

## HEBREWS

### ***Introduction:***

In introducing his study on Hebrews, J. Sidlow Baxter, in *Explore the Book*, writes: “I shall not forget my first sight of Mont Blanc, towering up beyond the Chamonix Valley, king among Alpine giants, crowned with a sun-transfigured majesty. One may well feel a similar, reverential wonder with this transcendent “Epistle to the Hebrews” opening up to view. It is one of the greatest two theological treatises in the New Testament. Moreover, it is king and leader to a new range of height, the last group of books in our New Testament, namely, the Hebrew Christian Epistles.”

When studying one of the books of the Bible, we always ought to ask ourselves the question: “What does the book add to the contents of the whole Bible?” In other words, if we would take The Epistle to the Hebrews out of the Bible, what would this do to our understanding of the truth of God or of the Gospel? It is obvious that there are certain lessons in The Epistle to the Hebrews that are found nowhere else in the Bible. At least seven points jump out on us:

#### **1. Condition and status of the recipients of The Epistle to the Hebrews**

We have to bear in mind that *The Epistle to the Hebrews* was primarily addressed to people who adhered to Judaism. They had recently heard that Jesus Christ is the Savior who had been promised in the Old Testament and that the requirements of the Old Testament law foreshadowed the work of Jesus who is “The Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world.”<sup>1</sup>

Those who accepted this Gospel were usually persecuted and ostracized from their families. They were no longer considered to be Jews by the other members of their race. They were viewed as people who had forsaken the faith of their fathers. We have to bear this in mind when we read the exhortations given by the author.

#### **2. The spiritual status of the recipients**

We have to remember that *The Epistle to the Hebrews* is addressed to Jews who adhered to the faith and regulations of the Old Testament. They were not pagans who did not know God, but they were members of the people to whom God had revealed Himself and to whom God had entrusted His revelation. The Apostle Paul states: “Theirs is the adoption as sons; theirs the divine glory, the covenants, the receiving of the law, the temple worship and the promises.”<sup>2</sup>

- In the law, the people of Israel possessed the whole truth of God in a figurative form.
- They knew that the sin of man had to be atoned for by blood that was poured out at the altar.
- They also knew that God had promised a Savior who would be a descendant of David.

In Paul’s words: “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”<sup>3</sup> The Jews had to understand that all the images of the Old Testament law were fulfilled in the person of Jesus Christ who had become the sacrifice and the high priest for all of humanity.

The difficulty for many Jews was not that they didn’t know the truth but that they didn’t realize that the truth they possessed in the law was not complete. Only those Jews who accepted Jesus Christ as Savior possessed the complete truth.

The difference between the Jews who accepted Christ and us who are not Jews is that we come from the darkness of sin and the power of Satan to God’s truth and in His marvelous light. The Jews did not come from the darkness into the light but from the picture to the reality. The sins that are, at some points, mentioned in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* are not sins like murder or adultery but the sin of clinging to the picture and rejecting the reality. What is called “sin” in the epistle is when people, who have heard that

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<sup>1</sup> John 1:29

<sup>2</sup> Rom. 9:4

<sup>3</sup> Rom. 10:4

Jesus poured out His blood for the atonement of the sin of men, reject this blood and continue putting their trust in animal blood for the covering of their sin, this.

By way of illustration, let's say that a man's wife goes away for a weekend to a retreat, leaving the husband alone at home. He has her picture that he puts on his nightstand and when he goes to bed at night, he speaks to the picture, tells it that he loves her and wishes her a good night of sleep. Two days later, the wife comes home and the husband meets her at the door, saying: "I don't really want you to come inside. I am perfectly happy with the picture I have of you." The story pushes the truth to the point of ridicule, but the Jews, who knew that they had the picture of their Messiah in the Old Testament ritual law, and rejected Jesus Christ as the Messiah, actually did the same thing. They preferred the picture to the reality it represented.

### 3. The concept of man in The Epistle to the Hebrews

*The Epistle to the Hebrews* teaches that man occupies a high position in God's plan. God placed man on a higher level in the order of creation than the angels. The fact that man sinned made him also fall from this elevated position. This is the reason man usually considers himself to be inferior to angels. But redeemed man is rehabilitated and restored to his original rank. "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" (ch. 1:14). "It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking. But there is a place where someone has testified: 'What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.' In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone" (ch. 2:5-9). No other creature is destined to sit with God on His throne. "Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness" (ch. 12:10).

### 4. The concept of Christ's position in this present dispensation

No other book in the Bible explains what Jesus is doing in heaven at the present time.

- "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven" (ch. 1:3).
- "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess" (ch. 4:14).
- "The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven, and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man" (ch. 8:1-2).

*The Epistle to the Hebrews* explains that Jesus serves as high priest in the real sanctuary. Aaron's priesthood and the ceremonies in the tabernacle and in the temple in Jerusalem foreshadowed this heavenly reality. It is for this reason that Jesus' humanity is emphasized so strongly in *The Epistle to the Hebrews*.

### 5. The concept of the salvation of man

The salvation that is mentioned in *The Epistle to the Hebrews* is complete salvation. "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them" (ch. 7:25). The opening verses of *The Epistle to the Hebrews* indicate that the sin question has been dealt with completely (See ch. 1:3). The important matter now is that people, whose sin has been atoned for, are brought to glory. The glory mentioned is not the heavenly glory we enter when we leave this world but a glory we have to pursue (ch. 12:14) and which is called "entering God's rest" (ch. 4:10).

There is a close relationship between complete salvation and Jesus' intercession for us in heaven (ch. 7:25).

### 6. The meaning of Old Testament worship is explained in relation to Jesus' ministry at present.

No other book in the Bible explains so clearly the meaning and purpose of the ceremonial law that is recorded in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers than *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. The author does not downplay or reject the ceremonial law but he shows that the law merely foreshadows the salvation God has prepared for us.

## **7. The importance of the admonitions**

There is a heavy stress upon admonition in the following five sections:

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|--|-------------|
| 1. Pay attention to the Word of the Son of God | 2:1-4       |
| 2. Make every effort to enter God's rest       | 3:7 – 4:13  |
| 3. Do not fall away                            | 5:11 – 6:20 |
| 4. On deliberate sin                           | 10:26 – 39  |
| 5. Do not sin and reject Christ                | 12:14 – 29  |

These admonitions are not parentheses, as some believe, but they are part of the real topic of *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. They are the main lessons for people who were used to follow the Old Testament form of worship and who have come to understand that the shadows of the ceremonial law are fulfilled in the reality of Jesus Christ.

## Outline:

We borrow the outline of the book from *Nelson's Illustrated Bible Dictionary*:

HEBREWS .....	1
Introduction:.....	1
Part One: The Superiority of Christ's Person (1:1—4:13) .....	6
I. The Superiority of Christ over the Prophets 1:1-3.....	6
II. The Superiority of Christ over the Angels 1:4—2:18.....	9
A. Christ Is Superior because of His Deity 1:4-14.....	9
B. First Warning: Danger of Neglect 2:1-4.....	12
C. Christ Is Superior because of His Humanity 2:5-18.....	13
III. The Superiority of Christ over Moses 3:1—4:13 .....	21
A. Christ Is Superior to Moses in His Work 3:1-4.....	21
B. Christ Is Superior to Moses in His Person 3:5-6 .....	22
C. Second Warning: Danger of Unbelief 3:7—4:13 .....	24
Part Two: The Superiority of Christ's Work (4:14—10:18) .....	31
I. The Superiority of Christ's Priesthood 4:14—7:28.....	31
A. Christ Is Superior in His Position 4:14-16 .....	31
B. Christ Is Superior in His Qualifications 5:1-10.....	33
C. Third Warning: Danger of Not Maturing 5:11-6:20.....	37
D. Christ Is Superior in His Priestly Order 7:1-28.....	41
II. The Superiority of Christ's Covenant 8:1-13 .....	45
A. A Better Covenant 8:1-6.....	45
III. The Superiority of Christ's Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:1—10:18 .....	49
A. Old Covenant's Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:1-10 .....	49
B. New Covenant's Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:11-10:18.....	52
Part Three: The Superiority of the Christian's Walk of Faith (10:19—13:25).....	60
I. A Call to Full Assurance of Faith 10:19—11:40.....	60
A. Hold Fast the Confession of Faith 10:19-25 .....	60
B. Fourth Warning: Danger of Drawing Back 10:26-39.....	64
C. Definition of Faith 11:1-3.....	68
D. Examples of Faith 11:4-40 .....	69
1. Abel 11:4.....	69

2. Enoch 11:5-6.....	70
3. Noah 11:7 .....	72
4. Abraham and Sarah 11:8-19.....	73
5. Isaac 11:20 .....	77
6. Jacob 11:21 .....	78
7. Joseph 11:22 .....	78
8. Moses' Parents 11:23 .....	79
9. Moses 11:24-29.....	80
10. Joshua and Rahab 11:30-31 .....	83
11. Many Other Heroes of Faith 11:32-40.....	83
II. Endurance of Faith 12:1-29 .....	86
A. Example of Christ's Endurance 12:1-4 .....	86
B. A Call to Endure God's Chastening 12:5-24.....	88
C. Fifth Warning: Danger of Refusing God 12:25-29 .....	93
III. A Call to Love 13:1-17 .....	95
A. Love in the Social Realm 13:1-6.....	95
B. Love in the Religious Realm 13:7-17.....	97
IV. Conclusion 13:18-25.....	101

## Part One: The Superiority of Christ's Person (1:1—4:13)

### I. *The Superiority of Christ over the Prophets 1:1-3*

*1 In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways,*

*2 but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe.*

*3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.*

The epistle opens with some of the most beautiful and powerful words in the whole New Testament. All of human history is divided in two parts: God's speaking to Israel through the prophets in the Old Testament and God's speaking to us in Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Andrew Murray, in his book *The Holiest of All*, says about "God has spoken" that it means:

- 1- An introduction to glory
- 2- A vehicle of fellowship
- 3- Imperfectly and provisionally through the prophets - Perfectly through the Son
- 4- A revelation of God's heart
- 5- Vehicles of this life, saving power, love
- 6- Speaking claims hearing

Donald Gunthrie, in his commentary on *Hebrews*, states that the past has bearing on the present. He proceeds: "This principle is basic to the New Testament and is nowhere brought to focus so clearly as in Hebrews. What strikes the writer is the variety of ways in which God had spoken in the past. He does not list them, but uses the expression *In many and various ways*. Anyone acquainted with the Old Testament would at once be able to fill in the details – the different modes (visions, angelic revelations, prophetic words and events) and the different occasions (stretching across the whole vista of Old Testament history). The most illuminating revelations came through *the prophets*. These were men raised up by God to challenge their own time. Their badge of office was the unshakeable conviction that they spoke from God. Their ability to say, 'God says,' gave their words a unique authority. They were ill-treated (as Heb. 11:33ff. shows) and yet they persisted with their message. Their stories make heroic reading, but what they said was incomplete. The writer knows that it needed a better method of communication, and he recognizes that this has come in Jesus Christ. If this is so we might wonder why the old cannot be forgotten. After all, what Jesus reveals is better than the prophets. Nevertheless the continuity is kept. What was said in the past (*palai*) prepared the way for the most important communication of all (*i.e.* revelation through the Son). This is the real theme of the whole letter: the past has given way to better things. This is the reason why the past (Old Testament religious ideas) keeps coming into the picture in this epistle, only to fade out again as better ideas fulfill and expand it. It is easy to see why the writer begins as he does. He sees value in the past (for God spoke through it), but he also sees its imperfections. What he says cannot fail to throw light on the Christian approach to the Old Testament. This makes his letter valuable for today as well as for his own time."

The fact that God speaks by His Son is nowhere so powerfully brought forth as in the prologue of John's Gospel, where Jesus is called *logos*, "the Word."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states: "We can scarcely conceive anything more dignified than the opening of this letter; the sentiments are exceedingly elevated, and the language, harmony itself. The infinite God is at once produced to view, not in any of those attributes which are essential to the divine nature, but in the manifestations of his love to the world, by giving a revelation of his will relative to the salvation of mankind, and thus preparing the way, through a long train of years, for the introduction of that most glorious Being, his own Son. This Son, in the fullness of time, was manifested in the flesh that he might complete all vision and prophecy, supply all that was wanting to perfect the great scheme of

revelation for the instruction of the world, and then die to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. The description which he gives of this glorious personage is elevated beyond all comparison. Even in his humiliation, his suffering of death excepted, he is infinitely exalted above all the angelic host, is the object of their unceasing adoration, is permanent on his eternal throne at the right hand of the Father, and from him they all receive their commands to minister to those whom he has redeemed by his blood. In short, this first chapter, which may be considered the introduction to the whole letter is, for importance of subject, dignity of expression, harmony and energy of language, compression and yet distinctness of ideas, equal, if not superior, to any other part of the New Testament.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes about the phrase, rendered “many times and in various ways,” that “the Greek structure of the whole with its rhythmical flow, betokens an original composition. The rolling music of the language cannot, of course, be reproduced in an English translation.”

The term “our forefathers” is the translation of the single Greek word *patrásin*, “fathers,” referring to all previous generation of the Jewish people. The “various ways” in which God spoke includes what God said through the greatest Old Testament prophet, Moses, who not only received the Ten Commandments, but also the whole ceremonial law with all its provisions of atonement for the sins of the people. It is good to remember this, as Paul says that “Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”<sup>4</sup>

In painting his picture of “the Son,” the author spans all of eternity by reaching out to the end of time and back to its beginning. Christ being “appointed heir of all things,” refers to the consummation of creation and “through whom he made the universe” to the beginning. It was through the Son that the Father called everything into being. In the Genesis record of creation, we read: “In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth,” and “God said, ‘Let there be light.’” The creation of the universe as well as the calling into of light and all that follows was the result of God’s speaking through His Son. The Apostle Paul says about Jesus Christ: “For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.”<sup>5</sup>

Andrew Murray, in his book *The Holiest of All*, writes about God’s speaking: “God has spoken! Speaking is the vehicle of fellowship. It is a proof that the speaker considers the one he addresses as capable of fellowship with himself, a token that he longs for that fellowship. Man was created for fellowship with God; sin interrupted it. Nature speaks of God and His work; but of Himself, His heart, and His thoughts of love toward us as sinners, nature cannot tell. In his deepest misery, man seeks for God—but how often, to all appearance, in vain. But, God be praised, this seeking in vain is not for always. The silence has been broken. God calls man back to fellowship with Himself. God has spoken!”

God’s speaking through His Son involves infinitely more than speaking to us only; it refers to everything visible and invisible. In the same way as God’s speaking resulted in creation, His Word takes form in a Person, the Second Person of the Godhead. This does not mean that the Father’s Word created the Son, but, as far as we are concerned it revealed Him. The Word of God is eternal; it existed before the creation of time.

The eye of our created body is unable to see God. But when the Word became flesh, the invisible God became visible to us. So Jesus could say to His disciples: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”<sup>6</sup> We could say, however, that the Father is just as much hidden in the Son as He is revealed in Him. The radiance of God’s glory was not visible in Jesus’ human body, except at one time during the transfiguration. Mark writes about this moment: “His clothes became dazzling white, whiter than anyone in the world could bleach them.”<sup>7</sup> And Peter, who witnessed this, writes: “We were eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honor and glory from God the Father when the voice came to him from the

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<sup>4</sup> Rom. 10:4

<sup>5</sup> Col. 1:16,17

<sup>6</sup> John 14:9

<sup>7</sup> Mark 9:3

Majestic Glory, saying, ‘This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased.’ We ourselves heard this voice that came from heaven when we were with him on the sacred mountain.”<sup>8</sup>

The glory about which the author speaks here surpasses anything visible on earth. Jesus is called “the radiance of God’s glory.” The Greek word used is *apaugasma*. *Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words* defines this: “The ‘glory’ of God expresses all that He is in His nature and His actings and their manifestation. The Son, being one with the Father in Godhood, is in Himself, and ever was, the shining forth of the ‘glory,’ manifesting in Himself all that God is and does, all, for instance, that is involved in His being ‘the very image of His substance,’ and in His creative acts, His sustaining power, and in His making purification of sins, with all that pertains thereto and issues from it.”

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “The shining forth to the world of the very character of God in Jesus Christ. He is the essential being of God. In the same way express image is used, as in Matt 22:20, where it refers to the image on the Roman coin. Christ is the stamp or impress of God (*charakter*); the essence of God. The whole force of the first two clauses of this verse stresses this one concept.”

Whereas His radiance refers to His relationship with the Father, His relationship to creation is expressed in the fact that He is the power that holds all together. The Word not only created, it also sustains everything. The Greek verb *phero* has a rather wide meaning, ranging from “to bring” to “to carry.” Paul’s definition is probably clearest, when he writes: “in him all things hold together.”<sup>9</sup> Christ’s Word is the power that holds all the atoms of created matter.

The whole story of His suffering, crucifixion and death is dealt with in the few words “he had provided purification for sins.” The emphasis is on the finality, not on the process. The Greek word, rendered here “purification,” is *katharismos*, which literally means “washing off.” It is used for the ceremonial cleansing of people and objects in the Old Testament rites. Jesus used the word when He said to the leper He had healed: “See that you don’t tell this to anyone. But go, show yourself to the priest and offer the sacrifices that Moses commanded for your *cleansing*, as a testimony to them.”<sup>10</sup> Andrew Murray, in his book *The Holiest of All*, writes about this: “The cleansing of sins, as something effected by Christ before He went to heaven, is the foundation of all His work. Let us learn, at the very start, that what God has to speak to us in Christ begins here: Sin must be cleansed away. This is the root-thought of redemption. As long as we seek salvation chiefly from the desire of personal safety, or as long as we approach the study of Christ’s person and work as the revelation of what is true and beautiful and good, we cannot enter fully into its power. It is the cleaning of *sin* God insists on—and with a desire so intense that He gave His Son to die for it. It is in the intense desire for the cleansing of sins that, all the way through the Christian life, our spiritual capacity to approach and enter into the salvation of Christ will be found. This desire of God’s heart lies at the root of all. It is the secret of Christian perfection. It was only when Christ had effected this cleansing that heaven opened to Him. The full acceptance of the cleansing of sins—as the meaning of the word *cleansing* will be unfolded later on – will be to us, too, the entrance into heavenly life.”

What strikes us most in the way this is stated is the finality. For us, who have experienced salvation, the sin problem is not finished yet. We do not usually feel our cleansing is a done deal, as if there is nothing left that should be taken care of. The fact that our sinful nature has not totally died, even if we consider ourselves as crucified with Christ, makes it difficult for us to accept that God considers us His finished products. Yet, it is on the basis of the closure of our case that God can extend daily forgiveness to us as an act of righteousness. As the Apostle John writes: “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”<sup>11</sup>

At this point the humanity of Jesus Christ has not yet been referred to. It is, however, understood in the process of purification of human sin. It was in Christ’s human body that the sin problem was taken care of. Consequently, it is the Man Jesus Christ, as well as the Second Person of the Trinity, who is presently seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, writes: “When He had effected the cleansing of sins, he ‘*sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high*.’ There He lives, opening up and keeping open the blessed access to God’s presence and fellowship for us while lifting us up

<sup>8</sup> II Peter 1:16-18

<sup>9</sup> Col. 1:17

<sup>10</sup> Mark 1:44

<sup>11</sup> I John 1:9



into and maintaining us in its enjoyment. And in the power that prevails there, He makes the kingdom of heaven a reality within the heart. It is the great object of the epistle to bring home to us the heavenly glory of Christ as the ground of our confidence, the measure of our expectation, and the character of that inward salvation He imparts. That Christ, as our Leader and Forerunner, has rent asunder the veil and, in the power of His blood, has taken possession of and secured access into the Holiest of All does not mean that we are to enter heaven only when we die. The whole practical teaching of the epistle is summed up and applied in the one word: 'We have boldness for entering in. Let us draw near. Let us enter in.' (See Hebrews 10:19-22). The fact of Christ being seated on the throne in heaven means we can actually be brought—through the supernatural power that the Holy Spirit supplies—into God's holy presence, living there our daily life. It was because the Hebrews did not know this—because they had rested content with elementary truths about faith and conversion and the life in heaven after death—that they had so notably failed. Truly, to know Jesus at the right hand of God would be the healing of diseases and their restoration to the joy and strength of a life carried out in accordance with their heavenly calling."

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: "The act of sitting (*he sat down, ekathisen*, aorist) carries a strong sense of fulfillment, for a sitting position is more suggestive of a finished task than a standing position. Indeed, this emphasis on Christ seated, which is supported by other New Testament evidence, shows conclusively that the sacrificial work is done. There is no longer any need for such sacrifice. The sitting position may also denote a position of high honor. There is only one reference of Christ standing in heaven: when Stephen saw the Son of man in heaven he saw him standing at the right hand of God (Acts 7:56). This refers to his work of intercession, not his work of sacrifice. Sin has been dealt with, but the people of God still need an intercessor to plead for them – another theme developed later in this letter. It is worth noting that *the Majesty on high* is a particularly respectful way of speaking of God. It reflects the Jewish reverence for the name of God which led devout Jews to avoid using it, and to substitute some phrase of respect. The writer uses an almost identical phrase in 8:1. The present statement is but a sign-post to the fuller exposition to follow. The writer clearly has a majestic view of God."

## **II. The Superiority of Christ over the Angels 1:4—2:18**

### **A. Christ Is Superior because of His Deity 1:4-14**

**4** *So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*

**5** *For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father"? Or again, "I will be his Father, and he will be my Son"?*

**6** *And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him."*

**7** *In speaking of the angels he says, "He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire."*

**8** *But about the Son he says, "Your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom."*

**9** *You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness; therefore God, your God, has set you above your companions by anointing you with the oil of joy."*

**10** *He also says, "In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands."*

**11** *They will perish, but you remain; they will all wear out like a garment.*

**12** *You will roll them up like a robe; like a garment they will be changed. But you remain the same, and your years will never end."*

**13** *To which of the angels did God ever say, "Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet"?*

**14** *Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?*

In order to prove that Jesus is God in the flesh, the author gives 7 quotations of the Old Testament:

1. The quotation in vs. 5a is from Psalm 2:7

2. The quotation in vs. 5b is from II Sam. 7:14
3. The quotation in vs. 6b is from Psalm 97:7
4. The quotation in vs. 7b is from Psalm 104:4
5. The quotation in the verses 8b and 9 is from Psalm 45:7,8
6. The quotation in the verses 10-12 is from Psalm 102:26-28
7. The quotation in vs. 13b is from Psalm 110:1

All quotations are from the Septuagint. The writer of Hebrews did not translate from Hebrew into Greek; he simply used the existing translation.

Ps. 2:7 is quoted twice in this epistle (See 5:5). *The New International Version* reading: “You are my Son; today I have become your Father” is a weak rendering of the more powerful “You are My Son, today I have begotten You” (NKJV). Paul’s use of the verse indicates the real meaning: “And we declare to you glad tidings--that promise which was made to the fathers. God has fulfilled this for us their children, in that He has raised up Jesus. As it is also written in the second Psalm: ‘You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.’”<sup>12</sup> Paul’s quotation is important because it indicates that Christ became High Priest on the day of His resurrection. The resurrection of Christ’s human body proves His divinity. Paul writes that Christ “through the Spirit of holiness was declared with power to be the Son of God by his resurrection from the dead: Jesus Christ our Lord”<sup>13</sup> Note how the features of Christ’s divine and human nature overlap.

A comparison between vs. 6 and Ps. 97:7 shows a substantial difference in meaning. Hebrews reads: “And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says, ‘Let all God’s angels worship him.’” Psalms 97:7 – “All who worship images are put to shame, those who boast in idols-- worship him, all you gods!” The Hebrew word *Elohim* can be translated “God,” “gods,” or “angels.”

In the quotation of Ps. 104:4 the word order is reversed. The psalm reads: “He makes winds his messengers, flames of fire his servants,” but the quotation reads: “In speaking of the angels he says, ‘He makes his angels winds, his servants flames of fire.’” Vs. 7 - Grammatically, both sentence structures are correct.

Vs. 14 indicates that when God created man, He placed man on a higher rank than angels in the order of creation. Angels are called “ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation.” The fact that man is mentioned in this context proves that Jesus, who is worshipped by the angels and who is seated higher than them, is MAN. With this verse, the author builds a bridge to the next chapter, which treats the subject of Jesus as the Son of Man.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes the following about these Old Testament quotations: “The first passage quoted comes from Psalm 2:7, a psalm which reflects a wartime environment and probably belongs to the historical situation described in 2 Samuel 7. Our writer is not, however, interested in the historical event, only in the suitability of the words to apply to the Messiah. In the psalm, the words *You are my son* apply to David but clearly have only an imperfect application to him. The early Christians recognized the words as Messianic. They are quoted in Paul’s address at Antioch in Pisidia (Acts 13:33). The Jews in his audience would have appreciated the force of this quotation; it added scriptural authority to the claims that Paul was making. What impresses the writer to the Hebrews is that, whereas the words apply to Jesus Christ, they cannot apply to an angel. If God addresses the Messiah in this way, the Messiah must therefore be superior to angels. But in what sense are the *today I have begotten thee* to be understood? As applied to David they may refer to the anniversary of his coronation. Or, perhaps the word ‘begotten’ (*gegennēka*) is to be understood of the paternity of God without indicating any specific point of time. When applied to Jesus Christ as Messiah the same applies. It could refer to the incarnation or to the resurrection. Indeed it is in the latter sense that it is applied in Acts 13:33. On the other hand it is not clear that in Hebrews any importance is attached to the time element. The writer is clearly more concerned with demonstrating the significance of the begetting in terms of the Son’s status, rather than with tying it down to a specific occasion.

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<sup>12</sup> Acts 13:32-33 – NKJV

<sup>13</sup> Rom. 1:4

The second quotation is another passage which was widely accepted as referring to the Messiah. It comes from 2 Samuel 7:14, from an oracle given to David. There is a close link between this passage and the last. The idea contained in it caught the imagination of many Old Testament writers, as seen in their belief in a coming Messiah. The father-son relationship is again the key idea for our writer, for it marks the Messiah as distinct from the creator-creature relationship between God and the angels. Historically the words may be said to find a partial fulfillment in Solomon, the son of David, who completed the building of the first temple. But the perfect fulfillment did not come until the time of David's greater Son. Both the kingdom and the temple needed re-interpreting in spiritual terms, and it was one of the main burdens of our writer to do this in reference to the tabernacle, which foreshadowed the temple. It is worth noting that there is some mention of the father-son relationship in Psalm 89:26f., followed by a reference to the first-born, a combination of ideas which is also found in verses 5 and 6 of this chapter. Since our writer is deeply versed in the Old Testament, it is probable that his acquaintance with Psalm 89 also influenced his selection of some of the other Old Testament passages cited here.

The words *And again, when he brings the first-born into the world*, which introduce the next quotation, themselves echo the Old Testament passage mentioned above (i.e. Ps. 89:27). There the word *first-born* is used ('I will make him the first-born') of David. It is clear that in the writer's mind the first-born' (*prōtotos*) of verse 6 is the Son of the previous verses. It is suggestive that the same term is used of Jesus Christ by the apostle Paul (Col. 1:15, 18; Rom. 8:29), qualified in the following way: first-born of all creation, first-born from the dead, first-born among many brethren. The expression clearly becomes invested with profound meaning when applied to Christ. The writer here does not, as Paul does, go on to enlarge on the superiority of Christ. He is content rather to make statements which will produce a profound impression of superiority. The primary reference must be to the incarnation to draw attention to the fact that when Jesus Christ was born the function of angels was to worship. In the writer's view the angels' homage is proof that they regarded the Son as superior. His meaning is clear enough, but a problem arises over the quotation.

The formula *he says (legei)*, which introduces the quotation, is a familiar one in this epistle. The subject is omitted, but God is clearly meant. The scripture quotations are not simply formal Old Testament statements, but God himself speaking personally out of the text. This gives an indication of the view of the inspiration of scripture held by the writer. He intends it to be understood that the quotation he makes comes with authority, although no such precise quotation as *Let all God's angels worship him* appears in the Hebrew Bible. In two passages in the Septuagint (Ps. 97:7 and Dt. 32:43) there is a close approximation; the latter passage includes the conjunction 'and' (*kai*) which is present in the Greek original of our verse, but omitted in most English translations. Deuteronomy 32:43 is part of the song of Moses which looks ahead to the triumph of Israel's Lord over his adversaries. Our writer transfers the triumph from this son to the Messiah, whom he sees as the 'first-born.' The same Old Testament passage is quoted by Paul in Romans 15:10 where the Gentiles are called on to rejoice. It is worth noting that Paul introduces his quotation from Deuteronomy 32:43 with the same formula (*legei*) as used in Hebrews, all the more significant because it is not usual for the apostle to use the formula without stating the subject. Another interesting parallel between the two New Testament passages is the double use of the word *again (palin)* in successive quotations as if intended to heighten the close connection between them. The practice of heaping up scriptural quotations in the manner of both Paul and the writer to the Hebrews can be paralleled in Jewish literature. In the passage under comparison, Paul finds a link word in 'the Gentiles,' while Hebrews does so in the idea of *angels*. The statement that angels are commanded to worship the first-born suggests that this is their proper duty."

In all this Donald Gunthrie bypasses the most important explanation, given in the last verse of this chapter, about the relationship between angels and humans: "Are not all angels ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation?" The question form of the sentence is idiomatic in Hebrew. The answer to the question is always understood to be positive. If angels are servants of those who inherit salvation, that is humans, then angels rank lower in the order of creation than humans. This suggests that Christ's superiority to angels, as established in this chapter, is not on the basis of His divinity, which would be too obvious to even mention, but on the basis of His humanity. And, as Jesus said to His disciples: "I tell you the truth, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him."<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> John 13:16

The words “ministering spirits” are the rendering of the Greek *leitourgikos pneúmata*. The angels’ ministering refers here to their public service, as can be deduced from the word from which we have derived “liturgy.”

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes this about the words *those who will inherit salvation*: “It may seem strange that no definition of salvation is given, which suggests that the readers already knew what was meant. It was not even defined as Christian salvation, although that is clearly assumed. The gist of the whole letter is bent on explaining salvation in terms of offerings and what they achieve. Indeed, the writer echoes the theme almost immediately in the next passage. What is important at the moment is to observe that heavenly messengers are occupied in a ministry directed toward the salvation of men. The focus of God’s plan of salvation is on people, thought of as heirs. The idea of inheritance does not come out clearly in the RSV, although it is present in the Greek (*klēronomein*). *The New International Version* has ‘those who will inherit salvation.’ It is familiar in New Testament thought, for Christian salvation is thought of as something worth possessing. Believers are called heirs, even joint-heirs with Christ (cf. Rom. 8:17). The inheritance idea, moreover, recurs in Hebrews 3 and 4 (under the metaphor of rest), in Hebrews 9 (under the imagery of a will) and in Hebrews 11 (in relation to the promises of faith). It may justly be claimed that in this first chapter of Hebrews are met many of the dominant ideas which recur in the epistle. Although these are not expressed in a formal sense, they are nevertheless an effective introduction to the following discussion.”

#### **B. First Warning: Danger of Neglect 2:1-4**

*1 We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away.*

*2 For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment,*

*3 how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.*

*4 God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.*

This warning begins with the words: “Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard” (NKJV). The word “therefore” presupposes the answer to two questions:

- Because Jesus is more than all the prophets and the angels and the new revelation supersedes the old.
- Because it is God who speaks to us by His Son.

The warning is also reinforced by a comparison between God’s speaking to Moses, which produced the law, and the Gospel that is announced to us. According to the Jewish tradition, God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses through the intermediary of angels. In addressing the Sanhedrin, Stephen said: “You who have received the law that was put into effect through angels but have not obeyed it.”<sup>15</sup> People who trespass against the Ten Commandments are punished according to the gravity of their offense. We should not think, therefore, that people who reject the Gospel would go free.

The Gospel was not given to man through the intermediary of angels but by the Lord Jesus Himself. This in itself is proof that the Gospel is superior to the Old Testament law, because the One who brought it is not a servant but the Lord Himself.

The author of this epistle does not present himself as one of the apostles, who directly received the Gospel from the Lord, but as one who heard the message of salvation from the apostles. This leads us to conclude that Paul did not write this epistle.

The Gospel message was reinforced and validated by “signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit.” This is mentioned as a fact to reinforce the warning.

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<sup>15</sup> Acts 7:53

The Jews were in danger of drifting away. William Barclay, in his commentary *The LETTER to the HEBREWS*, writes: “In the first verse there may be an even more vivid picture than there is in the translation which we have used.” The Greek text reads literally: “Therefore ought [the] more earnest to give heed we to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip.” Explaining the Greek word *pararrhūeo*, “drift away,” the author states: [*pararrhūeo*] is a word of many meanings. It is used of something flowing or slipping past; it can be used of a ring that has slipped off the finger, of a particle of food that has slipped down the wrong way; of a topic that has slipped into the conversation....” He continues: “Both these words have also a nautical sense. [The first] can mean to moor a ship; and [the second] can be used of a ship which has been carelessly allowed to slip past a harbor or a haven because the mariner has forgotten to allow for the wind or the current or the tide. So, then, this first verse could be very vividly translated: ‘Therefore, we must the more eagerly anchor our lives to the things that we have been taught lest the ship of life drift past the harbor and be wrecked.’ It is a vivid picture of a ship drifting to destruction because the pilot sleeps.”<sup>16</sup>

Jews, who believed in Jesus Christ as their Messiah, saw themselves as people who were swimming upstream against a strong current. They suffered for their faith. It would be easy for them to give up their faith, return to the symbols of the Old Testament, and let themselves be carried away on the current. The point of this first warning is that the one who brings the Gospel message is not an angel or a human being but the Lord Himself. This makes the Gospel “*such a great salvation*.”

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, writes about *Lest haply we drift away*: “– and perish more surely and more terribly than those who sinned under the Old Testament. There in the Old Testament, when the word was spoken, with its threatening, it was steadfast; every transgression was punished. ‘*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?*’ The Gospel does not, as so many think, lessen—in fact, it increases our danger. It does not diminish, but will terribly intensify, the soreness of the punishment in those who neglect it. Oh, let us sound out the warning: It is not only positive enmity or open sin that will be punished. No, simply not taking ‘*earnest heed*’ and instead drifting away unconsciously with the current of worldliness and halfhearted religion while ‘neglecting’ to give the great salvation that supremacy, that entire devotion, that it claims – it is this that will render escape impossible.”

The giving of the law had been accompanied by miracles and supernatural signs. The splitting of the Red Sea was one of the great signs of God’s involvement in leading Israel out of Egypt and bringing her to the foot of Mount Sinai. The incarnation and resurrection of the Son of God were in themselves great miracles. The miracles Jesus performed during His life on earth left little doubt as to the veracity of His claims of being the Messiah. And the miracles performed by the apostles after Pentecost confirmed the truth of their message. This all confirmed the genuineness of the message they preached.

### **C. Christ Is Superior because of His Humanity                      2:5-18**

**5** *It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to come, about which we are speaking.*

**6** *But there is a place where someone has testified: "What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man that you care for him?"*

**7** *You made him a little lower than the angels; you crowned him with glory and honor*

**8** *and put everything under his feet." In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him.*

**9** *But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.*

**10** *In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.*

**11** *Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.*

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<sup>16</sup> The Greek words are: *prosecho* to hold the mind towards, i.e. pay attention to, be cautious about, apply oneself to, adhere to, and NT:3901 *pararrhūeo* to flow by, carelessly pass (miss) let slip.

**12 He says, "I will declare your name to my brothers; in the presence of the congregation I will sing your praises."**

**13 And again, "I will put my trust in him. And again he says, "Here am I, and the children God has given me."**

**14 Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death — that is, the devil—**

**15 and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.**

**16 For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants.**

**17 For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.**

**18 Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.**

This passage, more than any of the previous ones, emphasizes the superiority of man over angel, in spite of the fact that the phrase "You made him a little lower than the angels," suggests that man ranks lower than angels. A closer look will confirm this. The quotation is from Psalm 8. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: "The use of Psalm 8 is ... interesting, for this passage was never considered to be Messianic. The original context is man, yet not in his ordinary state but in his ideal state, indicated by the use of the title 'son of man.' At creation man was given dominion over the earth, but ever since the fall that authority to subject has been lacking. The psalm is only perfectly fulfilled, therefore, in the ideal Man, Jesus Christ, who alone has that authority. The writer sees a fulfillment of this psalm in a way that the Jews never foresaw. The same psalm is cited by Jesus (Mt. 21:16) and Paul (1 Cor. 15:27), both in a way which points to its fulfillment in Jesus Himself."

The main point the author of Hebrews wants to make here is that Christ received the original mandate given to man in Paradise to "fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground."<sup>17</sup> The fall into sin of the first human pair cancelled this mandate. In making Christ the recipient of that which Adam forfeited, the scope of authority is enlarged well beyond "all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas." At the end of time "every knee [shall] bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father."<sup>18</sup>

There is an apparent discrepancy between the text in the Psalms and the quotation in Hebrews, due to the fact that the quotation is taken from the Septuagint. The problem is in the Hebrew text which reads literally: "For you have made him lower a little than the angels." The Hebrew words used are *m<sup>a</sup>`aT mee-<sup>a</sup>lohiym*. This means "lower than (almost like) *elohim*." And *Elohim* can mean either "God," "angels," or "gods." *The New Living Translation* renders the verse: "Yet you made them only a little lower than God and crowned them with glory and honor." The verse in the original could indicate man's high position or his low rank. We believe that David looked at man in his fallen state, although sin is not mentioned in the context of Psalm 8. The psalm shows David's amazement that God gives to man such a high rank. The author of the Hebrew Epistle looks at man as saved and restored by God to his original position. To him, man ranks higher than the angels. When David says "a little lower than the angels," he thinks that this is amazingly high for man. When the writer of Hebrews says "a little lower than the angels," he considers man to be below his rank. To him it is a disgrace when man is lowered to below the angels. Jesus was made a little lower than the angels because he suffered death, not because He became man. This becomes clearer when we consider the footnote in *The New International Version*, indicating that "a little" can also mean "for a little while."

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, comments appropriately on this section: "Psalm 8 does not speak directly of the Messiah but rather of man and his destiny. It is, however, applied most justly to the Messiah,

<sup>17</sup> Gen. 1:28

<sup>18</sup> Phil. 2:10,11

because in Him the psalm and man find the fulfillment of what is promised. The psalmist first speaks of man's littleness and the wonder that God should notice him. "*What is man, that thou art mindful of him? and the son of man, that thou visitest him?*" (Psalm 8:4). He then points out how high the place is that man occupies. His nature is little less than divine. "*Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels, and hast crowned him with glory and honour*" (verse 5). And universal dominion is assigned to Him. "*Thou madest him to have dominion over the works of thy hands; thou hast put all things under his feet*" (verse 6). Our epistle points out how this promise, though not yet true of man, has received its fulfillment in Jesus. "*But now we see not yet all things put under him. But we behold him...crowned with glory and honour.*" What was true of man in promise we see fulfilled in Jesus. And what we see in Jesus will be made true of man. What wonderful thoughts the psalm suggests."

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, adds: "Man was meant to have dominion over everything but he has not. He is a creature who is frustrated by his circumstances, defeated by his temptations, girt about with his own weakness. He who should be free is bound; he who should be a king is a slave. As G. K. Chesterton said, whatever else is or is not true, this one thing is certain—man is not what he was meant to be. The writer to the Hebrews goes further on. Into this situation came Jesus Christ. He suffered and he died, and because he suffered and died, he entered into glory. And that suffering and death and glory are all for man, because he died to make man what he ought to be. He died to recreate man until he became what he was originally created to be. In this passage there are three basic ideas. (i) God created man, only a little less than himself, to have the mastery over all things. (ii) Man through his sin entered into defeat instead of mastery. (iii) Into this state of defeat came Jesus Christ in order that by his life and death and glory he might make man what he was meant to be. We may put it another way. The writer to the Hebrews shows us three things (i) He shows us *the ideal of what man should be* – kin to God and master of the universe. (ii) He shows us *the actual state of man*—the frustration instead of the mastery, the failure instead of the glory. (iii) He shows us *how the actual can be changed into the ideal through Christ*. The writer to the Hebrews sees in Christ the One, who by his sufferings and his glory can make man what he was meant to be and what, without him, he could never be."

V.9 has been, throughout the ages, subject to much discussion and different interpretations. The Greek text reads literally: "But a little than the angels was made lower we see Jesus, for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that by the grace of God for man he should taste death." It is obvious that it take some efforts of reconstruction to make an English sentence out of the above. Some examples of different translations show how complicated this can be.

- *The New King James Version* reads: "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone."

- *The updated New American Standard*: "But we do see Him who was made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, so that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone."

- *The Revised Standard Version*: "But we see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for every one."

- *The Living Bible*: "but we do see Jesus—who for awhile was a little lower than the angels—crowned now by God with glory and honor because he suffered death for us. Yes, because of God's great kindness, Jesus tasted death for everyone in all the world."

- *The New Living Translation*: "What we do see is Jesus, who was given a position 'a little lower than the angels'; and because he suffered death for us, he is now 'crowned with glory and honor.' Yes, by God's grace, Jesus tasted death for everyone."

- *Good News Bible*: "But we do see Jesus, who for a little while was made lower than the angels, so that through God's grace he should die for everyone. We see him now crowned with glory and honor because of the death he suffered."

- *The Amplified Bible*: “But we are able to see Jesus, Who was ranked lower than the angels for a little while, crowned with glory and honor because of His having suffered death, in order that by the grace (unmerited favor) of God (to us sinners) He might experience death for every individual person.”

The main point seems to be that Jesus ranked below the angels for a little while because of the death to which He subjected Himself. The Greek word used is *elattoo*, which is derived from a word meaning “smaller.” It can be translated “less in rank.” The only other place in Scripture where this word is found is in the verse in which John the Baptist says: “He must become greater; I must *become less*.”<sup>19</sup> The problem is not so much in the Greek text, but rather in the original Hebrew text of Psalm 8. It is whether we translate *m<sup>a</sup>’aT mee-<sup>a</sup>lohiym* as “You made him a little lower than the heavenly beings,” or “You made him almost like God.” Yet, there is a problem in the Greek text to determine whether the clause “because he suffered death” modifies Jesus’ being made lower than the angels or His being crowned with glory and honor. In a way it modifies both, but that is impossible to maintain in an English sentence, without repeating the clause. What I mean is, Jesus did not rank below the angels because He had become man. As man He ranks higher than the angels. It was His death experience that made Him lower than the angels. And the fact that He voluntarily underwent death, made Him qualify for the highest honor in heaven and on earth.

There is another problem in vv.8 and 9. The writer states: “In putting everything under him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we see Jesus...” The fact that at present we do not see everything subject to the rule of man is very obvious. David stated: “you put everything under his feet: all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the seas.” All of nature does not obey man at present. If man is king of the beast, the wild boar, the lion, or the grizzly bear ought to come running toward man when called. If they do with creation in its present condition, man better run for his life! We have no problem of interpretation with that part of the text.

At present, Jesus’ condition of glory and honor is not visible to the naked eye. It takes faith and surrender of life to come to this discovery and that is not the present condition of most of mankind. Donald Gunthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on this: “There is a curious mixture of seeing and not seeing in this epistle. The writer acknowledges some things which are not seen (cf. 2:8; 11:1). He presents a firm basis for present faith in what can now be seen, hence the importance of the words, *But we see Jesus*. Moreover, in order to leave no doubt about the character of the one seen he combines two ideas which appear at first to be opposite: *the suffering of death* and *crowned with glory and honor*. The specific idea of the suffering of Jesus comes into the epistle here for the first time, although it is indirectly implied in the reference to the purification of sins in 1:3. Suffering is to be a dominant theme throughout the letter. Indeed, the present combination of suffering and glory supplies the key to the writer’s understanding of the Christian faith. The suffering of death is a major problem to all men, but is a particular problem for the Son of God unless some explanation of it can be given. The suffering itself belongs to a less exalted status than that of the angles, hence the statement applied to Jesus, *who for a little while was made lower than the angels* (which could also be rendered ‘a little’ instead of ‘a little while’). This present section of the letter is complementary to the first section. The glory and honor bestowed on Jesus is the direct result of suffering. The combination between the two ideas, which is alien to natural thought, is nevertheless central in the New Testament. It is not only Jesus himself who gains glory through suffering, but all his followers (cf. Rom 6:8ff.; 2 Tim. 2:11-12). The problem of the passion of Jesus becomes transformed into a path to glory once it is recognized that the God who bestows the glory is the one who permits the suffering.”

It appears that it is the glorification that links Jesus’ death to us. Jesus is “now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone.” It takes some effort to dig into the profound implications of this statement. It takes His glory combined with the grace of God that made Jesus drink this bitter cup of death on our behalf. It sounds almost as if Jesus keeps on having the taste of death in His mouth throughout eternity. So that at the moment we arrive on the other shore, He can say to us, as He said to John: “Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”<sup>20</sup>

<sup>19</sup> John 3:30

<sup>20</sup> Rev. 1:17,18



*The New International Version's* rendering in v.10 "it was fitting" is the translation of the Greek word *prepo*, which has the primary meaning of "to be conspicuous," or "to be suitable," or "proper." It is as if the writer wants to say that the need for Christ's suffering is so obvious that it needs no further comment. There are, however, several points in his statement that are not obvious at all. As the Second Person of the Trinity, Jesus Christ needed no perfection; He was perfect God to begin with. The reference, therefore, is, obviously, to His humanity. As a member of the human race, Jesus came into this world like Adam, without sin, but also without maturity. Adam and Eve were created in the image of God, but when in Paradise they were not ready to share in God's holiness. Had they eaten the fruit from the tree of life, instead of from the tree of knowledge, they would have taken the first step in the direction of the ultimate goal God had for their lives. Jesus came into this world as a baby. He had to grow up and "in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."<sup>21</sup> And since He came to be the representative of mankind, He had to deal with the sinful condition of mankind, which needed atonement. That made the death on the cross "fitting." As the Lamb of God that takes away the sin of the world, His suffering was "fitting."

But He also came to be the high priest of those who would accept His sacrifice as payment for their sins. Since "we must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,"<sup>22</sup> it was "fitting" that He would share in our experience in order for Him to identify with us and for us with Him.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: "This refers to what was said in the preceding verse, of Christ having been crowned with glory on account of his suffering of death, and of his tasting death for all. That he should attain through human suffering even unto death to his own perfected state of glory, as being the Leader of human sons whom the one Father of all would bring to glory, was a design worthy of him for whom and through whom are all things — suitable to what we conceive of him and of his way of working. The word *eprepe* is used in the same sense not infrequently in the LXX. It is probably used here with some view to "the offence of the cross," which might still linger in the minds of some of the Hebrew Christians. In the argument that follows, supported still by reference to Old Testament anticipations, the writer not only meets possible objections lingering in the Hebrew mind, but also carries on and completes the view of the Son which it is his purpose to inculcate, leading up (as aforesaid) to the final position of his being the High Priest of humanity."

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, adds: "It must be remembered that to Jews the idea of a suffering Messiah was abhorrent and the Christian claim that it was fitting must be viewed against this background. Moreover, from the point of view of man, with his sense of need, it was highly fitting that the grace of God should be extended towards him, whatever the reason for the method used. Some may feel that to judge what is fitting is too subjective a business, but this is not so with God, who can never do anything unworthy or inappropriate. Whatever the reason for the cross, there is no doubt that it is most revealing of the nature of God. It is in this sense that it was fitting."

It was "fitting" in that it corresponded to the character of God, "for whom and through whom everything exists." There can be no doubt about the appropriateness of Jesus' suffering and death, because there can be no doubt about the character of God. He is the only reason for the existence of all and He is perfect. If God were not perfect, life could not have been created and sustained, let alone, redeemed.

Jesus is given the title "the author of their salvation." The Greek word used is *archegos*, which derived from the words *archè*, "commencement" and *ago*, "to lead." *The King James Version* calls Him: "the captain of their salvation." *The Living Bible*: "a perfect Leader."

There is more in v.10 than only the surprise of the word "fitting." The phrases "In bringing many sons to glory" and "God, for whom and through whom everything exists," are glorious statements, which, although used as auxiliaries, deserve close attention. The ultimate goal of salvation of man is the glory of God and man's sharing in it. When Satan fell into sin and dragged God's creation with him, his intent was God's ruin, not His glory. The mystery of the fall is that it not only achieves glory for fallen man, but it even increases God's glory. Satan's fall did not cancel God's plan to share His glory with His creation, it promoted it!

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<sup>21</sup> Luke 2:52

<sup>22</sup> Acts 14:22

The phrase “God, for whom and through whom everything exists” states that God is the meaning of life. In the words of David: “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is your name in all the earth! You have set your glory above the heavens. From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies, to silence the foe and the avenger.”<sup>23</sup> And: “The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies proclaim the work of his hands.”<sup>24</sup> “Be exalted, O God, above the heavens; let your glory be over all the earth.”<sup>25</sup> “Praise be to his glorious name forever; may the whole earth be filled with his glory. Amen and Amen.”<sup>26</sup> “The nations will fear the name of the Lord, all the kings of the earth will revere your glory.”<sup>27</sup> “May all the kings of the earth praise you, O Lord, when they hear the words of your mouth. May they sing of the ways of the Lord, for the glory of the Lord is great.”<sup>28</sup>

The Greek of v.11 reads literally: “For both he that sanctifies and they who are sanctified [are] all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren.” The word “family” used by *The New International Version* is not in the Greek text. Some Bible scholars maintain that the verb “sanctify” should be interpreted in the sense of “to make expiation.” *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, therefore, states: “He that sanctifies is he that makes atonement; and they who are sanctified are they who receive that atonement, and, being reconciled unto God, become his children by adoption, through grace.”

*Barnes’ Notes* comments: “The word ‘sanctify’ is a general term, meaning to make holy or pure; to consecrate, set apart, devote to God; to regard as holy, or to hallow. Applied to the Savior here, it may be used in this general sense—that he consecrated, or devoted himself to God—as eminently ‘the consecrated’ or ‘holy one’ - the Messiah ...; applied to his people, it may mean that they in like manner were the consecrated, the holy, the pure, on earth. There is a richness and fullness in the word when so understood which there is not when it is limited to the idea of expiation; and it seems to me that it is to be taken in its richest and fullest sense, and that the meaning is, ‘the great consecrated Messiah—the Holy One of God—and his consecrated and holy followers, are all of one.’”

The Greek verb used is *hagiazō*, which means “to make holy,” “to purify,” or “to consecrate.” The same word is used in the opening of the Lord’s Prayer: “Our Father in heaven, *hallowed* be your name.”<sup>29</sup> In His prayer for the disciples, Jesus uses the word three times, saying: “*Sanctify* them by the truth; your word is truth. For them I *sanctify* myself, that they too may be truly *sanctified*.”<sup>30</sup> It is obvious that, although atonement is part of the process of sanctification, it is not all of it. The life that has been atoned for by Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross must also be transformed by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. It is obvious that it is Jesus who does the sanctifying and we are the ones who are being sanctified. The point of the phrase, however, is that there is a specific unity between Him and us, caused by the incarnation. The Second Person of the Trinity became a human being; God became one of our species. He was born on the planet on which the human race lives. But now, He is in heaven and we are on earth. In declaring His oneness with the earthlings for whom He died, He draws us up into heaven. It is as if the Son of Man states to the citizens of heaven that He makes no effort to hide His human background. We find an illustration of this in the life of David, who came from rags to riches. He was the shepherd boy who became king. That makes all shepherd boys pretenders to the throne.

In order to prove this, the author of Hebrews uses three Old Testament quotations. The first one is from the psalm that begins with the words: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”<sup>31</sup> obviously referring to the atonement made at the crucifixion. The following words “I will declare your name to my brothers; in the congregation I will praise you” show the fruit of this sacrifice. The next two quotations are both from Isaiah chapter eight. The complete text in Isaiah reads: “I will wait for the Lord, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him. Here am I, and the children the Lord has given

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<sup>23</sup> Ps. 8:1,2

<sup>24</sup> Ps. 19:1

<sup>25</sup> Ps. 57:5

<sup>26</sup> Ps. 72:19

<sup>27</sup> Ps. 102:15

<sup>28</sup> Ps. 138:4,5

<sup>29</sup> Matt. 6:9

<sup>30</sup> John 17:17,19

<sup>31</sup> Ps. 22:1

me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion.”<sup>32</sup> In these last two quotations, there is the element of faith as well as a testimony for God in a hostile world.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments: “The idea expressed here by the verb *hagiazō*, to sanctify, may be determined by comparison with ... Hebrews 9:13, 14; 10:14, 29; and 13:12 ... It is not the idea, to us most familiar, of moral sanctification through the Holy Spirit, but that of the redeemed being brought into a new relation to God, hallowed for ‘glory,’ through redemption; whence all Christians are called *hagioi* [holy ones]. *Hagiein* is the equivalent in the LXX. of the Hebrew *qadash*, which is applied to the hallowing of both the sacrifices and the people to God’s service. As an atoning sacrifice, Christ thus hallowed himself (... John 17:19), that thus he might hallow the ‘many sons.’ *Ex enos* [out of one] must certainly be taken as referring to God, not (as some take it) to Abraham or Adam. For the necessity of the Son taking part of *flesh and blood* in order to accomplish the redemption is not introduced till ver. 14. So far the common fatherhood spoken of has been that of him ‘for whom are all things and by whom are all things,’ who, ‘in bringing many *sons* to glory,’ has perfected ‘the Captain of their salvation.’ The idea is that it was meet that the Captain should be perfected through human sufferings, *since* both he and the ‘many sons’ are of one Divine Father; in their relation of sonship (with whatever difference of manner and degree) they are associated together. Be it observed, however, that it is not the *original* relation to God of the ‘Sanctifier’ and the ‘sanctified,’ but their relation to him in the redemption, that is denoted by *ex enos*. The common sonship does not consist in this, that *he* is Son by eternal generation and *they* by creation. It has been seen above that the term *huios* [son] is not applied to Christ in this Epistle with reference to his eternal Being, but to his incarnation; and the human ‘sons’ are not regarded as such till made so by redemption. *Ho hagiazon*, [he who sanctifies] and *hoi hagiazomenoi* [they who are sanctified] rule the sense of *ex enos* [out of one]. The view is that the one Father sent the Son into the world to be the Firstborn of many sons. The expression, frequent in the Pentateuch, ‘I am he that sanctifies,’ may be cited in illustration of the meaning of the passage. *For which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren; i.e.* in the Messianic utterances of the Old Testament, to which, in accordance with the plan and purpose of the Epistle, reference is again made for proof. The point of the quotations that follow (vers. 12, 13) is that the Messiah, notwithstanding the position above the angels, shown above to be assigned to him, is represented also as associating himself with men as brethren, in dependence on one heavenly Father.”

However deep one tries to dig into the verse, one has the impression that the mine of truth and beauty has not been exhausted. God identified Himself with man, with sinful man, in order that man will be able to identify himself with the glory of God. The purpose of it all, as v.10 states, is to bring as many sons to glory as is possible.

Vv.14-18 recapitulate the process by which the goal is achieved. Here again we are confronted with a wealth of truth that defies exhaustion. The main topic seems to be death as the punishment for sin. God had told Adam: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”<sup>33</sup> Satan is identified as the one who holds the power of death. By sinning, Adam fell victim to the devil’s power, which means that not only he would die physically, that is his body would die, but also that spiritually and emotionally he would be kept in the power death would have over him. Sin made man a slave of death, that is a slave of the devil. The key of power Satan used in exercising his dominion is fear.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: “The writer reflects on the incarnation and mission of Jesus. His becoming man was necessary because his ‘children’ were *flesh and blood*, a somewhat unexpected way of putting it. Nevertheless the idea is clear enough. It is worth noting that in the Greek text the order is blood and flesh. It has been suggested that ‘blood’ alludes to Christ’s shedding of blood, which is then given as the reason for his becoming flesh, *i.e.* the atonement required his incarnation. To deliver man, Jesus Christ had to share his nature. We are in the presence of a mystery here. The fact that *he himself partook of the same nature* sums up the perfect humanity of Jesus. When this statement is set over against the statement in chapter 1 about the divine Sonship of Jesus, the mystery deepens. His superiority to angels is set against his equality with man. There can never be a wholly satisfactory explanation of these two facets of his nature, because man has no suitable frame of reference in which to consider it. There are no human analogies. The writer is not concerned with theological debate, but with showing how closely Jesus Christ is identified

<sup>32</sup> Isa. 8:17,18

<sup>33</sup> Gen. 2:17

with his people. It is significant that a different verb (*meteschen*) is used to describe what Jesus shared from that used (*kekoinōnēken*) to describe what the children shared. Although there is no essential difference in meaning, the change of tense from perfect to aorist suggests that Christ's taking on human nature is a specific act in time; he became what he was not before (*i.e.* a man).

Once again *death* is mentioned. A statement is made that *through death he might destroy him who has the power of death*, which plainly brings out the powerful effect of Christ's death compared with the deaths of all other men. In Scripture death is the result of sin. The Genesis story bears this out. It is supported in the Pauline epistles (*cf.* Rom. 5:12). It is basic to the New Testament teaching on the death and resurrection of Christ. Because of Christ's resurrection, death has now lost its 'sting,' which shows that it possessed a sting (1 Cor. 15:55), identified by Paul as 'sin.' It is no wonder that Hebrews speaks of 'fear of death.' It is, therefore, paradoxical that Christ used death as a means of destroying the maliciousness of death. But the difference between his death and all others lies in the fact of his sinlessness. Death for him was caused by other men's sins. It is difficult to imagine the complete transformation which came to the minds of the early disciples in assessing death when they came to explain why Jesus died. The idea that the devil has *the power of death* is in complete agreement with other New Testament passages regarding his power. Death is the worst enemy of man, but many other human woes are seen to proceed from the same origin (*e.g.* the woman with the bent back is said to have been bound by Satan, Lk. 13:16). The power thus exercised is not absolute and applies only to man in his unredeemed state, as is clear from the fact that the death of Christ has brought deliverance to man and destruction to the devil. Both are potential rather than actual, for the devil is still active and most men still fear death. Nevertheless, the death and resurrection of Jesus have demonstrated once and for all that the devil is no longer master of death. For a variation of this victory theme, *cf.* Colossians 2:15. In this epistle salvation involves more than release from sin, for it includes complete deliverance from the bondage of the devil."

We do not read here how the death of Jesus resulted in victory over death. The key to understanding this can probably be found in a statement Jesus once made about hell, as being the place "where their worm does not die, and the fire is not quenched."<sup>34</sup> The Greek word used there for "hell" is *Gehenna*, which was the place where the city of Jerusalem dumped the garbage in the valley of Hinnom. It was a place of decomposition caused by two factors, fire and worm. In using this image of *Gehenna* as a place of eternal punishment, Jesus suggests that the fire is the external factor that makes life in hell unbearable, because of the internal corruption in man's heart exemplified by the "worm." When Satan claimed his victims for the fires of hell, he could do this on the basis of their sinful nature. When Jesus died on the cross, Satan may have thought he had made the catch of his life. But when he claimed his Victim, it became clear that the fire did not affect the man Jesus, because He had no sinful nature. The fire did not affect Him because the worm was absent. As the jailor tried to put his prisoner in His cell, the prisoner overpowered the jailor, took his keys and left the prison, which is the resurrection. Therefore Jesus could say to John: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."<sup>35</sup>

The sway Satan holds over human beings is the fear of death. Totalitarian governments have used this human fear to enslave their subjects. In his trilogy, *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn tells the story of an old lady who had helped a priest escape the clutches of the Soviet Secret Police (KGB). Her interrogator placed a revolver on the desk, telling her that if she did not reveal the whereabouts of the priest, there were eight ounces of lead in the gun that could be used to kill her. She declared that she was not afraid to die and would consequently not provide the information. The KGB agent finally had to let her go. The author of Hebrews states that Jesus' death on our behalf has freed us from the fear of death.

Jesus' death did not benefit angels. It was not for their salvation that He died, but for the deliverance of "Abraham's descendants." It sounds as if redemption is limited to the Jews, but, as the Apostle Paul declares: "Therefore, the promise comes by faith, so that it may be by grace and may be guaranteed to all Abraham's offspring — not only to those who are of the law but also to those who are of the faith of Abraham. He is the father of us all. As it is written: 'I have made you a father of many nations.' He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed — the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were."<sup>36</sup> And: "Understand, then, that those who believe are children of Abraham.

<sup>34</sup> Mark 9:48

<sup>35</sup> Rev. 1:18

<sup>36</sup> Rom. 4:16,17

The Scripture foresaw that God would justify the Gentiles by faith, and announced the gospel in advance to Abraham: ‘All nations will be blessed through you.’ So those who have faith are blessed along with Abraham, the man of faith.”<sup>37</sup>

It is at this point that Jesus is introduced to us as our High Priest in heaven. Having made atonement in His own body, He now pleads our cause before the Father. He does this knowingly, fully understanding our plight as we travel the desert of life on earth, because He traveled the same road Himself. Since it was His death on the cross and subsequent resurrection on earth that provided us with salvation and eternal life, His high-priestly intercession in heaven provides us with the needed safeguard for our earthly pilgrimage. His intercession is particularly relevant because of the trials and temptations that face us in everyday life. Jesus’ prayer for us before the Father makes it possible for us to be more than conquerors in every situation in life. Ultimately, Jesus’ prayer will prevail for us in the hour of death also. We will be able to face death with the same defiance the Apostle Paul demonstrated when he wrote: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>38</sup>

Andrew Murray in *The Holiest of All*, states about Jesus’ ministry as High Priest: “The work of our High Priest does not only consist in His atonement, nor even in the advocacy and intercession that is the fruit of that atonement. Above all, as the result of all these, His work consists in that personal charge of our spiritual life that He takes and in that never-ceasing succor that He is able to give in every temptation. This is the greatest and most blessed part of His work in bringing us to God; that, as the Leader in the path of suffering and perfection, He inspires us with His own dispositions and, by the mighty operation of His Spirit within us, gives us His help in every time of need. The only thing we need is to know and trust Him fully. To know Him as our High Priest who not only has opened a way to God for us to walk in and not only prays for us in heaven, but who also undertakes to keep us so in fellowship with Himself, under the covering of His power, and in the experience of His full redemption that temptation can never conquer us. His divinity secures to us His unfailing and never-ceasing presence. His humanity assures us of His sympathy and compassion. More ever-present and more mighty than the temptation, His unfailing love is always near to give the victory. He can and will do it. Our High Priest is a living, faithful helper: Let us trust Him. Salvation is not a thing He gives us apart from Himself. Full salvation is nothing but Jesus Himself, most compassionately, and most faithfully watching over us in daily life, and most really and fully giving and living His life in us. The abiding, indwelling presence of Jesus, able to succor, is the true secret of the Christ life. Faith will lead us into the experience that Jesus is and does all that is said of Him.”

Although Satan is not mentioned in this context, it is his existence and presence that necessitates the ministry of our High Priest. Without him there would be no temptation to overcome. There would even be no need for a Gospel testimony in this world, because everybody would flock to the fountain of salvation without being urged to do so.

Without the presence of the enemy the Holy Spirit would have no need to minister in and through us in this world. As it is, His presence is of the utmost importance. On the eve of His crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples: “When the Counselor comes, whom I will send to you from the Father, the Spirit of truth who goes out from the Father, he will testify about me. And you also must testify, for you have been with me from the beginning.”<sup>39</sup> As our High Priest, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit to us. His coming is the first fruit of His high-priestly intercession.

### ***III. The Superiority of Christ over Moses 3:1—4:13***

#### **A. Christ Is Superior to Moses in His Work 3:1-4**

***1 Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess.***

***2 He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God’s house.***

<sup>37</sup> Gal. 3:7-9

<sup>38</sup> I Cor. 15:54-57

<sup>39</sup> John 15:26,27

**3 Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself.**

**4 For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything.**

Before entering into the arguments that form the topic of this section, we are struck by the way the writer addresses his audience: “holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling.” The Greek text uses the expression “partakers of the heavenly calling.” Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on these words: “There may at first sight seem very little connection between the Moses theme and the theme of chapter 2. Nevertheless, the writer intended to connect the two ideas for he begins with *Therefore, holy brethren*, which follows on from his statement about Jesus as high priest. There is also a sequence in the mention of ‘brethren’ in 2:11, its repetition in 2:12, 17 and the description of the readers by the same word here. Twice more the same description is used (10:19 and 13:22), but only here is the adjective ‘holy’ added. It is surprising in this context. It shows at once both familiarity and respect. It is a combination which Christians would do well to cherish. Indeed there are other things or persons described in this epistle as holy (*cf.* the many instances of the Holy Spirit being mentioned, the holy place, the holy sanctuary, the holy of holies). The writer is not using the word lightly of the brethren. It is, of course, used ideally, as it is when it becomes a noun for describing believers (the saints), as in 13:24. This description of the brethren is then followed by a definition to exclude all possibility of confusion. They are the people *who share in a heavenly call*. This in fact introduces another characteristic theme of this letter, the word ‘heavenly.’ The writer speaks also of the heavenly gift (6:40), the heavenly sanctuary (8:5), heavenly things (9:23), the heavenly country (11:16) and the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22). In all cases the ‘heavenly’ is contrasted with the earthly, and in all cases the heavenly is the superior, the real compared with the shadow. If the heavenly call is understood in the same sense, it must mean a vocation which has a spiritual and not a material direction. This word for ‘call’ (*klēsis*) is especially characteristic of the apostle Paul who uses it nine times. Otherwise it occurs only in 2 Peter 1:10. There is no support for the view that the call comes from within a man, for in all cases the call comes from God. Man’s part is to become a co-operator by responding to it. The idea of sharing recurs in 3:14 where Christians are said to be ‘sharers of Christ.’ The phrase that the writer uses in the present context is pregnant with meaning. To share in a heavenly call is to become closely identified with the caller, *i.e.* God. No wonder such people are called ‘holy.’ The New Testament implies that this is the norm for Christians. They are a called out people.”

#### **B. Christ Is Superior to Moses in His Person**

**3:5-6**

**5 Moses was faithful as a servant in all God’s house, testifying to what would be said in the future.**

**6 But Christ is faithful as a son over God’s house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.**

With these verses the author of Hebrews begins a comparison between the old covenant and the new, eternal covenant. The only logical way in which this can be done is to place Jesus next to Moses. For a Jew no one could stand in the shadow of Moses; he was unique to the point where the whole Old Testament could be identified as “Moses and the Prophets.”<sup>40</sup> William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, observes: “Let us remember the conviction with which the writer to the Hebrews starts. The basis of his thought is that supreme revelation of God comes through Jesus Christ and that only through him has a man real access to God. He began by proving that Jesus was superior to the prophets; he went on to prove that Jesus was superior to the angels; and now he proceeds to prove that Jesus is superior to Moses. It might at first sight seem that this is an anticlimax. But it was not so for a Jew. For him Moses held a place which was utterly unique. He was the man with whom God had spoken face to face as a man speaks with his friend. He was the direct recipient of the Ten Commandments, the very Law of God. For a Jew the step that the writer to the Hebrews takes is the logical and inevitable step in the argument. He has proved that Jesus is greater than the angels; now he must prove that he is greater than Moses who was greater than the angels.”

The key words in the argument are in the answer God gave to some Israelites who questioned Moses authority during the desert crossing. God said to them: “Listen to my words: ‘When a prophet of the Lord is among you, I reveal myself to him in visions, I speak to him in dreams. But this is not true of my servant

<sup>40</sup> Luke 16:29

Moses; he is *faithful* in all my house.”<sup>41</sup> The Hebrew word used is *‘aman*, which has a variety of meaning, but which, in the context can be rendered “trustworthy.” The first time the word is used is in the verse: “Abram *believed* the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness.”<sup>42</sup> Moses was in God’s house what Joseph was in the house of Potiphar.<sup>43</sup>

It is obvious that this passage and the following continue to emphasize Jesus’ human nature. A comparison with Moses would be impossible if Jesus were portrayed here as the Second Person of the Trinity. The point of comparison is the way Moses and Jesus responded to the task God had given them to fulfill on earth. The Greek word used in this context is *pistos*, “trustworthy.” The first time that word is used in the New Testament is, appropriately, in the verse “Who then is the *faithful* and wise servant, whom the master has put in charge of the servants in his household to give them their food at the proper time?”<sup>44</sup>

There are several questions that must be answered in order to understand the details of this comparison. Both Moses and Jesus are credited with being faithful in the task given to them by God, the Father. The qualification “faithful” is only relevant if both Moses and Jesus are seen as servants. But here is where the comparison breaks down because Jesus Christ is seen as the builder and the master of the house of God, not as the servant. It is true that Jesus identified Himself to the disciples as master. He said to His disciples: “You call me ‘Teacher’ and ‘Lord,’ and rightly so, for that is what I am.”<sup>45</sup> At the same time He declared: “The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>46</sup> Our text will only make sense if we keep these two facets of Jesus’ coming into this world in mind. It is the mystery of the Lord of the universe who became a human being and as such the servant of mankind. It was the Lord of glory who washed the feet of the disciples.

Another point that needs clarification in the comparison is “the house.” Moses served in God’s house, as did Jesus. The house Moses served in was the nation of Israel; Jesus’ house includes Israel, the church and, ultimately the whole world.

*The Pulpit Commentary* states: “The identification increases the difficulty of understanding the relevance to the argument of ver. 4, of which more will be said presently. Taking, then, *ho kataskeuásas* (the builder) to denote God the Father, we may state the argument thus: God is the Builder, or Founder, of his own house. Christ has been already shown to be his Son, associated with him in dignity and power, and, as such, Lord over his Father’s house. Moses, on the other hand, as appears from ... Numbers 12:7, was but a servant in God’s house. As, then, the Founder is to the house, so is the Son and Lord to a servant in it; the Son partaking of the glory of the Founder; the servant only of that of the house in which he serves. According to this view of the argument, the premises have been established, and the conclusion follows; the relation of Christ to the Builder of the house has been set forth in the preceding chapter, and may be now assumed; that of Moses is sufficiently shown by the quotation from the Pentateuch. Thus also vers. 5 and 6 are found to carry out naturally the idea here introduced, instead of unexpectedly starting a different one.” As the Son, Jesus is the owner of the house His Father built. That is where the comparison between Jesus and Moses breaks down, putting Jesus above Moses.

The final surprise in the argument is that the author identifies his readers with the “house.” He can do this, first of all, because the Greek word *oikos*, “house,” as in many languages, stands both for a building and a family. We read in Luke’s Gospel: “And in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee, named Nazareth, to a virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the *house* of David; and the virgin’s name was Mary.”<sup>47</sup> Our belonging to the house of Jesus, however, is conditional. We will be part of the house “if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.” The Greek text reads literally: “If we hold fast [firm unto the end] the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope.” For some reason the more modern translations have taken “rejoicing” out of the text, replacing it by “boasting,”

<sup>41</sup> Num. 12:6,7

<sup>42</sup> Gen. 15:6

<sup>43</sup> See Gen. 39:4,5.

<sup>44</sup> Matt. 24:45

<sup>45</sup> John 13:13

<sup>46</sup> Matt. 20:28

<sup>47</sup> Luke 1:26,27 (KJV)

or “confident.” *The Living Bible* has: “If we keep up our courage firm to the end, and our joy and our trust in the Lord.”

The question is how much human effort is needed in order to hold on to our courage and hope? Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, writes: “It is in this that so many fail. When first they found peace, they learned that they were saved by faith. They understood that pardon, acceptance, peace, and life all come by faith alone. But they did not understand that we can stand only by faith; that we must always walk by faith; that ever and increasingly we must live by faith; and that every day and every hour nothing can help us but a clear, definite, habitual faith in God’s power and working as the only possibility of growth and progress. They sought to hold fast to the light and the blessing and the joy they had found; they knew not that it was their boldness of faith, the glorying of their hope, the beginning of their confidence—they knew not that it was this that they needed to hold fast firm to the end. And even when they learned something of the need of faith and hope, they did not know how indispensable the boldness of faith and the glorying of hope were. No one can conquer without the spirit of a conqueror. The powers of sin and Satan, of the world and the flesh, are so great that only he who is bold and glories in his hope upon what God will do will have strength to resist them. And only he who has learned to be bold with God, and to glory in Him, can be bold to face the enemy. It is when faith becomes a joy, and hope is a glorying in God, that we can be more than conquerors.”

The most important lesson we can learn in spiritual life is that unless God keeps us from stumbling,<sup>48</sup> we will stumble. We must learn to pray: “Lord, if you don’t do it in my life, it won’t be done. So, please keep me from trying by myself; help me to trust you for it.”

### **C. Second Warning: Danger of Unbelief      3:7—4:13**

*7 So, as the Holy Spirit says: "Today, if you hear his voice,*

*8 do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert,*

*9 where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.*

*10 That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways.'*

*11 So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'"*

*12 See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God.*

*13 But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.*

*14 We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first.*

*15 As has just been said: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion."*

*16 Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?*

*17 And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert?*

*18 And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed?*

*19 So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.*

*4:1 Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it.*

*2 For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*

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<sup>48</sup> Jude v.24



*3 Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said, "So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'" And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world.*

*4 For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: "And on the seventh day God rested from all his work."*

*5 And again in the passage above he says, "They shall never enter my rest."*

*6 It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience.*

*7 Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts."*

*8 For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.*

*9 There remains, then, a Sabbath — rest for the people of God;*

*10 for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his.*

*11 Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.*

*12 For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.*

*13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.*

The core of the message in this section is a quotation from Psalm 95:7-11. Part of that psalm is based on the events that took place at "Massah and Meribah," reported in Exodus 17:1-7 and Numbers 20:2-13. The word *Massah* means "testing" and *Meribah* means "provocation." God tested the faith of the Israelites and the whole nation miserably failed the test, including Moses and Aaron who were prevented from entering the Promised Land because of their disobedience.

The author of Hebrews intends to prove that the land of Canaan was an image of a spiritual reality which is found in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He does this by emphasizing two points made in Ps. 95, "Today," (cf. Ps. 95:7b and Heb. 3:13; 4:7,8) and "My rest" (cf. Ps. 95:11 and Heb. 4:1 ff.).

The psalm was written approximately five hundred years after Israel had entered Canaan. The author of Hebrews reckons that, if the Israelites are admonished to enter into God's rest five hundred years after they entered the land of Canaan, Canaan, obviously, is not the real promised rest but an image of a spiritual reality. The real rest is not an earthly but a spiritual rest. This is the meaning of the word "My rest." The rest is not a human cessation of activity but a rest of God. The rest of Canaan is linked to God's Sabbath rest which was inaugurated after the completion of God's creation. The word "rest" here implies the achievement of God's purpose.

The Greek word used is *katapausis*, meaning "reposing down," which in Hebrew is seen as "a place of rest," or "an abode." The word is particular to The Epistle to the Hebrews in which it occurs eight times. Stephen uses it once in a quotation from Isaiah: "'Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house will you build for me?' says the Lord. 'Or where will my *resting place* be?'"<sup>49</sup> The main idea in this word is that it stands for a place, rather than an experience. The word is different from the one used in Jesus' invitation: "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will *give you rest*,"<sup>50</sup> where the Greek word *anapano*, "to repose," or "to refresh" is used.

The place of rest for the New Testament believer is in Jesus Christ. That is what the author of Hebrews wants to impress upon his readers. David expressed this beautifully in one of his psalms: "My soul finds rest in God alone; my salvation comes from him. Find rest, O my soul, in God alone; my hope comes from

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<sup>49</sup> Isa. 66:1,2; Acts 7:49

<sup>50</sup> Matt. 11:28

him.”<sup>51</sup> The rest of God in Jesus Christ into which we are invited to enter is the supernatural experience of being filled by the Holy Spirit, to whom we give control of our daily life.

How this works out in practice is clear from the rest of Jesus’ invitation: “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. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”<sup>52</sup> It consists in the exchange of our yoke for the yoke of Christ. In the reference to gentleness and humility, we find the key to most of our problems, which are caused by pride and harshness.

In the reference to the rebellion in the desert the issue was drinking water. In both cases it appeared that there was no water. As it turned out, however, there was water inside a rock, which became available when Moses struck the rock with his staff. In the second instance Moses disobeyed God’s command by striking the rock instead of speaking to it. The Apostle Paul also draws a spiritual application from these incidents in writing to the Corinthians: “They all ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink; for they drank from the spiritual rock that accompanied them, and that rock was Christ.”<sup>53</sup> Jesus, Himself, confirmed this truth in His invitation: “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him.”<sup>54</sup>

The author’s admonition to his readers is “do not harden your hearts.” The example he uses of Israel’s attitude toward God during the desert crossing was part of well-known history. The Hebrew word used in the Old Testament is *qashah*, which has the root meaning of “to be dense.” It is the same word used to describe what God did to the heart of Pharaoh who refused to let God’s people go. It is important to realize that those who harden their hearts are held responsible. The fact that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart did not make him blameless. As a matter of fact we read six times that Pharaoh hardened his heart<sup>55</sup> before we read for the first time that God hardened Pharaoh’s heart.

The New Testament Greek word used is *skleruno*, which means “to render, or to become stubborn.” The English word sclerosis is derived from this. The first time that word is used is in the verse: “Paul entered the synagogue and spoke boldly there for three months, arguing persuasively about the kingdom of God. But some of them *became obstinate*; they refused to believe and publicly maligned the Way.”<sup>56</sup> The issue is not a lack of understanding, but an unwillingness to face and obey the truth. As in the cases used as illustrations, the Israelites had enough evidence of God’s power to protect and provide, which made their remonstrance “If only we had died when our brothers fell dead before the Lord! Why did you bring the Lord’s community into this desert, that we and our livestock should die here? Why did you bring us up out of Egypt to this terrible place? It has no grain or figs, grapevines or pomegranates. And there is no water to drink!”<sup>57</sup> uncalled for.

It is obvious that the author’s audience was not traveling through the desert; they were established somewhere in the Roman empire and they had been presented with the message of salvation in Christ. Some of them may have met Jesus and seen some of His miracles, or at least they had heard about them. Jesus’ words might pertain to them: “If I had not done among them what no one else did, they would not be guilty of sin. But now they have seen these miracles, and yet they have hated both me and my Father.”<sup>58</sup> The ultimate test was and is still the same. Whoever calls upon the Name of the Lord and believes the resurrection will experience the new birth by the Holy Spirit.

The recipients of this epistle were Jews who must have claimed to observe the law and believe the Old Testament scriptures. It is to them that the author issues the warning not to turn away from the living God. There is in this warning an implicit reminder that God, who spoke through the prophets of old, is now speaking through the Son. Refusing to accept the Son means refusing God. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “Here begins definitely the hortatory application of the warning of the ninety-fifth psalm. Its drift, to the

<sup>51</sup> Ps. 62:1,5

<sup>52</sup> Matt. 11:29,30

<sup>53</sup> I Cor. 10:3-5

<sup>54</sup> John 7:37,38

<sup>55</sup> (ch. 7:13,22; 8:15,19,32; 9:7, (34))

<sup>56</sup> Acts 19:8,9

<sup>57</sup> Num. 20:3-5

<sup>58</sup> John 15:24

end of the chapter, is: You, being called under the Son to a far higher position than your fathers under Moses were, but the retention of your position being, as theirs was, conditional on your faithfulness, see that you do not forfeit it, as some of you may be in danger of doing. That you may, if you are not careful, is shown by the very warning of the psalm, and by the example of your fathers, referred to in the psalm, *all* of whom, though called, failed of attainment through unbelief. It is implied all along that the ‘today’ of the psalm includes the present day of grace, and points to a truer rest than that of Canaan, still offered to the faithful.”

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes this about v.12: “Now follows a discussion, based on the quotation, which is clearly related to the historical situation of the readers. It appears most likely that among them were some who were tempted to fall away from God. *Take care (blepete)* as an exhortation to the readers occurs again in 12:25 and in both cases there is a serious issue involved. As the Israelites had fallen a prey to unbelief, so their successors, the Christians, must watch out that they do not fall into the same trap. The writer sums up the state of mind of the Israelites in the psalm as that of *an evil, unbelieving heart*, and sees the possibility of the same condition in some of his readers. The order of words in the original is ‘evil heart of unbelief,’ which leaves open whether the evil precedes the unbelief or vice versa. The writer is not interested in such niceties. What bothers him is that unbelief invariably leads to evil consequences. Unbelief leads people *to fall away from the living God*. The word used for falling away (*apostēnai*) is the root from which ‘apostasy’ comes. It involves a deviation from the truth. To fall away from the living God is the greatest defection possible. This particular title for God, which is familiar in the Old Testament, occurs several times in the New Testament, frequently, as here, without the article. The form without the article draws attention more vividly to the adjective ‘living.’ The Christians in pagan environments would warm to the contrast between the living God, whom they worshipped, and the dead idols of paganism (*cf.* Acts 14:15). The title was of equal appeal to a Jewish disciple, as in Peter’s confession at Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:16), or to a Jewish high priest as the oath in Matthew 26:63 shows. There are other places in Hebrews where the same title is used (9:14; 10:31; 12:22). The words convey the idea of a dynamic God and are particularly significant in any comments about men falling away from him (*cf.* especially 10:31). Such a God is, moreover, in constant communication with men.”

*The New International Version*’s reading: “We have come to share in Christ ...” is the translation of the Greek: “For we are made partakers of Christ ....” The Greek noun used is *metochos*, which can be translated “associate,” or “partner.” The same word is used in a verse in the story of the miraculous catch of fish: “So they signaled their *partners* in the other boat to come and help them, and they came and filled both boats so full that they began to sink.”<sup>59</sup>

What makes us “partakers of Christ” is the “confidence” that brought us into our relationship with Him initially. The Greek word used is *hupostasis*, which has the prime meaning of “essence,” or “assurance.” The author of Hebrews uses the same word at two other occasions, once in “Who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his *person*,”<sup>60</sup> and once in “Now faith is the *substance* of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”<sup>61</sup> There is a strong suggestion in the warning issued here that sin blinds us to reality. In order to understand what our association with Jesus Christ really means, we need the eye of faith and a pure heart. Hearing the voice of God speaking to us in the Son will keep our heart in a safe and healthy condition.<sup>62</sup>

In repeating the quotation from Ps. 95 about the rebellion, the author suggests that the recipients of his epistle share historic responsibility with their ancestors: “as you did in the rebellion!” In this he follows the example of Jesus, who said to His contemporaries: “And so upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.” Yet, none of them were alive when these crimes were committed. As human beings, members of the family of Adam, we share responsibility in all the crimes all

<sup>59</sup> Luke 5:7

<sup>60</sup> Heb. 1:3 KJV

<sup>61</sup> Heb. 11:1 KJV

<sup>62</sup> Matt. 23:35

of humanity ever committed worldwide, beginning with the first murder. Our only hope is in the shed blood of Christ “that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.”<sup>63</sup>

This chapter ends with three questions to which three rhetorical answers are given. “Who were they ...?” “And with whom was he angry for forty years?” “And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest ...? And the answers: “Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt?” “Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? “If not to those who disobeyed?” The style is typically Jewish.

The key admonition is a warning against unbelief of the Word of God spoken to us through His Son. God invites us into His Sabbath rest, into which we will be led by believing that this carpenter’s son from Nazareth, Jesus, is God who became a human being for the purpose of being the ultimate sacrifice for all human sin. He became “the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”<sup>64</sup> “He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.”<sup>65</sup>

The problem for most believing Jews was that they took the Old Testament ritual law for the ultimate reality instead of a shadow of reality. The author of Hebrews will come to the point where he proves that the blood of animals could never atone for human sin. Even David testified to the fact by saying: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll.’”<sup>66</sup> A footnote in *The New International Version* states: “Septuagint but a body you have prepared for me,”<sup>67</sup> which is the translation used throughout this epistle.

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, writes: “There are certain great warnings here: (i) God makes men an offer. Just as he offered the Israelites the blessings of the Promised Land, he offers to all men the blessings of a life which is far beyond the life that men can live without him. (ii) But to obtain the blessings of God two things are necessary. (a) *Trust* is necessary. We must believe that what God says is true. We must be willing to stake our lives on his promises. (b) *Obedience* is necessary. It is just as if a doctor were to say to us: ‘I can cure you if you obey my instructions implicitly.’ It is just as if a teacher were to say: ‘I can make you a scholar if you follow my curriculum with absolute fidelity.’ It is just as if a trainer were to say to an athlete: ‘I can make you a champion if you do not deviate from the discipline that I lay down.’ In any realm of life success depends on obedience to the word of the expert. God, if we may put it so, is the expert in life and real happiness depends on obedience to him. (iii) To the offer of God there is a limit. That limit is the duration of life. We never know when that limit will be reached. We speak easily about ‘tomorrow’ but for us tomorrow may never come. All we have is today. Someone has said: ‘We should live each day as if it were a lifetime.’ God’s offer must be accepted today; the trust and the obedience must be given today—for we cannot be sure that there will be a tomorrow for us. Here we have the supreme offer of God, but it is only for perfect trust and full obedience, and it must be accepted now—or it may be too late.”

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, draws the following pertinent lesson from these verses: “It was not in Egypt—let us note this well—it was on the very borders of Canaan that the men had begun to harden their hearts. It is among Christians who profess conversion—who have not only begun the Christian life but have even made some progress in it—that the hardening of the heart is now still found. The call to holiness; the call to cease from the life of wandering and murmuring and enter into the rest of God; the call to the life of victory over every enemy and to the service of God in the land of promise—these are not obeyed. I cannot with too much earnestness urge every Christian reader to learn well the two stages of the Christian. There are the carnal, and there are the spiritual. There are those who remain babes and those who are full-grown men. There are those who come up out of Egypt but then remain in the wilderness of a worldly life, and there are those who follow the Lord fully, entering the life of rest and victory. Let each of us find out where we stand and, taking earnest heed to God’s warnings, with our whole hearts press on to go all the length in following Jesus and in seeking to stand perfect and complete in all the will of God.”

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<sup>63</sup> Heb. 12:24

<sup>64</sup> John 1:29

<sup>65</sup> I John 2:2

<sup>66</sup> Ps. 40:6,7

<sup>67</sup> Heb. 10:5-7

The opening verse of chapter four reads literally in Greek: “Let us fear, therefore, lest being left [us] a promise of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it.” The Greek words for “fear” and “come short” are respectively *phobeo*, from which the English word “phobia” is derived, and *hustereo*, which literally means “to be later.” We could use the word procrastinate to describe the attitude. The last verb is used in the verse “for all have sinned and *fall short* of the glory of God.”<sup>68</sup> The writer’s emphasis is on the urgency of the matter. And the attitude of his readers seems to be “what’s the hurry?”

The writer touches upon a theme that is not easy to define: “God’s rest.” In the psalm, quoted in the previous chapter, God’s rest stood for entering into the Promised Land, Canaan. The story is recorded in The Book of Numbers. As a result of the unfavorable report brought back by ten of the twelve spies who had surveyed the land, the people rebelled against Moses and refused to enter Canaan. God responded by saying: “Not one of the men who saw my glory and the miraculous signs I performed in Egypt and in the desert but who disobeyed me and tested me ten times — not one of them will ever see the land I promised on oath to their forefathers. No one who has treated me with contempt will ever see it. In this desert your bodies will fall — every one of you twenty years old or more who was counted in the census and who has grumbled against me. Not one of you will enter the land I swore with uplifted hand to make your home, except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun. As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder, I will bring them in to enjoy the land you have rejected. But you — your bodies will fall in this desert. Your children will be shepherds here for forty years, suffering for your unfaithfulness, until the last of your bodies lies in the desert. For forty years — one year for each of the forty days you explored the land — you will suffer for your sins and know what it is like to have me against you.”<sup>69</sup>

The attitude of unbelief of those people is held up as an example to the recipients of this epistle. The writer uses the interesting expression “the gospel” in connection with God’s promise to bring the people into the Promised Land. That which was a natural and physical experience for those who had left Egypt and found themselves at the borders of Canaan, is seen as an image of the spiritual and supernatural message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. And since entering Canaan was more than a simple settling in at a place of real estate, but it involved conquest and victory, the implication is that the gospel of Jesus Christ stands for more than accepting forgiveness of sins; it involves a life of conquest and victory. All this is included in the concept of “God’s rest.”

The message the people of Israel had heard was the promise of God. They had not responded to this with faith. *The New International Version* states in a footnote that some manuscripts have the added phrase: “because they did not share in the faith of those who obeyed.”

In v.3 the writer takes his subject and places it against a much larger background that shows the great perspective of God’s plan with mankind. The picture has been marred with the grime of sin and unbelief. The author of Hebrews, therefore, takes us back to the original, to the condition of God’s creation before the fall. We read in Genesis: “By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day he rested from all his work.”<sup>70</sup> To the human mind “rest” is necessary as a means of recuperation from fatigue. God’s rest, obviously, has nothing to do with fatigue. Isaiah’s comment is pertinent here: “Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.”<sup>71</sup>

God’s rest is a rest of enjoyment, not of repose because of stress and weariness. Entering into God’s rest means entering into the joy of the Lord.<sup>72</sup> The Hebrew verb rendered “rest” is *shabath*. At one point *The New King James Version* renders it “to celebrate,” as in the verse “you shall celebrate your sabbath.”<sup>73</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>69</sup> Num. 14:22,23,29-34

<sup>70</sup> Gen. 2:2

<sup>71</sup> Isa. 40:28-31

<sup>72</sup> Matt 25:21

<sup>73</sup> Lev. 23:32 - NKJV

According to *The Pulpit Commentary*, the language used in this section is complicated and Bible scholars have argued extensively about its interpretation. Most of the arguments are too detailed and technical to fit into our study. One of the main problems is in the interpretation of “those who heard,” which must be read as “those who harkened.” But then their lack of faith does not fit the picture. Hearing and obeying is not always seen as identical in the Scriptures, although there are instances in which this is understood as in “He who has ears, let him hear.”<sup>74</sup> In some languages the verbs “to hear” and “to obey” are closely related.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “The promise of God was not used up on the wilderness generation. Only the failure to remain steadfast in faith limits entering into this rest. This is the direct application of the warnings against unbelief in the previous statements. We are those who have been ‘gospelled’ (AV, unto us was the gospel preached) resolves itself into a statement difficult to translate because of variant readings, but not difficult to understand. The faith of the believer exercised in relation to the promise of God guarantees the rest.”

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on the concept of “falling short”: “The verb *husterein* is applied here metaphorically; it is an allusion, of which there are many in this letter, to the races in the Grecian games: he that came short was he who was any distance, no matter how small, behind the winner. Will it avail any of us how near we get to heaven, if the door be shut before we arrive? How dreadful the thought, to have only missed being eternally saved! To run well, and yet to permit the Devil, the world, or the flesh, to hinder in the few last steps! Reader, watch and be sober.”

The rest we are invited to enter is prefigured in the Sabbath God celebrated at the completion of creation. There is in all of this a suggestion that sin is nothing but a temporary interruption that does not cancel out God’s eternal plan. As Adam and Eve fell into sin and took all of creation with them, God interrupted His Sabbath rest. To the Jews who accused Jesus of breaking the Sabbath, He said: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working.”<sup>75</sup> The fact that, according to the author of Hebrews God returned to His rest and invites us to join Him, is due to the purification for sins the Son has accomplished. As far as God is concerned the business of sin is finished. The new Sabbath is the eternal celebration that begins at our new birth on earth and carries on in heaven.

The repetition of the quotation of Psalm 95 “Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts” indicates that entering into God’s rest begins with hearing and obeying His voice. This refers to the opening statement of this epistle, which states that in these last days God has spoken to us by his Son.<sup>76</sup>

This brings the author to a comparison between Jesus and Joshua who led the people of Israel into Canaan. Since Canaan is used as a picture of God’s rest, the comparison is appropriate. The meaning of both names is the same – “Jesus” is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua, meaning “Yahweh is deliverance.” Canaan was only a picture of a spiritual reality, not the reality itself. The real rest of God is given to us in Jesus Christ. That Canaan was not the ultimate reality is proven by the fact that Psalm 95, from which the quotations are taken, was written by David centuries after Israel had conquered Canaan.

V.10 indicates how one enters into God’s Sabbath rest. It is by resting from one’s own works. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: “This verse gives an explanation of the sabbath rest. It is *God’s rest* and therefore has no lesser pattern. God’s people share his rest. What he did, they do. By becoming identified with him, they enter into his experience. There is no doubt that the writer is implying that the believers’ present sabbath rest is as much a reality as God’s rest. It is not some remote hope, but a hope immediately realizable. Nevertheless the writer still fears that some of his readers will miss the promised rest altogether, hence the exhortation in verse 11.”

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, writes: “In God we see, as it were, two distinct stages in His relation to His work. The first was that of Creation—until He had finished all His work that He created and made. The second, His rest when Creation was finished; and He rejoiced in what He had made, now to begin the higher work of watching the development of the life and perfection. It is a rest from work that is now finished so the higher work can be carried on. Even so, there are two stages in the Christian life. There is the one in which, after conversion, a believer seeks to work what God would have him do. And there is

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<sup>74</sup> Matt. 13:9

<sup>75</sup> John 5:17

<sup>76</sup> Heb. 1:2

the second, in which, after many a painful failure, he ceases from his work and enters the rest of God, there to find the power for work in allowing God to work in him. It is this resting from their own work that many Christians cannot understand. They think of it as a state of passive and selfish enjoyment, of still contemplation that leads to the neglect of the duties of life and unfits for that watchfulness and warfare to which Scripture calls. What an entire misunderstanding of God's call to rest! As the Almighty, God is the only Source of power. In nature, He works all. In grace, He waits to work all, too, if man will but consent and allow. Truly to rest in God is to yield oneself up to the highest activity. We work because He works in us to will and to do. As Paul said of himself, '*I labor..., striving according to his working which worketh in me mightily*' (Colossians 1:29). Entering the rest of God is the ceasing from self-effort and the yielding up of oneself in full surrender of faith to God's working." To put it practically, we enter into God's rest if we stop trying. We say to God: "Lord, it will not be done in and through me, unless You do it. Therefore, I will not even try." That is not a call to none activity, but a call to faith.

It sounds rather contradictory that we are encouraged to "make every effort to enter that rest." The effort is needed because ceasing to try is something that goes against the grain of our human nature. We consider it a defeat if we stop trying. The illustration of a person who is drowning and fighting for his life has been used in this connection. To save a drowning person's life, a lifeguard must wait till the victim ceases to try to save himself. Trying to save a person who is still fighting in the water could claim the life of the rescuer also. There is little God can do for us, to put it humanly, as long as we are trying to do it ourselves.

That brings us to one of the great statements in this epistle about the Word of God. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: "The offering of rest is reinforced by reference to the word of God, that is, reference both to Christ as the living Word and to the revelation, or written word. Five assertions are made concerning the word of God (*logos tou theou*): (1) it is living; (2) it is the word of power, or creative energy; (3) it severs, separating even the closest of relationships; (4) it is a judge of the innermost thoughts; and (5) it is the agency by which God deals directly with the creature. In this way the word of God reveals the whole man, particularly in relation to his heart attitudes, and his believing faith, that which will enable him to enter into rest. The word of God examines, judges, and admonishes the Christian to holy living and to believing faith." *Barnes' Notes* adds: "The design of this and the following verse is obvious. It is to show that we cannot escape the notice of God; that all insincerity, unbelief, hypocrisy, will be detected by him; and that since our hearts are perfectly open before him, we should be sincere and should not attempt to deceive him. The sense is, that the truth of God is all-penetrating and searching, and that the real thoughts and intents of the heart will be brought to light, and that if there is insincerity and self-deception there can be no hope of escape."

What is said about the Word of God, pertaining to the quotation from Psalm Ninety-five, applies to the Bible as a whole. The whole Word of God is like a sharp two-edged sword. We find the same image in Revelations.<sup>77</sup> The image speaks of the function of the Word of God that examines and judges. We are unable to evaluate our own lives sufficiently. Only when we hear, read, and study the Word of God will we be able to see our lives in the light of God and see ourselves as we really are. In *James' Epistle* we read: "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says. Anyone who listens to the word but does not do what it says is like a man who looks at his face in a mirror and, after looking at himself, goes away and immediately forgets what he looks like. But the man who looks intently into the perfect law that gives freedom, and continues to do this, not forgetting what he has heard, but doing it — he will be blessed in what he does." The Word of God will either help us to achieve God's purpose for us, which is entering into His rest, or it will judge us because we refuse to enter into that rest.

## Part Two: The Superiority of Christ's Work (4:14—10:18)

### I. The Superiority of Christ's Priesthood 4:14—7:28

#### A. Christ Is Superior in His Position 4:14-16

**14** *Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.*

<sup>77</sup> Rev. 1:16; 2:12,16; 19:15,21.

***15 For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are — yet was without sin.***

***16 Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.***

In these three verses the author of Hebrews makes one of the greatest statements about Jesus that can be found in Scripture. He emphasizes the twofold nature of Christ and the meaning for us as human beings. Jesus Christ is, at the same time, perfect God and perfect Man. As high priest, He is Man, as Son, He is God.

These words reminded the recipients of this epistle of their Jewish heritage. They saw the picture of Aaron entering into the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement to apply the blood of the sacrifice to the atonement cover of the ark. At the same time, they realized that what Aaron did was a picture of a heavenly reality, not the ultimate reality itself. “The faith we profess” stands for both faith in the Old Testament picture and in the New Testament fulfillment of that picture. The author of Hebrews makes clear that in believing that Jesus is the Messiah, one does not betray his Jewish heritage; one completes it.

The ritual performed by the high priest on the Day of Atonement foreshadowed the heavenly reality of Jesus applying His own blood to the throne of God, thus making atonement for the sins of the world once for all. This truth is worked out in further detail in the rest of this epistle.

The statement of v.14 speaks of what Jesus’ death on the cross and His ministry as high priest means to God, the Father. In v.15 we read what Jesus’ priesthood means for us. Confessing Jesus to be our Lord and our God implies that we recognize Him as high priest, as a human being who represents us before God, the Father. Isaiah prophesied about Christ’s attitude as high priest, saying: “‘Surely they are my people, sons who will not be false to me’; and so he became their Savior. In all their distress he too was distressed, and the angel of his presence saved them. In his love and mercy he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old.”<sup>78</sup>

Satan is not mentioned directly in these verses, but he looms at the background. If he were not there, there would be no temptation. Being fully human, Jesus was the object of Satan’s attacks. We read about the temptation in the desert, immediately upon Jesus’ baptism by John.<sup>79</sup> But there were other moments at which the devil tried to influence Jesus, as was obvious when “Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the things of God, but the things of men.’”<sup>80</sup> We may be sure, however, that Satan’s attacks were not limited to these two incidents. The enemy must have been relentless and persistent on a daily basis. Since Jesus was not the son of Joseph in the physical sense of the word, He was not born with a sinful nature that responded spontaneously to the enticements of the enemy. As far as that is concerned, we would suspect that it was easier for Him than for us to resist the devil. But when we read how Jesus responded to temptation by using Scripture instead of His own words, we understand that it was the same written Word of God that is available to us, that was His weapon of choice.

A study of Jesus’ methods in conquering temptation will provide us with a useful tool for our own life. More than that, the fact that Jesus is our high priest, the One who represents us before God, means that we can avail ourselves of His victory in order to win our own battles.

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, writes about these verses: “What comfort and strength comes at such a time to a soul when it sees that Jesus is able to sympathize and to succor because He Himself has been thus tempted. Or did it not become so dark in His soul that He had to wrestle and to cry, ‘*If it be possible*’ (Matthew 26:39) and ‘*Why hast thou forsaken me?*’ (Matthew 27:46)? He, too, had to trust God in the dark. He, too, in the hour of death had to let go His spirit and commit it, in the darkness of death into God’s keeping. He knew what it was to walk in darkness and see no light. And when a man feels utterly helpless and in despair, Jesus can sympathize with him. He is ‘*one that hath been in all points tempted like*

<sup>78</sup> Isa. 63:8,9

<sup>79</sup> Matt. 4:1-11; Mark 1:12,13; Luke 4:1-13

<sup>80</sup> Matt. 16:23



*as we are, yet without sin.*<sup>7</sup> If we would but rest in the assurance that He understands it all, that He feels for us with a sympathy in which the infinite love of God and the tenderness of a fellow-sufferer are combined, and is able to succor him, we would soon reach the rest of God. Trusting Jesus would bring us into it.”

In order to reap the full benefit of Jesus’ high priestly ministry in heaven in our behalf, we must realize that it is the combination of sympathy and omnipotence that guarantees our victory in temptation. We approach the One who could say: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”<sup>81</sup> We can be sympathetic in our human relationships by showing compassion and eagerness to help, but that does not always mean that it is in our power to lend a helping hand. Even more than when Jesus walked on the water and Peter, trying to do the same began to sink, He will reach out His hand to us and save us.<sup>82</sup>

The invitation in the last verse of this chapter is for us to approach “the throne of grace” to obtain mercy and grace. In the Old Testament setting this would mean entering the tabernacle into the holy of holies and touch the Ark of the Covenant. Not even the high priest was allowed to do this on the Day of Atonement. Because of Christ’s perfect sacrifice of atonement, our entering may be a daily experience of intimate fellowship with God. That truth is one of the themes that runs through the whole epistle. We will come back to it at a later time.

## **B. Christ Is Superior in His Qualifications**

**5:1-10**

*1 Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.*

*2 He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness.*

*3 This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people.*

*4 No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was.*

*5 So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."*

*6 And he says in another place, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."*

*7 During the days of Jesus’ life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission.*

*8 Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered*

*9 and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him*

*10 and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek.*

In this section we are introduced to the important theme of Jesus’ present ministry in heaven in behalf of us. While Jesus was on earth He lived the life of a complete and healthy human being, faced with the same challenges of life that face us all and dealing with them in a perfect and sinless way. Thus He left us a model to be emulated. That is what Peter says: “To this you were called, because Christ suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. ‘He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth.’ When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls.”<sup>83</sup>

But the main purpose of His coming in the world was not to teach us how to live by setting us an example. Jesus Himself stated: “the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”<sup>84</sup> Without this payment of the ransom, the model of His life would have remained an

<sup>81</sup> Matt. 28:18

<sup>82</sup> See Matt. 14:31.

<sup>83</sup> I Peter 2:21-25

<sup>84</sup> Matt. 20:28

unreachable goal. It is only after we have accepted the atonement for our sins that was accomplished by Jesus' sacrifice of His own body that we can begin by trying to follow in His steps.

The fact that Jesus is introduced to us here, not as sacrifice or model, but as high priest, launches the theme of what is going on at present in heaven and how that has a bearing upon our life on earth.

Since the office of high priest began with Aaron, a comparison between Aaron and Christ is in order. Aaron spent most of his time outside the holy of holies in the tabernacle. The only time he was allowed to enter the place where the Ark of the Covenant stood was on the Day of Atonement. The ministry he performed while there was mainly symbolic. The sacrificial blood he brought was animal blood in substitution for human death. And the application of that blood was made as a copy of the heavenly reality God had shown to Moses. Jesus, as high priest, entered the real tabernacle in heaven and applied His own blood to the throne of God.

In the comparison between Aaron and Christ, the compassion factor both unites and separates the two. Aaron "could deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray" because of his own sinful nature. That was not the reason for Jesus' compassion. As was pointed out at the end of the previous chapter, He was "tempted in every way, just as we are," but He did not have to bring a sacrifice for His own sin before making atonement for others.

The Greek text of the opening verse of this chapter reads literally: "For every high priest taken from among men for men is ordained in things pertaining to God that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sin."

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on this verse: "The discussion begins with a quite general statement regarding the high-priestly office. This moreover is seen to have some connection with the introductory section at the end of chapter 4 as the opening conjunction, *For (gar)* shows. Indeed, the ability of our high priest to help depends on the extent to which he fulfils the conditions. There are several specific characteristics mentioned. (i) The high priest is essentially a representative of man; he is *chosen from among men* (literally 'taken from among men'). It is because he is identified by nature with men that he can act and plead on their behalf. This was fundamental to the Aaronic priesthood. There was no question of the task being entrusted to a superhuman being. It needs a man who can understand and feel for men. (ii) He is *appointed (kathistatai)*. As the verb is passive, it is implied that the appointment of the high priest is made by God. The Aaronic order did not provide for democratic election, but only for authoritative theocratic assignments. (iii) His appointment is *in relation to God (ta pros ton Theon)*. His work as mediator, to act on God's behalf towards men and on man's behalf before God, is clearly seen here. This is an essential function of priesthood. (iv) His purpose is *to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins*. This clause (a *hina* clause) brings out the result of his being so closely identified with both God and men. The two things offered are closely allied. Indeed the two words are sometimes used interchangeably, but here they are distinguished. In this case the gifts (*dōra*) must relate to the meal offerings and the sacrifices (*thysias*) to the blood offerings. The Aaronic high priest, in fact, was making an approach to God on the score of man's sins. Here the statement 'for sins' is significant, for it is not restricted to sacrifices, but also relates to gifts. It is best therefore to understand this as referring to the full range of the high priest's work. His whole performance as representative of his people has value as an expiation, *i.e.* it has to do with the sins of the people whom he represents."

*Barnes' Notes* observes the following about the office of high priest: "By the original regulation the Jewish high priest was to be of the family of Aaron (Ex 29:9), though in later times the office was frequently conferred on others. In the time of the Romans it had become venal, and the Mosaic regulation was disregarded ... It was no longer held for life, so that there were several persons at one time to whom was given the title of high priest. The high priest was at the head of religious affairs, and was the ordinary judge of all that pertained to religion, and even of the general justice of the Hebrew commonwealth."

An important similarity between Aaron and Christ is the divine call upon their lives. Aaron did not run for election, as Donald Guthrie pointed out. Both Aaron and Christ became priests by divine appointment.

Interestingly, Aaron is nowhere called "high priest" in the Pentateuch. That he occupies that office can be inferred from the fact that he was the only priest who was allowed to enter the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. At the installation of the priesthood Aaron and his sons were all consecrated together. We read: "Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu,

Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests.”<sup>85</sup> The title “high priest” is used for the first time in connection with succession: “The priest who is anointed and ordained to succeed his father as high priest is to make atonement.”<sup>86</sup> But it is obvious that Aaron was the first to occupy the place of highest office in the priesthood in Israel and that God called him.

The author uses two quotations from the psalms to affirm Christ’s call to the priesthood; one from Psalm Two and the other from Psalm One hundred ten. *The New International Version*’s rendering of the first quotation is somewhat confusion: “today I have become your Father.” *The New King James Version* reads: “Today I have begotten You.” The Hebrew verb used in Psalm Two is *yalad*, which means “to beget.” The Greek word in Hebrews is *gennao*, which has the same meaning “to procreate.” From the way the Apostle Paul uses the quotation in his sermon in the synagogue in Antioch, Pisidia, we conclude that Jesus became high priest at His resurrection from the dead. We read: “We tell you the good news: What God promised our fathers he has fulfilled for us, their children, by raising up Jesus. As it is written in the second Psalm: ‘You are my Son; today I have become your Father.’”<sup>87</sup> It is significant to note that Jesus’ office as high priest is based upon His resurrection life. This indicates that this is the ministry He performs at present in heaven in our behalf. Our perseverance in Christian life is closely related to His present ministry of intercession for us.

The quotation from Psalm 110 is most unusual and that psalm is a most unusual psalm. Incidentally, that psalm is the most quoted Old Testament reference in the New Testament. Nothing but direct inspiration by the Spirit of God could have given David the thoughts expressed in this psalm.

Melchizedek is one of the most puzzling characters in the Old Testament. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: “Melchizedek, unlike Aaron, is a mysterious person. The fleeting mention of him in Genesis 14:18-20 shows him as a historical person whose priesthood was accepted by Abraham. It is remarkable that the author of this epistle makes nothing of the fact that the Genesis account says that Melchizedek brought out bread and wine. He might have attached symbolical importance to this, since the bread and wine are so highly significant in reference to the Lord’s supper. But he concentrates instead on the historic fact that Abraham offered tithes to Melchizedek (see ch. 7). He might further have cited and enlarged on the oath mentioned in Psalm 110:4, especially as he has already mentioned a divine oath in chapters 3 and 4. But he reserves such comment until 6:3 when the significance of the oath is expounded. The author’s method of introducing the strange figure of Melchizedek is as mysterious as the figure of the priest himself. There is a certain aura about him which is fitting in view of the exalted high priest whom he is seen to typify. In this epistle there are many surprises in the sudden introduction of different themes which do not at first seem to follow naturally from the context. The next section (verses 7-10) is an example of this. The writer introduces what may be called a historical reminiscence from the life of Jesus. We may wonder what this has to do with Melchizedek, whose order of priesthood is mentioned again in verse 10. It may be that the repeating of the quotation of Psalm 2 reminded the writer of his earlier sequence of thought where he concentrates on the divine Sonship (chapter 1) and on the humanity of Jesus (chapter 2). He seems to want to dispel any idea that Jesus is a mystical non-historical figure by abruptly reminding the readers what happened *In the days of his flesh*. The expression is interesting because it draws attention to the reality of his human life. The writer has already made this clear in chapter 2 (see verses 14 and 17), but the present reference much more vividly introduces a clear allusion to the historical record of the life of Christ. Indeed this is one of the most vivid examples in the New Testament outside the Gospels. In the Greek text the possessive *his* is not identified, but it must refer to *Jesus*, who is the subject of the whole of this section (*cf.* verse 5). The main statement about the human life of Jesus concerns his powerful prayers. The two words used for this, *prayers and supplications*, are closely akin, but are nevertheless distinct. The former (*deēsisis*) is the general New Testament word for prayers, but the latter (*hiketēria*) has a stronger element of entreaty and is derived from the ancient practice of holding out an olive branch as a sign of appeal. These are remarkable words in describing the Son’s prayer to the Father, but they show how completely identified he is with his people. The *loud cries and tears* seem to be an undeniable allusion to the agony of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where his prayer was accompanied by sweat of blood, revealing the inner intensity of the struggle through which he passed. The accounts in the Gospels do not mention tears, but tears would

<sup>85</sup> Ex. 28:1

<sup>86</sup> Lev. 16:32

<sup>87</sup> Acts 13:32,33

not be out of keeping with those accounts. He who could weep at the grave of Lazarus would not be beyond expressing himself similarly on other occasions of deep emotion. Although tears are usually regarded as a sign of weakness, they nevertheless have healing properties. Our high priest was not so far above us that tears were beyond him at times when his mind was sorely distracted. In describing the person to whom these intense prayers were addressed, the writer purposely uses a descriptive phrase to draw attention to God's ability to save: *who was able to save him from death*. This idea of God as deliverer is so characteristic of the New Testament that it is not easy to appreciate its full significance. This epistle has already drawn attention to man's constant bondage to the fear of death (2:15). The message that victory is through Christ has in the past brought challenge and new hope to many people. It is no wonder the writer returns to it when he thinks of the prayers of Jesus."

There are some questions in vv. 7-10 that are not easily answered: (1) What was Jesus' prayer? and (2) How was this prayer heard? There can be little doubt but "loud cries and tears" refer to Jesus' prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed: "My Father, if it is possible, may this cup be taken from me."<sup>88</sup> Jesus had said to His disciples: "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death"<sup>89</sup> If Jesus asked that the Father would prevent His death on the cross, how can the writer of Hebrew say that His prayer was heard? Jesus was not spared death on the cross!

We understand this to mean that Jesus was so overwhelmed with sorrow when God put the burden of the sin of the whole world before Him that He feared His body would not be able to stand the strain and that He would die in the Garden of Gethsemane before reaching the cross. He prayed that God would allow Him to finish His work as Savior of the world. That was the prayer that was heard. The fact that Jesus prayed: "Yet not as I will, but as you will" proves that Jesus had learned to be completely obedient to the Father's will. If, at the last moment, the Father would not allow Him to give His life as a ransom for the sins of man, Jesus would have submitted to the Father's will. This prayer shows us that Jesus passed the ultimate test.

No human being has ever faced a test similar to the one Jesus faced in the Garden of Gethsemane. Being born as a human baby, and growing up as a young man, He went through different stages of development as we all do. He grew physically, mentally and spiritually. He must have heard from His mother the circumstances that surrounded His birth. There were several crucial moments in His emotional and spiritual development that made Him understand the purpose for which He had come into this world. To His anxious parents who thought they had lost Him, He said: "Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"<sup>90</sup> God's plan for His life became more defined when, during His transfiguration on the mountain, "Two men, Moses and Elijah, appeared in glorious splendor, talking with Jesus. They spoke about his departure, which he was about to bring to fulfillment at Jerusalem."<sup>91</sup> It was through divine revelation that Jesus learned how He was to die for the sins of the world. John the Baptist had already presented Him as "the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!"<sup>92</sup> From David's prophecy in Psalm 40, Jesus had learned what the Old Testament wrote about the purpose of His coming. He had probably committed the verses to memory: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, 'Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll.'"<sup>93</sup> He understood enough of the Father's will for His life to be able to say: "The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."<sup>94</sup>

In Gethsemane Jesus faces the possibility that the carefully laid plan by which the salvation of the world would be accomplished, would fail if His physical body could not take the strain and would collapse prematurely. Facing this issue, Jesus did not claim the Father's promises or the prophetic Word, but He prayed: "Yet not as I will, but as you will."<sup>95</sup> Jesus would have given up everything, even the salvation of

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<sup>88</sup> Matt. 26:39

<sup>89</sup> Matt 26:38; Luke 22:44

<sup>90</sup> Luke 2:49

<sup>91</sup> Luke 9:30,31

<sup>92</sup> John 1:29

<sup>93</sup> Ps. 40:6,7

<sup>94</sup> Matt. 20:28

<sup>95</sup> Matt. 26:39

mankind, if that had been the Father's will. No one ever faced an issue similar to this. No one was ever tested on issues similar to this. Jesus' submission to the Father's will was obedience at the highest level possible. It was this total surrender to the Father's will that made Him our high priest and that assures our complete salvation.<sup>96</sup>

**C. Third Warning: Danger of Not Maturing 5:11-6:20**

*11 We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn.*

*12 In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!*

*13 Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.*

*14 But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.*

*6:1 Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God,*

*2 instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment.*

*3 And God permitting, we will do so.*

*4 It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit,*

*5 who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age,*

*6 if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace.*

*7 Land that drinks in the rain often falling on it and that produces a crop useful to those for whom it is farmed receives the blessing of God.*

*8 But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.*

*9 Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are confident of better things in your case — things that accompany salvation.*

*10 God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them.*

*11 We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.*

*12 We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.*

*13 When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself,*

*14 saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants."*

*15 And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.*

*16 Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument.*

*17 Because God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath.*

*18 God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us may be greatly encouraged.*

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<sup>96</sup> See Heb. 7:25.

**19 We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain,**

**20 where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.**

This section is one of the hardest to understand or explain in this epistle. The Greek text of v.11 reads literally: “Of whom we have to say many things, and hard to be uttered, seeing you are dull of hearing.” The apparent reference is to the person of Melchizedek. But the Greek word *hos* can either mean “who,” or “what,” the latter of which most modern translations seem to prefer. It is, therefore, less clear whether the author refers to the person of Melchizedek or to the doctrine of the priesthood of Christ. The main thrust of these final verses of chapter five and all of chapter six is a reproach to the readers for their lack of spiritual maturity.

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “This is a strong rebuke. The writer plainly states that his readers are in no condition to receive the teaching he feels obligated to give them. He calls them immature, backward, untaught, and dull of hearing. Because of this condition, the typology concerning Melchizedek might be beyond their understanding. Jonathan Edwards once preached a sermon on Heb 5:12 entitled: ‘The Importance and Advantage of a Thorough Knowledge of Divine Truth.’ He noted that the rebuke in the passage seems to include all the readers addressed in the epistle, that these believers had made no progress either doctrinally or experimentally, that they did not understand Melchizedek, and furthermore, what they should have known, they did not.”

William Barclay in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, comments: “Here the writer to the Hebrews deals with the difficulties which confront him in attempting to get across an adequate conception of Christianity to his hearers. He is confronted with two difficulties. First, the full orb of the Christian faith is by no means an easy thing to grasp nor can it be learned in a day. Second, the hearing of his hearers is dull. The word he uses (*nōthros*) is full of meaning. It means slow-moving in mind, torpid in understanding, dull of hearing, witlessly forgetful. It can be used of the numbed limbs of an animal which is ill. It can be used of a person who has the imperceptive nature of a stone. Now this has something to say to everyone whose business it is to preach and to teach; in fact, it has something to say to everyone whose business it is to think and that means that it has something to say to everyone who is a real person. It often happens that we dodge teaching something because it is difficult; we defend ourselves by saying that our hearers would never grasp it. It is one of the tragedies of the Church that there is so little attempt to teach new knowledge and new thought. It is true that such teaching is difficult. It is true that often it means meeting the lethargy of the lazy mind and that embattled prejudice of the shut mind. But the task remains. The writer to the Hebrews did not shirk to bring his message, even if it was difficult and the minds of his hearers were slow. He regarded it as his supreme responsibility to pass on the truth he knew.”

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, adds: “Unexpectedly the writer suddenly reflects on the capacity of his readers to grasp what he has just been saying and what he intends to expound further. This shows unmistakably that he is addressing real people whose condition is known to him. He is aware that they are *dull of hearing*, presumably in a spiritual sense. Perhaps he thinks his discussion of Aaron’s order and its inferiority to Melchizedek will sound too academic and theoretical to some of his readers. He seems, at least, to recognize that there are difficulties in his exposition thus far, and there are greater ones to come; but he knows that they ought to present no obstacles to men of mature minds. Nevertheless he has serious problems over the readers and decides to interrupt his main discourse to issue a strong warning. When he says *About this we have much to say which is hard to explain*, he is particularly referring to the Melchizedek theme which would not have been one of the more familiar themes in contemporary Judaism, though there is some mention of it in Philo’s writings, and in the Qumran documents. It is noticeable here that a direct relationship is assumed between spiritual condition and understanding. The latter is not merely a matter of intellect. The difficulty is essentially a problem of communication, how to express truths in a manner which is within the grasp of the readers. Undoubtedly the problem facing the writer is one faced by every exponent of divine truth.”

I would like to go a little beyond the statement that the problem is one of communication. Dull of hearing can be a spiritual condition. In one of his psalms, David writes: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,

but my ears you have pierced...”<sup>97</sup> The Hebrew verb used is *karah*, which literally means “to dig.” It is almost exclusively used in the Old Testament for the digging of a well, as in the verse: “Isaac built an altar there and called on the name of the Lord. There he pitched his tent, and there his servants *dug* a well.”<sup>98</sup> The reference is to the Hebrew slave who has the right to be set free, but declares, “‘I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,’ then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.”<sup>99</sup> The piercing of the ear symbolizes obedience based on love. This slave sells himself back to his master, promising total obedience for life because he loves his master. What the author of Hebrew is suggesting is that his audience lacks an open ear because of their lack of love for God.

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, comments: “Where there is no hunger for solid food (the higher truth of Christ’s heavenly priesthood) or where there is unwillingness to use what is received in helping others, the spiritual faculties are dwarfed and enfeebled; such a Christian never gets beyond the use of the milk meant for babes. In the Christian life, as in nature, there are two stages—the one of infancy or childhood, the other of manhood. In nature, the growth out of the one into the other comes spontaneously. In grace, this is not so. It is possible for a Christian to remain in a sickly infancy all his life, always needing help instead of being a help. The cause of this is sloth, reluctance to make the sacrifice needed for progress, unwillingness to forsake all and follow Jesus. And this again is very much owing to the fatal mistake that, in religion, our only thought is often of safety, that we may be content when some assurance of that is attained. Such a soul cares not for the heavenly blessedness of conformity to Jesus, of living fellowship with God, and of the godlike privilege of bringing life and blessing to men.”

There are two schools of theology that deal with the question of assurance of salvation. The question is whether a person who truly believes in Jesus as his Savior, and who is born again by the Holy Spirit, can lose his salvation. The first school holds to the Calvinistic teaching that God’s elect will persevere. Calvin did not teach that people who live in sin will be saved but that, if a person is chosen by God to be saved, he will be kept by God’s grace, so that he will not fall into sin. The second school comes from the Dutch seventeenth century theologian, Arminius, who taught that man is free to choose to sin or not to sin. Therefore, it is possible for a born-again believer to lose his salvation.

When we examine the Third Warning, especially ch. 6:4-6 in the light of the above two schools of thought, what do we conclude?

The author uses five expressions to describe backsliders:

1. those who have once been enlightened,
2. who have tasted the heavenly gift,
3. who have shared in the Holy Spirit,
4. who have tasted the goodness of the word of God
5. and [tasted] the powers of the coming age.

The question is whether these phrases describe people who were born-again and who were subsequently lost, or whether they had merely come close to the Kingdom of Heaven and experienced some of the blessings of the Gospel without, however, being born-again. Calvin believed that those people were never born-again. They turned away before they entered the gates of the Kingdom. According to Arminius, these people had been saved, but then they fell into sin and lost their salvation.

Another problem is the meaning of the verb translated with “fall away.” The Greek word is *parapipto* which is rendered “to fall aside,” or “to apostatize.” *The King James Version* translates it with “fall away.” *The Revised Standard Version* reads: “commit apostasy,” *The Living Bible*: “have turned against God.”

The problem that neither Calvin nor Arminius address is that the author states that “It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened..., if they fall way, to be brought back to repentance.” Arminius did

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<sup>97</sup> Ps. 40:6

<sup>98</sup> Gen. 26:25

<sup>99</sup> Ex. 21:5,6

not believe that people who had lost their salvation could not repent and be saved again. And Calvin did not believe that they had truly repented to begin with. This statement shows that it cannot be applied to the condition of Christians who have fallen into sin.

It is clear that the writer reproaches his readers that they fall short in their spiritual understanding, but he doesn't say that they are apostates (See ch. 5:11-14). Our problem is that when we read about sin and apostasy we always think in terms of adultery, theft, murder, lying, etc. Apostasy is not a question of moral shortcomings but of a fundamental shift in doctrine. We must remember that the epistle is addressed to Jews who were observers of the Old Testament ceremonial law. They possessed the truth of God's revelation under the form of symbols and images. In the Gospel they were confronted with the reality that was at the core of the Old Testament ceremonies. Their "falling away" consisted in choosing the picture over the reality it represented. This problem is hard for us to understand if we have not come to the Gospel out of a Judaist background. The writer says about those who reject the fulfillment of the Old Testament pictures in the person of Jesus Christ with the words: "They are crucifying the Son of God all over again." What this means is clear from a comparison with the parallel passage in ch. 10:26-29: "If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?"

One of the problems in the exegesis of the Epistle to the Hebrews as a whole is that the writer speaks about the whole nation of Israel as God's chosen people. He does not address single individuals who had no connection with God's promises to Israel. In the Old Testament, the whole nation of Israel received atonement under the symbol of the blood of a sacrificial animal. The coming of Jesus and His death on the cross indicates that the Old Testament could only provide for a symbolic atonement, not for the reality. Before the coming of Christ, the nation of Israel had *been enlightened*, had *tasted the heavenly gift*, had *shared in the Holy Spirit*, had *tasted the goodness of the word of God*, and *the powers of the coming age*. But yet the majority rejected their Messiah. People who had heard the Gospel but who choose the images of the reality above the reality itself, who reject Jesus as their Savior and go back to their animal sacrifices, those are the people who have "fallen away."

*The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states about this portion of Scripture: "1. I do not consider them as having any reference to any person professing Christianity. 2. They do not belong, nor are they applicable, to backsliders of any kind. 3. They belong to apostates from Christianity; to such as reject the whole Christian system, and its author, the Lord Jesus. 4. And to those of them only who join with the blaspheming Jews, call Christ an impostor, and vindicate his murderers in having crucified him as a malefactor; and thus they render their salvation impossible, by willfully and maliciously rejecting the Lord that bought them. No man believing in the Lord Jesus as the great sacrifice for sin, and acknowledging Christianity as a divine revelation, is here intended, though he may have unfortunately backslidden from any degree of the salvation of God."

It is obvious from vv.9-20 that the writer does not consider his readers to have fallen away. He compliments them for their work of love. V.10 does not imply that our salvation depends on our good works and our demonstration of love. Our salvation rests on God's promise which is reinforced by His oath. If, however, we have an assurance of salvation, there will be fruit to demonstrate this. This is "your work and the love you have shown him as you have helped his people and continue to help them." Our work for God is based on our salvation but, at the same time, our basis is strengthened by what we do. The key word in this is "patience."

The illustration of God's promise to Abraham serves to clarify this. God promised Abraham that he would have a son. It must have seemed to Abraham as if God had forgotten this promise. After Isaac's birth, God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son. Isaac's death would have annulled the promise. In spite of this, Abraham was ready to sacrifice Isaac. At that point God swore an oath. "I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you and make your descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as the sand on the seashore.



Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies.”<sup>100</sup> This is the quote referred to in v.14.

Abraham’s experience is given as an example to the recipients of this epistle so that, when their circumstances would make them think that God had forgotten His promises, God actually reinforces them with an oath. “Two unchangeable things” are God’s promise and God’s oath. God cannot lie. God’s character and His person guarantee our salvation.

The theme of Hebrews is the sanctification of the believer. The result of Abraham’s patience and God’s answer to him ought to be a stimulus for us to pursue holiness. The author will later state: “Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord”<sup>101</sup>

The chapter ends with a precious image of “an anchor for the soul.” Jesus’ ascension and His present ministry as High Priest in heaven in our behalf ties us to the throne of God like a ship that is anchored. The anchor is here used as a symbol of hope. The Greek word translated “hope” is *elpis*, which is derived from a word meaning “to anticipate.” Hope is only as good as the basis upon which it rests. If our soul is anchored to the throne of God, that is to the place of God’s omnipotence, it rests upon the most solid foundation imaginable. If the throne of God could be shaken, the basis of all life would be annihilated. If He, who is “sustaining all things by his powerful word,” would vacillate, all of creation would collapse.

We are looking at two images that are superimposed upon each other. One is the tabernacle or temple with the holy place, the place where the ark stood, the place in which the high priest would enter once a year to make atonement. The other is of a harbor with a ship anchored. Jesus entered the holy place once for all. He is there to stay after having applied His own blood, not to an ark that symbolized the throne of God, but to the throne itself. As the representative of all mankind He has arrived at man’s destination. The ship of our soul is still in the water, but the anchor has been tethered and we anticipate disembarking. That is what hope stands for.

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments: “The comparison of hope to an anchor is frequent among the ancient pagan writers, who supposed it to be as necessary to the support of a man in adversity, as the anchor is to the safety of the ship when about to be driven on a lee shore by a storm. ‘To ground hope on a false supposition,’ says Socrates, ‘is like trusting to a weak anchor.’ He said further, a ship ought not to trust to one anchor, nor life to one hope. The hope of eternal life is here represented as the soul’s anchor; the world is the boisterous, dangerous sea; the Christian course, the voyage; the port, everlasting felicity; and the veil or inner road, the royal dock in which that anchor was cast. The storms of life continue but a short time; the anchor, hope, if fixed by faith in the eternal world, will infallibly prevent all shipwreck; the soul may be strongly tossed by various temptations, but will not drive, because the anchor is in sure ground, and itself is steadfast; it does not drag, and it does not break; faith, like the cable, is the connecting medium between the ship and the anchor, or the soul and its hope of heaven; faith sees the haven, hope desires and anticipates the rest; faith works, and hope holds fast; and, shortly, the soul enters into the haven of eternal repose.”

#### **D. Christ Is Superior in His Priestly Order 7:1-28**

***1 This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him,***

***2 and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace."***

***3 Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest forever.***

***4 Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!***

***5 Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people — that is, their brothers — even though their brothers are descended from Abraham.***

<sup>100</sup> Gen. 22:16,17

<sup>101</sup> Heb. 12:14

*6 This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises.*

*7 And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater.*

*8 In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.*

*9 One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham,*

*10 because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.*

*11 If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come — one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron?*

*12 For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law.*

*13 He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar.*

*14 For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.*

*15 And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears,*

*16 one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.*

*17 For it is declared: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."*

*18 The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless*

*19 (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.*

*20 And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath,*

*21 but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are a priest forever.'"*

*22 Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.*

*23 Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office;*

*24 but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood.*

*25 Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.*

*26 Such a high priest meets our need — one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens.*

*27 Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.*

*28 For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.*

Before continuing his subject, the writer goes into greater detail about what was said before. It was mentioned already that Jesus went to heaven on our behalf. His ascension connects our soul with the throne of God. But up to this point, the importance of the task Jesus fulfills has not been clarified yet.

We have studied so far Jesus' preeminence over angels, and over Moses and Joshua, who led Israel into the Promised Land. Now we are introduced to someone who prefigured Jesus in the fulfillment of his ministry: Melchizedek. *The Adam Clarke's Commentary* states about Melchizedek: "There is something exceedingly mysterious in the person and character of this king of Salem; and to find out the whole is impossible. He seems to have been a sort of universal priest, having none superior to him in all that region;

and confessedly superior even to Abraham himself, the father of the faithful, and the source of the Jewish race.” *Barnes’ Notes* adds: “The Jews had a profound veneration for Abraham, and if it could be shown that Melchizedek was superior to Abraham, then it would be easy to demonstrate the superiority of Christ as a priest to all who descended from Abraham. Accordingly he argues, that he to whom even the patriarch Abraham showed so much respect, must have had an exalted rank. Abraham, according to the views of the East, the illustrious ancestor of the Jewish nation, was regarded as superior to any of his posterity, and of course was to be considered as of higher rank and dignity than the Levitical priests who were descended from him.”

This whole lesson is based on the prophecy of Psalm 110:4 – *The LORD has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek."*

Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the Old Testament, in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. In Genesis we read: “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, ‘Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.’ Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything”<sup>102</sup> This historical record is reinforced by the prophecy in Psalm 110:4 – “You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.” This quotation elevates Melchizedek from the level of an ordinary Old Testament character to a status that is above the whole Old Testament priesthood. Melchizedek thus becomes a type of the promised Messiah.

The priesthood in Israel had been ordained by God to Aaron and his offspring. We read in Exodus 28:1 – “Have Aaron your brother brought to you from among the Israelites, along with his sons Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar, so they may serve me as priests.” The ministry of the priesthood for the people of Israel was exclusively assigned to Aaron and his sons. According to the prophecy of Psalm 110:4, however, there is a priesthood assigned to the Messiah that is not subject to the priesthood of Aaron. That priesthood surpasses the priesthood of Aaron. Aaron’s priesthood was comprised in the Old Testament law but the priesthood of Melchizedek was outside the law. Yet, Melchizedek is called a “priest of God Most High” (Gen. 14:18).

Abraham is one of the most famous pre-law Old Testament characters. The writer to the Hebrews calls him “the patriarch Abraham.” Yet, Abraham lowered himself before Melchizedek and gave him a tenth of all the spoil. Evidently, Melchizedek ranked higher than Abraham. This proves that Jesus, whom Melchizedek foreshadowed, is greater than all.

In what respect is Melchizedek an image of the Lord Jesus Christ?

- First of all in the meaning of his name: *Melchi* means “king” in Hebrew and *zedek* means “righteousness.”
- Secondly, he was king of Salem, and *salem* means “peace.” (In later years the city of Salem was joined to Jebus and the two cities became Jebus-Salem, or Jerusalem). Jesus is the king of righteousness, and the king of peace, and He is also priest. In the Old Testament dispensation a king could never be a priest. But in Christ the two offices are united, as they were in Melchizedek.
- Thirdly, Melchizedek is an image of Jesus in that he has no genealogy that linked him to an existing priesthood. A genealogy was of the utmost importance in the ordination of Levitical priests, since only the offspring of Aaron had the right to serve as priests. Even if someone was of the lineage of Aaron but could not provide genealogical proof, he was not allowed to serve.<sup>103</sup>

No proof of Melchizedek’s genealogy exists. This is the meaning of v.3 – “Without father or mother, without genealogy.” It does not mean that Melchizedek had come into this world without a human father and mother, or that he did not die, but that those factors that are of the utmost importance in connection with the Levitical priesthood, are not mentioned at all. Some people interpret this as if Melchizedek would be someone who came from heaven and who was not a human being, but that can hardly be meant by this statement in Hebrews. The main point is that Melchizedek’s priesthood had no connection with the Levitical priesthood. In that way Melchizedek becomes a type of Jesus Christ, our High Priest.

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<sup>102</sup> Gen. 14:18-20

<sup>103</sup> Ezra 2:59-63

Then the writer of Hebrews proceeds to show that Melchizedek was more than Abraham.

- First of all, Abraham honored Melchizedek by giving him a tithe. If Abraham was less than Melchizedek then Abraham's offspring, including the tribe of Levi, also is less. The point is that the priesthood from the tribe of Levi is performed on a lower level than the High Priest's ministry of Jesus Christ.

- And finally, Melchizedek blessed Abraham. In the words of Hebrews: "And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater" (v.7). All this proves Jesus' preeminence as High Priest.

Not only is Jesus' priesthood of a higher rank than Aaron's, but Jesus becoming High Priest means that there is a fundamental change with regard to the law. The law did not permit anyone to function as high priest outside the family of Levi and Jesus descended from the tribe of Judah, not of Levi. Jesus' becoming High Priest means that the priesthood that was established under the Old Testament law is no longer valid. Jesus did not transgress the law when He became High Priest because this change had been foretold in Scripture by means of a prophecy. Several times, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 110:4 – "You are priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." The Word of God itself indicated that Aaron's priesthood was not meant to last forever; it was meant to be superseded by a priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. God used an oath to establish this: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: 'You are priest forever'" (v.21).

The sum of this is that the Old Testament law had to be superseded by a different law. The Old Testament law ordained that when a priest died, his son would take his place. Because of mortality there was no priest who was priest forever. The priesthood carried over from one generation to another. But the prophecy of Psalm 110:4 reads: "You are priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." Jesus is "priest forever" because after His resurrection from the dead, He cannot die. V.16 states that Jesus is priest "on the basis of the power of an indestructible life."

It is this fact that Jesus' High Priesthood is a priesthood forever that guarantees our complete salvation. V.25 reads: "Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them." There is, evidently, a relationship between our complete salvation and Jesus intercession in our behalf. In other words, if Jesus did not intercede for us, our salvation would not be complete.

We are saved by Jesus' death on the cross and we are born again by the power of the Holy Spirit. But the holiness we need in order to be able to see God would not be ours if Jesus did not pray for us in heaven.

This proves two things:

1. Sanctification does not come to us automatically after we are saved.
2. The power to overcome sin is not in us. Without Jesus' intercessory prayer we cannot be changed.

How this works in the practice of our daily lives, we understand from the example of Peter. Before Peter betrayed Jesus three times, Jesus prayed that his faith would not falter.<sup>104</sup> After Peter sinned, he remembered Jesus' words and he cried bitterly.<sup>105</sup> After that Peter humbled himself before the Lord and confessed his failure.<sup>106</sup> The Lord's intercession does not keep us from sinning but, because of Jesus' prayer we can repent and humble ourselves so that our conscience can be cleansed. Jesus' intercessory prayer is sung about in Charles Wesley's beautiful hymn "Arise, my soul, arise!"

*Arise, my soul, arise! Shake off thy guilty fears;*

*The bleeding sacrifice In my behalf appears;*

*Before the throne my Surety stands, Before the throne my Surety stands.*

*My name is written on His hands.*

*He ever lives above, For me to intercede.*

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<sup>104</sup> Luke 22:31-34

<sup>105</sup> Matt. 26:75

<sup>106</sup> John 21:15-19

*His all redeeming love, His precious blood to plead;  
His blood atones for all our race, His blood atoned for all our race,  
And sprinkles now the throne of grace.  
Five bleeding wounds He bears, Received on Calvary,  
They pour effectual prayers; They strongly plead for me.  
“Forgive him, oh, forgive,” they cry, “Forgive him, o, forgive, they cry,  
“Nor let that ransomed sinner die.”  
My God is reconciled; His pard’ning voice I hear;  
He owns me for His child; I can no longer fear.  
With confidence I now draw nigh, With confidence I now draw nigh,  
And father, Abba, Father, cry.*

He who prays for us is the one who paid our ransom. In heaven, Jesus is featured as “the Lamb who is slain.”<sup>107</sup> The sacrifice of Golgotha is before God the Father as a constant reminder.

The purpose of this lesson of Hebrews is that we should never lose heart when we are often tempted and sometimes fall, but that we should “pursue holiness.”

In vv.26-28 the author of the epistle sums up the supremacy of Jesus Christ, our High Priest. Jesus is not a man who is subject to human weakness, a sinner. The Levitical priests were sinful human beings who themselves needed to be saved. Jesus doesn’t need salvation. He only sacrificed Himself on the cross for our salvation. Our Savior is the Son of God who is perfect forever. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes about the oath mentioned earlier and in v.28: “The statement about *the word of the oath, which came later than the law* seems at first surprising in view of 6:13ff., which shows the oath to have been made to Abraham. This therefore antedates the law by several centuries. But what the writer evidently has in mind here is the appointment of Christ to the office of high priest, which historically places it centuries after the law. The writer may have been influenced by the reference to the oath in Psalm 110, already quoted in verses 20f. The major thought, however, is that of perfection, first introduced in the epistle in 2:10. With a perfect high priest, the office becomes permanent for there is nothing to render it invalid. The Christian may approach with confidence, seeing he has a high priest of such a character.”

## ***II. The Superiority of Christ’s Covenant 8:1-13***

### ***A. A Better Covenant 8:1-6***

***1 The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven,***

***2 and who serves in the sanctuary, the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, not by man.***

***3 Every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices, and so it was necessary for this one also to have something to offer.***

***4 If he were on earth, he would not be a priest, for there are already men who offer the gifts prescribed by the law.***

***5 They serve at a sanctuary that is a copy and shadow of what is in heaven. This is why Moses was warned when he was about to build the tabernacle: “See to it that you make everything according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.”***

***6 But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises.***

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<sup>107</sup> Rev. 5:6

The point the author of this epistle wants his readers to understand is that the whole Old Testament tabernacle and temple service were a picture of a spiritual reality, not the reality itself. When Moses was on Mount Sinai with God, he must have seen the heavenly reality, and God told him to make a copy of what he saw. The Apostle John confirms that there is a heavenly original of the things Moses copied on earth. We read in Revelation: “After this I looked and in heaven the temple, that is, the tabernacle of the Testimony, was opened.”<sup>108</sup> The burnt offering altar that stood in front of the tabernacle and the temple was a copy of the original in heaven. We read John’s report: “When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slain because of the word of God and the testimony they had maintained.”<sup>109</sup> The gold altar of incense also has its antitype in heaven. We read: “Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all the saints, on the golden altar before the throne.”<sup>110</sup> And the ark of the covenant was a copy of the one in heaven. “Then God’s temple in heaven was opened, and within his temple was seen the ark of his covenant.”<sup>111</sup>

A picture or a sculpture of a person may show a striking resemblance to that person, but it is not the person himself. A picture does not move or breathe; it is not alive. It needs no comment that the paper with the picture is inferior to the person it represents. Jesus’ ministry in heaven is the reality of which Aaron’s priesthood was an image.

The author calls the topic he is discussing “the point.” The Greek word used is *kephalaion*, meaning “the principal thing.” It is related to the Greek word *kephale*, “head.”

Jesus Christ is shown to be at the center of the heavenly reality, at the right hand of God. The moment had been predicted by David in the often quoted prophetic Psalm One hundred ten: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”<sup>112</sup> At this point the author does not focus on the enemies, unless all human sinners are included in the term. The Father’s victory over Christ’s enemies would then consist in His reconciliation with them. But, although this may be an important part of the program, the real intent seems to be the defeat of the spiritual powers that originally broke away from God and caused creation to fall in the temptation of the first human couple.

The first responsibility of any priest is to be in charge of the gifts and sacrifices. At this point that responsibility is not further mentioned in detail regarding Christ. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes: “The main function of earthly high priests is now transferred specifically to our high priest. The writer wants to show that Christ fulfills the usual functions of the office, but in a much better way than Aaron’s line fulfilled them. The statement, *For every high priest is appointed*, is a precise echo of 5:1, but whereas there the appointment is for a representative purpose, here it is more specifically *to offer gifts and sacrifices*, i.e. in the working out of the representative function. These sacrifices are a direct allusion to the Levitical offerings and possibly have mainly in view the ritual of the Day of Atonement. There is to be a fuller exposition of this in the next chapter. Here the immediate purpose is to comment on the spiritual offering which our high priest offered up. At this point the offering is not defined, but the writer has already shown in 7:27 that the offering was Christ himself and he further expands this later. He speaks of the necessity for our high priest to make an offering. This is the only instance in the New Testament where the word here translated *necessary* (*anakaaios*) is used of Christ. It is used of the necessary work of any high priest, but it has a deeper meaning when applied to Christ, for there was a divine necessity for him to offer up himself. It should be noted, moreover, that the principle of priestly offering is expressed in an impersonal form – *something* (*ti*) – which becomes personal only when applied to the offering of Christ himself.”

Jesus was never identified with the priesthood during His life on earth, although He was to be the next high priest, the one who would be priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. Some people recognized Him as divine and as the King. When Nathanael met Jesus he declared: “Rabbi, you are the Son

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<sup>108</sup> Rev. 15:5

<sup>109</sup> Rev. 6:9

<sup>110</sup> Rev. 8:3

<sup>111</sup> Rev. 11:19

<sup>112</sup> Ps. 110:1

of God; you are the King of Israel.”<sup>113</sup> When Thomas saw Jesus after His resurrection, he exclaimed: “My Lord and my God!”<sup>114</sup> As we observed before on the basis of the prophecy of Psalm Two, Jesus became high priest on the day of His resurrection. It was His new life that made Him “priest forever...”

Having proven that Jesus’ position in heaven is superior to the priests’ functions on earth, the author moves to the legal implication of the change. At this point the term covenant is introduced. The Greek word used is *diatheke*, meaning “a disposition,” or “a contract.” Jesus used the same word at the first communion celebration on the night before His crucifixion, when, taking the cup, He said: “This is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.”<sup>115</sup> The author of Hebrew uses the same word at least seventeen times in his epistle.

The word “covenant” implies that it is an agreement between at least two parties. It involves us as well as God. This is what makes this topic of such vital importance.

The author states that the first covenant God made with Israel was not faultless. The Greek word used is *amemptos*, meaning “irreproachable.” The idea seems to be, not that there was anything wrong with the demands of the law, but that the inability of the human heart to obey made the law ineffective. Since the law is an expression of the will of God, that is of God’s character, it cannot be qualified as imperfect. It is the imperfection of the human heart that made the law unproductive.

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, states about the covenant: “There is a strange point which requires explanation. For all normal uses the Greek word for an agreement is *sunthēke*, which is the word for a marriage covenant or bond and for an agreement between two states. Further, in all normal Greek *diathēke* means not an agreement, but *a will*. Why should the New Testament use this word for a covenant? The reason is this – *sunthēke* always describes an agreement entered into on equal terms. The parties to a *sunthēke* are on the one level and each can bargain with the other. But God and man do not meet on equal terms. In the biblical sense of a covenant, the whole approach comes from God. Man cannot bargain with God; he cannot argue about the terms of the covenant; he can only accept or reject the offer that God makes. The supreme example of such an agreement is *a will*. The conditions of a will are not made on equal terms. They are made entirely by one person, the testator, and the other party cannot alter them but can only accept or refuse the inheritance offered. That is why our relationship to God is described as a *diathēke*, a covenant for the terms of which only one person is responsible. That relationship is offered us solely on the initiative and the grace of God. As Philo said: ‘It is fitting for God to give and for a wise man to receive.’ When we use the word covenant, we must always remember that it does not mean that man made a bargain with God on equal terms. It always means that the whole initiative is with God; the terms are his and man cannot alter them in the slightest.”

The statement “God found fault with the people” sounds like an enormous understatement. We read that God said to Moses: “I have seen these people ... and they are a stiff-necked people.”<sup>116</sup> At one point, He was ready to destroy them. Israel was not an exception. What is said about them can be said about all of mankind. It is of mankind as a whole that the Apostle Paul writes: “As for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins, in which you used to live when you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient. All of us also lived among them at one time, gratifying the cravings of our sinful nature and following its desires and thoughts. Like the rest, we were by nature objects of wrath.”<sup>117</sup> We all fall short of the glory of God.

The following quotation is taken from Jeremiah’s prophecy. The author of Hebrews, using the Septuagint text, follows the Hebrew text of Jeremiah almost to the letter, with the exception of v.9, which in the Jeremiah reads: “because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them,” and here: “because they did not remain faithful to my covenant.”

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: “It is striking here that God himself made the covenant. He did not consult with men. Moreover, the expression *I took them by the hand* again stresses the divine initiative. It is

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<sup>113</sup> John 1:49

<sup>114</sup> John 20:28

<sup>115</sup> Matt. 26:28

<sup>116</sup> Ex. 32:9

<sup>117</sup> Eph. 2:1-3

a poetic way of making clear that the people were helpless until God, as it were, put his hand in theirs *to lead them out of the land of Egypt*, the place of their captivity. A covenant normally involves the full co-operation of both parties. If one party defaults, the covenant becomes invalid. This is virtually what happened to the old covenant. The Israelites *did not continue* in the covenant, which means that they broke away from its conditions. The pronouns ‘they’ and ‘I’ in both cases are emphatic, again bringing emphasis on the divine prerogative. This is equally seen in the description of the covenant as *my covenant*. When God declared, *I paid no heed to them*, this is not to be taken as an arbitrary act of disinterestedness, but as the inevitable consequences of his people turning their backs on the covenant of grace which he had made for their benefit and blessing. Now comes an exposition of the new covenant which is promised. It has several noteworthy features. It concerns *the house of Israel*, an expression ideally inclusive of the whole Jewish people. It will become effective *after those days*, which connect up with ‘these last days’ mentioned in 1:2 and refers to the Christian era. The Hebrew text of this verse has the singular ‘law,’ which has been rendered for some reason in the Septuagint as a plural laws, as here. This is all the more significant because on no other occasion does the Septuagint render the Hebrew singular in this way. It may be that the translator wished to emphasize the separate parts of God’s law to distinguish these parts from the law of Moses as a complete unity. The passage contains an implied contrast between law written on stone tablets and laws put into their minds. There can be no doubt that the latter is superior to the former, for what is in the mind cannot fail to affect the activity. The double statement *into their minds* and *on their hearts*, an example of Hebrew poetic parallelism, emphasizes the inward character of the new covenant. Of the two terms the more comprehensive in Hebrew usage is heart, which involved not only the will, but also the emotions. Both terms in this quotation are best regarded in a corporate sense, as if the writer has in view the corporate character of the other party in the covenant which God has made. There is a sense in which the new laws are impressed on the mind and heart of the *people* as a whole. Although the old covenant had demonstrated that God was the God of Israel and that he would regard Israel as his people, there is a deeper sense in which this could be achieved in a fully spiritual sense only in the new covenant. There is a significant stress on the pronouns *their* (*autois*) and *my* (*moi*). The Greek expresses it cryptically – ‘I will be to them as God, and they will be to me as people.’ The relationship is to be intimate and mutual.”

Moses made an allusion to the law of God becoming part of human nature when he said: “The word is very near you; it is in your mouth and in your heart so you may obey it.”<sup>118</sup> The only way the Word of God can be written on the human heart is in regeneration. When a person is born again, he receives a new heart in which the will of God becomes as natural to him as his own will. Although this is not specifically mentioned here, the main message of Hebrews is that, in the new covenant, which is based on the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for our sins, there is a provision for such a change of heart. That is what God promised in the Old Testament through Ezekiel, who prophesied: “I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit in you; I will remove from you your heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh. And I will put my Spirit in you and move you to follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws.”<sup>119</sup>

Although the text of v.11 reads: “No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’” it does not mean that this kind of instruction was actually practiced in general. Some Bible scholars actually observe that very little or any public religious instruction went on in Israel in the Old Testament. Yet, the topic to be taught, “Know the Lord,” is the most important lesson that can be learned. In Jesus’ words: “Now this is eternal life: that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom you have sent.”<sup>120</sup>

It also does not mean that, under the new covenant, believers should not testify to their neighbors or their family members about their new-found life and joy in the Lord. A time is envisioned in which every member of the human family will enter into such a personal and intimate relationship with God by being filled with the Holy Spirit, so that God can communicate to every individual what His will is for a person’s life. Jesus referred to this when He said: “It is written in the Prophets: ‘They will all be taught by God.’ Everyone who listens to the Father and learns from him comes to me.”<sup>121</sup> “The prophets” He referred to

<sup>118</sup> Deut. 30:14

<sup>119</sup> Ezek. 36:26,27

<sup>120</sup> John 17:3

<sup>121</sup> John 6:45



was Isaiah, who said: “All your sons will be taught by the Lord, and great will be your children’s peace.”<sup>122</sup> When writing to the Thessalonians, the Apostle Paul indicated that in some instances believers had already entered into such relationship with God. We read: “Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other.”<sup>123</sup>

*The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* makes this interesting observation: “The New Testament is shorter than the Old, because, instead of letter details, it gives the all-embracing principles of the spiritual law written on the conscience, leading to instinctive obedience in outward details. None except the Lord can teach effectually: ‘Know the Lord.’”

The Greek text of v.12 reads literally: “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins (and their iniquities) will I remember no more.” The Greek word for “unrighteousness is *adikia*, meaning “injustice.” It is the word Jesus uses to describe the immoral character of the unjust steward in the parable in Luke’s Gospel.<sup>124</sup>

The word “remember” sounds incongruous in connection with God. If God no longer remembers something, it does not mean that His divine mind no longer functions as it should, as is the case with people. It is by an act of the will that God cleans the slate of our sins when we enter into a new relationship with Him. As Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, sang, God gives “to give his people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins.”<sup>125</sup> When we enter into the new covenant God has opened for us, we understand that God considers the debt of our sin paid by the death of His Son on the cross. It was my personal experience as, for the first time in my life, I became conscious of God’s presence. I felt guilty and I feared that God would expose the filth of my soul to those around me. It was as if God said to me that He was not even willing to talk about my guilt. When I felt the load of shame slide off my shoulders I felt loved as I had never felt before.

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, observes about the new covenant and its benefits: “Of the blessings of the new covenant, the one that is here mentioned last, is in reality the first, ‘*For I will be merciful*’—this is what precedes and is the ground of the renewal of the heart and the fellowship with God. Pardon is the door; holiness of heart and life, the pathway; the presence of God, the blessedness of the Christian life. The first leads to the second, the first and second to the third. To live in God’s presence and fellowship, two things must be clear: The thought of sin must be put away out of God’s heart, and the love of sin must be put away out of our hearts. These two blessings are together secured in the new covenant. First, the forgiveness of sins is so complete that He remembers them no more forever; they never more enter into God’s heart. And second, the renewal of our hearts and wills is so complete that the law of God is written there by the Holy Spirit so that the will of God is our will.

The three blessings—the pardon of sin, the purity of heart, and the presence of God—are so joined that, as our views and our acceptance of one is feeble, our hold on the others will suffer. In Jesus, the Mediator of the new covenant, they are offered and secured to us in their fullness, in ‘*the power of an endless life*’ (Hebrews 7:16). But our experience of this depends upon our knowledge, our faith, and our surrender. And it is because our understanding and acceptance and experience of the first two blessings is so defective that our fellowship with God—our entrance into the holy presence and our abiding there—is still so much in Old Testament failure. ‘*They continued not*’ (8:9). Let us try and realize this.”

### ***III. The Superiority of Christ’s Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:1—10:18***

#### **A. Old Covenant’s Sanctuary and Sacrifice 9:1-10**

***1 Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary.***

***2 A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand, the table and the consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place.***

<sup>122</sup> Isa. 54:13

<sup>123</sup> I Thess. 4:9

<sup>124</sup> Luke 16:1-8

<sup>125</sup> Luke 1:77

- 3 Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place,**
- 4 which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant.**
- 5 Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.**
- 6 When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry.**
- 7 But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance.**
- 8 The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still standing.**
- 9 This is an illustration for the present time, indicating that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.**
- 10 They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings — external regulations applying until the time of the new order.**

The opening verse of this chapter reads literally in Greek: “Then also truly the first [covenant] had ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary.” Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on the term “regulations for worship”: “The word for regulations (*diakōma*) has many uses in the New Testament, as for instance ‘the just requirements of the law,’ or ‘the act which fulfills what is considered to be right.’ What comes out most clearly in this passage is that regulations were laid down which were expected to be followed. But the main interest is in the place of worship. That was not to come until much later. The place of worship is here called an *earthly sanctuary* (*to hagion kosmikon*), strictly ‘the’ rather than ‘an.’ The distinction is not unimportant, for a particular sanctuary is in mind, the scene of priestly activity in the tabernacle. The word for *sanctuary* (*hagion*) stands for both the holy place (verse 2) and the holy of holies (verse 3). The only other New Testament occurrence of *kosmikon* (earthly, worldly) is in Titus 2:12, where it is applied to worldly passions. In the present case it is used without any moral connotation and denotes the earth in contrast to heaven as the sphere of activity (cf. 8:1-2).”

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, writes: “The writer to the Hebrews has just been thinking of Jesus as the one who leads us into reality. He has been using the idea that in this world we have only pale copies of what is truly real. The worship that men can offer is only a ghostlike shadow of the real worship which Jesus, the real High Priest, alone can offer. But even as he thinks of that his mind goes back to the Tabernacle (the Tabernacle, remember, not the Temple). Lovingly he remembers its beauty; lovingly he lingers on its priceless possessions. And the thought in his mind is this—if earthly worship was as beautiful as this, what must the true worship be like? If all the loveliness of the Tabernacle was only a shadow of reality, how surpassingly lovely the reality must be. He does not tell of the Tabernacle in detail; he only alludes to certain of its treasures. This was all he needed to do because his readers knew its glories and had them printed on their memories.”

What strikes us in the author's description of the tabernacle is the sketchiness of it. The only two parts of the Old Testament tabernacle brought into focus are the two rooms inside the tent. The bronze altar and washbasin and the ceremonies that were carried out outside the tent are never mentioned. Yet, most of the daily priestly activities took place there. That is where the daily sacrifices for sin were brought. The emphasis in this sketch is on what the priests did after atonement for sin had been taken care of. Since, as the opening verses of the epistle stated, Jesus “had provided purification for sins,”<sup>126</sup> there is no need to go over that part again.

The ultimate goal of all human life, the purpose for which God created us, is fellowship with Him, the sharing of His love, His life, His glory. All this is symbolized in the tent, the tabernacle that represents His presence. God had said to Moses: “Have them make a sanctuary for me, and I will dwell among them.”<sup>127</sup>

<sup>126</sup> Heb. 1:3

<sup>127</sup> Ex. 25:8

And: “There, above the cover between the two cherubim that are over the ark of the Testimony, I will meet with you and give you all my commands for the Israelites.”<sup>128</sup> Using the tabernacle in the Old Testament as an object lesson of fellowship with God, therefore, makes perfect sense. At the height of his argument, the author will state: “Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus...”<sup>129</sup> The ultimate goal is the ark and its content. “This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant.” When later the ark was placed in the temple Solomon had built, we read: “There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt.”<sup>130</sup> The manna and Aaron’s staff had not survived the sands of time.

Although the author does not mention this specifically, the suggestion is that when we seek fellowship with God we will ultimately arrive at the law of God, the Ten Commandments that outline the requirements of man’s moral behavior. Jesus says to His disciples: “If you love me, you will obey what I command.”<sup>131</sup> And: “If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father’s commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.”<sup>132</sup> For those whose stone heart has been removed and replaced by a heart of flesh, these words are refreshing and revitalizing. If we have any problem with authority and obedience, we ought to look at the quality of our love for God.

A problem in connection with the altar of incense, in the description the author of Hebrews presents, seems to be its placement. From v.4, we could understand that this altar stood in the Holy of Holies, inside the veil, whilst we read in Exodus that it was in front of the veil: “Put the altar in front of the curtain that is before the ark of the Testimony--before the atonement cover that is over the Testimony--where I will meet with you.”<sup>133</sup> It must be understood, therefore, that the altar was considered to be part of the Holy of Holies. In connection with the building of Solomon’s temple we read: “He also overlaid with gold the altar that belonged to the inner sanctuary.”

It is possible to misunderstand what the author of Hebrews is saying about the tabernacle and its division. It sounds as if the first room of the tabernacle, the holy place, prevented entrance into the holy of holies. The detailed description of the furniture in the holy place could lead to this thought. But it makes more sense to consider the tabernacle as a whole with all the rites of service carried out, as an earthly shadow of a heavenly reality. As long as fellowship with God could only be expressed symbolically, it could not be intimate and perfect.

The practical implication of this is that the Old Testament worship service could not effect a change in the condition of a person’s heart. The sacrifices that were brought “were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper.” Since the blood of the sacrificial animals only covered human sin, it meant that sin remained a reality that prevented people from enjoying a perfect fellowship with God. It takes being washed in the blood of the Lamb of God to experience moral and spiritual cleansing.

The author of Hebrews refers to the ceremonial washings to prove his point. *The Nelson’s Illustrated Bible Dictionary* observes the following about these washings: “Ablutions have nothing to do with washing one’s body for sanitary or hygienic purposes. Rather, these were performed in order to remove ritual defilement. Some of the causes of ritual uncleanness in Bible times were bloodshed (Lev 17), childbirth (Lev 12), sexual intercourse (Lev 18), leprosy (Lev 12), menstruation (Lev 15), and contact with dead bodies (Num 19).”

What the author of Hebrews is saying is that the human problem is not outward pollution, but inward corruption of the heart. As long as that problem is not taken care of, God’s goal with mankind has not as yet been reached. The Old Testament rites were only pointers to the new order.

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<sup>128</sup> Ex. 25:22

<sup>129</sup> Heb. 10:19

<sup>130</sup> I Kings 8:9

<sup>131</sup> John 14:15

<sup>132</sup> John 15:10-11

<sup>133</sup> Ex. 30:6

**B. New Covenant's Sanctuary and Sacrifice**

**9:11-10:18**

*11 When Christ came as high priest of the good things that are already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not man-made, that is to say, not a part of this creation.*

*12 He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.*

*13 The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkled on those who are ceremonially unclean sanctify them so that they are outwardly clean.*

*14 How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!*

*15 For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance — now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.*

*16 In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it,*

*17 because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.*

*18 This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood.*

*19 When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people.*

*20 He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep."*

*21 In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies.*

*22 In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.*

*23 It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these.*

*24 For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence.*

*25 Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own.*

*26 Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.*

*27 Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment,*

*28 so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.*

*10:1 The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming — not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship.*

*2 If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.*

*3 But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins,*

*4 because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.*

**5** *Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said: "Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me;*

**6** *with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.*

**7** *Then I said, 'Here I am — it is written about me in the scroll — I have come to do your will, O God.'"*

**8** *First he said, "Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them" (although the law required them to be made).*

**9** *Then he said, "Here I am, I have come to do your will." He sets aside the first to establish the second.*

**10** *And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

**11** *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.*

**12** *But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.*

**13** *Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool,*

**14** *because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

**15** *The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this. First he says:*

**16** *"This is the covenant I will make with them after that time, says the Lord. I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."*

**17** *Then he adds: "Their sins and lawless acts I will remember no more."*

**18** *And where these have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin.*

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, gives an interesting description of the difference between Jesus' sacrifice for our sins and the Old Testament animal sacrifices: "Westcott outlines four ways in which Jesus's sacrifice of himself differs from the animal sacrifices of the old covenant.

- (i) The sacrifice of Jesus was *voluntary*. The animal's life was taken from it; Jesus gave his life. He willingly laid it down for his friends.
- (ii) The sacrifice of Jesus was *spontaneous*. Animal sacrifice was entirely *the product of the law*; the sacrifice of Jesus was entirely *the product of love*. We pay our debts to a tradesman because we have to; we give a gift to our loved ones because we want to. It was not the law but love that lay behind the sacrifice of Christ.
- (iii) The sacrifice of Jesus was *rational*. The animal victim did not know what was happening; Jesus all the time knew what he was doing. He died, not as an ignorant victim caught up in circumstances over which he had no control and did not understand but with his eyes wide open.
- (iv) The sacrifice of Jesus was *moral*. Animal sacrifice was mechanical; but Jesus's sacrifice was made, through *the eternal Spirit*. This thing on Calvary was not a matter of prescribed ritual mechanically carried out; it was a matter of Jesus obeying the will of God for the sake of men. Behind it there was not the mechanism of the law but the choice of love."

V.11 introduces us to the actual ministry of Christ in heaven. It shows the implications of His sacrifice on earth upon the uncreated reality of eternity.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: "The special description of Christ as *a high priest of the good things that have come* shows another distinction between the old and the new. Whereas the old was foreshadowing of better things to come, the new rests on an already accomplished fact. When Jesus Christ became high priest he at once dispensed many 'good things' as a result. Yet although they are perfectly realized in him, they are not yet so in us. These good things stand for all the spiritual blessings which are dispensed by our heavenly high priest. The alternative reading *tōn mellontōn* (i.e. good things to come) is

well attested and may be original. It would fit the general idea of expectation in Hebrews, but the alternative suits the present context better.

Next, focus falls on the place of Christ's ministry. Again the old symbolizes the new. The old tabernacle in the wilderness is now obsolete, but it has its counterpart – what the writer calls *the greater and more perfect tent*. It is significant that the tent is described in definite terms. The definite article points to a unique tabernacle which can be described as 'the greater.' There are no further possible comparisons with the spiritual tabernacle. It cannot be improved upon. The force of the word *through* (*dia*) should be noted since it affects our interpretation of the tent. It could mean 'through' (i.e. the high priesthood is by means of the tent); or 'by means of,' giving the humanity of Jesus as the means; or 'by means of,' understanding tent as the heavenly sanctuary.

The words in parenthesis are to explain that the meaning intended was not literal but spiritual. Stephen had looked ahead to the Temple *not made with hands* (Acts 7:48), and would have understood this writer's transference of thought. Many patristic writers interpreted the better tabernacle as Christ's flesh, but it seems to mean more than that. The explanatory words, *not of this creation*, would indeed appear to exclude that view. It would seem, in fact, that the writer wants to deflect attention from the earthly symbol to lead into Christ's spiritual work without defining further what he means by the 'perfect tent.' When he proceeds in verse 12 to speak of the holy place he is presumably thinking of man's approach to God. It has been suggested that the 'tent' where Christ ministers is the spiritual community in the sense that his 'body' is a spiritual temple, but this idea seems too remote from the context."

The whole scene described in this section is foreshadowed by the Day of Atonement, detailed in Leviticus chapter 16. Not only the ceremony of that day, but the place in which it was enacted and the person who enacted it, as well as the means used, were an earthly image of this heavenly reality. In the Old Testament rite two animals were used to represent what Christ would do in sacrificing Himself and in applying that sacrifice. We read in Leviticus: "Then [Aaron] is to take the two goats and present them before the Lord at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting. He is to cast lots for the two goats — one lot for the Lord and the other for the scapegoat."<sup>134</sup> The goat for the Lord was sacrificed and the scapegoat was loaded with the sin of the people and led away into the desert. It took two animals to represent what Jesus did as one single person, because one animal that died and whose blood was applied could not be resurrected in order to take away sin also. It was Jesus' resurrection that made it possible for Him to accomplish both acts in His own body; He was both the scapegoat and the Lamb of God that carries away the sin of the world. It must be observed that the rite of carrying away sin by the scapegoat derived its value from the application of the blood of the other goat to the ark in the Holy of Holies. In the same way our deliverance from sin does rest on the fact that Christ applied His own blood to the throne of God in heaven.

The author of Hebrews also mentions "the ashes of a heifer." *The Fausset's Bible Dictionary* explains: "Num 19. The ordinance was for cleansing, not atonement. Contact with death, the visible penalty of sin (Gen 2:17), was a defilement requiring purgation before one could have communion with the congregation of the living Israel (Isa 4:3). The defilement being but ceremonial (though at the same time conveying instruction as to real defilement) needed only ceremonial cleansing. The victim was a female, whereas the greater offerings for sin were male. No part came on the altar; even the blood was not sprinkled there, but before the tabernacle, and not by the high priest but by his son. No charge was given as to its being burnt in a clean place, but simply 'without the camp,' entire with skin and dung. The 'red' pointed not so much to the blood of Christ as to the earth color (*adam* meaning 'red earth'), the flesh being the object of the purifying; also to sin, deep dyed as 'scarlet,' and associated with the flesh (Isa 1:18)."

The author of Hebrews put great emphasis on the fact that the Old Testament rites of purification were only symbolic and could not achieve more than ritual cleansing. None of these rites affected the human soul. The point is well illustrated in an argument between the Pharisees and Jesus about the ritual washing of hands before eating a meal. In looking at the incident we remind ourselves that this washing of hands had nothing to do with microbes; it was a mere ritual that had only symbolic significance. The Pharisees objected to the fact that Jesus' disciples did not observe the ritual. In His subsequent explanation to the disciples, the stress shifted from ritual cleansing to kosher food. Eating non-kosher food was considered to defile a person. To this Jesus replied: "Don't you see that whatever enters the mouth goes into the stomach

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<sup>134</sup> Lev. 16:7,8

and then out of the body? But the things that come out of the mouth come from the heart, and these make a man ‘unclean.’ For out of the heart come evil thoughts, murder, adultery, sexual immorality, theft, false testimony, slander. These are what make a man ‘unclean’; but eating with unwashed hands does not make him ‘unclean.’”<sup>135</sup> This truth goes both ways. If ritual defilement does not affect a person morally, ritual cleansing does not affect him that way either.

The application of Jesus’ blood to the throne of God in heaven has the power to “cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God!” *The New International Version* uses the phrase “acts that lead to death” as a translation of two Greek words *nekroón érgoon*, meaning “dead works.”

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, observes: “It was the twofold infinite worth of the blood that gave it such mighty power—first, in opening the grave and then, in opening heaven. It was this that gave it the victory over all the powers of death and hell beneath and gave Him the victor’s place on high on the throne of God. And now, when that blood from out of the heavenly sanctuary is sprinkled on the conscience by the heavenly High Priest, how much more—with what infinite effectual cleansing!—must our consciences be cleansed.

We know what conscience is. It tells us what we are. Conscience deals not only with past merit or guilt but also with present integrity or falsehood. A conscience fully cleansed with the blood of Christ, fully conscious of its cleansing power, has the sense of guilt and demerit removed to an infinite distance. And no less is it delivered from that haunting sense of insincerity and double-heartedness, which renders boldness of access to God an impossibility. It can look up to God without the shadow of a cloud. The light of God’s face, to which the blood gave our Surety access, shines clear on the conscience and, through it, on the heart. The conscience is not a separate part of our hearts of inner natures that can be in a different state from what the whole is. By no means. Just as a sensibility to bodily evil pervades the whole body, so the conscience is the sense that pervades our whole spiritual nature and at once notices and reports what is wrong or right in our state. Hence it is that when the conscience is cleansed or perfected, the heart is cleansed and perfected, too. And so it is in the heart that the power the blood had in heaven is communicated here on earth. The blood that brought Christ into God’s presence brings us and our whole inner being there, too.

Oh, let us realize it. The power of the blood in which Christ entered heaven is the power in which He enters our hearts. The infinite sufficiency it has with God to meet His holy requirement is its sufficiency to meet the requirements of our hearts and lives. It is the blood of the covenant. Its three great promises—pardon and peace in God’s forgetting sin; purity and power in having the law of life in our hearts; and the presence of God set open to us—are not only secured to us by the blood, but the blood has its part, too, in communicating them. In the power of the Holy Spirit, the blood effects a mighty, divine cleansing, full of heavenly life and energy. The Spirit that was in Christ when He shed the blood makes us partakers of its power. His victory over sin, His perfect obedience, His access to the Father—the soul that fully knows the cleansing of the blood in its power will know these blessings too.”

V.15 presents a difficulty of interpretation of the Greek word *diatheke* used for “covenant.” Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: “The whole phrase *mediator of a new covenant* recurs in 12:24, almost as a title for Jesus, but with one difference. Here the word ‘new’ (*kainē*) means new in contrast to the old, whereas in 12:24 another word (*nea*) is used which calls attention to the fact that it is recent (*i.e.* as far as the readers are concerned). In the present phrase the emphasis falls on the word *covenant* (*diathēkē*) which is placed first in Greek. Indeed it is the covenant rather than the mediator which is the main subject of the whole passage.

Nevertheless, the immediate switch in verse 16 from covenant to will shows the flexible way in which the writer approaches the idea of covenant .... It may seem inappropriate to speak of a mediator of a will. Indeed [one Bible scholar] has maintained that the mediator of a will would not be the testator but the executor, but [another Bible scholar] argues that human analogies fail when applied to him who rose from the dead. ‘He is testator and executor in one, surety and mediator alike.’

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<sup>135</sup> Matt. 15:17-20

The purpose of the new covenant is said to be to provide *the promised eternal inheritance*. The idea of inheritance was central in the old covenant but it did not rise above the earthly level. Here it is eternal, hence clearly superior. This is the real fulfillment of the promise.”

Although there seems to be some confusion in the way the word *diatheke* is used, we must remember that the English word “testament” has multiple meanings also, as does the word “will.” There was death involved in both the old and the new covenant. In the Old Testament it was the death of an animal in substitution for human death; in the New Testament it was the death of the human body of Christ. The animal that died sacrificially in Old Testament rites, obviously, did not leave a will for the disposal of its possessions. Its social status in a human society did not allow for this. But the idea of an inheritance was present in the Old Testament, also. Living in the land acquired a spiritual connotation which made it a pointer to greater things to come. The change from covenant to will also opens the door for us to receive what God intended us to have all the time. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Now if we are children, then we are heirs — heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.”<sup>136</sup> In life on earth the recipient of an inheritance could never share with the person who left it behind, since that person is no longer alive. Christ’s resurrection changed all that. He was dead, left us His inheritance and came back to life to share it with us.

One of the problems in connection with the author’s description of the inauguration of the old covenant is that he mentions Moses sprinkling blood on the scroll of the law, which is not mentioned in the record in Exodus. There we read: “Moses took half of the blood and put it in bowls, and the other half he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it to the people. They responded, ‘We will do everything the Lord has said; we will obey.’ Moses then took the blood, sprinkled it on the people and said, ‘This is the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words.’”<sup>137</sup> The author may have used some extra biblical rabbinic source to justify his statement.

Actually, the author of Hebrews combines several of the rituals prescribed in the Pentateuch to create the suggestion of ritual cleansing under the old covenant, the details of which are not found in the Old Testament in connection with the erection of the tabernacle. Since Josephus mentions some of the extra biblical details in his writings, they may all have been part of a rabbinic tradition.

The main point the author wants to make is that blood was used for the purification of everything pertaining to the worship of God. Without sacrifice no fellowship with God was possible. The main thought expressed is that sin can only be atoned for by death. God had warned Adam: “You must not eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for when you eat of it you will surely die.”<sup>138</sup> Although Adam and Eve did not physically die when they committed their first sin, they cut themselves off from fellowship with God, which meant virtual death in every sense of the word. The only way they could stay alive physically was by being clothed with the skin of an animal that had died in their place. This first substitution opened the way for all following substitutions, in which man forfeited his life and an animal died in his place.

Blood, in Scripture, is the equivalent of life. The Bible states that all life, human and animal life alike, is in the blood.<sup>139</sup> The shedding of blood, therefore, stands for death. According to *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary*, the words “without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness” are a quotation from the Jewish writings called ‘*Menachoth*.’”

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on v.23: “The readers have already been introduced to the idea of earthly realities being copies of heavenly realities in 8:5; this clearly plays an important part in the writer’s whole argument and explains his constant emphasis on ‘better’ things. That the ‘copies’ had to be purified with these rites (Greek has only ‘these’ *toutois*) is because external things needed cleansing by external means (i.e. shedding of blood).

The *heavenly things* of which the writer speaks are presumably the heavenly counterparts of the earthly sanctuary and its furniture. He is loath to lose sight of the glories of the Jewish heritage and imagines more

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<sup>136</sup> Rom. 8:17

<sup>137</sup> Ex. 24:6-8

<sup>138</sup> Gen. 2:17

<sup>139</sup> Lev. 17:11



glorious fulfillments of them in a spiritual sense. But it is clear from the fact that he equates the antitype of the sanctuary with heaven itself (verse 24) that he is not thinking in literal terms. All that the copies were intended to teach are to be seen in pristine clarity in the presence of God. When *better sacrifices* (plural) are mentioned, it is not to be supposed that more than one is in mind, for the single supreme sacrifice of Christ is seen in the letter to be entirely adequate. The plural is used in the sense that the one sacrifice stands as the complete fulfillment of all the different sacrifices in the old order. It may be said that the sacrifice of Christ is so many-sided that it required a whole range of sacrifices to serve as adequate copies.”

The reference here, again, is to the Day of Atonement when the high priest would enter the holy of holiest and sprinkle the blood on the cover of the ark. In the Old Testament rite, the high priest entered the sanctuary twice, once with the blood of a bull, sacrificed for his own sin and once with the blood of one of the two goats set apart for the ceremony. The bull’s blood had to be sprinkled seven times before the atonement cover. We assume that the same was done with the goat’s blood.<sup>140</sup>

The amazing truth revealed in this ceremony is that human sin not only affects the sinner but also pollutes the throne of God. The shedding of blood by substitution not only saves the sinner but also cleanses heaven. It is difficult for us to understand that God’s absolute holiness could be affected by any kind of sin. If sinning means falling short of the glory of God,<sup>141</sup> then any sin means an attack upon the absoluteness of God’s holiness. And since God would not be God if He were not absolute in all His attributes, the atonement affected Him as well as it does those who commit sin. We are obviously talking about things that are far above our understanding. But it is good to realize that God’s grace drew us into a situation that is so immense and overwhelming that we will never be able to grasp all of it.

The author proceeds to emphasize the meaning of Jesus’ triumphant cry, while hanging on the cross: “*It is finished.*”<sup>142</sup> Greek: *Tetélestai*. This never needs to be repeated. What Jesus did in taking upon Himself the sin of the world will never have to be repeated. The scapegoat carried the sins of the people into the desert and will never be seen again. The blood of the other goat has been applied to the throne of God. The deal is done!

V.27 uses human death as an illustration, although any mention of death serves us as a reminder of what awaits us. But the purpose of the phrase “Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment...” is not to give us a warning, but only to show that death is unrepeatable. We can only die once. There is, of course a healthy warning in the addition “and after that to face judgment,” but that doesn’t change the reason for the comparison. Paul states clearly: “For we know that since Christ was raised from the dead, he cannot die again; death no longer has mastery over him. The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God.”<sup>143</sup> On the last statement of this chapter about Christ’s return, *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “And he will come a second time not to bear sin, but to meet sinners whose sins are washed away in his atoning blood. These are the redeemed of God who wait for him. Believers will then enter into full salvation and the actual presence of God. Those who know the joy of salvation should also know the hope of the Lord’s coming.”

The hardest point for a law-abiding Jew to understand was that the rituals he practices in daily life were not the ultimate reality; they were but a picture. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: “The contrast between *shadow* (*skian*) and *true form* (*eikona*) corresponds to the contrast between the old and new covenants, the old and the new approach to God. Yet there is a similar basic connection between them as an object bears resemblance to its shadow. A shadow can never claim to be a complete revelation of its object. At best it can give only the barest outline of the reality. Moreover, once the true form has been seen, the shadow becomes irrelevant. This observation is used by the writer to stress once again the inadequacies of the old shadowy procedures. *The good things to come* are clearly the gospel with its spiritual high-priesthood. Some patristic writers identified them as the Christian sacraments. But the interpretation here seems to be more general in the sense of all good things of which the law provided only the adumbration. This throws us back on the list of ‘better’ things already mentioned in the epistle. It is worth noting that the law is said to ‘have’ the shadow rather than to ‘be,’ which suggests that the law is not itself the shadow, but

<sup>140</sup> Lev. 16:6-17

<sup>141</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>142</sup> John 19:30

<sup>143</sup> Rom. 6:9,10

only that it possesses the shadow, *i.e.* the ceremonial cultus. There is also enshrined in the law what is more permanent, *i.e.* the moral demands.”

The sheer repetition of the rites is proof of its ineffectiveness. That is what the writer of the epistle is trying to prove. If the Old Testament sacrifice of an animal for human sin could clean the slate and eradicate sinful human nature, there would be no need for any repetition of sacrifices. The shedding of animal blood did not even have the potential to bring about moral cleansing. Animal blood could only cover human sin; it could not eradicate it. The blood of Christ has wiped clean the slate of our guilt and it cleanses our conscience of every sin we confess. So far human sinful nature has not been eradicated. That is why the Apostle John writes: “This is the message we have heard from him and declare to you: God is light; in him there is no darkness at all. If we claim to have fellowship with him yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not live by the truth. But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness. If we claim we have not sinned, we make him out to be a liar and his word has no place in our lives.”<sup>144</sup> The fact that, as redeemed people, we still struggle with sinful tendencies is a matter of great frustration. Luther captured this well by saying about our sinful nature: “We think we drowned the animal, but the beast can swim.”

The quotation in vv.5-7 is from Psalm 40 as it appears in the LXX. There are some slight differences between the text here and as it reads in the Old Testament. The original reads: “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require. Then I said, ‘Here I am, I have come — it is written about me in the scroll. I desire to do your will, O my God; your law is within my heart.’”<sup>145</sup> The most obvious difference is between “my ears you have pierced,” in the original and “a body you prepared for me,” in the quotation. In spite of the difference in wording, there is little difference in intent.

David’s reference to ear piercing points to the law about a Hebrew slave who had served his master for six years and was legally free to go in the seventh year. The law stated: “But if the servant declares, ‘I love my master and my wife and children and do not want to go free,’ then his master must take him before the judges. He shall take him to the door or the doorpost and pierce his ear with an awl. Then he will be his servant for life.”<sup>146</sup> The point in both texts is total obedience based on love.

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* suggests that the difference in reading in the LXX is due to the misreading of some Hebrew letters which caused the writers of the Greek translation to substitute “body” for “ears.” We will leave that problem for what it is.

We know very little about Jesus’ life on earth as a young man before He entered into His ministry at the age of approximately thirty. Going through the natural developments of childhood and adolescence, the Old Testament Scriptures must have played an important role in His understanding of the Father’s will for His life. Psalm 40 must have been an essential part of His coming to maturity. The understanding that the Old Testament ritual of sacrifices was a preparation for His death on the cross furnished the biblical basis for His obedience. There must have been a point in Jesus’ life as a human being at which He pledged total obedience to the Father’s will regarding His death on the cross as a ransom payment for all of humanity. This Psalm testifies to this pledge. His baptism by John the Baptist may have been Jesus’ public testimony signifying that He accepted the Father’s call for His life to give Himself as a ransom for many.

The point the author of Hebrews wants to make is that the sacrifice of Jesus’ body eliminated the need for animal sacrifices as substitute for human guilt. It was not that the Old Testament did not actually require those sacrifices, but they were not God’s final solution to man’s sin problem in life. This is expressed in the words “‘Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them’ (although the law required them to be made).”

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on vv.9 and 10: “Of special note is the recurrence of the words *Lo, I have come to do thy will* as an expression of the perfect obedience of Christ. The general comment on

<sup>144</sup> I John 1:5-10

<sup>145</sup> Ps. 40:6-8

<sup>146</sup> Ex. 21:5,6

the whole quotation is *He abolishes the first in order to establish the second*. An unusual word is employed for the abolition of the first, for the verb which is translated ‘abolishes’ (*anairei*) generally has the sense of kill. There is a finality about the passing of the old. If there had not been, the second could never have been established. It is the difference between the total failure of irrational offerings to effect a final solution and the total adequacy of a rational obedience to establish a new way once for all.

*By that will* refers to the will of God, which has just been mentioned in the quotation. Its only complete fulfillment is seen in the perfect obedience of Christ. The immediate effect is that *we have been sanctified*. The idea seems to be that those in Christ have been so identified with him that in him they too have fulfilled the will of God. This sense of solidarity with Christ is not as frequent in this epistle as in the epistles of Paul, but it is all the more striking in this context. The sanctification process is one which has never been completed except in Christ. Were it not for that the verb could not have been expressed as it is in the perfect tense. Since Christ is perfectly sanctified through his perfect obedience to the will of God, it may be said that his sanctification is shared by all who believe. It is noticeable, however, that the writer does not define the beneficiaries any further – the *we* must be interpreted in the light of the previous chapter (cf. 9:28).

The addition of the words *through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ* clarifies the means by which Christ’s obedience can be effective for us. It is important to notice that it was the body of Christ which was offered, for this draws attention to the centrality of the cross. What he did, he did in the body, in the sphere of human life, the same kind of human life which we possess. In his self-offering he gathered up mankind. Of course, what the writer is saying is not that believers have no further need of obedience because Christ has accomplished it, but that God received us on the basis of Christ’s perfect fulfillment of his will. The finality of it (*once for all, ephapax*) has already been mentioned in 7:27 and 9:12.”

The Greek text of v.10 reads literally: “By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” The Greek verb *heegiasménōi* is the perfect past participle of the verb *hagiazō*, “to sanctify.” It does not describe a growing process but an accomplished fact that cannot be changed and to which nothing can be added.

This does not correspond to our concept of sanctification, that is the awareness of sinlessness. It is the position we occupy before God, the legal ground that allow us to approach and enter into His presence. Whether our consciousness of guilt or the absence of it is active, has nothing to do with the legal fact.

*Barnes’ Notes* observes: “Whatever part his personal obedience had in our salvation, yet the particular thing here specified is, that it was his doing the will of God by offering himself as a sacrifice for sin that was the means of our sanctification. [We are sanctified] We are made holy. The word here is not confined to the specific work which is commonly called sanctification-or the process of making the soul holy after it is renewed, but it includes everything by which we are made holy in the sight of God. It embraces, therefore, justification and regeneration as well as what is commonly known as sanctification. The idea is, that whatever there is in our hearts which is holy, or whatever influences are brought to bear upon us to make us holy, is all to be traced to the fact that the Redeemer became obedient unto death, and was willing to offer his body as a sacrifice for sin.”

The finality and efficacy of Christ’s sacrifice is accentuated by the position He presently occupies in heaven. At other places in this epistle Jesus’ ministry as intercessor is emphasized.<sup>147</sup> Using a quotation from Psalm 110, the author now shows the victorious aspect of His atoning death. The verse referred to reads: “The Lord says to my Lord: ‘Sit at my right hand until I make your enemies a footstool for your feet.’”<sup>148</sup>

This section ends with two quotations from Jeremiah. The same passage had already been quoted in chapter eight. There is a slight change of words which makes no difference in the meaning. The literal text in Jeremiah reads: “‘This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time,’ declares the Lord. ‘I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my

<sup>147</sup> Heb. 7:25

<sup>148</sup> Ps. 110:1

people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, ‘ ‘Know the Lord,’ ‘ because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest,’ declares the Lord.”<sup>149</sup>

The most important implication of the first part of the quotation is that our legal status of being sanctified in Christ requires a change of heart and behavior on our part. God will not write His laws on our heart and mind without an act of total surrender on our part. It takes a pledge of obedience on our part for God’s covenant to take effect in our lives.

For as much as we can understand, God’s omniscience means that it would be impossible for Him to ever forget anything that ever happened in our lives. There is a sense in which God’s forgetting of our sins and lawless acts is an impossibility. My personal experience at the moment of my conversion was that God made it clear to me that He was no longer willing to discuss the topic of my guilt. By an act of divine will God decides to wipe clean the slate for those who believe that Jesus Christ paid for their sins when He died on the cross.

Since the ultimate substitution for human guilt has been made on the cross, the whole ceremonial Old Testament law of animal sacrifices has become redundant.

### **Part Three: The Superiority of the Christian’s Walk of Faith (10:19—13:25)**

#### ***I. A Call to Full Assurance of Faith 10:19—11:40***

##### ***A. Hold Fast the Confession of Faith 10:19-25***

*19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,*

*20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,*

*21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,*

*22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.*

*23 Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.*

*24 And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.*

*25 Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another — and all the more as you see the Day approaching.*

These verses are some of the greatest in all of Scripture. The keyword in this wonderful passage is “confidence.” The Greek word used is *parrhesia*, which has the root meaning of “frankness” or “assurance.” Writing to a Jewish audience which had been brought up with the Old Testament picture in mind of the high priest entering the holy of holies in the tabernacle, the thought that any layperson could possibly enter where the high priest would enter at the risk of his life would be an impossibility. In other verses in this epistle where the same word is used, it is rendered “confidence.” Confidence is the equivalent of faith. In the next chapter, the author will explain that faith is the substance of our relationship to God. Using the Greek word *hupostasis*, which refers to a solid base upon which a structure can be erected, he shows that faith is the entrance into a realm that is more concrete and real than anything else we know on earth.

Entrance into the holiest of all, into God’s very presence is called “the living way.” This is stated in contrast to what God said to Moses when introducing the law on the Day of Atonement. We read: “The Lord spoke to Moses after the death of the two sons of Aaron who died when they approached the Lord. The Lord said to Moses: ‘Tell your brother Aaron not to come whenever he chooses into the Most Holy Place behind the curtain in front of the atonement cover on the ark, or else he will die, because I appear in the cloud over the atonement cover.’”<sup>150</sup>

<sup>149</sup> Jer. 31:33,34

<sup>150</sup> Lev. 16:1,2

This way into God's presence is living, because it is a Person. Jesus says: "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."<sup>151</sup> Meeting the Father requires identification with the person of Jesus Christ.

The author of Hebrews uses some beautiful images to depict this entrance. He compares the veil that prevented people from entering the most holy place to the body of Christ. The reference is to the event the Gospel writers describe at the moment when Jesus died on the cross. We read: "And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit. At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom."<sup>152</sup> The curtain was torn as Christ's body was torn on the cross. As the curse of God upon human sin hit the person of Jesus Christ, the blessing of fellowship with the Father was poured out upon us in the person of Christ.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: "In describing the access as a *new (prosphaton) and living way*, the writer uses a word which occurs only here in the New Testament. It originally meant 'freshly slain,' but its derived meaning is 'fresh' or 'recent.' It is meant to contrast with the old order and so calls attention to its recentness, which at once links it with the work of Christ. The idea of the *way* is also suggestive not only because this was the title by which the early Christians were known, but also because of a word play in the Greek between this word and the word used in verse 19 for entrance (*hodos* and *eisodos*). Indeed the whole phrase used here would be an apt description of this writer's view of Christianity. The idea of the *way* has already been introduced in 9:8 and seems to have been a kind of technical term for access to God. There is no word corresponding to *by* in Greek, which makes the *way* the object of the verb *opened* and links it with the idea of entrance in verse 19. The construction is difficult in Greek, but it seems clear that the words do not identify Jesus as the way. The way of access is, in fact, the result of his atoning work."

The last statement can be refuted with a reference to John 14:6 where Jesus calls Himself "the way."

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, asks what is meant by "the Most Holy Place." He answers: "It is none other than that very same Holiest into which Christ, when He had rent the veil in His death, entered through His own blood, to appear before the face of God for us. That Holiest of All is the heavenly place. But not heaven, as it is ordinarily understood, as a locality, distinct and separate from this earth. The heaven of God is not limited in space in the same way as a place on earth. There is a heaven above us, the place of God's special manifestation, but there is also a spiritual heaven, as omnipresent as God Himself. Where God is, heaven is; the heaven of His presence includes this earth, too. The Holiest into which Christ entered and into which He opened the way for us is the inaccessible (to nature) light of God's holy presence and love; it is full union and communion with Him. Into that Holiest the soul can enter by the faith that makes us one with Christ. The Holy Spirit, who first signified that the way of the Holiest was not yet open; through whom Jesus shed the blood that opened the way; who, on the day of Pentecost, witnessed in the hearts of the disciples that it was now indeed open—this Holy Spirit waits to testify to us what it means to enter in and to bring us in. He lifts the soul up into the Holiest; He brings the Holiest down into the soul."

There are two requirements for entering into the place of intimate fellowship with God. The first one mentioned is "confidence" and the second "a great high priest." The second is the objective necessity upon which the first subjective rests. Confidence to enter would be unwarranted without the presence of the great high priest. In this instance, as in many instances in life, whom we know is more important than what we know. It is our relationship with Jesus Christ that allows us to come and commune with the Father.

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, states: "The function of the priest was to build a bridge between man and God. This means that Jesus not only shows us the way to God but also when we get there introduces us to his very presence. A man might be able to direct an enquirer to Buckingham Palace and yet be very far from having the right to take him into the presence of the Queen; but Jesus can take us the whole way."

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<sup>151</sup> John 14:6

<sup>152</sup> Matt. 27:50,51; Mark 15:37,38; Luke 23:44-46

In reality, the relationship of Jesus with the Father is so real and intimate that we could almost call it “organic.” When Philip asked Jesus to show the Father to him and to his fellow disciples, Jesus answered: “Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.”<sup>153</sup>

The Greek word for “draw near” is *proserchomai*, which is a combination of *pros* (a preposition of direction) and *erchomai* (“to come,” “to approach”). Since the exhortation describes a spiritual experience, not a physical entering into a place, it is an invitation to intimacy with God. To know God fully as He knows us is, of course, an impossibility. Our knowledge of God will grow in the measure in which we open ourselves up for Him. Having stated in one of his psalms: “O Lord, you have searched me and you know me. You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar. You discern my going out and my lying down; you are familiar with all my ways. Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O Lord,” David continues: “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.”<sup>154</sup> The measure of our intimacy with God will depend upon the degree of our surrender.

The author of Hebrews describes the attitude with which we must enter as “a sincere heart.” The actual words used are “a true heart.” The requirement is one of total honesty toward ourselves, which is not the attitude that comes naturally to people with a sinful nature. Our natural condition is what Jeremiah describes as: “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?”<sup>155</sup> God answers Jeremiah’s question by saying: “I the Lord search the heart and examine the mind, to reward a man according to his conduct, according to what his deeds deserve.”<sup>156</sup> Only God can make us honest toward ourselves. Without the help of the Holy Spirit no one would be able to enter into the Holy of Holies.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on the four conditions the author of Hebrews states as requirement for entry. We read: “Four conditions of approach are laid down in this verse:

(i) *With a true heart.* If the adjective is understood in the same sense as in 8:2 it refers to what is real as opposed to what is only apparent. There can be no pretence of a devotion which is not true. The expression would seem to refer to the genuineness of the worshipper’s approach to God.

(ii) *In (en) full assurance of faith.* Already some emphasis has been placed on faith in this epistle and more is to follow in chapter 11. This fullness of assurance is important, for there is no longer any reason to doubt that access will be gained. The writer is not only clear about the possibility of full assurance, but assumes it to be present in all worshippers who take advantage of the ‘new way.’ The use of the preposition (*en*) in fact suggests that this faith-assurance is the sphere or environment in which approach is to be made.

(iii) *With our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience.* Undoubtedly the metaphor of sprinkling is derived from the Levitical cultus, where blood sprinkling of people is spoken of at the ratifying of the old covenant (Ex. 24:8) and at the consecration of Aaron and his sons (Ex. 29:11). There is no specific mention there as here of cleansing the conscience. But the altogether more effective means of cleansing, which Christian worshippers have, relates directly to the conscience. It is more than a ritual act; it is a moral condition.

(iv) *And our bodies washed with pure water.* This appears to be an allusion to Christian baptism, although this view is not without its difficulties. If correct, it would require some initiatory rite of a public nature before anyone could draw near. But since the other conditions are not external it seems strange that the fourth should be so. The cleansing of the body might find some explanation from Ephesians 5:26 where Christ is said to have cleansed the church ‘by the washing of water with the word.’ The use of the adjective ‘pure’ would also seem to suggest a symbolic meaning. The difference between (iii) and (iv) would then be between purity of inner attitudes and overt acts.”

The Greek text of v.23, which *The New International Version* reads as: “Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful,” reads literally in the Greek text: “Let us hold fast the

<sup>153</sup> John 14:9

<sup>154</sup> Ps. 139:1-4,23,24

<sup>155</sup> Jer. 17:9

<sup>156</sup> Jer. 17:10

profession of [our] faith without wavering; he is faithful (for that promised).” The Greek has one word for “let us hold fast.” The word is *katecho*, which is also used in this epistle in ch. 3:6 and 14.

*Barnes’ Notes* comments here: “It is evident that those whom he wrote were suffering persecution (Heb 12), and that there was great danger that they would apostatize. As these persecutions came probably from the Jews, and as the aim was to induce them to return to their former opinions, the object of the apostle is to show that there was in the Christian scheme every advantage of which the Jews could boast; everything pertaining to the dignity of the great Founder of the system, the character of the High Priest, and the nature and value of the sacrifices offered, and that all this was possessed far more abundantly in the permanent Christian system than in what was typical in its character, and which were designed soon to vanish away.”

Although the word “hope” is not found in the original text, its insertion here is not inappropriate. The circumstances in which the recipients of this epistle lived must have been very frustrating and hard. As *Barnes’ Notes* pointed out, the pressure then, as it is now for Messianic Jews, was the accusation that conversion to Christianity meant abandoning the Jewish heritage. Outward circumstances invariably oppose the expectations of the Gospel message. For Jews, who were accustomed to equate fellowship with God with material prosperity, it was particularly difficult to accept that salvation and suffering were not incompatible. The message Paul and Barnabas brought to the early church was: “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God.”<sup>157</sup> It sometimes seems as if, to put it in human terms, the Almighty takes risky chances with His children. But, as most Christians who go through many hardships discover, God’s faithfulness becomes most evident in the dark spots of our life. Following the Jesus Way means to emulate the perseverance of Jesus Christ as He entered the kingdom through suffering, death and resurrection.

It is almost impossible for a person who has not grown up in the Jewish tradition to understand the awesomeness of the invitation to enter the Most Holy Place in the tabernacle or the temple. The Old Testament gives several examples of what happened to those who even inadvertently touched the ark. The two sons of Aaron lost their lives as did Uzzah.<sup>158</sup> Even if there were an awareness that the ark was only a copy of the heavenly reality, not that reality itself, the consequence of approaching or touching was like touching high-tension electrical wire. The result was instant death. Present day faithful Jews still stand in awe before the stones of the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, which are the only remainders of the temple that Solomon built. They believe that the presence of God is still in those old stones.

The author of Hebrews shoves all the images aside and takes us to the threshold of the original in eternity; there he invites us to enter. The stones of the Wailing Wall are dead stones; here we are putting our feet on the new and living way that leads us through the real curtain, torn for our benefit, into the very presence of the throne of God and to God who is enthroned on it. If the experience were a physical one, our senses would be overwhelmed to the point where we would fall at His feet as though dead.<sup>159</sup> We would then feel the touch of His right hand and hear His voice saying: “Do not be afraid I am the First and the Last. I am the Living One. I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever. And I hold the keys of death and Hades.”<sup>160</sup> That will be our experience physically as we pass on from life into eternity. But at present we may have the experience of this spiritual divine moment of fellowship with our Lord and our God, simply by faith.

No blessing is meant to be enjoyed privately. The quenching of our thirst produces streams of living water that flow out from within us.<sup>161</sup> That means that we will “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” Our prayer will be that God will make us a blessing in the lives of others.

The danger in this state of spiritual experience is that we may begin to consider ourselves to be very important tools in the Lord’s hand and take credit for this. The enemy will begin to make us compliments and tell us how good we are doing. After John Newton preached a sermon one Sunday morning, one of his parishioners came to him and said: “Reverend Newton that was a wonderful sermon.” To which Newton replied: “Thank you, brother, the devil told me that already.” We need the fellowship of the saints to keep

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<sup>157</sup> Acts 14:22

<sup>158</sup> Lev. 10:1,2; II Sam. 6:6,7

<sup>159</sup> Rev. 1:17

<sup>160</sup> Rev. 1:18

<sup>161</sup> John 7:37-39

in view where our place is in the body of Christ. Withdrawing from organized church services, which obviously was as much a problem in the early church as it is presently, can have harmful consequences for our own spiritual status. The saints need our fellowship and we need theirs.

One great stimulus, which has become less relevant for believers in later centuries, is the hope of Christ's return. Expecting the coming of the thief in the night will have a wholesome effect upon our moral behavior.

**B. Fourth Warning: Danger of Drawing Back                      10:26-39**

*26 If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left,*

*27 but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.*

*28 Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.*

*29 How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace?*

*30 For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people."*

*31 It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

*32 Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering.*

*33 Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated.*

*34 You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.*

*35 So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.*

*36 You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised.*

*37 For in just a very little while, "He who is coming will come and will not delay.*

*38 But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him."*

*39 But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved.*

Of all admonitions given so far in this epistle this one is by far the more serious and compelling. The Greek text of v.26 reads literally: "For if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remains no more sacrifice for sin." In the Greek, "willfully," *hekousios*, is the first word in the sentence, giving it the greatest emphasis. This is the only place in Hebrews where this word is found. Peter also uses it once in his admonition to the elders of the church, saying: "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because *you are willing*, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve."<sup>162</sup>

Some Bible scholars interpret this admonition to pertain to people who had reverted to the Old Testament ceremonial law and believed that the death of Christ had not eliminated the need for animal sacrifices. I believe the admonition is not given to unbelievers but to people who believed to have been set at liberty in the salvation of their souls and the forgiveness of their sins. They believed they were free to do whatever they wanted, and they tried to extend the boundaries of this freedom to the very limit. It is to those people

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<sup>162</sup> I Peter 5:2



that the Apostle Paul issued the warning: “‘Everything is permissible for me’ but not everything is beneficial. ‘Everything is permissible for me’-but I will not be mastered by anything.”<sup>163</sup>

It is sometimes difficult to determine the will of the Lord in certain instances about which Scripture does not give specific instructions. Two principles can be applied to any question in this area: “Is what I do glorifying God?” and “does my act express love for my neighbor?” As far as the first one is concerned, it is helpful to remember that we are to glorify God with our body. The Apostle Paul states: “Do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body.”<sup>164</sup> And: “You, my brothers, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the sinful nature; rather, serve one another in love. The entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”<sup>165</sup>

The assumption that the Levitical law only provided atonement for sins committed in ignorance is not correct. For example, we read: “If anyone sins and is unfaithful to the Lord by deceiving his neighbor about something entrusted to him or left in his care or stolen, or if he cheats him, or if he finds lost property and lies about it, or if he swears falsely, or if he commits any such sin that people may do — when he thus sins and becomes guilty, he must return what he has stolen or taken by extortion, or what was entrusted to him, or the lost property he found, or whatever it was he swore falsely about. He must make restitution in full, add a fifth of the value to it and give it all to the owner on the day he presents his guilt offering. And as a penalty he must bring to the priest, that is, to the Lord, his guilt offering, a ram from the flock, one without defect and of the proper value. In this way the priest will make atonement for him before the Lord, and he will be forgiven for any of these things he did that made him guilty.”<sup>166</sup> The acts described in these verses are committed knowingly and willfully.

So it was not that the Levitical law did not provide for willful acts of sin. The difference is that the Old Testament sacrifice was an animal, in the New Testament it is the body of Christ. If we consider the price paid for our sins and not determine that we are in desperate need of sanctification, we obviously miss the point of God’s grace. Any deliberate sin committed after we have come to the realization that God has wiped our slate clean amounts to a denial of the greatness and depth of Christ’s sacrifice.

The author reminds his audience that the Law of Moses demanded the death penalty for any transgression. This was not literally the case. The reference to the need for two or three witnesses points specifically to cases of idolatry.<sup>167</sup>

*Barnes’ Notes* observes about v.28: “[He that despised Moses’ law] That is, the apostate from the religion of Moses. It does not mean that in all cases the offender against the Law of Moses died without mercy, but only where offences were punishable with death, and probably the apostle had in his eye particularly the case of apostasy from the Jewish religion. The subject of apostasy from the Christian religion is particularly under discussion here, and it was natural to illustrate this by a reference to a similar case under the Law of Moses. The Law in regard to apostates from the Jewish religion was positive. There was no reprieve; Deut 13:6-10.

[Died without mercy] That is, there was no provision for pardon.

[Under two or three witnesses] It was the settled law among the Hebrews that in all cases involving capital punishment, two or three witnesses should be necessary. That is, no one was to be executed unless two persons certainly bore testimony, and it was regarded as important, if possible, that three witnesses should concur in the statement. The object was the security of the accused person if innocent. The ‘principle’ in the Law was, that it was to be presumed that two or three persons would be much less likely to conspire to render a false testimony than one would be, and that two or three would not be likely to be deceived in regard to a fact which they had observed.”

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<sup>163</sup> I Cor. 6:12; 10:23

<sup>164</sup> I Cor. 6:19,20

<sup>165</sup> Gal. 5:13,14

<sup>166</sup> Lev. 6:2-7

<sup>167</sup> See Deut. 17:2-7.

The attitude of those Jews who rejected the Gospel is described as trampling “the Son of God under foot,” treating “as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant,” and insulting “the Spirit of grace.” Trampling under foot is the translation of the Greek verb *katapateo*, which is the same word used in describing what happens when one throws pearls to pigs.<sup>168</sup> Considering the blood of Christ “unclean” (*koinos*) refers to things that are ceremoniously unclean. The same word is found in the accusation the Pharisees made to Jesus’ disciples when they observed that they ate food “with hands that were ‘unclean.’”<sup>169</sup>

Having made the point that the Law of Moses carried the death penalty for certain transgressions, the author states: “How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot...” The question arises naturally as to whether any punishment more severe than capital punishment can be administered to a person? And the suggestion is that there must be things worse than death.

We know virtually nothing about what happens to human sin at the moment of death. Passing through the narrow gate may trigger repentance in a flash and the tears wiped off by God from some faces may be tears of repentance. In some instances the death penalty may be the most merciful and liberating experience a person can go through. But those who insulted the Spirit of grace and who insist that their sins go with them in their grave, there will be a facing of the wrath of God on the other side. About this, the author of Hebrews says: “It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” The prophet Amos foresaw this and exclaimed: “The lion has roared — who will not fear?”<sup>170</sup> Here in Hebrews, the Lion has caught His prey and is ready to devour it. This is the second death for such a person. Since the roaring of a lion in any jungle will cause a healthy fear in a person’s heart and bring about some measures of protection, this warning in Hebrews, which is like the roaring of the Lion of Judah, ought to stop us in our tracks to reconsider if the path we are going through life is a safe one. The Spirit of grace is the One who is willing to serve as our guide. We do well to follow and respect Him.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on the last verses of this chapter: “The process of recollection is sometimes a fruitful pursuit when it calls to mind former lessons, even if those lessons had been learnt in a hard school. The word *recall* (*anamimnēskō*) is used only here in this epistle, but occurs twice in Mark (11:21; 14:72) and three times in Paul (1 Cor. 4:17; 2 Cor. 7:15 and 2 Tim. 1:6). It denotes some effort in calling to mind. One would have thought that such effort would be unnecessary when the subject of recall is the believer’s former sufferings, but it is surprising how most people’s memories need to be prodded.

*The former days* implies that this group of believers has been Christians for some time. They can now look back on earlier days to the time of their enlightenment. This is an expressive way of referring to their conversion (cf. 6:4). It is reminiscent of the Pauline statement in 2 Corinthians 4:6, where the idea of spiritual illuminations is prominent. These Christians are told *you endured a hard struggle*. The word *athlēsin* describing this is another word found nowhere else in the New Testament, meaning an athletic contest, and therefore applied metaphorically to a struggle. In this case the imagery seems to be an obstacle race with *sufferings* as the obstacles to be overcome.

Here details are given of the kind of suffering that the readers had endured. It is described as *being publicly exposed to abuse and affliction*. This shows how they had had a personal involvement in the suffering of Christ. Of the two words used here to denote suffering, ‘abuse’ (*oneidismoi*) is found also in 11:26 in the description of the abuse which Moses endured as a result of his rejection of his exalted position in Egypt, and in 13:13 in the description of what is in store for those who go outside the camp with Christ. It is very much tied up with the reproach which Christ endured (cf. Rom. 15:3). The other word, *affliction* (*thlipsis*), is much more common in the New Testament, although it occurs only here in Hebrews. Perhaps the most striking instance is in Colossians 1:25, in which Paul speaks of completing that which is lacking in Christ’s afflictions. These Hebrews had had a part in a similar experience. The verse translated *being publicly exposed* (*theatrizomai*) occurs only here in the New Testament, but Paul uses the cognate noun in 1 Corinthians 4:9. Both the verb and noun derive their force from a theatrical spectacle, the idea being that

<sup>168</sup> Matt. 7:6

<sup>169</sup> Mark 7:1-4

<sup>170</sup> Amos 3:8

the Christians had been made a public target for abuse. This again ties in with the abuse to which Christ himself was subjected.

In addition to their own personal sufferings, they sometimes suffered through association with others. A close-knit Christian community is bound to experience both kinds of suffering when persecution comes. What form this second kind took is not stated. It was enough for the writer's purpose to remind the readers that they were partners (*koinōmoi*), which recalls the familiar New Testament concept of fellowship or participation. The believers had found it a privilege to 'share' each other's sufferings. This is fellowship on the deepest level."

The reference to imprisonment reminds us of the activities of Saul before his conversion on the road to Damascus, who spent his time and energy in dragging Christians off to jail.<sup>171</sup>

The impression one gets is that in the early days of the church persecution came in waves. There had been an early hostile reaction from the side of conservative Jewish leaders to the conversion to the "Jesus Way" of a group of Jewish believers. That was the period in which Saul dragged people into prison. At the writing of this letter the trouble may have come from the side of the Roman government which considered Christians to be a threat to the stability of the empire because of their refusal to deify and worship the emperor. That was the time of Paul's imprisonment and death. As the new converts had persevered during the first wave of trouble, they are now encouraged to persevere in the second wave.

The author uses a quotation from Habakkuk's prophecy about the coming of the Babylonian invasion. There is quite a discrepancy between the Hebrew text as it is found in Habakkuk and the Greek quotation taken from the LXX. In Habakkuk's text it is the revelation that lingers to be given; in Hebrews the reference is to the coming of the Lord, which will not delay. Putting the two texts next to each other will prove the differences. In Habakkuk we read: "For the revelation awaits an appointed time; it speaks of the end and will not prove false. Though it linger, wait for it; it will certainly come and will not delay. 'See, he is puffed up; his desires are not upright — but the righteous will live by his faith.'"<sup>172</sup> The text in Hebrews reads: "He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith. And if he shrinks back, I will not be pleased with him." Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, attributes the changes in the text to the fact that in Habakkuk's time the application was the coming of the Chaldeans. The author of Hebrews applies the words to the coming of Christ and takes liberty to change the wording accordingly.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "The quotation, as usual, is from the LXX., which, in this case as in some others, differs from the Hebrew. But here, as in ver. 29, *supra*, the LXX. is not exactly followed. The writer cites freely, so as to apply the essential meaning of the passage to his purpose. The Prophet Habakkuk (writing probably during the long evil days of Manasseh) had in his immediate view the trials of faith peculiar to his own time — violence and iniquity in Israel, and imminence of judgment at the hands of Chaldean conquerors, under which he had cried, 'O Lord, how long?' But he stands upon his watch and sits upon his tower, to look out what the LORD will say to him in answer to his difficulties. And the LORD answered him, and said, 'Write the vision, and make it plain upon the tables, that he may run that readeth it. For the vision is yet for an appointed time, but at the end it shall speak, and not lie [rather, 'but it hasteth to the end, and doth not lie']: though it tarry, wait for it; because it will surely come, and not tarry [or, 'be behindhand']. Behold, his soul that is lifted up is not upright in him [or, 'behold, his soul is lifted up, it is not upright in him']; but the just shall live by his faith.' The drift of this Divine answer, which inspired the song of joyful confidence with which the Book of Habakkuk so beautifully concludes, is, as aforesaid, that, in spite of all appearances, the prophetic vision will ere long be realized; God's promises to the righteous will certainly be fulfilled; and that faith meanwhile must be their sustaining principle."

The chapter ends with the author's confidence that his readers will identify themselves with "the righteous" in Habakkuk's day, who lived by faith and identity, not with the ones who shrink back. The phrase is more than a mere psychological boost. As *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: "Faith is the keynote of this passage. Those who live by faith and die in faith will ultimately rejoice in the final salvation guaranteed in Christ. As Habakkuk admonishes, men are not to shrink back (ASV), for then God is obliged to act as described in Heb 10:26-31. True believers will not be guilty of such shrinking back. Their faith is a faith unto the saving of the soul (ASV). In his description of the faith of the true believer, the writer has

<sup>171</sup> Acts 9:1,2

<sup>172</sup> Hab. 2:3,4

introduced in a quiet manner the next phase of his exhortation.” In this way the bridge is built to the hall of fame chapter of Old Testament faith heroes to whom the readers can trace their roots.

### **C. Definition of Faith 11:1-3**

**1** *Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.*

**2** *This is what the ancients were commended for.*

**3** *By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.*

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* introduces this section with: “Having introduced the faith life as the subject of his final exhortation, and having described it both as to its elements and its opposites, the writer now brings to his argument the example of numerous people who lived such a life of faith. It is as though someone who had followed all the careful reasoning of the author now requested some evidence or proof to substantiate the claims made. Have any persons ever lived like this? Assuredly! Who are they? Heb 11:1-12:4 is the writer’s answer.”

The Greek text of v.1 reads literally: “Now faith is [the] substance of things hoped for, [the] evidence of things not seen.” The important Greek word in the text is *elpizoménōon*, a participle of the verb *elpizo*, “to expect.” In most instances the word is translated with “hope,” but occasionally we find the rendering “trust,” as in “And I trust that you will discover that we have not failed the test.”<sup>173</sup> The important thing is that in Greek “faith” is treated as a noun, not as a verb, as *The New International Version* does. Although *The New International Version*’s rendering is impressive, *The King James*’ “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” is more powerful and truer to the original. Faith is more than something we think, it is a foundation upon which life is built.

Faith is not wishful thinking, a vague, unsubstantiated hope that something will happen someday. Faith has a bases upon which it rests, which makes its expectation more than merely reasonable. We believe that the sun will rise this morning, because we have seen it happening all the mornings before. We trust a person because we found out at a pervious time that the individual came through with what was promised. We trust God, not only because we have some previous experiences of His faithfulness, but the very fact that He created everything visible and invisible out of nothing, makes Him trustworthy enough to provide for our smallest needs.

*The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* comments on the phrase “things hoped for”: “*Elengchos* signifies such a conviction as is produced in the mind by the demonstration of a problem, after which demonstration no doubt can remain, because we see from it that the thing is; that it cannot but be; and that it cannot be otherwise than as it is, and is proved to be. Such is the faith by which the soul is justified; or rather, such are the effects of justifying faith: on it subsists the peace of God which passes all understanding; and the love of God is shed abroad in the heart where it lives, by the Holy Spirit.”

Our text reads that the ancients were recommended for their faith. The Greek uses the word *martureo*, which literally means “to bear witness to.” The English word “martyr” is derived from it, carrying with it the extreme consequences of their witness, although this is not necessarily implied in this context.

As a first example of faith, the author uses nature in general. Looking at nature, it is logical to conclude that where there is a creation there must be a Creator. Believing that everything visible, which operates according to obvious logical laws of cause and effect, must find its origin in something other than sheer coincidence makes sense. To deny this means a suspension of a law that operates everything else observable.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on the opening verses of this chapter: “The account begins with some general statements about faith (verses 1-3). We need not suppose that the writer is attempting a precise definition of faith in his opening statement. He gives rather those important aspects which are illustrated so vividly in the past experiences of the people of God. The statement, *Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for*, introduces the word faith (*pistis*) without the article, which shows that the writer is thinking of faith in general and not specifically Christian faith. It has certain qualities which apply

<sup>173</sup> II Cor. 13:6

to both the pre-Christian and Christian eras. The word translated ‘assurance’ (*hypostasis*) has already been used in 1:3 in the sense of ‘nature’ or ‘essence’ and in 3:14 in the sense of ‘conviction.’ These different uses could both apply in the present passage and it is a question for debate which meaning is best suited to the passage. If the former is right the statement would signify that faith gives reality to the things hoped for. If the second meaning is right (as RSV prefers), the sense is that faith consists of the conviction that what is hoped for will happen. The difference is that between a state and an activity. To decide which is preferable, the meaning of the further word *conviction* (*elenchos*) must be considered. This word basically means ‘proof, test,’ which suggests that faith is seen as the proof of the reality of the *things not seen*. If both parts of the sentence are to be regarded as parallel to each other, it would be best to regard both the key words as pointing to the demonstrating function of faith. Nevertheless the difference between *things hoped for* and *things not seen* weakens the parallel and suggests that the two key words may be taken, one of a state and the other of an activity. Bruce makes a comparison between physical eyesight which produces conviction about visible things and faith which does the same for the invisible order.”

Pointing to nature that surrounds us, the author states “By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God’s command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” The Greek verb, rendered “understand,” is *noeo*, which literally means “to exercise the mind.” This undercuts the idea held by some that faith and reason are incompatible. If we fail to see God behind creation and believe that the present condition of the universe is the result of a series of haphazard collisions of atoms and molecules, we must conclude that our ability to reason also lacks any foundation that would make it solid and reliable. Yet, we use our reason as if the source from which it springs exists and makes it reliable enough to allow us to have opinions and pass judgments. If we believe that creation by a Creator makes no sense, our “sense” does not make sense either. We would not even know that things are supposed to make sense since we would be unable to understand what sense means.

If creation by a Creator makes no sense, none of the following examples of people who exercised faith will make sense either. The author places understanding of creation as the basis for all that follows in this chapter.

#### **D. Examples of Faith                      11:4-40**

##### **1. Abel    11:4**

***4 By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did. By faith he was commended as a righteous man, when God spoke well of his offerings. And by faith he still speaks, even though he is dead.***

The story of Abel’s sacrifice together with his brother’s, Cain, can be read in the fourth chapter of Genesis. “Now Abel kept flocks, and Cain worked the soil. In the course of time Cain brought some of the fruits of the soil as an offering to the Lord. But Abel brought fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The Lord looked with favor on Abel and his offering, but on Cain and his offering he did not look with favor. So Cain was very angry, and his face was downcast. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.’”<sup>174</sup>

In order to understand what happened we must have a closer look at the phrase: “sin is crouching at your door.” The phrase is more difficult to understand than would be expected because of the meaning of the keyword *chatta’ah*, which can mean “offence,” “penalty,” but also “sacrifice.” We could interpret God’s Word to Cain as: “There is a sacrificial animal at your doorstep.” The difference between Cain and Abel was that Abel had conviction of sin. Being dressed in animal skin, he understood what God had done for his parents when they fell into sin and found that their fig leaf covering was insufficient. He knew that the solution to man’s sin problem was in death by substitution. Cain grew up with the same knowledge. The story of paradise lost was as familiar to him as to his younger brother. But Cain lacked the conviction of sin that weighed upon Abel, and his sacrifice was meant to be a show of his ability. He wanted God to know how good a farmer he was, not that he was a sinner in need of forgiveness.

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<sup>174</sup> Gen. 4:2-7

This first illustration links faith to conviction of sin as the basis of all other exploits. The list of heroes of the faith does not begin with those who achieved fame by doing great exploits, it starts with one who confessed his sin and gave his life to prove it.

Some Bible scholars believe that in Abel's day the ceremony of sacrifices had not yet been developed to the point where sacrifices for sin could be expected. But the story of the fall must have been well known among the members of the first family, as was God's solution to the problem. And, as mentioned above, the fact that animal skins were the covering of every human being alive at that time was proof of man's sinful condition.

Bible scholars make much of the fact that God did not look with favor upon Cain's offering and that no indication is given in the text of Genesis how this became evident. Some believe that it was the way the smoke of the altar went upward or downwards. Others suggest that fire may have come from heaven to consume Abel's sacrifice, but not Cain's. All this amounts to guesswork. What is clear is that Cain knew what God thought of his sacrifice and that he heard the voice of God speaking to him.

What is also clear is that the first murder on earth was premeditated. Cain took his brother out to a solitary place and committed cold blooded murder.<sup>175</sup> When God called Cain to account, He said: "Listen! Your brother's blood cries out to me from the ground,"<sup>176</sup> meaning that Cain heard the cry of Abel's blood as well as God did. The author of Hebrews states that it can still be heard, although at a later point he says that the blood of Christ "speaks a better word than the blood of Abel."<sup>177</sup> It was the faith of Abel, which he sealed with his own blood that points to the ultimate sacrifice for sin by the Redeemer God had promised to Abel's mother.

## 2. Enoch

## 11:5-6

***5 By faith Enoch was taken from this life, so that he did not experience death; he could not be found, because God had taken him away. For before he was taken, he was commended as one who pleased God. 6 And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.***

Facts about Enoch are few in the Genesis record. We read that he was the son of Jared, that he fathered a son, Methuselah, at the age of sixty-five and that he began to "walk with God" after the birth of Methuselah for three hundred years. The most unusual detail given is that he was taken up into God's presence without experiencing death.<sup>178</sup>

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, observes this about Abel and Enoch: "The sacrifice of faith is the entrance to the life of faith and ever remains its chief characteristic. After the sacrifice of faith there follows the walk of faith—abiding, continuous fellowship is the fruit of Christ's self-sacrifice and ours. After Abel follows Enoch. Abel showed how death is the entrance to life; he triumphs over death by submitting to it. In Enoch, we see how life triumphed over death; he did not see death. Through faith, Abel, being dead, yet speaks; Enoch speaks as one who ever lives. In Abel, we see how death leads to life. In Enoch, we see the life that never dies. In Abel, we see Christ the crucified, and the boldness we have through the blood to enter in in the new and living way that goes through the rent veil. In Enoch, we see Christ, glorified and have life in the Holiest—the walk with God, the living One."

If we want to read more details about the life and person of Enoch we must go to extra-biblical literature, which lack Scriptural authority. William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the Hebrews*, gives us a sample of the information available, which we copy for the mere sake of curiosity. We read: "In the Old Testament the life of Enoch is summed up in one sentence: 'And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him.' (Genesis 5:24). Many legends gathered around his name. He was said to be the first man skilled in tailoring and in sewing and that he instructed men how to cut out skins in the proper shape to make garments. He was said to be the first to teach men to make shoes to protect their feet. He was said to be the first to put pen to paper and instruct men from books.

<sup>175</sup> Gen. 4:8

<sup>176</sup> Gen. 4:10

<sup>177</sup> Heb. 12:24

<sup>178</sup> Gen. 5:19-24

Legend tells that with Enoch the Angel of Death made a compact of friendship. Enoch made three requests of him. First, to die and come back again so that he might know what death was like. Second, to see the abode of the wicked so that he might know what the punishment of the evil was like. Both these requests were granted. His third request was to be permitted to see into Paradise so that he might see what the blessed enjoyed. This also was granted, but Enoch, having been granted a glimpse of Paradise never came back to earth again.

The simple statement in Genesis has a kind of mystical quality. In itself it does not say how Enoch died. It simply says that in God's good time he passed serenely from this earth. There were two specially famous interpretations of the death of Enoch.

- (i) *The Book of Wisdom* (4:10ff.) has the idea that God took Enoch to himself when he was still young to save him from the infection of this world. 'He was taken away while he lived amidst sinners ... He was snatched away lest evil should change his understanding or guile deceive his soul.' This is another way of putting the famous classical saying: 'Whom the gods love die young.' It looks on death as a reward. It means that God loved Enoch so much that he removed him before age and degeneration descended hand in hand upon him.
- (ii) Philo, the great Alexandrian Jewish interpreter, saw in Enoch the great pattern of repentance. He was changed by repentance from the life that is apart from God to the life that walks with God.

The writer to the Hebrews reads into the simple statement of the Old Testament passage the idea that Enoch did not die at all but that in some mystic way God took him to himself. But surely the meaning is much simpler. In a wicked and corrupt generation Enoch walked with God and so when the end came to him, there was no shock or interruption. Death merely took him into God's nearer presence. Because he walked with God when other men were walking away from him, he daily came nearer to him and death was no more than the last step that took him into the very presence of that God with whom he had always walked."

One of the problems in Barclay's comments seems to be a denial of divine inspiration of *The Epistle to the Hebrews*. The phrase "he did not experience death" can hardly be interpreted differently than in the sense that Enoch did not die in order to enter into the presence of the Lord. Whether his body went through some form of resurrection transformation, or how this happened, we are not told. It seems to me that we remain closer to the intent of the text if we see in Enoch's experience a foreshadowing of what will happen to the mortal bodies of present day believers at the coming of Christ, when "we will all be changed—in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet."<sup>179</sup>

There seems to be a correlation between Enoch's walking with God and the birth of his son Methuselah. We read: "And after he became the father of Methuselah, Enoch walked with God 300 years and had other sons and daughters."<sup>180</sup> This seems to indicate that the birth of Methuselah came to him as a revelation of God's creative power, which drew him to his Creator. Those who have witnessed the birth of their child can certainly identify with this man.

The main point of Enoch's testimony of faith is that it conquered death. As such he is an image of our Lord Jesus Christ, who went through death in order to conquer it. There is no biblical ground to assume that Enoch died and was resurrected, as the mythical records quoted by Barclay suppose. For us Enoch's faith is a stimulus of hope. Unless the Lord returns during our lifetime, we may believe that our dead bodies will be raised at the coming of Christ and that we will be with the Lord forever.

Another important feature in the record of Enoch's life is that faith pleases God. The Almighty is delighted when we put our trust in Him. For those of us who have experienced God's blessing in the renewal of our life through the forgiveness of our sins, the thought that God would not exist is preposterous. As suggested earlier, for life to make sense, there must be a source of sense and reason. To believe that logic is the fruit of an evolutionary development is the most illogical conclusion the human mind can come to. G. K. Chesterton even comments, not without humor, that without God there would be no atheists.

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<sup>179</sup> I Cor. 15:51,52

<sup>180</sup> Gen. 5:23

There is, however, a search for God in life that must result in the finding of God. Life on earth itself tends to argue against God's love and guidance, because of the existence of evil and death. In order to find God among the ruins of human society, one needs the faith that states, not only that there is a God, but also that He rewards our search.

### 3. Noah 11:7

**7 By faith Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. By his faith he condemned the world and became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.**

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, introduces this section with: "In Abel, we see how faith makes death the path to life; in Enoch, how faith conquers death; in Noah, how faith saves others from death by the work it does for them."

*First Chronicles* registers Noah as the great grandson of Enoch.<sup>181</sup> Noah is the second person of whom it is said that he walked with God. We read: "Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God."<sup>182</sup>

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on Noah's faith: "His faith developed in response to a specific warning from God (*being warned by God, chrēmatistheis*). The verb has already been used in 8:5 of God's instruction to Moses, with the force of an authoritative command. The subject of the warning here is said to be *events as yet unseen*, which is an indirect allusion to the flood, a symbol of divine judgment. The nature of Noah's faith is seen in his response to the warning (*took heed and constructed, eulabētheis kateskeuasen*). The former of these two verbs, which occurs only here in the New Testament, has the sense of reverential awe. Such godly fear formed an important element in Noah's faith. It was linked with immediate obedience to God's specific commands regarding the *ark*. Noah's faith, moreover, was not only effective on his own behalf but also on behalf of *his household*. This corporate aspect of faith shows a more extensive application than the faith of either Abel or Enoch.

It seems probably that the words *by this (di' hēs)* are intended to refer to the ark, although they could grammatically refer to Noah's faith. The ark was in any case a visible evidence of his faith to his unbelieving and scoffing contemporaries. The sight of the ark being constructed was a challenge to those contemporaries and forced on them their own condemnation. They were in fact rejecting the divine warning by their unbelief. It is a solemn thought that Noah's faith, because of its nature, was identified as the act by which he *condemned the world*. Where faith is resisted or rejected it leads to condemnation.

The expression *an heir of the righteousness which comes by faith* is interesting because of its linking righteousness (*diakaiosynē*) and faith (*pistis*) in a manner reminiscent of Paul (*cf.* Rom. 4:11; 10:6 and Phil. 3:9, for various formulae used). Here righteousness is said to be 'according to (*kata*) faith,' but RSV, *which comes by faith*, is probably right in seeing faith as the channel through which it comes. The idea of 'an heir' has twice before occurred in this epistle, once of the Son (1:2) and once of the heirs of the promise (6:7). In the case of Noah, the righteousness was not something in the future but in the present. Indeed, he is the first man specifically describes as righteous in the Old Testament (Gn. 6:9)."

The author of *Hebrews* packs a lot of theological truths in the one brief statement about Noah. We read that it was Noah's faith in the Word of God that prompted him to do something that was ridiculous in the eyes of his contemporaries. It was Noah's sense of righteousness that made him understand that the corruption of human society could not continue to exist before the holiness of God. And when God communicated to him that mankind was to be judged, he obeyed God's command to build the ark. We are not given any details about the corruption apart from the fact that every inclination of man's heart was evil. There may also be a reference to demonic involvement to which mankind had opened itself up in the mention of the "Nephilim."

Commenting on the phrase "warned about things not yet seen," *Barnes' Notes* observes: "The meaning is, that there were no visible signs of it; there was nothing which could be a basis of calculation that it would occur. This admonition was given a hundred and twenty years before the deluge, and of course long before there could have been any natural indications that it would occur."

<sup>181</sup> I Chron. 1:1-3

<sup>182</sup> Gen. 6:9



Noah's fear does not pertain to fear for his life and that of his family but to his awe of God, whom he knew in intimate fellowship. Noah walked with God as Enoch, his grandfather, had done. Noah may have known his grandfather and observed the quality of his spiritual life, which inspired him to follow his example.

His faith in God and his life of righteousness must have been seen by his contemporaries as a condemnation of their lifestyle. Added to this was the construction of the ark, a project which must have become an object of ridicule in the eyes of society. We don't know anything about weather conditions in the time before the deluge. But a universal flood that threatened the existence of life on our planet had never occurred before. Noah's building of the ark triggered questions the answer of which must have become a reason to ridicule Noah's project. A corrupted society believed that they were immune to judgment. When the flood came it was too late for repentance.

The author's observation that Noah "became heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" is a phrase loaded with theological content, as we saw above. The word "heir" suggests that Noah received something that was originally not his. In the natural, Noah was a man with the same sinful nature that all of mankind had inherited from Adam in his fall. In stating that Noah inherited righteousness, the author of *Hebrews* draws a line between what God did for Noah in the Old Testament dispensation and what He does for us in our relationship with Jesus Christ. The Apostle Paul writes about this: "This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe."<sup>183</sup>

#### 4. Abraham and Sarah 11:8-19

*8 By faith Abraham, when called to go to a place he would later receive as his inheritance, obeyed and went, even though he did not know where he was going.*

*9 By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents, as did Isaac and Jacob, who were heirs with him of the same promise.*

*10 For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.*

*11 By faith Abraham, even though he was past age — and Sarah herself was barren — was enabled to become a father because he considered him faithful who had made the promise.*

*12 And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.*

*13 All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth.*

*14 People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own.*

*15 If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return.*

*16 Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.*

*17 By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had received the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son,*

*18 even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned."*

*19 Abraham reasoned that God could raise the dead, and figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.*

In this section five examples of Abraham's faith are given and commented upon. Each of these examples is introduced by the words "by faith." In the Greek the preposition is included in the noun which it modifies; *pistis* becomes *pistei*.

The first demonstration of Abraham's faith was in his obedience to God's call to leave his homeland without any indication as to where his destination would be. We read in the Genesis record that God said:

<sup>183</sup> Rom. 3:22

“Leave your country, your people and your father’s household and go to the land I will show you.”<sup>184</sup> In the preceding chapter we read: “Terah took his son Abram, his grandson Lot son of Haran, and his daughter-in-law Sarai, the wife of his son Abram, and together they set out from Ur of the Chaldeans to go to Canaan. But when they came to Haran, they settled there. Terah lived 205 years, and he died in Haran.”<sup>185</sup> Stephen clarifies that the call came to Abraham while he was still living in Mesopotamia. We read: “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran. ‘Leave your country and your people,’ God said, ‘and go to the land I will show you.’ ‘So he left the land of the Chaldeans and settled in Haran. After the death of his father, God sent him to this land where you are now living.”<sup>186</sup> Evidently, when Abraham was called, Terah took the initiative, taking Abraham with him. God had not called Terah but Abraham, and Terah’s initiative almost led to a dead end for Abraham. The family got stuck in Haran and Abraham did not arrive at destination until the death of his father. Abraham’s faith was first put to the test at Haran; the place of which he knew that was not where God wanted him to be. Beware of “the old man” in any adventure of faith! The old man, in this case being literally a person of advanced age.

The second demonstration of Abraham’s faith was his lifestyle while in Canaan. He lived in a tent like a Bedouin, indicating that he was not there to stay indefinitely. The author of *Hebrews* makes a lot of this by stating that Abraham was waiting for “the city of God,” which the Apostle John would call later “the new Jerusalem,” “the bride of the Lamb.” We read about this: “One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, ‘Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb.’ And he carried me away in the Spirit to a mountain great and high, and showed me the Holy City, Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God. It shone with the glory of God, and its brilliance was like that of a very precious jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal.”<sup>187</sup>

Abraham’s lifestyle is a model of the life of a Christian about which the Apostle Paul writes: “What I mean, brothers, is that the time is short. From now on those who have wives should live as if they had none; those who mourn, as if they did not; those who are happy, as if they were not; those who buy something, as if it were not theirs to keep; those who use the things of the world, as if not engrossed in them. For this world in its present form is passing away.”<sup>188</sup>

The Dutch theologian W.J. Ouweneel, in a study of *Hebrews*, entitled *We see Jesus*, writes about this part of Abraham’s faith and the words *as did Isaac and Jacob*: “Abraham saw yet the third generation – Jacob and Esau were fifteen years old when he died – and he must have experienced that they had not yet received the promise either, but had to live in tents as foreigners. In this way Abraham’s faith was also put to the test; but the following verse indicates that he had himself already reconciled to the fact that the promise would not be fulfilled during his lifetime. As far as we know Abraham had never received any revelation regarding heavenly things. But when he understood that he would not receive the fulfillment of the promises in his lifetime, the intensity of his fellowship with God proved to be so great that his faith understood intuitively that God had something better in store for him. This is a surprising announcement about the scope of Abraham’s faith, about which we do not read in the Old Testament, and neither about the fact that he, as the Lord Jesus says, ‘rejoiced at the thought of seeing my day; he saw it and was glad’ (Jn 8:56). The secret is to be found in ‘the God of glory’ who had called him (Acts 7:2): the heavenly glory of that God made Abraham understand that more was involved than an earthly nation and an earthly country. The eye of faith focused on a heavenly people and a heavenly fatherland (v.16), with a heavenly city. It is a city God has prepared for his people (v.16), the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22), the eternal, the future city (13:14).”

The third demonstration of Abraham’s faith was in the birth of Isaac. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on the mention of Sarah’s faith in this context: “It is perhaps surprising to find Sarah spoken of as an example of faith, for according to Genesis she was more conspicuous as an example of doubt ... In spite of the fact that Sarah laughed when first hearing that she was to have a child, her mockery must have turned to faith long before Isaac was born. It needed a woman of faith to be wife of a believer as

<sup>184</sup> Gen. 12:1

<sup>185</sup> Gen. 11:31,32

<sup>186</sup> Acts 7:2-5

<sup>187</sup> Rev. 21:9-11

<sup>188</sup> I Cor. 7:29-31

outstanding as Abraham. She too had to come to the same conviction as her husband that the God who had promised would honor his word (*she considered him faithful who had promised*). In all spiritual encounters it is easier to doubt than to believe, and Sarah must be commended for her willingness to change her approach and to make way for the development of her faith. The conviction that God is faithful is one of the cardinal aspects of biblical doctrine. It is as strong in the Old Testament as it is in the New Testament. It is the foundation stone of the faith of God's people."

It must be stated in all honesty that Abraham's faith in regard to God's promise of offspring was not perfect and flawless throughout the years of his waiting. At Sarah's instigation he took Hagar as a concubine and became the father of Ishmael. This was not part of God's plan. The author of Hebrews states that the fulfillment of God's promise came when Abraham was, as the Greek text puts it, *nenekrooménou*, "as good as dead." The expression cannot, of course, be taken literally in the sense as if Abraham were dying. "Abraham was a hundred years old when his son Isaac was born to him,"<sup>189</sup> and he died at the age of one hundred seventy-five.<sup>190</sup> The text indicates that Abraham had come to the age when a person can no longer be considered to be sexually active, though yet very much alive physically and mentally.

The importance of the statement must be found in the fact that, in a sense, new life came out of death, foreshadowing what would happen to Jesus Christ who died and was buried and rose on the third day. Abraham and Sarah's experience had something of the exuberance of Jesus' statement to the Apostle John: "I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades."<sup>191</sup> The conception and birth of Isaac contained a promise that one day death in all of its forms would be swallowed up in victory. Isaac's birth was the seed of a harvest that would produce "descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore."

Vv.13-16 penetrate to the core of the problem of faith. The reality of death makes it seem as if faith in God's promise lacks any foundation. Death slams the door on all human hope, unless we understand that the door is not a closure but an entrance to fulfillment.

These verses are full of paradoxes. The physical aspect of the promise was the possession of the land, which was not fulfilled during the lifetime of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Those patriarchs also did not see the fulfillment of the promise that their offspring would be so numerous that they would be impossible to count. But in the spiritual sense, faith allowed them to see that earth was not their real home and the promised land was not Canaan. They did see the fulfillment when they entered into the Sabbath rest of God of which the author of Hebrews spoke earlier. It was this vision of the heavenly reality that prompted them to live as aliens and pilgrims on earth.

As a Dutch citizen, living as legal resident in the United States of America, I find an interesting resemblance to the living conditions of the patriarchs. The only real estate my wife and I possess is a burial plot of a few square feet in the local cemetery. It ought to be easier for me to understand what Abraham, Isaac and Jacob experienced than for an average American citizen.

The last statement of this section, "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them," deserves a closer look. As earthly mortals it is impossible to imagine that the Almighty Creator of heaven and earth could be ashamed. Shame is akin to sin, as far as we are concerned. When Adam and Eve sinned, they felt ashamed because they were naked.<sup>192</sup> God cannot be "naked" in that sense of the word. As the psalmist says: "O Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendor and majesty. He wraps himself in light as with a garment."<sup>193</sup> God will be ashamed of us when we profess to be Christians and yet do not bear out our profession of faith in a lifestyle of holiness. As an example we can look at David, who tried to cover up his affair with Bathsheba with the murder of her husband. The prophet Nathan said to him: "By doing this you have made the enemies of the Lord show

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<sup>189</sup> Gen. 21:5

<sup>190</sup> Gen. 25:7

<sup>191</sup> Rev. 1:18

<sup>192</sup> Gen. 3:7,10

<sup>193</sup> Ps. 104:1,2

utter contempt.”<sup>194</sup> Our un-confessed sins constitute a smutch on God’s holiness and make us an embarrassment to God. When we demonstrate faith in God and confess our sins, God is not ashamed of us.

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, comments: “Because these men were what they were, God was not ashamed to be called their God. Above all things, he is the God of the gallant adventurer. He loves the man who is ready to venture for his name. The prudent, comfort-loving man is the very opposite of God. The man who goes out into the unknown and keeps going on will in the end arrive at God.” But there is more to this than Barclay reveals. We read earlier: “Both the one who makes men holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.”<sup>195</sup> God’s lack of shame is connected to the atonement. When we confess our guilt before God, He refers us to the sacrifice of Christ in payment of our sin and says to us that He is not willing to discuss the subject of guilt with us. His forgiveness causes Him to be proud of His children. Proof of God’s pride in the patriarchs is the fact that He calls Himself “the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.” The most amazing part of that statement is the choice was His, not theirs. By simply putting our trust in God’s promise, God inserts our names in His title. We can only say we are Christians if God has adopted our name as His.

Vv.17-19 deal with the supreme test of Abraham’s faith in God. Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac stands out as the most paradoxical and most profound examples of a relationship a creature can have with his Creator. There was, first of all, the fact that God’s request for a human sacrifice was clearly against the will of God. Although Abraham obeys without asking questions, there must have been a great deal of emotional turmoil inside him; his reason and his emotion must have rebelled as he went to carry out the command. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: “The act of offering is spoken of in the perfect tense (*prosenēnochen*) is translated *was ready to offer* in an attempt to bring out the distinction between this and the former verb and to indicate that the act was considered in intention rather than fulfillment. The pathos of Abraham’s dilemma is vividly brought out by the use of the term only son (*monogenēs*), which must be understood in relation to the promise. Ishmael was also Abraham’s son, but Isaac was the sole heir to the promise. It was this that constituted the real test to Abraham’s faith. To be commanded to offer any of his sons would have been a shattering challenge, but doubly so the child of promise.”

In the story as it is recorded in Genesis, we do not read anything about Abraham’s emotions or thoughts as he went to the place where God had told him to sacrifice Isaac. Although we believe that the Holy Spirit inspired the comments on the subject given by New Testament writers, there is a certain amount of supposition involved, that can be drawn reasonably from the Old Testament text, but that is not clearly stated. What the Apostle Paul and the author of Hebrews write about Abraham’s venture of faith falls into the category of inspired supposition. We do not read that Abraham had thoughts about a possible resurrection. The only thing we hear him say to Isaac is: “God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt offering, my son.”<sup>196</sup> We can only conclude from this that Abraham did not know what would happen, but he trusted God for the outcome. It is that trust in God, which made him the father of all who believe. And so, the Apostle Paul writes: “He is our father in the sight of God, in whom he believed — the God who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were.”<sup>197</sup>

Abraham’s perfect obedience meant, in a sense, the death of Isaac. There is a way in which Isaac died that day and in which he was raised from the dead. A good illustration is the experience of the great Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky when he learned that he had been condemned to death and was going to be executed by firing squad. Dostoevsky did not know that all the guns were loaded with blanks. As he stood blindfolded, he expected death any second. In a way his expectation meant death. When the shots rang he was still alive and experienced this as a resurrection. It is said that Dostoevsky receives the inspiration of all he ever wrote in the few seconds between life and death. Both Isaac and Dostoevsky died and rose symbolically. Thus the author of Hebrews states about Abraham’s sacrifice of Isaac: “figuratively speaking, he did receive Isaac back from death.” The Greek text uses the word *parabole*.

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<sup>194</sup> II Sam. 12:14

<sup>195</sup> Heb. 2:11

<sup>196</sup> Gen. 22:8

<sup>197</sup> Rom. 4:17

**5. Isaac 11:20**

**20 By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.**

This statement raises questions that require a closer look. The story of Isaac's blessing on Jacob and Esau is found in Genesis 27. It begins by Rebekah eavesdropping and overhearing Isaac saying to Esau, his oldest son that he will bless Esau with the blessing for the oldest son when Esau brings him a dish of his favorite food from the hunting party.<sup>198</sup> During Rebekah's pregnancy God had told her that she was having twins: "Two nations are in your womb, and two peoples from within you will be separated; one people will be stronger than the other, and the older will serve the younger."<sup>199</sup> It is difficult to imagine that this information would not have been communicated to Isaac. So when Isaac promises to bless Esau with the blessing of the oldest son, he intends to overrule God's order of priority for the twin boys. That can hardly be qualified as an act of faith.

We know the story of Jacob's deceit, instigated by his mother, but willfully carried out by Jacob. Isaac, being blind, could not recognize Jacob's face; he had to go by smell and touch. Though not totally convinced, Isaac blessed Jacob with the blessing of the firstborn, thinking he blessed Esau. How can the writer to the Hebrews say about this: "By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future?" What faith? Ironically, this is the only incident in Isaac's life that brought him into the hall of fame of the Hebrew epistle.

This is where the relationship between faith and grace comes in. Isaac, Jacob and Esau all had to receive forgiveness. Isaac was the first one to confirm that the blessing he accidentally pronounced on the wrong person would stand as an act of God. He implied in this that God had overruled his foolishness. Isaac's faith is demonstrated at the moment where he feels he has physically come to the lowest point in his life. When Esau enters and claims the promised blessing, Isaac realized that he has been deceived. We read: "Isaac trembled violently and said, 'Who was it, then, that hunted game and brought it to me? I ate it just before you came and I blessed him — and indeed he will be blessed!'"<sup>200</sup> In confirming his blessing upon Jacob, he demonstrates faith. It may be faith of the size of a mustard seed, but it was enough to bring him into the hall of fame.

David Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes: "Isaac's position in the line of succession was different from Abraham's, for his twin sons were both in the line of succession. The blessings invoked upon them were recognized as being overruled, since God reversed the natural order and the heir of the promise became the second rather than the first of the twins. The problem of God's choice of Jacob rather than Esau is touched upon in Romans 9:13, the only other book in the New Testament which mentions Esau. The author of Hebrews, unlike Paul, does not quote the saying which comes in Malachi 1:2 ('Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau'). He describes him nevertheless as 'immoral or irreligious' in 12:16. In the present context he is concerned only with the faith which activated Isaac when he invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. No mention is made of Rebekah's deception, presumably because Isaac himself recognized that the blessing he had given to Jacob could not be reversed."

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* comments here: "Rebecca and Jacob are not to be justified in the indirect means they used to obtain this blessing, but God will be justified in overruling even the sins of men to serve the purposes of his glory. Now, the faith of Isaac thus prevailing over his unbelief, it has pleased the God of Isaac to pass by the weakness of his faith, to commend the sincerity of it, and record him among the elders, who through faith have obtained a good report."

The author of Hebrews does not leave us with a very convincing case of Isaac's faith in God's promises. Compared to Abraham's faith in the case of Isaac's birth and in bringing Isaac to God's altar, the faith of Isaac seems to dwindle to the point where we hardly recognize it as faith. It was more clearly demonstrated in the violent trembling of his body than in his intentions. Most of us would be embarrassed if we would be put on a pedestal because we lost control of our limbs. God who searches man's heart recognized Isaac's faith where Isaac would not have recognized himself.

<sup>198</sup> Gen. 27:1-4

<sup>199</sup> Gen. 25:23

<sup>200</sup> Gen. 27:33

## 6. Jacob

11:21

**21 By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.**

Jacob's blessing of Manasseh and Ephraim, Joseph's sons, is another rather unorthodox example of faith. There was a double reversal of natural birth order. Rueben was Jacob's firstborn. He lost his firstborn birthright because of his act of incest.<sup>201</sup> That brought Jacob to bestow the blessing upon the son who had been his favorite throughout the years, Joseph. But in blessing Joseph by blessing Joseph's two sons, there is another reversal of priorities that may be linked to a historical precedent. Undoubtedly Jacob relived some of the emotions he must have had when Isaac put his hand upon Jacob's head to give him the blessing of the firstborn. Some of the guilt feelings must have come up at this time. In reversing the firstborn blessing from Manasseh to Ephraim, Jacob may have tried to find relief in reliving the experience.

What amazes us is that the author of Hebrews does not focus on Jacob's blessing of Judah, who from a New Testament perspective was the most important of Jacob's sons and the link to the fulfillment of God's promise.

There is in Jacob's blessing of Joseph's children a hidden reference to life out of death. Jacob had lived for years with the lie that Joseph was dead. When Jacob first heard that Joseph was not dead but that he was the ruler of Egypt, he was unable to take it in. We read: "When he saw the carts Joseph had sent to carry him back, the spirit of their father Jacob revived. And Israel said, 'I'm convinced! My son Joseph is still alive. I will go and see him before I die.'"<sup>202</sup> Jacob did not only see Joseph, he saw Joseph's two children, his grandsons. Jacob's blessing is the blessing of a resurrection. It is also an expression of faith in God's promise. The reference to Jacob's act of worship comes from an earlier incident where Jacob spoke of the place he wanted to be buried, not in Egypt, but in the Promised Land. We read: "'Do not bury me in Egypt, but when I rest with my fathers, carry me out of Egypt and bury me where they are buried.' 'I will do as you say,' he said. 'Swear to me,' he said. Then Joseph swore to him, and Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff."<sup>203</sup> Actually, the lesson the author of Hebrews may want to convey is Jacob's faith in God's promise regarding Canaan. The only place Abraham possessed in the Promised Land was a grave; that is the place Jacob claims for his own and that is what gives him this place in God's hall of fame.

## 7. Joseph

11:22

**22 By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones.**

This is reference to the last chapter of Genesis. We read: "Then Joseph said to his brothers, 'I am about to die. But God will surely come to your aid and take you up out of this land to the land he promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.' And Joseph made the sons of Israel swear an oath and said, 'God will surely come to your aid, and then you must carry my bones up from this place.'"<sup>204</sup>

Evidently Joseph died before any of his other brothers even though he was younger than most of them. We learn from Stephen that the other brothers were all interred in Canaan, evidently before the exodus of the whole nation of Israel several centuries later. We read: "Then Jacob went down to Egypt, where he and our fathers died. Their bodies were brought back to Shechem and placed in the tomb that Abraham had bought from the sons of Hamor at Shechem for a certain sum of money."<sup>205</sup> We find no Old Testament record of the burial of Jacob's other sons. Apart from Stephen's testimony, which was probably part of a rabbinic tradition, we would have assumed that they were all buried in Egypt. Whether there were individual burials similar to the one for Jacob, in which each coffin was taken back to Canaan, we do not know.

Joseph must have become an Egyptian icon, which would have made it politically impossible for his body to be taken out of the country to being buried in Canaan. It was the prophetic insight that a day would

<sup>201</sup> Gen. 49:4

<sup>202</sup> Gen. 45:27,28

<sup>203</sup> Gen. 47:29-31

<sup>204</sup> Gen. 50:24,25

<sup>205</sup> Acts 7:15,16

come when his body could be taken back to the place of his birth that is proof of Joseph's faith, which placed him in this hall of fame.

Many other instances in Joseph's life could have been chosen as examples of faith in God. His perseverance during his years of slavery and imprisonment would have qualified him. But as far as the author of Hebrews is concerned, it was the hope of the coming exodus, some three centuries later, that made Joseph one of the most outstanding characters of his time. Ironically, it is Joseph, the mummy who enters into this hall of fame.

## 8. Moses' Parents 11:23

**23 By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict.**

The example of the birth of Moses brings us to the opening chapters of the Book of Exodus. The political conditions in Egypt had changed to the point where Israel's presence was seen as a threat; but since they provided a labor power that benefited the land, they were kept and exploited by the Egyptians. Israel's population explosion, however, was seen as a major problem and we read: "Then Pharaoh gave this order to all his people: 'Every boy that is born you must throw into the Nile, but let every girl live.'<sup>206</sup>

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, records the following interesting rabbinic tradition about the faith of Moses' parents: "Legend tells how Amram and Jochebed, the parents of Moses (*Exodus* 6:20), were troubled by the decree of Pharaoh. As a result Amram put away his wife, not because he did not love her, but because he would spare her the sorrow of seeing her children killed. For three years she was put away, and then Miriam prophesied: 'My parents shall have another son, who shall deliver Israel out of the hands of the Egyptians.' She said to her father: 'What hast thou done? Thou hast sent thy wife away out of thine house, because thou couldst not trust the Lord God that he would protect the child that might be born to thee.' So Amram, shamed into trusting God, took back his wife; and in due time Moses was born. He was so lovely a child that his parents determined to hide him in their house. This they did for three months. Then, the legend tells, the Egyptians struck upon a cruel scheme. The king was determined that hidden children should be sought out and killed. Now when a child hears another child cry, he will cry too. So Egyptian mothers were sent into the homes of the Israelites with their babies; there they pricked their babies until they cried. This made the hidden children of the Israelites cry too, and so they were discovered and killed. In view of this, Amram and Jochebed decided to make a little ark and to entrust their child to it on the waters of the Nile."

*The New International Version* translates the Greek text by stating that Moses "was no ordinary child." The Greek word *asteios* is rather unusual. Its literal meaning is "urbane," but in the context it can be taken as "handsome." *The New Living Translation* renders v.23: "They saw that God had given them an unusual child, and they were not afraid to disobey the king's command."

Whether the fact that baby Moses was handsome or whether there were other factors that made his parents decide to keep him hidden is difficult for us to determine from this distance in time. It may be that hiding male babies in defiance to the king's command endangered the life of the parents. The statement that "they were not afraid of the king's edict" may refer to this fact that Amram and Jochebed risked their own lives, as well as the lives of their two other children, in hiding baby Moses.

It must not have been too difficult to hide the baby for the first few months. Even if he cried, they could pass him for a girl. We do not know if Egyptians soldiers regularly swept through the neighborhood to look for children, or whether the ghetto was interspersed with informers, but hiding Moses became more and more difficult. Although the Bible speaks of the faith of the parents, it must have been sheer agony to surrender the little child to the river. What actually happened is a strange mixture of divine humor and human despair. If only Amram and Jochebed could have known how it would end, it would have been easy to abandon Moses to the water of the river. But how could they know what God would do? They had no guarantee that all would end well; no guarantee but God!

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<sup>206</sup> Ex. 1:22

**9. Moses      11:24-29**

***24 By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter.***

***25 He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time.***

***26 He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward.***

***27 By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible.***

***28 By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.***

***29 By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.***

When looking at the record in Exodus about the events concerning Moses' life referred to in these verses, we note that not everything Moses did qualifies as faith. Some of the writer's comments may be the result of the aura of glory Jewish history had woven around the person of Moses. This observation is not an effort to detract from the fact that all Scripture is inspired by God. God may look with much more favor upon some of the things we do out of fear or despair than we do. Moses flight from Egypt, after he killed the Egyptian, for instance, does not strike us as an act of faith. But God credited him for it, as if faith had been a major factor.

These verses suggest that there may have been a struggle in Moses' heart when he came to the point where he had to identify himself either with Egypt and the palace or with the suffering Hebrews. There must have been affection for Pharaoh's daughter who had saved his life. But that had been forty years before. Moses must have gone through a struggle before he came to the point where he stated clearly, "I am a Jew." When he came to that point he went beyond mere identification with the suffering nation; he became convinced that God had called him to be their Messiah. It took another forty years before he was proved to be right in this assumption, a long period in which he must have gone through another identity crisis. As the writer to the Hebrews puts it there was faith involved. He knew fellowship with God and understood that God had saved his life and put him where he was for a purpose. As Stephen testified: "Moses thought that his own people would realize that God was using him to rescue them, but they did not."<sup>207</sup>

We read in Exodus that Moses "went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor." Seeing one of the Israelites being beaten up by an Egyptian guard, Moses hit the Egyptian and killed him.<sup>208</sup> Somehow that fact became known to Pharaoh and Moses had to flee for his life. The author of Hebrews focuses more on Moses' attitude of trying to identify with his roots than on the fact that he actually committed murder. More may have been involved than can be gathered from the text in Exodus. If the Egyptian Moses killed was a slave, killing him might not have endangered Moses' life. It was the fact that Moses was a Jew, who, although he was living in the royal palace and was a protégé of the princess, had involved himself with the plight of his people, which was looked upon as treason by the Egyptian throne. That seems to be the point the author of Hebrews want to emphasize.

The phrase "He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt, because he was looking ahead to his reward" is, of course, an anachronism, but it effectively depicts the fact that Moses chose to identify with the suffering of his people instead of enjoying a life of ease in the palace by ignoring their lot.

The author is addressing people who were risking or were experiencing persecution because of their faith in Jesus Christ as the Messiah. They could have evaded this by denying this conviction, which would cause them to be taken in by their Jewish community. Messianic Jews then, as now, were considered to be traitors to their Jewish roots. To portray Moses as identifying himself with Christ, however anachronistic that may

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<sup>207</sup> Acts 7:25

<sup>208</sup> Ex. 2:11



sound, establishes a powerful precedent for Jews, then and now, to see in Jesus the fulfillment of all Old Testament prophecy. What the author of Hebrews is saying is that Moses was one of the great Old Testament Christians. If Moses, who towers over everyone else in the Old Testament, spoke and prophesied about the Christ, and if he lived a life that was in accordance with his faith in the Messiah, there is no reason for Jews of later days to believe that they would be un-Jewish if they accepted Jesus as their Messiah and suffered the consequences of their confession.

If we read the words “By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king’s anger” as referring to his fleeing for his life after he killed the Egyptian, we have trouble reconciling this statement with the text in Exodus, which reads: “Moses was afraid and thought, ‘What I did must have become known.’ When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from Pharaoh and went to live in Midian.”<sup>209</sup> But the phrase could refer to Moses’ return to Egypt in obedience to God’s command to lead the Israelites out of the country. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, however, does not agree, stating: “The exodus of Moses with Israel cannot be meant; for it was made, not in defiance, but by the desire, of the king. Besides, the chronological order would be broken, the next particular specified, namely, the Passover, having taken place before the exodus. It is Moses’ personal history and faith which are here described. The faith of the people is not introduced until Heb 11:29.” But *The Adam Clarke’s Commentary* believes that the author “speaks here of the departure of Moses with the Israelites, not of his flight to Midian, Ex 2:14-15; for he was then in great fear: but when he went to Pharaoh with God’s authority, to demand the dismissal of the Hebrews, he was without fear, and acted in the most noble and dignified manner; he then feared nothing but God.”

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “This forsaking of Egypt must, because of the order in which it comes and of Moses alone being mentioned, be his flight related in ... Exodus 2:15, not the final Exodus. The only seeming difficulty is in the expression, ‘not fearing the wrath of the king,’ whereas in the history Moses is represented as fleeing in fear from the face of Pharaoh, who sought to slay him. But the two views of his attitude of mind are reconcilable. The assertion of his fearlessness applies to his whole course of action from the time when he elected to brave the king in behalf of Israel. In pursuance of this course, it became necessary for him to leave Egypt for a time. In this, as well as in staying, there was danger; for the king might pursue him: he might, perhaps, have secured his own safety by returning to the court and giving up his project; but he persevered at all hazards. And thus the apprehension of immediate danger under which he fled the country with a view to final success, was in no contradiction to his general fearlessness. Further, his being content to leave Egypt at all, and that for so many years, and still never relinquishing his design, was an additional evidence of faith, as is expressed by the word *ekaptérese*, ‘he endured.’ The vision through faith of the unseen heavenly King kept alive his hope through those long years of exile: what was any possible wrath even of the terrible Pharaoh to one supported by that continual vision?” Having stated our own view on the subject, we better leave it.

There is, however, one factor mentioned in connection with Moses’ faith that is of such importance that we cannot leave it untouched. William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, observes: “Finally, this passage not only tell us of the faith of Moses; it also tells us of the source of that faith. Vers 27 tells us that he was able to face all things as one who sees him who is invisible. The outstanding characteristic of Moses was the close intimacy of his relationship with God. In Exodus 33:9-11 we read of how he went into the Tabernacle; ‘and the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face, as a man speaks to his friend.’ In Numbers 12:7,8 we read of God’s verdict on him when there were those who were ready to rebel against him: ‘with him I speak mouth to mouth.’ To put it simply—the secret of his faith was that Moses knew God personally. To every task he came out from God’s presence.” David describes a similar experience in one of his psalms, saying: “I have set the Lord always before me. Because he is at my right hand, I will not be shaken.”

The celebration of the Passover by the Israelites coincided with the tenth plague in Egypt. God had told Moses: “About midnight I will go throughout Egypt. Every firstborn son in Egypt will die, from the firstborn son of Pharaoh, who sits on the throne, to the firstborn son of the slave girl, who is at her hand mill, and all the firstborn of the cattle as well. There will be loud wailing throughout Egypt — worse than there has ever been or ever will be again. But among the Israelites not a dog will bark at any man or

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<sup>209</sup> Ex. 2:14,15

animal.’ Then you will know that the Lord makes a distinction between Egypt and Israel.”<sup>210</sup> God had also told the Israelites to kill a lamb and apply the blood to the doorposts of their houses. He said: “The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. No destructive plague will touch you when I strike Egypt.”<sup>211</sup>

Moses’ faith, as well as the faith of the whole nation, did not only demonstrate itself in doing what the Lord had told them to do, but also in understanding some of the symbolism of applying the blood. The application of the blood of the lamb was an indication of the fact that, so to speak, a death had already taken place in the family. The lamb substituted for the firstborn son. In modern-day Passover celebrations this symbolism is almost, if not completely, lost. The fact that no animal is killed in the present-day observation of the Jewish Seder certainly contributes to a lack of understanding of this part of the feast. Moses and the Israelites did understand that they owed their lives to the blood of the lamb.

The Jews to whom this epistle was addressed still celebrated Passover in its original form as it was done in Old Testament times. To them the feast had not lost any of its significance. For Jewish Christians of that time the significance of the celebration was even greater, if they understood that Christ was the fulfillment of what the feast stood for: deliverance from slavery in all of its forms.

David Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes: “*The Passover* occupied a place of considerable significance for the Jewish mind and came to have an even greater meaning for Christians because it was so closely linked with the passion of Jesus (cf. I Cor. 5:7). It was naturally an event of historic importance when the original Passover was instituted. It centered in the faith of Moses, according to this writer. It was essentially performed in faith because the sprinkling of blood did not appear as a logical means of warding off the angel of death. In the expression *sprinkled the blood*, the Greek has a noun (*proschysin*, sprinkling), rather than the verb, which more vividly places both the Passover feast and the sprinkling in close proximity as objects of the same verb, but they are nevertheless viewed as separate action. In the Hebrew text of Exodus 12:23, it is the Lord who will execute judgment, but here there is simply a reference to the *Destroyer*. The allusion is to the angel of death who passed over the houses where the sacrificial blood had been sprinkled on the doorposts and lintels, which ensured that the *first-born* might be saved.”

In referring to Moses as the one who accepted the disgrace of Christ and to the Passover celebration, which pointed to the death of Christ, the author of *Hebrews* reinforces the thought that the person of Christ and His atoning death were an essential part of the Old Testament message.

The story of Israel passing through the Red Sea is also found in Exodus.<sup>212</sup> The faith of the nation was more evident after the passage through the sea than before it. When Pharaoh decided to pursue the Israelites, the people reacted with panic, saying to Moses: “Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you brought us to the desert to die? What have you done to us by bringing us out of Egypt? Didn’t we say to you in Egypt, ‘Leave us alone; let us serve the Egyptians’? It would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the desert!”<sup>213</sup>

It was not that the Israelites were left in the dark as far as God’s presence with them was concerned. We read, as they left Egypt: “By day the Lord went ahead of them in a pillar of cloud to guide them on their way and by night in a pillar of fire to give them light, so that they could travel by day or night. Neither the pillar of cloud by day nor the pillar of fire by night left its place in front of the people.”<sup>214</sup> And when they were facing the Red Sea before them and the Egyptian army behind them, we read: “Then the angel of God, who had been traveling in front of Israel’s army, withdrew and went behind them. The pillar of cloud also moved from in front and stood behind them, coming between the armies of Egypt and Israel. Throughout the night the cloud brought darkness to the one side and light to the other side; so neither went near the other all night long. Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea, and all that night the Lord drove the sea back with a strong east wind and turned it into dry land. The waters were divided, and the Israelites went through the sea on dry ground, with a wall of water on their right and on their left.”<sup>215</sup> The example of

<sup>210</sup> Ex. 11:4-7

<sup>211</sup> Ex. 12:13

<sup>212</sup> Ex. 14:22-28

<sup>213</sup> Ex. 14:11,12

<sup>214</sup> Ex. 13:21,22

<sup>215</sup> Ex. 14:19-22

faith chosen by the author of Hebrews is not one of blind faith of which Jesus said to doubting Thomas: “Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.”<sup>216</sup>

We could say that, in the story of Israel’s passing through the Red Sea, we have more of a faith building experience than an act performed on the basis of faith. As mentioned above, faith was more the result of the incident than the stimulus of it.

#### **10. Joshua and Rahab 11:30-31**

***30 By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the people had marched around them for seven days.***

***31 By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.***

Significantly, no demonstration of faith is mentioned in the forty-year long period Israel spent from the time she left Egypt till she entered Canaan. Those years were more years of unbelief than of faith, a fact the author of *Hebrews* already mentioned in earlier chapters. The generation that witnessed the miracles of the ten plagues in Egypt and experienced the presence of the Lord at Mount Sinai reacted to the challenges that God put before them by rebellion and unbelief.

The capture of Jericho and the survival of Rahab are the last two specific incidents mentioned to illustrate that “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.”<sup>217</sup>

We have now moved out of the *Pentateuch* into *The Book of Joshua*. The story of the fall of Jericho is told in Joshua chapter six; the story of Rahab’s faith in hiding the Israelite spies in chapter two. But her survival is, of course, part of the story of the capture of the city. Her faith is expressed in what she told the spies: “We have heard how the Lord dried up the water of the Red Sea for you when you came out of Egypt, and what you did to Sihon and Og, the two kings of the Amorites east of the Jordan, whom you completely destroyed. When we heard of it, our hearts melted and everyone’s courage failed because of you, for the Lord your God is God in heaven above and on the earth below.”<sup>218</sup>

The author of Hebrews does not mention the fact that Rahab told a lie to the messengers of the king of Jericho, saying that the Israelite spies were no longer in her house, while they were hidden on the roof. But this does not mean that the Bible condones lying in circumstances where the life of others is at stake.

#### **11. Many Other Heroes of Faith 11:32-40**

***32 And what more shall I say? I do not have time to tell about Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets,***

***33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, and gained what was promised; who shut the mouths of lions,***

***34 quenched the fury of the flames, and escaped the edge of the sword; whose weakness was turned to strength; and who became powerful in battle and routed foreign armies.***

***35 Women received back their dead, raised to life again. Others were tortured and refused to be released, so that they might gain a better resurrection.***

***36 Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison.***

***37 They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated—***

***38 the world was not worthy of them. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.***

***39 These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised.***

***40 God had planned something better for us so that only together with us would they be made perfect.***

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<sup>216</sup> John 20:29

<sup>217</sup> NKJV

<sup>218</sup> Josh. 2:10,11

The chapter ends with a condensation of the history of faith of Israel's heroes, some of whom are mentioned by name without mentioning facts and some whose names are withheld and whose acts are highlighted.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, distinguishes an arrangement of "three groups of three," in which a common feature links each of them together. We read: "The first group marks attainments – the conquering of *kingdoms*, the establishment of justice, the inheriting of spiritual promises." "The second triplet is concerned with specific kinds of endurance and deliverance." "The third triplet turns away from marvelous deliverances to mention more positive achievements."

Faith is illustrated both in overcoming challenges and hardships as well as enduring and even perishing in the same. There is the faith that conquers death and the faith that sees through death to resurrection, even though that resurrection has not yet occurred.

About the faith of those who would be considered the outcast of society, the author makes the glorious statement: "the world was not worthy of them." The Greek word used is *axios* meaning "deserving." The English word "axiom" is derived from it. The Apostle John writes about Jesus Christ: "He was in the world, and though the world was made through him, the world did not recognize him."<sup>219</sup> And Paul describes what this lack of recognition entailed, saying: "None of the rulers of this age understood it, for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory."<sup>220</sup> The attitude of "the world" was that neither Jesus, nor His followers were worthy of the world; the author of *Hebrews* turns this around, saying that "the world was not worthy of them." Their rejection does not condemn them; it condemns the world.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: "The exclamation of *whom the world was not worthy* is an interjection at this point, as if the writer was suddenly conscious of the spiritual stature of the men being described. By comparison the men of the world, in spite of their possessions and status, are so inferior that the men of faith are not worthy to be compared with them. It has always been true that the world has failed to appreciate the value of some of its noblest sons. But there has been some dispute over the meaning of the word translated *worthy* (*axios*). It has been argued that if it is understood as 'worthy,' the statement is almost a truism, and that it is better to understand it as meaning hospitable. But the idea that the world offered no hospitality to the formidable list of persecuted people is as much of a truism as the alternative." We could say that God's list of *Who's who?* is quite different from ours.

As *Barnes' Notes* observes: "This is a most beautiful expression. It is at once a statement of their eminent holiness, and of the wickedness of the rest of mankind." *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* adds: "So far from their being unworthy of living in the world, as their exile in desert, etc., might imply. The world, in shutting them out, shut out from itself a source of blessing ... In condemning them, the world condemned itself."

The writer of *Hebrews* describes the living conditions of some of these heroes of faith as being below any standards of human dignity. "They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." God had created a world that would be a fitting habitat for all of humanity. To be forced to make one's abode in caves and holes in the ground is farthest from God's original plan. Yet, when the Creator of this world came to inhabit it, He had to say: "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."<sup>221</sup> Some of those who take following the Lord seriously have shared this part of His experience. "Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them."

As we leave this "hall of fame" the writer of *Hebrews* tells us that we have received something that would make all of the Old Testament saints jealous. As Jesus said to His disciples: "Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it."<sup>222</sup>

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<sup>219</sup> John 1:10

<sup>220</sup> I Cor. 2:8

<sup>221</sup> Matt. 8:20

<sup>222</sup> Matt. 13:16,17

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: “In explaining the relation between the Old Testament saints and the Christian church, the writer goes back to the plan of God. He uses the word which is translated *foreseen* (*prolepsamenou*), which draws attention to God’s overall view of his mission for man’s salvation. The thought reaches ahead to the time of consummation when the sum total of God’s people will be complete. It is for this reason that the Old Testament worthies could not as yet receive the promise. Something better for us undoubtedly refers to the superiority of the Christian revelation which provides for the development of a faith to match its object. The *better* theme has occurred so many times in the epistle that its presence here is only to be expected. It may be that the writer has in mind some who had exalted the heroes of Jewish history to such an extent that they had forgotten their imperfections and their need to be complemented by believers in Christ.”

No one captures the thought expressed in this last sentence better than the Apostle Paul, who writes in *Romans*: “Therefore no one will be declared righteous in his sight by observing the law; rather, through the law we become conscious of sin. But now a righteousness from God, apart from law, has been made known, to which the Law and the Prophets testify. This righteousness from God comes through faith in Jesus Christ to all who believe. There is no difference, for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus.”<sup>223</sup>

The Old Testament law, particularly the ceremonial part of the law pertaining to atonement of sin by animal sacrifices, was a copy of the real and ultimate sacrifice made by Jesus Christ when He presented His body to the Father as a sacrifice for the sins of the world. It was this sacrifice that united the Old Testament believers to the New Testament ones, forming the resurrected body of Christ, the New Testament church.

*The Pulpit Commentary* comments as follows on the last verse of this chapter: “The realization of all that is meant by the word here used is, indeed, even to Christian believers, still future (for cf. ... Hebrews 10:36, *hina komisesthe ten epaggelian*). Nay, it is future also in its fullness, even to the saints at rest; for in the passage just quoted it is plainly intimated that the entire fulfillment will not be till ‘he that shall come’ comes; *i.e.* till the second advent. The redeemed whose probation on earth is over are indeed, in one sense, said to be already ‘perfected’ (cf. ... Hebrews 10:14; 12:23); but still the ‘perfect consummation and bliss both in body and soul’ is nowhere in the New Testament contemplated till ‘the end.’ In the mean time, even the saints under the heavenly altar still cry, ‘Lord, how long?’ and the Spirit and the bride say, ‘Come, Lord Jesus.’ The full idea, then, of ver. 40 may be that, according to the eternal Divine purpose, the promise of redemption should not be fully realized till the number of the elect shall be accomplished, and all the redeemed of all ages since the world began shall be gathered together through Christ in one, and God shall be all in all.”

Finally, Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, comments: “The better thing God has provided is perfection. The word ‘perfect,’ or forms of it, is used fourteen times in the epistle. The law made nothing perfect. Jesus Himself was, in His obedience and suffering, made perfect in His human nature, in His will and life and character, that He might have a true, new, perfect human life to communicate to us. As the Son, perfected forevermore, He is our High Priest; having perfected us forever in His sacrifice, He now brings us, in the communication of that perfection, into real, inner, living contact with God. And so, He is the Perfecter of our faith, and He makes us His perfect ones, who press on unto Perfection. And our life on earth is meant to be the blessed experience that God perfects us in every good thing to do His will, working in us what is pleasing in His sight. Apart from us, they might not be made perfect; to us, the blessing of some better thing, of being made perfect, has come.

My fellow Christians, the old saints had only the promise; we have the thing promised, the divine reality, the full inheritance of what were to them only the good things to come! The promise was sufficient to make them live a wonderful life of faith. What would the effect be in our lives of having obtained the promises, of having entered into the possession of that of which the mere promise stirred them so? As much as deliverance is greater than the hope of it, as a divine possession is than the promise of it, so much greater is

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<sup>223</sup> Rom. 3:20-26

the better and perfect thing that God has provided for us—and so much greater ought to be the joy and the holiness and the nearness to God and the power of our lives. Is it so?

If not, the reason must be plain. We do not accept the possession with the intensity with which they accepted the promise. Our whole epistle was written to expose this evil, and to set before us the glory of the better, the perfect, thing that God has provided for us in Christ. Will we not listen to the witness of the heroes of our faith in the days when the sun had not yet risen, and let ourselves be ashamed out of our worldliness and sloth? If we will but yield ourselves to the glorious perfection-truths of our epistle—the perfection of our High Priest and His work—and press on unto it, then He to whom it has been given to work His work in us in the power of an endless life, and so to save completely, will reveal in us that better and perfect thing as we have never yet known it. By faith, they obtained the promises. By faith, the fulfillment of every promise will be made true to us in the power of the Pentecostal Spirit, who comes from the throne of our great High Priest.”

## **II. Endurance of Faith      12:1-29**

### **A. Example of Christ’s Endurance    12:1-4**

*1 Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.  
2 Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*

*3 Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.*

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

As we exit the hall of fame of Old Testament saints, the author of *Hebrews* makes us pause to reflect on what we have just seen. The picture he paints is as if we left a hall of paintings in which we saw the faces of those gone before and their eyes looking down upon us, bidding us to think about what we just saw. “Reflect” and “think about” are expressions that are too weak to describe the condition of the runner who stands on his mark, waiting for the signal to be given. This is a moment of intensity and total concentration. Every muscle is strained and every nerve is stressed. The race is about to begin.

There is an obvious paradox in the fact that, on the one hand, Christian life means entering into the rest of God, and on the other hand it is an effort that requires all the strength and energy a human being can muster. We have the invitation of Jesus to come to Him and find rest for our souls, while at the same time we are encouraged to fight the good fight. We see both features in the life of Jesus Himself. He enjoyed perfect fellowship with the Father that gave Him peace and joy that no other human being had ever experienced. On the other hand, in His few years as an itinerant rabbi, He traveled restlessly from one place to another with only minimal interruptions.

We will only be able to run the race of Christian life of Hebrew 12 if we have found the secret of fellowshiping with God at the quiet waters of Psalm 23.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, entitles the first eleven verses of this chapter *The need for discipline*. He states: “Although the first two verses are a continuation of the preceding chapter, they bring out in a more direct way the difference between the old order and the new. The heroes of the past are now viewed as spectators, whereas the Christians are in the arena. The focus shifts to the present, but the value of the examples of the past is incorporated into the total picture.

We note that the writer identifies himself with those in the arena, which clearly shows that he is describing the position of Christians generally. When he says *we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses*, he assumes that the Christians are aware of the presence of these spectators. The word used here for witness (*martyrs*) does not usually denote ‘spectators,’ and yet the use of the imagery here presupposes such a meaning. Nevertheless the word which the writer has chosen tells us something about the character of the spectators. They are to be distinguished from the fickle approach of those whose only desire is to be entertained.

These witnesses who watch from the stands are those well qualified to inspire – they bear witness to the faithfulness of God in sustaining them. They are there as encouragers to the present contestants. It may be wondered why the writer chooses the figure of a *cloud*. It is intended to convey the idea of a massive body of people, and may have been suggested by the idea of the verb *surrounded* (*perikeimenon*), which perhaps conjured up the picture of people being enwrapped in a cloud. Nevertheless it must be admitted that the idea seems somewhat foreign to the arena imagery, unless the view (suggested for instance by Chrysostom) be held that the cloud would offer protection to the contestants from the intense heat. But this is perhaps straining the analogy too far. Since a ‘cloud’ of witnesses is a good classical locution for a ‘host,’ the metaphor should not be pressed.”

Yet, the eye of the athlete is not on the crowd in the bleachers, but on “Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith.” The Greek text calls Him the “author and finisher,” using the words *archegos* and *teleiotes*. The author of *Hebrew* uses the latter word elsewhere where it is rendered “maturity.”<sup>224</sup> Whereas the witnesses of the previous chapter served as an inspiration, Jesus is not only the supreme example of faith; He is the one who creates faith in us if we ask Him. Like Jesus’ disciples, we may ask Him to “increase our faith.”<sup>225</sup> The previous chapter started out by stating that faith is the *hupostasis*, the “substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen.” Jesus Christ creates this faith in us if we ask Him and He will lead us to maturity in faith.

The cross of Christ is set before us as an example, even though it is impossible to emulate. The point the author wants to emphasize is not so much the crucifixion but the vision of joy and glory that allowed our Lord to go through with it and finish. It is this Jesus, who underwent the shame and agony of the cross, who has been given all power in heaven and on earth, who is seated on the throne of heaven, who is the author and finisher of faith. Fixing our eye on Him as we run the race will keep us on track and allow us to finish well.

*Barnes’ Notes* gives an interesting comment on the phrase “In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood,” of which we copy the following: “The general sense of this passage is, ‘you have not yet been called in your Christian struggles to the highest kind of sufferings and sacrifices. Great as your trials may seem to have been, yet your faith has not yet been put to the severest test. And since this is so, you ought not to yield in the conflict with evil, but manfully resist it.’ In the language used here there is undoubtedly a continuance of the allusion to the agonistic games-the struggling and wrestling for mastery there. In those games, the boxers were accustomed to arm themselves for the fight with the caestus. This at first consisted of strong leathern thongs wound around the hands, and extending only to the wrist, to give greater solidity to the fist. Afterward these were made to extend to the elbow, and then to the shoulder, and finally, they sewed pieces of lead or iron in them that they might strike a heavier and more destructive blow. The consequence was, that those who were engaged in the fight were often covered with blood, and that resistance ‘unto blood’ showed a determined courage, and a purpose not to yield. But though the language here may be taken from this custom, the fact to which the apostle alludes, it seems to me, is the struggling of the Savior in the garden of Gethsemane, when his conflict was so severe that, great drops of blood fell down to the ground ... It is, indeed, commonly understood to mean that they had not yet been called to shed their blood as martyrs in the cause of religion.”

And *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* comments: “They had not yet realized the full extent of the struggle. No martyrdom had as yet occurred; no extreme measures, such as wholesale taking of life, had been employed against them.”

I find something to object to in both comments. The reference to Jesus’ struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, where “His sweat was like drops of blood falling to the ground,”<sup>226</sup> was too unique to serve as an example of perseverance for us. We are not called upon to carry away the sins of the world, as He did. As far as the reference to martyrdom is concerned, if the participants in the race had suffered martyrdom, they would have become part of the crowd of witnesses and could no longer be addressed as participants in the race of faith.

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<sup>224</sup> Heb. 6:1

<sup>225</sup> Luke 17:5

<sup>226</sup> Luke 22:44

*The Matthew Henry's Commentary* observes: "He puts them in mind that they might have suffered more, that they had not suffered as much as others; for they had not yet resisted unto blood, they had not been called to martyrdom as yet, though they knew not how soon they might be. Learn here, (1.) Our Lord Jesus, the captain of our salvation, does not call his people out to the hardest trials at first, but wisely trains them up by less sufferings to be prepared for greater. He will not put new wine into weak vessels, he is the gentle shepherd, who will not overdrive the young ones of the flock. (2.) It becomes Christians to take notice of the gentleness of Christ in accommodating their trial to their strength. They should not magnify their afflictions, but should take notice of the mercy that is mixed with them, and should pity those who are called to the fiery trials to resist to blood; not to shed the blood of their enemies, but to seal their testimony with their own blood. (3.) Christians should be ashamed to faint under less trials, when they see others bear up under greater, and do not know how soon they may meet with greater themselves. If we have run with the footmen and they have wearied us, how shall we contend with horses? If we be wearied in a land of peace, what shall we do in the swellings of Jordan? Jer. 12:5."

Finally, Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes: "Christians have a *struggle against sin*. This does not exclude the constant inner conflicts, but the emphasis is clearly on those antagonistic to the Christian faith. Those responsible for such sin are personified as sin itself. Although the struggle has already been intense (the verb is *antagōnizō*), yet the resistance has not yet been *to the point of shedding your blood*. The Greek here is not so specific (*mechris haimatos*), for the words could refer to martyrdom or could be understood metaphorically in the sense of 'utmost.' The former seems preferable here, since the statement seems to contrast with verse 3, where the hostility which Christ endured had been 'unto blood.' Probably the thought of the writer is still influenced by his arena imagery in verse 1."

My objection, already expressed above, remains that if martyrdom were referred to the address would have become redundant. What is the point of addressing people who are no longer alive?

#### **B. A Call to Endure God's Chastening 12:5-24**

*5 And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,*

*6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."*

*7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father?*

*8 If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons.*

*9 Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live!*

*10 Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness.*

*11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.*

*12 Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees.*

*13 "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.*

*14 Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.*

*15 See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.*

*16 See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau, who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son.*

*17 Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. He could bring about no change of mind, though he sought the blessing with tears.*



**18 You have not come to a mountain that can be touched and that is burning with fire; to darkness, gloom and storm;**

**19 to a trumpet blast or to such a voice speaking words that those who heard it begged that no further word be spoken to them,**

**20 because they could not bear what was commanded: "If even an animal touches the mountain, it must be stoned."**

**21 The sight was so terrifying that Moses said, "I am trembling with fear."**

**22 But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly,**

**23 to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,**

**24 to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.**

From this section it becomes clear that the “struggle against sin” in the previous verse is primarily a struggle against sin in one’s personal life. The race to be run is a race of holiness. The requirement for holiness runs as a golden thread through *The Book of Leviticus*, where God says to Israel: “Be holy because I, the Lord your God, am holy.”<sup>227</sup> And at one point God adds: “I am the Lord, who makes you holy.”<sup>228</sup>

We cannot bring about our personal sanctification. The blood of Christ washes us from our sins and has the power to keep us clean. The doxology in *Revelation* reads: “To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”<sup>229</sup> And the Apostle John adds in his epistle: “If we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin. If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us. If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”<sup>230</sup>

In this section, the author of *Hebrews* uses several Old Testament examples to strengthen the impetus of the race of holiness. The first is to look upon the restraints God puts upon us as a form of discipline that qualifies us to participate.

There is an admonition that combines at least two Old Testament references, one from *Isaiah* and one from *Proverbs*, reading: “Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way; say to those with fearful hearts, ‘Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.’”<sup>231</sup> “Let your eyes look straight ahead, fix your gaze directly before you. Make level paths for your feet and take only ways that are firm. Do not swerve to the right or the left; keep your foot from evil.”<sup>232</sup> Those words seem to take us out of the realm of participating in the race, but rather taking care of our spiritual condition in a way that promotes healing and strengthening of our limbs. The point appears to be to practice things that help to overcome the results of sinful behavior in personal life.

V.14 emphasizes holiness in interpersonal relationships. This does not seem to be restricted to church members, but applies to society at large. If holiness is not demonstrated in our human relations, it will be non-existent in our relationship with God. “Without holiness no one will see the Lord!”

Next, bitterness is identified as a poison that makes us miss the grace of God and affects the lives of those whom we ought to love. Esau is mentioned as an example of how not to handle God’s discipline. He

<sup>227</sup> Lev. 11:44; 19:2

<sup>228</sup> Lev. 20:7,8

<sup>229</sup> Rev. 1:5,6 - NKJV

<sup>230</sup> I John 1:7-10

<sup>231</sup> Isa. 35:3,4

<sup>232</sup> Prov. 4:25-27

treated God's promises as a joke, preferring a bowl of his brother's soup to the grace of God. The Bible equates this to sexual immorality.

Finally, there is the Mount Sinai experience where Israel met God, after having been delivered from the slavery of Egypt.

We must take a closer look at all these examples. The means God uses to keep our eyes on the goal of holy living is discipline. There is a slight difference between the Greek text in *Hebrews* which is taken from the LXX and the Old Testament text in *Proverbs*. The text in *Proverbs* reads: "My son, do not despise the Lord's discipline and do not resent his rebuke, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, as a father the son he delights in."<sup>233</sup> The author of *Hebrews* copied his text from LXX, which reads: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." The Greek word used is *paideia*, which has a wider meaning than the Hebrew word *muwcar* in the Old Testament. *Paideia* is used for the whole process of education or training, of which disciplinary correction may be a part. *Muwcar* has the basic meaning of chastisement in order to install the concept of restraint in a child.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on the theme of discipline: "The writer seizes on the word *discipline* from the Old Testament text in order to apply it specifically to the readers. Moreover he uses the verb to *endure* (*hypomenō*) which he has already applied to Christ in verse 3. The same patient acceptance is expected of all the sons as is seen in the Son *par excellence*. Such acceptance is possible only where an understanding of the motive behind the discipline is fully grasped. The principle laid down here is that the relationship determines the purpose of the discipline. A *father* who neglects to discipline a *son* is deficient in his capacity as a father, and a son who escapes all discipline is losing out on his sonship. This is a principle which would not be recognized by all schools of thought in this modern age where permissiveness has such powerful influence. The authority of parents has been so eroded that discipline rarely if ever comes into play. It has generally ceased to be a part of sonship. It is small wonder that those brought up in such an atmosphere find genuine difficulty in understanding the discipline of God. There would have been less difficulty in appreciating the point among the first readers of this epistle."

Vv.12 and 13 seem to take the picture out of the context of race and competition. The Greek text reads literally: "Wherefore lift up that which hang down, hands and the feeble knees; and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed." "Be turned out of the way" is the translation of a single Greek verb *ektrepo*, meaning "to deflect," or "turn away, literally or figuratively." The Apostle Paul is the only other New Testament writer who uses the word in order to described people who turn their back to the Gospel.<sup>234</sup> The idea seems to be that exercise strengthens the limbs so that the body can be healed.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: "The words here are vivid with encouragement. *Drooping hands* and *weak knees* are typical of low spirits. They portray persons who have become incapable of action through sheer exhaustion. The RSV takes the exhortation as addressed to the readers to *lift* their own hands and strengthen their own knees, but the Greek text could be understood in the sense that others were encouraged to help strengthen their brethren. While the latter is possible, no-one who does not even exert effort to revive himself has any hope of reviving others.

The idea of *straight paths* introduces a different thought. It is no use the weak knees being strengthened to walk on devious paths. The straightness links with the righteousness idea of verse 11. Since natural paths are mostly winding, avoiding rather than confronting the difficulties, a straight path is a path which has been specially prepared with some effort (*cf.* the imagery of Isaiah 40:3ff.). Boulders and stumbling-blocks must be resolutely removed. A straight clear road is a blessing for those who are lame, no less in the spiritual sense than in the physical. The idea seems to be that the readers must accept the beneficial effects of any discipline they may at present be enduring and therefore pull themselves together and see to it that they make progress. Those in a weak state should concentrate on healing and not dislocation (*ektrapē*). The picture of a *lame* man putting his disabled leg completely *out of joint* because of the unnecessary roughness of the path vividly brings home the seriousness of ignoring spiritual and moral weakness. The aim must be healing rather than injury."

<sup>233</sup> Prov. 3:11,12

<sup>234</sup> See I Tim. 1:6; 5:15.

There are a few examples in the Gospels of paraplegics who were healed of their infirmity by the power of God. Jesus healed the man, who had been paralyzed for thirty-eight years, at the pool of Bethesda<sup>235</sup> and also the one who was let down by his four friends through the roof of a house.<sup>236</sup> The Apostles Peter and John healed the beggar at the Beautiful Gate at the temple in the name of Jesus.<sup>237</sup> Physical healing may not be what the author has in mind, but if we read what the power of God can do to our physical bodies, we must realize that He can do even more to our soul and spirit. When Isaiah proclaimed these encouraging words: “He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint,”<sup>238</sup> he spoke, primarily, of spiritual blessings, not physical health.

This leads us to v.14 where holiness is defined in terms of human relationships. The Greek text reads literally: “Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.”

*The Matthew Henry’s Commentary* states: “It is the duty of Christians, even when in a suffering state, to follow peace with all men, yea, even with those who may be instrumental in their sufferings. This is a hard lesson, and a high attainment, but it is what Christ has called his people to. Sufferings are apt to sour the spirit and sharpen the passions; but the children of God must follow peace with all men. Secondly, Peace and holiness are connected together; there can be no true peace without holiness. There may be prudence and discreet forbearance, and a show of friendship and good-will to all; but this true Christian peaceableness is never found separate from holiness. We must not, under pretence of living peaceably with all men, leave the ways of holiness, but cultivate peace in a way of holiness ... Without holiness no man shall see the Lord. The vision of God our Savior in heaven is reserved as the reward of holiness, and the stress of our salvation is laid upon our holiness, though a placid peaceable disposition contributes much to our meetness for heaven.”

The Greek word *dioko*, rendered by the NIV as “make every effort,” is a very strong term. In many cases where it is used in the New Testament it stands for “persecute.” We find it, for instance in: “Blessed are those who are *persecuted* because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.”<sup>239</sup> And also in: “Saul, Saul, why do you *persecute* me?”<sup>240</sup> In combination with “peace” the verb almost sounds like an oxymoron.

Oswald Chambers has been credited for saying: “We want to be conscious saints and unconscious sinners; God makes us unconscious saints and conscious sinners!” In a way, holiness is as illusive as humility; once we become aware of it, we lose it. Maybe we could say that holiness is best demonstrated in our life in the way we deal with our sinful tendencies. The context in which the author of Hebrews puts this suggests that the way we work on our inter-human relations is an indication of the degree of holiness we achieve. Jesus shows us how to deal with tensions that may develop in our relationships with fellowmen. “Therefore, if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there in front of the altar. First go and be reconciled to your brother; then come and offer your gift.”<sup>241</sup> We could say that we will not see God in heaven if we do not recognize the image of our Maker in our neighbor. Seeing God in others and treating them accordingly will open the way to see God when we enter the ultimate reality of heaven. Maybe heaven is not even in the picture in the text in *Hebrews*; it is all about life on earth in which we demonstrate holiness.

Commenting on v.15, Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: “The matter to be attended to is of utmost spiritual importance: to see that *no one fail to obtain the grace of God*. It is noticeable that it is the present tense which is here used (*hysterōn* has the force, ‘continuing to fail’). *The grace of God* stands here for all the benefits which God in his grace has provided. Much failure among Christians is due to a lack of appropriation of those benefits. A specific example is here quoted – as when a *root of bitterness* causes

<sup>235</sup> John 5:1-18

<sup>236</sup> Mark 2:1-12

<sup>237</sup> Acts 3:2-10

<sup>238</sup> Isa. 40:29-31

<sup>239</sup> Matt. 5:10

<sup>240</sup> Acts 9:4

<sup>241</sup> Matt. 5:23,24

trouble. The words are taken from Deuteronomy 29:17f., but are here applied in a general sense of anyone or anything which results in bitterness, as the root of a plant affects the fruits which the plant produces. The springing up of the root picturesquely describes the development and therefore multiplication of bitterness. The writer links bitterness with defilement here (*and by it may become defiled*), since bitterness, wherever it exists, extends its influence. Bitterness indeed always corrupts and spoils. The same word (*mianthōsin, become defiled*) is used in Titus 1:15 in describing unbelievers whose minds and consciences are said to be corrupt.”

In the reference of Deuteronomy to which Gunthrie refers, Moses speaks of bitterness in the context of idolatry. We read: “Make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison.”<sup>242</sup> Idolatry was probably not a serious threat to the Jewish audience to which this epistle is addressed. The first century Jews were more culpable of legalism than of overt idolatry. But anything that detracts from a personal relationship with God has the principles of idolatry in it. And since much idol worship of that time used temple prostitution there is a clear link between idolatry and sexual immorality.

In referring to Esau, the writer uses the Greek word *bebelos*, which is rendered “godless.” The Greek word is derived from a word that means “a threshold,” suggesting that Esau crossed the threshold when he flippantly exchanged his birthright for a bowl of Jacob’s lentil stew.<sup>243</sup>

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “Esau serves as the example of the hopelessness of such a condition. By his own choice he became a profane person, or lover of the earthly and sensual, so that he lost both birthright and spiritual sensitivity. This latter condition, particularly, is the antithesis of the standard held up in verse 14. Esau exchanged peace and holiness for immediate and earthly pleasures.”

When Esau attempted to change his condition, he found it impossible to do so. Whether the blessing of God or repentance was the object of his tears, it was too late. Esau was guilty of willful sin, from the consequences of which he found no deliverance. This is the lesson to the Hebrews who were contemplating an act of willful sin in the form of apostasy back to Mosaic tradition. To the writer the illustration-warning seemed obvious.”

In vv.18-24 the writer draws two pictures, illustrating the difference between law and grace. The Apostle Paul had already done this earlier in his *Epistle to the Galatians*, using Hagar and Sarah as an example. We read: “Tell me, you who want to be under the law, are you not aware of what the law says? For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the slave woman and the other by the free woman. His son by the slave woman was born in the ordinary way; but his son by the free woman was born as the result of a promise. These things may be taken figuratively, for the women represent two covenants. One covenant is from Mount Sinai and bears children who are to be slaves: This is Hagar. Now Hagar stands for Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present city of Jerusalem, because she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem that is above is free, and she is our mother.”<sup>244</sup>

In the description of Israel’s encounter with God at Mount Sinai, the author of Hebrews uses some details mentioned in Exodus and some in Deuteronomy. There is also a mix-up of the reaction of the people and of Moses to God’s revelation to them. The people feared when Mount Sinai exploded with fire as a result of God coming down upon it. Moses’ fear was not related to that event. He even climbed the mountain and spent forty days and nights in the presence of the Lord. Moses’ fear came when he went back to the top of the mountain after discovering Israel’s sin in making the golden calf. He testified some forty years later: “I feared the anger and wrath of the Lord, for he was angry enough with you to destroy you. But again the Lord listened to me.”<sup>245</sup> God had intended this encounter at Sinai to be a celebration of His glory. The message Moses and Aaron had to give to Pharaoh was: “Let my people go, so that they may hold a festival to me in the desert.”<sup>246</sup> As it turned out, the people were not ready to celebrate at Sinai.

In the presentation of the Gospel there is another celebration to which all of mankind is invited, not at Sinai in the desert but at a place the author calls: “Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the

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<sup>242</sup> Deut. 29:18

<sup>243</sup> See Gen. 25:29-34.

<sup>244</sup> Gal. 4:21-26

<sup>245</sup> Deut. 9:19

<sup>246</sup> Ex. 5:1

living God.” Although the names Zion and Jerusalem refer to places on earth, they are symbols of God’s glorious presence. Mount Zion was the home King David had built for himself and Jerusalem was the city he had captured as one of the last strongholds of resistance by the old population of Canaan. Because of David’s relationship with God, God moved in with David and made his home a place of divine residence. This made David a figure of the Son of David, our Lord Jesus Christ. The difference between the place where God was met in the Old Testament and where we meet Him in the New Testament is in the person of Jesus Christ, who is the embodiment of the Gospel message.

The angels at this new meeting place are gathered “in joyful assembly” as a result of the conversion of human souls.<sup>247</sup> The converted people become “the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven.”

It may seem strange to find “God, the judge of all men” mentioned between “the church of the firstborn” and “the spirits of righteous men made perfect.” We usually connect God’s judgment with condemnation since “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”<sup>248</sup> The mention of God’s judgment may be intended as a warning to those who considered turning their back on the Gospel message about Jesus Christ and return to their Jewish roots, which included the practice of Old Testament sacrifices. Such a return would exclude the reader from “the church of the firstborn” and “the spirits of righteous men made perfect.”

That thought is reinforced by the following mention of the new covenant of which Jesus is the mediator and by the reference to His blood “that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.” When Cain committed the first murder, God said to him: “Your brother’s blood cries out to me from the ground.”<sup>249</sup> Jesus had said to the people of His time: “Upon you will come all the righteous blood that has been shed on earth, from the blood of righteous Abel to the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar.”<sup>250</sup> God holds us responsible for the trillions of gallons of blood that has been shed in this world ever since the first murder up till the world’s last day. As members of the human race, God considers us to belong to a gang of criminals. Unless we are washed by the blood of the Lamb, we will have human blood on our hands on the Day of Judgment. But the blood of Christ drowns out the voice of Abel’s blood if we claim it to be shed for us.

### **C. Fifth Warning: Danger of Refusing God 12:25-29**

*25 See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?*

*26 At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens."*

*27 The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken — that is, created things — so that what cannot be shaken may remain.*

*28 Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe,*

*29 for our "God is a consuming fire."*

In the first “warning” in this epistle, the author had said: “For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him.”<sup>251</sup> The question “how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation” is repeated here with different words but with the same intent.

Once more the author of Hebrews takes his readers back to Mount Sinai. When God revealed Himself to Israel at that time the earth shook and the people were shaken. We read: “On the morning of the third day

<sup>247</sup> Luke 15:7,10

<sup>248</sup> Rom. 3:23

<sup>249</sup> Gen. 4:10

<sup>250</sup> Matt. 23:35

<sup>251</sup> Heb. 2:2,3

there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, the whole mountain trembled violently, and the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder.”<sup>252</sup>

The second statement is a quotation from Haggai, where God spoke to the people who were rebuilding the temple at the end of the Babylonian captivity. The people were discouraged because the new temple did not compare in beauty and glory to the old one built by Solomon. God answered them: “‘In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,’ says the Lord Almighty.”<sup>253</sup> In *Hebrews*, this shaking becomes more than a mild shaking up of people in order to make them give sacrificially; it becomes a violent earthquake that shakes all of mankind out of their complacency in order to wake up to the reality of who God really is.

There is a depth of theological truth in the last two verses of this chapter that is difficult to sound satisfactorily. “What can be shaken” turns out to be all of creation, heaven and earth, the whole universe. Everything God created was influenced by the fall of Lucifer; heaven and earth were polluted by it, including every constellation. All this will and can be shaken to the point of collapse. The only thing remaining is the kingdom of truth. Satan’s fall brought about death as a result of sin. The only life that is unshakable is the life of God. In connection with this, Jesus calls Himself “the way and the truth and the life.”<sup>254</sup> While everything belonging to Satan’s kingdom of lies will be shaken to the point of collapse, the kingdom of truth will stand firm. And that is the kingdom of which we have become part in worshipping Jesus Christ as Lord.

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, observes: “‘Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken.’ There is only one thing that cannot be shaken: the kingdom of God, that spiritual world in which His will is done and His love is revealed. That kingdom we receive by faith into our hearts. The kingdom of God is within you. And the more our faith knows and owns the unmovable kingdom, amid the things that are shaken and that will not remain, the more our faith will become firm and steadfast and enable us to stand unshaken and immovable too.

*‘Wherefore, receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us have grace, whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God with reverence and awe.’* Let us have grace—let us accept and realize and always hold fast the grace promised at the throne of grace for every time of need ... *‘Whereby we may offer service well-pleasing to God.’* We have been cleansed by the blood from dead works to serve the living God. Our entrance into the Holiest and our drawing near was so that we might serve Him day and night in His temple—serve Him so that we obtain the witness that our service is well-pleasing. Nothing less can satisfy our heart or His heart. But this is what grace will indeed effect. It will not only pardon and accept and cover what is defective, but it will also enable us to offer service well-pleasing to God. Let us have grace and faith for this; without faith, it is impossible to please God.”

The phrase “our God is a consuming fire” was coined by Moses as he prepared the people of Israel for their entrance into the Promised Land and warned them of the danger of idolatry. He said: “Be careful not to forget the covenant of the Lord your God that he made with you; do not make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything the Lord your God has forbidden. For the Lord your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God.”<sup>255</sup> In that context God’s consuming fire is His jealousy, which is His desire for our total love and complete devotion. In the last day of the history of this universe this jealousy will turn to God’s archenemy and make all of creation blow up in a ball of fire. That is what we want to escape. That is what we have already escaped by having crossed over from death to life.<sup>256</sup> The author’s conclusion is, “say: ‘thank-you,’ and stand in awe for God in worship.”

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<sup>252</sup> Ex. 19:16-19

<sup>253</sup> Hag. 2:6,7

<sup>254</sup> John 14:6

<sup>255</sup> Deut. 4:23, 24

<sup>256</sup> John 5:24

### III. A Call to Love

13:1-17

#### A. Love in the Social Realm

13:1-6

*1 Keep on loving each other as brothers.*

*2 Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it.*

*3 Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow prisoners, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.*

*4 Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*

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

*6 So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"*

In this last chapter of the book the author makes a series of practical applications evolving from the new intimate relationship with the Father through Jesus Christ, as symbolized in our entering into the Holy of Holies. Our headline classifies this as “social concern.”

Brotherly love must be demonstrated in the way we extend hospitality and consider people who suffer for their faith. In the reference to marriage relationships the author of *Hebrews* does not go so far as to use marriage as a paradigm for Christ’s relationship to the church, as the Apostle Paul does.<sup>257</sup> But since a supernatural element is introduced in the practice of hospitality (people have entertained angels without knowing it), a spiritual significance to a marriage relationship must be assumed also.

And there is certainly a spiritual dimension in the way we handle our finances. The keep our bank account out of the control of the Holy Spirit amounts to an act of rebellion against God. The surrender of our lives to Jesus Christ includes the administration of our finances and other material possessions.

The Greek text of the opening phrase reads literally: “Let the brotherly love continue.” The Greek verb *menétoō*, “remain,” is an imperative. It is not a matter of choice; it is a command. Disobedience to the command of brotherly love is an act of rebellion against God.

Regarding the exercise of hospitality, *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary* observes: “There is a play on the same Greek [*epilanthanesthe ... elathon*]: let not the duty of hospitality to strangers escape you; for, by entertaining, strangers, it has escaped the entertainers that they were entertaining angels. Not unconscious of the duty, they have unconsciously brought on themselves the blessing.” The mention of entertaining angels is probably a reference to the experiences of Abraham and Lot.<sup>258</sup>

It has been our personal experience as a family that given hospitality brings with it some unexpected blessings, of which supplies that enabled us to provide for our guests were an important part. We often reap the greatest gain from that on which we do not intend to make money.

There are circumstances in which extending hospitality entails danger. In some cases one may take in criminals who would present a danger to the wealth, health and life of the family members. In certain situations, such as during the persecution of Jews by a Nazi government during World War II, hiding Jews could cost someone his life. The story of Corrie ten Boom is well recorded and my personal testimony concurs with this as I remember my parents hiding Jewish guests in their home in the Netherlands.

Our present-day prison system may differ from the jails of the Roman government, where people were tortured and put to death. But that does not mean that Christians must not obey God’s call to visit those who are incarcerated and present to them the freedom they can have in Christ. Some people have taken this on as a ministry and found it very rewarding. In the context of this epistle, those in prison were probably not the hardened criminal ones, but fellow Christians whose testimony had become an embarrassment to

<sup>257</sup> See Eph. 5:21-33.

<sup>258</sup> Gen. 18 and 19

the state. We are called upon to intercede for those who suffer for their faith. For people who live in a country where there is freedom of speech and free exercise of religion, this kind of admonition is not redundant.

Although the author of *Hebrews* does not specifically define marriage as a relationship between one man and one woman, it can be safely assumed that this is what he had in mind. Scripture is clear enough in its condemnation of what is presently called “alternate lifestyle,” that need for further clarification was not needed.<sup>259</sup> The warning is directed against extra-marital relationships and premarital sex.

The fifth admonition pertains to our handling of money. The Bible gives us some clear teaching regarding the way we must deal with material possessions. Jesus taught, in *The Sermon on the Mount*: “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.”<sup>260</sup>

In his instructions to Timothy regarding requirements for church elders, the Apostle Paul states that an elder ought to be “not a lover of money.”<sup>261</sup> He furthermore stated: “For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”<sup>262</sup>

The author of *Hebrews* goes to the root of the problem by indicating that the love of money is an indication of insecurity and lack of faith in God’s provision and protection. People use money to build a wall of protection around them. A hefty bank balance makes trusting the Lord unnecessary.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, observes: “It is important to note that it is not money itself which is to be avoided, but love of it. The latter develops when money becomes an end in itself. Many who have discovered its snares would have saved themselves much misery had they heeded the advice given here. The further exhortation, *be content with what you have*, may be paralleled in Philippians 4:11. This is not an argument for an economic *status quo*. It refers rather to an attitude of mind. Contentment means more than passive acceptance of the inevitable. It involves a positive recognition that money is relative.”

The author uses two Old Testament quotes to back up his argument; both pertaining to the promise of God’s presence with us. The first one is from Joshua, where God promises Joshua to give him authority, both among the people of Israel as well as over his enemies. We read: “No one will be able to stand up against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you.”<sup>263</sup> The second promise is found in the Psalms: “The Lord is with me; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?”<sup>264</sup> From the second quotation we gather that hoarding of money can be inspired by the fear of men.

The problem with money is that it stands for more than a means to provide for our legitimate needs. Money means power and protection. We believe, incorrectly, that possession of money will give fulfillment of emotional needs. Greed keeps satisfaction beyond reach. Agur, son of Jakeh, says in Proverbs: “The leech has two daughters. ‘Give! Give!’ they cry.”<sup>265</sup>

*The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* observes: “*Aphilargyros* means ‘not money-loving,’ rather than not covetous, as in the AV. The manner of life (conversation, AV) or disposition to be cultivated is contentment with things present, or such things as ye have. If the torrents of abuse flung at these Jewish Christians by others more prosperous included references to their lack of prosperity, this came as a very practical and thoroughly NT bit of advice. It is still timely. Instead of taking comfort in possessions, Christians are to derive their comfort from God’s own presence and provision, for he neither leaves them nor fails them.”

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<sup>259</sup> See Lev. 18:22.

<sup>260</sup> Matt. 6:19-21

<sup>261</sup> I Tim. 3:3

<sup>262</sup> I Tim. 6:10

<sup>263</sup> Josh. 1:5

<sup>264</sup> Ps. 118:6

<sup>265</sup> Prov. 30:15



The secret of this kind of Christian attitude toward possessions is contentment. The Greek word here is *arkeo*, which conveys the idea of protection by raising a barrier, thus creating an atmosphere of satisfaction. The same word is used in Paul's statement about the Lord's answer to his prayer to be freed from his thorn in the flesh. "But he said to me, 'My grace is *sufficient* for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'"<sup>266</sup> And in response to a gift sent to him by one of the churches, Paul wrote: "I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, for I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength."<sup>267</sup>

A sense of the Lord's presence will free us from fear, which is at the base of all insecurity. Jesus spoke the final word on the subject when He said in *The Sermon on the Mount*: "No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money. Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own."<sup>268</sup>

## **B. Love in the Religious Realm 13:7-17**

**7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.**

**8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.**

**9 Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them.**

**10 We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.**

**11 The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp.**

**12 And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood.**

**13 Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.**

**14 For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.**

**15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise — the fruit of lips that confess his name.**

**16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.**

**17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.**

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<sup>266</sup> II Cor. 12:9

<sup>267</sup> Phil. 4:10-13

<sup>268</sup> Matt. 6:24-34

The Greek text of v.7 reads literally: “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith, considering the end of their conversation, follow.” The grammatical form of the word “remember” suggests “keep on remembering.” This would imply that those leaders are no longer present.

It is good to look at people, who have played an important role in our lives, and who have contributed to the fact that we are what we are and where we are. The recipients of this epistle are encouraged to remember those who preached the Gospel to them. Evidently, they are no longer alive, seeing the fact that the author speaks about “the outcome of their way of life.” The readers were those who were struggling with the thought of whether they should continue to follow Christ or return to their Judaist roots. Doing so would mean a betrayal to those who had led them into the Gospel.

V.8 – “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” is a golden verse in this epistle and in all of Scripture. We observe that it is placed in the context of human leadership and teaching. It is proclaimed to those who were considering whether to follow Jesus Christ or to return to the rabbinic teaching.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, writes: “It is at first surprising that a statement should be abruptly introduced at this point about the changeless character of Jesus Christ, *the same yesterday and today and for ever*. But the connection of thought may well be that since Christ is the same, the faith is equally the same. Past exponents of Christian faith may therefore serve as a pattern for succeeding generations. In introducing his statement the writer has given expression to a profound truth, which is in fact basic to the argument throughout the epistle. Only a changeless high priest could be spiritually acceptable. Moreover, it is fitting that the idea of divine changelessness which occurs at the beginning of the letter (1:12) should find a place at the end. It is here comprehensively expressed, for the phrase *and for ever* (*eis tous aiōnas*) includes the other two concepts, *yesterday* and *today*. This changelessness, in fact, embraces all aspects of time. It does not imply that God has no interest in time.”

Andrew Murray, in *The Holiest of All*, adds: “All that He was yesterday, He is today. All that He was yesterday—in the past of the great eternity, as the Object of the Father’s delight, and the Bearer and Dispenser of the Father’s life and love—He is today. All that He was yesterday—in His life upon earth, with His meek and gentle and sympathizing heart—He is today. All that He has been on His throne—in sending down His Spirit, in working mighty things in and on behalf of His church, in revealing Himself in joy unspeakable to trusting souls, in meeting and blessing you who read this—He is today. All that He is, He can be to you today. And the only reason that you ever had to look back to ‘a yesterday’ that was better than ‘today’ was that you did not know, or that you failed to trust, this Jesus, who was waiting to make each today a new revelation and a larger experience of the grace of yesterday.”

Terms like “yesterday,” “today” and “forever” are time determinations. Even the word “forever,” which speaks of eternity, is part of our concept of time. Since we cannot imagine what eternity is like, we can only speak of it in terms of time. But time is something God created; it is not the condition in which He Himself exists. We are all born in time and live in time, and, consequently, time is the only entity we can imagine. Even when speaking about eternity we think in terms of endless time. We may discover that this is incorrect, but we have no capacity or dimension to imagine eternity in any different way.

Now, one of the miracles of the statement “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” is that the eternal God has become part of His own creation. When the Word became flesh, He submitted Himself to time and all that was involved in it. He obeyed the limitations to which all time-bound creatures are submitted. He became an embryo, was born as a baby, grew up into a man, He died. And then He stepped out of time back into eternity, not to undo what happened to and through Him in time, but to affirm it. The Second Person of the Trinity, the Man Jesus Christ is eternal. We say “He exists forever,” even though that does not express it correctly.

But for us who live in time, it means that we can get the full benefits of Christ’s time and eternity even while we are still living on earth. The power He demonstrated as a man, living in a perfect fellowship of faith in the Father, is now available to us through the Holy Spirit He sent down. He still heals, restores and resuscitates both physically and spiritually. We may not always experience the full benefits of what is available, and we may not comprehend the mystery of eternity from our time-bound perspective; the fact that we know although we do not comprehend ought to draw us closer to the source.

The Greek text of v.9 reads literally: “Be not [carried about] with divers and strange doctrines.” The author does not specify any particular doctrine, but the following reference to ceremonial foods points in the direction of strict Judaist concepts of clean and unclean. The verse has presented a problem to Bible scholars. *The Pulpit Commentary* states: “From the exhortation to imitate the faith of the departed leaders, the transition is natural to warnings against being carried away from it by new teachings. The faith, which was their faith, remains unchanged, as Jesus Christ remains unchanged; why, then, these doctrines, new and strange (cf. ... 1 Corinthians 3:11; ... Galatians 1:6-10). What these doctrines were is not shown, except so far as is intimated by the word *broomasin* (‘meats’), which reminds us at once of similar warnings in St. Paul’s Epistles (cf. ... Romans 14:2, 14, 21; ... Colossians 2:8, 16-23; ... 1 Timothy 4:3). These passages seem to refer in the first place to purely Jewish distinctions, still held to by Jewish Christians, between clean and unclean or polluted meats; and further to a new kind of asceticism, not found in the Old Testament, but based probably on notions of the impurity of matter, which led to entire abstention from flesh or wine, and also in some (... 1 Timothy 4:3) from marriage; also, as appears from the passage in Colossians, a false philosophy about angels and the spiritual world. We may perceive in these allusions the germs at least of later Gnostic heresies, such as found (as that of the Ebionites) their first congenial soil in Jewish circles; Oriental theosophy, or neo-Platonic philosophy, being supposed to have been engrafted on Jewish modes of thought. Some, misled by what is said in ver. 10, see in the word *broomasin* an allusion to those sacrifices of the Law which were eaten by the worshippers, against any fancied obligation to partake in which the readers are supposed to be warned. But the word is never so applied in the Old Testament or the New (... Hebrews 9:10; ... Leviticus 11:34; 1 Macc. 1:16; ... Romans 14:15, 20, 31; ... 1 Corinthians 6:13, 8:8, 13); nor would such error be likely to be classed among ‘strange doctrines.’ The drift of the warning is that the religion of the gospel does not consist in any of these notions or observances, the supposed importance of meats being specially noted, and that to make them its essence is a misconception of its whole meaning, and a departure from the faith: ‘For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Ghost’ (... Romans 14:17).”

William Barclay, in *the LETTER to the HEBREWS*, writes: “This eating and drinking has something to do with the body of Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews goes back to the regulations for the Day of Atonement. According to these regulations, the body of the bullock which was an offering for the sins of the High Priest and the body of the goat which was an offering for the sins of the people must be totally consumed with fire in a place outside the camp (*Leviticus* 16:27). They were sin offerings and the point is that even if the worshippers had wished to eat their flesh they could not do so. The writer to the Hebrews sees Jesus as the perfect sacrifice. The parallel for him is complete because Jesus, too, was sacrificed ‘outside the gate’ that is, outside the city wall of Jerusalem. Crucifixions were always carried out outside a town. Jesus, then, was a sin-offering for men; and it follows that, just as none could eat of the flesh of the sin-offering on the Day of Atonement, no one can eat of his flesh.”

The main point of the mention of the place of crucifixion is that identification with the sacrifice of Jesus Christ means sharing in His humiliation. Jewish Christians were put down as people who had become second grade members of their race because of betraying their Jewish traditions. They were looked down upon by the Judaists. It is difficult for us to imagine the shame connected to crucifixion. Those who were condemned to this kind of execution were considered to be the scum of society. For self-respecting Jews, as for all members of the human race, that is a qualification hard to accept.

In v.14 the author returns to one of the themes that runs through all of Scripture, viz. that life on earth is transient. This earth is not our permanent abode. Although God’s original plan for man may have been to live forever on this planet, the entrance of sin into creation has made this impossible. For all of mankind death is the end of life on earth. The author had already mentioned about Abraham that he led a nomadic life “for he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”<sup>269</sup> And about all the patriarchs of old we read: “People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country — a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.”<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Heb. 11:10

<sup>270</sup> Heb. 11:14-16

What Abraham and the patriarchs did was leading nomadic life in the physical sense of the word. The recipients of this epistle are encouraged to follow their example in a spiritual sense. The whole matter of being considered second-class citizens amounts to a compliment if we consider that we are not citizens at all. Those who look down upon us because of our fellowship with Jesus Christ are those whose praise would not be a compliment. Being esteemed by them would be a disgrace. It was a compliment for Lot that the men of Sodom did not consider him to be one of them. One of the few compliments made regarding Lot was that the men of Sodom said about him: “This fellow came here as an alien, and now he wants to play the judge!”<sup>271</sup> The Apostle Paul says about those who identify with Christ: “Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”<sup>272</sup>

Some Bible scholars look for a more literal interpretation of the verse, placing the recipients literally in the city of Jerusalem. *The Jamieson, Fausset, and Brown Commentary*, for instance, states: “Those who clung to the earthly sanctuary represent all who cling to this earth. The earthly Jerusalem proved to be no ‘abiding city,’ having been destroyed shortly after: with it fell the Jewish civil and religious polity: a type of the whole earthly order of things soon to perish.”

In the previous verses the death of Jesus Christ was depicted as a sin offering, such as brought on the Day of Atonement. Now, the recipients of the epistle are encouraged to respond to this by bringing their own sacrifice as an act of praise. The Mosaic law of knew a thank offering that a person could bring to God to express his gratitude for grace received. To people steeped in Old Testament theology, the image was very meaningful. Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments: “The epistle does not close without another use of priestly imagery. Having expounded in great detail the priestly office of Christ, the writer here employs the same imagery to describe the function of the believers. There is a fundamental distinction in the type of sacrifices offered, for whereas Christ offered himself, the believer is to offer *a sacrifice of praise to God*. This idea of thanksgiving is frequent in the New Testament and may in fact be regarded as the norm for Christians. Especially characteristic is the idea that such a sacrifice should be offered *continually (diapantos)*, in striking contrast to the once-for-all character of the sacrifice of Christ. It was clearly not considered incongruous to suggest that praise should be a constant factor in Christian living. It should be noted that the praise-sacrifice must be offered *through him (i.e. Christ)*, through whom it is acceptable to God.”

As Paul and Silas demonstrated, the best way to encounter persecution and suffering is singing God’s praises.<sup>273</sup> It shakes up the evil empire!

If we consider that all the sacrifices detailed in the first seven chapters of *Leviticus* are images of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, we must conclude that even our bringing of a thank offering is not something that can be done in our own strength. The only praise we can bring to God is the cross of Christ with which we have identified ourselves in spirit, soul and body. We praise God continually on the basis of Christ’s death in our place. That is the only sacrifice that is acceptable to God.

Just as in the Old Testament ritual, praise was not merely a verbal expression, but it involved the death of one of God’s creatures, so our praise of God must be accompanied by good deeds and sharing with others. Like our local Salvation Army, we must excel in “Doing the Most Good.”

This section ends with an admonition regarding submission to human leadership within the fellowship of the church. In the Old Testament setting, the high priest, together with the priests and Levites had the final say in matters regarding the way the people were to behave in their worship of God and their fellowship with Him and one another. In a way this hierarchy was carried over in the New Testament church in the involvement of church elders and deacons.

Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, states the following about this: “Almost as an isolated injunction, the writer introduces here the need for a responsible attitude towards *leaders*. This is the first suggestion in the epistle of any church order and even here no hint is given of what offices were held. The writer is concerned only

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<sup>271</sup> Gen. 19:9

<sup>272</sup> Phil. 3:20,21

<sup>273</sup> Acts 16:25

about attitudes and mentions two which are complementary to each other – *obey* (*peithesthē*) and *submit* (*hypeikete*), the latter word occurring only here in the New Testament. The function of the leaders is described in general terms as *keeping watch over you souls*. The same verb is used in Ephesians 6:18 in an injunction to keep alert in prayer. The task of the overseers is to maintain constant watch over those committed to their care. This is reminiscent of Paul's care of all the churches (2 Cor. 11:28) and of Peter's injunction to the elders to tend God's flock (1 Pet. 5:2), which is itself reminiscent of the words of Jesus to Peter (Jn. 21:15ff.). It is noticeable that the writer here uses the word for *souls* (*psychai*) to describe people, for this is more vivid than saying 'you.' The office of leader is recognized as one of responsibility, for those who hold such office will be expected *to give account* of their work. It is important to note that those who exercise authority must also accept responsibility for their actions.

Leaders are enjoined to perform their tasks *joyfully*, which would exclude an overbearing approach. This is expressed negatively as *not sadly*, or more literally 'not with groaning,' (*mē stenazontes*), a word used by Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:2 of the Christian's groaning which accompanies the desire to put on his heavenly dwelling. The idea of leadership with groaning is clearly not one to be encouraged. The writer simply says *it would be of no advantage to you*, using yet another word (*alysiteles*) which occurs nowhere else in the New Testament. There is an occurrence in the papyri where it is used of inferior crops as compared with wheat ... There is no more striking example of the joyful, and therefore advantageous, leadership than Paul (cf. his Philippian letter)."

#### **IV. Conclusion            13:18-25**

**18 Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way.**

**19 I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.**

**20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,**

**21 equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.**

**22 Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter.**

**23 I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.**

**24 Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.**

**25 Grace be with you all.**

We find here the only kind of identification of the writer, who was obviously known personally to the recipients. It has been suggested that the concluding verses of this epistle are a postscript by a person, who may have been the Apostle Paul, or anybody else who had been in a working relationship with Timothy. The injunction "Pray for us," can be taken as pertaining to a single person, or a congregation of which the writer was a member.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: "When St. Paul uses the plural *hemeis* ('us') he usually at least, if not always, includes his colleagues (cf. ... 1 Thessalonians 5:25; ... 2 Thessalonians 3:1; ... Colossians 4:3). So probably the writer here, especially as there is a transition to the singular in the following verse. Whoever he was, he associates himself in sending the Epistle with his fellow-laborers, *i.e.* with others of what we may call the Pauline circle, who were engaged with him elsewhere. Both this and the request for prayer, and also the assertion of integrity, which seems to imply suspicion of possible mistrust, are quite in St. Paul's way, and confirm the view that, though the author may not have been St. Paul himself, it was at any rate some one who was, or had been, closely connected with him."

Whether it was the Apostle Paul, who wrote a postscript to a homily by someone else, or whether it was the author of the whole book, can not be determined from these verses. It is clear, however, that the writer was in trouble with the law and that his liberty was restricted. His request for prayer pertains to having a clear conscience and a good testimony. All this is strongly suggestive of a hearing in which a person is called upon to defend himself. There is also a strong suggestion that these words are addressed to a

particular group, rather than to members of the Hebrew race spread out over a large area. But if the text is merely a postscript to a homily, it brings us no help in identifying the author of the book.

Vv.20 and 21 constitute one of the great benedictions in the Bible. *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary* states: “This subscription in the form of a prayer should have been a particular blessing to those who heard or who read it. It speaks of:

- (1) Comfort, for, in and under persecution, they had access to and fellowship with the God of peace.
- (2) Hope in Christ resurrected; literally, brought up from the dead.
- (3) Personal and pastoral care in our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep.
- (4) Doctrine and theology. All of the comfort, hope, and pastoral care is sealed and guaranteed by the blood of the everlasting covenant.

Certain personal requests and wishes follow:

- (1) Make you perfect in every good work (v. 21) or more correctly, God make up to you, or in you, what you lack. This request conveys the writer’s desire that the believers might be fully fitted for their task, having no weaknesses, faults, or lacks. Believers need to be made complete (*katartizo*).
- (2) To know and to be doing the whole will of God. Because God works in us, we desire to work for him in devoted surrender and obedience.
- (3) To please God through Jesus Christ. Only the indwelling Son working in us by the Holy Spirit and through the Word of God can so make us pleasing to God. Let this request be the cry of our hearts.”

The Father is called “the God of peace.” There is a reference in this to the priestly benediction of the Old Testament, which reads: “The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face toward you and give you peace.”<sup>274</sup> The God of peace is the source of peace; He initiated reconciliation between Himself and fallen mankind and He creates peace in the human heart. In the words of the Apostle Paul: “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have gained access by faith into this grace in which we now stand.”<sup>275</sup> And: “The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace.”<sup>276</sup>

The legal basis for this administration of peace is the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ. He conquered death by undergoing death in our behalf. This, the author states, was part of an agreement between the Father and the Son, the first and second Person of the Holy Trinity, by which the Son pledged His life as an atoning sacrifice for the sins of mankind. He became, both the scapegoat that carried away the sin of the world as well as the lamb that was slain, the blood of which was sprinkled on the cover of the ark.

The blood of Christ is called “the blood of the eternal covenant.” It is difficult for us to grasp that, before sin ever entered creation, before the creation of time, God had a plan of salvation, which consisted in the sacrifice of His own Son. It involved, first of all, the Incarnation. There could be no question of “blood” if God had not become a human being. The Bible states that “the wages of sin is death.”<sup>277</sup> Death is also the end of sin. The blood that was poured on the altar signified that payment for sin was made by the death of a victim. In the Old Testament the sinner died by substitution; that is, another creature died in man’s place. In the New Testament it is the Creator who dies as a substitution for all of creation.

The author of Hebrews states that, before the beginning of time, there was this agreement between the Father and the Son. The Son pledged to give His life in behalf of fallen creation and the Father pledged to raise His Son from death.

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<sup>274</sup> Num. 6:24-26

<sup>275</sup> Rom. 5:1,2

<sup>276</sup> Rom. 8:6

<sup>277</sup> Rom. 6:23

The title given to the Son, “that great Shepherd of the sheep,” qualifies both what happened to the Son after His resurrection, as well as what happens to us, when we surrender our lives to His guidance. As God says in Ezekiel: “‘You my sheep, the sheep of my pasture, are people, and I am your God,’ declares the Sovereign Lord.”<sup>278</sup> In v.17 the author made mention of the shepherds of the flock, who were the leaders of the local church. Here, he identifies the source of their authority, in the “great Shepherd of the sheep,” to whom they are accountable.

In the picture of the shepherd and the sheep, the shepherd takes full responsibility for the welfare of the flock. Nothing is expected of the sheep; they are fed and kept. Without the care of a shepherd sheep go astray. That is the picture. In the reality depicted, human beings are being equipped by the One who rose from the dead. We need the equipment of the Holy Spirit in order to be able to live a life of obedience to the will of God.

The doxology not only serves to praise God; it also suggests that our equipment is meant to bring praise to our Creator and Savior. It is difficult for us to imagine how we could add to God’s glory. The words “to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen,” suggest that, somehow, our praise adds to God’s perfection, which, humanly speaking, is an impossibility. Seen in the light of the conflict between God and Satan, we will ultimately be the ones who proclaim God’s justification and Satan’s condemnation.

It strikes us as strange that the author of a treatise of thirteen chapters would say that he had only written a short letter. That is the reason most Bible scholars believe that the reference here is only to the last four verses of this chapter. The mention of “a short letter” gives credence to the theory that the epistle itself was written or spoken by someone else and sent on to some Hebrew readers by someone who knew Timothy and planned to travel with him.

*The Pulpit Commentary* observes: “Though the Epistle is not short as compared with others, yet it has been compressed with as ‘few words’ as the subject would allow (cf. ver. 11). If, however, this concluding portion of the Epistle was written or dictated by St. Paul himself, as suggested under ver. 19, the ‘few words’ may possibly refer to it only. This allusion to Timothy shows that the Epistle, whatever its exact date, was at any rate written in the apostolic age, before his death. Further, though not proving St. Paul’s authorship, it supports the conclusion that the writer, if not himself, was one of his associates, Timothy having been peculiarly his disciple and companion. It seems that Timothy had been, as the readers were aware, in prison; and the joyful news is communicated of his release, and of the prospect of his visiting them. This again shows that the Epistle was addressed to a definite circle of readers. It is observable that the word *apoluesthai*, which does not occur in St. Paul’s writings, is, like so many expressions throughout the Epistle, one usual with St. Luke (... Luke 22:68; 23. 16, etc.; ... Acts 3:13; 4:21; where it expresses release from prison or captivity). He uses it also for dismissal of persons on a mission (... Acts 13:3; 15:30); and hence one view is that Timothy’s having already set out to visit the Church addressed is all that is here meant. But the other meaning of the word is more likely.”

In conclusion, Donald Guthrie, in *Hebrews*, comments on v.24: “The concluding greetings are the most letter-like feature of this epistle. But even these create problems, because there is ambiguity about the Italians. The very general reference to all your leaders ties in with verse 17. *All the saints* is equally comprehensive.

It is noticeable that here the writer addresses the group as a whole, as he does throughout the epistle, even sending greetings to the leaders through the whole body of believers. There is no trace here of any hierarchical system. The repetition of ‘all’ reflects the house-church situation where not all Christians would be present in any one place at any one time.

*Those who come from Italy (hoi apo tēs Italias)* could be understood of those domiciled in Italy or of Italians who were residing elsewhere. The decision on this ambiguity will depend on what decision is made about the place of writing. The writer may be in some part of Italy writing to Rome, or he may be somewhere else and includes greetings from Italians abroad. But it makes little difference to an understanding of this epistle, whichever it is.”

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<sup>278</sup> Ezek. 34:31

The Greek text of the last verse reads literally: “The grace be with you all. Amen.” Interestingly, the final greeting given is a Greek one, not the Hebrew one *Shalom*, “peace.”