

## HEBREWS STUDY

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### I. INTRODUCTION/BACKGROUND

- A. Following the death and resurrection of Jesus around 33 A.D., the Christian faith grew initially among the Jews, but then among the Gentiles following the revelation to Peter in Acts, chapter 10, that the gospel was for Gentiles as well as for Jews. Once this revelation was accepted, the gospel spread rapidly among the Gentiles throughout the Roman Empire. Despite, or perhaps because of, its rapid spread, Christians faced increasing push back and resistance by the local cultures and eventually by the Roman government. Indeed, in A.D. 49 Emperor Claudius expelled all Jews from Rome, which included all Christian Jews. Among those expelled were Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, who are mentioned in Acts, chapter 18. The Roman government had issues with Christians because they (along with the Jews) refused to make the declaration once a year that, "Caesar is Lord." Following the great fire in Rome in A.D. 64, which destroyed most of the city, the Emperor Nero (whom historians are quite sure actually started the fire) blamed the Christians for starting it. In short order, Christians were routinely arrested and put to death for the crime of being a Christian. It was at this time that Christians began to flee to the catacombs outside Rome to hide from almost certain death.
- B. The Christian Jews were in an even worse position. They were subject to persecution and death by Rome for being Christian, but they were also ostracized from the Jewish community for becoming Christians, even though the early Jewish Christians (as with most modern Jewish Christians) still considered themselves to be Jewish. So, these Jewish Christians were in a very difficult position. They were persecuted by the Romans because they did not recognize the Emperor as God, and the Romans could be brutal. On the other hand, they were not accepted by their Jewish brethren either. In the book of Acts Paul would usually go first to the synagogue to preach the gospel to the Jews when he went into a new town, but they rarely accepted his message and often stirred up the authorities against them.
- C. Thus, many Jewish converts to Christianity were becoming discouraged and many were considering going back into Judaism, which at that time meant strict obedience to the law and the offer of sacrifices in the temple when they could get to Jerusalem. The cost of discipleship was weighing on them. They did not want to be subject to persecution or death anymore; they wanted to go back to what was familiar to them—the old way of worshiping God through the synagogue, temple sacrifices and adherence to the law. Slowly, they were drifting away from the gospel of Jesus Christ and going back to their old ways.

- D. Their predicament is one reason that the study of Hebrews can be so helpful for us. Just as they were discouraged because of what was going on in the culture around them, we Christians sometimes find ourselves at odds with the culture around us. Church membership and attendance have been on the decline for decades. Our own denomination—the Episcopal Church—has declined in membership by nearly 50% over the past 50 years. This is a time for us to examine our lives and our relationship to God, and to ask ourselves honestly if we have been drifting away from him. Have we lost the excitement of our first love when we came to Christ? Are we allowing the tedium and cares of everyday life to dull the relationship we once had with the Lord? Have the cultural changes that have occurred over the past decades cast doubts in our minds over the reliability of scripture? Have we put aside our recognition that we worship, and are privileged to have an intimate relationship with, the creator of the universe who desires to walk with us every day of our lives? Have we become disappointed because our lives are not how we think they should have turned out? Have our hearts become hardened so that we have difficulty hearing the voice of God and sensing his direction in our lives? If the answers to any of these questions is "Yes," then the book of Hebrews is for you, and this is the time to drink deeply of what Hebrews has to say to us.

## II. BRIEF OVERVIEW

- A. Because of the situation the Jewish Christians were in, we know *why* this book was written. As to *when*, it was likely written in the AD 60s, before the fall of Jerusalem in A.D. 70 when the temple was destroyed by the Romans. We don't know for sure who wrote it—whether Paul, or Barnabas or Apollos or someone else—but it really doesn't matter. What matters is the message, which speaks as clearly to us today as it did to the Hebrews nearly 2000 years ago.
- B. Although most Bibles call this the Letter to the Hebrews, it is not really a letter. It is a sermon—apparently one that had to be delivered in writing rather than in person. Compare the beginning of this book to the letters written by Paul, John or Peter. For instance, all of Paul's letters begin, "Paul, a servant (or apostle) of Jesus Christ, to (whomever the letter is written to)." Hebrews does not begin by saying who it is from or who it is to, although it quickly becomes apparent it is written to Jewish Christians. Despite being written to Jewish Christians, its message is helpful to all Christians for all time. Although we may not face the exact challenges they faced, we do face challenges, and we must respond as the writer of this book/sermon urges the original recipients to respond.
- C. One of the themes Hebrews addresses is the cost of discipleship. As mentioned, the Jewish Christians were persecuted by Romans and ostracized by Jews. They are discouraged, and they are weighing the cost of being a Christian. They are weary

with the constant struggles they are facing as Christians. Sometimes we modern Christians also come face to face with the cost of discipleship. If we are honest, we have to admit that the question of whether it is worth the cost and the struggle flashes through our mind, at least momentarily. When those moments come, we should remember Hebrews and the fact we are not the first to feel that way.

- D. Another thing Hebrews addresses is human frailty. The writer appreciates and understands that we are emotionally fragile. He knows that we become frightened when we are targeted and in danger. After the devastating fire in Rome in A.D. 64, many Christians were arrested and then put to death. Imagine what it must have been like to belong to a small house church when all of the resources of Rome were marshaled against Christians. Remember, Paul had been beheaded in Rome and Peter was crucified in Rome in the A.D. 50s. These Jewish Christians tried to avoid calling attention to themselves because the public confession of Jesus Christ as the Son of God could lead to their death.
- E. Finally, we will note that the author of Hebrews writes with a pastor's heart and as a friend writing to friends. He recognizes the peril they are in and their fears. But he is also totally committed to Jesus Christ. He was concerned they might give in and accept the Roman terms for release—which was a public denial of Christ. He remembered Jesus' warning in Mark 8:34-38 that if anyone was ashamed of him, even if his life was threatened, he would be ashamed of that person at the final judgment. As a pastor and friend, the writer's strongest encouragement was to remind his friends of the character of the Lord who cares for them. He displays Jesus in a fresh way as their champion, who not only identified himself with them but who has released them from the fear of death.
- F. One primary purpose of the author is to remind the readers how superior Jesus Christ is. He is superior to angels; he is superior to Moses, who was the giver of the law to the Israelites; he is superior to the priests who were descendants of Aaron; he is superior to the prophets; Jesus's sacrifice was superior to the temple sacrifices. The sacrifices offered by the Jewish priests had to be made repeatedly and did not absolve sin for all time. Jesus's sacrifice was once for all time and absolved all sin for all time for those who put their trust in him. The purpose of pointing out how superior Christ is to anything in Judaism is to encourage them to persevere in the faith and not to turn their backs on Christ or drift away from him. As we will see, the author even warns of the consequences of doing so, and he sets a higher goal for them—to be faithful even to death. We need to hear this message today. We need to have our fires lit again. We need to feel the breath of God on us as he leads us through difficult times. We need to be reminded that God created us for his

purposes, not for us to pursue our own goals. We need to see new and afresh the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ.

### III. CHAPTER 1: 1-4 A NEW REVELATION

- A. These verses are a summary of the entire Bible. God spoke to our ancestors in many and various ways through the prophets, but in the last days has spoken to us by his son. This son is the exact image of God and reflects his glory. The world was created through him, and he sustains the world through his powerful word. He is the one who has purified us from our sins and who now sits at the right hand of God on high. In other words, if you want to see God, look at Jesus. He created the world; he sustains the world; he saved us from our sins by his sacrifice and he now sits with the father in his resurrection body. So, why would you ever want to drift away from such a relationship, or from such a God?
- B. In these verses, the author is bringing the audience face to face with the God who speaks. He is not a god who is remote or remains silent. He has spoken in many and various ways through the prophets, but most recently has spoken to the world through his son. He is reminding them that God has not been silent in the past, and he still speaks at the time of his writing (and today). The author obviously believed it was important to remind them of this because in their time of persecution and fear they were undoubtedly asking why God had not delivered them from their Roman persecutors. So, after proclaiming God has spoken through his Son, the rest of Hebrews deals with explaining *why* the most recent word from God through his Son is the full revelation of God, superior in all ways to the word spoken through the prophets, through the Jewish fathers, and through angels.
- C. These discouraged Hebrew Christians are asking *Is God there?* They knew he had spoken in the past through Moses, through the prophets, and through others. The author is carefully pointing out that God's chosen method of speaking to them through his Son is superior to the method by which God spoke to them previously. God's complete and final word was spoken to them through his only Son, and can only be spoken by his Son, whose word sustains all things.
- D. Although the author does not expressly identify Jesus as the Wisdom of God, he assigns to Jesus the four tasks of the Wisdom of God described in the Old Testament: 1) the creation of the world; 2) the sustaining of the world; 3) the revelation of God's truth; 4) the reconciliation of mankind to God. Furthermore, when Jesus had made purification for sins he sat down at the right hand of God. Thus, Jesus is the perfect word of God revealed for their benefit (and ours) and they should not now abandon Jesus to return to something far inferior.

### IV. CHAPTER 1:5 – 2:4 ANGELS

- A. After this glorious introduction, the author turns in verse 5 to a discussion about angels. We might well ask, why would he do so? What does that have to do with the predicament they find themselves in? His concern for and discussion about angels is intensely practical. It was broadly accepted in Judaism that the law of God had been delivered to Israel through angels, even on Mt. Sinai. We find references to this in Acts, chapter 7 and Galatians, chapter 3. The Jewish Christians shared this belief and found in it a strong reason for respecting the law as the word of God. So, by establishing that Jesus is superior to the angels, he is preparing the audience for his declaration that Jesus' word is higher than that of the angels, and they cannot afford to neglect the message of salvation which was delivered by Jesus. Then, in the rest of this first chapter he points out in detail how the word of God shows that Jesus is superior to the angels. It may seem strange to us that he would go to such lengths to say that Jesus is superior to the angels, but in the Jewish thought of that day angels were viewed as creatures of a higher order and some even thought of them as intermediaries between men and God. And since Jesus had lived on earth as a man, some apparently thought that angels were superior to Jesus—at least during his time on earth. The author carefully uses scripture to say that isn't so. Jesus is higher than the angels; indeed, angels are spirits in divine service sent to serve those who are to inherit salvation, which comes only through Jesus Christ.
- B. After pointing out that Jesus is higher than the angels and that the angels' role is to serve us who are receiving salvation, he adds a pointed warning: we must not drift away from the message of salvation we have received. How can we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? The messages delivered through angels were valid, and there were just penalties for disobedience, so how could they expect to escape judgment if they ignored or rejected the message delivered by Jesus which was higher and more perfect than that delivered by angels. Furthermore, God confirmed what Jesus taught by signs and wonders performed by him.

#### **V. Chapter 2:5-18. THE SHARED SITUATION**

- A. The author continues his discussion of the superiority of Jesus by pointing out that God did not subject the world to angels. Here, he is referencing Genesis, chapter 1, where God instructed Adam and Eve to fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over all the earth. The enormity of this command by God is recognized in Psalm 8, which the author of Hebrews quotes. God gave man authority over all the earth—authority to live as God intended us to live when he created us. But the psalmist acknowledges that mankind hasn't exercised this authority well; we have disobeyed; we have rebelled; we have sinned. In verse 8, he says, "we do not yet see everything in subjection to them." Mankind was disobedient to God and therefore we were unable to fulfill the intent of the Father that we live in communion with him with the entire earth being the Garden of Eden he intended it to be. Furthermore, the law under which the Jews lived was unable to restore mankind to what God intended.

Remember, he is trying to convince his audience that they should not go back to the way things were before Jesus.

- B. In verse 9, he points out that although mankind has not honored God's command, Jesus has. Indeed, the author is saying, at least by implication, the following: 1) In the person of Jesus we see what God intended for humans to be and what our character was intended to be; 2) Like us, Jesus was made a little lower than the angels when he took on flesh; however, that was only temporary for Jesus and it does not call into question his superiority over angels; 3) Jesus dealt triumphantly with death on our behalf; 4) The purpose of the incarnation—Jesus becoming human—was so that he might experience death for others, thereby becoming our redeemer; 5) Jesus has been crowned with glory and splendor precisely because of what he has suffered on our behalf—death on a cross.
- C. In short, the author points out in these verses that Jesus took on the human condition, with its liability to death, in order to achieve for the Jews (and us) the glorious destiny designed by God for them. Again, without explicitly saying so, he is asking why would they ever abandon such a glorious future which God has prepared for them and go back to the old ways?
- D. Undoubtedly, the Hebrews to whom this sermon is written are questioning in their own mind why Jesus had to die, and they are, of course, concerned that they may have to die for their faith. The reference to Jesus' death in verse 9 prompts the author to reflect on the appropriateness of Jesus' incarnation and death, and he sets forth four purposes of the incarnation: 1) The Son of God had to share our humanity in order to experience death on behalf of others. Remember, neither God nor angels die; only humans and animals die. (Verse 9); 2) The Son of God had to share our humanity in order to bring us to glory—redeem us. (V. 10); 3) The son of God had to share our humanity in order to vanquish our adversary, Satan (vs 14-15); and 4) The Son of God had to share our humanity in order to become a fully qualified high priest. (vs 17-18).
- E. He also makes the point in verses 9-10 that Jesus was crowned with glory and honor because of his suffering and death on behalf of us all. In verse 10 he says Jesus brought salvation to us through his suffering, and he goes on to say that Jesus and his readers have the same Father. Although he does not say so here, the clear implication is that Jesus was faithful through his suffering, and we should likewise be faithful through whatever difficulties we experience.
- F. Beginning in verse 14 he points out that Jesus had to become flesh and blood as we are in order to be able to save us from the evil one. Furthermore, he points out that

Jesus did not come to save angels; he came to save the descendants of Abraham. That doesn't refer strictly to Jews; it refers to anyone who has the faith of Abraham, one who believes God (See Gen. 15:6). He finishes this thought by saying that Jesus had to become human to be able to make a sacrifice of atonement for us, and because he was tested by what he suffered he understands us and is able to help us when we are tested, or when we are suffering. So, we do not pray to or seek a God that can't relate to us; he has been in our shoes; he knows we get discouraged. He was human, as well as divine, and he can relate to our human condition. But he now has a resurrected body whereas we still have the old kind, at least for now.

### **Questions for Discussion:**

1. *Can you relate to being discouraged and having lost some of your zeal for God? Do you want the zeal back?*
2. *Do you sometimes have difficulty picturing Jesus going through periods of discouragement or sadness? If so, read what Jesus said about a prophet not being without honor except in his hometown and among his own family. Do you have trouble really believing that Jesus understands what you are going through in life?*
3. *Does it seem to you at times that God is there, but he seems to be far off or unconcerned about what is happening to you? Are these verses in Hebrews reassuring to you?*

### **VI. CHAPTER 3:1-6      MOSES A SERVANT, CHRIST A SON**

- A. Having established that Jesus is higher than the angels, and that he brought salvation to us through his suffering, the writer proceeds to compare Jesus to Moses. Remember, Moses is the one who received the law from God and presented it to the Hebrews; thus, Moses was perhaps the most esteemed man in Judaism. (Read Numbers 12:6-8, where God distinguishes Moses from other prophets). In fact, the writer commends Moses for his faith; he "was faithful in all God's house." But Jesus is still superior and worthy of more glory because "the builder of the house has more honor than the house itself." Moses was a faithful servant *in* God's house, but Jesus was faithful *over* God's house as a son, and the son has more honor than the servant, even if both are faithful. He concludes this thought by saying, "We are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope." In other words, we are the house of God so long as we are faithful to Jesus.
- B. Note also in verse 1 that the writer refers to Jesus not only as the high priest but also the apostle of our confession. No other writer in the New Testament refers to Jesus as an apostle, but the author clearly does so, and apparently intentionally so. Why? An apostle was one who was sent forth, and he was clothed with the full authority of the king who sent him. Indeed, Jesus had the full authority of God; in Hebrews 1:2 the writer says that it was through Jesus that God created the worlds. That is full authority! Also, the voice of the apostle—the ambassador—was the voice of the king who sent him. Therefore, to hear the voice of Jesus is to hear the voice of God the Father, as Jesus said repeatedly in the gospel of John.

## VI. Chapter 3:7-19

### WARNING AGAINST UNBELIEF

- A. Verses 7-11 are a direct quote from Psalm 95:8-11. The writer chose these verses carefully for several reasons: **1)** The evening sabbath synagogue worship always began with the words from the Psalm, "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." So, this warning was familiar to the Hebrews; **2)** The passage was a sober reminder of the unfaithfulness of Israel in the past. The backstory was that after being led out of Egypt, they came to the promised land and Moses sent 12 men to spy on the promised land and its people. When the 12 men returned, they said the land was flowing with milk and honey, but 10 said the people were too strong and the cities too fortified for them to prevail; only Joshua and Caleb trusted in the Lord for victory. God was angry with the people for their unbelief and lack of faith; he told them they would perish in the desert—except for Joshua and Caleb—and their children would be the ones to inherit the land. The people then repented and decided on their own to try to take the land. Despite Moses' warning, they invaded the land and were soundly defeated. They then wandered in the wilderness for 40 years until that generation died off before they occupied the promised land. **3)** This passage stresses the importance of listening to the voice of God. The Israelites did not listen to God, and they paid the price—defeat, followed by 40 years in the wilderness rather than occupying the promised land. **4)** The passage underscores the peril of unbelief, and the tragic cost of faithlessness. Of this the Jews were reminded every time they quoted these verses at Synagogue.
- B. The idea of Jesus as the voice—the Word—of God is incorporated into the warning against unbelief found in verses 7 and 8. The author points to the Hebrews wandering in the desert and hardening their hearts against God and warns them against doing the same thing with regard to Jesus. What did the Israelites do? They failed to trust God, and they failed to be obedient to God; he even refers to their actions in the wilderness as "the rebellion." Therefore, the warning is clear: do not be rebellious and disobedient as your forefathers were because just as they were unable to enter into the promised land because of their unbelief, the Hebrews to whom he is writing will be unable to enter into heaven if they harden their hearts and go back to the old way. "For we have become partners of Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end." (V. 14). The cost of disobedience would be high for them, just as it was for their forefathers who died in the wilderness.
- C. The author is also presenting squarely to his readers a shocking truth: *A participant in the plan of redemption provided by God can choose to disbelieve God, and to display indifference to the promise of God, with terrible consequences—they failed to enter into God's rest.*

## VII. Chapter 4:1-14

### A BASIS FOR FIDELITY

- A. In Hebrews 3:11 the writer refers to entering into God's rest. In this chapter he further develops that thought. The rest that the Israelites were to enter into was the bounty and security of the promised land. The rest that the writer is referring to in Hebrews is being in the eternal presence of God now and in heaven or the new earth. This promise was still open to the recipients of this letter because they were still alive. The good news had been presented by God to the Israelites in the desert, but they did not benefit from that promise and enter the promised land because they did not trust God in faith. As with them, it is only those who believe that shall enter into



God's rest. This is the promise of God that they are being warned not to drift away from or to harden their hearts to. "Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one may fall through such disobedience as theirs." (v. 11)

- B. In short, the author is pointing out vividly that God's promise to enter into his rest is open to all who hear the word of God, but the promise is only open "today." In other words, it is only open while we are alive and able to respond. In legal terms, a gift or a promise is only a completed gift or agreement once the gift or promise is accepted and acted upon. We must accept the living Word of God—Jesus—and we must do so in faith that leads to obedience.
  
- C. Verses 12 and 13 are some of the most quoted verses of scripture. "The word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart." In other words, God's word is piercing (or penetrating). It penetrates all aspects of our lives and is the standard by which all aspects of our lives will be judged, even the soul and the spirit, which includes our emotional life, our intellectual life, and our will. No aspect of our lives remains hidden from God. As he says in verse 13, "all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account." That can be a scary thought for us. We have no "little secrets" that only we know about. Our lives are an open book to God.
  
- D. The verses we have read today should lead us to certain conclusions: **1)** It is imperative to listen to the voice of God in Scripture; **2)** The pattern of disobedience begins in the heart, the center of human will; **3)** Hearing a message of good news does not itself assure we will receive what has been promised—we must act on it by faith and be obedient; **4)** The antidote to unbelief and disobedience is hearing and obeying God's living word in scripture; and **5)** We can only be faithful as we model our lives on the faithfulness of Christ who set the standard for fidelity to God.

#### **VIII. Chapter 4:14 — 5:10 A BASIS FOR TRUST**

- A. To review, the author has pointed out how certain decisions made by their Jewish ancestors had led to very unpleasant consequences—exclusion from the promised land by an entire generation. It was a reminder that the course of our lives is largely determined by the decisions we make. Our lives consist of a series of decisions, with each decision putting us on one road rather than another road which a different decision would have led us down. Each time we make a decision we are choosing one course of action and rejecting another which would have led us to a different place or position in life. Some of our decisions must be made before we are ready to make them, and sometimes it is confusing and painful to have to make them. Sometimes we realize right away that we have made a poor decision; sometimes that realization only confronts us much later. Likewise, sometimes we think we have made a bad decision but later in life we see that it was a good decision after all. For example, someone may feel that the decision to become a teacher, or an accountant, was not a good one five or ten years into the profession. But later, after thirty or forty years in, that decision may seem right after all. Life teaches us, just as it taught the Israelites, that we must live with the consequences of our decisions whether good or bad. As we get older that becomes ever more apparent.

- B. The author has pointed out that just like the Israelites as they approached the promised land and had to decide whether to go in and take the land as God had promised or disbelieve God, his audience would have to decide whether to remain faithful to Christ or return to Judaism. In both instances, the key issue was whether they believed they could trust God or not. The Israelites decided they could not trust God, believing instead what 10 of their own spies reported about the inhabitants of the promised land. These New Testament Jews were going to have to decide whether they could trust God by remaining faithful to Christ or whether they would decide they could not trust him and return to Judaism. In verses 12 and 13 of chapter 4, he reminds them the word of God is the standard by which their decisions in all areas of their lives would be measured. And no part of their lives was hidden from God.
- C. Having mentioned in chapter 2, verse 17 that Jesus is “a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God,” the author returns in chapter 4:14-16 to the idea of Jesus as the Christian’s high priest. Why does he do this, especially since no other New Testament author refers to Jesus as our high priest? Remember, the high priest in Judaism was the one person who was the mediator between God and man. He had a relationship with God because he was called by God and was the one person who would go into the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement each year to offer sacrifices for the Jewish people, as well as for himself. He had a relationship with the people because it was on their behalf—as well as his own behalf—that he offered sacrifices. By his life, death and resurrection, Jesus has performed the *role* of a high priest, and performed it perfectly, as distinct from an ordinary high priest who was himself a sinful man.
- D. This thought—that we cannot hide ourselves or our sins from God—leads to the conclusion (vs. 14-16) that we need a high priest, someone who can and will go before the Father on our behalf. And, the author points out, we have a high priest—Jesus—who is able to sympathize with our weaknesses, and who has been tested just as we have, but whom, unlike us, has not sinned. In these verses, he is emphasizing the incarnation. The reason that Jesus is a superior high priest is because even though he was God, he humbled himself and subjected himself to all of the same weaknesses and temptations that we experience. In other words, he has been tested in all of the ways we have been tested, but despite being severely tested, he never succumbed to temptation; he remained sinless. Because he has been tested in all ways as we have, he is able to sympathize with our weaknesses and understand our shortcomings. He knows it is possible for us to resist sin, because he was able to do so, and because he was our atonement, he is also able to forgive our sins. That is something no other high priest in Judaism was ever able to do. Because we now have such a high priest, the author admonishes them (and us) to go boldly to God to seek forgiveness, mercy and help in times of need. That is something that the Hebrews could not do under the old covenant, but they can do so now that Jesus is their high priest.
- E. This idea that they should go boldly to God for mercy, grace, and the strength to overcome is something entirely new and different from what they knew in Judaism. As mentioned, in the Old Testament, the people would go to the priest to have the priest offer prayers and sacrifices on their behalf to receive absolution for their sins. God, to them, was distant and could not be approached directly. But now with Jesus they could personally go directly to God, not only for forgiveness of sins, but also for help in times of need. In verse 15 he says, “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses.” By this, he isn’t just saying Jesus understands our weaknesses, he is saying Jesus intercedes for us in our weaknesses and brings

active help. The Greek word used implies more than compassion; it always includes the element of active help, something the Jewish high priest could seldom, if ever, provide.

- F. Having stated the broad proposition that Jesus is the Christian's high priest, chapter 5 is devoted to comparing Jesus as high priest to the high priests in Judaism—with the emphasis on the superiority of Jesus. Former high priests had to present sacrifices for their own sins as well as the sins of the people. Just as those priests had to be called by God to their position as priests, Jesus also was called by God, but his sacrifice—which was of himself—was only for the sins of the people, not for himself, and his sacrifice, being perfect, only needed to be made once. Because the Jewish high priests were sinful men, they had to make offerings of sacrifice repeatedly. As the writer points out, God accepted Jesus's sacrifice once and for all because of his reverent submission to the will of God. Even though he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Because of that he became the source of salvation for all who obey him, through faith. As our savior, he also becomes our high priest.
  
- G. In verse 5, he points out that Christ did not appoint himself high priest to receive glory for himself but was appointed by God. He quotes Psalm 2:7, which says, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you." He also quotes Psalm 110:4, which says, "You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." In short, in these two passages the author points out that by his declarative action God has decreed that Jesus is his son, and that he was installed in office as our high priest and invested with power. The author has already pointed out that Jesus is superior to Moses because Moses was faithful *in* God's house, but Jesus was faithful *over* God's house. Now he cites Psalm 110:4 as the biblical basis for the portrayal of Jesus as priest—indeed our high priest—in his letter to the Hebrews. Just what he means by Jesus being a priest according to the order of Melchizedek will be explained later in Hebrews.
  
- H. In verses 7-10 the author continues his explanation of how Jesus carried out his role as high priest. "He offered up prayers and supplications. . ." The Greek word used for "offered" is the same technical word used for the offering of sacrifices. In other words, he is saying that Jesus' prayers were a sacrificial offering. The author continues by saying Jesus ". . . Was heard because of his reverent submission." This statement doesn't only mean that God *heard* Jesus' prayers; it means that Jesus' offering of prayers was *accepted* by God. That had not always been true of the offerings by the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Israel and its high priest had often sinned grievously, and the formal offering of sacrifice alone was not sufficient for God to see repentant hearts, and therefore the offerings by the high priests were not always acceptable to God. But Jesus' offering was acceptable to God because he proved to be the one who trusted God without reservation. He was fully tested, yet without sin. That is why the obligation of the high priest to offer sacrifice for his own sin was not imposed upon Jesus.
  
- I. In these verses—particularly verse 7—Jesus' passion is described in its entirety as a priestly prayer. After all, the passion of Jesus was the ultimate sacrifice for the sins of the people. Perhaps the author had in mind the words from Psalm 116:1, "I love the Lord, because he has heard my voice and my supplications." That Psalm continues in verses 3-6 to describe the experience of being bound by the cords of death but of still being sustained by the Lord. That is

similar to what the author of Hebrews is saying Christ experienced as he went through his passion. In other words, the entire passion of Jesus could be viewed as Jesus performing the role of the high priest in offering a sacrifice acceptable to God on behalf of the people, but unlike the high priest Jesus did not have to offer a sacrifice for his own sins because he had none. Furthermore, rather than offering an animal as sacrifice, he offered himself in obedience to God.

- J. Verses 8 and 9 offer a unique view of what the incarnation was about. Although Jesus is the eternal Son of God—he existed as the Son before the incarnation, even before Genesis—he entered into a new dimension of sonship by the experience of taking on flesh and being obedient in the flesh through testing and suffering, even to the point of death. The author is saying that through his reverent submission to the Father, Jesus learned obedience in a way he only could by the incarnation. When in verse 9 the author says Jesus was made perfect through his obedience, he is not suggesting that Jesus was not perfect previously; he is saying that through Jesus' perfect obedience to God in the flesh he became the source of eternal salvation to those who trust him and obey him. And he thereby became qualified to be designated by God as our high priest, according to the order of Melchizedek.

#### **Questions:**

- 1. Is it comforting to know that Jesus is our high priest? Why so? Can you picture Jesus offering the elements of the Eucharist to you at the rail?*
- 2. We discussed that Jesus' sacrifice was unlike the sacrifice offered by the Old Testament priests. But does Jesus repeatedly have to go to the Father on our behalf? Why is that?*

#### **VII. CHAPTER 5:11 - 6:20 THE PERIL OF FALLING AWAY**

- A. The writer clearly believes the Hebrews should be further along in their faith walk by this time. By now, they should understand the basic tenets of the faith and should understand who Jesus was and is. In fact, he knows they have been taught about such things, and he even recognizes they have been faithful in the past. But they appear to have regressed; indeed, they have fallen away from the basic teaching about Christ. In some of the most frightening words in all of scripture, he says: "It is impossible to restore again to repentance those who have once been enlightened, and have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit . . . and then have fallen away. . ." By this the writer refers to one that has not merely sinned, but one who has accepted the gift of God of which he has partaken, but then repudiates that gift. He compares their lives to land that has received an abundance of rain but is still unproductive. Such a life is worthless to God, producing only "thorns and thistles," and is on the verge of being cursed.
- B. It is important that we understand what the author is saying and what he is *not* saying in this passage. Even though we come by faith to believe in Jesus Christ, that does not prevent us from sinning thereafter. We will not become perfect in this world. In his first letter, John says that whoever says he is without sin is a liar; but he also says that when we sin we can and should go

to the Father for forgiveness. Sometimes when we sin, we are so overwhelmed with guilt and grief that we may think we have lost our salvation. We do not lose our salvation, and the author of Hebrews is not suggesting this may happen. What he is referring to is making a knowing decision to reject Christ; that is something quite different from drifting away from the gospel. At the same time, it should be noted that if we continue to knowingly sin it may become easier to eventually make the knowing decision to reject Christ. The pattern that sin follows is: 1) We sin and are horrified by our sin; 2) We sin but are no longer horrified by it; 3) We sin but no longer believe we have sinned.

- C. What the Hebrews were facing was a stark choice: they would likely eventually be confronted by the Roman government with the choice of proclaiming Caesar Lord and offering sacrifice to him—in which event they would live—or refuse to do so and likely face death. It was no doubt very tempting for them to give in and deny Christ briefly and then go on with their lives. If they declared Caesar Lord, and offered a pinch of incense as a sacrifice to him, they could then practice their Christian faith for the remainder of the year without fear of the Roman government. It would be easy to come up with a rationalization for compromising—especially when the alternative was death—but the author is plainly pointing out to them that once they have accepted the gift of life from Christ, they cannot then deny who Jesus is and what he has done. Jesus himself said that whoever denies me before men I will deny before the Father. These are hard words to accept, but these words are consistent with what God told the Israelites throughout the Old Testament, and specifically at Mt. Sinai: if you obey me you will be blessed; if you deny me or refuse to obey me you will be cursed.
- D. Thankfully, the writer quickly tells his readers (including us) that although he is giving them a stern warning, he is "confident of better things" for them—things pertaining to salvation, not condemnation. He reminds them God is not unjust and will acknowledge the love they have shown in the past. He exhorts them to "realize the full assurance of hope to the very end. . . ." Thus, the writer's repeated warning against falling away is tempered by the hope that is theirs if they persist in the faith.
- E. The writer has earlier compared Jesus to the angels and to Moses and reminded the readers that Jesus is superior to them. He also has already referred to Jesus as the great high priest, and he has sternly warned them against falling away from him. In chapter 6, beginning at v. 13 he reassures the Hebrew readers of the certainty of God's promise to Abraham that he would bless the descendants of Abraham. He points out that God even took an oath, swearing by himself, that he would bless Abraham and his descendants. And as certain as God's existence is, he will fulfill that promise, and the Hebrew readers can and should rely upon that promise by God. He says that God's promise has become their hope which was fulfilled in Jesus Christ. In fact, that hope, in the person of Jesus Christ, has entered into the inner shrine—the holy of holies—where Jesus performs the function of the great high priest. Remember, the holy of holies was the place in the temple that no one could enter or he would die because that is where God dwelt. Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, and even he could only enter it once a year on the day of atonement. However, Jesus can enter the holy of holies at will and has done so to intercede with God on our behalf, thus becoming our high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

- F. Before examining what is meant by a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek, we should ask ourselves, what does all this have to do with me? Happily, what the writer says applies to us as much as it did to the Hebrews originally reading this letter because we also are descendants of Abraham, not by blood descent, but by spiritual descent because we have responded to God in faith as Abraham did (Gen. 15:6: Abraham believed the Lord and the Lord reckoned it to him as righteousness). So, when we respond to God in faith through Jesus Christ, he becomes our high priest. But not just any high priest—a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

**Questions:**

1. *Do you find the warning to the Hebrews frightening, even startling? Do you believe it is consistent with the rest of scripture?*
2. *Is the writer's confidence of better things for them reassuring to you? Why so?*

**Viii. CHAPTER 7:1-28. GOD'S SON, OUR HIGH PRIEST**

- A. Read Hebrews 7:1-28; Read Genesis 14:17-20; Read Psalm 110:4. These readings from Genesis and from Psalm 110 are the entirety of the mention of Melchizedek in the Old Testament. The only mention of Melchizedek in the New Testament is in Hebrews. So, why does the author of Hebrews claim that Jesus is a priest “according to the order of Melchizedek?” In answering this question, it is important to remember that the author is comparing Christianity to Judaism and is pointing out how the new order is superior to the old. To do this he compares what is known about Melchizedek and the nature of his priesthood to the priests of the Hebrews, all of whom came from the lineage of Aaron, the brother of Moses. If one was not a male descendant of Aaron on his father's side, and if his mother was not a pure Israelite woman, he was not qualified to be a priest regardless of how righteously he lived. Even David was not qualified to be a priest in Israel. Before we go deeper into this issue, let's review what scripture tells us about Melchizedek.
- B. Melchizedek was a historical figure who lived about 2,000 BC and was involved in a single incident in the life of Abraham. While quelling a rebellion, Kedorlaomer, the king of Elam and his allies, raided the city of Sodom, plundered the city, and took captives. One of the captives taken was Lot, the nephew of Abraham. Upon learning of this, Abraham raised a small army, pursued the plundering kings, somehow overpowered them, rescued Lot and the other captives, and captured the spoils of war. Upon his triumphal return from the engagement, Abraham met with the king of Sodom—the city that had been plundered—and Melchizedek, the king of the city of Salem. Genesis says that Melchizedek was a priest of God Most High, as well as a king. He brought out bread and wine and blessed Abraham, who in turn gave Melchizedek one tenth of all of the spoils of the engagement. The only other reference to Melchizedek is found in Psalm 110:4, a psalm of David, written sometime around 1,000 BC.
- C. So, with this meager record regarding Melchizedek, why does the author use Melchizedek to support his argument that Jesus is their (and our) high priest—a point not put forth by any other writer in the New Testament? And why does he *not* say Jesus is a high priest according to

the order of Aaron, which was a requirement for all of the Jewish priests? Remember, the whole purpose of Hebrews was to convince Jewish Christians to hold fast to the faith and to Jesus Christ in the face of serious persecution. In urging them to remain faithful, the writer is comparing Jesus's priesthood to the priesthood in Judaism to show that Jesus is a superior priest—one of a different kind—who has initiated a new and better covenant. The Jewish priests inherited their priesthood by blood descent—by being a descendant of Aaron, the brother of Moses and the first Jewish priest— rather than being appointed by merit. Melchizedek was a different sort of priest. First, he was a king, unlike Jewish priests. In Israel, by law one could not be both king and priest. His name meant king of righteousness and he was from Salem, which meant he was also king of peace. Furthermore, nothing is said in scripture about his genealogy, his birth or his death; thus, the writer says he was appointed directly by God and resembles the Son of God, who lives forever and remains a priest forever. Moreover, Melchizedek blessed Abraham, the greater blessing the lesser, and Abraham paid tithes to him.

- D. The key to understanding why the author says Jesus was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek is found in Psalm 110:4. It is a psalm of David. Jesus himself quoted this psalm in Luke 20:41-44 (Read it), and confounded the Jewish leaders by asking: if David called the Messiah Lord, how can he be David's son? By quoting this psalm and posing the question to the Pharisees, Jesus made clear that though this psalm is one written by David, he is referring to the Messiah, not himself, in Psalm 110:1. With this in mind, let's consider verse 4: "The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, 'you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" The person whom the Lord is appointing priest is clearly not David since it was unlawful under Jewish law for the same person to be both king and priest. The person being appointed priest in verse 4 was the same person to whom reference was made in verse 1—the Messiah. It was widely understood by the Jews that the Messiah would be the king of Israel when he came. Indeed, on Psalm Sunday, as Jesus entered Jerusalem the crowds declared, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord—the king of Israel." So, the Messiah, like Melchizedek, is both king and priest.
  
- E. The author is also pointing out that Jesus is a priest more like Melchizedek than like Aaron because Jesus became a priest not through blood descent but rather through the power of an indestructible life, a sinless life. Remember, Jesus was from the tribe of Judah, not of Aaron (or Levi), so he did not qualify to be a priest according to Jewish law, but he did qualify in the eyes of God because of his sinless life. The author also points out the Jewish priests took office without an oath since they were qualified by blood descent. Jesus, on the other hand, became a priest by God himself swearing an oath that the Messiah would be a priest forever—referencing Psalm 110:4) under the new covenant which is superior to the old covenant. (More on that in the next chapter)
  
- F. The writer also points out the Jewish priests were many in number, all subject to death, but Jesus is able to hold his priesthood forever because he lives forever. Consequently, Jesus is able to make intercessions for us and can save those who approach God through himself. And unlike the Jewish high priests, he has no need to make sacrifices repeatedly because he made the offering of a perfect sacrifice once for all when he offered himself.

- G. This reasoning may seem strange to us, but the writer is using Hebrew scriptures and Hebrew reasoning to convince his Hebrew readers that Jesus is the fulfillment of the promises of God. Thus, unlike the Jewish priests (i) Jesus was appointed high priest directly by God under oath, not pursuant to Jewish law; (ii) Jesus is the high priest whose priesthood depends not on genealogy but on his own righteousness and merit because of his sinless life and sacrificial death; (iii) Jesus is the high priest that lives forever; (iv) Jesus is a sinless high priest who has no need to offer sacrifices for himself; and (v) by making the sacrifice of himself Jesus once and for all time has made the perfect sacrifice that saves us from our sins and has brought about our reconciliation with God.
- H. The implication from this chapter—although not expressly stated in this chapter—is that the readers have a high priest far superior to any in Judaism, so this is another reason not to reject Jesus and return to the old order under Jewish law.

## QUESTIONS

1. *The reasoning may be confusing to us, but is it helpful to you to understand Jesus as our high priest as well as our savior and Lord?*
2. *The writer is also distinguishing between priests appointed under the law and the great high priest appointed under the grace of God in the new covenant. Does this difference help you better understand your relationship with God?*
3. *What differences are there between the priests in the old testament and our priests in the church today? How do their roles differ?*

## IX. CHAPTERS 8/9      MEDIATOR OF A BETTER COVENANT/EARTHLY & HEAVENLY SANCTUARIES

- A. As we get into chapter 8 it is helpful to again remember the primary purpose for which the book of Hebrews was written. The writer is encouraging the readers to hold fast to their faith in Jesus Christ and not to go back to their former faith based on the law and on the sacrificial system for remission of sins. He begins this chapter by pointing out that in Christ we have a high priest of the order of Melchizedek which he described in detail in the previous chapter. There is, however, one significant difference between the priesthood of Melchizedek and that of Christ. The scriptures make no mention of Melchizedek being associated with sacrifice, even of animals. So, if the sacrificial aspect of Jesus' ministry is to be addressed, a comparison to someone other than Melchizedek must be made. He compares the sacrifices required under Judaism with the one in Christianity. In making the comparison the author addresses the themes of *sanctuary* and *covenant*.
- B. Regarding sanctuary, the writer addresses the priestly action of Jesus with that of the Levitical high priest on the annual Day of Atonement. The requirements for the Day of Atonement are found in Leviticus, chapter 16, and they are extensive. The day was to be a day of fasting and self-denial because it was on that day the people of Israel were to be cleansed from the defilement of sin during the past year. The high priest had to offer sacrifices in the inner sanctuary of the tabernacle, and later—after the temple was built—the inner sanctuary of the temple for his own sin, which was an acknowledgment by the high priest that he, too, was



implicated in the defilement of sin, which characterized all the people of God. Then he would offer sacrifices for the people. Jesus, on the other hand, is a high priest in heaven, at the right hand of God, which is his sanctuary—a perfect sanctuary of which the earthly sanctuary was only an imitation. Thus, with regard to sanctuary Jesus has a more excellent ministry as high priest than the Leviticus high priest.

- C. Regarding covenant, Jesus has a more excellent ministry also because he is the mediator of a better covenant which has been enacted through better promises. What is a mediator? A mediator is one who brings warring factions—or at the least two parties in disagreement—into reconciliation. In verse 7, he points out that if the first covenant had been without fault—one which the Israelites had actually kept—there would have been no need for a second one. He then quotes from Jeremiah in the longest Old Testament quote in the entire New Testament to point out that a new covenant had been promised long ago. Verses 8-12, quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34, are among the most quoted verses of scripture and explain how the new covenant differs from the old covenant. The author concludes this chapter by pointing out the coming of a new covenant makes the old one obsolete. That new covenant came into being with the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. Again, he is implying they should not go back to living under an obsolete covenant.
- D. In chapter 9, the author expands on the themes of sanctuary and covenant that he mentioned in chapter 8. There is an ingredient common to both the old and the new covenant which the author identifies in verse 22: the shedding of blood in sacrifice. Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins. This is the reason why Jesus had to die a sacrificial death on the cross. The advent of the new covenant depended upon his making the perfect sacrifice. We tend to ignore this requirement of blood sacrifice in modern churches, preferring instead to focus on love and forgiveness. However, although the promise of a new covenant was motivated by God's love, and Jesus' love for the lost motivated him to accept the incarnation, it was the sacrifice which he made on the cross, followed by his resurrection and ascension, that brought the new covenant into existence. Without that sacrifice there would be no new covenant—or at least not the one we have. It is his shed blood that makes atonement for our sins, that washes them away.
- E. In the first 10 verses of chapter 9 the author describes worship in the tabernacle and temple under the old covenant. In discussing this issue, he emphasizes the severe restrictions there were on access to God by the people. There was an area called the Holy Place where only priests could go. In that area was the lamp stand, the table and the bread of the Presence. None of the people except priests could go into that area. Behind another curtain was the Holy of Holies where only the high priest could go and even he could only go there once a year. The priests and the high priest were carrying out their duties in these areas on behalf of the people who remained outside these areas at all times. Compare this to the situation in the Garden of Eden where Genesis tells us Adam and Eve—neither of whom was a priest—had direct contact with God who walked in the Garden in the cool of the evening. Why had this access to God been curtailed? It was because of the defilement of sin which had separated God from the people whom he had created. And the author points out the sacrifices offered under the old covenant could not perfect the conscience of the worshiper, which means those

sacrifices could not change the people at their core—their basic nature—which had to change for them to have direct access to God.

- F. In verses 11-14, the writer compares the high priesthood of Jesus. First, Jesus does not perform his duties in a tent, or even in a temple, made by mankind. Jesus performs his duties as priest in heaven—a place not made by human hands—in the very presence of almighty God. Unlike the Levitical priests who entered the heavenly sanctuary with the blood of goats and calves, Jesus entered heaven with his own blood as the sacrifice, which brings about redemption (note the reference again to the redeeming power of shed blood). Using once more a “how much more comparison,” he points out that if the blood of animals sanctified those who had been defiled by sin, how much more will the blood of Christ purify our consciences and turn us from attempting to work our way into God’s favor to accepting what Christ has given us, which leads us to worship the living God.
- G. In verses 15-22 of chapter 9, he reiterates that Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant and it is through his sacrificial death that they will inherit the promises made to their ancestors. He likens the situation to what is required for a will to go into effect. A will, of course, is made while one is still alive, but it does not come into effect until that person dies. And the person can change the will right up until the time of death (assuming the person still knows what he or she is doing). In probating a will, the first thing that must be done is to provide proof that the testator has actually died. And, he notes that even the first covenant had to be confirmed with the shedding of blood, which Moses did, offering sacrifices as required by the law.
- H. In verses 23-28, the writer says what was taking place in the earthly temple under Judaism was only a sketch or imitation of the heavenly rites, and the heavenly worship requires better sacrifices than the ones which occurred in the tabernacle and temple. Jesus did not enter into the tabernacle or temple to perform his priestly duties; he entered into heaven itself to appear before God on our behalf. Furthermore, unlike the Levitical priests, he didn’t have to offer repeated sacrifices because he had already made one full and complete sacrifice for all time which is sufficient for the removal of sin. Finally, the author says that Jesus, having come first to make the perfect sacrifice that removes sin, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those eagerly waiting for him—referring of course to those who have accepted his sacrifice on their behalf for the remission of their sins.
- I. In summary, the writer is carefully pointing out how much more they have under the new covenant as Christians. The author is methodical in his arguments, and there is some repetition, which will continue in the next lesson. The writer also points out that this is a fulfillment of Old Testament scriptures because God had promised the Hebrews a new covenant through the Old Testament prophets. In this new covenant God said that he would write his laws on his people’s hearts so that they would not depart from him. In other words, the righteousness of God would fill their hearts, and they would know God at their core. It would be a better covenant based on inner righteousness rather than on outward observance of the law and ritual sacrifice. God in his mercy would remember their sins no longer. Furthermore, by presenting them with a new covenant God made the old covenant obsolete. So, why would they want to return to an obsolete covenant?

## X. CHAPTER 10:1-39 THE SANCTUARIES/CHRIST'S SACRIFICE

- A. In chapter 10, the writer of Hebrews continues his comparison of Christianity to Judaism in his efforts to convince his Jewish readers not to go back to their old faith in the face of persecution from the Roman government. The focus of his argument throughout is the centrality and superiority of Jesus Christ. He has compared Jesus to angels and to Moses, establishing the Son's superiority to both. He then compared Jesus in his role as priest to the Levitical priests under Judaism, pointing out that Jesus' priesthood was of a different order—comparing him to Melchizedek—with Jesus' priesthood being centered in heaven at the right hand of God. He further points out that Jesus became the mediator of a better covenant which he ushered in through his death, resurrection and ascension, and he now performs his priesthood in a better sanctuary—heaven. Thus, Jesus' sacrifice is better than the sacrifice of bulls and goats under the old covenant. Throughout the book of Hebrews, the author has emphasized these points with repetition. That repetition continues in this chapter as he presses his argument regarding the superiority of Christ, the superiority of the better covenant, and the superiority of the better sacrifice.
- B. In verses 1-10, he focuses on the sacrifice of Christ being a better sacrifice. He begins with an interesting statement, repeating what he has said before about the temple, but this time about the law. He says that the law is “only a shadow” of the better things to come. This is similar to his earlier statement that the tabernacle itself was patterned after heavenly worship patterns, as was the temple, which was built long after the tabernacle. Since the law required repeated sacrifices year after year, the very fact they had to be offered repeatedly was a reminder of sin. Furthermore, since the sacrifices had to be repeated it was obvious these sacrifices were not sufficient to remove the consciousness of sin—in other words, be a sufficient sacrifice for all time. Then the author makes a remarkable statement: “It is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” We may well ask, if God required the sacrifice of animals under the law, why would those sacrifices not be sufficient to atone for our sins? Additionally, why does he then quote Psalm 40:6-8, which says, “Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired. . .?”
- C. The point the writer is making by quoting Psalm 40 is the same point King David made in Psalm 51:16-17: “You have no delight in sacrifice; if I were to give a burnt offering, you would not be pleased. The sacrifice acceptable to God is a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart, O God, you will not despise.” What David was saying, both in Psalm 40 and in Psalm 51, is that animal sacrifice *alone* was not acceptable to God. God has always demanded a repentant heart. The sacrifice is intended to be offered in conjunction with a contrite heart; without repentance the sacrifice is not effectual for the atonement for sin. Indeed, in Psalm 51:19, David says, *after* emphasizing the necessity of a repentant heart, “*Then* you will delight in right sacrifices, in burnt offerings and whole burnt offerings.” The problem with the old covenant was that the people were faithful in performing the ritual sacrifices but too often they did so without inward repentance for their sins, which meant the sacrifice was insufficient and would have to be repeated over and over. Psalm 40:6-8 deals with this very issue and is prophetic. The Messiah will come to offer the perfect sacrifice because he will offer the sacrifice of a holy life lived fully within the will of God, so the sacrifice does not have to be repeated. But the requirement for a repentant heart remains. So the pattern God required under the old covenant was: 1) a recognition of sin; 2) repentance for the sin; 3) offering of a costly sacrifice—a pure, undefiled animal. Because the people of God were more concerned with outward ritual observance of the

law rather than an inward purification of a contrite heart (they were ignoring step 2 and sometimes step 1) God determined to bring about a new covenant, one focused on inward purification based upon a better and more perfect sacrifice. This involved step 3, a sacrifice of his own son. Thus, the author is emphasizing the need for inward purification when he quotes Jer:31-34: "I will put my laws in their hearts, and I will write them on their minds."

- D. Although we now live under the new covenant, it is important for us to recognize that the pattern of our being reconciled with God is the same. Step 1 is the recognition of our sin; step 2 is our repentance for our sin, with repentance being a contrite heart that decides and promises that we will do our best, with God's help, to not repeat that sin; and step 3 is the sacrifice. But now, the sacrifice has already been offered in the death and resurrection of Christ. Thus, our sacrifice is the sacrifice of praise as we accept the sacrifice Jesus has already made for us. All of this pattern is incorporated into our liturgy of the Eucharist. We acknowledge our sins, we profess our repentance for our sin, and then we remember the sacrifice already made for us by Christ as we accept the bread and wine which represent the body and blood of Jesus Christ whose sacrifice was made on our behalf, and we praise him for it. Thus, our entire worship is based upon the sacrifice of Jesus Christ which brought about reconciliation with God. Indeed, it is why the cross of Christ—the place of the sacrifice—is front and center of Christian worship. We must never forget that.
- E. In verses 11-18, the author again compares what the Levitical priests do with what Christ has done. He points out that the Levitical priest *stands* as he offers sacrifices, which indicates that his work is not done. Christ, on the other hand, after offering the sacrifice of himself, *sat down* at the right hand of God, which indicates that his work of sacrifice was complete. He continues his work as our advocate before the Father, but his sacrificial work is done. In verse 17, he emphasizes the effectual result of Christ's work by quoting Jer 31:34: "I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more."
- F. In verse 19 he begins the transition from establishing the superiority of Jesus Christ to admonishing his readers to "hold fast to the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who has promised is faithful." In order for them to hold fast he tells them to provoke one another to love and good deeds, and not neglect to meet together, as some had apparently been doing. They must encourage one another in the face of the pressures and dangers they were facing. This is advice that we should heed today. It is not enough just to be a member of the church; we must continue to meet together, to encourage one another, to console one another, and to fellowship with one another. The Christian faith was never intended to be lived alone. We are all part of the body of Jesus Christ and those body parts need to be held together.
- G. In verses 26-31 he repeats the warning given in chapters 5 and 6 against falling away by rejecting Jesus Christ, and here he is even more blunt than in the earlier chapters. He points out that one could actually be put to death for certain sins under the law of Moses; how much more severe would be the punishment for one who has spurned the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant, and outraged the Holy Spirit? He concludes by saying "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God." These are hard words for us to hear. But we need to be reminded that God's love—vast as it is—is tempered by God's justice. Although we humans have the freedom to make our own decisions about God and his commandments, we do not have

freedom from the consequences of our decisions, as the author is pointing out. It is a false love that ignores the warnings of the perils for those who reject Jesus Christ and the sacrifice he has made for us.

- H. As he did following the warning given in chapters 5 and 6, the author pivots in verses 32-36 to remind them they have been faithful in the past and have already been through difficult struggles. They have been through abuse and persecution and have been willing in the past to cheerfully accept the plundering of their possessions because they had something better and more lasting than possessions through their faith in Jesus Christ. Therefore, they should have confidence in Christ and endure in the faith in order to receive what they have been promised. He concludes the chapter by reminding them that Christ will come again soon; in the meantime, the righteous ones will live by faith; God takes no pleasure in those who shrink back.
- I. Again, in verse 39 he again proclaims that “we”—believers in Jesus Christ—are not among those who shrink back and are lost. We are among those who have faith and so are saved. This verse sets the stage for an extended proclamation about faith in chapter 11, one of the most beautiful and most quoted chapters of the entire bible, which we will examine next.

## QUESTIONS

1. *Why do you think that immediately after going through a strongly theological argument as to why they should not go back into Judaism, he urges them to continue to meet together and to encourage one another?*
2. *We often hear in sermons and Sunday School about the love of God and how it is not God's will that any should perish. How then do you explain the threat of what their future will be if they return to sinful lives?*
3. *After the stern warning he reminds them of their previous faithfulness apparently in the face of serious disapproval and persecution. Why do you think he reminds them of their previous faithfulness?*

## XI. CHAPTER 11:1–12:3 THE MEANING OF FAITH

- A. To this point the author has made a strong *theological* argument why his Jewish Christian readers should not abandon their commitment to Christ and return to Judaism. He compared Jesus to angels and to Moses; he established Jesus' superiority in his role as our priest—indeed, our high priest; he established that Jesus made a better sacrifice than any sacrifice made under the law; and he points to Jesus ushering in a better covenant, a covenant in which God would write his law on our hearts. In this chapter he pivots to addressing an ingredient that was essential in the old covenant as well as in the new covenant: faith. But note that this faith is a *committed* faith—one that will not wilt in the face of adversity.
- B. This chapter is one of the high points of the entire Bible. It is a roll call of men and women of faith who persisted in their faith despite adverse circumstances that would defeat anyone lacking such faith. By the standards of this world many of them would appear to have received

little or nothing good for their faith. Some of them were tortured or were imprisoned or even died, and did so without receiving during their lifetime the promises made to them. But God was pleased with them because of their faith, and their reward was in accord with God's standard, an *eternal* reward for their faithfulness. They received their reward because they persisted in their faith. As mentioned in verse 6, without faith it is impossible to please God, for whoever would approach God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who seek him. In other words, we must believe that God's word is truth, that he will do what he says he will do, and we must act upon that belief.

- C. The author begins with a definition of faith: "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen." In other words, in faith we recognize the objective reality that what God has promised he will do, and what he says will happen will, in fact, happen. In faith, we know we can rely upon God's promises, and we respond to him accordingly. Note that our responsive action is an integral part of faith. For example, it is one thing to believe theoretically that an airplane will fly; it takes faith to lead us to the action of getting on the airplane as it is about to take off.
- D. After giving us a definition of faith, he gives us examples of how faith was lived out in the past by certain exemplars of faith. In all of these examples we see that faith celebrates *now* the reality of *future* blessings which comprise our hope in what God has promised. And faith allows us to maintain a firm grasp upon truth which perhaps cannot be demonstrated at the present time. Furthermore, faith allows us to display a quietness and confidence in the presence of turbulent times or hostility against us because we know that the blessings we anticipate are guaranteed by the promise of God. So, faith should lead us to be optimistic about the future that God has promised for us, and it should encourage us to live a godly life in the present, knowing that we can rely upon God.
- E. The roll call of the faithful begins with the ancients—Abel, Enoch, and Noah, who by faith built an ark on dry land, believing God when he said he would destroy the earth by a great flood. He was no doubt laughed at and ridiculed while building the ark, but he persisted in building it, which was no mean feat—it was huge!—because he believed God and he acted on that belief when all of the evidence, other than God's word, was that no flood was imminent.
- F. Abraham is the next exemplar of faith who was called by God when he was 75 years old to leave his home, where he was both successful and content, and go to an unspecified place. Abraham obeyed because he believed God would honor his promises to him, including that he would give Abraham an heir when he and Sarah both were well past childbearing years. Obeying God was no easy task for Abraham, as he wandered in tents for years before reaching the land promised to him. As with other giants of the faith, he died without receiving in his lifetime all the promises made to him, but in faith he saw that God would fulfill his promises and he, like the other exemplars, looked forward to a "better country" or a "homeland" whose architect and builder is God, as did his descendants Isaac, Jacob and Joseph.

- G. Moses was also a pillar of the Jewish faith, and the writer takes us through the key events in the life of Moses and his parents, pointing out how each of the key decisions they made was made in faith even though to purely human eyes some of the decisions may have seemed foolhardy at the time. And the results of many of those decisions were not always seen immediately, but decisions were always made in faith that God would do what he promised. The people Moses led out of Egypt also responded in faith. They entered the Red Sea on dry land with the water stacked up on either side of them, believing in faith that God would deliver them from the Egyptians and from the sea surrounding them. And he did. The water flowed back over the Egyptian army and drowned all of them. Much later, as the Israelites entered the promised land, the walls of Jericho fell after the Israelites marched around them for seven days in obedience to God. In faith, Rahab the harlot had her life spared because she believed it was God who was leading the Israelites and so she protected the Israelite spies.
- H. By verse 32, the author apparently realizes he could not continue his catalogue of witnesses to the life of committed faith under the old covenant; there was simply too much to tell. So, the roll call continues without supporting detail of others of the faith who also heard God and responded to him in committed faith: Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David and Samuel, and the prophets. Some gained great honor or success according to the values of this world, but most did not. Many were tortured, beaten or killed—men and women of whom the author says, “the world was not worthy.” It is important for us to recognize the author’s list of people of committed faith includes those who suffered persecution, humiliation, and violent death. Their great faith did not give them immunity from these things—just as Jesus himself was not immune from persecution, humiliation, and a violent death. This reminds us that an important ingredient of faith is endurance. God expects—indeed he demands—that we endure and persist in our faith in him, regardless of the circumstances. If we do so, we will be commended by God for our faith, just as those listed in chapter 11 were. Yet the author points out they did not receive fully what they were promised because God had something better in mind for them, just as he does for us. That something better was the new covenant—a new relationship with God through Jesus Christ—built upon the sacrifice of Christ and entered into by faith, not by outward observance of the law or animal sacrifice.
- I. In verses 1-3 of chapter 12, the author reminds us we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—those being the people he has just discussed—who faced challenges at least as difficult as those the recipients of the letter faced, or that we face today. To me, this is an encouraging thought. We are not alone as we face difficulties and temptations that can easily get us off course. Of course, the Holy Spirit speaks to our conscience to warn us of sin, but these verses also say that there are hosts in heaven of those who have trod this earth just as we have and have faced temptations and difficulties just as we have, and they are rooting us on to keep our eyes upon Jesus and endure—just as he did—to fulfill what God has for us in this life. The author reminds us not to grow weary, but to press on with endurance toward the reward which God has promised to those who are faithful. In verse 2, he compares the Christian life to a race. The race is not a sprint; it is a marathon, and anyone who runs a marathon is going to get tired. The author is telling us to avoid the sin that would cling to us and weigh us down as run the race. We must continue to run the race without becoming too weary or losing heart. It is a message we need to hear today. There are many reasons to become discouraged about the state of our world, of our country, and of our church. But we

are to press on, following the example of Jesus Christ who faced far worse than we ever will, and who persevered so that we may run the race successfully.

## QUESTIONS

1. *In verse 1, faith is defined as the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Are there specific biblical characters that come to mind when you consider this definition? Who?*
2. *When is faith the most difficult for you, when things are going well or when you are encountering difficulties?*

## XII. CHAPTER 12:3–13:25 THE EXAMPLE OF JESUS/WARNINGS/SERVICE TO GOD

- A. To encourage us, the writer in chapter 12 turns to a wonderful image of our being surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses—the saints who have gone before us—as we run the race, following the example of Jesus who ran the race set before him with perseverance. He exhorts us to lay aside the sin that seeks to slow us down and to keep our eyes upon Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. Just as Jesus endured the cross "for the sake of the joy that was set before him" we should resolve to follow his example and not grow weary or lose heart. As the writer notes, "You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood." This is a reminder that being a Christian is serious business, and we must be faithful to the end.
- B. He also reminds them, and us, that God disciplines those whom he loves. God is treating them as children undergoing discipline for their own good. Were God not disciplining them, they would not be his children. Just as we respect our parents who discipline us, we should also revere God who disciplines us for our own good. Even though discipline is painful, it will yield the fruit of a life acceptable to God and will enable us to share in his holiness and be at peace with God. Therefore, they should strengthen themselves and take the right path, aligning themselves with Jesus.
- C. Just as he has done repeatedly throughout the book of Hebrews, the writer returns to a warning and provides guidelines for them to follow. They are to seek peace and holiness, eager to obtain the grace of God through Jesus. They are not to reject the birthright that is theirs in Christ, as did Esau who sold his birthright for a bowl of porridge. He points out that where they find themselves is unlike the situation the Israelites faced at Mount Sinai when God warned them not to touch the mountain or they would die. He tells the readers that they have come to Mount Zion and the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. Angels and "the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven" await them, as does Jesus himself and God, the judge of all. However, he again warns them not to refuse God's offer in Jesus Christ, for if the Israelites did not escape when they were warned by God at Mount Sinai, how much less will they, and we, escape if we reject the one who warns from heaven.
- D. The final chapter admonishes them to show hospitality to strangers, to visit those in prison, to remain faithful in marriage and to keep themselves free from the love of money, to be content



with what they have, all admonishments that we need to hear and to follow. He then reminds them (and us) of the most wonderful of promises: "I will never leave you or forsake you."

- E. He advises them to follow the example of their leaders that spoke the word of God to them. Those leaders were living out the faith they were preaching, and they should consider the outcome of their lives. He reminds them that Jesus is the same yesterday, today and forever, so they should not be carried away by strange teachings. Apparently they were being taught that it was sinful not to follow the Jewish laws regarding food or to eat meat offered to idols. But the heart is to be strengthened by grace, not by regulations regarding food, something that had not benefitted those who followed such regulations.
  
- F. He wraps up with the reminder that they should remain faithful through all the difficulties of this life because "here we have no lasting city, but we are looking for the city that is to come." Thus, while on this earth they should continually offer a sacrifice of praise to God, to continue to do good and to share what they have with others, all of which is pleasing to God. They should pray for their leaders and obey them. In his benediction, he prays that the Lord God who raised Jesus from the dead will enable them to do God's will, which is pleasing to God.
  
- G. Thus ends this short but powerful book which succinctly reminds us of who Jesus is, how much God loves us and how God has provided for our salvation. This book also reminds us that it is critically important that we remain faithful to Jesus Christ, that we not drift away or allow our hearts to become hardened, but rather endure and persevere in the faith. We should regularly examine ourselves, prepared to repent, and remind ourselves of the grace God has shone us in the past and the promises he has made to us for our future. If we do this, we will not be found lacking due to a hardened heart or drifting away. Instead we will be renewed in our faith and not grow weary in following Jesus who has reconciled us with God.

### **XIII. POSTSCRIPT/SUMMARY**

- A. The writer of Hebrews says in chapter 13:23 that he is coming to visit his readers soon, and plans to bring Timothy with him if he can. It is obvious that he looked forward to visiting them, to encouraging them in the faith, to strengthening their resolve to be faithful to Christ, and to hopefully stem the tide of defections which had disrupted their assembly. We don't actually know whether the writer ever made it to visit them in Rome. We also don't know the extent to which this small house church was directly affected by the measures taken by Nero against Christians in Rome. What we do know is that the suffering church in Rome survived Nero's persecution, and thereafter experienced growth in numbers, influence, and spiritual maturity. The letter to the Hebrews in Rome was undoubtedly a significant factor in the survival of the church in Rome.
  
- B. We also know that the letter of Hebrews had a significant impact on the church in Rome from an early Christian document written about A.D. 95, known as 1 Clement. It is a pastoral letter sent by the church in Rome to its sister church in Corinth which was experiencing disruption during the A.D. 90s, roughly 30 years after the letter to the Hebrews was written. The name of that

writer isn't mentioned in the document, but it is attributed to Clement, a senior pastor of the church in Rome during the last decades of the first century. The phraseology and content closely follow those of Hebrews, with Clement also teaching that Jesus is our high priest, an assertion not found in any other books of the New Testament besides Hebrews.

- C. Hebrews is not cited as often as other books of the New Testament. However, in some ways we face circumstances today that bear some similarity to those addressed in Hebrews. Although Christians are not persecuted in the USA in the way described in Hebrews, that is not true throughout the world. In many parts of the world today declaring oneself a Christian is a dangerous act. In our country the challenge comes from secularism that tells us that religion, particularly the Christian religion, is the problem, and that Christian teaching should be banned from the public square. The letter to the Hebrews reminds us that God's word is true and reliable, and it is God's voice alone that should guide our lives, not the culture in which we find ourselves. Hebrews also reminds us that Jesus understands our situation and intercedes with the Father on our behalf as "the great cloud of witnesses" provide exemplars for us as we live out our faith. We would do well to return often to Hebrews for encouragement, for enlightenment, and for comfort.

## QUESTIONS

1. *What does the promise that "I will never leave you or forsake you" mean to you? Does it mean that all will always go as you would like it to go?*
2. *Have you learned anything new about your relationship to God during this study of Hebrews? If so, what?*
3. *Has it been helpful to you to be reminded of the importance of not drifting away or allowing our hearts to become hardened? What do you plan to do to ensure that this does not happen?*
4. *What is the most important thing you will take away from this study of Hebrews?*