

Exploring the Word of God: The Letter to the Hebrews



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Living and Sharing the Gospel

**Exploring the Word of God:
The Letter to the Hebrews**

By Michael D. Morrison

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Introduction: This project began in the mid 1990s. The first volume of *Exploring the Word of God* was published in 1995. We were not able to print

any more volumes, but we continued to study and write articles about Scripture. We have gathered these articles, edited them, and are publishing them as e-books. We hope you find these studies useful and encouraging.

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The Reflection of God's Glory:

Hebrews 1

In the first century, some Jews believed in Jesus as the Messiah and yet still wanted all the rituals of Judaism. The boundaries between Christianity and Judaism weren't clear, and these people weren't sure where their primary identity was.

The book of Hebrews may have been written to some of them. It was apparently written to people who already believed in Jesus as the Messiah. The book argues that Jesus is better than Judaism, because he brings a reality that the Jewish rituals could only symbolize. The readers should see their religious identity in Jesus. It is Jesus who gives us access to God.

Let's see how the letter begins.

The exact representation (verses 1-3)

“Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son...” The sentence goes on for two and a half more verses. It's an elaborate, well-composed sentence, written with rhetorical polish. This is not the way that Greek letters normally begin — this is the way that oratory begins. This book was written to be delivered orally, as a sermon.

Here, in the first sentence, there is a contrast between old and new. God spoke to the patriarchs in many ways — some things to one person, something else to another, a different portion to someone else many years later, etc. God would sometimes speak in a thundering voice, sometimes in a whisper, and sometimes in a vision.

Some Jews might have felt honored that God had dealt with their nation in many different ways, but the problem is that none of the methods were perfect. None of the prophets had the whole message, and none of the visions

revealed everything we need to know.

That is in contrast to the way that God has spoken in his Son. Jesus is not a prophet — he is a Son, and as a Son he has a complete revelation of what God wants to reveal. This is definitive. The prophets could only dimly foresee the day of Jesus Christ, but he is the fulfillment of what they said. God has spoken to us in his Son.

How great is he? Verse 2 tells us that God appointed him “heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds.” He was appointed heir even before anything existed. He is the Creator and the owner of the universe.

Not only that, “He is the reflection of God’s glory and the exact imprint of God’s very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word” (verse 3). Unbelievers might think it blasphemous to say that these things. When we look at him, we see God’s glory, and he is the exact representation of his nature, and he is so powerful that he can sustain the universe simply by speaking a word.

Why does the author think that the readers will accept this without any evidence or supporting arguments? Probably because he knows them and knows what they have been taught. Perhaps he is the one who taught them. He is reminding them of how great Jesus is, because they are letting this greatness slip away, and they are ignoring the salvation that Jesus brought.

Now the author gets to the main subject of the letter, the subject that he will develop in much more detail: “When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

If you want your sins to be forgiven, to be purified, then you need to pay attention to Jesus, because he provides the way for us. He is with God, and he carries far more authority than the prophets do, because they had only part of the truth. What they wrote was true, but it was only part of what we need. Now we have Jesus, and in him, we have all that we need.

Better than angels (verses 4-7)

The author now introduces the subject of the first chapter, which argues that Jesus is better than angels: “having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” As the Son of God, he is by nature superior to the angels, who are messenger servants of God.

Jews in the first century had a lot of respect for angels. They speculated about them and even assigned them a role in giving the law at Mt. Sinai (see Gal. 3:19). Some gave the angels too much honor (Colossians 2:18), but this does not seem to be a problem for the readers of Hebrews. The author says only positive things about the angels.

The author wants to correct some of the readers’ ideas, but he does not attack those ideas in the very first chapter. That might cause resistance. Greek rhetorical manuals advised speakers to get rapport with the audience first. Here, the author is reminding the readers of things they already know, of conclusions they will be likely to agree with. It is only later in the book that he says, now let’s go on to something new.

The author uses a chain of scriptures to support his point that Jesus is superior to the angels. He does not stop to demonstrate that these scriptures are really about Jesus — that seems to be something he figures the readers already agree on. On this topic, he is writing to a sympathetic audience, not a hostile one.

But in preparation for the subjects that he deals with in later chapters, he does want to remind them of how great Jesus is, and he begins by comparing him to angels. Hebrews 1:5: “For to which of the angels did God ever say, ‘You are my Son; today I have begotten you’? Or again, ‘I will be his Father, and he will be my Son’?” The answer is that God never said this to any angel, but he did say it for Jesus.

The first quote comes from Psalm 2:7, which was originally about the

kings of Israel, but was often understood as a messianic prophecy. The second quote is from 2 Samuel 7:14, which was originally about Solomon, but came to be applied to the end-time Son of David, the Messiah. The point in both quotations is that Jesus is the Son of God, whereas angels are only messengers. Although angels are great and powerful, they aren't even in the same league as Jesus. They are the hired help; Jesus is the Son of God.

The next two quotations are about angels: “And again, when he brings the firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’ Of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, and his servants flames of fire.’”

The first quote is from the Greek version of Deuteronomy 32:43; the Hebrew original doesn't say this. Even in the Greek version, the scripture is about the angels worshipping *God*. But the author of Hebrews makes no attempt to explain why he can use this verse for Jesus — he apparently knows that these readers already understand the verse in this way. The second quote is from the Greek version of Psalm 104:4; the Hebrew version has a different emphasis.

Like God in every way (verses 8-14)

The next two quotes are much longer. “But of the Son he says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of your kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions’” (quoting from Psalm 45:6-7).

Again, there is no attempt to explain why these verses can be used for Jesus Christ, even when they plainly call him God: “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever...” Apparently the author is reminding the readers of something they have already been taught. The point is that the Son is a ruler, but the angels are only servants.

The next verses are quoted from Psalm 102:25-27: “And, ‘In the

beginning, Lord, you founded the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands; they will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like clothing; like a cloak you will roll them up, and like clothing they will be changed. But you are the same, and your years will never end.” The original psalm is about God. In Hebrews, it is applied to Christ, saying that he is the Creator and that he will live forever. In every respect, Jesus is greater than angels.

“But to which of the angels has he [God] ever said, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet?’” As in verse 5, the answer is “none.” God never put an angel at his right hand, but he did put Jesus there. This is quoted from Psalm 110:1, the Old Testament verse that is quoted the most often in the New Testament. This verse will be used again in Hebrews, but here, it is used simply to say that the Son is better than the angels. They are merely “spirits in the divine service,” as it says in verse 14, “sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation.”

Angels serve us; we serve Christ; that makes them two steps lower than Christ is. He is far greater — exactly like God, called God, creating like God and living like God.

What conclusion can readers draw from this? That will be revealed in chapter 2.

Things to think about

When I think of God, do I remember that Jesus is exactly like him? Does my concept of God look just like Jesus?

When I think of creation, do I think of Jesus?

Without the book of Hebrews, would I apply these Old Testament verses to Jesus Christ?

Do I view the heavens and earth as perishable, scheduled for change?

How does this affect my priorities?

In what ways have angels served the children of God?

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Perfect Through Suffering:

Hebrews 2

The first chapter of Hebrews gives a series of Old Testament scriptures to show that Jesus is better than angels. For the most part, the scriptures are just quoted, with no attempt to prove that they are indeed about Jesus Christ. The rapid succession of scriptures appears to be a review of something the readers already believe. The author is reminding them that Jesus, the Son of God, is superior to the angels. Angels are servants, but Christ is the creator and ruler of all.

The recipients of the letter may have thought: Yes, we knew all that. What's your point?

A superior message (verses 1-3)

The author makes his point in chapter 2. "Therefore," he says, because Christ is so great, "we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it." By using the word "drift," the author is suggesting a nautical image: We need to anchor our boat, or the currents will gradually move us away. We aren't planning to drift away, but if we aren't careful, we will. The way to stay anchored is to focus on the message of Jesus.

Verse 2: "For if the message declared through angels was valid..." What message was declared through angels? It was the law of Moses. Angels were involved in giving the law (Deuteronomy 33:2-3; Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). It was under the law of Moses that "every transgression or disobedience received a just penalty."

But "how can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" If the message of angels was valid (and it was) and disobedient people were punished, surely we won't escape if we ignore the message of Christ. This is

an argument from the lesser to the greater, a common Jewish method of teaching. If Jesus is better than the angels, then his message is better than theirs. If the message delivered by servants was authoritative, then the message delivered by the Son is even more so.

The readers were attentive to the law of Moses, but they weren't being attentive enough to the message of Jesus. They believed in Jesus as the Christ, but they hadn't thought enough about his significance. They were so busy with Moses that they were not hearing Jesus.

Rhetorical strategy (verses 3-4)

In this, Hebrews uses a clever rhetorical strategy. The author begins with concepts the readers agree with, and they go through chapter 1 agreeing with him. Then he takes that point of agreement and turns it into a point of correction. You say that Jesus is great, he says, but you are not acting like it. You are paying too much attention to the old message and not enough to the new.

The author has called for their attention now. He has explained why his message is worth listening to. It's about salvation, something more important than Moses. This salvation "was declared at first through the Lord, and it was attested to us by those who heard him." The author and the readers had learned about Jesus from others. (This is one reason that scholars conclude that Paul did not write the book of Hebrews. In Galatians 1:11-22, Paul insists that he was taught by the Lord, not by others.)

"God added his testimony by signs and wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit, distributed according to his will" (verse 4). The people had seen evidence that what they heard about Jesus was true. They had accepted him as the resurrected Son of God. However, he wasn't making much difference in their lives and their worship. They never asked, If Jesus is the Son of God, does that change the way we worship? They were

still focusing on Moses. As the author will explain in later chapters, the way we approach God has changed enormously. Jesus is in heaven interceding for us. He is our mediator, giving us access to God.

Jesus the human (verses 5-9)

But before the author explains the change in worship, he lays a foundation. He reviews the fact that Jesus was human. In verse 5 he writes, “God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels.” To support this statement, he quotes from the Old Testament Scriptures: “But someone has testified somewhere, ‘What are human beings that you are mindful of them, or mortals, that you care for them? You have made them for a little while lower than the angels; you have crowned them with glory and honor, subjecting all things under their feet’” (see Psalm 8:4-5).

The psalm says everything will be put under humans. But the Son of God is the heir of everything (Hebrews 1:2). That means that, to fulfill the Scriptures, he must be human. Jesus had to be made lower than the angels for a time, crowned with glory and honor at a later time. He is the representative and the pioneer, the trailblazer, for all other humans.

“Now in subjecting all things to them [humanity], God left nothing outside their control. As it is, we do not yet see everything in subjection to them, but we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor” (Hebrews 2:8-9). We do not yet see glory and honor for other humans, but we do see it for Jesus, our representative.

Why was he so honored? Verse 9 tells us it is “because of the suffering of death.” His example would be meaningful to readers who were facing persecution and threats. In this world, we suffer and die. In the next, we have glory and honor.

However, Jesus' death is far more significant than just as an example. Verse 9 goes on to tell us that "by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone." He died for us, in our place. The author will enlarge on this concept in a later chapter.

Many children to glory (verses 10-15)

Jesus is our representative not only in death but also in ruling the universe. The journey he has taken, we also participate in. This is the greatness of the salvation that Jesus brings: the greatness of ruling all things. But it comes through death—Jesus had to die, and we have to die, too, before we can enter into glory and reign with Christ.

"It was fitting that God, for whom and through whom all things exist, in bringing many children to glory, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings." God's plan is for many children to be given glory. To save us, the Messiah had to become one of us, and die. "Perfect" here does not mean moral perfection (he was already perfect in that sense), but completion: through his sufferings, he became completely qualified to be our Savior.

"The one who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one Father. For this reason Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters." Jesus sanctifies us, makes us holy, and because we are made holy, we are part of his family. He has joined himself to us.

Psalm 22:22, a messianic psalm, supports that. As quoted in Hebrews, it says, "I will proclaim your name to my brothers and sisters, in the midst of the congregation I will praise you." Jesus put himself at our level so he could bring us up to his level. This is the great salvation he offers us, the great salvation we do not want to neglect or drift away from.

Then Hebrews quotes from Isaiah 8:17: "I will put my trust in him." (Isaiah 8 is also a messianic passage; verse 14 is about the stone of

stumbling.) The Messiah had to trust in God. He depended on God to take care of him after death.

The next verse that's quoted, Isaiah 8:18, also says that we are in Christ's family. "And again, 'Here am I and the children whom God has given me.'" The image has changed from siblings to children, but the point is still the same: Christ is a human, just as we are. We should not be embarrassed by the fact that Jesus was a human, even to the point of death. Instead, we should be encouraged, because it is appropriate for our Savior to be one of us, to lead us into glory.

"Since...the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil." Jesus became human so his death would be effective for us. The devil and death can no longer keep us captive: they have been conquered. We can be confident that Jesus conquered death because he came back from death, which was possible only if he was mortal.

Jesus did this to "free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death." Death still strikes us, and it is still an enemy, but it cannot hold us permanently. Jesus gives us courage in the face of death.

Summary (verses 16-18)

"For it is clear that he did not come to help angels, but the descendants of Abraham" (verse 16). Jesus wanted to save us, so he became one of us. Although he was higher than the angels from the beginning, he became temporarily less than an angel. "Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people" (verse 17).

Here the author has come to the end of a section, and he begins to lay a foundation for later parts of the letter. He summarizes by saying that Jesus

was fully human so he could save us. He will write more about the atonement in later chapters, and more about Jesus' mercy and faithfulness. But now he just mentions them as hints of things yet to be discussed. He mentions Jesus as high priest, too, which he will also develop.

But after these hints, he goes back to wrap up this section: "Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested" (verse 18). The readers were facing suffering and temptation. They were afraid of death, and the author is saying, Jesus has been there. He can help, because he was one of us. His role as Savior was made complete by these sufferings.

Jesus is not just a heavenly being—he was made flesh so he could suffer and die for us, and pave the way for our exaltation into glory. We are his family, and he will bring us through. On the other side of death is tremendous glory.

Things to think about

Am I paying careful attention to Jesus, or am I drifting? Is my life focused on the gospel?

Do I take the great salvation lightly? Do I see my future crowned with glory and honor with Jesus?

How well do I trust God in the face of trials, or even in day-to-day routines?

Do I fear death? Do I fear the smaller problems of this world? Do I look to Jesus for help with my temptations?

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Think About Jesus and Be Faithful:

Hebrews 3

How can we be faithful? How can we help one another? Hebrews 3 addresses these questions. They are as important today as they were in the first century.

The first word in Hebrews 3 is *therefore*, which means that it is drawing a conclusion based on previous things. Chapter 2 explained that Jesus became a human being so he could save human beings. Because he was a human, he is qualified to be our high priest and intercessor. He suffered, so he knows the struggles we go through, and he can sympathize with our weakness. He can help us. He not only atoned for our sins, he is able to help us in our temptations.

Think about Jesus (verses 1-4)

Based on that foundation, the author writes, “Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider...Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.” Since Jesus is the basis of our salvation and the one who applies it in our lives, we need to concentrate on Jesus. We need to make sure that nothing distracts us from a focus on Jesus.

This is the only place in the Bible where Jesus is called an apostle. The word means “one who is sent,” and Jesus was sent from God to us. He had a message, and we are to pay attention to what he said, but we are also to pay attention to Jesus himself, because he as a person is part of the message of God. His death has meaning for us only because of who he is: the Son of God.

Hebrews is the only book in the Bible that calls Jesus our high priest. As an apostle, he speaks to humanity on behalf of God. As a high priest, he speaks to God on behalf of humanity. He is our mediator, who bridges the

gap between us and God. That's why we need to look to him.

What are we supposed to see in Jesus? Verse 2 tells us that he "was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also 'was faithful in all God's house'" (with a short quote from Numbers 12:7). The readers respected Moses, so our author is building on that. Moses was a really faithful person, but let's compare Moses with Jesus.

"Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses, just as the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself." Jesus, at the right hand of God, has more honor than Moses. "For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God." God made everything through his Son (Hebrews 1:2); that in itself gives Jesus more honor than Moses.

Servant or Son? (verses 5-6)

The author now shifts to a different analogy, the difference between a servant and a son: "Moses was faithful in all God's house as a servant, to testify to the things that would be spoken later." Moses faithfully said what God wanted him to say, but he was faithful as a servant. The best that he could be, the best that any human being could be, was a faithful servant.

"Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son." Jesus Christ is in a class by himself. Moses was faithful, but if you look to him as an example of faithfulness, you are looking to an inferior example. Before Jesus, he was the best example available. But now that Jesus has been revealed, we should look to Jesus as our example. Our religious life centers on him, not on Moses.

Then we are told, "and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope" (verse 6b). If we keep our faith in Christ, then it shows that we are his house, his people. This is a general statement; it is not talking about whether a person can leave for a time and then come back to Christ. This book is written so that people will not leave; it encourages

them to be diligent.

Do not resist (verses 7-12)

“As the Holy Spirit says: ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years.’” This is quoted from Psalm 95, which was apparently read in the synagogues at the start of each Sabbath.

This, like everything else in Scripture, is a message from the Holy Spirit, and it applies today, just as much as it applied when first written for ancient Israel, and in the first century for the church. Do we hear his voice today? We should, because he is still speaking in Scripture. Are we listening? Are we willing to do what he says?

Hebrews was written to people who were attracted to Moses. And the author says, That’s not good enough anymore. Someone better has come along, and we need to respond to him. You can’t just keep on doing the same old things you have always done. You have to change.

That is still true. We can’t just keep doing things we have always done. We have to look to Christ, not to traditions. He may want us to do the same things for a long time, and they may become traditional to us, but we can never let those traditions become more central to us than Christ is. We cannot let them become so important to us that we can’t hear him when he says it’s time to change.

When Israel was in the wilderness, they had to listen to what God was saying. They didn’t go to Canaan by the quickest highway, because first they had to learn to trust God. When Christ calls us to follow him, we need to follow. We can’t just pick our own path — and we can’t always stay on the first path he puts us on. We have to continue to follow him. We have to let him change us.

This is what God says about those who resist his will: “Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.’ As in my anger I swore, ‘They will not enter my rest.’” The ancient Israelites had to wander in the wilderness for 40 years because they didn’t listen. They heard the words, but they didn’t obey them.

Then he makes the application from ancient Israel to the church of the first century: “Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God” (verse 12). Make sure that you believe in your heart, sincerely. That is how you can be faithful. That’s the way to avoid turning away from God. Examine your heart — are you focusing on Jesus?

Encourage one another (verses 13-15)

How can we be faithfully focusing on Christ? “But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today,’ so that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” Anything that takes our minds away from Jesus is deceitful. Anything that causes us to tune him out is causing us to sin. Anything that makes us want the old, when we need the new, is wrong. We need to encourage one another to focus on Jesus.

Faithfulness is a community project. God puts us together to help one another. We are to encourage one another in the faith, so that no one drifts away. Our priority is not a style of music, a day of worship or a particular tradition. Our priority is Christ, and we need to help each other remember that, so no one will become tired of hearing about the one who died for us.

“We have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end.” Our faithfulness will show that we are now sharing in Christ. So we hold on tight, and help other people hold on tight. We do that by meeting together and worshiping together, always fixing our thoughts on

Jesus.

“As it is said,” verse 15 tells us, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion.” Even today, some people harden their hearts and resist the changes that Christ wants to bring to their lives. The answer now, as it was then, is to fix our thoughts on Jesus, so that we hear what he is saying, and to encourage one another.

The need for faith (verses 16-19)

“Who were they who heard and yet were rebellious?” the author asks, and then he answers: “Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses?” Elsewhere, the author has only positive things to say about Moses, but here he has a subtle criticism. He did not have to mention Moses here at all.

“But with whom was he angry forty years? Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?” This was the generation of Israelites who had come out of Egypt.

“And to whom did he swear that they would not enter his rest, if not to those who were disobedient?” The people who disobeyed (that generation) were not allowed to enter the Promised Land. Why? “Because of unbelief.” They refused to trust God — refused to listen and follow. The same thing could happen in the first century, the book of Hebrews implies. The same thing can happen in any century. If people don’t focus on Christ, they drift away and begin to trust in other things instead of him.

Things to think about

Do the worries of this life take my attention away from Jesus? (verse 1)

What can I do today to focus on him?

Do I have courage in Christ, and do I take pride in the hope he gives?
(verse 6).

Are there any traditions in my life that might make me less responsive to

Jesus? (verse 7).

Do I encourage others by meeting together? (verse 13).

Am I holding tight to the faith, or is my confidence slipping a little?
(verse 14).

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Entering God's Rest:

Hebrews 4

The letter to the Hebrews weaves theology and practical application. After each doctrinal section, it urges the readers to do something as a result. This often takes the form of “Therefore, let us do such and such.”

As part of that pattern, chapter 4 begins with the word *therefore*, meaning that the exhortations we read in chapter 4 are built on a point made earlier. So our study of chapter 4 must begin with a review of chapter 3. Chapter 3 tells us to look to Jesus, because he is superior to the angels and to Moses.

To make the point, the author quotes Psalm 95:7-11:

Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, as on the day of testing in the wilderness, where your ancestors put me to the test, though they had seen my works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with that generation, and I said, ‘They always go astray in their hearts, and they have not known my ways.’ As in my anger I swore, ‘They will not enter my rest.’” (Hebrews 3:7-11).

Don't be like your unbelieving, disobedient ancestors, he says. They refused God so many times that he set them aside and shut them out. Don't test his patience, he seems to say. Listen to what God is saying now. To develop this point, he elaborates on the last part of the quote from Psalm 95: “They will not enter my rest.” What is this “rest,” and what can we learn from it in connection with Jesus? This brings us to chapter 4.

How we enter (verses 1-5)

“Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.” We can paraphrase the thought in this way: God makes it possible for us to enter his rest, so we need to make sure that we accept his offer. If we do not keep our

faith in him (the main exhortation of this book), we will fail to enter.

How do we enter? Verse 2 tells us, “For indeed the 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.” The author urges us to be diligent, then he talks about “the good news.” This implies that we enter God’s rest by means of the gospel.

The ancient Israelites had the gospel in a veiled form, in symbols such as the bronze snake, the washings, the sacrifices and festivals. But despite the miracles, the people did not have faith in God and the message did not do them any good. We do not have to make the same mistake. “For we who have believed enter that rest.” Believe what? Believe the gospel. All who look to Jesus, who have faith in Jesus, are entering God’s rest.

But wait! Didn’t God rest thousands of years ago? How can it be possible for us to enter something that is long gone? The author deals with this objection by bringing it up: “...although his works were finished at the foundation of the world. For in one place it speaks about the seventh day as follows, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all his works.’”

Genesis tells us that God rested on the seventh day (Genesis 2:2). That is, he had finished the creation. (He continues to work in the sense of upholding all things.) But the author of Hebrews observes that God’s work has been finished ever since, which means that God is still resting. God is still in his rest, and it is open for humans to enter. It was available for the ancient Israelites; otherwise there would be no point in saying, “They will not enter my rest.” God’s rest was available to them, but they refused to enter.

Still available for us (verses 6-8)

God’s rest is available to us, too: “it remains open for some to enter it.” The offer is still open, and it is made even more clear and compelling through Jesus Christ. The Israelites at the time of Moses, “those who formerly

received the good news failed to enter because of disobedience.” Their disobedience was evidence of their lack of faith. They did not believe that God would give them what he had promised.

God “sets a certain day—‘today’—saying through David much later, in the words already quoted, ‘Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.’” Many years after Moses, God again spoke about rest, urging people to not harden their hearts and thereby fail to enter his rest. Hear him today, David urged. The offer was still good. People could enter God’s rest, could be secure in his promise, if they listened with faith and willingness.

But didn’t the people enter God’s rest when they entered the Promised Land? No. “For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not [through David] speak later about another day.” The “rest” that Psalm 95 was speaking of was not the Promised Land. It was something that the Israelites, with few exceptions, failed to enter. They did not respond to God with faith and willingness.

Our Sabbath-rest (verses 9-10)

The author then concludes: “So then, a sabbath rest still remains for the people of God.” Is he bringing up a new subject? No — he is still on the same subject, using different words to develop it further. He is saying, Since people did not enter God’s rest in Moses’ day, nor in Joshua’s day, and yet we are still exhorted in the Psalms about God’s rest, the conclusion is that this rest still remains for the people of God today. It is still available.

Why does he call this a sabbath rest? He is not slipping in a command for the seventh-day Sabbath. That would be totally out of context. His exhortation throughout this book is telling Jewish people to look to Jesus. He is not urging them to do a better job of keeping Jewish customs. The ancient Israelites, even though they had the Sabbath, did not enter the rest he is talking about. God’s rest is entered by faith — by believing the gospel

(verses 3-4). The author is not interested in a day of the week — he is concerned about how people respond to Jesus. A person who keeps the weekly Sabbath but rejects Christ has not entered God’s rest. We enter God’s rest only by believing the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Why does he call this a sabbath rest? By using this word, he indicates that this is what the weekly Sabbath pointed to. Just as the bronze snake pointed to Jesus’ crucifixion (John 3:14-15), and the washings pointed to forgiveness, and the sacrifices pointed to Jesus, similarly, the weekly Sabbath pointed to something spiritual: our rest through faith in Christ.

It is available — we may enter God’s rest. Don’t put it off — do it today! “For those who enter God’s rest also cease from their labors as God did from his.” God rested from his creative work, but what kind of work do we rest from? What do we quit doing when we come to have faith in Christ? The work of trying to earn our salvation, the work of trying to qualify for the kingdom, the work of trying to be accepted by God. When we look to Jesus for our salvation, we quit looking to ourselves.

Practical applications (verses 11-16)

The author again draws a practical conclusion: “Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.” Since the rest is available to us, let’s enter it with faith. Ironically, this rest requires effort, he says, rather than passivity. Our “effort” is that we should believe what God has done in Jesus Christ.

Why should we be so careful to respond? “For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Just as Psalm 95 said, we must hear and heed God’s message. His word contains both promise and command, so we should respond with faith and obedience. And as Hebrews 4:13 says, nothing is hidden from

God's sight. He sees everything we do and knows our thoughts, and we must give account to him. That is why we are exhorted to respond, right now, with faith in Jesus Christ.

Then comes another practical application: "Since, then, we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast to our confession." Again, the exhortation is not to a day of the week, but to Jesus Christ, our Savior.

Here's a summary of the chapter: Since God's rest is available to us and God cares about how we respond, we need to keep believing in Jesus, because he is the one we need. He became human, so he understands our weaknesses, but he lived without sin, so he can be our Savior. Since Jesus has done this, we can be sure that he will help us now.

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need." Jesus knows what it's like to suffer and to be tempted to quit. He can strengthen us, so we need to come to him with confidence that he will help us.

We need rest, and Jesus offers us rest. Today, if you hear his word, trust in it, and enter his rest.

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Jesus Qualified As a High Priest:

Hebrews 5

At the end of Hebrews 4, the author gives this exhortation: since we have a high priest who can sympathize with our needs, and is able to help us, we should boldly go to the throne of grace, confident that he will help us (4:14-16). In chapters 5, 6 and 7, he gives evidence that Jesus is our high priest. At the beginning of chapter 8, he summarizes his point as “we have such a high priest” (NRSV throughout). This is the main topic for these three chapters.

The length of the discussion suggests that the author thinks that this topic is at the heart of the problem his readers had. They were struggling in their faith, struggling in their commitment to Christ, because they did not understand his role as a high priest, as the key link in their connection with God. Jesus is the Messiah, they might have said, and he might be in heaven, but what does that have to do with us? Does it make any difference?

Yes, it does. Not only does it give us confidence that God wants us to come to him, it also affects the way we worship and the people we worship with. But before the author gets to those details, he wants to build a solid foundation for it, proving that Jesus is our high priest. Hebrews is the only book in the Bible that calls Jesus a high priest. (Although Paul talks about Jesus interceding for us [Romans 8:34], he does not use the term “high priest.”)

Chosen for service (verses 1-6)

He begins by discussing in general terms the function of a high priest: “Every high priest chosen from among mortals is put in charge of things pertaining to God on their behalf, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.” Although pagan religions had high priests, they were probably not in view here – the discussion throughout Hebrews is on the old covenant priests.

They served to represent the people in their relationship to God, specifically to offer sacrifices.

The high priest “is able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is subject to weakness.” This statement may have provoked a mild protest (“humpf”) with the readers, since the Levitical priests of the first century were known more for political maneuvering than for being gentle. (John 7:49 reports the attitude of the Pharisees – they thought that people ignorant of the law were accursed. It is likely that the upper-class priests shared the sentiment.)

The author’s point is that a high priest *ought* to be gentle. The Levitical high priest is in the same situation as the people: in need of God’s mercy. He sins, “and because of this he must offer sacrifice for his own sins as well as for those of the people.” On the Day of Atonement, the high priest had to sacrifice for his own sins before he could do anything for the nation as a whole (Leviticus 16:11).

He was not superior to the people, but one of them. This is shown also in the way that he was chosen – not by being better than others, but simply by God’s choice: “One does not presume to take this honor, but takes it only when called by God, just as Aaron was.” In the same way, Jesus did not appoint himself (although he was fully qualified to do so) – he had been appointed by the Father:

So also Christ did not glorify himself in becoming a high priest, but was appointed by the one who said to him, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you”; as he says also in another place, “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.” (quotes from Psalms 2:7 and 110:4)

This is the first mention in Hebrews of the mysterious person named Melchizedek. Here, it is a teaser. As he does with several other topics, the author first mentions him, and comes back to it later. The reader might think,

“What’s that about? I hope he explains what that means.” So the author will come back to it shortly, after piquing their interest, and will explore it in more detail later – in this case, in chapter 7.

Of all Old Testament quotes in the New Testament, Psalm 110:1 is the most common. But only Hebrews quotes verse 4, which refers (without any explanation) to a priesthood that is outside of the Levitical order. First-century Jews had various speculations about Melchizedek as an end-time figure, but there was no consistent view. Consequently, any mention of Melchizedek was likely to arouse the interest of the audience. The author will have to explain what he means.

Power through weakness (verses 7-10)

But he keeps them in suspense. First he talks about the qualifications of Jesus to sympathize with people who are weak: “In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications, with loud cries and tears, to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.”

This may refer to Jesus’ agonized prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane (Luke 22:40-46), but we might also wonder: If Jesus was praying to be saved from death, how can the author say that “he was heard”? The author knows that God allowed Jesus to die. Jesus was saved from death by going *through* it and being brought back to life; that was the reason he had come (Hebrews 2:14-15).

“Although he was a Son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.” Jesus did not use his position to benefit himself – he willingly placed himself in the circumstance all humans experience. Although he had always been obedient to the Father, he experienced what it is like to be obedient even in situations of suffering. As a human, he grew in his relationship with God (see Luke 2:52). He can relate to the struggles other people have, so he “is able to

deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself [was] subject to weakness.”

Now, “having been made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him.” Jesus was already perfect in one sense, but not in another. He was always perfect in morality, and he therefore never sinned (Hebrews 4:15). But the Greek word for *perfect* also means complete; here it seems to refer to Jesus’ ability to be our high priest. Through his sufferings, he completed the qualifications of being able to represent humans before God (see Hebrews 2:10).

Not only could he represent humanity, he could also save everyone. We are not saved *by* our obedience, but this verse implies that those who are saved also obey, albeit always imperfectly. (It does not comment on the status of those who do not even desire to obey.) The important point here is that Jesus is the source of the salvation that all humans need.

The author then connects the role of Savior to the role of high priest: “having been designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.” The Melchizedekian high priest does not just offer rituals to picture salvation – he has the power to bring salvation. He is a human who can empathize with weakness, but he also has power to overcome it.

Get ready to learn! (verses 11-14)

The author has mentioned Melchizedek again, but he is not yet ready to get into the details. First, he wants to ready the readers for a significant new teaching. “About this we have much to say that is hard to explain.” Why is it difficult to explain this doctrine? It is because the readers might not want to learn: “...since you have become dull in understanding.”

It is not that they could not learn, but because they were *not interested* in learning more about Jesus. Unfortunately, that happens to some Christians today: they are dull in their desire to learn more about the faith. They want

Christianity to be intellectually easy – “easy enough for a 10-year-old child to understand.” Christianity *is* easy enough for children, but our author is saying that we should not be content to remain as children in our understanding. We should want to grow, not coast.

“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the basic elements of the oracles of God.” The readers had been Christians for a long time; they should be active, not passive. With some exaggeration, the author says they need to start all over. He will list some of the “basic elements” in the next paragraph (6:1-3), but he also says that he will not rehearse them. The chief problem is their willingness to learn, not their lack of a foundation.

He uses a metaphor that other first-century teachers did: “You need milk, not solid food.” Although they should have been taking some initiative and seeking to understand more, they were acting like intellectual babies, and the food had to be brought to them in an easy-to-digest way. This was not meant to put the audience down, but to stir them up, to call them to listen more attentively.

“For everyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is unskilled in the word of righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, for those whose faculties have been trained by practice to distinguish good from evil.” The author assumes that the readers *want* to be counted as mature; they *want* to know the difference between good and evil. Just as he does in 2:1-3, he is calling them to attention. He is drawing near to the heart of what he wants to say – the heart of the problem he is addressing – the key doctrine that will tell them *why* they should remain faithful to Christ rather than going into any other religious option.

Things to think about

- Do you think of Jesus as a person of weakness, who wept and suffered?

(verses 7-8)

- Why is it important to us that Jesus “learned obedience through what he suffered”? (verse 8)
- If Christians today are tired of learning, what is the best way to encourage them to be interested again? (verse 11)

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Danger and Promise:

Hebrews 6

The author of Hebrews wants to help his readers understand that Jesus is our High Priest. This is a key point that will help them choose to remain in Christianity rather than go to any other religious option. They need to see Jesus as their Savior, as the key to forgiveness of sin and acceptance by God.

However, he knows that this will not be an easy doctrine for them – not because it is difficult in itself, but because they will be reluctant to hear it. So at the end of chapter 5, he has a short exhortation for them to be willing to learn. This exhortation continues into the first part of chapter 6.

The foundational doctrines (verses 1-3)

“Therefore let us go on toward perfection,” he writes. He does not mean that we will become sinless in this life (even though we want to go in that direction) – the meaning in context is that they should become complete in their understanding. He tells them what he has in mind:

Leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And we will do this, if God permits.

The author is not trying to be comprehensive here, but he gives a sampling. These doctrines were found in first-century Judaism as well as in Christianity, and this is probably part of the author’s rhetorical strategy. Both groups said that people should repent from dead works (behaviors that lead to death rather than life) and have faith in God. However, the two groups would develop these doctrines in different ways. Christians would say, for example, that our faith in God should also include faith in the Son he sent for our salvation.

Both groups talked about baptisms, although in different ways. Jews taught baptism for Gentile proselytes, and ritual washings for various occasions. Christians taught about baptism in water and baptism in the Spirit. We do not know which of these baptisms is meant here; the author is probably deliberately vague. He mentions these doctrines, but also says that he will “leave them behind.” His purpose is not to develop the foundation, but to acknowledge that he and the readers already share some important beliefs. He is building rapport with his readers before he moves to the more difficult teaching.

Both groups talked about laying on hands, for blessing or for appointments. (This is probably better categorized as a custom, for it is not a key teaching in either Judaism or Christianity. Perhaps the author included it because in his mind it went along with baptisms.)

Last, he mentions the resurrection and the judgment; these beliefs were similar in Judaism and Christianity. The key difference in beliefs here is the role of Jesus Christ at the judgment. Faith in Christ affects the way we understand all these “foundational” teachings, but the author is not choosing to talk about any of those things.

Falling away (verses 4-6)

The author wants to explain Jesus’ role as our High Priest. But he is still not ready to do it, because he thinks his readers may not be ready to listen to it. He wants to emphasize to them the importance of listening, so he warns them about the danger of turning away from God (his warning implies that he thinks they may be in danger of doing this, of drifting away from God by neglecting Jesus). This warning is one of the most controversial parts of his letter. We’ll quote it all and then return to look at the individual parts:

For it is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word

of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, since on their own they are crucifying again the Son of God and are holding him up to contempt.

Here is the controversy: some theologians say that God's grace is irresistible and always effective; therefore it is impossible for a true believer to permanently fall away. This passage is a "difficult scripture" for this belief because it seems to say the opposite of what they teach. Various exegetical strategies are used to explain this passage from this perspective, such as

- 1) The people described in these verses are not true believers – the author is writing to a group in which some are chosen by God and some are not; he is describing the result for those who are not chosen: no matter how close they come to the church, they will eventually fall away.
- 2) The author is speaking hypothetically. *If* people who experienced all these blessings fell away, then it *would* be impossible to restore them to repentance. No one does this, though, because they always heed warnings such as this one.

I do not think that either of these strategies accurately portrays the intentions of the author of Hebrews. It seems to me that interpreters end up muzzling Scripture in order to uphold their beliefs. It is legitimate for people to bring theological beliefs to help them understand passages of Scripture, but I think in this case they have not allowed the Scriptures to correct their beliefs. (For more on that, see the excursus below.)

Look at how the passage describes these people:

- They were once enlightened, able to understand the gospel.
- They tasted the heavenly gift, experienced some of the blessings.
- They shared in the Holy Spirit – they were not just spectators.
- They tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come.

If the author wanted to describe people who were on the margins of the church, who were deceived into *thinking* they had faith, then it is hard to imagine why the author would describe their status in such glowing and lengthy terms. What more could a true believer have? These people had the gospel, and grace, and God himself. If people with all these spiritual benefits fall away, then it is impossible for us to restore them to repentance again. (The word “again” implies that they had a genuine repentance once before.) Perhaps they can repent in some other way, but it is outside of our ability to lead them to it.

The author seems to describe true believers. But is it hypothetical? It would be odd for him to give the readers such a lengthy warning about something that cannot happen. He has already warned them about drifting away (2:1), and about falling due to disobedience (4:11); he warns them not to lose the grace of God (12:15). If he thought that believers had a promise of preservation, he has hidden that belief. We do not normally give warnings about things that cannot happen.

I will proceed on the conclusion that the author is giving a genuine warning to genuine believers. People who understand and experience the gospel, but reject it anyway, have rejected the only salvation that God gives. They don't like what he is giving (which is himself), and we cannot do anything to change that. It would be an irrational choice, but Scripture indicates that some people make it anyway. They are telling the public that Jesus is of no value to them, in effect putting him back on the cross.

Let's remember the context in the letter: The author has a teaching about Christ that the readers need, but they may not want to hear it. He tells them they need to grow in their understanding, to learn something new. Then he warns them about how serious it is for someone to deliberately turn their back on what God has given. He intends for the readers *to see themselves in this*

description: They are the ones who have been enlightened, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, etc. He is warning them about the potentially unpleasant consequences of refusing to listen to this message from God (12:25). The language may seem harsh, but we do not know the people or the situation as well as the author does.

Close to being cursed (verses 7-8)

Despite the severity of the warning above, the author is not finished. He gives an agricultural metaphor to help explain why God might not want to deal with people who refuse to listen. He begins by stating the positive results of a good response: “Ground that drinks up the rain falling on it repeatedly, and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is cultivated, receives a blessing from God.” In analogy, these are the people who listen and grow; they are blessed.

But if these people receive God’s grace (symbolized by the rain) and fail to produce the desired results, they are like a field of weeds: “But if it produces thorns and thistles, it is worthless and on the verge of being cursed; its end is to be burned over.” If farmers want wheat but get only weeds, they will burn the weeds (which kills the weed seeds and fertilizes the soil), and hope for a better result the next time. At least for soil, there will be a next time, another chance.

There is a slight softening here – the curse is only near, not certain – but the language is still very blunt, stronger than we usually use today. The author believes that blunt warnings are needed to help his readers listen and heed.

Words of affirmation (verses 9-12)

Ancient rhetorical manuals advised speakers to follow warnings with expressions of confidence that the readers will heed the warnings. Our author follows this advice: “Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are

confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.” His own feeling is that the readers will not fall away – they will choose to listen, and to heed the warnings.

He reminds them of God’s good will for them: “For God is not unjust; he will not overlook your work and the love that you showed for his sake in serving the saints, as you still do.” In chapter 10 he gives more details about what they did; here he indicates that God will reward them for their previous work. He does not mean that God will save them even if they fall away, merely on the basis of their previous good works. He is not presenting a doctrine of how people are saved – he is just trying to encourage them to be faithful, and to continue in their works of love. God does care about what we do, but our good works cannot buy our salvation.

Verse 11 gives another exhortation to keep up the good work: “We want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end.” The readers will experience the future blessings if they diligently continue in their faith, work and love.

He repeats his primary concern in verse 12: “so that you may not become sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” Do not be sluggish, he says – be patient and hold on to the faith. Others have done it, and so can you. We do not inherit the promises by giving up hope and quitting.

God’s guarantee (verses 13-18)

After mentioning the promises, he explains how certain they are. This does not mean that they are certain even if the people fall away; that would contradict the context. Although God made a promise, the promise will be claimed only by those who want it. The author is trying to make sure that the readers will continue to want it. He does not detail what the promise includes, presumably because the readers already know. He will describe it more fully

in chapter 12.

He begins by referring to the patriarch Abraham, a figure held in high regard by the readers: “When God made a promise to Abraham, because he had no one greater by whom to swear, he swore by himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you and multiply you.’ And thus Abraham, having patiently endured, obtained the promise” (Genesis 22:17).

God did not merely say that he would do it – he said “I will *surely* do it.” The author of Hebrews takes this as equivalent to swearing an oath. God emphasized that the promise was certain, and Abraham eventually received what was promised.

The author elaborates on the significance of this oath:

Human beings, of course, swear by someone greater than themselves, and an oath given as confirmation puts an end to all dispute. In the same way, when God desired to show even more clearly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it by an oath, so that through two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible that God would prove false, we who have taken refuge might be strongly encouraged to seize the hope set before us. (verses 16-18)

Humans invoke the names of deities to lend support to what they say, and that kind of testimony is accepted by others. But since there is no one higher than God, God had to invoke himself: “I will surely do it.” The two “unchangeable things” are his purpose (one thing that is specifically said to be unchangeable) and his oath. God will not be false in either one. The author is dwelling at length on God’s promise in order to encourage the readers to not give up on their hope. God has not changed his mind, he seems to say. The reward is still there, but you need to endure with patience, like Abraham did. The hope is set before us, but we need to seize it.

The author describes himself and the readers as “we who have taken

refuge.” We do not know what they fled, but it does suggest persecution. Or it may be a metaphor for salvation: they fled the threat of death by taking refuge in Christ.

Our hope in heaven (verses 19-20)

With the mention of hope, he transitions to the teaching that he wants the readers to accept: “We have this hope, a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul, a hope that enters the inner shrine behind the curtain, where Jesus, a forerunner on our behalf, has entered, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”

Hope is an anchor for the soul. The metaphor suggests stability, but the author adds movement to it: this hope enters the “inner shrine,” meaning God’s presence in heaven, pictured by the room behind the curtain of the tabernacle (Exodus 26:31-35). The metaphor has moved from stability to security. Our salvation is secure when we have a hope that is anchored in the inner shrine, and in Jesus, this is what we get.

Jesus is a high priest “according to the order of Melchizedek.” The author told us that he has much to say about this (5:11), and he will get into it in chapter 7.

Things to think about

- If you listed the foundational teachings of Christianity, what would you include? (verses 1-3)
- Some people who drop out of Christianity eventually come back to faith. Does this contradict verses 4-6?
- “God will not forget your work” (verse 10). Does this encourage people to relax because they have already done enough?
- In what way is hope an anchor for your soul? (verse 19)

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Excursus:

Calvinism, Arminianism, and Apostasy

Classical Calvinism has five key points, commonly presented with the acronym TULIP:

T is for total depravity. This does not mean that everything people do is evil, but it means that all humans have some evil within them, and that the evil is found in all parts of humanity, including our use of reason.

U is for unconditional election. God chooses some people for salvation, and his choice is based entirely within himself, not on anything the people have done or will do.

L is for limited atonement, that Jesus died only for the people he intended to save; he did not die for the sins of the people God does not want to save.

I is for irresistible grace. Grace is always effective, because God always gets what he wants. If Jesus died for someone, or for a group of people, his sacrifice is not going to be in vain.

P is for perseverance or preservation of the saints. Those who begin the journey will always finish it.

This is not all there is to Calvinism, but these five points help distinguish Calvinism from other Christian theologies. The five points are logically connected. If humans are all depraved, then they cannot save themselves; it must be done by God. Salvation is by grace alone, not by anything anyone can do. Therefore God must initiate salvation, and he must be the one who sees it through to completion. Since he is all-powerful, he will always be effective. But since we see in Scripture and in experience that not everyone is saved, it must be because God intended it that way. He wants some people to be saved, but not all people, so he sent Jesus to save only those people that he

intends to save, and he will see them through to the end.

Most people who call themselves Calvinists accept all five points, and some say that an authentic Calvinist must be a “five-point Calvinist.” However, others claim to be “four-point Calvinists” – these usually deny the middle point. They believe that Jesus died for all people, even if God does not want to save all people. They believe the Bible teaches an unlimited atonement and therefore requires them to have this element in their theology even if they cannot explain why Christ would die for people he did not want to save. Calvin himself did not teach unlimited atonement (or at least the evidence can be understood in different ways), but his followers said that it was logical deduction from the other points.

Non-Calvinism comes in diverse forms, but is often called Arminianism, after Jacobus Arminius, a 16th century Dutch professor who had been in the Calvinist tradition. In 1619, a synod defined Calvinism as upholding the five TULIP points over against the beliefs of Arminius. Many Anglicans, Catholics and Eastern Orthodox have beliefs similar to Arminius, but it seems odd to call them Arminian because they are not following Arminius – these beliefs existed before Arminius did. Nevertheless, it was the Dutch controversy that helped define the points in dispute.

The dispute has roots in the Bible and in theology:

- 1) God is sovereign, omnipotent and almighty (Psalm 115:3).
- 2) Humans cannot save themselves; salvation must be by grace (Ephesians 2:8 and other scriptures).
- 3) God loved the world, and Jesus is the Savior of all people, especially those who believe (John 3:16; 1 Timothy 4:10 and other scriptures).
- 4) Passages such as Hebrews 6 and 10 imply that people can receive God’s blessings and yet fall away.
- 5) Not everyone is saved (John 5:29 and other scriptures).

As a simplification, Calvinists stress the first two points, and reduce the meaning of points three and four. Arminians stress points three and four, and reduce the meaning of point one. Calvinists struggle to explain why God is not the author of evil, if everyone is simply doing what God has decreed. By positing a God who loves the world yet creates some people for eternal destruction, they end up with a love that cannot be comprehended, and a God who cannot be known by what we see in Jesus. Jesus supposedly revealed that there *is* a Father, but did not reveal what he is like. Why would anyone want to spend eternity with a being they cannot know?

Arminians struggle to explain why people cannot take a little credit for their own salvation, if their salvation depends on something they do. If people do not believe, then God does not welcome them – but if they believe, then he does. People change God’s attitude toward them – they change God. Arminians say that, with his foreknowledge, God has chosen people based on what they do.

Calvinists seem to start with a definition of sovereignty that does not allow them to accept what some scriptures seem to say. Arminians seem to start with a definition of free will that does not allow them to accept what other scriptures say.

Calvinists want to give us assurance that people who have faith in Christ are eternally safe. However, Calvinists cannot guarantee this for any specific person. Some people who think they have faith, and *look* like they have faith, nevertheless end life without faith, so Calvinists conclude that they never really had faith despite what the appearances were. Appearances can be deceiving. Therefore, no matter how good the doctrine of perseverance is in theory, in practice, there is an appearance of failure for some individuals. People who seem to have faith at one stage of their life can end up not having faith at the end of their life. We can never have an iron-clad guarantee that we

are part of the elect.

More complex than “on” and “off”

It is a complex problem; that is why there is no consensus even after 400 years of debate. One contributing factor to the problem, I suspect, is that people are working with an overly simplified definition of salvation. People are acting as if salvation is a transaction, a payment that is external to what humans are. It's like a light switch, either on or off. Either God flipped the switch with an ancient decree, or the switch is flipped when people come to faith in Christ. People go from category A (unsaved) to category B (saved).

Perhaps from a medieval emphasis on hell and the last judgment, some people act as if salvation is primarily about getting a favorable verdict at the last judgment. It is “yes” or “no.” People want to be declared “not guilty.” Salvation is all about escaping the threat of hell. That is a reasonable concern, but salvation is more than a way to escape hell, and more than an entrance ticket into heaven.

The Bible says that Jesus purchased us by his death on the cross, but that is only one of many metaphors the Bible uses for salvation. There is more involved in salvation than just flipping a switch, or just declaring a verdict at a trial. That is why the Bible speaks of salvation in past, present, and future tenses (for examples: Ephesians 2:8; 1 Corinthians 1:18; 3:15). It is not just something done in the past – it involves an ongoing process and a future culmination.

Heaven (or salvation) is good not because of its location, but because of who is there. Salvation is defined by the triune God: it is an eternal relationship with the Father through Jesus in the Spirit. It is life in harmony with God, life characterized by love, joy, peace, patience, meekness, kindness and faithfulness. It is life freed from the “works of the flesh” (Galatians 5:19-24).

We not only need a favorable verdict on the day of judgment – we also need to be saved from ourselves. The doctrine of total depravity is right: there is something seriously wrong about human nature. We need not just an external pronouncement – we need an interior transformation, brought about by the Holy Spirit. This does not happen at the flip of a switch or simply by command. This part of our salvation is a process. We need to be rescued – saved – from our own tendency to sin, our tendency to hurt ourselves and everyone around us.

Jesus Christ is our salvation – not just that he purchased it, but he embodies it as we are connected to him. Our lives are hidden in him and he lives in us (Galatians 2:20; Colossians 3:3). He is our righteousness, our sanctification, and our redemption (1 Corinthians 1:30). It is through him that we are children of God. As our Creator, he represents all humanity before God. Salvation is always in relationship with him, not merely a declaration about where we will go after we die, as if we could exist independently of him. Relationships are complex; they are not just a matter of “yes” or “no.”

The biblical data

Let us return to the Bible. On one side, we see passages that seem to include everyone in the scope of God’s redeeming love: God loved the world; Christ died for all; in him all are reconciled to God. But in other passages, we see that some people reject what Christ has done for them. Some reject him from the start; others reject him after they have started. Many seem to have no chance to even get started.

Calvinism says that Jesus died only for the elect, only for those who God predestined for salvation. Arminians say that Jesus died for everyone. There is biblical support for this, and if a Calvinist abandons one of the five points, it is most likely this one. Calvin himself was not always clear on this topic.

The primary question is what the Bible teaches. Here are some key

verses:

- 2 Corinthians 5:14: “We are convinced that one died for all, and therefore all died.”
 - Colossians 1:19-20: “God was pleased...to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”
 - 1 Timothy 2:3-6: “God...wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.... Christ Jesus...gave himself as a ransom for all people.”
 - 1 Timothy 4:9-10: “The living God...is the Savior of all people, and especially of those who believe.”
 - Hebrews 2:9: “Jesus...suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.”
- 1 John 2:2: “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”

Some of these verses distinguish between believers and nonbelievers, and say that Jesus is the Savior of both categories. Calvinists, based on their understanding of how predestination works, suggest a different meaning for these verses. I have read those suggestions, but they seem to me to be contorted and special pleading. I think the better exegesis is that these verses indicate that Jesus died for all people, and I will fit my understanding of predestination around that, rather than let my prior understanding dictate what the meaning of these verses is.

Jesus is the atoning sacrifice for the whole world, but not everyone ends up being saved. How can that be? Arminians have an answer, but I do not think that their answer does justice to the above scriptures. Arminians say that Jesus' sacrifice is not effective until a person accepts it, or has faith in Jesus. But this falls short of what the verses actually say. How could Jesus'

effectiveness be limited by human unbelief?

Jesus died for all people, he ransomed all people, he paid for the sins of all people, and he reconciled all people (2 Corinthians 5:14-19). God is “not counting people’s sins against them” (verse 19). As Paul said, love does not keep a record of wrongdoing (1 Corinthians 13:5). His love (which is far more powerful than ours) covers a multitude of sins (1 Peter 4:8). So at the final judgment, all the charges have been dropped. Jesus paid for all our sins, even the sin of unbelief, and he did it 2000 years ago. It was done before we lived and before we believed. Forgiveness has been granted; God is not waiting on us to believe before we are actually forgiven. There is no longer any debt to speak of.

The gates of heaven are flung wide open – any yet not everyone goes in (Revelation 21:25-27; 22:15). It seems that not everyone *wants* to go in. Although God wants everyone to be saved (1 Timothy 2:4), not everyone wants to be saved. Some do not want to live in a kingdom in which there is no more pride and selfishness. They do not want life on the terms that God gives it. They want God to stay out of their life. God gives forgiveness, reconciliation, and acceptance, but they do not want it. They have chosen what the evil spirits chose long ago.

God gives, but does not force. This is not built on any prior belief in “free will” – it is an observation of the biblical data: God desires salvation for all, and purchases salvation for all, but not all end up with the result that God desires. Since all created things are sustained by Jesus’ word (Hebrews 1:3), there is no such thing as a will that is totally free (except for God). God puts boundaries on what a human can choose – we cannot choose to have life inherent within ourselves, for example. We are finite. He may influence our desires, to cause us to want certain things rather than others, but he apparently does not force all of our choices. People can grieve the Holy Spirit

and despise his gifts. His grace may be powerfully attractive, but some people resist, even after experiencing the heavenly gifts.

Some say that divine perseverance will eventually overcome all objections, and everyone will end up saved (even the evil spirits, according to some). But there is no biblical evidence for this. The Bible indicates that some will be outside, and the story of the Bible ends with that situation.

God does not decree evil, but he allows it. He allows things (traditionally called his “permissive will”) to happen outside of his decrees. Just as he allowed Adam and Eve to disobey his command, he allows people today to reject what he commands. Although he has the power to force them to do whatever he wants, he does not always use his power in the way that we might think that he would. Our understanding of power, and its proper use, is fallible. We cannot rely on our logic to tell us what God must do with his sovereignty. Rather, we must see what he actually does, as he reveals in Scripture, and what we see in Scripture and in experience is that he gives grace to all, but not everyone responds to his grace in the right way.

God welcomes us to come, but he does not manipulate us so that we always do his bidding. He does not force us to enjoy what he enjoys. Although no one can snatch us out of his kingdom, it seems that he allows people to opt out (just as he allowed spirit beings to rebel long ago).

Assurance in Christ

Our assurance is not in our logic, but in Christ. We can be confident that he will never leave us or forsake us. He died for us when we were sinners; we can be doubly sure that he is on our side when we love him. We can also be confident that Jesus will not force us to be in his kingdom when we don’t want to be. (Calvinists agree, with the explanation that God causes the elect to *want* to be in the kingdom.) Christ is always willing. If we want to be with him, we get what we want. On the other hand, if we want him to leave us

alone, we also get what we want. As C.S. Lewis wrote,

There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, "Thy will be done," and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done." All that are in Hell, choose it.... No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. For those who knock it is opened. (*The Great Divorce*)

People who want the salvation that God gives – life with God in love, joy and peace – will accept it; those who do not want what he gives will not be forced to live in it.

So, is it possible for someone to be enlightened, to repent, to taste the heavenly gift and experience the Holy Spirit, and despite all that, to eventually turn away from it? The author of Hebrews implies that this is a real possibility, although he does not say it is a common one. We would hope that it is extremely rare.

Does this mean that a person's salvation depends partly on what that person does – on what the person chooses? The salvation is given regardless of what the person does or wants. The person can choose to enjoy it, or choose to despise it, but the person cannot choose whether it is given. The person can have eternal joy in what was given, or the person can have eternal frustration in trying to live in a way that is contrary to the way that God has created them to be. If we choose to enjoy what God has given, it is good, but we cannot take any credit for enjoying it. Salvation is 100 percent grace; even our ability to enjoy it is a gift we did not deserve.

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A Priest Like Melchizedek:

Hebrews 7

The New Testament often quotes the Old Testament. One of the most commonly quoted verses is Psalm 110:1: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’” The Gospels tell us that Jesus quoted this verse as a scripture about the Messiah.

If we read further in this psalm, we will come to verse 4, which has a thought found nowhere else in the Old Testament. This Lord is to be a priest—not a Levitical priest, but a different kind of priest. The book of Hebrews tells us that this verse of the psalm is also about Jesus. It briefly mentions this in chapter 5, and then again at the end of chapter 6, telling us that Jesus “has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” Chapter 7 explains this in more detail.

A priest without genealogy (verses 1-3)

The chapter begins with a quick summary of the story: “This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything” (see Genesis 14).

First, the unusual name is explained. The Hebrew word *melek* means king, and *tsedek* means righteousness, so his name is explained as meaning “king of righteousness.” And since *shalom* means peace, he was also the “king of peace.” These meanings are significant because Melchizedek prefigures Jesus Christ.

Next, we are told that Melchizedek was “without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.” From the grammar, it is not clear whether Melchizedek is like the Son in every respect, or just in being a

perpetual priest. Jesus had parents, a genealogy, a birth and a death, so he was different in these respects. Scripture does not say that Melchizedek *was* the Son of God—just that he was “like” the Son.

However, Melchizedek had no parents that are mentioned in Scripture. His position as priest did not depend on his parents or his genealogy (unlike the Levitical priests). His priesthood was a different kind, a different order. Similarly, Scripture says nothing about his birth or death (unlike the patriarchs, who are carefully chronicled). He did not create a dynasty of priests, each dying and passing the priesthood to a son. Today we might say today that he came out of nowhere, and then disappeared – neither of those expressions meant in a literal way.

Melchizedek remains known as a priest even today. “He remains a priest forever...is declared to be living” (verses 3, 8). (A similar thought may be in Luke 20:37-38—the patriarchs are among “the living.”) This mysterious priest is the prototype of Jesus Christ. Psalm 110 predicted that the Lord would be a priest in the same way: not according to genealogy, but by special appointment.

This order of priests was significant in several ways:

- 1) It was more important than the Levitical priesthood,
- 2) It implied that the Levitical priesthood was temporary and
- 3) The new order was permanent.

Greater than Levi (verses 4-7)

Although little is known about Melchizedek, we can discern that he was important. Abraham gave him 10 percent of the spoils of war (verse 4). The old covenant required the Israelites to give 10 percent to the Levites, but Abraham gave 10 percent to Melchizedek even though Melchizedek was not a Levite (verses 5-6). He was getting priestly honors before Levi was even born.

From this, the author constructs a hypothetical argument: “One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.” Levi didn’t actually pay tithes to Melchizedek, but in a figure of speech he did. The point is that Abraham is greater than Levi, since Abraham is Levi’s ancestor, and Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, since Abraham gave tithes to him, so Melchizedek is greater than Levi.

Verses 6-7 emphasize Melchizedek’s greatness: He not only received a tithe, he also blessed Abraham. “And without doubt the lesser is blessed by the greater.” Abraham is the lesser person in this case—but the real point of comparison being made is with Levi. Since Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, he is also greater than Levi, and—most important for the book of Hebrews—his priesthood is more important than the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priests die, but Jesus has been made a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, a priesthood that is more important for our salvation.

New priesthood implies a new law (verses 11-19)

Now the author observes that “if perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?” Note here that the law was given on the basis of the priesthood. The law was designed with the Levitical priesthood in mind—the law and the priesthood went together. But neither the law nor the priests could bring people to perfection. That is why Psalm 110 spoke of another priesthood.

The descendants of Aaron would be replaced by a better priesthood, a better priest—and that has important consequences: “When the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also” (verse 12). What law is changed? The law that said only Levites could be priests. Which law said that? The old

covenant. This will become stated more directly later in this chapter, and developed in the next few chapters.

But first, the author wants to make certain basic facts clear. “He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe” (verse 13). We are speaking about Jesus, of whom it is said that he is a priest after the order of Melchizedek—but Jesus was not a Levite. He belonged to the tribe of Judah, and no one from that tribe was ever a priest, and Moses did not authorize anyone from Judah to be a priest (verse 14).

“And what we have said”—that is, that the law has been changed—“is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.” Jesus was appointed as priest not by a law that focused on genealogy, but because he lives forever at God’s right hand. From this fact alone, we can see that the Law of Moses is no longer in force.

“The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.” The law that restricted the priesthood to Levites was ineffective.

How much was “set aside”? Certainly, it was the regulation restricting the priesthood. But no one expected that restriction to produce perfection, anyway. There is more involved than just one regulation. It is “the law” *as a whole* that is under discussion here. The law of Moses did not have the power to make anyone perfect. The best that the old covenant could offer was not good enough. Now, instead of the law, we are given a better hope, and since we have something better than the law, we are now able to draw near to God in a way that was not possible under the law of Moses.

Guaranteed by an oath (verses 20-26)

The author then uses a small detail from Psalm 110 to emphasize the importance of Jesus' appointment as priest. God himself makes an oath to appoint Jesus as high priest (verse 20). The descendants of Aaron became priests without any oath, but Jesus became priest by a special oath.

The old covenant was given by God, but here is a new word from God—not just an oath but also a promise of permanence: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever’” (Hebrews 7:21, quoting Psalm 110:4). When this new priest is appointed, the old priesthood becomes obsolete. The old regulation was set aside. A new and better hope is given to bring people to a perfection that the law could not give.

“Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.” Here the word *covenant* is used for the first time in this letter, almost casually. It will be picked up again in the next three chapters for more detailed comment, but even here it is implied to be a replacement for the inferior, ineffective covenant given through Moses. The discussion is not just about one priestly regulation but a covenant, which includes many laws.

The author then contrasts the mortality of the Levitical priests with the immortality of Jesus Christ: “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.” The fact that there were many Levitical priests is an illustration of their weakness, not of their effectiveness. The genealogy that validated them also testified to the weakness of the entire system. Each high priest held office only temporarily, and the entire priesthood itself was temporary.

In contrast, because Jesus lives forever, he will forever continue to be our High Priest, because his priesthood is effective in bringing us to perfection: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.”

“Such a high priest truly meets our need,” the author says. Jesus is exactly what we need. He was human, so he knows our needs (2:14-18), and he is now in heaven, in power, so he can effectively intercede for us. We can therefore be confident that we can approach God through him (4:14-16). He gives us access to God in a way that the Levitical priests could only symbolize.

Exactly what we need (verses 26-28)

“Such a high priest meets our need — one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.” The Old Testament priests had to make sin sacrifices every day, showing that the final solution had not yet arrived. But Jesus was so effective that once was enough. It did not have to be repeated.

The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus did not, because he had no sin. When he offered himself, it was not for himself, but for everyone else. He was the kind of sacrifice we really needed — without blemish, fit even for the holiest place in heaven. The old covenant appointed imperfect men as priests (7:28), but God promised to appoint another priest, a permanent priest — which implies someone who is perfect in himself and perfect in his work (Psalm 110:4).

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The Superior Ministry of Jesus:

Hebrews 8

The New Testament tells us that Jesus is our intercessor, our mediator, our Savior and King. But only the book of Hebrews tells us that he is our priest. This unique concept is the central message of Hebrews, the main idea from which the others flow. Priesthood is the purpose for which Jesus was made human (2:17); his priesthood is the reason we should hold fast to our faith (4:14); and the proof that the old covenant has been set aside (7:12).

Jesus guarantees a better covenant, a better relationship with God. And because he lives forever at God's right hand, "he is able to save completely those who come to God through him" (7:25). The old covenant priests could not save anyone, but Jesus is fully effective at what they could only picture. Jesus does it not by adding himself to the old covenant, but by fulfilling the old so thoroughly that the old becomes unnecessary. He supersedes the old covenant, replacing it with a better covenant (7:22).

When we have Jesus, we do not need the old covenant. The practices commanded in the Old Covenant (circumcision, various rituals, sabbaths and festivals) have no spiritual merit for the Christian. All we need is Jesus.

The main point (verses 1-2)

"The main point of what we are saying is this..." After seven chapters, here is what we should have firmly in mind: "We do have such a high priest." What humans need, what God has promised, has finally come. We have the priest who is able to save us completely. We need to focus our thoughts on him, hold fast to him and have confidence in him.

He is our priest not only because he lives forever, but because he has been exalted to a position of royal and spiritual power: He "sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and...serves in the sanctuary, the

true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being” (8:1-2). What earthly tabernacles and priests could only picture, Jesus Christ is. He is the reality forever, not a temporary imitation.

A superior ministry (verses 3-6)

The author has capped off seven chapters with a simple summary: Jesus is our high priest. What then? The letter begins to move forward by discussing the work of a priest: “Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer” (8:3). What did Jesus offer? The author has already told us in 7:27, and he will develop it more fully in chapter 9, but here he mentions it only briefly. First, he wants to set the scene for chapter 9 by discussing the tabernacle.

If Jesus were on earth, he observes, “he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law” (8:4). The earthly rituals were being done according to the laws of Moses. The temple work was being done by Levitical priests, as the law required. Jesus did not work in the earthly temple, but the earthly sanctuary does teach us something about the priestly work of Jesus.

The tabernacle of Moses, and later the temple, was “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.” It is therefore important, and “this is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (8:5). The author is quoting Exodus 25:40 to show that the earthly tabernacle was a copy, not the real thing. The Levitical priests served as a copy, and the rituals they performed were copies, not the spiritual realities.

“But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises” (8:6). The Greek verb is past

tense: the new covenant “has been enacted through better promises” (NRSV). It is already established. Just as the heavenly sanctuary is better than the earthly one, so also is Jesus’ priestly ministry better than the Levitical ministry, and so also is the new covenant better than the old.

The tabernacle was merely a copy, a cheap imitation, in comparison to the heavenly reality. In the same way, the Levitical priesthood, although divinely ordained, was merely an imitation of a heavenly reality fulfilled by Jesus Christ. The Levitical rituals came in great variety: water rituals, grain rituals, special clothing, hand motions, killing of animals and releasing of animals. All these rituals were fulfilled by and superseded by the work of Jesus Christ.

We do not see exact correspondence for every detail, nor do we need to. We cannot insist that the spiritual is just like the physical. We do not expect that the heavenly sanctuary has wool and linen curtains, bronze basins, acacia framing and red ram skins. Indeed, it does not need curtains, frames and skins at all. Those are merely physical things that corresponded to a spiritual reality.

Jesus’ priestly work is much better than the old priesthood — in quality, not quantity. The work he did once was better than millions of rituals done by Levites. Christ’s work was so much superior that it did not have to be repeated. It was a different kind of priesthood. We should expect major differences between spiritual realities and earthly copies.

In the same way, we should expect the new covenant to be different in quality from the old covenant. Just as every ritual has been superseded, so also is every detail of the law. In some cases we can see how the new covenant modifies or clarifies an old law, but in other cases we see laws disappear without any particular replacement. The new is better than the old, as far as heaven is from earth. The old covenant promised a long life in the land of Israel; the new covenant promises eternal life with God. It is a very

different kind of covenant.

Predicted in the Scriptures (verses 7-13)

The author of Hebrews likes to show that the Old Testament Scriptures contain hints of the dramatic change brought by Christ. There are hints of a “rest” to come, hints of a priesthood to come, hints of a spiritual reality that supersedes and replaces the rituals. Now he shows that a change in covenants was also predicted. “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another.” The fact that a new covenant was predicted, implied that something was wrong with the Sinai covenant.

“God found fault with the people,” but it is also correct to say that there was something lacking in the old covenant. The author has already said that the old covenant could not make anyone perfect (7:11, 19). It could point toward perfection, but it could not bring it. Many Jews thought it was good enough, but it was not, and that is why God predicted a new covenant:

“The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah” (8:8). This is quoted from Jeremiah 31:31, which is one of many predictions of a new relationship between God and humans. The prophets described it as a new spirit, a new heart, a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant. This covenant would be made not only with Israelites, but also open to Gentiles.

“It will not be like the covenant I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord” (8:9). Because the Israelites repeatedly broke the old covenant, the new covenant will be different.

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

their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (8:10). The Israelites had some of God’s laws in their minds, and they sometimes wanted to obey them. But this prophecy implies that the new covenant will have a different level of internalization. The relationship will be characterized by attitude, not external rituals.

“No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (8:11). All humans will have equal access to God; no longer will one tribe have special status. Jeremiah’s prophecy does not spell out all the details, but the beginning is here of a very different covenant.

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (8:12). The covenant does not predict perfect people — it predicts perfect forgiveness, a forgiveness available to everyone based on God’s grace, without any priests or rituals. The fact that this prophecy was given implied that the old covenant was ineffective and soon to be replaced. “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear” (8:13).

Even in Jeremiah’s day, the old covenant was destined to come to an end. Israel’s history had already shown that this covenant could not bring the people toward perfection. God’s plan required a new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness, a more spiritual covenant, a covenant with a perfect priest, who made a perfect offering for all sin. That is the subject of chapter 9.

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A Perfect Sacrifice:

Hebrews 9

The book of Hebrews tells us that Jesus Christ is the mediator of a better covenant. He has a better priesthood and a better ministry. Chapter 9 then describes in more detail the priestly ministry of our Savior.

The tabernacle (verses 1-5)

First, the old covenant ritual is described: “The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.” The author does not write about the covenants made with Noah or Abraham, even though they came first. Rather, by “first” he means the covenant made at Sinai, because it is the covenant replaced by Jesus’ new covenant. The Sinai covenant had laws about how people could approach God.

“A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place” (see Exodus 25:23-40). The author describes the tabernacle rather than the temple, perhaps because the biblical details were given for a tabernacle, and that is what would be familiar to the readers.

“Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant” (see Exodus 25:10-22; 30:1-6). “This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now” (for details see Exodus 16:33-34; 25:18; Numbers 17:10; Deuteronomy 10:1-5).

What the rituals could not do (verses 6-10)

“When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high

priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.” The high priest entered the Most Holy Place only on the Day of Atonement. Before he entered, he sacrificed a bull for his own sins, and later, a goat for the people (Leviticus 16:1-17).

What is the spiritual significance of this symbolism? “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning.” In the tabernacle symbolism, God was near but not accessible. The symbolism hinted that there was a way to approach God, but almost no one could do it.

“This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.” Despite the sacrifices, the people were unable to go to God, unable to enter his presence. The rituals could not bring about the reality that they symbolized.

“They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order.” Rituals are external actions, and they cannot change the heart. They do not cleanse the conscience. They were valid only until Christ came. Our author mentions the Levitical rituals, but we can follow the logic to see more. External rituals like circumcision are no longer required. Worship details no longer apply. The entire covenant is obsolete.

Christ’s work in heaven (verses 11-15)

Now, in contrast to the ritual works of the old covenant, we are told about the superior ministry of Christ: “But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation.” The better blessings have already begun, the author

reminds us. We already have forgiveness and direct access to God, because Christ went through the heavenly holy place.

Jesus Christ entered the reality, not the imitation, and he did it by a better sacrifice: “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption.” By dying for us, the Son of God was able to redeem us once for all. It was a perfect, sinless sacrifice, presented in the heavenly holy place, fully effective, never needing to be done again. This was a sharp contrast with the Levitical rituals, which were repeated continually yet never bringing the people closer to God.

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean” (see Numbers 19:1-22). The heifer ritual, like the others, had obscure details that had nothing to do with a person’s conscience. Christ is much better than a heifer, and we should expect that his sacrifice achieves a much better kind of cleansing. “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!”

He offered a perfect sacrifice, willingly, and this cleanses us on the inside and enables us to worship God. We can do what the high priest could only symbolize: we can approach God with total confidence. We have been washed and purified by the blood of Christ — all sins are removed. If a burned-up heifer could ritually cleanse an Israelite, we can be sure that the sacrifice of Jesus is more than enough for us.

Since Christ brings us complete forgiveness, he “is the mediator of a new covenant.” He gives us a relationship with God on a completely new basis — not the old covenant, but the new. Here is the result: “those who are called

may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”

This was achieved, the author reminds us, because “he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” Under the first covenant, many external regulations defined sin. Christ set us free from that. He forgives any kind of sin, but he sets us free from the rituals that were important under the old covenant.

Covenant enacted by blood (verses 16-25)

This new covenant could come about only through a better sacrifice — something far superior to animals. The author begins by using an illustration from the legal customs of the day. He uses the example of a will, because the Greek word for covenant could also mean a will. It was a contract that became valid only when someone died. “In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.”

The Sinai covenant also involved death — the death of animals. “This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep’” (quoting Exodus 24:5-8).

“The law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.” The Law of Moses required blood in its rituals of cleansing (9:21-22), but drops of blood do not make anything physically clean. What the Israelites needed was a spiritual cleansing — an elimination of spiritual defilement, imperfection, sin, guilt and anything that kept them away from God’s purpose for them. They needed

forgiveness.

Animal blood cannot change spiritual realities, and animal sacrifices cannot eliminate sin (10:4), but the old covenant nevertheless prescribed animal sacrifices for forgiveness. Just as the tabernacle pictured a heavenly reality, these animal sacrifices pictured a future death that would be effective in removing sin.

The earthly tabernacle had to be ritually purified by animal sacrifices, but the heavenly holy place required a better sacrifice (9:23). The spiritual distance between God and humans required a spiritual sacrifice — someone with a perfect conscience, totally without sin.

“Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence.” Jesus was not dealing with a physical, symbolic copy. He was not working with external rituals. Rather, he was dealing with the real spiritual problem, and he did his work in heaven. It was a better place, and a better sacrifice.

Humans are both matter and spirit; Christ’s work was both physical and spiritual. He became fully human, mortal and physical, in order to redeem humans. But his redemption had to be on the spiritual level as well: a conscience untainted by sin, a life willingly offered on behalf of others, a person worthy of entering heaven itself to intercede for humans. He offered himself, both body and spirit.

Jesus is now in heaven to help us (9:24). He is the God-man who eliminates the distance between God and humans. His work is fully effective — for all time. “Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own.” Once was enough, unlike the work of the Levitical priests, who had to repeat the same rituals over and over. The fact that the rituals had to be

repeated showed that their work was not effective. True cleansing was possible only through a better sacrifice, a better priest, a better covenant.

The decisive sacrifice (verses 26-28)

Jesus did not go to heaven to perform endless rituals. He is not copying the old covenant, because the old covenant had only temporary substitutes. Jesus does not have to suffer forever to rescue us from sin. He gave himself once, and that was enough.

“He has appeared once for all.” When? “At the end of the ages.” Why? “To do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” Even in the first century, believers were living in the “end of the ages” — “in these last days” (1:2). The old era had ended; a new age had begun with Jesus Christ. The spiritual world was radically different. The sacrifice of all time had been given.

But the story is not yet done. Just as ordinary humans appear once, and then will appear again in the judgment, so also with Christ. “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

Each person dies for his or her own sins, but Jesus died for others. Each person will face the judgment for his or her sins, but Jesus will be the judge. His death took away their sins, and when he appears again, he will not be bringing their sins against them. Rather, he will be bringing eternal salvation for all who trust in him.

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Perfect Results: Hebrews 10:1-18

The book of Hebrews explains that Jesus Christ is the perfect priest and the perfect sacrifice. Chapter 10 concludes the center section of the book by discussing the perfect results of Jesus' priestly work.

The law was not effective (verses 1-4)

The chapter begins with a conclusion: "The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves." This builds on chapter 9, which sketched the rituals of the Levitical high priest and stated that Jesus did far better, offering a perfect sacrifice (himself) in a perfect place (heaven). The Levitical rituals had to be continually repeated, but Jesus' sacrifice was fully effective and therefore did not have to be done again.

Just as the tabernacle was a copy of the true holy place in heaven (8:5), so also the rituals were copies or shadows of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle and its rituals (all included in the word "law") represented good things, but could not bring them about. The law talked about cleansing and forgiveness, but could not cleanse or forgive.

Are the "good things" already here, or are they yet future? The grammar in this verse could be understood in either way, but Hebrews 9:11 makes it clear: Christ is the "high priest of the good things that are now already here." Forgiveness and cleansing and relationship with God are already given through Jesus Christ, and the new covenant has already been established (8:6). There are better things yet to come (9:28), but the author's stress in chapter 10 is on things that Christ has already brought.

The law is a shadow, not the spiritual reality. "For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect

those who draw near to worship.” No matter how many animals were killed, no matter how much water was used, the law could never achieve the forgiveness that the new covenant gives.

The law could not make people perfect; this implies that people *are* made perfect in the new covenant. However, the word “perfect” can create unrealistic ideas. Faith in Christ does not make people morally perfect. We still sin, and we still fall short of what we ought to be. The Greek word could also be translated as “complete,” and this is probably a better translation. We are completely forgiven by Christ, completely cleansed, and therefore perfectly qualified to worship God, perfectly able to have a relationship with him.

The context shows what the author has in mind: the removal of sin (verse 4) and a cleansed conscience (verse 2), so that we can approach God to worship him (verse 1b). The author seems to view all of these as the same basic concept. We are qualified to approach him because he has qualified us by forgiving us. The old covenant could *picture* forgiveness, but could not achieve it.

If the law could qualify the people for worship, then there would be no more need for sacrifices. If the sacrifices could achieve what they pictured, “Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.” The logic is this: If the sacrifices completely prepared people for approaching God, then further sacrifices would not be needed. The people would not have a guilty conscience, and would not feel any need to offer sacrifices for sin. So we conclude that the sacrifices did not completely qualify anyone.

The law was inadequate, and the author implies that the new covenant gives what the old could not: a cleansed conscience. Through faith in the

effectiveness of Christ's sacrifice, we do not feel guilty. Rather, we feel forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by God. Rather than being excluded from the holy place, we are invited in.

The author then summarizes the argument against the old covenant system: The sacrifices, instead of cleansing the people, "are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins." A physical substance, such as blood, cannot remove a spiritual problem. The old covenant was designed to picture forgiveness; it was not designed to bring forgiveness.

The Old Testament saints were forgiven their sins, but it was based on faith and God's grace, not because they had paid a big enough price or earned it. Forgiveness was available, but it was not through the covenant rituals. The sacrifices had a shadow of forgiveness — they spoke about forgiveness and they pictured forgiveness — but they were not the way that forgiveness actually comes.

Christ is the answer (verses 5-10)

The author begins verse 5 with the word "therefore," meaning "because of what I have just said." Here, we might paraphrase it like this: "Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ came into the world and said..." and then follows a quote from the Greek version of Psalm 40:6-8: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, my God.'"

This is one of several Old Testament passages that foreshadow the end of the sacrificial system. Our author rephrases the psalm to emphasize his point, and he begins by giving the label "first" to a point that he will come back to shortly: "First he said, 'Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin

offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them.”

To make another point, he adds a comment: “though they were offered in accordance with the law.” He is making a contrast between what the law required, and what God ultimately wanted. (Jeremiah 7:22-23 has a similar contrast.) God gave the law not as a permanent ideal, but as a temporary system that would prepare the way for Christ, who brought the reality that the old rituals pictured. The old covenant law was not the final word on what God wanted.

What did he want? Verse 9 says, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” God wanted the people to obey him — but only Christ did it perfectly. The early church understood this psalm as a messianic psalm because Jesus fulfilled its words in a way that no psalm-writer could.

Then comes an important conclusion: “He sets aside the first to establish the second.” What is the “first”? In the immediate context, it is sacrifices and offerings, but our writer has also used the word “first” five times to refer to the old covenant. The covenant with its sacrifices and rituals has been set aside.

What has been established? The doing of God’s will. The word “establish” was also used for covenants, and the word “second” was also used for the new covenant (8:7). Our author is making a literary parallel here, using Psalm 40 as a miniature picture of the change in covenants. Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ said, Out with the old, and in with the new! The new covenant been established by the obedience of Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the deficiency of the old covenant.

Verse 10 begins, “And by that will...” Whose will is this talking about — God’s will, or Christ’s willingness to obey it? It is not clear; perhaps our author left it ambiguous because both meanings are true. Since Christ conformed his will to God’s, they had the same will. It is by God’s choice,

and by Christ's obedience, that "we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all."

We have been made holy — this is another way of describing the results of the new covenant. Our sins are removed, our conscience is cleared, and we are made holy, so we can approach God to worship. How is it done? Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ — a sacrifice that involved both his will and his body, both his mind and his flesh. Further, we do God's will when we accept this as our means of sanctification.

Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth, between spirit and matter, in a way that nothing else could. Only he could make an offering on earth that was acceptable in heaven. The flesh and blood of his body was no different than the flesh and blood of any other crucified man, but it was effective for our sanctification and our forgiveness because Jesus was perfectly obedient, willingly obedient.

Humans are both physical and spiritual, and we sin in the flesh and in the mind. The salvation that we have in Christ redeems our bodies and our minds, sanctifying both for true worship of God. We are not saved by a purely physical sacrifice, nor by a purely spiritual one. A physical body had to be willingly given, because the spiritual sacrifice had to be expressed in the physical world. In Christ, we have been completely redeemed. His will and his body were given for us, and it was fully effective, once for all time.

Perfect forever (verses 11-18)

Our acceptance by God does not depend on the performance of rituals (either ancient or modern) — it depends on what Christ has already done, and it is therefore guaranteed. This is contrasted with the ineffective work of the old covenant priests: "Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins." Was it an exercise in futility? No, it was a picture, a

drama that was worth repeating until Christ fulfilled it.

“But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.” The Levitical priests stood while they worked; Christ is able to sit (figuratively speaking) because his work is done. There will be more work in the future (verse 13), but he is sitting now, “for by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.”

The work of sanctification is done (verse 10), and it is still being done (verse 14). Christ is still working in our lives, but the work is based on the sacrifice that was done in the past, once for all time. He has completely cleansed us, qualified us to be in God’s presence.

As evidence, he quotes Jeremiah 31:33 again, the prophecy of the new covenant: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds.” This is the work now being done as we are in the process of “being made holy.”

Then our author skips down to the last part of Jeremiah 31:34: “Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more.” He draws this conclusion: “And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.” This is the grand finale: Our sins are forgiven; there is no need for animal sacrifices. To us, this may seem a minor point, an anticlimax, something we take for granted. But to our author, this is a major point, the point he has been hammering away at for four chapters. The sacrificial system is not needed any more. The old covenant has been set aside. It never was effective, and Christ has set us free from it.

Apparently the audience of Hebrews found the sacrificial system attractive. It was a God-given pattern of worship, and the people saw no reason to give it up. Even if God allowed other forms of worship, wouldn’t it

be better to stick to the original plan? Wouldn't this assure us that we were doing something that God likes? No, our author says. God does not necessarily want us to do something that he commanded for a different people centuries ago. He didn't like it in Jeremiah's day, or when Psalm 40 was written. The law was good for a time, but its time is past.

In the early church, when Jewish people first believed in Jesus as the Messiah, many of them continued to participate in the temple rituals, either in person or through the offerings collected in the synagogues. At first this seemed harmless, and the people were allowed to continue their customs. However, as time went on, it began to seem that the rituals were a competitor to Christ. People were looking to the rituals for assurance, rather than to Christ. In their minds, their relationship with God was based partly on their participation in the rituals. They probably thought, Doesn't this make us more obedient, more pleasing to God? Even if the laws were optional, wouldn't it be *better* to continue them? And, aren't those who continue better than those who don't? The rituals could easily lead to judgmentalism.

In response, our author argues, chapter after chapter, that the rituals are obsolete imitations. This is not the better way — this is the inferior way. Rituals do not achieve anything. Our standing with God is based on what Christ has done, and he has set aside the old covenant. Throughout the book, Christ is compared to various aspects of the old covenant, and Christ is always better. Does our author want his people to participate in the sacrifices and rituals? Probably not. Does he command them to quit? No, not directly, but he probably wants them to come to that decision themselves.

What he commands them is to look to Jesus. Old covenant rituals are ineffective. They are shadows — copies. Jesus is the reality, and he is fully effective. There is no need for obsolete rituals. They are not a badge of better Christianity — they are an unnecessary burden that can block our view of

Christ.

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Exhortations, Warning, and Reassurance:

Hebrews 10:19-39

Practical exhortations (verses 19-25)

Hebrews is a practical book. After each chapter or so of doctrinal explanation, the author puts in the word “therefore,” and points out how believers should respond to what he has said about Christ. At several points in the book, he says, “Therefore, let us do such and such.” At 10:19, after several chapters of doctrine, the author comes to an exhortation passage. This is a climactic point in the book, with five exhortations. Since the old covenant is done away, and since we are forgiven by Christ, what are we supposed to do?

The author begins these exhortations in verse 19 by reminding us that we have two major benefits in Christ: First, “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” and second, there is “a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body” (verse 20). The old tabernacle had a curtain that closed off the Most Holy Place, which symbolized the throne of God. Only the high priest could go into that area, and he could do it only once a year, and only after sacrifices for sin. In the symbolism, God was near but not accessible. But now, the author says, we have a way opened for us through that curtain. Our high priest doesn’t just represent us – he brings us in. We are welcome in the presence of God because Christ has cleansed us, once for all time and all peoples. He did it not through an animal sacrifice, but through his own body. He is the way that we can enter. As verse 21 says, “We have a great priest over the house of God.” Christ connects us to God.

Since we have these benefits, he says, we should respond in five ways:

- 1) “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full

assurance that faith brings” (verse 22). We should believe that Christ has cleansed us, and use this cleansing in the way that God intended: that we draw closer to God. The rituals of the old covenant symbolized separation; the coming of Jesus Christ reveals that we should approach God. He *wants* us to be with him. He wants us to come with sincerity, wanting to be with him, and with faith. Why can we be confident? Because “our hearts [have been] sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.” In the old tabernacle, it was the altar that was sprinkled. Here, it is our hearts, because our hearts needed to be cleansed — and they have been cleansed. We have been forgiven by the death of Christ. This is symbolized in baptism: our bodies are washed with water, not so much because our *bodies* are dirty, but as a ritual that symbolizes the inner cleaning that Jesus has given us. If we feel guilty, then we are not going to want to come to God with confidence. But Jesus says that our sins have been forgiven, and we can have confidence. We are fully qualified, and God wants us to come.

- 2) “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (verse 23). Why? Because “he who promised is faithful.” Christ is faithful toward us, so we should be faithful toward him, keeping him central in our thoughts. We should not give up our hope due to persecution — nor should we allow boredom or the passage of time to cause us to drift away.
- 3) “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” It is not that we should *do* good deeds. That is true, but the focus here is on encouraging *other* people to do good deeds — and not just exhorting, but thinking about, considering *how* we might exhort one another. The good deeds will then be multiplied. Our relationship with God will have results in the way we think about and interact *with*

each other.

- 4) “Not giving up meeting together” (verse 25). Some first-century Jewish Christians were no longer meeting together. Perhaps they were pressured by the Jewish community. Perhaps they were disappointed that Christ had not yet returned. Perhaps they felt that Christianity had become a “Gentile” religion. Some of them, it seems, were more interested in their Jewish heritage than they were in Christ. So the author urges, Don’t drop out! If you don’t *meet* with one another, you can’t show *love* to each other. Christ has been faithful to us, so we should be faithful to one another. Christ calls us not to be loners, but to be in community with other believers.
- 5) “But encouraging one another” (verse 25). The readers needed to encourage one another; mutual encouragement helps everyone stay in the faith. We do this not by frequent use of the word “encourage,” but by *being with* and walking with one another. We share life together. People are encouraged to be faithful to Christ by being involved in a community of people who are faithful *to each other*. That’s how we encourage one another in faith and in faithfulness — “all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Christ will return, and every day, we are closer to the fulfillment of all our hopes and desires. As chapter 9 said, he will “bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.”

One more warning passage (verses 26-31)

Right after these exhortations, the author gives one more strong warning passage to emphasize how important it is for the readers to be doing these things. He describes the alternative: “If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God” (verses 26-27; using words from Isaiah 26:11 and

Zephaniah 1:18).

Does this mean that if we sin after our conversion, then we are doomed? No, all Christians sin after their conversion. Some of these sins are inadvertent, unintended, or accidental, but other sins are committed in moments of weakness, even when we know they are sins. Are they “deliberate” sins that doom us to destruction? No, that is not what the passage is talking about.

The sin under discussion is that of deliberately turning our back on Jesus. If we know that Jesus is the sacrifice for our sins and the High Priest who gives us access to God, and yet we still turn away, the author warns us that there is salvation nowhere else. There is no sacrifice for sins, no other way to be accepted by God, except for what Jesus has already done. If we reject him, we will be afraid of God’s judgment, afraid of the fire that eliminates God’s enemies. They don’t need to be afraid of that fire, but they are. They will be conscious of their sins, yet they have refused the only cleansing that God provides.

Fire is a *cleansing* agent. As Paul describes in 1 Corinthians 3, *everyone’s* work will be tested by fire (1 Corinthians 3:13). Whatever can burn will burn, and the solid stones and metals will remain in place. This corresponds with the fact that all the bad will be removed from our lives and minds, and only the good will remain. People who love righteousness look forward to that kind of cleansing, because wrong ways of thinking are enemies of our happiness, and we want God to remove those problems from us. But those who like sin will be afraid of any such cleansing. The judge is Jesus Christ. He will love them, but they will be embarrassed and want to hide from him. They will be afraid of the judgment, and afraid of the fire that cleanses.

If people reject Jesus, will they be able to come back? We hope so — their lack of faith does not change the fact that Jesus is the Savior of all

peoples. Even while they were his enemies, he died for them, and the sooner they accept that and are thankful for that, the happier they will be. They need not fear, because with Jesus everyone can have confidence to approach the throne of grace. The author is doing his best to encourage them to make the right response.

Then, as he does in several places in this letter, the author makes a comparison with the old covenant:

Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. [See Deuteronomy 17:2-6 for an example.] How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? (verses 28-29)

The “deliberate sin” is a rejection of Jesus, just as in Deuteronomy it was idolatry. Such people know what God has done for them, and yet still reject him. The author reasons that, since we have a better covenant, it is a greater offense to reject the covenant with Jesus. But he does not directly state this — he puts it in the form of a question. Do they deserve punishment? Yes, but we all do. Did Jesus pay for their sins and sanctify them? Yes, he did. Because of Jesus, none of us will be punished in the way that we deserve. Does the author believe that the people who reject Jesus will be punished, or is it simply that they suffer the natural consequences of their own lack of faith and their own fears? It’s hard for us to know, because he puts it as a question, and the question is designed to get people to think, not to state a doctrine.

He implies that rejecting Jesus is comparable to trampling him underfoot. Even though the people were sanctified by the death of Jesus (they were part of the elect), they would (if they rejected his sacrifice) be insulting the Holy Spirit. The purpose throughout this passage is that the readers will *not* fall

away, that they will realize how insulting, how sacrilegious it would be to abandon the faith, to abandon the Christian meetings as if the sacrifice of Christ was nothing more than the death of a despised criminal. He gave his life for them, and they acted as if they didn't care.

The author reminds them that God discerns between good and evil, between faithfulness and betrayal: "For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay' [Deuteronomy 32:35], and again, 'The Lord will judge his people' [Deuteronomy 32:36]. It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (verses 30-31).

Or he could also rightly say, "It is a wonderfully *comforting* thing to be in the hands of the living God." Our hope is that we *will be in his loving embrace*. His presence is a wonderfully *good* thing for those who love him, for those who know that Jesus has qualified them to be with God forevermore. But for those who are afraid, who have rejected the Mediator God has provided, the presence of God will be a dreadful experience. They will, strangely, be frightened of the one who loves them. Jesus has sanctified them, and yet they have rejected the only source of sanctification. They are God's people, and he will judge them — he will repay them according to the way they have responded to Jesus (Matthew 16:27; Romans 2:6; and the overall emphasis of Hebrews).

A word of reassurance (verses 32-39)

In the ancient world, speakers were advised to give encouragements after warnings, and the author of Hebrews does this, too, with a reminder that the readers had responded well in the past:

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. ³³ Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. ³⁴ You suffered along with those in prison and

joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. ³⁵ So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. (verses 32-35)

This passage is one of our few clues about the situation of the readers. Many years earlier, shortly after the readers had accepted the gospel, they endured a time of persecution. They were ridiculed for their faith in Jesus, some were beaten, some were jailed, and their houses were looted. But they did not give up on Jesus then, so the author encourages them that they should not give up on him now. They had faith that God would reward them and replace their material things with better things in the resurrection. Were their previous sacrifices all for nothing? No, the author says. You had faith then; you can exercise the same faith now, because the promises of reward are still good. Do not throw away your hopes for the future.

What should they do? “You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (verse 36). In other words, this is the path with the payoff. The real reward is the presence of God, of being in his family forever, of sharing in his joy forever. If we are faithful to him, he will be faithful to us. (Actually, he is faithful even if we are not, but the point is that we need to desire for and believe in what he is giving, and not give up on it.)

Then he supports his words with some biblical exhortations: “For, ‘In just a little while, he who is coming will come and will not delay’ And, ‘But my righteous one will live by faith. And I take no pleasure in the one who shrinks back” (verse 37, quoting from the Greek version of Habakkuk 2:3-4). The Hebrew version would also be appropriate:

The revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. See, the enemy is puffed up; his desires are not

upright—but the righteous person will live by his faithfulness” (Habakkuk 2:3-4, NIV).

Although God’s promises might sometimes seem to “linger,” they will come right on time—they will not turn out to be false. Therefore, righteous people should not give up their faith. We will live because God is faithful to us; we should therefore be faithful to him and reflect his faithfulness in the way we live. This is a relationship of love between a Father and his children. Although we can contribute nothing that God needs, and not even our best actions are perfect, he is faithful to us because he has committed himself to be our God and Father. He is pleased when we have faith; he is disappointed when we shrink back. (The apostle Paul also uses this passage from Habakkuk to emphasize our need to have faith in Jesus – see Romans 1:17 and Galatians 3:11.)

The author concludes this chapter with a word of confidence: “But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved” (verse 39). This is speaking optimistically; it is not proof that the author knows for a fact that everyone who reads his letter will stay faithful. He writes because he is concerned about them, and he does not warn about outcomes that were irrelevant to his readers. The warnings are real — and so are the promises and rewards. He is putting his words together in the best possible way to try to get the readers to respond positively, but he does not have an infallible knowledge of what they will do. He encourages them in the most positive way that he can. And with this mention of faith, he prepares for the next chapter, often called the faith chapter.

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Faithful Heroes: Hebrews 11:1-7

Hebrews 11 is often called the faith chapter. It describes how various people responded in faith to what God said to them. But these stories are not told as historical trivia — they encourage us to have faith in our situations, too.

An introduction to faith (verses 1-3)

Chapter 10 has just told the readers that God wants his people to “live by faith” (10:38). He wants them to persevere, to do his will and be blessed (verse 36). Christians are people “who believe and are saved” (verse 39). Chapter 11 then describes what faith is like: “Faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” Ancient orators sometimes gave a brief definition of a word they wanted to talk about. This is not a complete definition, but it highlights one characteristic of faith.

Commentators disagree about the precise meaning of the Greek words used here: Is faith a feeling of being sure (as the NIV has it), or is it the “substance” (NKJ) or content of our hope? However, the author is not trying to define faith, but to describe one of the results it has in our lives. His point is that faith means believing and acting on something we cannot see. This is the quality of faith that the author especially wants the readers to imitate.

“This is what the ancients were commended for.” The element of faith is a thread that runs throughout the history of God’s people, and the author brings it down to the present day by adding, “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible” (verse 3, referring to Genesis 1:3 and Psalm 33:6).

From the very beginning to the present moment, faith is needed. Creation itself shows that just because something can’t be seen, doesn’t mean that it

won't happen. The author does not say that God made everything out of nothing (that was a later development in Christian theology) — he only says that he made the visible out of the invisible; that is the specific contrast he wants to make. Our future is based not on what we see today, but on something we do not see: God.

Abel and Enoch (verses 4-6)

With that brief introduction, the author starts to give examples: “By faith Abel brought God a better offering than Cain did. By faith he was commended as righteous, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith Abel still speaks, even though he is dead.” Genesis tells us very little about Abel: He brought an offering, and God looked on him with favor (Genesis 4:4). It does not tell us why his offering was better than Cain's (in ancient Israel, grain was just as legitimate an offering as a lamb was), and it says nothing about faith. Nevertheless, the author of Hebrews believes that if God was pleased, then Abel must have had faith.

The next example is Enoch: “By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death: ‘He could not be found, because God had taken him away.’ For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God” (Hebrews 11:5, quoting Genesis 5:24). Again, Genesis says little about Enoch, but Jewish legends said that he was taken into heaven, and this is reflected in the author's comments — that Enoch did not die. God took him because he “walked with God,” which presumably included faith. We do not know exactly what he believed, or what he did.

The readers probably do not need any proof that Enoch had faith, because they already know that Enoch was one of the “good guys.” The author is not trying to argue his case with logic here — he is painting a picture, presenting faith not as an unusual demand, but as normal for the people of God.

The readers already know that faith is good, but the author is using his

skill as an orator to build positive emotions for faith, when the readers already face possibly unpleasant consequences for having faith in Jesus Christ. For Abel, faith meant an early death; for Enoch it meant the opposite. Either way, the people of God need faith.

After these two introductory examples, the author states the lesson he wants to highlight: “Without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” The author reminds his readers that God rewards the faithful — those who seek him. Although we cannot see God, we have evidence that he exists. In addition to supernatural rewards, faith has natural rewards in the here and now: Faith feels better than fear.

Noah (verse 7)

The author emphasizes his point more by beginning each sentence with “by faith”: “By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that is in keeping with faith.” For Noah, the author has more biblical information: God warned Noah about a flood, told him to build an ark, and Noah obeyed and saved himself and his family (Genesis 6–9). Noah didn’t really condemn the world (God did that, based on their behavior), but his faithful example was a stark contrast to how evil the world had become — no one repented even after 120 years of warning.

By his faith Noah became an heir of righteousness — he is the first person in the Bible to be called righteous (Genesis 7:1). He was considered right with God because he was faithful. The Greek word *pistis* can mean either faith or faithfulness, and Hebrews often uses it in the sense of faithfulness, or obedience, and it is sometimes hard to tell whether the author is focusing on belief or behavior. (Although Paul sometimes uses the same word in the sense of faithfulness, he usually refers to belief.) Belief leads to

obedience, and both are needed. Noah did what God told him to do because he trusted God — he believed that God would save Noah and his family if they built an ark.

Things to think about

If we are certain that something will happen, but it doesn't, is it still right to call it faith? (verse 1)

The universe is visible, but do we have visible evidence that it was created? That it was created by a command from God? (verse 3)

How can Abel speak even when he is dead? (verse 4)

Abel is dead, but Enoch did not experience death (verse 5). Why this difference, and where are they now?

Is it important for us to believe that God will reward us? (verse 6)

In what way do people today “condemn the world” by having faith? (verse 7)

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Abraham's Example of Faith:

Hebrews 11:8-19

Hebrews 11 is a description of faith in action — how God's people have always lived by faith. In this chapter, several verses are devoted to the example of Abraham, who is called “the father of the faithful.” Genesis 15:6 tells us that he “believed the Lord.” Hebrews 11:8 says, “By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going” (see Genesis 12:1).

The author's purpose is not to prove that Abraham had faith (the readers already knew that), but to give examples that 1) illustrate a life of faith and 2) encourage the readers to have similar faith when they are pressured to abandon Christianity. So the author selects situations from the life of Abraham that have some similarity to situations the readers are in. Just as Abraham had been called out of Mesopotamia, they had been called out of Judaism toward a promise they could not see, and they obeyed and went.

“By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise” (Hebrews 11:9). It is possible that the readers had physically left their homeland and moved to a new city, but it is more likely that the author is suggesting that the readers felt like strangers religiously. They probably met in a house church instead of a synagogue; they did not have a feeling that they had a permanent place. Welcome to the club, the author says. Abraham felt like that, too, even when he was in the Promised Land.

God does not want us to view this world as a permanent home, because he has something better for us. We are encouraged to see the future with

Abraham: “For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God” (verse 10). Canaan had many cities with foundations, but they were all destined to fall, because they were built on physical foundations, and the cities were filled with violence and idolatry.

Abraham was looking forward to something far more permanent than stone. Genesis says nothing about this, but our author believes that Abraham had religious motives that were similar to his own. We should look to the future reward, not to the circumstances we are in right now.

Verse 11 has a translation difficulty because the sentence seems to have Sarah as the subject, but the Greek verb refers to the father’s role in reproduction. Some translations choose to put Sarah as a parenthetical thought (Even though Sarah was old, Abraham was made able to father children...). Others, such as the NIV, make the verb appropriate to a mother’s role: “And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise.”

Sarah laughed; so did Abraham (Genesis 17:17; 18:12). They both thought they were too old to have children, but God blessed them with a child anyway. Abraham even had children years later, after Sarah died (Genesis 25:1-2). The author’s point is that God did what he had promised, so we should also consider God faithful, and trust him to keep the promises of salvation he has made to us.

“And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore” (Hebrews 11:11, referring to Genesis 22:17). Just as God made the universe from something that could not be seen, he made the Israelites from something humanly impossible.

Summary

The author is not done with his examples yet, and is not even done with Abraham, but he interrupts his list of faith-accomplishments to summarize some lessons from the story for the benefit of his readers. “All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own” (Hebrews 11:12-13).

The point: We do not receive all the promises of God in this life. Although we are given eternal life, we still die. But the gift is real, and the promise will be kept. We have to trust God on it. (We certainly can’t bring it about on our own power!) We look to God, not this world, for meaning and purpose in life. Our current life is a temporary training time. We do not “belong” in this society and culture; our permanent home and allegiance is the kingdom of God, and that is where our hopes should be.

“If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them” (verses 15-16).

As far as we know, Abraham never had a desire to go back to Mesopotamia, but he could have gone if he wanted to. He could have turned his back on God’s promises, but he did not. In contrast, the readers of Hebrews were tempted to go back to where they had come from — back into Judaism. Don’t do it, the author seems to say. There is a better country waiting for you through Christ. His kingdom is calling, and God will be pleased if you are faithful, and he is planning on your presence in his kingdom.

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob

The roll call resumes in verse 17, with Abraham’s most severe trial: “By

faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, ‘It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned’” (verses 17-18, referring to Genesis 21:12 and 22:1-18).

Abraham could not see how God would keep his promise, but in faith he did what God told him to do. He did not know how God would do it, but he guessed at one possibility: “Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead” (Hebrews 11:19). Abraham himself had once been “as good as dead” (verse 11); the same God who gave him life could also give Isaac life. When Abraham took Isaac up the mountain, he told his servants that “we” will return (Genesis 22:5); he did not expect Isaac to stay dead.

As the story turns out, however, God provided a substitute sacrifice (just as he later provided his own Son as a substitute for us), and Hebrews concludes: “and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.” In Abraham’s mind, Isaac was as good as dead, but he was rescued from it.

The author has given many details about Abraham; now he picks up the pace with a rapid-fire summary of three descendants: “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future. By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph’s sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff. By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones” (Hebrews 11:20-22, referring to Genesis 27:27-40; 48:10-20; 50:25).

Isaac and Jacob believed in the promise of God, and passed it on to their children. Jacob, blind and on his deathbed, blessed Ephraim and Manasseh — acting on faith, not sight. Joseph also acted on the promise that God gave Abraham. Although Joseph was prince of Egypt, he knew that his descendants would later move to Canaan, and so he directed that his bones

should also be moved. It was a reminder to the Israelites that Canaan was the land God promised to them.

Things to think about

When God called me, did I understand where I was going? (verse 8)

How “at home” do I feel in this world? (verse 9)

Am I prepared to die before receiving the promises? (verse 12)

Have I ever wanted to go back to where I came from? (verse 15)

When faced with death, do I think of God’s promises? (verses 21-22)

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Faith in Victory and in Death:

Hebrews 11:23-40

It is easy to have faith when everything is going well. But faith is needed most when we face danger. The “faith chapter” continues with stories of how people remained faithful in life-threatening situations.

Moses (verses 23-29)

The author takes several episodes from the life of Moses. He starts with Amram and Jochebed: “By faith Moses’ parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king’s edict.” Moses’ parents saw that God had a special purpose for this boy, and they risked their lives to keep him (Exodus 2:1-10). The lesson implied for the readers (who seem to be facing a threat of persecution) is that they should not be afraid of a government edict, either.

“By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh’s daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin.” Moses turned down a privileged position, and chose instead to be part of the people of God. He gave up the easy life and suffered. If the readers have faith like Moses, they will be faithful, even if they are persecuted.

“He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.” The readers were also facing disgrace for the sake of Christ. Even if they might lose a lot of money, the choice should be clear, because God offers a far more valuable reward. It’s in the future, but it’s worth waiting for, even if we have to suffer for our allegiance to Christ.

“By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.” The first time Moses left Egypt, he

was afraid (Exodus 2:14), but the author here is probably referring to a later time, when Moses had courage to lead the Israelites out of Egypt. (There are several parts of Hebrews 11 that are not in chronological order. The author is giving a motivational speech, not a history lesson, and he is selective about which events he reports, and in what order.) The point for the readers: Do not be afraid of the king — keep God in the picture. Moses saw God at the burning bush, but for us he is invisible.

The author presents two more examples from the Exodus: “By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel. By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.” The departure from Egypt is credited to the faith of all the people. The Egyptians had faith, too — they believed they could cross the seabed just like the Israelites did. But their faith was in vain, because it was not based on the promise of God. All the great moments of Israelite history came about through faith, so we should not be surprised if God calls on us to have faith in perilous circumstances, too.

Life in Canaan (verses 30-34)

The author now moves to the Israelite conquest of Canaan, and in doing this, he has skipped an important moment in Israelite history: Mt. Sinai. Hebrews says nothing about the role that Moses had in building the nation, because those situations were less relevant to the readers. The author is trying to get the readers to stop looking to Moses and his covenant; he is not going to praise it here. He emphasizes Moses’ role as a fugitive, as a person who went out.

When the people reached Canaan, “By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days. By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were

disobedient.” Surprise! The heroes in Israelite history include a non-Israelite woman. She was saved by faith, in contrast to people who disobeyed (disobeyed God, that is, rather than the king of Jericho).

The author could go on, but he has already amassed enough evidence to illustrate his point, so now he wraps it up: “And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson and Jephthah, about David and Samuel and the prophets....” The author does not dwell on the history of the people as a nation — he was more interested in illustrating people who were isolated and persecuted. But he mentions some blessings that came with faith. Through faith, these people “conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised” (verse 33). They gained Canaan, but they did not gain all that God had promised (verse 39).

The author skips to the end of the Scriptures for some final examples. Through faith, he says, some people “shut the mouths of lions [Daniel 6], quenched the fury of the flames [Daniel 3], and escaped the edge of the sword [possibly the story in Esther], whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.”

A great contrast (verses 35-40)

Then the author moves from triumph to tragedy: “Women received back their dead, raised to life again. [But] there were others who were tortured, refusing to be released so that they might gain an even better resurrection.” In times of triumph, Elijah and Elisha brought people back to life (1 Kings 17:17-23; 2 Kings 4:17-35). But other equally great prophets were persecuted to death for that “better resurrection.” The author refers to a story from the Jewish historical book 1 Maccabees, chapter 7. There we are told about seven brothers who were tortured by the Syrian ruler, while their mother reminded them that God would resurrect the faithful — a resurrection even better than Elijah and Elisha restoring people back to life.

History is full of people who refused to give up, even when threatened with death, and God wants his people to have faith like that — a faith that sees beyond the temporary treasures and temporary trials of this world, and seeks the heavenly country, the city built by God, the place of permanent reward.

Hebrews tells us what it may cost: “Some faced jeers and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated — the world was not worthy of them.” If you are persecuted, the author says, you are in good company. The world does not deserve to have such honorable people in its midst, but God puts his people here anyway.

“They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and in holes in the ground. These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.” These trials were not punishments from God, nor were they evidence that God had taken away his protection. These people were strong in faith, and yet had troubles in this life. That’s because the promise of God is not a better life in this world — it is life in a better world.

We will all die, but for those who die in the faith, the promises are guaranteed. The readers are worried about threats of persecution, so the author encourages them to keep their eyes on the eternal, not the temporary. “Since God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.” God wants us to join the heroes, and we will be rewarded together; through faith, we will all be brought to the finish line.

Things to think about

In what circumstances would I choose pain over pleasures? (verse 25)

Why was Rahab the only person in Jericho who put her life in God’s

hands? (verse 31)

Who turned weakness into strength? (verse 34) Can I do that, too?

In what way were the Old Testament heroes waiting for us? (verse 40)

What New Testament heroes of faith are there? Who had victories, and who had tragedies?

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Dealing With Difficulties:

Hebrews 12:1-17

After mentioning a long list of heroes who were faithful in difficult times, the author of Hebrews now addresses the readers directly, encouraging them to follow the example of the faithful. They should acknowledge the hardships they encounter — even be encouraged by them — and complete the journey they have begun.

Finish the race (verses 1-4)

In Hebrews, doctrinal information is often the springboard for practical application. After each section of information comes a brief section of exhortation, often with the words “therefore, let us...” Chapter 12 begins with “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.”

What kind of witnesses surround us? Perhaps they are spectators in a stadium, watching us run the race — but since the author hasn’t used the metaphor of a footrace yet, the readers might not think of “witness” in that sense. Rather, the witnesses are people who can testify that it is possible to be faithful in the face of temptations, even in persecutions.

Examples of success surround us, so we should get rid of anything that distracts us, anything that slows us down — especially sin. Sin is like an octopus that grabs us first with one tentacle, then another, and another, until we are trapped. Sin makes it harder for us to follow Christ, or to trust in him for our salvation. So, to be faithful, we need to put aside sin or any other hindrance.

“Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” Now, the Christian life is compared to a race, perhaps a marathon, in which finishing the race is more

important than coming in first. How can we finish? By keeping our eyes on the goal: Jesus. He is not only the one who calls us to faith in the beginning, he is also the one who will complete his work within us.

What kind of example did he set for us? “For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” Jesus kept his eyes on the goal — the joy set before him. What is his joy? It is our salvation. That is what motivated him to endure the pain and shame of the cross. The cross shows us how much Jesus wants us to join him in his joy, to join him in his position of honor and authority next to God. This sets an example that can help us endure our difficulties.

“Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.” If we think about what he did, we will be encouraged to put up with the inconveniences that Christianity may bring us. As we focus on him, he will strengthen the faith within us.

But as the author observes, the readers had not experienced the trial that Jesus had: “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.” In the faith community of the readers, no one had been killed. Even so, they should be willing to give their lives, because the life they would gain is far more than anything they might give up.

Children and discipline (verses 5-13)

The author then quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 to give the readers a better way to view their problems:

Have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says, “My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.” Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children.

This does not mean that every problem we face has been specifically

caused by God, or that it is a punishment for something we did wrong. But problems can be turned for good in our lives if we look at them as athletic training that can help us be stronger and more faithful.

In the Christian life, difficulties are to be expected: “For what children are not disciplined by their parents? If you are not disciplined — and everyone undergoes discipline — then you are not true sons and daughters at all.” In Greek society, wealthy men often had mistresses, and they often had illegitimate children. They sent their legal children to school and trained them, but they usually ignored their illegitimate children.

Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of spirits and live! They disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share in his holiness. (verses 9-10)

He is speaking in general terms here, not commenting on parents who are too strict or abusive. Human discipline has temporary benefits, but divine discipline has eternal benefits, so we should be even more willing to endure it. This is not always easy, but we will endure it better if we are mentally prepared for it. “No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.” We may not see those results right away (especially peace), but we will enjoy the results if we persevere.

“Therefore,” since discipline has good results in our lives, “strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed” (verses 12-13, quoting Proverbs 4:26). Don’t let problems cause you to drop out of the race. Keep aiming for the goal, even though it is sometimes difficult.

Don’t be like Esau (verses 14-17)

The author now shifts gears and makes a general exhortation: “Make

every effort to live in peace with everyone” — don’t *seek* persecution — “and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.” Since Jesus makes us holy by his death (10:10, 14), we need to trust him for the status we need to be with God.

But there is a danger: “See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” How might people fall short of God’s grace? The “bitter root” probably refers to Deuteronomy 29:18, which describes someone who turns away from God. If we turn away from Christ, it means that we do not want his benefits.

See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

Esau is an example to avoid: He gave up a long-term blessing for a short-term benefit. This is the choice the readers were facing, too: Would they give up eternal life with Christ for a little convenience in this world? If you do this, the author says, the time will come when the result will be irreversible. Esau repented in one sense — he decided he wanted the blessing — but it was too late, because the blessing was part of the inheritance he had already traded away. Do not sell out the faith, the author says. Stand firm, and be faithful — and we do that by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

Things to think about

What kind of sin tends to entangle people today? (verse 1) What pulls them away from faith in Christ?

What joys are set before us? (verse 2)

Do people now have different attitudes about parental discipline? (verse 9) How does this affect our attitude toward difficulties we may face?

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A Mountain of Joy:

Hebrews 12:18-29

After exhorting readers to continue in the Christian faith, Hebrews gives further encouragement by painting a picture of the choice set before them. On one side is fear and death, but the readers have chosen a life of joy with Christ.

The mountain of fear

You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm; to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them, because they could not bear what was commanded: “If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned.” The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, “I am trembling with fear.” (Hebrews 12:18-21, referring to Exodus 19:13)

The mountain does not need to be named, for the readers know it well: Mount Sinai, where the old covenant was made with Israel. The mountain stands for the old covenant — a covenant they have left behind in order to embrace a life with Christ. If we read between the lines, we see that the readers were being pressured by neighbors to return to the old covenant. By describing the results of their choice, the author is encouraging them to remain faithful to Jesus. Don’t look back, he says. That is a covenant of gloom and doom. It has condemnation, not salvation. You have not come to a place like that.

Moses did not fear for his own life — he said, “I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you” (Deuteronomy 9:19). Moses knew that the people had rebelled against God and deserved to die. He asked God to spare them, and God did, but his fear shows the serious penalties involved in breaking the Sinai covenant.

A joyful assembly

In contrast, the new covenant is a place of joy and fellowship with God:

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, 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)

The new covenant is filled with happy people, where angels rejoice. This is the reward of the saved, those who are the firstborn children of God, who have been welcomed by the Judge of the universe. They were not perfect, but they have been made perfect by the blood of Christ, which promises forgiveness rather than vengeance. The readers have not come to this place yet, but the author describes it as if they have. When they accepted Jesus as their Savior, this joyful place became their new destination, and the author wants to make sure that they do not turn aside.

“See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?” (verse 25). The readers probably had Jewish neighbors who said, “If you turn away from the old covenant, you will be punished.” So the author responds by saying it is the other way around: “It is true that people were punished for turning away from Moses, but Jesus rescues us from that punishment, so do not abandon the salvation he gives.”

The unshakable kingdom

The author makes a transition from this warning into a reminder of the reward God has promised:

At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised,

“Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” The words “once more” indicate the removing of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain. (verses 26-27, quoting Haggai 2:6)

At Mount Sinai, God’s voice shook the earth, but he has also promised to shake the earth again, and the author of Hebrews focuses our attention on the word *once*. He will do it only once — never again will the heavens and earth need to be shaken, because the shaking will be so severe that only the permanent will remain. Haggai 2:7 promises that God “will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord Almighty.”

The eternal kingdom will come, so how should we respond? “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (verses 28-29, quoting Deuteronomy 4:24). Since God has promised us a great reward, we should be thankful and worship him — and as the letter makes plain, we must come to him through Jesus. Part of our reverence and awe comes from knowing the power and righteousness of God. As Deuteronomy says, he is a consuming fire. This is good news for all who love God, because it means that he will eliminate all the evil that is within us. But this is a threat for those who love evil.

Things to think about

Why does the author characterize Mount Sinai so negatively? (verses 18-21)

Do I *feel* like I have come to a joyful assembly in heaven? (verses 23)

Do I worship God with thanksgiving, or with fear? (verses 28-29)

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Final Exhortations:

Hebrews 13

As the author of Hebrews reaches the end of his letter, he encourages the readers to be faithful to Christ. He also gives us hints about the situation the readers are in.

Concluding exhortations (verses 1-6)

In chapter 13, the writing style changes abruptly, and the author gives some short reminders: “Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it.” The chance of entertaining angels is small, but the author is reminding the readers to do something that they already know they should.

He gets more practical in verse 3: “Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.” Some members of the congregation were in jail, and the author encourages the readers to continue to visit them. Ancient prisons did not give prisoners much, so visits from friends were essential, even though the jailers might suspect that the visitors were likely to participate in the same “crimes.” Why should we risk our safety to visit prisoners? Because we might be in prison tomorrow, and we will need people to visit us.

“Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.” The author does not emphasize this point, which means that it was probably not a problem for the readers. This ethical exhortation was common advice among Jews.

“Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake

you” (13:5, quoting Deuteronomy 31:6). Although enemies may steal our possessions (see 10:34), we can be content with the greatest treasure of all: a promise of life eternal with God.

“So we say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?’” (13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6-7). Yes, what can people do to us when we have faith in Christ? As the author has already noted, they can ridicule us, take our possessions, put us in jail, even kill us. But they can never take away the reward that God has reserved for us. We can be confident because he gives us an eternal perspective on the things of this world.

Avoid strange teachings (verses 7-10)

He then exhorts the readers to “remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” This implies that the leaders who began the church were faithful until they died. They were exemplary in many ways, but their faith was especially noteworthy.

He introduces a new topic in the next verse: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” This refers to Jesus’ character and teachings, not his physical appearance. His significance does not change. Therefore, the author exhorts: “Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings.”

What are these strange teachings? As far as we can tell from previous chapters, the readers had no question about Jesus being the Messiah, and that he was now in heaven. But they seemed to need some convincing that Jesus had taken care of their sins. Jewish neighbors were pressuring them to look to the old covenant for atonement, perhaps saying that they would be more faithful to God if they participated in the meals that were part of synagogue life in the first century. So the author responds: “It is good for our hearts to be

strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so.” He is concerned about spiritual health, not physical health. Our hearts are put right with God by grace, not by rituals.

“We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.” Here, “altar” is a metaphor for a place of atonement. In Jesus, we have a source of forgiveness that is not available to people who rely on old covenant methods of worship.

Accepting disgrace (verses 11-17)

The author notes a final similarity between the old covenant sacrificial system and Jesus. On the annual Day of Atonement, “the high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp” (verse 11, referring to Leviticus 16:14, 27). Similarly, “Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood” (Hebrews 13:12; see John 19:20).

Since Jesus died for us outside of Jerusalem, the author urges: “Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.” “Camp” is a metaphor for Judaism, perhaps referring to the camp the Israelites had in the wilderness; the readers should leave the tabernacle rituals behind and accept the social consequences of following Jesus.

Why should we be willing to accept disgrace? “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” This refers to Hebrews 11:10 — Abraham looked for a future city, one built by God. Since our hope is in the world to come, we look to Jesus and not to public opinion for approval.

How do we worship without old covenant sacrifices? “Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.” We worship God when

we publicly confess our faith in Jesus, and when we do good to others, for that is what God wants us to do.

The author closes this paragraph with another reference to leaders: “Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.” Authority can be misused, and this verse does not mean that people should submit to unbiblical or selfish commands. However, church leaders do have the responsibility to “keep watch over” people, to be concerned about their spiritual health. If they lead the people well, it will be of great benefit, but if members continually resist authority, they will miss out.

Personal requests (verses 18-25)

The letter ends, as many Greek letters did, with personal comments from the author: “Pray for us,” he asks. “I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.” The word *restored* indicates that the author was once part of the congregation. He wants to return, but is detained in some way.

He adds his own prayer for the readers: “Now may the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”

He adds another request: “I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.” The sermon could have been much longer, but the author has been as brief as possible. He closes in verses 24-25: “Greet all your leaders and all God’s people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Grace be with you all.” We do not know whether he was writing from Italy, or to Italy.

When the author says “all” your leaders, and “all” the people, this suggests that the readers were in a city that had several congregations. Yet the letter was written only to this one, probably because it had the people with the pressures and doctrinal questions implied in the letter. It may have been a Jewish congregation surrounded by Gentile congregations.

No matter who and where the original readers were, the message of this epistle is clear: Jesus is our High Priest, who gave himself so that our sins might be forgiven, and he brought the only effective way for us to worship God. Instead of looking to the old covenant, we should look to Jesus, be faithful to Jesus, and trust in him to bring us to eternal joy with the people of God.

Things to think about

Am I commanded to visit prisoners today? (verse 3)

Am I unafraid of what people can do to me? (verse 6)

What “strange teachings” carry people away from Christ today? (verse 9)

Does grace strengthen my heart, or make me less diligent? (verse 10)

Did I leave a “camp” in order to come to Christ? (verse 13) What kind of camp or social group do others leave?

Do I respond to leaders with respect, or skepticism? (verse 17)

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Hebrews and the Change of Covenants

The book of Hebrews has much to say about the covenants. We will go verse by verse to make sure that we are not lifting verses out of context. We want to see the thought-flow of this section in Hebrews.

Let's start in chapter 7, verse 11. The author has just explained that Jesus Christ has been appointed as a priest "after the order of Melchizedek." Although that is an interesting story in itself, we will skip it and get to the point at hand: "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?" (verse 11). In other words, the appointment of Christ as high priest proves that the Levitical priests were not enough.

Note in the middle of verse 11 that the law established the priesthood. The Mosaic law and the Levitical priesthood went together. But neither the law nor the priests could bring people to perfection. That is why the Scriptures spoke of another priesthood.

A change in the law

The descendants of Aaron would be replaced by a better priesthood and a better priest — and that has enormous consequences: "For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also" (verse 12). What law is changed? The law that said only Levites could be priests. Which law said that? The old covenant. This will become more clear later in this chapter, and in the next few chapters.

But first, the author wants to make some basic facts clear. "He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe" (verse 13). We are speaking about Jesus, who is a priest after the order of Melchizedek — but

Jesus was not a Levite. He belonged to the tribe of Judah, and Moses did not authorize anyone from Judah to be a priest (verse 14).

“And what we have said” — that is, that the law has been changed — “is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life” (verses 15-16). Jesus was appointed as priest not by a law that focused on genealogy, but because he lives forever at God’s right hand. From this fact alone, we can see that the Law of Moses is no longer in force. One of its important restrictions has been set aside.

“The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God” (verses 18-19). The law that restricted the priesthood to Levites was not effective for our salvation.

How much was “set aside”? Certainly, it was the regulation restricting the priesthood to Levites. But no one expected that restriction to produce perfection, anyway. There is more involved than just one regulation. It is “the law” as a whole that is under discussion here. The Law of Moses did not have the power to make anyone perfect. The best that the old covenant could offer was not good enough.

Instead of the law, we are given a better hope, and since we have something better than the law, we are now able to draw near to God in a way that was not possible under the Law of Moses.

Guaranteed by an oath

The author then uses a detail from Psalm 110 to emphasize the importance of Jesus’ appointment as priest. God makes an oath to appoint Jesus as high priest (verse 20). The descendants of Aaron became priests without any oath, but Jesus became priest by a divine oath.

The old covenant was given by God, but here is a new word from God — not just an oath, but also a promise of permanence: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest forever’” (verse 21). Because of this, the old priesthood is obsolete. The old regulation, the old law, was set aside. A new and better hope is given to bring people to a perfection that the law could not give.

“Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant” (verse 22). Here the word *covenant* is used for the first time in this letter. It will be picked up again in the next three chapters for more detailed comment, but even here the “better covenant” is implied to be a replacement for the inferior, ineffective Law of Moses. The discussion is not just about one priestly regulation but an entire covenant, which includes many laws.

The author then contrasts the mortality of the Levitical priests with the immortality of Jesus Christ: “Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood” (verses 23-24). The fact that there were many Levitical priests is an illustration of their weakness. The long genealogy that validated them also testified to the weakness of the entire system. Each high priest held office only temporarily, and the entire priesthood itself was temporary.

In contrast, because Jesus lives forever, he will forever continue to be our High Priest, because his priesthood is effective in bringing us to perfection: “Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them” (verse 25).

Exactly what we need

•Jesus is exactly what we need. He was human, so he knows our needs (2:14-18), and he is now in heaven, in power, so he can effectively intercede for us. We can therefore be confident that we can approach God through him

(4:14-16). He gives us access to God in a way that the Levitical priests could only symbolize.

When we have Jesus, we do not need the old covenant. The practices commanded in the old covenant (circumcision, various rituals and worship days) have no spiritual merit for the Christian. All we need is Jesus.

“Such a high priest truly meets our need — one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself” (7:26-27).

The Old Testament priests had to make sin sacrifices every day, showing that the final solution had not yet arrived. But Jesus was so effective that once was enough. His work did not have to be repeated. The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus did not, because he had no sin. When he offered himself, it was not for himself, but for everyone else. He was the kind of sacrifice we really needed — without blemish, fit even for the holiest place in heaven.

The old covenant appointed imperfect men as priests (7:28), but God promised to appoint another priest, a permanent priest — which implies someone who is perfect in himself and perfect in his work (Psalm 110:4).

Hebrews 8: the superior ministry of Jesus

“Now the main point of what we are saying is this,” the letter says (8:1), focusing our attention. After seven chapters, here is what we should have firmly in mind: “We do have such a high priest.” What humans need, what God has promised, has finally come. We have the priest who is able to save us completely. We need to focus our thoughts on him, hold fast to him and have confidence in him.

He is our priest not only because he lives forever, but because he has been

exalted to a position of royal and spiritual power: He “sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and...serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by a mere human being” (verses 1-2). What earthly tabernacles and priests could only picture, Jesus Christ *is*. He is the reality forever, not a temporary imitation.

The author has capped off seven chapters with a simple summary: Jesus is our high priest. What then? The letter begins to move forward from this by discussing the work of a priest. “Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer” (verse 3). What did Jesus offer? The author has already told us in 7:27, and he will develop it more fully in chapter 9, but here he mentions it only briefly. First, he wants to set the scene for chapter 9 by discussing the tabernacle.

If Jesus were on earth, he observes, “he would not be a priest, for there are already priests who offer the gifts prescribed by the law” (verse 4). The earthly rituals were being taken care of. The temple work was being done by Levitical priests, as the law required. That is not where Jesus is doing his work. But the earthly temple does teach us something about the priestly work of Jesus.

The earthy imitation

The tabernacle of Moses, and later the temple, was “a copy and shadow of what is in heaven.” It is therefore important, and “this is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: ‘See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain’” (verse 5). The author is quoting Exodus 25:40 to show that the earthly tabernacle was a copy, not the real thing. The Levitical priests served at a copy, and the rituals they performed were copies, not the spiritual realities.

“But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the

covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises” (verse 6). Just as the heavenly sanctuary is better than the earthly one, so also is Jesus’ priestly ministry much better than the Levitical ministry, and—here’s an important point—the new covenant has already been established. Moreover, it is much better than the old.

How much better? The tabernacle was a copy, a cheap imitation, in comparison to the heavenly reality. In the same way, the Levitical priesthood, although divinely ordained, was merely an imitation of a heavenly reality fulfilled by Jesus Christ.

How exact is the copy? The Levitical rituals came in great variety: water rituals, grain rituals, special clothing, hand motions, killing of animals and releasing of animals. All these rituals were fulfilled by and superseded by the work of Jesus Christ. We do not see exact correspondence for every detail, nor do we need to. We cannot insist that the spiritual is just like the physical. We do not expect that the heavenly sanctuary has wool and linen curtains, bronze basins, acacia framing and red ram skins. It does not need curtains, frames and skins at all. Those are merely physical things, part of the imitation of a spiritual reality.

A superior priesthood

Jesus’ priestly work is much better than the old priesthood — in quality, in effectiveness, not in quantity. The work he did *once* was better than millions of rituals done by Levites. Christ’s work was so much superior that it did not have to be repeated. It was a different kind of priesthood. We should expect major differences between spiritual realities and earthly copies.

In the same way, we should expect the new covenant to be different in quality from the obsolete covenant. Just as every ritual has been superseded, so also is every detail of the law. In some cases we can see how the new

covenant modifies or clarifies an old law, but in other cases we see laws disappear without any particular replacement. The new is better than the old, as far as heaven is from earth. The old covenant promised a long life in the land of Israel; the new covenant promises eternal life with God. It is a very different kind of covenant.

Predicted in the Scriptures

The author of Hebrews likes to show that the Old Testament Scriptures contain hints of the dramatic change brought by Christ. There are hints of a “rest” to come, hints of a priesthood to come, hints of a spiritual reality that supersedes the rituals. Now he shows that a change in covenants was also predicted. “For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another” (verse 7). The fact that a new covenant was predicted implied that something was wrong with the Sinai covenant.

“God found fault with the people” (verse 8), but it is also correct to say that there was something wrong with the covenant, as verse 7 implies. The author has already said that the old covenant could not make anyone perfect (7:11, 19). It could point toward perfection, but it could not bring it. Many Jews thought it was good enough, but it was not, and that is why God predicted a new covenant:

“The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and with the people of Judah” (8:8). This is quoted from Jeremiah 31:31, which is one of many prophecies of a new relationship between God and humans. The prophets described it as a new spirit, a new heart, a covenant of peace, an everlasting covenant. This covenant would be made with Israelites, but would also be open to Gentiles.

Different in quality

The new covenant, God says, “will not be like the covenant I made with

their ancestors when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord” (Hebrews 8:9). Because the Israelites broke the old covenant, the new covenant will be different.

“This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people” (verse 10). The Israelites had some of God’s laws in their minds, and they often wanted to obey them. But this prophecy implies that the new covenant will have a different level of internalization. The relationship will be characterized by attitude, not rituals.

“No longer will they teach their neighbor, or say to one another, ‘Know the Lord,’ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest” (verse 11). Everyone will have equal access to God; no tribe or ethnic group will have special status. Jeremiah’s prophecy does not spell out all the details, but the hint is here of a very different covenant.

“For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more” (verse 12). The covenant does not predict perfect people — it predicts perfect forgiveness, a forgiveness given to everyone based on God’s grace, without any priests or rituals.

This prophecy implied that the old covenant was ineffective and soon to be replaced. “By calling this covenant ‘new,’ he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear” (verse 13). Even in Jeremiah’s day, the old covenant’s days were numbered. Israel’s history had already shown that this covenant could not bring the people toward perfection. God’s plan required a new covenant, a covenant of forgiveness, a more spiritual covenant, a covenant with a perfect priest, who made a perfect offering for all sin. That is the subject of Hebrews 9.

Hebrews 9: the superior sacrifice of Jesus

Hebrews 9 begins by describing the old covenant ritual: “The first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary” (verse 1). The author does not write about the covenants made with Noah or Abraham, even though they came first. Rather, by “first” he means the covenant made at Sinai, because it is the covenant relevant to the situation the readers were in. The Sinai covenant had laws about how people could approach God.

“A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place” (verse 2; see Exodus 25:23-40). The author describes the tabernacle rather than the temple. If the readers lived outside of Judea, they would be more familiar with the Torah’s description of the tabernacle than they would be about the Temple.

“Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant” (9:3-4, see Exodus 25:10-22;30:1-6). “This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now” (9:4-5; for details see Exodus 16:33-34; 25:18; Numbers 17:10; Deuteronomy 10:1-5).

What the rituals could not do

“When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance” (Hebrews 9:6-7). The high priest entered the Most Holy Place only on the Day of Atonement. Before he entered, he sacrificed a bull for his own sins, and later, a goat for the people (Leviticus 16:1-17).

What is the spiritual significance of this symbolism? “The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed” (Hebrews 9:8). In the tabernacle symbolism, God was *near* but *not accessible*. The symbolism hinted that there was a way to approach God, but that way was not yet revealed.

“This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper” (verse 9). Despite the sacrifices, the people were unable to go to God’s throne, unable to enter his presence. The rituals could not perform the work that they symbolized.

“They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order” (9:10). Rituals are external actions, and they cannot change the heart. They do not cleanse the conscience. They were valid only until Christ came. Our author does not list all the obsolete regulations. It was enough to mention the Levitical rituals. But we can follow the logic to see much more. Worship details no longer apply. External rituals like circumcision, tassels and phylacteries are no longer required. The entire covenant is obsolete.

Christ’s work in heaven

Now, in contrast to the ritual works of the old covenant, we are told about the superior ministry of Christ: “But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation” (9:11). The better blessings have already begun, the author reminds us. We already have forgiveness and direct access to God, because Christ went through the heavenly holy place.

Jesus Christ entered the reality, not the imitation, and he did it by a better sacrifice: “He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he

entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal redemption” (verse 12). By dying for us, the Son of God was able to redeem us once for all. It was a perfect, sinless sacrifice, presented in the heavenly holy place, fully effective, never needing to be done again. This was a sharp contrast with the Levitical rituals, which were repeated continually yet never bringing the people any closer to God.

“The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean” (verse 13; see Numbers 19:1-22). Like the other rituals, the ashes of a heifer involved obscure details that had nothing to do with a person’s conscience.

Christ is much better than a heifer, so we should expect that his sacrifice achieves a much better kind of cleansing. “How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” (Hebrews 9:14).

He offered a perfect sacrifice, willingly, and this cleanses us on the inside and enables us to worship God. We can do what the high priest could only symbolize: we can approach God with total confidence. We have been washed and purified by the blood of Christ — all sins are removed. If a burned-up heifer could ritually cleanse an Israelite, we can be sure that the sacrifice of Jesus is more than enough for us.

Since Christ brings us complete forgiveness, he “is the mediator of a new covenant” (verse 15). He gives us a relationship with God on a completely new basis, a new covenant. The result is “that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance.”

This was achieved, the author reminds us, because “he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.” Under the first covenant, many external regulations defined sin. Christ set us

free from that. The old covenant is no longer the standard of righteousness and sin. Christ forgives sin, but he also *sets us free* from the rituals that were important under the old covenant. We are not obligated to perform those rituals or to follow the old covenant.

Covenant enacted by blood

This new covenant could come about only through a better sacrifice — something far superior to animals. The author begins by using an illustration from the legal customs of the day. He uses the example of a will, because the Greek word for *covenant* could also mean *will*. It was a contract that became effective only when someone died (verses 16-17; it is also possible to interpret these verses in reference to a biblical covenant).

The Sinai covenant involved the death of animals (verses 18-20; Exodus 24:5-8). The Law of Moses required blood in its rituals of cleansing (Hebrews 9:21-22). Drops of blood do not make anything clean, either physically or spiritually. The Israelites needed a spiritual cleansing — an elimination of spiritual defilement, imperfection, sin, guilt and anything that separated them from God. They needed forgiveness.

Physical blood cannot change spiritual realities, and animal sacrifices cannot eliminate sin (Hebrews 10:4), but the old covenant nevertheless prescribed animal sacrifices for forgiveness (Hebrews 9:22). Just as the tabernacle itself pictured a heavenly reality, these animal sacrifices pictured a death that would be effective in removing sin. They did not do it — they only symbolized it.

The earthly tabernacle had to be ritually purified by animal sacrifices, but the heavenly holy place required a much better sacrifice (verse 23). The spiritual barrier between God and humans required a spiritual sacrifice — someone with a perfect conscience, totally without sin. Jesus was not dealing with a physical, symbolic copy (verse 24). He was not working with external

rituals. Rather, he was dealing with the real spiritual problem, and he did his work in heaven. It was a better place, and a better sacrifice.

Humans are both matter and spirit; Christ's work was both physical and spiritual. He became fully human, mortal and physical, in order to redeem humans. But his redemption had to be on the spiritual level as well: a conscience untainted by sin, a life willingly offered on behalf of others, a being worthy of entering heaven itself to intercede for humans. He offered himself, both body and spirit.

Jesus Christ now appears for us in heaven to help us (verse 24). He is the God-man who bridged the gap between God and humans. His work was fully effective — for all time. Once was enough, unlike the work of the Levitical priests, who had to perform the same rituals repeatedly (verse 25). By this the Holy Spirit was showing that their work was not effective. True cleansing was possible only through a better sacrifice, a better priest, a better covenant.

The decisive sacrifice

Jesus did not go to heaven to perform endless rituals. He is not copying the old covenant, because the old covenant had only temporary substitutes (verse 25). Jesus does not have to suffer forever to rescue us from sin (verse 26). He gave himself once, and that was enough. “He has appeared once for all.” When? “At the culmination of the ages.” Why? “To do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself” (verse 26). Even 1,950 years ago, believers were living in “the last days” (Hebrews 1:2). A new age had begun with Jesus Christ. The spiritual world was radically different. The sacrifice of all time had been given.

But the story is not yet done. Just as we appear once, and then will appear again in the judgment, so also with Christ. “Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but

to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:27-28). Each person dies for his or her own sins, but Jesus died for others. Each person will face the judgment, but Jesus will be the judge. His death removed our sins from the record, and when he appears again, he will not be bringing our sins against us. Rather, he will be bringing eternal salvation for all who desire his return.

Hebrews 10: the perfect results of Jesus

Hebrews 10 concludes this section of Hebrews by discussing the perfect *results* of Jesus’ priestly work. Verse 1 begins with a conclusion: “The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves.” This conclusion is based on chapter 9, which sketched the rituals of the Levitical high priest and stated that Jesus did far better, offering a perfect sacrifice (himself) in a perfect place (heaven). The Levitical rituals had to be continually repeated, but Jesus’ sacrifice was fully effective and therefore did not have to be done again.

Just as the tabernacle was a copy of the true holy place in heaven (Hebrews 8:5), so also the rituals were copies or shadows of the real sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The tabernacle and its rituals (all included in the word “law”) *represented* good things, but could not bring them about. The law talked about cleansing and forgiveness, but could not cleanse or forgive.

Are the “good things” already here, or are they yet future? The grammar in this verse could be understood in either way, but Hebrews 9:11 makes it clear: Christ is the “high priest of the good things that are already here.” Forgiveness and cleansing and relationship with God are already granted through Jesus Christ, and the old covenant is obsolete because the new covenant has already been established (Hebrews 8:6). There are better things yet to come (Hebrews 9:28), but the author’s stress in chapter 10 is on things that Christ has already brought.

Law cannot finish the job

The law is only a shadow, not the spiritual reality. “For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship” (Hebrews 10:1). No matter how many animals were killed, no matter how much water was used, the law could never achieve the forgiveness that the new covenant gives.

The word “perfect” can create unrealistic ideas. Faith in Christ does not make people morally perfect. We still fall short of what we ought to be. The Greek word can also be translated as “complete.” We are completely forgiven by Christ, completely cleansed, and therefore perfectly qualified to worship God, perfectly able to have a relationship with him. The context shows what the author has in mind: 1) the removal of sin and a cleansed conscience, so we can 2) approach God to worship him (verses 1-2, 4). The author views these as the same basic concept. The old covenant could picture forgiveness, but could not achieve it.

If the Mosaic law could qualify the people for worship, then there would be no more need for sacrifices. If the sacrifices could achieve what they pictured, “would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins” (verse 2). The logic is this: If the sacrifices completely prepared people for being in God’s presence, then further sacrifices would not be needed. The people would no longer have a guilty conscience, and would not feel any need to offer sacrifices (at least not sin sacrifices).

The law was inadequate, and the author implies that the new covenant gives what the old could not: a cleansed conscience. Through faith in the effectiveness of Christ’s sacrifice, we do not feel guilty. Rather, we feel forgiven, cleansed, and accepted by God. Rather than being excluded from the holy place, we are invited in.

The author then summarizes the argument against the old covenant system: The sacrifices, instead of cleansing the people, “are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (verses 3-4). A physical substance, such as blood, cannot remove a spiritual stain. The old covenant was designed to *picture* forgiveness, not to actually bring it.

The Old Testament saints were forgiven on the basis of faith and God’s grace, not because they had paid a big enough price or earned it. Forgiveness was available, but it was not through the details of the old covenant. The sacrifices had a shadow of forgiveness — they spoke about forgiveness and they pictured forgiveness — but they were not the way that forgiveness actually comes.

Christ is the answer

The author begins verse 5 with the word “therefore,” meaning “because of what I have just said.” In this case, we might paraphrase it like this: “Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ came into the world and said...” and then comes a quote: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased. Then I said, ‘Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, my God’” (Hebrews 10:5-7; quoting the Greek version of Psalm 40:6-8).

In this psalm, the author found one of several Old Testament passages that foreshadow the end of the sacrificial system. He rephrases the psalm to emphasize his point, and he begins by giving the label “first” to a point that he will come back to shortly: “First he said, ‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them.’”

To make another point, he inserts an additional comment: “though they

were offered in accordance with the law” (verse 8). For the old covenant era, God commanded these offerings, but in themselves, they did not please him—they were not what he really wanted. (Jeremiah 7:22-23 has a similar contrast.) God gave the law not as a permanent ideal, but as a temporary system that would prepare the way for the reality, which is Christ. The old covenant law was not the final word on what God wanted.

What did he want? Verse 9 says, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” God wanted the people to obey him — but only Christ did it perfectly. The early church understood this psalm as a messianic psalm because Jesus fulfilled it in a way that no psalm-writer could. He did the will of God in a way that no one else did.

Then comes a powerful conclusion: “He sets aside the first to establish the second” (verse 9). What is the “first”? In the immediate context, it is sacrifices and offerings, but our writer has also used the word “first” five times to refer to the old covenant. The sacrifices and offerings were representative of the first covenant; sacrifices and rituals have been set aside because the entire covenant has been set aside.

What has been established? The doing of God’s will. The word “establish” was also used for covenants, and the word “second” was also used for the new covenant (8:7). The author is making a parallel here, using Psalm 40 as a miniature picture of the change in covenants. Because the old covenant could not bring forgiveness, Christ said, Out with the old, and in with the new! The imitation is not needed, because the reality is here! The new covenant has been established by the obedience of Jesus Christ. He is the answer to the deficiency of the old covenant.

Made holy by Christ

Verse 10 begins, “And by that will...” It is by God’s choice, and by Christ’s obedience, that “we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the

body of Jesus Christ once for all.” We have been made holy — this is another way of describing the results of the new covenant. Our sins are removed, our conscience is cleared, and we are made holy, so we can approach God to worship. How is it done? Through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ — a sacrifice that involved both his will and his body, both his mind and his flesh. We do God’s will when we accept this as our means of sanctification.

Jesus bridges the gap between heaven and earth, between spirit and matter, in a way that nothing else could. Only he could make an offering on earth that was acceptable in heaven. The flesh and blood of his body was no different than the flesh and blood of any other crucified man, but it was effective for our sanctification and our forgiveness because Jesus was perfectly obedient, because there was a perfect will in him.

Humans are both physical and spiritual, and we sin in the flesh and in the mind. The salvation Christ gives us redeems our bodies and our minds, sanctifying all of us for true worship of God. We are not saved by a purely physical sacrifice, nor by a purely spiritual one. A physical body had to be willingly given, because the spiritual sacrifice had to be expressed in the physical world. In Christ, we are assured that we have been completely redeemed. His will and his body were given for us, and it was fully effective, once for all time.

Perfect forever

Our acceptance by God does not depend on the performance of rituals (either ancient or modern) — it depends on what Christ has already done, and it is therefore guaranteed. This is contrasted with the ineffective work of the old covenant priests: “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (verse 11). Was it an exercise in futility? No, it was a picture, a drama that was worth repeating until Christ fulfilled it.

“But when this priest [Christ] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God” (verse 12). The Levitical priests stood while they worked; Christ is able to sit (figuratively speaking) because his work is now done. There will be more work in the future (verse 13), but for now he rests, because “by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy” (verse 14).

The work of sanctification is done (verse 10), and it is still being done (verse 14). Christ is still working in our lives, but the work is based on the sacrifice that was done once for all time. He has completely cleansed us, made us qualified to be in God’s presence. That does not change.

As evidence, he quotes Jeremiah 31:33 again, the prophecy of the new covenant: “This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds” (Hebrews 10:16). This is the work now being done as we “are being made holy.”

The grand finale

Then the author skips down to the last part of Jeremiah 31:34: “Then he adds: ‘Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more’” (Hebrews 10:17). He draws this conclusion: “And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary” (verse 18). This is the grand finale: Our sins are forgiven; there is no need for sin sacrifices. To us, this may seem a minor point, an anticlimax, something we take for granted. But to the author of Hebrews, this is a major point, the point he has been driving toward for four chapters. The sacrificial system is not needed any more. The old covenant has been set aside. It never was effective, and Christ has set us free from it.

Apparently the first readers of Hebrews found the sacrificial system attractive. It was a God-given pattern of worship, and the people did not want

to give it up. Even if God allowed other forms of worship, wouldn't it be better to stick to the original plan? Wouldn't this assure us that we were doing something that God likes? No, our author is explaining. God does not necessarily like now what he commanded centuries ago. He didn't like it in Jeremiah's day, or when Psalm 40 was written. The law was good for a time, but its time is past.

Is the original plan better?

In the early church, when Jewish people first believed in Jesus as the Messiah, many of them continued to participate in the old covenant rituals, either in person or through offerings collected in the synagogues. At first this seemed harmless, and the people were allowed to continue their customs.

However, as time went on, it became clear that the rituals were a competitor to Christ. They were an enemy of faith. People were looking to the rituals for assurance, rather than to Christ. In their minds, their relationship with God was based partly on their participation in the rituals. They probably thought, Doesn't this make us more obedient, more pleasing to God? Even if the laws were optional, wouldn't it be better to continue them? Further, aren't those who continue better than those who don't? The rituals could easily lead to judgmentalism.

So our author argues, chapter after chapter, that the rituals are obsolete imitations. This is not the better way — this is the inferior way. Rituals do not achieve anything. Our standing with God is based on what Christ has done, nothing else, and he has set aside the old covenant. The old covenant was once the best system around, but now that Christ has come, Christ is far better, and the old covenant is inferior.

Throughout the book, Christ is compared to various aspects of the old covenant, and Christ is always better. Does our author want his people to participate in the sacrifices and rituals? Probably not. Does he command them

to quit? No, not directly, but he probably wants them to come to that decision themselves.

What he commands them is to look to Jesus. Old covenant rituals are ineffective. They are shadows — copies. Jesus is the reality, and he is fully effective. There is no need for obsolete rituals. They are not a badge of better Christianity — they are an unnecessary burden that can block our view of Christ. It would be wrong to insist on old covenant practices.

Practical exhortations

Hebrews is a practical book. After each chapter or so of doctrinal explanation, the author puts in the word “therefore,” and he points out how the believers should respond to the truth about Christ. At several points in the book, the author says, “Therefore, let us do such and such.” At Hebrews 10:19, after several chapters of doctrine, the author comes to an exhortation passage. This is a climactic point in the book. It has five exhortations. Since the old covenant is done away, and since we are forgiven by Christ, what are we supposed to do?

The author begins these exhortations by reminding us that we have two major benefits in Christ: 1) “We have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus” and 2) “We have a great priest over the house of God” (verses 19-21). Since we have these two benefits, he says, we should respond in five ways:

1. “Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings” (verse 22). We should accept the cleansing that Christ has given us, and use it for its purpose: that we draw closer to God. The rituals of the old covenant symbolized separation; the coming of Jesus Christ emphasizes the approachability of God.
2. “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess” (verse 23). Christ is faithful toward us, so we must be faithful toward him, keeping him

central in our thoughts.

3. “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” The focus is not that each person should do good. Yes, they should, but the focus here is on encouraging *others* to do good — and not just exhorting them, but *thinking* about how we might do it better. In this way, the good deeds will be multiplied. Our relationship with God will have results in the way we interact with each other.
4. “Not giving up meeting together” (verse 25). It seems that some first-century Jewish Christians were no longer meeting together. Perhaps they were pressured by the Jewish community. Perhaps they were disappointed that Christ had not yet returned. Perhaps they felt that Christianity was becoming a “Gentile” religion. They were more interested in their Jewish distinctives than they were in Christ. So the author urges, Don’t drop out! If you don’t meet with one another, you can’t show love.
5. “Encouraging one another” (verse 25). Mutual encouragement helps everyone stay in the faith.

This advice is still true today. We need to encourage one another in the faith, and in doing good — “all the more as you see the Day approaching.” Christ will return, and it will be seen how we responded to his message, and what our focus was. He will “bring salvation to those who are waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28) — and not just waiting, but responding to what he has done for them.

Review

There has been an important change in the law. Therefore:

- We are to look to Jesus, not to ritual laws.
- We should not expect the new covenant to be just like the old.
- The new covenant offers real forgiveness, not rituals.

- Jesus gives us complete forgiveness and makes us perfectly acceptable to God.
- If we try to observe ritual laws, we are likely to lose focus.

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