



Reflections on Hebrews

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Revised

Introduction

I'm really not sure what to call this; is it a book, a Bible study, a devotional, a small group study, a commentary? To be honest, it isn't quite any of those things, yet it has aspects of all three. It's hardly long enough to be a book; it isn't complete enough to be a commentary. It's not quite a devotional, but it could be used for devotions. It's not quite a Bible study, but it could easily be used for that, too. If you're creative, it could also be used to teach a class, but it isn't in a proper format to be curriculum.

One thing differs here from the first two collections I have released. For this collection, I have not included discussion questions, but anyone could make up their own for use in a discussion or class setting.

This little "document" is freely given to you. By all means, feel free to share it with others for free. Please do not use any of this for commercial purposes! Make use of whatever helps you grow in your relationship with our Lord and anything here that isn't helpful, by all means set it aside. Helping other believers in their walk with Christ is my only purpose here!

All blessings to you in Christ!

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Chapter 1

Jesus: God's Word

In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. 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. So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.

Hebrews 1:1-4

Here we are at the beginning of a tour of a new book from the New Testament, my very favorite book of all, a book that will show you how the Old and New Covenants come together, a book that will both challenge and encourage each one of us. I sure hope that you will have the time and inclination to be fed and encouraged on our tour: Here we go!

The book begins with a bang in these four verses! Take a minute to drink them in; they are simply amazing. Look first of all at the contrast between God's former ways, and His ways now. In the past, He spoke *through* the prophets. Now, He speaks *directly* by His Son. Can you see the difference? In the Old Testament, there is always an intermediary, but in the New Testament, God speaks directly to us by His Son; this is a paradigm shift of massive proportions. This Son by whom God speaks is not just some kid, He is not only heir of all things, He is also the one by and through whom God created the entire universe. When God spoke the words "let there be light" it was the Son's lips that were moving... Just let that sink in... This is a huge statement. There's more coming, catch this one:

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. The "radiance" of God's glory! Jesus Christ is the radiance of God's glory, and God sent Him to be with us, to teach us, to have relationships with us... and to die for us. It's one thing to be amazed at God's unending love for us in sending His Son to die for us, but when you combine that kind of love with just exactly who this Jesus is... WOW!

Jesus is also the "exact representation of His being": Jesus is in fact God. This is what Jesus meant when He said "the Father and I are one." WOW! If you want to know what God is like, look at Jesus. If you want to know what God thinks, look at Jesus. If you want to know if God loves you, look at Jesus on the cross.

"...sustaining all things by his powerful word." Ever wonder why the planets don't just fly off into space? Ever wonder why the seasons keep coming at the right time after all of these years? Ever wonder who made up the laws of physics, of nature, of right and wrong? Ever wonder why your head doesn't explode? The entire universe is sustained by His Word! Ever wonder why so many people seek to denigrate the Bible? Now you know why; it is *His Word*. It is so powerful that it could call the universe into existence. It is nothing to be trifled with, as so many

philosophers have found out. It is a force that we cannot even begin to fathom, and God sent Him to give us direct access to Him. If this does not inspire you, then maybe you need to see if you can still fog a mirror!

After He finished His work on the earth, He was returned to the glory from whence He had come, superior to the angels, yes. Superior to all living beings everywhere? Yes. This is our Savior, with whom we have a relationship. I wonder, do we value that relationship as we ought?

Hebrews is simply an awesome book. I think you'll see as we continue going through it, that it is like no other.

Jesus: Superior to the Angels

Hebrews 1:5-14

As we continue through the rest of Hebrews chapter 1, the author is setting about to prove his assertions of Christ's supremacy by comparing Him to the angels. Verses 5-13 are quotations from the Old Testament that contrast the Son with angels.

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*

Hebrews 1:5

Notice that in these words, God has a special relationship with Jesus, the relationship of Father and Son; this is quite a different relationship than that which He has with the angels. In the next verse, our author shows that at the Incarnation, the angels must worship the Son:

And again, when God brings his firstborn into the world, he says,

“Let all God’s angels worship him.”

Hebrews 1:6

As the chapter continues, we can see that the Son will reign, but the angels are His servants (1:8-9 c.f. 1:7) In vv. 10-12 he quotes Psalm 102 indicating that the Son will reign over the

universe, will destroy it and yet remain the same always. In verse 13 he quotes Psalm 110 showing that God will destroy all of the Son's enemies and make them "a footstool for your feet" surely God has never made such a promise to an angel!

Finally, comes verse 14 and a curve...

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

As the book continues, we will see the author demonstrate that Jesus is not only superior to the angels, but that He is also superior to Moses, that His sacrifice is superior to the sacrifices of the Old Covenant, that His New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant, and that the promises of the New Covenant are superior to those of the Old Covenant, for they are brought by a superior High Priest (Jesus) who brings a superior sacrifice to establish a superior Covenant. With this in mind, consider 1:14 above...

By asking the question, the author is asserting its truth: Yes, the angels are "ministering spirits" sent to "serve those who will inherit salvation." Slow down, take a closer look; Jesus is the "firstborn" of the Father, His salvation isn't even an issue, who are these people the author is referring to? Let's figure it out: Who inherits salvation? Who are called "co-heirs with Christ?"

Let's see... salvation comes from accepting Christ as savior, by His work on the cross. Those who are "in Christ" are His co-heirs. Therefore, the angels are ministering spirits sent to serve you and me. Again, slow down and let that sink in...

This "in Christ" thing is really too cool!

So, why is it that we waste so much time arguing and complaining? It seems to me that our author is going to make the point that we really need to grab on to what we have in Christ, and not worry about all of the noise and distractions of this life.

Wow, ministering spirits...

Chapter 2

No, don't do it!

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For since the message spoken through angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him. God also testified to it by signs, wonders and various miracles, and by gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will.

Hebrews 2:1-4

This letter was sent to Jewish Christians in Rome during the time of Nero's persecution, and it has a theme that carries from front to back that screams. 'Persevere in times of trial! Hold on firmly to what you have in Christ and don't let go!' As you might imagine with such a theme, there are several warnings in the letter, and here is the first one.

Like the opening of the first chapter, this one has an opening paragraph that is heavy on content. The content here is a contrast between the Old and New Covenants

<i>Old Covenant</i>	<i>New Covenant</i>
A message spoken by angels	Announced by Jesus Himself
It was binding	It was confirmed by its hearers and by God Himself
It contained just punishment for every infraction	It includes no escape for ignoring it or even for just drifting away

Simply stated, these verses are telling us that we must give our relationship with Jesus Christ (New Covenant) the highest possible priority. In fact, this is the thesis for the entire chapter. I know that I don't need to ask (Well, do we?) of anyone, because if you are anything like me, we can all do a better job in this area.

Now, let's think about this another way. The author has included a contrast between the Old and New Covenants here, as well as throughout this entire letter: Why?

I think the reason is a simple one, but maybe not as obvious to the modern reader as it would have been when it was written. Remember, it is written to Jewish Christians. Of course they would be interested in this comparison, just on general principle, but there is a deeper reason.

Nero persecuted Christians in his day. Remember the story of the great fire in Rome that burned out the center of the city, and resulted in a whole new building program by Nero that

seemed to be his way of immortalizing himself as a Roman Emperor? Who did Nero, who probably had quite a bit to do with starting the fire, blame for the fire?

Exactly: Christians! The Christians were the specific target of his persecution, not Jews. Thus, a Jewish Christian might have felt pressure to renounce Christ and just be an innocent Jew again to avoid Nero's persecution. That, dear reader, is the historical context of this letter. Hold on to what you have in Christ. The author is constantly reminding his readers how much better their lot as Christians is, in spite of Nero... so this theme is oft-repeated.

We must pay the most careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. (2:1)

We need to pay careful attention to what we have in Christ (what we have heard) lest we drift away. Thus "drift away" would mean going back to the old ways to avoid trouble in this life. He goes on in verse 2 to describe their situation under the Law with its system of rules and punishment for infractions, and then verse 3: *how shall we escape if we ignore so great a salvation?* refers back to "drift away". If they would be ignoring their great salvation and returning to the old system, they would find themselves in a world of hurt with God. On the one hand, they turned their backs on salvation, and on the other hand, they'd be returning to the condemnation of the Law; a lose - lose situation. Verse 4 underscores the fact that God Himself has confirmed to them the validity of the New Covenant in various ways. As we continue through the rest of the chapter, our author will build this case even more.

For the time being, I might suggest that each of us consider this warning. OK, we might not have been Jewish, and we might not be living under Nero's persecution, but are we ever tempted to "drift away?" Are we ever tempted to slack off, get lazy, not care...? What will be running through your mind if this kind of temptation ever comes your way?

But We See Jesus!

For He has not put the world to come, of which we speak, in subjection to angels. But one testified in a certain place, saying:

*“What is man that You are mindful of him,
Or the son of man that You take care of him?
You have made him a little lower than the angels;
You have crowned him with glory and honor,
And set him over the works of Your hands.
You have put all things in subjection under his feet.”*

For in that He put all in subjection under him, He left nothing that is not put under him. But now we do not yet see all things put under him. 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.

Hebrews 2:5-9 (NKJV)

When I was a teenager, this passage grabbed my imagination and really locked me in as a follower of Jesus; "you have made him a little lower than the angels..." Wow!

At any rate, our author is moving on from our last tour segment, and he is making the case that Jesus is superior to the angels. In verse 5 he mentions that the "world to come" is not in the subjection of the angels, but it is made subject to a man. Then he quotes Psalm 8 which is an amazing journey into God's purpose. Beginning with the great and wonderful question *What is man that You are mindful of him, Or the son of man that You take care of him?* Obviously questions such as this have gone through all of our minds, but there is an amazing answer, an answer that blows us away every time we consider it. Yes, God made us "a little lower than the angels" but He also put the world under us in His hierarchy; amazing.

Recall that back in the Garden, God gave Man "dominion" over all of the creatures of the earth; that "dominion" was not given to angels, nor was it given to any "fallen angel" for it was given to the Man. Of course we know that particular man went astray, but there is another Man who would change that. God put all things under Mankind, but we don't currently see that having entirely come to pass because of what happened later, the Fall...

But we see Jesus!

Jesus, that second Man, who has changed everything, yes, we see Him. Yes, He was made a little lower than the angels, so that He could suffer death for everyone, yes, this Jesus is now crowned with glory and honor, for He has tasted death for all of us. What a glorious sight that is; it is our deliverance. Jesus, remember who He is? He is the One through whom all things were made, way back in the very beginning. In the fullness of time, when God saw that the right time had come, Jesus was made a little lower than the angels, which is to say that He took on the form of a human body, being entirely human and entirely divine, this amazing Jesus came to earth to take away the problem of sin and shame to restore Mankind to the purpose for which God had created Him to fulfill.

Jesus, who is in every way superior to the angels, allowed Himself to be humbled greatly to accomplish the purpose of God, and soon in God's time, all will be returned to God's original design. How is it that God even takes notice of Man? Yes, it still blows my mind, but He does, for He has big plans for us.

WOW!

Brothers (and Sisters)

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he

*suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters. He says,
“I will declare your name to my brothers and sisters;
in the assembly I will sing your praises.”*

And again,

“I will put my trust in him.”

And again he says,

“Here am I, and the children God has given me.”

Hebrews 2:10-13

This is another section of text that is breathtaking if you'll relax and let its full significance settle in. Check out that first paragraph... Yes, it was quite fitting for God to make Jesus perfect through His suffering, but that isn't the breathtaking part, at least not for me. It is the part about bringing many sons (and daughters) to glory. Jesus attained glory through His suffering; we attain glory through *His suffering*. Jesus is in glory— we are headed for glory. Wow!

Note: If you are wondering why I put "sisters" and "daughters" in parentheses, it's because those words are not in the Greek. It's "brothers" and "sons". If you would like to accuse the "new" NIV of being politically correct, I would join with you here, and it is irritating to me too.

However, it does capture the full intent of the original, because while they didn't come out and say it literally, those were inclusive terms in context. Sometimes we forget that in Middle Eastern cultures back then, and even today, it is not polite to refer to women in this fashion; the masculine form represents the whole. By adding those terms, the NIV has captured this and made it clear to modern Western readers that it was intended in the inclusive form. Back to the text...

The one "who makes people holy" is obviously a reference to Jesus. We who are His followers are the ones made holy, and another wow moment: Both are in the same family: Welcome to God's family, we are the brothers and sisters of Jesus! Therefore, it wouldn't be wrong to say that Jesus Christ, as He sits on the throne at the right hand of God, ruling heaven and earth is not only King of kings and Lord of lords, but He is also our "big brother." If you aren't filled with awe right now, please slow down and read that again.

The Old Testament quotes that follow are placed there to demonstrate that this is something that has been foretold in Scripture, even though people may not have comprehended it at first.

Imagine how Jewish Christians in the circumstances of their time would have reacted to this. Being the brother of the Son of God, a God whose name it was unlawful to even say out loud: Amazing!

I hope that it strikes you the same way. So many of us go through our lives filled with guilt, grief and fear, not ever comprehending how precious we are in God's sight... Brothers, in the family... relations... Not evil, wretched sinners. Thanks to the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and your

acceptance of His grace, all of that is so far away, and God remembers it no more... Brother!
Sister! Son! Daughter!

Welcome home!

Fully Human

Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might break the power of him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil— and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death. For surely it is not angels he helps, but Abraham's descendants. For this reason he had to be made like them, fully human 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. Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.

Hebrews 2:14-18

Following the last section, in which we saw that we are God's children, Jesus' brothers and sisters, our author continues with his theme in verse 14. Since these "children" have flesh and blood, Jesus took on flesh and blood too, and then we clearly see why. Jesus was incarnated so that He could die, to break the power of the devil, by setting us free from the fear of death. Interesting concept isn't it? Being set free from slavery to the fear of death, and from the one who holds power over us by our fear of death...

So, how does the author move from the fear of death to Satan holding power over us because of our fear of death? Here's a thought: If you are a follower of Jesus who lives in a place where following Jesus is not permitted by law, will you follow Jesus or will you follow the law of that land? If the authorities in power there are seeking to enforce their laws, then they will seek to coerce you into following their laws, right? What is the ultimate means of coercion on this earth? Death. If you fear death, you are likely to follow the law. If you have been set free from the fear of death, you are free to follow Jesus. Consider who this letter was written to: Jewish Christians in Rome during the persecution of Nero. The whole book of Hebrews is a persuasive argument to them to hold onto their faith, even to the point of death, a death they have no reason to fear. We also have no reason to fear death, since we know that because of Jesus, we have eternal life. You can destroy my body, but I live on anyway. Yes, dear reader, this is much more than empty talk or an academic doctrine, it is very real.

He continues: Jesus didn't do this amazing thing for the angels, He did it for "Abraham's descendants." This might trip you up if you don't keep your covenants straight. "Abraham's descendants" is a term used in the Old Testament to refer to the Jews, for they were literally the genetic descendants of Abraham, and were sometimes called the "children of Israel." Of course "Israel" was also one of Abraham's descendants. In the New Testament, the Gospel changed all of this. Through having been born again, both Jew and Gentile are saved by Christ. There is no more Jew and Gentile, there is only "in Christ." Thus, this refers to all followers of Jesus, not just Jewish followers, for as Paul says in Galatians 6:16, we are "the Israel of God." To

accomplish all of this, the Son had to become fully human... and so He did become fully human, and in so doing, He became a faithful and merciful high priest in service to God. There will be much about this "high priest" as the letter continues.

His humanity also made Him subject to every temptation that you and I will face in life, and thus, He is able to help us when we are tempted. What a great comfort this is! Jesus had to deal with the same kinds of things that may get to me, and He is able and willing to help in those tough moments. I don't know about you, but I find that He is much more helpful when I get out of His way, when I ask for His help, and when I am willing to turn to Him. When I force Him out of my mind, I always seem to fall... Maybe there's a pattern there.

Chapter 3

Jesus: Greater than Moses

Therefore, holy brothers and sisters, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, whom we acknowledge as our apostle and high priest. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. "Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house," bearing witness to what would be spoken by God in the future. But Christ is faithful as the Son over God's house. And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.

Hebrews 3:1-6

Chapter 3 begins with a summing up from the previous chapter: Fix your thoughts on Jesus! We acknowledge Him as our "apostle and high priest." The next sentence is the transition to a comparison between Jesus and Moses...

"Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses" would really set Jesus apart as an important figure in the Jewish mindset, for apart from Abraham, nobody would have been considered greater than Moses. "Just as the builder of a house is greater than the house itself" is the comparison between the two. In saying that Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house, but God is the owner of the house, and Jesus is the owner's Son and Heir; Moses was working for Him. Thus, He is far greater than Moses. While Jesus is "over" God's house, and Moses was a *servant in* God's house, we *are* God's house, *if* "we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory."

Moses served in God's house. We are God's house.

Once again, we see a stark contrast between the relationship of Old Testament Israel and God, and the New Testament Church and God; the two are quite profoundly different. Israel consisted of God's covenant people, His Nation on earth. He was their God and they were His people. They did not, however have eternal life, the removal of sins or a direct relationship with God. Christians have these things and more, because while the Israelites were born into their covenant as a function of biology, we are born again into a covenant relationship as a function of the life force of the Holy Spirit within us, and as a result, we are not just His people, but His children, whom Jesus calls brothers; Israel was God's people, we are God's family.

This is great news indeed, and I hope you are filled with joy at the thought... BUT... this is very much a conditional statement, for there is a great big IF in the middle of it. Depending on your doctrinal positions, you might start feeling a little uneasy right about now, but I would encourage you to recognize that this is not simply "Don's crazy thinking" here, for you might have noticed that the rest of the chapter is another warning... and I'm not making that up, obviously. Of course, you are free to see things differently than I do.

The IF is this: *...if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory.* What is this hope in which we glory business? Does he mean just a hopefulness about things in general, or does this specifically refer to something? Jesus is our hope for glory; our author is making remaining faithful as followers of Jesus a condition for the promises. In the verses that follow, which will be our next subject, you will see that our author cites examples from the Old Testament that back this up, so if this statement of mine seems unsettling to you, I sure hope you'll read on...

For as Long as it is Called "Today"

So, as the Holy Spirit says:

*"Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion,
during the time of testing in the wilderness,
where your ancestors tested and tried me,
though for forty years they saw what I did.
That is why I was angry with that generation;
I said, 'Their hearts are always going astray,
and they have not known my ways.'
So I declared on oath in my anger,
'They shall never enter my rest.'*

Hebrews 3:7-11; cf Psalm 95:7-11

As we begin, we need to recall that this is an expansion on the conditional statement in verse 6: "And we are his house, if indeed we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope in which we glory." (Heb. 3:6b)

These verses taken from Psalm 95 recount the experience of the people in the wilderness. You'll remember that they kept trying God's patience, complaining, rebelling and being disobedient in the extreme, and of all those who were saved out of Egypt, only two of them were allowed to enter the rest, the Promised Land. Not even Moses was permitted to enter into it; they all perished in the wilderness. God had promised to deliver Abraham's descendents out of Egypt, which He did, and into the Promised Land, which He did, even though of the ones who left Egypt, all save 2 died en route. Yet a vast number did enter the Land, but they were born during the 40 years between the exodus from Egypt and the entry into the Land, and thus we can see that God's promise to Abraham was unconditional for the group called the descendants of Abraham, but conditional to the individuals within the group. God kept His promise to the Israelites in the Wilderness, in spite of the fact that most of them turned their backs on Him and never entered... see how this worked?

See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called "Today," so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end. As has just been said:

*“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts
as you did in the rebellion.”*

Hebrews 3:12-15

As our attention is turned back to the "here and now" the author issues a challenge to his readers. They are to "see to it" that they aren't led to turn their backs on God. Instead, they are told to "encourage one another daily, as long as it is called 'Today'". As I read it, this reference to "Today" tells us that this is a command that is not just for the recipients of the letter, but for all generations until Jesus returns: Encourage one another daily, lest any should fall away from their faith! This seems to harmonize nicely with the injunction that we love one another, don't you think? How can we love one another and not encourage and help our brother or sister in times of trial and testing?

With that warm and cheerful mental image of love, encouragement and community, the author drops another conditional statement: *We have come to share in Christ, if indeed we hold our original conviction firmly to the very end.* "Share in Christ" refers to all that we have attained in Him: Salvation, forgiveness, freedom, joy, hope, peace, sonship, eternal life, God's family, co-heirs... all of it... IF... we hold onto our faith until the "very end." Then, he repeats the warning from the Psalm...

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies perished in the wilderness? And to whom did God swear that they would never enter his rest if not to those who disobeyed? So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their unbelief.

Hebrews 3:16-19

Hold on to your faith until the very end! This is the clear message for both his original recipients in Nero's Rome, undergoing persecution often unto death, and it is also the clear message to us today. The various theologies might dispute what the alternative is, but all agree that we must hold on to our faith.

By now, three chapters into Hebrews, you should see the pattern: Something wonderful, followed by a warning, and then something wonderful... What an amazing letter! I hope you'll also be seeing that it is not a theoretical kind of book, it is real, living and alive with vitality, the kind of life and vitality that can change a person's outlook on life itself.

Chapter 4

Word of God

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. For we also have had the good news proclaimed to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because they did not share the faith of those who obeyed. 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 works have been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: “On the seventh day God rested from all his works.” And again in the passage above he says, “They shall never enter my rest.”

Hebrews 4:1-5

The warning continues in this text, but now the warning is building up to something wonderful. The "promise" of entering His rest still stands. Needless to say, this is sometimes a source of confusion; what exactly is this "rest" that still stands? In the original Old Testament context, the "rest" was the Promised Land, but it was also the Sabbath. Now, there seems to be another context taking shape: What's going on?

Whatever is going on, we still have that hope somehow, and we need to be careful that we don't fall away from God before we get there. Now our author adds the rest and the Sabbath. So is the Sabbath as promise? Some say so, but last time I checked, it wasn't a promise, it was a Commandment! In fact, it's one of the 10 Commandments, but unlike the other 9, Jesus didn't re-assert this one in the Gospels: Why? Because it was the sign of the Old Covenant, just as circumcision is the sign of the Abrahamic Covenant; neither are in force now. And yet, there is still a rest for the people of God...?

Therefore since it still remains for some to enter that rest, and since those who formerly had the good news proclaimed to them did not go in because of their disobedience, God again set a certain day, calling it “Today.” This he did when a long time later he spoke through David, as in the passage already quoted:

*“Today, if you hear his voice,
do not harden your hearts.”*

Hebrews 4:6-7

There it is again! There is still a "rest" that we might enter into, and we need to ensure that our hearts aren't hardened into disbelief, or we might miss out. I don't know about you, but I think this is really cool... and great fun! What could he mean?

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from their works, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will perish by following their example of disobedience.

Hebrews 4:8-11

Again the promise, again the warning— and more clues. Joshua led the people into the Land, Moses had given them the Law, and still centuries later, David spoke of another "rest" and the disobedience of old. Hebrews has several instances where the Old Testament is said to contain "shadows" that are pictures of the glorious reality to come in Christ, and this is the first one of them, even though the author hasn't come right out and said so yet. In this case, both the Land and the Sabbath are mere shadows of a great reality that doesn't come until Christ. Everything in the Old Covenant is centered on the physical world. The promises, the curses, the worship, the Temple, the festivals... all are physically oriented, but point to a great reality that was to come; this is called "typology" and these things are called "types." Thus, the Land and the Sabbath are "types" of something wonderful that the people of the Old Testament had no real concept of... *eternity*. When Jesus began speaking of eternal life, He was speaking of something that the Old Testament made no mention of... at all. All of the promises in the Law were earthly, not one was eternal in scope. Jews do not die and go to Heaven, they die and live through their children. If you don't believe me, ask one of your Jewish friends.

Yes, I know that some Christians might want to dispute this, saying that God hasn't kept the Land promise, and will do so in the millennium. Personally, I think that runs counter to our text right here, but my normal reply is: "Would you rather have a Tel Aviv address for a thousand years, or eternal life with Christ? Jesus fulfilled the promise of land with something far better than real estate: This is the wonderful part. Yet, another warning, "make every effort" to enter the rest and not to perish because of disobedience.

For the word of God is alive 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. 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.

Hebrews 4:12-13

This is the sternest warning of all in this section, and yet it is wonderful at the same time: The Word of God— powerful, penetrating, alive! We often refer to the Scriptures as the Word of God, and so they are. Then we go and relegate it to a mere academic discipline full of teachings, rules and promises... even trivia, but the Word of God is never trivial. The Word of God is powerful, the most powerful force in our universe, for it holds the entire universe together as we saw in chapter 1. The Word is also a Person. Go back and read John 1:1-4; 14. The Word of God is none other than Jesus Christ Himself: The Word of God is Wonderful!

Our Great High Priest

Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has ascended into heaven, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to empathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet he did not sin. Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16

It is altogether fitting that the text shifts from warning against falling away, to the piercing power of the Word of God, to our Great High Priest Jesus, for our author has been warning and encouraging his readers to hang on to their faith through a time of great trial lest they should perish. Think about it: They were being told to endure a really horrible time in history, Christians were being burned alive for fun and amusement, and the author is telling the people to endure that rather than turn their backs on God: Yikes!

There is a huge difference between unbelief, turning our backs on God and making an error or committing a sin. The error part, the sin part is not a problem, for we have a great High Priest. Since Jesus, our "big brother" has ascended into heaven where He is our high priest who makes intercession for us with God, we must, and we can hold onto our faith. Jesus, who makes intercession for us with God, has endured every temptation; He knows what it's like to be a weak human, so He will understand and intercede for us.

Do you see how encouraging this must have been for those brothers and sisters who first heard it? Isn't it pretty encouraging for us now? Do I hear an "Amen"?

With this in mind, the next step is to approach the throne of grace with confidence. Why? Because we know who our High Priest is, there is nothing to fear... We can remain in our faith and seek forgiveness when we fall short; there is no need to give up and turn our backs on God, thinking that our case is hopeless, for Jesus is in our corner.

It's Time to Grow Up!

We have much to say about this, but it is hard to make it clear to you because you no longer try to understand. 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! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil.

Hebrews 5:11-14

Well now, isn't this an interesting thing to say? Let's bear in mind that our author has been talking about Jesus as our great high priest, according to the order of Melchizedek, but he hasn't discussed Melchizedek yet, he's only made a reference to him. He has teased us with a contrast between the Old and New Covenant priesthood, and by extension the very nature of the two covenants, and then he diverts his discussion here and gets into the issue of maturity. I really hope that we can avoid the temptation to think that his readers must be very much the immature ones; that we are somehow in a better position spiritually than they were. If the truth were really to be told, we are not much different today; in fact we might just be worse off than they were.

I hope, dear reader that anyone who has the courage to keep reading, will take this as an opportunity for some serious reflection and self-examination, as I am doing as I write this; it is a serious matter.

The author is speaking about the process of spiritual maturity as a life-long journey, a journey of growth and attainment of maturity. Think of it this way, how long have we gone on with the attitude that when we reach out to those people who are living without a relationship with Christ, and when they agree to receive His grace and become a "new" Christian, our job is done? The reality of the situation is that our job has only just begun! How many of us have been Christians for a lifetime, but are still "infants" spiritually... yet think we are mature because we can recite scripture and answer trivia questions? How many of us are still growing in our relationships with Christ, versus thinking we need not grow further? Consider our text: "by this time you ought to be teachers" but "you need someone to teach you..." I can attest to the fact, that this is a typical condition in the church today. Notice that there is linkage between "elementary truths of God's word" and a baby's milk. Here the author is using infancy and adulthood as a metaphor for spiritual growth, particularly in relation to the respective diets of the two; "milk" as opposed to "solid food."

Chapter 6

Therefore let us move beyond the elementary teachings about Christ and be taken forward to maturity, not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God, instruction about cleansing rites, the laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And God permitting, we will do so.

Hebrews 6:1-3

For me, this little bit of text always brings bit of a shock, for we see that the things we almost *always talk about* are the "elementary teachings," the "milk" but not the "solid food" of maturity at all! Let's take a closer look:

"...*not laying again the foundation of repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God...*" This is something we need to see in a different way, for it isn't maturity in Christ. What is this "foundation" for repentance from sins and faith in God? Think...

It is the cross. All of us take everything back to the cross, and properly so, but we normally do that as if the cross was the end, but it is not the end; *the cross is the beginning of the story*. Yes, it's true, as awe-inspiring, wonderful and amazing as it is in its fullness and mercy and love, the cross is the beginning, not the end of maturity. "Cleansing rites" for us today would be in the same category as rituals, ceremonies, styles of worship and so forth. These things are elementary, "young" and baby milk things, not the sort of things that the mature in the faith are much concerned with. "Laying on of hands" and other spiritual gifts are wonderful, but elementary. Resurrection, eternal life, and judgment are at the beginning of the process, wonderful promises, and highly instructive at an early stage of growth, but they are not in and of themselves maturity in Christ. Can you see why I said that these are things we always talk about? Yet, they are milk, not solid food for adults; God permitting, we will move on from these things.

Before I close out this section, let's pause and take stock. Hebrews is written to Jewish Christians in Rome who are being persecuted by the Emperor Nero, one of history's most notorious criminals. The author is writing this to encourage them, to instruct them and to hopefully energize them so that they do not give up their faith in the stress of persecution. Doesn't it seem reasonable to suggest that their "elementary" spiritual development might be the cause of their temptation to drift away? I hope that we too, will reflect on this.

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. 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. But land that produces thorns and thistles is worthless and is in danger of being cursed. In the end it will be burned.

Hebrews 6:4-8

About 10 years ago, I was teaching a class in a predominately Calvinist group of people. The scope of my engagement was that I would present "controversial" passages giving the various interpretations, and then let each decide their own view. In teaching this section, I presented various views and then broke down the various arguments and ended by saying "We report, you decide!"

The following week, a guy came up to me and said, "Boy Don, you really had me going last week; I had to go home and look this up in my study Bible, and then I saw the note that said that the author obviously was talking about people who weren't really all the way saved. That was sure a clever way to get us to go deeper into the Word!" Yes, clever.

I thanked the man and told him that it was great to hear that he went deeper into the Word, and found the answer in a margin note... the irony, I'm afraid, was lost on him that day. Clearly, his margin note might reflect the way this is often explained, but it seems at odds with the text under review.

Let's get back into context. We are in a section of warning to Christians enduring terrible persecution, not to fall away from the faith. We just covered the section referring to spiritual maturity, and now the warning gets a little pointed. It is not possible for someone who falls away from their faith in Christ to return to the faith. Now, a closer look:

It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, (6:4) This verse is a parallelism., thus "enlightened", "the heavenly gift" and "shared in the Holy Spirit" are all referring to the same thing: receiving the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit. Let's be very clear and simple; it doesn't really matter what your doctrinal position is, the only way that someone can receive the indwelling of the Holy Spirit without "really" being saved, is if they could fool God. It seems unlikely to me that this is possible. Moving on, *who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age (6:5)* this also provides a challenge for some, for how does an unbeliever "taste the goodness of the word of God"? The only way would be if the "Word" is something on a printed page, rather than a Person. (cf. John 1:14) Tasting the powers of the coming age...? Isn't that the power to overcome death? (Hint: Yes) So far, the author is referring to a person who has received the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and received the gift of eternal life, and then... *and who have fallen away, to be brought back to repentance. To their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace. (6:6)* Here you can see that they have fallen away and would need to be brought back to repentance. Repentance is something that we do *after* we first believe. This person, who has received the gift of the indwelling Holy Spirit, and the gift of eternal life, would need to be *brought back* to repentance, so it is impossible since they would be crucifying the Lord over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace. It sure sounds to me like this person had been a "real" Christian, but they gave it all up and now can't come back. Verses 7 and 8 use another metaphor (land) to underscore that conclusion, or at least that's how I read it.

If you, dear reader, prefer the doctrine of eternal security, that's OK by me, but I wouldn't suggest this text as being one that supports it. Yes, I know there are other passages; maybe they support it better than this one.

Even though we speak like this, dear friends, we are convinced of better things in your case—the things that have to do with salvation. 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. We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, so that what you hope for may be fully realized. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised.

Hebrews 6:9-12

This paragraph begins the transition into the next area of discussion in the letter, and it does so on a more optimistic note, showing the love and mercy of God. Even though our author has just delivered a very serious warning, he believes that the people who read it will heed the warning and remain faithful. Notice he says "in your case" as opposed to in every case, meaning that some others might not be so wise. Notice also that our attention is now turned to God's mercy and forgiveness. This is a really important thing for us to bear in mind, for God is not looking for a technicality to have as an excuse to cut anybody off from relationship. He knows that we will make mistakes He knows that we will slip up, and the blood of Christ is sufficient for those cases. If we can lose our salvation, we would have to really work at it before God gave up on us; we would need to utterly reject Him and walk away, and to me, this seems like a very rare thing, as opposed to those who might have a season out in the wilderness, or benign neglect of our relationship with Him.

The whole point of the warning bears this out; God loves us, even when we aren't doing a very good job in following Him. Yet, it is much better if we hang in there and see things through.

Who is the Author?

I'm sure that you have noticed that as we continue through the book of Hebrews, I haven't mentioned the name of the author, instead, I've just said "the author." This is because his name is never mentioned in the text. Obviously, whoever it was knew an awful lot of Old Testament details, so many scholars believe that it must have been Paul. Others have suggested Barnabas, while still others have suggested different possibilities.

Some suggest that it couldn't have been Paul, since Paul's other letters have a greeting that includes his name, and this has no greeting of any kind. The complete lack of any greeting at the beginning has led some to theorize that Hebrews isn't a letter at all, but a sermon that has been transcribed, and there is some merit to this thought since it follows an outline that is more like that of a sermon than any other of the epistles in the New Testament.

As for me, if I were a betting man, I would probably bet that Paul wrote it, but I am not a betting man. He is my guess, but since there is no evidence that directly supports the guess, I will simply continue to refer to him as "the author."

I hope that you will consider this as an interpretational principle when you read the Bible. If the text doesn't actually say something, we should use caution about asserting it as a fact. Yes, of course there are things we can infer, and many times this inference is so clear as to make it a necessary inference. Yet more often, these inferences are only possible, and not necessary. Very often these possible inferences, taken as fact without adequate evidence become the basis of unnecessary arguments, and even division within the church. Thus I would conclude that since some things aren't completely certain, we should leave others to draw their own conclusions in those areas without debate, for while many things are left open to interpretation and opinion, one thing is very clear in Scripture: Dissention, endless arguments and divisions within the church are frowned upon!

God's Promises

When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, "I will surely bless you and give you many descendants." And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

Hebrews 6:13-15

It shouldn't surprise anyone that our author has moved into a section that reassures us of God's promises right after the warning contained in the first part of this chapter. The message is clear: God keep His promises! Since Abraham is the point at which Jewish history was generally thought to have begun, it would only be natural to start with God's promises to Abraham, which is what the author does. Notice that he makes the point that God swore an oath in making His promises; a covenant required an oath, and God swore His by Himself, since there is nobody greater than He. Also notice that the author adds that after Abraham waited patiently, God kept His promises.

People swear by someone greater than themselves, and the oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. 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. 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 set before us may be greatly encouraged. We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.

Hebrews 6:16-20

In this final verses of chapter six, an amazing transformation begins to take shape, for beginning with God's promise to Abraham, a promise that Jewish Christians would be very well aware of as a foundational event, our author begins the process of morphing it into a New Covenant reality. Notice that he wants us to understand that God swore the oath so that there could be no argument about His intentions and purpose in entering covenant. He points out two unchangeable things that form the basis for our own hopes. First, God cannot break His promise, for He is holy and faithful. Second, God cannot break His oath, for He swore it on Himself. To the ancient Middle Eastern mindset, the significance of the oath would be that if He broke His oath, He shall die, and this applies to all oath swearing at the entry point of all covenants, thus the use of blood sacrifices in oath swearing. There will be more on this point as we continue...

Next, the author applies this principle to our situation in Christ with the words "we who have fled to take hold of the hope set before us". This refers to all of us who have left behind the old ways and taken up the cross of Jesus, and here the point is made that because of the surety of our hope in Jesus Christ, we will be greatly encouraged, both in our times of trial and in all other situations. You see, this is a transition to a larger principle that is only just beginning to take shape in this amazing letter.

The larger principle is that Jesus, who is superior to the angels, and superior to Moses, our superior high priest, has brought a superior sacrifice to establish a superior covenant with superior promises. This great hope is not only encouraging, but it is the very anchor of our souls, because *It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where our forerunner, Jesus, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.*

When the reference is made to the "inner sanctuary, behind the curtain" the author is actually referring to the Holy of holies in the Temple, where nobody can go. Once a year, the High Priest could enter there, but only if he followed the prescribed procedure. Any other time, any other person would be immediately struck dead. The reason for this is that the Holy of holies was considered to be the dwelling place of God on the earth, and since God is holy and righteous, and no man is holy or righteous, no man could enter His presence. Then the author makes an amazing claim: Jesus has entered that space. No matter how carefully you read the four Gospels, you will not find this event; when did Jesus enter the Holy of holies? To understand fully this statement, we must go back to the cross. Remember that at the moment Jesus died, there was an earthquake, and the veil (curtain) in the Temple was torn in two? This veil (curtain) was what separated the Holy of holies from everything else, it was the thing that kept man from coming into the presence of Holy God, and when Jesus' work was done, it was ripped apart, because Jesus had made it possible for us to enter God's very presence. No, Jesus did not enter that exact geographical location in body, but He entered it in a vastly more significant way, for He did in Spirit and in Truth; the Old Covenant was over forever.

Actually, as we will soon see, the Temple itself was only a picture of the reality to come, for Jesus entered God's actual presence when He returned to the throne in heaven where He sits at God's right hand to this day...

In doing so, He became our high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek. Yes, there he is again! Chapter seven is all about Melchizedek and Jesus.

Chapter 7

Who Is This Guy?

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, the name Melchizedek means “king of righteousness”; then also, “king of Salem” means “king of peace.” Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

Hebrews 7:1-3

The story of Melchizedek and Abraham is found in Genesis 14:17-20, and he isn't mentioned again, except for an obscure reference in Psalm 110 that is only understood when it is quoted here in Hebrews 7. He came suddenly out of nowhere, and was gone just as quickly, and many scholars believe that Melchizedek is a pre-incarnation appearance of Christ (called a Christophony). Clearly there are similarities between the two, but without more evidence, I'll only say that he was a "type" of Christ.

Don't go too fast in this passage; you don't often come across a guy who is both king and priest, in fact that is not the Jewish model at all; only Jesus Himself comes to mind quickly for these two offices. Note also the similarity of names. Melchizedek is called "king of righteousness" and "king of peace" while Jesus is called "Righteous King" and "Prince of Peace." He has no genealogy, no beginning of days or end of life... Very interesting. Here is a comparison chart for Melchizedek and Jesus:

Melchizedek	Jesus
A King	A King
A High Priest	A High Priest
No beginning of days and without genealogy	No beginning of days and without genealogy (on his Father's side)
Ministered bread and wine	Ministered bread and wine
Non Levite	Non Levite
King of Salem (King of Peace)	Prince of Peace (Is 9:6)
King of Righteousness	Righteous King (Is 9:7)
Greater than Abraham	Greater than Abraham

Isn't it interesting also that the author says that Melchizedek resembles the Son of God. I'm having a hard time thinking of another text that makes this kind of statement...

Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people—that is, from their fellow Israelites—even though they also are descended from Abraham. This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. And without doubt the lesser is blessed by

the greater. In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

Hebrews 7:4-10

Up to this point in Hebrews, we have seen that Jesus is superior to the angels, and we have seen that Jesus is superior to Moses, but now we see that *Melchizedek* is superior to Abraham; in Jewish tradition, *nobody* is superior to Abraham! Yet when you consider the author's evidence, it would seem that he has a valid point. Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek, this can also be rendered "tribute" which is always paid by the lesser to the greater. Under the Law, a tithe is paid to the Levites, the priests, and yet the father of all the Israelites paid a tithe to this Melchizedek centuries before the Law, and in a sense, Levi himself was involved in the payment, since his ancestor paid it.

The really amazing statement that the author makes in this section is this: *In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.* (7:8) I don't mean to be overly simplistic, but you just don't come across writing like this very often; who is this guy? It's becoming easier to understand why many scholars have concluded that he must be Jesus pre-incarnation. Of course, the point was also made in verse 7 that the lesser is blessed by the greater. Clearly, Melchizedek is superior to Abraham, as mind-boggling as that must have been to a Jewish audience.

Before I wrap this up, I think we need to recognize here and now that this section is entirely intentional in the letter, for our author is building up to a massively important crescendo. As we continue, we will see that not only was Melchizedek greater than Abraham, but the Jesus is like Melchizedek, and as a result, He is also a high priest superior to the Levites, administering a covenant superior to the Law of Moses, and theologically speaking, that's the ball game.

Like Melchizedek

f perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood—and indeed the law given to the people established that priesthood—why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when the priesthood is changed, the law must be changed also. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests.

Hebrews 7:11-14

In the last section, we got into the whole Melchizedek issue, and here, the author is applying it to our present situation in Christ. A careful reading of this text will begin to reveal an amazing

aspect of the relationship between the Old and New Covenants, and we quickly discover why the Old Covenant is no more. To begin, verse 11 brings us a rhetorical question: If perfection could have been attained through the old priesthood, why do we need another? Simple enough... Let's understand "perfection" for a minute here, since I think it might refer to something that many might not be thinking about right off. By "perfection" the author isn't asking whether or not the Law could make a man perfect through His obedience to it; I'm sure you can recall Paul asking those kinds of questions. In this case, perfection is linked to the priesthood itself, and the priesthood represents the entire Old Covenant system of atonement for sins.

Since that system cannot take sin away, it cannot bring about perfection. Jesus not only provided for forgiveness of sins, He took them away entirely.

Verse 12 brings up an interesting point in claiming that if the priesthood is changed, the Law must also be changed. This is because the Levitical priesthood (Order of Aaron) was created and established by the Law, and a new priesthood can only be established by doing something with the Law first. In the next verse, the author points out that the new high priest is from the tribe of Judah, and the old priests were from the tribe of Levi. According to the old Law, priests can only come from the tribe of Levi, while kings come from the tribe of Judah. Jesus came from Judah, the tribe of kings, and He was the heir to the throne of David. He is not eligible for priesthood under the Law of Moses... so something must give!

And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life.

Hebrews 7:15-16

Enter Melchizedek; he is a priest, but he is not a Levite, so how can he become a priest? Think carefully now... a Levite is a priest because of a life force, in their case one of genetics and ancestry, but that life force is temporary, because they will die and need to pass the priestly office on to an heir. Contrast this with the life force by which Melchizedek is made a priest: Indestructible life. Which is better?

For it is declared:

*"You are a priest forever,
in the order of Melchizedek."*

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

Hebrews 7:17-19

Again we have the quote from Psalm 110:4. Melchizedek is priest forever; indestructible life. In addition the old Law was set aside because it was "weak and useless". An interesting note here

is that the term "set aside" is a legal term. Even now, when a judge sets something aside, he rules that it is null and void, and has no effect.

When the author says that the "law made nothing perfect" you might well notice that the Law is being spoken of in the past tense because it is entirely over. Also, notice that "perfect" is being used in a different context than it was several verses back when it was applied only to the priesthood. Here we are talking about the entire context of the Law, not just atonement. Not only could the Law not take sin away, it made sin more evident than having no Law at all. For anyone who cares to notice, the Law makes imperfection obvious, so that we can easily see that Man is quite lost without a direct relationship with God. Melchizedek's priesthood is a vast improvement over the Law of Moses, for it gives us this direct relationship.

And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, 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.'"*

Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantor of a better covenant.

Hebrews 7:20-22

Melchizedek became a high priest, not because he inherited it, but because God directly intervened in the process to appoint him... and He swore an oath that it should be so: Powerful stuff. Because of it Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant, and that pretty much says it all.

Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them.

Such a high priest truly meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. For the law appoints as high priests men in all their weakness; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect forever.

Hebrews 7:23-28

I think these final verses are pretty obvious and no further words are necessary from me. We have arrived at the point where the superiority of Jesus as our high priest is obvious to all, and the author is moving on to a discussion of the New Covenant.

Chapter 8

A New Covenant

Now the main 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 a mere human being.

Hebrews 8:1-2

This section is one that is often a surprise to people not familiar with the relationship between Old and New Testaments. As we go through this chapter, we will be challenged to see things the way God views them, and to be quite candid, things aren't always what they at first appear to be. These first two verses give us a bit of that; notice that there is a difference between the tabernacle that Jesus is serving in as high priest, and the earthly one. For starters, Jesus isn't in Jerusalem, nor is He serving in a place made by human hands, but by God Himself. Finally, notice that the tabernacle He is in is "true." If Jesus is in the true sanctuary, what does that say about the one in the Old Testament?

Fasten your seat belts, we are about to find out!

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

Hebrews 8:3-4

The offerings and gifts that the earthly priests sacrificed were prescribed by the same Law that established their office and Jesus, because He is from the tribe of Judah could never have been a priest, and since He is an entirely different kind of priest, He has a different kind of offering. Jesus did not offer sacrifices consisting of animals for atonement to put off the penalty for sins, He offered Himself, and took sin away entirely.

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." But in fact the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, since the new covenant is established on better promises.

Hebrews 8:5-6

How surprising it would have been for those first recipients of this message to learn that their beloved Temple in their beloved Jerusalem was only a shadow of the real thing. I am often amazed today when I listen to people discuss the rebuilding of this Temple in the future, as though the Temple were the real thing... but it was never the real thing; it's but a mere copy or

shadow of the reality that is in heaven... and do you know what? So were the sacrifices, the priests and even the Law itself. Of course Jesus is superior to the Levites; He is the real thing, while they were shadows of what would come one day. Of course Jesus was the superior sacrifice; for His was the one that takes away sin. Of course the New Covenant is superior to the Old, for the New Covenant is the real deal and the Old Covenant was but a shadow of the reality that was to come, and it was set to pass away.

None of this should really be a shock to anyone, for the Old Covenant Law was entirely earthly; physical. It never promised to take away our sins, it never promised eternal life. These things weren't even ideas that were in play anywhere at that time. The rules and regulations are but a shadow of the reality of having God's laws written on our hearts. Most importantly, the Old Covenant and its system of laws and sacrifices and the Temple all speak of Jesus Christ who was to come one day.

And that day came!

Our author will continue to explain all of this from this point through 10:18...

The old is no more

For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another. But God found fault with the people and said:

*“The days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will make a new covenant
with the people of Israel
and with the people of Judah.
It will not be like the covenant
I made with their ancestors
when I took them by the hand
to lead them out of Egypt,
because they did not remain faithful to my covenant,
and I turned away from them,
declares the Lord.*

Hebrews 8:7-9

Something was wrong with the Old Covenant, the Law of Moses. The prophet Jeremiah foretold of its end, and the author of Hebrews is telling us clearly and unambiguously that the end has come. I'm always amazed that more of us can't seem to comprehend this. So many Christian doctrinal traditions treat the New Covenant as little more than addendum to the Old. Others add elements of the Old into the New almost on a whim; how clear does it need to be?

*This is the covenant I will establish with the people of Israel
after that time, declares the Lord.
I will put my laws in their minds
and write them on their hearts.
I will be their God,
and they will be my people.
No longer will they teach their neighbor,
or say to one another, 'Know the Lord,'
because they will all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.
For I will forgive their wickedness
and will remember their sins no more."*

Hebrews 8:10-12

This is the rest of the quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34, note that he described features of the New Covenant that were never present in the Old. Notice also that this entire quotation is cited by our author here in Hebrews as an accomplished fact, and not something still off in the future, as some would claim it to be today. If you still aren't convinced, there is one more verse in this chapter:

By calling this covenant "new," he has made the first one obsolete; and what is obsolete and outdated will soon disappear.

Hebrews 8:13

The Old Covenant is called "obsolete and outdated." Some might suggest that it will "soon disappear" but it still hasn't; if you are thinking along these lines, think again.

Within just a few years of the time Hebrews was written, the Romans sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple and scattered the people who were fortunate enough to survive the siege, and the Old Covenant has not been practiced from that day until this. Gone are the sacrifices, the offerings, the priests, the tabernacle, the holy place and all the rest of the system that was completely, totally and utterly replaced by the work of Jesus Christ, our great high priest who reigns even now at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven... and all of that was foretold centuries before by the prophets.

Chapter 9

Tabernacle Worship

Now the first covenant had regulations for worship and also an earthly sanctuary. A tabernacle was set up. In its first room were the lampstand and the table with its consecrated bread; this was called the Holy Place. Behind the second curtain was a room called the Most Holy Place, which had the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant. This ark contained the gold jar of manna, Aaron's staff that had budded, and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover. But we cannot discuss these things in detail now.

Hebrews 9:1-5

Chapter 9 opens with a brief description of the Old Testament Tabernacle and its contents which would have been quite familiar to the Jewish readers of this letter. As you can see, it is not the author's purpose here to go into any great detail on this subject, for he is heading in a more important direction, however, I've included a chart that will compare the tabernacle contents with their New Testament counterparts:

OT Tabernacle	New Covenant counterpart
Altar of burnt offering	The cross and death of Jesus
Basin	Baptism
Holy Place	The church
Lamp	The Word and the Holy Spirit
Table	Fellowship between God and Man
Bread	Lord's Supper
Altar of incense	Prayer
Veil	Body of Christ
Ark	Presence of God
Manna	God's provision
Staff	Leaders of God's choice
Tablets	God's law
Cherubim	Ministering angels of God
Atonement cover	Reconciliation to God

When everything had been arranged like this, the priests entered regularly into the outer room to carry on their ministry. But only the high priest entered the inner room, and that only once a year, and never without blood, which he offered for himself and for the sins the people had committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit was showing by this that the way into the Most Holy Place had not yet been disclosed as long as the first tabernacle was still functioning. 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. They are only a matter of food and drink and various ceremonial washings—external regulations applying until the time of the new order.

Hebrews 9:6-10

Verses 6-7 continue with the author's brief description of the scene in the tabernacle, culminating in the annual entrance of the high priest into the Most Holy Place; notice that he had an offering for his own sins, as well as for all of the people. I point this out because it is a tell-tale sign that the ministry of Jesus is completely different than that of the Old Covenant priests, and should convey to us that Jesus is not and will never be an Old Covenant priest.

Verse 8 marks the point where the author shifts from his description of the tabernacle into his application of this information. See the words "the Holy Spirit was showing by this..."? The author is telling us that as long as the Old Covenant was in effect, the reality of Jesus was not yet in force. Please take note that the opposite is also true: Now that Jesus has finished His work, the Old Covenant is no longer in effect, and never will be again. Why do I keep pointing this out? Because millions of our dear brothers and sisters in Christ are looking forward to the day when the Old Covenant Temple is rebuilt, and the Old Covenant sacrificial system is once again practiced, with the understanding that Jesus Himself will one day be that high priest who enters the Most Holy Place... and that simply cannot be!

Look at the next verse: "This is an illustration for the present time..." All of the things that went on in the Temple were *illustrations*, even the Temple itself was an illustration. An illustration represents the reality pictured, but an illustration is never the reality itself. The gifts and offerings in the old Temple worship could never clear the conscience of the worshippers, because they could never take sin away, for in the final analysis, they only involve earthly things. Now pay careful attention to what he says next: *external regulations applying until the time of the new order*. These are very interesting "external regulations" for they have an expiration date attached; how can that be? Yes, I've even had a comment or two along these lines... how can something "everlasting" be over?

Let's think... these Temple ceremonies and sacrifices are meant to *illustrate something*. They illustrate an eternal truth that Man needs salvation from sin. When that salvation was accomplished once for all time by Jesus on the cross, the illustration is no longer necessary, but the truth they once illustrated remains: Man needs salvation from sin, only now, we have found it in the work of Jesus on the cross.

You see, that wasn't really so hard to understand, was it? The illustration that was the Old Covenant is over because the eternal reality of what it illustrated has come to pass... simple.

Superior Sacrifice – Superior Covenant

But when Christ came as high priest of the good things that are now already here, he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not made with human hands, that is to say, is not a part of this creation. He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, thus obtaining eternal

redemption. 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. 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,[c] so that we may serve the living God!

Hebrews 9:11-14

In yet another amazing passage, one that continues to build his case, our author charges head long into the notion that the Old Covenant is still somehow in effect. Having just concluded a discussion of the earthly tabernacle and earthly sacrifices, he contrasts the work of Jesus against the old system in telling us that the Most Holy Place into which High Priest Jesus entered with His blood sacrifice was not the one in Jerusalem that is a mere illustration of the real thing, He instead entered the Real Thing in heaven. Our author highlights the difference and relevance of his assault by noting that the reality and result of this work by Jesus is "already here." Clearly, he is not referring to any future event.

Next is a contrast between the nature of the old and new sacrifices, the first being performed with the blood of animals, is contrasted with the second, being the blood of the Son of God, and it is this difference that made possible eternal redemption. Can you see why the author earlier said that the Old Covenant Law was obsolete? If the final blood sacrifice was made with the blood of the Son of God, what standing can there be for animal sacrifices going forward? It's really a ridiculous notion when you think about it.

Verse 13 makes reference to sacrifices and ashes that were made to cleanse those who were "ceremonially unclean" under the Law, and the author makes the point very clearly that this only made those people "outwardly clean." Keep in mind, that everything that the Law dealt with was "outward" for it was a set of earthly regulations; even its promises are of an earthly nature. Contrast this with verse 14: The sacrifice of Christ doesn't aim to cleanse us outwardly, for it cleanses our conscience which is an inward cleansing; the New Covenant is all about inward spiritual things, not outward earthly ones. With this inner cleansing, we can serve the living God in fellowship with Him.

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.

Hebrews 9:15

Jesus Christ is the mediator of a superior covenant. It is superior because it deals with the inner parts of Man rather than the outward parts. This has set us free from our bondage to sin, death and the grave, and made it possible for us to actually be called God's children, not as a metaphor, but by that eternal life which is now ours in Christ.

Last Will and Testament

In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living.

This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every command of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, "This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep." In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

Hebrews 9:16-22

The Hebrews author is continuing his contrast between the Old Covenant and the New, but here he takes an interesting twist, one that I would never have thought of— is this last will a metaphor, or is it literal? I'll let you decide as we go along...

Clearly a will has no impact on anything until the person who made it dies. Then we go through a descriptive reminder of the oath swearing ceremony at the inception of the Old Covenant, with all of the people parading past and being sprinkled with the blood of the sacrificed animals, and the sprinkling of the various objects of the tabernacle. This served a dual purpose by most accounts, first that of the actual oath swearing, which can be compared to signing a contract, for it is the point at which the people voluntarily entered into relationship with God. It symbolized this oath: If I do not obey the terms of this covenant, then so shall it be with me, or to be blunt, if I don't keep up my end of the deal, I give permission for my own blood to be spilled. The second purpose was the ritual of cleansing, as was discussed in the previous verses in the last section, in the case of the Old Covenant these are outward acts and cleansing, not inward ones. God also swore an oath when the carcasses of the sacrificed animals were consumed by fire.

My question for you is this: OK, so who died that the Old Covenant should take effect?

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. For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made with human hands that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. 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. Otherwise Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world.

But he has appeared once for all at the culmination of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as people are destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.

Hebrews 9:23-28

Now the contrast of the New Covenant: Jesus needed better sacrifices for the New Covenant, since it is the reality that the Old Covenant merely illustrated. Once again, the author points out that High Priest Jesus did not enter the Most Holy Place in a Temple that was a copy, but that He entered the real Temple that is in the actual presence of the Father in heaven, and He brought with Him a different sacrifice altogether. *Jesus Himself was the sacrifice*. He was sacrificed once for all time, and this was possible because He was not a goat or a calf or a lamb, He was the Son Of God. As our author makes so very clear here, there is one sacrifice that counts, and that was the sacrifice of Jesus; the Real Deal.

So, who died, that all of God's promises might come into effect in reality and truth?Got it? Yep, it was Jesus!

Wait! No! What about the Old Covenant, who died to put it into effect?

Really? Do I really need to answer that one?

OK, fine... it was no one. Remember, the Old Covenant was only a picture, a poor copy of what would come later, so at the time the author described in verses 16-22, calves stood in for the oath swearing; no one died. When Jesus died on the cross, He fulfilled all of God's promises, bringing from illustration into present reality.

There's only one question left to complete the picture, and that is: When do we have our oath swearing ceremony, coming into contact with the blood of the New Covenant sacrifice?

Chapter 10

Once for All

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. Otherwise, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins. It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.

Hebrews 10:1-4

The author of Hebrews is now wrapping up this central core section of the letter, and he is doing so by once again focusing on the superior sacrifice that Jesus brought to establish a superior covenant with superior promises. Again, he states that the Law is merely a shadow of a reality to come, stating again that its sacrifices cannot take away sin. In fact, he seems to have found three ways to restate this in just a few short sentences here. I've never actually gone through these chapters and counted the number of times he's made this same point... why? It might just be that this point takes a lot of repetition before we comprehend it. The Law was not sufficient to complete God's purposes, so it has been replaced by a better system, a perfect one, that takes our sins away entirely, after all, the Law was but an illustration of what was to come, and what was to come was the reality of Jesus Christ.

Therefore, when Christ came into the world, he said:

*“Sacrifice and offering you did not desire,
but a body you prepared for me;
with burnt offerings and sin offerings
you were not pleased.*

*Then I said, ‘Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—
I have come to do your will, my God.’*

Hebrews 10:5-7

After the restatement of the Law's inadequacy in the first 4 verses, this quotation from Psalm 40 shows the attitude of Christ, the *real sacrifice*, who gave up His life as the sacrifice that would end the problem of sin once for all.

First he said, “Sacrifices and offerings, burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not desire, nor were you pleased with them”—though they were offered in accordance with the law. Then he said, “Here I am, I have come to do your will.” He sets aside the first to establish the second. And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

Hebrews 10:8-10

Acting as commentator, the author restates another of his themes: The first covenant was set aside to make room for the second, and by that second covenant, the New Covenant, we have been made holy by the removal of our sins in Christ.

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. But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God, and since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool. For by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Hebrews 10:11-14

You've probably noticed that the mere fact of the repetition of the old sacrifices has been used by the author to make the point that they could never take away sins, and here that is one more time, set beside the contrasting one time sacrifice that Jesus made. This fact alone, repetition of the same sacrifices, day after day, year after year, is proof enough that this system is finished... yet so many miss it even now! Jesus, after making His sacrifice has sat down on high and awaits his enemies being made His footstool which is some interesting imagery, for sure. His enemies are defeated, and upon His return, their activities will cease once and for all time, becoming as a footstool for His feet.

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

*“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.”*

Then he adds:

*“Their sins and lawless acts
I will remember no more.”*

And where these have been forgiven, sacrifice for sin is no longer necessary.

Hebrews 10:15-18

Once again, we see the verses from Jeremiah 31 foretelling of the New Covenant that was to come, and now has come, and notice the final sentence, the author's summation of these chapters. Sin has been forgiven, and further sacrifices are no longer necessary: The Old Covenant is over.

When the same things are repeated over and over again, it is incumbent upon us to take notice of them. This repetition isn't simply poor writing style, if anything, the letter to the Hebrews of Rome is one of the best written of all the New Testament books; some of the phrasing is nothing

less than brilliant. No, the repetition is a literary device to underscore these points, to highlight them; the author really wants the people to remember them, and hopefully we will remember.

Unswerving Faith

Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.

Hebrews 10:19-25

After the wonderful news of the last couple of chapters, the author is moving us toward another series of warnings, and his transition in these verses is as inspiring as any appeal in the entire New Testament. We have a confidence gained from the previous discussion of the superior high priest who has brought us a superior sacrifice to bring about a superior covenant based on superior promises, and as a result we can ourselves enter the Most Holy Place.

Imagine how this would have sounded to the original recipients... Remember, they were Jewish Christians living in Rome at the time of Nero's terrible persecution, tempted to give it all up to avoid the Emperor's wrath, but after reading these chapters and now coming to this incredible assertion... how can they turn their backs on Jesus? Oh yes, very persuasive!

Yes, we have an entirely new way, a way right into the holy presence of God, a way that their ancestors couldn't have imagined, and it is here now... and yes, here it comes: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful." How could they let all of this go? They have in their hands the keys to the Kingdom, what could Nero do to them to make this worth giving up? Then the author takes the next step, a very dangerous one... Not only should they hold on, they should seek out ways to encourage others, and as if this weren't enough, they should not give up meeting together.

Let's stop and consider this point. It was dangerous enough to simply be a Christian in those days, but meeting together was infinitely more dangerous than that. A group of believers in worship can bring attention, can be noticed. It can result in somebody reporting that they saw you with the others; guilt by association could result. Some had apparently quit meeting for these reasons, but our author urges them to continue, to persist no matter the cost, for what they had in Christ was so worth it. Even more as the Day approaches...

The Day, as we saw earlier, refers to Jesus' coming again, and as we know, He didn't come in their lifetimes. We can also reasonably infer that we are about 2,000 years closer to His return in our day, yet we still don't know when His return will happen. Most of you who read this are

not in places where there is persecution. For us this should be so easy, it shouldn't even be an issue, and yet more and more have forsaken the assembling of the believers together. Even among those who have not forsaken it, how much do we really encourage others?

Since I can only answer for myself, I guess we'll leave that as a rhetorical question...

Warnings

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 someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, "It is mine to avenge; I will repay," and again, "The Lord will judge his people." It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

Hebrews 10:26-31

Our author gets off to a very candid start in this paragraph, coming right to the point of his warning. You will recall no doubt, that this letter was written to Jewish Christians in Rome during the persecution of Nero for the purpose of encouraging them to hold firmly their faith through a time of severe trial, and this is not the first such warning in this letter. (see Hebrews 8:1 ff.)

I would call your attention to the word "we" in verse 26; "If we deliberately keep on sinning..." Surely the word "we" does not mean the same thing as the word "they." Thus, in a context of a letter written to encourage Christians, "we" is not referring to those who are not in Christ, and to suggest otherwise requires the suspension of the rules of context, grammar and vocabulary. If we would go further and suggest that "after we have received the knowledge of the truth" would refer to an unbeliever, saying that to receive the knowledge of the truth is not to have accepted it and been born again, because they knew but didn't believe, would also seem to be a contention in utter disregard of the rules of context, grammar and vocabulary; a parsing of words worthy of a politician. Must I really comment on the words "enemies of God"?

How much more severely do you think someone deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified them, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? Can you think of any context in the New Testament that asserts that an unbeliever is sanctified by the blood of the Covenant? Take a look at the next verse, v. 30, and consider what it means to know God; hey didn't Jesus have something to say about that in John 8:55? Notice here that "we" are they who "know" him who said... Who is this "we" again— unbelievers? Hardly.

Look, I know I'm laying it on more thickly than I normally do here, and I'm doing so for a reason. If we want to merrily go on down the road with the idea that these warnings are for "them" and not "us" then how can we learn from them? What is the point of giving these warnings to Christians, if they apply only to non-Christians? What would be the purpose of these warnings, if we have nothing that we can lose— the whole letter would be almost meaningless to the people it was written to.

Are these warnings uncomfortable? Yes they are, and yes they should be. Would I rather not think about them? Yes, but how could I learn and grow if I only did what I want and only thought about the fun stuff? Can you see why I keep saying that Hebrews is often quoted and seldom taught? It gets messy!

Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you endured in a great conflict full of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You suffered along with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions. So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded.

Hebrews 10:32-35

We continue now with the warnings in chapter 10. Remember the context; Hebrews 10:19-39 is the section context in this letter written to Jewish Christians in Rome during the persecution of Nero to encourage them to hold on to their faith in severe trial, and following right after a section on the superiority of the New Covenant.

The author refers to an earlier persecution, a time of trial almost as difficult as the present one, when these Christians had come through with their faith intact, and then he urges them to continue to hold on through the present crisis promising them a rich reward. We might ask ourselves what this reward is to be, is he referring to a temporal reward or an eternal one? In context, it must be an eternal one— why? Because that is the reward that has been under discussion leading up to this section; there has been nothing in the text to tell us differently, thus that context remains in place. If we attempt to impose a different meaning here, then we might satisfy our doctrinal need to reinterpret this section, but we will have the wrong application for the text.

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

*“In just a little while,
he who is coming will come
and will not delay.”*

And,

*“But my righteous one will live by faith.
And I take no pleasure
in the one who shrinks back.”*

*But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith
and are saved.*

Hebrews 10:36-39

Verse 36 keeps the last three verses of the chapter in context as an exhortation; this is critical to our understanding of 37-39. Verse 37 tells us that Jesus is surely coming soon (so hang in there, hold on to your faith). Verse 38 tells us that the righteous will hold on to their faith, and yet some will shrink back and lose out, and verse 39 encourages us all to continue in our faith and not shrink back, for to shrink back will result in our destruction. Notice that "destruction" is contrasted with "saved." We are only left with one last question: What is destruction?

*But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith
and are saved.*

Hebrews 10:39

It would seem entirely consistent with the context of this passage within the letter to the Hebrews, and within the New Testament, that our author is telling us that we could lose everything we have in Christ.

This chapter falls at the high point of the letter. We've seen that our superior high priest has brought a superior sacrifice to establish a superior covenant based on superior promises. We've seen that the old Law is gone, and that the New has come, and that the New is the reality that was only illustrated by the Old. We have learned that we can enter the Most Holy Place, the very presence of God with confidence, and we have been warned to hold on to what we have in Christ, even in very difficult times, because what we have is so great and so wonderful that nothing can compare with it.

This is a message of love and encouragement, not a threat or a warning about a God who wants to zap you! Some have suggested that this passage is too harsh, others have suggested that it must be adapted to fit a doctrine: Why? Too harsh— Really? Would we have God hide things from us and then fall away out of ignorance? That would be the actions of a God looking for a "gotcha" moment, not a God of love. Doctrinal traditions... would we really rather use this for an argument to be "right" about something that may or may not be right, when it is a message of encouragement? Really?

All we have in the passage is a message that our hope is awesome, so hang on to your faith come what may, and you will be in an amazing place for all eternity... this strikes me as wonderful! You know why? Because I can do it, and so can you. This is not a burden, at least

not until we make it one. This isn't negative; it's positive... until we make it negative... and it certainly isn't complicated until we impose our doctrines upon it and make it complicated... so why do that?

Here's a challenge for you, just for fun: Forget everything you've heard and everything you've read, including what you've read here. Then go back and read chapter 10 over again, verses 1-39. Don't think about anything it doesn't say... and then see if you haven't just read the most amazing and encouraging thing ever!

Chapter 11

Active Faith

Chapter 11 of Hebrews is a discourse on active faith; interesting when you consider that it comes right after the warnings of chapter 10 against losing our faith.

Who said faith and works were mutually exclusive?

That faith and works were somehow in opposition to one another is a presupposition of men, not a Biblical concept, for in the Bible, the two go hand in hand. This is not to say that we can ever earn our salvation by works; of course not! Salvation is by grace through faith. Yet, there is a definite linkage in the Scriptures between faith and action that many seem to miss. I think they might miss this connection because they consider salvation the end of the story, but as we have seen time and time again, it is the beginning.

In this chapter, the author begins with a very brief discussion of what faith is:

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. This is what the ancients were commended for.

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.

Hebrews 11:1-3

Of course, we all know verse one as the classic definition of faith, and it is this faith that the Old Testament heroes were commended by God for having. It is also the faith that we have in Jesus Christ, for we are certain of His Truth even though we have neither seen nor touched Him. Verse 3 gives us an example of faith in the creation of the universe at God's command. The universe is made of what was not seen, for no one saw Him give the command, and the universe came into being where before there was nothing at all.

Verses 4-7, which you can refer to at your leisure, refer to several Old Testament characters, and reminds us of their active faith, and then the author comes to Abraham:

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. 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. For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. And by faith even Sarah, who was past childbearing age, was enabled to bear children because she considered him faithful who had made the promise. And so from this one man, and he as good as dead, came descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky and as countless as the sand on the seashore.

Hebrews 11:8-12

When God called Abraham to pack up the household and leave his homeland, he had no idea where he was going, but he went because he had faith. (Action) When he finally arrived in the promised land, he made his home there even though he was a stranger in that place and knew no one, because he had faith in God and His promises. (Action) Abraham and his descendants were confident in God's promises of a great nation, and they *acted* accordingly. Abraham believed God actively, and as a result Sarah bore him the son of promise and because of Abraham's active faith, God fulfilled His promises, in spite of Abraham's mistakes and miscues. This is what faith can do when coupled with God's covenant promises.

Why do you suppose the author took this detour from the rest of the letter, and why here?

Let's consider the structure of the letter first. In chapters 8-10:18 we saw an amazing recitation of all that God has done for us in Christ, with the superior high priest, superior sacrifice, bringing about a superior covenant with superior promises. We also saw how all of this replaced the old shadows of the old ways. This was followed by a section of warnings, and now faith. This all makes perfect sense, because all that the author has been sharing was there to help the recipients of the letter hold on to their faith in terrible times of trial. At such a time, more than in normal times, it would have been critical for them to understand that their faith is active rather than passive, for none of the characters discussed in this chapter were mentioned because of the way they clung to their faith while sitting at home on the couch. They are all heroes of faith because they put their faith into action.

All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that they were foreigners and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. 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.

Hebrews 11:13-16

"These people," Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and their families, lived in a time and place where the fullness of God's promises to them had not entirely come to pass, and they looked forward to complete fulfillment to their dying day, but they did so with joy, for the fulfillment of God's promises was never in doubt; they lived by faith. They saw from a distance, but they held on. You'll recall that our author said that the Old Covenant worship was but an illustration, a shadow of the reality to come. Here the author uses the words "at a distance" to describe the same thing, for the reality of all of God's promises came in the person of Christ.

There's something really interesting developing in these verses, something that is very relevant for the original recipients of the letter, and very relevant for us as well. Did you notice that the author keeps pointing out that they were foreigners? They were strangers in a strange land when Abraham and his household entered the promised land, for there were already people

there with a different culture, different language and different values. Abraham had followed God to a place he didn't know, and where the inhabitants didn't know him. But that isn't the point the author is making. Notice verse 13, "...they were foreigners and strangers *on earth*." It wasn't just that they had left Ur and travelled to Canaan, they had left the kingdom of this earth, and entered a covenant with God. They were no longer like the other people in a way that is much more significant than mere language and culture, for they have become people of God, in an environment that was in rebellion against God. Returning to Ur wouldn't bring them home, for they were no longer citizens there either, their orientation was now a heavenly one, and they could only look forward to the day when it became a reality.

Now, consider the implications of this upon the Jewish Christians in Rome during Nero's persecution. Even if they had lived in Rome all of their lives, even if the State recognized them as Roman citizens, they had been transformed into citizens of a different realm, for in Christ they had become citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven. They were now strangers in a strange land, a land that was in open rebellion against God... and Rome was acting the part. Rome persecuted them because they were of God now; that's what the world does and it should surprise no one. Yet through this trial, they had thus far remained faithful to their new Kingdom, and in the course of that, they had declared a testimony for Christ, and as we now know as we study the past, the Gospel spread rapidly by their testimony of faith in Jesus even in the face of terrible persecution. Thus, God was not ashamed to be their God.

The historical context of this is very interesting, but it also cries out to us in an important way. What is it telling us...? It tells us that we, too are strangers in a strange land, for no longer are we citizens of an earthly nation; we too are citizens of the Kingdom of Heaven, and we too have a role to play in its development. As Paul tells us, we are its Ambassadors here on earth; what will our testimony be?

Priority

By faith Abraham, when God tested him, offered Isaac as a sacrifice. He who had embraced the promises was about to sacrifice his one and only son, even though God had said to him, "It is through Isaac that your offspring will be reckoned." Abraham reasoned that God could even raise the dead, and so in a manner of speaking he did receive Isaac back from death.

Hebrews 11:17-19

What an amazing thing Abraham did when God told him to sacrifice Isaac! The author brings this out in these verses, and let's just stop and think about it for a moment. God's big promise to Abraham was that he would have offspring greater in number than the stars in the sky and the sand on the shore, pretty amazing considering his age. The greatest promise of all was that through his seed, all nations of the earth would be blessed, and when the son of promise finally comes along, nothing short of a miracle in itself, God tells Abraham to sacrifice him... and Abraham was about to do what God had told him to do; now that is putting faith into action!

I can't imagine what Abraham must have been thinking... I really can't; but our author tells us, and apparently it occurred to Abraham that if God made this promise, and then told him to kill the boy, God must have a plan to raise Isaac from the dead. His faith was so strong, he wasn't thinking that God had changed His mind. So, in a way, he did receive Isaac back from the dead, for at that critical moment, poor Isaac was a dead boy walking.

By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau in regard to their future.

By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff.

By faith Joseph, when his end was near, spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions concerning the burial of his bones.

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.

Hebrews 11:20-23

Take a close look at these "by faith" verses.... very close. What do they all have common, other than "by faith"? It's no trick, there is a clear pattern...

Each one of these "by faith" incidents is directly related to covenant faithfulness. The main things mentioned about Abraham related to the land promise. In the verses above, it's the son of promise. Isaac and Jacob verses are referring to their covenant birthrights. Joseph was concerned about the exodus, also a promise of the covenant. Moses was no ordinary child, because God would make another covenant with him... and later we'll see more about Moses.

All of these people were imperfect, and the truth is that some of them were very imperfect. All, however, placed their priority on their covenant relationship with God, over all else, and when things were tough, that's where their hearts were to be found. The really big question is this: What does that tell us about God's priorities in relation to our sins?

In case I haven't made this quite clear enough, let's go about this in a slightly different way.

None of the patriarchs was a saint. A few of them were a mess, and I'm including Abraham in this group. How many times did he allow Sarah, the woman who was to bear the son of promise, go into the harem of a pagan king? Not once, but twice! Now I haven't been so perfect in my lifetime, but I most certainly have never done anything like that, have you?

Probably not... Yet Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness, because Abraham, in spite of his faults, placed his highest priority on his covenant with God; in this area, he was faultless. The same can also be said of his son and grandsons.

Back to the original recipients... Everything in this letter is in the context of covenant. Just think about all of the amazing things we've learned about the New Covenant in Hebrews. Think about what we've learned about our relationship with God in Hebrews. With all of that in mind, can

you see what an insult it would be to God if we, after all He has done, and after all He has given to us, would turn our backs and walk away from this covenant relationship when the going got tough? You see, these warnings aren't so much about our petty sins which are already forgiven anyway, they are about protecting and maintaining our covenant relationship with God.

It's something to reflect upon, I should think.

“By faith Moses...”

By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be known as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. 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. By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the king's anger; he persevered because he saw him who is invisible. By faith he kept the Passover and the application of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel.

Hebrews 11:24-28

In these few verses, the author of Hebrews reveals something truly incredible: Moses knew about Jesus!

That knowledge accounted for some of the actions that Moses took, and the author cites the fact that Moses made a choice to be numbered among the Hebrews rather than to continue in his place of privilege in the household of Pharaoh. Moses "regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt" and so he left the slave masters and joined with the slaves. Moses placed his priority in line with God's covenant purpose, not because the New Covenant was in effect, for it was centuries in the future, but because God's covenant with Abraham was in effect, and it contained a promise that the people would be set free from bondage in Egypt, a promise that was made over 400 years before the time of Moses.

In this, Moses was forward-looking, to his reward, to the exclusion of his current peril on the earth. How might that have inspired the original recipients of the letter? How might that inspire us?

It was by faith that he both left Egypt and incurred the anger of Pharaoh, and later that he applied the blood of the Passover.

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as on dry land; but when the Egyptians tried to do so, they were drowned.

Hebrews 11:29

The people Moses led had their moments of faith too, as when they crossed the Red Sea, but sadly they more often drifted away from their faith, and never received God's land promise;

even Moses rebelled and could only gaze upon the Land. But Joshua and Caleb never lost their faith:

By faith the walls of Jericho fell, after the army had marched around them for seven days.

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed with those who were disobedient.

Hebrews 11:30-31

The story of faith is an amazing one indeed, and it is a story that you and I are part of. What role will we play?

Chapter 12

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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.

Hebrews 12:1-3

We begin chapter 12 with an amazing shift in tone, yet it is a small section that is actually in the position of summing up the previous chapter. Remember that chapter 11 has been all about active faith, and here in summing that up the author, sounding very much like the Apostle Paul, uses a sports metaphor. We are surrounded by a "great cloud of witnesses" referring to all of those great people of faith who were named in chapter 11, and here they are the spectators at a great race; the stage is set...

The author now urges us to throw off everything that hinders as an athlete would remove all hindering clothing in preparation for a race. Then, he applies this to our reality when he says "and the sin that so easily entangles." If we were athletes in a locker room before a great race, we would change out of our "street clothes" and into the garb of a runner; minimal clothing that allows full freedom of movement, with no extra weight, and nothing to limit our ability to run the race. Likewise, as servants of Jesus who are running the "race" of life, we must get rid of anything that would limit our ability to run our "race." Sin, distractions and the like must be left behind, lest they should inhibit our efforts.

Then, we run our race that has been "marked out for us" with our eyes fixed on Jesus. When you run a race, you don't just make up the course as you go along; it has been fixed by the racing officials. Likewise, the race that is our lives has been marked out by God, so that we run a certain course. We usually call this our "calling." Each of us has been "called" to His service in a certain way, and the author is trying to encourage the people to fix their eyes on Jesus, and run the race we have been called to effectively and without distraction or restraint.

Jesus, who is the author and perfecter of our faith is our model for the race. Notice that He is author; He is the One who has written this tale and marked out our race. He has perfected our faith by His work on the cross. As you read further, we see that Jesus is our model, for in His earthly ministry, He has done exactly what we are to do now in our own rights. He threw off sin and distraction, fixed His eyes upon the will of the Father, and ran His race to win. We are to throw off all distraction and sin and fix our eyes upon Jesus and run our race to win just as those great people of faith in chapter 11 did.

Finally, Jesus sat down at the right hand of the throne on high; He reached the finish line. For the finish line and as He sat down on high, so shall we when we finish the course before us. I'm struck at this moment that the whole concept of this is so simple. It's really easier to

comprehend than it is to describe, which is the mark of a great metaphor. Will we get ready and run that race?

On your mark.... get set.... GO!

Discipline, everybody's favorite thing

In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you completely forgotten this word of encouragement that addresses you as a father addresses his son? It says,

*“My son, do not make light of the Lord’s discipline,
and do not lose heart when he rebukes you,
because the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and he chastens everyone he accepts as his son.”*

Hebrews 12:4-6

Our author moves from the high ground of the first 3 verses into an area that isn't quite as warm and fuzzy... or is it? Remember who he is writing to, Jewish Christians in Rome during the time of Nero's persecution. These brothers are enduring very difficult times, times most of us can hardly imagine. This whole letter has served to encourage them to persevere, to hold on to their faith in Christ, and to recognize that whatever the current crisis may be, it is never worth throwing away our future hope to avoid it. Now, the author takes a different approach: Discipline.

Notice that right off, he paints discipline as a positive. To receive the discipline of the heavenly Father is to have our sonship confirmed! Have you ever thought of it that way? I hadn't until about the third or fourth time I studied this.

As we struggle with sin... and yes, we all have that struggle in one form or another... we have not resisted (sin) to the point of shedding our blood (being killed). Even for the original recipients, this statement must have been obvious. Then the word of encouragement, that we receive discipline because we are God's children... Take a minute to reflect on this quote from Proverbs 3. Early on in this letter, we rejoiced at the thought that through Christ, we have been made His sons and daughters, remember? We are co-heirs with Christ! As sons and daughters normally do, we come under the authority and discipline of Father. Are we still rejoicing?

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as his children. For what children are not disciplined by their father? If you are not disciplined—and everyone undergoes discipline—then you are not legitimate, not true sons and daughters at all.

Hebrews 12:7-8

I have three children, all grown now, and when they were growing up, they were subject to my discipline. There were times when they were punished. There were times when I lectured them, times when I scolded them and times when I pleaded with them. As they grew, some of my methods changed because their understanding changed. There were times with all of them when I had to step aside and let them get hurt so they could learn the hard way a lesson they were slow to learn by other means; this was the worst for me. Oh, how much it hurt to step back and let them do something stupid; how hard it was to force myself not to say "I told you that would happen!" (I sometimes failed at this point, by the way) Of course, there were times when they blamed me for not stopping them when they set out to do something they knew better than to do. Maybe this sounds familiar to you parents out there... maybe this sounds familiar to all of us in our relationships with God also.

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

Hebrews 12:9-11

Our human fathers did their best with us in most cases, as I did my best with my kids. But neither I nor any other human father was always right, no human father did as good a job for their children as our heavenly Father does with us. The sad truth is that for many, the concept of a loving and merciful father is hard to comprehend because of the imperfections of their human father, yet the truth remains that our heavenly Father is love itself. He is able, willing and more than capable of guiding us along through this great adventure that is our lives... this "race" we are in. Yet, from time-to-time we are much like any stubborn teenager, slow to learn.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. "Make level paths for your feet," so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed.

Hebrews 12:12-13

A word of encouragement! Yes, may we learn, may we come to see the way that we should go. May we be like the young person who is willing to be taught, rather than like the one who is certain that they know everything already! May we accept our Father's lessons and discipline and learn and grow from it quickly, and run our race straight to the finish line.

Did You Hear That?

Make every effort to live in peace with everyone and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one falls short of the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau,

who for a single meal sold his inheritance rights as the oldest son. Afterward, as you know, when he wanted to inherit this blessing, he was rejected. Even though he sought the blessing with tears, he could not change what he had done.

Hebrews 12:14-17

This is a particularly interesting little paragraph; look at it carefully, and let's see what riches are in store for us...

First, the author exhorts us to live in peace with everyone, and to strive to be holy, set apart, for without that, no one will see God. Living at peace with everyone seems to be referring to a lifestyle that is not engaging in controversy and discord; things that the New Testament teaches in many places, as we have seen. Living holy lives is also a common theme in the New Testament, and keeping in mind that holy means "set apart" it isn't too difficult to follow what that means. We are to be set apart from the world we live in, set apart for God and not partakers in every crazy thing that comes along. We are to be willing to undergo God's discipline and to stand for the Truth of His Word; these things would be very consistent with the 11 chapters of Hebrews that we have been through so far, and would make sense considering the historical context that we have seen so many times.

We've been told before in this letter to help and encourage one another to hold on to our faith, and so to be told here not to let anyone "fall short of the grace of God" and to allow no "bitter root" in our midst to defile others would also seem to make sense. That sexual immorality is mentioned right after this is interesting... but the most interesting little piece of the entire paragraph comes right after that. "Godless like Esau" is a very interesting thing; the author goes on to remind his readers that Esau sold his birthright for a dinner, and could not get it back.

His birthright, or inheritance is a covenant reference, for he was to inherit his right as a patriarch of old, as a direct descendant of Abraham. Remember that Esau didn't really take that inheritance as seriously as he should have, and traded it to his younger brother Jacob for a bowl of stew, and thus Jacob inherited upon Isaac's death. So, what will we take away from this?

What has Hebrews been all about so far? It was written to the Jewish Christians in Rome in a time of severe persecution, to urge them not to give up their faith under severe trial. The message has been that in the New Covenant relationship with Christ, we have a superior high priest who brought a superior sacrifice to establish a superior covenant based upon superior promises. We have just been warned not to be like Esau who lost his place in Abraham's covenant when he valued a bowl of stew more than his birthright. Once again, in a slightly different way than before, the author is telling his readers, including you and me, to place our highest priority on our New Covenant birthright as co-heirs with Christ to everything, lest we should lose everything.

Interesting, isn't it? So, I must ask...

Is God speaking to us in this passage? I sure "hear" Him. What's He saying to you?

Two Mountaintops

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

Hebrews 12:18-21

We're in the home stretch now on our tour of Hebrews, and it begins with two mountaintops. In these verses, we see Mount Sinai in quotes from both Exodus and Deuteronomy. Notice that the author is speaking in the negative: "You have *not* come to a mountain that..." See it? He is about to describe a place we have moved away from...

Read the passage slowly, try to picture the terror the people felt when they came to Mount Sinai. Fire, darkness, gloom; everything about the place was intimidating and terrifying; they were in the presence of God, and that was not a place you wanted to be. Poor Moses had to climb up there and receive the Law from a God who was unapproachable. Yes, he was a God of love, but he was dealing with a people who were in rebellion against Him, yet He had taken the initiative to build a relationship with them. These were the descendants of Abraham, now grown to the size of a small nation. This was not a negotiation, it was a truce being offered by the stronger side: Take it or leave it. If they took it, God was willing to be their God, as long as they kept His Law. If they left it, well, let's not think about what might happen. What is really important for us to understand is that God, the party in the stronger position, was offering the truce, and this was an act of mercy.

Oh, yes... and it wasn't the end of the story; it was just the beginning!

But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the Judge of all, to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

Hebrews 12:22-24

Now, the second mountaintop, and what a contrast; this is the mountain we have come to, Mount Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. This is the reality that was only pictured in the old earthly city. Joyous angels, the spirits of the righteous, the presence of God... without the fear and the dread, for now we are made perfect in His sight by the blood of Jesus. No longer are we at war. This is not just a truce, this is a Treaty of Alliance, of Fellowship: We are now members of the Family!

Here's a little bonus for you: notice the terms that are used here as one: Mount Zion, city of the living God, Heavenly Jerusalem, church of the firstborn. These are combined with the descriptive comments; thousands of angels, spirits of the righteous, the presence of God and Jesus the mediator of a better covenant. You see, they all refer to what we would call the heavenly church or heaven. Remember this when you read the prophets and the Psalms and you will find them easier to understand.

Finally, that sprinkled blood, the blood that was brought by the mediator of the New Covenant, His own blood. It speaks a better word than the blood of Abel, for it speaks not of senseless hatred and violence, it does not cry out for vengeance, it speaks of redemption and life; what an awesome picture this is.

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? At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, "Once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens." The words "once more" indicate the removing of what can be shaken—that is, created things—so that what cannot be shaken may remain.

Hebrews 12:25-27

This, is a powerful passage, one of amazing awe and wonder to ponder. The author begins it with an imperative, "See to it..." Who is speaking, the one we aren't supposed to refuse? The answer is in the next sentence: Who warned the people from earth, and warns us from heaven? God would be my answer.

Go back to verses 18-21, and you can get an idea of what the author is referring to here. He recounted Mount Sinai, the fire, the darkness the smoke and shaking... Yes, there was warning for the people in all of that: They were to take the Law that was given to Moses seriously. Did they? Well, some of the time. Did those people get into the promised land?

No, they didn't.

We have the reality that was to come, and yet we are being told not to turn away from Him. Yes, that warning was for the Jewish Christians of Nero's Rome, and it is for those who followed them as well. The author continues his thought in the rest of this passage by making a comparison between God's warnings on Sinai, and the judgment that is to come. When that day arrives, all of creation will be stripped away, and only that which is entirely of God will remain, and the very strong implication is that those who are left standing will be the ones who remained faithful to God.

Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our "God is a consuming fire."

Hebrews 12:28-29

Here the chapter draws to a close. Look carefully and you see that it ends on an optimistic note. Preachers over the centuries have often quoted verse 29 "for our God is a consuming fire." to strike fear into the hearts of their congregations, and that is a pity. They often left out verse 28 entirely, and verse 28 gives verse 29 its rich significance, for it reminds the readers of this letter that we have a great inheritance, that we are a heavenly kingdom and that we shall indeed stand on that day. Yes, we will stand for we will never turn away from Him. No! We will worship Him properly, with reverence and awe in loving and faithful trust.

To wrap up the chapter, I just want to mention one final thought about judgment day. What we have just read is not a literal description of the day. It is told here in figure, as an illustration of the reality that is to come; sound familiar? It probably won't be a great earthquake that shatters everything except God's people, but of course it will accomplish the same thing. For us today, it is simply important to understand that no matter what the future may hold, we simply need to remain faithful to our Lord, to love Him, to trust Him and to share His love with one another... and not worry about the details of the great day. We'll come out just fine if we do that, and that is the point of the chapter.

Chapter 13

Continue in Love

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are mistreated as if you yourselves were suffering.

Hebrews 13:1-3

Chapter 13 is largely made up of exhortations, and from these, we can fill in any blanks we might have in our understanding of chapter 12. Notice how it begins: "Keep on loving..." As we saw at the end of the last chapter, this is really what the book is trying to teach us, to keep on doing the things we are supposed to do as Christians, no matter what happens in this life.

Obviously, this should have had a powerful impact on the original recipients of the letter who were having such a rough time in Rome, but let's not think it doesn't apply in our time as well.

Loving one another is one of the commands of Jesus that is repeated over and over again in the New Testament, and frankly it deserves more than lip service from us.

Showing hospitality to strangers is another common theme in the New Testament; have you ever wondered about it? Does it mean showing hospitality to dangerous persons on the run from the police? Does it mean only for other believers? Different people are led in different ways here... and for the record, I wouldn't advise harboring fugitives from the law... I can only suggest that we all follow the Lord's leading. Some, especially those who have the spiritual gift of hospitality, will be led more than others. Certainly, however, those who habitually refuse hospitality might not seem like people who are sharing God's love very freely.

Taking this verse in a broader cultural context sheds a better light on its meaning. In that context, it would seem most likely that the author is referring to people who are believers, such as those sent from another church congregation. A travelling preacher or messengers might qualify more than just anyone who looks lost...

Finally, those in prison. I doubt the author is talking about random thieves and violent criminals. It seems more likely to me that he is referring to people being held in prison for their faith, as were many at the time of his writing. This would fit more clearly into the first verse and its injunction to keep on loving one another.

Whatever our personal views may be on these topics it is clear that these three verses are all about sharing the love of Christ with others.

Persevere!

Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. 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.”
So we say with confidence,*

*“The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.
What can mere mortals do to me?”*

Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

Hebrews 13:4-8

The Hebrews author continues to wind up his letter to Rome with exhortations, and at first glance this selection seems a little random, almost out of context, in fact. We've been going through the amazing reality of the New Covenant, sweeping through redemption history, coming into the very presence of God... in a context of remaining faithful to the end, even through terrible persecution; even unto death. Then the author suddenly begins to tell us to respect marriage, be pure, not to love money and to respect our leaders in the faith. Circle the piece in the picture that doesn't belong...

But don't be too hasty!

You could say that these things are mentioned to remind the recipients not to slip into sin, and who could argue with that? Yet it still doesn't quite fit in context, does it? Yes, yes, not slipping into sin is the correct Sunday school answer, but it hardly gets to the point; Sunday school answers usually don't get to the point.

Remain faithful to the end, even unto death. Faithful is a covenant term meaning to keep covenant. Adultery is a violation of the marriage covenant. Have you ever known (or been) someone who is involved in an extra marital affair? These things seem to require a web of deceit and deception to keep them going, and there seems to be a certain drive to keep them going. When the guilty party is found out, there is great carnage in their homes, relationships and in their lives in general. These things take a lot of work and attention, and I can say with great confidence that they do not promote or advance anybody's relationship with Jesus Christ. Sexual immorality tends to have the same kinds of attributes even if there is no marital issue involved. How about the love of money and things? While this may not always require secrecy, it does require attention and effort; a great deal of it, actually. Does it enhance one's relationship with our Lord? Hardly!

The author has been teaching us not to neglect our covenant relationship he has been encouraging us to remain faithful. Sexual immorality of whatever kind and the love of money are things that can become so all-encompassing in a person's life that they can easily cause one to

slip away from Christ, their faith and even to "fall away" entirely; thus these are not random exhortations at all. The quotations from Deuteronomy 31 and Psalm 118 take the exhortation to the next step, for they remind us that in Christ, we have the help we need to stand firm in our faith, to remain faithful and to persevere. Even the mention of our leaders who stand tall in their faith to teach, encourage and exemplify what it is to live in Christ is there to give us encouragement. Leaders, this should also remind you of your responsibility to emulate Jesus Christ in everything that you do and say.

As we pause here to reflect, can you see how this all fits together? It is as though the author is telling us to keep our eyes on Jesus, not to be drawn off track by the temptations of this world, but to persevere through any kind of trial, whether it is a trial of persecution or a trial of temptation so that we can remain faithful to the end. What he is not really doing here is citing mere "violations", for he is going much deeper than that. He is asking us to consider our innermost priorities, just as Jesus taught in His Sermon on the Mount.

Do not be carried away

Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by eating ceremonial foods, which is of no benefit to those who do so. We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat.

Hebrews 13:9-10

As he continues in his exhortations, the Hebrews author now moves into the area of "strange teachings." This follows from his remarks in verses 7-8 in which he told us to "remember" our leaders who "spoke the word of God to you." Strange teachings seem to refer to teachings that are at variance with the Truth, that are at variance to the pure Gospel of Jesus Christ. Very clearly, any teaching that re-imposes the Old Covenant Law onto the New Covenant would count as "strange" indeed. He continues by pointing out that it is better for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, rather than by eating ceremonial foods which are of "no benefit." In trying to follow this, we might keep in mind that Jesus, the Living Word came to us "full of grace and truth." He didn't bring us ceremonial regulations like those contained in the Old Covenant, He brought "grace and truth." The reality of grace and truth replaced the ceremonies, feasts and festivals; why put any reliance upon these things now that the New has come? In light of this, it always strikes me as interesting when I think of our special days, special meals and special ceremonies today...

The author underscores this with his comment about the altar that we have, that the Old Covenant priests have no access to; the real one in heaven that they cannot approach, as opposed to the "illustration" in the Temple. And now, the author has set up what comes next:

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. And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make

the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

Hebrews 13:11-14

In this little paragraph, the author makes a comparison between the sacrifice made in the earthly Temple and the fire consuming the sacrifices outside of the earthly camp, with the New Covenant sacrifice outside the city... with our being "strangers" on earth. In order for us to fully appreciate this, recall that contrast of Covenants: The Old Covenant is an earthly exercise in every respect. It has outward laws, outward sacrifices and outward, physical promises. It has a physical Temple and a physical earthly nation. The New Covenant brings the reality of what was pictured in the physical aspects of the Old Covenant. We are no longer citizens of an earthly realm, being now citizens of a heavenly Kingdom. We no longer have human priests presenting animal sacrifices in a physical Temple, we have the superior sacrifice of Christ, and we can now present ourselves in the heavenly Temple, in the actual presence of God. With this in mind, let's look at verses 13-14:

Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

We leave the earthly city and go outside to where Jesus bore our sin and its disgrace in perfect humility, as servants. We have no city here, for we are not citizens of earth, but citizens of heaven, and we look forward to the day when we will go "home" to our true heavenly home. Think about the impact of this to his original readers, in their trial of persecution.

Now, think about what this means for us... Only our earthly circumstances are different, the Truth of these things is the same.

Pleasing Sacrifices

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that openly profess his name. And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Hebrews 13:15-16

Wonderful verses! Our author is wrapping up his exhortations now, thus the "therefore." A sacrifice of praise; this isn't really an Old Testament concept as much as it is a recognition of the reality that has come in Christ. What is left to do but praise Him? This is a sacrifice that pleases God...

But there is something of a "catch" in the second part of the sentence. This pleasing sacrifice is the "fruit of lips that openly profess his name." Think about those original recipients in Rome

during Nero's persecution. Wouldn't it make sense to keep your mouth shut if you were in their situation? Of course it would, there's no need to invite trouble, right?

Well dear reader, that's why the author called it a sacrifice; it was truly a dangerous thing to do.

Fast-forward to the 21st century... How is it exactly that so many who live in freedom justify not speaking out in praise of Jesus Christ...? Yeah, I know, I've heard all of the excuses.

There is another new sacrifice mentioned in verse 16. We must "do good" and "share with others." Please take careful note of the word "do." As I've mentioned previously, the whole faith versus works argument is an argument based entirely on a false premise, for the two are not mutually exclusive. We don't earn anything by what we do... clearly! We "do" because we love. We love because He first loved us, therefore the "do" part is a response to His love. Stop fighting it; it has nothing to do with earning something, it is a sacrifice that is pleasing to God.

As true as that is, there is more, for in serving others and "doing good" there is an added benefit, we grow closer to Him in relationship when we humble ourselves and put others ahead of ourselves. When the Body of Christ lives this way, the testimony to the world is powerful to say the least, and many more come to receive His love. You see, dear reader that is what Christ's Ambassadors are here to do in this strange and foreign land we call earth.

Leaders

Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.

Hebrews 13:17

This is a tough verse for me to comment about; I was in church leadership for roughly 20 years, and I doubt I ever once quoted it unless I was teaching Hebrews 13: We live in cynical times...

Over the years, there have been great leaders in the church; there have also been some who were not so great; leaders can suffer from the same issues that everyone else may suffer from. Some may be in leadership for all of the wrong reasons, some may think that being a leader in the church makes them a big shot or an important person, and yes I have met a few like that. In my experience, many church members are critical of their leaders, no matter what those leaders do, but I must tell you that in my experience, that sort of criticism usually said much more about the critic than the leader.

This simple verse has two points to it. First is the injunction for us to submit to Biblical authority within the church. Dear reader, if we cannot do this, there will never be unity in our churches. The second is that leaders must understand that they will give an account for their leadership

tenure, for it is a heavy responsibility. It occurs to me that I should say that when I speak of leaders in the church, I refer not to leaders within a denominational structure somewhere, but rather at the local congregational level, and this is because these are the ones this verse refers to, not denominational authorities. I can say this because at the time of writing, there were no denominational structures or authorities.

To be a leader in the church is not for everyone; it means that you become the servant of all. It involves making sacrifices that few will give you credit for, few will ever even know about. It means that you will be unfairly criticized by those you serve, and it will result in many sleepless nights and lots of prayers for guidance. In short, it is possibly the most wonderful experience anybody can have on the earth... but it isn't for most people.

It is a whole lot easier if people complain and criticize less and focus on Jesus Christ more, that's for sure.

Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way. I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon.

Hebrews 13:18-19

Please read these 2 verses carefully, and you will detect a heart that yearns to be with the people of the church, apparently a church in which the author has served as a leader. In verse 18 it is clear that he fully comprehends the responsibility of leading, the parental love he feels for his people, and in verse 19 you can easily see his longing to return to them in these difficult times of testing through which they are travelling. I can tell you from experience that this is how it "feels" to have been a leader in the church.

A Prayer of Purpose

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

Hebrews 13:20-21

The author of Hebrews is now in the final part of the letter, and he opens it with a prayer of purpose. Let's take a closer look, for it is quite instructive.

Our God is identified as the God of peace, something we might want to keep in mind, and then goes on to an interesting statement that has a way of summarizing the letter. "The blood of the eternal covenant" is a reminder that God has committed Himself to the New Covenant and its promises. Notice that it was through the blood of the covenant, the superior sacrifice of our superior high priest, that brought Jesus back from the dead; you don't see that spelled out very often, for usually we see God's power cited for this. Think about it: Jesus arose from the grave

by the power of an indestructible life, He was raised by the power of God... and now He is brought back by the blood of the covenant. What does that tell you about His blood?

I don't know about you, but it strikes me as pretty powerful stuff. It is the same stuff that all of our hopes are based upon... so what does that tell you about our hope and God's promise?

"Powerful" is one word I can think of.

Next, Jesus is called "the great shepherd of the sheep," reminding us that He is our Lord, our Master. Here we come into the "what" that the author is praying for: May God "equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him". Notice that the author is asking only for things that accomplish God's will and that please Him. He is not asking anything for himself. This, dear reader, is a prayer of power and purpose. Jesus told us many times that whatever we ask for in His name will be given to us, but each time He said this, the context was clearly upon doing God's will. I have no doubt whatsoever that God answered this prayer directly. Obviously, praying in Jesus' name is what follows when the author adds, "through Jesus Christ..."

I wonder how often we pray like this: Boldly for God's purposes to be done and not our own; in power for God's will in our lives, as opposed for our list of goodies.

Yes indeed, this is a prayer of purpose and power, may all of us pray such prayers.

Final Comments

Brothers and sisters, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for in fact I have written to you quite briefly.

I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

Greet all your leaders and all the Lord's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings.

Grace be with you all.

Hebrews 13:22-25

We don't know for sure who wrote this letter to the Jewish Christians of Rome, but we do know why he wrote it. He was concerned for the people there who were dealing with such a terrible ordeal at the hands of Nero, one of history's great villains. These brothers and sisters in Christ had been pushed to the wall and were in danger of losing much more than their lives, so he wrote one of the most amazing letters ever written.

The author gave them a real glimpse of glory, God's glory through Jesus Christ, and also of the glory that awaits His followers. With his continuing message of holding on to what we have in Christ, he hoped to see these people through their ordeal and to come with them to the ultimate glory beyond this earthly vale, that true glory which is forever ours in Christ.

As we read these last few verses, how can we miss the love with which he writes? Here is a man who is feeling for his flock, here is a man who truly cares about God's people. Have you noticed that the word "love" is not mentioned in these verses? Yet it is evident in the emotion behind the words: This is love in action! This man knew of the suffering in Rome, felt for his people and took up his pen. He didn't simply say "I love you," he showed them his love through his concern, and in the process he gave them the strength to carry on. Yes, dear reader, we can learn so much from our study of this great letter to the Hebrews!