

# Notes on Hebrews

2024 Edition  
Dr. Thomas L. Constable

## Introduction

### DATE

The writer said that he and those to whom he had written had come to faith in Jesus Christ through the preaching of others who had heard Jesus (2:3-4). Apparently those preachers had since died (13:7). The original readers of Hebrews had been Christians over an extended period of time (5:12). So probably the earliest possible date of composition was about A.D. 60.

Some scholars believe that the book must have been written before A.D. 70 since the writer spoke of animal sacrifices as being offered at the time of writing (7:27-28; 8:3-5; 9:7-8, 25; 10:1-3, 8; 13:10-11). However the writer showed no interest in the temple but described the sacrifices as those that the Israelites offered when the tabernacle stood. He evidently used the present tense to give these references a timeless quality rather than indicating that temple worship was still in practice.

Nevertheless since the writer did not mention the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70, it seems probably that he wrote before that event took place.<sup>1</sup>

"The best argument for the supersession [replacement] of the old covenant would have been the destruction of the Temple."<sup>2</sup>

The reference to Timothy's release from imprisonment (13:23) appears to date the book later within the lifetime of that outstanding man. Almost all scholars believe that the Timothy referred to in Hebrews is the same man

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<sup>1</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 1—8*, pp. lxii-lxvi; Andrew H. Trotter Jr., *Interpreting the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 27-38; Philip E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 30-31.

<sup>2</sup>H. W. Montefiore, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 3.

named elsewhere in the New Testament. Timothy was evidently a young man when Paul first met him in Lystra, probably in A.D. 50.<sup>1</sup> Luke called him "a disciple," which suggests that he was at least a teenager at that time (Acts 16:1).<sup>2</sup> No other New Testament writer mentioned Timothy's imprisonment.

The imprisonment of Christians seems to have been a well-known fact of life to the writer of Hebrews (10:34; 13:3). This took place after Nero launched an empire-wide persecution of them in A.D. 64. All of these factors, when taken together, seem to point to a writing date near A.D. 68-69.<sup>3</sup>

### WRITER

As to authorship, most students of this subject are not dogmatic—or even certain—for good reason.<sup>4</sup> Origen, the Alexandrian church father who died about A.D. 255, wrote: "But who it was that really wrote the epistle, God only knows."<sup>5</sup>

"The language of the Epistle is both in vocabulary and style purer and more vigorous than that of any other book of the New Testament. ... The vocabulary is singularly copious [abundant]. It includes a large number of words which are not found elsewhere in the apostolic writings, very many of which occur in this book only among the Greek Scriptures ..."<sup>6</sup>

"All that can be said with certainty is that Hebrews was composed by a creative theologian who was well trained in the exposition [explanation] of the Greek Scriptures. ... He was

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<sup>1</sup>See Appendix 1: "Sequence of Paul's Activities," in my notes on Acts.

<sup>2</sup>Quotations from the English Bible in these notes are from the *New American Standard Bible* (NASB), 2020 edition, unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>3</sup>See Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of The Epistle to the Hebrews and The Epistle of James*, p. 22; Robert G. Gromacki, *Stand Bold in Grace*, p. 16; J. Paul Tanner, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Grace New Testament Commentary*, 2:1032.

<sup>4</sup>See Hughes, pp. 19-30; Trotter, pp. 39-57; or Donald A. Carson and Douglas J. Moo, *An Introduction to the New Testament*, pp. 600-4; for good discussions of authorship.

<sup>5</sup>Eusebius, *The Ecclesiastical History of Eusebius Pamphilus*, p. 247.

<sup>6</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xlv. Paragraph division omitted. See also Trotter, pp. 117-43.

surely a hellenistic [i.e., having his background in Greek culture and language] Jewish-Christian."<sup>1</sup>

Commentators have made cases for the writer being Paul,<sup>2</sup> Apollos,<sup>3</sup> Barnabas,<sup>4</sup> Luke,<sup>5</sup> Peter, Jude, Stephen, Silvanus (Silas), Epaphras (Epaphroditus), Philip the Evangelist, Priscilla,<sup>6</sup> Mary the mother of Jesus, Clement of Rome,<sup>7</sup> Aristion, and others. However, the masculine participle *diegoumenon* ("to tell"), which refers to the writer in 11:32, would seem to rule out a female writer. Ancient testimony mentioned only four possibilities: Paul, Luke, Barnabas, and Clement.<sup>8</sup> None of these suggestions has found enthusiastic reception by most students of Hebrews for various reasons. Probably we should be content to share Origen's agnosticism on this question and look forward to getting the answer in heaven.<sup>9</sup>

"The absence both of solid testimony, internal or external, and of any firm traditions means that, as things are, the riddle of the authorship of Hebrews is incapable of solution."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. xlix.

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, p. 1929; W. J. Conybeare, in *The Life and Epistles of St. Paul*, pp. 788-790; Robert Jamieson, A. R. Fausset, and David Brown, *Commentary Practical and Explanatory on the Whole Bible*, pp. 1393-95; J. N. Darby, *Synopsis of the Books of the Bible*, 5:269; G. Campbell Morgan, *An Exposition of the Whole Bible*, p. 518; Adolph Saphir, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, 1:19, footnote 10; Arno C. Gaebelien, *The Annotated Bible*, 4:1:230-32; William R. Newell, *Hebrews Verse by Verse*, p. 493; Arthur W. Pink, *An Exposition of Hebrews*, pp. 18-21; J. Sidlow Baxter, *Explore the Book*, 6:275; Ray C. Stedman, *What More Can God Say?* p. 3; J. Vernon McGee, *Thru the Bible with J. Vernon McGee*, 5:503.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, pp. 21-22; A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5:329.

<sup>4</sup>Tertullian, cited by Jamieson, et al., p. 1393.

<sup>5</sup>G. Campbell Morgan, *The Unfolding Message of the Bible*, p. 359; David L. Allen, *Lukan Authorship of Hebrews*.

<sup>6</sup>Adolph Harnack, "Probabilia über die Adresse und den Verfasser des Hebräerbriefs," *Zeitschrift für die Neutestamentliche Wissenschaft*, I (1900):16-41.

<sup>7</sup>Erasmus, cited by Preserved Smith, *The Social Background of the Reformation*, p. 113.

<sup>8</sup>See Gregory Goswell, "Finding a Home for the Letter to the Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59:4 (2016):747-60 for discussion of the placement of Hebrews in various ancient editions of the New Testament.

<sup>9</sup>See Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text*, pp. 3-21.

<sup>10</sup>Hughes, p. 19.

The early Christians originally accepted all the New Testament books as inspired by God because they each contained teaching from an official apostle. For this reason the writer was probably either an apostle or a well-known close associate of at least one of the apostles (cf. 13:23).

"... the reception of Hebrews was also impacted by theological and ecclesial controversies common during the second, third, and fourth centuries."<sup>1</sup>

### RECIPIENTS

The original recipients of the epistle are also unknown. The title "The Epistle to the Hebrews" implies that they were Jewish Christians. This title is ancient and is probably a safe guide to the identity of the first readers. Many references in the epistle also suggest that the original readers were mainly Jewish. The writer assumed, as we can infer from what he wrote, that his readers were very familiar with the institutions of Judaism. The warnings against turning away from Jesus Christ back to the Old Covenant also imply the Jewish identity of his original audience.

Other indications of a Jewish target audience are the emphasis on the superior priesthood of Jesus and the many appeals to the authority of the Hebrew Scriptures. However the brand of Judaism in view seems to have been Hellenistic rather than Judean (Hebraic). While conceding that it is now impossible to identify the original recipients exactly, some respected scholars favor the theory that they were probably former Jewish priests, probably of the Essene variety.<sup>2</sup>

The reference to the generosity of the readers and their helping other believers (6:10) suggests that the original audience did not live in Palestine. The Palestinian churches had a reputation for needing material assistance rather than for giving it to other Christians (cf. Rom. 15:25-31; 1 Cor. 16:3). Probably, therefore, they were Jews of the Diaspora (Jews who lived outside Judea). This conclusion has support in the writer's consistent use

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<sup>1</sup>Benjamin P. Laird, "Theological Controversies and the Canonical Reception of Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66:2 (June 2023):266.

<sup>2</sup>See Hughes, pp. 10-15.

of the Septuagint Old Testament version.<sup>1</sup> All the quotations from the Old Testament, except two (10:30; 13:5), are taken from the Septuagint.<sup>2</sup> Hellenistic Jews used this translation widely, but Judean Jews did not use it as much. Arguments for the recipients being Judean Jews include their intimate knowledge of temple rituals and their opportunity to escape suffering by returning to the observance of Jewish practices and feasts.<sup>3</sup> I think the arguments for their living outside Judea are stronger.

In most of the New Testament churches there was a mixture of Jewish and Gentile believers. The appeal of this epistle would certainly have been as great to Gentiles, who were tempted to return to paganism, as it would have been to Jews, who faced temptation to return to Judaism. However the writer's primary concern appears to have been that his Jewish readers were failing to appreciate that Christianity is the divinely revealed successor to Judaism. He did not want them to abandon Christianity and return to Judaism.

Probably the letter originally went to one or more house-churches outside of Judea that had a strong Hellenistic Jewish population. The recipients may have been in or near Galatia, in view of conditions that existed there that the Epistle to the Galatians reflects. However they may very well have lived in another area. Many scholars believe that the letter went first to a church in or near Rome.<sup>4</sup> Evidently knowledge of where the original recipients lived disappeared about the same time as knowledge of who the writer was.<sup>5</sup>

Robert Gromacki summarized the internal evidence of the audience's identity well: First, they were believers. Second, they were immature. Third, they were wavering in their faith. Fourth, they were apparently well known to the writer. Fifth, they resided either in Rome or in Judea.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Septuagint (Greek) translation of the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) was made in the third century B.C. and is often abbreviated LXX.

<sup>2</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1393.

<sup>3</sup>See Pink, p. 11; J. Dwight Pentecost, *A Faith That Endures*, pp. 12-13; and Hughes, pp. 15-19.

<sup>4</sup>See Lenski, pp. 14-21; Lane, pp. lviii-lx; Ellingworth, p. 29; Donald Guthrie, *The Letter to the Hebrews: An Introduction and Commentary*, pp. 25-27; Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 226; E. M. Blaiklock, *Today's Handbook of Bible Characters*, p. 597..

<sup>5</sup>James Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. xvii.

<sup>6</sup>Gromacki, p. 14.

## PLACE OF ORIGIN

In view of 13:24b it has seemed to some scholars that the writer was in Italy when he sent this epistle, perhaps in Rome. However the expression "from Italy" in that verse probably refers to those living outside Italy, such as Priscilla and Aquila, who were Jews forced to leave Rome by Emperor Claudius' edict in A.D. 49 (Acts 18:2).<sup>1</sup> This expression suggests that the writer was not in Italy when he wrote.

"A great many other places, virtually covering the Mediterranean world from Spain to Galatia, have been proposed both for the epistle's origin and for its destination."<sup>2</sup>

## GENRE

Many students of the book have observed that Hebrews is more of a sermon in written form than an epistle in the traditional New Testament sense.<sup>3</sup> The writer even described it as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). Hebrews is like a sermon reduced to writing. Additional indications of this fact are the writer's references to "speaking" and "hearing" (cf. 2:5; 5:11; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32). His epistle is more typical of speech than of writing.

"... Hebrews is a sermon rooted in actual life. It is addressed to a local gathering of men and women who discovered that they could be penetrated by adverse circumstances over which they exercised no control. It throbs with an awareness of the privilege and the cost of discipleship. It is a sensitive pastoral response to the sagging faith of older and tired individuals who were in danger of relinquishing their Christian commitment. It seeks to strengthen them in the face of a new crisis so that they may stand firm in their faith. It warns them of the judgment of God they would incur if they were to waver in their commitment. Exhortations to covenant fidelity and

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<sup>1</sup>See Merrill C. Tenney, "A New Approach to the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 123:491 (July-September 1966):234-35.

<sup>2</sup>Hughes, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>See Lane, pp. lxxix-lxxxiv, for an extended discussion of the genre (type of literature), or Trotter, especially pp. 59-80.

perseverance are grounded in a fresh understanding of the significance of Jesus and his sacrifice."<sup>1</sup>

"It [Hebrews] is called an epistle and so it is, but of a peculiar kind. In fact ... it begins like a treatise, proceeds like a sermon, and concludes like a letter."<sup>2</sup>

There is an alternation in the genre of this epistle, namely, from exposition to exhortation to exposition to exhortation, and so forth. Exhortation to apply truth consistently follows explanation of truth. Noting these major changes makes interpreting the book much easier. The blocks of material by genre are as follows. I will note the changes in the notes that follow as well.

Exposition	Exhortation
ch. 1	2:1-4
2:5-18	3:1—4:14
4:15—5:10	5:11—6:12
6:13—10:18	10:19-39
ch. 11	chs. 12—13

Within the two parts of chapter 12 there is further alternation between exhortation and exposition, though the main genre there is exhortation: exhortation (12:1-2), exposition (12:3-11), exhortation (12:12-13); and exhortation (12:14-17), exposition (12:18-24), exhortation (12:25-29).

## PURPOSE

The writer urged the original readers to persevere in their faith rather than to abandon Christianity and return to Judaism. A note of urgency and

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. xlvi. See also Ellingworth, pp. 78-80.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 5:328. See also Robert W. Ross, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, p. 1406.

pastoral concern permeates the whole letter. This tone comes through especially strongly in the five warning passages and in the encouragements that follow each of these warnings.

"... the purpose of the writer to the Hebrews is not to give us an interpretation of Old Testament prophecy. ... Using material not from the prophets but primarily from the Psalms, with other materials added to elaborate the argument, the writer's goal was to establish the superiority of the gospel in contrast to all that went before, particularly the levitical system. The primary evidence of the supremacy of Christianity is presented in its *finality*. Coming to Christ means final access to God without any barrier."<sup>1</sup>

"... in Hebrews the author is battling to stop a stampede from Christ back to Judaism, a revolt (apostasy) in truth from the living God. ... It is the first great apologetic for Christianity and has never been surpassed."<sup>2</sup>

"Of all New Testament writers he [this writer] is the most theological—that is, he is most exclusively occupied with presenting Christianity as the final and absolute religion ..."<sup>3</sup>

## THEME

"The comprehensive theme of the Epistle to the Hebrews is that of the absolute supremacy of Christ—a supremacy which allows no challenge, whether from human or angelic beings."<sup>4</sup>

"To the writer to the Hebrews Jesus was the one person on earth who gave access to reality [the great goal of the Greeks] and access to God [the great goal of the Jews]."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Robert L. Saucy, *The Case for Progressive Dispensationalism*, p. 56.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 5:331.

<sup>3</sup>James Denney, *The Death of Christ*, p. 207.

<sup>4</sup>Hughes, p. 2.

<sup>5</sup>William Barclay, *The Letter to the Hebrews*, p. xvii.



## STYLE

Various stylistic devices enable the student of this book to identify the sections of the writer's thought. These devices include inclusio,<sup>1</sup> linking words, the repetition of key terms, alternation between exposition and admonition, and others, which I shall point out in the following notes where appropriate. These rhetorical devices were common in the writer's culture, and his use of them indicated to the original readers where his thoughts were moving.

"... *Hebrews* is written in the best Greek in the New Testament."<sup>2</sup>

The Book of Hebrews is very similar to a sermon that has been adapted to an epistolary (letter) format. The Books of James and Jude are similar in their styles.

## CHARACTERISTICS

"In several noticeable respects Hebrews differs from all the other Epistles of the New Testament. The name of the writer is omitted, there is no opening salutation, the ones to whom it was first specifically and locally sent are not mentioned. On the positive side we may note, that the typical teachings of the O.T. are expounded here at greater length than elsewhere; the priesthood of Christ is opened up, fully, only in this Epistle; the warnings against apostasy are more frequent and more solemn, and the calls to steadfastness and perseverance are more emphatic and numerous than in any other N.T. book."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>An inclusio is a literary device based on a concentric principle, also known as bracketing, bookending, or an envelope structure, which consists of creating a frame by placing similar material at the beginning and end of a section.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. xxii.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 15.

**OUTLINE<sup>1</sup>**

- I. The culminating revelation of God chs. 1—2
  - A. The agent of God's final revelation 1:1-4
  - B. The superiority of the Son 1:5-14
  - C. The danger of negligence (the first warning) 2:1-4
  - D. The humiliation and glory of God's Son 2:5-9
  - E. The Son's solidarity with humanity 2:10-18
  
- II. The high priestly character of the Son 3:1—5:10
  - A. The faithfulness of the Son 3:1-6
  - B. The danger of disbelief (the second warning) 3:7-19
  - C. The possibility of rest for God's people 4:1-14
  - D. The compassion of the Son 4:15—5:10
    - 1. The introduction 4:15-16
    - 2. The explanation 5:1-10
  
- III. The high priestly office of the Son 5:11—10:39
  - A. The danger of immaturity (the third warning) 5:11—6:12
    - 1. The readers' condition 5:11-14
    - 2. The needed remedy 6:1-3
    - 3. The dreadful alternative 6:4-8
    - 4. The encouraging prospect 6:9-12
  
  - B. The basis for confidence and steadfastness 6:13-20
  - C. The Son's high priestly ministry 7:1—10:18
    - 1. The person of our high priest ch. 7
    - 2. The work of our high priest chs. 8—9
    - 3. The accomplishment of our high priest 10:1-18
  
  - D. The danger of willful sinning (the fourth warning) 10:19-39

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<sup>1</sup>For an evaluation of three views of the structure of Hebrews, the traditional (doctrinal followed by practical sections), that of Albert Vanhoye (chiastic structure), and "patchwork," see David Alan Black, "The Problem of the Literary Structure of Hebrews: An Evaluation and a Proposal," *Grace Theological Journal* 7:2 (Fall 1986):163-77. See also Lane, pp. lxxxv-cxv; Trotter, pp. 81-94; and Ellingworth, pp. 50-62.

1. The threefold admonition 10:19-25
  2. The warning of judgment 10:26-31
  3. The encouragement to persevere 10:32-39
- IV. The proper response 11:1—12:13
- A. Perseverance in faith ch. 11
    1. Faith in the antediluvian era 11:1-7
    2. Faith in the patriarchal era 11:8-22
    3. Faith in the Mosaic era 11:23-31
    4. Faith in subsequent eras 11:32-40
  - B. Demonstrating necessary endurance 12:1-13
    1. The example of Jesus 12:1-3
    2. The proper view of trials 12:4-11
    3. The need for greater strength 12:12-13
- V. Life in a hostile world 12:14—13:25
- A. The danger of unresponsiveness (the fifth warning) 12:14-29
    1. The goal of peace 12:14-17
    2. The superiority of the New Covenant 12:18-24
    3. The consequences of apostasy 12:25-29
  - B. Life within the church ch. 13
    1. Pastoral reminders 13:1-21
    2. Personal explanations 13:22-25

### **MESSAGE**

I would summarize the message of this epistle in the following words: Christians will only realize our full eternal reward as believers if we appreciate the greatness of Jesus Christ and continue to trust God rather than turning away from Him in this life.

The ultimate goal that the writer had in view was Christians' full eternal reward as believers. I do not believe that it was the conversion of the unsaved members of his audience. He addressed his readers consistently

as believers. He wrote to encourage Christians to persevere faithfully so that they will receive all that God wants to give them at the judgment seat of Christ. Our rewards are at issue in this letter, not our salvation. The writer did not want us to suffer loss but to enter into our full inheritance, our full rest, the fullness of our salvation.

In order to accomplish this he wrote that we must know one thing and do two things: one positive and one negative.

We must know, and appreciate, the greatness of Jesus Christ. In this epistle the writer presented Him as the greatest revelation that God has given humankind. God's revelation in His Son is superior to all other revelations that He has given in three respects:

First, it supersedes all other revelations: God's revelation through angels (the Mosaic Law), His revelation through humans (the prophets), and His revelation through rituals (the Old Covenant). When Jesus Christ came to reveal God, He brought revelation that superseded what had preceded Him. The revelation that He brought was similar to that of a spotlight, compared to previous candle-like revelations.

Second, God's revelation in His Son is sufficient to meet every basic human need. God spoke through His Son, so the need for a prophet (a revealer of God) no longer exists. He established a New Covenant, so the need for a priest (a mediator for people) no longer exists. And He exalted His Son to His right hand, so the need for a king (a righteous ruler) no longer exists.

Third, God's revelation in His Son ensures final victory in every basic sphere of life. The individual (the human order) attains perfection through the Son. Society (the social order) will experience perfection through the Son. And the universe (the cosmic order) will reach perfection through the Son.

This is what we need to know, objectively, to do, subjectively, what is necessary in order to gain our full reward as believers. All Christians will go to heaven and receive many blessings (Eph. 1; 1 Pet. 1). But faithful Christians will receive additional rewards (various "crowns," the privilege of reigning with Christ, etc.; cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

What we must do is continue to trust God. Hebrews places great emphasis on the importance of living by faith in God. It teaches us three things about faith (ch. 11):

First, Hebrews defines faith. Faith is volitional surrender and obedience to God, regardless of how things may look. It is not just intellectual conviction. It is the action of the will that expresses intellectual conviction. This epistle regards unbelief as disobedience, as does all of Scripture. People in the past who lived by faith made decisions and acted because they believed God, in spite of appearances (ch. 11).

Second, Hebrews also illustrates faith. It describes faith as doing, as suffering, and as waiting. These are the primary activities of faith that the writer of Hebrews emphasized. They are progressively more difficult. It is harder to suffer persecution for our faith than it is to obey God when obedience does not involve suffering. And it is most difficult to keep on trusting God when suffering does not end. Waiting for God to fulfill His promises is hardest of all when our hopes do not materialize (e.g., Christ's return).

Third, in addition, Hebrews vindicates faith. It assures us of the ultimate triumph of those who live by faith in God. People in the past who acted in faith achieved. People who suffered for their faith triumphed. People who waited in faith received their reward. There are examples of all three types of people in Hebrews.

On the positive side, then, we need to continue to trust God in order to realize our full reward as believers. What we must not do is turn away from God. This is the negative responsibility that the letter also stresses. If we apostatize, we will lose our full reward. Apostasy is the abandonment or renunciation of some belief. Hebrews teaches us three things about apostasy, as it does about faith.

First, this epistle defines apostasy descriptively. Apostasy is the opposite of faith. Its root is disobedience because of appearances (e.g., the 10 Israelite spies; cf. Jude). Apostasy for a Christian is turning away from faith, having previously embraced faith. An apostate, however, can be a believer or an unbeliever.

Second, Hebrews also illustrates apostasy in the same three ways as it illustrates faith. Apostasy acts. It involves a deliberate turning away. It also suffers, not now, but in the future, because of what the apostate loses. It also waits, even though it lives for the present rather than for the future.

Third, Hebrews condemns apostasy. It assures us of the ultimate tragedy of apostasy. Apostates may achieve what they want in the present, for example, approval by others. But they will lose what is far more valuable in the future, for example, God's approval. They may avoid suffering now, but later they will be sorry. They may not want to wait for their reward now, but they will wait forever for it later and not get it.

This is the central message of the epistle: We will only realize our full eternal reward as believers if we appreciate the greatness of Jesus Christ and continue to trust God rather than turning away from Him.

The writer urged his readers to persevere in faith by using two appeals: one negative and one positive.

The first appeal is negative: the warning passages. There are five warning passages in Hebrews. Each one warns of the danger of apostasy from a different angle.

The first warning passage (2:1-4) warns of the danger of drifting away from the truth. It pictures a ship dragging its anchor. The tides of our age can draw us away from our moorings. We need to keep standing firm in the faith (cf. Col. 1:23).

The second passage (3:7-19) warns of the danger of disbelief. Disbelief results in heart-hardening. We need to keep on believing rather than ceasing to believe (cf. Luke 17:3).

The third passage (5:11—6:12) warns of the danger of immaturity. When we do not put truth into practice, we do not just remain in the same spiritual state. We regress. Therefore we need to keep on growing (cf. 2 Pet. 3:18).

The fourth passage (10:19-39) warns of the danger of willful sinning. If we abandon confidence in the effectiveness of Jesus Christ's sacrifice there is no other sacrifice that can protect us from God's judgment on us as believers. We need to keep submitting to God (cf. Rom. 6:16).

The fifth passage (12:14-29) warns of the danger of unresponsiveness. The message of this letter demands positive response. If we do not respond positively we will lose part of our reward. We need to keep on obeying God (cf. Titus 3:8).

Some students of this book believe that there are seven warning passages rather than five. In addition to those mentioned above, they identify 4:1 through 13 and divide 12:14 through 29 into two warnings: 12:14 through 17 and 12:18 through 29.<sup>1</sup>

The second appeal to persevere in the faith is positive: the encouragement passages. Following each of the warning passages is at least one word of encouragement. The writer balanced his negative warnings with positive words of encouragement.

The first encouragement passage (2:1-4) encourages the readers with a reminder that God confirmed His promises with miracles in the apostolic age.

The second passage (3:7-19) encourages by reminding us of Jesus' example of faithfulness and our resources for remaining faithful as believers.

The third passage (5:11—6:12) encourages with a reminder of the readers' past faithfulness and God's firm promises.

The fourth passage (10:19-39) also encourages with a reminder of the readers' past perseverance.

The fifth passage (12:14-29) encourages by reminding us of Jesus' example of perseverance and the reason for divine discipline.

By way of application I would like to make three observations based on three major revelations in the epistle:

First, appreciation for Jesus Christ is foundational to faithful perseverance. Probably the main reason many Christians turn away from the Lord is that they do not appreciate His greatness. Many church congregations get very little preaching and teaching on who Jesus Christ is and the many-sided splendor of His person. They also do not understand as they should all that He accomplished for them. Isaac Watts once wrote a 12-stanza hymn ("Join All the Glorious Names") in which he included 17 different names of Jesus Christ. Just singing this one hymn helps one to appreciate the greatness of the Savior. Many people who are now members of cults were once in Christian churches. But they left them because the cult promised a

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Gromacki, p. 37.

deeper understanding of the truth, which they felt they were not getting in their church, because all they ever heard was the simple gospel message.

Second, Christian leaders need to emphasize the Christian's hope more in their ministries. We live in a present-oriented culture that values immediate self-gratification. Many Christians are apostatizing because they do not appreciate the greatness of the reward that they will receive if they remain faithful to the Lord. This life is preparation for the next. Prophecy conferences stress our hope. Baby boomers (people born between 1946 and 1964), especially, are searching for hope, but all people need it.

Third, we need to realize that God will judge Christians who apostatize. They will not lose their salvation, but they will lose much that they will wish they had never given up, if they stop walking by faith (cf. Rom. 8:18). It is hard to finish well, but it is possible (cf. Jude 24; Heb. 12:1-3). Our motivation should include a combination of the fear of God and the love of God, like the two wings on an airplane.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Adapted from G. Campbell Morgan, *Living Messages of the Books of the Bible*, 2:2:107-21.



## Exposition

### I. THE CULMINATING REVELATION OF GOD CHS. 1—2

The writer of Hebrews customarily began with a brief statement that presented the theme of each major section of his discourse. The first such statement appears in 1:1 through 4, and it introduces the theme of the culminating revelation of God, which continues through 2:18.

"The final disclosure of God's mind and purpose has been made in his Son, who is far superior to the angels; beware then of taking it casually and carelessly (1<sup>1</sup>—2<sup>4</sup>)."<sup>1</sup>

#### A. THE AGENT OF GOD'S FINAL REVELATION 1:1-4

The writer began his epistle with an affirmation of Jesus Christ's greatness in order to introduce his readers to his subject. This section is one sentence in the Greek text. It contrasts God's old revelation with the new, specifically by presenting God's Son as superior to all other previous modes of revelation.

"The aim of the writer is to prove that the old Covenant through which God had dealt with the Hebrews is superseded by the New; and this aim he accomplishes in the first place by exhibiting the superiority of the mediator of the new Covenant to all previous mediators."<sup>2</sup>

"It would be misleading to think of vv. 1-4 as stating a thesis to be proved, or as giving a précis of the following argument. The author proceeds rather by an interweaving of themes, as in musical composition."<sup>3</sup>

"The literary structure of the exordium [beginning part, vv. 1-4] exhibits a concentric symmetry (A [vv. 1-2a] B [v. 2b] C [v. 2c] C' [v. 3a-b] B' [v. 3c] A' [v. 4]): the conceptual

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 1.

<sup>2</sup>Marcus Dods, "The Epistle to the Hebrews," in *The Expositor's Greek Testament*, 4:247.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 90.

correspondence of vv 1 and 4 serves to frame the several statements concerning the Son in vv 2 and 3 ..."<sup>1</sup>

"The core of the exordium (B C C' B') describes Jesus in an arresting way as the royal Son, divine Wisdom, and the royal Priest."<sup>2</sup>

"This is the most sonorous [impressive] piece of Greek in the whole New Testament. It is a passage that any classical Greek orator would have been proud to write. The writer of the Letter to the Hebrews has brought to it every artifice of word and rhythm that the beautiful and flexible Greek language could provide. ... The man who wrote his letter must have been trained in Greek oratory."<sup>3</sup>

1:1 "It is significant that the subject of the first verb is 'God,' for God is constantly before the author; he uses the word sixty-eight times, an average of about once every seventy-three words all through his epistle. Few NT books speak of God so often."<sup>4</sup>

God gave many revelations of Himself to Old Testament believers, "the fathers" being a shorthand way of referring to them (cf. v. 2). Ellingworth suggested that the writer may have referred to them as "the" fathers, rather than as "our" fathers because some of his readers were Gentiles.<sup>5</sup> Another possibility is that "the" gives more honor than "our." God gave these revelations in many periods of history. He did this by various means and in various ways ("in many portions and in many ways"). Another rendering of this phrase is "different modes ... and ... different occasions."<sup>6</sup> For example, His means included types, symbols, commandments, precepts, warnings,

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, pp. 6.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 7. Cf. pp. cxxxix-cxl.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup>Leon Morris, "Hebrews," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, vol. 12 of *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, p. 12.

<sup>5</sup>Ellingworth, p. 92.

<sup>6</sup>Guthrie, p. 62.

exhortations, visions, dreams, signs, parables, events, and face-to-face visitations (cf. Num. 12:6-8).

God's ways included supernatural interventions into history as well as natural phenomena such as storms, plagues, and other historical events. They also included people, namely, the prophets through whom He spoke (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:21). The writer probably used the Greek words *polymeros* ("portions") and *polytropos* ("ways") partially for their alliterative value. Moffatt captured this alliteration in English by translating the first part of verse 1: "Many were the forms and fashions in which God spoke ..."<sup>1</sup>

"The earlier revelations were the preparation for the later but were distinguished from it in four particulars—in the time, in the recipients, in the agents, in the manner."<sup>2</sup>

1:2a God's most recent revelation had come through His own "Son."<sup>3</sup> The writer was not denying divine revelation to the apostles. He was stressing the culminating character of God's revelation in Jesus Christ compared with what He had given to the Old Testament prophets. His statement establishes the fact of progressive revelation and has strongly suggested to some the cessation of revelation in the apostolic age.<sup>4</sup> God's final revelation through His Son came first as Jesus conducted His earthly ministry, but then it continued after Jesus ascended to heaven, from where He gave further revelation through the apostles (cf. Acts 1:1-2). People have not taken the initiative to discover God, but God has taken the initiative to reveal Himself to people.

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 2.

<sup>2</sup>Dods, 4:247.

<sup>3</sup>See Nathan D. Holsteen, "The Trinity in the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 168:671 (July-September 2011):334-46; and Gareth Lee Cockerill, "The Truthfulness and Perennial Relevance of God's Word in the Letter to the Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 172:686 (April-June 2015):190-202.

<sup>4</sup>See John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4:8:7; F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 3.

Some translators have supplied the word "His" before "Son" (v. 2a). Its absence in the Greek text (along with the absence of the definite article "the") stresses the character of "Son" as a vehicle of revelation.<sup>1</sup> God's own "Son" is a superior revelation compared to "the prophets" (v. 1).

"... Jesus, the Son of God, not merely declares unto us the message of the Father, but He Himself is the message of the Father. All that God has to say unto us is *Jesus*. All the thoughts and gifts and promises and counsels of God are embodied in Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

There are seven references to Jesus Christ as "the Son" in Hebrews (1:2, 5, 8; 3:6; 4:14; 5:8; 6:6; 7:28; 10:29), plus others in some of the Old Testament passages that the writer quoted.<sup>3</sup>

"In the prophets God 'spoke' (revealed Himself) as *light*: the requirements, claims, demands of his holiness being insisted upon. But in the Son it is the sweet accents of *love* that we hear. It is the *affections* of God which the Son has expressed, appealing to ours; hence, it is by the heart, and not the head, that God can be known."<sup>4</sup>

"God might have spoken 'Almightywise,' as He did at Sinai; but that would have terrified and overwhelmed us. God might have spoken 'Judgewise,' as He will at the great white Throne; but that would have condemned us, and forever banished us from His presence. But, blessed be His name, He has spoken 'Sonwise,' in the *tenderest* relation which He could possibly assume."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek*, p. 114.

<sup>2</sup>Saphir, 1:38.

<sup>3</sup>See Mikael C. Parsons, "Son and High Priest: A Study in the Christology of Hebrews," *Evangelical Quarterly* 60:3 (July 1988):192-215.

<sup>4</sup>Pink, p. 26.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 27.

"... the fundamental truth set forth in Hebrews is that Christ Himself, the Son of God, *is* God's message, His voice to us."<sup>1</sup>

1:2b-3 Seven facts in these verses stress the Son's unique greatness and the culminating character of His revelation. For the writer's original Jewish readers the number seven connoted a complete work of God, as in the Creation.

First, He is the "heir of all things." "Heir" suggests both dignity and dominion, with the added implication of legal title.<sup>2</sup> All things will fall under His authority. While Jesus Christ is presently in authority over all things, in the future God the Father will subject all things to Him in a more direct sense than the way in which they are now subject to Him (cf. Phil. 2:9-11). The writer introduced the concept of inheritance here, which he proceeded to develop in this epistle (cf. Ps. 2:8; Heb. 2:5-9). The believer's inheritance is a major theme in Hebrews.

"Christ is the heir of *all* things precisely because God has only *one* Son and *one* Heir. Christians, it is true, are also called sons and heirs of God, but they are so not in their own right but solely by virtue of their incorporation into the only-begotten Son with whom alone God is well pleased (Mt. 3:17; 17:5; Rom. 8:14-17; Gal. 4:4-7; 1 Pet. 1:3f.)."<sup>3</sup>

Second, it was through the Son that God "made the world" (Gr. *aiones*, lit. ages, i.e., the whole created universe of time, matter, and space). The Son was God's agent in creation (John 1:3; Col. 1:16). He created both matter and history. Both ideas are in view here.<sup>4</sup> However the emphasis is on the various dispensations (administrations) through which the world has passed, is passing, and will pass.<sup>5</sup> Jesus Christ is not a created

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<sup>1</sup>Newell, p. 4.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Hughes, p. 39.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce, p. 4.

<sup>5</sup>W. H. Griffith Thomas, *Hebrews: A Devotional Commentary*, p. 22.

being, as Jehovah's Witnesses and some others claim.<sup>1</sup> He is the Creator of all.

"Thus the writer of Hebrews, in a single term (*aionas*), unites the idea of the world existing in space with the idea of the world moving through time—no mean accomplishment."<sup>2</sup>

Third, the Son "is the radiance of His [God's] glory." The Greek word *apaugasma*, translated "radiance," refers to what shines out from the source of light. Jesus Christ revealed the glory of God in a veiled way during His incarnation. Peter, James, and John saw that radiance revealed more directly on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:1-2). Probably the writer meant that Jesus' glory was like the glory of the sun rather than like the glory of the sun that is reflected by the moon.<sup>3</sup>

Fourth, the Son is "the exact representation of His [God's] nature." The Greek word *charakter*, translated "representation," occurs only here in the New Testament. Greek writers used it to describe the emperor's picture on Roman coins and the clear-cut impression made by a seal (a facsimile). It did not express a general likeness but an exact duplication of the original. Jesus Christ let humankind know exactly what the nature of God, whom no one has seen, is like during His earthly ministry (cf. John 14:9).

"The apostle, calling the Son of God 'the stamp of the Father's hypostasis' [nature, v. 3], doubtless assigns some subsistence to the Father wherein he differs from the Son."<sup>4</sup>

Fifth, the Son "upholds all things by the word of His power" (i.e., His powerful word). The idea is not so much that Jesus upholds the universe as a dead weight, similar to Atlas shouldering the world. Rather He carries all things forward (Gr.

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<sup>1</sup>See Jan Karel Van Baalen, *The Chaos of Cults*, pp. 238-39; John H. Gerstner, *The Theology of the Major Sects*, p. 131.

<sup>2</sup>Alva J. McClain, *The Greatness of the Kingdom*, p. 32.

<sup>3</sup>See Gromacki, pp. 26-27.

<sup>4</sup>Calvin, 1:13:2.

*pheron*) on their appointed course providentially (Col. 1:17).<sup>1</sup> Jesus Christ's "word" has tremendous power and authority. It is the greatest force in the universe (cf. Gen. 1:3; et al.).

Sixth, the Son "made purification of sins" as no one else could. He did so by His own sacrifice at Calvary and by His work as the ultimate priest. The Greek word *katharismos*, translated "purification," means both removal and cleansing (cf. Mark 1:44; 2 Pet. 1:9). "Sin" (*hamartia*) is a very common word in Hebrews occurring 25 times. The only other New Testament book in which it appears more frequently is Romans, where Paul used it 48 times.

"Hebrews views sins and their remedy in cultic [formal Israelite worship] terms. The purification of sins by Christ's sacrifice is related, on the one hand, to the establishment of a new order of relationships between God and mankind, and on the other hand to obedience (10:1-18, especially vv. 8-10) and moral effort (12:1-4). Apart from passing references to adultery and the love of money (13:4f.), Hebrews says little about individual sins, and contains no list of vices comparable to Rom. 1:29-31; Gal. 5:19-21; or 1 Pet. 4:3. The fundamental sin for Hebrews is that of unfaithfulness to God, which may superficially appear as neglect or lassitude [sluggishness] (*amelesantes*, 2:3; or *nothroi*, 5:11), but which in essence is rebellion against God's will, and more specifically apostasy (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 6:4-6; 10:26-31)."<sup>2</sup>

Seventh, the Son "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" when He returned to heaven after His ascension. He took the choice place of honor and authority in relation to God the Father (cf. Eph. 4:10; Phil. 2:9; Luke 22:69). Here the

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 38; Hughes, p. 45. Providence refers to the working of God through the normal circumstances of life.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 102.

writer introduced his key text, Psalm 110, which he proceeded to expound in the chapters to follow.

The writer referred to the place where Jesus now sits, ruling, as at the Father's right hand in heaven (Ps. 110:1). This is not the same as the Davidic throne, which will be on earth in the future (Isa. 9:6-7; Dan. 2:44; 7:13-14; et al.). Jesus will begin His rule over Israel and the whole world on earth as the Davidic Messiah after He returns to the earth at His second advent (Rev. 20:1-6).<sup>1</sup> Presently He rules over the church, the angelic host, and all things from heaven (Eph. 4:15; Col. 1:18; 2:10).

"Nor should it be imagined that the author of our epistle intended such expressions as 'sat down,' 'on the right hand,' and 'on high' in a crassly literalistic sense. ... Herveus, for example, explains that 'he sat down' denotes that he is resting and reigning and judging supremely, that 'on the right hand' denotes a position of equality and honor, and that 'on high' denotes above every creature."<sup>2</sup>

"That no literal location is intended was as well understood by Christians in the apostolic age as it is by us: they knew that God has no physical right hand or material throne where the ascended Christ sits beside Him; to them the language denoted the exaltation and supremacy of Christ as it does to us."<sup>3</sup>

Sitting does, however, connote a position of dignity, settled continuance, and rest.<sup>4</sup>

Each one of these seven actions points to the full deity of Jesus Christ. The original Jewish audience, which was faced with the temptation to abandon discipleship of Jesus for return

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<sup>1</sup>See Cleon L. Rogers Jr., "The Davidic Covenant in Acts-Revelation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 151:601 (January-March 1994):81-82.

<sup>2</sup>Hughes, p. 48.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup>Pink, p. 40.



to Judaism, received a strong reminder of His deity at the very outset of this epistle. The writer presented Him as Creator, Prophet, Priest, and King in these verses. He would say much more about Jesus as the Priest-King in the following chapters.

1:4 These seven facts also clearly reveal the Son's superiority to any other of God's messengers, even "the angels." This superiority is also clear in the fact that His "name" is Son (singular) rather than sons (collectively). The Old Testament writers called the angels "sons of God" (e.g., Job 2:1; 38:7). Jesus Christ inherited the name "Son" before creation (v. 2, cf. 5:8). Within the Trinity, God the Son carried out the will of God the Father in a way that corresponds to the way in which sons in biblical culture carried out the wills of their fathers. In another sense, Jesus became ("having become") God's Son at His ascension, by taking His seat at the Father's right hand, with a view to returning to the earth and ruling over it (cf. 2 Sam. 7:12-16; Ps. 2:7).

This is the first of the writer's 13 uses of the word "better" (Gr. *kreitton*), all of which contrast Jesus Christ and His order with what preceded Him in Judaism (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6 [twice]; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). This word appears only six times elsewhere in the New Testament. The writer used many comparatives (e.g., more excellent, lesser, better, more, greater, et al.) in order to support his argument that the new Christian order is superior to the old Jewish order. This is also a "signpost passage" in which a brief statement (in this case "much better than the angels") identifies a main subject that the writer proceeded to develop later (cf. 2:17; 5:9-10; 10:36-39; 12:11?).<sup>1</sup> "Angel" (Gr. *angelos*) is another of this writer's favorite words. It appears 13 times in Hebrews.

"Opinions differ as to what is meant here by 'the name.' Some take this to mean that in his whole character and personality Christ was superior to any angel. Others think the reference is simply to the name 'Son,' which is a better name than

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<sup>1</sup>See David J. MacLeod, "The Literary Structure of the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146:582 (April-June 1989):187.

'angel' because it denotes superiority in character and personality. Either interpretation is possible."<sup>1</sup>

The Hebrews writer introduced several concepts in the prologue (vv. 1-4) that he developed more fully later. These include the distinctive quality of the Son's revelation, the superiority of His sacrifice, His sovereignty, and His greatness compared with the angels.<sup>2</sup>

"The basic idea of this whole letter is that Jesus Christ alone brings to men the full revelation of God, and that He alone enables men to enter into the very presence of God."<sup>3</sup>

The differences between the beginning of this epistle and the beginnings of other New Testament epistles are striking. There is no introduction of the writer, no mention of the original readers, and no benediction, all of which were common features of letters in the first century. The writer obviously wanted his readers to give their full attention to the greatness of Jesus Christ. Some students of Hebrews have concluded that the writer did not identify himself or his readers deliberately because he wanted to make Jesus Christ primary in the readers' thinking throughout this epistle. I think this is very likely.

"In 1:1-4 the writer gave christological precision to a cluster of ideas derived from hellenistic Judaism. He boldly applied the categories of Wisdom to a historical figure, Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews was a creative theologian who brought together wisdom motifs and priestly motifs in a tightly formulated statement concerning the dignity and achievement of the Son of God. The opening paragraph establishes a firm christological foundation for all that the writer has to say concerning the character and demands of the revelation mediated by the Son. The joining together of wisdom and priestly notes in the carefully orchestrated presentation of the Son provides the readers with the assurance of Jesus' sustained concern for them and his ability to strengthen and

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 16.

<sup>2</sup>For another exposition of verses 1-4, see David J. MacLeod, "The Finality of Christ: An Exposition of Hebrews 1:1-4," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:646 (April-June 2005):210-30.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, p. 2.

vindicate the people of God when they become objects of contempt in a hostile world."<sup>1</sup>

### **B. THE SUPERIORITY OF GOD'S SON 1:5-14**

The writer proceeded to explain God's exaltation of Jesus Christ in order to help his readers appreciate the fact that He perfectly fulfilled Old Testament prophecy concerning the Son of David.<sup>2</sup> The Jews knew that their Messiah had to be a descendant of David. The writer also did this so that his readers would appreciate Christ properly and not overemphasize the importance of angels. Angels were very important in Judaism, primarily because multitudes of them assisted God in giving the Mosaic Law at Mount Sinai (cf. Deut. 33:2; Ps. 68:17; Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). They also appeared occasionally to make very important announcements (e.g., Gen. 16:9; 31:11; Exod. 3:2; et al.).<sup>3</sup>

"The internal structure of the first major segment of the address (1:5—2:18) exhibits the writer's customary style of alternating between two types of literary genre, exposition and exhortation. The chain of OT passages demonstrating the superiority of the Son to angels (1:5-13) is expository in character and lays the foundation for the solemn appeal in 2:1-4."<sup>4</sup>

The "hook-word" that connects these two sections of the epistle (1:1-4 and 1:5-14) is "angels." Lane provided the following helpful comparisons:<sup>5</sup>

PARALLELS BETWEEN 1:1-4 AND 1:5-13			
1:1-4		1:5-13	
A	Appointment as royal heir (2b)	A'	Appointment as royal Son and heir (5-9)

<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 19.

<sup>2</sup>See Victor (Sung Yul) Rhee, "Christology in Hebrews 1:5-14: The Three Stages of Christ's Existence," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59:4 (2016):717-29.

<sup>3</sup>See C. Fred Dickason Jr., *Angels*, for biblical answers to many questions about angels.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, p. 22.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

B	Mediator of the creation (2c)	B'	Mediator of the creation (10)
C	Eternal nature and pre-existent glory (3a-b)	C'	Unchanging, eternal nature (11-12)
D	Exaltation to God's right hand (3c)	D'	Exaltation to God's right hand (13)

"Christology is the central focus in all the theology of Hebrews, and two titles of Christ are central to its Christology: Son of God and High Priest. Around these two focal points all the major ideas in Hebrews concerning Christ's person and work can be located. Christ as High Priest is actually the more distinctive and important idea in the theology of the book, but Christ as Son of God is foundational."<sup>1</sup>

Bibliology (specifically the writer's uses of the Old Testament), eschatology (specifically the believer's future rewards), and soteriology (specifically progressive sanctification and perseverance) are also major theological emphases in Hebrews.<sup>2</sup>

The writer cited seven Old Testament passages in order to prove Jesus' superiority over the angels (v. 4). As mentioned previously, the number seven was especially significant to the Jews as representing the completeness of something (e.g., the work of creation, etc.). Probably the writer used seven facts in verses 2b and 3, and seven passages in verses 5 through 13, in order to impress completeness and finality on his original readers strongly.

"The author has an unusual method of citation; he almost always neglects the human author of his OT quotations (exceptions are 4:7; 9:19-20), though throughout the rest of the NT the human author is often noted. Instead, without actually saying 'God says,' he normally ascribes the passage he quotes to God, except, of course, where God is addressed, as in 2:6. Twice he attributes words in the OT to Christ (2:11-

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<sup>1</sup>Buist M. Fanning, "A Theology of Hebrews," in *A Biblical Theology of the New Testament*, p. 370.

<sup>2</sup>Trotter, pp. 185-222.

12; 10:5ff.) and twice to the Holy Spirit (3:7; 10:15). No other NT writer shares this way of quoting the OT. ... The effect is to emphasize the divine authorship of the whole OT."<sup>1</sup>

"Unlike Paul, who shows a preference for the introductory formula *kathos gegraptai* ["as it is written"], the writer of Hebrews never introduces a quotation from the OT with a form of the verb *graphein*, 'to write.' His preference is for the verb *legein*, 'to say,' especially in the form of the present participle *legon*, 'saying.' The text of the OT is presented dynamically. The writer is persuaded that God continues to speak today in the biblical passages that are cited."<sup>2</sup>

The writer's contrast of Jesus Christ's authority and name with that of the angels suggests that his original readers may have regarded the angels too highly. This was true of certain first-century sects within Judaism, one of which was the Essene community that lived at Qumran. The Dead Sea Scrolls have revealed that this group had a highly developed angelology and that they regarded angels with more veneration than they should have. Nevertheless, all the Jews regarded angels highly because God had given the Mosaic Law and other special information to them through angelic mediation (cf. Deut. 33:2; Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19; Heb. 2:2).<sup>3</sup>

What the writer said here about angelic mediators applies especially to those who claim to mediate knowledge concerning God and the after-life to humankind. Such self-proclaimed mediators today include leaders of some cults such as Theosophy, some New Age proponents, Shirley MacLaine, and other advocates of reincarnation.<sup>4</sup> Finding one's spiritual "guide" and "channeling" to the unseen world, through that being, is popular in some circles. This also applies to people who claim to reveal how human beings can find God and secure His acceptance and who at the same time deny biblical revelation on these subjects.

1:5            The phrase "to which of the angels" opens and closes this section of the text (cf. v. 13). This literary device (an *inclusio*) marks off a literary unit by using the same word or phrase both

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 7.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. cxvii. See also his discussion of the writer's use of the Old Testament, pp. cxii-cxxiv.

<sup>3</sup>See *ibid.*, p. liv.

<sup>4</sup>See Gerstner, p. 185.

at the beginning and end of a discussion (cf. 2:5-16; 3:1—4:14; 5:1-10; 5:11—6:12; 7:1-10; 12:14—13:20).

David prophetically referred to Jesus Christ as God's "Son" in Psalm 2:7, the verse that the writer quoted first.<sup>1</sup> The Old Testament writers referred to angels collectively as "the sons of God" (Job. 1:6; 2:1; 38:7; Ps. 29:1) in order to emphasize their greatness, but they did not refer to any one of them as the Son of God. "Son of God" is a title that referred to the Davidic kings (2 Sam. 7:14) and specifically to Jesus Christ: God the Son (Mark 1:11; Luke 1:32). "Today" evidently refers to the occasion of Jesus Christ's entrance into heaven. This happened after His resurrection and at His ascension.

The eternal Son of God "... entered into the full exercise of all the prerogatives implied by His Sonship when, after His suffering had proved the completeness of His obedience, He was raised to the Father's right hand."<sup>2</sup>

"In other words, resurrection, ascension, and glorification should be viewed as forming a unity, each one contributing to the exaltation of the Son to transcendental heights of power and dignity."<sup>3</sup>

Another, but less probable view I think, is that this day ("Today") was only the day of Jesus' resurrection.<sup>4</sup> It was probably not the day of the Savior's birth, as some believe.<sup>5</sup>

"The writer is clearly more concerned to demonstrate the significance of the begetting in terms of the Son's status, rather than to tie it down to a specific occasion."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See. Franz Delitzsch, *Biblical Commentary on the Psalms*, 1:95-97.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, p. 13. Cf. v. 3.

<sup>3</sup>Hughes, p. 55.

<sup>4</sup>Pentecost, p. 48.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Pink, pp. 50-51.

<sup>6</sup>Guthrie, p. 73.

"In Ancient Near Eastern thought, when a god elevated a person to kingship, the king assumed the *status* of being his 'firstborn.' This analogy is applied to the Messiah in Ps 89:3-4, 26-27. Hence this has nothing to do with physical birth, but the king's coronation."<sup>1</sup>

The second quotation, from 2 Samuel 7:14 or 1 Chronicles 17:13, like the first, ties in with the Davidic Covenant and advances the previous point. Not only is Jesus the Son of God, but He is also the promised son of David (Luke 1:32-33, 68-69; Rom. 1:3). Even though Jesus Christ was always God's eternal Son (in eternity past), in human history He became the Son prophesied to rule over David's house. He received permission to rule the whole earth after His ascension (cf. Ps. 2:8).

To summarize, the title "Son" refers to Jesus in three separate respects: He was always the pre-existent Son (v. 3a-b; cf. 5:8), He became the incarnate Son at His birth (v. 2a), and He became the exalted Son when He returned to heaven.<sup>2</sup>

Note the chiasmic style of the quotations, which begin and end with references to the Son and surround references to the Father. This has the effect of stressing the Father but uniting the Son closely with Him.<sup>3</sup>

1:6 We can see the superiority of the Son, also, in the third quotation, from Deuteronomy 32:43 (in the Septuagint), in that the :angels ... worship" the Son as Yahweh. "Again" may go with "brings," implying Jesus Christ's second advent.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, "again" may go with "says," implying the first advent.<sup>5</sup> In the latter case it would simply separate this quotation from the former one. The word order in the Greek text favors the first option, but the sense of the context

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1035.

<sup>2</sup>See Lane, pp. 25-26.

<sup>3</sup>A chiasmus is a rhetorical or literary figure in which words, grammatical constructions, or concepts are repeated in reverse order, in the same or a modified form.

<sup>4</sup>Westcott, p. 22; Thomas Hewett, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 56.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, p. 15.

favors the second. Many translators and interpreters support both views.<sup>1</sup> The point is that the angels, who are inferior to the Son (v. 5), worship the Son. The angels worshiped Jesus at His first advent (Luke 2:13-14). and they will undoubtedly worship Him at His second advent.

The title "firstborn" reflects the sovereignty, uniqueness, and superiority of the Son (Ps. 89:27). It does not always mean born first chronologically. Solomon exercised the sovereignty of the Davidic house as Israel's king even though he was the tenth son of David chronologically (1 Chron. 3:1-5). The title describes rank and honor here. The firstborn received special blessings (more inheritance) from his father than the other sons did.

"The context requires that *oikoumene* ["world"] be understood as the heavenly world of eschatological salvation into which the Son entered at his ascension [cf. 2:5] ..."<sup>2</sup>

- 1:7 Instead of being sovereign, the angels are servants ("ministers"). The fourth quotation is from Psalm 104:4. By describing the angels as "winds" the psalmist was drawing attention to their spirit nature, invisibility, power, and role as servants of a higher Power. As "a flame of fire" an angel was God's agent of judgment and illumination. Wind and fire were also symbols of the Holy Spirit in the Old Testament. They were appropriate designations of both the Holy Spirit and angels because both served the Father in similar ways as His servants. Even though the angels are as swift as wind and as powerful as fire, they are inferior to the Son.
- 1:8-9 By contrast to the ministry of angels who serve, the Son's ministry is to rule. His "throne" is both eternal (unending) and immutable (unchanging). This is a reference to the throne of God at whose right hand Jesus now sits (cf. 12:2).<sup>3</sup> This fifth quotation, from Psalm 45:6-7, describes the final triumph of

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<sup>1</sup>See Hughes, p. 57-59.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 27.

<sup>3</sup>McClain, p. 436.



David's Son, the Messiah, who is also "God." The Son is also superior to angels because He is God.

"This and the following quotation (vv. 10-12) are used to show that the Son is addressed in scripture both as God and as Lord. ... The point of v. 8b, for the author of Hebrews, seems to be that the Son exercises royal power, whereas the angels are mere *leitourgoi* ["ministers"] v. 7)."<sup>1</sup>

"Jesus' deity is more powerfully asserted in Hebrews than in any other New Testament writing, with the exception of the Gospel of John."<sup>2</sup>

The prophets predicted that Messiah would be righteous. Jesus Christ demonstrated this quality perfectly during His earthly ministry (cf. John 8:46). It is His love of "righteousness," manifested in His earthly life, that entitles Him to sovereignty.<sup>3</sup> The anointing to which the writer referred ("your God, has anointed you") probably took place after His ascension. Even though Messiah is God, yet God (the Father) anointed Him.

"The anointing of the Son is not to be thought of in connection with coronation rites, but as symbolizing the joy of festival occasions, when the practice of anointing was followed."<sup>4</sup>

The "companions" of the Son probably include all other righteous beings, angelic and human, including faithful Christians (cf. 2:10-11; 3:1, 14; 12:8). Part of the quotation in this verse does not argue the superiority of Christ over the angels. The writer probably included it because it makes a statement that he developed later in this epistle. The term "companions" describes those who have intimate, not just

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 122.

<sup>2</sup>Oscar Cullmann, *The Christology of the New Testament*, p. 305.

<sup>3</sup>Dods, 4:256.

<sup>4</sup>Guthrie, p. 77.

superficial, association with the Son (cf. Luke 5:7).<sup>1</sup> The NASB translators rendered the Greek word *metochos*, translated "companions" here, as "partakers" everywhere else it occurs in Hebrews (i.e., 3:1, 14; 6:4; 12:8).

1:10-12 Psalm 102:25-27, the sixth quotation, also referred to Messiah. The Son is also the Creator ("You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth"; cf. v. 2). This verse looks back to the past. "Lord" means "Master" (Gr. *kurie*) and refers to God in the passage the writer quoted.

This quotation is also important to the writer's argument because it reveals the immutability (unchangeableness) of the Son. After God burns up the present earth and heavens He will create new heavens and a new earth (2 Peter 3:10-12; Rev. 21—22). Many people in the Greco-Roman world believed that the world and the universe were indestructible.<sup>2</sup> Even though the earth as we know it will end, the Son's rule will continue eternally ("your years will not come to an end")—and along with it His "joy" (v. 9).

Note that the quotations tied together with "and" (v. 10) begin and end with the Son's eternal nature (vv. 8, 12).

"The attribute of permanence in the Creator corresponds to the durability of his throne and serves to reinforce the contrast between the mutability [changeableness] of the angels and the stable, abiding character of the Son."<sup>3</sup>

1:13 The seventh and last quotation in this series is from Psalm 110:1. Angels stand and serve, but the Son sits and rules (cf. v. 3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2; Matt. 22:43-44; 26:64; Mark 16:19; Acts 2:33-34; Rom. 8:34; Col. 3:1; 1 Pet. 3:22). The vindication predicted here ("make Your enemies a footstool for your feet") will take place when Jesus Christ returns at His second advent and at the various judgments of God's enemies

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<sup>1</sup>See John Soden, "The Use of Psalm 45:7-8 (6-7) in Hebrews 1:8-9," *Exegesis and Exposition* 2:1 (Summer 1987):51-70.

<sup>2</sup>J. Héring, *L'Épître aux Hébreux*, p. 8, cited by Guthrie, p. 78.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 30.

that will follow that return (cf. Matt 25:31-46; Rev. 20:11-15; et al.). Jesus Christ's present rule, on His Father's throne, is not the same as His rule on the earth, which will follow His second coming (cf. v. 3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2).<sup>1</sup> Eventually every knee will bow to Him (Phil. 2:10-11).

One writer identified a chiasmus in the quotations in verses 5-13:<sup>2</sup>

- A The Son's status as royal King (Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14) (Heb. 1:5)
- B The Son's status as Divine Wisdom (Deut. 32:43; Ps 104:4) (Heb. 1:6-7)
- C The Son's status as royal King and Divine Wisdom (Ps 45:6-7) (Heb. 1:8-9)
- B' The Son's status as Divine Wisdom (Ps 102:26-28) (Heb. 1:10-12)
- A' The Son's status as royal King (Ps 110:1) (Heb. 1:13)

1:14 God revealed a primary purpose and ministry of the angels ("ministering spirits") in this verse. It is "to provide service" for human beings ("those who will inherit salvation") so that they can achieve final deliverance over their spiritual enemies. This involves protecting and strengthening us who are believers so that we may one day obtain our full inheritance with Christ in glory. This angelic ministry of service is obviously inferior to Jesus Christ's ministry of ruling.

I do not think that the writer meant that angels "provide service for the sake of" unbelievers, since they will not "inherit salvation." One might understand this verse as saying that angels serve those who will be saved (born again, regenerated). But those who "inherit" elsewhere in this epistle

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<sup>1</sup>See Rogers, pp. 81-82.

<sup>2</sup>Herbert W. Bateman, IV, "Two First-Century Messianic Uses of the OT: Heb 1:5-13 and 4QFlor 1.1-19," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 38:1 (March 1995):26.

are believers. The "salvation" in view here seems to refer to the yet future aspect of believers' salvation.

Was the writer speaking of all Christians or only of faithful Christians when he wrote of "those who will inherit salvation"? The word "salvation" (Gr. *soteria*) occurs seven times in Hebrews, more than in any other book of the New Testament.<sup>1</sup> In some of his other uses of the words "inheritance" and "inherit," the writer referred to all Christians as inheriting from God (e.g., 9:15; cf. 11:8). At other times he apparently meant only faithful Christians (e.g., 6:12; cf. 11:17). I think he was probably speaking of all Christians here in view of what he just said about the ministry of angels. There is no other Scripture that limits the angels' ministry to faithful Christians or which indicates that angels have a special ministry to faithful Christians (cf. Matt. 18:10).

"'Inherit' is often used in the NT in senses other than the strict one of obtaining something by a will. It can mean 'obtain possession of' without regard to the means. It is used of possessing the earth (Matt 5:5), the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9-10), eternal life (Mark 10:17), the promises (Heb 6:12), incorruption (1 Cor. 15:50), blessing (Heb 12:17), a more excellent name (v. 4, ...)."<sup>2</sup>

The Hebrews writer spoke of the inheritance of Christians in the same way that the Old Testament writers spoke of the inheritance of the Israelites. Our potential inheritance as Christians refers to all that God wants to give us. We will inevitably receive some of that (cf. 1 Per. 1:3-9). However we can forfeit part of our inheritance through unfaithfulness, like Esau did (12:16) and like the generation of Israelites who died in the wilderness did (3:7—4:11).

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<sup>1</sup>For a study of salvation in Hebrews, see Brenda B. Colijn, "'Let Us Approach': Soteriology in the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 39:4 (December 1996):571-86.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 20.

"In contrast with the first part of this verse, the last three words ["will inherit salvation"] are all major concepts in Hebrews."<sup>1</sup>

Thus this section closes with a positive encouragement for the readers. The writer's array of Old Testament quotations in this pericope (section of text) presents one of the most glorious Christologies (studies of Christ) in Scripture. He placed special emphasis on Jesus' future reign as God's King, who is at the same time David's Son. In summary, the Son is superior to (better than) the angels in seven respects:

1. He is the Son of God (v. 5a).
2. He is the promised Son of David (v. 5b).
3. He is the sovereign (supreme authority) whom angels worship as Yahweh (v. 6).
4. His ministry is not that of a temporary servant like the angels (v. 7).
5. His ministry is that of the eternal Ruler and King (vv. 8-9).
6. He is the immutable Creator (vv. 10-12).
7. He is the sovereign (supreme authority) who will rule as Victor over all His enemies (v. 13).

"The writer of Hebrews uses seven eschatological passages in Hebrews 1:5-14 to demonstrate Jesus' right to rule in the coming millennial kingdom. Because of this extensive quoting from six psalms and 2 Samuel 7, the term *soteria* ('salvation') in Hebrews 1:14 is best understood in the Old Testament sense as deliverance from the enemies of Yahweh and participation in His kingdom."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 133.

<sup>2</sup>T. Kem Oberholtzer, "The Warning Passages in Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 145:577 (January-March 1988):96-97.

### C. THE DANGER OF NEGLIGENCE (THE FIRST WARNING) 2:1-4

Having just encouraged his readers with a reminder of God's help for believers (1:14), the writer next urged them to remain faithful to Him. He did this as a warning to them of the possibility of retrogressing spiritually and consequently losing part of the inheritance that could be theirs if they remained faithful. Three of Jacob's sons had done this: Reuben, Simeon, and Levi.

<b>BELIEVERS' FUTURE INHERITANCE</b>	
<b>What all believers will inherit</b>	<b>What faithful believers will additionally inherit</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Entrance into God's kingdom (John 3:3, 5; 1 Cor. 6:9; Gal. 5:21; Eph. 5:5)</li> <li>• Eternal life (John 3:16, 36; et al.)</li> <li>• Acceptance by God (Rom. 5:1; 8:31-39)</li> <li>• No condemnation (Rom. 5:9; 8:1; 1 Thess. 1:10)</li> <li>• Resurrection or translation (1 Cor. 15:53-57; 1 Thess. 4:13-17)</li> <li>• Glorification (1 Pet. 1:9)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Abundant eternal life (James 1:12; Rev. 2:10)</li> <li>• Reigning with Christ (Luke 19:17, 19; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 2:26-27)</li> <li>• Praise from God (Matt. 25:21, 23; Luke 19:17; John 12:26; 2 Tim. 4:8; 1 Pet. 1:7; 5:4)</li> <li>• Intimacy with Christ (John 15:14)</li> <li>• Various rewards (Matt. 5:12, 46; 6:1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 16, 18; 10:41-42; 16:27; Mark 9:41; Luke 6:23, 35; 1 Cor. 3:8, 14; 9:16-18, 25, 27; 2 Cor. 5:9-11; Phil. 4:1; Col. 3:24; 1 Thess. 2:19; 1 Tim. 4:14; 5:18; 2 Tim. 2:5; 4:8; Heb. 11:6; 1 Pet. 5:4; 2 John 8; Rev. 2:7, 11, 17, 28; 3:5, 11, 12, 21; 11:18; 22:12)</li> </ul>

"The second step in the argument for Jesus' superiority shows him to be infinitely great because of the nature of the salvation he won. ... The author precedes the development of this thought with a brief section in which he exhorts his readers to attend to what has been said, a feature we shall notice elsewhere (e.g., 3:7-11; 5:11-14)."<sup>1</sup>

"The author uses doctrine as a basis for exhorting believers."<sup>2</sup>

"The number of unusual words and idioms and the avoidance of the vocabulary of the LXX [Septuagint] suggest that in this paragraph it was the writer's intention to confront the thought and life of his readers in a more arresting way than reliance upon familiar words and phrases would foster."<sup>3</sup>

2:1        The meaning of "For this reason" is that, since Jesus Christ is greater than the angels, we should take the revelation that has come through Him seriously ("pay much closer attention to what we have heard"). If the Israelites received severe punishment whenever they disobeyed the Mosaic Law that God gave them through the angels, the punishment for disregarding what God has given us through His Son will be even more severe.<sup>4</sup>

Later in this epistle we learn that the original readers were slow to respond to Scriptural imperatives (5:11-12). They had not grown as Christians as they should have. The writer took this opportunity to exhort them to "pay" much closer "attention" (Gr. *prosechein*) to what their teachers had taught them and to what they had read in the Scriptures. This Greek word means not only to turn the mind to something but also to act upon what one perceives and has heard (cf. Acts 8:6; 16:14). The readers were apparently regarding these things too lightly.

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 21.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, p. 24. Cf. 3:1, 8, 12, 13, 15; 4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1, 11, 12; 10:22, 23, 24, 25, 32, 35; 12:1, 3, 12, 14, 15, 25, 28; 13:1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 9, 13, 15, 17, 18, 22, 24.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 35.

<sup>4</sup>Ellingworth, p. 137.

"God's speaking is the basis for the writer's own 'word of exhortation' (13:22)."<sup>1</sup>

The writer illustrated their position: It is as though they were in a boat on a river or at sea. He pictured them moored at a dock or anchored. If they continued to neglect their attachment to the truth that does not change, the currents of their age might carry them away from it. They might "drift away" (Gr. *pararreo*) from the truth that they had heard (though not from their eternal salvation, cf. 6:19).

"The LXX of Prov 3:21 uses this verb [*pararreo*] in reference to someone gradually losing sight of God's wisdom, suggesting that the fundamental nuance is a *gradual* departure rather than an abrupt one."<sup>2</sup>

"The world is ever tugging at the believer, and that so often unconsciously to him, to go along with its false hopes. Satan likes nothing better than a *neglecting* Christian! We all know, too, that the tendency of our natures is to drift along with earthly things away from the gospel."<sup>3</sup>

"What we have heard" is the antecedent of "it." This is a warning against apostatizing, namely, departing from truth once held. All the warnings in the Bible against following false teachers are similar to this one in their intent. If we Christians do not diligently retain the truth—and to do so we must know it and remember it—we will depart from it. We live in a world that is striving to separate us from it. Satan also wants us to abandon it (cf. Gen. 3; Matt. 4).

"... the [five warning] passages in question are concerned with the danger of apostasy."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Tanner, 2:1037.

<sup>3</sup>Newell, pp. 35-36.

<sup>4</sup>Stanley D. Toussaint, "The Eschatology of the Warning Passages in the Book of Hebrews," *Grace Theological Journal* 3 (1982):67-68.



The writer just quoted, however, believed that the apostates were all unbelievers. Most of the commentators, and I, believe that Christians can apostatize.

"... apostasy ... [is] the central concern of the entire epistle."<sup>1</sup>

"That church's experience 2,000 years ago intersects our lives in this way: *drifting is the besetting sin of our day*. And as the metaphor suggests, it is not so much intentional as from unconcern. Christians neglect their anchor—Christ—and begin to quietly drift away. There is no friction, no dramatic sense of departure. But when the winds of trouble come, the things of Christ are left far behind, even out of sight."<sup>2</sup>

"... if you examined a hundred people who had lost their faith in Christianity, I wonder how many of them would turn out to have been reasoned out of it by honest argument? Do not most people simply drift away?"<sup>3</sup>

"Perseverance in the faith, continuance in the Word, is a prime pre-requisite of discipleship [not salvation], see John 8:31; Col. 1:23; etc. Many who heard, and once seemed really interested in spiritual things, 'concerning the faith *have made shipwreck*' (1 Ti. 1:19)."<sup>4</sup>

Is this warning addressed to genuine believers or only professing believers? Some interpreters hold the first opinion, and others the second. This verse by itself does not give us enough information to decide for sure. The later warning passages will help. What seems clear is that both genuine and only professing believers can drift away from the truth. "We"

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<sup>1</sup>George E. Rice, "Apostasy As a Motif and Its Effect on the Structure of Hebrews," *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 23:1 (Spring 1985):33.

<sup>2</sup>R. Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, 1:48.

<sup>3</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity*, p. 124.

<sup>4</sup>Pink, p. 85.

can refer to either type of believer, but it includes the writer who, of course, was a believer.

2:2-3a The writer proceeded to argue from the lesser to the greater. "The word spoken through angels" refers to the Mosaic Covenant (cf. Deut. 33:2 LXX; Acts 7:38, 53; Gal. 3:19).<sup>1</sup> For the Jews, it was the Law under which they lived. For them the will of God was "unalterable." It required strict obedience. Under the Old (Mosaic) Covenant the connection between "every violation and act of disobedience" and "punishment" was clear and direct. Even more so, the readers could count on the New Covenant that had come, not through angels but through God's Son, to involve severe punishment for sinners. This is especially true if that sin involves failing to give continuing attention to (neglecting) our "so great a salvation."

The Greek word translated "violation" refers to overstepping bounds, and the one translated "disobedience" refers to the violation of God's will more generally. Another, less probable view, is that "violation" refers to sins of commission, and "disobedience" to sins of omission.<sup>2</sup> The writer did not specify the "punishment," but it cannot be loss of salvation since Scripture specifically states that Christians will not lose their salvation (John 10:28-29; Rom. 8:31-39; Eph. 1:11-14; 1 Pet. 1:3-5; et al.). In view of the context (1:8-14), belief in the all sufficiency of Jesus Christ, and possibly some of their reward for faithful perseverance, seem to be what the readers were in danger of neglecting and forgetting.

"The neglected salvation is not our final deliverance from hell, that is not the salvation 'about which we are speaking.' Rather, it is the opportunity to enter into the final destiny of man, to reign with Christ over the works of God's hands (Heb. 2:8-9)."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Moffatt, p. 18.

<sup>2</sup>Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, 2:282.

<sup>3</sup>Joseph C. Dillow, *The Reign of the Servant Kings*, p. 131.

"Salvation includes far more than moral and bodily regeneration, for it embraces the covenanted [earthly] kingdom of God, the inheritance of David's Son, the joint-heirship and reign with Christ."<sup>1</sup>

Note that the writer himself could have become negligent. He said, "how will we escape?" not how will you escape? (cf. v. 1). The most natural conclusion is that genuine Christians are in view in this warning, not simply unsaved professing Christians.<sup>2</sup> The writer gave us no clues in the text that he had in mind unsaved professing Christians. Furthermore, everything he said can be and has been true of genuine believers.<sup>3</sup>

"Unlike most modern congregations the early Christian church was an integrated community centered around the worship of God and the advancement of his kingdom. Economically it was a commonwealth, which meant that its members were not being pulled apart from one another by the pursuit of individual goals of success; they were devoting everything they were and owned to the strengthening of one another and the cause of Christ. Worshiping and eating together, the members were in constant communication [cf. Acts 2:42]. ... Little time or distance separated the members of this body, so there was an unhindered communication of the gifts and graces of each one to the others."<sup>4</sup>

"It is emphatically NOT the same situation a Baptist preacher in the twentieth century faces when he climbs into the pulpit before eight thousand professing Christians. We are therefore

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<sup>1</sup>George N. H. Peters, *The Theocratic Kingdom*, 3:451.

<sup>2</sup>See McGee, 5:514; Kenneth G. Hanna, *From Gospels to Glory*, pp. 393-97.

<sup>3</sup>See Herbert W. Bateman IV, ed., *Four Views on the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, for four understandings of the warning passages.

<sup>4</sup>Richard F. Lovelace, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, p. 161.

fully justified in concluding that, when a New Testament writer uses a term like 'brethren,' he is not thinking that some may and some may not really be brothers, but he assumes and believes that all his readers are in fact born again.<sup>1</sup>

"Since the writers [of the New Testament epistles] themselves never explicitly say that they feel their audience is a mixture and since they everywhere make statements to the effect that they are talking to genuine Christians, we have no warrant for reading into their otherwise clear statements qualifications which they themselves never make."<sup>2</sup>

The warning is against neglecting, not rejecting, salvation (cf. 6:19; Matt. 22:5). In keeping with 1:14 and 2:5, the eschatological aspect of our salvation (our glorification) is again in view. Neglecting assumes that one has something, whereas rejecting assumes that one does not have it.

"He [the writer] is not encouraging sinners to become Christians; rather, he is encouraging Christians to pay attention to the great salvation they have received from the Lord. ... More spiritual problems are caused by neglect than perhaps by any other failure on our part. We neglect God's Word, prayer, worship with God's people (see Heb. 10:25), and other opportunities for spiritual growth, and as a result, we start to drift."<sup>3</sup>

"For most of us the threat of life is not so much that we should plunge into disaster, but that we should drift into sin. There are few people who deliberately and in a moment turn their backs on

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<sup>1</sup>Dillow, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:282. Paragraph division omitted. Cf. pp. 276, 277, 278.

God; there are many who day by day drift farther and farther away from Him."<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 1 glorifies the person of our great Savior, and chapter 2 exalts the work of our great Savior: our "so great salvation."

2:3b-4 "The Lord" Jesus Christ spoke of salvation ("it") during His earthly ministry (e.g., Matt. 4:17; 19:28; Luke 12:31-32; 22:29-30). The apostles ("those who heard") taught the same truth, and by doing so they "confirmed" His teachings. This is the gospel in its widest meaning: the message of salvation.

"By speaking of 'the hearers' (*ton akousanton*), all interest is concentrated on the message, not the office, of those who had brought the word of redemption to the community ..."<sup>2</sup>

"God" testified to His approval of Christ's preaching, and the apostles' preaching about Christ, by providing authenticating miracles that showed that God was with them (cf. Acts 2:43; 4:30; 5:12; 6:8; 8:6, 13; 14:3; 15:12; 2 Cor. 12:12). The word "signs" emphasizes that the miracles signify something. "Wonders" emphasizes the reaction of awe that the miracles produced in those who observed them. The word "miracles" emphasizes their supernatural origin, and "gifts" stresses the graciousness of God in providing them. "Gifts of the Holy Spirit" refer to the gifts of prophecy, tongues, faith, etc. The writer intended that his reference to these miracles would bolster the readers' confidence in the gospel that they had heard and believed. Jews in particular were impressed that miracles were signs of God's activity (cf. John 2:18; 1 Cor. 1:22).

This statement does not force us to date the epistle after the apostles had died, as some interpreters have done.

"It is too much to read into this verse that the writer and his readers belonged to a second

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 13. See also R. K. Hughes, 1:52.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 39.

generation of Christians ... though 5:12 shows that they were not new converts ..."1

The original readers seem to have been people who had heard the apostles' preaching and had observed the miracles that accompanied that preaching. Guthrie believed that the writer had not heard Jesus firsthand.<sup>2</sup> This verse does not say that the signs and wonders had already ceased. They may have, but this statement does not say that. The prediction that they would cease occurs in 1 Corinthians 13:8. Ephesians 2:20 implies the temporary duration of apostolic ministry that included performing signs and wonders.<sup>3</sup>

"Hebrews' references to the Holy Spirit are generally incidental; much of the space occupied in Paul's theology by the Spirit is filled in Hebrews by the exalted Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Perhaps signs and wonders are less common in developed countries today because most of these countries have the complete Word of God. The Holy Spirit now typically validates the gospel by using God's Word (cf. Rom. 8:16; 1 John 5:1-13). Occasionally we hear reports of miracles that validate the gospel, but they are usually in places where the Word of God is not as available.

This is the first of five warnings in Hebrews (cf. 3:1—4:16; 5:11—6:20; 10:19-39; 12:1-29). It is the shortest and mildest one. These five warnings deal with drifting away from the gospel, disbelieving the gospel, dullness toward the gospel, despising the gospel, and defying the gospel. Some scholars view them as a chiasmus:<sup>5</sup>

A 2:1-4: hear (believe)

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 141. Cf. Robertson, 5:343.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 82.

<sup>3</sup>See J. Lanier Burns, "A Reemphasis on the Purpose of the Sign Gifts," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 132:527 (July-September 1975):245-46; Morris, p. 22.

<sup>4</sup>Ellingworth, p. 143.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert W. Bateman IV, "Introducing the Warning Passages in Hebrews," in *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, p. 84.

- B 3:7—4:13: trust and obey (explicit concern about distrust and disobedience)
- C 5:11—6:12: be lifelong learners
- B' 10:19-39: trust and obey (explicit concern about distrust and disobedience)
- A' 12:14-29: listen (believe)

"The warning of Hebrews 2:1-5 is linked by *dia touto* ('for this reason') with the entire argument of Hebrews 1. Because of the Son's superiority to angels (1:1-5), the angels' worship of and service to Him at His coming (1:6-7), His future rule and sharing of joy with His companions (1:8-9), and His future subjugation of His enemies (1:10-14), the readers would do well to heed these eschatological teachings. Neglect of this eschatological salvation (cf. 1:4; 2:3, 5) may result in individual temporal discipline similar to that experienced under the Old Covenant (2:2). The 'salvation' of 2:3 is the same as that in 1:4. Hebrews 2:5 clarifies that the *soteria* [salvation] under discussion is eschatological."<sup>1</sup>

"One of the greatest dangers of the Christian life is losing interest in what is familiar (8:9; Matt. 22:5). The entire Epistle lays stress on steadfastness at almost every stage, and this is one of the essential marks of the true, growing, deepening Christian life (3:14; 4:2, 12, 13; 6:1, 19; 10:26; 12:27, 28; 13:8)."<sup>2</sup>

"... the doctrines the epistle presents, the warnings it delivers, and the exhortations it gives all were intended to prevent regression and to encourage continuous dynamic development toward spiritual maturity."<sup>3</sup>

It may be helpful to summarize four common understandings of these warning passages at this point.

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<sup>1</sup>Oberholtzer, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Pentecost, p. 31.

### A STANDARD ARMINIAN VIEW

"Hebrews is describing a very real danger of apostasy that true believers can commit, and if they do so it is an unpardonable sin from which there is no possibility of repentance, but only of eternal judgment."<sup>1</sup>

### A STANDARD REFORMED VIEW

"It is, strictly speaking, not man but God who perseveres. Perseverance may be defined as that continuous operation of the Holy Spirit in the believer, by which the work of divine grace that is begun in the heart, is continued and brought to completion. It is because God never forsakes His work that believers continue to stand to the very end."<sup>2</sup>

"The warnings in Hebrews about falling away and the exhortations to endure are intended to urge the readers to maintain faith in Christ's high priestly work, not to provoke fear that they may lose their standing with God, nor primarily to test the genuineness of their faith. Nevertheless, those who repudiate Christ thereby give evidence that they have never partaken in the benefits of Christ's cleansing sacrifice, and the writer wants his readers to see the consequences of this in starkest terms, be motivated to endure by God's grace, and so show themselves to be true 'partakers of Christ.'"<sup>3</sup>

### A WESLEYAN ARMINIAN VIEW

"... Hebrews envisions the possibility of an apostasy from which those once in faith cannot or will not return because they have severed themselves from the culmination of God's plan of salvation in the Son of God. This apostasy is the result

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<sup>1</sup>Grant R. Osborne, "A Classical Arminian View," in *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, p. 128.

<sup>2</sup>L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 546.

<sup>3</sup>Buist M. Fanning, "A Classical Reformed View," in *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, pp. 218-19.



of a willful and purposeful abandonment of trust and its consequent obedience."<sup>1</sup>

#### A MODERATE REFORMED VIEW

I have not been able to find a concise expression of this view, but it is the one presented in an essay by Randall Gleason.<sup>2</sup> Essentially this view is that those addressed are genuine Christians who are in danger of repudiating Christ by turning from the faith that they formerly professed, namely faith in Christ. If they did this, they would be doing essentially what the Exodus generation did, and they would eventually die as believers and would fail to enter into all the blessings that God intended for them to enjoy in the future.

Four outstanding dispensational Bible teachers (J. Dwight Pentecost, Charles C. Ryrie, Zane C. Hodges, and S. Lewis Johnson) all held different views of the warning passages in Hebrews, though their views did not correspond exactly to the four major views described above. All of these men, who were my teachers, held variations of the Reformed view, and all taught at Dallas Theological Seminary at the same time. So there is no one "dispensational view" of the warning passages.<sup>3</sup>

#### D. THE HUMILIATION AND GLORY OF GOD'S SON 2:5-9

Verses 5 through 18 present eight reasons for the incarnation of the Son: (1) to fulfill God's purpose for humankind (vv. 5-9a), (2) to taste death for all (v. 9b), and (3) to bring many sons to glory (vv. 10-13). He also came (4) to destroy the devil (v. 14), (5) to deliver those in bondage (v. 15), (6) to become a priest for people (vv. 16-17a), (7) to make propitiation for sins (v. 17b), and (8) to provide help for those tested (v. 18).<sup>4</sup>

Some of the original Jewish readers of Hebrews felt inclined to abandon the Christian faith because of Jesus' humanity and, more specifically, because of His death. The writer said that Jesus was superior to angels, even though

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<sup>1</sup>Gareth Lee Cockerill, "A Wesleyan Arminian View," in *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, p. 289.

<sup>2</sup>Randall C. Gleason, "A Moderate Reformed View," in *Four Views of the Warning Passages in Hebrews*, pp. 336-77.

<sup>3</sup>See Fanning, "A Classical ...," p. 172, footnote 1. See Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference*, for a comparison of covenant and dispensational theology.

<sup>4</sup>Pentecost, pp. 58-68.

Jesus died and angels do not die (Luke 20:36). The writer stressed Jesus' deity first, in chapter 1, because some Jews—even Jewish Christians—failed to appreciate that. In chapter 2, he showed why Jesus was not inferior to the angels because He was a man. It was Jesus' humanity and death that enabled Him to regain mankind's lost dominion (vv. 5-9) and to bring many sons to glory (vv. 10-13). His humanity and death also equipped Him to disarm Satan, to deliver us from death (vv. 14-16), and to be a sympathetic High Priest to His people (vv. 17-18).<sup>1</sup>

"No New Testament book emphasizes the humanity of Jesus more emphatically than does Hebrews."<sup>2</sup>

The writer returned to his main argument (ch. 1) after digressing briefly to warn his readers of the danger of drifting away from the truth that they had been taught (2:1-4). He resumed his exposition in order to develop the destiny of Jesus Christ more fully so that his readers would strengthen their commitment to continue following Him.

2:5 "The world to come" refers to the inhabited earth under Jesus Christ's future reign (during the Millennium and from then on; cf. 1:8-9, 11-13).<sup>3</sup> Some branches of Judaism believed that Michael (the archangel) and his angels would rule over it.<sup>4</sup> The "angels" administer the present world (under God's sovereignty; Deut. 32:8; Dan. 10:20-21; 12:1), but the Son will administer the world to come.

"This will occur at His second advent when He returns to this earth to sit as David's Son on David's throne and rule over David's kingdom in fulfillment of God's covenants and promises."<sup>5</sup>

In this respect too Jesus is superior to the angels. The phrase "about which we are speaking" indicates that the writer was

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:283-84.

<sup>2</sup>George E. Ladd, *A Theology of the New Testament*, p. 574.

<sup>3</sup>Dods, 4:261; Pink, p. 96; Saphir, 1:102.

<sup>4</sup>Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: New Testament*, p. 783.

<sup>5</sup>Pentecost, p. 57.

resuming his exposition and continuing his thought from 1:5 through 14.

2:6-8a The writer interpreted this passage (Ps. 8:4-6) as messianic.<sup>1</sup> There is some evidence that most of the Jews of the late first century did not consider Psalm 8 to be messianic.<sup>2</sup> "Son of Man" is a messianic title (Dan. 7:13-14). However in Hebrew "son of man" always means "a man."<sup>3</sup>

"It is characteristic of our author ... that he is not concerned to provide a precise identification of the sources from which he quotes. It is sufficient for him that he is quoting from Holy Scripture, whose inspiration and authority he accepts without question."<sup>4</sup>

As a man Jesus was temporarily ("for a little while") "lower than angels," namely, during His earthly ministry. His crowning ("You have crowned him") took place at His ascension, as did His receiving authority from the Father over all creation ("You have put everything in subjection under his feet"). The time when all things now under His authority will bow to that authority awaits Jesus' return to earth at His second advent and the judgments that will follow His coming.

The Hebrew text of Psalm 8:5 can be translated: "You have made him [man] a little lower than God." But the writer of Hebrews quoted from the Septuagint: "You have made him for a little while lower than angels." The writer of Hebrews evidently chose the Septuagint version because it suited his purpose. God made man a little lower than both Himself (God the Father) and the angels. What the psalmist wrote and what

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<sup>1</sup>See Donald R. Glenn, "Psalm 8 and Hebrews 2: A Case Study in Biblical Hermeneutics and Biblical Theology," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, p. 44.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 84. See also Martin Pickup, "New Testament Interpretation of the Old Testament: The Theological Rationale of Midrashic Exegesis," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 51:2 (June 2008):353-81.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 83.

the Septuagint translators interpreted him as meaning are both true.

2:8b-9 Even though believers "do not yet see all things subjected to" Jesus—this will happen when He is glorified on earth—we do see Him, with the eye of faith, glorified in heaven. "But now we do not yet see all things subjected to Him" can be thought of as the language of a hypothetical objector to what has just been said.<sup>1</sup> What follows in this chapter answers this objection. God has crowned Jesus with glory and honor because He endured death (cf. Phil. 2:8-9).<sup>2</sup>

Significantly the writer used the name "Jesus" (v. 9) in order to stress our Lord's humanity and humiliation. Jesus suffered "death" because it was God's will for Him to "taste death for everyone." "Suffering," introduced here, becomes a dominant theme in this epistle.<sup>3</sup> This was God's purpose in the Incarnation.<sup>4</sup>

*"Should taste death* means not only that He died (cf. Mt. xvi. 28 and Jn. vii. 52), but that He tasted all the humiliation and bitterness of death."<sup>5</sup>

Jesus' death was "for everyone" in that by dying He paid the penalty for the sins of every human being—elect and non-elect alike (cf. 1 John 2:2; 2 Peter 2:1; John 3:16). His death was sufficient to accomplish the salvation of everyone, but it is efficient (it accomplishes its intended result) only for those who rest their confidence in it as what satisfied God.

"God forgives *us*, but *our sins* He never forgives, never pardons, in the sense of remitting their

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 101.

<sup>2</sup>See Moffatt, p. 24.

<sup>3</sup>See James E. Allman, "Suffering in the Non-Pauline Epistles," in *Why, O God? Suffering and Disability in the Bible and Church*, pp. 195-205.

<sup>4</sup>On the variant textual reading "apart from God" in place of "by the grace of God" (v. 9), see Paul A. Hartog, "The Text of Hebrews 2:9 in Its Patristic Reception," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 171:681 (January-March 2014):52-71.

<sup>5</sup>Hewett, p. 69.

punishment. All our sins were laid upon Jesus, every one was punished."<sup>1</sup>

Verse 9 reveals the humiliation of the Mediator, the character of His humiliation, the object of His humiliation, the ultimate cause of His humiliation, and the reward of His humiliation.<sup>2</sup>

"... Christ undertook a work which was far above the power of all the angels, and yet to effect it He was made lower than them! If ever power was made perfect in weakness, it was in this!"<sup>3</sup>

To summarize, the writer made three main points in verses 5 through 9: (1) God created man to have mastery over the earth, (2) man through his sin failed to obtain the mastery, and (3) Jesus, the man superior to the angels, came to enable man to do what he was created to do.<sup>4</sup>

"There is a profound note of anticipation in the OT teaching about humanity. The words of the psalmist look forward into the future, and that future is inextricably bound up with the person and work of Jesus. His condescension to be made for a brief while 'lower than the angels' set in motion a sequence of events in which abasement and humiliation were the necessary prelude to exaltation. His coronation investiture with priestly glory and splendor provide [*sic* provides] assurance that the power of sin and death has been nullified and that humanity will yet be led to the full realization of their intended glory. In Jesus the hearers are to find the pledge of their own entrance into the imperial destiny intended by God for them."<sup>5</sup>

"The Epistle to the Hebrews does not make as clear to us as the Pauline epistles how it is that Christ's death becomes effective for men. The author was not an evangelist so much

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<sup>1</sup>Saphir, 1:114.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 106.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., pp. 107-8.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Barclay, p. 17.

<sup>5</sup>Lane, p. 50.

as a pastor, and it is not the initiation of Christianity but its conservation with which he deals throughout."<sup>1</sup>

### E. THE SON'S SOLIDARITY WITH HUMANITY 2:10-18

The Hebrews writer next emphasized the future glory that the Son will experience in order to heighten his readers' appreciation both for Him and for their own future with Him. He did this by reflecting on Psalm 8. He wanted his readers to appreciate these things so that they would continue to live by faith rather than departing from God's will (cf. James 1; 1 Pet. 1). This section concludes the first major part of the writer's address and prepares his audience for the next one (3:1—5:10).

"The three thoughts quickly made in Hebrews 2:9 are ... filled in by further theological reflection in 2:10-18. They are not taken up in distinct sections but are interwoven in the argument of the paragraph. ... The first theme ... is that Jesus as God's Son came to earth to share fully in our humanity and thus to establish His solidarity [unity, identity] with all people.<sup>2</sup>

"The second theme ... is that in God's plan Jesus had to undergo suffering and death in order to provide salvation for humankind.<sup>3</sup>

"The third theme ... is that because of His obedience in carrying out God's redemptive plan despite severe temptation, Jesus has been exalted to the honored position in God's very presence as the believers' perfected High Priest."<sup>4</sup>

2:10        The writer proceeded to give a commentary on the last clause of verse 9, particularly on the phrase "by the grace of God."

The Son of Man is not the only One whom God intends to glorify (v. 6). All of His "many sons," believers, will experience glorification. "Him" is God the Father, and "the originator of their salvation" is Jesus Christ, the Son of Man. The unusual

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<sup>1</sup>Denney, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, "A Theology ...," pp. 379.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 381.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 382.

title "originator" (Gr. *archegos*) describes Jesus as a file leader, pioneer, pathfinder, and captain of a company of followers (cf. 12:2; Acts 3:15; 5:31).<sup>1</sup> It describes someone who begins something so that others may enter into it.<sup>2</sup>

"He is the strong swimmer who carries the rope ashore and so not only secures His own position but makes rescue for all who will follow."<sup>3</sup>

However this Greek word *archegos* also views Jesus as the personal source of salvation.<sup>4</sup>

God perfected Jesus by charting His path to glory "through sufferings," and He does the same for Jesus' followers. We must go through suffering before we get to glory. By having experienced suffering Jesus can more perfectly help us as we suffer (v. 18). He was perfected in this sense. "To perfect" (Gr. *teleioo*) is another favorite word of this writer. He used it nine times, more frequently than it occurs in any other New Testament book. The Greek word means that the thing described fully carries out the purpose or plan for which it was designed and intended.<sup>5</sup>

"Since His sinlessness is an accepted fact, it is clear that the perfection is viewed as a fitness for the fulfilling of the office assigned to Him."<sup>6</sup>

"This representation of the achievement of Jesus was calculated to recall one of the more famous labors of Hercules, his wrestling with Death, 'the dark-robed lord of the dead' (Euripides, *Alcestis*, ll. 843, 844 ...). The designation of Jesus as *archegos* in a context depicting him as

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<sup>1</sup>See J. Julius Scott Jr., "Archegos in the Salvation History of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:1 (March 1986):47-54.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 18.

<sup>3</sup>Dods, 4:265.

<sup>4</sup>Moffatt, p. 31.

<sup>5</sup>Barclay, p. 19.

<sup>6</sup>Everett F. Harrison, "The Theology of the Epistle to the Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 121:484 (October-December 1964):338.

protagonist suggests that the writer intended to present Jesus to his hearers in language that drew freely upon the Hercules tradition in popular Hellenism ..."<sup>1</sup>

2:11 "He who sanctifies" refers to Jesus Christ in this verse. There is great solidarity between Jesus Christ and believers ("those who are sanctified"). The Old Testament taught this solidarity ("are all from one Father") in Psalm 22:22 (v. 12), Isaiah 8:17 (v. 13a), and Isaiah 8:18 (v. 13b). Jesus will not feel "ashamed" (embarrassed or disappointed) to call sanctified believers His "brothers and sisters" when He leads them to glory (vv. 5, 10). "Not ashamed" is a litotes meaning that Jesus ("He") is, quite to the contrary, willing, happy, and proud to call them His brethren (cf. 11:16).<sup>2</sup>

"He might have been expected to shrink from those who had so belied their high origin, or at the best to move among them with the kindly superior professionalism of a surgeon who enters the ward of an hospital solely to heal, not to live there; but He claims men as his kin and on this bases His action (cf. xi. 16)."<sup>3</sup>

2:12 The following three quotations illustrate that Jesus will not blush to identify with the people of God publicly ("in the midst of the assembly"). The emphasis in the first quotation is on the character ("name," reputation) that Jesus Christ and believers share. His death has made us holy (set us apart; cf. 10:10, 14). Consequently we can have intimate fellowship with Jesus who dwells among us (by His Spirit; cf. Exod. 25:8; 29:46).

2:13 The point of the second quotation is that Jesus, as well as His followers, trusted God. Consistent "trust" in God characterized Jesus, and it characterizes Christians who continue to follow

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 57. Cf. W. Manson, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: An Historical and Theological Reconsideration*, pp. 103-4.

<sup>2</sup>A litotes is an ironic understatement in which an affirmative is expressed by the negative of its contrary. It states something negative but intends it to be understood positively.

<sup>3</sup>Dods, 4:266.



God faithfully. Such daily trust results in intimate fellowship with God.

The point of the third quotation is that believers and Jesus Christ are God's spiritual "children." Jesus is a "child" of God the Father in that He is His "Son." God will provide for us "children" and prepare us for the future—like a loving parent (cf. John 14:1-3).<sup>1</sup>

"The description of Christians as the 'children' or 'sons' of Christ is peculiar to this epistle among the New Testament writings ..."<sup>2</sup>

This relationship stresses intimacy and tenderness as well as solidarity.

2:14 We "children share in flesh and blood" with one another; we share the limitations of humanity. In order to free us from these limitations the Son had to assume the same limitations ("He Himself likewise also partook of the same"), which He did at the Incarnation.

"Flesh is the expression used for humanity in its frailty and mutability [changeability]; and thus suited to express the depth of the divine condescension, which was on this account also the full display of the glory of God."<sup>3</sup>

One of the purposes of Jesus' incarnation was to ultimately "destroy ... the devil." Ironically it was that by dying ("through death") that Jesus destroyed "the one who has the power of death." Jesus Christ broke Satan's "power" over believers by His death. Obviously Satan still exercises great power, but Jesus Christ rendered him powerless to enslave believers (cf. Rom. 6:1-14). And by His death Jesus did what will ultimately result in Satan's destruction (Rev. 20:10). Jesus Christ

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<sup>1</sup>See Brian Pate, "Who Is Speaking? The Use of Isaiah 8:17-18 in Hebrews 2:13 as a Case Study for Applying the Speech of Key OT Figures to Christ," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59:4 (2016):731-45.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, p. 48. Cf. Isa. 8:18; 53:10.

<sup>3</sup>F. W. Grant, *The Crowned Christ*, p. 25.

defeated Satan in the area of his greatest strength, namely, his power to inflict death.

2:15 The "fear of death" enslaves unbelievers ("those who ... were subject to slavery all their lives") in that this fear leads them to behave in ways that please Satan (e.g., selfishly, living for the present, etc.). A believer need not have the same fear of death as an unbeliever (cf. Luke 11:21-22). Consequently we need not feel compelled to live for the present (e.g., put self first, do anything to save our lives, etc.) as unbelievers do. The fear of death tyrannizes many people, both consciously and subconsciously.

"It is ironical that human beings, destined to rule over the creation (Ps 8:5-7 LXX, cited in vv 6-8), should find themselves in the posture of a slave, paralyzed through the fear of death (Kögel, *Sohn*, 80). Hopeless subjection to death characterizes earthly existence apart from the intervention of God ..."<sup>1</sup>

2:16 Here "the descendants of Abraham" probably refer primarily to believers, the spiritual descendants of Abraham (Gal. 3:29), rather than to all Jews, the physical descendants of Abraham (cf. Isa. 41:8-10). The original readers, saved Jews, were both the physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham. The contrast is between "angels" and human believers in the context. Jesus Christ does not give help to angels in the same way that He gives help to Christians. He helps us uniquely: like an elder brother (vv. 11-15, 17) and as a fellow human being.

2:17 "All things" means in every way, specifically by experiencing human life and by suffering. Jesus Christ's identification with us in His incarnation made possible His ministry as "high priest," in which He would be "merciful" to us and "faithful" to God. Eli is an example of a high priest who was neither faithful nor merciful (cf. 1 Sam. 2:27-36). As a merciful and faithful high priest Jesus serves people in "things pertaining to God," specifically "to make propitiation [satisfaction] for the sins of

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 61.

the people" by His own sacrifice. "The people" in view here are probably "the descendants of Abraham" (v. 16), namely, believers.

"The primary duty of the High Priest of sinful men is *to make reconciliation* by the removal of the sin which has created estrangement."<sup>1</sup>

"The idea of compassion as an attribute of priests is not found in the Old Testament."<sup>2</sup>

"... the concept of high priesthood, as applied to Christ, expresses both Christ's unity [solidarity] with mankind in a particular historical tradition (5:1) and his leadership of God's pilgrim people into the heavenly sanctuary."<sup>3</sup>

" *'O laos* [the people] is Hebrews' preferred term for the people of God."<sup>4</sup>

This reference to "the people" has led some interpreters to see support for their belief that Christ died only for the elect.<sup>5</sup> However other Scriptures indicate that Jesus died for everyone, elect and non-elect alike (e.g., John 3:16; 2 Cor. 5:19-20; 1 Tim. 4:10; 1 John 2:2; 2 Pet. 2:1; et al.).

In His first advent Jesus functioned as a prophet by declaring the Word of God to people. Between His first and second advents He functions as a priest by serving as an advocate and intercessor for us with the Father. After His second advent He will function as a king by ruling over the entire earth as its sovereign. In this verse Jesus' priestly work of offering Himself as a substitute sacrifice for the sins of the world—and of His people, believers, in particular—is in view.

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<sup>1</sup>Hewett, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Kenneth S. Wuest, *Word Studies in the Greek New Testament*, 2:2:65.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 186.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 190.

<sup>5</sup>E.g., Pink, pp. 148-49.

"Nowhere, except in Psalm 110, Zechariah 6:13, and in this Epistle, is Christ expressly called a *priest*."<sup>1</sup>

2:18 As our priest Jesus Christ can help us ("come to the aid of those who are tempted"), because He has undergone the same trials that we experience (in body, mind, and emotions), and He has emerged victorious over them. The picture is of an older brother helping his younger brothers navigate the pitfalls of growing up successfully. That is one of the roles that a priest plays. The particular temptation that the original recipients of this epistle were facing was the temptation to depart from God's will, specifically apostasy (departure from truth previously believed; cf. 5:8; Matt. 4:8-11; 16:22-23; 26:39; Luke 22:44).

"Think of it this way—which bridge has undergone the greatest stress, the one that collapses under its first load of traffic, or the one that bears the same traffic morning and evening, year after year?"<sup>2</sup>

"Some have objected that only by the experience of sin could Christ have evinced full fellow feeling with fallen mankind; but for the incarnate Son to have succumbed to temptation, while it would certainly have meant his becoming a fellow sinner, would also have meant his failure and defeat, with the consequence that he would have been disqualified for the fulfillment of his high-priestly office (cf. Heb. 5:8-10) and unable to come to our aid and lead us in the way of victory."<sup>3</sup>

"... the power of sympathy does not depend on the experience of sin, but on the experience of the

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<sup>1</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 14-2.

<sup>2</sup>R. K. Hughes, 1:86.

<sup>3</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 123.

strength of the temptation to sin which only the sinless can know in its full intensity."<sup>1</sup>

The writer developed Jesus' high priesthood, temptation, suffering, sacrifice, and sympathy more fully later. He only mentioned these themes here.

"It is a characteristic of this Epistle just to touch upon a truth, and then to dismiss it for a time, taking it up later for full treatment."<sup>2</sup>

"... the writer composes like a musician intertwining one theme with another."<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis in 2:5 through 18 is on Jesus Christ's present ministry, whereas that of 1:5 through 14 is on His future ministry. In both sections, however, the writer was looking forward to the time when all things will be subject to Him. The writer focused on the future in order to encourage his readers to persevere faithfully in the present rather than apostatizing.

Ray Stedman summarized verses 5 through 18 as follows:

"He [Jesus] became a man not only to recapture our lost destiny but also to heal the disagreements among us and bring us into the unity of one life in Him; to release us from daily, lifelong bondage to the fear of losing out on life; and to bring us that sweet, healing ministry which, in time of failure, restores us to fellowship without condemnation."<sup>4</sup>

"With vv 17-18 the writer prepares to lead his hearers directly into the body of the discourse devoted to the exposition of Jesus as priest and sacrifice. Common to the concepts both of champion and of high priest are the elements of representation and solidarity with a particular people. The presentation of Jesus in 2:10-18 provided assurance that the exalted Son

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<sup>1</sup>Hewett, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, p. 36.

<sup>3</sup>John Bligh, "The Structure of Hebrews," *Heythrop Journal* 5 (April 1964):171.

<sup>4</sup>Stedman, pp. 34-35.

continues to identify himself with the oppressed people of God exposed to humiliation and testing in a hostile world."<sup>1</sup>

## II. THE HIGH PRIESTLY CHARACTER OF THE SON 3:1—5:10

The writer proceeded to take up the terms "merciful" and "faithful" from 2:17 and to expound them in reverse order. He spoke of the faithfulness of Jesus (3:1-6, exposition) and the need for his hearers to remain faithful as well (3:7—4:14, exhortation). He then encouraged his audience with a reminder of Jesus' compassion as a merciful High Priest in the service of God (4:15—5:10, exposition).

### A. THE FAITHFULNESS OF THE SON 3:1-6

"The author steadily develops his argument that Jesus is supremely great. He is greater than the angels, the author of a great salvation, and great enough to become man to accomplish it. Now the author turns his attention to Moses, regarded by the Jews as the greatest of men. ... The writer does nothing to belittle Moses. Nor does he criticize him. He accepts Moses' greatness but shows that as great as he was, Jesus was greater by far."<sup>2</sup>

It was important to convince the Jewish readers that Jesus Christ is greater than Moses because the entire Jewish religion came through Moses. Christianity came through Christ.

"Observing the grammatical markers supplied by the writer, we submit that the development of the author's thought reflects the following scheme:

- vv. 1-2: Introduction of the comparison between Jesus and Moses
- v. 3: Assertion of Jesus' superiority to Moses
- vv. 4-6a Explanation for this assertion

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 67.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 31.

v. 6b Relevance for the congregation"<sup>1</sup>

3:1 The writer now made his first direct appeal to his readers. Clearly they were believers ("holy brothers and sisters"). We should give careful attention to Jesus because of our solidarity as brethren and our "heavenly calling" as participants in His future reign and joy (2:10-12). Our calling as Christians is not just earthly but also heavenly.

"Jesus" is "the Apostle" (lit. delegate, messenger, one sent forth with orders) in that He is the One whom God sent to reveal the Father to humankind (cf. 1:1-2; John 1:14; 3:17, 34; 5:36, 38; et al.). Furthermore He is the "High Priest" in that He is the One whom God anointed to represent human beings to Himself (2:17-18). Two great revelations in the Book of Hebrews are that (1) Jesus Christ reveals God to people, and (2) He represents people before God. "Our confession" is that for which we take a public stand in water baptism, namely, Christianity (cf. 4:14; 10:23).

"These Hebrew Christians had confessed Jesus as their Apostle and High Priest."<sup>2</sup>

"... Moses was recognized as God's ambassador to the people and Aaron as man's representative before God. Both these titles are vested in the Son who is the Moses and Aaron of the new covenant."<sup>3</sup>

"The term *brethren* ["brothers and sisters"] which the author uses to address the recipients of his letter shows that, though they are in need of correction and admonition, he has not ceased to regard them as his fellow Christians and companions in the faith. ... The description of the brethren as 'holy' does not imply that they are holy in themselves, but rather 'sanctified' or 'consecrated' as those who have been chosen and

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 72.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 5:353.

<sup>3</sup>Hewett, p. 77.

set apart by God (cf. 'those who are sanctified' in 2:11 ...)"<sup>1</sup>

3:2 We should probably translate this verse to tie it in directly to verse 1 rather than making it a separate statement. The idea is that "Jesus" is now faithful, not that He was in the past. He is faithful now just as Moses was in the past. We can see Moses' faithfulness in how he served regarding God's household: Israel. He served exactly as God instructed him (cf. Num. 12:7; 1 Sam. 2:35; 1 Chron. 17:14). The Greek word *oikos* can mean "house" or "household." Here it signifies a family or "household" and refers primarily to the nation of Israel (cf. v. 6).

"This is the one thing required of us, to be faithful. And well were it for us if we laid more stress on faithfulness, and thought less of gifts and talents, or of success and results. For while it belongs to God to appoint unto each of us severally our position, to distribute gifts according to His wisdom and good pleasure, and to reward us with results and harvests, hundredfold, sixtyfold, or thirtyfold, it belongs to us to be faithful to God wherever He has placed us, and in the gift and task which His love assigns."<sup>2</sup>

3:3-4 We can see the difference between Jesus' importance and Moses' importance by comparing "the builder" of "the house" (or the founder of the family) with "the house" (or the family) itself. No matter how grand a building may be, its builder always gets more glory than the building itself, because he created it. Whereas Moses served faithfully within Israel, Jesus created Israel. Moses served faithfully in the Israelite system of worship, but Jesus Christ designed and built that system of worship. These verses are a powerful testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ. Since "God" is "the builder of all things," and "Jesus" built Moses' "house," Jesus is God.

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup>Saphir, 1:157-58.



3:5-6a

"There are two main points of comparison, namely, that Moses *as a servant* was faithful *in* God's house, whereas Christ *as a son* was faithful *over* God's house."<sup>1</sup>

Moses functioned as a "servant" (Gr. *therapon*, one who freely renders personal service) by preparing something ("those things") that would serve as a model for a later time. The "house" of Israel served as a model of what Christ brought into existence later, namely, the church. The church was spoken of later by God when He revealed the mystery (new revelation) of the church to the New Testament apostles and prophets. The temple of the church is a spiritual building in contrast with the physical tabernacle.

Messiah's rule over the earth was also a revelation about which the prophets who followed Moses spoke more fully. Jesus Christ will not serve; He will reign. He is not God's Servant, but God's Son. As such, He sits; He does not stand like a servant. He is the Possessor (Owner) of all things, not one who makes preparation for things, like Moses did.

"By defining Moses' service in this way, the writer indicates that Moses' status as servant corresponds to that of the angels, who are servants to the heirs of salvation (see ... 1:14)."<sup>2</sup>

God's "house" over which Jesus Christ sits in authority includes the whole system of worship that our Lord inaugurated with the New Covenant. He sits in God's place, the Holy of Holies of this house. The tabernacle foreshadowed this final system of worship in which Jesus will rule as King-Priest. The tabernacle was a microcosm of God's greater house. Moses served in the model (prototype) faithfully. Jesus rules over the larger house faithfully, not as a servant, but as God's Son with full authority.

"In some sections of Jewish Christianity Christ's role was envisaged as primarily that of a second

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 134.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 78.

Moses; here He is presented as being much more than that."<sup>1</sup>

3:6b God's household ("house") consists of people, not boards, bars, and curtains. The writer was thinking of priestly functions, as is clear from the context. His concern was that his readers might not remain faithful to God (cf. Mark 4:5-6, 16-17; John 8:31). This would result in their losing their privilege as priests, which included intimate fellowship with God and the opportunity to represent God before people and people before God.

This priesthood is what the Israelites (as a whole nation) lost when they turned away from the Lord and built the golden calf at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 32). Instead of all the Israelites being priests (Exod. 19:6) God limited this privilege to the Levites, who remained faithful when the other Israelites apostatized (Exod. 32:26-29; cf. Num. 3:12-13). Just so today it is possible for us to forfeit the privilege of functioning as a priest in the present by apostatizing (cf. 1 Pet. 2:5). Again, this is not loss of salvation but loss of opportunity for service.

<b>THE PROOFS OF JESUS' SUPERIORITY OVER MOSES</b>	
Moses was an apostle.	Jesus is the Apostle (v. 1).
Moses was the member of a house (family).	Jesus is the builder of a house (v. 3).
Moses was connected with one house.	Jesus built all things (under the sovereign authority of God, v. 4).
Moses was a man.	Jesus is God (v. 4).
Moses was a servant in a house.	Jesus is a Son over a house (v. 5).

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, p. 58.

Moses was the announcer of things past.	Jesus is the bringer of things present (v. 5).
Moses served in God's house.	Jesus is Son over His own house (v. 6).

The writer's point in this pericope was that his readers should follow the example of faithfulness to God that Moses and Jesus set—or they could lose their privilege as priests. Essentially priests represent people to God. They exercise leadership of people God-ward. The writer had previously warned his readers that unfaithfulness could result in their drifting away from God's truth (2:1-4; cf. John 8:31). Moreover, by contrasting Jesus and Moses, he helped his Jewish readers appreciate the superiority of Jesus over Moses and so discouraged them from departing from Christianity and returning to Judaism.<sup>1</sup>

"When we withdraw from the exercise of our priestly New Testament worship, we are no longer fellowshiping with the other believers. But this does not mean we are not saved or that we had salvation and lost it."<sup>2</sup>

Some students of this passage have concluded that verse 6b means the following:

"If these Jews, to whom he is writing, hold fast their confidence and rejoicing of their professed hope in Messiah firm to the end of their lives, that fact shows that they belong to the house of God, in other words, are saved. If they do not do so, but instead, renounce that profession and return to the abrogated system of Levitical sacrifices, that shows that they never were saved."<sup>3</sup>

This explanation is unsatisfying to me because it makes perseverance a requirement for salvation, and it grounds assurance of salvation on faithful perseverance. The New Testament is full of warnings about false teachers and exhortations to Christians to persevere faithfully in the faith, since it is

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<sup>1</sup>See Brett R. Scott, "Jesus' Superiority over Moses in Hebrews 3:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:618 (April-June 1998):201-10.

<sup>2</sup>Dillow, p. 458.

<sup>3</sup>Wuest, 2:2:72.

possible for genuine believers not to persevere to the end. If genuine Christians all persevere faithfully, why all these exhortations and warnings? More significantly, our salvation does not depend on faithful perseverance but on the justification that God grants the believing sinner when he or she trusts in Christ (Rom. 8:1). And our assurance of salvation does not depend on our faithfulness but God's faithfulness to His promise to glorify all those whom He has justified (Rom. 8:30).

### **B. THE DANGER OF DISBELIEF (THE SECOND WARNING) 3:7-19**

"The comparison between Christ and Moses leads to one between their followers. The writer uses the conduct of the Israelites as a means of challenging his readers to a closer walk with God."<sup>1</sup>

The writer next reminded his readers of the fate of the Israelites when they failed to continue believing God at Kadesh-barnea. His purpose was to help them realize the serious consequences of that behavior and to motivate them to persevere faithfully in the apostles' teaching. This exhortation is really a commentary on Psalm 95:7b through 11, in which the psalmist assumed a correspondence between the successive generations of God's people and the consistency in God's character.<sup>2</sup> In verse 6 the writer warned of losing our privilege of serving as priests in the present. Now he warned of losing some of our privileges as heirs in the future.

"This warning is directed to God's people (genuine believers) indicating that believers are capable of hardening their hearts against God and experiencing His judgment."<sup>3</sup>

3:7-11      These quotations from the Old Testament teach four things about "the Holy Spirit": (1) He is God (cf. 1:1; 2:3; Acts 4:25; 2 Pet. 1:21). (2) He is a person, not merely an influence (He "says," v. 7). (3) He existed before Jesus' incarnation (He spoke through David). (4) He authored Old Testament Scripture.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 83.

<sup>3</sup>Tanner, 2:1043.

<sup>4</sup>Cited by Pink, p. 166.

"Today" stresses the urgency of immediate action. This writer used this word eight times in Hebrews. The context of the words quoted (Psalm 95:7b-11) is very significant. The verses immediately preceding those quoted (Ps. 95:6-7a) are a call to bow down and worship the Lord. That was the writer to the Hebrews' desire for his readers as well. The words he quoted urge avoidance of Israel's sin at Kadesh-barnea. The writer evidently extended the meaning of "this generation" (v. 10) to include the whole Jewish race (cf. Matt. 24:34).<sup>1</sup> The sacrifice of Jesus Christ initiated a new Exodus.

"... the writer of Hebrews appeals to his recipients not to become discontented because of their suffering, and not to let discontentment give way to open rebellion—lest they, like their forefathers, lose the blessings of the privileges that now were available to them as believers."<sup>2</sup>

"The grand and terrible lesson of Israel's history is that *it is possible to begin well and end poorly*. In fact, this tragic human tendency dominates much human spiritual experience."<sup>3</sup>

"'Rest' (*katapausis*), as used here, points to a place of blessing where there is no more striving but only relaxation in the presence of God and in the certainty that there is no cause for fear."<sup>4</sup>

"Rest" is another of the writer's favorite words. Whereas the place of rest is important, the meaning of rest is even more important in understanding how the writer used this word. "To rest" means to cease from labor (cf. Gen. 2:2; Rev. 14:13) or to stop working.

"As to the 'works' from which we rest, the similarity with God's works is simply this: as God set himself a task to perform during the six days

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<sup>1</sup>Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, 4:2:67.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup>R. K. Hughes, 1:98.

<sup>4</sup>Morris, p. 35. Cf. P. E. Hughes, p. 143.

of creation and, when he had finished it, rested in the contemplation of his work and its glorious perfection, so we have a task set for us, a vocation assigned us by God as his people, and when we complete it we are made partakers of his rest with all that this means of heavenly satisfaction and joy ... God's rest is not idleness, nor shall ours be when we enter his rest."<sup>1</sup>

For Israel, "rest" meant the enjoyment of all that God had promised the Israelites when they had successfully completed their task of taking possession of the Promised Land, not just entering into the Promised Land. Joshua's generation of Israelites did enter the Promised Land and experienced rest there because they chose to trust and obey God and therefore subdued the Canaanites (cf. Num. 14:22-23; Josh. 1:13, 15; 21:44; 22:4; 23:1).

For the Christian, rest is similarly the enjoyment of all that God has promised us when we finally subdue our enemies and complete our God-given task. It is not just getting to heaven. Our rest includes the full enjoyment of rewards that can be ours if we follow the Lord faithfully as well as the other eternal blessings that God has promised all His people.

All Christians will go to heaven and receive many blessings (Eph. 1; 1 Pet. 1), but some blessings are reserved for believers who continue to trust and obey God when faced with temptations to apostatize.<sup>2</sup> The crown of righteousness, the crown of life, the crown of glory, etc., are such rewards. Much confusion has resulted because Christians have interpreted "rest" in this passage simply as reaching Canaan, in the case of the Israelites, and heaven, in the case of Christians. In chapter 4 the writer spoke of Sabbath rest, which is something different.

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<sup>1</sup>Lenski, p. 138.

<sup>2</sup>See the Appendix at the end of these notes.

USES OF THE TERM "REST" IN HEBREWS 3 AND 4	
The Israelites' rest in Canaan	3:11, 18; 4:3b, 5, 8
The Christian's rest in all that God has promised for us in heaven	4:1, 3a, 6, 9, 10a, 11
God's rest following the Creation	4:4, 10b

"This way of using a word in two or three different ways, of teasing at it until the last drop of meaning was extracted from it, was typical of cultured, academic thought in the days when the writer to the Hebrews wrote his letter."<sup>1</sup>

3:12 Here is an exhortation to apply this lesson from the past (cf. 1 Cor. 10:6-11). Note again that those to whom the writer addressed this epistle were believers: "brothers and sisters." Their danger was apostasy, departure from God, not failure to come to God in saving faith.<sup>2</sup>

"The rebellion he warns against consists of departing from a living, dynamic person, not from some dead doctrine. Jews might retort that they served the same God as the Christians so that they would not be departing from God if they went back to Judaism. But to reject God's highest revelation is to depart from God, no matter how many preliminary revelations are retained."<sup>3</sup>

"*Apistias* ["unbelieving"] is more than mere unbelief, here rather disbelief, refusal to believe, genitive case describing the evil heart marked by

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 30.

<sup>2</sup>See Hodges, p. 787; P. E. Hughes, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 36.

disbelief which is no mark of intelligence then or now."<sup>1</sup>

"We may have much consciousness of, and struggle with, unbelief, but could our hearts be described as evil hearts of unbelief—that is, hearts willfully inclined to a state of unbelief and rejection of the fellowship of the 'Living God'?"<sup>2</sup>

The Greek words translated "to apostatize" (lit. to stand away, *aphistemi*) and "apostasy" (defection, *apostasia*) do not by themselves indicate whether believers or unbelievers are in view. The reader must determine this from the context. Here believers are in view (cf. Luke 8:13; Acts 15:38; 1 Tim. 4:1; cf. 2 Tim. 2:12b; 4:4), since the writer called them "brothers and sisters." Some people refer to Christian apostates as backsliders. However the apostates in view here were not average backsliders (people who regressed slightly) but very serious backsliders. In other contexts unsaved apostates are in view (e.g., Luke 13:27; cf. 2 Thess. 2:11). In still other passages there is not sufficient information to pass judgment on their salvation (e.g., 2 Thess. 2:3; cf. Titus 1:14).

Other Scripture seems to reveal quite clearly that genuine Christians can renounce their faith (Matt. 10:33; Mark 8:32; 2 Tim. 2:12; Rev. 3:8). Experience confirms this conclusion. False teachers have deceived many Christians into believing that the truth that they formerly believed is not true, even truth about Jesus Christ. For example, many young people abandon their Christian faith because some respected university professor convinces them that what they formerly believed is not true. The cults are full of people who formerly professed belief in the cardinal doctrines of the Christian faith but who no longer do so.

However this does not mean that genuine Christians who become deceived will lose their salvation (John 10:28; 2 Tim.

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 5:358.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 96.



2:13).<sup>1</sup> They will not. We are not saved by our good works, and we cannot lose our salvation by our bad works (i.e., failing to persevere faithfully in the faith). Justification is a legal verdict that God renders in which He declares the believing sinner forgiven on the basis of Christ's death on his or her behalf, and He never revokes that verdict (Rom. 8:1).

"No believer today, Jew or Gentile, could go back into the Mosaic legal system since the temple is gone and there is no priesthood. But every believer is tempted to give up his confession of Christ and go back into the world system's life of compromise and bondage."<sup>2</sup>

"There is no prayer that a Christian needs more frequently to present than, 'Lord, increase my faith'; 'deliver me from an evil heart of unbelief.'"<sup>3</sup>

As often occurs elsewhere in Hebrews, references to God as "living" imply that He is the Giver of Life.<sup>4</sup>

3:13 If a sinner continues in his or her sin, he or she may conclude that sin does not matter, as the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea did when they failed to respond to the warnings of Caleb and Joshua. Their unbelief there was the tenth instance of unbelief from the time that they left Egypt (cf. Num. 14:22). This is sin's deceitfulness: one may think that because God does not punish the sinner immediately sin does not really matter. Sin matters very much.

Newell identified three other ways in which sin deceives us: (1) because of delayed judgment, (2) by appearing harmless, and (3) by hardening our consciences.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, s.v. "*aphistemi, et al.*," by Heinrich Schlier, 1(1964):512-13.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:288.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 180.

<sup>4</sup>Ellingworth, p. 654.

<sup>5</sup>Newell, pp. 101-2.

The writer counseled his readers to "encourage one another" to continue believe God. He did this in order to help them avoid the rationalizing that people can get into when they do not confess and forsake their sins. Meeting regularly with other Christians for mutual encouragement can be a great help to any Christian. When we do this we are reminded from the Word that failing to continue to trust God will bring bad consequences. However we need to encourage one another soon ("as long as it is still called 'today'"), and not put it off. Mutual encouragement in godliness is something we all need frequently so that we do not become "hardened" to sin.

"The implication is unmistakable [*sic*]: hardness of heart is the consequence of neglecting the means for softening it—'lest.' Clay and wax which are naturally hard, melt when brought under a softening power, but when the heat is withdrawn they revert again to their native hardness. The same evil tendency remains in the Christian."<sup>1</sup>

"The hardening of our hearts is the spring of all our other sins."<sup>2</sup>

"A hardened attitude is not a sudden aberration, but a habitual state of mind."<sup>3</sup>

We need to get started "today," while there is still opportunity.

"One of the best ways of keeping ourselves true is to help other people, and the duty is here set forth of exhorting one another. There is scarcely anything more striking in Christian experience than the fact that in helping others we often help ourselves."<sup>4</sup>

The idea that a genuine Christian could never have "an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God" is simply

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 181.

<sup>2</sup>Henry, p. 1913.

<sup>3</sup>Guthrie, p. 107.

<sup>4</sup>Thomas, p. 44.

naive. Scripture frequently warns believers against being misled by false teachers and false teaching, departing from God like the prodigal son did from his father, and choosing to sin, which results in heart hardening. Experience also confirms that true Christians can withdraw from fellowship with God and end up not believing things that are true (cf. 2 Pet. 2:1).

3:14 This verse on the surface may seem to be saying that in order to be saved a person must remain faithful to God to the end of his or her life ("if we keep the beginning of our commitment firm until the end"). This interpretation contradicts the teaching of Scripture elsewhere that in order to be saved a person must only believe on the Lord Jesus Christ (e.g., John 1:12; 16:9; Acts 16:31; Rom. 10:9; et al.).

Believers are already partakers of a heavenly calling (v. 1), and "we have become partakers of Christ"—we are "in Christ" to use a favorite phrase of Paul's. The Greek word *ean*, translated "if" also means "since," and that is probably its meaning here. The evidence that we are "partakers of Christ" is that "we keep the beginning of our commitment firm until the end." The NLT rendering of this verse is helpful: "For if we are faithful to the end, trusting God just as firmly as when we first believed, we will share in all that belongs to Christ."<sup>1</sup>

We can lose the privilege of partaking with Christ fully if we stop trusting and obeying God. By the same token we can lose the privilege of serving as priests to the extent that we could serve as priests—bringing people to God and God to people—by proving unfaithful (v. 6; cf. Luke 19:11-27; 2 Tim. 2:12). The condition that the writer stated here is the same as in verse 6. We must continue to walk by faith, and to trust and obey God daily, just as we began the Christian life by faith.

"Failure to do so will not mean loss of salvation, but rather loss of reward (and possibly temporal judgment while on earth)."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>NLT refers to *The Holy Bible: New Living Translation*.

<sup>2</sup>Tanner, 2:1044.

"... A son who leaves home ceases to be an active partner in the home, though he does not thereby cease to be a son!"<sup>1</sup>

"To begin well is good, but it is not enough, it is only those who stay the course and finish the race that have any hope of gaining the prize."<sup>2</sup>

3:15 We see an example of failure in Israel's unbelief at Kadesh-barnea, which the writer repeated for emphasis (vv. 7-8). It is unusual for a biblical writer to repeat a quotation from the Old Testament in a single passage. The fact that this writer did that shows the vital importance of not hardening one's heart.

Much misinterpretation of the warnings in Hebrews has arisen because of failure to appreciate that this writer was drawing parallels between the behavior of God's people in the past (Israel) and the behavior of God's people in the present (the church). Christians face the same kinds of temptations that the Israelites did, and we should learn from their mistakes (cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-22).

"The allusions to Num 14 are significant because they indicate that unbelief is not a lack of faith or trust. It is the refusal to believe God. It leads inevitably to a turning away from God in a deliberate act of rejection."<sup>3</sup>

"Hardness of heart originates in *unbelief*, which produces *contempt* for God, which in turn shows itself in distinct behavioral patterns—namely, *negativism*, *grumbling*, *quarreling* and *disobedience*."<sup>4</sup>

3:16-19 These verses constitute an exposition of the passage quoted (Ps. 95:7b-11). The questions indicate the diatribe style of rhetoric in which the speaker raises questions and then

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<sup>1</sup>Zane C. Hodges, *The Gospel Under Siege*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, p. 68. Cf. 12:1-2.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 86.

<sup>4</sup>R. K. Hughes, 1:101.

provides answers. The Israelites who died in the wilderness were mostly redeemed believers (cf. Exod. 14:31).<sup>1</sup> They died as believers. Thus they did not lose their salvation. However they failed to enter into the blessings that could have been theirs because they refused to believe that God would defeat their enemies and bring them into rest in the Promised Land.

Likewise if Christians fail to believe that Jesus has defeated and will continue to defeat our enemies (1:13-14), we too will fail to enter into all the blessings that can be ours in heaven. We need to continue to trust and obey, just as the Israelites should have done.

"By saying *So we see that* [v. 19], the writer assumes that his reasoning will be self-evident."<sup>2</sup>

"The conclusion thus introduces the motif of the impossibility of a second repentance after apostasy, in anticipation of a fuller treatment later in the sermon (6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:16-17 ...). The hearers are left with the overwhelming impression that unbelief would expose them to the same precarious situation as Israel at Kadesh."<sup>3</sup>

When the Israelites at Kadesh-barnea heard God's judgment of their unbelief, they confessed their sin and tried to go up against the Canaanites, but they were defeated. God did not accept their repentance. Likewise a time may come when we refuse to believe God, and then repent, that our repentance will do no good. This is what it means when we read that it is impossible to repent. Our repentance is then ineffective because God does not accept it.

"A heart of unbelief is an evil heart. An evil heart of unbelief is at the bottom of all our sinful

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<sup>1</sup>See Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of Rest in Hebrews 3:7—4:11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 157:627 (July-September 2000):288; Newell, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 89.

departures from God; if once we allow ourselves to distrust God, we may soon desert him."<sup>1</sup>

The apostate generation of Israelites failed to enter the Promised Land when they hardened their hearts and provoked God by their disbelief. Is the implication that Christians who do the same will not enter heaven? Many interpreters have taken this view. However the New Testament elsewhere teaches that all who believe in Jesus Christ will go to heaven because their simple faith in Christ is what saves them (e.g., Eph. 2:8-9; et al.). God has promised to complete the work of salvation that He began in us (cf. John 10:27-28; Rom. 8:30; Phil. 1:6; et al.).

God will glorify us, just as He justified us, and just as He is sanctifying us. He will do this despite our unbelief (cf. 2 Tim. 2:13). If our unbelief resulted in our loss of salvation, then the condition for being saved would have to be faith plus faithfulness, which it is not. Remember, "rest" did not equal the Promised Land for the Israelites, and it does not equal heaven for Christians. It equals obtaining all the inheritance that God wants to give believers—for the Israelites that was in the Promised Land, and for Christians it is in heaven.

### C. THE POSSIBILITY OF REST FOR GOD'S PEOPLE 4:1-14

The writer returned again from exhortation to exposition. He now posed the alternatives of rest and peril that confronted the new people of God: Christians. It seems that this section ends with 4:14, rather than 4:15, since 4:14 contains the end of an *inclusio* that begins in 3:1. The writer warned his readers so that they would not fail to enter into their rest (cf. 1 Cor. 10:12).

"Since Moses was unable to lead the Israelites into Canaan, the writer reflects on the position of Joshua, who did lead them in. But he shows that even Joshua did not secure for his people true rest. Joshua failed for the same reason as Moses, that is, through the people's unbelief."<sup>2</sup>

4:1 "Therefore" introduces an application on the basis of what the writer had just written. The writer wrote that "we [himself and

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, p. 1913.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 110.

his readers] must fear if ... any one of you [his readers] may seem [appear] to have come short of [failed to obtain] it [the promise that those who continued to believe God will enter into His rest]." This "promise" is referred to here as "a promise ... of entering His rest." It "remains" means that it is still in force; the promise that God gave the Israelite about the possibility of entering into rest is still good for Christians. This "promise" is the reverse of what the writer wrote earlier in 3:11 and 18 and 19, namely, that those who disbelieved God would not enter into rest. The writer expressed concern in this verse that his readers might miss entering into the "rest" that God wanted them to have (i.e., their full spiritual inheritance). They would miss it if they stopped believing God.

"The two words which claim our special consideration in this section are, fear and rest."<sup>1</sup>

This is the first appearance of the exhortation translated "we must," "let's," or "let us," which occurs 13 times in Hebrews (4:1, 11, 14, 16; 6:1; 10:22, 23, 24; 12:1[twice], 28; 13:13, 15).

"This type of command [using the Greek hortatory subjunctive] was not as direct or harsh as a regular imperative ["Fear!"]. The author thus spoke to himself as well as to his readers."<sup>2</sup>

#### FIVE VIEWS OF THE "REST" IN HEBREWS

1. The Millennium and/or heaven
2. Present rest in (enjoyment of) our riches in Christ
3. Future (eschatological) enjoyment of all that God wants us to enjoy (i.e., our full inheritance)

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<sup>1</sup>Saphir, 1:174.

<sup>2</sup>Gromacki, pp. 18-19.

4. Some particular blessing in the eschatological future
5. A peaceful life now as Christians

Some people interpret this verse to mean that the readers should fear that they would not go to heaven if they proved unfaithful (view 1 above).<sup>1</sup> This cannot be the meaning, because God has promised heaven to every believer regardless of their faithfulness to Him (Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Thess. 5:10; 2 Tim. 2:13; 1 Pet. 1:3-6; et al.). Others conclude that all believers enter this "rest" when Christ returns and continue in it throughout eternity.<sup>2</sup> This explanation also confuses what the writer called "rest" with heavenly rest (view 1 above).

"We must keep our eyes clear and open, and not look at all things through the light of a favorite doctrine [i.e., that Christians will have rest from our earthly labors in heaven]."<sup>3</sup>

"To equate the inheritance [and "rest" only] with heaven [cf. Matt. 11:28] results in a glaring inconsistency. It would mean that believers, by entering the church, are already *heirs* of the kingdom. Why then are they uniformly exhorted to *become heirs* by faithful labor when they are already heirs?"<sup>4</sup>

Teachings that compare crossing the Jordan with the believer's death have clouded divine revelation concerning the Christian's future rest (e.g., Johnny Cash's song "I'm Just a Poor Wayfaring Stranger"). Crossing the Jordan marked the beginning of God's testing of the new Israelite generation. He had previously tested the former generation during the wilderness wanderings. Each succeeding generation throughout the history of Israel faced its own tests. The people's responses to these tests determined the amount of

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1914.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Gaebelien, 4:1:255-57.

<sup>3</sup>Saphir, 1:176.

<sup>4</sup>Dillow, p. 83. Italics added.



rest that they experienced. Likewise the Christian's responses to God's tests (whether he or she will trust and obey God faithfully or depart from God's will) will determine how much rest he or she will enjoy.

View 2 above is that rest refers to the present life of the believer who rests in the Lord: the "faith rest" life, or the "abundant life."<sup>1</sup> Having been saved, we enter into our rest as believers by surrendering our lives to Him and enjoying peace with God. This view seems unlikely because of how the writer equated "rest" and "inheritance" after the pattern of Old Testament usage, namely, as a future possession. Furthermore, if rest equals enjoying our spiritual blessings now, the writer should have at this point warned his readers about losing their rest if they departed from God (3:12). After all, the writer himself could have lost his own rest if he departed—if this was the danger. Instead he warned them about failing to enter into their rest.

The writer used the term "rest" like Moses did, namely, as an equivalent to ceasing from the work of fulfilling God's will and entering into all the inheritance that God promised His people (Deut. 3:18-20; 12:9-11; cf. Heb. 1:14; 3:11, 18; 4:3-5, 10-11; 6:12, 17). For the Christian this full inheritance is everything that God desires to give us when we see Him (view 3 above).<sup>2</sup> It is an eschatological rest, not a present rest. We enter into our rest after we cease from our labors in this life. We then enter into our Sabbath rest, the rest that follows a full period of work (i.e., a lifetime of work; cf. vv. 9-11). I believe this is the correct view.

"An eschatological understanding of 'my rest' in Ps 95:11 is presupposed in v 1 and is fundamental to the exhortation to diligence to enter God's rest in 4:1-11."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hewett, p. 92; Pentecost, pp. 80-81; Gromacki, pp. 71, 76; Stedman, pp. 37-60; Wiersbe, 2:289.

<sup>2</sup>See Joe L. Wall, *Going for the Gold*, p. 84.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 98. Cf. Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 788.

The readers might fail to enter their rest, in the sense of losing part of their inheritance, if they apostatized. Losing part of one's inheritance probably involves losing the privilege of reigning with Christ in a position of significant responsibility in the future—at least (cf. Matt. 25:14-30). It does not mean losing the privilege of living with Christ in the future. As it is possible to receive a greater or a lesser inheritance (reward), it is also possible to enter into more or less rest.

The generation of Israelites that crossed the Jordan River with Joshua only entered into partial rest in the land due to their failure to trust and obey God completely. Israel's compromises with the Canaanites limited their rest. Subsequent generations of Israelites experienced the same partial rest, as the Book of Judges reveals. They apostatized, God disciplined them, they repented, and then they experienced rest until they (usually the next generation) apostatized again.

"This ... view has the best support for the following reasons. First, the rest is understood as a future experience in keeping with 4:1 ('a promise remains of entering His rest'). Second, the epistle began by stressing that Christ is the heir of all things, a promise which finds its fulfilment at the Second Coming, when all His enemies have been subjected to Him (cf. 10:13). Third, the author has been concerned about those who would *inherit* salvation (1:14) in the 'world to come' (2:5). Fourth, this period of salvation makes it possible for man to have dominion over the created realm, satisfying God's original intentions (2:5-9). Fifth, this view is consistent with the analogy suggested in chap. 3 (recall Psalm 95), in which God's children (not unbelievers) failed to gain their potential inheritance on account of unbelief and disobedience. Sixth, the matter of rewards for faithfulness is an ongoing motif of the epistle (cf. 6:11-12; 10:35-36; 11:6, 26, 39). Seventh, this epistle stresses Messiah's kingdom (cf. 1:8;

12:28), and the concept of 'rest' was even linked in such passages as Isa 11:10 with Messiah's kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

It also seems better to identify "rest" with our full future inheritance, rather than only with participation in the Millennium,<sup>2</sup> or with our "heavenly husband,"<sup>3</sup> or with some other particular blessing in the future (view 4 above). One writer assumed this meant the right to worship before the personal presence of Yahweh.<sup>4</sup> God has assured all Christians of enjoying the millennial kingdom and our "heavenly husband" (i.e., Jesus Christ). The New Testament links receiving other particular blessings (crowns, various rewards) with specified conditions (e.g., 1 Cor. 9:25; Phil. 4:1; 1 Thess. 2:19; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:4; Rev. 2:10; 3:11).

This passage is not talking about living a peaceful life here and now either (view 5 above). That is not the rest that is in view. This should be clear from the context. Throughout this epistle the writer used the terms "rest" and "inheritance" just like the Old Testament used them when speaking of what the Israelites in the wilderness anticipated. These terms refer to blessings that God's people could anticipate in the next stage of their lives if they followed Him faithfully in the present stage of their lives. For the Israelites in the wilderness this meant enjoying the peace and prosperity of the Promised Land to the full. For Christians it means enjoying all the blessings that God has promised that faithful believers will experience in heaven.

4:2 What is the "good news" that both the Israelites and the original readers of this epistle had heard preached to them? It was probably the news about their inheritance and the possibility of entering into their rest. This seems clear from the context. This is not a reference to the gospel message. The good news that the Israelites heard did not profit them because they refused to trust God and rebelled against Him.

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1046.

<sup>2</sup>G. H. Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, p, 78.

<sup>4</sup>Gleason, "The Old ...," p. 297.

Likewise the good news of our inheritance and rest may not profit us if we fail to trust God and turn from Him in unbelief.

"The whole point of the apostle's exhortation here is a pressing upon Christians the imperative need of persevering in the faith."<sup>1</sup>

All that God wanted and wants to give His people is a full (complete) inheritance. Christians will all receive many blessings, even if we apostatize, because we are God's children whom He has promised to glorify (cf. Eph. 1:3-14; 1 Pet. 1:3-9). Nevertheless we will not enter into full rest, or experience all that we could inherit, if we depart from God.

4:3 A better translation of "we who have believed" would be "we who believe" (Gr. *pisteusantes*, aorist active participle). The writer was not looking back to initial faith that resulted in justification but to present faith that would result in entering into rest (our full inheritance).

The quotation from Psalm 95:11 emphasizes the impossibility of entering into our full inheritance without faith. The writer added that this was true even though God had planned rest for His people when He created the world ("His works were finished from the foundation of the world"). God's purpose and provision did not guarantee that His people would experience it. These things also depended on their faith. Even Moses failed to enter rest in the Promised Land because he failed to trust God at Meribah (Num. 20:12).

4:4-5 The writer here evidently introduced the idea of God resting on "the seventh day" (cf. v. 3) because it illustrates the fact that rest follows work. The work that God called the Israelites in the wilderness to do was to trust and obey Him. This would have resulted in rest from wandering in the wilderness, and rest in the land, if they had persevered in their trust and obedience. The work that He calls us Christians to do is also to continue to trust and obey Him. If we do this we can look

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 196

forward to receiving our full inheritance (rest) when we see the Lord. But if we turn from God we cannot.

4:6-7 Not all of the descendants of Abraham lost the opportunity to receive God's inheritance ("failed to enter") because the generation of Israelites living during the wilderness wanderings disobeyed God (by failing to trust Him). In David's day God re-extended His offer of entering rest, and his generation had to respond for itself. (The title of Psalm 95 in the Septuagint credited "David" with writing it.) They had their "today" of opportunity also. Each and every generation of believers needs to continue to trust and obey in order to enter into their rest (full inheritance).

"*Tinas* ["some"] is generally explained as implying a warning that not all the readers are certain to receive what God promises (cf. ... 3:12; also v. 13; 4:1, 11 ...)."<sup>1</sup>

4:8 The prospect of rest for the Israelites, specifically the possession of the Promised Land and full blessing in it, did not end when "Joshua" defeated the Canaanites. Each succeeding generation had to continue, for itself, to trust and obey God in order to assure its own rest in the land.

"What our author is saying is that God's promise of rest did not and does not have a merely earthly fulfillment, but is rather eschatological in purport, and therefore still awaits the people of God in all its fulness [*sic*]."<sup>2</sup>

4:9 The "Sabbath rest" in view is the rest (full inheritance) that every generation of believers, and every individual believer, enters into when he or she—like God—faithfully finishes his or her work. That work for us involves continuing to trust and obey God (i.e., walking by faith daily as opposed to apostatizing). We who are Christians will enter into our "rest," if we have persevered in faith, when we receive our inheritance

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 250.

<sup>2</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 160.

from Jesus Christ at His judgment seat (1 Cor. 4:1-5; 2 Cor. 5:9-12).

Millennial rest in the Promised Land will be the portion of Israel in the future. Walter Kaiser also interpreted the rest as future. He believed that first Israel, and then all believers, would fulfill this promise by possessing the Promised Land in the Millennium.<sup>1</sup> However this passage seems to be referring to eternal rest for all believers, of which the Millennium is just the beginning. Israel will be the primary people that God blesses and makes a blessing in the Millennium. Neither is this Sabbath rest the present rest that Christians enjoy, because God has finished His work of providing salvation for us in Christ, and we have entered into it by faith. That should be clear because the rest in view is still future for us (cf. vv. 1, 6, 9, 11). Neither is it a reference to the so-called Christian Sabbath (i.e., Sunday) as some believe.<sup>2</sup>

4:10 When we enter that rest we can cease walking by faith, because then we will experience what we now only hope for (11:1; cf. 1 Cor. 13:12). We will cease from our work "as God did from His." The Hebrew word translated "rested" in Genesis 2:2 literally means "ceased." God's work of creating did not exhaust Him, since He never tires (Ps. 121:4; Isa. 40:28). He simply stopped creating (working) on the seventh day.

4:11 In the meantime, before we enter into our rest, we need to follow Jesus' and Moses' examples of faithfulness to God. We need to carry out the work that He has given us to do (i.e., to continue to trust and obey, rather than turning from Him; 3:2, 6, 14). Note again that the writer said that he faced the same danger as his readers: "let's" (cf. v. 16).

"We enter into rest only when we persevere in faith to the end of life. When we do this, we will obtain a share in the inheritance, the millennial land of Canaan, and will rule with Christ as one of

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<sup>1</sup>Walter C. Kaiser Jr., "The Promise Theme and the Theology of Rest," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130:518 (April-June 1973):149-50.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Pink, pp. 210-11.

His *metochoi* [partners] there. Rest is not just the land itself; it also includes the state or condition of 'finished work,' of final perseverance, into which the faithful Christian will enter. God has not set aside His promises to Israel. The promise of the inheritance, the land, is eternally valid, and those Christians who remain faithful to their Lord to the end of life will share in that inheritance along with the Old Testament saints."<sup>1</sup>

"To have God's rest one must persevere in faith."<sup>2</sup>

Christians need to be diligent "to enter that rest." If the rest was just getting to heaven we would not have to exercise diligence, because God has promised that all believers will go to heaven (John 10:27-28; Rom. 8:30; Phil. 1:6; et al.). Or if the rest was just the rest that we presently enjoy, because God has forgiven our sins, we would not have to be diligent to enter it either, because we already have entered into that rest.

"*That rest* of which the author has been speaking is not something to be trifled with; it calls for full seriousness and intensity of application on the part of those who wish *to enter* into its enjoyment. The issue is eternal in its consequences, for the sole alternative to entry is exclusion. Hence the need to be serious and, like the apostle Paul, to stretch out for what lies ahead and press toward the goal of God's heavenly rest (Phil. 3:13f.)."<sup>3</sup>

The alternative to entering our rest is to "fall." This is not just falling short of our goal but, in light of the comparison with Israel in 3:17, it must involve divine judgment: "whose dead bodies fell in the wilderness."

"There are many different kinds of hearing in this world. There is indifferent hearing; there is

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<sup>1</sup>Dillow, p. 109.

<sup>2</sup>Darby, 5:306.

<sup>3</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 162.

disinterested hearing; there is critical hearing; there is skeptical hearing; there is cynical and mocking hearing. The hearing that matters is the hearing that listens eagerly, and then believes and then acts. The promises of God are not merely beautiful pieces of literature; they are not merely sweet sayings which mean nothing; they are promises on which a man is meant to stake his life and by which he is meant to dominate his action."<sup>1</sup>

4:12 After we die, or experience the Rapture, God will do a spiritual postmortem on us at the judgment seat of Christ (Rom. 14:10-12; 2 Cor. 5:10). He will examine our innermost attitudes and motives. The "scalpel" that He will use is His "word." Most interpreters understand "the word" as referring to the written Word of God, but some understand it to refer to Christ, the living Word.<sup>2</sup> The Word of God is "living" because it is the word of the living God (3:12), and it is "active" (energetic, powerful).

The "two-edged sword" in view (Gr. *machairan*) was originally a small one, like a boning knife that cooks used to cut up meat. In its double-edged form it was a symbol for judges and magistrates in the Roman world. It illustrated the power of those officials to turn both ways to get to the bottom of a case. However it is possible that by the time Hebrews was written, *machaira* had come to mean a sword of any size, long or short.<sup>3</sup> The writer pictured this sword as a devouring beast (cf. 2 Sam. 11:25).<sup>4</sup>

The Word of God can bring out and distinguish between what is soulish (natural) and what is spiritual in our motivation and actions. It can do so even when those elements are as close to each other as our "joints and marrow" are. It is even able to

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., G. Campbell Morgan, *Categorical Imperatives of the Christian Faith*, p. 73.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, p. 56.

<sup>4</sup>Dods, 4:281.



expose our deepest "thoughts and intentions" (motives; cf. 1 Cor. 4:5).

"The Jew always regarded a word, not as a sound, but as a power."<sup>1</sup>

"What the author is saying is that God's Word can reach to the innermost recesses of our being. We must not think that we can bluff our way out of anything, for there are no secrets hidden from God. We cannot keep our thoughts to ourselves."<sup>2</sup>

"The Word of God is the only power that can penetrate so deeply and expose so completely the inwardness of our being."<sup>3</sup>

Many Christians use this verse to show that God will judge unbelievers with His piercing Word, but in the context it refers to God judging believers in order to determine our rewards (1 Cor. 3:11-15).

4:13 Since "there is no creature hidden from His sight" we need to realize that our Lord will examine every Christian; not one can avoid His judgment seat. This prospect should motivate every Christian to remain faithful to God until we see Him. We should "fear" (anticipate seriously, v. 1) that event as we prepare for it (cf. 1 John 2:28). Will God find us faithful when we see Him?

4:14 Our "great high priest" (2:17) has already proved faithful through suffering, and He is now in God's presence where He intercedes for us (cf. Rom. 8:34). He is not just a priest serving on earth like Israel's high priests. He is our file leader (2:10), and we will follow Him through the heavens to our Father's house one day. This great High Priest is none other than "Jesus," not an angel (1:4-14) or Moses (3:2-6). He is "the Son of God" (1:2).

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 34.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 44.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 143.

"The picture of Jesus Christ as High Priest is the most distinctive theme of Hebrews, and it is central to the theology of the book."<sup>1</sup>

"The reference to Jesus in his office as high priest in v 14 is not an afterthought, but the intended conclusion of the entire argument. The crucial issue for the community is whether they will maintain their Christian stance. The issue was posed conditionally in 3:6b, and more pointedly in 3:14. It was raised again forcefully in v 14 in the exhortation to hold fast to the confession that identified Christians as those who had responded to the message they had heard with faith (cf. v 2). The ministry of Jesus in the heavenly sanctuary as a faithful high priest in the service of God gives certainty to the promise that God's people will celebrate the Sabbath in his presence if they hold fast their initial confidence."<sup>2</sup>

Notice that this verse does not say that since we have such a High Priest, we will inevitably hold fast our confession. Perseverance in faith and good works is not inevitable, though perseverance in salvation is (2 Tim. 2:12-13). Since we have such a High Priest we must be careful to "hold firmly to our confession" and not apostatize. This verse concludes the exhortation to enter into rest that began in 3:12. Some students of the book consider this its key verse.<sup>3</sup>

"The warning in Hebrews 3:1-4:13 is inextricably related to the Exodus generation and the concept of rest. By referring to Moses' and Christ's faithfulness in the house of God, the writer exhorted his readers to remain faithful to their worship function in God's house as believer-priests (Heb. 3:1-6). The generation in the wilderness is an example of those who failed to be faithful and as a result experienced both temporal discipline and eschatological loss. A royal enthronement psalm

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<sup>1</sup>Fanning, "A Theology ...," p. 388.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 105.

<sup>3</sup>Hanna, p. 391.

(Ps. 95), with its past and present perspectives, was used as the basis for explaining Israel's failure. Hebrews 4 begins with an application to the present readers. Four times the text says that the promise of rest remains [i.e., is future] (4:1, 6, 9, 11). The concept of rest in Hebrews 3:1-4:13 includes (a) a historical sense related to the Exodus generation and Joshua (Ps. 95; Josh. 21:44); (b) an eschatological sense related to the Exodus (Ps. 95); and (c) the sabbath rest related to the readers with its eschatological perspective (Gen. 2:2-3; Heb. 4:9). The readers' entrance into this eschatological rest depends on their faithfulness in doing good works. As *metochoi* ('companions') of Christ they must be diligent to receive eschatological reward (4:11-13) at the judgment seat of Christ. Failure to persevere may result in temporal discipline (12:4-11) along with the loss of future rewards and authority to rule with Jesus in the millennium."<sup>1</sup>

#### **D. THE COMPASSION OF THE SON 4:15—5:10**

Having explored the concept of Jesus as a faithful high priest (3:1—4:14), the writer proceeded next to develop the idea that Jesus is a merciful high priest in the service of God (cf. 2:17). A high priest must be faithful to God and compassionate with people. This section is entirely exposition except for 4:16, which is an exhortation to pray. Verses 15 and 16 of chapter 4 announce the perspectives that the writer developed in 5:1 through 10.

"As a unit 4:15—5:10 lays the foundation for the great central exposition of Jesus' priesthood in 7:1—10:18, where the emphasis will be placed on his dissimilarity to the Levitical priesthood."<sup>2</sup>

#### **1. The introduction 4:15-16**

4:15 Jesus experienced temptation in every area of His life ("in all things"), as we do. Obviously He did not experience temptation to waste His time by watching too much television, for example. But He experienced the temptation to waste His time in other ways and to do or not do things contrary to God's will.

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<sup>1</sup>Oberholtzer, 578:196. Paragraph divisions omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 111.

His temptations did not come from a sinful nature, as many of ours do. He was never tempted by an inward desire for sin, because He had no sinful nature. But He suffered temptation as we do because He was fully human.

Since Jesus endured every temptation successfully, He experienced temptations more thoroughly than we do, especially in cases where we yield to them before they pass. Consequently He can "sympathize" (feel and suffer) with us when we experience temptation. The writer's point was that Jesus understands us, He sympathizes with us, and He overcame temptation Himself.

"The Stoics argued that the very essence of God's being and nature was that God was beyond all feeling. ... The Epicureans held that the gods lived in perfect happiness and blessedness [detached from and unaware of the world]. ... The Jews had their *different* [holy] God [which attribute of God led them to think that He could not really sympathize with them]. And into that world of thought there comes the Christian religion with its completely incredible conception of a God who has deliberately undergone every human experience."<sup>1</sup>

As an illustration of the thoroughness of Jesus' temptations, imagine a large boulder on the seacoast. Since it does not move it experiences the full force of every wave that beats against it. Smaller pebbles that the waves move around do not receive the full force, because they yield to the force of the waves. Similarly Jesus' temptations were greater than ours because He never yielded to them. By the same principle a prizefighter (Jesus) who defeats the champion (Satan) endures more punishment than other contenders who throw in the towel or are knocked out before the end of the fight.

"... in this epistle as high a Christology as is conceivable is combined with an emphasis on the

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, pp. 39-40.

real humanity of Jesus. Nobody insists on the limitations of Jesus' human frame as does the writer of Hebrews."<sup>1</sup>

"The best person to give you advice and help on a journey is someone who has travelled the road before you. The best person to help you through an illness is someone who has come through it."<sup>2</sup>

Earl Radmacher illustrated how Jesus could not have sinned: Suppose you had a thick iron bar and a thin wire. The bar represents Christ's divine nature and the wire His human nature. The bar cannot be bent, but the wire can. Yet, if the wire is fused to the bar, the wire cannot be bent either. Thus the fusing of Christ's divine and human natures meant that He could not sin.<sup>3</sup>

4:16 Since we have such a High Priest to intercede for us with God, we can "approach" God confidently in prayer (cf. 3:6; 10:19, 35). Every Christian can come right up to God's heavenly "throne," not just the high priests of Judaism. The high priests of Judaism could only approach God at His earthly throne, in the holy of holies in the tabernacle or temple, once a year. God's throne of judgment (for the Israelites) has now become a "throne of grace" (undeserved favor and help) for us. Our Sovereign will be merciful (not giving us what we deserve) and gracious (giving us what we do not deserve).

"Grace in this sense is the direct supplying by the almighty power of God, by the indwelling Spirit, of such Divine help as the believer needs at any time."<sup>4</sup>

"Grace is an aspect of mercy. It differs from mercy, in that it has reference to sinful man as guilty, while mercy has respect to sinful man as miserable. The one refers to the culpability [guilt]

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 17.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 41.

<sup>3</sup>Earl D. Radmacher, *Salvation*, pp. 40-41.

<sup>4</sup>Newell, p. 153.

of sin, and the other to its wretchedness. The two terms, however, in common use are interchangeable. Grace, like mercy, is a variety of the Divine goodness."<sup>1</sup>

This verse again contrasts the superiority of Christianity over Judaism.

"The law was given that every mouth may be shut, for we are guilty. The High Priest is given that every mouth may be open, for Jesus receive[s] sinners."<sup>2</sup>

"The problem with those to whom our author is writing is that instead of drawing near they are in danger of drawing back (cf. 10:35). In the face of opposition they are showing signs of a loss of confidence and even of turning away from the faith into apostasy."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The explanation 5:1-10

Lane identified the chiasmic structure of these verses:

- "A The old office of high priest (5:1)
  - B The solidarity of the high priest with the people (5:2-3)
  - C The humility of the high priest (5:4)
  - C' The humility of Christ (5:5-6)
  - B' The solidarity of Christ with the people (5:7-8)
  - A' The new office of high priest (5:9-10)"<sup>4</sup>
- 5:1 In order to qualify for the high priesthood in Israel, one had to be, first, a male ("taken from among men"). The high priest

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<sup>1</sup>William G. T. Shedd, *Dogmatic Theology*, 1:390.

<sup>2</sup>Saphir, 1:207.

<sup>3</sup>P. E. Hughes, p. 174.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, p. 111.

appointee would be expected to stand between God and people as their representative before Him. His services would also include presenting "gifts" of worship and "sacrifices" for sins.

"Although it would be natural to distinguish between *dora*, 'gifts' (i.e., peace and cereal offerings), and *thysiai*, 'sacrifices' (i.e., the sin and trespass offerings), in later statements in the OT all sacrifices pertain to the procuring of atonement and the removal of sin (cf. Ezek 45:15-17). The bloody offerings for the Day of Atonement are in the foreground of the discussion of the sacrificial ministry of the Levitical high priest here and elsewhere in Hebrews (cf. 7:27; 10:4, 12, 26)."<sup>1</sup>

Exodus 28:1 and 3, and 29:1, stressed that the high priest was appointed for God, but in this verse the writer said that he was appointed for ("on behalf of") people. Both statements are true.

"A. J. Gossip used to tell his students how he felt when he was ordained to the ministry. It was as if the people said to him: 'We are for ever involved in the dust and the heat of the day; we have to spend our time getting and spending; we have to serve at the counter, to toil at the desk, to make the wheels of industry go round. We want you to be set apart so that you can go in to the secret place of God and come back every Sunday with a word from God to us.'"<sup>2</sup>

5:2-3 A high priest also had to be, second, a compassionate person ("deal gently with the ignorant and misguided"). This grew out of his own consciousness of being a sinner himself. In other words, he needed not only to carry out his duties acceptably, but he also needed to do so with the proper attitudes and

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 116. Cf. P. E. Hughes, p. 175.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 42.

feelings. "Deal gently with" (Gr. *metriopathein*) means neither indifferent to moral lapses nor harsh.

"Although nothing is said in the Old Testament about moral qualities [such as compassion], the writer has deduced this quality of gentle understanding from the basic fact that the high priest is essentially a man among men."<sup>1</sup>

The evidence of Israel's high priest's sinfulness ("he himself also is clothed in weakness") was the fact that he was "obligated to offer sacrifices for sins for himself" as well as for those of the people. Since Jesus Christ was sinless, He did not need to do this (4:15; 7:27). However Jesus Christ's compassion far exceeded that of other high priests.

5:4 Third and finally, a man could attain the high priesthood only by divine appointment ("he is called by God").

"The essential nature of a high priest is that he should be chosen by God to act for his fellows in offering sacrifices related to the removal of sin."<sup>2</sup>

Only those whom God chose served in this office in early Israel. These high priest appointees were primarily "Aaron" and some of his descendants. This ceased to be true after Israel lost her sovereignty as a nation, beginning with the Babylonian Captivity. Then the high priesthood became a political appointment that was determined by Israel's governing power. However the writer was speaking of Israel as a sovereign nation. Disaster befell those individuals who took "the honor" upon themselves to perform high priestly duties without divine authorization (e.g., Korah, Num. 16; Saul, 1 Sam. 13:8-14; Uzziah, 2 Chron. 26:16-21). The writer stressed the essential humility of the high priest, who stood in his privileged position only by divine appointment. He was not stressing the dignity of his office or the grandeur of his call to his office.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, p. 125.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 272.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 117.



5:5-6 God appointed "Christ" as a King-Priest when He sat down at the right hand of the Father following His ascension (1:5). The title Christ (Anointed One) stresses our Lord's humility. As the Anointed of God, Jesus (cf. 4:14) "did not glorify Himself" as He might well have done.<sup>1</sup> These two offices and functions (king and priest) were primary in the writer's argument in this epistle. Psalm 2:7 (quoted here) through 9 and Psalm 110:1 (cf. 1:13) predicted Messiah's reign as king. Psalm 110:4 also predicted His priesthood. As in verse 4, the emphasis in this verse is on the humility of this High Priest.

The same God who appointed Jesus as His "Son" also appointed Him as high "priest forever" (cf. 6:20; 7:17, 21, 24, 28). We have a Great High Priest, Jesus the Son of God, and it is while He is Son that He carries out His vocation of high priest.<sup>2</sup> No other New Testament writer referred to Psalm 110:4, but this writer quoted it three times (cf. 7:17, 21) and alluded to it eight more times (in chs. 5—7).<sup>3</sup>

"The appeal to Melchizedek, who as the first priest mentioned in Scripture is the archetype of all priesthood, validates Jesus' priesthood as different from and superior to the Levitical priesthood."<sup>4</sup>

"When ... Jerusalem fell into David's hands and became his capital city (II Sam. 5:6ff.), he and his heirs became successors to Melchizedek's kingship, and probably also (in a titular [name only] capacity at least) to the priesthood of God Most High."<sup>5</sup>

"All that a priest does in offering sacrifice for men Christ does. But whereas they do it only symbolically, he really effects atonement. ... There was no succession of priests from

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<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, p. 127.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 64.

<sup>3</sup>See D. M. Hay, *Glory at the Right Hand: Psalm 110 in Early Christianity*, pp. 46-47.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, p. 123.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, pp. 95-96.

Melchizedek and thus no 'order.' Jesus, however, was a priest of this kind—not like Aaron and his successors."<sup>1</sup>

5:7 The phrase "days of His humanity" (Gr. *sarx*, flesh) draws attention to the weakness that characterized Jesus' life during His earthly sojourn in contrast to the powerfulness of His pre-incarnate existence. Jesus' offerings to God (cf. v. 1) included His "prayers and pleas" Specifically, Jesus' prayers from Gethsemane and the cross ("with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death"), which were part of His offering of worship and atonement to God, illustrate this (cf. Ps. 22:22-24; Heb. 2:12). However Jesus' entire passion ministry is probably in view here.<sup>2</sup> God "heard" and granted Jesus' petitions, the evidence of which was Jesus' resurrection (cf. Ps. 22:22-31).

"Christ's prayer here ['remove this cup from me,' Luke 22:42] was answered in the same way as was Paul's request for the removal of the thorn in his flesh—not by exemption, but by Divine succor [aid] which gave enablement to bear the trial ['an angel from heaven appeared to Him, strengthening Him,' Luke 22:43]."<sup>3</sup>

"The prayers and supplications that Christ offered up were joined with strong cries and tears, herein setting us an example. How many dry prayers, how few wet ones, do we offer up to God!"<sup>4</sup>

"Devout behavior" means reverent submission, godly fear, and trust—in short, sinlessness. Jesus' "prayers and pleas," specifically, demonstrated His ability to sympathize and identify with those He represents (vv. 2-3; cf. John 17). The

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 49. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 120.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 246.

<sup>4</sup>Henry, p. 1915.

writer of Hebrews said more about Jesus' priestly ministry than any other New Testament writer.<sup>1</sup>

Most students of Scripture believe that Jesus prayed that, if it was the Father's will, He would not have to endure the Cross (Luke 22:42). A few have understood Him to mean that He wanted the Father to prevent Satan from killing Him in the Garden of Gethsemane.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that He was praying to be resurrected.<sup>3</sup> I prefer the first interpretation.

Scripture records Jesus weeping on three separate occasions: at the tomb of Lazarus, over the city of Jerusalem, and in the Garden of Gethsemane.

5:8 Even as God the "Son," and as such perfect in His deity, Jesus gained something through His sufferings, namely, experiential knowledge of what being a human involves. Similarly Jesus grew in favor with God and man (Luke 2:52). He "learned obedience" in the sense that He learned to obey His Father's will as a human being through what He suffered. For Jesus, God's will involved suffering (cf. Phil. 2:6-8).

"It is when the child is told to do something which pains him, and which he shrinks from, that he learns obedience, learns to submit to another will."<sup>4</sup>

"Innocence is life untested, but virtue is innocence tested and triumphant."<sup>5</sup>

"Here the remarkable thing is that Jesus had to suffer, not because but although he was *huios* ["Son"], which shows that Jesus is Son in a unique sense; as applied to Jesus *huios* means something special. As divine *huios* in the sense of 1:1f [i.e.,

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<sup>1</sup>See Manson, pp. 109-10.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., McGee, 5:540.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Wuest, 4:1:30-31.

<sup>4</sup>Dods, 4:289.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, p. 64.

1:1-2], it might have been expected that he would be exempt from such a discipline."<sup>1</sup>

5:9 Suffering "perfected" Jesus Christ in the sense that it completed Him as our Great High Priest—by giving Him experiential knowledge of what human beings must endure. Obeying God in this verse means trusting Him (cf. John 6:29; Acts 6:7; Rom. 10:16; 1 Pet. 1:22). Jesus is, of course, the "source of eternal," not just temporal, "salvation" to all who initially believe on Him. However, in view of the writer's emphasis, it may be that he was also referring here to the ultimate aspect of our salvation: our eternal inheritance (1:14; 9:15). We obtain this to the extent that we obey God—and obey Him through suffering as Jesus did (cf. Mark 8:34-35).<sup>2</sup>

A major reason that early Jewish Christians suffered was because they chose to follow Christ. Likewise today all Christians face the temptation to play down their commitment to Christ in the face of persecution of various kinds. Jesus Christ is the source of our inheritance, not only because it comes from Him, but also because as our file leader (Pioneer) He has blazed a trail through suffering to glorification by His Father for us (2:10). He is also the source of our inheritance because, as our High Priest, He provides what we need to persevere and to live obediently to God all of our lives.

"It is a nice touch that he who learned to obey brought salvation to those who obey."<sup>3</sup>

5:10 It was for this purpose: that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in order to help us in our obedience and sanctification, that "God" the Father appointed Jesus as our "High Priest." The writer unpacked the subject of "the order of Melchizedek" later (ch. 7).

"It was in death that Christ fulfilled the Aaronic type, making a full and perfect atonement for the sins of His people. It is in resurrection that He

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 66.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Dillow, p. 132.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 50.

assumed the character in which Melchizedek foreshadowed Him—a *royal* Priest."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus Christ is not only superior to angels (1:5-14) and to Moses (3:1-6), but also to Aaron (5:1-10).

"The orientation given to the exposition is intensely practical. The solidarity of the heavenly high priest with the community in its weakness provides a strong motivation for earnest prayer. The demand to draw near to the one who is thoroughly familiar with the human condition, who suffers with their suffering, and who is therefore qualified to mediate renewed strength (4:15-16) is an appeal to recognize the importance of prayer in the rhythm of Christian life."<sup>2</sup>

### III. THE HIGH PRIESTLY OFFICE OF THE SON 5:11—10:39

The transition from exposition (5:1-10) to exhortation (5:11—6:20) marks the beginning of a new division in this "sermon." The structure of this division is as follows:<sup>3</sup>

- a Preliminary exhortation (5:11—6:20)
  - A The priest who is like Melchizedek (7:1-28)
  - B The single, personal sacrifice for sins (8:1—9:28)
  - C The achievement of eternal salvation (10:1-18)
- a' Concluding exhortation (10:19-39)

A major theme of Hebrews, redemptive sacrifice, now comes into prominence in this section of the epistle.

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 261.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 123.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 128.

**A. THE DANGER OF IMMATURITY (THE THIRD WARNING) 5:11—6:12**

"Poor" (5:11) and "sluggish" (6:12, Gr. *nothroi* in both verses) form an inclusio that frames this pericope and sets it off as a distinct textual unit. This Greek word occurs nowhere else in the New Testament, and it describes the "listeners" (5:11), "brothers and sisters" (3:1, 12), who first received this epistle. The first two warnings in Hebrews were against drifting (2:1-4) and disbelief (3:7-19), and this third one deals with the danger of immaturity. All of the warning passages in Hebrews involve negative actions in relation to the Word of God (turning away from what God has revealed).

"It is commonly assumed on the basis of 5:11—6:3 that the community addressed had failed to mature in faith and understanding, and consequently required rudimentary instruction rather than the advanced exposition of Christ's priesthood and sacrifice presented in 7:1—10:18. The problem with this reconstruction of the situation is that it is not supported by the detail of the text. The biblical interpretation and the presentation of christology in 1:1—5:10 presuppose advanced Christian instruction and a level of understanding that corresponds to the adult consumption of solid food and not to a diet of milk. In addition, the writer shows no inclination to review with his hearers the foundational elements of the Christian faith [6:1]. He clearly regarded the hearers as mature. He reminds them that they have ingested over a considerable period of time the instruction that qualified them to be the teachers of others (5:12). Consequently, the portrayal of them as infants who have to be nurtured with milk is not an actual description of some or all of the members of the community. It is irony, calculated to shame them and to recall them to the stance of conviction and boldness consonant with their experience (6:4-5, 10) and hope (6:9-12). The community has deviated from its earlier course (cf. 10:32-34) by becoming sluggish in understanding (5:12). Their regression to infancy must represent a quite recent development. It was apparently an attempt to sidestep their responsibility in a world that persecuted them and held them in contempt, but it threatened their integrity. The purpose of 5:11—6:12 is to preserve the community from such aberration

by reminding them of what they have experienced and what they possess through the gospel ..."<sup>1</sup>

"If you keep in mind that the emphasis in this section is on *making spiritual progress*, you will steer safely through misinterpretations that could create problems."<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The readers' condition 5:11-14

5:11 "Him" refers back to Melchizedek (v. 10; cf. 6:20—10:18). Evidently the original readers had begun to let their minds wander as they heard the same things repeatedly. Rather than listening carefully, hearing completely, and comprehending clearly, they had become mentally and spiritually dull in their hearing "poor listeners." They were not slow learners, but they had allowed themselves to grow lazy. A spiritual callus was growing over their ears.

"This term [Gr. *nothroi*, "poor listeners"] occurs again in v 12 [of ch. 6, there translated "sluggish"], thus forming an inclusion for the subunit. This observation is significant, suggesting that the same group of people are addressed throughout. Thus all the severe things he says to them in vv 1-8 [of ch. 6] stem from their spiritual immaturity (not their lack of regeneration)."<sup>3</sup>

"Deafness or dullness in receptivity is a dangerous condition for those who have been called to radical obedience. The importance of responsible listening has been stressed repeatedly in the sermon (2:1 ...; cf. 3:7b-8a, 15; 4:1-2, 7b)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 135. For defense of the view that Jesus is the object of faith in this passage, and not just our model and enabler of faith, see Victor (Sung-Yul) Rhee, "Christology and the Concept of Faith in Hebrews 5:11—6:20," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 43:1 (March 2000):83-96.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:294.

<sup>3</sup>Tanner, 2:1051.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, p. 136.

"One of the first symptoms of spiritual regression, or backsliding, is a dullness toward the Bible. Sunday School class is dull, the preaching is dull, anything spiritual is dull. The problem is usually not with the Sunday School teacher or the pastor, but with the believer himself."<sup>1</sup>

5:12 Every Christian becomes capable of instructing others when he or she has a grasp on the elementary truths of the faith. This is true whether one has the gift of teaching (the ability to communicate information with unusual clarity and effectiveness) or not. However when we fail to pass on what we know we begin to forget what we know. Eventually we may even need to relearn the most basic teachings of Scripture. When we stop growing we start shrinking. We do not simply stay the same.

The readers were in such a condition. They had been Christians long enough, and had learned the Word of God well enough, that they should have been teaching others the truth. Instead, they had forgotten even "the elementary principles of the actual words of God." Rather than needing advanced teaching ("solid food") they need to relearn the ABCs of the Christian faith ("milk").

"Christians who have really progressed in the faith ought to be able to instruct others (as 1 Peter 3:15 shows; cf. Rom. 2:21)."<sup>2</sup>

"One of the most important spheres is *the home*, and that should be a Christian seminary."<sup>3</sup>

"The Gospel is given by God to the Christian, not only for his own individual edification and joy, but as a 'pound' to be traded with for Christ's glory (Luke 19:13), as a 'light' for the illumination of others (Matt. 5:15, 16). ... How few listen to the ministry of the Scriptures with an ear not only for

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:294.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 51.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 266.



their own soul's profit, but also with the object of being equipped to help others. Instead, how many attend the preaching of the Word simply as a matter of custom, or to satisfy their conscience. Two aims should be prayerfully sought by every Christian auditor: his own edification, his usefulness to others."<sup>1</sup>

5:13 "An infant" consumes only "milk." Immature babies cannot chew and assimilate solid food because they are not equipped to digest it. Comparing "milk" and "solid food" was a very common metaphor in Greek ethical philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Thus the readers would have had no question about the writer's meaning. Immature Christians take in only the basics of the gospel because they cannot receive and assimilate the more advanced teachings of the faith. They cannot do this because they have to have a grasp of the basics in order to understand the more complex teachings of the Bible. The writer's illustration is a picture of Christians who have been content to know and practice only the most elementary lessons of their faith. They were too "sluggish" (lazy, 6:12) to do what is necessary to grow. Of course, even mature adults continue to need milk, which is pre-digested food, but they can also eat solid food, which they must digest themselves.

5:14 The writer's point in verses 13 and 14 is not just that spiritual babies lack information, which they do, but that they lack experience ("who because of practice have their senses trained"). A person becomes a mature Christian, not only by gaining information, though that is foundational, but by using that information to make decisions that are in harmony with God's will.

"Though it may be oversimplified, one of my favorite definitions of maturity is *the ability to*

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, pp. 70-71.

*know good from evil, combined with the self-control to respond accordingly."*<sup>1</sup>

"The word [message] of righteousness" (v. 13) is the "solid food" (v. 14) that results in righteous behavior, which in this verse is described as distinguishing "between good and evil." In this present context the "solid food" must refer to instruction about the high priestly office of Jesus Christ (cf. 7:1—10:18). Practice, as well as information, is essential for maturity. Consequently a brand new Christian cannot be mature by this definition, even if he or she follows the leading of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 2:14—3:3).

"Spiritual maturity comes neither from isolated events nor from a great spiritual burst. It comes from a steady application of spiritual discipline."<sup>2</sup>

The readers were in danger of not comprehending what the writer had to tell them because they had not put into practice, in their lives what they did understand. Instead, they were thinking of departing from the truth.

"As we grow in the Word, we learn to use it in daily life. As we apply the Word, we exercise our 'spiritual senses' and develop spiritual discernment. It is a characteristic of little children that they lack discernment. A baby will put anything into its mouth. An immature believer will listen to any preacher on the radio or television and not be able to identify whether or not he is true to the Scriptures."<sup>3</sup>

"There is a difference between maturity and spirituality and between immaturity and carnality. Maturity involves time, growth, and experience, whereas spirituality stresses a believer's momentary relationship to the Holy Spirit. A believer who is walking in the Spirit is spiritual

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<sup>1</sup>Charles R. Swindoll, *The Swindoll Study Bible*, p. 1568.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:295.

because he wants to be controlled by Him, but that same Christian may be immature if he has just been saved for a short time (Gal. 5:16). A carnal child of God is one who responds to a problem out of his sinful human nature (1 Cor. 3:3-4). Believers in their practice and disposition can thus possess these characteristics in pairs. The goal of each saint should be maturity and spirituality. The worst position would be immaturity and carnality. He could however be mature and carnal or immature and spiritual. The readers were basically immature with periodic lapses into carnality."<sup>1</sup>

This section gives four marks of spiritual immaturity: careless listening to the Word (v. 11), inability to teach the Word to others (v. 12), a diet of only elementary truths in the Word (vv. 12-13), and lack of skill in applying the Word (v. 14). As with the muscles in our bodies, if we do not use what we have gained spiritually, we will lose it (cf. 2 Pet. 3:18).

## 2. The needed remedy 6:1-3

The writer proceeded to explain what the community of Christians whom he addressed should do in order to change their dangerous condition.

6:1 Since they needed to grow spiritually, the readers should, with the writer, "press on to maturity." The writer could include himself in this charge because even mature believers, like himself, can become more mature. We never gain perfect spiritual maturity in this lifetime.

The writer did not want his readers to be content with their present condition but determine to advance. In this context, spiritual maturity involves receiving and responding appropriately to revealed truth (5:14), zeal for the realization of hope (v. 11), and unwavering faith and steadfast endurance (v. 12).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Gromacki, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 140.

"It is a moral duty to grow up, and the duty involves an effort."<sup>1</sup>

The verb translated "let us press on" (*pherometha*) is in the passive voice. We could render it: Let us be carried on (i.e., by God's Holy Spirit). Spiritual maturity does not come merely by striving with self-effort but by cooperating with God as we do His will while depending on His help. It comes as we follow the Holy Spirit who leads and empowers us (Rom. 8:14; Gal. 5:16).

"... they are saved. They are genuine believers. Thus their need is not knowledge; rather, they need to use the knowledge they possess."<sup>2</sup>

The writer challenged his readers to leave "elementary teaching about Christ [Messiah]" in the past. There are two possibilities regarding what this teaching refers to: elementary Christian teaching (teaching that Christians receive), or elementary teachings of Judaism (what the Jewish readers of this epistle had been taught in Judaism). Most interpreters believe that the former is what the writer meant, but a good case can be made for the latter. It is, after all, in harmony with the purpose of this epistle, which was to demonstrate the superiority of Christianity over Judaism. I think both interpretations are correct.

The writer proceeded to specify six things that his readers did not need to learn again: (1) They did not need further instruction about abandoning confidence in works ("repentance from dead works"). If Christian teaching is in view, the writer probably meant "dead works" in contrast to faith for salvation. If Jewish teaching is in view, he probably meant the "dead works" involved in the rituals of Judaism. (2) If Christian "faith" is in view, he probably meant the necessity of trust in Christ for salvation. If Jewish "faith" is in view, he probably meant a general faith in God.

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 72. Cf. 2 Peter 3:18.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, p. 103.

6:2 Neither did they need further instruction in four other subjects: (3) "Washings" evidently refers to the doctrine of spiritual cleansing. The Greek word translated "washings" is *baptismos*, which refers to Jewish ceremonial washings whenever it occurs in the New Testament (Mark 7:4, 8; Heb. 9:10). A different Greek word (*baptisma*) describes Christian baptism. This means that the writer was not referring to baptism here but to spiritual cleansing.

"Purification by the blood of Christ has accomplished infinitely more than what Levitical washings did under the Old Covenant."<sup>1</sup>

(4) The "laying on of hands" in Judaism was part of the sacrificial ritual (Lev. 1:4; 3:2; 4:4; 8:14; 16:21; et al.), it indicated the transference of a blessing (Gen. 48:14-15; et al.), and it was involved in commissioning for public office (Num. 27:18, 23; Deut. 34:9; cf. Acts 6:6; 13:3). In the early church the imparting of the Holy Spirit sometimes accompanied this practice (Acts 8:17-18; 19:6; cf. v. 4, 2:4; 10:29).

(5) The Old Testament taught the "resurrection of the dead" (Isa. 26:19; Dan. 12:2; cf. John 11:24; Acts 24:14-15) and (6) "eternal judgment" (Gen. 18:25; Isa. 33:22). The revelation that Jesus Christ brought shed new light on both of these fundamental doctrines.

"We are responsible people, and one day we shall rise from the dead and give account of ourselves to God. This must have been of importance to new converts in a time when many people thought of death as the end of everything."<sup>2</sup>

"Though a serious situation, there is nothing in the passage that explicitly states they might lose their salvation, any more than the sin of the wilderness generation meant loss of salvation for

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1052.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 54.

them. The analogy in chap. 3 with the wilderness generation suggests they may face temporal judgment and loss of inheritance."<sup>1</sup>

The writer presented the six foundational teachings in verses 1 and 2 in three pairs: (1) "repentance from dead works," and "faith toward God" (v. 1), both referring to one's relationship to God, (2) instruction about "washings," and "laying on of hands" (v. 2a), both referring to one's relationship to the church, and (3) instruction about "the resurrection of the dead," and "eternal judgment" (v. 2b), both relating to one's relationship to the future life.<sup>2</sup> The structure of this sentence (vv. 1-2) in Greek suggests that the last two pairs explain the first pair: Laying the foundation of repentance and faith consists of instruction regarding washings, sortilege (laying on hands), resurrection, and judgment. The first pair points God-ward, the second man-ward, and the third forward into the future.

Each of these teachings was foundational in Judaism as well as in Christianity. Most of the original Jewish readers would have come to believe these truths even before they became Christians. They are very basic. The writer seems to be saying that they needed to move beyond the elementary (foundational) teachings of Judaism and to press on to maturity in Christianity.

"The apostle is not contrasting two different stages of Christianity, an infantile and a mature; rather he is opposing, once more, the substance over against the shadows. He continues to press upon the Hebrews their need of forsaking the visible for the invisible, the typical for the antitypical."<sup>3</sup>

6:3 We will press on to maturity only "if God permits" us to do so. The writer again (v. 1, Let us be carried on) acknowledged

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1052.

<sup>2</sup>Hewett, pp. 104-5.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 273.

dependence on God for spiritual growth. We can continue to grow only as He enables us to do so.

"It seems that the apostle here addresses true Christians, as non-Christians cannot grow in their ability to experientially apply the word of righteousness to daily life and have their spiritual senses trained in spiritual discernment."<sup>1</sup>

What does a stagnant, sometimes sour believer need? He or she needs to mature. How does growth toward maturity take place? It happens when, by God's grace, the believer responds positively to further revelation beyond the basics. We see examples of the danger that the writer warned his readers about all around us. Many Christians attend churches where they only hear the basics repeatedly. Their ears become dull, they stop growing, and many of them turn away from the faith. Some of these people follow cultic leaders who claim to offer deeper spiritual truth. Those who put themselves under the challenge of more advanced sound teaching, and respond properly to it by applying it in their lives, grow more mature.

### **3. The dreadful alternative 6:4-8**

The writer pointed out in these verses the consequences of not pressing on to maturity in order to motivate his readers to pursue spiritual growth diligently (cf. 2 Pet. 1:5; 3:8).

Christians have interpreted this passage in many different ways. Some believe that those who fall away (v. 6) are believers who lose their salvation.<sup>2</sup> Others hold that those who fall away are people who have professed to be believers but really are not.<sup>3</sup> One writer who held this view claimed that they are well-instructed unbelievers.<sup>4</sup> Still others take the whole situation as hypothetical. They believe that if a Christian could lose his salvation, which he cannot, it would be impossible for him to be saved

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<sup>1</sup>Dillow, p. 434. His whole nineteenth chapter, pp. 433-55, deals with Hebrews 6.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Westcott, pp. 148-53; Moffatt, pp. 76-82; Lenski, p. 185; I. Howard Marshall, *Kept by the Power of God*, et al.

<sup>3</sup>E.g. Henry, p. 1916; Bruce, pp. 118-25; P. E. Hughes, pp. 206-24; Pink, pp. 298-320; Saphir, 1:260; Gaebelien, 4:1:263-64; E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 160-68; R. K. Hughes, 1:156-57; Stedman, pp. 84-90, 175; and *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 1315.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Pink, p. 290.

again.<sup>1</sup> A fourth view is that only Hebrew Christians who were living before the destruction of the temple (A.D. 70) could have committed this sin, whatever it is.<sup>2</sup> The view that I believe harmonizes best with the writer's emphasis is that those who fall away are believers who turn away from God's truth and embrace error (i.e., apostates).<sup>3</sup> According to I. Howard Marshall the majority of scholars view these people as genuine believers.<sup>4</sup>

"The transition from the first person (vv. 1-3) to the third person suggests that the author does not wish explicitly to identify the people described with the readers of the epistle. This may be partly out of tact; it is certainly (cf. v. 9) in part because he believes that his readers can still avoid apostasy."<sup>5</sup>

6:4 The writer could describe Christians fairly as "those who have once been enlightened" (cf. 10:32; 2 Cor. 4:3-6). He probably used the impersonal "those" in an impersonal, objective fashion rather than making a direct appeal, as he did in 2:3; 3:8 and 12.<sup>6</sup> "The heavenly gift" of which they "have tasted" (cf. 2:9) at conversion seems to refer to salvation (cf. John 4:10; 6:51-58; Rom. 6:23; Eph. 2:8-9; James 1:17-18). Any attempt to interpret "tasting" as only partial appropriation (i.e., the idea that they tasted it but did not swallow it) is not credible.<sup>7</sup>

"This is not to explain Scripture, [but] to explain it away in favour of some preconceived doctrine."<sup>8</sup>

Elsewhere the same Greek word translated "tasted" refers to complete appropriation (e.g., Jesus Christ tasted "death for

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Westcott, p. 165; Guthrie, pp. 140-46; Hewett, pp. 108; Thomas, pp. 74; Kenneth S. Wuest, "Hebrews Six in the Greek New Testament," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 119:473 (January 1962):45-53; Homer A. Kent Jr., *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 113-14; Wiersbe, 2:297; idem, *Word Studies ...*, 2:2:117; *The Ryrie Study Bible: New Testament. King James Version*, p. 404; Ryrie, *Biblical Theology ...*, pp. 256-58.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Wuest, *Word Studies ...*, 4:1:22.

<sup>3</sup>See Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 515; Swindoll, p. 1569; Daniel Carfrey, "Hebrews," in *Surveying Hebrews through Revelation*, pp. 25-26, for the same or similar views.

<sup>4</sup>Marshall, p. 142.

<sup>5</sup>Ellingworth, p. 318.

<sup>6</sup>Gromacki, p. 107.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Pink, p. 291; John MacArthur, *Hebrews*, p. 143.

<sup>8</sup>F. W. Farrar, *The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, p. 82.



everyone," 2:9; cf. 1 Pet. 2:1-3). This is an Old Testament usage of "tasted" as well (cf. Ps. 34:8).<sup>1</sup> Christians "have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit" through Spirit-baptism the moment they trust in Christ for their salvation (cf. 1:9; 3:1, 14; Rom. 8:9).

"... to dilute this expression so as to make it mean anything less than genuine participation is inconsistent with the author's employment of the term ["partakers," Gr. *metochous*] elsewhere. The statement thus asserts a sharing of the Holy Spirit, and in the Christian context of this epistle, it refers to a sharing of the Spirit's indwelling presence. Normal understanding of the phrase would lead to the conclusion that such persons are viewed as regenerated, not merely exposed to the Spirit's convicting power but unresponsive to it."<sup>2</sup>

6:5 Every true Christian has "tasted the good word of God" and found it to be good to some extent. The original readers had also tasted "the powers [lit. miracles] of the age to come." They had observed the apostles perform miracles (cf. 2:3-4). The five events listed in verses 4 and 5 view salvation as involving different aspects; they do not present a succession of salvific events (events leading to salvation).<sup>3</sup>

"Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed."<sup>4</sup>

"These are all given as actual spiritual experiences."<sup>5</sup>

"The warnings are clearly not addressed to nominal Christians, but to those who have shared,

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<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, p. 141.

<sup>2</sup>Kent, p. 109.

<sup>3</sup>Philip E. Hughes, "Hebrews 6:4-6 and the Peril of Apostasy," *Westminster Theological Journal* 35 (1973):143.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, p. 141.

<sup>5</sup>Robertson, 5:375.

as fully as it is possible to share in the present time, in the blessings which accompany and follow entry into the Christian life (6:4f.)."<sup>1</sup>

6:6 Earlier in this letter the writer had warned his Christian readers about drifting away from the truth through negligence (2:1-4). He had also warned them about failing to continue trusting God—failing to walk by faith (3:7-19). Now he referred to the same apostasy as falling away.

"The aorist tense [of the Greek verb translated "have fallen away"] indicates a decisive moment of commitment to apostasy. In the LXX, the term *parapiptein* has reference to the expression of a total attitude reflecting deliberate and calculated renunciation of God (Ezek 20:27; 22:4; Wis 6:9; 12:2; cf. Michaelis, *TDNT* 6:171 ...).<sup>2</sup> In Hebrews it is equivalent to the expression *apostenai apo theou zontos*, 'to fall away from the living God,' in 3:12. Apostasy entailed a decisive rejection of God's gifts, similar to the rejection of the divine promise by the Exodus generation at Kadesh (3:7—4:2 ...). ... What is visualized by the expressions in v 6 is every form of departure from faith in the crucified Son of God. This could entail a return to Jewish convictions and practices as well as the public denial of faith in Christ under pressure from a magistrate or a hostile crowd, simply for personal advantage (cf. Mark 8:34-38 ...)."<sup>3</sup>

"... the case supposed is very similar to that of the Galatians, to whom St. Paul says, ... ["You have been severed from Christ, you who are

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 75.

<sup>2</sup>[Cf. P. E. Hughes, "Hebrews 6 ...," pp. 146-50.]

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 142. Cf. J. C. McCullough, "The Impossibility of a Second Repentance in Hebrews," *Biblical Theology* 20 (1974):2-3.

seeking to be justified by the Law; you have fallen from grace"] Gal. v. 4."<sup>1</sup>

Falling away from the truth is not a hypothetical possibility but a tragic reality in too many cases among believers (cf. Num. 14:27-32; Gen. 25:29-34; Heb. 3:7-19; 10:23-25, 35-39).<sup>2</sup> Christians departed from the faith in the first century (e.g., 2 Tim. 2:17-18: "gone astray from the truth") and they also do so today (cf. 1 Tim. 4:1).

"If they have never believed, never been regenerated, how can it be more difficult to renew them to repentance, than the heathen, or any unconverted persons?"<sup>3</sup>

"The author repeatedly urges his readers to maintain their Christian profession and confidence (cf. 3:6, 12-15; 6:11, 12; 10:23-25). The man who falls away is evidently the one who casts that confidence, and its attendant reward, aside (10:25)."<sup>4</sup>

To what is it impossible for an apostate to be restored? The writer said it is repentance, not forgiveness or salvation. Immediately the question arises whether this explanation is realistic, since some believers who have departed from the truth have repented and returned to belief in the truth and the fold of the faithful. I believe the writer meant that in the case of apostates, the really hard cases who are persistently hostile to Christ, it is impossible "to restore" such people "to repentance" (cf. vv. 1, 3, 7-8). The word "apostate" refers to extreme cases of departure from the truth. We usually refer to less serious departure as backsliding (e.g., Peter's denial of Christ). This inability to repent is the result of sin's hardening effect, about which the writer had sounded a warning earlier

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<sup>1</sup>Alford, 4:2:110.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 141.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 4:2:113.

<sup>4</sup>Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, pp. 70-71. Cf. McGee, 5:546.

(3:13). It is also the result of divine judgment (cf. Pharaoh, Exod. 9:12; 10:20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8, 17; Isa. 6:10).

"Saul forfeited for himself and his posterity the possibility of kingly rule over Israel when he dared to officiate as a priest (I Sam. 13:13-14). Esau lost any future opportunity of spiritual leadership when he sold his birthright to Jacob ([Heb. ]12:16-17). In fact, he 'found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears' (12:17). Israel could not go into Canaan once they refused to do so at Kadesh-barnea. Even though people may change their minds after they recognize the consequences of their deeds, God forbids them from recovering their lost opportunities."<sup>1</sup>

Some people, who earlier in their lives have given evidence of being true Christians, have later renounced their belief in Christianity, and even in the deity of Christ. Does this mean they were never saved in the first place? Possibly. But it may mean that they were believers and were misled by erroneous thinking or false teaching. Or they may be prodigal sons who have deliberately departed from the Father's house to seek greener pastures elsewhere. If such a person persists in his or her departure from the truth, this verse warns that he or she might not be able to return to the truth.

The Hebrews writer also wrote about three other impossible things: It is impossible for God to lie (v. 18), for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins (10:4), and for someone to please God without faith (11:6).

"God has pledged Himself to pardon all who truly repent, but Scripture and experience alike suggest that it is possible for human beings to arrive at a

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<sup>1</sup>Gromacki, p. 110.

state of heart and life where they can no longer repent [i.e., change their minds]."<sup>1</sup>

"That certain persons could not repent of their sins was ... an idea admitted in rabbinic Judaism."<sup>2</sup>

Even God cannot renew these apostates to repentance, because He has determined not to do so.

"... the author does recognize the possibility that one may have regressed so far that it is impossible to again make progress toward maturity. He therefore states in verses 4-6 that it may be impossible to renew certain believers so that they can progress toward maturity."<sup>3</sup>

Would it not glorify God more for apostates to repent? Evidently by making it impossible for them to repent God will bring greater glory to Himself than if they did repent. Consider the glory that came to God because the Pharaoh of the Exodus did not repent. One might ask the same question in regard to everyone being saved? Would it not glorify God more for everyone to be saved than for some to perish eternally? Evidently by permitting some to disbelieve God will bring greater glory to Himself than if everyone believed.

By repudiating Jesus Christ these apostates dishonor Him. The writer spoke of this dishonor in terms of taking the side of Jesus' enemies who crucified Him ("they again crucify to themselves the Son of God") and publicly humiliated Him ("put Him to open shame"). The apostates in view re-crucify Him in the sense of passing judgment against Him again, by repudiating Him and His work, as those who literally crucified Jesus did. Evidently these hard cases are not those who turn away from just any aspect of God's will but specifically the biblical teaching concerning the person and work of Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, p. 124. See also Gromacki, p. 110.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 77.

<sup>3</sup>Pentecost, pp. 105-6.

"The meaning of the vivid phrase ["they again crucify to themselves the Son of God"] is that they put Jesus out of their life, they break off all connexion [*sic*] with him; he is dead to them."<sup>1</sup>

"Anyone who turned back from Christianity to Judaism would be identifying himself not only with Jewish unbelief, but with that malice which led to the crucifixion of Jesus."<sup>2</sup>

"... once Christ and his sacrifice have been rejected, there is nowhere else to turn. ... The 'impossibility' of a second repentance is thus not psychological or more generally related to the human condition; it is in the strict sense theological, related to God's saving action in Christ."<sup>3</sup>

"Just as the Hebrew spies who returned from their expedition carrying visible tokens of the good land of Canaan nevertheless failed to enter the land because of their unbelief, so those who had come to know the blessings of the new covenant might nevertheless in a spiritual sense turn back in heart to Egypt and so forfeit the saints' everlasting rest."<sup>4</sup>

Not only did the 10 spies fail to enter the Promised Land through unbelief, but so did the whole adult generation of Israelites who left Egypt with Moses (Num. 14). It was impossible for them to repent in the sense that, even though they confessed their sin of unbelief (Num. 14:40), God would not permit them to enter the land (Num. 14:41-45). Two New Testament examples of these hard cases may be Hymenaeus and Alexander, whom Paul described as having faith. Paul wrote

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 80.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 144.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 323.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce, pp. 119-20. Cf. 3:7-11. See also Lang, pp. 98-107.

that he had turned them over to Satan so that they might learn not to blaspheme (1 Tim. 1:18-20).

"These verses [4 through 6] describe a genuine Christian for at least three reasons: (1) the author had expressed concern about his readers earlier (3:12) though calling them 'brethren'; (2) 6:4-6 cannot be divorced from what he has said about them at the beginning of the literary unit in 5:11-14, namely, that they are spiritual babies who have not matured; and (3) the terminology in 6:4-5 is most naturally descriptive of Christian experience."<sup>1</sup>

6:7 "A double illustration forms a transition between the negative and positive realities described in vv. 4-6 and vv. 9-12:

<b>vv. 4-6</b>	<b>v. 7</b>	<b>v. 8</b>	<b>vv. 9-12</b>
negative reality	positive image	negative image	positive reality" <sup>2</sup>

In the illustration in this verse the "ground" represents believers who drink in "the rain" of God's Word "which often falls on it" and which "produces vegetation" as a result. This accepting response leads to God bestowing "a blessing" on those individuals who receive it ("those for whose sake it [the ground] is also tilled": cf. Matt. 13:23).

6:8 If no good fruit results, however, but only dangerous and destructive "thorns and thistles," God will bring judgment on this ground rather than blessing it (cf. Gen. 3:17-18; Lev. 26; Deut. 28—29; John 15:2, 6).

"Worthless" literally means "disapproved" (Gr. *adokimos*). It does not mean totally rejected but rather failing to gain God's approval (cf. 1 Cor. 9:27). It is in danger of ("close to") "being

<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1053.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 325.

cursed." But it is not cursed like unbelievers are. "Burned" does not mean burned in hell (cf. 1 Cor. 3:12-15). In ancient times, as well as today, farmers often burned their fields in order to removed unwanted vegetation, not to destroy the field itself.

"Although this might appear to be a reference to hades or to the lake of fire, it really points to the judgment seat of Christ where a fruitless, wasted life will be examined by fire (John 15:6; 1 Cor. 3:13)."<sup>1</sup>

This burning is evidently a judgment on a believer that God allows because of his or her apostasy (cf. Isa. 9:18-19; 10:17; John 15:6; Heb. 10:17). The judgment might result in premature death in some cases (cf. 1 John 5:16-17). However the text does not warrant concluding that this fate will befall every apostate. Some fields, once burned, turn out to be more productive in the future, and that might be what God's judgment would lead to in the case of some apostates (cf. 1 Tim. 1:19-20). The purpose of the burning (chastening) is restoration to fruitfulness, not total destruction (cf. 13:1-9, 18-23).<sup>2</sup>

"The contrast in vv 7-8 is most likely between a faithful believer who is fruitful and an unfaithful believer who should have produced but did not (consistent with 5:11-14)."<sup>3</sup>

The history of the interpretation that I have supported in this passage, and in Hebrews generally, is as follows: Robert Govett was one of the earliest modern authors who wrote on the theme of the Christian's rewards, though he believed in a partial rapture.<sup>4</sup> He was also a leading figure in the school of thought that took the warnings of Hebrews as being addressed to Christians who were eternally saved and secure. However some in this school also believed that unfaithful Christians would miss the Millennium and spend 1,000 years in a kind of purgatory. Those who adopted this

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<sup>1</sup>Gromacki, p. 113.

<sup>2</sup>See Charles C. Bing, "Does Fire in Hebrews refer to Hell?" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 167:667 (July-September 2010):342-57.

<sup>3</sup>Tanner, 2:1054.

<sup>4</sup>See Robert Govett, *Entrance Into the Kingdom*.



interpretation include G. H. Lang,<sup>1</sup> R. E. Neighbor,<sup>2</sup> and probably Philip Mauro.<sup>3</sup>

Among the standard commentators Henry Alford, B. F. Westcott, James Moffatt, and I. Howard Marshall, as well as most others, took the view that the writer addressed true Christians in the warning passages. The last three of these men took what we would call an Arminian stance, believing true Christians can lose their salvation, but they believed that the writer addressed Christians in these passages. I do not know if Alford was a Calvinist or an Arminian.

Students of this passage sometimes assume that the view that the writer addressed only false professors (nominal Christians, i.e., not genuine Christians) is the majority view, but it is not. It is, however, the most popular Calvinistic interpretation. Calvinist Louis Berkhof believed that the type of sin described in this passage could only occur in the apostolic age.<sup>4</sup>

Another modern writer who takes this passage as I do is R. T. Kendall.<sup>5</sup> He also discussed briefly the history of this interpretation in the church fathers.<sup>6</sup> Hodges also held this view<sup>7</sup> as did Oberholtzer,<sup>8</sup> Dillow,<sup>9</sup> Gleason,<sup>10</sup> McGee,<sup>11</sup> Tanner,<sup>12</sup> Eaton,<sup>13</sup> Olson,<sup>14</sup> and others.

I think it is significant that the writer did not simply identify "those" in verse 4 as believers or as unbelievers. This would have cleared up the whole discussion of their identity. I wonder if he did not because he wanted to stress that his warning about turning back was his main point, and that this

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<sup>1</sup>G. H. Lang, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 106-7.

<sup>2</sup>R. E. Neighbor, *If They Shall Fall Away*.

<sup>3</sup>Philip Mauro, *God's Pilgrims*.

<sup>4</sup>Berkhof, p. 254.

<sup>5</sup>R. T. Kendall, *Once Saved, Always Saved*, pp. 175-99, and 219-28. Kendall succeeded D. Martin Lloyd-Jones as minister of Westminster Chapel, London, England.

<sup>6</sup>Kendall, pp. 224-25.

<sup>7</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews;" and *The Gospel ...*

<sup>8</sup>Oberholtzer, "The Warning ...," 145:319-28.

<sup>9</sup>Dillow, pp. 433-55.

<sup>10</sup>Randall C. Gleason, "The Old Testament Background of the Warning in Hebrews 6:4-8," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:617 (January-March 1998):62-91.

<sup>11</sup>McGee, 5:546-49.

<sup>12</sup>Tanner, 2:1051-55.

<sup>13</sup>Michael Eaton, *No Condemnation*, pp. 37, 208-12.

<sup>14</sup>C. Gordon Olson, *Beyond Calvinism & Arminianism*, pp. 207-11.

warning needs to be taken seriously by both genuine Christians and merely professing Christians. While the discussions of this passage have focused on who the writer was addressing, the more important issue is a warning about abandoning the truth about Christ for falsehood—no matter who you are.

#### 4. The encouraging prospect 6:9-12

Even though the danger that his readers faced was great, the writer believed that they could avoid it. Consequently he concluded this warning, as he did the ones in 2:1 through 4 and 3:1 through 4:16, with a word of hope to encourage his audience.

6:9        The "better things" in view reflect the writer's confidence that his readers would not turn away from the truth. He based his confidence on their realizing the dreadful consequences of apostasy, which he had just explained, and avoiding it. "Salvation" in this verse refers to the full salvation that lay ahead of them, about which he had been speaking throughout this epistle (cf. 1:14).

"The things to which he refers are defined in the following verses (6:10-12): work and love, diligence to the end, and faith and patience. Salvation is the victorious participation with Christ in the coming kingdom as it is in Heb. 1:14, which only those who persevere as companions of the King will inherit. The writer obviously expects that his readers will persevere to the end, enter into rest, and obtain these blessings."<sup>1</sup>

This is the only place in the epistle where the writer referred to his readers as "beloved" (dear friends). This affectionate term softens the severity of the warning just given (vv. 4-8). Verses 9 through 12 provide additional strong evidence, I believe, that genuine Christians are in view throughout this warning passage.

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<sup>1</sup>Dillow, p. 132.

6:10 "God" had taken note of the readers' commendable Christian conduct, and He would justly reward them for it. Therefore they should persevere in it and not turn aside from it (i.e., apostatize). "Not unjust" is understatement; God is, of course, perfectly just. This is also a litotes, a figure of speech that sets forth a positive idea by stating its negative opposite (cf. Acts 12:18; 15:2; 17:4, 12; 19:24; 27:20; et al.).<sup>1</sup>

6:11-12 "Hope is important. Probably no movement has ever gripped the hearts of people if it did not give them hope."<sup>2</sup>

Earlier the writer had described his readers as being poor listeners (lit. lazy, 5:11). Now he urged them to be diligent and to stop being lazy (v. 12; cf. Prov. 24:30-34; 2 Pet. 1:5, 10). The same Greek word (*nothroi*) occurs in both places. He wanted them to remain faithful to God while waiting patiently for Him to fulfill His promises to them regarding their future inheritance (be "imitators of those who through faith and endurance inherit the promises").

"The theme of imitation recurs in 13:7, and in both instances faith is seen as steadfast persistence that pursues the divine promise ..."<sup>3</sup>

"In the arid times, the best thing to do is to go on with the habits and the routine of the Christian life and the life of the Church. If we do, we can be sure that the sun will shine again."<sup>4</sup>

Some commentators have used verse 11 to support the unbiblical idea that believers should look to their good works as evidence of their election and as the basis for their assurance of salvation. This verse is not saying that. The Greek word *plerophoria* ("full") always means fullness in the passive sense, not fulfilling. The writer meant that we need to be

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<sup>1</sup>For further discussion of rhetorical elements in Hebrews, see Trotter, pp. 164-77.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 58.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 145.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 61.

diligent regarding something that we have already obtained, not in order to obtain something, namely, assurance.<sup>1</sup>

Note the linking of "love" (v. 10), "hope" (v. 11), and "faith" (v.12) here (cf. 10:22-24). This triad occurs often in the New Testament epistles (cf. Rom. 5:2-5; 1 Cor. 13:13; Gal. 5:5-6; Col. 1:4-5; 1 Thess. 1:3; 5:8; 1 Pet. 1:21-22).

"Faith looks to the Promiser, hope to the things promised."<sup>2</sup>

### **B. THE BASIS FOR CONFIDENCE AND STEADFASTNESS 6:13-20**

Again the change in genre, this time from exhortation to exposition, signals a new literary unit within the epistle. Here the writer proceeded to expound the reliability of God's promise to Christians as a result of Jesus Christ's high priestly ministry. Notice the repetition of key words introduced in 6:12 as the exposition unfolds. This pericope contains a strong argument for the believer's eternal security, so it is unlikely that we should understand the earlier part of the chapter as saying that we can lose our salvation.

6:13-15 The writer offered "Abraham" as an encouraging and supreme example of one who continued strong in faith and endurance.

"There is in Hebrews a sustained interest in Abraham (2:16; 6:13-15; 7:4-5; 11:8-19). The appeal to Abraham as a prototype of faithful endurance in vv 13-15 gives specific content to the exhortation in v 12."<sup>3</sup>

"The promise" to which the writer referred here was the one that God gave Abraham after he had obeyed God by offering up Isaac (Gen. 22:17; cf. James 2:21). Abraham was still trusting God to fulfill His former promise regarding his descendants by expecting Him to raise Isaac from the dead. The writer was calling his readers to do what God called Abraham to do when He instructed him to go to Mt. Moriah.

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<sup>1</sup>See Dillow, pp. 293-95.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 332.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 150.

They too needed to continue to trust and obey, as they had done in the past, even though circumstances appeared as if their perseverance would result in tragedy. "Having patiently waited" and remained steadfast in the face of trying circumstances, Abraham qualified to receive everything that God wanted to give him ("he obtained the promise"; cf. Col. 1:11; Heb. 12:1-3, 7; James 5:11).

"The author's example of Abraham pertains not to his justification, but to his faithfulness as a believer (which has important implications for the warning in vv 4-8)."<sup>1</sup>

6:16-18 When a person wants to end an argument, one way to do so is to appeal to a higher authority with an oath. For example, some people do this by saying, "I am telling the truth so help me God." Even God used "an oath" to guarantee His "promise" to bless Abraham greatly (Gen. 22:16; cf. Exod. 32:13; Isa. 45:23; Jer. 22:5; 49:13). The fact that God swore by Himself signifies that He binds His word to His character. Thus God gave Abraham double assurance that He would indeed deliver what He had promised. He gave him: (1) the assurance of the "promise" of the God who does not "lie," and (2) the assurance that God specially guaranteed that particular promise "with an oath."

The two "unchangeable" things are God's "promise" and His "oath." God's doubly-strong guarantee to Abraham, then, can be a great (doubly-strong) encouragement to us, now, because God has also promised us future blessings. Specifically, He has promised that we will receive rewards when we see Him if we persevere faithfully now (cf. 2 Tim. 2:12).

"One of the most determinative passages on the unconditional character of the Abrahamic covenant is found in Hebrews 6:13-18 ..."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1055.

<sup>2</sup>John F. Walvoord, *Major Bible Prophecies*, p. 65.

The figure that closes verse 18, of taking "refuge" in something, is an Old Testament one. In our times of temptation to apostatize we can take "refuge" in the promises of God. We can take "hold" of them, just as a fearful person in Israel could flee to the altar of burnt offerings, take hold of its horns, and be safe from his enemies. The cities of refuge also provided safety for the Israelites (Num. 35:9-15; Josh. 20). Christians have a better refuge than the Israelites did in Judaism, namely, "the hope set before us." That hope is what God has promised us.

"In Hebrews, the word 'hope' never describes a subjective attitude (i.e., 'our hope,' or 'hopefulness') but always denotes the objective content of hope, consisting of present and future salvation ..."<sup>1</sup>

6:19-20 These verses provide another illustration of our security. When Jesus Christ entered heaven at His ascension He took our "hope" of future blessings (glorification, inheritance, and full salvation) with Him. That is, since our hope is what He has promised us, it really depends on Him. And since He is now in heaven, our hope is in heaven. In the first century sailors would carry their ship's anchor in a small boat and deposit it on the shore so that the ship would not drift away as waves beat against it (cf. Acts 27:29-30).

"The Greek word for *forerunner* was used in the second century A.D. of the smaller boats sent into the harbor by larger ships unable to enter due to the buffeting of the weather. These smaller boats carried the anchor through the breakers inside the harbor and dropped it there, securing the larger ship."<sup>2</sup>

In the same way, the hope that Jesus Christ has planted firmly in heaven should serve as an anchor for our storm-tossed souls. It should keep us from drifting away from God (cf. 2:1).

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 153.

<sup>2</sup>*The Nelson Study Bible*, pp. 2085-86.

The anchor was a symbol of hope in the ancient world.<sup>1</sup> Our "anchor" rests firmly in the Holy of Holies ("within the veil"), namely, in God's presence in heaven with Jesus. According to Wiersbe, at least 66 pictures of anchors appear in the catacombs under Rome, indicating its popularity as a Christian symbol of Jesus Christ.<sup>2</sup>

"The author is not saying simply that hope secures the 'spiritual' aspect of man. He is affirming that hope forms an anchor for the whole of life. The person with a living hope has a steady anchor in all he does."<sup>3</sup>

The writer returned here to his view of the universe (God's heavenly realm, and specifically, the heavenly temple) as the true tabernacle of God (3:1-6). He also returned to the thought of Jesus Christ as our High Priest after "the order of Melchizedek" (cf. 5:10), which he proceeded to develop in the next chapter.

The writer of Hebrews was now ready to proceed to serve the "solid food" that he had mentioned previously (5:12), which he said his readers needed to eat (5:14—6:1). This spiritual meat was specifically the exposition concerning the present high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ.

### **C. THE SON'S HIGH PRIESTLY MINISTRY 7:1—10:18**

The great resource of Christians, when we are tempted to apostatize, is our high priest: Jesus Christ. The writer therefore spent considerable time and space expounding His high priesthood in order to enable his readers to benefit from their resource.

"The priest's function, speaking generally, is to establish and to represent the fellowship of God and man."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 63.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:298. The catacombs of Rome are underground galleries that were used for centuries as cemeteries.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>Denney, p. 218.

This section of the book continues to glorify Jesus Christ so that the readers might appreciate Him sufficiently and not turn from Him. The priesthood of Melchizedek provided an analogy, for the writer, of Jesus' priesthood.

"Here begins the longest single expository passage in the epistle. Its very length suggests its importance. Its theme is the core theme of Hebrews. The real resource of the readership, in the midst of their pressures, is the high priesthood of Christ. They must realize the greatness of that priesthood, its superiority to the Levitical institutions, and the perfect access they have to it on the basis of Christ's death."<sup>1</sup>

"In Hebrews 7, the writer argued that Christ's priesthood, like Melchizedek's, is superior in its *order*. In Hebrews 8, the emphasis is on Christ's better *covenant*; in Hebrews 9, it is His better *sanctuary*; and Hebrews 10 concludes the section by arguing for Christ's better *sacrifice*."<sup>2</sup>

### 1. The person of our high priest ch. 7

"For the Jews of his day, it would have been axiomatic that there was no priesthood other than the Aaronic. We are now shown that the Law itself proves that there is a higher priesthood than that."<sup>3</sup>

"Three main arguments will be seen: Melchizedek is positionally better than both Abraham and Levi (7:1-10); the prediction of a new priest of the order of Melchizedek shows the temporary character of the Levitical system (7:11-22); and the Levitical ministry ended at death, but the priestly service of Christ continues forever because He rose from the dead (7:23-28)."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 797.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:299.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 62.

<sup>4</sup>Gromacki, p. 120.



## The significance of Melchizedek 7:1-10

The writer began by explaining the significance of Melchizedek, because understanding him is foundational to appreciating Jesus Christ's high priestly ministry.<sup>1</sup>

"The dominant text in 7:1-10 is Gen 14:17-20, but in chap. 7 as a whole Gen 14:17-20 is subordinated to Ps 110:4 ..." <sup>2</sup>

"The limits of the first section are confirmed literarily by an *inclusio* established between vv 1 and 10 by the repeated statement that Melchizedek met Abraham."<sup>3</sup>

### The particulars of Melchizedek's significance 7:1-3

7:1-2 The writer referred to "Melchizedek" (lit. Righteous King, certainly a title but perhaps also a proper name, cf. the title/name "Christ") as the head of a priestly order ("priest of the Most High God").

"This title [the Most High God] was also used by the Phoenicians, and it is evident that the worship of the one true God was not confined to the family of Abraham."<sup>4</sup>

The writer called Melchizedek "king of peace" (v. 2) because that was his realm, "Salem" being the name of his city-state (cf. Heb. *shalom*). Salem is an older name of Jerusalem (cf. Ps. 76:2). The order is significant: "righteousness" necessarily precedes "peace."

It was not uncommon for one individual to combine the roles of priest and king in antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Aaron was also the head of a priestly order. The writer explained that Jesus Christ was a member of Melchizedek's order, not Aaron's (6:20). Melchizedek was a prototype of Jesus Christ in two respects: (1) He was both a king and a priest, and (2) what characterized

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<sup>1</sup>See James Swetnam, "Form and Content in Hebrews 7-13," *Biblica* 55 (1974):333-48.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 159.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Hewett, p. 116.

<sup>5</sup>Morris, pp. 62-63.

him was righteousness and peace (cf. 12:10-11; Ps. 85:10; Isa. 32:17; Rom. 5:1; James 3:17-18).<sup>1</sup>

The fact that Melchizedek was a priest is clear from two facts: he "blessed" Abraham, and Abraham paid tithes ("apportioned a tenth") to him "of all the spoils" that he had taken in war (v. 4; cf. Gen. 14:23-24).

"It was common [in Abram's day] to offer a tenth of the spoils to the gods."<sup>2</sup>

According to Moffatt, the Jews under the Mosaic Covenant did not pay tithes from the spoils of war.<sup>3</sup> This was a pagan custom. But, of course, Abraham lived long before the Mosaic Covenant.

These verses point out four important facts about Melchizedek: (1) he was a king-priest, (2) he was a person who blessed, (3) he received tithes, and (4) he had a significant name.

7:3 A literal interpretation of this verse might lead one to conclude that Melchizedek was an angelic being, and the Qumran Community evidently regarded Melchizedek as an angel.<sup>4</sup> But there is no indication elsewhere in Scripture that he was anything but a human being. Many of the Jewish writers understood Melchizedek to be Shem, the son of Noah.<sup>5</sup> But there is no biblical basis for this view either. Neither should we conclude that Melchizedek was the pre-incarnate Christ because the writer wrote that he was "made like the Son of God."<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, it would be difficult for him to be a priest after the order of Himself. Consequently most commentators have concluded that Melchizedek was the person referred to

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<sup>1</sup>For more information about types and typology, see Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation*, ch. 9: "The Interpretation of Types"; and Roy B Zuck, *Basic Bible Interpretation*, ch. 8: "Testing the Types and Sensing the Symbols."

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 5:380.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 798.

<sup>5</sup>See Henry, p. 1917.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 515.

in Genesis 14 and have adopted a metaphorical interpretation of what the writer of Hebrews said of him here.

Limiting our knowledge of Melchizedek to what Moses specifically stated, this first priest mentioned in Scripture had no known parents ("without father, without mother") or children ("without genealogy") and no known birth ("beginning of days") or death ("end of life"). In this too, besides being a priest, Melchizedek represented (was "made like") "the [eternal] Son of God." It was essential that the Levitical priests be able to prove their ancestry (cf. Ezra 2:61-63; Neh. 7:63-65).

Since Moses did not record Melchizedek's death, this writer could say that he continued as a priest forever ("perpetually"), which is another respect in which he was like Jesus Christ. It is remarkable that in the record of Melchizedek in the Book of Genesis, which is full of genealogies, the genealogy of Melchizedek is absent.

"When nothing is recorded of the parentage of this man, it is not necessarily to be assumed that he had no parents but simply that the absence of the record is significant. What was true of Melchizedek simply as a matter of record was true of Christ in a fuller and more literal sense. So the silence of the Scripture points to an important theological truth."<sup>1</sup>

Thus it is not that Melchizedek sets the pattern and Jesus follows it. Rather, the record about Melchizedek is so arranged that it brings out certain truths, that apply far more fully to Jesus than they do to Melchizedek. With the latter, these truths are simply a matter of record; but

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 63.

with Jesus they are not only historically true, they also have significant spiritual dimensions."<sup>1</sup>

"It is when the writer bases his exposition on the silence of Scripture that his method of exegesis seems strangest to modern readers."<sup>2</sup>

"The idea of basing exegesis on silence is familiar in Philo's writings and would not in itself have seemed strange to Jewish readers."<sup>3</sup>

In contrast with Melchizedek's lack of genealogy, the Aaronic priesthood depended entirely on genealogy. Unless a man could trace his genealogy back to Aaron, he could not serve as a priest (cf. Ezra 2:61-63; Neh. 7:63-65). His personal qualifications had nothing to do with becoming a priest. Everything depended on his physical ancestry: the blood line that he inherited. Melchizedek's (and Christ's) qualifications were, on the other hand, completely personal.

This verse highlights a fifth important fact about Melchizedek: he had a significant (unusual and unknown) family history, according to the biblical record.

### **The exposition of Melchizedek's significance 7:4-10**

In these straightforward verses, which expound verses 1 through 3, the writer explained further how Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, the ancestor of Levi, who was the head of the priestly tribe under the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. He said more about three of the facts mentioned above: Melchizedek received tithes from Abraham, he blessed Abraham, and he lived longer than Abraham.

7:4           The writer's purpose was to show "how great" Melchizedek was compared to the venerated patriarch "Abraham."

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 64. See also Charles P. Baylis, "The Author of Hebrews' Use of Melchizedek from the Context of Genesis," (Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1989); Robertson, 5:381; and Lane, pp. 164, 166.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 156

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 157. See also Barclay, pp. 69-70.

- 7:5-6a The descendants of Abraham paid tithes ("a tenth") to their priests, the sons of Levi, but Abraham himself paid tithes to Melchizedek. The writer was really contrasting Aaron and Melchizedek more than Abraham and Melchizedek in these verses. The writer implied that the one to whom Abraham paid tithes (Melchizedek) was superior to the one to whom Abraham's descendants paid tithes (the Levitical priests).
- 7:6b-7 "Greater" people typically bless "lesser" people, so the fact that Melchizedek "blessed" Abraham ("the one who had the promise," cf. Gen. 12:1-3) shows his superiority over Abraham in a second way, in addition to the fact that he received tithes from Abraham.
- 7:8 The sons of Levi, who received tithes from their brethren, died; they were "mortal men." But Melchizedek, who received tithes from Abraham, lived on. Melchizedek was immortal ("lives on"), as far as the specific revelation of Scripture states. In contrast, Moses wrote that Abraham, Levi, and the Aaronic priests, who were all mortal men and died.
- 7:9-10 In a sense, even "Levi, who received tithes" himself "paid tithes" to Melchizedek, since "he was still in the loins of" Abraham ("his forefather") when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. In the ancient Near Eastern view of things, people regarded a descendant as in one sense participating in the actions of his ancestors (Gen. 25:23; Mal. 1:2-3; Rom. 9:11-13). This is true to reality in certain respects (cf. Rom. 5:12-21; 1 Cor. 15:22), though we are responsible for our own actions too (Ezek. 18:20). Levi, the head of the priestly tribe in Israel, had not yet begun his independent existence as a human being, but he was involved, in this sense, in everything that Abraham did.<sup>1</sup> Levi was seminally present in Abraham.

Barclay summarized the writer's arguments for the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood over the Levitical priesthood:

"(i) The Levites receive tithes from the people, and that is a right that only the Levites enjoy. Melchizedek received tithes

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<sup>1</sup>See Ellingworth, p. 369. Cf. Rom. 5:12-21.

from Abraham, and he was not a member of the tribe of Levi. ... (ii) The Levites tithe their brother Israelites; but Melchizedek was not an Israelite; he was a stranger; and it was no ordinary Israelite from who he received tithes; it was from no less a person than Abraham, the founder of the nation. (iii) It was due to a legal enactment that the Levites had the right to exact tithes; but Melchizedek received tithes for the sake of what he was personally, and not because of any legal enactment. He had such an essential and personal greatness that he needed no legal enactment to entitle him to receive tithes. (iv) The Levites receive tithes as dying men; but Melchizedek lives for ever. (v) ... Levi was a direct descendant of Abraham and Levi was the only man legally entitled to receive tithes. Now, if Levi was a direct descendant of Abraham it means that Levi was already in Abraham's body. It was Abraham who begat Isaac; and Isaac begat Jacob; and Jacob begat Levi; therefore it can be argued that even at this time Levi was potentially in Abraham's body. Therefore when Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, Levi also paid them, because he was included in Abraham's body; therefore Levi, the one man who was entitled to receive tithes, actually paid tithes to Melchizedek ..."<sup>1</sup>

### **The superior priesthood of Jesus 7:11-25**

Having shown the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham and Levi, the writer proceeded to point out the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood and Jesus' priesthood. He did so in order to clarify for his readers the inferiority of the Mosaic Covenant and its priesthood compared to the priesthood of Jesus. Not only was Melchizedek greater than Aaron, but Melchizedek, though he preceded Aaron in time, also replaced Aaron.

"Within the structure of the homily [sermon], 7:1-28 is clearly defined as a literary unit. The reference to 'the Son of God' in v 3 prepares for the climactic reference to the 'Son' in v 28. The entire chapter is concerned with the Son as priest, or high priest, 'like Melchizedek,' who is superior to the Levitical priests. The fact that v 28 summarizes and concludes the comparison of Jesus as Son with the Levitical priesthood, a

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, pp. 80-81.

subject that occupies the writer in a preparatory way in 7:1-10 and directly in 7:11-28, is of special importance ..."<sup>1</sup>

Genesis 14:17 through 20 now falls into the background, and Psalm 110:4 becomes dominant.<sup>2</sup> Note also the keywords "perfection" (v. 11) and "perfect" (vv. 19, 28). These two words not only form an inclusio, but they begin and end the argument of this pericope. Perfection did not come through the Old Covenant priests, but through the Son, the New Covenant Priest. Why would God replace the Levitical priesthood? Four reasons follow.

### **The imperfection of the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic Law 7:11-14**

7:11            "'Perfection' means the bringing of a thing to that completeness of condition designed for it [cf. 10:1]."<sup>3</sup>

The writer's point was that since God promised in Psalm 110:4 that the coming Messiah would be a priest after Melchizedek's order, He intended to terminate and replace "the Levitical priesthood," because it was inadequate. If the Levitical priesthood had been adequate, the Messiah would have functioned as a Levitical priest.

7:12            The priesthood was such a major part of the whole Mosaic Covenant that this predicted change in the priesthood signaled a change in the whole Covenant. This verse is one of the clearest single statements in the New Testament indicating that God has terminated the Mosaic Law (Covenant; cf. Rom. 10:4).

"The Levitical priesthood has been superseded, and with its fall is included the whole constitution, not merely the ceremonial."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 177.

<sup>2</sup>Cf. Gareth Lee Cockerill, *The Melchizedek Christology in Heb. 7:1-28*, pp. 16-20.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 381.

<sup>4</sup>Hewett, p. 120.

Paul went on to say in his epistles that Christians, therefore, are not under the Law (Rom. 6:14-15; Gal. 3:24-25; 5:1; 6:2; 2 Cor. 3:7-11). That is, the Mosaic Covenant is not what God has given to regulate the lives of Christians.

"If Christ is our high priest today, then there has to be a change in the law, since He could not qualify as a priest under the Levitical arrangement (being of the tribe of Judah). If the law has not been done away today, then neither has the Levitical priesthood; but if Christ is our high priest, we cannot be under the law. Every prayer offered in the name of Christ is an affirmation of the end of the law."<sup>1</sup>

"So by his own independent line of argument our author reaches the same conclusion as Paul: the law was a temporary provision, 'our tutor to bring us unto Christ ... but now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor' (Gal. 3:24f.)."<sup>2</sup>

"The problem of the old system was twofold. First, all, priests and people alike, were breakers of the law, and the fact that the priests of the levitical order were themselves sinners incapacitated them for offering up an adequate and perfect sacrifice; indeed, they had first to offer sacrifice for their own sins before presenting an offering for the sins of the people (see v. 27 below; 5:3). Second, no unwilling and uncomprehending animal, such as was offered under the old system, was competent to serve as a true substitute for the human sinner."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Charles C. Ryrie, "The End of the Law," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 124:495 (July-September 1967):244. Cf. Morris, p. 67; and Hal Harless, "The Cessation of the Mosaic Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 160:639 (July-September 2003):349-66.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, p. 145.

<sup>3</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 256-57.



7:13-14 The prophecies that Messiah would come from the tribe of "Judah," not from the priestly tribe of Levi, were further confirmations of this change (Gen. 49:10; Mic. 5:2; Isa. 11:1).

### **The need for a better replacement 7:15-19**

7:15-17 A third proof that God made a change in the priesthood is that God predicted that Messiah would live forever (Ps. 110:4). Jesus Christ did not become a priest because He met a physical requirement, namely, that He was born into the priestly tribe and was thus qualified by His lineage to serve as high priest. He became a permanent high priest after His ascension, because He would never die again. In this He showed Himself to be a member of Melchizedek's "order," since Melchizedek appears from the scriptural record to have lived forever. Jesus is a priest forever because of His resurrection and ascension.<sup>1</sup>

"... every single regulation that governed the old priesthood had to do with the priest's physical body. ... Every single item in the whole ceremony is a physical thing, affecting the priest's body. ... Christ's priesthood depends not on physical things, but on His character, His personality, His being, what He was in Himself. Here was a revolution; it is no longer outward ceremonies and observances that make a priest; it is inward worth."<sup>2</sup>

7:18-19 These verses summarize the argument that God has superseded the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic Law (Covenant). He has replaced the old system ("former commandments") with a better, new system that can do what the old one could not do, namely, bring us into intimate relationship with God ("through which we come near to God," v. 19).

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<sup>1</sup>See Manson, p. 116.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 83.

"The term *athetesis*, 'annulment ["nullification"],' is a stronger term than *metathesis*, 'alteration [change]' (v 12)."<sup>1</sup>

The "better hope" that Christians have is the assurance that this special, eternal, and intimate relationship with God is now possible for us to experience thanks to our Great High Priest.

### The inviolability of God's oath 7:20-22

Verses 20 through 25 draw out the pastoral implications of the conclusion that the writer reached in verses 18 and 19.

7:20-21 Another "oath" from God (cf. to Abraham, 6:16-18; Ps. 110:4) launched Messiah's priesthood. The Levitical priesthood had no such origin ("they indeed became priests without an oath," v. 21). This was another indication of its inferiority.

7:22 Because God promised on oath to install Messiah permanently as our priest, the writer could say that Jesus is "the guarantee of a better covenant." Since the old priesthood was the heart of the Old Covenant, and God terminated both of them, the new priesthood must be connected to a new covenant that is superior to the Old Covenant. Since the new Priest has come, so must the New Covenant have come (cf. Luke 22:20). This is the first mention in the epistle of the word "covenant," which will play a major role in the writer's argument to follow.

"Hebrews develops the theme of the new covenant more fully than any other NT writer, the epistle accounting for just over half the occurrences of *diatheke* ["covenant"] in the NT."<sup>2</sup>

The writer used this Greek word *diatheke* 17 times, far more than it occurs in any other New Testament book. He preferred this word to the more common *syntheke* (also translated "covenant"), evidently because *syntheke* suggests an agreement made on relatively equal terms. *Diatheke* has the

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 386. See Showers, ch. 10: "The New Covenant," pp. 99-111.

idea of a more absolute and final will, such as a last will and testament.

### The mortality of the Levitical priests 7:23-25

7:23-24 The Levitical priests ("The former priests") had to succeed one another, one after the another, because they kept dying. But "Jesus" needs no successor (He "holds His priesthood permanently"), because He will not die. Josephus wrote that there were 83 different high priests between Aaron and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70.<sup>1</sup>

7:25 The fact that Jesus will not die and need a replacement by another priest means that He can see His work of delivering His people through to the end. He can deliver ("save") completely (better than "forever") in the sense of seeing us through to the realization of our full salvation and our rest (inheritance) in God's presence (cf. 1:14).

"Here the author is not referring to His saving work as the salvation of sinners from judgment and death, but rather using the words *to save* in the sense of 'to bring to God's desired end' ..."<sup>2</sup>

Our trials and temptations need not separate us from our inheritance, since Jesus Christ can continue to support us by providing mercy and grace (4:14-16) all the way to our ultimate reward. What a comfort and assurance it is to realize that Jesus Christ Himself is praying for us constantly.

This verse is not talking about eternal security but about remaining faithful to the Lord, and, as a result, receiving our full reward. Our eternal security does rest on the intercessory ministry of Jesus Christ, but that was not the writer's point here (cf. Rom. 8:33-34).

"It is important to emphasize this, for the character of our Lord's intercession has at times been grotesquely misrepresented in popular

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<sup>1</sup>Flavius Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 20:10:1.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, p. 126.

Christian thought. He is not to be thought of 'as an orante [a usually female figure standing with outstretched arms as if in prayer used in early Christian art as a symbol of the faithful dead], *standing* ever before the Father with outstretched arms, like the figures in the mosaics of the catacombs, and with strong crying and tears pleading our cause in the presence of a reluctant God; but as a *throned* Priest-King, asking what He will from a Father who always hears and grants His request."<sup>1</sup>

"Despite these exhortations to faithfulness and warnings against unfaithfulness [in 6:4-6], Hebrews does not base the believer's assurance on works. The basis of ongoing assurance is Christ's high-priestly work of intercession."<sup>2</sup>

"In Hebrews 'salvation' is presented as a future eschatological inheritance (1:14; 5:9; 9:28). There is, nevertheless, a definite sense in which the community has already begun to participate in salvation as a result of the obedience and sacrificial death of Christ and his subsequent exaltation (cf. 2:3-4; 6:4-5, 9)."<sup>3</sup>

"Just as Christ's priesthood is permanent, so is the salvation which he makes possible."<sup>4</sup>

### The summary conclusion concerning Christ's superiority as a person 7:26-28

7:26 In view of His superior ministry, it is only "fitting" that our High Priest should be a superior Person, which the writer described. "Holy" (Gr. *hosios*) stresses blamelessness. (Another Greek

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, p. 155. His quotation is from H. B. Swete, *The Ascended Christ*, p. 95. An orante is a figure (usually female) standing with outstretched arms as if in prayer. It was used in early Christian art as a symbol of the faithful dead.

<sup>2</sup>Colijn, p. 585.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 189.

<sup>4</sup>Ellingworth, p. 391.

word translated "holy," *hagios*, stresses separateness.) "Innocent" means without guile or malice. "Undefined" looks at His absolute purity. "Separated from sinners" probably refers to His being in a different class from sinful people.<sup>1</sup>

"The point, then, is that Christ, who is 'holy, blameless, unstained,' is *ipso facto* [by that very fact] 'separated from sinners.'"<sup>2</sup>

"This proves Jesus is GOD."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus was not only inherently pure, but He remains pure in all His contacts with sinners.<sup>4</sup> Another view is that Christ's separation from sinners refers to His exaltation.<sup>5</sup> "Exalted above the heavens" stresses His greatness, authority, majesty, and rule over all of the universe.

"The exposition is brought to a conclusion in vv 26-28 with a majestic statement concerning Jesus' character, achievement, and status as high priest."<sup>6</sup>

7:27 In Israel's "daily" "sacrifices" the priest had to offer a sacrifice "for his own sins" before he could offer one "for the sins of the people" (others; Exod. 29:38-46; Lev. 4:3-12). Also, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would offer a sin offering for himself and then another one for the sins of the people (Lev. 16:6-10).

"... our author is speaking both generally and particularly in this verse, in such a way that when he says 'daily' he has in mind the complex daily sacrificial routine performed by high priest as well as priests, whereas when he says 'first for his own sins and then for those of the people' his thought

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<sup>1</sup>Manson, pp. 116-17.

<sup>2</sup>P. E. Hughes, A Commentary ..., p. 274.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1417.

<sup>4</sup>Guthrie, p. 168.

<sup>5</sup>Robertson, 5:387.

<sup>6</sup>Lane, p. 191.

is moving from the general to the particular, and is in fact beginning to focus on that great festival which was the annual consummation of the whole sacrificial system."<sup>1</sup>

Jesus Christ does not need to offer up daily and periodic sacrifices to atone for sins, either for His own sins or for those of His people. His "once for all" sacrifice of both worship and atonement on the cross completely satisfied God. No subsequent sacrifices are necessary to satisfy God. The writer proceeded to develop this thought more fully in 9:11 through 14 and 10:1 through 15 after introducing it initially here.<sup>2</sup>

7:28 "The profound difference between the two priesthoods is detailed in a concluding contrast summarizing the argument of the entire chapter."<sup>3</sup>

Jesus Christ is superior (1) because He is "a Son" (i.e., the Son of God) rather than a mere man, (2) because God appointed Him more recently ("after the Law") than He appointed the Levitical priests, and (3) because God appointed Him with an "oath" (v. 21). He is "perfect" because He offered one sacrifice for sin that was adequate to satisfy God completely (cf. 2:10; 5:8-10; 7:28; 12:2; 1 John 2:2). Because He is perfect He can intercede effectively for us. Consequently we can go to Him confidently (cf. 4:16) and anytime we need His help for overcoming trials and temptations, specifically those trials that might result in our apostatizing. "Perfect forever" has the idea of not being subject to defects. He will never fail us, and another high priest will never replace Him.

To summarize, the superiority of Jesus' high priesthood is clear from four facts: (1) Jesus' priesthood did not depend on His ancestors but on Himself alone, (2) Jesus lives forever and never dies, (3) Jesus is sinless and never

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 277.

<sup>2</sup>For information about Seventh-day Adventists' belief that Christ only made provision for atonement on the Cross, see Van Baalen, pp. 212-16; and Gerstner, pp. 23, 27-28.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. 194.

needs to offer a sacrifice for His own sins, and (4) Jesus offered a perfect and adequate sacrifice.<sup>1</sup>

In view of the superior order of priesthood that Melchizedek foreshadowed, and that Jesus Christ fulfilled, why would anyone want to go back to the old Aaronic order? The Person of our high priest is superior. The order of His priesthood is superior. Christ is completely adequate in His Person and preeminent in His order. We should worship His Person and rely on His intercession in view of His position. And we should not abandon Him.<sup>2</sup>

"One of the most distinctive themes in the theology of Hebrews is the change from old to new in God's dealings with humankind. In Jesus Christ a decisive shift in salvation-history has occurred according to God's plan. What was provisional and ineffective has been superseded by the final and full salvation in the Son of God, a change anticipated in the Old Testament itself."<sup>3</sup>

## 2. The work of our high priest chs. 8—9

The writer developed, in this next section of Hebrews, topics that he had announced thematically in 7:26 through 28.

"The unit introduced in 8:1-2 consists entirely of exposition. Its limits are indicated by an *inclusio*: corresponding to the statement in 8:3 that every high priest is appointed to offer (*prospherein*) gifts and sacrifices is the complementary declaration that Christ was offered (*prosenechtheis*) once to take away the sins of the people in 9:28. These limits are confirmed by the observation that the theme of Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, which is announced in 8:1-2, is actually developed in 9:11-28. The new unit extends from 8:1—9:28 and constitutes the central section within the compositional structure of the sermon. Its place at the center

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<sup>1</sup>Cf. Barclay, p. 74.

<sup>2</sup>See also David J. MacLeod, "Christ, the Believer's High Priest: An Exposition of Hebrews 7:26-28," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 162:647 (July-September 2005):331-43.

<sup>3</sup>Fanning, "A Theology ...," p. 398.

indicates the importance that the writer ascribed to this facet of his message ..."<sup>1</sup>

"As the writer has already discoursed at some length about Christ as high priest, it might be wondered what is still left to be expounded. But so far he has not explained how our high priest carries out his duties. This really forms the theme of the next two and a half chapters (to 10:18), but another important matter, the new covenant, is introduced in the course of the discussion. In the present chapter the ministry of Jesus and the need for a new covenant are linked together."<sup>2</sup>

The ministry of Jesus Christ as our High Priest involves a particular kind of service, which involves a covenant, a sanctuary, and a sacrifice. The writer here explained the service that Jesus Christ renders in order to help his readers understand His adequacy and superiority as our High Priest. The writer moved on from explaining the person of our Great High Priest to expounding His work. In all of this he was contrasting the superiority of Christianity with the inferiority of Judaism.

One writer observed a chiasmic structure in 8:1 through 9:28 that emphasizes the contrast between worship under the Old Covenant and under the New Covenant.<sup>3</sup>

- A The old worship, earthly and figurative (8:1-6)
- B The first covenant, imperfect and provisioned (8:7-13)
- C The old and powerless institution of worship (9:1-10)
- C' The new, efficacious institutions (9:11-14)
- B' The new covenant (9:15-23)
- A' The entrance to heaven (9:24-28)

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 202.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup>Albert Vanhoye, *A Structural Translation of the Epistle to the Hebrews*, pp. 4, 20-23.



## The new ministry and covenant ch. 8

The writer's discussion of the new ministry and the New Covenant in chapter 8 introduces his fuller development of those themes in chapter 9. His flow of thought proceeded as follows.

- A. Christ, the ministering priest (8:1-5)
  - 1. A new ministry (8:1-2)
  - 2. which is set in opposition to the old (8:3-5)
- B. Christ, the mediator of the new covenant (8:6-13)
  - 1. The new ministry is associated with a better covenant (8:6)
  - 2. which is set in opposition to the old (8:7-13)<sup>1</sup>

"In 7:11-28 the writer drew attention to certain deficiencies in the Levitical arrangement. Among these were the mortality of the ministering priests (7:23) and the necessity of repeating sacrifices for sins, both of the priests and the people (7:27). Two further weaknesses of the Levitical arrangement are demonstrated on the basis of Scripture in 8:1-13. First, the contrast between the heavenly and earthly tabernacle is introduced to supplement the distinction between the new and the old. Levitical priests serve only a shadowy suggestion of the heavenly sanctuary in which Christ exercises his ministry. To the degree that the earthly sanctuary with its ministry only imperfectly corresponds to the ministry conducted in the presence of God, it is marked by deficiency. Secondly, the covenant under which the Levitical arrangement was instituted has been treated by God as obsolete. The mediation of the new covenant demonstrates the eschatological superiority of Christ's ministry and the divine intention to replace the old arrangement with another that is eschatologically new."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>M. Gourgues, "Lecture christologique du Psaume CX et fête de la Pentecôte," *Revue Biblique* 83 (1976):31.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 204.

### Christ's better ministry 8:1-5

In this section the writer first stated (vv. 1-2) and then explained (vv. 3-5) Jesus Christ's better ministry. It is superior in three respects: (1) He serves as a seated priest having finished His work of offering a final sacrifice for sins (v. 1). (2) He is an enthroned priest having taken His place at the right hand of God the Father (v. 1). And (3) He is a heavenly priest having entered the true sanctuary where He now ministers (vv. 1-2).

8:1-2 "What has been said" refers to chapter 7. This is a transitional statement. The writer now moved on to explain Jesus Christ's majesty and ministry more fully. Chapter 7 was in a sense introductory and foundational to what follows.

"... the doctrine of Christ's high priesthood and the pilgrimage of God's people dominate the expository and paraenetic [exhortation] sections [of the epistle]. The theme of Christ as High Priest, however, is central to the epistle as a whole."<sup>1</sup>

The writer again referred to "the heavens" where God abides and where Jesus Christ now serves in "the true tabernacle," meaning the only tabernacle that does not imitate something better than itself. In particular the Holy of Holies ("the sanctuary") of that tabernacle is in view. This tabernacle is probably not a reference to the human nature of Christ, as some have suggested,<sup>2</sup> but to the very presence of God (cf. 9:11).<sup>3</sup> In contrast to the Israelite tabernacle in the wilderness, this is a heavenly tabernacle that "the Lord set up, not man." These verses summarize what follows in chapter 8.<sup>4</sup>

"The throne He occupies and from which He ministers is not David's throne, which He will one day occupy here on earth as the promised Messiah

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<sup>1</sup>David J. MacLeod, "The Doctrinal Center of the Book of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 146:583 (July-September 1989):300.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 430; Hewett, p. 135.

<sup>3</sup>See P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 283-90.

<sup>4</sup>See idem, "The Blood of Jesus and His Heavenly Priesthood in Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 130:520 (October-December 1973):305-14.

(Matt. 25:31). Rather, He was identified with the throne of 'the Majesty in the heavens.' The authority assigned to the One so enthroned was to be 'a minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle' (Heb. 8:2). Thus He was not appointed to be a king in an earthly domain, but rather He was appointed to function as a High priest in a new sanctuary. And the appointment as High Priest, according to Psalm 110:4, follows the enthronement of Christ at His Father's right hand."<sup>1</sup>

"... the supreme function of any priest is to open the way to God for men."<sup>2</sup>

We not only have a High Priest who has majestically taken His seat at the Father's "right hand" (i.e., as the Father's "right hand man," v. 1), but we have One who now ministers as a priest in the heavenly sanctuary (v. 2; cf. Ps. 110:1).

"There are other sons beside the Son (2:10), but no other priests subordinated to Christ as high priest."<sup>3</sup>

8:3 Since "every high priest" had "to offer both gifts" of worship "and sacrifices" for sin, it was "necessary" that Jesus "also have something to offer."

8:4 If Jesus was still "on earth, He would not be a priest," since it was the responsibility of the Levitical priests to "offer the gifts according to the Law." The writer's point was that Jesus' priesthood was not an earthly priesthood but one that operated in the realm of heaven. Jesus could have functioned as a priest on earth after the order of Melchizedek, but His real priestly ministry of sacrifice and intercession began when He entered heaven. Jesus interceded for others during His earthly

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<sup>1</sup>Pentecost, pp. 131-32. See also John F. Walvoord, *Jesus Christ Our Lord*, pp. 224-25.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 94.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 403.

ministry (e.g., Luke 22:32; John 17), but His ministry as our King-Priest began with His ascension.

"The contrast developed is not simply between an earthly copy and a heavenly archetype but between a historical situation in the past and one that succeeded it *in time*. During the former situation, marked by the ministry of the Levitical priests, there was no entrance into the real, heavenly presence of God; full entrance into the eternal presence of God was made possible only with the life and redemptive accomplishment of Jesus."<sup>1</sup>

This verse sounds as though the Jewish priests were presenting offerings in Herod's Temple when the writer wrote ("there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law"). This understanding of the text has led some students of the book to date its writing before the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70.<sup>2</sup> However it is more likely that we should take these present tenses as timeless.<sup>3</sup> In other words, the writer was describing what had been done in Judaism as though it was still going on for the sake of vividness (cf. 7:27-28; 9:7-8, 25; 10:1-3, 8; 13:10-11). Nevertheless it seems likely that the epistle does indeed date from before A.D. 70.<sup>4</sup>

8:5 God had explained to Moses that the tabernacle in the wilderness was a prototype ("a copy and shadow") of another temple, the heavenly one, when He gave him the directions ("the pattern") for the construction of the earthly tabernacle (Exod. 25:40; cf. Rev. 4:5-6; 6:9-11; 8:3-5; 11:19; 21:22). Moses may have received a vision of God's heavenly dwelling place then (cf. 1 Chron. 28:19).

"Probably the conception of the *tabhanith*, the 'model' (Exodus 25:9), also goes back ultimately

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, p. 207.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 292; Gromacki, p. 138.

<sup>3</sup>See Lane, p. lxiii.

<sup>4</sup>See my discussion of the date in the Introduction section of these notes.

to the idea that the earthly sanctuary is the counterpart of the heavenly dwelling of a deity [in ancient Near Eastern thought]."<sup>1</sup>

Plato (c. 425-347 B.C.) advanced the theory that physical things on earth are only shadows and copies of realities that exist in heaven. So what the writer to the Hebrews wrote here would have made sense to Platonic Greeks.

"In 8:1-5 the primitive Christian confession of Jesus as the one who has taken his seat at God's right hand is reinterpreted in the light of the theme of heavenly sanctuary and liturgy. The development of this theme, which dominates the argument in 8:1—9:28, is clearly the central and most distinctive aspect of the writer's interpretation of the saving work of Christ. ... By means of a typological interpretation of the OT, the writer asserts that Christ has achieved what the sacrificial action of the high priest on the great Day of Atonement only foreshadowed. His entrance into the heavenly sanctuary, which is the true tabernacle where he has unrestricted access to the eternal presence of God, demonstrates the eschatological superiority of his priestly service to the ministry of the Levitical high priests. The priestly ministry of Christ in the celestial sanctuary is of capital importance in the thought of Hebrews."<sup>2</sup>

### The better covenant 8:6-13

The writer proceeded to explain the superiority of the New Covenant that Jesus Christ ratified with His blood (death), which is better than the Old Mosaic Covenant that He terminated when He died. He first explained the reason for the change in covenants (vv. 6-9), then he quoted the four superior promises of the New Covenant (vv. 10-12), and finally he underlined the certainty of the change (v. 13).

8:6           The superiority of Jesus' "more excellent ministry" as our High Priest also rests on the superiority of the "better covenant" that forms the basis of that ministry. That covenant, in turn,

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<sup>1</sup>Frank M. Cross, "The Tabernacle," *Biblical Archaeologist* 10:3 (September 1947):62. Cf. G. Ernest Wright, "The Significance of the Temple in the Ancient Near East. Part III: The Temple in Palestine-Syria," *Biblical Archaeologist* 7:4 (December 1944):66.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, p. 210.

rests on "better promises" compared with the Mosaic Covenant promises, and on a better "mediator," namely, Jesus Christ, compared with the angels and Moses (Gal. 3:19).

"Here we have a summary of the five points of superiority of Jesus as high priest (8:1-6). He is himself a better priest than Aaron (*toioutos* ["such a"] in 8:1 such as shown in 4:16 to 7:28); he works in a better sanctuary (8:2, 5); he offers a better sacrifice (8:3f.); he is mediator of a better covenant (8:6); his work rests on better promises (8:6); hence he has obtained a better ministry as a whole (8:6)."<sup>1</sup>

8:7 As with the Levitical priesthood (7:11-12), so it is with the Mosaic ("first") "covenant" and its promises. If the first covenant had been faultless, God would not have promised a second covenant.

8:8-12 God gave the promise of a new covenant because "the people" of Israel had failed Him and had broken the Mosaic Covenant. He also did so because the Mosaic Covenant did not have the power to enable them to remain faithful to God. The New Covenant includes the power whereby God's people may remain faithful, namely, the presence of God living within the believer. This is one way in which it differs from the Old Covenant (v. 9).<sup>2</sup>

"How great is the contrast between the old and the new covenant! In the one God demands of sinful man: 'Thou shalt.' In the other God promises: 'I will.'"<sup>3</sup>

The writer used the Greek word *kainos* ('new') to describe this covenant. *Kainos* means different in quality as well as new in time, as opposed to simply new in time, which the Greek word

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 5:388.

<sup>2</sup>For helpful essays on the new covenant, see J. Dwight Pentecost, *Thy Kingdom Come*, pp. 164-77; Walvoord, *Major Bible ...*, pp. 176-91; and Bruce A. Ware, "The New Covenant and the People(s) of God," in *Dispensationalism, Israel and the Church*, pp. 68-97.

<sup>3</sup>Saphir, 2:413.

*neos* ("new") describes. The New Covenant has not only been given more recently than the Old Covenant, but it is of a different, superior quality.

God promised that the New Covenant would enable the Israelites—these promises were given to the Israelites (v. 8)—to do four things: They would (1) know and desire to do God's will ("I will put My laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts." v. 10b). (2) They would enjoy a privileged, unique relationship with God ("I will be their God, and they shall be My people," v. 10c). (3) They would "know" God ("the Lord") directly (v. 11). And they would (4) experience permanent forgiveness of their sins ("I will be merciful toward their wrongdoings and their sins I will no longer remember," v. 12). (A double negative in the Greek text of verse 12 [*ou me*] heightens this promise: "I will never, ever remember their sins.") These are the better promises that the writer referred to earlier (v. 6). Note that they are unconditional; the Israelites would not have to do anything to obtain these promises.

"... new covenant promises are not yet fully realized. The promises in Jeremiah, Isaiah, and Ezekiel [enumerated above] describe a people who have the law written in their hearts, who walk in the way of the Lord, fully under the control of the Holy Spirit. These same promises look to a people who are raised from the dead [cf. Ezek. 37], enjoying the blessings of an eternal inheritance with God dwelling with them and in them forever."<sup>1</sup>

Amillennial interpreters take the reference to "the house of Israel" and "the house of Judah" (v. 8) as symbolical.

They are "symbolical of the healing of every human breach and the reconciliation of all nations and persons in Christ, the seed of Abraham in

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<sup>1</sup>Craig A. Blasing, "The Fulfillment of the Biblical Covenants," in *Progressive Dispensationalism*, pp. 208, 209.

whom all the peoples of the earth are blessed and united ..."<sup>1</sup>

Premillennialists see nothing in the texts involved or in their contexts to warrant taking these references as anything but literal. That is, we believe that the promises were given to Israel.

8:13 The writer contrasted the New Covenant with the Old Covenant, namely, the Mosaic Covenant. The Mosaic Covenant is now "obsolete," and, even as the writer wrote the Book of Hebrews, it was also "growing old" and "about to disappear." It disappeared in A.D. 70 when the Romans destroyed the temple, terminated its ritual and officiants, and scattered the Jews throughout the world (cf. Matt. 24:1-2). This made it impossible for the Jews to carry out what the Old Covenant required. Some interpreters believe that if the writer had written this book after A.D. 70 he would have written "has disappeared" rather than "is about to disappear."<sup>2</sup>

"Now *aphanismos* ["about to disappear"] is the word that is used for wiping out a city, obliterating an inscription, or completely abolishing a law. It indicates a complete obliteration or wiping out."<sup>3</sup>

The New Covenant is a branch of the Abrahamic Covenant. In the Abrahamic Covenant God promised Abraham a piece of real estate for his descendants, an incalculable number of descendants, and blessing for his descendants and for all people through his descendants (Gen. 12:1-7; et al.). Deuteronomy 29 and 30, sometimes called the Palestinian Covenant, gave more specific information about the land that God had promised to Abraham. The Davidic Covenant gave more information about God's promises regarding descendants (2 Sam. 7). The New Covenant revealed the particulars of the promised blessing (Jer. 31).

Each of these later covenants relates to the Abrahamic Covenant organically; they were outgrowths of it. In contrast, the Mosaic (Old) Covenant does not relate organically but was added (Gal. 3:19), as an

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 300. Cf. Pink, p. 445.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Robertson, 5:393.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, p. 100.



appendage. It explained how the Israelites could maximize the benefits that God had promised in the Abrahamic Covenant. Consequently when God terminated the Old Covenant He did not eliminate anything that He had promised Abraham. Another difference is that the Mosaic Covenant was bilateral and conditional ("If you will do this, then I will do this."). The other biblical covenants are unilateral and unconditional ("I will do this."), though they sometimes contain conditional elements subsumed under the unconditional promises.

Dispensational commentators have taken various positions on the relationship of the New Covenant, promised in Jeremiah 31, to the New Testament references to the New Covenant (in Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25; 2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8; 9:15; 12:24; cf. Matt. 26:28; Mark 14:24; Rom. 11:27; Heb. 8:10, 13; 9:15b; 10:16). Was it the same covenant, or is a second New Covenant in view?

Some dispensationalists believe that the New Covenant was with Israel only.<sup>1</sup> Therefore the church has no relation to it.

Other dispensationalists believe there are two new covenants: one with Israel and one with the church.<sup>2</sup> This position rests on the fact that the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah 31 was specifically "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31). Those who hold this view take the New Covenant under which Christians live as a different New Covenant (2 Cor. 3:6; Heb. 8:8; 9:15). They regard Jesus' references to the New Covenant as to a New Covenant with the church (Luke 22:20; cf. 1 Cor. 11:25).

Most dispensationalists believe that the church enters into the blessings of the New Covenant.<sup>3</sup> Even though the New Covenant was "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah" (Jer. 31:31), the benefits promised extended to all believers after Jesus Christ died (cf. Isa. 19:24-25; 42:6; 49:6; Rom. 15:9-12).

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Darby, 5:286, 329-30.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lewis S. Chafer, *Systematic Theology*, 4:325, 7:98-99; Newell, p. 261; John F. Walvoord, *The Millennial Kingdom*, pp. 208-20; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Basis of the Premillennial Faith*, pp. 105-25; idem, *Biblical Theology ...*, p. 249; John R. Master, "The New Covenant," in *Issues in Dispensationalism*, pp. 93-110.

<sup>3</sup>*The New Scofield ...*, p. 1317; Kent, pp. 158-60; Showers, p. 109.

Christians experience the blessings referred to now, but God will fulfill the covenant completely in the Millennium, when the Jews ("the house of Israel and the house of Judah") who will be living on the earth then will receive the promised blessings (Rom. 11:25-32).<sup>1</sup> According to this one New Covenant view, when Jesus said that the cup at the Lord's Supper represented His blood that is the New Covenant, He meant the following: His death was the basis for the fulfillment of the promises that the New Covenant contained. I prefer this view mainly because I do not believe there is adequate basis in the text for applying the term "New Covenant" to two different covenants. There are few dispensationalists today who hold the two New Covenants view.

Suppose that there was a vastly wealthy, generous philanthropist. As he prepared his will he bequeathed millions of dollars to various charitable causes that, upon his death, would benefit millions of people all over the world. But he also wrote in his will that, when his only son reached 21, his son would inherit billions of dollars. When this man died, his son was only 5, so for 16 years he did not enter into his father's inheritance. But as soon as the philanthropist died, the millions of dollars that he had bequeathed to charity went to work to help many people immediately. This illustrates how the church enters into the blessings of the New Covenant.

When Christ established the Lord's Supper, it was as though He had signed His legal will. It became official right around the time when He said, "This cup ... is the New Covenant in My blood" (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor. 11:25). As soon as He died, His "estate" (the benefits of His death) was made available to those whom He chose to benefit from His will. Immediately many people around the world, Jews and Gentiles who believed on Him, began to benefit from the blessings of His death. But His chosen people, His "son" Israel, will not enter into his inheritance until the appointed time: the Millennium. The "will" is the New Covenant. Blessings for the church began almost immediately after Christ's death. But blessings for Israel will not begin until Christ's appointed time for that arrives, namely, the Millennium.

Most amillennialists believe that the church has replaced Israel as the recipient of the New Covenant.<sup>2</sup> These "covenant theologians" explain how the church benefits from the New Covenant promises by saying that the church is "spiritual Israel." These promises, they claim, belong to Abraham's

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Lenski, p. 263; Oswald T. Allis, *Prophecy and the Church*, p. 154.

spiritual seed but not to his physical seed. It is clear from Galatians 3:13 through 29 that Christians are the spiritual seed of Abraham, but that is not the same as saying that the church is spiritual Israel. The basic difference between dispensational theologians and covenant theologians is that the former take references to Israel literally whereas the latter take them spiritually.<sup>1</sup>

"Once we are permitted to make such plain words as 'Israel' and 'Judah' mean something else, there is no end to how we might interpret the Bible!"<sup>2</sup>

### The heavenly sanctuary 9:1-10

"In case any of the readers should think that the writer was underestimating the old, he now outlines some of the glories of the old tabernacle. He is impressed by the orderliness of the arrangements within the Levitical cultus [system of worship], and aims to present this in order to demonstrate the greater glory of the new."<sup>3</sup>

In this pericope the writer concentrated on the tabernacle and its provisions for cultic worship. ("Cultic" refers to the rituals involved in religious service.) The word "first" (v. 1, Gr. *prōte*) links this section with the former one (cf. 8:13). The writer introduced two subjects in the first verse: regulations of divine worship, and the earthly sanctuary. He then proceeded to expound them in reverse order (vv. 2-5 and 6-10), as he often did in this book.

"The writer is most concerned to stress that the disposition of the tabernacle and its cultic regulations expressed symbolically the imperfect and provisional character of the old Sinaitic covenant. His description emphasizes limited access and the inadequacy of the offerings."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Showers, pp. 169-86.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:306.

<sup>3</sup>Guthrie, p. 178.

<sup>4</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 217.

"The descriptions are based, not on the author's personal involvement in worship at Jerusalem ... but on scripture."<sup>1</sup>

It was natural for the writer to use the tabernacle for his lesson, rather than the temple, because he proceeded to associate this sanctuary with the giving of the Old Covenant at Mt. Sinai (cf. 8:5). Furthermore, he had been using Israel's experiences in the wilderness to challenge his readers (3:1—4:7).

"The chief obstacle in the way of the Hebrews' faith was their failure to perceive that every thing [*sic*] connected with the ceremonial law—the tabernacle, priesthood, sacrifices—was *typical* in its significance and value. Because it was typical, it was only preparatory and transient, for once the Antitype materialized its purpose was served."<sup>2</sup>

A type is a divinely intended foreshadowing of something else: the antitype. A type may be a person (cf. Rom. 5:14), a thing (cf. Heb. 10:19-20), an event (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11), a ceremony (cf. 1 Cor. 5:7), or an institution.

9:1-5 "The first covenant" was the Mosaic Covenant. The writer called it "first" in relation to the New Covenant that replaced it. The outer tabernacle (lit. dwelling place) was the holy place (v. 2), and the inner ("behind the second veil," v. 3) tabernacle was the Holy of Holies. "The table and the sacred bread" (v. 2) is a hendiadys for "the table of sacred bread."<sup>3</sup>

Some readers have understood verse 4 as saying that "the golden altar of incense" was inside the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle. This seems to contradict the Old Testament, which located this altar in the holy place (Exod. 30:6; 40:3-5, 21-27).<sup>4</sup> The writer of Hebrews probably meant that the veil, not the Holy of Holies, had the altar of incense and the ark of the covenant connected with it (v. 3; cf. 1 Kings 6:22). These pieces of furniture were on either side of the veil. Describing it this way clarified that the writer meant the veil that hung

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 420.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 460.

<sup>3</sup>A hendiadys is a figure of speech in which a writer expresses a single complex idea by joining two substantives with "and" rather than by using an adjective and a substantive.

<sup>4</sup>See also Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 3:6:8; and idem, *Against Apion*, 2:8.

between the holy place and the Holy of Holies. "Having" (v. 4, Gr. *echousa*) should be understood in the sense of "belonging to" rather than "standing within."<sup>1</sup>

"The best answer to this puzzle is to note the author's statement as being influenced by liturgical function at this point rather than by strict physical location. In so doing he is following precisely the thinking as well as the terminology of the Old Testament which also describes the incense altar in relation to the veil and the ark, rather than in terms of the chamber in which it actually was placed ... (Exod. 40:5 ... 1 Kings 6:22). The altar of incense was thus described in this fashion because of its close association with the Day of Atonement ritual, for the high priest took burning incense from that altar with him into the holy of holies so that the smoke of it would cover the mercy seat and protect him from death (Lev. 16:12, 13)."<sup>2</sup>

Another explanation is that on the Day of Atonement the veil that separated the holy place and the Holy of Holies would have been drawn aside so that the altar of incense would be next to the ark of the covenant.<sup>3</sup> However there is no indication elsewhere in Scripture that that veil was drawn aside on that day.

A third explanation follows:

"The author is speaking about the golden censer, in which were placed coals from the altar of incense and then brought inside the veil into the Holiest of All. Incense placed on these coals would fill the room with smoke, sending forth a pleasing fragrance. As support for this interpretation, whenever the term *thumiaterion* is used in the

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<sup>1</sup>Guthrie, p. 180. Cf. Lenski, p. 277; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 309-13.

<sup>2</sup>Kent, p. 164. Paragraph division omitted. See also Morris, pp. 81-82; R. K. Hughes, 1:224.

<sup>3</sup>Hewett, p. 141.

LXX, it is clearly used for a censer (2 Chr 26:19; Ezek 8:10)."<sup>1</sup>

"Because of its function, the censer was commonly associated with the Most Holy Place (see Ex. 30:6; 40:6)."<sup>2</sup>

The reference to "the second veil" (v. 3) may refer to one of two that separated the holy place from the holy of holies. According to Jewish tradition there were two veils in that location, and one of them hung over a wooden partition.<sup>3</sup> However there is nothing in the Old Testament that confirms this tradition.

A second problem is that this writer described "the ark of the covenant" as having "a golden jar containing manna" and "Aaron's staff which budded" inside it. The Old Testament says that these items were "beside" the ark in the holy of holies, not "in" it (Exod. 16:32-34; Num. 17:10-11).

"It would at least seem reasonable to suppose that if the urn and the rod were originally placed in front of the ark, yet subsequently, for the sake of convenience (for example, when carrying the ark from one place to another), they were placed inside it."<sup>4</sup>

"According to the rabbis, the ark disappeared at the time of the early prophets (Mishnah, *Yoma* 5:2; *Shekalim* 6:1f.); and there was a tradition that Jeremiah hid it (2 Macc. 2:4ff.)."<sup>5</sup>

"With the destruction of Solomon's temple in 587 B.C. the ark disappeared from the scene, and in

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1064-65.

<sup>2</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2089.

<sup>3</sup>See Alfred Edersheim, *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, 2:611; idem, *Sketches of Jewish Social Life*, p. 197; idem, *The Temple*, p. 58.

<sup>4</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 315.

<sup>5</sup>Morris, p. 82. The Mishnah is an authoritative collection of exegetical material embodying the oral tradition of Jewish law and forming the first part of the Talmud.

the second or post-exilic temple, which remained standing until the sack of Jerusalem in A.D. 70, the holy of holies was completely empty, the former position of the ark being demarcated by a slab of stone known as 'the stone of foundation.'"<sup>1</sup>

The writer declined to speak of the tabernacle furnishings in more detail (v. 5), because his main purpose was to contrast the two rituals and the two covenants.

9:6-7 He now passed on to the "regulations of divine worship" (v. 1) in the Old Covenant in order to further show its inferiority. "The outer tabernacle" is the holy place (v. 6), and "the second" is the Holy of Holies (v. 7). The high priest entered the Holy of Holies only "once a year," on the Day of Atonement, in order to offer the special sacrifices for that day (Lev. 16:2). His offering that day covered only those sins of the people that they had committed ignorantly, as opposed to those that they committed in deliberate rebellion (cf. Lev. 4:1-2; 5:17-19). Some ignorance is culpable (blameworthy); sins committed in ignorance do matter.

In Israel the punishment for deliberate rebellion against the Mosaic Covenant was death. It was about this kind of rebellion that the writer warned his audience here. But at the same time he also comforted his readers with the assurance that their High Priest would deal gently with the misguided who sin ignorantly (cf. 5:2).

9:8-10 The writer clarified that "the Holy Spirit" intended to communicate the fact that the Levitical system did not provide access into God's presence for the ordinary believer.

"The 'front compartment' (*he prote skene*) becomes a spatial metaphor for the time when the 'first covenant' (*he prote diatheke*) was in force. As an illustration for the old age, which is now in process of dissolution (8:13), it symbolizes the

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 314.

total first covenant order with its daily and annual cultic ritual (9:6, 7). Once the first has been invalidated, the second becomes operative (see 10:9). In the figurative language of the writer, the front compartment of the tabernacle was symbolic of the present age (*ton kaipon ton enestekota*), which through the intrusion of the *kairos diorthoseos*, 'the time of correction' (v 10), has been superseded ..."<sup>1</sup>

The Old Covenant system of worship did not meet the deepest need of God's people, namely, intimate personal relationship with God. Its rites and ceremonies extended mainly to external matters—until God would provide a better system at "a time of reformation" (v. 10).

This comparison should help us keep externals in their proper perspective as secondary to inward reality with God. It is possible to fulfill all the outward obligations of religion and still have a "conscience" that is not right with God (v. 9). This is one of the tragic inadequacies of religion that does not involve relationship with God.

"The necessity of a cleansed conscience is insisted upon throughout the letter [9:9, 14; 10:2, 22; 13:18]. A conscience stained with sin is the one effective barrier to man's fellowship with God ..."<sup>2</sup>

"The word *worship* comes from the same Anglo-Saxon root word as *worth*. To worship is to give someone something of which they are worthy. The Lord Jesus Christ is worthy to receive our praise and our adoration. That is worship, and from that follows service. Real worship will always lead to service."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 224.

<sup>2</sup>F. F. Bruce, "The Kerygma of Hebrews," *Interpretation* 23:1 (January 1969):12. See also Guthrie, p. 184.

<sup>3</sup>McGee, 5:564.



"The reason for detailing the arrangement of the tabernacle and its furnishings in 9:2-5 is manifestly to show the lack of access to God under the old cultus. This, in turn, provides a framework for the development of certain deficiencies in the cultic regulations that had been imposed under the terms of the Sinaitic covenant in 9:6-10."<sup>1</sup>

"The greatest festival of the Jewish year paradoxically shows most clearly the limitations of the old dispensation and its high priesthood."<sup>2</sup>

The Old Covenant sanctuary was inferior for five reasons: (1) It was an earthly sanctuary (v. 1), (2) it was a type of something greater (its antitype; vv. 2-5), and (3) it was inaccessible to the people (vv. 6-7). Furthermore, (4) it was only temporary (v. 8), and (5) its ministry was external rather than internal (vv. 9-10).<sup>3</sup>

### **The final purging of sin 9:11-28**

The writer now focused on the issue of sacrifice, having contrasted the two priestly orders (ch. 7), the two covenants (ch. 8), and the two sanctuaries (9:1-10).

"The argument moves a stage further as the author turns specifically to what Christ has done. The sacrifices of the old covenant were ineffectual. But in strong contrast Christ made an offering that secures a redemption valid for all eternity. In the sacrifices, a good deal pertained to the use of blood. So in accord with this, the author considers the significance of the blood of animals and that of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

Blood in Scripture is frequently a metonym for death, particularly violent death involving bloodshed.<sup>5</sup> There was nothing magical about Jesus' physical blood that made it a cleansing agent for sin. It was the death of Christ that saves us, not something physically special about His blood. However Scripture is full of references to something special about Jesus'

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 434.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:308-10.

<sup>4</sup>Morris, p. 85.

<sup>5</sup>A metonym is a figure of speech in which one thing stands for another.

blood spiritually, powerfully, and effectively, as the purchase price for our redemption (cf. Eph. 1:7; Col. 1:14; Heb. 9:12-14; Rev. 1:5; et al.).

In verses 11 through 14 the writer introduced Jesus' present high priestly ministry, which climaxes in verse 15. Verses 16 through 22 are parenthetical, explaining verse 15. Then verses 23 through 28 resume the discussion of Jesus' priestly ministry in heaven.

"The conception of Christ's death as a liturgical high priestly action is developed as a major argument in 9:11-28. Prior to this point in the homily, the high priesthood tended to be linked with Christ's present activity as heavenly intercessor (cf. 2:18; 4:15-16; 7:25; 8:1-2)."<sup>1</sup>

### The superior priestly ministry 9:11-15

The writer pointed out two primary accomplishments of the atoning work of Christ in this section: eternal redemption (vv. 11-12) and a cleansed conscience for those who serve the living God (vv. 13-15).

9:11        A better translation might be: "He entered *in connection with* the greater and more perfect tabernacle ..." Jesus Christ did not pass "through" heaven (4:14) in the sense of going on to some other place after He arrived there. He is there now (v. 24).

9:12        "The blood" of innocent animal substitutes ("goats and calves") was sufficient only to atone for sin temporarily. But "the blood" of Jesus Christ, because He was a perfect human Substitute, adequately paid for humankind's "eternal redemption."

"This is the great distinction between Christ as High Priest and all other high priests. They offer blood (verse 7), but he offered his own blood."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 235.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 5:399. For an extended discussion of various views concerning the blood of Jesus and His heavenly priesthood, see P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 329-54.

A few Bible expositors have believed that when Christ ascended into heaven He offered His literal blood upon a literal altar there.

"There have been expositors who, pressing the analogy of the Day of Atonement beyond the limits observed by our author, have argued that the expiatory work of Christ was not completed on the cross—not completed, indeed, until He ascended from earth and 'made atonement "for us" in the heavenly holy of holies by the presentation of His efficacious blood'. [Footnote 82:] K. M. Monroe, *EQ* [*Evangelical Quarterly*] v (1933), p. 404 (in an article 'Time Element in the Atonement', pp. 397ff., which was answered by T. Houghton, 'The Atonement', *EQ* vi [1934], pp. 137ff.). Monroe argued that our Lord, after His resurrection, ascended immediately into heaven to sprinkle His blood on 'the heavenly capporeth [mercy seat]' and therefore could not allow Mary Magdalene to hinder Him (John 20:17) until He had completed this essential stage of His atoning work. The ascension of John 20:17 is thus quite distinct from the ascension of Acts 1:9."<sup>1</sup>

Most expositors have understood these references to be metaphorical, and I agree with them.

Having died "once for all time" (7:27; 10:10) Jesus was able to enter God's presence "once for all time."

9:13-14 Old Covenant sacrifices for sin on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16) only provided temporary cleansing, but the sacrifice of Jesus Christ provided permanent cleansing. The author's reference to "the ashes of a heifer sprinkling" (cf. Num. 19) seems somewhat incidental to his argument. One writer explained it as follows:

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, pp. 200-201. Chafer, 4:118; 5:262-63; and 7:20 also held this view as did McGee, 5:566. See P. E. Hughes, "The Blood ...," 519:195-212, for refutation and further discussion.

"We have, then, a situation prevailing at the time when the Epistle to the Hebrews was written which would have particular point to the mention of the rite of sprinkling with the ashes of a heifer if the supposition is correct that the recipients of the letter were being enticed to imagine that the observance of this rite might be advantageous to them, Christians though they now professed themselves to be."<sup>1</sup>

"The blood of goats and bulls" adequately removed ceremonial guilt, but it could not remove moral guilt. "The ashes of a heifer" removed ritual pollution, but they could not remove spiritual defilement.

The reference to "the eternal Spirit" (v. 14) is unique in Scripture.

"It seems that the writer has chosen this unusual way of referring to the Holy Spirit to bring out the truth that there is an eternal aspect to Christ's saving work."<sup>2</sup>

In other words, it is possible that the writer described the Holy Spirit as "eternal" because he wanted to contrast the eternal nature of Christ's sacrifice with the temporary animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant. Other scholars have taken "the eternal Spirit" as referring to Christ's own spirit, which is eternal.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the Law required sacrifices to be physically without blemish outwardly, Christ's spotless purity was inward and ethical.

The "dead works" in view are evidently those of the Mosaic Covenant (cf. 6:1), though some commentators take them as referring to works of "the flesh" that result in spiritual defilement.<sup>4</sup> They were "dead" in that they did not impart

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<sup>1</sup>Idem, *A Commentary ...*, p. 364.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 87.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Robertson, 5:400; Hewett, p. 148.

<sup>4</sup>E.g., Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, pp. 206-7.

spiritual life. P. E. Hughes saw them as dead in three ways: they proceed from him who is dead toward God, they are essentially sterile and unproductive, and they end in death.<sup>1</sup>

Thus there is a contrast between physical and conscience cleansing as well as between temporary and permanent cleansing in these verses. We must not feel conscience-bound to follow the Old Covenant, in view of Jesus Christ's perfect sacrifice, but should serve God under the terms of the New Covenant. A notice on a church marquee warned: "Most people want to serve God, but only in an advisory capacity."

"... for the author of Hebrews *syneidesis* [conscience] is the internal faculty within man that causes him to be painfully aware of his sinfulness and, as a result, to experience a sense of guilt."<sup>2</sup>

"The sacrifice that inaugurated the new covenant achieved the cleansing of the conscience that all worshipers lacked under the former covenant and that all had sought through prescribed gifts and offerings (10:1-2 ...).<sup>3</sup>

"The implication (which underlies all the epistle) is that even in his earthly life Jesus possessed eternal life. Hence what took place in time upon the cross, the writer means, took place really in the eternal, absolute order. Christ sacrificed himself *ephapax* ["once for all time"], and the single sacrifice needed no repetition, since it possessed absolute, eternal value as the action of One who belonged to the eternal order. He died—he had to die—but only once (9<sup>15</sup>—10<sup>18</sup>), for his sacrifice, by its eternal significance, accomplished at a stroke what no amount of animal sacrifices

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 360-61.

<sup>2</sup>Gary S. Selby, "The Meaning and Function of *Syneidesis* in Hebrews 9 and 10," *Restoration Quarterly* 28:3 (Third Quarter 1985/86):148.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 241.

could have secured, viz. [namely] the forgiveness of sins."<sup>1</sup>

All three persons of the Trinity had a part in redemption (v. 14).

9:15 Since we have obtained eternal redemption (v. 12) through the death of our Mediator and the eternal Spirit (v. 14), we can have hope in an "eternal inheritance." In contrast, believers under the Old Covenant enjoyed mainly temporary blessings and had comparatively little understanding of eschatological rewards.

"With a play on the double meaning of *diatheke* (both 'a covenant' and 'a testament'), the author goes on to bring out the necessity for the death of Christ just as the death of the testator is required if a will is to come into force."<sup>2</sup>

"... the sacrifice of Jesus Christ is retroactive. That is to say, the sacrifice of Christ is effective to wipe out the consequences of the sins of men committed under the old covenant, and to inaugurate the fellowship which is promised under the new covenant."<sup>3</sup>

The readers should not feel guilty about abstaining from the rituals of the Old ("first") Covenant. Instead they should appreciate the accomplishments of Jesus Christ's death.<sup>4</sup> They should also turn their attention to obtaining what God had promised them as a future "inheritance" and continue to follow the Lord faithfully and patiently (6:12).

The New Testament revelation concerning the inheritance that believers can merit by faithful perseverance in the faith and

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 124.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 88.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, p. 117.

<sup>4</sup>See Rodney J. Decker, "The Church's Relationship to the New Covenant," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:607 (July-September 1995):290-305; 608 (October-December 1995):431-56.

good works is extensive. Some passages indicate that it involves participation in the wedding banquet at the beginning of the earthly messianic kingdom (e.g., Matt. 25:1-13; et al.). Others present it as involving an especially honorable resurrection (Luke 20:35). Still other passages speak of the inheritance as reigning with Christ (Matt. 19:27-28; Luke 19:17-19; 22:28-30; Rom. 8:17-21), or as treasure in heaven (Matt. 6:19-21, 30; 19:21; Luke 12:32-33; 1 Tim. 6:17-19). It also involves receiving praise and honor from Jesus Christ and the Father (Matt. 6:1, 5, 16; 25:21; John 12:26; 1 Cor. 4:5; 1 Pet. 1:6-7; 2 Pet. 1:10-11). These honors are sometimes spoken of as crowns (Phil. 4:1; 1 Cor. 9:24-27; 1 Thess. 2:19; 2 Tim. 4:6-8; James 1:12; 1 Pet. 5:1-4; Rev. 2:10; 4:9-10).<sup>1</sup>

### The superior sacrifice for sin 9:16-28

"The author has made it clear that Christ's death has instituted a better covenant (vv. 11-15) which is superior to animal offerings (vv. 12-14). But the need for such a sacrifice has yet to be explored. So a key word in this subunit [vv. 16-28] is 'necessary' (*ananke*, vv. 16, 23). In the process of exploring this point, the author clearly underscored the measureless superiority of the sacrificial death of Christ."<sup>2</sup>

- 9:16-17 In certain respects the covenants that God made with humankind are similar to wills. With all wills the person who made the will must die before the beneficiaries experience any effects of the will.
- 9:18-21 The Old Covenant went into effect when the Levitical priests shed the "blood" of animal substitutes ("the calves and the goats") and sprinkled that blood "with water and scarlet wool" on "the book itself," "the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry" (cf. Exod. 40:9-15), and all the beneficiaries of the covenant ("all the people," Exod. 24:6-8). The New Covenant went into effect similarly when Jesus Christ shed His blood and

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<sup>1</sup>See Dillow, pp. 551-83.

<sup>2</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 802.

God applied it to its beneficiaries (Christians) spiritually (cf. Matt. 26:28).

"The central thrust of the argument is that there is an intimate relationship between covenant and sacrificial blood."<sup>1</sup>

9:22 This verse is not a continuation of the description of the covenant ratification process described in verses 18 through 21, but an explanation of the importance of cleansing sin by the shedding of blood.

The exception to which the writer alluded ("almost all things are cleansed with blood") was God's provision for the poor in Israel. He allowed them to bring a flour offering in place of an animal if they could not afford two doves (Lev. 5:11; cf. Lev. 22:6-7; Num. 16:46; 31:22-23; 31:50). Also some pollutions were cleansed by water rather than by blood (Exod. 29:4; 30:20; 40:12; Lev. 1:9, 13; 6:28; 8:6, 21; 14:8-9; 15:5-8, 10-13, 16-18, 21-22, 27; 16:4, 24, 26, 28; 17:15; 22:6; Num. 8:7; 19:7-9, 12-13, 17-19). But in almost every case God required the shedding of blood (death) for forgiveness under the Mosaic Law. This was an understood requirement for forgiveness in other ancient Near Eastern religions as well.<sup>2</sup>

The Israelites saw this principle most clearly on the Day of Atonement, but every animal sacrifice reminded them of it. The principle expressed is true of the New Covenant as well: Blood (death) is essential for spiritual cleansing.

9:23 Whereas animal blood adequately cleansed the prototypes on earth ("the copies of the things in heaven") under the Old Covenant, a better sacrifice was necessary in order to cleanse the realities in heaven ("the heavenly things themselves," cf. 8:5; 9:24). Thus Jesus Christ's death was essential. The "heavenly things" may refer to the consciences of men and women.<sup>3</sup> It seems more likely, however, that they refer to the

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 244.

<sup>2</sup>J. E. Jennings, "Ancient Near Eastern Religion and Biblical Interpretation," in *Interpreting the Word of God*, pp. 20-21,

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 218.



things connected with the heavenly tabernacle (God's dwelling-place). This may include angels that need cleansing (cf. Job 4:18; 15:15),<sup>1</sup> or heaven itself as a result of Satan's rebellion,<sup>2</sup> or "wickedness beyond this earth"<sup>3</sup> (cf. Rom. 8:38-39; 1 Cor. 2:8; Eph. 6:12; Col. 1:20; 2:15).

"As sinful pilgrims on their way to the heavenly city, God's people defile all they touch, even their 'meeting place' with God, and they need the constant efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ their High Priest to remove that defilement."<sup>4</sup>

9:24 Jesus Christ's ministry required a once-for-all, sufficient sacrifice. Jesus Christ entered "into heaven itself." His purpose was "now to appear in the presence of God for us." He did not enter "a holy place made by hands."

"Copy" translates the Greek word *typos* (type). The writer identified a type (a divinely intended illustration) here. The holy place in the tabernacle or temple was a type of heaven.<sup>5</sup> (See Romans 5:14; 1 Corinthians 10:6, 11; and 1 Peter 3:21 for other New Testament identifications of types.)

9:25 Jesus made His offering only once, rather than "often" and repeatedly ("year by year"). And He offered His own blood, whereas the Israelite high priest offered blood that was "not his own."

9:26 If Jesus had offered blood that was not his own (i.e., animal blood), He would have had to "suffer often," even since the creation ("foundation") "of the world." Every sins that had ever been committed, from Adam on down, had to be atoned for with blood. "But now," "at the consummation of the ages He has been revealed" for the purpose of offering a final sacrifice for sin ("to put away sin"). He sacrificed Himself

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<sup>1</sup>Pentecost, *A Faith ...*, pp. 156-57.

<sup>2</sup>Kent, p. 179.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 91.

<sup>4</sup>David J. MacLeod, "The Cleansing of the True Tabernacle," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152:605 (January-March 1995):71.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 60-63. See also P. E. Hughes, "The Blood ...," 131:521:26-33.

"once," and in so doing He "put away sins" forever, rather than removing them only temporarily (cf. 1 Pet. 1:20). He "put away sins" forever in that by dying He made a sacrifice that paid the penalty for all the sins of humankind that had ever been committed. "The consummation of the ages" probably refers to the end of the Old Covenant.

"At His ascension Christ was formally installed as High Priest and began His present high priestly work. In the heavenly tabernacle today He represents His people (i.e., He secures their acceptance with God); obtains free access for them into God's presence; intercedes in prayer for them and grants them help; mediates their prayers to God and God's strength to them; anticipates His return to earth to reign; and, at the end of the present session, will bless His people by bringing them deliverance into the kingdom."<sup>1</sup>

9:27-28 The writer explained parallel truths here. Just as judgment inevitably follows death (v. 27), so Jesus' return for His own inevitably follows His having dealt with sin (v. 28). These verses are a great promise of the Lord's return for faithful believers ("those who eagerly await Him"). Because Jesus Christ died once, for our sins, we do not need to fear condemnation after death (cf. Rom. 8:1), but we can look forward to ultimate deliverance ("salvation," i.e., glorification, v. 28).

"There is a finality about it [death] that is not to be disputed. But if it is the complete and final end to life on earth, it is not, as so many in the ancient world thought, the complete and final end. Death is more serious than that because it is followed by judgment. Men are accountable, and after death they will render account to God."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David J. MacLeod, "The Present Work of Christ in Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:590 (April-June 1991):200.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 93.

"No reincarnation here."<sup>1</sup>

Verse 28 is one of only two references to sin-bearing in the New Testament (cf. 1 Pet. 2:24), but the concept is common in the Old Testament (cf. Num. 14:34; Isa. 53:11-12; Ezek. 18:20). Jesus appeared the first time (His first advent) to provide salvation from the penalty of sin by offering Himself as the final sacrifice "to bear the sins of many." He will appear "a second time" (His second advent) to provide "salvation" from the presence of sin for the "many" "who eagerly await Him."

"Reference to the 'many' is not ... to be understood as limiting the effects of Christ's sacrifice to those who accept it in faith. The implied contrast, as in Is. 52:12; Heb. 2:10; Mk. 10:45; 14:24ff, is rather between the one sacrifice and the great number of those who benefit from it."<sup>2</sup>

When the Lord returns at the Rapture, all Christians will enter into His presence, but only believers who have remained faithful to Him will enter into their full inheritance (cf. 1:14; 3:14; 9:15). "Those who eagerly await Him" evidently refers to faithful believers.<sup>3</sup> Some interpreters take this as a reference to all believers, but not all believers are eagerly awaiting Jesus' return.

Specifically, what will take place is that at the Rapture all believers will go to be with Christ. However, only those who have not apostatized will receive a full reward at the judgment seat of Christ (1 Cor. 3:14-15; cf. 1 Thess. 5:9-10).<sup>4</sup>

"... his appearance will confirm that his sacrifice has been accepted and that he has secured the blessings of salvation for those whom he

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 5:404.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 487.

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Dillow, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup>See Gerald B. Stanton, *Kept from the Hour*, pp. 165-77, for refutation of the partial rapture view.

represented. ... The parousia [appearing] is thus the key event in the realization of salvation."<sup>1</sup>

"On one day of the year alone only the high priest could pass through the curtain to appear before God (9:7). That he must do so year after year indicated that the atonement he secured was merely provisional in character. The sacrifices he offered were inadequate to accomplish a decisive purgation of the defilement of sin. Against this backdrop the writer contrasts the efficacy of the unrepeatable action of Christ, whose single offering secured eschatological salvation and provided access to the inaccessible presence of God. The key to the typological exposition of salvation in 9:11-28 is that entrance into the heavenly sanctuary pertains to an eschatological and eternal order of salvation. The writer's primary concern in this section is with objective salvation. The exposition is focused upon the saving work of Christ in relation to God in behalf of the redeemed community rather than upon salvation realized subjectively in Christians."<sup>2</sup>

In summary, the New Covenant sanctuary is superior for five reasons: (1) It is heavenly (v. 11), and (2) its ministry is effective in dealing with sin (vv. 12-15). (3) Its ministry also rests on a more costly sacrifice (vv. 16-23), (4) it represents fulfillment (v. 24), and (5) it is final and complete (vv. 25-28).<sup>3</sup>

### 3. The accomplishment of our high priest 10:1-18

The section of the epistle that deals with the high priestly ministry of Christ (7:1—10:18) concludes with this pericope, in which the writer emphasized the perfecting effect of Jesus Christ's sacrifice on New Covenant believers. He wrote this in order to impress his readers further with the superiority of their condition compared with that of Old Covenant believers.

As pointed out previously, 7:1 through 10:18 constitutes an exposition of distinctive features of the high priestly office of the Son. These are: its similarity to the priesthood of Melchizedek (ch. 7), the fact that it involved

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 251.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:310-12.

a single, personal sacrifice for sins (chs. 8—9), and its achievement of eternal salvation (10:1-18).

"... in 10:1-18 the writer elaborates the 'subjective' effects of Christ's offering for the community that enjoys the blessings of the new covenant. Christ's death is considered from the perspective of its efficacy for Christians."<sup>1</sup>

The writer's argument is again chiasmic:

- A The inadequacy of the Old Covenant: repeated sacrifices were necessary (vv. 1-4).
- B The one sacrifice of Christ: it supersedes the repeated sacrifices (vv. 5-10).
- B' The priesthood of Christ: it supersedes the Levitical priesthood (vv. 11-14).
- A' The adequacy of the New Covenant: no more sacrifice for sins is necessary (vv. 15-18).

#### The inadequacy of the Old Covenant 10:1-4

10:1 The very nature of the Mosaic "Law" made it impossible to bring believers into intimate relationship with God, since it was only "a shadow" of a substance ("form"). The substance was the final resolution of the sin problem. This is contrary to what seems real, since the Law dealt with visible, physical matters but the work of Christ dealt with invisible, spiritual matters. It was impossible for the sacrifices that the Levitical high priest offered year by year to make the Israelites who approached God acceptable to Him ("perfect"). Jesus Christ provided perfect spiritual cleansing by His death, as the following verses show.

"Both Paul and our author speak of the law as 'a shadow'; but whereas Paul in Col. 2:17 has in mind the legal restrictions of Old Testament times (food-laws and regulations about special days),

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 258.

our author is thinking more especially of the law prescribing matters of priesthood and sacrifice in relation to the wilderness tabernacle and the Jerusalem temple."<sup>1</sup>

"The 'shadow' [Gr. *skia*] then is the preliminary outline that an artist may make before he gets to his colors, and the *eikon* [lit. image, "form"] is the finished portrait. The author is saying that the law is no more than a preliminary sketch. It shows the shape of things to come, but the solid reality is not there."<sup>2</sup>

"... the Old Testament dispensation had confessedly within its sanctuary no real provision for the spiritual wants to which they symbolically pointed; their removal lay outside its sanctuary and beyond its symbols. Spiritual death, as the consequence of the fall, personal sinfulness, and personal guilt lay beyond the reach of the Temple-provision, and pointed directly to Him who was to come. Every death, every case of leprosy, every Day of Atonement, was a call for His advent, as the eye, enlightened by faith, would follow the goat into the wilderness, or watch the living bird as, bearing the mingled blood and water, he winged his flight into liberty, or read in the ashes sprung from the burning of the red heifer the emblem of purification from spiritual death."<sup>3</sup>

"This verse (and in fact the whole chapter) continues our writer's argument regarding the superiority of the sacrifice of Christ over the Mosaic rites."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 95

<sup>3</sup>Edersheim, *The Temple*, p. 350.

<sup>4</sup>Jeffrey R. Sharp, "Typology and the Message of Hebrews," *East Asia Journal of Theology* 4:2 (1986):100.

10:2 The Israelites never enjoyed the extent of freedom from sin's guilt that Christians do.

"To have no more consciousness of sins does not mean that true believers are henceforth blissfully unaware of sinfulness in their lives. The statement refers to the consciousness of sin's guilt as being still objectively unremoved."<sup>1</sup>

10:3 The Day of Atonement reminded the Israelites yearly that their sins needed to be removed so that they could continue to have fellowship with God. Christians do not have a yearly reminder, since Jesus Christ's sacrifice made us perfectly acceptable to God (cf. John 13:10; Acts 15:9).

"The conscience of a devout Jew resembled the conscience of a devout Roman Catholic today. The Catholic must go to his 'priest,' to the 'confessional,' telling this man-made priest his sins; and the promise is, that the 'priest' will get him forgiveness. The 'priest' resorts to the figment of the 'unbloody sacrifice' of 'the Mass,' for he knows not the finished work of Christ, by Whose blood sin was *put away* once for all, on the Cross. What the Romish 'priest' finds and the Jew of old found, is a **remembrance of sins**."<sup>2</sup>

10:4 "It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins" because of God's eternal purpose: He chose to require a perfect human sacrifice, not just animal sacrifices.

"'Take away' (*aphaireo*) [v. 4] is used of a literal taking off, as of Peter's cutting off the ear of the high priest's slave (Luke 22:50), or metaphorically as of the removal of reproach (Luke 1:25). It signifies the complete removal of sin so that it is no longer a factor in the situation. That is what is

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<sup>1</sup>Kent, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>Newell, p. 331.

needed and that is what the sacrifices could not provide."<sup>1</sup>

"Some one has well said: 'The blood of animals cannot cleanse from sin because it is non-moral. The blood of sinning man cannot cleanse because it is immoral. The blood of Christ alone can cleanse because it is moral.'"<sup>2</sup>

The incompetence of the old Levitical order is set forth in four particular respects in verses 1 through 4: (1) the insubstantial (shadowy) character of the Mosaic system, (2) the repetitive nature of the old sacrifices, (3) the function of the Levitical sacrifices as repeated reminders of sin, and (4) the ineffectiveness of the blood of animals.<sup>3</sup>

"Why did God appoint unto Israel sacrifices so ineffectual? ... First of all, they served to keep in the minds of Israel the fact that God is ineffably [too great to be described in words] holy and will not tolerate evil. They were constantly reminded that the wages of sin is death. They were taught thereby that a constant *acknowledgment* of their sins was imperative if communion with the Lord was to be maintained. In the second place, by means of these types and shadows God was pointing out to them the direction from which true salvation must come, namely, in a sinless Victim enduring in their stead the righteous penalty which their sins called for. Thereby God instructed them to look forward in faith to the time when the Redeemer should appear, and the great Sacrifice be offered for the sins of His people. Third, there was an efficacy in the O. T. sacrifices to remove temporal judgment, to give ceremonial ablution [cleansing], and to maintain external fellowship with Jehovah. They who despised the sacrifices were 'cut off' or excommunicated; but those who offered them maintained their place in the congregation of the Lord."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 96.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, pp. 117-18.

<sup>3</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 389-92.

<sup>4</sup>Pink, p. 531. Paragraph division omitted.



## The one sacrifice of Christ 10:5-10

10:5-7 This biblical writer liked to clinch his argument by appealing to Scripture, which he did in these verses.

"His argument up till now has been the negative one that the animal sacrifices of the old covenant were unavailing. Now he says positively that Christ's sacrifice, which established the new covenant, was effectual. It really put away sin. And it was foreshadowed in the same passage from Jeremiah."<sup>1</sup>

The passage he quoted first (Ps. 40:6-8) expresses Messiah's commitment to offer His body (a synecdoche for His whole person) as a sacrifice to God (at His first advent), because animal sacrifices of all types were inadequate ("sacrifice and offering You have not desired").<sup>2</sup> They were inadequate because those sacrifices could not accomplish what Christ's sacrifice did. God took no pleasure in them relatively speaking, not absolutely.<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 40:6 reads: "You have opened [i.e., cleaned out] my ears," whereas Hebrews 10:5 says: "You have prepared a body for me." The idea is the same, the former expression being a figurative allusion (Exod. 21:6; cf. Isa. 50:4-5), and the latter a literal description. God had prepared His servant to hear His Word so that he would obey it.

God's will was the perfection (acceptability to God thorough cleansing) of believers. Jesus was not some dumb animal that offered its life without knowing what it was doing. He consciously, voluntarily, and deliberately offered His life in obedience to God's will ("I have come ... to do Your will, O God").

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 97.

<sup>2</sup>A synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a part is used to represent the whole or the whole is used to represent a part.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 545.

"The psalmist's words, 'Lo, I am come to do thy will, O God,' sum up the whole tenor of our Lord's life and ministry, and express the essence of that true sacrifice which God desires."<sup>1</sup>

"The scroll of the book" is the written instruction (Heb. *torah*) of God. Throughout the Old Testament the prophets presented Messiah as committed to doing God's will completely.

10:8-10 God took no delight in sacrifices as such: if they were not the product of a proper attitude. He took away "the first," the Mosaic Covenant and its sacrifices, to establish "the second," the New Covenant. Psalm 40 announced the abolition of the old sacrificial system. This was God's will, and it satisfied Him. The writer's view of sanctification here, as elsewhere in this epistle, is positional ("we have been sanctified ... once for all time"), rather than progressive. God sets aside (sanctifies) all believers to Himself at conversion. That is what is in view here.

"Indeed it can be said that sanctification in Hebrews is almost equivalent to justification in Romans, both referring to our position, not to our condition. But there is this vital difference of standpoint: that justification deals with position in relation to God as Judge, while sanctification deals with position in relation to our fellowship with God and our approach to Him in fellowship."<sup>2</sup>

"... we must be on our guard lest we read this epistle with Pauline terminology in mind."<sup>3</sup>

"Nothing but obedience can open the way to God."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 234.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, p. 125. Cf. Dods, 4:344; Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 804.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 99.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 128.

### The priesthood of Christ 10:11-14

10:11-12 The writer further stressed the finality of Jesus Christ's offering with the contrasts in these verses.<sup>1</sup> The Levitical priests never sat down but stood "daily" because they never finished their work. But Jesus Christ "sat down" beside His Father because He finished His work.

"A seated priest is the guarantee of a finished work and an accepted sacrifice."<sup>2</sup>

Not only is Jesus a seated priest, but His "one sacrifice" did what the repeated sacrifices of Judaism could never do, namely, "take away sins." "For all time" (v. 12) can modify either "offered one sacrifice for sins," or "sat down at the right hand of God," or both.<sup>3</sup> Most English translations reflect the first option.

10:13-14 Jesus Christ now awaits the final destruction of His enemies. "Those who are sanctified" are those whom Jesus Christ has perfected and are consequently fully acceptable to God (i.e., all believers, cf. v. 10).<sup>4</sup>

Jesus Christ's sacrifice has accomplished three things for us: (1) It has cleansed our consciences from guilt, (2) it has fitted us to approach God as worshippers, and (3) it has fulfilled what the Old Testament promised.

### The adequacy of the New Covenant 10:15-18

10:15 "The Holy Spirit" testified to the Jews through Jeremiah about a New Covenant that God would initiate with them (Jer. 31:33-34; cf. Heb. 8:8-12). But the writer of Hebrews also revealed that Jeremiah "testifies to us" Christians in what he wrote.

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<sup>1</sup>See William David Spencer, "Christ's Sacrifice as Apologetic: An Application of Heb 10:1-18," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 40:2 (June 1997):189-97, for a response to resurgent contemporary paganism that encourages self-sacrifice and other types of blood sacrifices.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 239.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 566.

<sup>4</sup>See Kendall, pp. 180-82.

That is, what Jeremiah wrote about the New Covenant was not only for the Jews but for Christians as well.

10:16 "Those days" refer to days in the future ("days are coming," Jer. 31:31). "Those days" proved to be the days of Jesus' earthly ministry and death. When God inaugurated the New Covenant He did not give His people laws written of stone tablets, as He did when He gave the Israelites the Mosaic Law. He put His "laws" in their "hearts" and "minds." Again the contrast is between the physical and external Old Covenant and the spiritual and internal New Covenant.

10:17 God also promised to forgive the "sins" and "lawless deeds" of His people. The statement that God will "remember" sins "no longer" means that He will no longer call them back to memory with a view to condemning the sinner (cf. Rom. 8:1). Since God is omniscient He remembers everything, but He does not hold the forgiven sinner's sins against him or her. This verse has been a great help to many sinners who have found it hard to believe that God really has forgiven them (cf. 1 John 2:2).

"In Ch. 8 the oracle of Jer. 31:31-34 was quoted in order to prove the obsolescence of the old economy; now it is quoted again in order to establish the permanence of the era of 'perfection' inaugurated under the new covenant. 'God has spoken in His Son'; and He has no word to speak beyond Him."<sup>1</sup>

10:18 This verse draws a conclusion: If sins have been forgiven there is no more need for sacrifices. Verse 18 directly contradicts the Roman Catholic doctrine of the Mass, in which, it is claimed, Christ is offered anew.<sup>2</sup>

"In summary this section from Heb 10:1-18 is actually a series of proof texts from the OT that argue for the once-for-all nature and superiority of Christ's sacrifice. Those trusting in

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 242.

<sup>2</sup>See Ludwig Ott, *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, pp. 402-12.

His sacrifice need not have a troubled conscience, and can be absolutely assured of God's eternal forgiveness of their sins."<sup>1</sup>

The long section on the high priestly ministry of Jesus ends here (7:1—10:18). Priestly ministry was such an important part of old Israelite worship that the writer gave it lengthy attention. The writer showed that Jesus is a superior priest compared with the Levitical priests and that His priesthood supersedes (has replaced) the Levitical priesthood. He also pointed out that Jesus brought the New Covenant that is superior to the Old Covenant. Furthermore, His sacrifice is superior to the animal sacrifices of the Old Covenant. Finally, Jesus' priesthood brings the believer into full acceptance with God, something that the former priesthood could not do. Therefore the readers would be foolish to abandon Christianity to return to Judaism. Contemporary believers are also foolish to turn away from Christ and the gospel.

Lenski outlined 8:1—10:18 as follows: preamble (the main point, 8:1-2), two ministries compared (8:3-6), two testaments (covenants) compared (8:7-13), two tabernacles compared (9:1-12), two kinds of blood compared (9:13-28), two kinds of sacrifice compared (10:1-10), and the final comparison regarding the removal of sins (10:11-18).<sup>2</sup>

#### **D. THE DANGER OF WILLFUL SINNING (THE FOURTH WARNING) 10:19-39**

From this point on in the epistle the writer made application from the great truths concerning Jesus Christ that he had now finished explaining. He followed his exposition of Jesus Christ's superior high priestly ministry (6:13—10:18) with exhortation: with another stern warning against apostatizing, and with an encouragement to remain faithful to the Lord (10:19-39). The Greek word *parresia* ("confidence"), which appears in verse 19 and in verse 35, frames the section and forms an inclusio tying the thought of the passage together.

"With 10:19-39 the great central division of the sermon (5:11—10:39) is drawn to a conclusion. Viewed from the perspective of the homiletical and literary structure of Hebrews, this concluding exhortation is symmetrical with the preliminary exhortation found in 5:11—6:20. ... The great

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1072.

<sup>2</sup>Lenski, p. 248.

exposition of Christ as priest and sacrifice is thus framed by parallel parenetic [exhortation] units ..."<sup>1</sup>

This warning passage is in a sense central to all the hortatory passages in Hebrews. Lane entitled this warning passage: "The Peril of Disloyalty to Christ."<sup>2</sup> It echoes former warnings (cf. 2:1-4 and 10:28-31; and 6:4-8 and 10:26-31) and repeats characteristic expressions in them (cf. 3:6b and 10:23; and 3:17 and 10:26). Yet it also anticipates what is to come by introducing the triad of Christian virtues, which the writer developed in chapters 11—13 (cf. 6:10-12). He spoke of faith in 10:22, and developed it in chapter 11, hope in 10:23, and developed it in 12:1-13, and love in 10:24, and developed it in 12:14—13:21.

### 1. The threefold admonition 10:19-25

The writer began with a three-fold admonition, which is all one sentence in the Greek text. The long sentence intensifies the writer's appeal.<sup>3</sup>

"In view of all that has been accomplished for us by Christ, he says, let us confidently approach God in worship, let us maintain our Christian confession and hope, let us help one another by meeting together regularly for mutual encouragement, because the day which we await will soon be here."<sup>4</sup>

"A loyal response to Christ is the logical correlate of the magnitude of Christ's redemptive accomplishment [cf. Rom. 12:1-2]."<sup>5</sup>

10:19 "Therefore" sums up the entire argument to this point, but especially the affirmation of 8:1 and 2 and its exposition in 9:1 through 10:18. "Brothers and sisters" recalls the writer's address of his audience of believers in the earlier exhortations (cf. 3:1, 12; 6:9). All believers now have an open invitation to come into the heavenly "holy place." Under the Old Covenant

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 279.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 271.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 516.

<sup>4</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 244.

<sup>5</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 281.

the privilege of entering the earthly holy place was reserved for the priesthood: only part of God's people.

There are two reasons that we can and should approach God (v. 22): First, we can have confidence to enter God's presence now and in the future because of what Jesus Christ has done for us ("the blood of Christ").

"It is striking that whenever the writer makes his most emphatic assertions concerning the saving work of Christ, he makes an explicit reference to the blood of Jesus (9:12, 14; 10:19, 29; 12:24; 13:12, 20). This fact is indicative of the importance of the cultic argument developed in 9:1—10:18, where the blood of Jesus is a graphic expression for Jesus' death viewed in its sacrificial aspect. That cultic argument is clearly presupposed here."<sup>1</sup>

10:20 We can enter God's presence through (by means of) Jesus' crucified flesh as though we are entering the earthly Holy of Holies through the torn temple veil (Matt. 27:51). This is an example of one thing (i.e., the veil in the temple) being a type of another thing (i.e., Christ's flesh). Christ's sacrifice provided "a new and living way" compared with the old, and now dead, way of the Old Covenant. The "way" in this verse is not Jesus Himself, in the sense of Jesus being the way to salvation (John 14:6). It is the way of direct access that Jesus opened for us through His death into God's presence.<sup>2</sup>

"The way to God is both 'new' and 'living.' It is 'new' because what Jesus has done has created a completely new situation, 'living' because that way is indissolubly bound up with the Lord Jesus himself."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 211.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 103.

The "living way" also connotes the fresh, vitalizing realities of the New Covenant.<sup>1</sup>

"The author is saying in his own way what the Synoptists said when they spoke of the curtain of the temple as being torn when Christ died (Matt 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45)."<sup>2</sup>

10:21 Second, we can have confidence to enter God's presence because we have "a great priest" (cf. 7:1—10:18). "The house [or household] of God" is the whole family of God (cf. 3:6).

10:22 We should draw near with freedom from guilt ("our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience") and with holy conduct (cf. 4:16). This is the first of three admonitions (in vv. 22-25) that together constitute the main exhortation in the epistle.<sup>3</sup> This first admonition refers to personal devotion to God. Because Christ's self-sacrifice has made full atonement for the sins of His people (v. 19), we can and should "approach God."

"If the writer to the Hebrews had one text and one summons, it was: '*Let us draw near.*'"<sup>4</sup>

A "sincere heart" is one that is true and dependable, unmixed with sin. We should approach God with the "full assurance of faith" that Jesus Christ's death has removed our sin and has made us acceptable to God (9:13-14; Num. 8:7; Rom. 5:1; 8:1; cf. 1 John 1:9). The writer believed that we who are Christians can have "full assurance" of our faith, because our confidence rests in the sufficiency of what Christ has done for us. God wants Christians to know for sure that they are going to heaven (cf. 1 John 5:13).

"... the specific imagery of the 'sprinkling of the heart from a burdened conscience' has been anticipated in 9:18-22. There the writer reminded the community of the action of Moses, who

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<sup>1</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 804.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 103.

<sup>3</sup>Guthrie, p. 213.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. xiv.



sprinkled the people with blood during the ratification of the old covenant at Sinai. The thought that Christians have been made participants in the new covenant by the blood of Christ is forcefully expressed in the immediate context (v 19). This suggests that the 'sprinkling with respect to the heart' in v 22b is to be associated with Jesus' inauguration of the new covenant through his death ..."<sup>1</sup>

The reference to the "bodies washed with pure water" may be to water baptism as the outward sign of inward cleansing (cf. 1 Pet. 3:21).<sup>2</sup> However the radical spiritual cleansing that water baptism symbolizes may be primarily in view (cf. Ezek. 36:25; John 3:5; Eph. 5:26; Tit. 3:5-6). Some understand the "pure water" to refer to the Word of God.<sup>3</sup>

"Possibly the mention of sprinkling and washing is an echo of the injunctions of Exod. xxix. 4, 21, xxx. 20, xl. 30, prescribing similar preparation for the priestly functions."<sup>4</sup>

- 10:23 We should not only exercise faith (v. 22), but also hope (v. 23) and love (v. 24). The second admonition, to "hold firmly to the confession of our hope without wavering" is the one that the writer emphasized most strongly in this epistle. It is an exhortation to persevere. Since Christ has consecrated a new and living way in which we can walk before people in the world (v. 20), we should continue in it. The basis of our steadfastness is the fact that God "who promised is faithful" to His promises concerning our future.
- 10:24 The third admonition addresses our responsibility to fellow believers. We should think about "how" we can "encourage one another in love and good deeds." This admonition to love one another was also necessary because some Christians were

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 287.

<sup>2</sup>See Lenski, p. 349; J. D. G. Dunn, *Baptism in the Holy Spirit*, pp. 211-14.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Gromacki, p. 171.

<sup>4</sup>Dods, 4:347. See also Kent, p. 200.

abandoning the faith. The readers needed to encourage one another to remain faithful to the Lord's command to love God wholeheartedly and our neighbors as ourselves since we have a great High Priest who can help us (v. 21). This type of love is the product of communal activity; we cannot practice it in isolation from other believers.

"Any early Christian who attempted to live like a pious particle without the support of the community ran serious risks in an age when there was no public opinion to support him. His isolation, whatever its motive—fear, fastidiousness, self-conceit, or anything else—exposed him to the danger of losing his faith altogether."<sup>1</sup>

10:25 Regular attendance at church meetings facilitates love for one another because it is there that we receive reminders and exhortations to persevere. It is only natural for one who has abandoned or weakened in his faith to absent himself or herself from the meetings of his or her church. But this is the very thing that such a person should not do. Christians need each other.

"The failure of love shows itself, then, in selfish individualism, and specifically here in *the habit of some of neglecting to meet together*. Such unconcern for one's fellow believers argues unconcern for Christ himself and portends the danger of apostasy, concerning which our author is about to issue another earnest warning (vv. 26ff.)."<sup>2</sup>

"Whatever the motivation, the writer regarded the desertion of the communal meetings as utterly serious. It threatened the corporate life of the congregation and almost certainly was a

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 147. Cf. Guthrie, p. 216.

<sup>2</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 415.

prelude to apostasy on the part of those who were separating themselves from the assembly ..."1

"The follower of Jesus cannot profess allegiance to Him and deny His Church."2

The writer was urging mutual accountability, since we all will have to give an account of ourselves to God. "The day" that is "drawing near" is the day that we will give an account of ourselves to God (cf. v. 37). This may have been, partially, an allusion to the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 for the original readers.<sup>3</sup> But it is probably primarily an allusion to the judgment seat of Christ. Or this may be a reference to the day of the Lord that accompanies the Second Coming (cf. 9:28; 10:37).<sup>4</sup>

## 2. The warning of judgment 10:26-31

The writer turned from positive admonition to negative warning in order to highlight again the seriousness of departing from the Lord.

"Between the imperatives of vv. 22-25 and 32, 35, the author describes, more fully than in 2:2f.; 6:4-6, the nature and consequences of apostasy, previously described as 'falling away from the living God' (3:12)."<sup>5</sup>

10:26 "Sinning willfully" in the context of Hebrews is deliberate apostasy, turning away from God (2:1; 3:12; 6:4-8; 10:23).<sup>6</sup>

"The faulty translation 'keep on sinning' [or "go on sinning"] misses the point altogether. The context suggests that the author is thinking of a

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 290. Cf. Robertson, 5:412.

<sup>2</sup>Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, p. 7. See also J. Paul Nyquist and Carson Nyquist, *The Post-Church Christian*, ch. 6: "Do I Need to Be Part of the Church to Follow Jesus?" pp. 75-86.

<sup>3</sup>J. Dwight Pentecost, "The Apostles' Use of Jesus' Predictions of Judgment on Jerusalem in A.D. 70," in *Integrity of Heart, Skillfulness of Hands*, pp. 140-41.

<sup>4</sup>Tanner, 2:1074.

<sup>5</sup>Ellingworth, p. 530.

<sup>6</sup>Dods, 4:348.

particular sin rather than a lifestyle in which one *continues to sin*."<sup>1</sup>

"Knowledge [Gr. *epignosis*] of the truth" is full knowledge. This Greek word suggests that those who could sin willfully had a good grasp of basic Christian teaching (cf. 6:4-5).

If an apostate rejects Jesus Christ's sacrifice there is no other sacrifice that can atone for his or her sins, and there is nothing else that can protect him or her from God's judgment (cf. 6:6; Num. 15:30-31). Some interpreters believe that rejecting Christ's sacrifice is only a hypothetical possibility for a genuine Christian.<sup>2</sup> Others believe that only professing, not genuine, Christians are in view.<sup>3</sup> Still others believe that "this sin could only be committed in the first century when the temple was still standing, and only by an unsaved Jew or proselyte to Judaism."<sup>4</sup> However, what the writer said in all of the warning passages in Hebrews makes it clear that genuine Christians can apostatize: renounce Christ and His sacrifice.<sup>5</sup>

"The word 'we' cannot refer to any other group of people than his readers and himself [cf. 2:1]."<sup>6</sup>

10:27 The "judgment" in view will take place at the judgment seat of Christ, not the Great White Throne. It is the judgment of Christians (cf. 2 Cor. 5:10), not of unbelievers (cf. Rev. 20:11-15). It will result in loss of reward, not loss of salvation. The same "fire" (divine judgment) that will test believers will also "consume" unbelievers ("the adversaries"). Fire is a frequent symbol of God and His work in Scripture (Exod. 3:2; 19:18; Deut. 4:24; Ps. 18:8-14; Isa. 33:14; Ezek. 1:4; Mal. 3:2), and

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<sup>1</sup>Tanner, 2:1074.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Pink, p. 614; Hewett, p. 170.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1921; Gaebelien, 4:1:285.

<sup>4</sup>Wuest, *Word Studies ...*, 2:2:183.

<sup>5</sup>See Alford, 3:2:199; Swindoll, p. 1575; and Jonathan A. Campbell, "The Circularity of Grace in the Warning Passages of Hebrews," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 178:711 (July-September 2021):332-50.

<sup>6</sup>Marshall, pp. 141-42. Cf. Pink, p. 604.

it often indicates His judgment (Mal. 3:2; Matt. 3:11; Luke 3:16).

"The motif of inescapable judgment is developed with an allusion to Isa 26:11. The imagery of 'raging fire ready to consume God's adversaries' is vividly suggestive of the prospect awaiting the person who turns away from God's gracious provision through Christ. ... The description of judgment as a fire that devours and utterly destroys recalls the actual experience of the followers of Korah who were consumed by fire because they had shown contempt for God (Num 16:35; 26:10). The consequence of apostasy is terrifying, irrevocable judgment."<sup>1</sup>

10:28 Apostasy under the Old Covenant resulted in "death" if "two or three witnesses" could verify it. It received a severe punishment ("without mercy").

10:29 But apostasy under the New Covenant receives a "much more severe punishment," because it involves (1) walking roughshod over ("trampling underfoot the Son of God") by rejecting Him. Also it involves (2) despising the superior blood of Jesus Christ that sanctified the apostate ("has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant"; cf. vv. 10, 14). "By which he was sanctified" indicates that the person in view is a Christian. Furthermore, the apostate (3) "has insulted the Holy Spirit" who graciously brought him or her to faith in Christ. These three parallel participial clauses in the Greek text stress triply the seriousness of apostasy under the New Covenant.

"Taken cumulatively, the three clauses in v 29 define persistent sin (v 26a) as an attitude of contempt for the salvation secured through the priestly sacrifice of Christ. Nothing less than a complete rejection of the Christian faith satisfies

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 293.

the descriptive clauses in which the effects of the offense are sketched."<sup>1</sup>

"It is an extreme case of apostasy which is being envisaged."<sup>2</sup>

"To look on Christ and what He had done on the Cross with scorn would be a most grievous sin for a Christian."<sup>3</sup>

Willful rebels under the Old Covenant only lost their lives (cf. Deut. 17:2-7; 13:8), but willful rebels under the New Covenant lose an eternal reward. Not only so, but God often begins to punish modern apostates in this life, premature death being a possibility.

"For God to remove a believer by physical death *and* for that believer to experience eternal loss of reward certainly constitutes a 'worse punishment.' The remainder of the chapter confirms this."<sup>4</sup>

There are degrees of punishment in the afterlife (cf. Matt. 10:15; 11:22, 24; Mark 12:40; Luke 12:47-48; Rom. 1:20—2:16).

"It was commonly inferred [incorrectly] in the Early Church from this and other passages in the epistle that forgiveness for all kinds of post-baptismal sin, inadvertent as well as deliberate, was ruled out."<sup>5</sup>

10:30 In Deuteronomy 32, which the writer quoted here twice (Deut. 32:35-36, 40-41), Moses warned the Israelites against apostatizing. That was this writer's point here as well. Note that Moses addressed his warnings to believers ("His people"),

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 295.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 219.

<sup>3</sup>Tanner, 2:1075.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 2:1076.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 260.

though many interpreters have applied what he said to unbelievers (cf. 2 Sam. 24:12).<sup>1</sup>

10:31 It is a "terrifying" prospect for a believer who has renounced his or her faith to fall under God's hand of chastisement ("into the hands of the living God").

"Actually, Heb. 10:30, 31 forms a parallel reference to II Cor. 5:10, 11, and the preceding verses (vv. 26-29) provide additional information concerning that facet of the judgment seat associated with the 'terror of the Lord.'"<sup>2</sup>

This verse is not so much a logical conclusion from what precedes as it is a summary recalling the context of the Deuteronomy quotations.<sup>3</sup>

"For the faithful, in their chastisement, it is a blessed thing to fall into God's hands: for the unfaithful, in their doom, a dreadful one."<sup>4</sup>

### **3. The encouragement to persevere 10:32-39**

The writer concluded this warning by reminding his readers of their former faithfulness, when they were being tempted, in order to encourage them to endure their present and future tests (cf. 4:12-16; 6:9-20).

"The juxtaposition of 10:26-31 and 32-35 suggests that it may have been the experience of suffering, abuse, and loss in the world that motivated the desertion of the community acknowledged in v 25 and a general tendency to avoid contact with outsiders observed elsewhere in Hebrews (see ... 5:11-14)."<sup>5</sup>

10:32-33 In the past ("the former days") the original readers had proved faithful in severe trials of their faith. These believers (they had

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<sup>1</sup>See Fanning, "A Theology ...," pp. 407-8.

<sup>2</sup>Arlen L. Chitwood, *Judgment Seat of Christ*, p. 31.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 543.

<sup>4</sup>Alford, 3:2:203.

<sup>5</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 297.

been "enlightened," cf. 6:4) had stood their ground ("endured a great conflict of sufferings") when others had encouraged them to abandon it. They had withstood "public" shame and persecution ("insults and distress") for their faith. They had also unashamedly supported others who had undergone persecution in the same way; they became "companions with those who were so treated."

"In the world of the first century the lot of prisoners was difficult. Prisoners were to be punished, not pampered. Little provision was made for them, and they were dependent on friends for their supplies [including food<sup>1</sup>]. For Christians visiting prisoners was a meritorious act (Matt 25:36). But there was some risk, for the visitors became identified with the visited. The readers of the epistle had not shrunk from this. It is not pleasant to endure ignominy, and it is not pleasant to be lumped with the ignominious. They had endured both."<sup>2</sup>

10:34 They had shown "sympathy to the prisoners" and had "accepted joyfully the seizure of" their "property" because they looked forward to "a better and lasting possession," namely, an inheritance from God in the future (cf. Luke 21:19).

"The eternal inheritance laid up for them was so real in their eyes that they could lightheartedly bid farewell to material possessions which were short-lived in any case. This attitude of mind is precisely that 'faith' of which our author goes on to speak."<sup>3</sup>

"It is a truth of life that in many ways it is easier to stand adversity than it is to stand prosperity.

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, p. 154. Cf. Guthrie, p. 222.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 110.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 270.



Ease has ruined far more men than trouble ever did."<sup>1</sup>

10:35 Now was not the time to "throw away" their confidence in Christ, "which has a better reward" (cf. 3:6; 4:16; 10:19).

"What they had endured for Christ's sake entitled them to a reward. Let them not throw it away. The NT does not reject the notion that Christians will receive rewards, though, of course, that is never the prime motive for service."<sup>2</sup>

10:36 They needed "endurance" to persevere in their faith, to "keep on keeping on," as the saying goes. By doing this they would do God's will and eventually receive what He "promised," namely, an eternal reward (1:14; 3:14; 9:15; Matt. 6:19).<sup>3</sup> This exhortation is a good summary of the whole message of Hebrews.<sup>4</sup>

"The safeguard against degeneration, isolation, and consequent failure is to make progress in the Christian life, and to proceed from point to point from an elementary to the richest, fullest, deepest experience."<sup>5</sup>

If the writer's concern had been the salvation of those readers who were unbelievers, this would have been an opportune time for him to exhort them to believe in Christ. He could have written: For you have need of regeneration. Instead, he exhorted his readers to endure rather than apostatize.

"Perseverance is one of the great unromantic virtues. Most people can start well; almost everyone can be fine in spasms. Most people have their good days. Most men have their great moments. To everyone it is sometimes given to

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 142.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, pp. 110-11. See also Calvin, 3:25:10; and *The Nelson ...*, p. 2094..

<sup>3</sup>Cf. Dillow, p. 129.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 806.

<sup>5</sup>Thomas, p. 11.

mount up with wings as eagles; in the moment of the great effort everyone can run and not be weary; but the greatest gift of all is to walk and not to faint."<sup>1</sup>

10:37 After all, we will not have long to persevere. The Lord's return is near: "in a very little while" (cf. Rev. 22:20). "He who is coming" is Jesus Christ. He "will come, and will not delay." The writer quoted Habakkuk 2:3. In this passage Habakkuk wrote that Yahweh told him to "write down the vision [v. 2] ... For it will certainly come, it will not delay long." The Hebrews writer applied this promise to the Lord's return. He may have had Isaiah 26:21 in mind as well: "For behold, the LORD is about to come out from His place to punish the inhabitants of the earth for their wrongdoing ..." The fact that this writer held out the prospect of Jesus Christ's imminent return shows that he believed that the Lord could come at any moment. This promise is as true for us today as it was for the original readers of Hebrews. The prospect of seeing Jesus soon is a great incentive to persevering in the faith in spite of persecution.

10:38 In the meantime, we need to keep living by faith. If we abandon the hope of the Lord's imminent return and shrink back, we will not please God ("My soul has not pleasure in him").

"This observation [in v. 38b] is a figure of speech called litotes in which a positive idea is expressed by negating the opposite. As the larger context makes plain, he means, 'God will be severely angered' (see verse 27)."<sup>2</sup>

The quotation in this verse is from Habakkuk 2:4 in the Septuagint. The writer took all of his Old Testament quotations from this version, except the one in 10:30, which he took from the Hebrew Bible. "My righteous one" refers to any individual believer. Shrinking "back" refers to apostasy.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, pp. 143-44.

<sup>2</sup>Hodges, *The Gospel ...*, p. 74.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 305; Moffatt, p. 158.

"Paul is concerned with the way a man comes to be accepted by God; the author [of this epistle] is concerned with the importance of holding fast to one's faith in the face of temptations to abandon it."<sup>1</sup>

10:39 The writer assumed, hopefully, that his Christian readers, along with himself ("we"), would not apostatize.<sup>2</sup> "Destruction" (or ruin) could refer either to eternal damnation in hell or to some other form of punishment. But in view of what has preceded in this epistle, and in the immediately preceding verses, the latter alternative is undoubtedly in view (cf. Matt. 26:8; Mark 14:4; Acts 25:16). The writer did not want his readers to be the objects of God's discipline.<sup>3</sup> What "destruction" might God inflict on the apostate believer? The writer was not specific. Perhaps some form of physical, mental, or emotional affliction in this life, or even premature death,<sup>4</sup> but definitely the loss of some reward (for persevering) would be lost in the next life.

"I personally believe that 'waste' is the best translation for this word [destruction] in Hebrews 10:39. A believer who does not walk by faith goes back into the old ways and wastes his life."<sup>5</sup>

Likewise the positive alternative set forth at the end of this verse ("the safe-keeping of the soul") is not a reference to conversion. It refers to the preservation of the faithful believer ("those who have faith") until he receives his full reward (cf. 1 Pet. 2:9). "The safe-keeping of the soul" is equivalent to saving the life in James 5:20.<sup>6</sup>

This is the most direct and severe of all the warnings in Hebrews. In view of the Son's priestly ministry (5:1—10:18), apostasy is a sin that will draw

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 111.

<sup>2</sup>See P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 437.

<sup>3</sup>See Dillow, pp. 336-37.

<sup>4</sup>Oberholtzer, 145:418.

<sup>5</sup>Wiersbe, 2:317.

<sup>6</sup>Moffatt, p. 158.

terrible consequences for the believer. It will not result in the loss of eternal salvation but the loss of some of his or her eternal reward—at least.

"The nature of the writer's response to the men and women he addressed confirms the specifically pastoral character of the parenesis [exhortation], in which he closely identifies himself with his audience. The severity with which he writes of apostasy and of the destructive lifestyle of those who have deserted the house church expresses anguish and compassionate concern that Christians should not be subverted by a form of worldliness that would separate them from the life and truth they have received from Christ and from one another."<sup>1</sup>

#### **IV. THE PROPER RESPONSE 11:1—12:13**

"In chapter 10:22-25 there were three exhortations, respectively to Faith, Hope and Love. These are elaborated in turn: chapter 11 dealing with Faith; chapter 12 with Hope; chapter 13 with Love."<sup>2</sup>

In this fourth major section of the epistle the writer concentrated on motivating his readers to persevere in their faith with steadfast endurance. He continued the idea that he introduced in 10:35-39. Some writers do not acknowledge this connection in the flow of the writer's argument. They view chapter 11 as a revelation of what faith will inevitably do, rather than what faith should do.<sup>3</sup> Having introduced faith and endurance in 10:39, the writer proceeded to develop these concepts further. He celebrated the character of faith in chapter 11 and then summoned the readers to endurance in 12:1-13. The first of these sections is exposition, and the second is exhortation. Even though chapter 11 is primarily exposition, it is full of application.

"The characteristic vocabulary of this section relates to the vital issue of enduring disciplinary sufferings. Anticipating the subsequent development in 12:1-13, the writer underscored

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 311.

<sup>2</sup>Thomas, p. 140.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., John MacArthur, *Faith Works*, pp. 37-54.

the community's need for *hypomone*, 'endurance,' in 10:36. That note is resumed in 12:1, when the commitment required of the Christian life is reviewed under the metaphor of an athletic contest, and the key to victory is found in 'endurance.'"<sup>1</sup>

"The story of God's people includes a succession of examples of persistent, forward-looking faith. The story is not complete without us. We, in our turn, must submit to God's fatherly discipline and stand firm together in the faith."<sup>2</sup>

"'We are of FAITH,' concluded the last chapter. And now this great word comes before the mind of the Writer for its *definition*, its *exemplification*, its *triumphs*. By this, all the servants of God from the first have been upheld, and stimulated, and carried through their glorious course."<sup>3</sup>

#### A. PERSEVERANCE IN FAITH CH. 11

The writer encouraged his readers in chapter 11 by reminding them of the faithful perseverance of selected Old Testament saints. The only other historical characters besides Jesus that the writer had mentioned so far were Abraham, Melchizedek, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua. Of these, the only one mentioned in connection with faith was Abraham (6:13-15). That the main purpose of this chapter is to show the patience of selected Old Testament saints, who endured by faith before they received what God promised, is clear from verses 13 and 39.

"Israel was pre-eminently to be an historical people. They were always exhorted to remember and to consider their history. It was their solemn duty to cherish the memory of the past. The remembrance of the wonderful dealings of God was to be perpetuated from generation to generation. The Jewish nation lived in the remembrance of its early history."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 313.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 558.

<sup>3</sup>Alford, 3:2:206.

<sup>4</sup>Saphir, 2:594.

This chapter is expository in form but parennetic in function, inviting the readers to imitate the example of the heroes listed. The linking word that ties this section to what precedes is "faith" or "faithfulness," which the Habakkuk 2:4 quotation introduced (10:38-39; cf. 10:20). The Habakkuk quotation gives faith the nuance of faithfulness. The writer repeated this word (faith, Gr. *pistis*) 24 times in chapter 11. It occurs in the first and last sentences of the section, forming an inclusio. Classical orators and authors frequently used lists of examples in order to motivate their hearers and readers to strive for virtue.<sup>1</sup> These lists also appear in Jewish and early Christian literature, indicating that this was a distinctive literary form.<sup>2</sup>

"As J. W. Thompson has observed, 'a catalogue of heroes of *pistis*, introduced as patterns of imitation, is unthinkable in any Greek tradition.'<sup>3</sup> The reason for this is that to the formally educated person, *pistis*, 'faith,' was regarded as a state of mind characteristic of the uneducated, who believe something on hearsay without being able to give precise reasons for their belief. The willingness of Jews and Christians to suffer for the undemonstrable astonished pagan observers.<sup>4</sup> Yet this is precisely the conduct praised in Heb 11:1-40. This fact constitutes the note of offense in this section of the homily."<sup>5</sup>

Another feature of this chapter is the anaphoric use of *pistis*, faith.<sup>6</sup> *Pistis* occurs 18 times without an article (the anarthrous use) in verses 3 through 31 but nowhere else in Hebrews. This literary device serves to stress the importance of faith and to unite the chapter.<sup>7</sup>

"We will also see in this chapter that unbelief is the worst sin anyone can commit. God has a remedy for every sin but the *state* of unbelief. This does not mean that there is an

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<sup>1</sup>See M. R. Cosby, "The Rhetorical Composition and Function of Hebrews 11 in Light of Example-lists in Antiquity" (Ph.D. dissertation, Emory University, 1985), pp. 45-106.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., pp. 114-61.

<sup>3</sup>J. W. Thompson, *The Beginnings of Christian Philosophy: The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 53.

<sup>4</sup>Cf. E. R. Dodds, *Pagan and Christian in an Age of Anxiety*, pp. 120-22.

<sup>5</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 316.

<sup>6</sup>Anaphora is the rhetorical repetition of a key word or words at the beginning of successive clauses for the purpose of giving unity, rhythm, and solemnity to a discourse.

<sup>7</sup>See also Victor (Sung Yul) Rhee, "Chiasm and the Concept of Faith in Hebrews 11," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 155:619 (July-September 1998):327-45.

unpardonable sin. There is no *act* which you could commit today that God would not forgive tomorrow. But if you continue in a state of unbelief, God has no remedy for that at all."<sup>1</sup>

This chapter is one of the strongest proofs that eschatological reward is the full afterlife inheritance (rest) that the writer urged his readers not to sacrifice. The reward of these saints in the past lay beyond the grave (cf. vv. 1, 13).

### 1. Faith in the Antediluvian Era 11:1-7

The writer began this section by stating three facts about faith. These are general observations on the nature of faith, some of its significant features. He then illustrated God's approval of faith with examples from the era before the Flood.

11:1      Essentially "faith" is having the confidence ("the certainty") that things yet future and unseen ("hoped for," cf. 10:35-39) will happen as God has revealed they will. This is the basic nature of faith.

"Saving faith may be defined as a certain conviction, wrought in the heart by the Holy Spirit, as to the truth of the gospel, and a hearty reliance (trust) on the promises of God in Christ."<sup>2</sup>

Verse 1 describes faith more than defining it.

"Faith is that which enables us to treat as real the things that are unseen."<sup>3</sup>

"Faith is the assurance of the heart in the adequacy of the evidence."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>McGee, 5:579.

<sup>2</sup>Berkhof, p. 503. Italics omitted.

<sup>3</sup>Dods, 4:352.

<sup>4</sup>Josh McDowell, *Evidence that Demands a Verdict*, p. 4.

"[Faith] ... is not blind, irrational assent, but an intelligent reception of the truth on adequate grounds."<sup>1</sup>

"This word *hypostasis* ["certainty"] has appeared twice already in the epistle. In Ch. 1:3 the Son was stated to be the very image of God's *hypostasis*; in Ch. 3:14 believers are said to be Christ's associates if they hold fast the beginning of their *hypostasis* firm to the end. In the former place it has the objective sense of 'substance' or 'real essence' (as opposed to what merely seems to be so). In the latter place it has the subjective sense of 'confidence' or 'assurance.' Here it is natural to take it in the same subjective sense as it bears in Ch. 3:14, and so ARV and RSV render it 'assurance.'"<sup>2</sup>

"Faith is the basis, the substructure (*hypostasis* means lit. 'that which stands under') of all that the Christian life means, all that the Christian hopes for."<sup>3</sup>

"To the writer to the Hebrews faith is a hope that is absolutely certain that what it believes is true, and that what it expects will come. It is not the hope which looks forward with wistful longing; it is the hope which looks forward with utter certainty. It is not the hope which takes refuge in a perhaps; it is the hope which is founded on a conviction."<sup>4</sup>

"Faith and hope go together; and the same things that are the object of our hope are the object of our faith. It is a firm persuasion and expectation

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<sup>1</sup>Charles Hodge, *Systematic Theology*, 1:53.

<sup>2</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 278. ARV refers to the *American Revised Version* also known as *The Holy Bible: American Standard Version*, 1901 ed.; and RSV refers to *The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version*, 1952 ed.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, pp. 144-45.



that God will perform all that he has promised to us in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

"Faith provides a firm standing-ground while I await the fulfillment of God's promises. Faith furnishes my heart with a sure support during the interval."<sup>2</sup>

"... faith celebrates *now* the reality of the *future* blessings that constitute the objective content of hope."<sup>3</sup>

Someone else—I do not remember who it was—described faith as the spiritual organ that enables a person to perceive the invisible realities of life.

The faith that the writer wrote about is not believing what you know is not true, or believing in something that you do not understand because it is unclear, or believing as a necessary addition to one's works, "like it is the dressing which is added to the salad of good works."<sup>4</sup>

11:2 God has approved such confidence, as is clear from His commendations of certain Old Testament men and women "of old" who walked by faith.

11:3 However faith is a way of viewing all of life: what is in the past as well as what lies ahead in the future. It involves accepting God's viewpoint as He has revealed it in His Word. This extends not only to how "the world" (or worlds, i.e., the universe, lit. the ages) came into being (cf. 1:2-3), but how it will end as well.

"There are two explanations for the origin of this universe. One is speculation, and the other is revelation."<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Henry, p. 1922.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 650.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 328.

<sup>4</sup>McGee, 5:580.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 5:582.

"The origin of the universe presents a problem which neither science nor philosophy can solve, as is evident from their conflicting and ridiculous attempts; but that difficulty vanishes entirely before *faith*."<sup>1</sup>

One view regarding the writer's choice of *aion* ("age"), rather than *cosmos* ("world") is that he referred to ages in anticipation of the list of heroes, who lived in various ages, that follows. If this is correct, verse 3 is more of a commentary on God's creation of history than it is on His creation of the cosmos. The last part of verse 3 may seem to contradict this view, but "what is seen" could refer to what is seen in history rather than what is seen in the material world.

Another view is that *aion* is simply a synonym for *cosmos* here and refers to the universe of time and space. *Aion* seems to be used this way in 1:2 as well. Perhaps the writer chose *aion* here to emphasize the temporal progression of God's creation rather than its physicality.<sup>2</sup> Many of the commentators favor this view, as I do. They believe that the writer was looking back on the creation account in Genesis rather than forward to what he would say in the rest of chapter 11.

"Belief in the existence of the world is not faith, nor is it faith when men hold that the world was made out of some preexisting 'stuff.' (In the first century there were people who did not believe in God but who held to some kind of 'creation.')

But when we understand that it was the Word of God ('God's command,' NIV) that produced all things, that is faith."<sup>3</sup>

Notice that the writer did not say that God created the universe out of nothing (*creation ex nihilo*), an idea that the Greeks rejected.<sup>4</sup> He simply said that the universe did not

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 654.

<sup>2</sup>Kent, p. 218.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 114. NIV refers to *The Holy Bible: New International Version*.

<sup>4</sup>Guthrie, p. 227.

originate from primal material or anything observable. His description does not rule out *creation ex nihilo*, but neither does it affirm it. Genesis 1:1-3 and logic seem to indicate that God did indeed create the universe, something visible ("what is seen"), by His word, which is something invisible ("not ... visible").

"Had the visible world been formed out of materials which were subject to human observation, there would have been no room for faith. Science could have traced it to its origin. Evolution only pushes the statement a stage back. There is still an unseen force that does not submit itself to experimental science, and this is the object of faith."<sup>1</sup>

11:4 The readers could identify with "Abel" because he too had "a better sacrifice." Those who based their hope of God's acceptance on an inferior sacrifice, as in Judaism, would experience disappointment, like "Cain" did.

It is very difficult to tell if "through which" refers to Abel's "faith" or his "sacrifice." Perhaps the antecedent is the whole preceding clause: He offered his sacrifice in faith.

By the way, what made Abel's offering superior to Cain's was evidently its being an offering of the firstborn, and its inclusion of the fat (Gen. 4:4). Ancient Near Easterners commonly held that a deity deserved the first of whatever man, beast, or crop brought forth. The fat, likewise, represented the best part of an animal offering. Along the same line, by offering a blood sacrifice, Abel offered the most precious thing that life supplies: life itself.<sup>2</sup>

God may have revealed to Cain and Abel which type of sacrifice to bring,<sup>3</sup> but the text does not say so. The Bible does say, however, that "faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17). What word had God given that

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<sup>1</sup>Dods, 4:353.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 148.

<sup>3</sup>McGee, 5:584.

Abel believed? Perhaps it was that the death of an animal was acceptable for covering Adam and Eve's nakedness (sin being the cause of their shame), and their own provision of leaves was not (Gen. 3:7, 21).<sup>1</sup> Abel's offering also shows the respect that he gave God as worthy of the best, whereas Cain's offering, as Moses described it in Genesis 4, indicates that he did not so reverence God.<sup>2</sup>

"The general tenor of Scripture indicates that the superior quality of Abel's offering derived from the integrity of his heart rather than from the nature of the offering itself. This is the clear implication of Gen 4:7, where the Lord says to Cain, 'If you do what is right, will you not be accepted?'"<sup>3</sup>

"... what gave Abel's offering greater value was his faith, not the fact that it was an animal sacrifice."<sup>4</sup>

Faith must inspire any worship that God will accept. Even though Abel died long ago, "he still speaks" to us through the scriptural record and so challenges us to continue to worship (show reverence for) God by believing His promises.

We may wonder why the writer did not begin his list of the faithful with Adam rather than with Abel. Adolph Saphir gave two reasons: (1) Adam was the federal head of the human race through whom disobedience and death came upon us all, and (2) it is through Adam that we inherit our unbelief and distrust of God's Word.<sup>5</sup> Even though Adam probably believed God in a saving sense, in Scripture he is associated with sin and death primarily and is therefore not an outstanding example of a person of faith.

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, pp. 658-59; Gromacki, p. 185.

<sup>2</sup>See Bruce K. Waltke, "Cain and His Offering," *Westminster Theological Journal* 48:2 (Fall 1986):363-72.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 334.

<sup>4</sup>Ellingworth, p. 571.

<sup>5</sup>Saphir, 2:583-84.

11:5 Whereas Abel was murdered, "Enoch" never died, yet both demonstrated faith. Enoch was "pleasing to God" and set an example of walking by faith all his life that readers would do well to follow.<sup>1</sup> The Lord may return at any time to take modern Enochs into His presence, just as He took that great saint.

"Enoch's walk of faith must precede Noah's witnessing by faith; and this, in turn, must be preceded by Abel's worship of faith."<sup>2</sup>

11:6 Walking by faith involves not only believing that God exists but also believing that He will reward the faithful. The original readers faced the temptation to abandon that hope, as we do. Note that those whom He will reward are those who are seeking after Him (present tense in Greek), not believers who have stopped seeking after Him. Ultimately we know God's will by faith.

"It should be noticed that our author does not attempt to offer arguments and proofs for the existence of God. Throughout the whole of Scripture the existence of God is never a matter of doubt or debate. Such reasonings as are found (for example, Ps. 19:1ff.; Rom. 1:19ff.) always start from assurance, never from uncertainty. God is not a metaphysical concept for questioning and discussion. He is the supreme reality, and the foundation and source of all created being [existence]. Hence when the reader is advised that to draw near to God he *must believe that he exists* he is not being invited to take a step in the dark but to turn to the light; he is not being encouraged to work up a blind faith but to entrust the whole of his being to him who is himself truth and light and life."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>See Timothy J. Cole, "Enoch, a Man Who Walked with God," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 148:591 (July-September 1991):288-97.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 668.

<sup>3</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 462.

"The concept of God ought to be one of the most difficult ideas for children to grasp, since God cannot be seen. But the amazing thing is that children have no difficulty at all in believing that God exists. It requires long and careful effort to train the mind to reject this evidence and explain it on other terms."<sup>1</sup>

In almost all of the following exemplars of faith that the writer cited, there is a clear and direct relationship between faith and reward.<sup>2</sup>

"The best way to grow in faith is to walk with the faithful."<sup>3</sup>

"The Reformed understanding of the New Testament doctrine of rewards is well presented by Martin Bucer, who writes: 'That the Lord rewards his people for their good works is not on the grounds of their righteousness, but purely from his free grace and for the sake of his dear Son (Rom. 11:6), in whom he chose us for eternal life before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and created us for good works (Eph. 2:10) which through him he effects in us (Jn. 15:5) and rewards so generously (Rom. 8:10-14, 26-30).' Consequently, 'when God rewards our good works he is rewarding his works and gifts in us, rather than our own works.' Moreover, while the faith we exercise and the good works we perform proceed from our own free will, 'nevertheless it is he who produces this good will and action in us, impelling us by his Holy Spirit (Phil. 2:13)'; thus 'all the good that God does to us and the eternal life that he gives us still remain the results of his grace alone, so that no one should boast of himself, but only

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<sup>1</sup>Stedman, p. 185. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 339.

<sup>3</sup>Wiersbe, 2:318.

of the Lord (Phil. 2:13; Rom. 6:23; 11:5f., 36; 1 Cor. 1:29f.)"<sup>1</sup>

With this understanding I totally agree.

11:7 "Noah" "prepared" for "things not yet seen" by building an ark. He did not live for the present but for the future (in view of the coming judgment of God). By continuing to believe the promises of God, even when everyone else disbelieved them, Noah inherited ("became an heir of") a new world after the Flood. The writer had promised the readers the world to come (2:5-8). Noah's faith led to the preservation ("salvation") of his family ("household"). Likewise, as we continue to trust God, we will encourage others to do so, and they also will enter into their full inheritance—if they follow our example of faithful perseverance.

"Abel, Enoch, Noah, are a threefold type both of Christ and of the believer."<sup>2</sup>

Some have seen Enoch as representing saints of the present time and Noah the Jewish remnant in the future.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Faith in the Patriarchal Era 11:8-22

11:8-10 Like "Abraham," we should look forward to our inheritance in the coming world and should live as strangers and pilgrims in this world (1 Pet. 1:1).<sup>4</sup> Abraham demonstrated faith in three phases: when God "called" him to leave Mesopotamia (v. 8), when he reached the Promised Land but still had to live in it "as a stranger" (vv. 9-10), and when God called him to sacrifice Isaac (vv. 17-19).

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 461-62. His quotations are from Martin Bucer, *A Brief Summary of Christian Doctrine*, 10 (1548). See also Pink, p. 679.

<sup>2</sup>Saphir, 2:604.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Darby, 5:374.

<sup>4</sup>See Daniel J. Estes, "Looking for Abraham's City," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:588 (October-December 1990):399-413, for evidence of Abraham's pilgrim character in Genesis.

"Abraham's faith accepted God's promises and acted on them even though there was nothing to indicate that they would be fulfilled."<sup>1</sup>

As Abraham later received "for an inheritance" (v. 8) some of the land that he had formerly lived in as a stranger, so we will, if we remain faithful. "The city" that Abraham looked for (v. 10) was a city that God would provide for him. A city with "foundations" offered a permanent, established home, in contrast to the transient existence of a tent-encampment.

"To cultured men in the first century, the city was the highest form of civilized existence."<sup>2</sup>

Christians look for such a dwelling-place as well, namely, the New Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1, 9-27).

The Hebrews writer referred to Abraham 10 times in total. His example is especially helpful for those tempted to abandon faith in God. Only two other books mention him more: Luke (15 times) and John (11 times).

11:11-12 "Sarah" also believed that God would fulfill His promise, and that He would provide something (a child) totally beyond the realm of natural possibility. God wants us too to believe the promises He has made to us. God rewarded her faith far beyond what she imagined, and He will reward ours in the same way (cf. Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17-18).

Sarah at first did not believe God's promise of a child (Gen. 18:12-13). Perhaps that is why the writer wrote "even Sarah"; she was not always strong in faith. But after the Lord repeated His promise to Abraham (Gen. 17:19), she evidently believed it. Likewise, when we give repeated attention to God's promises our faith becomes stronger (Rom. 10:17).

11:13-16 Lenski believed that "All these" probably refers to Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, and Jacob (vv. 8-9, 11), who lived as exiled strangers, or aliens by faith, not all whom the writer had listed

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 117.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 118.



to this point.<sup>1</sup> Others take "All these" as referring to all the people that the writer had listed previously. "Strangers and exiles" is probably a *hendiadys* meaning exiled strangers.

Verses 13 through 16 interrupt the recital of Abraham's acts of faith. Evidently the writer decided to preach a little at this point, which is the middle of his exposition of the patriarchs' example. He emphasized the eschatological perspective that is the point of this entire unit (vv. 8-22).

These patriarchs all continued to live by faith to the very end of their lives, and they died believing that God would eventually fulfill His promises to them. They looked forward to possessing "a better country" that God had promised to give them (v. 16). They did not turn back to what they had left, which would have amounted to apostasy.

"Continual hankering would have found a way."<sup>2</sup>

In the same way we Christians should not abandon our hope. God was "not ashamed" of these patriarchs because they were not ashamed to believe Him and to remain faithful to Him. "Not ashamed" (cf. 2:11) is a litotes implying that God is willing and happy to be called their God. Likewise we will not shame Him if we resist the temptation to turn from Him in shame (1 Sam. 2:30; 2 Tim. 2:12). God prepared a heavenly habitation ("a better country") for them, and He has done the same for us (John 14:1-3).

Each example of faith that the writer has cited so far is a positive one involving a believer who kept on trusting God and His promises in spite of the temptation to stop trusting. That is what the writer was urging his readers to do throughout this epistle: Keep on trusting and do not turn back. In every case God approved and rewarded the continuing faith of the faithful.

11:17-19 Here the writer began to develop the idea that he expressed in verse 3: that faith should be the way that the believer looks at all of life and history. He did so to help his readers see that

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<sup>1</sup>See Lenski, p. 396.

<sup>2</sup>Robertson, 5:423. Cf. Gen. 19:26.

continuance in faith is the only logical and consistent attitude for a believer.

"A new movement, the author's exposition of the life of faith, begins here. In a multiplicity of varied experiences faith remains the constant factor by which these experiences are met and understood. Faith constitutes a Christian's true 'world view' (cf. v. 3)."<sup>1</sup>

It is the belief that God could and would raise the dead that is the key element in these verses. From Abraham's perspective God's promise and His command seemed to conflict.

"We are apt to see this as a conflict between Abraham's love for his son and his duty to God. But for the author the problem was Abraham's difficulty in reconciling the different revelations made to him."<sup>2</sup>

Abraham's willingness to continue to trust and obey God was illustrated when he "offered up Isaac," because he believed that God could even "raise" Isaac, his unique ("only," Gr. *monogenes*) son, from the dead in order to fulfill His promises of an heir. Similarly we need to continue to trust and obey God even though He may have to raise us from the dead to fulfill His promises to us. Isaac's restoration was "a type" (Gr. *parabole*, parable, figure, illustration) of resurrection. When Isaac arose from the altar it was just as if he had risen from the dead.

By the way, verse 19 is one of the statements in Scripture that reveals that Old Testament saints—at least some of them, in this case Abraham—believed in the resurrection of the dead (cf. (cf. Job 19:25-27; Dan. 12:2; Hos. 13:14).

11:20-22 "Isaac," "Jacob," and "Joseph" all demonstrated confidence in God's word by how they behaved. Isaac and Jacob "blessed" (pronounced prophetic blessings on their sons that indicated

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<sup>1</sup>Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 808.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, pp. 121-22.

that what they believed would happen). Jacob "worshipped" (trusted God for the future fulfillment of His promises). Joseph "made mention" (of God's promise of the Israelites' future "exodus" from Egypt), and "gave orders" (that his "bones" should be buried in Canaan after the Israelites returned there). They believed, "regarding things to come" (v. 20), that He would provide for them what He had promised. We should do the same. The faith of all three of these patriarchs affected their descendants. Ours should as well.

"With all three the significant thing was their firm conviction that death cannot frustrate God's purposes."<sup>1</sup>

"Faith is gifted with long-distance sight, and therefore is it able to look beyond all the hills and mountains of difficulty unto the shining horizon of the Divine promises."<sup>2</sup>

### **3. Faith in the Mosaic Era 11:23-31**

Here the writer began to focus on the way that faith deals with hostility and persecution, which was a subject of special interest to his readers who were facing opposition from their unsaved Jewish brethren.

"Moses and Abraham hold the most prominent places in the roll of faith; and the central event of both their lives, as Hebrews presents them, is a journey."<sup>3</sup>

"Of all the great men whom God raised up in Israel, there is none whom the nation regarded with a more profound veneration than Moses."<sup>4</sup>

11:23 Faith confronts hostility in a characteristic way, which the writer began to emphasize in this verse. We see the faith of Moses' "parents," Amram and Jochebed, in their placing God's

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 123.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 774.

<sup>3</sup>Ellingworth, p. 608.

<sup>4</sup>Saphir, 2:620.

will above Pharaoh's command. Moses was no ordinary child ("a beautiful child"), among other ways, in that his parents saved his life even though Pharaoh had ordered all the Jewish male babies killed. Josephus wrote that Moses was an unusually "beautiful" (Heb. *tob*) baby.<sup>1</sup> Another explanation of Moses' parents' action follows, based on the fact that "faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ" (Rom. 10:17):

"Most probably the Lord made known to these parents that their child was to be the promised deliverer, and furnished them beforehand with a description of him."<sup>2</sup>

The writer mentioned Moses 11 times, more than in any other New Testament book except for John and Acts. Amram and Jochebed regarded God's will concerning the sanctity of life as more important than obedience to the state, when national law required disobeying God's will (cf. Acts 4:19). God honored their faith.

11:24-26 When Moses became an adult "he refused" to benefit from the privileges associated with being "the son of Pharaoh's daughter." He turned his back on the world and all that it offered him. Instead he chose to suffer affliction ("endure ill-treatment") with the Hebrews because they were "the people of God," not because they were the people of Israel or his people. Moses had a true appreciation for the promises of God. This led him to choose "the reward" associated with Israel's promised Messiah ("the reproach of Christ") over the temporary material wealth that he could have enjoyed had he stayed in Egypt. He was laying up treasure in heaven.<sup>3</sup> We ourselves should be willing to suffer temporary criticism, shame, and loss as we continue to cast our lot with God's faithful disciples in view of God's promises to us of a reward for persevering with His people.

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<sup>1</sup>Josephus, *Antiquities of ...*, 2:9:6.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 784.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 5:426.

"As with Abraham and Moses of old, the decisions we make today will determine the rewards tomorrow. More than this, our decisions should be motivated by the expectation of receiving rewards. ... The emphasis in the Epistle to the Hebrews is: 'Don't live for what the world will promise you today! Live for what God has promised you in the future! ...'"<sup>1</sup>

"The possibility of reward is the most frequently mentioned motivation for enduring in the faith (for example, see Matt. 5:10-12; 16:24-27; 1 Cor. 3:12-15; 2 Cor. 4:16-18; 2 Tim. 2:11-13; 1 John 2:28; Rev. 22:12)."<sup>2</sup>

Many Reformed interpreters believe that the reward in view in these passages is heaven.<sup>3</sup> However that can hardly be the case since heaven is a free gift, not a reward for doing something.

11:27 Moses "persevered" in spite of the king's wrath, and so should we in spite of the wrath that we may experience from ungodly authorities and opponents. Probably Moses' departure for Midian 40 years before the Exodus is in view here. This seems likely in view of the chronological sequence that the writer followed in this passage. The reference to the king's "wrath" is appropriate because Moses left Egypt when Pharaoh sought to kill him (Exod. 2:15).

"... it was not personal fear of Pharaoh but the awareness of his destiny as the deliverer of the covenant people that caused him to take flight. Had he remained [in Egypt], at that juncture, this destiny would have been thwarted, humanly speaking, by his execution; and so, impelled by

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:279.

<sup>2</sup>*The Nelson ...*, p. 2096.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Pink, p. 803, et al.

faith in the divine purpose for his life, Moses took refuge in Midian."<sup>1</sup>

"The emphasis ... falls not on endurance but on continually seeing, as it were, the unseen God ... The reference is not to the awesome event at the burning bush ... as if to say that Moses saw one who is invisible, but to a fixed habit of spiritual perception. ... From the pastoral perspective of the writer, the firmly entrenched habit of Moses in keeping God continually in view establishes a standard for imitation by the community in its experience of fear and governmental oppression."<sup>2</sup>

"The courage to abandon work on which one's heart is set, and accept inaction cheerfully as the will of God, is of the rarest and highest kind, and can be created and sustained only by the clearest spiritual vision' (Peake)."<sup>3</sup>

11:28 Furthermore, as Moses continued to demonstrate confidence in "the blood" of the lamb that God provided for the Passover, so should we continue to demonstrate confidence in "the blood" of the Lamb that God provided for our salvation. Moses avoided, and we can avoid, God's judgment by doing so.

In this verse there is a subtle transition from emphasis on exemplary persons to exemplary events (cf. vv. 29-30, 33-38).

11:29 The people of Israel experienced victory over their enemies as they trusted God, and we can too. At "the Red Sea" the Israelites willingly went forward at God's word rather than turning back. Trust and obedience resulted in the Israelites' preservation and eventual entrance into the Promised Land. The believing community that originally received this homily

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 499. Cf. Dods, 4:361.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 376. Paragraph division omitted.

<sup>3</sup>Moffatt, p. 181.

could identify with a group of people who persevered, not just individuals who did.

"There are three degrees of faith. There is a faith which *receives*, when as empty-handed beggars we come to Christ and accept Him as our Lord and Saviour: John 1:12. There is also a faith which *reckons*, which counts upon God to fulfill His promises and undertake for us: 2 Tim. 1:12. There is also a faith which *risks*, which dares something for the Lord."<sup>1</sup>

11:30 Likewise "the walls of Jericho fell down" because the Israelites believed that God would give them the Promised Land if they followed His strategy. His strategy is for us to keep trusting and obeying Him in spite of appearances.

11:31 Even though "Rahab" was a Gentile sinner and a "prostitute," God spared her because of her faith when He destroyed all "those who were disobedient" around her. The fact that "she welcomed the spies in peace" showed her faith. Likewise God will preserve today's faithful and give them a glorious future, not because they are personally worthy, but because of their faith in Him.

"Although a foreigner to the covenant people, she manifested a faith that was oriented toward the future and that found specific content in the acts of the God of Israel (Josh 2:11). She was prepared to assume present peril for the sake of future preservation (Josh 2:12-16)."<sup>2</sup>

#### 4. Faith in subsequent eras 11:32-40

11:32 The rhetorical question "And what more shall I say?" suggests that the writer did not consider that there was much point in citing more examples.<sup>3</sup> The writer employed the rhetorical

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 834.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 379.

<sup>3</sup>Guthrie, p. 243.

device of *paraleipsis* here: "what more shall I say."<sup>1</sup> This technique stresses the suggestiveness of what he has omitted. In this case the writer suggested that he could have cited many more examples of persevering faith.

The Old Testament is full of good models of persevering, vital faith. Nevertheless the writer mentioned briefly only a few additional Israelites, along with what their faith accomplished. Each individual that the writer cited was less than perfect, as is every believer. Yet God approved the faith of each one. This is the only New Testament reference to "Gideon," "Barak," "Samson," and "Jephthah."

"The order of names here may be understood if they are read as three pairs, Gideon-Barak, Samson-Jephthah, David-Samuel, the more important member of each pair being named first."<sup>2</sup>

In addition to these individuals, the writer could have cited several of "the prophets" as examples of persevering faith.

By the way, the Greek pronoun *me*, translated "me," is qualified by a participle in the masculine gender (*diegoumenon*), which defines the pronoun as masculine. This indicates that the writer of this epistle was a man and not a woman.

11:33-34 Joshua, Israel's judges, and David (v. 32) "conquered kingdoms."

"There are two principal 'kingdoms' which the Christian is called upon to 'subdue': one is within himself, the other without him—the 'flesh' and the 'world.'"<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>In *paraleipsis* the speaker or writer suggests that he is not going to mention something but then mentions it anyway.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 623. Cf. 1 Sam. 12:11.

<sup>3</sup>Pink, p. 860.



Numerous Old Testament saints "performed acts of righteousness" and "obtained promises." Daniel "shut the mouths of lions" (Dan. 6:17-22) as did Samson (Judg. 14:5-6), David (1 Sam. 17:34-37), and Benaiah (1 Chron. 11:22; cf. 1 Pet. 5:8). Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego escaped fiery deaths ("quenched the power of fire"; Dan. 3:23-27; cf. Eph. 6:15). Jephthah, David, Elijah, Elisha, Jeremiah and others avoided execution ("escaped the edge of the sword"; cf. Heb. 4:12). Gideon, Samson, David, and Esther are all examples of people who were weak but "were made strong" through faith (cf. Rom. 14:4; Phil. 2:27; James 5:15). Many of Israel's judges and kings "became mighty in war" and "put foreign enemies to flight."

11:35a "Women received back their dead by resurrection" because they believed that God could and would do what He had promised (cf. 1 Kings 17:17-24; 2 Kings 4:17-37). Some commentators have seen allusions in verses 34 and 35 to experiences that the Israelites also underwent during the Maccabean struggle (1 Macc. 2:7; 3:15; et al.).<sup>1</sup>

11:35b Faith does not result in deliverance in every case however (cf. 1 Pet. 4:12). Verses 35b through 38, which would have been particularly comforting to the original distressed readers, refer to many different forms of persecution.

The "better resurrection" that those who "were tortured" but did "not" accept "their release" obtained was perhaps their bodily resurrection, in contrast to the "resurrection" from reproach to honor, from poverty to riches, from pain to ease and pleasure that they could have obtained by apostatizing.<sup>2</sup> A more probable interpretation, I think, is that the "better resurrection" refers to the resurrection and welcome into the Lord's presence that a faithful believer will receive after he or she dies compared to the resurrection and welcome that an unfaithful believer will receive from the Lord.

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Moffatt, pp. 186-87; Alford, 3:2:230.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, pp. 871-72.

11:36 The Old Testament prophets often received mockery from the Israelites (2 Chron. 36:16; Jer. 20:7; Lam. 3:14; cf. Gal. 4:29; Gen. 21:9; Macc. 9:26; 2 Macc. 7:7). Jesus and His apostles were scourged (Matt. 27:26; Acts 5:40; 16:23). Jeremiah was bound and imprisoned (Jer. 38:11-13; cf. 1 Macc. 13:12).

11:37 Stephen and Paul were "stoned" (Acts 8:1; 14:19) as was Zechariah the son of Jehoiada (2 Chron. 24:20-22). Traditionally Isaiah suffered death at King Manasseh's hand by being "sawn in two."<sup>1</sup>

"According to ... mutually complementary rabbinic sources, Manasseh, enraged because Isaiah had prophesied the destruction of the Temple, ordered his arrest. Isaiah fled to the hill country and hid in the trunk of a cedar tree. He was discovered when the king ordered the tree cut down. Isaiah was tortured with a saw because he had taken refuge in the trunk of a tree ..."<sup>2</sup>

Many saints "were tempted" to abandon their faith and to pursue the pleasures and treasures of the world (e.g., Moses; vv. 24-26). The priests at Nob and their families were "put to death with the sword" by Doeg the Edomite (1 Sam. 22:18-19). This fate also befell the Lord's prophets in the days of Ahab and Jezebel (1 Kings 19:10) and the prophet Uriah in Egypt (Jer. 26:23). People who "went about in sheepskins and goatskins" as their clothing were those who were forced to exist on the barest necessities. Some were impoverished ("destitute"), "afflicted" in their minds and bodies by their persecutors, and "tormented" by others who encountered them (e.g., Num. 20:18).

11:38 The writer added as a sideline that "the world was not worthy" of such faithful believers. Those who accept death ("not accepting their release," v. 35) without apostatizing are those

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<sup>1</sup> *The Martyrdom of Isaiah* 5:1-14.

<sup>2</sup> Lane, *Hebrews 9-13*, p. 390.

"the world" is "not worthy" of, because they do not turn from following the Lord even under the most severe pressure.

The Israelites wandered "in deserts and on mountains" during their 40 years in the wilderness. They lived "in caves and holes in the ground" during the years when the Midianites oppressed them during the days of Gideon (Judg. 6:2). Others lived outdoors like wild animals (1 Kings 28:4, 13; 29:9, 13; 1 Macc. 2:28-30; 2 Macc. 5:27; 7:11; 10:6).

"The most distinctive aspect of the exposition is the development of the relation of faith to suffering and martyrdom."<sup>1</sup>

"But why should God allow many of His dear children to encounter such terrible experiences? Among other answers, the following may be suggested. First, for the more thorough trial of his champions, that their faith, courage, patience, and other graces, might be more manifest. Second, to seal or ratify more plainly the Truth which they profess. Third, to encourage and strengthen the faith of their weaker brethren. Fourth, to give them more sensible evidence of what Christ endured for them. Fifth, to cause them to perceive the better the torments of Hell: if those whom God loves are permitted to endure such grievous and painful trials, what must we understand of those torments which the wrath of God inflicts upon those whom He hates!"<sup>2</sup>

However, "There are Christians in every generation who walk away from the faith, who choose not to trust the living God with their lives."<sup>3</sup>

11:39      Those faithful believers who died in Old Testament times have "gained" God's "approval through their faith," but they have

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 395.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 875.

<sup>3</sup>Swindoll, p. 1580.

"not" yet "received what was promised" them. They have not yet entered into their inheritances. This awaits the future, specifically the Second Coming, when Christ will resurrect and judge Old Testament saints (Dan. 12:1-2; cf. Isa. 26:19).

11:40 The reason that Old Testament saints have "not" yet "received what was promised" them is because God has something better in store for "us." I take it that "us" here refers to all believers: Old Testament saint and New Testament saints. God has postponed the rewarding of Old Testament saints "so that apart from us [New Testament saints] they [Old Testament saints] would not be made perfect." Being "made perfect" here probably means being fully rewarded, receiving what God promised them and what they persevered in faith to obtain.

Christians will evidently have some part in the rewarding of Old Testament saints. We will at least have some part in their reward as Christ's companions who will witness their award ceremony. Their being "made perfect" rests entirely, as ours does, on the sacrificial death of Christ (cf. 9:15). Sometimes the faithful believer's reward comes entirely on the other side of the grave.

"God's plan provided for 'something better for us.' The indefinite pronoun leaves the precise nature of the blessing undefined. The important thing is not exactly what it is but that God has not imparted it prematurely."<sup>1</sup>

'Knowing how susceptible we are to success's siren call, God does not allow us to see, and therefore glory in, what is done through us."<sup>2</sup>

Verses 39 and 40 summarize chapter 11 by relating the list of exemplary witnesses to the audience's experience, and they provide a transition to the argument of 12:1-13.

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<sup>1</sup>Morris, p. 132.

<sup>2</sup>Charles W. Colson, *Loving God*, p. 36.

God intended this inspiring chapter to encourage us readers to continue to trust and obey Him in the midst of temptations to turn away from following Him faithfully. The implication is that our reward, as theirs, is eschatological.

"The men and women celebrated in the catalogue of attested exemplars all directed the capacity of faith to realities which for them lay in the future (cf. 11:7, 10, 13, 27, 31, 35-38). They found in faith a reliable guide to the future, even though they died without experiencing the fulfillment of God's promise (11:23, 39)."<sup>1</sup>

"... it is the future, and not the past, that molds the present."<sup>2</sup>

### **B. DEMONSTRATING NECESSARY ENDURANCE 12:1-13**

The writer followed up his scriptural exposition with another final exhortation (chs. 12—13). As we have seen, this is the pattern that he followed consistently throughout this epistle.

He first called on his readers to persevere faithfully, so that they would not lose any of their reward. He advocated three practices to remain faithful: keep your eyes on Jesus (vv. 1-3), understand God's use of trials in your life (vv. 4-11), and grow stronger as a Christian (vv. 12-13). This section is chiasmic:

- A A call to run with endurance (vv. 1-3)
- B Explanation of the role of suffering (vv. 4-11)
- A' A call to renew commitment to endure (vv. 12-13)

### **1. The example of Jesus 12:1-3**

"There should be no chapter division here, since 12:1-3 really is the climax in the whole argument about the better promises (10:19—12:3) with a passionate appeal for loyalty to Christ."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, pp. 394-95.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 394.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 5:432.

One writer observed a chiasmic structure in verses one and two:

"Therefore we,

[A] having *seated around about* us such a cloud of witnesses,

[B] *setting aside* every weight and every clinging *sin* ...

[C] with patient endurance ...

[D] let us run the race that is set before us

[E] keeping our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of the faith,

[D'] who for the joy that was set before Him ...

[C'] *patiently endured* the cross ...

[B'] despising shame ...

[A'] and *is seated* at the right hand of the throne of God."<sup>1</sup>

This structure focuses attention on the central element (which is usually true with chiasms), Jesus, rather than on the first element, us.<sup>2</sup>

"It seems likely that here [in 12:1-2], as in 1, 3 [i.e., 1:3], the author intentionally used poetic language to highlight and emphasize the significance of his theme: Jesus Christ is 'better.' Moreover, the balance and rhythm of the language make the text more esthetically attractive and provide a high degree of emotive [arousing intense feeling] impact. Thus the interpretation of the discourse by the intrusion of poetic language was bound to carry considerable impact and appeal ..."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Estella B. Horning, "Chiasmus, Creedal Structure, and Christology in Hebrews 12:1-2," *Biblical Research* 23 (1978):41.

<sup>2</sup>See Ronald E. Man, "The Value of Chiasm for New Testament Interpretation," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 141:562 (April-June 1984):149.

<sup>3</sup>David Alan Black, "A Note on the Structure of Hebrews 12, 1-2," *Biblica* 68:4 (1987):551.

One writer argued that Hebrews 11:1 through 12:2 is an encomium on Jesus.<sup>1</sup> Another saw this section as an encomium on faith.<sup>2</sup>

12:1 The "cloud of witnesses" refers to the Old Covenant saints whom the writer just mentioned (ch. 11). They are "witnesses," not just because they presently view our actions, as spectators,<sup>3</sup> but more importantly because by their lives they bore witness to their faith in God.<sup>4</sup> The preceding chapter presented them as bearing witness to their faith. The description of these predecessors as a "cloud" is an interesting one, since they are presently without resurrected bodies. They await the resurrection of their bodies at the Second Coming (Dan. 12:2). The writer's main point was that we have many good examples of people who faithfully trusted God in the past. Nevertheless the word "witness" does also imply a spectator (cf. 10:28; 1 Tim. 6:12).<sup>5</sup>

In view of this encouragement we should "rid ourselves of every obstacle" that impedes our running the Christian race successfully (cf. 1 Cor. 9:24; 2 Tim. 4:7-8; Tit. 2:12). Popular moral philosophers, who spoke on the streets of every sizeable Hellenistic community in the first century, commonly used an athletic contest as an illustration of life.<sup>6</sup> Obstacles are added weights (burdens) that may not necessarily be sins but nevertheless make perseverance difficult.

The Greek word translated "obstacle" is *ogkos*, which means protuberance. A protuberance is a tumor or swelling, an excess growth. So the idea seems to be that we should lay aside anything that is superfluous, that we do not need, in order to "run with endurance the race set before us." Too much of anything, even any good thing, should be left behind. This is a

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<sup>1</sup>Merland Ray Millar, "What Is the Literary Form of Hebrews 11?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29:4 (December 1986):411-17. An encomium is a literary work in praise of someone or something.

<sup>2</sup>Leland Ryken, *The Literature of the Bible*, p. 212.

<sup>3</sup>Jamieson, et al., p. 1437; Wuest, *Word Studies ...*, p. 213; Gromacki, p. 198.

<sup>4</sup>Dods, 4:365; Robertson, 5:432; Lenski, p. 424; Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 346; Wiersbe, 2:322.

<sup>5</sup>See Alford, 3:2:234.

<sup>6</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 408.

call to moderation in order to keep in spiritual shape so that we can "run with endurance."

"Some one is recorded to have asked whether a certain thing would do a person harm, and the reply was given, 'No harm, if you do not wish to win.'"<sup>1</sup>

We should also rid ourselves of "sin" of any kind. "The sin" that the writer warned his readers against especially in Hebrews is unbelief, apostasy.<sup>2</sup> In view of the immediately preceding context, it might refer to losing heart, quitting the race, or giving up the fight. However many different kinds of sin can trip us up, and we should avoid all sin for this reason.<sup>3</sup>

"This might have reference to the love of wealth, attachment to the world, preoccupation with earthly interests, or self-importance."<sup>4</sup>

The reason for this self-discipline is so that we can keep on running the Christian race "with endurance." Here the writer returned to the thought of 10:36: "You have need of endurance." He viewed the Christian life as an endurance race, a marathon, not a 50-yard dash.

"Many start well in the race of faith 'lying before us,' which is like the track laid out for runners, but they do not hold out to the end, they fail in regard to perseverance."<sup>5</sup>

"... the real test of life is the steady, normal progress of the soul—'not paroxysms [spasms] of effort but steady endurance.'"<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas, p. 156.

<sup>2</sup>Alford, 3:2:237; Robertson, 5:433; McGee, 5:601.

<sup>3</sup>Dods, 4:365; Guthrie, p. 249; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 520.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 409.

<sup>5</sup>Lenski, p. 426.

<sup>6</sup>Thomas, p. 156. See Eugene H. Peterson, *A Long Obedience in the Same Direction*.



Note that the writer of Hebrews did not assume that all true believers will inevitably persevere in the faith and so demonstrate their faith by their perseverance, as some Reformed interpreters teach. He exhorted his believing readers ("we ... let's") to persevere with the clear assumption that some of them might not persevere.

12:2 Like a runner keeps looking toward his or her goal, so we should keep "looking only at Jesus," not primarily at the other witnesses, much less at other distractions (v. 1; cf. Acts 7:55-56; Phil. 3:8). When we take our eyes of faith off Jesus, we begin to sink spiritually, like Peter did literally (Matt. 14:22-33). "Jesus" should be our primary model when it comes to persevering, as He is our primary source of strength for persevering.

"The man who has struggled to purify himself and has had nothing but repeated failures will experience real relief when he stops tinkering with his soul and looks away to the perfect One."<sup>1</sup>

The writer used the simple personal name "Jesus" to accent our Lord's humanity, especially His endurance of pain, humiliation, and the disgrace of the cross.

"The writer now returns to the duty of *hupomone* [endurance] as the immediate exercise of *pistis* [faith] (10<sup>36f.</sup>), as the great Believer, who shows us what true *pistis* means, from beginning to end, in its heroic course (*ton prokeimenon hemin agona*) ["the race that is set before us"]."<sup>2</sup>

Jesus is the "originator" (lit. file leader, captain, pioneer; 2:10) "of the faith." It was by looking to Him in faith that we were saved. Jesus set the example of living by faith for us, one evidence of His faith being His prayers. Jesus is the "perfecter of the faith" in the sense that He finished His course of living by faith successfully (cf. 2:13).

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<sup>1</sup>A. W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, p. 91.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 192.

"As the 'perfecter of faith' Jesus is the one in whom faith has reached its perfection."<sup>1</sup>

"He alone is the source of hope and help in their time of need. Looking to Him in faith and devotion is the central theological and practical message of Hebrews."<sup>2</sup>

"The joy" that Jesus felt at the prospect of His reward, namely, His victory over death, glorification, inheritance, and reign, motivated and encouraged Him, as it should us (1:9, 13-14; 8:1; 10:12). This is the only occurrence of the word "cross" outside the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles, and its presence here stresses the shame associated with Jesus' crucifixion. What we look forward to is very similar to what Jesus anticipated. Such a prospect—resurrection bodies, glorification, inheritance, reigning with Christ—will help us to endure suffering and despise "the shame" involved in living faithful to God before unbelieving critics.

12:3 The readers should "consider" (think upon) "Jesus," so that they might not "grow weary" of persevering and "lose heart." Meditation on Jesus and the cross encourages us to continue to follow God's will faithfully. It is natural for us to overestimate the severity of our trials, and the writer did not want us to do this.

"Understanding Jesus is the key to the whole problem, the cure for doubt and hesitation."<sup>3</sup>

"The clear implication for the audience is that if they were to relinquish their commitment to Christ under the pressure of persistent opposition they would express active opposition against

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<sup>1</sup>D. G. Peterson, "An Examination of the Concept of 'Perfection' in the 'Epistle to the Hebrews'" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Manchester, 1978), p. 298.

<sup>2</sup>Fanning, "A Theology ...," p. 415.

<sup>3</sup>Robertson, 5:434.

themselves (as in 6:6!), just as did Jesus' tormentors [cf. 10:38-39]."<sup>1</sup>

## 2. The proper view of trials 12:4-11

The writer put his readers' sufferings in perspective so that they might not overestimate the difficulty they faced in remaining faithful to God.

"Suffering comes to all; it is part of life, but it is not easy to bear. Yet it is not quite so bad when it can be seen as meaningful. ... The writer points out the importance of discipline and proceeds to show that for Christians suffering is rightly understood only when seen as God's fatherly discipline, correcting and directing us. Suffering is evidence, not that God does not love us, but that he does."<sup>2</sup>

12:4 The readers had "not yet resisted" sin to the extent that their enemies were torturing them, "shedding" their "blood," or killing them for their faith—as had been Jesus' experience. Evidently there had been no martyrs among the readers yet, though the writer and the readers undoubtedly knew of Christians elsewhere who had died for their faith (e.g., Stephen, James, et al.). Their "striving against sin" probably refers to both resisting sinful opponents and resisting inward temptations to depart from the faith (v. 1; cf. Luke 18:1; Gal. 6:9).

12:5 We also need to remember that God allows His sons to experience some difficulty in order to make us stronger in the faith (Deut. 8:5; James 1). This is the point of Proverbs 3:11 and 12, which the writer quoted here. We should not take "lightly" ("scorn," NET2; "ignore," NLT; "shrug off," *The Message*) the Lord's "discipline."<sup>3</sup> Nor should we "faint" (give up our struggle to remain faithful) when He punishes us. It is easy to become discouraged when we encounter hard times and to give up following Him faithfully. The Israelites certainly

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, pp. 416-17.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 136.

<sup>3</sup>NET2 refers to *The NET2 (New English Translation) Bible*, 2019 ed.; and *The Message* refers to Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*.

gave evidence of this when they left Egypt following the Exodus. Another value of divine discipline is that it prepares us to reign with Christ (cf. 2:10).

12:6 When a parent disciplines his or her child, it is (or should be) a sign that he or she loves the child. Failure to discipline a child really shows lack of love (cf. Prov. 13:24). And the fact that the Lord disciplines His sons shows that He loves us. Those sons whom "He accepts" are those among His children whom He is preparing to inherit His blessings. Not that the terms "discipline" and "punished" or "punishes" are used as synonyms in this quotation. We should not make a distinction, therefore, and conclude that God disciplines His children but punishes unbelievers.

12:7 Verses 7 through 11 may be regarded as an exposition of Proverbs 3:11 and 12. It is because of God's discipline that we are able to "endure" and persevere. Divine discipline may cause a believer to stop enduring, but the intent of God's discipline is to strengthen us so that we can endure. His discipline therefore assures us that we are His "sons." When we face difficult times of testing we can respond in two ways: We can conclude that God has abandoned us, or we can conclude that He is allowing the trial to strengthen us because He loves us and is preparing us for greater things in the future.

12:8 All believers are "partakers" (cf. 1:9; 3:1, 14; 6:4) of "discipline." The "illegitimate children" in view seem to be genuine children of God but not approved "sons." (See Romans 8:14-17 for the contrast between children and sons.)

"A father would spend much care and patience on the upbringing of a true-born son whom he hoped to make a wealthy heir; and at the time such a son might have to undergo much more irksome discipline than an illegitimate child for whom no future of honor and responsibility was envisaged,

and who therefore might be left more or less to please himself."<sup>1</sup>

Ishmael is an Old Testament example of an "illegitimate" child. He was the true child of Abraham, but because he was illegitimate (i.e., the son of Hagar rather than Sarah, Abraham's wife), he did not receive the inheritance that Isaac, the legitimate child and heir, did (cf. Gen. 17:19-21; 21:12-14). Ishmael received some blessing because he was Abraham's son, but he did not receive the full inheritance because he was an illegitimate child. Similarly, all Christians will receive some blessings from the Lord because they are His children, but they will not receive the full inheritance that God will give to believers who have persevered in following Him faithfully.

The approved "sons" in view ("whom He accepts," v. 6), here in Hebrews, are evidently those who persevere through discipline to the end of their lives, whereas the illegitimate children do not stay the course but apostatize.<sup>2</sup>

"In the Roman world, an 'illegitimate child' had no inheritance rights."<sup>3</sup>

The writer seems to be saying that God disciplines all Christians, but when a believer apostatizes, God may let him go his own way without disciplining him further, especially if he has not responded to previous discipline but has hardened his heart. God disciplines Christians to prepare them for future service, but when they apostatize, He stops preparing them for future service.<sup>4</sup> This is probably true only in extreme cases of departure from God and His truth (i.e., apostasy; cf. 6:6, where we read that it is impossible to renew these apostates to repentance).

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, pp. 357-58.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 651; Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 810.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid. See also *The Nelson ...*, p. 2098.

<sup>4</sup>For defense of the view that discipline (Gr. *paideia*) in this context includes both punitive and non-punitive connotations, see Ched Spellman, "The Drama of Discipline: Toward an Intertextual Profile of *Paideia* in Hebrews 12," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59:3 (September 2016):487-506.

"The author does not specify what, in literal terms, would be involved in being an illegitimate member of God's family. The context does not refer, even indirectly, to 'false brethren [i.e., non-Christians] secretly brought in' (Gal. 2:4). The wider context does suggest that such illegitimate offspring are apostates such as Korah, Dathan, and Abiram, probably alluded to in v. 3; or more generally, those who do not keep faith firmly to the end (10:39)."<sup>1</sup>

Another view of the terms "sons" and "illegitimate children" is that they refer to true Christians and only-professing but not genuine Christians respectively.<sup>2</sup> The reason I do not favor this view is that throughout this epistle I believe the writer is urging true Christians to remain faithful and not apostatize. In other words, the larger context of these verses favors this interpretation. Moreover an illegitimate child is, after all, still a child of his father. We need to understand the legitimate and illegitimate distinction in the light of Jewish and Roman culture.

"The ancient world found it incomprehensible that a father could possibly love his child and not punish him. In fact, a real son would draw more discipline than, say, an illegitimate child for the precise reason that greater honor and responsibility were to be his."<sup>3</sup>

This probably explains why committed Christians seem to experience more difficulties than non-committed Christians. This is observable more clearly in countries of the world where Christians are being persecuted. Christians in those countries, who seek to remain faithful to the Lord, draw more persecution than Christians who compromise or even renounce their faith

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 651.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Morris, p. 137; Pink, p. 953..

<sup>3</sup>R. K. Hughes, 2:173.

in order to escape persecution. God is preparing committed Christians for greater honor and responsibility in the future.<sup>1</sup>

"A *father* who neglects to discipline a *son* is deficient in his capacity as father, and a son who escapes all discipline is losing out on his sonship. This is a principle which would not be recognized by all schools of thought in this modern age where permissiveness has such powerful influence. The authority of parents has been so eroded that discipline rarely if ever comes into play. It has generally ceased to be a part of sonship. It is small wonder that those brought up in such an atmosphere find genuine difficulty in understanding the discipline of God."<sup>2</sup>

12:9 The writer argued that, since he and his readers had had "earthly fathers" who disciplined them, and they "respected them," how "much more" should they submit to their heavenly Father ("the Father of spirits") and His discipline. After all, His discipline, if submitted to, would result in life, namely, the fullness of eternal life, in contrast to the extended temporal life that human discipline is intended to produce (cf. Prov. 3:1-2). The title "Father of spirits" occurs only here in the New Testament (cf. Num. 16:22; 27:16). It probably means something like "our spiritual Father," as some English versions translate it, in contrast to our physical earthly fathers.

12:10 Here the contrast between human and divine discipline focuses on the fact the God's discipline has longer lasting consequences than human discipline does. A human father's discipline of his son lasts only a few years—until the child is mature enough to live on his own—and then eventually the son dies. But the heavenly Father's discipline lasts as long as the son is alive, and, if responded to appropriately, its effect have eternal consequences ("that we may share His holiness"). There is also a contrast between the fallibility of human

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<sup>1</sup>See V. Raymond Edman, *The Disciplines of Life*.

<sup>2</sup>Guthrie, p. 253.

fathers' discipline ("as seemed best to them") and the infallibility of the divine Father's discipline ("for our good").

12:11 Here the contrast is between the present painfulness of discipline and its future benefit. As Christians we need to submit to God's discipline in our lives, "painful" as it may be, because it will result in fullness of life (v. 9), greater holiness (v. 10), and righteousness along with peace ("the peaceful fruit of righteousness") when we "have been trained by it."

"It is called the 'peaceable fruit' because it [divine discipline] issues in the taming of our wild spirits, the quieting of our restless hearts, the more firm anchoring of our souls."<sup>1</sup>

"... there may be an implied contrast between temporary human punishment ["for the moment"] and the permanent reward which is given to those who submit to divine discipline ["it yields ..."]."<sup>2</sup>

God always designs discipline for our welfare, even though it may not be pleasant to endure.

"God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world."<sup>3</sup>

This is one of the great sections in the New Testament that clarifies the reason for the Christian's trials (cf. James 1; 1 Peter). It is essential that we view our sufferings as being our loving Lord's discipline, rather than an indication of His displeasure, or even worse, His hatred (cf. Deut. 1:26-27) in order to persevere faithfully. There is a real, as well as a linguistic connection between the words "discipline" and "disciple" and "discipleship."

"We shall cease from self-pity, from resentment and from rebellious complaint if we remember that there is no discipline

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 981.

<sup>2</sup>Ellingworth, p. 654.

<sup>3</sup>Lewis, p. 81.



of God which does not take its source in love, and which is not aimed at good."<sup>1</sup>

During some spring seasons, I used to notice that birds were building a nest in my garage. When I saw that, I moved the nest outside. It would not be safe for the birds to live in the garage, since their access to the outdoors would be greatly limited by the closed door. I am sure that they did not appreciate my moving their nest from its secure place indoors. But I had to do it for their welfare. Likewise, God sometimes moves our "nests" from comfortable places to locations that are better for us in the long run.

Some Christians who have walked in close fellowship with God for many years have not experienced many hard times in their lives. They may wonder why God has not disciplined them more. It seems to me that the reason for this is that they do not need the discipline that many Christians do. Many Christians do not walk in close fellowship with God consistently and so divine discipline is more common in their lives. It would be oversimplifying God's sovereign dealings with humanity, however, to conclude that this is the only reason some Christians suffer less than others (cf. Isa. 55:8-9).

In Hebrews the writer was addressing Christians who were experiencing hard times that God had permitted to descend upon them. Therefore he needed to explain to them why God was allowing them to undergo persecution.

### **3. The need for greater strength 12:12-13**

The writer next urged his readers to take specific action that would facilitate their continuance in the faith.

12:12 This word of exhortation, as well as others in this epistle, reveals that the original readers were spiritually "weak" and "feeble." Consequently the writer urged them to build up their strength (cf. Isa. 35:3) so that they could work effectively ("strengthen the hands") and walk without stumbling ("strengthen ... the knees"; cf. Prov. 4:25-27).

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 204.

12:13 Making "straight paths" for their "feet" is a figure for removing obstacles that might impede their progress (cf. v. 1). This might involve, for example, avoiding contact with people, situations, and materials that encourage departure from God's will. The writer probably intended this exhortation to include avoiding compromising associations with apostates who might throw harmful barriers such as false teaching in the Christians' path. The figure of an "impaired" "limb" also pictures the readers as suffering from a sub-normal condition. They needed to take care that this weakness did not become more serious ("be dislocated") "but rather be healed." The Greek word *ektrepo*, translated "dislocated" has the technical medical sense of a foot turning and becoming dislocated.<sup>1</sup> The power to build up our strength comes as we draw upon our resources for strength, namely, the Word of God and the grace of God (4:12-16).

This encouragement completes the thought of verses 1 through 13. The writer began with an exhortation, expounded the value of discipline, and ended with another exhortation.

"A depth of pastoral concern is evident throughout this section. The writer understood that faith can be eroded by constant exposure to harsh circumstances."<sup>2</sup>

Over the years, God has given me the privilege of encouraging several ministers who became discouraged. I remember a conversation with one pastor who wept in my office. He told me that he knew he spent more time in sermon preparation and prayer than the other preachers in his town, but his church was declining while theirs were growing. Another man told me that he had been invited to pastor his church because its leaders wanted good Bible preaching, and they believed he was the man for the job. Yet after preaching for some time there, this brother discovered that the leaders did not really want him to preach the Bible but to reinforce their traditions. Many people had left this church, and my friend feared that he would not be able to get another opportunity to pastor elsewhere because his congregation had declined so greatly. A third man told me that he was

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 659.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 428.

thoroughly discouraged because nothing that he had tried as a pastor had produced growth.

In each case I asked them to tell me what they had been doing, and in each one the brother explained that he had been faithfully preaching the Bible, as well as doing other good things. I was able to encourage each one because even though, when the Bible is preached effectively a church usually grows, this is not always what happens. The most important thing is to keep doing what is right regardless of the immediate results. God will bless such faithfulness eventually, at the judgment seat of Christ, if not in this life.

#### V. LIFE IN A HOSTILE WORLD 12:14—13:25

This final major section of the book conceivably grew out of the writer's reflection on the Greek text of Proverbs 4:26 and 27. He specified how his readers could make straight paths for their feet (v. 13).

"In the final division of the homily the writer provides the members of the house church with a fresh orientation for life as Christians in a hostile society. The new people of God are engaged in pilgrimage to the city of God. This world is not their home; their goal is 'a kingdom that cannot be shaken' (12:28) or 'the city that is to come' (13:14). The metaphor of the journey to the city of God characterizes men and women of committed faith as pilgrims and implies an understanding of Christian life as commitment to pilgrimage. It also implies fidelity to the covenant."<sup>1</sup>

The sections of this final division all contain these themes of pilgrimage and covenant privilege and obligation. As in the first division (1:1—2:18), there is much emphasis on God speaking and the importance of listening to His voice.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., pp. 433-34.

"The writer offers his readers advice on how to live as a community of faith, between well-founded hope and the dangers which surround them."<sup>1</sup>

### A. THE DANGER OF UNRESPONSIVENESS (THE FIFTH WARNING) 12:14-29

The writer now turned from the hearers' responsibility as they experienced suffering (vv. 1-13) to the peril of rejecting God who continues to speak to us through His Son by using the Scriptures. As with the preceding pericope (vv. 1-13) this one is also a chiasmus:

A Exhortation (vv. 14-17)

B Exposition (vv. 18-24)

A' Exhortation (vv. 25-29)

"The synthesis of so many significant themes and motifs within a single section identifies 12:14-29 as the pastoral and theological climax of the sermon ..."<sup>2</sup>

#### 1. The goal of peace 12:14-17

These verses summarize what the writer said previously about irrevocable loss through disobedience, unbelief, apostasy, and contempt for New Covenant privileges (cf. 6:4-8). The fearful warning about Esau brings these earlier warnings to an awesome head.

12:14 We need to live peaceably with all people as much as we can (cf. Matt. 5:9; Mark 9:50; Rom. 12:18; 14:19; 2 Tim. 2:22) because peaceful interpersonal relationships foster godliness (James 3:18). However this writer's emphasis was more on the objective reality of "peace" that results from Christ's death than on our subjective enjoyment of peace (peace with God rather than the peace of God). In view of the preceding and following contexts, "all people" seems to refer to everyone, including other believers. Since all believers will one day "see the Lord," and since no sin can abide in His presence (1 John

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 661.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 448.

3:2), we must also pursue "holiness" in our lives now. As with peace, holiness is our present state, and we need to continue to manifest it by remaining faithful when tempted to depart from the Lord.

If no one can see God without holiness, how could Satan (the unholy one) see God and appear in His presence (Job 1 and 2)? While Satan did, and probably still does, have access to God's presence, that will not be his permanent privilege. The writer of Hebrews spoke here of the permanent privilege of human beings.

"The two exhortations, to follow peace with all men, and that holiness without which none can see the Lord, comprise the whole Christian life. They refer to our relation to God and to our neighbor. They embrace both tables of the law."<sup>1</sup>

12:15 Negatively the writer warned against neglecting God's "grace" (help). God's grace enables us to persevere (cf. 3:12), but here it is almost synonymous with the Christian faith. This neglect would result in unfaithfulness spreading like a poison among God's people (cf. Deut. 29:17-18). The writer pictured departure from the truth here as a "root" that produces bitter fruit ("bitterness") in the Christian community (cf. 1 Cor. 5:6). It normally results in the eventual spiritual defilement of "many" other believers. The writer was not implying that most of his readers were in danger of apostatizing (cf. 6:9) but that the failure of only one individual can affect many other believers negatively.

"Stubbornness, when it grows, produces the noxious fruit of apostasy, which is equivalent to excluding oneself from the grace of God."<sup>2</sup>

"The sin of one individual can corrupt the entire community when that sin is apostasy, because defilement is contagious. One who is defiled by

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<sup>1</sup>Saphir, 2:674.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 453.

unbelief and apostasy becomes a defiler of others."<sup>1</sup>

"The writer has just referred to the need for helping those who are weak and failing in their faith. It would be logical that this still is in reference to them, providing a more specific instance in which some are failing. It is a failing with reference to the grace of God, especially as it relates to seeking forgiveness for failure. It is uncalled for to take this reference and make it a general designation of the plan of salvation."<sup>2</sup>

12:16 Esau is a clear example of someone who apostatized. He despised his inheritance ("his own birthright") and forfeited ("sold") it to satisfy his immediate desires ("a single meal"). That is precisely what the writer warned his readers not to do in this letter.

The writer warned against two things: immorality (Gr.  *pornos*) and godlessness (*bebelos*). The Old Testament makes no mention of Esau's immorality, so perhaps the writer understood this term metaphorically in the sense of apostasy.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Esau married two wives, so in this sense he was an immoral person (Gen. 26:34-35; 27:46).<sup>4</sup>

Esau was godless in that he relinquished his covenant rights for the sake of immediate gratification. Some translators rendered the Greek word *bebelos* "profane," which means "before (outside) the temple." This paints Esau correctly as a man who lived his life by avoiding God. Today we might know him as a secular or irreligious man.

12:17 Esau could not regain his inheritance later when he wanted it ("he was rejected"). His decision had permanent consequences. He could not repent ("he found no place for

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid., p. 454.

<sup>2</sup>Duane A. Dunham, "An Exegetical Examination of the Warnings in the Epistle to the Hebrews" (Th.D. dissertation, Grace Theological Seminary, 1974), p. 227.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 445.

<sup>4</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 540.

repentance"; cf. 4:1; 6:4-6; 10:26).<sup>1</sup> David is another example of a person who had to bear the consequences of his sins, even though God forgave him for those sins.

Esau is "the prototype of all who throw away the heavenly reality for the sake of the earthly one."<sup>2</sup>

"Esau was like a living beer commercial—bearded, steroid-macho, with two things on his mind: sexual pleasure and physical pleasure—food, drink, sports and sleep."<sup>3</sup>

"To take a very simple example—if a young man loses his purity or a girl her virginity, nothing can ever bring it back. The choice was made and the choice stands. God can and will forgive, but God Himself cannot turn back the clock and unmake the choice or undo the consequences."<sup>4</sup>

"Whether or not Esau was saved is not relevant to this discussion. The writer uses him as an illustration of the fact that the saved can lose their firstborn inheritance rights. His example is applied to those who have come to the church of the firstborn ones (Heb. 12:23)."<sup>5</sup>

"True Christians fully parallel the description of Esau. We are children of God and we are firstborn sons. Because of that we possess the rights of the firstborn. We do not have to earn these rights. They are given to us through the grace of God. However, we must value and keep these rights and are warned by Esau's example regarding the possibility of not doing so. But even though we

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<sup>1</sup>See Ellingworth, pp. 668-69; and Moffatt, p. 212.

<sup>2</sup>Thompson, p. 43.

<sup>3</sup>R. K. Hughes, 2:184.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 210.

<sup>5</sup>Dillow, p. 85.

cannot forfeit eternal life, we can forfeit our firstborn rights."<sup>1</sup>

"Esau's willingness to give up all that was his as the firstborn son reflected a contempt for the covenant by which his rights were warranted. By descriptive analogy, he is representative of apostate persons who are ready to turn their backs on God and the divine promises, in reckless disregard of the covenant blessings secured by the sacrificial death of Jesus. The immediate reference is to the objective blessings of 'peace' and 'holiness,' specified in v 14. With the example of Esau, apostasy is further defined as a decisive rejection of God's gifts."<sup>2</sup>

"In Jewish history, the birthright belonged to the firstborn son in a family simply by right of birth and consisted of three things: 1) *ruler* of the household under and for the father, 2) *priest* of the family, and 3) the reception of a *double portion* of all the father's goods. Although a firstborn son did nothing whatsoever to come into possession of the birthright, he could conduct his life in such a manner so as to forfeit the birthright. He could not forfeit his *position* as firstborn in the family, but he could forfeit the *rights* of the firstborn."<sup>3</sup>

A contemporary Christian's firstborn rights are similar to those that the Jewish firstborn enjoyed, namely, special privileges and blessings from the Father.

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, pp. 445-46.

<sup>3</sup>Chitwood, p. 139.



## 2. The superiority of the New Covenant 12:18-24

The writer proceeded to reemphasize the superiority of the New Covenant in comparison with the Old Covenant by using the figure of two mountains: Mt. Sinai and Mt. Zion.

"As vv.<sup>14-17</sup> recall the first warning of 6<sup>4-8</sup>, so he [the writer] now proceeds to reiterate the second warning of 10<sup>26-31</sup>, reminding his readers that they stand in a critical position, in which any indifferences or disobedience to God will prove fatal."<sup>1</sup>

12:18-21 These verses describe the giving of the Old Covenant at Mt. Sinai (cf. 2:2-4; Exod. 19:9-23; Deut. 4:11; 9:8-19).<sup>2</sup> The writer made Sinai and Zion metaphors (symbols of the two covenants) in order to show the difference in quality between people's relationship to God under the Old and New Covenants (cf. Gal. 4:24-26).<sup>3</sup> The emphasis in this comparison is on the holiness of God and the fearful consequences of incurring His displeasure (cf. Judg. 13:20; 1 Kings 8:12; 18:38; Nah. 1:3; Matt. 24:30-31; 1 Cor. 15:52; 1 Thess. 4:16). God was far from the Israelites when He gave the Old Covenant, and even Moses was full of fear and trembling when he went up Mt. Sinai. These verses emphasize the awesome majesty of God, the absolute unapproachability of God, and the sheer fearsomeness of God.<sup>4</sup>

12:22 The giving of the New Covenant and the things associated with that covenant are more impressive than the giving of the Old Covenant and the things associated with it, because they are the heavenly realities, not the earthly foreshadowings. These realities include "the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem" (cf. Ps. 9:11; 76:2) and heavenly beings ("myriads

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<sup>1</sup>Moffatt, pp. 213-14.

<sup>2</sup>See J. M. Casey, "Eschatology in Heb 12:14-29: An Exegetical Study" (Ph.D. dissertation, Catholic University of Leuven, 1977), p. 318.

<sup>3</sup>See D. G. Peterson, "The Prophecy of the New Covenant in the Argument of Hebrews," *Reformed Theological Review* 38 (1979):79-80.

<sup>4</sup>Barclay, p. 212.

of angels). Everything about the New Covenant encourages us to come boldly into God's presence (cf. 4:16).

"First, the Mosaic covenant is a covenant of the senses because Mount Sinai was unapproachable yet perceivable by the senses. Second, the new covenant's Mount Zion is superior because it is unperceivable by the five senses while being approachable."<sup>1</sup>

12:23 The phrase "the general assembly and church of the firstborn" probably means "the general assembly even the church [assembly] of the firstborn." The Greek construction suggests one group. The NET2 translation "the assembly and congregation of the firstborn" gives the sense of the phrase.

This group probably refers to all those believers who had died but will receive their full inheritance because they followed the Lord faithfully and did not apostatize.<sup>2</sup> In this case "the church of the firstborn" is probably another reference to Christ's companions (1:9; 3:12) who are partakers of His glory (3:14; 6:4; 12:8), namely, those who faithfully persevere in their faith.<sup>3</sup> Their names are on a heavenly roll "in heaven" as those who died cleaving to the Lord (cf. Exod. 32:33; Ps. 69:28; Isa. 4:3; Dan. 12:1; Luke 10:20; Phil. 4:3; Rev. 3:5; 13:8; 20:12). The firstborn in the ancient world was the son who received the greatest amount of inheritance and honor.

"To come to the 'church of the firstborn' means to be called to the privilege of being a firstborn son. All Christians are called to be part of that assembly and by birth have a right to be there. However, they may forfeit that right and never achieve their calling. That is the thrust of all the warnings of the book of Hebrews."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>David H. Wenkel, "Sensory Experience and the Contrast between the Covenants in Hebrews 12," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 173:690 (April-June 2016):219.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Hodges, "Hebrews," p. 811.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 469; Tanner, 2:1091.

<sup>4</sup>Dillow, p. 85, n. 73.

Another view is that "the general assembly and church of the firstborn" refers to all the saints on earth and in heaven.<sup>1</sup> Others believe that only believers in the church are in view.<sup>2</sup> Still other interpreters believe that all Christians on earth are in view.<sup>3</sup> Others believe all Christians already in heaven are.<sup>4</sup> Some believe that this phrase refers to the angels just mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Some who distinguish "the general assembly" from "the church of the firstborn" believe that the "assembly" is the angels, and the "church" is the saints.<sup>6</sup>

Since "the city of the living God" is "the heavenly Jerusalem," and since these individuals "are enrolled in heaven," and since "God, the Judge of all" is in heaven, and since "the spirits of the righteous made perfect" are in heaven, and since "Jesus" is in heaven, it seems that these "firstborn" are seen as being in heaven as opposed to being on earth.

"The spirits of the righteous made perfect" evidently refers to all the glorified redeemed, faithful and unfaithful, whom Christ's sacrifice perfects eventually (glorifies; cf. 10:10, 14; 11:40). But some view these "spirits" as Old Testament believers.<sup>7</sup> If "the general assembly ... of the firstborn" refers to all Christians or all believers, it would be redundant to mention the same group as "the righteous made perfect."

12:24 Jesus' "blood" is better than Abel's because Jesus' blood did not cry out for justice, retribution, and revenge as Abel's blood did (cf. 11:4; Gen. 4:10). It satisfied God's demands and secured God's acceptance of believers (cf. 9:12, 26; 10:10, 14, 19). It "speaks better" because it cries out to God for

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<sup>1</sup>E.g., Henry, p. 1928; Robertson, 5:440; Morris, p. 142; Hewett, p. 201; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 555.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Gaebelien, 4:1:297.

<sup>3</sup>E.g., Moffatt, p. 217; I Howard Marshall, "New Wine in Old Wine-Skins: V. The Biblical Use of the Word 'Ekklesia,'" *Expository Times* 84:12 (1973):364; and Barnabas Lindars, *The Theology of the Letter to the Hebrews*, pp. 115-16).

<sup>4</sup>E.g., e.g., Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, pp. 376-77.

<sup>5</sup>Pink, p. 1051.

<sup>6</sup>E.g., Jamieson, et al., p. 1440.

<sup>7</sup>E.g., Pink, p. 1054; Gaebelien, 4:1:297.

mercy and pardon on behalf of those for whom Jesus shed it.<sup>1</sup> Their "blood" is a metonymy for their death. Both deaths were violent and involved the shedding of blood.

"It must be acknowledged that the reference to Abel in v. 24b is unexpected, because it does not belong to the developed comparison between Sinai and Zion. It may have been suggested by the reference in v 23b to the presence of *pneumasi dikaion*, 'the spirits of righteous persons,' in the heavenly city, since the writer had specified in 11:4 that Abel was attested by God as *dikaios*, 'righteous.' It may also have been the writer's intention to evoke the whole history of redemption, from the righteous Abel to the redemptive sacrifice of Jesus, mediator of the new covenant ..."<sup>2</sup>

This sevenfold comparison (vv. 18-24) should motivate us to remain faithful and thereby realize all the superior blessings of the New Covenant.<sup>3</sup>

CONTRASTS IN HEBREWS 12:18-24	
Mt. Sinai, a mountain that may be touched	Mt. Zion, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem
Blazing fire	Myriads of angels
Darkness	The general assembly and church of the firstborn
Gloom	God, the Judge of all
Whirlwind	The spirits of righteous people made perfect

<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 552.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 474. Cf. Casey, pp. 380-82.

<sup>3</sup>See also Paul W. Lamicela, "Grace in Place of Grace: Perfections of Grace in Old and New Covenants," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 66:3 (September 2023):421-36.

The blast of a trumpet	Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant
The sound of words	The sprinkled blood of Christ that is better than Abel's blood

### 3. The consequences of apostasy 12:25-29

The writer shifted again from exposition to exhortation. The hook word "speak" (Gr. *lalounti* "speaks", and *lalounta* "speaking") in verses 24 and 25 ties the two sections together.

12:25 "Do not refuse him who is speaking" is a litotes, namely, a negative way of saying: Hear him. The One "speaking" probably refers to God (cf. 1:1-2).

"The Epistle opened with a declaration that God had spoken, and now the writer says, 'See that ye refuse not Him that speaketh.'"<sup>1</sup>

"Him who warned them on earth" probably refers to God when He spoke from Mt. Sinai. The contrast is not primarily between the persons who spoke but between the places from which God spoke (cf. v. 26). Another view is that the contrast is between a human oracle of God (Moses) and the divine Voice (Christ).<sup>2</sup> This contrast would have been especially impressive to Jewish Christians. The present warning, the Book of Hebrews, came from God in heaven, and it dealt with the importance of cleaving to His Son (cf. 1:1-2; 2:2-3).

Many Reformed interpreters take this warning, and the other warning passages in Hebrews, as warnings to persevere in Christianity, but they make perseverance a condition for salvation, as the following quotation illustrates. This, to me, adds works (perseverance) as a condition for salvation.

"Those who reach Heaven are they who follow (though stumbling by and with many falls) the

<sup>1</sup>Morgan, *An Exposition ...*, p. 518.

<sup>2</sup>Moffatt, p. 220; Barclay, p. 215.

only path which leads there, namely, the 'Narrow Way' of *self-denial*. Or, to put it in another way, the only ones who escape the everlasting burnings are they who heed Him that speaketh from Heaven, for 'He became the Author of eternal salvation unto all them that *obey* Him' (Heb. 5:9)."<sup>1</sup>

12:26 God's "voice shook the earth" at Mt. Sinai (Exod. 19:18; Judg. 5:4-5; Ps. 68:8; 77:18; 114:4, 7). God will shake both "the earth" and "the heavens" in the future. That shaking will lead to the creation of new heavens and a new earth that will remain throughout eternity (Ps. 95:9-11; Hag. 2:6; Rev. 21:1). I do not think that Haggai 2:6 predicts the establishment of Christianity, as some do.<sup>2</sup> Since God will shake the earth and the heavens, He is capable of making, and has indeed made, a shake-up in His dealings with humankind. Specifically He has (temporarily) abandoned Judaism and established Christianity.

"The 'shaking' is a metaphor for the judgment of God executed in history, as in the case of the fall of Babylon announced in Isa 13:1-22."<sup>3</sup>

12:27 The "things which can be shaken" refer to physical things, like "created things." "Those things which cannot be shaken" refer to the things of "a kingdom that cannot be shaken" (v. 28).

12:28 Our "kingdom" that "cannot be shaken" is the messianic kingdom. I believe the Scriptures teach that this kingdom began when Jesus Christ began His public ministry, is presently in existence under Christ's rulership from heaven, will come to the earth when the King returns to reign for 1,000 years, and will continue throughout eternity in the new heavens and new earth. We "receive" this "kingdom" when we trust in Christ for our salvation. Our response to having received this kingdom (being made part of it) should be "gratitude." The expression of our gratitude should be "acceptable service" of God. Our

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 1061. The italics are his.

<sup>2</sup>E.g., Pink, pp. 1080, 1085-86.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 479.

attitude toward Him as we serve should be "reverence and awe"—in view of His ability to judge the unfaithful (cf. v. 23; 1 Cor. 3:14-15).<sup>1</sup>

12:29 Many readers of Hebrews associate the figure of God "consuming" with His judging unbelievers in hell, but this figure also occurs in the Old Testament with reference to God's judgment of His people (cf. Exod. 24:17; Lev. 10:2; Num. 16:35; Deut. 4:24; 1 Cor. 3:15). The point is the character of God, not the destiny of those judged.

"As a consuming fire, God purifies all that is unworthy and unacceptable in those who serve Him and all that is unfit to abide in His presence."<sup>2</sup>

The reference to "fire" completes an inclusio that began with a previous mention of "fire" in verse 18. This whole section within the fire references deals with how important it is to respond properly to God, specifically by not apostatizing.

"So the writer to the Hebrews finishes with one of these threatening quotations which he so often flings like a thunderbolt at his hearers. It is a quotation from Deuteronomy 4:24."<sup>3</sup>

"The warning proper is found in 12:25-29. The readers are called to heed Yahweh, for an eschatological shaking is coming in which the earthly material order will pass away, leaving only an eternal kingdom. The faithful readers who endure will have a part in the eschatological kingdom—the millennium and the New Jerusalem as 'companions' of Jesus, the Messiah-King (1:9, 13-14). This kingdom will become an eternal kingdom."<sup>4</sup>

"All five warnings in the epistle [this being the fifth one: 12:14-29] have a positive thrust and a negative impetus. ... Disobedience to God and His Word will result in a forfeiting of

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<sup>1</sup>See Joshua C. Hutchens, "Christian Worship in Hebrews 12:28 as Ethical and Exclusive," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 59:3 (September 2016):507-22.

<sup>2</sup>Pentecost, *A Faith ...*, p. 225.

<sup>3</sup>Barclay, p. 216.

<sup>4</sup>Oberholtzer, 146:75.

eschatological rewards; obedience to God and His Word will result in a gaining of eschatological rewards."<sup>1</sup>

Chapter 12 contains three resources that encourage and enable Christians to run the Christian race with endurance. They are the example of Jesus (vv. 1-4), the assurance of the Father's love (vv. 5-13), and the enablement of God's grace (help; vv. 14-29).<sup>2</sup>

### **B. LIFE WITHIN THE CHURCH CH. 13**

The writer now concluded his written sermon with specific exhortations, requests, and greetings in order to enable his readers to continue worshiping God acceptably under the New Covenant (cf. 12:28).

"The emphasis in this last section of the book is on *living by faith*. The writer presented the great *examples* of faith in Hebrews 11, and the *encouragements* to faith in Hebrews 12. In Hebrews 13, he presented the *evidences* of faith that should appear in our lives if we are really walking by faith and not by sight."<sup>3</sup>

The four evidences that the writer identified are enjoying spiritual fellowship (vv. 1-6), submitting to spiritual leadership (vv. 7-9, 17, 24), sharing in spiritual wisdom (vv. 10-16, 18-19), and experiencing spiritual Lordship (vv. 20-21).

"In this chapter we find exhortations apparently springing out of a desire to arrest symptoms of a tendency to hide their Christian profession disowning their teachers and fellow Christians and resenting the shame and hardship incident to the following of Christ."<sup>4</sup>

This last chapter has two parts: Verses 1 through 21 develop the idea of thankfulness expressed in service that is motivated by the fear of God, which the writer introduced in 12:28. Verses 22 through 25 constitute a

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<sup>1</sup>Ibid.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:322-26.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 2:326.

<sup>4</sup>Dods, 4:375.



personal note to the readers that lies outside the argument of the homily proper.

### 1. Pastoral reminders 13:1-21

This section consists of exhortations in the form of reminders of what the readers already knew, or were doing, or of what they knew they should avoid. As in the Mosaic Law, moral directions (vv. 1-6) precede religious instructions (vv. 7-19).

#### Directions regarding morality 13:1-6

13:1 When love for Jesus Christ falters, "love of the" Christian "brothers and sisters" normally fades as well (cf. Rom. 12:10; 1 Thess. 4:9-10; 1 Pet. 1:22; 2 Pet. 1:7; 1 John 2:9).

"The Hebrew Christians to whom this letter is addressed are flagging, it seems, not only in their zeal for the race on which they have set out (12:1, 12) but also in the ardor of their love for each other."<sup>1</sup>

"Somehow or other we have to combine two things—a desperate earnestness in the faith and a kindness to the man who has strayed from it."<sup>2</sup>

This was a particularly appropriate exhortation for the original readers. Some of these people were apparently Jews who had left Judaism for Christianity, but others of them had evidently remained in Judaism, or perhaps returned to it—judging from what the writer wrote previously. It was especially important, therefore, for these Hebrew Christians to continue to love their racial, as well as their spiritual, brethren. But this exhortation is just as appropriate for modern Christian readers, Jews and Gentiles alike, as it was for the original Jewish readers.

13:2 Abraham "entertained angels" when he showed them "hospitality" (Gen. 18:1-3). So did Lot (Gen. 19:1-3), Gideon

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 562.

<sup>2</sup>Barclay, p. 218.

(Judg. 6), and Manoah (Judg. 13). "Hospitality" (Gr. *philoxenia*, lit. "love to strangers") is a concrete expression of Christian love today as it was in the first century (cf. 3 John 5-8).<sup>1</sup>

"... inns were proverbially miserable places from earliest antiquity on. In Aristophanes' *The Frogs*, Dionysus asks Heracles if he can tell him which inn has the fewest fleas. Plato, in *The Laws*, instances the innkeeper keeping his guests hostage. And Theophrastus puts innkeeping on the level of running a brothel."<sup>2</sup>

Abraham received a special blessing because he showed hospitality, and we may too (cf. Matt. 25:35). All Christians should practice hospitality (Rom. 12:13), especially Christian leaders (Titus 1:8).

"Owing to the hatred of the [unsaved] Jews for the Christians it was extremely difficult for those Christians, who were travelling on business or in the service of the Church, or had been driven from their homes through persecution, to find accommodations."<sup>3</sup>

Have you ever entertained an angel? Since the word "angel" means "messenger," in both Greek and Hebrew, in one sense any time we entertain someone who brings a message from God (e.g., a visiting preacher or missionary) we entertain an angel.

13:3 "The prisoners" in view were evidently Christians who were suffering for their testimonies (cf. 10:34; Matt. 25:36, 40). Oftentimes prisoners in the Roman world had to depend on friends outside the prison to provide them with food and other necessities. The existence of a significant number of prisoners

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<sup>1</sup>For an overview of hospitality in the early church, see J. H. Elliott, *Home for the Homeless: A Sociological Exegesis of 1 Peter*, pp. 145-50, 165-200; and G. Bornkamm, *Early Christian Experience*, pp. 123-93.

<sup>2</sup>R. K. Hughes, 2:209.

<sup>3</sup>Hewett, p. 205.

(plural) supports a date of writing after A.D. 64, when an empire-wide persecution of Christians began.

In July of that same year Emperor Nero set fire to Rome and blamed the Christians. This resulted in much persecution of Christians. The readers themselves might one day suffer the same fate as these prisoners, since they were still leading a mortal existence ("are in the body"). Paul urged Timothy not to be ashamed of him when he was a prisoner (2 Tim. 1:8). All the Christians in the province of Asia had abandoned Paul at that time, except for those in Onesiphorus' household (2 Tim 1:15-18). Remembering these people would involve praying for them and assisting them in any way possible.

13:4 Christians also need to maintain a high regard for "marriage" and to remain sexually pure. God's judgment will follow the sexually impure (cf. 12:29). Under the Old Covenant the Israelites were to punish fornicators and adulterers, but under the New Covenant, God Himself has promised to do it. The "sexually immoral" may refer especially to unmarried persons and "adulterers" to the married.<sup>1</sup>

"How does God judge fornicators and adulterers? Sometimes they are judged in their own bodies (Rom. 1:24-27). Certainly they will be judged at the final judgment (Rev. 21:8; 22:15). Believers who commit these sins certainly may be forgiven, but they will lose rewards in heaven (Eph. 5:5ff). David was forgiven, but he suffered the consequences of his adultery for years to come; and he suffered in the hardest way: through his own children."<sup>2</sup>

13:5-6 Greed has lured many believers away from a life of faithful discipleship, as has sexual temptation. We need to cultivate a spirit of contentment ("free from the love of money") so that we do not apostatize. Contentment really has nothing to do with how much money we have, though the world generally

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<sup>1</sup>Robertson, 5:444-45; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 566.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:327.

thinks it does. We have "the Lord," and in Him we have all that we need (cf. Luke 12:15; Phil. 4:11; 1 Tim. 6:6-10). Furthermore, He has promised never to abandon us (Matt. 28:20).

"One of the results of persecution has been the loss of property (10:34). In these circumstances, the Christian response is not to grasp all the more eagerly at material wealth, but to rely quietly on God's provision, even in the face of human opposition."<sup>1</sup>

"We may assume that *love of money* was another temptation to which the recipients of this letter were showing signs of giving in."<sup>2</sup>

### Instructions regarding religious duties 13:7-19

"Within the structure of 13:7-19, vv 7-9 and vv 17-19 constitute the literary frame for the central unit of explanatory parenesis [exhortation] in vv 10-16."<sup>3</sup>

13:7 The behavior of our spiritual leaders is one that we should "imitate" (cf. 12:1; 13:17, 24). They, like the heroes of faith in chapter 11, set a good example. The outcome of the Hebrews' leaders' lives, if they had died, was that they were now with the Lord and already beginning to enjoy some of their eternal inheritance. They may have been the founders of the church to which this letter went.<sup>4</sup> People tend to forget or to idolize their former leaders, but we should "remember" them and consider their godly teachings and examples, plus "the result of their way of life": the plenteous fruit of many lives edified (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12-13).

"The duty of the real preacher is not so much to talk to men about Christ as to show men Christ in his own life and work and being. Men listen not so

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<sup>1</sup>Ellingworth, p. 698.

<sup>2</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, p. 567.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 526.

<sup>4</sup>Guthrie, p. 270. Cf. v. 17.

much to what the man is saying as to what the man is. His life is not an argument in words but a demonstration in living."<sup>1</sup>

13:8 "Jesus Christ" was the center of the message that the leaders had preached to these hearers (cf. v. 7).<sup>2</sup> That message and its Hero is what this writer had urged his readers not to abandon. The leaders had preached the Word of God to these readers, and that preaching culminated in Jesus Christ.

"Jesus is not the object of faith [in this verse or in Hebrews, according to this writer], but the supreme model of it."<sup>3</sup>

"'Yesterday' the original leaders preached Jesus Christ, even as the writer does now; the present time can tolerate no other approach to the grace of God (2:9). 'Forever' recalls the quality of the redemption secured by Jesus Christ (5:9; 9:12, 14-15; 13:20) and of the priesthood of Christ (7:24-25): it is 'eternal.'"<sup>4</sup>

Another less probable interpretation of this verse sees Jesus as the Leader who is perpetually available, in contrast to the leaders who had preached to these readers but who were now dead.<sup>5</sup> Jesus had also died and gone to heaven (cf. 12:2). His example of faithfulness, as emphasized in this epistle, should be a continuing encouragement to all believers. He is as faithful to His promises now as He ever was, and He always will be faithful to them. This epistle reveals many changes that God made with the advent of His Son, but Christ Himself never changes.

13:9 Christians should reject "teachings" that deviate from apostolic doctrine. This too is a strong safeguard against

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<sup>1</sup>Barclay, p. 222. See also Pink, pp. 1159-60.

<sup>2</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 570-71.

<sup>3</sup>G. W. MacRae, "Heavenly Temple and Eschatology in the Letter to the Hebrews," *Semeia* 12 (1978):194.

<sup>4</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 530.

<sup>5</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 395.

apostasy. The words "varied" and "strange" describe a variety of heretical positions. Rather than accepting these ideas, we should receive strength by taking in God's "grace" that comes through His Word (4:12-13; 1 Pet. 2:2). This strength comes from spiritual rather than material food.

Evidently one of the strange teachings, that was prevalent when this letter originated was that eating certain "foods," or abstaining from certain "foods," resulted in greater godliness (cf. Col. 2:16; 1 Tim. 4:1-5). This was, of course, what Judaism taught too. Judaism taught that eating food strengthened the heart in the sense that when the Jews ate it, they also gave thanks to God, and thus brought Him into their experience (cf. Ps. 104:14-15).<sup>1</sup> However Jesus' death on the cross is the source of both the saving and the sustaining grace of God by which we experience strengthening.

"This, I think, is the key message of Hebrews: 'You can be secure while everything around you is falling apart!'"<sup>2</sup>

13:10 Believers under the Old Covenant ate part of what they offered to God as a peace offering (Lev. 7:15-18). However believers under the New Covenant feed spiritually on Jesus Christ who is our Peace Offering. Those still under the Old Covenant ("who serve the tabernacle") had no right to partake of Him for spiritual sustenance and fellowship with God, since their confidence was still in the Old Covenant.

"Christians had none of the visible apparatus which in those days was habitually associated with religion and worship—no sacred buildings, no altars, no sacrificing priests. Their pagan neighbors thought they had no God, and called them atheists; their Jewish neighbors too might criticize them for having no visible means of spiritual support."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, pp. 533-36.

<sup>2</sup>Wiersbe, 2:278.

<sup>3</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 400.

Roman Catholics have tended to see in this "altar" a reference to the mass, whereas Protestants have viewed it as a reference either to Christ Himself, or His cross, or a heavenly altar. I prefer the cross, since it is the counterpart (antitype) of the altar of burnt offerings in Judaism, namely, the place where the sin offering was made. Unbelieving Jews "have no right to eat" of (feed on) Christ, who was sacrificed on that cross altar.

13:11 Far from defiling those who associated with Jesus Christ, who is our Sin (purification) Offering, associating with Him leads to holiness. Here the writer compared Jesus to the sin offering that the Jewish high priest offered on the Day of Atonement (cf. Lev. 16:27).

"... in Hebrews the expression 'high priest' customarily signals that the field of reference is the annual atonement ritual (cf. 5:3; 7:27; 8:1-3; 9:7, 11, 12, 24-26)."<sup>1</sup>

13:12 Jesus' death "outside the gate" of Jerusalem fulfilled the Day of Atonement ritual (v. 12). The Jewish high priest burned the remains of the two sacrificial animals outside the precincts of the wilderness camp (v. 11). Jesus' death also fulfilled the ritual of that day in that Jesus' execution outside the city gate involved the shame of exclusion from the sacred precincts. It therefore symbolized His rejection by the Jewish authorities.<sup>2</sup>

13:13 "This verse may be regarded as the crux of the conclusion, a final direct appeal to the readers to identify themselves wholly with Christ."<sup>3</sup>

Christians bear Jesus' "reproach" when they identify with Him. He suffered reproach (insults, shame, and rejection), and so do we, but only when we identify with His name and person. This was especially true of the original Jewish recipients of this epistle. They needed to cut their emotional and religious ties

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 540.

<sup>2</sup>Morris, p. 151.

<sup>3</sup>Guthrie, p. 274.

to Judaism.<sup>1</sup> Jerusalem was no longer their special city (cf. v. 14). There is nothing wrong with Jewish Christians maintaining Jewish customs provided they do not rely on them for favor with God.

"To fulfil the type it was not necessary for Christ to suffer outside the camp, or beyond the gate of the holy city. The fact that He did so signified that He had been cast out by those under the old covenant. The exhortation *let us go forth therefore unto him* means that no longer must the readers look for salvation in the old forms of Judaism; they must come outside of it to Jesus who cannot be found in Judaism."<sup>2</sup>

"The exhortation to leave the camp [i.e., official Judaism] and to identify fully with Jesus introduces a distinctive understanding of discipleship. Jesus' action in going 'outside the camp' (v 12) set a precedent for others to follow. The task of the community is to emulate Jesus, leaving behind the security, congeniality, and respectability of the sacred enclosure [cf. the Israelites' camp in the wilderness wanderings], risking the reproach that fell upon him. Christian identity is a matter of 'going out' now to him. It entails the costly commitment to follow him resolutely, despite suffering. In the context of the allusion to Golgotha in v 12, this summons to discipleship implies following Jesus on the way to the cross ..."<sup>3</sup>

13:14 "The city" that Christians seek is the heavenly Jerusalem (cf. 12:22). Our present habitation on earth is only temporary (cf. 11:26).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Bruce, *The Epistle ...*, p. 403; P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary ...*, pp. 580-82.

<sup>2</sup>Hewett, p. 210.

<sup>3</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 543. Paragraph division omitted. Cf. Guthrie, pp. 274-75.

<sup>4</sup>See Fred R. Lybrand Jr., *Heavenly Citizenship: The Spiritual Alternative to Power Politics*.



13:15-16 Even though God does not require periodic animal and vegetable sacrifices from us, we should "offer" other sacrifices to Him. These sacrifices include "praise" (cf. Hos. 14:2), "doing good" works, and "sharing" what we have with others (as well as giving Him ourselves, Rom. 12:1).

"The heart that praises God is delivered from anxious care and self-centered gloom."<sup>1</sup>

"A spirit of philanthropy and benevolence is to be manifested by well-doing. It is not enough to *be* good; we must *do* good."<sup>2</sup>

We should offer these "sacrifices" of the New Covenant "continually" (cf. Ps. 34:1; 92:2; 104:33).

"In systems like Judaism sacrifices were offered at set times, but for Christians praise goes up all the time."<sup>3</sup>

13:17 The "leaders" in view are church elders (pastors; cf. vv. 7, 24). These shepherds watch over the "souls" (lives) of those under their care and will have to "give an account" to God one day for their stewardship over them. We should make their work in this life easier for them by being obedient and submissive to them.<sup>4</sup>

"... obey in those things which they command you to do as salutary [beneficial]: submit even when they demand a little more."<sup>5</sup>

The presence of this exhortation at this point in the epistle may suggest that the racially Jewish element in the church tended to be obstinate or rebellious. Will the leaders of your church be able to tell God that leading you was a pleasure when they stand before Him?

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<sup>1</sup>Saphir, 2:710.

<sup>2</sup>Pink, p. 1222.

<sup>3</sup>Morris, p. 151. Cf. Moffatt, pp. 236-37.

<sup>4</sup>See Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pp. 309-16.

<sup>5</sup>Bengel, quoted by Hewett, p. 211.

13:18-19 The writer confessed to needing the prayers of his brothers and sisters in the faith. He faced the same pressure to depart from the Lord (apostatize) that they faced. He probably emphasized his "good conscience" because Jewish antagonists had opposed him.<sup>1</sup> He longed to return to his readers again, wherever they may have been living. He believed that their prayers could affect God's timing of his return to them. Hebrews was not originally anonymous, since the writer and the readers knew each other.

"Who can tell how much each servant of Christ is indebted to the prayers of God's hidden ones? To bear such up before Him is a wondrous ministry, the full of which will only be manifested in that day when every secret thing will be revealed and each one will be rewarded according to his own service. Let none think that it is a little thing to pray. There is no higher ministry, no more important office, than that of intercessor."<sup>2</sup>

### Doxology 13:20-21

These verses express the writer's prayerful wish for (or benediction on) his readers.

13:20 The writer referred to God as "the God of peace." He is the source of peace between redeemed sinners and Himself, and the source of peace between believers, in this case especially Jewish Christians and Gentile Christians. The evidence that God has made peace is that He "brought" Jesus our Lord "up from the dead."

"Peace means not merely calmness and rest of conscience and heart, based on the righteousness of God, but it means also restoration to health and well-being ..."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Pink, p. 1257.

<sup>2</sup>Harry A. Ironside, quoted in E. Schuyler English, *H. A. Ironside: Ordained of the Lord*, p. 198.

<sup>3</sup>Saphir, 2:717.

Elsewhere John and Peter called Jesus Christ the good Shepherd (John 10:14) and the chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:4). Here He is "the great Shepherd," greater than any in Judaism. This is another expression of Jesus' superiority over the Mosaic system.

"As the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ *died* for the sheep (John 10:11). As the Great Shepherd, He *lives* for the sheep in heaven today, working on their behalf. As the Chief Shepherd, He will *come for the sheep* at His return (1 Peter 5:4). Our Shepherd cares for His own in the past, present, and future. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever!"<sup>1</sup>

"The eternal covenant" is the New Covenant in contrast to the temporary Old Covenant. Jesus' "blood" (death) in this eternal New Covenant was superior to animal blood (death) offered under the Old Covenant.

13:21 To "equip" means to prepare for use (cf. 2 Tim. 3:16-17). The same Greek word, *katartidzo*, elsewhere describes a doctor setting a broken bone, a general preparing his army for battle, and a fisherman mending his net (cf. Matt. 4:21). It was the writer's concern that his readers be ready to reign with Jesus Christ by doing "His will." This is the purpose for remaining faithful to God throughout the epistle. Part of our full inheritance (full rest, full salvation) is the privilege of reigning with Him (2 Tim. 2:12). To attain this privilege we must continue to press on toward maturity by following Jesus Christ faithfully, rather than turning from Him.

But it is God who works in us to do His will, namely, "what is pleasing in His sight." That is why He deserves "the glory forever and ever." "Amen" (So be it!).

This pastoral prayer (vv. 20-21) brings the sermon to its conclusion. Many of the emphases expounded in the epistle come together in this benediction: peace, resurrection, ascension, Jesus' present shepherding

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<sup>1</sup>Wiersbe, 2:330.

(priestly) ministry, blood, covenant, Jesus' Lordship, good works, God's will, enabling grace, and glory.

## 2. Personal Explanations 13:22-25

The closing verses of Hebrews are an addendum to the body of this sermon epistle. The writer added them because he felt pastoral concern for his addressees and wanted to add a few personal remarks.

13:22 The writer again urged his readers to "listen patiently" to the "word of exhortation" contained in this epistle rather than rejecting it. It is, after all, a brief word. The Greek noun *paraklasis* ("exhortation") means imploration, supplication, entreaty, admonition, encouragement, consolation, comfort, and solace.<sup>1</sup>

"The definite expression 'the exhortation' is a synonymous designation for the sermon. It referred specifically to the exposition and application of the Scripture that had been read aloud to the assembled congregation. In a fourth-century description of the liturgy for the consecration of a bishop the homily is designated *logous parakleseos*, 'words of exhortation' (*Apost. Const.* 8.5). This appears to be a fixed expression for the sermon in early Christian circles ..."<sup>2</sup>

13:23 The writer obviously composed this epistle during the lifetime of "Timothy" and after some confinement that Timothy had experienced. Evidently the writer and Timothy were close associates in the Lord's work. This is almost certainly a reference to the same Timothy who was known as Paul's son in the faith and who is referred to elsewhere in the New Testament. This is the only Christian that the writer mentioned

<sup>1</sup>Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, s.v. "*paraklasis*," p. 483.

<sup>2</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9—13*, p. 568. See also L. Wills, "The Form of the Sermon in Hellenistic Judaism and Early Christianity," *Harvard Theological Review* 77 (1984):280 and footnote 10.

by name in the entire epistle, though he did name several Old Testament saints.

13:24 The term "leaders" refers to local church leaders (cf. vv. 7, 17). The letter probably went to one house-church or possible a few of them. The evidence indicates that most first-century churches had more than one leader (cf. Tit. 1:5; Acts 14:23; 20:17; Phil. 1:1). It would be unusual for the writer to send this letter to someone in a church who was not a leader in it.

"The multiplicity of house churches suggests why diversity, disunity, and a tendency toward independence were persistent problems in the early Church. Unity and organization became matters of urgent concern. The members of the several house churches in a particular center needed to keep in touch with one another. It was of vital importance that the greetings of the writer be conveyed to 'all the saints' ..."<sup>1</sup>

"Those from Italy" probably refers to Christians who had left Italy rather than to believers currently living there (cf. Acts 18:2).<sup>2</sup> If this is true, the writer probably wrote from somewhere other than Italy. Another view is that "those from Italy" refers to Christians living in Italy who joined the writer in sending greetings. If the letter went originally to Christian Jews in Rome, the writer may have been writing from somewhere else in Italy.<sup>3</sup>

13:25 The writer closed with a final benediction and prayer that God's "grace" would be with his readers—in the sense that they would receive strength from it (cf. 2:9; 4:16; 10:29; 12:15; 13:9). This would happen as they persevered faithfully in the truth.

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<sup>1</sup>Lane, *Hebrews 9–13*, p. 570. Cf. F. V. Filson, *"Yesterday": A Study of Hebrews in the Light of Chapter 13*, p. 76.

<sup>2</sup>Westcott, pp. 451-52. Cf. Tenney, pp. 234-35.

<sup>3</sup>Lenski, p. 499.

This entire last chapter is an admonition to worship God acceptably, that is, according to the New Covenant rather than according to the Old Mosaic Covenant.

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