

Long ago God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, through whom he also created the worlds. He is the reflection of God's glory and the exact imprint of God's very being, and he sustains all things by his powerful word. When he had made purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high. . .

Hebrews 1:1-3

At first glance one might ask, Why study Hebrews? As we open the pages of this often neglected New Testament book we might think the author's concerns are far from our own. In Hebrews we find comparisons drawn between Jesus and Moses, Jesus and Aaron, Jesus and Joshua, Jesus and the angels. Even Jesus and Melchizedek! Twentieth century readers of Hebrews find themselves asking, "Who are these people, how do I pronounce their names and why should I care about such comparisons?" But to ask these questions is to miss the forest for the trees. Ultimately, Hebrews is about listening to the voice of God!

Hebrews is unlike the other letters of the New Testament. It is, essentially, a sermon which was written down and read to a congregation of believers who were tempted to fall away from their confidence in Jesus as savior. The message of the sermon is summarized in the first verses of the book: God has spoken in his Son! Listen to Him!

### **Who wrote Hebrews?**

We don't know. The original King James Version (1611) attributed the book to Paul, but this is unlikely for several reasons. First, Paul's characteristic style, his introduction, conclusion and common vocabulary are missing from the book.<sup>1</sup> Second, Paul's common theological themes of justification by faith, sanctification, etc., are present in Hebrews, but they are presented in a different light. In Hebrews we find a continual comparison of the new covenant in Christ with the old covenant of Moses. Paul tends to present the cross as God's work of reconciliation in legal terminology. In Christ we are "declared righteous" (cf. Rom. 1:17, 3:10, 5:19, etc.). In Hebrews the emphasis is on Christ's priesthood. Here we learn that the old covenant, the tabernacle and temple, were but shadows of the reality which is found in Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Paul is known for his very simple Greek vocabulary, while the language of Hebrews has been called "the most sonorous piece of Greek in the New Testament." (Barclay, p. 1)

<sup>2</sup> The Jerusalem temple is not directly mentioned in Hebrews.

## **INTRODUCTION**

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Tertullian suggested, early in the third century, that Barnabas wrote Hebrews. The sixteenth century reformer Martin Luther thought Apollos was the author, while others have suggested Priscilla. In the end Origen had it right when he said, “Only God knows.”

### **What is the setting of Hebrews?**

We know the recipients of Hebrews were Jewish, but what kind of Jews were they? Were the Hebrews Hellenistic (Greek influenced) Jews? Or were they “Esseno-Christian” Jews living in the dessert?<sup>1</sup> Again, we don’t know for sure. We can, however, make some educated guesses about the setting from the contents of the book. As we read through these pages it will become clear that Hebrews was addressed to a group of Jewish Christians who were suffering some level of persecution for their faith. As Jews, their looming temptation was to leave their allegiance to Christ and revert back to Judaism *per se*. In so doing, they would be exempt from the threat of overt persecution.

One question we must ask as we read Hebrews concerns the temple. Why is it never mentioned? Titus Flavius Vespasianus, Emperor of Rome (AD 79-81) destroyed the temple and greater Jerusalem in AD 70. Is the temple a thing of the past by the time the book was written? Or does the writer refer to the tabernacle (as opposed to the temple) to make his point without needlessly offending Jews who still held temple worship in high regard?<sup>2</sup>

Probably the most popular view of the setting of Hebrews is to see it in a Roman context. In AD 64 the city of Rome was devastated by fire. While most of the city was affected, three of the city’s fourteen districts were leveled to the ground.

Nero, emperor at that time, was blamed for the fire by the public. In spite of his re-building programs his popularity in the polls fell lower and lower. In order to divert attention from himself, Nero blamed Christians for the fire and began a pogrom against them. Roman historian Tacitus wrote, “To suppress this rumor Nero fabricated scapegoats, and punished with every refinement the notoriously depraved Christians (as they were popularly called).”<sup>3</sup>

Jewish Christians in Rome were no strangers to severe persecution. Fifteen years earlier, while Claudius was emperor, Jewish believers were expelled from the city. Evidently their evangelistic efforts in the Jewish quarter provoked riots. Claudius solved the problem by

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<sup>1</sup> The Essenes were a group of Jews who gave up on society and became, essentially, a monastic community in the dessert. They flourished during the first century BC and the first century AD.

<sup>2</sup> Many interpreters date Hebrews shortly before the destruction of the temple in AD 70. Why do they hold to this position? Frequently the writer will refer to Israel’s 40 year period of wilderness wandering in the Sinai desert. After the 40 years were complete, the nation entered the promised land. Could it be that the preacher was saying, in effect, “It’s been almost 40 years for us too. Jesus died and he is coming again soon! Hang in there.”

<sup>3</sup> from *Annals of Rome*, 15:44. Cited in CTC, p. 24.

deporting the Jewish segment of the church.<sup>1</sup> The readers of Hebrews had been here before.

But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting.

Heb. 10:32-34

But the present situation is more serious. Loss of life is a possibility.

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood.

Heb. 12:4

The people of the house churches in Rome were deeply frightened! Some began to neglect corporate worship (10:25) and others had, perhaps, begun to deny Christ (6:6; 10:29). Lane writes,

In the year A.D. 64 martyrdom became an aspect of the Christian experience in Rome. There were several house-churches in the city, and the group addressed in Hebrews had not yet been affected by the emperor's actions. But the threat of death and arrest was real. (CTC, p. 24)<sup>2</sup>

Kent Hughes ponders what might have been in the minds of the congregation.

The tiny home-church was asking some hard questions: Did God know what was going on? If so, how could this be happening to them? Did he care? Only God could protect them, but where was he? Why did he not answer? Why the silence of God? (Hughes, I, p. 19)

We will approach Hebrews from this perspective. The readers are beginning to suffer significant persecution for their faith and are thus tempted to return to their pre-conversion Judaism. The writer is an intimate friend of the readers who are in or near Rome (cf. 13:24), and he hopes to return to them soon (13:19).

### **What is the style of Hebrews?**

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<sup>1</sup> This is based on Sestonius' biography of Claudius, Life of the Deified Claudius. There Sestonius writes, "There were riots in the Jewish quarter at the instigation of Chrestus. As a result, Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome." Many historians think Sestonius confused the name *Chrestus* with the title *Christus*, Christ or Messiah.

<sup>2</sup> "Hebrews appears to be addressed to the members of a house church that had not yet borne the brunt of the persecution, or, less probably, to Jewish Christians who returned to Rome after [the fire]. It is reasonable to assign tentatively a date for the composition of Hebrews to the insecure interval between the aftermath of the great fire of Rome (A.D. 64) and Nero's suicide in June, A.D. 68." Lane, I, p. lxvi.

## **INTRODUCTION**

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Hebrews is unlike the letters of the New Testament. As a matter of fact, Hebrews appears to be not a formal letter but a sermon containing both encouragement and warning.<sup>1</sup> The book is a sermon in written form (a first century tape ministry) meant to both encourage and challenge its hearers. Hebrews “sounds” like the author is speaking:

Heb. 2:1 Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.

Heb. 2:5 Now God did not subject the coming world, about which we are speaking, to angels.

Heb. 5:11 Concerning him we have much to say, and {it is} hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. (NASB)

Heb. 6:9 Even though we speak in this way, beloved, we are confident of better things in your case, things that belong to salvation.

Heb. 8:1 Now the main point in what we are saying is this. . .

Heb. 9:5 . . .of these things we cannot speak now in detail.

Heb. 11:32 And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets . . .<sup>2</sup>

At the end of the sermon (or letter) the author refers to his work as “a word of exhortation” (13:22). The phrase occurs only one other time in the New Testament. In Acts 13:15 Paul and Barnabas are invited to preach in the synagogue of Antioch of Pisidia. “Brothers, if you have any word of exhortation for the people, give it.”

One noticeable feature of Hebrews is found in the frequency, introduction and style of Old Testament quotations. “Hebrews is impregnated with the OT.” (Lane, I, p. cxv) The author is so steeped in the Old Testament that readers have a difficult time agreeing on exactly how many quotations are found in the epistle.<sup>3</sup>

When Paul introduces a quotation from the Old Testament he customarily says, *It is written*. . . In Hebrews we find a different verb, *It says*. In 2:6 the preacher sounds as if he is thinking aloud, *But someone has said somewhere*. . . What follows is a quotation from Psalm 8.

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews lacks the form of an ancient letter. The writer fails to identify himself (cf. The beginning of Paul’s letters), or those to whom he is writing. There is no formal salutation at the beginning and the conclusion.

<sup>2</sup> Don’t you wish your teachers had such sensitivity to the clock?

<sup>3</sup> Richard Longenecker finds thirty-eight, Caird twenty-nine, while Lane finds thirty-one explicit references, four implicit and thirteen others. (Lane, I, cxvi)

But the style of Old Testament quotations is most noticeable. The preacher quotes not from the Hebrew Bible but from the Greek translation (the Septuagint) of the Hebrew Bible. At times the difference between the two is significant. Consider the following:

	<b>Hebrew Bible</b>	<b>Greek Bible (Septuagint)</b>
Psalm 8:5	<i>You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings [or than God]</i>	<i>You made him a little [or for a little while] lower than the angels. (Heb. 2:7)</i>
Psalm 40:6	<i>Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced;</i>	<i>Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me. (Heb. 10:5)</i>

Why did the author use a translation that differed from the Old Testament text? Possibly the writer did not know Hebrew, had learned the Scriptures through a Greek translation, and wrote to readers who themselves used this translation. Does this mean that the so-called Septuagint translation was inspired? Of course not. But this does not mean that the writer of Hebrews was forbidden to quote from a translation, even from one that showed some variation. However, at the moment the author wrote his letter, the inspiration of the epistle, including the Old Testament quotations, took place. (Kistemaker, p. 5)

### **What is the emphasis of Hebrews?**

“Hang in there!” is an apt summary of the message of Hebrews. The looming persecution is a threat to the faith of this house church.

Hebrews was written to arouse, urge, encourage, and exhort those addressed to maintain their Christian confession and to dissuade them from a course of action that the writer believed would be catastrophic. He calls them to fidelity and obedience and seeks to prepare them for suffering. . . . The writer’s intention is to address the sagging faith of men and women within the group and to remind them of their responsibility to live actively in response to God’s absolute claim upon their lives through the gospel. He urges his listeners to hold loyally to their confession of Jesus Christ as the sole mediator of salvation in a time of crisis and warns them of the judgment of God they would incur if they should renounce their Christian commitment. (Lane, I, c)

Consider some of the words of warning and encouragement in these pages:

Heb. 2:1 Therefore we must pay greater attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it.

Heb. 3:12 Take care, brothers and sisters, that none of you may have an evil, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.

## **INTRODUCTION**

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Heb. 4:1 Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest is still open, let us take care that none of you should seem to have failed to reach it.

Heb. 4:11 Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs.

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

Heb. 4:16 Let us therefore approach the throne of grace with boldness, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Heb. 6:1 Therefore let us go on toward perfection, leaving behind the basic teaching about Christ, and not laying again the foundation: repentance from dead works and faith toward God. . .

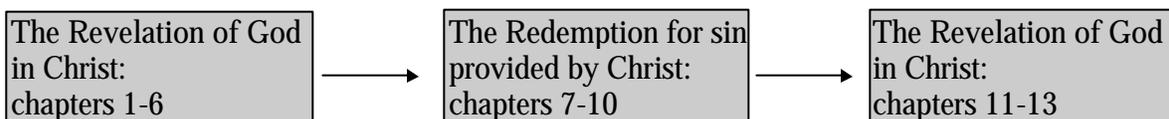
Heb. 6:11-12 And we want each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope to the very end, so that you may not become sluggish. . .

Heb. 12:1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. . .

Why should the Hebrews stick with the Christian faith? What is it about Jesus which makes it worth suffering persecution, loss of property and even life itself?

The writer of Hebrews presents Jesus as the final revelation of God who provided the final redemption for sin. In these pages we learn a good deal about what Jesus is doing in heaven during the present dispensation, but we also learn more about Jesus' ministry on earth than we do in any other New Testament letter, save the four gospels.

From one vantage point we could outline the book accordingly:



A more detailed outline of Hebrews would include the following:

1:1-4

1. Introduction: God Has Spoken in Jesus!

- |             |  |
|-------------|--|
| 1:5—2:18    | 2. Jesus Is Superior to Angels             |
| 3:1—4:13    | 3. Jesus Is Greater Than Moses             |
| 4:14—7:28   | 4. Jesus Is The Great High Priest          |
| 8:1—10:18   | 5. Jesus Is The Mediator of a New Covenant |
| 10:19—12:29 | 6. Jesus' Work Is Applied to the Believer  |
| 13:1-25     | 7. Concluding Comments                     |

### **What is the value of Hebrews?**

John Calvin, the theological voice of the Protestant reformation, was exuberant over Hebrews.

There is, indeed, no book in the Holy Scriptures which speaks so clearly of the priesthood of Christ, so splendidly extols the power and worth of that unique sacrifice which he offered by his death, deals more adequately with the use and also the abrogation of ceremonies, and in short, explains more fully that Christ is the end of the Law.

Philip Hughes, who wrote one of our era's most significant commentaries on the book, points to the spiritual value of the writer's sermon.

[Hebrews] is a tonic for the spiritually debilitated. The study of this epistle leads us beneath the surface of things to the profound depths of our evangelical faith, and enriches and establishes our understanding of the grace of God manifested on our behalf in the incarnation, self-offering, and exaltation of him who is the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. (Hughes, p. 1)

In the 1990s we probably don't wrestle too often with Jesus' status relative to angels, Moses, Aaron and Joshua. Nevertheless, we have our false gods which compete for our attention and adoration. Hebrews serves as a wonderful reminder and exhortation to trust in the sufficiency of Christ for life and salvation. As we study this letter we will come to a more complete and mature understanding of the One who is the final revelation of God and who provided final atonement for sin. Hebrews is, indeed, the key to understanding our salvation in the context of the whole Bible. Here we find our place in the flow of redemptive history. The study of Hebrews cannot help but make us appreciate the wonder of the new covenant. After the death of Christ, true worship is possible because of the blood of Christ (10:19-20)! We are invited to enter into the presence of God himself! Praise Him!

## ***INTRODUCTION***

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Many thanks to the artists who provided pictures for our study: Garth Humbert, John Worthy, Amy Bond, Heather Ridenour, Heidi Palladino. The study was written by Reed Jolley and proof read by about half the world (9/98).

*Sermon Notes. . .*

## **Study One**

### **God's Megaphone!**

### **Hebrews 1:1-3**

Imagine Santa Barbara Community Church as a church in a Hebrews-like situation. The government of Santa Barbara has blamed the most recent earthquake on our church because our worship was too exuberant. Homes of various members have been confiscated. Some members are being held at the county jail while others have been beaten and released. Corporate worship on Sunday is out of the question, but many of our homegroups are still meeting. The easiest way to circumvent the threat of reprisal is to quietly slip out of the church and hope the persecution goes away. One of our homegroup leaders, now living in Europe, hears of our difficulties and sends a lengthy e-mail to one of our elders. The message is so pertinent that copies are made and distributed to those homegroups which are still meeting. "READ THIS AT YOUR NEXT MEETING," is printed at the top of the message.

As we read the e-mail we are bombarded in the very first sentences with the main point of the missive: Jesus is God's megaphone!

With the above in mind, read the three verses in this week's study. Notice the eloquence of the author's language, the poetry of his style and the rich content packed into these verses.<sup>1</sup> Read these verses from as many translations as you can find. Do you notice any differences? See, especially, verse 3 when comparing translations.

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<sup>1</sup> Most students will, of course, recall the beautiful Dutch translation of 1637 which preserves the alliteration of the original Greek text: *God, voortijds veelmaal en op velerlei wijze tot de vaderen gesproken hebbende door de profeten, heeft in deze laatste dagen gesproken door de Zoon!*

Note the comparison of the old revelation with the new.

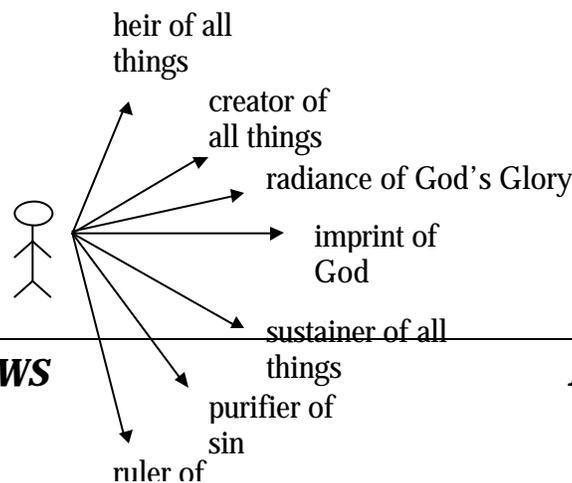
	<b>Old Revelation</b>	<b>New Revelation</b>
<i>how?</i>	at many times and in various ways	
<i>when?</i>	in the past	in these last days
<i>to whom?</i>	to our forefathers	to us
<i>by whom?</i>	through the prophets	by his Son

Simon Kistemaker observes,

The figure appears to be incomplete: the “how” on the Old Testament side does not have a New Testament counterpart. The phrase “at many times and in various ways” lacks a parallel. The writer is pointing out that the fullness of revelation is unique, final and complete. (Kistemaker, p. 27)

F. F. Bruce is more succinct. “The story of divine revelation is a story of progression up to Christ, but there is no progression beyond Him.” (Bruce, p. 3) God’s revelation before the time of Jesus was valid, but it was incomplete. Indeed, God spoke through the prophets, through the law given to Moses, through the miracles performed by Elijah and Elisha. But Jesus is God’s final word, God’s final self-revelation. There is, therefore, no one else to whom we may turn. For the Hebrews to leave their faith in Christ and return to their Jewish roots would be to miss the one to whom the prophets were pointing.

Verses 2-3 are filled with the truth about the Jesus we worship. Notice seven predicates ascribed to our Lord.



Compare the following verses with regard to each of the ascriptions to Jesus. How do these verses inform your understanding of Jesus? Make a few notes and share them with your group.

<b>Hebrews</b>	<b>Other Bible references</b>
heir of all things	Psalm 2:8 Colossians 1:16b Romans 11:36
creator of all things	Colossians 1:16a John 1:3 I Corinthians 8:6
radiance of God's glory	Mark 9:3 Acts 9:3; 22:6 (note context) Revelation 1:13-17
imprint of God	John 1:1
sustainer of all things	Colossians 1:17
purifier of sin	II Corinthians 5:21
ruler of the universe	Psalm 110:1 I Corinthians 15:22-26

As you read through these passages, what attributes or characteristics of Jesus enrich your faith in him? Why?

**Notes and Questions:**

In the Jewish mind God's "wisdom" was virtually personified (see Proverbs 8:22ff.) and wisdom was understood to be (1) the creator of the world, (2) the sustainer of the universe, (3) the revelation of God's truth and (4) the agent of reconciliation between God and sinful humanity. Think through this list with regard to our text. God's wisdom has become a man, Jesus!

After the temple was destroyed in AD 70 the Jews were filled with despair.

In former times, even in the generations of old, our fathers had helpers, righteous men and holy prophets. . . . But now the righteous have been gathered, and the prophets have fallen asleep. We also have gone forth from the land, and Zion (Jerusalem) has been taken from us, and we have nothing now except the Mighty One and his law."<sup>1</sup>

*The righteous have been gathered, and the prophets have fallen asleep. . .* The writer of Hebrews has an incredible correction to the gloom of this lament. Jesus is the glory of God manifest!

Compare translations in vs. 3.

NRSV            He is the reflection of God's glory. . .

NASB            And He is the radiance of His glory. . .

NIV              The Son is the radiance of God's glory. . .

The Greek word used is *apaugasma* (ἀπαύγασμα). It means, indeed, to radiate. The moon reflects the sun's light, the sun is the source of light. Jesus, we learn, is the very radiance of God's glory!

The idea must have been thrilling to Jewish readers. The manifestation of the glory of God was temporal during Old Testament times (cf. I Samuel 4:21-22). Jesus is the final and permanent manifestation of Yahweh's glory!

The writer goes on to describe Jesus as the "imprint of God." The Greek word used is found only here in the New Testament, but Philo, a Greek philosopher, used the word fifty-one times in his writings. He used the word to describe a man's soul which bears the *imprint* of God.<sup>2</sup> If we turn this noun into a verb we have the Greek word *charakter* which means "to engrave." Jesus "bears the very stamp of God's nature." (Brown, p. 31)

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<sup>1</sup> From the second *Apocalypse of Baruch*, cited in Lane, I, p. 10.

<sup>2</sup> cf. Lane, I, p. 13.

## ***GOD'S MEGAPHONE!***

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Hebrews 1:1-3 answers several of the most significant questions one may ask of life. Does God exist? If he does, is it possible for me to communicate with Him? On what basis might I know God?

One of the preeminent film makers of our time is Ingmar Bergman. His films of the 1950s and 1960s grappled with the question of God's existence, or rather, the question of God's silence in the modern world. *The Seventh Seal*, thought by many to be the Swedish director's greatest work, wrestles with these issues. Early in the film we meet a knight returning from the Crusades. He stops in a small chapel and enters the confessional booth. The priest hearing his confession is Death personified.

**Knight:** Why can't I kill God within me? Why does he live on in this painful and humiliating way, even though I curse him and want to tear him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is he a baffling reality that I can't shake off? Do you hear me?

**Death:** Yes, I hear you.

**Knight:** I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal himself, speak to me.

**Death:** But he remains silent.

**Knight:** I call out to him in the dark, but no one seems to be there.

**Death:** Perhaps no one is there.

**Knight:** Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death knowing that all is nothingness.<sup>1</sup>

Respond to the knight's last statement. Is life without God an "outrageous horror?" Why? How is it that many "atheists" are seemingly so happy?

What do our verses have to say to our neighbor who "calls to the dark" and finds no one there?

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<sup>1</sup> cf., *The Silence of God: Creative Response to the Films of Ingmar Bergman*, New York: Harper & Row, 1969. See also CTC, p. 30.

Respond to the following statement.

Possibly our vision of Christ is limited. We are in danger of confining him to our restricted experience or limited knowledge. We need a vision of Christ with these immense cosmic dimensions, a Christ who transcends all our noblest thoughts about him and all our best experience of him. These first-century readers would be less likely to turn from him in adversity if they had looked to him in adoration. The opening sentences of the letter are designed to bring them and us to our knees; only then can we hope to stand firmly on our feet. (Brown, p. 32)

How is it with your vision of Christ?

Do you worship a Christ with “immense cosmic dimensions”?

How does your understanding of Jesus affect the pattern of your life?

Are you (we) “looking to him in adoration”? How does this affect your relation to him during times of adversity?

*Sermon Notes. . .*

## **Study Two**

### **Better Than Angels**

#### **Hebrews 1:4-14**

“Hang in there. . . keep going” says the writer of Hebrews. “Jesus is the one in whom we are to place our faith. He is the only one who is sufficient for our salvation.” To this point in Hebrews, in three short verses, we have learned the following about Jesus:

He is:

1. the Prophet through whom God has spoken
2. the Creator who made the universe
3. the Heir of all things
4. the Representation of God’s being
5. the Upholder of all things
6. the Priest who provided purification for sins
7. the King who sat down in the place of honor<sup>1</sup>

Now, having drenched the reader with the wondrous truth about Jesus, the author affirms the superiority of the Son over angels (vs. 4). Jesus is “better than”<sup>2</sup> angels. The remainder of the chapter offers seven quotations from the Old Testament to corroborate this wonderful truth.

Angels embarrass us. We find angels in comic strips, starring as cartoon characters and spicing up romantic movies. If we come close to having an accident we might blush and say, “Guess my guardian angel was looking out for me. . .” But we don’t take angels seriously in public discourse. One would be hard pressed to find a senator or a representative in Congress referring to the “angels assigned to protect America.” Angels don’t fit in a naturalistic world, a world devoid of the supernatural.

It hasn’t always been like this. During Old and New Testament times, Jews (and some Greeks) held angels in high regard. Angels were invisible, but understood to be real. In fact, by the time of Jesus, Jews tended to hold angels in such esteem that they even worshipped them (cf. Col. 2:18). By the time of the writing of Hebrews interest in and exoneration of angels was on the increase.

What are angels? Are there “boy” angels and “girl” angels? Do angels fly?<sup>1</sup> Before turning to Hebrews do a little digging on your own. The Bible mentions angels almost three hundred times!

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Kistemaker, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word “better” used here is *kreittōn* (κρείττων). It is a favorite of the author’s. Of the nineteen times the word occurs in the New Testament, thirteen occur in Hebrews. Jesus is “better than” angels, the old covenant, Aaron, etc.

## **BETTER THAN ANGELS. . .**

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What do you learn about angels from the following verses?

Define an angel.

Why did God make angels?

Are there very many angels?

What general statements can you make about angels from these verses?

What do angels look like? Do they all look the same?

- Revelation 5:11
- Genesis 18:2
- Mark 16:5
- Luke 2:9
- II Kings 6:17
- Genesis 19:1-2
- Matthew 28:2-3
- Exodus 25:20 / Isaiah 6:2

Consider the following summary statements about angels (Keep digging: look up the verses).<sup>2</sup>

1. Angels are creatures made to worship God. (Psalm 103:20; Revelation 4:8, 5:9-12)
2. Angels serve God's children. (Psalm 34:7; Acts 5:19; 12:6-11)
3. Angels reveal God's truth to humans. (Acts 7:38, 53<sup>1</sup>)

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<sup>1</sup> In the preface to *The Screwtape Letters* C.S. Lewis writes, "In the plastic arts these symbols have steadily degenerated. *Fra Angelico's* angels carry in their face and gesture the peace and authority of Heaven. Later come the chubby infantile nudes of *Raphael*; finally the soft, slim, girlish, and consolatory angels of nineteenth century art, shapes so feminine that they avoid being voluptuous only by their total insipidity—the frigid hours of a teatable paradise. They are a pernicious symbol. In Scripture the visitation of an angel is always alarming; it has to begin by saying "Fear not." The Victorian angel looks as if it were going to say, 'There, there.'" (*The Screwtape Letters*, pp. viii-xi).

<sup>2</sup> based on Hughes, I, p. 35.

4. Angels were with God in creation (Job 38:7), they assist God in his providence (Daniel 12:1) and they will deliver judgment with God in the future (Matthew 24:31; I Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Kent Hughes is exuberant:

What awesome beings are angels! And what terrific power they wield! But despite all their cosmic excellencies, their significance dwindles in the presence of Christ. Thus, we come to the grand theme of Hebrews 1:4-14, *Christ's superiority to angels*. (Hughes, I, p. 35)

With the above in mind, read Hebrews 1:4-11. Jesus is superior to angels! What preliminary thoughts come to mind as you read?

In verse 4 the author begins a discussion which will continue through chapter 3. Jesus' superiority over angels is pertinent to the argument of the book. As we have already noted, by the time of the writing of Hebrews, angels objects of great interest. Jews had a sense of spiritual isolation. Recall the quotation from the second *Apocalypse of Baruch* written after the destruction of the temple in AD 70.

In former times, even in the generations of old, our fathers had helpers, righteous men and holy prophets. . . . But now the righteous have been gathered, and the prophets have fallen asleep. We have also gone forth from the land, and Zion [Jerusalem] has been taken away from us, and we have nothing now except the Mighty One and his law.<sup>2</sup>

But even God (the Mighty One) was increasingly viewed as distant, transcendent, far off. Angels filled the void. They were viewed as intermediaries between God and his people.

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<sup>1</sup> "In the Old Testament angels were ascribed a broad role in revelation and in redemptive history. It was commonly understood that the Law had been mediated to Moses, the greatest of the prophets, through angels. That understanding was shared by the preacher and his friends, for at a later point in this section the Mosaic Law is described as 'the message declared by angels' (2:2)." (CTC, p. 34)

<sup>2</sup> cited in Lane, I, p. 10.

## **BETTER THAN ANGELS. . .**

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Notice the genius of our author's argument. It begins with an assertion, *Jesus is better than angels*. Why?

Go through 1:5-14 paragraph by paragraph. These verses contain seven Old Testament quotations which are applied to Jesus. They show his superiority over angels in at least five areas.<sup>1</sup> Give this some thought and share your insights with the group. What is the author trying to say to the Hebrews about the superiority of Jesus over the angels?

How do these verses address our own situation? It seems that the one side of the Christian faith which is hard for our non-believing friends to accept is the exclusivity of Jesus' claims. When Jesus says (and we agree) that he is indeed "the way, the truth and the life"<sup>2</sup> and that no one comes to know God apart from Him, our neighbor gags and mutters, "How can you say that!!!???"

Respond to the following quotation:

. . . the supremacy of Christ brings tension in everyday life. The world bristles at "Jesus only." But one does not have to deny him outright to get along. Rather we

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<sup>1</sup> Some students of Hebrews find as many as eight areas of superiority.

<sup>2</sup> John 14:6

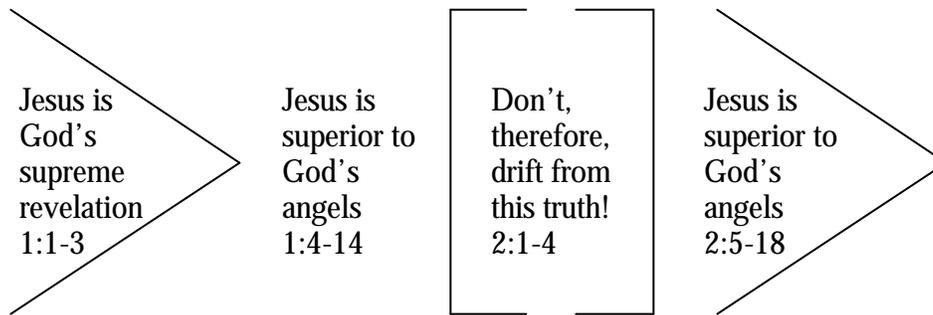
are encouraged to simply affirm that he was the very best of men to ever walk on this planet—that his ethics were exalted—that his life was heroic from beginning to end—and that he is the supreme example for sacrifice. If one does this, the pressure will be off. What a temptation for the Hebrew Christian in a life-threatening context. A simple change of emphasis on the person of Christ from Son to angel and one would be spared suffering. (Hughes, I, p. 36)

Look again at 1:14. What do angels do? Have you ever been aware of angels ministering to you? In what ways?

*Sermon Notes. . .*

**Study Three**  
**Setting Your Anchor (Part 1)**  
**Hebrews 2:1-9**

Take a few minutes and read Hebrews 1-2. Consider the following outline as you read:



The first verses of chapter 2 are a parenthesis in the preacher's sermon. Notice how smoothly the text reads if one jumps from 1:14 to 2:5. 2:1-4 contain the first of several stern warnings to the reader. *Pay attention or dreadful consequences will follow!*

In our next two studies we will unpack some of the wonders of Hebrews 2. On your first reading of these verses make a few notes of your observations. What questions come up? What insights do you glean from our preacher's sermon? Warning: These verses will probably raise more questions than provide answers on your first reading.

## ***SETTING YOUR ANCHOR (PART 1)***

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### **Notes and Questions:**

Outline 2:1-4. What is the flow of the author's argument?

2:1 contains the verb "to drift." We are to "pay greater attention" to the gospel so that we do not *pararuômen* (Greek) or "drift." The word means "to drift away aimlessly," or "to slip." It was a nautical term in the first century used of ships or boats which lost their secure anchorage. The verb was used of a ring which slipped off of one's finger and of water which leaked from a clay pot.

Notice the unique nature of this warning! Typically in the New Testament we are warned of the deleterious effects sin has on our walk with Christ.<sup>1</sup> Here we are sternly warned against spiritual torpor (mental inactivity). "Drifting" is not an activity, it results from inactivity, inattentiveness. The results of drifting, we learn, are catastrophic.

Think about your own Christian pilgrimage. Have you, or are you now, experiencing the consequences of drifting? What were (or are) those consequences like? Have you witnessed others who have drifted away from the Christian life? Share an example with your homegroup.

Read 2:1-4 again. What is the preacher's solution to drifting?

Respond to the following quotation of eighteenth century British statesman Edmund Burke. Burke was speaking of our participation in public affairs. Is there a valid spiritual application?

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<sup>1</sup> Consider Romans 13:13, I Corinthians 6:18, Galatians 5:19ff., etc.

## SETTING YOUR ANCHOR (PART 1)

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The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is for good men to do nothing.

Notice the serious nature of drifting (vss. 2-3). Raymond Brown boldly asserts,

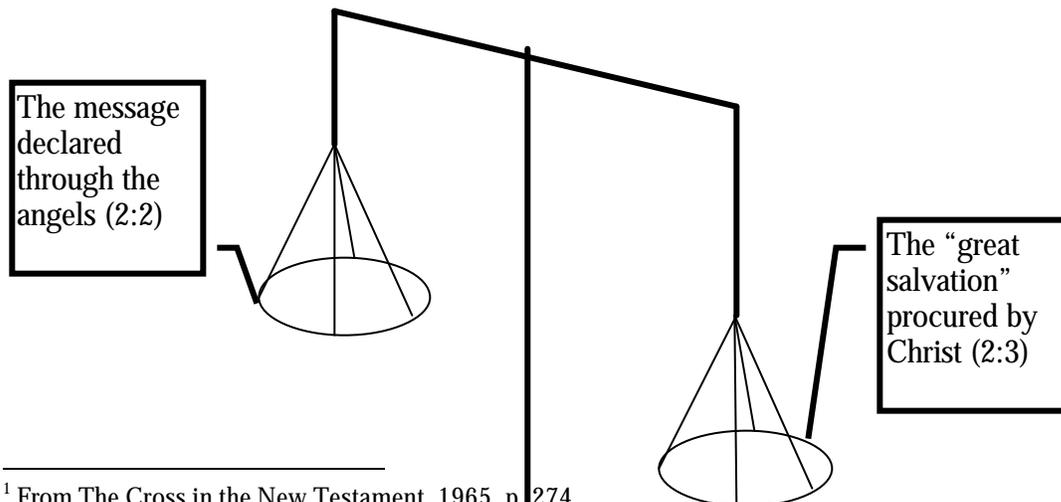
This passage in Hebrews talks plainly about the *just retribution* of those who disobeyed God's word and goes on to ask how we can possibly escape even more serious punishment if we deliberately choose to reject Christ and his *great salvation*. (Brown, p. 51, emphasis is Brown's)

Leon Morris writes,

This Epistle leaves us in no doubt but that those who are saved are saved from a sore and genuine peril. Christ's saving work is not a piece of emotional pageantry rescuing men from nothing in particular.<sup>1</sup>

What concrete steps will you take in your life to avoid drifting?

Jewish writers in the first century loved to argue in the style which came to be known as *qal wa-homer*, that is, from the light to the heavy.<sup>2</sup> Notice how the argument is used here.



<sup>1</sup> From *The Cross in the New Testament*, 1965, p. 274.

<sup>2</sup> Rabbi Hillel, who died in AD 20 is credited with formulating this argument. "The implication is that the particulars that are applicable in the case of minor things certainly hold true for major things." (Kistemaker, p. 56)

## **SETTING YOUR ANCHOR (PART 1)**

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What is the message “declared through the angels”?

Although it is never said explicitly in the Old Testament that the Law was delivered through angels, this was a common conviction in the Jewish community because of the presence of angels at Sinai.<sup>1</sup> (CTC, p. 39)

Moses, looking back on the giving of the Law, says that God came “with myriads of his holy ones” (Deuteronomy 33:2). We know that the writer of Hebrews, however, used the Greek translation of the Old Testament for he quotes it over and over again.<sup>2</sup> In that translation we find words added to the Hebrew text of Deuteronomy 33:2: “angels were with him at his right hand.” (cf. CTC, p. 39)

Notice, therefore, what the author is saying. If the Old Testament is valid, *how much more* is the salvation found in Christ!

How does the author support the salvation provided by Christ (vss. 3-4)?

It was *declared* by \_\_\_\_\_

It was *attested* by \_\_\_\_\_

It was *witnessed* by \_\_\_\_\_

Think about how the gospel has been presented to you from the time before your conversion. Have you heard the emphasis made in vss. 2-3? Did the content of the gospel message you heard emphasize what God would do to make your life better, or, the fact that you would be spared the wrath of the righteous and holy God?

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<sup>1</sup> Sinai is the desert where the Law was given to Moses. See the book of Exodus.

<sup>2</sup> see Introduction p. 4.

Read James 5:19-20. Is James' concern the same as the preacher's concern in our passage? How is it similar/different?

Respond to the following quotation by the 16th century pastor/theologian John Calvin:

It is not only the rejecting of the Gospel, but even the neglecting of it that deserves the severest penalty in view of the greatness of the grace which is offered in it. . . . God wishes His gifts to be valued by us at their proper worth. The more precious they are, the baser is our ingratitude if they do not have their proper value for us. In accordance with the greatness of Christ, so will be the severity of God's vengeance on all despisers of the Gospel. (Calvin, p. 19)



**Study Four**  
**Setting Your Anchor (Part 2)**  
**Hebrews 2:5-18**

In our last study we saw the danger of spiritual disaster through spiritual neglect. *Ignore your teeth and they will go away*, says the sign in the dentist's office. The same is true of one's Christian life.

Read Hebrews 1-2 again. Review the chart on p. 21. Recall the setting of the Hebrew people. We find a house church which wonders where God is now that the going is tough, now that persecution is a reality. The preacher wants to exhort and to encourage. God is *not* silent. God has spoken through the prophets and finally through Christ. See if you can make

any sense of the Old Testament quotations. What are the preacher's points? Jot down any new thoughts you have as you read.

Pay attention, don't drift, stick with it for Jesus is the final revelation of God, the mediator between God and humanity, the one who secures our salvation! This is the message of 2:1-4. The remainder of Hebrews 2 supports this exhortation. Jesus, we will learn, is

1. Our Ultimate Protagonist (vss. 5-9)
2. Our Ultimate Pioneer (vss. 10-16)
3. Our Ultimate Priest (vss. 17-18)

**Notes and Questions:**

## SETTING YOUR ANCHOR (PART 2)

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**2:5** Note the time-frame of this verse. The preacher is talking about the world to come. Angels will not rule in the coming age. Some Jewish rabbis of the first century held that two messiahs were coming. One was a “kingly” messiah while the other was “priestly.” Both messiahs would fall under the rule of Michael, the archangel. Was the house church of Hebrews affected by this thinking? We cannot be sure, but 2:5 settles the issue. The coming kingdom will be ruled by the glorified Son, not by the angels.

Notice what happens in 2:6. The preacher pulls a few verses right out of the middle of Psalm 8. As a whole, the Psalm ponders the grandeur of the universe and the magnitude of God’s creation. In the midst of this contemplation, the psalmist is stunned at the place men and women have in God’s cosmos. Psalm 8 celebrates God’s original intent for his children.

### Psalm 8

When I consider your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You made him ruler over the works of your hands; you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.  
(vss. 3-8)

### Genesis 1

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”  
Gen. 1:26-28

Now notice what the writer of Hebrews does with this quotation.<sup>1</sup>

Heb. 2:8-9 (NASB)

“THOU HAST PUT ALL THINGS IN SUBJECTION UNDER HIS FEET.”

A quotation from the Psalm itself

For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him.

A double negative is used. In Greek this is used for emphasis! All things are subject to “man.”

But now we do not yet see all things

This is the reality of human experience. We, in fact, do not see all things subject to “man”

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted from the NASB.

subjected to him.

But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, {namely,} Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone.

“The fact that the decree has not yet been realized indicates that the promised subjection of everything has reference not to man in general but to Jesus, whom God has appointed ‘heir of everything’ (Heb. 1:2)” (CTC, p. 44)

Brown comments on these verses.

Man is certainly not remotely like the ideal humanity portrayed by the psalmist, but Jesus has come into the world to show us what man is like in God’s original purpose and what man can be like through Christ’s effective work. (Brown, p. 57)

With the above in mind, look at Hebrews 2:9 closely. What do we learn about Jesus? In what ways is he our ultimate protagonist?

In vss. 10-16 we see Jesus as our ultimate pioneer. We could easily devote an entire study to verse 10 alone. Notice the grand themes presented with so few words. Where does the universe come from? What is the purpose of the universe?

Our preacher calls Jesus the “author” (NIV) or “pioneer” (NRSV) of salvation. The Greek word is *archegos* (αρχηγος) and is translated in a variety of different ways: leader, founder, hero, captain, champion, pioneer and author. It contains the “ideas of supremacy, personal participation, originating. . . . *Pioneer* is the best translation, for Christ blazed the trail of salvation that we can now follow. God has given us Jesus as the divine hero/pioneer of our salvation!” (Hughes, I, p. 65)

## ***SETTING YOUR ANCHOR (PART 2)***

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Notice 2:10 in light of what we have already studied. Jesus, our ultimate protagonist, brings us to glory as our ultimate pioneer!

We might be confused at the notion of Jesus being *made perfect*. It is important to note that Jesus did not grow in moral perfection for he has always been the sinless son of God (see Heb. 4:15). The word *perfect* means complete. How, then, was Jesus *made perfect* through suffering?

What is the result of Jesus' sufferings? See verse 11.

The preacher follows verse 11 with three Old Testament quotations. These are found in Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8:17-18. Look at these quotations in their original setting. What insight does the context lend to Hebrews 2?

What was the purpose and result of Christ's death according to 2:14-15?

Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Tennessee Williams had the following to say about death:

Whether or not we admit it to ourselves we are all haunted by a tremendous sense of impermanence. I have always had a particularly keen sense of this at New York cocktail parties. And perhaps that is why I drink martinis almost as fast as I can snatch them from the tray. Fear and evasion are the two little beasts that chase each others tails in the revolving wire cage of our nervous world.

How does 2:15 address this concern?

How old are you? Assuming Jesus does not return during your lifetime, how many years do you expect to live? How often do you think about death? Why do we fear death? Share your answers to these questions with your group.

How does (or should) Hebrews 2:14-15 affect your thoughts on your own death?

**2:17-18** present Jesus as our ultimate priest.

What does the preacher mean when he says Jesus had to be *made like his brothers in every way*?

What is Jesus' priestly function as described in these verses? Old timers help out those who are new to the world of the Scriptures. Explain what an Old Testament priest did. How does Jesus function as the ultimate priest? What priestly functions can you find in these verses?

We would miss a valuable jewel if we neglected the word *atonement* in verse 17. Notice the difference in two translations.

### NRSV

Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a **sacrifice of atonement** for the sins of the people.

### NASB

Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, **to make propitiation** for the sins of the people.

The Greek word in question is *hilaskesthai*. It means to propitiate, to appease or to conciliate the anger of a person or a god. Translators have fought over the English equivalent of this word. The RSV used the word *expiate*, while the NIV, NRSV and others use *atonement*. The NASB employs the traditional rendering *propitiation*.

Leon Morris explains:

## ***SETTING YOUR ANCHOR (PART 2)***

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The word “atonement” is one of the few theological terms which derive basically from Anglo-Saxon. It means “a making at one,” and points to a process of bringing those who are estranged into a unity. . . . Its use in theology is to denote the work of Christ in dealing with the problem posed by the sin of man, and in bringing sinners into right relation with God.<sup>1</sup>

“Atonement” is a great word and it is one of the accomplishments of the cross of Christ. But “atonement” is not a good rendering of *hilaskesthai*. Neither is the word “expiation” found in the RSV.

Expiation properly has a thing as its object. We may expiate a crime, or a sin. Propitiation is a personal word. We propitiate a person rather than a sin. . . . If we are to think of our relationship with God as basically personal we cannot afford to dispense with the concept of propitiation.<sup>2</sup>

Think for a moment about your Christian faith. How would your relationship to God be different without a “perfect” high priest?

Our sin truly arouses God’s wrath (Romans 1:18, 5:10). Jesus’ priestly service made a true propitiation for my sins! Celebrate!

*Sermon Notes. . .*

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<sup>1</sup> From *New Bible Dictionary* 1987, p. 104.

<sup>2</sup> From *Leon Morris, The Cross in the New Testament*, 1972, p. 362.

**Study Five**  
**Better Than Moses**  
**Hebrews 3:1-19**

Hebrews was written to encourage the troubled and tested faith of some in the tiny house church in Rome. Jesus is God's final word (1:1-3). He is far superior to God's angels (1:4-14; 2:5-18). To our surprise, perhaps, the preacher encourages his readers with both the deity of Jesus and with the true humanity of Jesus. Jesus was tested in his human experience. He experienced profound suffering (2:18) and profound testing (2:18). In this regard Jesus was a model for the suffering Hebrews! They can be faithful because he was faithful. Or to put this into our context, we can be faithful because Jesus was faithful.

Read Hebrews chapter 3. What preliminary considerations do you have? Make a brief outline of the chapter. Is this an easier chapter to follow than the first two chapters of Hebrews? What is clear? Unclear?

Before going on make your own study of the author's comparison of Jesus and Moses in vss. 1-6. How are Jesus and Moses similar? How are they different? What is the author's point in the comparison?

**Jesus**

**Moses**

### Notes and Questions:

**3:1** Here we are told to *consider Jesus* (NASB) or *fix* our thoughts on Jesus. This injunction governs the rest of the passage. The key to spiritual success is found in having our focus on the right object. The word is something of a picture. It comes from the Greek preposition *kata* (down), and the verb *noeô* (I put my mind to). It means to apply one's mind diligently.<sup>1</sup> Eugene Peterson, therefore, paraphrases,

. . . take a good hard look at Jesus. He's the center-piece of everything we believe.

Think about this word picture. What does it mean for you to "apply your mind" to Jesus? What helps you do this? What hinders "a good hard look at Jesus"?

In this same verse Jesus is called both *apostle* and *high priest*. Both designations are unique to the book of Hebrews.<sup>2</sup> Jesus is called *apostle* only here, but he is called *high priest* twelve times in the Hebrews. Both titles introduce the idea that Jesus is superior to Moses.

Moses' place in the Jewish mind was unique. There was simply no man in history quite like the one who delivered the nation from Egypt.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face. He was unequaled for all the signs and wonders that the LORD sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

Deut. 34:10-12

God had spoken to Moses face to face in the burning bush.

When a prophet of the LORD is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant Moses; he is faithful in all my house. With him I speak face to face, clearly and not in riddles; he sees the form of the LORD.

Numbers 12:6-8 (NIV)

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Hughes, I, p. 92.

<sup>2</sup> This is another of the many reasons we don't think Paul, John or Peter wrote the book of Hebrews.

Moses received and gave the Ten Commandments to the nation of Israel. This was the law of God, the greatest thing in the world! Jews understood Moses to be the author of the Pentateuch, the first five books of the Old Testament. By the second century Rabbi Jose ben Chalafta was able to say,

God calls Moses faithful in all his house and thereby he ranked him higher than the ministering angels themselves.

Adolph Saphir, a nineteenth century Jewish scholar who became a Christian, said in his commentary on Hebrews,

It is hardly possible for Gentiles to understand or realize the veneration and affection with which the Jews regarded Moses, the servant of God. All their religious life, all their thoughts about God, all their practices and observances, all their hopes of the future, everything connected with God, is with them also connected with Moses. Moses was the great apostle unto them, the man sent unto them of God, the mediator of the old covenant. . .<sup>1</sup> (Saphir, p. 173)

Recall the emphasis of Hebrews 3. The listener is encouraged to fix his or her thoughts on Jesus. Jesus cannot be apprehended with a passing glance.

With the above in mind consider the reasoning of our preacher:<sup>2</sup>

### **Moses**

Faithful to God (vs. 2b).

Faithful as a servant (vs. 5)

A servant in God's house (vs. 5a).

### **Jesus**

Faithful to God (vs. 2a).

Faithful as a Son (vs. 6a).

A Son over God's house (vs. 6b)

**Conclusion:** We are His house if we prove faithful (vs. 6b).

**3:7-19** constitute an earnest warning against unbelief. These verses are the negative counterpart to verses 1-6.

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<sup>1</sup> Consider the strength of John 9:28: "Then they hurled insults at [the man born blind] and said, 'You are this fellow's disciple! We are disciples of Moses!'"

<sup>2</sup> This chart is based on CTC, p. 60.

## Positively

3:1-6

Fix your thoughts on Jesus  
he is our apostle  
he is our high priest  
he was faithful  
he is greater than Moses

## Negatively

3:7-19

Don't harden your hearts  
you will never enter God's rest  
Guard against an *unbelieving heart*  
you will turn from the living God  
you will provoke the anger of God

The author begins his warning from Psalm 95. This Psalm was used as an invitation to worship in the synagogue on every Sabbath evening. Jewish readers of Hebrews would be as familiar with Psalm 95 as we are with "Welcome to Santa Barbara Community Church. . ." Psalm 95 reflects back upon the time of Israel's wilderness wanderings. There the Jews rebelled against God and suffered his wrath as a consequence.

Two words in our text are of particular significance. The readers are told not to harden their hearts as those in the *rebellion*, during the time of *testing*. In the Hebrew Bible these words were actually places, Meribah and Massah. Jewish readers of Hebrews would instantly connect this warning with the story told in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:1-13. There the people of Israel rebelled. They were thirsty and regretted that they had left Egypt. The people demonstrated and expressed a lack of faith in God's provision. The Lord instructed Moses to speak to a limestone rock and water would gush out. Moses, however, in his anger and frustration struck the rock. Because of this God declared that Moses would not enter the Promised Land.

As Hebrew 3:7-19 progresses, the scene shifts to the decisive moment in Israel's wilderness wanderings described in Numbers 13-14. By the time we get to 3:16 three rhetorical questions are framed with reference to what happened at Kadesh-Barnea.

Read Numbers 13-14. What happened there? Why can we safely call this the decisive moment in Israel's wilderness period?

Notice the interplay between Psalm 95 and Numbers 14.<sup>1</sup>

### Psalm 95

3:16 Now who were they who heard and yet were rebellious?

3:17 But with whom was he angry forty years?

### Numbers 14

Was it not all those who left Egypt under the leadership of Moses?

Was it not those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?

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<sup>1</sup> cf. CTC, p. 65.

3:18 And to whom did he swear that they [was it] not to those who were disobedient? would not enter his rest,

Hughes points out the tragedy of the situation.

It all began so well—but ended so poorly. Of the 600,000 men (the million-plus Israelites who began so well), only two over the age of twenty ever got to the Promised Land—and that was forty years later. The rest fell, disappointed corpses in the desert. (Hughes, I, p. 98)

The point in Hebrews 3 is clear: a hard heart can cause us to miss the wonderful “rest” of God. We will discuss the “rest” which we are invited to enter as we study chapter 4. But first, ponder these questions.

Is your heart growing softer or harder this year? What evidence do you have for your answer?

Look at 3:12 again. Here we learn that we are responsible for “unbelief.” What does this teach us about the nature of faith? Of belief and unbelief?

Where do you think you are vulnerable to *the deceitfulness of sin* (3:13)?

We are told to *exhort* (NRSV) or *encourage* (NIV) one another as long as it is called “today.”<sup>1</sup> How do you put this into practice? Who have you sought to encourage in the last month?

Who has been an “encourager” in your life? What difference did it make?

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<sup>1</sup> “The author of Hebrews links the exhortation to the lengthy quote from Psalm 95 with the single word *Today*. He calls to mind the experience of the nation Israel in the wilderness; he intimates that the present is a period of grace that God extends until death terminates man’s earthly life. And the termination of life may come rather suddenly for some people.” (Kistemaker, p. 95.)

The people of Israel (Numbers 14) forfeited the blessing of God because they were afraid of the “giants in the land.” What are the giants in your life? What fear could keep you from entering the Promised Land?

*Sermon Notes. . .*

**Study Six**  
**Just Relax. . .**  
**Hebrews 4:1-13**

The opening words of Ecclesiastes (another sermon found in the pages of Scripture) are sobering.

The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever. The sun rises and the sun goes down, and hurries to the place where it rises. The wind

blows to the south, and goes around to the north; round and round goes the wind, and on its circuits the wind returns. All streams run to the sea, but the sea is not full; to the place where the streams flow, there they continue to flow. All things are wearisome; more than one can express; the eye is not satisfied with seeing, or the ear filled with hearing. What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done; there is nothing new under the sun. Is there a thing of which it is said, "See, this is new"? It has already been, in the ages before us.

Ecclesiastes 1:1-10 (emphasis added)

We could summarize these verses with the words, "Life is exhausting." We work and we rest. We experience success and failure. Then we die. What we experience in our work lives is parallel to our experience with God. We long for Him. We are sinners. We have a great worship experience. We find ourselves cursing at the kids while driving home.

In every area of life we long for resolution, for genuine rest. Think of the house church addressed in Hebrews. There men and women were struggling to get through another season of life. Their jobs, their homes, perhaps even their lives were in jeopardy. They longed for rest at every level.

Read Hebrews 4 in the context of last week's study. Notice the author brings up Psalm 95 three more times. If you have a copy, re-read Hebrews 4 from The Message. What preliminary thoughts do you have about this chapter? Where is the preacher taking the reader?

**Notes and Questions:**

Chapter 4 begins with an admonition: Be careful that you don't miss the "rest" of God.

"Rest" is a slippery term in Hebrews. It means "the peace of God," the "Promised Land,"<sup>1</sup> and the rest God entered into after his work of creation. Eleven times in chapter 3 and 4 the author speaks of "entering the rest" of God. Leon Morris says the noun refers to "a place of blessing where there is no more striving but only relaxation in the presence of God and the certainty that there is no cause for fear." (Morris, p. 35)

**4:1** contains the first use of the word *promise*. Read the following verses in Hebrews. What is the author's understanding of the *promise* of God?

6:13-15

6:17ff.

9:15

11:9ff.

Are we living in the *promise* of God or are we still waiting for the *promise* to be fulfilled?

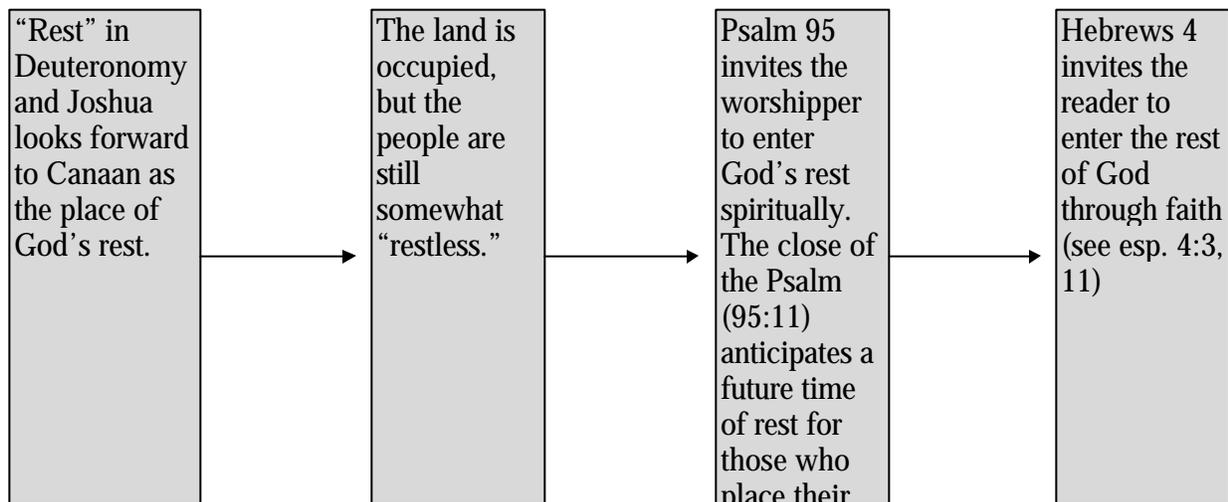
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<sup>1</sup> Cf. 3:11 and Deut. 12:9.

**4:2** looks back, again, to the event at Kadesh-Barnea (Numbers 14). The *good news* came to Israel from Joshua and Caleb (two of the 12 spies): “We can take the land!”<sup>1</sup> But Israel listened instead to the spies who cowered in fear, “What? We can’t do that. The cities have walls and the people look like NBA recruits!!!”

**4:2** says the news presented by Joshua and Caleb was of no value because it was not *united by faith*. Literally the text reads, “they didn’t *mix it with faith*.” All Israel had the same report, but only two mixed what they heard and saw with faith.

With this in mind, examine again 4:3-11. The emphasis of the chapter is on our entrance into God’s rest through faith. The backdrop is Israel’s experience after the Exodus in the desert. In using Psalm 95 the preacher gives a future perspective to God’s rest.



Kistemaker probes the depth of meaning in Hebrews 4.

From Psalm 95 the author has shown that the rest that the Israelites enjoyed in Canaan was not the rest God intended for his people. The intended rest is a Sabbath-rest, which, of course, is a direct reference to the creation account (Gen. 2:2; see also Exod. 20:11; 31:17) of God’s rest on the seventh day.

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<sup>1</sup> Num. 14:9 reads, “Only do not rebel against the LORD; and do not fear the people of the land, for they shall be our prey. Their protection has been removed from them, and the LORD is with us; do not fear them.” The Hebrew text reads, literally, “they will be bread for us. . .”

For the believer the Sabbath is not merely a day of rest in the sense that it is a cessation of work. Rather it is a spiritual rest—a cessation of sinning. It entails an awareness of being in the sacred presence of God with his people in worship and praise. . . . The day of rest is indeed an *emblem* of eternal rest! During our life span on earth, we celebrate the Sabbath and realize only partially what Sabbath-rest entails. In the life to come, we shall fully experience God's rest, for then we will have entered a rest that is eternal. (Kistemaker, p. 112)

Celebrating the Sabbath, then, should prepare us for the other six days of our week. We should always cease from sinning. And the Sabbath is also a rehearsal for eternity! In putting aside our work, along with our sin, we look forward to the coming reality of life with God where there will be no work but worship and where sin will be but a distant memory.

What does your Sabbath typically look like? Do you protect the Sabbath as a day of rest and worship?

Consider the notion of Sabbath-keeping in the Heidelberg Catechism.<sup>1</sup>

Q. What is God's will for you in the fourth commandment?

A. First,

that the gospel ministry and education for it be maintained,  
and that, especially on the festive day of rest,  
I regularly attend the assembly of God's people  
to learn what God's word teaches,  
to participate in the sacraments,  
to pray to God publicly,  
and to bring Christian offerings for the poor.

Second,

that every day of my life  
I rest from my evil ways,  
let the Lord work in me through his Spirit,  
and so begin already in this life  
the eternal Sabbath. (emphasis added)

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<sup>1</sup> The Heidelberg Catechism was a document written in the middle of the sixteenth century. The document was approved by the Synod of Dort in 1619 and became the most ecumenical of the Reformation catechisms and confessions.

Look back to 4:1. In the broadest sense, “resting” is to trust in the sufficiency of the work of Christ. This is why the writer can warn his readers not to “fall short” of God’s rest. The preacher is not saying, “Be good and then you may rest. . .” On the contrary, the emphasis is, “Quit trusting in the way of Moses, the observance of the law, etc. Instead, trust in the accomplishment of Jesus. Rest in Him!”

How is it with your soul? Are you at “rest” with God? Does Hebrews 4 comfort or challenge you?

What steps can you take to move toward God’s rest?

Augustine said in his *Confessions*,

Thou movest us to delight in praising Thee; for Thou has formed us for Thyself, and our hearts are restless till they find rest in Thee.

Does your experience testify to the truth of these words? In what ways are you trying to find rest in something other than God?

**4:11** brings us back to 4:1. *Let us make every effort to enter that rest. . .* Verses 12-13 serve as a warning to those who might be tempted to forsake the *rest* of God.

Christian pilgrims in the contemporary world must realize that, in the light of a passage such as this, it will not do to confess a merely nominal allegiance to Christian truth or pay occasional lip service in meetings and services to faith in Christ. Our commitment must be sincere and genuine, and it can be so for two reasons given [in vss. 12 and 13]: what God says and what God sees.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The preacher ends this section of his sermon with a reference to the power of the word of God. These verses refer to the spoken or written word of God. Some interpreters have taken verse 12 as a reference to Jesus as the context might suggest. But, “The phrase *Word of God* occurs at least thirty-nine times in the

Verses 12-13 focus on the power of God's word. The leader of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther, put it like this:

I simply taught, preached, wrote God's word: otherwise I did nothing. And when, while I slept, or drank Wittenberg beer with my Philip and my Amsdorf, the Word so greatly weakened the papacy that never a Prince or Emperor inflicted such damage upon it, I did nothing. The Word did it all.<sup>1</sup>

Make a list of the attributes of God's word in vss. 12-13. Which of these attributes have you experienced? In what ways have you changed as a result?

Share with your group your personal habits of Bible reading, Bible study, Bible memorization, etc. How has God's word affected you in the past twelve months? How would you like to grow in this area? What can your homegroup do to hold you accountable to your goals?

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New Testament and almost exclusively is the designation for the spoken or written Word of God rather than the Son of God." (Kistemaker, p. 116)

<sup>1</sup> cited in John Stott, *Between Two Worlds*, 1982. p. 25.

*Sermon Notes. . .*

## **Study Seven**

### **Jesus our High Priest**

#### **Hebrews 4:14-16**

In the fall of 1996 presidential candidates George Bush and Bill Clinton were engaged in their third televised debate. This was the “town hall” debate where the questions came from the proverbial “man on the street.” Responding to one question, Bill Clinton left his podium and took a few steps toward the questioner. He asked for clarification of the question and uttered the words, “I feel your pain. . .” It made for great television. Here was a would-be chief executive who was truly concerned about common women and men. Clinton went on to become the forty-second president of the United States of America.

We need to identify with our leaders. More important we need them to identify with us. We like to see politicians kissing babies and CEOs serving soup to the homeless. Our preacher in Hebrews builds chapter 4 to this climax. We have such a leader, such a high priest. Jesus is able to empathize with us in our predicament. Indeed he feels our pain.

Think about this. The suffering church in Rome may have thought of Jesus as quite distant. After all, Jesus is God and what could God possibly know about suffering? In these verses the readers are encouraged with the parallel truth about Jesus, He was a true man who was tempted and prevailed.

Read Hebrews 4:14-16 from as many translations as you have available. Meditate upon these verses.

How do they fit into the overall argument of the book? Notice the progression of the writer’s prompting. Consider 3:6, 3:14, and then 4:14.

What does the “therefore” of vs. 14 refer to? (Hint: find the last time the preacher brought up the high priest imagery in his sermon.)

## ***JESUS OUR HIGH PRIEST***

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You should be able to find four assertions about Jesus as our *great high priest* in these verses. What are they?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

In Jewish worship the high priest would enter the *holy of holies* (the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle or temple) once each year. To get there he would offer a sacrifice for his own sins. Once inside the most holy place the priest would sprinkle blood on the *mercy-seat*. There he stood, for a moment, in the presence of God to offer a sacrifice for the people's sins.<sup>1</sup> Then he left as quickly as possible. It was a terrifying experience to be in the presence of the holy God.

Notice the wonderful contrast in 4:14. Jesus is the *great high priest* who has *passed through the heavens!* He is always in the presence of God (Heb. 9:24)!

The title is wonderfully redundant. In the Hebrew Bible the title "high priest" is literally "great priest." To call Jesus our *great high priest* is to say the equivalent of "great great priest."

What are we, the readers, to do with this marvelous truth? See 4:14b.

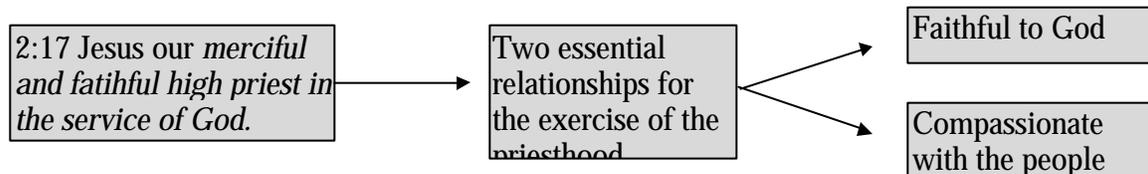
What does it mean *to hold fast to our confession* (NRSV) or *to hold firmly to the faith we profess* (NIV)? Couldn't those in the Roman church "believe" the right things while slipping into an *incognito* expression of their allegiance to Christ? Philip Hughes is helpful.

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<sup>1</sup> We will look in more detail at tabernacle worship in study 12. Leviticus 16 records the original instructions for the day of atonement.

[Faith] is the belief that is both inwardly entertained by the heart and outwardly professed before men. (PH, p. 171)

From this sublime truth of Jesus' priestly work *through the heavens*, the author moves to the earthy reality of Jesus' priesthood. Note the progression:



Lane writes,

The sequence of [4:14 and 4:15] makes an important point: although Jesus is the exalted Son of God who is now enthroned in the Father's presence (4:15) he is related by experience to a humiliated and suffering community (4:16). *The exalted status of our heavenly high priest does not detract in any way from his ability to empathize with the weariness and defenselessness of the Church in the world.* (CTC, p. 74)

Note the double negative in 4:15. In Greek syntax a double negative gives emphasis. Rewrite this statement as a positive affirmation.

Verse 15 says Jesus *has been tested as we are*. Do you have a difficult time believing this? If your answer is yes, what does this tell you about your understanding of Jesus?

Respond to the following by C. S. Lewis:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is. After all, you find out the strength of the German army by fighting against it, not by giving in. You find out the strength of a wind by trying to walk against it, not by lying down. A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about badness. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in. We never find out the strength of the evil impulse inside us until we try to fight it: and Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist.<sup>1</sup>

Compare 1 Corinthians 10:13. What does this add to Hebrews 4:15?

The progression of thought in Hebrews 4:14-16 should startle us. The reader has been reminded of the image of the high priest serving the people in the tabernacle year after year. Jesus is the ultimate high priest (4:14-15). Therefore, *let us approach the throne of grace with boldness*. Peterson translates the text wonderfully,

So let's walk right up to him and get what he is so ready to give. Take the mercy, accept the help.

When Isaiah had a vision of God in the temple he cowered in fear. "'Woe to me!' I cried. 'I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty.'" (Isa. 6:5)" After the priestly work of Christ we are invited to approach God with *boldness*, or *confidence*. The Greek word used (31 times in the New Testament) refers to open, public discourse. The Jews used the word in the Septuagint to describe prayer. Lane translates the word "bold frankness."

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<sup>1</sup> From *Mere Christianity*, 1952, pp. 124-125. *Mere Christianity* was originally radio addresses given on the BBC during World War II.

How does the truth of these verses manifest itself in your Christian life?

In what ways do you sense Jesus is able to identify with your weakness?

Why do you carry some of your guilt with you as you continue your Christian pilgrimage?

How would you respond to a friend who said, "I can't worship or take the Lord's supper, I feel too guilty. . . ."?

The Jews had a high regard for the holiness of God. The high priest would actually wear bells on his robe while in the *holy of holies* so that those outside could hear the ringing and know that he was still living and moving. In what ways have we substituted the *boldness* of Hebrews 4:16 with a flippant, casual attitude in worship? If so, what can we do to correct this?

John Calvin was exuberant when pondering our text.

The basis of this confidence is that the throne of God is not marked by a naked majesty which overpowers us, but is adorned with a new name, that of *grace*. This is the name that we ought always to keep in mind when we avoid the sight of God. If we turn our minds to it alone, the glory of God cannot but fill us with despair, such is the awfulness of His throne. Therefore in order to help our lack of confidence, and to free our minds of all fears, the apostle clothes it with grace and gives it a name which will encourage us by its sweetness. It is as if he were saying, Since God has fixed on His throne as it were a banner of grace and of fatherly love towards us, there is no reason why His majesty should ward us off from approaching Him. (Calvin, p. 57)

Indeed he has fixed the banner of grace to his throne. Let us approach that throne and worship!

*Sermon Notes. . .*

**Study Eight**  
**Sluggish Ears**  
**Hebrews 5:1-14**

Indolent. Do you know this word? It is an adjective which means, “averse to activity, effort, or movement: habitually lazy.” The Hebrew church had grown doctrinally indolent, spiritually lazy.

This is our eighth week in the book of Hebrews. No doubt some students are thinking, “Ho hum. Hebrews sure is a difficult book. I’m getting tired of this.” If you find yourself thinking like this at all, ponder the stinging rebuke at the close of our passage.

Read 5:11-14. The Hebrews were tired too. Our preacher pulls out all the stops. “I’d like to tell you more, but you have remained in the infantile stage of the Christian life. *Because* you can’t tolerate the strong truths of the Christian faith you are *learners* when you should be *teachers*.”

The Hebrews did not aspire to indolence. They ended up in that state. Their hearing had become “dull” (5:11). The word means to be “sluggish,” or “slothful.”<sup>1</sup>

[The word] here describes those who develop a ‘couldn’t care less’ attitude to the study of holy Scripture, and have failed to give themselves to a regular, methodical, and painstaking study of its teaching and its relevance in everyday life. . . . Many people casually drift into a low standard of Christian life simply because they minimize the importance of Christian instruction and disciplined Bible study. (Brown, pp. 104-105)

The admonition comes as a good “mid-study” reminder of the importance of our study of the Scriptures. In Hebrew and Greek the verb for obedience is simply an intensive form of the verb “to hear.” To truly “hear” the word is to “obey” the word. And, conversely, “obedience” requires a prior hearing of the word. So Hebrews begins with the “speech” of God (1:1-3) and moves to repeated references to “hearing” the voice of God. Review the following verses. What does Hebrews teach us about “hearing”?

2:1	4:2
3:7	4:7
3:15-16	5:11

Before going on in this study, contemplate the following questions:<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We find the same word in 6:12.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Hughes, I, p. 148.

# SLUGGISH EARS

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Do I know the basics of the Christian faith to the extent that I could teach them to others?

Have I become “sluggish in the ears”? How does this sluggishness manifest itself?

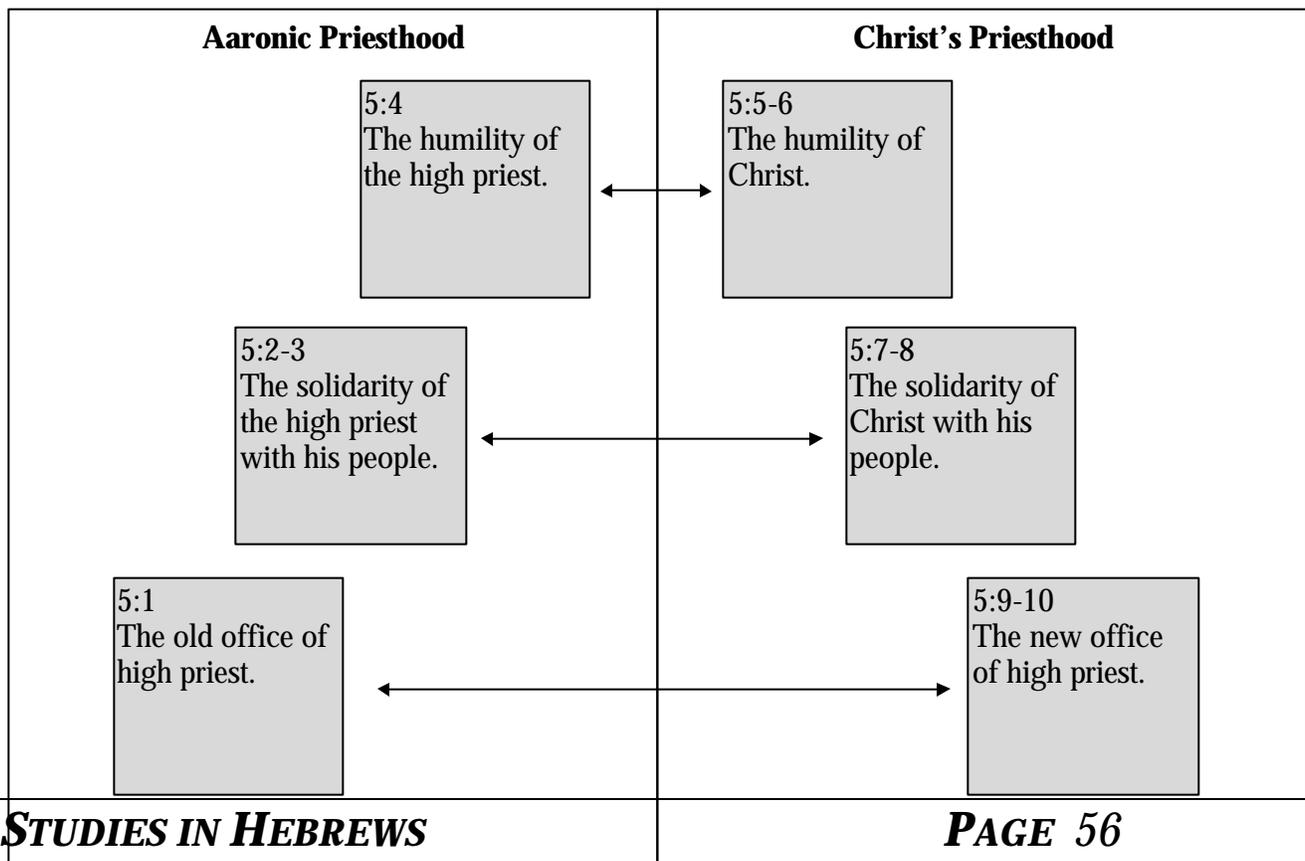
Have I cultivated an excitement with respect to the learning of God’s word?

Am I growing in this area of my faith?

Respond to the following:

. . . the great scandal of today’s church is *Christians without Christian minds*—those who ought to be teachers, but need someone to teach them the elementary truths of God’s Word all over again. (Hughes, I, p. 148)

With this in mind, let’s “listen” to God’s word. Dig in to Hebrews 5:1-14. These verses elaborate on what is perhaps the dominant theme of our sermon: Jesus is our great high priest! Keep the following parallelism in mind as you read.



The word “priest” occurs thirty-one times in the New Testament. Fourteen of these references are in the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is the only New Testament book which refers to Jesus as *high priest*. The idea is introduced in 4:14-5:10, but it will occupy a good deal of all that follows in our preacher’s sermon.

In the Old Testament the priest was one who stood, figuratively and symbolically, between God and the people. Because of sin the relationship of God and Israel was disturbed. The priest would offer daily sacrifices to God for the people to restore that relationship. On the Day of Atonement, an annual worship service, the high priest did the following:

1. Offered a bull as a sin offering for himself and the other priests.
2. Entered the Holy of Holies with a censer of incense.
3. Sprinkled blood from the bull on the Ark of the covenant
4. Cast lots over two live goats as a sin offering for the nation.
5. Killed one of the goats and took its blood and sprinkled it in the Holy of Holies.
6. Placed his hands on the head of the live goat confessing the sins of the people.
7. Sent the live goat into the wilderness. This goat was called the scapegoat (escape goat).<sup>1</sup>

According to the Mishna, the high priest would pray,

O God, I have committed iniquity,  
transgressed, and sinned before thee  
I and my house.  
O God, forgive the iniquities and  
transgressions and sins which  
I have committed and transgressed  
and sinned before thee,  
I and my house.

Then it was over for another year. The sacrifices continued on a daily and yearly basis for hundreds of years! From the time of Aaron, the first high priest, until the temple was destroyed in AD 70, bulls and goats were sacrificed, incense was burned, prayers were offered. The writer of Hebrews presents Jesus to be the perfect high priest. The old system of sacrifices looked forward to the perfection found in Christ. “His task is to bring the voice of God to man and to usher men into the presence of God.” (Barclay, p. 41)

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<sup>1</sup> From Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, vol. 1, p. 414.

Look at 5:1-4. What are the specific qualifications to be high priest? How many can you find?

5:5-6 contain two Old Testament quotations. The first is from Psalm 2:7 and refers to Jesus' royal office. The second quotation will play a large role in the remainder of the letter. The preacher quotes Psalm 110:4. The writer of Hebrews is the only first century writer to quote this passage, yet the verse will come up again in 7:17 and 21 and will be alluded to eight more times in the sermon. We will have to wait until Hebrews 7 to realize the fullness of the author's argument.



Hebrews 5:6 and 5:10 bring up the truth that Jesus was a priest after the *order of Melchizedek*. We will discuss this aspect of his priesthood in study ten.

**5:7-10** contain some difficult phrases.

First, verse 7 is probably a reference to Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane.

Read Mark 14:32ff. Notice how Jesus' prayer in Gethsemane parallels Hebrews 5:7.

The preacher chooses his words carefully to describe Jesus' prayer. He prays with *loud cries and tears*. A rabbinical saying may have been in the author's mind. It reads,

There are three kinds of prayers, each loftier than the preceding: prayer, crying, and tears. Prayer is made in silence; crying with raised voice; but tears overcome all things, there is no door through which tears do not pass.

Why were Jesus' prayers heard (vs. 7)? What do you learn from this?

Second, in verse 8 we find that Jesus *learned obedience*. This is a reference to the passion of Jesus. “Jesus learned experientially through his passion what obedience entails in order to achieve salvation and to become fully qualified for his office as eternal high priest.” (CTC, p. 82)

How have you “learned obedience” in your own Christian life?

Third, 5:9 says that Jesus was *made perfect*. In what sense? Isn't Jesus perfect, i.e., sinless already?

This does not mean that he was imperfect and that out of his imperfection he became perfect. There is a perfection that results from having actually suffered; it is different from the perfection that is ready to suffer. “He became” indicates a change of relationship that follows the perfecting. The suffering that led to the perfecting did something. It meant that Jesus became “the source of eternal salvation.” (Morris, p. 50.)

In 5:11-14 we return to our preacher's biting indictment. Notice the grotesque imagery. These adult believers have returned to nursing.<sup>1</sup> Literally the text reads, “You have become having need of milk, not solid food.” (PH, p. 191) We find a picture of spiritual regression. Members of the house church in Rome had lapsed into the spiritual diet of a spiritual infant.

The truth is there is simply no such thing as a static Christian. We either move forward or fall back. We are either climbing or falling. We are either winning or losing. Static, *status quo* Christianity is a delusion! (Hughes, I, p. 149)

Where are you in your faith-journey right now? Are you climbing or descending, winning or losing? What factors have played a part in bringing you where you are?

How do your priorities in life correspond to your answer to these questions?

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<sup>1</sup> Paul met a similar tragedy in the church of Corinth (see I Cor. 3:1ff.).

## ***SLUGGISH EARS***

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Notice the charge against “milk-drinkers” in 5:13. They are *unskilled in the word of righteousness. . .*” What do you think is meant by this phrase? Compare verse 14. Those with an adult diet are *trained by practice to distinguish good from evil*. What does it mean to distinguish *good from evil*? Are you so trained? How are you helping others to be trained?

*Sermon Notes. . .*



## **Study Nine**

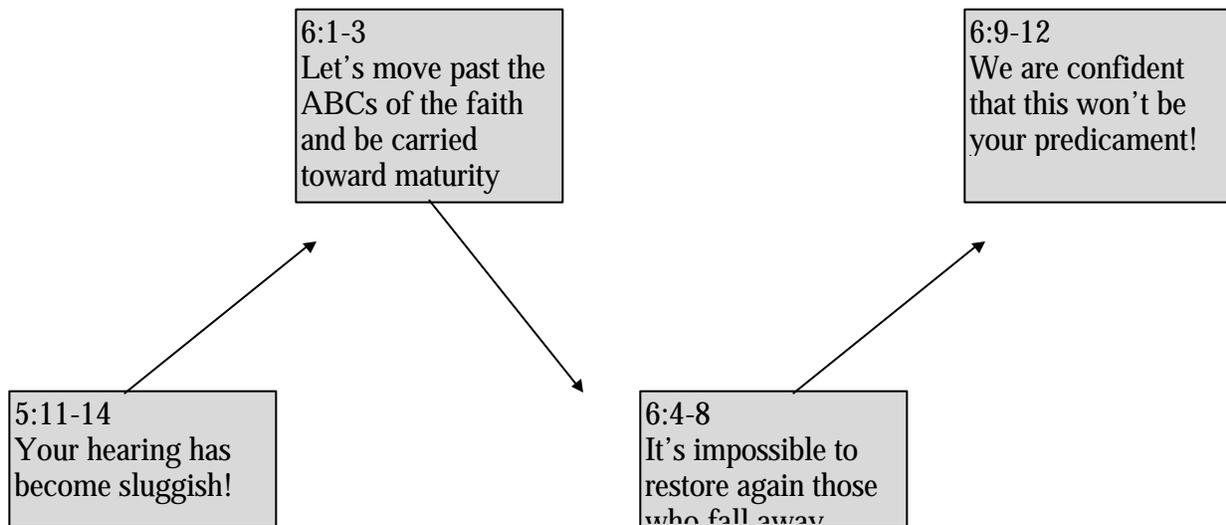
### **Pressing On**

### **Hebrews 6:1-20**

Note the flow of the sermon before us. Just as the preacher brings up *the order of Melchizedek* (5:10) he digresses into an extended warning (5:11-6:20). If we skipped from 5:10 to 7:1 we would find tremendous continuity in the preacher's thinking. The digression (5:11-6:20) is anything but a tangent. It restates the main point of the sermon, "Hang in there!"<sup>1</sup> We might outline this section as follows:

1. The Peril of Spiritual Immaturity (5:11-6:12)
2. The Power of God's Promise (6:13-20)

Read these verses and make a few notes as you read. This section contains one of the strongest warnings in all of Scripture. Notice the vacillation between pessimism and optimism in these first section.



<sup>1</sup> Introduction, p. 5.

### **Notes and Questions:**

**6:1-2** is the preacher's "action step." Okay, you are "dull in the ears. Let's get moving toward maturity!"

Make a list of those things in 6:1-2 which are considered the *basic teachings* about Christ. You should be able to find at least six.<sup>1</sup>

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.

*Leaving behind* (6:1) the basics of the Christian faith is not an indictment against those foundational truths. The emphasis is on "pressing on" toward maturity. A building doesn't despise its own foundation, but to be a true building it needs more than a foundation.

Notice the words "dead works" in verse 1. These words occur here and in Hebrews 9:14. What do you think the author has in mind? What are "dead works"? Compare the following verses.

- Romans 6:23
- Romans 7:11
- Ephesians 2:1, 5
- Colossians 2:13

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<sup>1</sup> F.F. Bruce makes an interesting observation about the "elementary teachings" listed. "... [I]t is remarkable how little in the list is distinctive of Christianity, for practically every item could have its place in a fairly orthodox Jewish community. Each of them, indeed, acquires a new significance in a Christian context; but the impression we get is that existing Jewish beliefs and practices were used as a foundation on which to build Christian truth." (Bruce, p. 112)

What “dead works” do you have in your life?

**6:1-2** sound very proactive. “GET OUT THERE, GRUNT AND GROW UP!” But the Greek text is rich in its subtle nuance. The “voice” of the verb used in 6:1 is passive and could be translated, “Let us be carried forward.”

[This suggests] that it is not a matter of the learners being carried by their instructor, but of both being carried forward together by God. (PH, 194)

Thomas Aquinas writes of this verse,

He says ‘let us be carried’, and this refers to being impelled by the Holy Spirit.<sup>1</sup>

Think about your own Christian maturity and development. What role does “self-effort” seem to play? Try to put into words the ministry of the Holy Spirit in your growth process. How have you had the sense of “being carried forward”?

**6:4-8** contain one of the most frightening warnings in all of Scripture and one of the more difficult sections of Hebrews to interpret. Read these verses again. What do you think the preacher has in mind?

Interpretations of these verses abound.<sup>2</sup>

1. Some argue the text teaches that it is indeed possible for a true Christian to lose his or her salvation. *Enlightenment, tasting the heavenly gift, and sharing the Holy Spirit* etc. are marks of saving faith. Against this interpretation stand the biblical texts which assure the believer of eternal security. Read the following verses:

- John 6:39-40

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<sup>1</sup> cited in PH, 194. Hughes says the verb should be interpreted as a “divine passive.”

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 2nd edition, 1981, p. 319.

- John 10:27-29
- Romans 11:29
- Philippians 1:6
- I Peter 1:3-5
- I John 2:1

Note, if the preacher has in mind the losing of one's salvation, it can only be lost once! There is no possibility of regaining salvation (if this is one's interpretation) according to 6:4.

2. Some see this text as presenting a hypothetical possibility which will not (and cannot) come to pass.
3. Some tone down the severity of the judgment. Loss of reward is in the author's mind, not loss of salvation.
4. Still others understand this text as one which refers to "near Christians" but not true believers. This minimizes the meaning of 6:4-5a. The writer appears to have genuine Christian experience in mind.

Robert Gundry lends insight. Read and discuss the following quotation.

The most promising interpretation views the warning as directed to professing Christians, with the implication they must show the genuineness of their profession by withstanding pressure to apostatize (to deny the faith). Whereas assurances of eternal security reflect a divine perspective (God, who knows the hearts of men perfectly, will forever keep His own), this warning and others like it reflect a human perspective (Christians, who know their own hearts imperfectly, must outwardly demonstrate to themselves and others that their profession is real, not by sinless perfection but by perseverance against opposition and temptation). Thus the author of Hebrews addresses his readers as Christians, as he must since at the time of writing they all profess to be Christians. Yet, unlike God, he cannot know their inward spiritual state. He must warn against the danger of false profession, ultimate apostasy by willful and final denial of previously professed Christian faith, and the resultant irrevocable judgment. It is not *really* possible to be saved and lost, but it is *apparently* possible—and the "apparently" must be treated with all gravity. . .<sup>1</sup>

Which understanding of 6:4-6 makes the most sense to you? How does this understanding of Hebrews fit into the larger teaching of the New Testament and the Bible as a whole?

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Gundry, *A Survey of the New Testament*, 2nd edition, 1981, p. 320

Do you ever think of your salvation as a possession which you might lose? If your answer is “yes,” does this lead you to a kind of legalism, an effort toward “works-righteousness”? If your answer is “no,” are you inclined to sit back and be lazy in the spiritual arena?

**6:7-8** contains something of a parable, a sermon illustration. How does this fit into the preacher’s warning?

**6:9-11** counter-balance the warning of 6:4-6. *We are confident of better things in your case. . . .* These verses acknowledge the positive side of the Hebrews’ faith (vs. 1) and call the church to greater diligence.

**6:12** employs the same word used in 5:11. But here the listener is warned against *sluggishness*. Hughes writes,

Here we see that the great enemy of perseverance is sloth or laziness—one of the seven deadly sins. . . . Spiritual sluggishness is a danger that looms over all of us if we do not work against it, for just as surely as friction will stop a train unless there is a consistent source of power, or as surely as a pendulum will settle to an inert hanging position unless the mainspring urges it on moment by moment, so will each of us wind down without an assertion of the will! (Hughes, I, p. 167)

What person or persons are in your life who are urging your will toward greater spiritual devotion? What specific things are they doing to spur you on?

In 6:13-20 we come full-circle in this chapter. We may fail God, but he never fails us. The preacher reflects back upon the Old Testament covenant concept. We are assured of our

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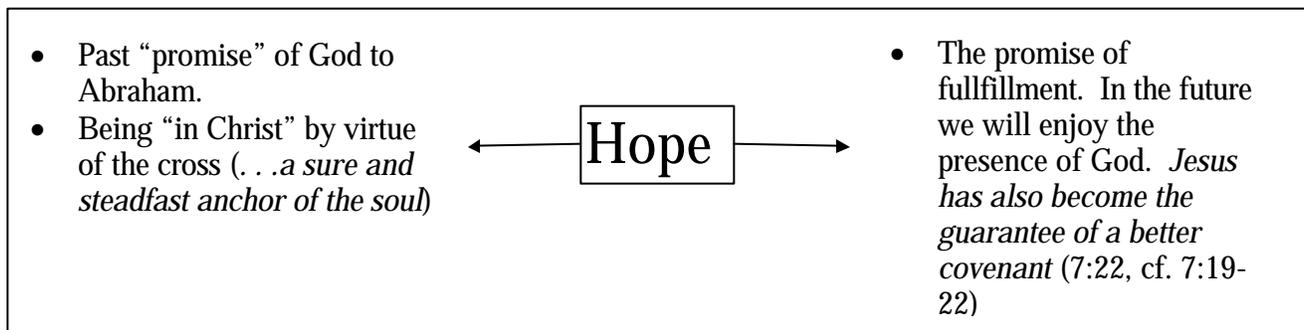
salvation first, because God keeps his promises and second, because God confirms his promise with an oath (cf. Genesis 22:16-17).

Notice verse 18. What are the *two unchangeable things*?

**6:18-20** center on the “hope” of a believer. Think about the context of this letter. The church has suffered persecution in the past (10:32ff.) and is again beginning to feel the heat of Roman opposition to the Christian faith. These believers needed hope. What the preacher has in mind is not a sentiment (*I feel hopeful*) but an objective reality.

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. . . . In vv. 18-20 the community is led to consider the character of hope as “promise” and “realization” (cf. v 11), as announcement and fulfillment (cf. 7:19). (Lane, I, 153)

We might think of our “hope” as the bridge between the past and the future.



The image of hope as *an anchor for the soul* is entirely appropriate. In the first century Mediterranean world an anchor was a symbol for hope. Greek philosopher Epictetus said, “A ship should never depend on one anchor or a life on one hope.” Pythagoras said, “Wealth is a weak anchor; fame is still weaker. What then are the anchors which are strong? Wisdom, great-heartedness, courage—these are the anchors which no storm can shake.”

Interestingly, our preacher does encourage us to trust in a single anchor, Jesus our redeemer. As we face the struggles of life “we are not flotsam on the tides.” (Hughes, I, 179.) Instead, we are rooted in heaven. We have access to God’s presence, with the promise of deeper intimacy in the future. Let us, therefore, *go on toward perfection*. . . (6:1)!

*Sermon Notes. . .*

**Study Ten**  
**Like Melchizedek**  
**Hebrews 7:1-28**

We can summarize the major themes of the Bible with three words: creation, fall, restoration.

Creation is what God did. He made the universe and everything in it. *And it was very good* (Gen. 1:31).

The “fall” refers to Adam and Eve’s original sin (Genesis 3). With their act of disobedience everything changed. Because of their sin Adam and Eve now hid from God. It is not too much to say that the fundamental issue of humankind’s existence, from the time of Adam and Eve until the present, is its alienation from God! Sin places distance between a holy God and tarnished

people.

The rest of the story of the Bible is that of restoration. The Bible is one long sentence of God’s gracious restoration of his fallen creation.

Centuries after the fall, God provided a priesthood for Israel from the tribe of Levi. These priests stood between sinful, alienated people and Yahweh<sup>1</sup>, offering sacrifices for sins. Two features of the priest’s work were essential.

1. The priest made intercession for the people. Again, the priest stood between a sinful people and a righteous God.
2. The priest offered a blood sacrifice to atone for the sins of the people (cf. p. 29 for a study on propitiation.)

Three hundred fifty years after the introduction of the levitical priesthood David wrote Psalm 110, a messianic Psalm which boldly predicts that Messiah will be a priest of a different order.

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<sup>1</sup> Yahweh is the covenant name for Israel’s God.

The LORD has sworn and will not change His mind, “Thou art a priest forever  
According to the order of Melchizedek.”  
Ps. 110:4

Hebrews 7 unravels this mysterious prophecy!

Hang on! We are entering virgin territory in Hebrews 7. Hebrews 7:10—10:18 form the heart of our preacher’s sermon. The subject is the high priesthood of Jesus Christ. There is simply no parallel to this material in Paul’s letters, in Luke’s history,<sup>1</sup> or in John’s writings.<sup>2</sup>

Notice the build-up to this point in the sermon:

Heb. 2:17 Therefore he had to become like his brothers and sisters in every respect, so that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.

Heb. 3:1-2 Therefore, brothers and sisters, holy partners in a heavenly calling, consider that Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession, was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses also “was faithful in all God’s house.”

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

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

Heb. 5:10 [Jesus was] designated by God a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Now the reader is ready to hear the preacher’s revelation: Jesus is our high priest, after the order of Melchizedek. Why? How is this priesthood different from the levitical priesthood? What are the implications of this priesthood for the suffering church in Rome? 7:1—10:18 provide our answer.

Hebrews 7 is a gold mine of truth regarding the priestly ministry of Jesus. This study is an attempt to gather a few nuggets of insight from the mother lode.

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<sup>1</sup> Luke wrote the Gospel of Luke and the book of Acts.

<sup>2</sup> John wrote the Gospel of John, I, II, III John and Revelation.

## **LIKE MELCHIZEDEK**

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Read Hebrews 7. Take a few notes on the comparison drawn between the levitical priesthood, the Melchizedekian priesthood and Jesus' priesthood. Note the following outline as you read.

- I. The greatness of Melchizedek (vss. 1-10) —————> Looks back to Genesis 14:17-20
- II. Jesus is *like* Melchizedek (vss. 11-25) —————> Looks back to Psalm 110:4
- III. Jesus is *unlike* the levitical priests (vss. 26-28)

**Melchizedek**

**Levites**

**Jesus**

### **Notes and Questions:**

**7:1-10** looks back to Genesis 14 where Abraham rescued his nephew Lot from King Kedorlaomer (and you thought Melchizedek was hard to pronounce).

**7:1** In Scripture the one pronouncing a formal blessing is superior to the one receiving the blessing. God told Abraham that he [Abraham] would be a blessing to all the nations of the earth (Gen. 12:3). But here Abraham is the one receiving a blessing.

**7:3** *[W]ithout father, without mother, neither beginning of days nor end of life* does not mean Melchizedek had no parents, simply that in Genesis there is no record of his genealogy.

The point is that these assertions apply positively to Christ, not Melchizedek. The significance of the biblical silence is that it marks Melchizedek out as a type who in these respects *resembles the Son of God*, who alone exists everlastingly, from eternity to eternity. Surrounded by this silence, Melchizedek is the figure, but Christ is the reality. The incarnate Son, it is true, insofar as he was one with us in our humanity, had a human mother and a human genealogy. . . and a human birth as well as a human death (of which our author has much to say). But as the Son of

God he is eternally the same and his years will never end (Heb. 1:12; 13:8). (PH, pp. 248-249)

**7:4** reads, *Even Abraham the patriarch gave [Melchizedek] a tenth of the spoils.* Think about this. In the ancient Near East paying tithes was a sign of subjection. Abraham is subject to Melchizedek.

What other features from the life of Melchizedek does our preacher bring up in vss. 2-3? You should be able to find three or four.

**7:11** points to the failure of the levitical priesthood. What is it? What is the author's point here?

**7:11** *The order of Aaron* is another way of referring to the levitical priesthood. Aaron was the first high priest in Israel's history.

**7:11-14** explain the insufficiency of the Aaronic (levitical) priesthood. **7:15-19** goes on to show the sufficiency of Melchizedek's priesthood. How is this sufficiency described?

**7:23ff.** Notice the comparison drawn in vss. 23ff. What is it about the priesthood of Jesus which should compel the Roman church to cling tenaciously to Him? See especially vs. 25.

Read vs. 25 from as many translations as possible. How would you explain this verse to someone interested in learning more about the Christian faith?

When we think back to our three point outline of the Scriptures (creation, fall, restoration), we see the stunning implications of Christ's Melchizedekian priesthood. The levitical priesthood brought the worshipper close to the presence of God. But only temporarily and always with the mediation of a priest. The priesthood of Christ gives God's people continual access to the God of the universe.

Respond to the following statement.

But in grand distinction the New Covenant began with the rending in two of the veil (separating the people from the Holy of Holies) at the very moment Christ offered himself as a sacrifice for sin (Matthew 27:50-51). A new priesthood in the order of Melchizedek "institutionalized" access for every true believer. Unrequited longings for God's presence became a thing of the past for all Christians. . . . Whatever our problem, Jesus is the answer! We must not sell our life short by looking to other places or persons for help. As contemporary evangelicalism is doing more and more. We must hold to the sufficiency of our Melchizedek with all we have! (Hughes, I, p. 194, 199)

Hebrews continually presents Jesus as the believer's high priest. How has this presentation changed or modified your view of Jesus' role in your life?



*Sermon Notes. . .*

## **Study Eleven**

### **The Main Point**

### **Hebrews 8:1-13**

The sermon we call Hebrews is building to a crescendo. Lest the reader (listener) miss this build-up, he is reminded,

*Now the main point in what we are saying is this:<sup>1</sup>*

The preacher is urging his readers to cling to Christ with tenacity because He is the one who brings salvation. In chapter 7 the priesthood of Jesus was likened to that of Melchizedek. According to 7:1-3 both priests:

1. were appointed by God
2. possessed a permanent priesthood
3. were kings in addition to being priests

But there is one aspect of priestly ministry which is not modeled in the shadowy Old Testament figure of Melchizedek. “That aspect concerns Jesus’ presentation of his life to God as an unblemished sacrifice.” (CTC, p. 114) Hebrews 8:1—9:28 will focus on Jesus’ offering of himself to God for the remission of sins. The parallel here is not Melchizedek, but the day of atonement as described in Leviticus 16 (cf. page 51).

Read Hebrews 8:1-13 with care. What preliminary thoughts do you have as you read these verses? Note the following outline.

- I. The superior priesthood of Jesus (vss. 1-7)
- II. The superior covenant of Jesus (vss. 8-13)

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<sup>1</sup> The NIV translates the Greek text simply as *point*. Other translators try to bring out the force of the word. Two translations use *chief point*. The NASB, NEB, NRSV and NKJV use *main point* while the Jerusalem Bible uses *great point*. GNB uses *whole point*, Peterson features *in essence* and the KJV says *the sum*. The point may be that we have too many Bible translations.

### Notes and Questions:

**8:1** Remember, Hebrews 7 looked back to Psalm 110. 8:1 does the same and continues the comparison.

Ps. 110:1 The LORD says to my lord, “Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool.”

Heb. 8:1 Now the main point in what we are saying is this: we have such a high priest, one who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens . . .

The fact that Jesus is *seated* points to the finality of his work of forgiveness.

[Being seated] is the physical expression of his triumphant cry from the cross,<sup>1</sup> “It is finished” (John 19:30). Because in his person he brought finite man and infinite God together, he could then do what no one else could—he could bear all our sins in a single cosmic sacrifice. Hence the heavenly song, “You are worthy to take the scroll and to open its seals, because you were slain, and with your blood you purchased men for God from every tribe and language and people and nation” (Revelation 5:9). In contrast, no earthly Levitical priest ever sat down. “Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (10:11). (Hughes, I, pp. 214-215)

One curious aspect of Hebrews is that the author always refers to the tabernacle (a portable temple) and never to the temple built in Jerusalem (cf. 8:2, 5; 9:2, 3, 6, 11, 21; 13:10; see also Introduction p. 2). Does this indicate the book was written after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in AD 70? Or is the tabernacle referred to because of the epistle’s emphasis on Israel’s 40 years in the desert? Does 8:13 refer to the last days of temple worship? Such questions are, in the end, unanswerable but they inspire profitable reflection.

We are more than half-way through this rich New Testament epistle. What is your opinion of the above questions? Why?

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<sup>1</sup> New Testament scholar R. T. France observes, “Sitting was often a mark of honor or authority in the ancient world: a king sat to receive his subjects, a court to give judgment, a teacher to teach.” (New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology, vol. 3, p. 588). The book of Revelation often pictures God as seated on his throne with Jesus at his side (cf. Rev. 4:2, 10; 5:1, 7, 13; 6:16; 7:10, 15 *et. al.*).

**8:5** calls the earthy tabernacle a *sketch* and a *shadow* of the heavenly reality. The first Greek word refers to a specimen or a sketch-plan (blue print). The second means shadow, reflection or silhouette.

**8:3-6** Compare and contrast the priestly ministry of Jesus with the ministry of the Levitical priests in the Old Testament.

Consider the offerings made by Jesus and the Old Testament priests. How are they similar/different?

Read Ephesians 5:1-2. What is the practical side of Jesus' offering? How is this offering to make a change in our lives?

**8:6** speaks of a profound change in the history of salvation. Jesus introduced a *better covenant!* In Bible times a covenant is an agreement (or a contract) between a weaker and a stronger party. The weaker promises loyalty while the stronger provides protection. To break the stipulations in the agreement is to abrogate the covenant.

Read Exodus 19:5-8 and 24:1-11. Here we see the formation of what Hebrews 8:7 calls *the first covenant*. Why did this covenant need to be replaced? Was the fault in the covenant itself? See Romans 8:3, 7-8.

In the following verses we learn that Jesus inaugurated the "new covenant" promised through the prophet Jeremiah. The setting of the Jeremiah quotation is significant. It takes the readers back 600 years to the time of King Josiah. During Josiah's reign Israel rediscovered God's law, repented from her sins and experienced great spiritual revival.<sup>1</sup> But the revival was only temporary. Israel again lapsed into a period of spiritual darkness. It was at this point Jeremiah uttered his prophecy.

Read Hebrews 8:8-12. Notice the specific differences in the new covenant.

## ***THE MAIN POINT***

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There are at least four distinct features of this new covenant:

1. The new covenant is internal while the old was external (vs. 10).
2. The people of the new covenant will be in an intimate relationship with their God while the people of the old covenant were often distant from God (vs. 10).  
Jeremiah 7:23-24 says,  

. . . I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you. But they did not listen or pay attention; instead, they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts. They went backward and not forward.
3. All who enter into the new covenant will know God. This is in contrast to first century Judaism. The Pharisees and other groups of religious Jews had a derogatory name for ordinary, non-religious Jews, *the people of the land*. These were the common people who made little or no effort to observe the ceremonial aspect of the law. Yet, by virtue of their Jewish heritage, they were part of the first covenant. Hence, there was a need to teach one's neighbor, "Know the Lord!"
4. The sins of those who enter the new covenant are truly forgiven.

In what ways does the new covenant fulfill (instead of cancel) the old covenant?

Respond to this statement. Have you ever considered the new covenant concept in this way (i.e., in continuity with the first covenant)? What difference does this make in your understanding of your salvation?

Read Ezekiel 36:26-27. What does this add to your understanding of the new covenant?

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<sup>1</sup> The reign of Josiah is told beginning in 2 Kings 22.

Read vss. 8-12 again. How would you explain these verses to someone who is not a Christian? How would you explain these verses to a “New Age” thinker who says “We all have God within us.”?

**8:13** Here the writer of Hebrews makes the same discovery that Stephen made in Acts 7:44-53. Because of the surpassing greatness of what Jesus has done on the cross, the first covenant is obsolete. The connection may seem obvious to our minds, but Stephen was stoned for his conclusion. The readers of Hebrews seem reticent to give up the old ways of Judaism and to trust in the sufficiency of Jesus. Why did they find it hard to give up their hope in the old way of worship? Do we (you) have this same tendency?

Are we the beneficiaries of the fullness of the new covenant, or is that fullness still to come in the future? Explain.

Let us conclude our study where we began.

The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man. (NIV, emphasis added)

Respond to the following exultation by Kent Hughes.

Serving is part of his divine being. Think of it! Jesus, our eternal priest who *sits* at the Father’s right hand in ineffable glory enthroned on emerald atop a crystal sea amongst the adoration of millions, *serves* in our behalf! “God serves me!” It is a ludicrous expression but *true*. Take a deep breath, swallow your incredulity, and humbly believe it. Jesus’ prayers are placed in your service and mine. There are no lapses, no disaffections, no uneven devotion—only a loving constancy of intercession—serving, serving, serving. . . (Hughes, I, p. 215)

Worship!

*Sermon Notes. . .*

## **Study Twelve**

### **Once For All**

### **Hebrews 9:1-14**

Sin places distance between a person and God. God is holy and therefore unapproachable by sinful men and women. Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury in the eleventh century grappled with the problem of sin and the necessity of forgiveness in his work *Cur Deus Homo* (Why God Became Man). If anyone imagines God can simply forgive us the way we forgive one another, that person has “not yet considered the seriousness of sin”, or “what a heavy weight sin is.”<sup>1</sup>

The “heavy weight of sin” colors all of life. Not only is our relationship with God affected, our relationship with our neighbor and even our relationship with our self is broken.

Albert Speer was Hitler’s chief architect and personal confidant. He is generally credited with keeping the Third Reich running during WWII. Of the twenty-four war criminals tried in Nuremberg, he alone admitted his guilt. He served twenty years in Spandau prison for his crimes. Shortly before his death Speer was interviewed on “Good Morning America.”

“You have said the guilt can never be forgiven, or shouldn’t be. Do you still feel that way?”

Speer replied,

I served a sentence of twenty years, and I could say, “I’m a free man, my conscience has been cleared by serving the whole time as punishment.” But I can’t do that. I still carry the burden of what happened to millions of people during Hitler’s lifetime, and I can’t get rid of it.<sup>2</sup>

“I can’t get rid of it.” Guilt before God is humankind’s most significant problem. Hebrews 9 addresses God’s sublime solution to our most profound burden.

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<sup>1</sup> from John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 1986, p. 88.

<sup>2</sup> from Charles Colson, *Who Speaks for God*, 1985, pp. 86-87.

## ONCE FOR ALL

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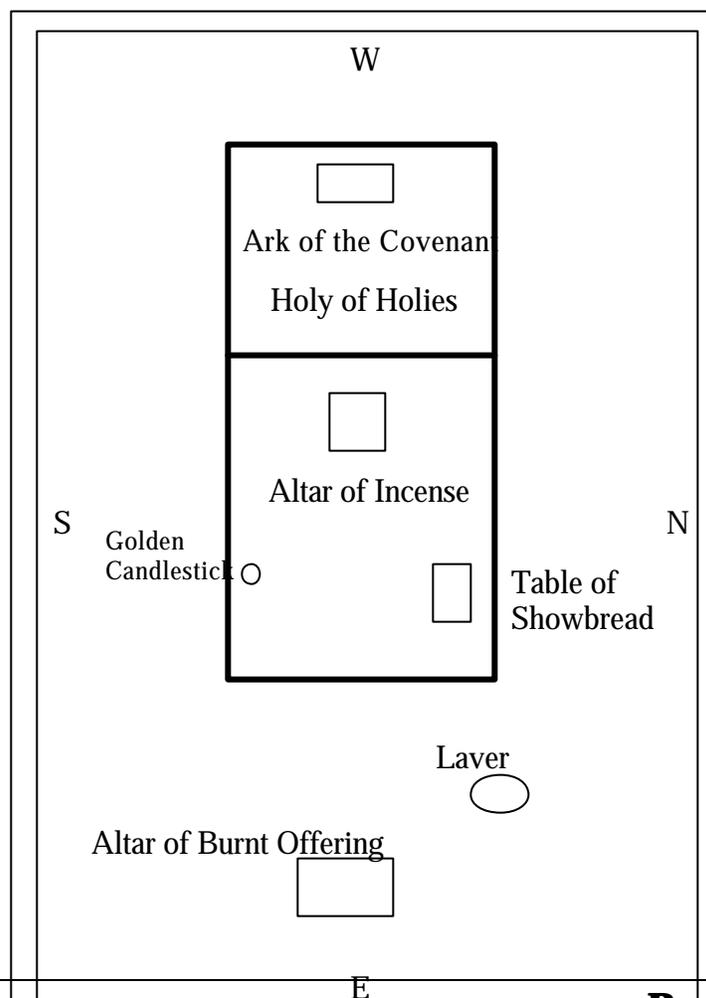
Before going on, read Hebrews 9:1-28. Notice the building exuberance of the preacher. Try to read this chapter from the vantage point of a first century Jewish believer in the face of persecution. What thoughts and questions come to mind as you read?

### Notes and Questions:

The superior priesthood of Jesus and the forming of a new covenant are dominant themes in our preacher's sermon. Hebrews 9 is, perhaps, one of the most scintillating presentations of the gospel in the entire New Testament.

The writer has devoted most of eight chapters presenting Jesus as the one who leads us into the presence of God. In chapter 9 we have an illustration of this deep truth. The ministry of Jesus is compared to the ministry of the priests in the earthly tabernacle.

Read vss. 1-5 while considering the lay-out of the tabernacle.



The tabernacle was a portable house of worship which the Jews made and carried during their wilderness wanderings. Exodus 25-31 and 35-40 contain a detailed description of the tabernacle. Later a temple, built during the time of King Solomon, was a permanent copy of the tabernacle.

The outer court of the tabernacle was 150 feet long and 75 feet wide. It was surrounded by a curtain-like fence that stood 7 1/2 feet tall. There was only one entrance to the tabernacle, a 30 foot wide opening on the east side. The outer court contained the Brazen Altar (7 1/2 feet square and 4 1/2 feet high) and the Brazen Laver which was used for ceremonial washing of the priests.

The tabernacle itself was 45 feet long and 15 feet wide. Two thirds of the tabernacle was called *The Holy Place*. This area contained the Table of Showbread (a table upon which twelve loaves were displayed made from the finest flour each Sabbath), the Golden Lampstand, and the Altar of Incense.<sup>1</sup> Behind this altar was a veil which closed off the Most Holy Place (*Holy of Holies*). This tent-room, fifteen feet square, held the Ark of the Covenant which contained the golden jar of manna, Aaron's rod and the Ten Commandments.

The tabernacle was a tangible parable that taught Israel, among other things, the severity and gravity of sin. The tabernacle was the place where the high priests would make sacrifices to placate the wrath of God. Because of sin, Israel was alienated from her God. The ordinary Jew could go no farther than the gate of the tabernacle court. The priests and the Levites were allowed to enter the outer court. Only the priests were permitted into the *Holy Place*. Annually, on the Day of Atonement, the high priest would purify himself and enter the *Holy of Holies* for a brief period of time. There he would offer a blood sacrifice for his own sins and for the sins of the people. The people would wait in hushed silence to see if the priest would survive his moment in the presence of a holy God. When the high priest emerged from the tabernacle the sigh of relief sounded "like a gust of wind."<sup>2</sup> (Barclay, p. 109)

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 9:4 places the Altar of Incense inside the Holy of Holies. Kistemaker explains, ". . . on the Day of Atonement the high priest had 'to take a censer full of burning coals from the altar before the LORD and two handfuls of finely ground fragrant incense and take them behind the curtain' (Lev. 16:12). On that special day, once a year, the censer became the extension of the altar of incense. The smoke of the incense had to conceal the atonement cover of the ark, so that the high priest would not die (v. 13). . . . Thus, the censer momentarily entered behind the curtain as an extension of the altar of incense." (Kistemaker, p. 238)

<sup>2</sup> We have a record of the crowd's response to the high priest's return from the *Holy of Holies*. Joshua ben Sira, who witnessed Simon II the Just officiate at the Day of Atonement two centuries before Christ expresses in exceedingly flowery metaphors the relief the people experienced.

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How glorious he was when the people gathered round him

## ONCE FOR ALL

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With this background material in mind re-read 9:1-15. How was the work of Jesus similar and dissimilar to the work of the high priest in the tabernacle? Be careful as you look at the text. Note the following chart as you draw your comparisons.



**Similar**

**Dissimilar**

List the ways in which Jesus' sacrifice is superior to the sacrifice offered by the high priest in the tabernacle?

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as he came out of the inner sanctuary!  
Like the morning star among the clouds,  
like the moon when it is full;  
like the sun shining upon the temple of the Most High,  
and like the rainbow gleaming in glorious clouds;  
like roses in the days of the first fruits,  
like lilies by a spring of water  
like a green shoot in Lebanon on a summer day;  
like fire and incense in the censer,  
like a vessel of hammered gold adorned  
with all kinds of precious stones'  
like an olive tree putting forth its fruit,  
and like a cypress towering in the clouds.

From CTC, p. 127.

Read Mark 15:37-39. Hebrews 9 is something of a commentary on these three verses.

**9:6-7** Notice the qualitative difference in our relationship with God before and after the cross!

First, *only* the high priest had access to the *Most Holy Place*.

Second, this access was *only* once a year.

Third, this access needed to be accompanied by a blood sacrifice.

Indeed, the people of the first covenant had very limited access to God. The climax of our text is found in 9:12. The priest's sacrifices, offered for more than a thousand years,<sup>1</sup> had to be repeated day after day, year after year. These sacrifices were ineffectual in removing sin. They symbolized a future reality.

But Jesus entered the heavenly tabernacle *once for all!*

**9:13-14** Celebrate the wonder of these verses as a homegroup. The ceremony in the tabernacle was effective insofar as it produced ceremonial cleanliness (vs. 13). But the blood of Christ truly *purifies our conscience*.

God has built into our consciousness a sensitivity to the fact of feeling filthy at the surface of our lives as a means of summoning us to recognize that sin makes us dirty within. We have a tendency to forget that fact. Sin corrupts. It is not simply a violation of the law of God; it is a violation of our personhood. Sin stains us, and demands cleansing. (CTC, pp. 122-123)

If you have placed your faith in the ultimate *once for all* work of Jesus on the cross your conscience has been cleansed. Do you feel this truth in your daily life? Why is it that believers are, nevertheless, often plagued with feelings of guilt?

How can you more fully and consistently live under this truth that Jesus died once for all and truly forgives our sins?

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<sup>1</sup> Some estimate that over a million animals had been sacrificed in the temple by the time of Jesus.

*Sermon Notes. . .*

**Study Thirteen**  
**New Covenant, New Blood**  
**Hebrews 9:15-28**

If you go to a “worship service” in any church in America you will witness or participate in a relatively tame event. Hymns and songs will be sung, a sermon will be heard, perhaps an “offering” will be taken. But there is one feature of the worship service which is anything but tame. That is the celebration of the Lord’s Supper.

During the celebration of the Lord’s Supper you might hear Mark 14:24 recited.

[Jesus] said to them, “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many.”

The congregation is then instructed to drink this blood and to eat Christ’s body.<sup>1</sup> Real blood and flesh are not offered to the congregants. Instead they receive juice or wine and crackers. Most have “taken” the Lord’s Supper so many times that the imagery of eating and drinking the flesh and blood of Jesus has lost its shock value. Why does the church practice such a ritual? Readers of Hebrews have great insight into the question. Jesus is the fulfillment of Jeremiah’s prophecy (cf. Heb. 8:8ff.). He is the one who has inaugurated the new covenant, with his own blood!

The original readers of Hebrews knew about the first covenant and its bloody details. This covenant takes us back to Exodus 24. There Moses read the law of God to Israel. Then, long before the building of the tabernacle, he made sacrifices to God.

He sent young men of the people of Israel, who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed oxen as offerings of well-being to the LORD. Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and half of the blood he dashed against the altar. (Ex. 24:5-6)

At this point Moses read the law to the people and they responded,

All that the LORD has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient.

And then it happened. Moses took some of the blood of the bulls which had been sacrificed and sprinkled it on the people!

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<sup>1</sup> See also Matt. 26:28; Luke 22:20 and I Cor. 11:25.

## NEW COVENANT, NEW BLOOD

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Everything was covered with blood. The altar, the people, even the scroll from which Moses read was sprinkled with blood. Such a worship service was anything but tame.

Why? Why the emphasis on blood? Because, as Paul points out,

The wages of sin is death. . .  
Romans 6:23

Blood sacrifice showed Israel, and it shows us what Anselm called “the heavy weight of sin” and the high price of forgiveness.

Blood stands . . . for the bringing to an end of life in the flesh. It is a witness to physical death. . . .<sup>1</sup>

With the above in mind, read this brief section of Hebrews. What is unclear? What questions do you have as you read? What portions of these verses compel you to worship God?

### Notes and Questions:

Look over these verses again with the following outline in mind.

9:15 Jesus = mediator of a new covenant	( Parenthesis: explanation of why Jesus needed to die 9:16-22 )	9:23-28 Jesus = mediator of a new covenant
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**9:15ff.** contain what is probably a play on words. In Greek the word *diatheke* (διαθηκη) is normally translated as “covenant.” But the same word is used for a “will.” The word occurs four times in vss. 15-17 and translations vary.<sup>2</sup>

Kistemaker explains.

In 9:15 the context is a religious setting, and the word means “covenant”; the author speaks of the new covenant of which Christ is the mediator and of the

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<sup>1</sup> John Stott, *The Cross of Christ*, 1986, p. 180.

<sup>2</sup> The NASB translates the word “covenant” throughout.

first covenant which, by implication, has been superseded. In the next two verses (16 and 17), the writer switches from the religious setting to a legal framework. Now he introduces the concept of a last will. A lawyer draws up a will for a client who apportions his belongings to various people and agencies. But this last will becomes valid only after the death of the person who made it. While the person is living, the will is nothing but a document, even though a lawyer testifies to its legality. . . .

How do verses 16-17 relate to 9:15? What is the connection between the word *covenant* and the word *will*? In verse 15 the author teaches that Christ, the mediator of a new covenant, died a sacrificial death to redeem those who will receive their promised inheritance. In the following two verses, he states that the death of the maker of a will validates this document. The implication is that the maker of the covenant is God, who has also made a will. Christ, the Son of God, is not the maker of a covenant or a will. Functioning as a mediator and as a guarantor, he sees that the conditions of the covenant are met and that its promises are honored. Christ died to fulfill these conditions. But at the same time, Christ's death validates the last will and testament, so that believers indeed "may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (9:15). (Kistemaker, pp. 256-257)

Notice, however, that the remainder of the chapter speaks of the progressive appropriation of our inheritance. Read vss. 23-28 again. Christ died once *to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself*. When he returns he will *save those who are eagerly waiting for him*.

Do you think of salvation primarily as your present possession or as your future assurance? Consider the following passages.

- Ephesians 1:13-14
- Titus 3:4-7

In what ways does the second coming of Christ change the way you are living your life? Share three or four areas with your homegroup.

Now invert the question: How would you change your life if you were to learn that the Christian faith is only for this life? If Jesus was never coming back and there was no life after death, how would your life be different?

Think about the blood sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. That sacrifice was made for sins committed in ignorance during the previous year. Note 9:15. The blood of the new

## ***NEW COVENANT, NEW BLOOD***

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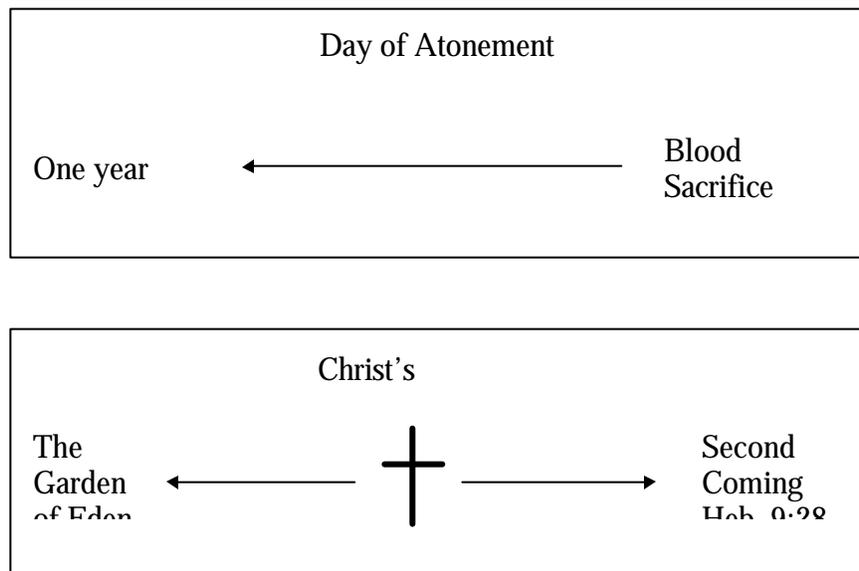
covenant truly covers the sins of those who placed their faith in God during the first covenant!

*. . . a death has occurred that redeems them from the transgressions under the first covenant.*

The effect of the blood used in the two covenants is incomparable. Paul makes the same point in Romans 3:24-25.

*. . . they are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith. He did this to show his righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over the sins previously committed . . .*

We can diagram the difference between the two covenants as follows:



Twentieth century readers of the Bible often find this emphasis on blood offensive. Why? Do you find this idea offensive?

Consider a few of the many New Testament verses on the power of Christ's blood.

- Acts 20:28
- Romans 3:25

- Ephesians 1:7
- Colossians 1:20
- Revelation 1:5
- Ephesians 2:13
- I Peter 1:2 (notice how this looks back to Exodus 24)
- Revelation 5:9-10

What is the role of confession when our sins have been forgiven once and for by Christ's work on the cross?

Use your own words to formulate a sentence or two summarizing what the blood of Christ means to you as a believer. How would you explain this concept to a non-believer unacquainted with the Scriptures?

William Cowper's hymn has been mocked as "primitive," "gory" and as an example of "slaughterhouse religion." Nevertheless the hymn testifies to the high price God paid for his children's redemption.

There is a fountain filled with blood  
Drawn from Immanuel's veins,  
And sinners plunged beneath the flood  
Lose all their guilty stains.  
The dying thief rejoiced to see  
That fountain in his day;

## ***NEW COVENANT, NEW BLOOD***

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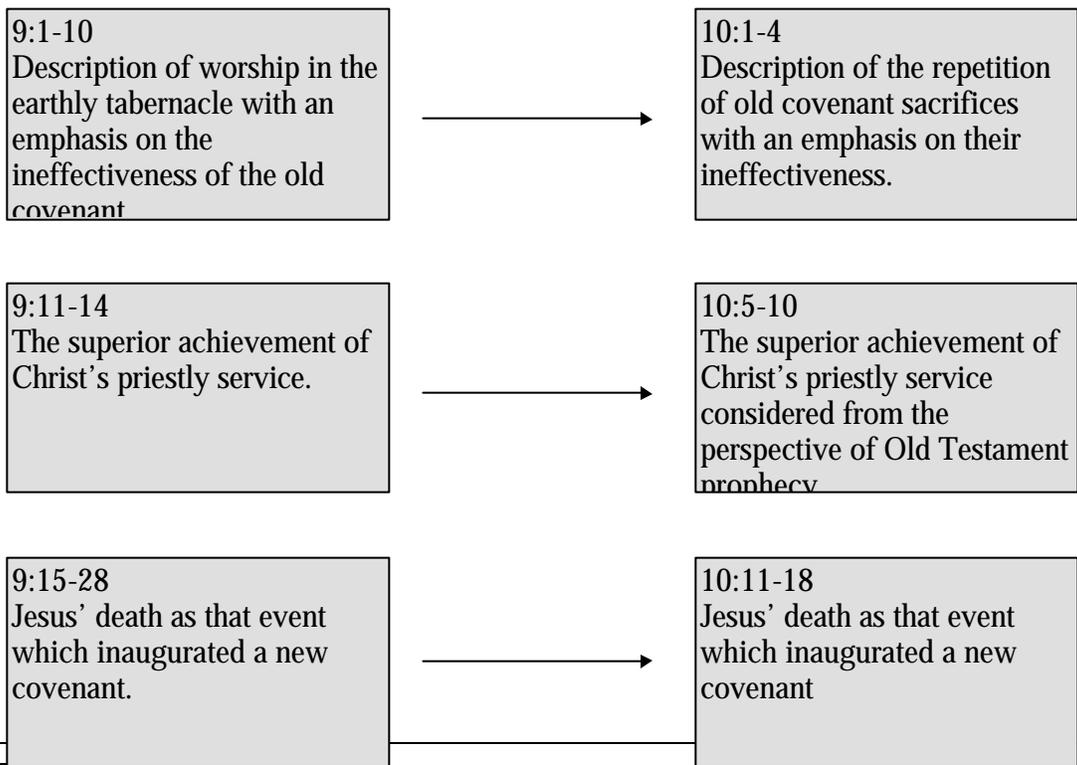
And there may I, though vile as he,  
Wash all my sins away.

*Sermon Notes. . .*

**Study Fourteen**  
**One Sacrifice, Two Blessings**  
**Hebrews 10:1-18**

As we study the book of Hebrews is it important to keep our perspective of the forest even as we examine particular trees. Recall, Hebrews is a sermon committed to writing. The preacher wants to encourage Jewish believers who are suffering persecution. The writer/speaker warns and encourages his audience to cling tightly to Jesus because He is the final sacrifice for sin. The sermon has been building to a crescendo which is sustained throughout chapters 9 and 10. In many ways Hebrews 10 is the mirror image of Hebrews 9. The themes of chapter 9 are explained more fully in 10:1-28.

Consider the following as you read our text:



Notice the different emphasis of chapter 9 and 10. The focus of the former chapter is on the objective accomplishment of Jesus: He made atonement for sin before God (cf. 9:12, 15, 26, 28). Chapter 10 looks at the experience of forgiveness in the life of believers (cf. 10:14-15, 19ff.).<sup>1</sup>

### Notes and Questions:

**10:1** says the *law is only a shadow of the good things to come*. . . The Greek word used is *skia* and refers to a “nebulous reflection, a mere silhouette, a form without reality.” (Barclay, p. 112) The *shadow* is compared with the *true form (reality* in the NIV). This is the Greek word *eikôn* which refers to an *exact replication*. This is the same word Paul uses of Jesus in Colossians 1:15.

He is the *image (eikôn)* of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.

Compare 10:1-5 with 10:5-14. Compare the *shadow* of the law and the *reality* found in Christ. What are the similarities between the two?

Specifically, what did the sacrifice of Jesus do that the Old Testament sacrifices did not do (see vs. 14 in addition to the above verses)?

Look at 10:12. What did Jesus do that the Aaronic priests did not do?

Kent Hughes comments,

Significantly, there were no chairs in the Tabernacle—no provision whatsoever to sit down. Priests stood or kept moving, because their imperfect work was never over. But Jesus, in exact fulfillment of the Melchizedekian prophecies in Psalm 110:1 — “The Lord says to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your

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<sup>1</sup> cf. CTC, p. 130-132.

## **ONE SACRIFICE, TWO BLESSINGS**

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enemies a footstool for your feet’” — sat down forever at the right hand of honor and power (cf. 1:3, 13; 8:1). Jesus rests. Our salvation . . . is a “done deal.” (Hughes, 2, p. 24)

As you think personally about the forgiveness God has provided you in Christ, what difference does Jesus’ posture of sitting make?

From our New Testament perspective these verses seem self-evident. “Oh, of course,” we say. But such was not the case for first-century Jewish believers.

For readers of Jewish origin who considered the law of God their most precious possession, the author’s assertion—“the law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming”—must have been astounding. If the law was their treasured possession, it would be difficult to imagine that far more desirable things were in store for them. The writer of Hebrews calls these things “the realities themselves,” and he explains that they consist of Christ and his redemptive work. Writing to Jewish readers in Colosse about religious observances, Paul says almost the same thing. He writes, “These [regulations] are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ” (Col. 2:17). (Kistemaker, p. 278)

**10:5-7ff.** Notice what our preacher does in these verses. By putting Psalm 40:6-8, originally from the pen of David, on the lips of Jesus, the author makes the quotation a messianic prophecy. The Psalm points out what any student of the Old Testament should know: Obedience to God is more important than observance of the sacrificial system. When Psalm 40:6-8 is interpreted as our Lord’s declaration, the author of Hebrews sees the announcement of the end of the sacrificial system (10:8-9). When Jesus said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will,” he declared his willingness to suffer and to completely atone for our sins (Heb. 10:10).

Again, this insight of the author of Hebrews is anything but new. Consider the following Old Testament writers’ comments on the inadequacy of the ceremonial law in procuring a right relation with God:

Isaiah 1:11-13 “What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?” says the LORD; “I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed beasts; I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs, or of goats. When you come to appear before me, who asked this from your hand? Trample my courts no more; bringing offerings is futile; incense is an abomination to me. New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation — I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.”

Jeremiah 7:21-23 (NIV) “This is what the LORD Almighty, the God of Israel, says: Go ahead, add your burnt offerings to your other sacrifices and eat the meat

## ***ONE SACRIFICE, TWO BLESSINGS***

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ourselves! For when I brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices, but I gave them this command: Obey me, and I will be your God and you will be my people. Walk in all the ways I command you, that it may go well with you.”

Hosea 6:6 “For I desire steadfast love and not sacrifice, the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.”

Amos 5:21-24 “I hate, I despise your festivals, and I take no delight in your solemn assemblies. Even though you offer me your burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them; and the offerings of well-being of your fatted animals I will not look upon. Take away from me the noise of your songs; I will not listen to the melody of your harps. But let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.”

Christians are in right relation with God according to the “new covenant” prophesied by Jeremiah (Heb. 10:16-17). How should the above Old Testament verses inform our worship of and service to our Lord as we live out our relationship with Him?

Our passage ends with a quotation from Jeremiah 31:33-34. Here we learn that the finality of Jesus’ sacrifice brings two blessings.

First, the law is written on our hearts. The “law” is no longer exterior. Instead, God’s people have inward motivation and guidance through the Holy Spirit.

Read Romans 8:1-11. Here Paul expands upon this theme.

Think about your own conversion and walk with God. How has this blessing become evident in your life?

The second blessing concerns the forgetting of sin. Think back to the chart on page 62. The offering made on the Day of Atonement was actually a reminder of the sins committed during the previous year. The quotation from Jeremiah (10:17) gives us the wonderful assurance that God cannot remember what we often remember: our own sins!

## ***ONE SACRIFICE, TWO BLESSINGS***

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When we place this text in the larger context of the letter we see the wonderful implications. No longer do we need to offer the sacrifices of bulls and goats. Instead, we are invited to offer the sacrifice of praise.

Through him, then, let us continually offer a *sacrifice of praise* to God, that is, the fruit of lips that confess his name.

The gospel is stunning in its application of grace. We are forgiven by Christ and then re-made, given a new heart so that we might enjoy the *sacrifice of praise*!

Hebrews 10:19-39 will invite us to appropriate these blessings. In the meantime, praise God as a homegroup.

**Study Fifteen**  
**Keep At It!**  
**Hebrews 10:19-39**

The Wallenda family is possibly the most famous circus family in history. Their roots go back to 18th century Bohemia. Family members served as clowns, tumblers, jugglers, trapeze artists, animal trainers, and circus proprietors. If we have heard of the Wallendas we probably know them because of the death of Karl Wallenda in March of 1978. It was in San Juan, Puerto Rico where the 73 year-old performer fell to his death while walking a tightrope stretched between two hotels

about one hundred feet above the ground! After the accident Karl's wife discussed the change in her husband shortly before his fall. "All Karl thought about for three straight months prior to it was falling. It was the first time he'd ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energies into not falling rather than walking the tightrope."

After ten and a half chapters of encouragement the writer of Hebrews longs for his readers to soar in the Christian life! He wants them to think about far more than "not falling." Instead, the church is invited to *enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus!* The church is invited to evaluate its present circumstances in light of previous times which were difficult (10:32-36). Their prior endurance should bolster their confidence as they face trials in the present.

We move from doctrine to application in these verses. *Since we have confidence. . . let us keep at it!* There is no point in turning back now!

Before going on in this study guide read Hebrews 10:19-39. Notice as you read the repetition of the words *let us*. Make a few notes as you read. Be sure to grasp the specific encouragement.

10:22 *let us* \_\_\_\_\_

10:23 *let us* \_\_\_\_\_

## **KEEP AT IT!**

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10:24 *let us* \_\_\_\_\_

10:25 *let us* \_\_\_\_\_

10:25 *but (let us)* \_\_\_\_\_

Think about your own life of faith at the present time. In what ways are you putting these commands into practice during this season of your Christian pilgrimage?

What other preliminary observations do you have about this chapter?<sup>1</sup>

We realize as we read these verses that we have come to the turning point in our preacher's sermon. We have both the climactic warning of the letter (10:26-31) and the climactic invitation of the letter in these verses. Here we have the call to decision. Jesus has done stupendously wonderful things for us. How are we to appropriate these blessings? We must:

**I. Enter In (10:19-22)**

**II. Hold Fast (10:23-25)**

**III. Stay Confident (10:26-35)**

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<sup>1</sup> William Lane notes that our chapter displays a "familiar sequence" as the preacher develops his thought.

**5:11-6:12**

**10:10-39**

A. 5:11-6:3	Reminder of the actual situation of the community	10:19-25
B. 6:4-8	Warning against apostasy	10:26-31
C. 6:9-10	Encouragement based on past performance	10:35-39
D. 6:11-12	Appeal focused on the future	10:35-39

**IV. Press On (10:36-39)<sup>1</sup>**

**I. Enter In (10:19-22)**

Think about the invitation to *enter the sanctuary* in 10:19ff. Summarize what this would have meant to the original Jewish readers of Hebrews (compare Matthew 27:51).

What does this invitation mean to you personally at this point in your Christian pilgrimage?

How should these verses speak to a believer who doesn't "feel" right before God? See Romans 8:31-34. Respond to the following statement:

Jesus is both the curtain (our access) and the priest (our advocate). His torn body and shed blood provides our access to the presence of the Father. And in our access he is our perpetual priestly advocate. (Hughes, 2, p. 30)

**10:22** See page 79 for a review of the significance of the sprinkling of blood. Notice the subjective side of Jesus' sacrifice: Our *hearts* have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ. There is no reason to carry our guilt.

There is a rich observable symmetry when we compare 10:1 with 10:22. The ritual of the old covenant could never *make perfect those who approach* God. But the blood of Christ allows us to *approach* (God) *with a true heart in full assurance of faith*. . . By employing the same Greek word in both instances our preacher draws attention to the wonderful difference between the two covenants.

**II. Hold Fast (10:23-25)**

**10:23** What do you think the writer has in mind with the words *the confession of our hope* (*the hope we profess* in the NIV)?

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<sup>1</sup> cf. Brown, p. 183.

**10:24** contains an almost humorous exhortation. We are to consider how to *provoke one another to love and good deeds*. What a provocation! English translations differ widely and our imaginations benefit from the divergence.

The RSV reads “stir up,” the NEB “arouse,” while the NIV employs the word “stimulate.” Peterson’s *Message* is benign: *Let’s see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out. . .*

Our preacher uses the Greek word *paroxysmos* which has the meaning of “irritation” or “exasperation.” “It is most unusual to have it used in a good sense, and the choice of the unusual word makes the exhortation more striking.” (Morris, p. 105) The word could be translated “agitate.”

*Let us consider how we might agitate one another toward love and good deeds.*

Think about this for a moment. List five or six ways you might agitate or exasperate those in your homegroup toward these lofty ends.

In what areas of your Christian life do you need “agitation” towards good deeds?

**10:25** contains the call to church life. We are not saved to be “pious particles.” Instead, the Hebrews, even at the risk of persecution, were instructed to meet together regularly.

If persecution was the impediment to church-life for the readers of this letter, what hinders church-life in our time and culture? How would you encourage the “un-churched” believer? Why is church involvement important?

### **III. Stay Confident (10:26-35)**

Notice the strong warning in these verses. The preacher argues from the lesser to the greater. What is this argument (see. vss. 26-31)?

**The Lesser**

**The Greater**

The warning in these verses is severe. The sin of apostasy is warned against. The Protestant Reformer and pastor John Calvin explains.

The apostle describes sinners not as those who fall in any kind of way but those who forsake the Church and separate themselves from Christ. He is not dealing here with this or that kind of sin but he is exposing by name those who withdraw themselves of their own accord from the fellowship of the Church. There is a great difference from individual lapses and a universal desertion of this kind which makes for a total falling away from the grace of Christ. Because this cannot happen to anyone who has not already been enlightened, he says, *if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth*, as though he were saying, 'If anyone knowingly and willingly throws away the grace which he had received' . . . He says that there is no offering left for those who reject the death of Christ because such rejection does not come from some particular offense, but from a total rejection of faith. (Calvin, p. 146)

Kent Hughes is more succinct.

To reject the gracious work of the Spirit of grace renders one irremediably lost. (Hughes, 2, p. 45)

**10:29** Notice the three aspects of the sin of apostasy. What are they? What do you think the author has in mind with each description?

**10:32** The word which is translated "struggle" is *alethesis* in Greek, from which we get our word athletic. The life of faith is a hard fought contest requiring endurance.

**IV. Press On (10:36-39)**

## ***KEEP AT IT!***

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At the end of our chapter the author says “Stick with it!” What supporting encouragement does he give his readers?

Find three verses in the Scriptures to share with your group which encourage perseverance in the faith.

How does verse 39 inform our understanding of the very severe warnings in the book of Hebrews (i.e., 6:4-6; 10:26-31)?

*Sermon Notes. . .*

### **Study Sixteen**

### **Following the Faithful**

### **Hebrews 11:1-12**

It seems every few weeks we read of someone, or of a group of people who win a huge state lottery. The television cameras show up at the person's apartment and film the festivities. Uncles and aunts are present, parents weep, champagne is poured. Everyone seems to be ecstatic because the winning numbers were chosen and over one hundred million dollars is promised to the lucky ticket holder.

Think about the scene carefully. The party begins the moment the victory is announced. But not a single dollar has yet been received by the fortunate (?) gambler. The conviviality is an expression of faith for a future award.

Hebrews 11 encourages a similar celebration of what God is going to do. The Hebrew house church had suffered in the past.

Heb. 10:32-35 But recall those earlier days when, after you had been enlightened, you endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to abuse and persecution, and sometimes being partners with those so treated. For you had compassion for those who were in prison, and you cheerfully accepted the plundering of your possessions, knowing that you yourselves possessed something better and more lasting. Do not, therefore, abandon that confidence of yours; it brings a great reward.

If our hypothesis in this study is correct, these verses refer to the persecution of the church under Claudius in AD 49 (cf. Introduction, p. 2-3). The decree of Claudius which expelled Jews from Rome (Jewish Christians included) was lifted and these Jews moved back to their home town (cf. Romans 16:3-5). In AD 64 Nero begins to persecute the church in a more severe manner.

Under Claudius there had been imprisonment and banishment; under Nero there were executions (Tacitus, *Annals of Rome*, 15:44). (CTC, p. 147)

The words "Here we go again. . ." were uttered with intensity. The church needed encouragement to keep her faith.

After ten chapters of theological argument, encouragement and warning, our preacher turns to the past with a view to the future. The faith of the saints of old is held up to encourage the Roman church in the present.

Before going on in this study, read and enjoy Hebrews 11. Make your own outline as you read. What verses stand out? If you are not familiar with the Old Testament this chapter will provoke numerous questions. Make a list of things you want your homegroup to clarify (and watch 'em squirm).

### **Outline**

### **Highlights**

### **Questions**

Think back over what you have just read. Did you notice the emphasis on the suffering and death of the faithful in this section of Hebrews? Note this theme in the following verses:

- 11:4
- 11:5
- 11:7
- 11:11-12
- 11:13
- 11:17-19
- 11:20
- 11:21
- 11:22
- 11:23
- 11:25-26
- 11:30
- 11:31
- 11:33-34
- 11:35-38
- 12:2-3

Why would this emphasis be so pervasive in Hebrews 11?

### **Notes and Questions:**

Believers are fond of summarizing Christianity with the words, *saved by faith*. This is at the heart of Paul's teaching in his thirteen letters and, indeed, it is an apt summary of what it means to be in right relation to God.

The writer of Hebrews makes this same point in 10:38 by quoting Habakkuk 2:4, *My righteous one will live by faith*. But what is faith?

**11:1-2** Here we find a classic biblical definition of biblical faith. Read these verses from as many translations as you have available. Do you notice any significant differences?

The text says, *Faith is*. . . Translators have to decide whether to render the following word in a subjective or an objective sense. The Greek word in question is *hupostasis* which means, "that which stands under" or "foundation." (Hughes, 2, p. 16). But how should we translate this word?

The NIV, NRSV, NASB, NAB, etc. translate the word subjectively. Faith is our personal *guarantee or assurance of the things hoped for*. . .

The KJV, NEB and others translate the word in its objective sense. Faith is the *substance* of our hope. The NEB reads,

*Faith gives substance to our hopes*. . .

Consider William Lane's translation. He, rightly, attempts to combine both senses of the word.

Now faith celebrates the objective reality of the blessings for which we hope, the demonstration of events as yet unseen. On this account the men and women of the past received approval by God. (11:1-2)

**11:3** *By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God*. . . Think about this. "Faith" is a comprehensive world-view. When the person of faith contemplates the universe that person gives God praise. The German astronomer Johannes Kepler

studied the universe early in the seventeenth century. His faith compelled him to give God His due.

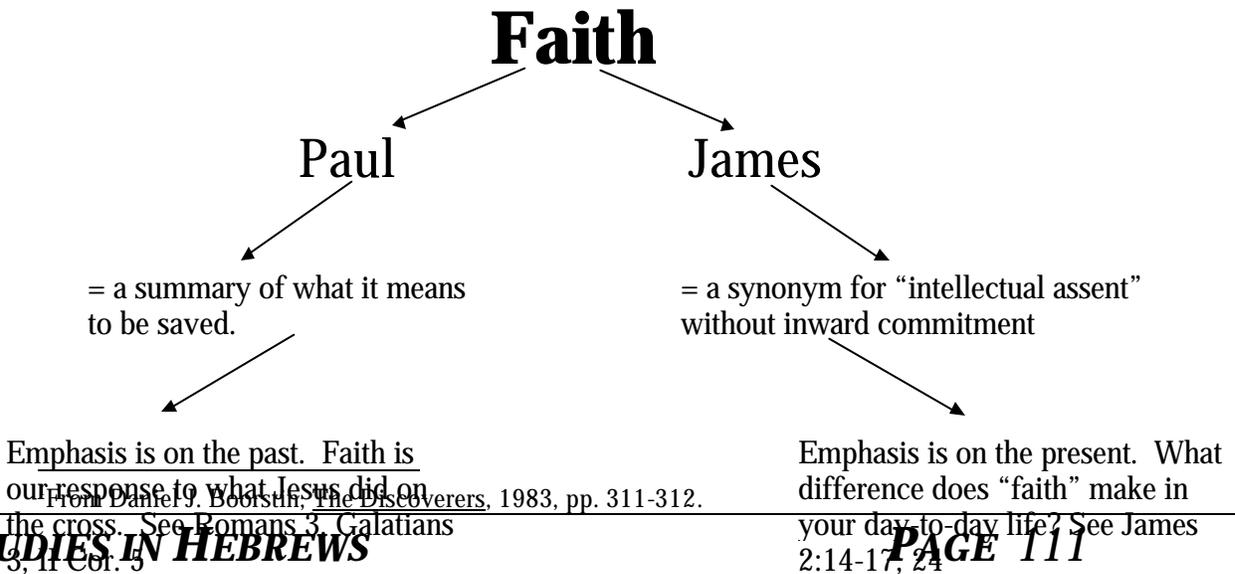
I yield freely to the sacred frenzy; I dare frankly to confess that I have stolen the golden vessels of the Egyptians to build a tabernacle for my God far from the bounds of Egypt. If you pardon me, I shall rejoice; if you reproach me, I shall endure.<sup>1</sup>

But many scientists of our time look at the universe and find only a grand accident. Carl Sagan, for example, begins his book Cosmos with the words, “The cosmos is all there is, or ever was or ever will be.” The title of Richard Dawkins’ book says it all, Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without God.

What is the difference between Johannes Kepler and Richard Dawkins? Is Dawkins smarter or more advanced as a scientist relative to his seventeenth century counterpart? Why is it that some can look at the universe and see God’s glory while others see only the process of evolution?

**11:1-3** should not be understood as an exhaustive definition of faith. Different biblical writers use the word in different ways.

Notice the difference between Paul and James as they use the term “faith.”



The writer of Hebrews adds a third perspective on faith. Here we find a look to the future. The Old Testament examples of faith looked to what God would do in the future and based their lives on this hope.

Think about this in light of our materialistic culture. We want the good things of life now! If we cannot afford them we buy on credit. We have very little social encouragement to wait for anything (travel, sex, cars, fine foods).

How should this chapter challenge the way we view life in a consumer culture? Abraham left the comforts of Ur for the wilderness of Canaan (11:8). His life was radically transformed by his vision of the future (11:10). How has your life been transformed by the second coming of Christ? Read the following verses and think about your own life of faith. What difference should the future make in the present? Be specific!

- 2 Peter 3:8-13
- 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11

Henry Scougal was a Puritan and a Professor of Divinity at Aberdeen University in the seventeenth century. He wrote his own “letter to the Hebrews” when he sought to encourage a friend in his faith. The letter was later published and remains in print under the title The Life of God in the Soul of Man.<sup>1</sup> Respond to the following statement.

The worth and excellency of a soul is to be measured by the object of its love: he who loveth mean and sordid things doth thereby become base and vile; but a noble and well-placed affection doth advance and improve the spirit unto a conformity with the perfections which it loves.

Do the “objects” of your love testify to the faith you profess? Explain your answer.

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<sup>1</sup> The great revivalist George Whitefield credits this book as the instrument which drew him to Christ. “I must bear testimony to my old friend Mr. Charles Wesley; he put a book into my hands, called *The Life of God in the Soul of Man*, whereby God showed me, that I must be born again, or be damned.” (From J. I. Packer’s forward to The Life of God in the Soul of Man, Christian Focus Publications, 1996, p. 14)

Compare Hebrews 1:1-2 with 2 Corinthians 4:16-18. What insights do you glean from this comparison? How might we encourage one another to pursue what the NRSV calls *an eternal weight of glory*? Why is it that we have such difficulty keeping our focus on the future?

What are the areas of your life in which you could be more diligent to control your affections and impulses and thus better glorify God?

**11:6** Discuss the meaning of this verse. What does it mean to say, *Without faith it is impossible to please God*? Does God not delight in the good deeds of an atheist?

*Sermon Notes. . .*

## **Study Seventeen**

### **The Faith of Strangers**

#### **Hebrews 11:13-40**

If a person has only read one chapter of Hebrews, surely that chapter will be the eleventh! This is “the great faith chapter” of the Bible. Puritan writer Richard Sibbes called this chapter “a little book of martyrs.” Chapter 11 forms a bridge between the doctrinal section of our preacher’s sermon (1-10) and the final exhortation which we find in chapter 12. The faith of these men and women of the old covenant is meant to encourage an even deeper faith in the lives of those reading the epistle. Re-read the entire chapter with the following outline in mind:

- I. The celebration of faith (11:1-2)
- II. The role of faith (11:3-38)
  - 1. Creation, to Noah (11:3-7)
  - 2. The patriarchs (11:8-22)
  - 3. Moses, to the conquest of Jericho (11:23-31)
  - 4. Triumphs over opposing powers (11:32-35a)
  - 5. Sufferings in life and death (11:35b-38)
- III. The importance of faith (11:39-40)<sup>1</sup>

Observations:

#### **Notes and Questions:**

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<sup>1</sup> based on CTC, pp. 148-149.

Notice the “preachy” style of the chapter. While cataloguing the faithful acts of Old Testament believers, our preacher stops to make several editorial comments (see especially 11:13-16). Verse 32 sounds like the preacher is noticing the clock (or the sleepiness of some who are listening). “Wow, we’ve got to relieve the child-care helpers and I am only to Joshua 6! *And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson. . .*”

**11:13-16** These are among the most important verses in this chapter. In the middle of his discussion of Abraham’s faith, the writer digresses to discuss the character of the faith we find exemplified. Notice how contrary a life of faith is to a life of “un-faith.”

Unpack these verses as a homegroup.

First, the patriarchs possessed a **patient faith**. They *died in faith*, that is “under the rule of faith” (Brown, p. 206) while waiting for God to fulfill his promises.

Heb. 11:13 *All of these died in faith without having received the promises, but from a distance they saw and greeted them.*

John Calvin says of this verse,

. . . God gave to the fathers only a foretaste of His favor which is poured out generously upon us, and though He showed them only a vague image of Christ at a distance who is now set before our very eyes to see, yet they were satisfied and never fell from their faith. *How much more* cause is given to us today to persevere? If we fail we are doubly without excuse. . . . If they nonetheless were steadfast to death, how great will be our idleness if we grow tired of believing when the Lord supports us with so many helps? (Calvin, p. 170, emphasis added)

Notice the phrase *from a distance they saw and greeted* [the promises of God]. Interestingly, our preacher moves from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph, to Moses. Moses literally “saw” the promise of God. At the end of his life Moses climbed to the top of Mt. Pisgah and was given a peek at the land of promise (cf. Deuteronomy 3:25-28).

How is it with your faith?

What promises are you waiting for God to fulfill?

Think about how you see the Christian life. Does “waiting on God” mean waiting for a few months or years? Or do you have the sense that you will be waiting until either death or until the second coming of Christ?

What decisions have you made that give evidence of a patient faith?

## ***THE FAITH OF STRANGERS***

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Second, the patriarchs possessed an **alien mentality**.

Heb. 11:13 *They confessed that they were strangers and foreigners on the earth. . .*

Foreigners keep their distance from the affairs of the country they visit. They do without certain comforts and without many entanglements because their home is elsewhere.

Respond to the following quotation. How is it with your life? Are you a “stranger in Babylon”?<sup>1</sup>

Secularization is accommodation to the world. It occurs whenever we become comfortable and complacent with our surroundings. We begin to lose a perspective on life as a stranger in Babylon. It is imperative for the man or woman of God to remember that Babylon is not holy and that Babylon is not home. We have here no enduring city. As pilgrims earnestly waiting for the disclosure of the City of God we spurn the city of man. (CTC, p. 161)

If we are to have this *alien mentality*, what does this say about the Christians participation in the civic order? Can we (should we) involve ourselves in public life? Can a Christian be both an *alien* and a politician? Explain.

In what specific areas of life do you struggle most to have this “alien mentality”?

With your answer to the above questions in mind, respond to the following quotation by Herbert Butterfield:

Hold to Christ, and for the rest be totally uncommitted.

Third, the patriarchs sought a **better home**.

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<sup>1</sup> For the newcomer to the world of the Bible, “Babylon” in Scripture was both a historical city and a symbol of a place where God is absent. The judgment of God is poured out on “Babylon” in Revelation 18.

Heb. 11:14-16a . . . *for people who speak in this way make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of the land that they had left behind, they would have had opportunity to return. But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one.*

Discuss and interpret the following New Testament passages.

- Philippians 3:20
- 1 Peter 1:17
- 1 Peter 2:11

The early church had a reputation for putting this alien mentality into practice. We have an anonymous letter written to a man named Diognetus which is dated late in the second century. Like Hebrews, this letter invites the reader to consider the superiority of the Christian faith over legalistic Judaism. Notice what the author says about the posture of the early church.

Though they are residents at home in their own countries, their behavior there is more like that of transients; they take their full part as citizens, but they also submit to anything and everything as if they were aliens. For them, any foreign country is a homeland, and any homeland a foreign country.

How does Santa Barbara Community Church compare with this early church? How does your life compare in these areas?

While reflecting on the faith of the patriarchs, Raymond Brown issues the following challenge:

# THE FAITH OF STRANGERS

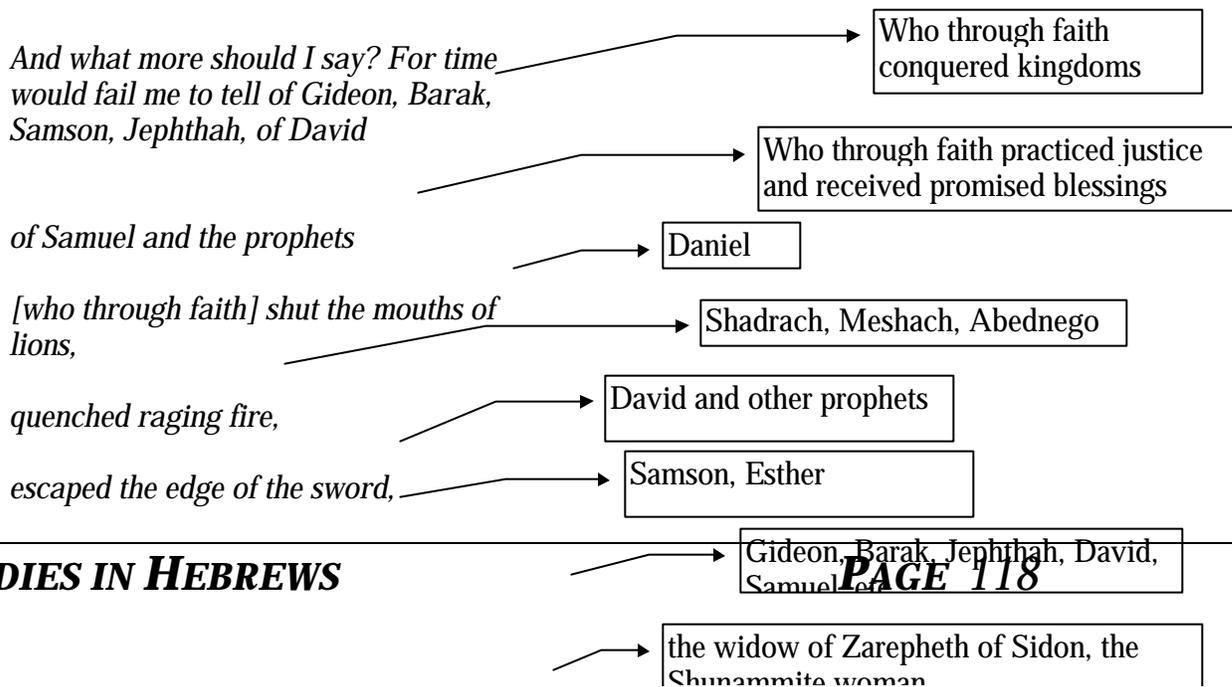
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These *strangers and exiles* have something to say to us about personal evangelism in the twentieth-century world. They make bold confession of their pilgrim attitude to life. They made it clear that they were seeking a homeland. Their outspoken witness is a challenge to our guilty silence. The majority of our contemporaries live as though this world is everything. Christians have the responsibility of reminding them, winsomely but directly, that there is a life beyond this one and that after death comes judgment (9:27). (Brown, p. 208)

Are you seeking a *better country*? What evidence would an impartial observer of your life see of this quest for heaven?

**11:26-28** Notice the rich perspective of our preacher. Moses gave up the glitter of Egyptian life *for the Christ*. The original readers of this letter are living in Rome, the seat of world power. Rome was a city adorned with the accouterments of the good life. “Hang in there. Be like Moses. Though he was Pharaoh’s adopted grandson, he suffered for the greater glory of Christ. He left Egypt and its comforts, but he held on to his faith.”

**11:32-35a** show the rich diversity of Old Testament people of faith. Even a casual reading of the Old Testament will reveal that these persons were anything but sinless. But in spite of their serious flaws they placed their trust in God.



*won strength out of weakness,*

*became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.*

*Women received their dead by resurrection.*

**11:35b-38** Notice the shift in the middle of 11:35. The author moves from examples of victorious faith to examples of faithful failure. These unnamed individuals paid for their faith with their lives, yet they persevered. Members of the church in Rome might be called to do likewise.

Raymond Brown aptly summarizes the point being made.

[T]he reader is confronted with both the courageous achievements and the imperfect attainments of the Old Testament heroes. They were enabled to do so much, but it was limited and partial. They inherited, received, obtained and proved the promises. But in some cases it was mainly a sense of expectancy and lifelong anticipation which characterized their faith. . . . Similarly, Christians receive some promises and experience their blessings, whilst at the same time they trust other promises and await their fulfilment. But we have received far more than any believer could have hoped to experience under the old covenant. They could not hope to experience personally the inward purification, freedom from fear, immediate help, timely grace, present and eternal salvation, certain hope, clear conscience, assured pardon and constant access which we have in Christ.<sup>1</sup> The richer provision ought surely to inspire us to better faith and more costly sacrifice. (Brown, p. 224)

Meditate on vs. 40. What does this mean? How does this verse inform your own thinking about your present circumstances?

*Sermon Notes. . .*

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<sup>1</sup> Hebrews 1:3; 2:15, 18; 4:15-16; 5:9; 6:18-19; 7:25; 9:14, 26; 10:19-22



## **Study Eighteen**

### **Stripping Down**

### **Hebrews 12:1-3**

In 1970 the first New York Marathon was held. One hundred twenty-six runners entered the 26 mile, 385 yard race. In our era about 25,000 runners show up each year to compete in the showcase event. The vast majority of the runners are competing against the clock, trying to shave a few minutes or seconds off their best time. Many competitors are satisfied simply with finishing the grueling distance. Each year a significant percentage of runners “pack it in” and hitch a ride to the finish line. Most of those who don’t finish quit during the last five miles!

Hebrews is a letter which says, “Don’t quit now! You’re almost there. . . Only a few more miles.”

Hebrews 12 continues the now familiar encouragement to persevere in the faith. Like chapter 11, this chapter is less theological than the earlier material of the letter. Here the emphasis is on enduring hardship and persecution. Devotionally Hebrews 12 is, perhaps, the high water mark of the sermon. Read 12:1-29. What are the author’s main points? What speaks to you personally? What questions do you have as you read the chapter? Give special attention to verses 1-3.

#### **Notes and Questions:**

**12:1** commands that we *run with perseverance*. Notice what comes before this encouragement. First, we are *surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*. The word “cloud” is a Greek idiom which means “a multitude.” We don’t run without an audience. Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and the others mentioned in Hebrews 11 are watching *us*.

## ***STRIPPING DOWN***

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The heroes of faith mentioned in chapter 11 speak, but they do so through the pages of Scripture. They cheer us on, so to speak, for the race we run concerns the cause of Christ. Through their biblical voices they encourage us in our contest of faith. The witnesses surround us, for they have an interest in our achievement (11:40). (Kistemaker, p. 366)

Have you ever competed in a sport? How did the presence of witnesses (a crowd) help or hinder your performance?

Do you have the sense of participating in the Christian life *with* the saints of the ages? Explain.

How do you sense the “watching participation” of other members of Santa Barbara Community Church as you run the race of the Christian life? What part does this play in your spiritual pilgrimage?

Notice the specific instructions for those in *the race that is set before us* . . .

First, we are to *lay aside every weight* Runners in first-century Rome competed without any clothes at all!

Second, we are to shed *the sin that clings so closely* . . .

Third, we are to *fix our eyes* (NIV) on Jesus.

Think about your own *race* in the Christian life.

What hinders you? What unnecessary clothes are you wearing as you run?

What sin entangles you?

What habits and practices do you maintain which help you keep looking at Jesus?

**12:1** The word *perseverance* (NIV, NRSV) or *endurance* (NASB) is loaded with significance. The Greek word is *hupomonê* (ὑπομονή) The word does not refer to passive resignation; neither is it shorthand for “what will be will be. . .”

William Barclay calls *hupomonê* “one of the noblest of NT words.” It was used in Greek literature of a plant’s ability to survive under harsh conditions. In Jewish literature it took on the quality of “spiritual staying power.”<sup>1</sup> We might translate it *stick-to-itive-ness*, *hanging in there*, *going the distance*.

Chrysostom, the fourth-century bishop of Constantinople called *hupomonê* “the root of all the goods, the mother of piety, fruit that never withers, a fortress that is never taken, a harbor that knows no storms.” Consider this word’s use in a few other texts.

Rev. 1:9 I, John, your brother who share with you in Jesus the persecution and the kingdom and the **patient endurance**, was on the island called Patmos because of the word of God and the testimony of Jesus.

Titus 2:2 Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in **endurance**. . .

2 Tim. 2:12 If we **endure**, we shall also reign with Him; If we deny Him, He also will deny us. . .

Obviously, endurance is a crucial component of the Christian life. Discuss this discipline as a homegroup.

What helps your spiritual endurance?

What is the greatest hindrance to endurance in your walk with Christ?

What steps can you take to eliminate this hindrance?

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<sup>1</sup> cf. William Barclay, *New Testament Words*, 1964, pp. 143-145.

## **STRIPPING DOWN**

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**12:2** What does the preacher have in mind with the words *for the joy set before him* . . . ?

Scholars disagree over this phrase. Some see in it the indication that Jesus exchanged “heavenly joy” for earthly sorrow. William Lane’s translation reflects this view,

. . . *who rather than the joy set before him endured a cross.* (Lane, 2, p. 397)

Others see “the joy awaiting Jesus after his death,” i.e., his ascension and glorification. This interpretation is reflected in most of our English translations. Kistemaker, who shares this view explains.

Some scholars think that Jesus chose death on the cross in place of the joy of heavenly bliss he enjoyed in the presence of God (II Cor. 8:9; Phil. 2:6-7). . . God destined the path of suffering for Jesus (Isa. 53:4-6) and afterward filled him with joy (Ps. 16:11; Acts 2:28). The clause “for the joy set before him” seems to point to the future. It relates to Jesus’ exaltation when he was glorified after his death. (Kistemaker, p. 368)

Look up the four verses mentioned in the above quotation. What do you think?

**12:2** Jesus *disregarded* the shame of the cross. Interestingly, in a book of the Bible which is thoroughly centered on the atonement Christ effected, this is the only reference to the cross. In the Jewish mind crucifixion was a scandal, a curse (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13). Our preacher could have avoided the reference altogether, but he wants his Jewish audience to appreciate the complete humiliation Jesus endured in order to procure their salvation.

When paraphrasing this text the Message reads,

Strip down, start running—and never quit! No extra spiritual fat, no parasitic sins. Keep your eyes on *Jesus*, who began and finished this race we’re in.

Are you “stripped down”? What do you think it means to be “spiritually fat”? What are the consequences of remaining that way?

Respond to the following quotation by John White.

A Christian is a one-priority person. A Christian cannot have a vivid faith if he is torn in two directions at once.

It is precisely here that many Christians fail. Attracted by money or pleasure, by a career, by position or prestige they try to close their eyes to the fact that human nature makes it impossible for us to have more than one supreme goal in life. Ask them what their supreme goal is and they'll say, "To glorify God, . . . to serve Christ," and so on. But watch their lives and you'll be puzzled. Talk to them and you'll find a strange lack of excitement about the glory of God. You'll also find little evidence of vital faith.<sup>1</sup>

Are you striving to be a one-priority person? In what ways would someone who observed your life see an excitement concerning the glory of God?

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<sup>1</sup> John White, *The Fight*, 1976, p. 110

### **Study Nineteen** **Divine Discipline** **Hebrews 12:4-17**

Hebrews is a difficult letter for North American Christians to understand. In our society we are as likely as not to be rewarded for our faith. Our president likes to be photographed coming out of church each Sunday. Our local police department will usually have a volunteer chaplain. Many cities and towns have what is called the “Christian Yellow Pages.” Such was not the case for the Hebrews. They were a group of persecuted believers who were tempted to leave the faith in order to circumvent hardship. Chapter 12 is our preacher’s final appeal to his readers. The chapter moves from a focus on Christ’s life and death (12:1-3) to the coming glory of God (12:25-29). Along the way we find the familiar contrasts of Hebrews: the new is better than the old, the future is better than the past.

Read 12:1-29. This chapter should be somewhat familiar by now. What additional insights do you have as you re-read these verses?

#### **Notes and Questions:**

**12:4-11** see great value in tough times. The readers are encouraged in the fact that they are still living (vs. 4). “Hey, at least you haven’t been put to death!!!” They are encouraged to understand the hardship and persecutions as the fatherly discipline of the Lord.

The Greeks used the word *discipline* to refer to the training of a child. “It signified whatever parents and teachers did to train, correct, cultivate, and educate children in order to help them mature properly.” (LCS, p. 159) Kistemaker adds, “The concept of discipline in ancient Israel was not limited to describing physical punishment but included the concept

of *education*.” (Kistemaker, p. 376) This all seems well and good, but consider the strength of 12:6. Quoting Proverbs chapter 3 our preacher says,

*The Lord disciplines those whom he loves,  
and chastises every child whom he accepts.*

The NASB translates this word *scourges* while the NIV uses *punishes*. In the first century the word referred to flogging with a whip or a severe a beating. In other words, God’s discipline is sometimes severe!

How has the “disciplinary” side of God’s care for you been emphasized (or de-emphasized) in the Christian books you have read and the sermons you have heard?

Notice the significant differences in the way verse 7 is translated.

<b>NASB</b>	<b>NIV</b>	<b>KJV</b>
It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom {his} father does not discipline?	Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?	If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons. . .

Leon Morris explains,

NIV takes the verb “endure” as imperative. This may well be correct, though it could be an indicative.<sup>1</sup> The important thing here is the emphatic position of the words “as discipline” in the Greek sentence. It is not as misery, accident, or the like that Christians should understand suffering but as discipline. (Morris, p. 137)

Look at vss. **7-11**. How many reasons does the author give his readers supporting the notion that discipline should be welcomed? What are they?

Think about your Christian pilgrimage. Have you experienced the discipline of God? What would your life be like today if God had not cared enough to discipline you?

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<sup>1</sup> The KJV sees this as a conditional clause and is based on an inferior manuscript.

Evaluate the discipline you have experienced in light of 12:11. Does the experience of discipline produce righteousness in your life?

What parallels or contrasts are there in the discipline you experienced from your earthly father and the discipline you experience from your heavenly father?

Jerome, a church father of the fourth and fifth century said,

The greatest anger of all is when God is no longer angry with us when we sin.

What is meant by this statement? Should we, therefore, be concerned if we have a difficult time answering the question above which concerns our own experience of God's discipline?

Consider the value of discipline from other portions of Scripture. Read and evaluate the following verses from the perspective of your own spiritual journey:

- Psalm 38:1-8
- Psalm 39:1-3
- Psalm 119:67, 71, 75
- 1 Corinthians 11:27-32

- 2 Corinthians 12:7-10

**12:12-17** If discipline is God's responsibility, a proactive faith is our responsibility. Read 12:12-17. We are not called to simply "endure" discipline, rather, we are called to action.

Make a list of the commands in these verses. How many can you find?

Compare 12:12-13 with Proverbs 4:25-27.

William Lane sees this as the "forgotten" portion of Hebrews.

The pastor brings before his friends a series of seemingly simple instructions in verses 14-17. For example, "Pursue peace with everyone, and the holiness without which no one will see the Lord" (v. 14). The formulation appears to be so general in character that it is easily relegated to the realm of the forgotten. The set of instructions in verses 14-17 is seldom made the subject for deep reflection or for teaching in the Church. That may be one reason there is so little evidence of spiritual maturity in the church. (CTC, p. 166, emphasis added)

Notice the corporate dimension of our faith in vs. 15. *See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God* (a positive command) *and that no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled* (a negative prohibition).

Think about the first of these commands. What would the author have in mind for his Hebrew audience? How might we apply this command to our own context? How can we *see to it that no one misses the grace of God* (NIV)?

What is a *root of bitterness*? Compare Deuteronomy 29:18.

- Can you identify a *root of bitterness* in your life (past or present)? How did you deal with this bitterness?
- How can we protect Santa Barbara Community Church from developing *roots of bitterness*?

**12:16** looks back to Genesis 25. There Esau allowed himself to be cheated out of his inheritance for a bowl of vegetables. Here our author ties Esau's act to sexual immorality.

Sexual responsibility is an awareness that our human sexuality is the gift of God. It is to be respected as an expression of our distinctiveness as persons. Sexual responsibility is an opportunity to affirm the lordship of God the Creator in the pilgrim's life. . . . A godless person is one who allows his appetites to dictate his desires and his behavior. He is godless because he enthrones his appetites as god! (CTC, p. 168)

Compare 1 Thessalonians 4:3-8.

Kent Hughes summarizes our passage.

Of course, he is not promoting a do-it-yourself, bootstrap Christian life. But Christians must will to tough it out by God's grace. Life for the believer is full of hardships that come as divine discipline. In fact, these disciplines are substantive signs that we are authentic sons and daughters (cf. vv. 7, 8). But they still require grit every bit analogous to the determined [marathon runner]. Muscular Christianity is a must! Run tough! (Hughes, 2, p. 179)

*Sermon Notes. . .*



**Study Twenty**  
**A Tale of Two Mountains**  
**Hebrews 12:18-29**

Bertrand Russell (1872-1970) is one of the most influential philosophical thinkers of the 20th century. Though raised in a puritanical home, Russell rejected the faith of his family. In 1927 the Cambridge University professor published a book entitled, Why I Am Not a Christian. Russell's atheism did not stifle his passion. The philosopher was imprisoned for his pacifism during World War I. After World War II Russell founded the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (1958) and became a strong advocate for civil disobedience as a protest to nuclear weapons. With philosopher Jean Paul Sartre, he organized the Viet Nam War Crimes Tribunal in Stockholm to protest U.S. involvement in southeast Asia.

Think about this philosopher's example. Though Bertrand Russell gave up on the idea of a God who reveals Himself, who orders life and prescribes justice, Russell nevertheless acted *as if* life had meaning. Russell's *passion* was a deep contradiction of his *philosophy*. His philosophy said, essentially, "There is no God, nothing therefore really matters." Consider his own words on the ultimate significance of life.

. . . the labours of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and that the whole temple of Man's achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins. . . only within the scaffolding of the truths, only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul's habitation henceforth be safely built.

Bertrand Russell, A Free Man's Worship

"Life is meaningless" summarizes this eloquent statement. But in his day-to-day life Bertrand Russell's passion was stringent.

How different is the view of God's children! The Christian world view sees life and history as purposeful. History, though replete with tragedy, is going somewhere. Instead of looking forward to a burial "beneath the debris of a universe in ruins" we look forward to *the city of the living God* (12:22)! The components of every-day life are full of significance and wonder because we are, one day, going to be in the eternal presence of Jesus.

# ***A TALE OF TWO MOUNTAINS***

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Read Hebrews 12:18-29 a few times. Our preacher, as always, assumes a working knowledge of Old Testament history. Before reading on in this study jot down any questions the text provokes. What stands out as you read? Compare translations.

## **Notes and Questions:**

**12:18-24** contain one of the many contrasts between the Old and the New Covenants.<sup>1</sup> We read a tale of two mountains.

The first, Mount Sinai, was a physical mountain in the desert near Egypt. **12:18-22** refer to the time shortly after the exodus of Israel from Egypt. While the nation of Jews camped near this mountain a remarkable occurrence took place.

Read Exodus 19. Answer the following questions as you read.

- How long has Israel been out of Egypt?
- What specific promise does God make to the nation (19:6)?
- What preparations are the people to make for God's visit (19:10ff.)?

Notice the power of God's holiness. "Police tape" marks the base of Mount Sinai. To come into God's presence without his protection would result in that person's death. Bruce comments on 19:20:

If even a beast accidentally touched or trespassed on the hill of God, it contracted so much holiness from it that it became highly dangerous to touch itself; it must be killed from a safe distance. . . (Bruce, p. 371)

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<sup>1</sup> See 1:1-4; 2:1-4; 3:1-6; 3:7 - 4:11; 5:1-10; 8:1-5; 9:1-5; 8:6-13; 9:6-14. These contrasts are, obviously, at the center of our preacher's argument.

## ***A TALE OF TWO MOUNTAINS***

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Once on the mountain, Moses received the Ten Commandments (see Exodus 20).

The people are stunned by their proximity to God. They heard the trumpet and the thunder, saw the darkness and felt the heat of the fire which was *blazing up to the very heavens* (Deuteronomy 4:11).<sup>1</sup>

The effect of these physical signs was to display in no uncertain terms the absolute unapproachableness of God. The mountain was so charged with the holiness of God that for a man to touch it meant certain death. (Hughes, 2, p. 189)

Note the people's reaction to this dramatic event. They come to Moses and say, "From now on,"

*You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die.*  
Exod. 20:19

Think about this reaction in light of all we have discovered in Hebrews. Access to God without fear (Hebrews 10:19) is not something to take for granted.

**12:22-24** Fortunately there is a second mountain in our chapter. The second mountain is Mount Zion.

Historically Mount Zion refers to the highest place in Jerusalem. It was once a fortress held by the Jebusites and conquered by King David. The area became known as the City of David. Mount Zion became the religious center of Israel when David brought the Ark into the city (2 Samuel 6). David's son Solomon built a temple in Jerusalem which became a permanent house for the Ark, and, symbolically, a house for God. "Zion" became a synonym for Jerusalem. In time, all of Judah, the southern kingdom of Israel, was called Zion.

But Israel's poets and prophets began to use the term Zion to refer to the presence of God with his people in the future. "Zion" signified the presence of God in the coming kingdom, in the new covenant. See, for example,

- Psalm 50:1-5
- Psalm 53:6
- Isaiah 2:2-4
- Isaiah 4:3-6

With this in mind, notice the tense of the verb in verse 22! What difference should this make in the Hebrew Christians' lives? What difference should it make in our lives?

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<sup>1</sup> Moses recalls this event 40 years later in Deuteronomy 4.

## ***A TALE OF TWO MOUNTAINS***

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Look at **12:22-24** carefully. Make a list of the blessings we already have in Christ. You should be able to find up to nine blessings.

**12:22** says we *have come to Mount Zion*. Explain this in light of Hebrews 13:14.

**12:24** returns again to the notion of *sprinkled blood*.<sup>1</sup> The blood which was sprinkled on the mercy seat in the tabernacle has been finally replaced with the blood of Jesus. Simon Kistemaker ponders the wonder of this truth.

What is the message of the blood? It tells me that Jesus removed the curse, lifted the burden of guilt, and forgave my sins. It assures me that I have peace with God and that I have been set free to live a life of obedience. It tells me that God loved me so much that he had his son die for me.

I go to church not to hear a theological lecture or to receive some pastoral advice on how to avoid conflict, but to learn that the blood of Jesus daily speaks to me and brings me the message of salvation. I have been delivered from the bondage of sin because of Jesus' blood. (Kistemaker, p. 396)

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<sup>1</sup> See 9:13-14; 9:20-22; 11:28 etc.

**12:25-29** invite a response to what God has done.

What is the argument of **12:25**?

**12:26** compares the event at Mount Sinai with the coming judgment of God. Our preacher uses Haggai 2:6 to make his point. This is a familiar theme in Scripture. The world as we know it will come under the judgment of God.

Psalm 102:25-26 Long ago you laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands. They will perish, but you endure; they will all wear out like a garment. You change them like clothing, and they pass away. . .

Isaiah 13:13 Therefore I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the LORD of hosts in the day of his fierce anger.

2 Peter 3:10 But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a loud noise, and the elements will be dissolved with fire, and the earth and everything that is done on it will be disclosed.

What is the preacher's point in using the quotation from Haggai?

This entire section of Hebrews has been dominated by the awesome holiness and power of God. The chapter ends with the statement *[I]ndeed our God is a consuming fire*. Because this is true we are invited to worship God *with reverence and awe*.

- How should these verses affect our corporate worship as a church?
- What do *reverence* and *awe* mean to you personally?
- What are some practical steps you can take in your own spiritual life to cultivate reverence and awe in your worship?
- Is “casual worship” an abomination to God? Is it possible to be both casual and reverent at the same time?
- What do these verses say to the one who mutters, “I’ll pass on ‘church’ today. There’s a great football game on TV”?

## ***A TALE OF TWO MOUNTAINS***

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What is the balance between Hebrews 12:29 (*reverence and awe*) and Hebrews 10:19 (*since we have confidence*)?

We began this study with a brief look at the atheism of Bertrand Russell. He claims, as an atheist, that all of life is ultimately meaningless. How does this section of Hebrews answer Russell's despair?

*Sermon Notes. . .*



## **Study Twenty-one**

### **Outside The Camp**

### **Hebrews 13:1-25**

Hebrews 13 is a treasure chest of forgotten gems. The last chapter of Hebrews contains perhaps the most famous verse in the letter (13:8) along with instructions and one final appeal to hold tightly to Jesus as savior. Our preacher has just looked at the clock and muttered to himself, “Yikes. It’s late. I better wrap this thing up now!” But before the final prayer he offers a barrage of staccato exhortations to his listeners.

Read Hebrews 13. Keep the following broad outline in mind.

- I. Instructions for Christian living (13:1-9a)
- II. A final appeal to trust Jesus for salvation (13:9b-16)
- III. Instructions regarding church leaders (13:17-20)
- IV. Benediction (13:20-21)
- V. Postscript (13:22-24)

#### **Notes and Questions:**

**13:1-9** cover a number of areas of Christian living. List the specific commands made by our preacher. Evaluate your life with respect to each command.

**13:4** contains a challenge to both the asceticism and the hedonism of the day. Kistemaker paraphrases the first part of the verse, “Let marriage be precious to you all. . .”

Marriage statistics in our society do not reflect a “precious” understanding of this institution. Divorce rates are up while marriage rates are down. Should the “stats” be different in the church? Obviously divorce is not to be held up as a model. But does the church in America do a good job of deeming the institution of marriage as a precious gift? How does Santa Barbara Community Church do in this area?

Concerning **13:4b** Philip Hughes writes,

The description *immoral* designates those persons who indulge in sexual relationships outside the marriage bond, both heterosexual and homosexual, while *adulterous* indicates those who are unfaithful to their marriage vows; thus the two adjectives cover all who licentiously engage in forbidden practices. (PH, p. 566)

Do we take sexual sin seriously enough in the church? Consider the following verses. Notice the connection between sexual sin and the wrath of God. What would you say to a believer who will not submit this area of his or her life to God?

1 Corinthians 6:9-10 Do you not know that wrongdoers will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived! Fornicators, idolaters, adulterers, male prostitutes, sodomites, thieves, the greedy, drunkards, revilers, robbers —none of these will inherit the kingdom of God.

Ephesians 5:5-6 Be sure of this, that no fornicator or impure person, or one who is greedy (that is, an idolater), has any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no one deceive you with empty words, for because of these things the wrath of God comes on those who are disobedient.

1 Thessalonians 4:3-6 For this is the will of God, your sanctification: that you abstain from fornication; that each one of you know how to control your own body in holiness and honor, not with lustful passion, like the Gentiles who do not know God; that no one wrong or exploit a brother or sister in this matter, because the Lord is an avenger in all these things, just as we have already told you beforehand and solemnly warned you.

Revelation 21:8 But as for the cowardly, the faithless, the polluted, the murderers, the fornicators, the sorcerers, the idolaters, and all liars, their place will be in the lake that burns with fire and sulfur, which is the second death.

God's grace covers *a multitude of sins* (James 5:20). But grace causes us to change our behavior.

**13:5** What is the basis of keeping one's life *free from the love of money*? Santa Barbara is a very wealthy city in a very wealthy country. Where are you vulnerable in this area? How can those who are close to you encourage you with regard to the issue of "loving money"?

In what areas are you tempted to spend money which you shouldn't spend? What is your plan for overcoming this weakness?

What are our responsibilities as a church in this area? How can we set a corporate example with regard to the *love of money*?

Respond to the following quotation from John White.

Riches are not evil but they are dangerous. . . . Riches corrupt everybody who is in the least corruptible. God is merciful and can deliver the rich from the danger of being rich. But many of us do not want to be delivered. We say we trust in God. But we act as though our trust is in riches, as indeed it often is. Riches undermine faith.<sup>1</sup>

Compare I Timothy 6:3-18. What does this add to the above?

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<sup>1</sup> From *The Golden Cow*, IVP, 1977, p. 61.

## ***OUTSIDE THE CAMP***

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**13:9b-16** Examine these verses. After twenty-one weeks in Hebrews we should be able to make sense of them. Explain how this section reiterates the fundamental argument of our preacher.

What is *the altar*?

Who are those *who officiate in the tent*?

What is *the tent*?

Why the emphasis on *the outside*? (See. Leviticus 4:12; 16:27-28)

**13:17-19** contain advise on how the Roman church should view its leaders.

Notice what church leaders are to do. **13:17** says they are *keeping watch over your souls*. The word used here was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament in Isaiah 62:6.

I have posted watchmen on your walls, O Jerusalem; they will never be silent day or night. You who call on the LORD, give yourselves no rest. . . (NIV)<sup>1</sup>  
Homegroup leaders, do you “keep watch” over the souls of those in your homegroup? Do you pray for those in your group with regularity? Do you “check-in” with them to inquire about the state of their souls?

Are you in the habit of praying for our elders? How can you make an effort to support and encourage the elders of our church? Be specific.

Notice the goal as we support the leadership of our church.

*Let them do this with joy and not with sighing—for that would be harmful to you.*

The word translated *sighing* is strong. It means to groan! Church leadership should be a joy for the leader and the led.

**13:20-21** If these verses were the only two you had, what would you know about God, Jesus, sin and redemption?

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<sup>1</sup> See also Ezekiel 3:17; 33:1-9 and 1 Peter 5:2.

During his last sermon before his death author Joe Bayly uttered the following words.

Oh, God, burn eternity into my eyeballs. Help me to see all of this life through the perspective of eternity.

In many ways this seems a fitting prayer at the end of Hebrews. The writer earnestly desires that his readers focus on eternity. We are to forsake the earthly tent and focus instead on the *city that is to come* (13:14).

Spend some time together as a homegroup pondering Hebrews as a whole. How has this book transformed your understanding of God? Has this sermon “burned eternity into your eyeballs”? What have you learned and what difference is this knowledge making in your life? Allow this discussion to culminate in a time of worship and praise.