

Study of Hebrews

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Introductory to Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews presents several interesting problems to the student. Here is a book that begins like a sermon, yet ends like a letter (13:22–25). No author's name is attached to it, nor is its destination clearly given. Certain passages in this book have been wrongly used to upset Christians; we should remember that the epistle was originally given to exhort and encourage God's people. It is important to study Hebrews in the light of all the Word of God, and not as an isolated book.

I. The Message

The main message of Hebrews is summarized in 6:1: "let us go on unto perfection [spiritual maturity]." The people to whom Hebrews was addressed were not growing spiritually (5:11–14) and were in a state of second childhood. God had spoken in the Word, but they were not faithful to obey Him. They were neglecting God's instruction and drifting away from His blessing. The writer seeks to encourage them to move ahead in their spiritual lives by showing them that in Christ they have the "better" blessings. He is the "author and perfecter [finisher] of our faith" (12:2). The book presents the Christian faith and life as superior to Judaism or any other religious system. Christ is the superior Person (1–6); His Priesthood is superior to that of Aaron (7–10); and the principle of faith is superior to that of law (11–13).

II. The Writer

Since no name is attached to the book, students have been discussing for centuries who the author is. The earliest traditions point to Paul. Others have suggested Apollos, Luke, Philip the Evangelist, Mark, and even Priscilla and Aquila! The writer is obviously a Jew, since he identifies himself with his Jewish readers (1:2; 2:1, 3; 3:1; 4:1; etc.). He also identifies himself with Timothy (13:23), which certainly Paul could do. The closing benediction of grace is typical of Paul (see 2 Thes. 3:17–18). The writer has been in prison (10:34; 13:19). The matter seems to be settled by 2 Peter 3:15–18, where Peter clearly states that Paul had written to the same people Peter wrote to, the Jews of the dispersion (1 Peter 1:1; 2 Peter 3:1). Furthermore, Peter calls Paul's letter Scripture. Now, if Paul wrote an inspired letter to the Jews scattered abroad, and that letter has been lost, then a part of God's inspired, eternal Word has been destroyed; and this is impossible. The only writing in Scripture that is addressed to Jews and is not credited to another author is Hebrews. Conclusion: Paul must have written Hebrews. Those who argue that the style and vocabulary are not typical of Paul must bear in mind that writers are free to adapt their style and vocabulary to their readers and topics.

III. The “Warnings”

Even Peter informs us that some people had taken Hebrews and misinterpreted the “hard things” to their own destruction (2 Peter 3:16). This is because they wrest the Scriptures, or twist passages out of context, perverting the letter to say what it does not really mean. We must be careful to interpret Hebrews in the light of the entire Word of God. The five exhortations (see 13:22) are placed in our outline so that you may be able to see clearly the development of the book. We believe that these exhortations are written to believers, since the writer identifies himself with the people he addresses: “We ought to give heed ...”; “how shall we escape ...”; “let us therefore fear...”; etc. To say that 6:4–5 describes people who were “almost” saved is to abuse these verses’ meaning. Some Christians have so misunderstood the grace of God and the precious doctrine of eternal security that they forget that God also chastens His people when they sin. We should approach Hebrews as a letter written to believers who were in danger of lapsing into a carnal state of spiritual immaturity because of their wrong attitude toward the Word of God. Such disobedience, Paul warned, might lead them to the chastening hand of God and loss of rewards at the judgment seat of Christ (see 10:35–36; 11:26). Hebrews does not warn believers that their sins will condemn them, since no true Christian can ever be eternally lost.

IV. Key Words

The key words are “better” (1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24) and “perfect” (2:10; 5:9, 14; 6:1; 7:11, 19, 28; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:2, 23).

Hebrews 1

“God has spoken!” This is the great message of Hebrews. “God has spoken”—so take heed how you respond to His Word. After all, the way we respond to the Word of God is the way we respond to the Son of God, for He is the Living Word. In this first chapter we see Christ’s superiority over the prophets and the angels.

I. Christ Is Better Than the Prophets (1:1–3)

A. In His Person.

Christ is the Son of God; the prophets were merely men who were called to be servants. Christ made the worlds (or “framed the ages”), and it is He who upholds the worlds. His Word has power. He spoke the worlds into being, and now His Word controls and sustains our world. Christ is also the Heir of all things. “All things were made by Him and for Him” (Col. 1:16). He is God’s sacrifice for the sins of the world. He “purged our sins” by His death on the cross. Now He is seated in glory, as God’s King-Priest. His work on earth is completed; He has sat down.

B. In His message.

God's revelations in old times were given "in many portions and in many ways." No prophet received the complete revelation. God spoke through visions, dreams, symbols, and events, as well as through human lips. These revelations pointed to Christ, and He is the final revelation from God. Christ is God's "last Word" to the world. All of OT revelation led up to Christ, God's final and full revelation. Anyone today who boasts of having a "new revelation from God" is deceived. God is not giving revelations today; He is illuminating His once-for-all revelation in Christ.

II. Christ Is Better Than the Angels (1:4–14)

Angels played a vital role in the Jewish religion. The Law was given through the ministry of angels, according to Gal. 3:19, Acts 7:53, and Deut. 33:2 (*saints* means "holy ones, angels"). If the Jews paid attention to the Law, given through angels, then they ought to give greater heed to the message given by Christ, who is greater than the angels. The author cites seven OT quotations to show Christ's superiority to the angels.

A. Verses 4–5 quote Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14.

As the Heir of all things, Christ has a greater inheritance and thus a greater name. In Ps. 2:7, God the Father calls Christ "My Son," a title He would not give to angels. (In the OT, the angels collectively are termed "sons of God," but this title is not bestowed on them individually.) Psalm 2:7 refers to Christ's resurrection, not His birth at Bethlehem (see Acts 13:33). Christ was "begotten" from the virgin tomb when He was raised from the dead. Colossians 1:18 calls Him "the first-born from the dead." The second quotation refers to Solomon; read all of 2 Sam. 7 carefully, for the "house" of David comes up again in Hebrews. David wanted to build a house for God, but God decreed that Solomon would do the work. God promised David that He would be a Father to Solomon; and Heb. 1:5 applies this promise to Christ, who is "greater than Solomon" (Matt. 12:42).

B. Verse 6 quotes Ps. 97:7 (or perhaps Deut. 32:43 in the Greek version, called the Septuagint).

This quotation refers to the return of Christ to the earth ("And again, when He brings ..."). Just as the angels worshiped Him at His first coming (Luke 2:8–14), they will worship Him when He returns to reign. Christ is greater than the angels.

C. Verse 7 quotes Ps. 104:4.

The angels are spirits, created by God to be servants. The next quotation shows that Christ is not a servant but a Sovereign.

D. Verses 8–9 quote Ps. 45:6–7.

Psalm 45 is a marriage psalm, picturing Christ and Israel. God clearly states that Christ has a throne, and the Father calls the Son "God." Those who deny the deity of Christ twist these verses to try to prove their point. One version even says, "Thy throne is God ..." No, these verses boldly announce the deity of Christ; He is God.

E. Verses 10–12 quote Ps. 102:25–27.

Here, again, Jesus is called “Lord.” He is from the beginning the Creator of the universe. Like a worn-out garment, creation will decay and fall to pieces, but Christ will never change. He is “the same, yesterday, today, and forever.” Angels are created beings; Christ is the eternal Son.

F. Verse 13 quotes Ps. 110:1.

This is the key psalm in Hebrews, for Ps. 110:4 declares the priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek. Christ is now seated at God’s right hand, a Priest-King. Peter quotes this same passage in Acts 2:34. Christ’s enemies have not yet bowed before Him, but they will one of these days.

Verse 14 summarizes the place of the angels: they are ministering spirits, not enthroned sons; and their work is to minister to us who are heirs with Christ in His wonderful salvation.

As you review these quotations, you can see the majesty and glory of the Son of God. As v. 4 states, Christ has a more excellent name than the angels because through His suffering and death He acquired a greater inheritance. In His character, work, and ministry Christ stands supreme. Though His glorious kingdom is not seen on earth today, He has still been enthroned as King and will return one day to establish righteousness on this earth.

Hebrews 2

This chapter continues the argument that Christ is superior to the angels. The writer interrupted the argument for an exhortation, the first of five in the book (see Hebrews outline).

I. An Exhortation (2:1–4)

Since the Word spoken by angels was steadfast, then certainly the Word spoken by God’s Son would also be steadfast! If in the OT days God dealt with those who disobeyed His Word, then surely He would deal with those who ignored or rejected His Word as given by His Son in the last days!

The danger here is one of drifting through neglect: “lest at any time we should drift from them” is the best translation of v. 1. Note that v. 3 does not say, “How shall sinners escape if they reject” but “How shall we [believers] escape if we neglect ...” Spiritual deterioration begins when Christians start to neglect this great salvation. From the admonitions in 10:19–25, it seems that these Jews were guilty of neglecting prayer and united fellowship with God’s people. Note 1 Tim. 4:14.

The word *disobedience* literally means “unwillingness to hear.” Saints who will not hear and heed the Word of God are disobedient and will not escape the chastening hand of God. After all, God confirmed His Word through “signs, miracles, and powers” (v. 4, and see Acts 2:22 and 43); this Word is not to be treated lightly! In fact, the word *neglect* is translated “made light of” in Matt. 22:5.

II. An Explanation (2:5–18)

The writer's argument in chapter 1 that Jesus is better than the angels has raised a new question: "How could Jesus be better when He had a human body? Are not the angels better than He because they had no human bodies to limit them?" This question is answered with an explanation of why Jesus took upon Himself a body of flesh.

A. *To be the Last Adam (vv. 5–13).*

Nowhere in the Bible does God promise the angels that they will rule in the world to come. God gave Adam the rule over all the earth (Gen. 1:26–31). The writer quotes Ps. 8:4–6 in which God's blessing is repeated from Genesis. God made man a little lower than the angels or, literally, "for a little while lower than God." The suggestion seems to be that Adam and Eve were in a period of probation. They were not created to remain less than God, and had they refused to sin, they would have ultimately shared God's glory in a wonderful way. Satan knew that they would be lower than God only "for a little while," so he hurried and promised them glory ahead of time. Sin came into the human race and robbed Adam of his earthly dominion. He ceased being a king and became a slave. That is why v. 8 says, "But now, we see not yet all things put under him [man]."

What do we see? "We see Jesus!" He is the Last Adam who, by His death and resurrection, undid all the ruin Adam caused when he disobeyed God. For a little while, Christ was lower than the angels, even to the depths of Calvary (Phil. 2:1–12). Christ had to have a body of flesh in order to die for the sins of the world. Men crowned Him with thorns on earth, but now He has been crowned with glory and honor; see 2 Peter 1:17. There is now a new family in the world: Christ is bringing many sons to glory. Adam, through his sin, plunged his descendants into sin and death; Christ now changes Adam's children into the children of God. He is the "Pioneer" (captain) of our salvation, the one who blazes the trail that we might follow. We are His brethren, for we are all of one family, having become partakers of His divine nature and set apart unto God through His death (10:10). Verse 22 of Psalm 22, that Calvary Psalm, is quoted here, speaking of Christ's resurrection. Isaiah 8:17–18 is also quoted.

Isaiah's two sons were signs to the nation: Shear-jashub (Isa. 7:3) means "a remnant shall return"; and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Isa. 8:1) means "haste-spoil-hurry-prey." In other words, in the Prophet Isaiah's day there was a faithful remnant that was saved when the nation was judged. These people were "Isaiah's children," so to speak. Likewise, Christ has a family of believers, a remnant among the Jews and Gentiles; they too will be delivered from the wrath to come.

B. *To defeat the devil (vv. 14–16).*

Death and the fear of death were the consequences of Adam's sin (Gen. 2:17; 3:10). The fear of death has been Satan's strongest weapon. Satan does not have "the power of death" absolutely, since, as we see in Job's case, Satan could do nothing without God's permission (Job 1–2). The word for power in v. 14 means "might" rather than "authority." Satan has might over sinners and darkness (Luke 22:53), but Christ has delivered saints from the power of darkness (Col. 1:12–13). Satan seized this "might of death" to get control over God's creatures; but by His death on the cross, Christ "made inoperative" (destroyed) this power and thus delivered those who were in bondage because of the fear of death. Christ had to have a human body in order to die and thus

defeat Satan. See also 1 John 3:8. In v. 16 the writer makes it clear that Christ did not take on Himself the nature of angels, but rather the seed of Abraham. In other words, Christ did not become an angel; He became a man, a Jew. He did not die for angels; He died for humans. Fallen angels can never be saved, but fallen men and women can be saved!

C. To become a sympathetic priest (vv. 17–18).

This is the third reason Christ took on Himself a human body. God knew that His children would need a sympathetic priest to help them in their weaknesses. He permitted His Son to suffer; and through this suffering, He equipped Him for His priestly ministry (v. 10). Christ's person needed no perfecting, since He is God; but as the God-Man, He endured suffering to prepare Himself to meet our needs. He was made flesh at Bethlehem (John 1:14); He was "made like unto His brethren" during His earthly life; and He was "made sin" at the cross (2 Cor. 5:21). Now He is a merciful and faithful High Priest; we can depend on Him! He is able to succor us when we come to Him for aid. The word *succor* means "to run when called for" and was used of physicians. Christ runs to our aid when we call Him!

This section completes the argument for the superiority of Christ over the angels. The writer has shown that Christ is superior in His person and work and in the name the Father has given Him "above every name." The conclusion is clear: since Christ is superior, we must heed His Word and obey it. We must beware of drifting through neglect.

Hebrews 3

We move now into the third argument for the superiority of Christ: Christ is better than Moses. Of course, Moses was the great hero of the Jewish nation, and for Paul to prove Christ's superiority over Moses was tantamount to proving the superiority of the Christian faith over Judaism. How could these people go back to Judaism when what Christ offered was so much greater than what Moses could offer?

I. Christ Is Greater in His Office (3:1–2)

Moses was primarily a prophet (Deut. 18:15–19; Acts 3:22), although he did exercise the functions of a priest (Ps. 99:6), and even a king (Deut. 33:4–7). However, Moses was called of God, while Christ was sent by God. Christ is the "Apostle" or "The Sent One" (see John 3:17; 5:36–38; 6:57; 17:3, 8, 21, 23, 25). Christ is also the High Priest, an office that Moses never occupied. Furthermore, Christ's ministry has to do with the "heavenly calling" and not only the earthly calling of Israel. Moses ministered to an earthly people whose calling and promises were primarily earthly; Christ is the Apostle and High Priest of a heavenly people who are strangers and pilgrims on this earth. We might also add that Moses was a prophet of law, while Christ is the Apostle of grace (John 1:17). Moses sinned, while Christ lived a sinless life. No wonder we are told in v. 1 to "consider" or "observe attentively" Jesus Christ!

II. Christ Is Greater in His Ministry (3:3–6)

God states that Moses was faithful (Num. 12:7) as was Christ (3:2), but their ministries part at this point. Moses was a servant; Christ is the Son. Moses served in the house, while Christ is Lord over the house. “The house” means, of course, the household of God, not the temple or the tabernacle. Moses was a servant in Israel, God’s OT household; Christ is a Son over God’s household, which, today, is the church (Heb. 3:6 and 10:21; also 1 Peter 2:5; 4:17; Eph. 2:19). For an example of the word “house” meaning “people” see 2 Sam. 7:11, where God promised to “build David a house,” that is, establish his family and his throne forever.

While Israel was God’s earthly household and the church His heavenly household, we need to keep in mind that God’s household is always marked by faith. People in OT times were saved by faith just as people are today. It is this continuity of faith that tied together the people of God under both covenants. This is why Gal. 3:7 calls true believers “children of Abraham,” for he is the “father of the believing.”

Two other matters remain in this contrast between Moses and Christ:

A. Moses was a servant while Christ is the Son.

This statement suggests that the OT ministry was one of bondage and servitude, while Christ’s ministry under the New Covenant is one of liberty and joy. The OT Law is termed “a yoke of bondage” (Gal. 2:4; 5:1, and see Acts 15:10). The blessed privileges of sonship that we enjoy in God’s household of faith were unknown under the Old Covenant.

B. Moses ministered using symbols, while Christ is the fulfillment of these things.

See 3:5—“those things which were to be spoken after ... “In Christ we have the true light shining; in Moses, we are in the shadows. For his readers to go back to Judaism meant to exchange fulfillment for types and shadows!

III. Christ Is Greater in the Rest He Gives (3:7–19)

The word “rest” is used twelve times in chapter 4 but not always with the same meaning. We will study this word in detail in the next chapter, but we must introduce the basic ideas at this point. The writer uses the nation of Israel as an illustration of spiritual truth (see also 1 Cor. 10:1–13). The Jews were in bondage in Egypt, just as sinners are in bondage in the world. God redeemed Israel by the blood of the lamb, just as He redeems us through the blood of Christ. God promised the Jews a land of blessing, and He has promised to His own a life of blessing, a spiritual inheritance in Christ. But this blessing could come only to those who separated themselves from the world and followed God by faith. So, God took Israel through the Red Sea (separation from Egypt, the world) and led them to the border of Canaan. Deuteronomy 1:2 informs us that this was an eleven-day journey. But at this point, Israel rebelled in unbelief and refused to believe God (Num. 14). Because of this, God judged the entire congregation, excepting Joshua and Caleb, who trusted God and opposed the vote of the people. The Jews had to wander in the wilderness for forty years, a year for each day the spies were in the land. The nation did not enter into the promised rest (Deut. 12:9; see Josh. 1:13–15).

It is here that the writer warns his readers. They had been redeemed by the blood of Christ and set free from the world. Now, like Israel, they had been tempted to go back. To do so meant not entering into the life of fullness and blessing that God had promised them. There are, in chapters 3 and 4, three different rests, all of which are related in God's plan: (1) the rest of salvation (4:3, 10); (2) the rest of victory in the midst of trials, symbolized by the Promised Land of Canaan (4:11); (3) the future eternal rest, the heavenly rest (4:9). We will study these distinctions in detail in the next chapter. The exhortation here is for the people of God to trust Him in spite of difficulties, as did Joshua and Caleb, and move into the promised rest. Please keep in mind that Canaan is not a picture of heaven; it is a symbol of the life of blessing and battles, progress and victory, that we have in Christ as we yield to Him and trust Him. It is that present rest that we have even in the midst of trials and testings. This rest neither Moses nor Joshua could give.

The writer quotes Ps. 95 and reminds the readers of Israel's hardness of heart. You will want to read Ex. 17 as well to see how Israel provoked and tested God when the going got tough. Believers do this today when trials and testings come! And here we have the basic theme of Hebrews: Let us go on to maturity, overcoming the enemy and claiming our inheritance in Christ. Let us cross Jordan (die to the old life, Rom. 6) and claim the present inheritance God has planned for us (Eph. 2:10).

Can this warning in v. 12 apply to believers? Certainly! Unbelief is a besetting sin among Christians, and this unbelief comes from an evil heart that neglects the Word. It is one thing to trust God for salvation, and quite another to surrender our wills and lives to Him for daily guidance and service. Many Christians are still "wandering in the wilderness" of defeat and unbelief; they have been delivered from Egypt, but they have never crossed into Canaan to claim their inheritance in Christ. The Jews were bought by the blood and covered by the cloud, yet most of them died in the wilderness! Is this a matter of "losing salvation"? Of course not! It is a matter of losing one's life of victory and blessing through lack of trust in God. And what causes this evil heart of unbelief? (1) Not hearing God's voice, vv. 7 and 15; and (2) allowing ourselves to be deceived by sin, v. 13.

How important it is to hear the Word of God! If we fail here, we then start to drift from the Word (2:1-4) and then doubt the Word (3:18-19). We refuse the exhortations of those who want to help us (3:13) and go on in stubborn disobedience until we become dull toward the Word (5:11-6:20).

Sin in the life of the believer is deceptive. It begins small, but gradually grows larger. Doubting God in one point can lead to an evil heart of unbelief. Those who press on and hold fast their confidence prove that they are truly saved (3:6, 14) and by doing so avoid God's chastening—and possibly (as with Israel) judgment in this life. Unbelief is a serious thing!

Hebrews 4

This chapter continues the theme of rest that was begun in 3:11. The word “rest” is used in five different senses in this section: (1) God’s Sabbath rest of Gen. 2:2 and Heb. 4:4, 10; (2) Canaan, the rest for Israel after wandering for forty years (3:11, etc.); (3) the believer’s present salvation rest in Christ (4:3, 10); (4) the overcomer’s present rest of victory (4:11); and (5) the future eternal rest in heaven (4:9). God’s Sabbath rest is a type of our present rest of salvation, following the finished work of Christ on the cross. It is also a picture of the “eternal Sabbath” of glory. Israel’s Canaan rest is similar to the life of victory and blessing we gain as we walk by faith and claim our inheritance in Christ. There are in this chapter four exhortations relating to the life of rest.

I. Let Us Therefore Fear (4:1–8)

God promised rest to the people of Israel, but they failed to enter that rest because of disobedience stemming from unbelief. God has promised a rest for His own today—peace in the midst of trial, victory in spite of seeming impossible problems. This “life of rest” in our spiritual Canaan is called “going on unto perfection (maturity)” in 6:1; “the full assurance of hope” in 6:11; “inheriting the promises” in 6:12. Keep in mind that the readers of Hebrews were going through a time of testing (10:32–39; 12:3–14; 13:13) and were tempted, like Israel of old, to “go back” into the old life. God had promised them a rest of victory, yet they were in danger of falling short of it. God had given them the Word, but they would not “mix it with faith” (4:2) and apply it to their own lives. Again, see the importance of the Word of God in the life of the believer.

The writer’s argument runs like this: God has promised a rest to His people (v. 1), but Israel failed to enter that rest (4:6). His promise still stands, because Joshua (v. 8) did not give them this spiritual rest, even though he did lead them into national rest (see Josh. 23:1). Otherwise, David would never have spoken about this rest centuries later in Ps. 95. Conclusion: “There remains therefore a rest for the people of God” (v. 9, NKJV). He relates this rest to God’s Sabbath rest (vv. 4, 10); that is, it is a rest of satisfaction, not a rest after exhaustion. God was not tired after creating the worlds; the “rest” of Gen. 2:2 speaks of completion and satisfaction. It is a “Sabbath of the soul.” This is the “rest of faith” that Jesus promises in Matt. 11:28–30. The “rest” of Matt. 11:28 is salvation, and it is a gift that we receive by faith. The rest of 11:30 is what we find day by day as we take His yoke and surrender. “Let us therefore fear” (v. 1) is God’s warning, for many of His children have failed to enter into this life of rest and victory.

II. Let Us Therefore Labor (4:9–12)

“Labor” here means “give diligence”—let us give diligence to enter into this rest. To “give diligence” is just the opposite of “drifting” (2:1–3). Nobody ever matured in the Christian life by being careless or lazy. Read carefully 2 Peter 1:4–12 and 3:11–18, where Peter three times exhorts believers to be diligent. If we are not diligent, we will repeat the failure of Israel and fail to enter the promised rest and inheritance. (Note, again, that this is not salvation, but victory in the Christian life.) What is the secret of

entering into this rest? The Word of God. Hebrews 4:12 is the answer to every spiritual condition; if we allow the Word to judge us and expose our hearts, then we will not fail to inherit the blessing. Israel rebelled at the Word and would not “hear His voice” (Ps. 95); therefore, they wandered in defeat for forty years. God’s Word is a sword (see Rev. 1:16; 2:12–16; 19:13; Eph. 6:17). It pierces the heart (see Acts 5:33 and 7:54, where Israel again refused to yield to the Word). Too many believers fail to hear and heed God’s Word and thus rob themselves of blessing. It takes diligence to mature spiritually, and so a believer needs to apply God’s Word faithfully.

III. Let Us Hold Fast Our Profession (4:14)

Verse 14 does not say, “Let us hold fast our salvation.” The word “profession” here is really “confession—to say the same thing” (3:1; 10:23; 11:13). “Confession” has to do with the believer’s testimony of his faith in Christ and his faithfulness to live for Christ and gain the promised blessing. Read 10:34–35. The Jews who wandered in the wilderness had lost their confession even though they were still under the cloud and redeemed from Egypt. What a poor testimony they were of the power of God! God brought them out, but they would not trust Him to bring them in! Their unbelief had robbed them of God’s blessing.

This explains why these Jewish readers are reminded of the great “giants of faith” named in chapter 11. All of these people faced difficulties and trials, yet they overcame and maintained a good confession. Hebrews 11:13 states that all of these people “confessed” (same word as 4:14) that they were “strangers and pilgrims on the earth.” Before he was taken to heaven, Enoch had a good testimony (11:5). At the end of the chapter, the writer sums it all up by saying, “And these all, having obtained a good report [witness]” (11:39). Where there is faith, there is a good testimony (11:2); where there is unbelief, there is no testimony.

Where does faith come from? “So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the Word of God” (Rom. 10:17, NKJV). Israel in the OT would not hear the Word, and therefore these people had no faith. “Today, when you hear His voice ... “is the warning repeated in 3:7, 15, and 4:7. Christians who hear and heed the Word of God will maintain good confessions and will not lose their testimony before the world.

IV. Let Us Come to the Throne of Grace (4:15–16)

These verses offer proof that the believer cannot lose his salvation. We have a High Priest who knows our temptations and weaknesses, who endured testings that we must endure. When times of testing come, we need but turn to the throne of grace for the help Christ alone can give. The writer will elaborate on this theme in the later chapters, but he puts this exhortation here lest his readers become discouraged and say, “It is impossible for us to go on! We simply do not have what it takes!” Of course we don’t! No believer has strength enough to cross Jordan and conquer the enemy! But we have a great High Priest who has mercy and “grace to help in the nick of time!” (That is the literal meaning of v. 16.)

Why does the writer refer to a “throne” at this point? The reference is to Ex. 25:17–22, the golden mercy seat. The ark of the covenant was a wooden chest covered with

gold. On top of the ark, Moses put a golden “mercy seat” with a cherub at each end. This mercy seat was God’s throne, where He sat in glory and ruled the nation of Israel. But the OT mercy seat was not a throne of grace, since the nation was under a yoke of legal bondage. “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (John 1:17). Christ is our Mercy Seat (“propitiation” in 1 John 2:2). When we come to Him, we come to a throne of grace, not a throne of judgment; and He meets us, talks to us, and strengthens us.

Read this chapter again, and you will see that it is not warning us against losing our salvation. Rather, it is encouraging us to live in the Word and in prayer, and to let Christ take us into our spiritual Canaan where we will find rest and blessing. Spiritual progress is the result of spiritual discipline.

Hebrews 5

In the first two chapters, the writer has shown that Christ is greater than the prophets and the angels; in chapters 3–4, he has shown that Christ is even greater than Moses. Now he points to Aaron, Israel’s first high priest, and proves that Christ is a greater priest than Aaron. If his readers were to abandon Christ for Judaism, they would be exchanging a great High Priest for a lesser high priest. The writer shows that Christ is superior to Aaron in at least three ways.

I. Christ Has a Greater Ordination (5:1, 4–6)

Aaron was taken from among men and elevated to the position of high priest. He passed this honor along to his eldest son, and thus the line continued. Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi; this tribe was set aside to be the priestly tribe for the nation of Israel.

But Christ’s ordination was greater. For one thing, He is not merely man; He is God in the flesh, the Son of God and the Son of Man. He did not selfishly take this honor of the priesthood for Himself. The sons of Korah tried to do this (Num. 16) and died for their sin. No, God Himself ordained His Son. Here the writer quotes from Ps. 110:4, in which the Father ordains the Son into the eternal priestly ministry. He ties this verse to the quotation from Ps. 2:7 in v. 5 because the priestly ministry of Christ is related to His resurrection, and it is the resurrection of Christ that is involved in Ps. 2:7 (Acts 13:33).

The priesthood of Melchizedek is the main theme of Hebrews 7–10, so we need not enter into the details now. You will want to read Gen. 14:17–20 for the background. The whole argument of Heb. 7–10 is that Christ is a greater high priest because His priesthood is of a greater order—it belongs to Melchizedek, not Aaron. The name “Melchizedek” means “king of righteousness”; he was also priest of Salem, which means “peace.” Aaron was never a priest-king; but Jesus is both Priest and King. He is a Priest seated on a throne! And His ministry is of peace, the “rest” that was discussed in chapters 3–4.

Christ came from Judah, the kingly tribe, and not from Levi, the priestly tribe. Melchizedek suddenly appears in Gen. 14 and then drops out of the story; there is no

listing of his beginning or ending. Thus, he is compared to Christ's eternal Sonship, for He too is "without beginning and ending." Aaron died and had to be replaced; Christ will never die—His priesthood is forever. Aaron was priest over an earthly household, while Christ is Priest over a heavenly people.

II. Christ Has a Greater Sympathy (5:2–3, 7–8)

Not only must the high priest be chosen of God; he must also be sympathetic with the people and be able to help them. Of course, Aaron himself was a mere man and would know personally the weaknesses of his people. In fact, he had to offer sacrifices for himself and his family. But Christ is better able to enter into the needs and problems of God's people. In vv. 7–8 we are told of the "training" Christ received as He endured suffering while here on earth. Keep in mind that, as God, Christ needed nothing; but as the Man who would one day become High Priest, it was necessary for Him to experience trials and suffering, a theme discussed in 2:10–11. The Jews might look down upon Christ and question His deity because of the suffering He endured. These sufferings, however, are the very mark of His deity. God was preparing His Son to be the sympathetic High Priest of His people. Verse 7 refers to His prayers in Gethsemane (Matt. 26:36–46). Note that Christ did not pray to be saved "from death" but "out of death." He did not pray for the Father to rescue Him from the cross, but to raise Him from the tomb. And this prayer was answered. Certainly Christ was willing and ready to face the cross and to drink of the cup God had poured for Him (John 12:23–34).

Someone may ask, "But can the Son of God really know our trials better than another man would, such as Aaron?" Yes! To begin with, Christ was perfect and experienced each trial totally. He was tested to the full, tasting every temptation men and Satan had to offer. This means that He went beyond anything any mortal man could endure, since most of us give in before a test really gets difficult. A bridge that has endured fifty tons of weight has experienced more testing than one that has felt but two tons.

III. Christ Offered a Greater Sacrifice (5:3, 9–14)

Aaron's main ministry was to offer sacrifices for the nation, especially on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). The priests and Levites would minister to the people during the year, but everyone looked to the high priest on the Day of Atonement, for he alone could enter into the holiest with the blood. First of all, though, he had to offer sacrifices for himself.

Not so with Jesus Christ! Being the sinless Lamb of God, He needed no sacrifices for sin. And the sacrifice He did offer for the people was not that of an animal, but Himself. Moreover, He did not have to repeat this sacrifice; He needed to offer Himself but once, and the matter was settled. How much greater He is than Aaron and his successors! Christ is the "Author of eternal salvation" (v. 9); Aaron could never do this. The blood of bulls and goats only covered sins; Christ's blood took away sin once and for all.

The writer now wanted to enter into a deeper study of the heavenly priesthood of Christ, but he found himself in difficulty. The problem was not that he was a dull

preacher or writer, but that he had dull hearers. He wanted to go from milk (the basic things of the Christian life, listed in 6:1–2) to meat (the heavenly priesthood of Christ); but he could not do it unless his readers woke up and grew up. How many Christians there are who live on milk—they recognize the ABCs of the Gospel and Christ’s mission on earth—but gain no nourishment from the meat, those things that Christ is now doing in heaven. They know Christ as Savior, but they do not understand what He can do for them as High Priest.

These people had been saved long enough for them to be teaching others, yet they had lapsed into a spiritual “second childhood.” Somebody had to teach them again the things they had forgotten. They were “inexperienced” in the Word (“unskillful” in v. 13). We see again the vital role of the Word of God! Our relationship to the Word of God determines our spiritual maturity. These people had drifted from the Word (2:1–3), doubted the Word (chaps. 3–4), and became dull toward the Word. They had not mixed the Word with faith (4:2) and practiced it in their daily lives (5:14). They had not “exercised their spiritual faculties” (5:14) and therefore were growing dull and ineffective in their spiritual lives. Instead of going forward (6:1), they were going backward.

Growing in grace depends on growing in knowledge (2 Peter 3:18). The more we know about ourselves and Christ, the better we are able to move forward spiritually. Where are you in your spiritual growth? Are you a babe, still living on milk, wandering in the wilderness of unbelief? Or are you maturing, feeding on the meat of the Word and making it a habit to practice the Word of God?

Hebrews 6

No chapter in the Bible has disturbed people more than has Heb. 6. It is unfortunate that even sincere believers have “fallen out” over the doctrine of “falling away”! Scholars have offered several interpretations of this passage: (1) it describes the sin of apostasy, which means Christians can lose their salvation; (2) it deals with people who were “almost saved” but then backed away from trusting Christ; (3) it describes a sin possible only to Jews living while the Jewish temple was still standing; (4) it presents a “hypothetical case” or illustration that could not really happen. While I respect the views of others, I must reject those ideas just listed. I feel that Heb. 6 (like the rest of the book) was written to believers, but this chapter does not describe a sin that results in a believer “losing salvation.” If we keep the total context of the book in mind, and if we pay close attention to the words used, we will discover that the main lessons of the chapter are ones of repentance and assurance.

I. An Appeal (6:1–3)

The writer has severely scolded his readers because of their spiritual dullness (5:11–14); now he urges them to go on to maturity (“perfection”). This, of course, is the main theme of the book. The word “perfection” (maturity) is the same word used in the Parable of the Sower in Luke 8:14 (“and bring no fruit to perfection”). This image ties in

later with the illustration of the field in Heb. 6:7–8. The appeal “Let us go on” is literally, “Let us be borne, or carried, on.” It is the same word translated “upholding” in 1:3. In other words, the writer is not talking about self-effort; he is appealing to the readers to yield themselves to the power of God, the same power that upholds the whole universe. How can we fall when God is holding us?

Instead of going ahead, however, these believing Jews were tempted to lay again “a foundation” that is described in vv. 2–3. The six items in this foundation do not refer to the Christian faith as such, but rather to the basic doctrines of Judaism. Facing the fires of persecution, these Hebrew Christians were tempted to “fall by the wayside” by forsaking their confession of Christ (4:14 and 10:23). They had already slipped back into “babyhood” (5:11–14); now they were prone to go back to Judaism, thus laying again the foundation that had prepared the way for Christ and the full light of Christianity. They had repented from dead works, referring to works under the law (9:14). They had shown faith toward God. They believed the doctrine of washings (not baptism, but the Levitical washings; see Mark 7:4–5 and Heb. 9:10). Laying on of hands refers to the Day of Atonement, Lev. 16:21; and every true Jew held to a future resurrection and judgment (see Acts 24:14–15). If they did not move forward, they would be moving backward, which meant forsaking the substance of Christianity for shadows of Judaism.

II. An Argument (6:4–8)

Note from the beginning that the issue here is repentance, not salvation: “For it is impossible ... to renew them unto repentance” (vv. 4, 6). If this passage is talking about salvation, then it is teaching that a believer who “loses salvation” cannot regain it. This means that salvation depends partly on our own works and, once we lose salvation, we can never get it back again.

But the subject of the chapter is repentance—the believer’s attitude toward the Word of God. Verses 4–5 describe real Christians (see 10:32 as well as 2:9, 14), and v. 9 indicates that the writer believed they were truly saved. We do not have “almost saved” people here, but real believers.

The two key words in v. 6 are “fall away” and “crucify.” “Fall away” is not the Gk. word *apostasia*, from which we get the English word “apostasy.” It is *parapipto*, which means “to fall beside, to turn aside, to wander.” It is similar to the word for “trespass,” as found in Gal. 6:1 (“if a man be overtaken in a fault [trespass]”). So, v. 6 describes believers who have experienced the spiritual blessings of God but who fall by the side or trespass because of unbelief. Having done this, they are in danger of divine chastening (see Heb. 12:5–13) and of becoming castaways (1 Cor. 9:24–27), which results in loss of reward and divine disapproval, but not loss of salvation. The phrase “seeing they crucify” (v. 6) should be translated “while they are crucifying.” In other words, Heb. 6:4–6 does not teach that sinning saints cannot be brought to repentance, but that they cannot be brought to repentance while they continue to sin and put Christ to shame. Believers who continue in sin prove that they have not repented; Samson and Saul are cases in point. Hebrews 12:14–17 cites the case of Esau as well.

The illustration of the field in vv. 7–8 relates this truth to the image of the testing fires of God, a truth given in 1 Cor. 3:10–15 as well as Heb. 12:28–29. God saved us to bear fruit; our lives will one day be tested; what we do that is not approved will be burned.

Note that the field is not burned, but rather the fruit. The believer is saved “yet so as by fire” (1 Cor. 3:15). So, the whole message of this difficult passage is this: Christians can go backward in their spiritual lives and bring shame to Christ. While they are living in sin, they cannot be brought to repentance, and they are in danger of divine chastening. If they persist, their lives will bear no lasting fruit, and they will “suffer loss” at the judgment seat of Christ. And, lest we use “grace” as an excuse for sin, Heb. 10:30 reminds believers: “The Lord shall judge His people.”

III. An Assurance (6:9–20)

The writer closes with as solid a passage on eternal security as we will find anywhere in the Bible. He points, first of all, to their own lives (vv. 10–12) and reminds them that they had given every evidence of being true Christians. We find faith, hope, and love described in these three verses, and these traits are the characteristics of true believers (1 Thes. 1:3; Rom. 5:1–5). But he cautions them in v. 12 not to be “dull of hearing” (or “slothful,” same word as in 5:11). God has given His promises; they need only exercise faith and patience to receive the blessing.

He then uses Abraham as an illustration of patient faith. Certainly Abraham sinned—and even repeated one sin twice!—yet God kept His promises to him. After all, the covenants of God do not depend on the faith of the saints for their certainty; they depend only on the faithfulness of God. God verified the promise of Gen. 22:16–17 by swearing by Himself—and that settled it! Abraham did not receive the promised blessing because of his own goodness or obedience, but because of the faithfulness of God. Abraham experienced many trials and testings (as did the original readers of Hebrews), but God saw him through.

In v. 17, the writer says that God did all this for Abraham that the “heirs” might know the dependability of God’s counsel and promise. Who are these heirs? According to v. 18, all true believers are heirs, for we are Abraham’s children by faith (see Gal. 3). So, there are “two immutable things” that give us assurance: God’s promises (for God cannot lie) and God’s oath (for God cannot change). The unchanging Word of God and the unchanging Person of God are all we need to assure us that we are saved and kept for eternity. We have a “hope” to anchor our souls, and this “hope” is Christ Himself (7:19–20; 1 Tim. 1:1). How can we “drift” spiritually (2:1–3) when in Christ we are anchored to heaven itself? We have a sure and steadfast anchor; and we have a “Forerunner” (Christ) who has opened the way for us and will see to it that we one day shall join Him in glory. Instead of frightening saints into thinking they are lost, this wonderful chapter warns against unbelief and an unrepentant heart and also assures us that we are anchored in eternity.

Hebrews 7

This chapter introduces us to the major second section of Hebrews (see outline). It is the writer’s purpose in this section to show that the priesthood of Christ is better than

that of Aaron's (whose successors were at that time ministering on earth, 8:4) because His priesthood is of a superior order (chap. 7). It is ministered under a superior covenant (chap. 8), in a superior sanctuary (chap. 9), because of a superior sacrifice (chap. 10).

The key figure in chapter 7 is that mysterious king-priest, Melchizedek, who appears but twice in the entire OT (Gen. 14:17–20 and Ps. 110:4). The writer presents three telling arguments to prove the superiority of Melchizedek over Aaron.

I. The Historical Argument: Melchizedek and Abraham (7:1–10)

First, the writer identifies Melchizedek as a type of Christ (vv. 3, 15). He was both king and priest, and so is Jesus. No priest in Aaron's line ever sat on a throne. In fact, the Aaronic priests did not sit down at all (spiritually speaking), for their work was never done. There were no chairs in the tabernacle or temple! See Heb. 10:11–14. Furthermore, Melchizedek was king of Salem, which means "peace"; and Jesus is our King of Peace, our Prince of Peace. The name "Melchizedek" means "king of righteousness," a name which certainly applies to Christ, God's Righteous King. So, in his name and his offices, Melchizedek is a beautiful likeness of Christ.

But Melchizedek also resembles Christ in his origin. The Bible contains no record of his birth or his death. Of course, this does not mean that Melchizedek had no parents or that he never died. It simply means that the OT record is silent on these matters. Thus Melchizedek, like Christ, is "without beginning of days or end of life"—his priesthood is eternal. His priesthood did not depend on earthly successors, while the Aaronic priests had to defend their office by family records (see Neh. 7:64). Every high priest that descended from Aaron died, but Christ, like Melchizedek, holds His priesthood permanently (vv. 8, 16, 24–25).

Having identified Christ with the order of Melchizedek, the writer now explains that Melchizedek is superior to Aaron, for Aaron paid tithes to Melchizedek while yet unborn in the loins of Abraham. And when Melchizedek blessed Abraham, he was blessing the house of Levi as well; and certainly "the lesser is blessed by the better" (v. 7). On earth, in the Jewish temple, the priests received tithes; but in Genesis 14, the priests (in Abraham's loins) gave tithes to Melchizedek. This event clearly showed the inferiority of the Aaronic priesthood.

II. The Doctrinal Argument: Christ and Aaron (7:11–25)

Having clearly established the historical foundations for the superiority of Melchizedek over Aaron, the writer now shows that Melchizedek is also superior from a doctrinal point of view. Here he uses the quotation from Ps. 110:4 as the basis for the argument, and he presents three facts:

A. Aaron was replaced by Melchizedek (vv. 11–19).

When God said to Christ in Ps. 110:4, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek," He was actually setting aside the Levitical priesthood founded in Aaron. It is impossible for two divine priesthoods to operate side by side. The fact that God established the new order proves that the old order of Aaron was weak and ineffective; and it also meant that the Law under which Aaron functioned was likewise set aside:

“The Law made nothing perfect” (v. 19). Consequently, the priesthood made nothing perfect (v. 11), and the sacrifices these men offered made nothing perfect (10:1). Of course, the Hebrew word for *perfect* means “having a perfect standing before God” and has nothing to do with sinlessness. Aaron was made priest by a carnal commandment, but Christ’s priesthood functions “after the power of an endless life” (v. 16) because, unlike Aaron, Christ will never die.

B. Aaron was not ordained by an oath (vv. 20–22).

While God acknowledged Aaron and his successors in the elaborate ceremonies described in Ex. 28–30, we have no record of a divine oath that sealed their priesthood. In fact, God would not seal their order with an oath because He knew that their work would one day come to an end. But when He ordained Christ to be a priest, He confirmed it with an unchanging oath.

C. Aaron and his successors died, but Christ lives forever (vv. 23–24).

The Law was holy and good, but it was limited by the frailties of the flesh. Aaron died; his sons after him also died. The priesthood was as good as the man, and the man did not last forever. But Christ lives to die no more! He has an unchanging priesthood because He lives by the power of an endless life. He “continues forever” to make intercession for God’s people and thus is able to save them (God’s people) “to the uttermost.” We often apply v. 25 to the lost, but its main application is to the saved, those for whom Christ intercedes daily. Yes, He saves from the uttermost, and any sinner can be forgiven. But the point here is that those whom He saved are saved forever, for eternity!

III. The Practical Argument: Christ and the Believer (7:26–28)

“Such a high priest was fitting for us” (v. 26, NKJV)—that is, suits us, meets our needs. No descendant of Aaron could fit the description given of Christ in these verses. These men were not “holy, harmless, undefiled.” Aaron made a golden calf and led Israel into idolatry! And Eli’s sons were guilty of gluttony and immorality (1 Sam. 2:12ff). But we have a perfect High Priest: He is holier and higher than any priest on earth, for He is ministering in the heavenly tabernacle in the very presence of God.

Aaron and his sons had to offer daily sacrifices, for themselves first, and then for the people. Christ is sinless; He needs no sacrifices. And the one sacrifice that He offered settled the problem of sin for all eternity. Furthermore, He offered *Himself*, not the blood of bulls and goats, as the sacrifice.

It is easy to see, then, that the order of Melchizedek is superior to the order of Aaron. This point has been proved historically, for Abraham honored Melchizedek above Levi; it has been proved doctrinally, for Ps. 110:4 definitely states that God created a new order of priesthood in the Law; and it has been proved practically, for no man could ever qualify to be High Priest except Jesus Christ. There is no need for us to look beyond Christ—He is all that we need.

Hebrews 8

Having proved that Christ's heavenly priesthood is of a better order, the writer now shows that this priesthood is ministered through a better covenant. The Levitical priests ministered according to the Old Covenant that God had made with Israel at Sinai. The very fact that God calls it an "Old Covenant" by introducing a "New Covenant" proves that the old Levitical priesthood has been done away by the cross. To prevent his readers from going back to Aaron and the Old Covenant, the writer in chapter 8 proves the superiority of the New Covenant. In what ways, then, is the New Covenant better than the Old?

I. The New Covenant's Superior Priest (8:1)

Verse 1 is the "summing up" of the previous arguments. "We have such a high priest" (as described in 7:26–28), a high priest already proved to be superior to Aaron. Christ, our High Priest, has sat down, since His work of redemption is finished. No priest of Aaron's line ever sat down. Neither did any Levitical priest ever sit down on a throne. Christ is our King-Priest in heaven; and because He is a better High Priest, He mediates for us a better covenant. Certainly He would not minister an Old Covenant from heaven; a new High Priest demands a new and better covenant.

II. The New Covenant's Superior Place (8:2–5)

Since Jesus came from the tribe of Judah, not Levi, He would not have been considered to minister as a priest. We find Christ in the courts of the temple while on earth, but never in the holy place or in the holy of holies. But this only proves the superiority of the New Covenant: it is ministered from heaven and not from earth.

The writer adds another argument: the original; the earthly tabernacle (and temple) were but copies of the heavenly tabernacle. Moses copied the tabernacle from the pattern God revealed to him on the mount (Ex. 25:9, 40). The Jews revered their temple and its furnishings and ceremonies; yet these things were merely shadows of the reality in heaven. To go back to the Old Covenant meant forsaking the realities of heaven for earthly imitations. How much greater it is to have a heavenly high priest ministering in a heavenly sanctuary.

III. The New Covenant's Superior Promises (8:6–13)

This passage contains the key argument of this chapter: the promises of the New Covenant are far better than those of the Old Covenant. Consequently, the priesthood of Christ, which is based on better promises, must be itself a better priesthood—and it is. First, read Jer. 31:31–34 and then note what these better promises are:

A. *The promise of grace (vv. 6–9).*

Six times in vv. 8–13 God says "I will." This is grace! The Old Covenant was a yoke of bondage, demanding perfect obedience. But the New Covenant emphasizes what God

will do for His people, not what they must do for Him. Note that God does not find fault with the Old Covenant, but with the people themselves. The Law is spiritual, but men are carnal, “sold under sin,” says Rom. 7:14; and Rom. 8:3 makes it clear that the Law was “weak through the flesh.” In other words, the failure of Israel could not be blamed on any weakness in the Old Covenant, but on the weakness of human nature. It is here, then, that grace steps in; what the Law could not do because of man’s weakness, God accomplished through the Cross.

B. The promise of an inner change (v. 10).

Read Jer. 31:31 for the promise of the New Covenant, and note that it involves an inner change of the heart. Read 2 Cor. 3 for additional light on this wonderful topic. The Old Covenant was written with the finger of God on tablets of stone, but the New Covenant is written by the Spirit on the human heart and mind. An external law can never change a person; it must become a part of the inner life if it is to change our behavior. See Deut. 6:6–9. This is the meaning of Rom. 8:4—“That the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us.” This is accomplished, of course, by the Holy Spirit, who enables us to obey God’s Word.

C. The promise of unlimited blessing (v. 11).

The day will come when there will be no need for personal witnessing, for all people will know the Lord. Of course, the ultimate fulfillment of this promise awaits the establishing of the kingdom. “All shall know Me” (v. 11) parallels the repeated promise of the OT that “the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God” (Isa. 11:9), Gentiles and Jews alike.

D. The promise of sins forgiven (v. 12).

Read Heb. 10 and you will see that, under the Old Covenant, there was a remembrance made of sins but no remission of sins. The blood of bulls and of goats could cover sins, but only the blood of the Lamb of God could “take away the sins of the world” (John 1:29). What a wonderful promise the New Covenant gives to the burdened sinner: his sins will be forgiven and forgotten forever!

E. The promise of eternal blessing (v. 13).

The very fact that God calls it a “New Covenant” means that the Old Covenant is obsolete and will pass away. About the time Hebrews was being written, the Roman legions were being readied for their invasion of Palestine, which occurred in a.d. 70. The phrase “ready to vanish away” indicates that but a brief time would elapse before the temple would be leveled and the priestly activities cease. But the New Covenant, like the priesthood of Christ, would endure forever.

When did this New Covenant come into being? Luke 22:20ff and 1 Cor. 11:23–26 make it clear that the New Covenant was established by the shedding of Christ’s blood on the cross. According to Heb. 12:24, Christ is today the Mediator of the New Covenant.

But Jer. 31:31ff states that God promised this New Covenant to the Jews. What right do we have to apply it to the church? The answer lies in the dispensational character of the Book of Acts. We recall that Acts 1–7 is God’s offer of the kingdom to the Jews. When the Holy Spirit came to the believers at Pentecost, the New Covenant was in force. Had the nation repented and received Christ as Messiah, all of the blessings and

promises of the New Covenant would have followed. But Israel refused the message and resisted the Spirit, and thus the nation was set aside. It is at this point that God brought the Gentiles into the New Covenant and formed the church out of believing Jews and Gentiles. So, we today in the body of Christ share in the New Covenant; but the nation of Israel at some future date will enjoy these same blessings when it “looks upon Him whom they have pierced” and the kingdom is established (Zech. 12:10).

Hebrews 9

We have seen that Christ’s priesthood is better than Aaron’s because it belongs to a better order, that of Melchizedek (chap. 7) and because it is administered under a better covenant, namely the New Covenant (chap. 8). Here in chapter 9 we will see that Christ’s priesthood is superior because it is administered from a better sanctuary.

I. The Inferior Sanctuary Under the Old Covenant (9:1–10)

The writer gives five reasons why the Old Covenant sanctuary was inferior:

A. *It was on earth (v. 1).*

The word “worldly” means “of this world, on the earth.” God gave Moses the pattern from heaven, but Moses built the tabernacle (and Solomon the temple) on earth and of earthly materials. The sanctuary was divinely appointed, and the services were carried on under God’s direction. Still, everything was on the earth. As we shall see in the latter part of this chapter, the new sanctuary is heavenly.

B. *It was but a shadow of things to come (vv. 2–5).*

Here the writer describes the arrangement and furnishings of the OT tabernacle. Note that “the first” in vv. 2 and 6 means “the first section of the tabernacle,” the holy place. “The second tabernacle” of v. 7 does not refer to a second tabernacle built after the first one that Moses made; it means the second division of the tabernacle—the holy of holies. The brazen altar and the laver stood in the outer court. The first veil (note v. 3) hung between this outer court and the holy place. In the holy place stood the candlestick, the table of bread, and the incense altar. Behind the second veil was the holy of holies, into which only the high priest could go, and then only on the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16). In the holy of holies stood the ark of the covenant. All these things pointed to Christ and were shadows of the great spiritual realities that God would give in the New Covenant.

C. *It was inaccessible to the people (vv. 6–7).*

Only the priests could minister in the court and the holy place, and only the high priest could enter the holy of holies. As we shall see, the heavenly sanctuary is open to all of God’s people.

D. It was temporary (v. 8).

The veil between men and God reminded the people that the way into God's presence had not yet been opened. Verse 9 says that while the veil remained, there would still be two parts to the tabernacle—a symbol (figure, parable) of the relationship between Israel and God. When Christ died, the veil was torn and the need for an earthly sanctuary was abolished.

E. It was ineffective for changing hearts (vv. 9–10).

Day after day, the priests offered the same sacrifices. The blood covered sin but never washed it away. Nor could the blood of animals change the hearts and consciences of the worshipers. These were “carnal ordinances,” that is, ceremonies that dealt with the externals, not the inner person. They were temporary acts, awaiting the full revelation of the grace of God in Jesus Christ at the cross.

II. The Superior Sanctuary Under the New Covenant (9:11–28)

At v. 11 the picture changes, and the writer explains why the New Covenant sanctuary is superior to the Old and why Christ's priesthood is superior to Aaron's.

A. It is a heavenly sanctuary (v. 11).

Christ is a high priest of good things “that have come to pass.” His heavenly sanctuary is greater and more perfect because it was not made with human hands. The word “building” ought to read “creation”; it is not of this creation because it is of the new creation. The earthly tabernacle belonged to the Old Covenant, the old creation, but Christ's sanctuary is of the New Covenant, the new creation. See also v. 24.

B. It is effective for changing lives (vv. 12–23).

What a contrast! The high priest took another creature's blood into the holy of holies many times during his life; but Jesus took His own blood into God's presence once for all. The OT sacrifices brought about ceremonial cleansing for the body (v. 13) but could never reach into the heart and conscience. But the blood of Christ, shed once and for all, purges the conscience and gives the believer an unchanging and perfect standing before God. All Jewish ceremonies were but “dead works” in comparison to the living relationship with God under the New Covenant.

Verses 15–23 use the illustration of a testament or will. A person makes a will and determines how to distribute the estate. But the inheritance goes to no one until the person dies. Christ had an eternal inheritance to give to His church, and this inheritance is spelled out in the New Covenant, Christ's “last will and testament.” For the will to take effect, He had to die. But the amazing thing is this: Christ died to make the will effective, and then came back from the dead to administer His estate personally! Even the first covenant, under Moses, was sealed with blood (Ex. 24:6–8). When the earthly sanctuary was erected, it was also dedicated with blood. But this blood of animals could only bring about ceremonial purity, not inward cleansing.

Verse 23 suggests that Christ's death even purified the heavenly things. These things may be the heavenly people of God (see 12:22ff; Eph. 2:22) who have been purified by Christ's blood; or, it may suggest that the presence of Satan in heaven (Rev. 12:3ff) demanded a special cleansing of the heavenly sanctuary.

C. It is the fulfillment and not the shadow (v. 24).

The Aaronic priests ministered in a tabernacle that was temporary; it pointed to a Christ yet to come. Christ is not ministering in a man-made tabernacle full of earthly imitations; He is ministering in a heavenly sanctuary that is the fulfillment of these OT practices. The high priest sprinkled blood on the mercy seat for the people, but Christ represents us in the very presence of God. What a tragedy it is when people cling to religious ceremonies that please the senses and fail to lay hold, by faith, of the great heavenly ministry of Christ.

D. It is based on a completed sacrifice (vv. 25–28).

The superiority of Christ's sacrifice is the theme of chapter 10, but it is also mentioned here. The priest's work was never done because the sacrifices were never final. Christ's death was final. He appeared "at the climax of the ages" to put away sin, not merely cover it. The veil has been rent and the way opened into the presence of God. Christ appears in heaven for us; we can come into the presence of God. The OT Jew did not have access to God's immediate presence; he would not have dared to enter the holy of holies. But because of Christ's completed work on the cross ("It is finished!"), we have an open path to God through Him.

Note that the word "appear" is used three times in vv. 24–28. We see Christ's past appearance, which put away sin (v. 26), His present appearance in heaven for us (v. 24), and His future appearance to take us to glory (v. 28). When the high priest disappeared into the tabernacle on the Day of Atonement, the people waited outside expectantly for him to reappear. Perhaps God would refuse the blood and kill the high priest. What joy there was when he came out again! And what joy we will have when our High Priest appears to take us to our eternal holy of holies, to live with Him forever!

Hebrews 10

This chapter closes the section on "the Superior Priesthood" (7–10) by explaining that the priesthood of Jesus Christ is based on a superior sacrifice—the sacrifice of Christ Himself. The writer gives three reasons why Christ's sacrifice is superior to those described in the OT.

I. Christ's Sacrifice Takes Away Sin (10:1–10)

A. The OT sacrifices were ineffective (vv. 1–4).

For one thing, they belonged to the age of types and shadows, and therefore could never change the heart. They were repeated "year by year" (v. 1) and "day by day" (v. 11), thus proving that they could not do away with sin. Otherwise the high priest and his helpers would not have had to repeat these actions. As Heb. 9:10–14 explained, the OT rituals dealt only with external things and ceremonial uncleanness. Sacrifices produced a "remembrance of sins" but not a remission of sins (see 9:22). In the Lord's Supper, we remember Christ, not our sins (1 Cor. 11:24; Luke 22:19), because He has forgotten our sins (8:12).

B. Christ's sacrifice is effective (vv. 5–10).

Here he quotes Ps. 40:6–8. The Holy Spirit has changed “My ears have You opened” to “a body You have prepared for Me” (NKJV). The reference may be to Ex. 21:1–6. In the year of release, the Jew was required to set his Hebrew servants free. But if a servant loved his master and wanted to remain with him, he was marked by placing a hole through his ear lobe. From that moment on, his body belonged to his master for life. When Christ came into the world, the Spirit prepared for Him a body, and He was completely dedicated to and dependent on His Father’s will. That body would be sacrificed on the cross for the sins of the world. Passages such as Ps. 51:10 and 16, 1 Sam. 15:22, and Isa. 1:11ff make it clear that God saw no finished salvation in the blood of animals; He wanted the believer’s heart. In vv. 8–9, he uses the words of Christ to show that God, through Christ, set aside the first covenant with its animal sacrifices and established a New Covenant in His own blood. By Christ’s surrender to the will of God, we have been set apart for Him (sanctified) once and for all.

II. Christ’s Sacrifice Need Never Be Repeated (10:11–18)

Note the contrasts: the OT priest stands daily, but Christ has sat down; the OT priest offered the same sacrifices often; Christ offered one sacrifice (Himself) once. By one offering God has given a right standing, that is perfected, forever to those who have been set apart through faith in Christ. (In v. 10, we are sanctified once for all; in v. 14 we are being sanctified daily. This is positional and progressive sanctification.) The OT sacrifices produced a remembrance of sins, but Christ’s sacrifice makes possible remission of sins (v. 18). *Remission* means “sending away.” Our sins have been pardoned and sent away forever (Ps. 103:12; Micah 7:19). On the annual Day of Atonement (Lev. 16), the high priest confessed the sins of the nation over the head of the scapegoat, and then the goat was led off to be lost in the wilderness. This is what Christ did with our sins. There is no more suffering for sin because there is no more remembrance of sin. The Holy Spirit witnesses in our hearts, and we have the blessing of that promised New Covenant (vv. 14–17; Jer. 31:33ff).

III. Christ’s Sacrifice Opens the Way to God (10:19–39)

A. Explanation (vv. 19–21).

The writer reviews the blessings that believers have because of Christ’s once-for-all death. Because we have a perfect standing in Christ, we can have boldness (literally “freedom of speech”) to come into His presence. No veil stands now between us and God. That tabernacle veil symbolized Christ’s human body, for it covered the glory of God (John 1:14). When His body was offered, the veil was torn. We have a new way based on the New Covenant; we have a way to life, because we have a living high priest (7:25). The house of God (the church) has a great high priest in glory.

B. Invitation (vv. 22–25).

There are three “let us” statements here (see 6:1 also): (1) “Let us draw near” instead of drifting away; (2) “Let us hold fast” our confession (testimony) of faith (or hope, as in some translations), not wavering because of trials; (3) “Let us consider” other believers

and, by our example, encourage them to be true to Christ. If we provoke each other at all, it should be unto love (see 1 Cor. 13:5). The boldness we have in heaven ought to lead to spiritual growth and dedication on earth. It seems that these believers, because of trials, were neglecting Christian fellowship and the mutual encouragement that believers need from each other. Since Christ is our high priest, and we are a kingdom of priests (1 Peter 2:9), we ought to assemble together for common worship, teaching, and service. The OT Jew could not enter the tabernacle, and the high priest could not enter the holy of holies whenever he pleased. But, through Christ's sacrifice, we have a living way into heaven. We can come to God at any time. Do we take advantage of this privilege?

C. Exhortation (vv. 26–39).

This is the fourth of the five exhortations (see outline). It warns against willful sin. Please remember that this exhortation is to believers, not unsaved people, and that it is related to the previous three exhortations. Careless Christians start to drift through neglect; then they doubt the Word; then they grow dull toward the Word; and the next step is deliberately sinning and despising their spiritual heritage. Note the important facts about this particular sin. It is not one sin committed once; "sin willfully" in v. 26 should read "willingly go on sinning." It is the same continuous tense of the verb as in 1 John 3:4–10 — "Whosoever continually and habitually sins is not born of God." So, this passage is not dealing with an "unpardonable sin"; it is talking about an attitude toward the Word that God calls willful rebellion. There were no sacrifices in the OT for deliberate, presumptuous sins (see Ex. 21:14; Num. 15:30). Sins of ignorance (Lev. 4) and of sudden passion were covered; but willful sins merited only punishment.

Verse 29 reminds us that our salvation (and the shed blood that purchased it) are held in high regard by God. The Father values His Son; the Son shed His blood; the Spirit applies the merits of the cross to the believer. For us to sin willfully is to sin against the Father and the Son and the Spirit. The writer quotes Deut. 32:35–36 to show that God, in the OT, saw to it that His people (not unbelievers) reaped what they sowed and were judged when they disobeyed willfully. The fact that they were His covenant people made their obligations that much greater (Amos 3:2). God judges His people; see Rom. 2:16; 1 Cor. 11:31–32; and 1 Peter 1:17. Of course, this is not eternal judgment, but rather His chastening in this life and the loss of reward in the next. Note vv. 34–35, where the writer emphasizes reward for faithfulness, not salvation. See also 1 Cor. 3:14–15, 5:5, 9:27, and 11:30.

In vv. 32–39 (as in 6:9–12), he gives a wonderful assurance to these believers that their lives had proven they were truly born again. They were among those who had put faith in Christ (Hab. 2:3–4) and therefore could not "draw back" as those did who were not truly saved (1 John 2:19). Their destiny is perfection, not perdition, because they have Christ in their hearts and look for His return.

Hebrews 11

This chapter illustrates the lesson of 10:32–39 and shows that throughout history, men and women have done the impossible by faith. “The just shall live by faith” states 10:38. This chapter proves that faith can conquer in any circumstances.

I. Faith Described (11:1–3)

True biblical faith is not an emotional kind of wishful thinking; it is an inner conviction based on the Word of God (Rom. 10:17). In v. 1 the word *substance* means “assurance” and *evidence* means “proof.” So, when the Holy Spirit gives us faith through the Word, the very presence of that faith in our hearts is all the assurance and evidence we need! Dr. J. Oswald Sanders says, “Faith enables the believing soul to treat the future as present and the invisible as seen.” Through faith, we can see what others cannot see (note vv. 1, 3, 7, 13, and 27). When there is true faith in the heart, God bears witness to that heart by His Spirit (note vv. 2, 4–5, and 39). By faith, Noah saw coming judgment, Abraham saw a future city, Joseph saw the Exodus from Egypt, and Moses saw God.

Faith accomplishes things because there is power in the Word of God, as illustrated by the Creation in v. 3. God spoke, and it was done! God still speaks to us. When we believe what He says, the power of the Word accomplishes things in our lives. The same Word that acted in the old creation acts in the new creation.

II. Faith Demonstrated (11:4–40)

A. Abel (v. 4; Gen. 4:3ff).

God asked for a blood sacrifice (Heb. 9:22), and Abel had faith in His word. Cain did not show faith, however, and was rejected. God witnessed to Abel’s faith by accepting his sacrifice; and by this witness, Abel still speaks to us.

B. Enoch (vv. 5–6; Gen. 5:21–24).

In a wicked age, Enoch lived a dedicated life; he did this by trusting God’s Word. See Jude 14ff. He believed that God would reward him for his faith, and God did so by taking him to heaven so that he did not die. The reward of faith is important in Hebrews (10:35; 11:26; 12:11).

C. Noah (v. 7; Gen. 6–9).

No one had seen or anticipated judgment through a flood; Noah saw it by faith. Faith leads to works. Noah’s attitude and actions condemned the unbelieving, wicked world around him.

D. Abraham (vv. 8–19; Gen. 12–25).

Here we have the great “father of the believing” who is one of the OT’s, greatest examples of faith. Abraham believed God when he did not know where (vv. 8–10), when he did not know how (vv. 11–12), when he did not know when (vv. 13–16), and when he did not know why (vv. 17–19). It was faith in God’s Word that made him leave his home, live as a pilgrim, and follow wherever God led. Faith gave Abraham and Sarah power to

have a child when they were “as good as dead.” Abraham and his pilgrim descendants did not turn back, as the Hebrew leaders were tempted to do, but kept their eyes on God and pressed on to victory (vv. 13–16; 10:38–39).

E. Isaac (v. 20; Gen. 27).

He believed the Word passed on to him from Abraham and conferred the blessing on Jacob.

F. Jacob (v. 21; Gen. 48).

In spite of his failures, Jacob had faith in God’s Word and blessed Ephraim and Manasseh before he died.

G. Joseph (v. 22; Gen. 50:24ff; Ex. 13:19; Josh. 24:32).

Joseph knew that Israel would one day be delivered from Egypt, for this is what God promised Abraham (Gen. 15:13–16). It is amazing that Joseph had any faith at all, after going through so many trials and after living in pagan Egypt most of his life.

H. Moses (vv. 23–29; Ex. 1–15).

Moses’ parents had faith to hide Moses since God had told them (in some way) that he was a special child (Acts 7:20). Moses’ own faith led him to refuse position in Egypt and to identify with Israel. Again, he saw the reward of faith (v. 26) as opposed to the pleasures of sin for a season. Faith in the Word led to the Passover deliverance (how the Egyptians must have scoffed at the blood on the doors!) and the crossing of the Red Sea.

I. Joshua (v. 30; Josh. 1–6).

God promised to deliver Jericho to Joshua, and faith in that promise led to victory. Israel marched around the city for seven days and must have looked foolish to Jericho’s citizens, but the Jews’ faith was rewarded.

J. Rahab (v. 31; Josh. 2; 6:22–27).

Her confession of faith is in Josh. 2:11. Her faith led to works (James 2:25) when she risked her life to save the spies. Though a harlot, she was saved by faith and was even brought into the human ancestry of Christ (Matt. 1:5). Her faith was contagious because she also won her family (Josh. 6:23).

K. “Others” (vv. 32–40).

Some people are named, others are not. All these men and women, nevertheless, are among the giants of the faith. The writer sees the entire OT history as a record of victories of faith. Some victories were public and miraculous, such as deliverance from death; others were private and rather ordinary, such as “out of weakness were made strong ...” and “wrought righteousness.” Some were delivered by faith; others did not escape, but were, by faith, given grace to bear suffering. The unbelieving world looked upon these believers as refuse, “cranks,” and “pests.” God, though, says of them, “Of whom the world was not worthy” (v. 38). Each of them received from God that witness of faith (v. 39).

Though faith enabled these people to receive promises (plural), they did not receive the promise (v. 39); but now, in Christ, that promise has been fulfilled. Note v. 13 as well

as 1 Peter 1:11–12. Verse 40 indicates that God’s plan for these OT saints also includes NT Christians who today share in that New Covenant through Christ. That “better thing” has been described in Hebrews—the better priest, sacrifice, sanctuary, and covenant. In a very real sense, Christians today are heirs of the promise (6:17–18) through faith in Christ, since all of our spiritual blessings are the results of the promises God made to Abraham and David (Rom. 11:13–29). Of course, though these promises are now fulfilled spiritually in Christ (Gal. 3), they will also literally be fulfilled in Israel during the “age to come” (Heb. 2:5–9).

The lessons of this chapter are many, but perhaps it would be helpful to mention just a few. (1) God works through faith and faith alone. Exercising faith is the only way to please Him and receive His blessing. (2) Faith is a gift from God through the Word and the Spirit. It is not something we “work up” ourselves. (3) Faith is always tested; at times it seems that trusting God is foolish, but faith always conquers in the end.

Hebrews 12

The key word in this chapter is “endure”; it is found in vv. 1 (translated “patience”), 2–3, 7, and 20. The word means “to bear up under trial, to continue when the going is tough.” These Christians were going through a time of testing (10:32–39) and were tempted to give up (12:3). None of their number had yet been called to die for Christ (12:4), but the situation was not getting any easier. To encourage their trust in Christ, the writer reminded them (note v. 5) of three encouragements that would help keep them going and growing.

I. The Example of the Son of God (12:1–4)

In chapter 11, his readers looked back and saw how the great saints of the OT won the race of life through faith. Now the writer urges them to “look away to Jesus” and have their faith and hope strengthened. The picture here is of an arena; the spectators are the heroes of faith listed in the previous chapter; the runners are the believers going through trials. (This image does not necessarily imply that people in heaven watch us or know what is going on here on earth. It is an illustration, not a revelation.) If the Christians are to win the race, they must get rid of the weights and sins that make it hard for them to run. Most of all, they must keep their eyes on Christ as the goal! Compare Phil. 3:12–16. Christ has already run this race of faith and conquered for us! He is the Author (Pioneer, Trailblazer) and Finisher of our faith; He is Alpha and Omega, the Beginning and the End. What He starts, He finishes; He can see us through to victory.

Our Lord went through many trials while on earth. What was it that helped take Him through to victory? “The joy that was set before Him” (v. 2). This was His goal—the joy of presenting His church before the Father in heaven one day (Jude 24). Note also John 15:11, 16:20–24, and 17:13. His battle against sin took Him to the cross and cost Him His life. Most of us will not run on that course; it will probably be our task to live for Him,

not die for Him. “Consider Him!” “Look unto Jesus!” These words are the secret of encouragement and strength when the race gets difficult. We need to get our eyes off of ourselves, other people, and circumstances and get our eyes on Christ alone.

II. The Assurance of the Love of God (12:5–13)

These Christians had forgotten the basic truths of the Word (5:12); and v. 5 tells us they had even forgotten what God says about chastening. The writer quoted Prov. 3:11ff and reminded them that suffering in the life of a Christian is not punishment, but chastening. This word “chastening” literally means “child-training, discipline.” They were spiritual babes; one way God had of maturing them was to put them through trials. Punishment is the work of a judge; chastening is the work of a father. Punishment is handed out to uphold the law; chastening is given out as a proof of love, for the bettering of the child. Too often we rebel at God’s loving hand of chastening; instead, we ought to submit and grow. Satan tells us that our trials are proof that God does not love us; but God’s Word says that sufferings are the best proof that He does love us!

When suffering comes to believers, they can respond in several ways. They can resist the circumstances and fight the will of God, growing bitter instead of better. “Why does this have to happen to me? God doesn’t care anymore! It doesn’t pay to be a Christian!” This attitude will only produce sorrow and bitterness of soul. The writer argues, “We have had earthly fathers who chastened us, and we respected them. Should we not respect our Heavenly Father who loves us and desires to bring us to maturity?” After all, the best proof we are God’s children, and not illegitimate children, is that God disciplines us. The suggestion is made in v. 9 that if we do not submit ourselves to God, we may die. God will not have rebellious children and may take their lives if He must.

Then too the Christian may give up and quit. This is the wrong attitude (see vv. 3, 12–13). God’s chastening is meant to help us grow, not to beat us down. The correct attitude is that we endure by faith (v. 7), allowing God to work out His perfect plan. It is that blessed “afterward” of v. 11 that keeps us going! Chastening is for our profit that we might be sharers of His holiness, and our submission brings the most glory to His name.

III. The Power of the Grace of God (12:14–29)

This is the fifth of the exhortations in Hebrews, and the key thought is grace (see vv. 15, 28). The contrast is made between Moses and Christ, Sinai and Mt. Zion, the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. When the Law was given at Sinai, fear and terror ruled, and the mountain was covered with smoke and fire. When God spoke, the people trembled. But today, we have a spiritual experience greater than that of Israel’s at Sinai, for we have a heavenly priest, a heavenly home, a heavenly fellowship, and a voice speaking from on high that gives a message of grace and love.

The description in vv. 22–24 is of the New Covenant blessings in Christ. Mt. Zion is the heavenly city (13:14; Gal. 4:26), in contrast to earthly Jerusalem, which was about to be destroyed. There are three groups of people in the heavenly city: (1) the host of angels, who minister to the saints; (2) the church of the firstborn (see 1:6); and (3) the OT saints. “Made perfect” (v. 23) does not mean that believers in glory are now in their

perfect resurrection bodies. It refers, rather, to the OT saints who have now a perfect standing before God because of the death and resurrection of Christ (10:14; 11:40). Anyone who believes God's Word (as did the OT saints) goes to heaven; but the perfection of God's work did not come until Christ's death on the cross.

At the top of this list is Jesus, the Mediator of the New Covenant. How could these people go back to an earthly city (about to be destroyed) and an earthly temple (which would also be destroyed), earthly priests and earthly sacrifices? The blood of Christ has taken care of everything! Abel's blood cried out from the earth for vengeance (Gen. 4:10), but Christ's blood speaks from heaven for salvation and forgiveness. This is grace! Christ is a minister of grace. The New Covenant is a covenant of grace. God's grace does not fail, though we may fail of His grace (v. 15) because we fail to appropriate it. Esau is the illustration of one who despised spiritual things and lost the blessing. ("Profane" means "outside the temple" or "worldly, common.") Esau failed of the grace of God because he would not repent (note 6:6).

"God is shaking things!" is the theme of the closing verses. None of us likes to have things shaken; we enjoy stability and security. But God was shaking already the Jewish economy and was about to destroy the temple in Jerusalem. The material things would have to go so that the spiritual realities might take their place. God was building a new temple, His church; and the old temple would have to be removed. The writer quotes Haggai 2:6 to show that one day God will shake the world itself and usher in a new heaven and earth.

"Wherefore" (v. 28) introduces the practical application: "Let us have grace." How do we receive grace? At the throne of grace, where our eternal High Priest intercedes for us. We must serve God, not old laws and customs. We are part of a kingdom that will never be shaken or removed. We are building our lives on the eternal, unchanging spiritual realities that we have in Christ. Therefore, let us serve God with reverence. Let us heed His Word and not refuse to listen, for in His Word is the grace and life that we need. The admonition of v. 25 does not regard our eternal destiny. As with the other exhortations of Hebrews, it deals with God's chastening in this life, and not judgment in the next.

Hebrews 13

Here we have the final appeals of this epistle. The writer has explained the doctrinal truths; now he closes with practical admonitions for all believers. Their enemies were saying, "If you stay true to Christ, you will lose everything—your friends, your material goods, your religious heritage in the temple, sacrifices, and priesthood!" But here, the writer points out that the believer loses nothing by trusting Christ. By faith, Christians turn their backs on the "religious systems" of this world (in this case Judaism) and fix their eyes and hearts on the true spiritual worship of God in Christ. Note in this chapter the spiritual blessings Christians have, though they may lose everything in this world.

I. A Spiritual Fellowship of Love (13:1–4)

Love for God's people is one of the marks of a true believer in Christ (John 13:35; 1 John 3:16; 1 Thes. 4:9, etc.). Christians are hated by the world (John 15:17–27) and need the mutual love of the saints for encouragement and strength. This love is expressed in practical ways, such as sympathizing with those in trials (v. 3, see 1 Cor. 12:26) and being hospitable. He refers to the visits of angels in the OT, to Abraham (Gen. 18), Gideon (Jud. 6:11ff), and Manoah (Jud. 13). Of course, true Christian love ought to be seen first in the home and family, so he warns about sexual sins that can destroy marriage. In this day when marriage vows are taken so lightly, we need to remember that God judges all immoral people, whether believers or unbelievers.

II. Spiritual Treasures (13:5–6)

It cost something to be a Christian in the first century. These people had suffered the plundering of their goods (10:34) and were paying a price for their testimony. How easy it is for Christians to be covetous and desire the things of the world (1 Tim. 6:6ff and Luke 12:15). "Be content!" is easy to read but difficult to practice. True contentment never comes from possessing many things; it comes when we rest our lives wholly on Christ. The writer quotes the OT promise that God gave to Moses (Deut. 31:6–8) and Joshua (Josh. 1:5) and applies it to God's people today. Since Christ is always with us, we have all that we need! We need never desire any material thing (Phil. 4:19); we need never fear the attacks of people. Christ is our Helper; we need never fear (Ps. 118:6). When the children of God are in the will of God, obeying the Word of God, they will never lack anything and can never be harmed. This is a promise that we can count on.

III. Spiritual Food in the Word (13:7–10)

There are three commandments in this chapter that refer to the local church and the place of the pastor and people:

A. "Remember them which have the rule over you" (v. 7).

He is probably referring to pastors who had led them but were now gone. Perhaps they had been martyred. "Have the rule" means "to lead"; the pastor is expected to be the spiritual leader of the flock. How does he lead? Through the Word of God, which is the spiritual food for God's sheep. The believers are to follow the example of their faith, but the leaders are expected to point to Christ. Verses 7–8 should read: "... considering the end (purpose) of their behavior, which is Jesus Christ ... "Pastors come and go, but Christ remains the same.

B. "Obey them that have the rule over you" (v. 17).

Christians are to submit to the Word of God as taught and lived by their spiritual leaders. It is a solemn thing to be a pastor entrusted with the watch for souls. The pastor must give an account of his ministry to the Lord; if his flock has disobeyed the Word, the sorrow will be theirs, not his. How important it is to respect pastoral leadership and submit to the Word of God.

C. “Salute them that rule over you” (v. 24).

The people should communicate with their leaders and be on “speaking terms” with them. It is a tragedy when Christians become angry and refuse to talk with their pastor. This is disobedience to the Word of God.

Believers who do not feed on the Word will feed on “strange doctrines” (v. 9) and become “spiritually sick.” The only way to grow to maturity and be established is through the Word of God (Eph. 4:14ff, and see Heb. 5:11–14). Our hearts are established by grace, not by law or earthly religious systems. The Christian’s “altar” is Christ, the once-for-all sacrifice for sin; we feed on Him as we feed on His Word. Just as the OT priests ate the meat and grain from the sacrifices, so we feed on Christ, the living sacrifice.

IV. Spiritual Sacrifices (13:11–16)

In turning to Christ, these Hebrews lost the temple and its priesthood and sacrifices; but they gained in Christ far more than they lost. Christ rejected the temple and called it “a den of thieves”; and He rejected the city of Jerusalem by being crucified outside the gate (John 19:20). The writer compares Christ’s death to the burning of the sacrifices on the day of atonement (Lev. 16:27), since both suffered “outside the camp.” The readers were being tempted to go back to Judaism. “No,” admonishes the writer. “Instead of going back, go outside the camp and bear reproach with Christ!” You may summarize the two-fold message of Hebrews in the phrases “within the veil” (fellowship with Christ) and “without the camp” (witness for Christ). Believers look to no earthly city; they have a heavenly city awaiting them, as did the heroes of faith of old (v. 14; Heb. 11:10; 12:27).

As a kingdom of priests, Christians are to offer spiritual sacrifices (1 Peter 2:5). A spiritual sacrifice is something done or given in the name of Christ and for His glory. In v. 15, he states that praise is such a sacrifice; see Eph. 5:18–19, Pss. 27:6 and 69:30–31. Good works and sharing material blessings are also spiritual sacrifices (v. 16). Other spiritual sacrifices include the believer’s body (Rom. 12:1–2); offerings (Phil. 4:18); prayer (Ps. 141:2); a broken heart (Ps. 51:17); and souls won to Christ (Rom. 15:16).

V. Spiritual Power (13:17–24)

The benediction of vv. 20–21 explains how the Christian is enabled to live for Christ in this wicked world: Christ works in us from His throne in heaven. There are three separate titles given to Christ, the Shepherd: (1) the Good Shepherd, who dies for the sheep—John 10:11 and Ps. 22; (2) the Great Shepherd, who perfects the sheep—Heb. 13:20–21 and Ps. 23; and (3) the Chief Shepherd, who will come for the sheep—1 Peter 5:4 and Ps. 24. Our High Priest is our Shepherd and Helper; He works in us and gives us the grace and power to live for Him and serve Him.

“Make you perfect” is the theme of Hebrews; “let us go on unto perfection [maturity]” (6:1). Maturity does not come through our striving in our own strength; it comes as we allow Christ to work in us through the Word of God. This parallels Phil. 2:12–16 and Eph. 3:20–21. God cannot work through us until first He works in us, and He works in us through His Word (1 Thes. 2:13).

The closing greetings show the love that bound believers together in the early church. The closing benediction of grace identifies Paul as the writer (compare 2 Thes. 3:17–18).