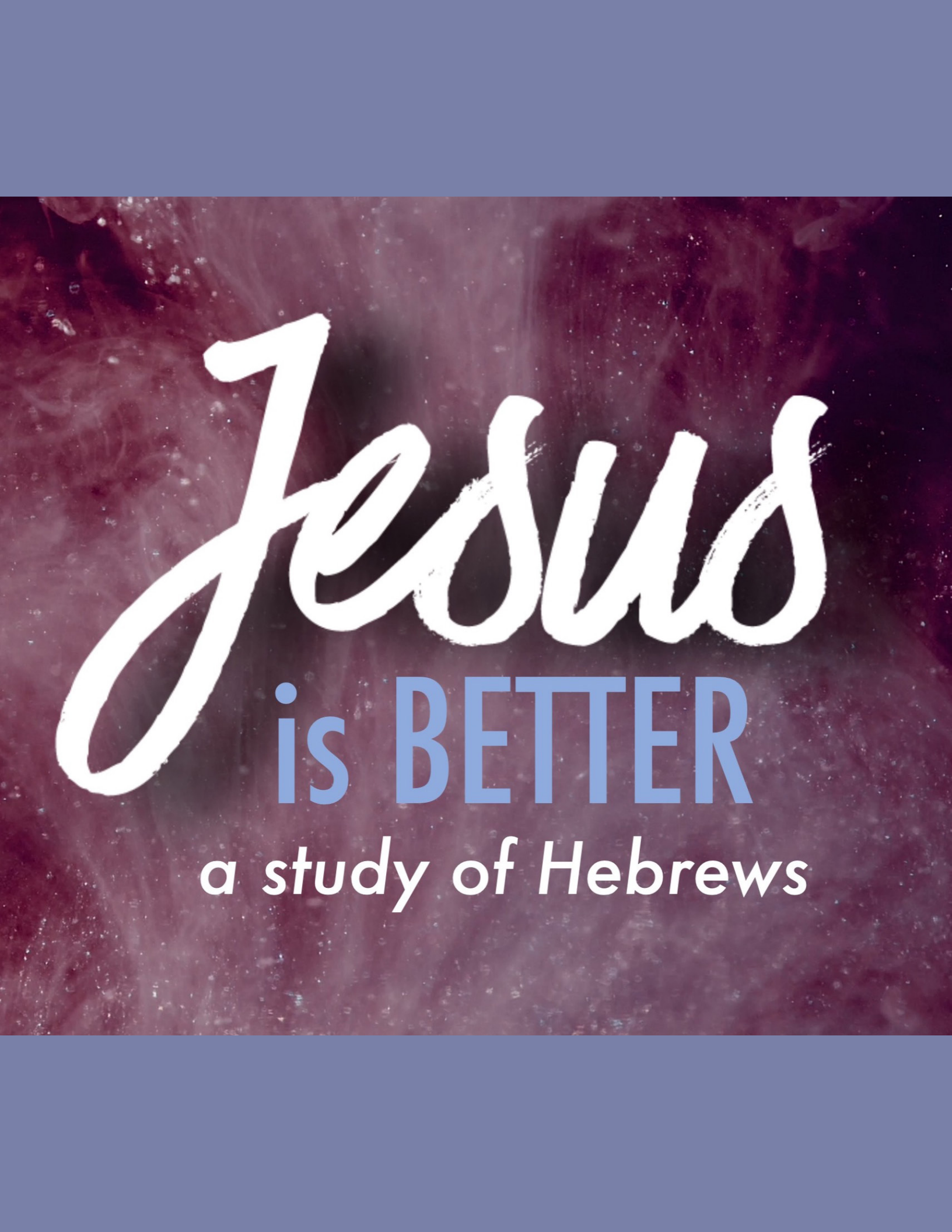




Jesus

is BETTER

a study of Hebrews



A Study of Hebrews

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Lesson 1: Jesus Is Better

Hebrews 1.1-2.4

A study of Hebrews presents some challenges because there are several questions about the letter which we simply cannot answer. Let's briefly note some of these questions:

- Who wrote the letter? There was a relatively early tradition in the church that Paul wrote the letter in Hebrew and Luke then translated it into Greek. However, other early traditions pointed to a variety of possible authors including Barnabas, Aquilla and Priscilla, and finally Apollos. The author speaks of having received the gospel from the original witnesses, and not from the Lord (see Hebrews 2.3). This argues against Pauline authorship as Paul proclaimed that he received the gospel from the Lord (see Galatians 1.12). Apollos is an attractive option given his description in Acts 18.24-25.
- Who were the recipients? This letter was known and circulated among the churches very early (by the end of the first century), but it did not receive its traditional title until late in the second century. The letter bears out that the intended audience were Jewish Christians who were undergoing persecution (see Hebrews 12.1-4), and were thus tempted to go back to Judaism. It's likely that these Jewish saints did not live in Palestine, but where they lived is unknown. Asia Minor, Greece and Rome are all given as possibilities.
- When was the letter written? We know that the community was experiencing persecution, but none of them had yet died for the faith (Hebrews 12.4). This argues for a date before Nero's general persecution against Christians in the mid 60s. It is also likely that the letter was written before Jerusalem was destroyed in AD 70. "The principal indication of the date is that the epistle says nothing about the destruction of the temple but leaves the impression that the Jewish sacrificial system, with its ministry of priests and all that that involved, was a continuing reality, cf. 9:6-9." (Expositors Bible Commentary). So, a date in the early 60s is likely.

While there are many things about the letter we don't know, the message of the letter is not in doubt! The author's point to this Jewish community of saints is that Jesus Christ is better! Note how this is stated throughout the letter:

1. Jesus is better than the angels (Hebrews 1.4)
2. Jesus offers a better hope (Hebrews 7.19)
3. Jesus guarantees a better covenant (Hebrews 7.22)

4. Jesus has better promises (Hebrews 8.6)
5. Jesus made a better sacrifice (Hebrews 9.23)
6. Jesus provides a better possession (Hebrews 10.34)
7. Jesus provides a better resurrection (Hebrews 11.35)
8. Jesus' blood is better (Hebrews 12.24)

The message of "Jesus is better" is prominent from the moment the letter begins, describing how Jesus is better than God's other messengers. God had many faithful prophets (spokesmen) in the Old Testament, and He had communicated to them in numerous ways including a burning bush (Exodus 3.2ff), a still, small voice (1 Kings 19.12ff) and glorious visions (Isaiah 6). But "in these last days" (i.e. the Messianic age), God spoke through His Son! And God's Son is not only better than the prophets (Hebrews 1.1-2), He's also better than the angels (Hebrews 1.4)! The writer gives seven descriptive phrases of Jesus which show how superior He is!

1. Jesus is appointed heir of all things (Hebrews 1.2). Just as the Father had promised (see Psalm 2.8).
2. God made the world through Jesus (Hebrews 1.2). Note John 1.1-4.
3. Jesus is the radiance of God's glory (Hebrews 1.3). NLT: "The Son radiates God's own glory". See John 1.14,18.
4. Jesus is the exact representation of God's nature (Hebrews 1.3). NLT: "expresses the very character of God". Expositors Bible Commentary: "in is literal sense it was used of the impression on coins".
5. Jesus upholds all things by the word of His power (Hebrews 1.3). NLT & NIV: "sustains".
6. Jesus made purification of sins (Hebrews 1.3). This is the issue at the heart of the letter. The Old Testament sacrificial system could not make purification... but Jesus could! See Hebrews 10.3-4,10.
7. Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high (Hebrews 1.3). Note how the Hebrew writer speaks of the priests standing daily to offer their sacrifices (see Hebrews 10.11). But Jesus, since He made one sacrifice for all, now sits at God's right hand!

Jesus is better, and our study of Hebrews will show just how much better He is! And since He is better, the call for us is the same as was given to the original recipients of this letter:

"¹² Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God. ¹³ But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today," so that none of you will be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴ For we have become partakers of Christ, if we

hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end..." Hebrews 3:12-14 (NASB95)

1.5-14, Why Jesus Is Much Better Than The Angels

To make his case, the author of Hebrews appeals to a number of Old Testament passages which contrast the positions of the Messiah with that of the angels. Before making particular points from the text, we should note the author's approach to Old Testament Scripture. The author sees Jesus as the fulfillment of numerous passages, not just ones that are explicitly Messianic. Vs. 5 quotes Psalm 2, which is readily seen as Messianic, but vss. 8-9 quotes Psalm 45.5-6, a passage which appears to be addressed to the Father. Furthermore, 2Samuel 7.14 (quoted in vs. 5) would have first applied to Solomon. The point is that the Hebrew writer viewed the entire Old Testament as pointing to the Messiah, a position Jesus taught (see Luke 24.44-47).

- Vss. 5-6 emphasize the Father-Son relationship, quoting from both Psalm 2.7 and 2Samuel 7.14. No angel could claim the same relationship, rather the angels are called to worship the Son! Note: the use of "firstborn" is significant. As we will note in a later lesson, Jesus' position as firstborn means that there are others who are children of God, brothers and sisters of Jesus (see Hebrews 2.11). But in this instance the use of "firstborn" emphasizes Jesus' status in the family of God. He is the only heir (see vs. 2).
- Vss. 7-14 contrast the relative positions of Jesus and the angels. The position of the angels bookend the passage (vss. 7,14) and show their inferiority to God's Son. Vs. 7 quotes Psalm 104.4 and the meaning may be that the angels have the qualities of wind and fire, showing their superiority to man (note 2.7), but they are still inferior to the Son. They are but God's messengers, sent to minister to God's people (vs. 14).
- But the Son reigns! Vss. 8-13 quote from Psalm 45.6-7; Psalm 102.25-27 and Psalm 110.1. Psalm 45 not only states the fact of His reign, but the nature of His reign: He is both righteous and loves righteousness! Psalm 102 emphasizes the enduring nature of Jesus' reign, for He not only laid the foundations of the earth, but will one day "roll them up like a garment". Through it all, He will be the same. And Psalm 110 emphasizes His authority: He sits at the right hand of the Father and will rule over all His enemies!

2.1-4, Ramification of Jesus' Superiority: Heed Him!

Having established the superiority of Jesus to the angels, the author of Hebrews moved quickly to the practical ramifications of Jesus' exalted position. This explanation is helpful when reading the passage: "One of the key roles of ancient speakers, rhetoricians and rabbis alike, was to motivate people to take specific courses of action, and they utilized a wide variety of oratorical and literary tools to accomplish that end. One such tool was the 'argument from lesser to greater,'

also known as an a fortiori argument. This device lies at the heart of 2:1–4. This type of argument reasoned that if some principle is true in a less important situation, then it certainly is true—and has greater implications—in a more important situation.” (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary)

- The author’s concern is apparent in vs. 1; if his audience doesn’t heed the gospel they would drift away! “the word translated ‘pay ... attention’ in 2:1 was used as a technical term for bringing a ship into port. The wind or oars powered ancient ships. A test of a captain’s skill in controlling a large, wind-driven vessel came upon entering a harbor and approaching a dock, since there were no ‘reverse engines’ to slow the ship’s progress. To carry too much speed would result in crashing into the docks; to carry too little speed resulted in falling short. A ship in the latter instance would ‘drift’ by the place at which it was supposed to land, perhaps being impeded or driven off course by strong currents or prevailing winds. Thus, the author of Hebrews expresses concern over the spiritual state of his readers, whom he fears may be drifting off course from a clear focus on the gospel of salvation.” (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary)
- Vs. 2 refers to the angels role in delivering the Mosaic Law, a point also made in Acts 7.38 and Galatians 3.19. The Jews knew that all of the Law was to be followed, else they face the righteous punishments detailed in the Law (cf. Deuteronomy 28.15ff). And if that was true of disobedience to the word delivered by angels, what of the word that through God’s Son?
- Vss. 3-4, there is no escape if we neglect the salvation provided by the Son, “what we have heard” in vs. 1. To bolster the point even further, the author notes how three parties were involved in delivering this word of salvation: Jesus first proclaimed it (vs. 3), it was confirmed by those who heard, i.e. the apostles (vs. 3), and God testified with them through signs, wonders and miracles (vs. 4; cf. Mark 16.20).



Lesson 2: Jesus Is Better, But Was Humbled

Hebrews 2.5-18

The author had demonstrated the superiority of Jesus to the angels by appealing to how the Old Testament Scriptures contrasted the nature of the Messiah with that of angels (Hebrews 1.5-14). And if Jesus is clearly superior, then we are under obligation to heed His word, words which were confirmed by His messengers and by the Father Himself! (Hebrews 2.1-4). But all of this raises a question: if Jesus is so superior to the angelic host of heaven, why was He humbled and made to live as a man?

2.5-9, The Reality of Jesus' Exaltation

Before giving an explanation of this text, we need to answer a couple of questions:

1. What is "the world to come" (vs. 5)? "The Greek expression (hē oikoumenē hē mellousa) can be understood in various ways, as for instance (i) of the afterlife, (ii) of the new order inaugurated by Jesus Christ, i.e. the fulfillment of the looked for 'age to come' which was now come in the present kingdom of God, or (iii) of the end of the present age. There may be truth in all three, but the second seems to be brought most clearly into focus by the context. It is worth noting that the word used here for 'world' is not kosmos (the world as a system), but the world of inhabitants (oikoumenē)." (Donald Guthrie, TNTC).
2. Who is the subject of the quotation: Jesus or mankind? Psalm 8 is not an explicitly Messianic Psalm and the references to both "man" and "son of man" is likely an example of Hebrew poetry where both phrases mean the same. Some commentators think the Hebrew writer is speaking of man, pointing out how all things are not subject to man, even though they should be. With this interpretation, Jesus' current exaltation (vs. 9) is contrasted with man's current state (vs. 8). However, it seems more natural and more likely that the quotation is in reference to Jesus, which is how we will interpret the passage.

The passage begins with yet another contrast between Jesus and the angels: the Father did not subject "the world to come" to the angels, but He did subject it to His Son. Psalm 8.4-6 is given as confirmation of this fact. Significant in the passage is the fact that the "son of man" was "made for a little while lower than the angels" (vs. 7). This phrase is picked up in vs. 9 and shows that while Jesus was

temporarily humbled, that was not His ultimate state; He is now “crowned with glory and honor”! Yes, He was humbled and it seemed as if all things weren’t subject to Him. But the Father “has left nothing that is not subject to Him” (vs. 8).

Of equal significance is what vs. 9 says about why Jesus is now crowned with glory and honor. His exaltation was because He suffered death... and He did so for everyone. There was a reason why Jesus was humbled and became a man, and those reasons are the focus of the next section.

2.10-18, Why Jesus Was Humbled For A Little While

The humbling of God’s Son, Jesus living as a man, occurred because God desired it and He purposed it. Thus, the passage begins by saying “it was fitting”. The incarnation wasn’t an accident or an alternate plan; Jesus’ life on earth was to fulfill the divine purpose of “bringing many sons to glory”. The author goes on to detail just why it was so important that Jesus be humbled:

1. Jesus was “perfected” by suffering (vs. 10). Jesus is referred to as the “author” of our salvation in this passage. The term could also be translated as “pioneer”, “leader”, or even “champion”. “The term was used for both human and divine heroes, founders of schools or those who cut a path forward for their followers and whose exploits for humanity were rewarded by exaltation.” (IVP Bible Background Commentary). The idea is that Jesus paved the way for our salvation, and of course that meant suffering was involved. Since man suffers as a result of sin, and has done so ever since the Fall, God’s Son would also have to suffer so that He could save us. It is in this sense, and without any reference to moral perfection, that Jesus was “perfected” through sufferings; His suffering is what made Him the author of our salvation.
2. Jesus can now call us brothers and sisters (vss. 11-13). The NASB reads “He who sanctifies and those are sanctified are all from on Father” (vs. 11). Note that “Father” is supplied and not in the original text. The idea is that Jesus and mankind all come from the same source. Since Jesus’ human existence is under consideration the idea would be that we share a common human lineage, going all the way back to Adam. Thus, Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters! An appeal is made to Psalm 22.22, a Messianic psalm which recognizes the kinship between the Messiah and His “brethren”. However, note the distinction that is still made: we may be brethren, but only He can declare God’s name (i.e. His whole character) to us.
3. Jesus could die, saving others from death (vss. 14-16). Humanity, children of God and descendants of Adam all “share in flesh and blood”... it was how we were created. As such, we are subject to physical death... and worse (Genesis 2.17; 3.17-24). Creation and the Fall seem to be in the author’s thoughts, and if so he was also mindful of God’s promise to one day defeat

Satan: "And I will put enmity Between you and the woman, And between your seed and her seed; He shall bruise you on the head, And you shall bruise him on the heel."" (Genesis 3:15, NASB95) Jesus, born of a woman, became flesh so that He could die, and in death could free us from the devil and from fear.

4. Jesus can now serve as our high priest (vss. 17-18). Jesus' position as high priest is the subject of much of this letter, but is introduced here in connection with why Jesus had to be humbled. As we will see, the high priest served the role of intercessor between God and the people. For Jesus to be our high priest, He had to become like us, to share even in the experience of being tempted. Jesus, because He was humbled and became a man, can be merciful; He can truly come to our aid! And since He is God's Son, He is "faithful... in things pertaining to God." One such matter is singled out in the passage: making "propitiation for the sins of the people". Propitiation "relates to putting away the divine wrath" (EBC). Man, because of sin, is deserving of God's wrath, but Jesus' sacrifice and His ongoing work as our high priest saves us from God's righteous wrath. He truly comes to our aid.



Lesson 3: Jesus Is Better Than Moses

Hebrews 3

The author of Hebrews had established Jesus' superiority over the angels (1.5-14). Even Jesus' becoming a man enhances His superiority, for by sharing "in flesh and blood" He was able to both render Satan powerless and be a merciful high priest (2.14-18). Recall that angels had a part in delivering the Law (2.2; cf. Acts 7.38; Galatians 3.19), so it was essential to show Jesus' superiority to these heavenly beings. But what about the lawgiver, Moses; how does Jesus compare to Him?

3.1-6, Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses

There is no difficulty in understanding this passage: Jesus is shown to be better than Moses, because as the Son over the house He is deserving of more glory than a servant in the house. It is interesting that the Hebrew author does not point out Moses' flaws and moments of doubt (like his reluctance to return to Egypt, Exodus 3-4, or his failure to honor the Lord resulting in his inability to enter the promised land, Numbers 20.1-12). Rather, the author emphasizes Moses' greatness and faithfulness to amplify the glory of Jesus.

Note the following from the text:

- Recall that Jesus "partook" of flesh and blood (2.14), and the result is that we can now be "partakers of the heavenly calling" (3.1).
- Jesus is referred to as "apostle", the only such occurrence in the New Testament. This is not an official designation (like the 12 apostles), but points out that Jesus was "sent" to accomplish the Father's will (see 2.10).
- The use of "house" in this passage does not refer to a structure, but to the household (note vs. 6).
- The term "servant" in vs. 5 is not the same as the one which would reference a slave. "The word for "servant" (therapōn) is found only here in the NT. It denotes an honored servant, one who is far above a slave but still a servant." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary). Thus, Moses was elevated above the rest of Israel, but he was still subordinate to the Son.
- The term "Christ" is first used by the Hebrew author in vs. 6. The frequent use of "Jesus" in the prior passages emphasized the Son's humanity, but to show the contrast with Moses it was also necessary to emphasize the Son's status as the chosen, anointed one.

3.7-15, Call to hold fast to our assurance

Having established the Son's superiority to Moses, the author uses the example of Israel's unfaithfulness to urge his readers to heed and follow the Lord. The quotation is taken from Psalm 95.7-11, a psalm which begins with the psalmist urging the reader to "shout joyfully", to worship and kneel before the Lord (Psalm 95.1-7). It was then that the psalmist warns against making the same mistake as Israel in the wilderness. Though written hundreds of years later and to a different audience, the Hebrew author is making the exact same appeal.

- Note that the Lord speaks of Israel's rejection from when they first left Egypt (Maribah and Massah, Exodus 17.2-7) and throughout the entire 40 years in the wilderness (vs. 10).
- Contrast the "sinful, unbelieving heart" (vs. 12) to the faithfulness of both Jesus and Moses (vs. 2).
- "Today" is emphasized in the passage, beginning the quotation (vs. 7) and formulating part of the appeal in vs. 13. Each day is "Today" and thus an opportunity to heed and follow the Lord... or to reject Him in unbelief.
- Israel tested the Lord because they were deceived into thinking that their previous life in Egypt was better. Similarly, sin has the potential to deceive us into thinking this world is better (vs. 13).
- "Partakers with Christ" is probably a better translation than "partakers of Christ" (vs. 14). This connects back with 2.11, we come from the same and He is not ashamed to call us brethren.
- Note that our status as "partakers with Christ" depends on us holding fast. Israel lost their status as God's chosen because they failed to hold fast; we must not repeat their mistakes!

3.16-19, Results of Israel's unbelief

In chapter 4 the author will make the case that a rest remains for the faithful, but we mustn't make the mistake of Israel who failed to enter their rest. This section at the close of chapter 3 shows why they failed to receive what was promised: their unbelief (vs. 19). This unbelief provoked the Lord to anger (vss. 16-17) and resulted in Him swearing that "they would not enter His rest" (vs. 18).

While unspoken, it is implied that if God's wrath came upon those who followed one as faithful as Moses, those who follow God's Son should also expect divine wrath if we fail to "hold fast to our assurance" because of unbelief.



Lesson 4: A Sabbath Rest Remains

Hebrews 4

After explaining how Jesus is better than Moses (3.1-6), the author introduced Psalm 95 (3.7-11). There, the Psalmist (David according to Hebrews 4.7) exhorted the people of his generation to praise and reverence the Lord, to listen to His voice “today” unless they repeat the failures of the wilderness generation, the people of whom God swore, “they shall not enter my rest”. The author of Hebrews then proceeded to make the same appeal to his audience as David had made to his; don’t have a heart that falls away, rather encourage each other “today” lest they repeat the mistake of the wilderness generation, the people who were not able to enter His rest because of unbelief (Hebrews 3.12-19).

However, Israel’s failure to enter the Lord’s rest doesn’t mean the rest is no longer available, quite the opposite. The Lord’s rest remains, and we can enter His rest! That is the point of Hebrews 4.1-11. Instead of going through the passage from beginning to end, we will examine the text by answering two questions: 1) what is the Lord’s rest and 2) how can we enter His rest?

What is the Lord’s rest?

1. The rest was promised by the Lord (vs. 1). “Promise” is an important concept in Hebrews, occurring 14 times in the letter (the most in the NT). The author wants his audience (and us) to know that the Lord’s promise remains, it was not frustrated by Israel’s disobedience. The quotation from Psalm 95 is also significant for understanding the concept of the Lord’s promise. The Psalm, written by David (vs. 7), was composed centuries after Joshua led Israel into Canaan, fulfilling the Lord’s promise to give Abraham’s descendants the land (see Joshua 21.43-45). But the author of Hebrews is implying that the Lord’s promise of rest was not fulfilled in Joshua’s day or when David composed Psalm 95; His promised rest meant more than living in Canaan!
2. The rest is for those who believe (vss. 2-3). Verse 2 is an important verse as it makes an important comparison between God’s people in the old and new covenants. Both have had “good news” proclaimed to them, but what differentiates God’s people in the new covenant from the old is that those in the new have faith! Don’t listen to anyone who says the old covenant system was one of works. Yes, it had a Law to follow, but so does the new (see Matthew 28.20). Israel’s failure wasn’t a result of a lack of God’s grace, for He made wondrous promises to them. Neither was their failure a result of a Law too

difficult to keep, for God provided atonement for their transgressions. Israel's failure was a lack of faith! Their lack of faith resulted in their failure to enter His rest, but "we who have believed enter that rest" (vs. 3).

3. The rest has been in existence since creation (vss. 4-5). Vs. 3 concluded with the statement that God's works have been "finished from the foundation of the world". The author then quotes from Genesis 2.2 in vs. 4. Significantly, while the first six days of creation were marked by the refrain, "and there was evening and there was morning", no such statement was made regarding the seventh day. God's rest, begun after creation, has continued to exist ever since! Israel did not enter that rest, but we can.
4. The rest remains for the people of God (vss. 6-10). The author proceeds to make a logical argument:
 - Israel, who had good news preached to them, failed to enter God's rest because of disobedience (vs. 6).
 - The Lord has fixed a day when His rest can be entered: that day is "today" (vs. 7).
 - As we've already noted, Joshua did not give the people God's promised rest, even though they received the land (vs. 8). So, there's another day of which David was speaking. Note: "The name "Joshua" is the Hebrew form of the Greek name "Jesus." "Joshua" is a good way of rendering the text, as it makes clear to the English reader who is in mind. The Greek text, however, says "Jesus"; and both the writer and his original readers would have been mindful of the connection with the name of Christ, even though the emphasis in the passage lies elsewhere. There had been a "Jesus" who could not lead his people into the rest of God just as there was another "Jesus" who could." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary)
 - There remains a "Sabbath rest for the people of God". The term "Sabbath-rest" (sabbatismos) is found nowhere else in Scripture and in no manuscripts found dating prior to this letter. Hence, it may have been a term invented by the author. It harkens back to the rest God now takes part in (vs. 4), a rest Israel was to commemorate each Sabbath day (Exodus 20.11). But the true fulfillment of the Sabbath rest wasn't the weekly cessation from work, but the true rest of God is to rest from all his works (vs. 10).

Before we move to our next question, we need to address one feature of the promised rest. Specifically, is this rest speaking of our future rest with God in heaven, or something we can experience now. While heaven is the final fulfillment of this rest, I believe the author is speaking of something believers enter now. The promised rest is tied to "Today" (vs. 7), not a point in the future. Also, recall the promise of the Lord: 28 "Come to Me, all who are weary and heavy-laden, and I

will give you rest. 29 "Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and YOU WILL FIND REST FOR YOUR SOULS. 30 "For My yoke is easy and My burden is light." Matthew 11:28-30 (NASB95) Those who place their trust in the Lord and come to Him experience real rest for their souls. They rest from their works in the sense that they no longer trust in their own merit, but place their trust in God.

How can we enter His rest?

1. We "fear" (vs. 1). Fear of God is not contrary to faith. Israel not only demonstrated lack of faith, but lack of fear. The Hebrew author urges his audience to not make the same mistake. We must fear, or we will fall short. Recall that the author has already given reasons to fear (see 3.16-19).
2. We combine the gospel with faith (vs. 2). God has promised us rest; that's good news! But Israel was also promised rest, but they lacked the faith to receive God's promise. The promise of rest remains, but it must be united with faith in those who hear.
3. We maintain diligence (vs. 11). I maintain that God's promised rest is something we enter now, but that doesn't mean we cease diligently pursuing that rest. Each day is "today", so each day is an opportunity to enter His rest, or to fall short of it. Again, Israel serves as an example of those who did not diligently pursue His rest and thus fell short through disobedience (see 1 Corinthians 10.1-12).

The Word (Hebrews 4.12-13)

Israel was unable to enter the Lord's rest because of their unbelief (3.19), but a rest remains for the faithful (4.9). However, before moving on the author wanted his audience to understand a crucial point: everything depends on how you treat the word of God. Psalm 95 has figured prominently in this discussion and recall that David gave this exhortation: "Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me..." (Psalm 95.7-8; Hebrews 3.7-8). In other words, pay attention to what God says because our ancestors did not! The Hebrew author is making the same appeal. Israel didn't enter God's rest because they did not receive the Lord's word with faith (Hebrews 4.2). And if we aren't diligent, the same will be true of us (Hebrews 4.11). For this reason, the author gives this sobering reminder of the power of God's word...

- The word is living and active: God's word brought good news to Israel and also pronounced judgment on their unfaithfulness. His word has not lost any potency through the years. It is alive, it is active. Thus David exhorted his generation to heed God's word (3.7) and the Hebrew author does the same.
- The word is sharper than any two-edged sword: "As his primary weapon a Roman legionnaire would carry a gladius, a double-edged sword about twenty

ty inches long, strapped to his right side. This weapon was designed for slashing and thrusting in close, hand-to-hand combat.. This "sword's" ability to cut deeply is seen in its penetration to a person's inner life." (ZIBBC). Describing God's word as a weapon is significant as it was His word of judgment which resulted in Israel perishing in the wilderness (see 3.11). Significantly, when Israel tried to escape God's oath that they would not see the Promised Land, they died by the swords of the Amalekites and Canaanites (see Numbers 14.43-45).

- The word pierces as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow: it does not seem that the author is trying to give a definition of what composes man (body AND soul AND spirit?). Rather, "however we term the inner recesses of a human... God's word sees that." (Will Dilbeck).
- The word is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart: note, God's word doesn't just judge our actions, but our thoughts and even our intentions. He knows if we actually believe in Him or if we are acting out of tradition or even compulsion. "What the author is saying is that God's Word can reach to the innermost recesses of our being. We must not think that we can bluff our way out of anything, for there are no secrets hidden from God. We cannot keep our thoughts to ourselves. There may also be the thought that the whole of man's nature, however we divide it, physical as well as nonmaterial, is open to God." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary)
- "there is no creature hidden from His sight..." God's word reveals His will to us, but it also reveals much about us. Do we receive it with faith? God sees that. Do we hear His word, but disobey? God sees that too. Because His word has come to all, none are hidden from His sight!

The High Priest (Hebrews 4.14-16)

The omnipotence and omniscience of God's word is a frightening prospect, so much so that we may wonder what hope we have of entering His rest. If His word sees our times of doubt and when our intentions aren't what they should be, how are we any better off than the wilderness generation? And this is when we return to the main point of the book: Jesus is better. Specifically, He's a better high priest... and thus we have hope!

- He has passed through the heavens: "The Jews sometimes thought of a plurality of heavens, as in Paul's reference to "the third heaven" (2 Cor 12:2) or the Talmud's reference to seven heavens (Hagigah 12b). The thought is that Jesus has gone right through to the supreme place." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary)
- He can sympathize with our weaknesses: Some may think that Jesus' sinlessness makes Him less sympathetic to we who sin, but the exact opposite is true.

"We give in before the temptation has fully spent itself; only he who does not yield knows its full force." (Ibid).

- He provides mercy and grace in our time of need: given our failures to keep God's word, we are certainly in need of mercy. And we continue to need His gracious promises and help. And with Jesus as our High Priest, these needs are supplied! Thus, we can draw near to the throne with confidence, not because of what we have done, but because of what He has done!



Lesson 5: Jesus Our High Priest

Hebrews 5.1-10

Having established that a “Sabbath rest remains for the people of God” (4.9), the author exhorted his audience to “be diligent to enter that rest” (4.10) knowing that not only is the “word of God... living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword” (4.11) but that no one is hidden from His sight (4.12). But lest they despair that they too couldn’t enter His promised rest, the author returned to the hope and confidence they can find with Jesus as their high priest (4.14-16).

The office of the high priest is of great importance in Hebrews, the term for “high priest”, ἱερεὺς, being found 17 times in the letter. Jesus was first introduced as our high priest in Hebrews 2.17 where we are told that Jesus’ human existence was necessary so He could “become a merciful and faithful high priest”. Then again we are exhorted in Hebrews 3.1 to “consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession.” And that very consideration may have caused some confusion among the original audience: they knew who the priests were and that the High Priest was to be a descendant of Aaron, from the tribe of Levi. How could Jesus fulfill the role of high priest? The author begins to explain that very question in this section by first revealing three essential qualifications of the high priest and then explaining how Jesus met each one.

The high priest must be one of the people (Hebrews 5.1,5-6).

This point is established in Hebrews 5.1. Not only is the high priest “taken from among men” but He is “appointed” (more on this later) “on behalf of men in things pertaining to God.” I believe the NLT captures the idea of the passage: “Every high priest is a man chosen to represent other people in their dealings with God.” The high priest since he is a man, but appointed by God, can serve as an intermediary between the two. And he does so by offerings “gifts and sacrifices for sins.”

Aaron was the first high priest chosen by God from among the people (see Exodus 28.1) and the priesthood was to be kept among Aaron’s descendants (Exodus 29.9). They were God’s chosen intermediaries, but it was apparent early on that they could not fulfill the role perfectly. Two of Aaron’s sons were killed for offering strange fire (Numbers 10.4) and Aaron would die in the wilderness because of his failings (Numbers 20.23-29). But the Lord had another in mind who would perfectly fill the role of high priest.

The Hebrew author uses two OT passages to establish that Christ meets the qualifications laid out in vs. 1. First, in vs. 5 he references Psalm 2.7. The Christ is God's "Son" and is "begotten". His humanity means He can be "taken from among men". However, His status as God's Son also paves the way for the author's later point that Jesus ministers in a heavenly sanctuary, not an earthly one.

The second passage referenced is Psalm 110.4, and this passage explains how the Christ could be high priest, even though He did not descend from Aaron. Melchizedek is referenced only twice in the OT: Genesis 14.18-20 and Psalm 110.1-5. The Genesis narrative reveals that Melchizedek was priest-king of Salem. Psalm 110 is a psalm of David which emphasizes both the rule and the priesthood of the Messiah. Significantly, it was David who conquered Jerusalem (i.e. Salem, see 2Samuel 5.6-9). The promise of the Lord was that the descendant of David would fulfill the priest-king office of Melchizedek.

Much more will be said in later passages to show how Jesus is the perfect mediator between God and man. But no-one need to doubt that Jesus meets the qualification of one "taken from among men".

The high priest must be able to sympathize with the people (Hebrews 5.2-3,7-9).

The reason why the high priest must be "taken from among men" is explored further in vss. 2-3 and is deserving of a close examination:

- "he can deal gently": The word for "deal gently with" "It refers to taking the middle course between apathy and anger. A true high priest is not indifferent to moral lapses; neither is he harsh. He 'is able' to take this position only because he himself shares in the same 'weakness' as the sinners on whom he has compassion." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary).
- "with the ignorant and misguided": the compassion of the high priest was for those who sinned through ignorance or error (Leviticus 4.2; Hebrews 9.7), not for those who sinned wilfully (see Numbers 15.30-31).
- "he himself also is beset with weakness": in the case of Aaron and his sons, the weakness of the high priest was his own moral frailty. He needed atonement and forgiveness just as much as the people.
- "obligated to offer sacrifices for sins... for himself": no time was this more clear than on the Day of Atonement when Aaron first had to atone for his own sins (see Leviticus 16.6,11).

Jesus was not beset by the same moral weakness as the Aaronic priesthood, but He can still sympathize with man as is made clear in vss. 7-9:

- "offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying...": While not

explicitly said, this likely refers to Jesus' experience in Gethsemane (Luke 22.41-44). Also has a backdrop in such psalms as Psalm 116.1-8; 22.1-2,15,23-24). "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')." (Leon Morris quoting a rabbinic saying, EBC).

- "He was heard because of His piety": ultimately, Jesus' prayer was that the Father's will be done. Jesus was heard; the Father's will was done, even though it mean suffering for His Son.
- "He learned obedience from the things which He suffered": this is not saying that Jesus had been disobedient, but in going through with the Father's plan, Jesus was given the opportunity to "learn obedience" by suffering. "Sons of high position in the ancient world were honored and advanced on the basis of their status. Yet Jesus' relationship with the Father did not make for an easy appointment to high priesthood." (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary)
- "having been made perfect": complete, able to serve as high priest.
- "became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation": Jesus "learned obedience" and can now bring salvation to those who obey.

The high priest must be appointed by God (Hebrews 5.4,10).

During the first century and while Jerusalem was under Roman occupation, the office of the high priest was typically granted to the person who offered the most money to the Roman officials. However, man was not supposed to take this honor on themselves, but it was for the one whom God chose. God chose Aaron (Exodus 28.1-3) and others who tried to take the honor on themselves were severely punished (see Numbers 16).

Jesus did not take the honor on Himself (vs. 10). He was chosen by God to priest, not after the line of Aaron, but according to the order of Melchizedek. Much more about this will be said in following chapters.



Lesson 6: Those Who Fall Away & Those Who Stay

Hebrews 5.11-6.20

Recall that in chapter 1, the author provided evidence for Jesus' superiority over the angels: "having become as much better than the angles, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they" (Hebrews 1.4). Having established this fact, the author this warning: "For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away from it." (Hebrews 2.1). But the author wasn't done, for after showing Jesus' superiority to Moses, he repeated the warning: "Take care, brethren, that there not be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart that falls away from the living God." More recently in our study, we noted how Israel failed to enter the Lord's rest because of their unbelief. Thus, "there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God" (Hebrews 4.9). But to enter that rest we must "be diligent... so that no one will fall, through following the same example of disobedience" (Hebrews 4.11).

It's clear that the author was concerned that his Jewish brethren might repeat the mistake of their ancestors and fall away. In fact, he was aware that some had already fallen away (Hebrews 6.6), thus in this passage he exhorts his readers lest they also fall away. As we examine the text, let's note how a Christian could fall away...

Step 1: Stop Listening (Hebrews 5.11-14)

The high priesthood of Jesus is a very important concept. His work on our behalf is what gives us confidence that we can enter the Lord's rest; He allows us draw near to the throne of grace (Hebrews 4.14-16). The author had more to say about Jesus' priesthood, in particular the fact that His priesthood is after the order of Melchizedek, but the author knew that his audience wasn't ready for it... because they had "become dull of hearing" (Hebrews 5.11). The NIV reads, "you no longer try to understand", the NASB202 reads, "you have become poor listeners." The problem wasn't their ability, but their willingness!

They had the ability to teach others, in fact they should have progressed to that point. But because of their "dull hearing" they still needed to be taught "the elementary principles of the oracles of God" (Hebrews 5.12). Their lack of progress was even more severe than many of our translations may indicate: "Writers used *stoicheia* to refer to basic elements of the alphabet or the most basic, fundamental concepts in education. Thus, we might, with the NEB translation, think of the term as used in Hebrews 5:12 as meaning 'the ABCs of God's Word.'"

(Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary)

They weren't the only Christians who failed to progress from milk to meat, for Paul used the same imagery to rebuke the saints in Corinth (see 1 Corinthians 3.2). Milk is good and has its place, but their failure to progress to meat meant they were "not accustomed to the word of righteousness" and had not been "trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5.13-14). Their listening problems had serious consequences and could result in their falling away!

Step 2: Get Hung-up On Elementary Principles (Hebrews 6.1-3)

Since the problem wasn't their ability, but their willingness, the author is hopeful that he can move on to teachings which would promote their maturity. Thus, his intention was to leave "elementary teaching about the Christ" and not lay "again a foundation...". Implied is the audience's willingness, even desire to stay focused on these elementary principles. Perhaps they thought they were sufficient or more interesting. But their failure to move on was hurting their growth!

What are the foundational principles the author hoped to move on from? Each seems to relate to their former life in Judaism.

- repentance from dead works: forgiveness from dead works is possible only in Christ, not through the Law (see Hebrews 9.10,14).
- faith toward God: Christians can draw near to God through faith (see Hebrews 10.22).
- washings: literally "baptisms" but the term is used of Jewish cleansing rites in Hebrews 9.10)
- laying on of hands: part of the OT sacrificial system, in particular when the high priest laid his hands on the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement.
- resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment: perhaps related to differing views of the Sadducees and Pharisees regarding the resurrection. Note Hebrews 9.27.

The fact that all of these matters related to aspects of Judaism shows that these brethren were still fixated on their past, perhaps they had not firmly grappled with these foundational concepts or they simply enjoyed discussing them. It was time to move on!

Step 3: Forget The Blessings You've Experienced (Hebrews 6.4-8)

The author makes a rather startling statement regarding those who've fallen away: "it is impossible to renew them again to repentance" (Hebrews 6.6). The impossibility does not lie with Jesus who serves as our faithful high priest (see Hebrews 4.14-16). Rather, the impossibility lies with their rejection of Jesus: "the apostate repudiates the only basis upon which repentance can be extended. To

repudiate Christ is to embrace the ‘impossible.’” (Lane, Word Biblical Commentary). Their repudiation of Christ is shown by the fact that “they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame”. “In 13:13 the author notes the proper stance of a Christian, a stance that constitutes standing with Christ, bearing his disgrace. Thus believers are challenged to follow the example of the Lord, who “scorned [the] shame” of the cross (12:2). The apostates used as a negative example in Hebrews 6:4–8, however, have reversed this position, instead standing with those who used the cross, the ultimate instrument of public shame in the Greco-Roman world, to crucify Christ.” (Zondervan Illustrated Bible Background Commentary)

These weren’t loosely affiliated people who repudiated the Lord, but those who had “tasted” (i.e. experienced) all of the blessings of Christ (vss. 4-5). They had received all the blessings the Lord had to offer, but rather than producing fruit they yielded thorns and thistles. Falling away will certainly result from a lack of appreciation of God’s blessings.

Hebrews 6.9-12, Convinced of Better Things

The author challenged his audience in the previous section, pointing out their dullness of hearing and immaturity (Hebrews 5.8-6.3). But the author was also confident that his brethren would take the warning to heart, thus he was “convinced of better things... things that accompany salvation” (vs. 9). He had a few reasons for such confidence:

1. God’s character (vs. 10). The real basis for confidence wasn’t in men at all, but in God. God is just AND He does not forget His people. God’s remembrance is emphasized in the Old Testament as God would “remember His covenant” with the people (see 1Chron 16.15; Psalm 105.8; 111.5).
2. Their work and love (vs. 10). At this point the author does not comment on their work and love for the Lord, instead saying they had ministered and continued to minister to the saints. He gives more context in Hebrews 10.32-34, stating how they endured sufferings and yet still served their brethren. Such love and service provides confidence since they could know God remembered their service and such dedication wouldn’t be quickly forsaken.
3. Good examples to follow (vss. 11-12). The author harkens back to how the brethren had been “dull of hearing” (5.11), but was confident they would not remain “sluggish” (6.12, same word in both passages). They wouldn’t remain sluggish if they were “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” While many such examples existed (see Hebrews 11), the author proceeds to point them to the example of Abraham and how by faith he received God’s promises (vss. 13-20). And such an example provides hope to all of God’s people.

Hebrews 6.13-20, Surety of God's Promise

This section emphasizes God's promise, but it's important to keep in mind that two promises are in view. The example of Abraham centers around the promise the Lord made to him in Genesis 22.16-17. However, the passage ends by picking back up with the Lord's promise that the Messiah would be "high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek (vs. 20; Psalm 110.4). The saints were the beneficiaries of the Lord's promise to Abraham, but His promise to the Messiah is what gave them real hope.

Central to the passage is the Lord's promise. The writer makes numerous points showing how important it is for our hope that the Lord makes promises:

- He swore by Himself, since He could swear by no one greater (vs. 13). "The notion that God swears by himself (cf. Exod 32:13; Isa 45:23; Jer 22:5; 49:13) signifies that he is bound to his word by his character. The divine oath provides the guarantee that excludes doubt and affirms the abiding validity of the promise." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)
- His oath is given as confirmation (vs. 16). "When a man swears an oath, he makes a solemn affirmation of the truth of his words before a greater who presumably will punish any misuse of his name if a false statement is made." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary) Since the Lord swore by His own name, no other confirmation is needed.
- His promise is unchangeable (vs. 17). His promise is unchangeable because the Lord guaranteed (i.e. interposed) it with an oath.
- It is impossible for God to lie (vs. 18). God's oath is bolstered by the fact of God's character: He cannot lie (see Numbers 23.19; 1 Samuel 15.29).

The Lord's promise may be great and guaranteed by an oath, but man must still put faith in Him to receive the promised blessing. Thus, Abraham serves as an example of believing the Lord's promise:

- The Lord's promise, quoted in vs. 14, was made after Abraham's greatest demonstration of faith: his willingness to sacrifice Isaac in Genesis 22.
- Abraham is described as "having patiently waited" (vs. 15). "Abraham was content to await God's time for the fulfillment of the promise. This meant real patience, because Isaac was not born till twenty-five years after the promise was first given (Gen 12:4; 21:5) and long after Sarah could have been expected to bear children. Abraham's grandchildren were not born for another sixty years (Gen 25:26), only fifteen years before his death (Gen 25:7). The complete fulfillment of the promise, of course, could not take place within his lifetime (a nation cannot be born so quickly). But enough happened for the writer to say, 'Abraham received what was promised.;" (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary).
- Thus Abraham "obtained the promise" (vs. 15). Note John 8.56, Abraham

understood the promise would be fully obtained in Christ.

So what does all of this mean for the author's original audience, and for us? We, the "heirs of the promise" have also received a promise composed of "two unchangeable things" (vs. 18). Jesus is 1) high priest forever and 2) after the order of Melchizedek. This promise, sworn with an oath, allows us to "take hold of the hope set before us" (vs. 18). That hope extends all the way to the very presence of God, because our High Priest has gone before us!

Knowing that Jesus is our High Priest, that God's oath has been kept, truly provides an anchor for the soul. Those with such a hope will not "drift away" (2.1); those with such a hope will imitate the example of Abraham's faithfulness (6.12). The Hebrew author will continue to focus on this hope in the coming chapters.



Lesson 7: According To The Order Of Melchizedek

Hebrews 7

Jesus' role as high priest has been a chief part of the author's argument of the superiority of Jesus. In explaining why Jesus had to live as a man, the author stated that such was necessary so that "He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people" (Hebrews 2.17). The importance of Jesus' high priesthood is again raised in Hebrews 4.14-5.4, giving assurance that Christians can enter God's rest since our high priest can "sympathize with our weaknesses". But how can Jesus serve as our high priest when He is not of the tribe of Levi nor a descendant of Aaron? Thus, the author reminded His audience of God's promise to the Messiah: "You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (Hebrews 5.6).

Hebrews 7.1-3, Who Is Melchizedek?

Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament. There is the promise we have been studying from Psalm 110.4 and there is the historical account found in Genesis 14.18-20. The narrative takes up after Abraham leads his men to rescue his nephew Lot and the other inhabitants of Sodom who had been taken captive by four kings from the north. While little is said about Melchizedek in the text, each bit of information is of great relevance

- King of Salem, priest of the Most High God: the Christ can be of the order of Melchizedek since he held both the offices of king and priest. The same cannot be said of Aaron and his line.
- Blessed Abraham: an important point to establish the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham (see vss. 6-7).
- Given a tenth of the spoils by Abraham: another important point to establish the superiority of Melchizedek to Abraham (see vs. 6).
- King of righteousness: literal rendering of the name "Melchizedek"
- King of Salem, which is king of peace: note that Salem is another name for Jerusalem (see Psalm 76.2).
- Without father, without mother... there are some who take this to mean that Melchizedek was either a theophany (manifestation of God on earth) or an angel. However, such a conclusion is not warranted or needed. The author is merely making a point from what the text does not say to establish another linkage with the Christ. "Melchizedek's priesthood was not established upon the external circumstances of birth and descent. It was based on the call of

God and not on the hereditary process by which the Levitical priesthood was sustained... Melchizedek's sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance from recorded history evoked the notion of eternity, which was only prefigured in Melchizedek but was realized in Christ." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary).

- Made like the Son of God, he remains a priest perpetually: "The writer says that Melchizedek is "made like" (aphōmoiōmenos) the Son of God, not that the Son of God is like Melchizedek. Thus it is not that Melchizedek sets the pattern and Jesus follows it. Rather, the record about Melchizedek is so arranged that it brings out certain truths that apply far more fully to Jesus than they do to Melchizedek." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary).

Hebrews 7.4-10, The Order Of Melchizedek > The Order Of Aaron

Having laid out Melchizedek's credentials, the author gets to his main point: Scripture shows that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, and by extension the Aaronic priesthood.

1. The Law stipulated that the Aaronic priesthood would collect tithes from the people (see Numbers 18.21ff). They collected the tithes from their "brethren", other descendants of Abraham (vs. 5). But Abraham gave a tithe "of the choicest spoils" to Melchizedek (vs. 6).
2. Melchizedek not only received tithes from Abraham, he blessed the patriarch... and the lesser is always blessed by the greater (vss. 6-7).
3. In the case of the Aaronic priesthood, those who receive the tithes are mortal. But as was established in vs. 3, Melchizedek "lives on" (vs. 8).
4. Since Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek, so did his great grandson Levi... the ancestor of Aaron (vss. 9-10).

Hebrews 7.11-17, Changing Of The Orders

Having established that Melchizedek is superior to Abraham and the Aaronic priesthood, the author turns his attention back to the promise of Psalm 110.4. Why did God make this promise; why the need for another priest after the order of Melchizedek? Because the Levitical priesthood didn't make man perfect, i.e. acceptable to God (vs. 11). Thus, another priesthood was necessary to accomplish this (recall Hebrews 4.14-16). But the need for another priest after the order of Melchizedek raises another issue: what about the Law? The Levitical priesthood was inseparable from the Mosaic Law, for not only did the Law prescribe the qualification for the priests, but the priests functioned to carry out the various ordinances of the Law. Without the Law there was no Levitical priesthood; without the Levitical priesthood there was no Law (vs. 12)!

Jesus, the One spoken of in Psalm 110.4, was not of the tribe of Levi, but of the tribe of Judah... a tribe with no association to the priesthood (vss. 13-15).

But Jesus' priesthood was not founded on the basis of the Law which required physical lineage from Aaron, but on the "power of an indestructible life" (vs. 16). "It was well suited to acknowledge that although Jesus' human life had been exposed to κατάλυσις, "destruction," through crucifixion, his life was not destroyed by the death suffered on the cross. The phrase δύναμιν ζωῆς καταλύτου describes the new quality of life with which Jesus was endowed by virtue of his resurrection and exaltation to the heavenly world, where he was formally installed in his office as high priest" (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary). And since He possesses an "indestructible life", He can be declared "priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek" (vs. 17).

Hebrews 7.18-22, Changing Of The Priesthood... And The Covenant

The Levitical priesthood could not make one perfect (vs. 11), and neither could the "former commandment" i.e. the Law (vss. 18-19). The author says this was because "of its weakness and uselessness". "Its "weakness" inheres not in the law or its purpose, but in the people upon whom it depends for its accomplishment (see Comment on 4:15; 5:2; 7:28). Its "uselessness" derives from the fact that the law regulated the approach to God in a cultic sense and was able to cleanse only externally (9:9-10, 13, 23; 10:14)." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary). And since the Law could not make anything perfect, it was "set aside".

But God had prepared something better to follow: a better priesthood under a better covenant which would bring in "a better hope, through which we draw near to God" (vs. 19). Note that this hope is tied directly to the change in priesthood and covenant, because we've already seen that Jesus' priesthood is how we can "draw near with confidence to the throne of grace" (4.16). Furthermore, this was always God's intention for while the Levitical priesthood was "without an oath" (vs. 21), the Lord made an oath that the Messiah would be "priest forever" (vs. 21). And since Jesus is priest forever, He "has become the guarantee of a better covenant" (vs. 22). "He guarantees to men that God will fulfill his covenant of forgiveness, and he guarantees to God that those who are in him are acceptable." (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary).

Before we move on we should note that vs. 22 is the first occurrence of the term "covenant" in the letter. It is an important concept, being found 17 times in the letter. It would seem that the author uses the term *diathēkē* to get across a couple of concepts: "This is the writer's first use of the term "covenant" (*diathēkē*), a word whose importance for him may be gauged from the fact that he uses it no fewer than seventeen times, whereas in no other NT book is it found more than three times. In nonbiblical Greek it denotes a last will and testament, but in the LXX it is the normal rendering of the Hebrew *berît* ("covenant"). It is agreed that in NT *diathēkē* mostly means "covenant." It also seems, however, that now

and then the meaning “testament” is not out of mind (e.g., 9:16). The author may have chosen this word rather than *synthēkē*, the usual word for “covenant,” because the latter might suggest an agreement made on more or less equal terms. By contrast, there is something absolute about a will. One cannot dicker with the testator. And in like manner man cannot bargain with God. God lays down the terms.” (Leon Morris, *Expositors Bible Commentary*).

Hebrews 7.23-28, Superiority Of The New Covenant Priesthood

The new priesthood of Jesus and the associated new covenant are better than the Levitical priesthood and the Mosaic Law, and now the author gives one concrete reason why this is true. The high priests under the Law, being mortal, died! (vs. 23, cf. vs. 8). Josephus states that there were 83 high priests from Aaron until the destruction of the temple in AD 70 (*Antiq. XX, 227*). But Jesus, being after the order of Melchizedek, retains his high priesthood forever (vs. 24).

Since Jesus lives forever and thus remains high priest forever, it follows that He saves forever. And this He does for those who “draw near to God through Him” (vs. 25). He saves forever because He is able to always intercede for us (see Romans 8.34; Hebrews 9.24). Jesus is a “fitting” high priest of the new covenant because of His holy character (vs. 26) and because of His superior sacrifice (vs. 27). Thus, the author again makes a contrast between the old and new covenants: the old appointed weak high priests, but the oath of Psalm 110.4 appointed God’s Son to be an eternally perfect high priest for us.



Lesson 8: Better Priest... Better Covenant Hebrews 8

The superiority of Jesus' priesthood was already evidenced by the fact that while the Levitical priesthood was comprised of mortals who could not continue as priests because of death, Jesus maintains His priesthood forever because He lives forever (Hebrews 7.23-25). Furthermore, the Levitical priests were required to offer sacrifices for their own sins, but Jesus is "holy, innocent, undefiled" (Hebrews 7.26-28). In chapter 8 the author continues to show how Jesus's priesthood is superior to that of the Levitical priesthood, but then turns his attention to a matter he brought up in Hebrews 7.12: "for when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also." And since Jesus' priesthood is better, it would follow that the new law/covenant is also better!

Hebrews 8.1-6, Jesus' Better Priesthood

It's always nice when an author comes out and tells you his main point, and that's exactly what the Hebrew writer does in vs. 1: "the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest..." The Levitical priesthood was not perfect for a variety of reasons, but Jesus' priesthood is perfect... and He's our high priest! The author continues to show how much better Jesus' priesthood is compared to the Levitical priesthood.

- **Our high priest is seated at God's right hand (vs. 1).** This harkens back to Psalm 110. Vs. 4 of that Psalm stated that the Messiah would be "priest forever after the order of Melchizedek" but Vs. 1 stated that the Messiah would be seated at the Lord's right hand. His place in the sanctuary is permanent, contrasted with the Levitical priesthood who could only enter at certain times; His permanent place in the sanctuary is the source of our hope (Hebrews 6.19-20).
- **Our high priest ministers in the true sanctuary (vss. 2-5).** The original tabernacle was a beautiful and costly structure (cf. Exodus 35.20-29). Yet, it was only "a copy and shadow" of the heavenly tabernacle, a fact attested in Exodus 25.40 where Moses was instructed to build the Tabernacle "according to the pattern which was shown you". By contrast, Jesus is "a minister in the sanctuary... which the Lord pitched, not man." Vs. 3 notes that Jesus offers gifts and sacrifices, just as other priest do, but the superiority of His gift and sacrifice will be considered in Hebrews 9.13-14.

- **Our high priest is mediator of a better covenant (vs. 6).** If Jesus is a vastly superior high priest, it would follow that the covenant He ministers under is also superior. And so it is, "a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises."

Hebrews 8.7-11, The New & Better Covenant

The idea of covenant was introduced in Hebrews 7.22, but now the author goes into much greater detail. A basic understanding of covenant would be to picture an agreement, not between equals, but between a sovereign and his subjects. The sovereign promises blessings on his subjects (grace), provided they keep the terms of the covenant (law). What is unsaid is that faith is required; the subjects must believe that the sovereign will do what he has promised... and if they believe then they will keep the stipulations. The wondrous part of the covenant is that God deigns to bind Himself to man; He will do what He has promised (Hebrews 10.23). The only question is will His subjects have enough faith to keep covenant. And that will help us understand the great difference between the old and new covenants.

The author uses an extensive quotation from Jeremiah 31.31-34. At that time Israel had already been taken away into captivity and Judah was on the verge of destruction. Because the people lacked faith, the old covenant was in tatters... but the Lord promised to establish a new and better covenant!

- **The fault of the first covenant (vss. 7-9).** The first covenant had fault, but the fault was not the Lord's! He had been gracious to them, but they had rejected Him; thus the need to "effect a new covenant". Note that the Lord said this covenant would be "with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah". In Jeremiah's day the house of Israel was no more, but the Lord was promising a new covenant with them. The Lord had a different Israel in mind, not a physical nation but those who have the same kind of faith as Abraham (cf. Galatians 3.29).
- **An internalized covenant (vs. 10).** The old covenant was made with a physical nation, but the new covenant is made with those who voluntarily come to Jesus in faith. That fact is fundamental to understanding the blessings of this new covenant. "The Israel of old never really adopted God's ways for themselves. God had given them his instructions for how they were to live, but they did not appropriate them, they did not allow those commandments to mold them into the image God wanted them to have. The law was therefore always something that was external to them. In the new relationship with the new Israel, however, things would be different... Acceptable obedience is the outward demonstration of an inward spirit, heart, and mind that is loyal and dedicated to God. It is this inward commitment, which makes obedience meaningful, that would be the basis of the new covenant with God... the im-

portant point is that God's new people would be characterized by a dedication and faithfulness to God that resided not simply in their actions, but in the core of their being." (David McClister)

- **A personal covenant (vs. 11).** Under the old covenant each succeeding generation had to be taught the will of God and shown the importance of keeping his covenant. And rarely did succeeding generations keep the covenant. But the new covenant is made with believers, thus all know Him! "It would be unnecessary for God's new people to exhort each other to draw close to God, for that would be the fundamental basis on which they were God's people in the first place." (David McClister)
- **A perfect covenant (vs. 12).** Remember that neither the Levitical priesthood or the Law could make people perfect (see Hebrews 7.11,19), but this covenant does... "I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." The author will return to this point in chapter 10.
- **First covenant now obsolete (vs. 13).** There were those who still sought to approach God based on the terms of the old covenant (note vs. 4), but because of Jesus' better priesthood and the superiority of the new covenant the old was now obsolete. It had served its purpose... and was ready to disappear. It is possible that the author had in mind the destruction of the Jerusalem temple which would occur in AD 70 (cf. Matthew 24).



Lesson 9: A Better Tabernacle, A Better Covenant Hebrews 9

In chapter 8 we focused on the better priesthood of Jesus and the associated better covenant, but there was one other matter introduced which shows the superiority of Jesus' priesthood: He is "a minister in the sanctuary and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man" (Hebrews 8.2). The author returns to the matter of the sanctuary in chapter 9, showing the superiority of the true tabernacle to that which was only "a copy and a shadow of the heavenly things" (Hebrews 8.5).

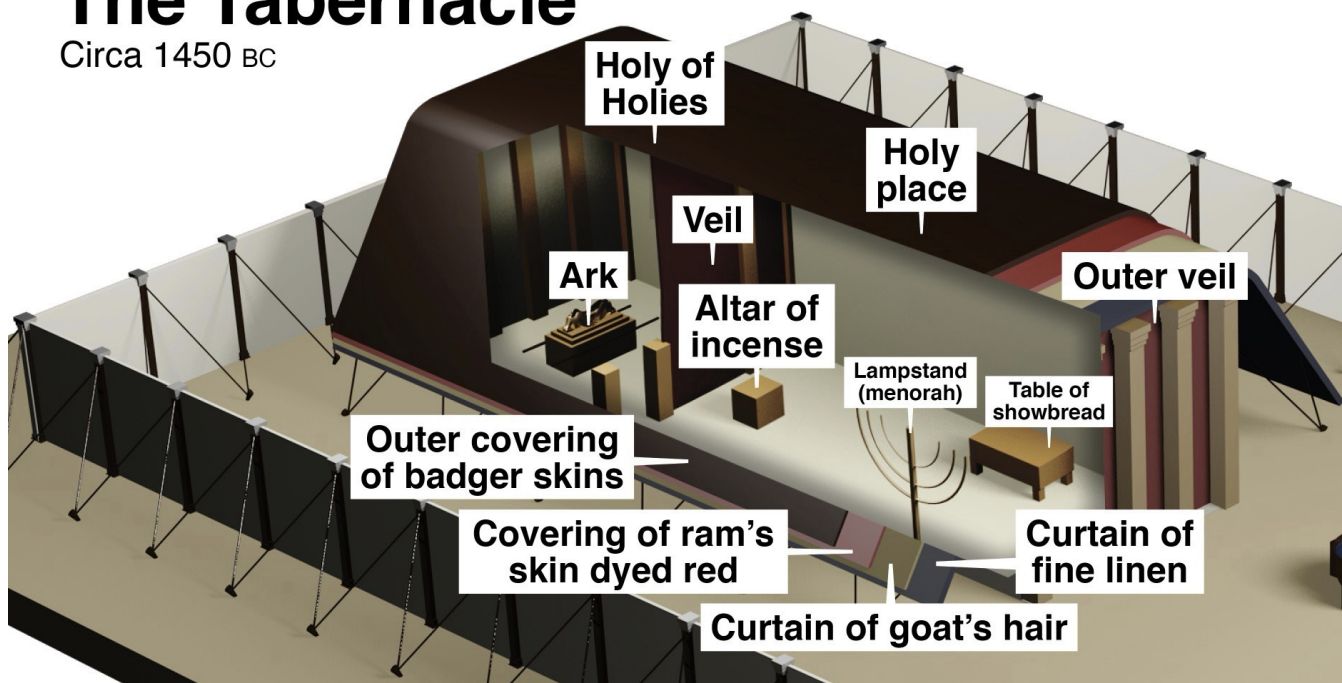
Hebrews 9.1-5, The First Tabernacle

The chapter begins with the author describing both chambers of the old covenant tabernacle and the furnishings. Some note a discrepancy in vs. 4, because the altar of incense was located in the outer tabernacle and not in the holy of holies. However, the altar of incense was closely associated with the most holy place and the high priest's entrance on the day of atonement (see Leviticus 16.12-13). The author makes clear that his intention is not to discuss the tabernacle in depth: "of these things we cannot now speak in detail" (vs. 5). He has more important matters to discuss.

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The Tabernacle

Circa 1450 BC



Before we move on we should note some of the language used regarding the old covenant tabernacle. The NASB describes the holy place as the “outer one”, but the literal rendering should be “first one” (as reflected in the ESV, NIV, NLT, NKJV, etc.). It’s the same word used for the first covenant (see Hebrews 8.7,13;9.1). As we will see, the first chamber of the covenant was associated with the first covenant; therefore the second chamber, the most holy place, was a part of something else entirely.

Hebrews 9.6-10, Imperfect Service Of The First Tabernacle

The author contrasts the priestly service conducted in the first chamber of the covenant from that conducted in the second. In the first chamber, the holy place, the priests served on a daily basis (vs. 6). Their service included:

- trimming of the lamps (Exodus 27.20-21)
- burning of incense on the altar (Exodus 30.7-8)
- weekly replacing of unleavened loaves on the table (Leviticus 24.8-9).

However, only the high priest could enter the most holy place, only once a year and only with blood. This occurred on the day of atonement (Leviticus 16).

Remember, the earthly tabernacle was based on a pattern shown to Moses (Hebrews 8.5; Exodus 25.40). The author states that God was making a point through the Holy Spirit: “the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer (first) tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the present time” (vss. 8-9). Furthermore, the shortcomings of the first tabernacle meant that the service done there could not “make the worshiper perfect in conscience” (vs. 9). “The ordinances of the old covenant had been external. They had not been able to come to grips with the real problem, that of the troubled conscience. This does not mean, of course, that no OT saint ever had a clear conscience, but he did not obtain it by the sacrifices as such.” (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary)

Hebrews 9.11-14, Christ’s Perfect Service In The Perfect Tabernacle

Under the old covenant constant service was offered in the tabernacle, but the mediator for the people could enter the presence of God on only one day each year and only with the blood of sacrifices made for the people and for himself. No wonder the conscience (consciousness of sin in Hebrews 10.2) could not be perfected. But what if your high priest was always in the presence of God; what if He was always able to minister on your behalf? Those who belong to the new covenant have such a High Priest (Hebrews 8.1-2).

Jesus, the Christ, has now entered the true tabernacle (vs. 11) and He did so with a vastly superior sacrifice: His own blood (vs. 12). And since our High Priest is always in the presence of God, and since He offered the truly unblemished sacrifice, we can know we have “obtained eternal redemption” (vs. 12);

our consciences can be thoroughly cleansed (vs. 14). "The ability of the defiled conscience to disqualify someone from serving God has been superseded by the power of the blood of Christ to cleanse the conscience from defilement." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)

Having established that the new covenant was superior than the first, being based on better promises (Hebrews 8.6-13) and that the priestly service in the tabernacle of the first covenant was vastly inferior to Jesus' ministry in the true tabernacle (Hebrews 9.1-14), the author returns to Jesus' role as "mediator of a new covenant" (Hebrews 9.15; cf. 8.6). Specifically, the author shows how Jesus' role as mediator involves blood and death. Rather than approaching this text on a vs. by vs. basis, let's consider the three main themes in the passage: covenant, blood and death.

Covenant or Will?

A major question in vss. 16-17 is if the author has in mind a covenant agreement or a will / testament, a question not helped by the fact that the term *diathēkē* can mean both covenant AND will. Many believe that the author is showing how Jesus' death accomplished both the required sacrifice to inaugurate a covenant and to bring in force a will. Thus, even some translations (such as the NLT) alternate between translating *diathēkē* as "covenant" in vs. 15 and "will" in vss. 16-17. This may well be what the author intended.

However, it is also possible that the author was speaking only of the covenant agreement. In that case, the death spoken of was a representative death. "The ratifying party invoked a curse upon himself when he swore commitment to comply with the terms of the covenant. In the transaction the ratifying party was represented by animals designated for sacrifice. The bloody dismemberment of representative animals signified the violent death of the ratifying party if he proved faithless to his oath (e.g., Gen 15:9-21; Exod 24:3-8; Ps 50:5; Jer 34:17-20). (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary) I am in favor of this argument since it flows with the author's point of how the Mosaic covenant was inaugurated with blood in vss. 18-22).

Blood of the Covenant

All one needs to do is read chapter 9 to see how important "blood" is in the author's argument. The term is found 11 times in the chapter and is central to much of what the author is saying:

- Whereas the Levitical high priest entered the most holy place once each year with the blood of animals, Jesus entered once for all time with His own blood (vss.7,12).
- The blood of goats and bulls could cleanse the flesh under the first covenant,

but in the new covenant Jesus' blood can cleanse our conscience (vss. 13-14).

- Not only was the first covenant inaugurated with blood (vs. 18), but blood was also used to cleanse the people, the book of the law and even the tabernacle (vss. 19-22). But Jesus' one-time sacrifice (i.e. blood) cleansed the true tabernacle and has "put away sin" (vss. 23-26)! Note: there is some question about why the "things in the heavens" needed to be cleansed. It would seem that this cleansing was not because of any defilement in heaven, but rather since Jesus is bringing men before God it was necessary that these be cleansed so that we would not defile them.

Death of the Testator

With the great importance attached to blood, it would follow that death would also play a significant role in the passage since the blood of Jesus was shed at His death.

- Jesus' death was also "for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant" (vs. 15). "The old covenant exacted death for transgressions committed while it was in force (cf. 10:28). Those who had ratified the covenant had pledged their obedience to the stipulations of the covenant in a self-maledictory manner. Their transgressions were evidence that they had failed to keep their oath and put them in jeopardy of being cut off from God (cf. Deut 30:15-20). In his death Jesus identified himself with the transgressors and took upon himself the curse sanctions of the covenant that were invoked whenever the stipulations of the covenant were ignored. In an act of supreme obedience, Jesus died a representative death as the cursed one so that those whom he represents may receive the blessings of the covenant promised to those who obey its mandates." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)
- Jesus' death brought the new covenant into force (vss. 16-17).
- Whereas men die with the expectation of judgment, Jesus' death was for our sins and His return will achieve our ultimate salvation (vss. 27-28). "The reference to Christ's return to those who wait for him draws its force in this context from the analogy with the sequence of events on the Day of Atonement. The people waited anxiously outside the sanctuary until the high priest emerged from the Most Holy Place after he had fulfilled his office (cf. Lev 16:17). His reappearance provided assurance that the offering he had made had been accepted by God... his appearance will confirm that his sacrifice has been accepted and that he has secured the blessings of salvation for those whom he represented. For those who are the heirs of salvation (1:14; cf. 2:3, 10; 5:9; 6:9), it will mean full enjoyment of their inheritance." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)



Lesson 10: A Better Offering

Hebrews 10

Thus far, the author has stated several times that the Levitical system was insufficient to deal with man's real problem: sin. Neither the Levitical priesthood or the Law could make man perfect (Hebrews 7.11,19) and while the blood of bulls and goats could "sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh" (Hebrews 9.13), they could not "make the worshiper perfect in conscience" (Hebrews 9.9). However, the blood of Christ has the power to "cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Hebrews 9.14). In Hebrews 10.1-18 the author gives a more detailed explanation of why the Levitical system could not make perfect, but Christ can.

Why The Law Could Not Take Away Sins (Hebrews 10.1-4,11)

The author does not mince words in this section as he points out the insufficiency of the Levitical system. First, he states that the Law is "only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form..." (vs. 1). The author had previously stated that the tabernacle was merely copy of the true dwelling of God (see Hebrews 8.3-5; 9.23-26) and now he states that the Law itself is only a foreshadowing of what was to come. But his strongest language is used in regards to the sacrificial system of the Levitical law:

- Those sacrifices "can never... make perfect" (vs. 1).
- "It is impossible" for those sacrifices "to take away sins" (vs. 4).
- Those sacrifices "can never take away sins" (vs. 11).

But what proof does the author offer for stating that the Levitical sacrifices so deficient? The fact that the worshipers still had a consciousness of their sins (vs. 2)! The fact that the same sacrifices had to be offered "continually year by year" (vs. 1), that the priests stood "daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices" (vs. 11) meant that those sacrifices contained "a reminder of sins year by year" (vs. 3). Remember, the Levitical sacrifices could only cleanse the flesh (9.13) but not the conscience (9.9). "The Day of Atonement was designated as a day for fasting (Lev 23:26-32) and the confession of sins (Lev 16:20-22). The elaborate ritual was intended to accentuate a consciousness of sins. The solemn entrance of the high priest into the Most Holy Place dramatized the fact that sin separates the congregation from God. From this perspective, the sacrifices really provided "a reminder of sins," which brought to the consciousness of the

worshippers the reality of their sins as an obstacle to fellowship with God.” (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)

Sanctification Is Found In Christ (Hebrews 10.5-10 ,12-14)

It was “impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (vs. 4) because consciousness of sins remained in those sacrifices. So, what made Christ’s sacrifice so much better and able to sanctify? In short, it was His devotion!

The section opens with a quotation from Psalm 40.6-8. Two things stand out from the passage:

1. A “body” was prepared for the Messiah (vs. 5). It was this “body” that was offered” (vs. 10). This sacrificial “body” was superior to the sacrificial offerings of the Law.
2. The Messiah came not to make offerings, but “to do your will, O God” (vs. 7). God repeatedly stated that what He desired was the obedient hearts of His people (see 1 Samuel 15.22; Psalm 51.16-17; Isaiah 66.2-4; Jeremiah 7.21-24; Hosea 6.6; etc.). And that is exactly what Jesus did, completely submitting to the Father’s will by offering His body (vss. 9-10; cf. Matthew 26.39). Furthermore, His submitting completely to the will of God is what fulfilled the first covenant and established the second (vs. 9)... a covenant that offers real sanctification because of the superiority of the sacrifice (vs. 10). “These are not complementary systems that may exist side by side. The one excludes the other. No compromise is possible between them.” (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary)

In vss. 11-14 the author brings our attention back to the priesthood, showing by contrast just how much superior Jesus’ work is to that of the Levitical system:

- They “stand daily” (vs. 11), but He “sat down at the right hand of God” (vs. 12).
- They offer the same sacrifices daily (vs. 11), but He offered “one sacrifice... for all time” (vs. 12).
- Their sacrifices “can never take away sins” (vs. 11), but His sacrifice was “for sins”(vs. 12) and has thus “perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (vs. 14).
- Furthermore, Christ now awaits the time when all of His enemies will be subjugated (vs. 13). “The session at the right hand puts Christ in a position where he may provide assistance to his people without having to offer sacrifices. The allusion to Ps 110:1 in vv 12–13 insists on the established firmness of his position. For the future he has only to wait for the complete subjugation of every power that resists the gracious redemptive purposes of God. Jesus’ place in the presence of God enables him to exercise in heaven the ministry of the new covenant. This is the basis of the assurance extended to the community that they possess now full access to God.” (William Lane, Word Biblical Com-

The Law Is No Longer Needed (Hebrews 10.15-18)

The author then returns to God's promise of the new and better covenant which He made in Jeremiah 31.31-34. This quotation was given in full in Hebrews 8.7-12, but now the author uses a smaller portion to establish one point: now that sins are forgiven, no other offerings are needed (vs. 18). This takes us back to the how the author began the section, stating that the Law was "only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things" (vs. 1). Now that real sanctification is available through the sacrifice of Christ's body (vss. 9,14), the sacrifices of the shadow system are not needed... they accomplish nothing. A better sacrifice has been made; sanctification is ours in the better covenant.

Good theology is more than learning some truths about God, rather good theology always has practical application. In other words, good theology teaches "since this is true about God, this is what we should do in response." The author of Hebrews had been reminding his audience of some important theological truths: the failure of the Levitical system to make perfect, the superiority of Jesus' priesthood and offering, the taking away of the old covenant and the bringing in of the new, etc. But what did these theological truths mean for the author's audience... what do these truths mean for us? How can this good theology be put into practice?

"Since we..." (Hebrews 10.19-21)

Before moving to the practical application of the theological truths presented, the author summarizes two blessings at the heart of these truths, each introduced with the phrase, "since we...". The first blessing is the confidence we have to enter the holy place (vss.19-20).

- The holy place is where Jesus now is, ministering on our behalf (Hebrews 6.19-20; 8.1-2; 9.11-12,24).
- Our entrance is provided "by the blood of Jesus". Remember, it was His blood that can completely cleanse our conscience (Hebrews 9.14) and is what perfects and sanctifies us (Hebrews 10.14).
- Our entrance is "by a new and living way". Remember, the former way was only a "shadow" or "copy" (Hebrews 10.1). This new way has replaced the old and actually leads to life (Hebrews 8.13; 9.9).
- Our entrance has been "inaugurated" by Jesus who serves as the forerunner into the presence of God (see Hebrews 6.19-20).
- He inaugurated the entrance "through His flesh" (ESV and NASB2020). The offering of His body is what has made our access possible (see Hebrews

10.10).

The second blessing is the fact that “we have a great priest over the house of God” (vs. 21). The subject of Jesus’ priesthood has been at the heart of the author’s message (see Hebrews 8.1), but now we are reminded again that Jesus is over God’s house... a reminder of Jesus’ greatness compared to Moses (see Hebrews 3.1-6).

“... let us” (Hebrews 10.22-25)

Having summarized the blessings that spring from the theological truths established, the author moves on to three calls to action, each introduced by the phrase, “let us”. Significantly, the calls to action are formed around “faith... hope... love” the three great spiritual gifts (see 1Corinthians 13.13). “Since we... let us”

Let us draw near in faith (vs. 22). Drawing near was an impossibility under the old covenant because the offerings and sacrifices of that covenant could not make perfect (see Hebrews 10.1). But since Jesus has inaugurated the way for us, we can draw near... but we must do so in faith!

- Recall that faith was where Israel stumbled (see Hebrews 4.2).
- The author also stresses the need for sincerity of heart... the same kind of heart possessed by Jesus who committed Himself to doing the will of God (see Hebrews 10.5-9). Furthermore, our hearts have been freed from an evil conscience (see Hebrews 9.9,14).
- And our bodies have been washed. The author may be drawing on the imagery of the priests who were sprinkled with blood and their bodies washed with water (Exodus 29.4,21; Leviticus 8.6,30). Without question, baptism is in view (cf. 1Peter 3.21).

Let us hold fast in hope (vs. 23). Recall the author’s words in Hebrews 6.17-18: “In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us.” We have every reason to hold fast our hope because of the proven trustworthiness of God. But, it remains up to us to hold fast to that hope... or abandon it.

Let us practice love toward each other (vss. 24-25). “the picture here is like that in Ephesians 4.16, of a church made up of interconnected members who support each other and in so doing build each other up in love. Cf. also 1Thess 5.11; Col. 3.14. When some become weak in faith and cease to contribute to the well-being of the group, the entire group suffers. It therefore behooves every member to show love to the rest, and to encourage others to continue in the good works that reflect our faith. With each one contributing to the support of the oth-

ers, the Lord's church can remain strong even in times of persecution." (David McClister).

In vs. 25 the author stresses the importance of the assembly. "It stands to reason that no provocation to love is possible unless suitable opportunities occur for the stirring process to take effect." (Donald Guthrie, Tyndale Bible Commentary). Significantly, the word translated as "assembly" is found in only one other passage in the NT, 2Thessalonians 2:1. "Hebrews 10:25 refers to the assembling of Christians in worship. II Thessalonians 2:1 describes the second coming of Christ. Putting these two texts together, our assembling of ourselves to worship here and now helps prepare us for the great assembling of all Christ's people at the end of time. Also, every time we assemble to worship God, it is a foreshadowing of a greater assembling to come." (Tommy Peeler)

Call To Continue In Faith (Hebrews 10.26-39)

Having exhorted his audience to put good theology into practice, the author warns them against continuing in willfully sinning (vss. 26-31). However, the author is confident that his audience will have the proper response given their past actions (vss. 32-36). Thus, he ends this chapter with a note of confidence: "But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." Note the following from the passage:

- Sinning willfully (vs. 26): "The concept of deliberate sin derives from Num 15:22-31, where a distinction is made between those who unintentionally transgress God's commandments (vv 22-29) and the person who sins "defiantly," who must be "cut off from his people" because he has despised the Lord (vv 30-31)." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)
- Dies without mercy (vs. 28): see Deuteronomy 17.2-7; 13.8.
- Trampled under foot" (vs. 29): "to thoroughly despise someone or something" (Louw Nida).
- When you have done the will of God (vs. 36): Jesus came to do the Father's will (Hebrews 10.7,9) and so it is expected that His followers will do the same.
- Of those who have faith... (vs. 39): a topic the author will explore in depth in chapter 11.



Lesson 11: Now Faith Is... Hebrews 11

When speaking of the new and better covenant, the author of Hebrews stated “if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second” (Hebrews 8.7). But what was the fault of the first covenant? Granted, the promises of the first covenant were not as great as the promises of the new one (Hebrews 8.6) and the Law, tabernacle and sacrifices were a mere shadow or copy of the heavenly (cf. Hebrews 10.1), but those were not what doomed the first covenant. Rather, the “fault” of the first covenant was that the people “did not continue in my covenant, and I did not care for them” (Hebrews 8.9). And why did the people not continue in the covenant? They lacked faith! “the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard” (Hebrews 4.2).

Faith is the key to keeping covenant; faith is what keeps us from “shrink(ing) back to destruction” and is what “preserves the soul” (Hebrews 10.39). Faith is what we must possess if we desire to “come to God” (Hebrews 11.6). Note that the word translated as “come to” is the same translated as “draw near” in Hebrews 4.16; 7.25; 10.1,22. God has established the new covenant; Jesus has made the only offering we need and now sits at God’s right hand... but we must come to Him in faith! So, we must ask the question, “what is faith?” The author answers in Hebrews 11; “Now faith is...”

Faith Is Convinced

“Now faith is the certainty of things hoped for, a proof of things not seen.”
(Hebrews 11.1, NASB2020)

Hebrews 11.1 is probably the best known verse in the entire letter and often given as THE definition of faith. I don’t think the author intended to say that this is the definition of faith, rather he was revealing an important truth about faith: faith is why we can be convinced of what God has promised. The author had established that our hope rests on the priestly ministry of Jesus (Hebrews 6.19-20). However, we are not there to witness His intercessory work on our behalf, so how can we know His work is taking place? Faith.

But understand that while faith is the “proof of things not seen”, the author is not saying that faith is blind (i.e. lacking evidence). The author has endeavored to give evidence throughout the letter, mainly using OT prophecy, and that

evidence should convince us that Jesus is ministering on our behalf; we have reason to believe. Take vs. 3 as another example: we did not see the creation of the world, but we accept this on faith. But God has provided evidence which gives us reason to believe that “the worlds were prepared by the word of God” (see Psalm 19.1; Romans 1.20).

But the greatest reason for faith is the nature of God Himself: “He who promised is faithful” (Hebrews 10.23). The faithfulness of God is why we can be certain of all that He has promised; His faithfulness gives us every reason to have faith!

Faith Is Grounded In The Trustworthiness Of God

“he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11.6, NASB1995)

Most of us, if asked to define faith would probably say something like “faith is trusting in God”. While not the complete picture of faith, trust is certainly the main component. The Scriptures record God’s dealings with man and show over and over again that God keeps His word. Thus, we can know that “He is faithful” (Hebrews 10.23) and reading the Bible should produce faith (trust in God) in us (Romans 10.17).

In chapter 11 the author records how by faith “men of old gained approval” (vs. 2). He spans Biblical history, furnishing examples from before the flood (vss. 4-5), the flood (vs. 7), the patriarchs (vss. 8-22), the exodus (vss. 23-29), the conquest (vss. 30-31) and the rest of Biblical history (vss. 32-38) showing how all of these “gained promises” (vss. 17,33) and “gained approval” (vs. 39).

We can have faith that God will reward us if we seek Him because He has always done so! He has proven Himself to be faithful and trustworthy, so we can “draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10.22).

Faith Obeys With The Assurance That He Rewards

“For by it the men of old gained approval.”
(Hebrews 11.2, NASB1995)

It is tragic that many seek to separate faith from obedience, when in reality the two are inseparably linked. Remember, the reason why Israel failed to keep their covenant was because they lacked faith in God (Hebrews 4.2). In chapter 11 the author shows that faithful men and women throughout history obeyed God BECAUSE they believed that He is a “rewarder of those who seek Him”. They acted in faith and thus gained approval.

Perhaps no example better illustrates this principle than Abraham offering up Isaac (vss. 17-19). Abraham was commanded to do something that not only

would have been at odds with his fatherly feelings of love, but also made no logical sense: how would God keep His word if the son of promise was killed? But Abraham had faith! He believed that God could raise Isaac, even though there were no recorded accounts of resurrection at that time. Abraham's trust in God was complete and absolute, thus He was able to obey even the most difficult of commands.

Throughout the New Testament, God tells us that real faith is faith that will submit to His will. Thus salvation is for those who "believe and are baptized" (Mark 16.16) and why Paul sought to "bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles" (Romans 1.5). And as James emphatically stated, "faith, if it has no works, is dead, being by itself" (James 2.17). The Hebrew author is exhorting us to have the same kind of obedient faith, faith that trusts God enough to "lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12.1).

Faith Continues

"But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them."
(Hebrews 11.16, NASB1995)

God had been faithful to His promises to the faithful throughout time, but the Hebrew author repeatedly makes the point that God's ultimate promise was not fulfilled during their lifetimes. Abraham lived in the promised land, but he dwelt in tents and never possessed the land. Yet, he was looking for something greater than an earthly dwelling place: "he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Hebrews 11.10).

The author makes the same point again in vss. 13-16: they had not received the promises (the better ones of the new covenant), but they could see them from afar (i.e. they had a glimpse of how God would redeem man). Thus, their hope wasn't for any earthly blessing, but for "a better country, that is, a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them." (Hebrews 11.16).

The author was endeavoring to show that the faithful ones of the Bible were those who maintained their faith throughout their lives, not just until they received some earthly blessing. They always trusted that God would fulfill the eternal promises and that they would be part of a heavenly dwelling, not an earthly one. And so the author concludes in vss. 39-40 that they could not be made perfect apart from us, but his point is that now they can be made perfect because the new covenant based on better promises has been established. "now that Christ has accomplished his high priestly ministry, they too will share in its blessings" (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary)



Lesson 12: Run With Endurance

Hebrews 12

Earlier, the Hebrew author had told his audience that they “have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Hebrews 10.36). The author then proceeded to give numerous examples in chapter 11 of men and women who through faith endured, even though they hadn’t yet received the promises (see Hebrews 11.13,39). In chapter 12 the author returns to his exhortation that they “run with endurance the race that is set before us” (Hebrews 12.1). This endurance race is the main idea in Hebrews 12.1-17 (note the terms “endurance” and “endure” in vss. 1,2,3,7).

Our Inspiration To Endure (Hebrews 12.1-3)

The exhortation given to Christians is to “lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us” (vs. 1). The Christian walk is a marathon, not a sprint and the exhortation is to rid ourselves of anything and everything that would hinder us running the race. Sin certainly would be a hindrance to this race, but sin isn’t the only “encumbrance”. Recall that the people of faith “had opportunity to return” to their earthly countries, but they forsook that in their quest for the “heavenly one”. Everything, even home, should be left behind for this race.

But what would encourage and inspire us to leave everything behind and endure such a race? The author provides two sources of inspiration. The first is the people of faith described in chapter 11, referred to here as the “great cloud (or host) of witnesses”. The idea may be that they are witnessing / observing us as we run the race, or that their example bear witness to the fact that running with endurance is possible. Personally, I prefer the later interpretation, but it may be that both are intended. But the host of witnesses take a back seat compared to our main source of inspiration; we are to “fix our eyes on Jesus” and “consider Him who endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (vss. 2-3). His example is what should inspire us to likewise run with endurance. A few notes about what is said about Jesus in this passage:

- He is described as the “author and perfecter of faith”. “Author” is the same term translated as “forerunner” in Hebrews 6.20. “Jesus trod the way of faith first and brought it to completion” (Leon Morris, Expositors Bible Commentary).

- “for the joy set before Him” describes Jesus’ motivation for enduring; He knew what would result from His sacrifice!
- This was no easy race for Jesus, for He “endured the cross, despising the shame”. “It reflects the universal response of antiquity toward the horrific nature of crucifixion and underscores Christ’s utter humiliation in dying ignominiously like a slave or common criminal, in torment, on the cross” (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary).
- But when Jesus endured, He received what was promised to Him: He “sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.” And since He has received what was promised, so can we!

God’s Reason For Our Endurance (Hebrews 12.4-11)

The author reminds his audience that they had not yet experienced anything like what their Lord had been forced to endure; “you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin” (vs. 4). Jesus had been crucified by sinners, and while they had experienced persecution at the hands of sinners, they had not yet faced death. But all of this begs the question, “why must they be persecuted?” Without removing the guilt from their persecutors (they are termed “sinners” after all), the author states that God has good reason: discipline is good for them!

First, discipline shows that they are sons of God (vss. 5-8)! The author quotes from Proverbs 3.11-12 to remind his readers that discipline, even rebukes, are evident that God loves them. In fact, if God didn’t discipline them it would mean they weren’t His real sons! Second, discipline produces the results the Father desires to see in His children. His discipline means we will “live” (vs. 9), share in His holiness (vs. 10) and bear the “peaceful fruit of righteousness” (vs. 11). God has set a difficult race in front of us, a race requiring great endurance. His discipline insures that we can complete the race!

The Good Results Of Our Endurance (Hebrews 12.12-17)

This final section calls us to action, focusing on the good results which will come. However, the author does not call them to individual action, but to communal action. There were evidently some among them who felt too weak to run the race, thus the author exhorted them to “strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, and make straight paths for your (plural) feet...” (vss. 12-13). The result would be that the lame would find their strength; they would all be healed! How could they strengthen the entire community of believers?

- They should “pursue peace with all men” and mutual “sanctification” (vs. 14).
- They should do all they could to make sure “no one comes short of the grace

of God" (vs. 15).

- They should take care that no "root of bitterness" arise among the believers, because bitterness would surely spread (vs. 15).
- And they should rid the body of any "immoral or godless person like Esau" (vss. 16-17). Esau stands in juxtaposition to the faithful of chapter 11, for while they forsook their earthly homes in search of a heavenly one, he sold his birthright for a single meal.

But where does this race finish; what is the goal? That is the subject of vss. 18-29, but rather than simply defining our goal, the author makes yet another contrast between the old and new covenant. The idea of "drawing near" has been an important one in the letter. The Law and its accompanying sacrifices could not perfect those who attempted to draw near under the old covenant (Hebrews 10.1), but Jesus' sacrifice and His priestly ministry allow us to draw near in confidence (Hebrews 4.16; 7.25; 10.22). Significantly, the word translated in the NASB as "come to" in Hebrews 12.18,22 is the same word translated as "draw near" in the above passages. As we run the race with endurance, we are drawing ever nearer to the true Zion!

Sinai and Zion Contrasted (Hebrews 12.18-24)

As he's done throughout the letter, the author makes another contrast between the old and new covenants. The old covenant is typified by Sinai, a scene of terror. The new covenant is typified by Zion, the new Jerusalem and a scene of celebration. Let's begin by noting some of the ways Sinai is described:

- "can be touched" Sinai was a tangible and physical place. It could be touched, even though Israel was warned against doing so (Exodus 19.12-13).
- "blazing fire...darkness...gloom...whirlwind" see Exodus 19.18; Deuteronomy 4.11; 5.22.
- "blast of a trumpet" see Exodus 19.19.
- "sound of words" see Deuteronomy 5.22.
- "begged that no further words be spoken to them" see Deuteronomy 5.23-27; Exodus 20.18-19.
- "they could not bear the command..." Not speaking to the disobedience of the people on this account, rather emphasizes the sense of terror that even this command evoked.
- "so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, 'I am full of fear and trembling' The Exodus account does not present Moses as fearful at Sinai, however other encounters with God did fill him with fear (see Deuteronomy 9.19; Acts 7.32; Exodus 3.6).

Contrasted with this scene of terror is Mount Zion, a scene even more awesome than Sinai, but approachable because of the work of Jesus (vs. 24).

- “to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” the very city the faithful of old were searching for (see Hebrews 11.10,16).
- “myriads of angels” these had also been present at Sinai (see Deuteronomy 33.2).
- “general assembly and church of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven” harkens back to Hebrews 1.6; 2.12.
- “God, the Judge of all” note Hebrews 2.2-3; 4.13; 6.8; 9.27; 10.26-31. The idea of God as Judge is terrifying, but for those who are part of God’s family, His judgments are vindication.
- “spirits of the righteous made perfect” including those faithful saints of the old covenant (see Hebrews 11.39-40).
- “Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant” see Hebrews 9.11-15. Remember, this is a better covenant, based on better promises (see Hebrews 8.6-13).
- “sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel” The sprinkled blood is the means of ratifying the covenant (Exodus 24.8). In this case, an innocent had to die... just as Abel was innocent (Hebrews 11.4). However, Abel’s blood brought a curse (Genesis 4.11-12), while Jesus’ blood brings perfection (Hebrews 10.14,19).

Since we’ve come to Zion (Hebrews 12.25-29)

Zion is superior to Sinai in every way, the most important difference being that Jesus’ work as mediator allows us to draw near in confidence (see Hebrews 4.16). We are greatly blessed, receiving the kingdom the faithful of old were looking for (Hebrews 11.10,16). And such blessing carries with it obligation: “See to it that you do not refuse Him who is speaking...” The author again harkens back to an earlier point: the superiority of Christ and the blessings He brings carries even greater responsibility to heed what He says! (see Hebrews 2.1-4).

The author proceeds to give another reason why his audience should “not refuse Him who is speaking”: the great day when both heaven and earth will be shaken... leaving only the heavenly kingdom which won’t be shaken. The author quotes from Haggai 2.6-9, written during a time when the Lord was going to shake the kingdom of Babylon (cf. Isaiah 13.1-22). Just as the Lord had shaken that great kingdom, a day was coming when all of creation will be shaken! But “we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken”!

Such assurance should instill in us a desire to heed the words of our Lord, not out of slavish obedience, but with gratitude as we seek to present our entire lives as an offering of “acceptable service with reverence and awe”. The closing verse, “for our God is a consuming fire” is interesting for it takes us back to the terrible scene at Sinai (see Deuteronomy 4.24). It provides further reason to serve Him with “reverence and awe” but also gives assurance for it is He who will shake all of creation... leaving only His faithful who will stand with Him.



Lesson 13: Acceptable Worship Hebrews 13

At the close of chapter the 12 the author of Hebrews encouraged his readers that since they received “a kingdom which cannot be shaken” they should “show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe” (vs. 28). The word translated as “offer...service” in the NASB95 is translated as “worship” in both the ESV and NIV. In fact, it’s translated as “worship” in the NASB elsewhere in Hebrews (see 9.9; 10.2). The term describes those who offer religious service and rites, i.e. worshippers. However, the Christian’s worship/service isn’t relegated to what one does at a worship service, but makes up his/her entire life.

On the surface, chapter 13 might seem to contain several unrelated exhortations. However, these exhortations describe different ways which God’s true people can offer Him acceptable service on a daily basis.

Brotherly love (Hebrews 13.1-6)

The first 6 verses contain varied exhortations, but they all relate back to the opening admonition: “let love of the brethren continue.” Brotherly love is not only commanded by Jesus, this affection for each other should be one of the traits which causes others to see that we belong to Christ. “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another, even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.” (John 13.34-35, NASB95) And such brotherly love did in fact stand out, as the 2nd century satirist Lucian noted: “Moreover, their original law-giver persuaded them that they should be like brothers to one another.... Therefore, they despise all things equally, and view them as common property, accepting such teachings by tradition and without any precise belief (Peregrinus 13).”

Brotherly love would dictate how the saints treated their brethren in challenging circumstances, such as strangers in need of hospitality and those who were in prison (vss. 2-3, note the parallel to Matthew 25.35-36). An added exhortation to show hospitality was the fact that men of faith had unwittingly hosted angelic guests (Abraham in Genesis 18, Lot in Genesis 19). The author had previously mentioned their service to their imprisoned brethren (Hebrews 10.32-34) and brotherly love for those in the body would prompt them to continue remembering their persecuted brethren.

On the surface, the exhortation to honor marriage in vs. 4 would seem to be unrelated to brotherly love. However, the Christian's sexual morality is related to love for others elsewhere in Scripture (see Romans 13.9). "Regard for marriage is an essential expression of the quality of love that binds the community together as brothers and sisters who share a common confession. As a community they must respect marriage as the gift of God and support those who share the marriage relationship with empathy and affection." (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary).

Finally, these saints are urged to not let their brotherly love be replaced with the love for money. Earlier persecution had resulted in the loss of property (see Hebrews 10.34), so the author encourages them continue to keep material possessions in the proper perspective. Furthermore, the author gives the key to contentment: the saint has God with him, and He will never forsake His people (see Deuteronomy 31.6,8; Joshua 1.5; Psalm 118.6).

Follow Your Leaders (Hebrews 13.7-17)

We come to another section where various appeals are made, but the fact that the author bookends the section with appeals "remember" and "obey" leaders gives us the common thread in the passage. The leaders are not defined as elders, preachers, etc., but their leadership was defined by 1) their speaking the word of God and 2) faithful conduct. Vs. 7 speaks of their former leaders while vs. 17 addresses their relationship to the current leaders in the church. The need to obey church leaders, to heed God's word spoken through them and to emulate their example, is further shown in vs. 9: varied and strange teachings abounded, but godly leaders were watching over their souls (vs. 17).

Vs. 8 is key to the section: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The everlasting nature of Jesus has been brought up before in the letter, with particular reference to His role as High Priest (Hebrews 1.12; 7.24-25). It was Jesus that their leaders had proclaimed (vs. 7), but the varied and strange teachings would take them away from the grace that He mediates in the new covenant. His unchanging character means that we can be saved forever (Hebrews 5.9), but only by obeying Him. Christians must not be duped by false teachings, because Jesus and His will have not changed!

It is apparent that these particular false teachings encouraged these Hebrew Christians to place their trust in aspects of the old covenant. Based on the verses that follow, it would seem that they were being told that if they kept the old covenant festivals (associated with food) they could secure God's grace. But God's grace is found in Jesus, not in food! Thus, the author reminds his audience that "we have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat" (vs. 10). Exactly what he means by this is clarified in vs. 11 where procedures for the Day of Atonement are specified (see Leviticus 16.27). The animals

sacrificed on that day, whose blood was used for atonement, were taken out of the camp and burned. And so Jesus, whose blood secures our atonement, also “suffered outside the gate” (vs. 12). “The declaration that the adherents of the old cultus have no right to eat from the altar asserts that they have no share in the sacrifice of Christ on Golgotha and are excluded from its benefits. Participation in the efficacy of Jesus’ sacrifice is limited to those who recognize in the cross-event the source of the grace by which the heart is strengthened.” (William Lane, Word Biblical Commentary).

Since Jesus “suffered outside the gate”, His followers are called to “go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach”. There may be a possible allusion to Exodus 33.7-10 where Moses would meet God outside the camp following Israel making the golden calf. When Jesus was crucified God was once again rejected; His followers must once again go outside the camp to Him. Practically speaking, these Hebrew Christians would have to leave what was familiar and comfortable (i.e. Judaism) and suffer with their Lord. But bearing His reproach is worth the sacrifice, “for here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come” (see Hebrews 11.10,16; 12.22-24,28). And since He was sacrificed for us, we now offer appropriate sacrifices in gratitude: the praise of our lips (vs. 15) and charity (vs. 16).

Final Exhortations and Benediction (Hebrews 13.18-25)

The author ends with some of the only personal remarks found in the letter. He requests their prayers on the behalf of him and his coworkers (vss. 18-19) and expresses the hope that he and Timothy would come to them soon given that the latter was recently released from prison (vs. 23). But such future plans were uncertain; what was certain was that God would continue to provide for and take care of His people. Thus, the author offers this benediction: “Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.” (vss. 20-21) The benediction borrows from Isaiah 63.11-14 and Zechariah 9.11 and expresses confidence that God has provided all they need: Jesus is now their great Shepherd and He has equipped them “in every good thing to do His will”. God’s grace would indeed be with them... and with us.