

HEBREWS: THE  
SUPREMACY OF CHRIST  
OVER ALL



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54 SERMONS ON THE EPISTLE TO THE  
HEBREWS

*by*

*Jeremiah Bass*

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## PREFACE

THIS IS A BOOK OF SERMONS, preached at Cincinnati Primitive Baptist Church from June 2021 to November 2022. I preached this series of messages for the primary reason that I think the message of this epistle is incredibly relevant for the church in the West. We are facing an increasingly hostile culture which will demand more and more compromise in order to fit in. We will be told that our religion is out-dated and old-fashioned, and that there will be great costs socially and economically if we do not bow the knee to the spirit of the age.

In the face of such demands, we need to be reminded why our faith is worth keeping. We need to know why the call to persevere in our faith and hope in Christ is worth it. It is to such people that this epistle is so relevant. For the Hebrew Christians to whom this letter was written were also being pressed to abandon their faith for a Christ-less Judaism. The pressure upon them was great, and many of them were apparently on the verge of outright apostasy. In this epistle, which is “a word of exhortation” (Heb. 13:22), a written sermon, they - and we - are reminded why our faith is so precious and why it is worth it to endure to the end, even if we lose every earthly possession.

It is precious because Christ is precious. In this letter, Christ is exalted as the unchanging and eternal Son of God who became also the Son of Man so that he could be our true High Priest. As such, he accomplished what no angel, or lawgiver, or military leader, or earthly priest could ever do. He accomplished redemption, a redemption that grants true and lasting forgiveness of sins and gives us the right, through faith in

Christ, to fellowship with God and never-ending, ever-increasing joy in his presence.

I have divided this book into thirteen parts, corresponding to the number of chapters the epistle to the Hebrews has in our Bibles. Each part is given a title that I think briefly summarizes the content of that chapter. Thus, Part 1 is entitled, "The Son of God" because perhaps the main theme of chapter one is the glory of Christ as the eternal Son of God. Part 2, on the other hand, is entitled, "The Son of Man" because the humanity of Christ is the great theme of this chapter. And so on.

This is not a commentary and shouldn't be read that way, though I certainly hope that the exposition given in this book is an accurate and faithful representation of the message of the text of Hebrews. The reason why I preached these sermons is the reason why the author of Hebrews wrote his epistle: this is a word of exhortation, intended to bring about change that results in hearts that love Jesus and hate sin more. It is my prayer that as you read this you will be challenged and encouraged in such a way that this is what will happen for you, too.

# CONTENTS

<i>Preface</i>	iii
<i>Hebrews: A Call to Hear God's Voice in Christ (Heb. 1:1-2)</i>	2
<i>The Incomparable Christ (Heb. 1:1-3)</i>	14
<i>Christ Better than the Angels (Heb. 1:4-14)</i>	28
<i>A Warning to Heed (Heb. 2:1-4)</i>	42
<i>Human dignity redeemed (Heb. 2:5-9)</i>	55
<i>Our Lord's Victory over Death (Heb. 2:10-18)</i>	68
<i>The Humanity of Christ (Heb. 2:10-18)</i>	79
<i>The Claims of Christ (Heb. 3:1-6)</i>	92
<i>Do Not Harden Your Heart (Heb. 3:7-11)</i>	104
<i>Exhort one another (Heb. 3:12-13)</i>	117
<i>What's the problem with unbelief? (Heb. 3:14-19)</i>	129
<i>The Rest of the Story (Heb. 4:1-11)</i>	143
<i>The Word of God (Heb. 4:12-13)</i>	155

<i>Help for Hurting People (Heb. 4:14-16)</i>	167
<i>God, Man, and Sin (Heb. 5:1)</i>	182
<i>A Better High Priest (Heb. 5:1-10)</i>	195
<i>Christ died for those who obey him (Heb. 5:9)</i>	207
<i>A Posture of Obedience (Heb 5:9)</i>	219
<i>How we need to hear (Heb. 5:11-14)</i>	231
<i>Let us go on unto perfection (Heb. 6:1-3)</i>	243
<i>How to think about apostasy (Heb. 6:4-12)</i>	254
<i>The Full Assurance of Hope (Heb. 6:11-20)</i>	268
<i>The Mysterious Melchizedek (Heb. 7:1-10)</i>	282
<i>A New Priesthood (Heb. 7:11-19)</i>	294
<i>Jesus: Our Only High Priest (Heb. 7:20-28)</i>	305
<i>Christ's Heavenly Priesthood (Heb. 8:1-5)</i>	317
<i>The Mediator of a New Covenant (Heb. 8:6-13)</i>	328
<i>The Way into the Holiest of All (Heb. 9:1-10)</i>	343
<i>The Redemption Accomplished by Christ (Heb. 9:11-14)</i>	355
<i>The Christ of the Covenants (Heb. 9:15)</i>	367
<i>The New Covenant-Testament (Heb. 9:16-22)</i>	377
<i>Christ: Past, Present, and Future (Heb. 9:23-28)</i>	389



<i>Will our sins be remembered or forgotten? (Heb. 10:1-18)</i>	402
<i>Three things to do when you've scaled the summit of Hebrews. (Heb. 10:19-25)</i>	416
<i>A Warning against Entrenched Unbelief (Heb. 10:26-31)</i>	429
<i>How heaven helps us to hold on (Heb. 10:32-39)</i>	443
<i>Faith is the substance of things hoped for (Heb. 11:1-3)</i>	455
<i>Antediluvian Exemplars of Faith (Heb. 11:4-7)</i>	469
<i>The Faith of Abraham (Heb. 11:8)</i>	483
<i>The Victory of Faith (Heb. 11:9-19)</i>	496
<i>Faith and the Future (Heb. 11:20-22)</i>	507
<i>The Faith of Moses (Heb. 11:23-29)</i>	520
<i>"Of whom the world was not worthy" (Heb. 11:30-40)</i>	534
<i>The Christian Race (Heb. 12:1-4)</i>	548
<i>God's Fatherly Discipline (Heb. 12:5-11)</i>	560
<i>The Necessity of Hope and Holiness (Heb. 12:12-17)</i>	571
<i>The Two Mountains (Heb. 12:18-24)</i>	585
<i>Steps to Service (Heb. 12:25-29)</i>	598
<i>Let brotherly love continue (Heb. 13:1-3)</i>	613
<i>The Value and Vandalism of Marriage (Heb. 13:4)</i>	624
<i>Contentment in Christ (Heb. 13:5-6)</i>	637

<i>Spiritual Leadership in the Church (Heb. 13:7,17)</i>	649
<i>The Exclusive and Superior Priesthood of Jesus Christ (Heb. 13:8-16)</i>	663
<i>A Prayerful Close to a Powerful Epistle (Heb. 13:18-25)</i>	676
<i>Why I am a Baptist - and why you should be one, too</i>	689

*Hebrews: the Supremacy of Christ over all*

# THE SON OF GOD

# CHAPTER I

## HEBREWS: A CALL TO HEAR GOD'S VOICE IN CHRIST (HEB. 1:1-2)

IT IS MY INTENTION, over the next weeks and months to deliver a series of expository messages on the book of Hebrews. I'm excited about this, and I hope you will join me in my excitement, because this is such a wonderful and important epistle. Of course it is, because it is in the Bible! It is inspired and without error. But why begin here with Hebrews?<sup>1</sup> Let me give you a couple of reasons.

Why Hebrews?

First, Hebrews is important because in some sense this epistle summarizes the message of both the Old and the New Testament. It is the entire Bible in the short compass of its thirteen chapters. I think this is the reason R. C. Sproul said that, if he were going to be stranded on a desert island and could only take one book, he would take the Bible;

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<sup>1</sup>This was the first series of messages that I gave as the Senior Pastor at Cincinnati Primitive Baptist Church.

but if he could only take one book from the Bible, he would choose Hebrews.

But second, I think the book of Hebrews is especially relevant for our day, because it speaks to people who are thinking about leaving the faith. Today we are seeing a lot of vocal and visible people leave the Christian faith and the Christian church. Deconversion stories abound. We are clearly living in a time when a lot of people, who were raised in the church or who were once members of the church, are seriously questioning the feasibility of remaining a Christian. To many people, it is seeming less and less plausible. I would not be surprised if there are some in this very congregation who are there. So I hope this epistle speaks to you and encourages you to remain faithful to Christ. But even if you are not there, discouragement can make being a Christian and being a light in the world difficult, and this epistle speaks to that as well. So I hope these messages will encourage you.

Let's start there – what kinds of things would make someone want to leave the faith, and what does Hebrews say about this? There are many things that might make one want to give up on Christianity or the church or the faith. Of course, we know from the Bible that the enemy of the church – Satan – is constantly at work to overthrow the faith of the saints. He is roaming about, seeking whom he may devour, wanting to sift the faith of the vulnerable. But he uses a multitude of means to accomplish his nefarious ends, and I want to mention a few of these.

One of the main things the devil likes to use is just plain old suffering. It could be suffering through persecution. Or it could be suffering as it comes in a number of other forms: cancer, family crises, betrayal, job loss, business failure, and on and on. But the thing that is most likely to put the greatest amount of stress upon our faith is not just suffering; it is suffering with no earthly end in sight. When we look at the trial we are going through and it doesn't look like it will ever let up – that is often when our faith becomes strained to the point of breaking. And the devil knows that. We ask, "If God is real, and if the Christian faith is

real, wouldn't that mean that God will take these sufferings away? And if they're not taken away, doesn't that prove that Christianity doesn't work, or at least that God doesn't care?" And so many folks have walked away from Jesus since, because of their suffering, they don't have confidence anymore that he is there or that he cares.

Another thing that really is a subset of the former category, but which I want to highlight, is social alienation. I'm not talking about social awkwardness; I'm talking about people rejecting you or marginalizing you because of your faith in Christ. At times like this we are tempted to ask, "How can this be right when so many people find it disgusting? How can something be right that so many people think is foolishness? How could I live in a world created by God amidst people created by God and see things so entirely different from everyone else? Might not the answer be that I am wrong?" And then add to this the fact that, if we stopped being faithful to Christ, it would make our lives much easier on this earth, and you have a recipe for walking away from Jesus.

Add to that the doubts that we all wrestle with from time to time. Of course, doubts don't come from nowhere. They are there many times when we are in circumstances like those we have just mentioned. But the fact of the matter is that our culture is constantly bombarding us with doubts about our faith. Everything is being questioned. There is no part of the Christian faith that is not under attack. A few years ago, here in the West we had the privilege of living in a society that shared many of our basic convictions. But that is no longer the case. We cannot even assume that our culture accepts many of our basic convictions about ethical issues. But here's the point: when doubts begin to pile up – doubt upon doubt, we get to the point where we don't think we can believe in the Christian faith anymore. So people walk away.

### Discouraged Believers

So here's the question: how do you encourage someone (and that might be yourself!) to keep the faith when they are weary and discouraged, perhaps to the point of wanting to give up? Here is where the book of Hebrews can be of tremendous help and benefit. Because the book of Hebrews was written to a small church of mainly Jewish believers, many of whose members were apparently in precisely this predicament. What we have in front of us in the book of Hebrews is a sermon – it is called a “word of exhortation” in Heb. 13:22 – meant to encourage and strengthen and give hope to worn and weary believers who were on the verge of abandoning the faith.

We know that they had become weary through persecution for the faith from evidence given to us in the book itself. In 10:32-39, we are told that they had “endured a hard struggle with sufferings, sometimes being publicly exposed to reproach and affliction” (32-33, ESV). Some of them had gone to prison, and others had lost property and possessions (34). Their enduring the contradiction of unbelievers had had its toll: and later these believers will be exhorted to look to Christ “lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds” (12:3). Apparently, some were already there. Then, we have this exhortation: “Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (12:12), a picture of utter discouragement, because that's where they were. Finally, in 13:13, the author encourages them to “go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach.” It seems that they were so worn down and disheartened that they just didn't feel it in them to endure anymore. If they were going to remain Christian, they were going to do so in private. They had just had enough of this persecution. They didn't want to endure any more, even if that meant they had to give up the faith.

We can't know for sure, but it seems – and there seems to be somewhat of a general consensus on this – that this epistle was written to a house church in Rome about the middle of the first century. It is thought to have been addressed to a church in Rome for two main reasons. First, because the very first time this epistle is quoted is by Clement of Rome at the end of the first century. The fact that it first shows up

in the writings of an elder of the Roman church makes it likely that the epistle originated near there. Second, we have these words in 13:24 – “They of Italy salute you.” This is not the only way to interpret this sentence, but certainly one way is that the author is with folks from Italy who want to send their greetings back to their fellow countrymen.

It was probably written in the middle of the first century. Assuming a Roman provenance, an earliest date would be A.D. 49, for this was when the Jews were evicted from Rome by the Emperor Claudius (an event noted in Acts 18:2 and by the Roman historian Suetonius). It was this event which probably explains the loss of property and imprisonment referred to in chapter 10. So it had to be after that. An upper bound for the date of this epistle is A.D. 95 because that’s when Clement of Rome quotes parts of Hebrews 1 in his epistle to the Corinthians. However, the fact that Hebrews seems to assume the Temple service is still ongoing (cf. Heb. 10:11) would mean that it had to be before A.D. 70. But there is another consideration. It is this: though they had endured persecution, they had not yet experienced martyrdom, for they had “not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin” (12:4). However, we know that the Emperor Nero persecuted Christians in Rome between A.D. 64 and 68, when he died. It seems likely, then, that it was written perhaps in the early 60’s in the first century.

Now I said that this was written to a congregation of mainly Jewish believers, because, it seems to me, the argument of the epistle demands that. They were weary and thinking about walking away from the faith. But what were they walking to? It seems that they were thinking about returning to a Christless Judaism. That is, they just wanted to set back the clock and go back to the way things were before Jesus showed up. That would certainly relieve them from a lot of the persecution they were experiencing. Judaism was a legally recognized religion in the Roman empire, but Christianity was not. By going back to their old Judaism, they would no longer have to endure persecution for their faith. The argument of the epistle is that they must not, they should



not, do this. It is insanity to abandon their faith in Christ, no matter what sufferings they will have to endure. That's the argument.

Before I proceed, let me address the million-dollar question: who wrote Hebrews? Well, if you have a KJV, you might think I'm being cheeky here, because it says, in all caps at the very beginning of the epistle: "THE EPISTLE OF PAUL THE APOSTLE TO THE HEBREWS." However, you need to understand that this heading did not originate with any of the Greek manuscripts from which Hebrews is translated. It originated, I believe, with Jerome's version of the Bible in Latin, called the Vulgate. The reality is that there has been a lot of debate from the very beginning over the authorship of this epistle, and that Paul's name was never universally recognized as the author, although due to the influence of Augustine and Jerome in the fourth century, Paul's name became for many years the one associated with this letter.

I can't say that I know who wrote it. However, I can say that I'm pretty sure that the apostle Paul did not in fact write it. I say that for two reasons. First, in every other epistle of his, Paul always identifies himself (and it seems pretty important to him that he does this). The fact that the author doesn't do so here indicates this is not the apostle Paul writing it. Second, and what I consider to be the decisive argument, is what is said in 2:3-4: "How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?" Whoever wrote Hebrews does not put himself with those who personally heard Jesus, nor with those who performed miracles in his name. This would certainly rule Paul out.

But who did write it? I think it was Origen who famously said of the author of Hebrews, "Only God knows," and I agree. Tertullian thought Barnabas wrote it. Others suggested Luke (author of the gospel of Luke and Acts) and Clement of Rome. Martin Luther thought Apollos wrote it. Other names have been put forward as well. Nevertheless, the most we can say is that whoever wrote it was a Jewish

Christian man (the grammar of Heb. 11:32 demands that the author is male) in the first century. Does it make a difference not knowing? No; there are several books in the Bible whose authors we do not know (think the books of Kings and Chronicles, for example), but that does not negatively affect their canonicity. The reality is that the early church accepted Hebrews as canonical because it recognized that in this book we have a word inspired by the Holy Spirit for the good of God's church and for the glory of his name. One writer has put it this way: "Hebrews was preserved and transmitted because Christian leaders kept picking it up and positive results followed."<sup>2</sup>

### The Roots of their Discouragement

The author, whoever he was, was clearly concerned for the spiritual welfare of these Jewish Christians in Rome. He knew that they were on the verge, at least some of them, of spiritual collapse. And so he is writing them to encourage them to persevere, to continue in the faith.

Now, I think it is very instructive how he does not do it. He does not do it by promising them that if they remain faithful, things will look up and they will escape persecution. In some ways, the author is steeling their minds and hearts for faithfulness in future persecution.

Rather, what he does in this book is to look at the roots of their discouragement and to address those. He considers how the alienation and loss they had experienced, and were experiencing, had undermined their faith. There were at least three things that were happening, which the book of Hebrews was written to address.

First, they had failed to embrace a pilgrim mindset, which will make suffering for Christ much more difficult. Hence, we have the call to such a mindset in Hebrews 11 and 13. If you view this world as your home, you will be discouraged when it becomes inhospitable. But when you consider yourself a pilgrim, a sojourner, you are going to be more likely to put up with certain losses and crosses. So there is this tremendous

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<sup>2</sup>William Lane, Hebrews 1-8 [WBC], (Zondervan, 1991), p. cliv.

emphasis on seeing themselves as aliens in a foreign land, on their way to their true homeland.

Second, they had failed to believe that the Christian hope is superior to its alternatives. Other things had grabbed their hearts. And this will inevitably cause a person to abandon the faith in Christ for something else that is perceived to be superior. So this epistle aims at convincing its audience that the Christian hope is superior to its competitors.

You see this concern embedded in the very structure of the book. Comparisons are made and the hope of Christ is argued to be “better.” Thus, “For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God” (7:19). “By so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament” (7:22). “But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises” (8:6). Then you have this magnificent running comparison between Mount Sinai [which represents the law] and Mount Zion [which represents the Christian hope] in 12:18-29.

In fact, the whole argument of this epistle is that Christ is better. He is better than the angels through which the law was given (chapters 1-2). He is better than Moses to whom the law was given (chapter 3). He is better than Joshua, who led law-blessed Israel into the Promised Land (chapter 4). He is better than Aaron and the Levitical Priesthood established by the law of Moses, which is where the author camps out and spends a lot of time developing the superiority of Christ to all that (chapters 5-10). What remains of the book (beginning about 10:19) is to apply the richness of the excellence of the gospel to their lives. If they really grasp these things, they will, they must, hold the confidence of their hope firm to the end.

Of course, that doesn’t mean application isn’t ongoing throughout the epistle. The whole letter is one sustained exhortation, and the author doesn’t wait until the end to make application; he does so throughout. Thus you have repeated instances of exhortation and rebuke throughout the letter. In fact, I would argue that the doctrine of Hebrews is

meant to support the entreaties and warnings made throughout the letter. It is an urgent call to see the superiority of the hope we have in Christ so that we don't abandon him for second-rate and phony alternatives.

So they had failed to embrace a pilgrim mindset, they had failed to see the superiority of the Christian hope, and they had failed to see the excellency and sufficiency of Christ as our Savior, which guarantees our hope and grounds it. Such a failure to see these things will surely lead to spiritual attrition and apostasy. This book deals with each one of these failures head on and diagnoses them, then gives the Biblical solution to them.

### The Need to Hear the Word of God

However, underneath all this, all these failures, lies a more fundamental error, although, at the same time they also perhaps contributed toward this error. That is, these Christians had stopped listening to the voice of God in his Scripture and in his Son. They had stopped believing that God was speaking to them in the preaching of the gospel. This is, as I understand it, the overarching theme of the book of Hebrews: this epistle fundamentally addresses the need to listen to, to take heed to, to hear afresh the voice of God in the word of God.

You can see this in the way the author bookends this letter. He begins with the statement that God has spoken – first in the prophets and climatically and finally in his Son (1:1-2), and then towards the end, exhorts them to “see that ye refuse not him that speaketh” (12:25). God has spoken: hear him! that's the message. The problem when we become discouraged is that we stop listening to God. We start listening to other things, other messages, and we therefore give in to other hopes and end up walking away from Christ. One of the goals of any Christian minister and pastor is to facilitate the faithful hearing of the word of God to the people of God. That is what this pastor – the author of Hebrews – is doing.

It's amazing and fascinating in the way he does it. We have to remember that, for him, Scripture was the Old Testament. And so he quotes it, and does so often, expounding and explaining and applying God's word to God's people. In Hebrews, the OT is quoted and alluded to so often that it's actually difficult to nail down precisely just how much he does it. According to one NT scholar, "there are thirty-one explicit quotations [of OT Scripture] and four more implicit quotations, a minimum of thirty-seven allusions, nineteen instances where OT material is summarized, and thirteen more where a biblical name or topic is cited without reference to a specific context."<sup>3</sup> That's a lot for a small book.

But what I find compelling is how he quotes the OT, and this is actually without parallel in the NT. He doesn't quote the OT by the phrase, "It is written," but by something like, "he says," or "it says." For example, just to take one instance, look at Heb. 3:7. When he quotes Psalm 95, he does so by introducing it by the phrase, "as the Holy Ghost saith." Two things are very important here. First, this is not just David speaking. David probably wrote Psalm 95, but that is not how the author of Hebrews begins the quote.

He does so by saying that this is the word of God; specifically the word of the Holy Spirit, the one who inspires all God's word. But this is not all. He could have justly said, "The Holy Spirit said," past tense – but this isn't what he did, is it? No – instead he puts it in the present tense: "The Holy Spirit is saying." Do you see what he is doing? The Bible is not some dead letter. God is still speaking through it. This is why "the word of God is quick [living], and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and the marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and the intents of the heart" (4:12). Do we understand the Bible like that? Do we understand that when we pick of the Bible, God is speaking to us?

Someone could tell whether or not I believe this by how often I pick up the Bible. It's one thing to believe that the Bible is God's word, that

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<sup>3</sup>Lane, p. cxvi.

he has spoken in the pages of Scripture. Yes, and Amen. But if that's where I stop, I may never really appreciate what the Bible is to me, and as a result I will not incorporate it into my life like Psalm 1 and Deut. 6 commands us to do. And so I am going to be a weak and a defective Christian. How is a Christian to become strong and mature? It is by the word of God (2 Tim. 3:16-17; cf. 1 Thess. 2:13).

This is what had happened, apparently, to these Christians. Instead of listening to the word of God with enthusiasm, they had become "dull of hearing" (5:11). Because of the suffering they had endured, they had stopped being willing to listen to the word of God. Persecution and loss can indeed make it hard to believe that God is concerned about us and our circumstances. And if that's the case, it's hard to believe that his word has anything to say to us. But it does! Hebrews is meant to convince us of this reality. I hope it does this for you and for me. Our God is concerned for us. He does speak to us, and he speaks to us in such a way that, if we are willing to listen, it will fill us with hope and joy and confidence and determination.

Let me summarize for you what kind of word God has to say to us in this book. First of all, it is a word of salvation – he has given us the gospel of our "great salvation" (2:1-3; 4:2; 8:10-12; 10:15-17). This is not some cheap salvation, like this world offers. This is not some "live for the moment" kind of mumbo-jumbo. No, this is great salvation. It is described as rest – can the world really give you this? But Christ can (cf. Mt. 11:28-30), and we are encouraged to enter into that rest.

Second, it is a word of hope – "strong consolation" (6:13-19). No matter what is facing us, the hope that we have in Christ is sure and steadfast and certain. Again, there is nothing on this earth that can give you that. I challenge you to present it, if you can. Only Christ can give us this kind of hope, and this in fact is the very word he has given.

Third, it is a word of wisdom – like a father instructing his children (12:5, ff). God relates to his children as a good Father, genuinely caring for their needs. And this means that he will discipline us if that is what

is needed. He knows what is best for us, and his word comes to us with wisdom of a good and gracious father.

Finally, it is a word of warning (2:1-4; 3:7-19; 5:11-6:12; 10:19-39; 12:14-27). There are five major warnings in this epistle. Frankly, these warnings are the reason for much consternation – as well as bad doctrinal conclusions – in the church. We will consider them in due time. But the point I want to make at this juncture is that such warnings are good and necessary for us. Parents that never warns their children are bad parents. God is going to warn us of what will happen if we walk away. And in his sovereign grace and mercy these become the means by which he often brings back his straying children. We should heed the warnings. Don't write them off. Take them seriously. Do not refuse the God who speaks!

## CHAPTER II

# THE INCOMPARABLE CHRIST (HEB. 1:1-3)

IN ONE OF HIS ENCOUNTERS WITH THE PHARISEES, our Lord asked them the following question: “What think ye of Christ? Whose son is he?” (Mt. 22:42). In another place, he asked his own disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” and when they gave him a number of answers, he pressed them: “But whom say ye that I am?” (Mt. 16:13-15). There has never been a time when there has not been confusion about the person of Jesus Christ, and our day is no exception. The reason why our Lord asked these questions is because so many people were getting it wrong. Yet he was not satisfied that people get it wrong. This is no intellectual question: the problem is that many people, being confronted with the person of Christ, interpret him in ways that are compatible with a lifestyle of sin and spiritual hardness. The thing is, if Jesus is just another spiritual guru, he is harmless. But if he is who he himself said he is: the Son of God and Savior of the world – then his claims are not so easily dismissed.

This is why the author of Hebrews begins where he does. Though this entire book is about Jesus, in these first few verses, he sums up for us the essence of who Jesus Christ is. He begins by saying that the fun-



damental identity of Jesus is that he is the Son of God and he unpacks this reality for us. In this text we are told that though God has spoken before at many times and in many ways through the prophets, yet in these last days – that is, in the Messianic age, last in the sense that there is no great redemptive historical event between now and the culmination of history in the Second Coming – God has spoken to us in his Son. What this tells us is that God’s ultimate word has been spoken in the person and ministry of his Son. This word is now communicated to us in the words of the apostles, so that in the Bible we have God’s completed word. The OT is the word of the prophets, and the NT is the word of the apostles which communicates the word of the Son.

What follows the announcement that God has spoken finally and climactically in his Son is a description of the Son. In the first three verses, we have seven distinct yet related statements about the Son, who he is and what he does. In a fundamental way, of course, this entire letter is an explanation of the superiority of the Son to the Law, but the author begins with a basic summary of the key attributes of the person of the Son so that what follows in the rest of the book is in one way or other really an unpacking of the implications of these three verses. So these are very important verses.

It is important to see, first of all, that nothing ascribed to Jesus the Son of God can be attributed to anyone or anything else. There is no scientist, scholar, statesman, political leader, social justice warrior, military warrior, dictator, or any other mere mortal man who can affirm even one thing that is here said of the Son. This is why merely human solutions to mankind’s most pressing problems are always fraught with failure. A godless culture refuses to accept the reality of the depth of its need (namely, sin), and therefore it does not see its need for a transcendent Savior to come to its rescue. It settles for Band-Aids on cancers.

If you don’t see man’s deepest need in terms of the Fall of man into sin and the effects of that Fall, you are going to locate the problems elsewhere. One particularly modern explanation of our problems is to look at society and to locate our problems in external systems and

societal structures, whether political or economic (or both). The idea is that, if society is broken, the explanation of that brokenness is always an external thing – it is a bad political structure or a wrong economic structure. We are told that all that needs to happen is to replace the bad structure with a good one and our problems will be solved. This is the approach, for example, of Marxism.

Now I don't want to convey the idea that political or economic systems can't be bad and be in need of replacement or repair. However, if that's all you see, your solution is not going to come near to fixing the problems. Unfortunately, this is the way people are thinking today because they have rejected the Biblical view of man and sin. They think that if we just fix the "system" – whatever that is – all will be well. I fear that we are making the same mistakes that the Russian people made back at the beginning of the 20th century. They were living under an oppressive government and the Communists came along and told them that, if they overthrew the government, they would give them something much better. Well, the problem, as history makes clear, is that they just replaced one oppressor with another. This is because Marxism, which begins with a denial of God and of sin, cannot do anything but replace one broken system with another.

It is important that we begin with a Biblical view of the problem of man and sin. It is especially important today because modern man has completely rejected the Biblical account of our problems. Recently, I read a post by a friend in which it was claimed that it is child abuse to teach children that they are born in a state of sin. I say it is child abuse to teach the opposite. It sounds nice, of course, to teach that people are basically good, but this is just a Pollyannish view of the world – it is certainly not a realistic one. Lying to children (or anyone else) is not doing them a favor. It is akin to telling them that Santa Claus is real – a nice thought, but a lie, nonetheless. I know that original sin is not a popular idea (it never has been), but as one person put it, the doctrine of original sin is one of the doctrines of the Christian faith than can actually be empirically verified. Look around you and you will find

constant verification of the Pauline statement that “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:18).

So what has the Fall done, and what does this have to do with Hebrews 1? Well, let’s begin with what the Fall has done and then I want to circle back and tie this to what the apostle is saying here in the first few verses of the book of Hebrews.

What is the Biblical description of mankind’s fundamental problem? The Bible teaches that every human being is fundamentally corrupt, not only by practice but also by nature. This is what the apostle Paul is getting at in his description of the human predicament in Eph. 2:1-3: “And you hath he quickened, who were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in time past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others.” We are dead in sins and we are that way by nature – and you can’t get much worse than that (cf. Rom. 1-3).

Now this doesn’t mean that we’re as bad as we can possibly be. Thank God for his common grace and restraining hand! Nor does it mean that men by nature can’t do many good things. Nor does it mean that we are not accountable before God for our actions. What it does mean is that, left to ourselves, we will always freely choose a course that is fundamentally opposed to submission to God, to love to God. We are invariably idolators. And though it doesn’t mean that we are all Hitlers, it does mean that we are all capable of Hitler’s atrocities, given the right circumstances, even if we don’t (mercifully) get there.

This is what theologians mean by phrases like “original sin” or “total depravity.” Original sin means that we are born with a nature that is turned in on itself and oriented away from God. Total depravity means that every faculty of our soul is corrupted by this sin – total referring to the totality of our being (not totally depraved in the sense that we

can't get any worse): mind, affections, and will. And this has left us, as the Shorter Catechism so well summarizes, in a state of sin and misery.

The doctrine of original sin is the great leveler. If this is the case, no one can say that they are fundamentally better than another person, for that would be like one dead person saying that they are not as decomposed as the next. However, most importantly, it means that we cannot be our own saviors. It means that it must take a Being transcendent to us and holy – in other words, it must take the Son of God.

This is why what Hebrews tells us about the Son is so important. Only such a person can save us. As the apostle puts it in 7:25, “Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.” In the surrounding verses, the author is comparing Jesus with priests who were mortal. It is because he is the immortal Son of God that he can do what those priests could not. We need someone who can save us “to the uttermost;” only the kind of person described in these verses can do such a thing.

On the other hand, if you don't recognize that Jesus Christ is in fact the eternal Son of God, you will end up making salvation a matter of works and have to correspondingly dumb down our true condition. What I mean is, once you stop recognizing the deity of Christ, salvation must be something that I can accomplish; it has to be something that a mere man can do. This is verified in religious movements that claim to follow Jesus yet reject the Biblical view of his divinity.

Therefore, it is of utmost importance to uphold a Biblical view of Christ as the eternal Son of God. This is why the way Hebrews starts out is so important. Again, the seven things that are here predicated of the Son transcend any description of mere mortal men. This is not a description of some super saint; it is a description of one who shares the very nature of the Father, who is co-equal and co-eternal with the Father, the eternal Son of God. So what are these seven things? Let's look at them one by one.

He is the heir of all things: “whom he appointed heir of all things”

The phrase is a clear allusion to Psalm 2:8, which the early church took to be a psalm about Jesus, because it is a psalm about the Christ. In the psalm, God is speaking to his anointed one (ver. 2), and he says, “Ask of me, and I shall give thee the heathen for thine inheritance, and the uttermost parts of the earth for thy possession.” In Psalm 82:8, we read, “Arise, O God, judge the earth: for thou shalt inherit all nations.” Now why would the Christ, why would God, need to inherit the nations? Aren’t they already his? In one sense, the answer is yes. But in another sense, the answer is no because not all nations yet acknowledge his sovereignty. Hence, I take this to be a reference to the culmination of history at the Final Judgement when every knee will bow and every tongue will confess the sovereignty of God over all things. And this is exactly what the NT affirms of Christ. The apostle Paul puts it this way to the Philippians (quoting Isaiah 45:23): “Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name: that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth: and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Phil. 2:9-11).

Now this is a statement of the deity of Christ because it is God who will inherit the nations. In fact, what Paul affirms of our Lord in his statement to the Philippians, is affirmed of God in Isaiah 45. As the one who inherits all things, the Son shares the glory of his Father, because he is the Son of the God. He is the creator of all things: “by whom also he made the worlds”

It is sometimes affirmed by some folks that God made the Son first and then the Son made everything else. But we know this is not the case. For example, the apostle John puts it this way: “All things were made by him: and without him was not anything made that was made” (Jn. 1:3). Now imagine with me two categories: “Made” and “Not Made.” Clearly, these two categories include everything that exists. My question

is this: in which category does Jesus belong? Now the apostle affirms, if anything was made, Jesus made it: this is the clear implication of the second part of the verse. But this would mean that Jesus is not in the “Made” category, for then that would mean that he created himself. In other words, it would mean that he existed before he existed! So our Lord must belong to the “Not Made” category. But there is only one Being who belongs in the “Not Made” category: God himself!

Thus, when we read Genesis 1:1, “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” (which is a Hebraism for the universe), we see that this is a statement about the Son. It is the reason why John self-consciously (I think) began his epistle in such a way as to make an explicit a parallel with Genesis 1:1. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God. All things were made by him.”

Think about it: the one who is restoring God’s broken world is none else than the Creator of all things. The one who made it can fix it. He can recreate and restore what has been undone by sin.

He is the brightness of the Father’s glory and

He is the express image of his person

We must consider these two things together because, I believe, they are saying the same thing in two different ways. Now there is no question, in my mind, that these phrases are a clear witness to the deity of the Son. In fact, apparently the heretical Arians in the Christological debates of the fourth century did not want to include Hebrews in the canon of Scripture precisely because of this verse. However, there is the question of whether this is a reference to the visible manifestation of his deity, or if it is a description of the deity itself. A lot of the early church fathers understood this to be a description of the deity itself. They would say that, just as you cannot separate the radiance or brightness of a light from the light itself, even so you cannot separate the essence of the God-

head that is shared between the Father and the Son, and this proves that Christ is God. For example, Athanasius said, “Who does not see that the brightness cannot be separated from the light, but that it is by nature proper to it and co-existent with it, and is not produced by it?”<sup>1</sup> You see this in the Nicene Creed, where it says, “We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father; through him were all things made.” I don’t think there’s any question that the phrase “Light from Light” has its origins in Heb. 1:3.

Nevertheless, I think that probably what the author had in mind here was the visible manifestation of the glory of the Father in the person of the incarnate Christ. As such he is the “radiance of the glory of God” (ESV). But the reality is that only someone who is truly God can radiate the glory of God in this way. This is what the apostle John was getting at when he said, “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (Jn. 1:14). Or when he wrote, “No man hath seen God at any time: the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him” (1:18). [Remember that he had just said that “the Word was God”!] This visible manifestation of the Father’s glory was reflected throughout the entirety of his life, but especially in his miracles, in his Transfiguration, and ultimately in his Resurrection and Ascension (“raised in glory,” 1 Tim. 3:16). Donald Guthrie is right on when he comments, “To reflect the glory of God in this way presupposes that the Son shares the same essence as the Father, not just his likeness.”<sup>2</sup> It is why our Lord could say to Philip, who asked the Lord to show them the Father: “Have I been so long time with you, and yet hast thou not known me, Philip? He that hath seen me hath seen the Father: and how sayest thou then, Show us the Father?” (Jn. 14:9).

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<sup>1</sup>Quoted in Philip Edgcumbe Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 42.

<sup>2</sup>Donald Guthrie, *Hebrews* [TNTC], (IVP, 1999), p. 66.

This is also why he is the “express image of his person.” Now I think perhaps that a better translation here would be, “the exact imprint of his nature” (ESV). This is because the Greek word here which is translated “person” in the KJV is better translated “nature.” It is true that the word for “person” in the KJV (hypostasis) came to mean “person” in later centuries and at that time Greek theologians would use this term to distinguish between the Father, Son, and Spirit who share the same essence (ousia). However, in the first century it was apparently used more often with the meaning “nature” rather than “person.”

The idea behind “express image” is that of a die or an engraving: “a stamp on a wax seal will bear the same image as the engraving on the seal.”<sup>3</sup> It is the same idea, I think, as what the apostle Paul was getting across when he wrote of our Lord that he is “the image of the invisible God” (Col. 1:15). He is the image of the invisible God because he shares the very nature of God. There is an exact correspondence between the Son and the Father in a way that infinitely surpasses our ability to image forth God. We are created in God’s image, yes, but it cannot be said of us what is said of the Son, for he is the “express image” or “exact imprint.” That is something which can only be said of someone who is in fact God. One author put it this way: in this verse the author is seeking “to convey as emphatically as he could his conviction that in Jesus Christ there had been provided a perfect, visible expression of the reality of God.”<sup>4</sup>

One way to put these two ideas together is simply like this: the incarnate Son of God visibly radiates the glory of the Father for the simple reason that he shares his nature. He is God. Or, to put it another way, the glory of the Son is the glory of God. It is why in 2 Corinthians 4, Paul talks about the “light of the gospel of the glory of Christ” [this is a literal translation of verse 4], and he talks about the “light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ” (ver. 6). In the gospel the glory of God shines forth in the glory of Christ, because

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* [WBC], (Zondervan, 1991), p. 13.



his glory is the glory of God.<sup>5</sup> In other words, Jesus is not the Son of the Father like we are. We are children of God by adoption. But Jesus is the pre-existent and eternal Son of God. He did not ever become the Son, for he was always the Son. He was not adopted by the Father for he is his Son by eternal generation. The church Fathers had it right: He is “God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.” Therefore, we can say with surpassing joy and hope and confidence: “For us and for our salvation he came down from heaven.”

He upholds the universe by his powerful word: “and upholding all things by the word of his power”

Not only is Jesus the creator of all things, but he also upholds all things. He is sovereign in creation, and he is sovereign in providence. I’m so thankful for this reality. Paul put it this way: “For by him were all things created, that are in heaven, and that are in earth, visible and invisible, whether they be thrones, or dominions, or principalities, or powers: all things were created by him, and for him: and he is before all things, and by him all things consist [hold together, ESV]” (Col. 1:16-17). Our Lord, God’s Son, is not the god of the deists. He didn’t wind up the world and let it go to spin out its future on its own. He not only created it, but he upholds it every moment and down to the last atom. You and I can’t even walk out of this room apart from Christ giving us the breath to do so. The reality is that man is not the captain of his soul, he is not the master of his fate. God is sovereign, not man. And thank God for that. It is for this reason that I believe that all things work together for the good of those who are called according to God’s purpose (Rom. 8:28). Not just some things, but all things!

We can have supreme confidence in Jesus as our Savior because he is sovereign over all things. If even one thing were out of his control,

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<sup>5</sup>I owe this insight to John Piper. See his book, *Providence* (Crossway, 2020), p. 195-196.

we would have just cause to be anxious about the future. But we need not fear. He is in control. As the hymn puts it: “Have faith in God, he’s on his throne.” Things are not going to spin out of control because he holds all things in his powerful hand. Rest in that and trust in him!

Think about it: how does he exercise his sovereignty? He does so by his word. By his word he created and called all things into existence, and by his word he upholds them in being. Here is someone who is not like us! The disciples began to realize this when they were in the boat in the middle of a terrific storm, and Jesus stood up in the boat and simply spoke a word and calmed the storm. I love the response of the apostles: “What manner of man is this, that even the wind and the sea obey him?” (Mk. 4:41). He could do it because he is not just a man: he is the eternal Son of God.

He purged our sins: “when he had by himself purged our sins”

The incarnate Son not only relates to the Father as the one who perfectly reflects his glory, and he not only relates to the universe as the one who created it and upholds it, but he also relates to his church, as the one who purged its sins. The meaning of “purged” carries the idea of purification. Sin corrupts and it defiles. It renders us utterly unworthy to enter into the presence of God. But on the cross, our Lord died for the sins of his people so that they might be cleansed from the pollution arising from their guilt and be able, therefore, to come into God’s presence with joy. This phrase introduces a theme that this epistle will elaborate over several chapters. It is because of this cleansing that the author will be able to say in 10:19-22, “Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.” Note that it is “purged,” not

“purges.” This is a once-for-all event. Atonement is not an on-going thing, for the sacrifice of Christ for our sins happened once for all at the cross. The way we presently appropriate it (cf. Rom. 5:11) is by faith, by looking to Jesus and trusting in him. We don’t cleanse ourselves by making ourselves better; we receive the atonement accomplished by our Lord by resting in his finished work. But this needs to be a daily reality grasped by faith. It is this idea that is behind 1 John 1:7, “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin.” From all sin, praise God!

He is seated at the Father’s right hand: “sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high”

All the previous descriptions of the Son grammatically hang on this one. In other words, the author is saying that the one who sits at the Father’s right hand is the one who is the heir of all things, who made the worlds, who is the perfect reflection and image of the Father, who upholds the universe by the word of his power, and who once-for-all purged the sins of those who believe in him. This is the Son of God.

In saying that the Son is seated, we are not to take this in a crassly literal sense. The idea is that his atoning work is accomplished and he is perfectly in control of all things. In the tabernacle there were no chairs because the priest’s work was never done. The fact that the Son is pictured as seated is an indication that he has done what he set out to do. There is nothing more to be done for the forgiveness of sins but simply to receive the pardon through faith.

In saying that he is at the right hand of the Majesty on high, the author is indicating the supremely exalted status of the Redeemer. It is true that when Jesus came to earth, he came into a state of humiliation. He was born in a low condition, made under the law, underwent the miseries of this life, the wrath of God and the cursed death on the cross, and he was buried and continued under the power of death for a time

(Shorter Catechism). “For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich” (2 Cor. 8:9). But he is poor no more. He is infinitely exalted and his elect are exalted with him: “and [God] hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:6-7).

This is the Son through whom God has spoken. He is our Prophet, for he is the one through whom God has spoken the final and decisive word. The truth we need to know about God and ourselves and how to relate to the living God – this truth is found in Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn 14:6), and those who come to God must come through him. Those who embrace him will find true freedom (Jn 8:32). He is our Priest, for he is the one who has fully and completely purged the sins of his people. I know that a lot of people don’t think there is any need for atonement from sin. They think they’re okay, especially when they compare themselves to other people. But my friends, it is our one great need. We don’t need to compare ourselves to other people: we need to see ourselves as standing before the holy and eternal God. There is no other way to relate to God unless we have the defilement of our sins removed. It is insanity to think that God will just automatically do it. It is tragic thinking to believe that God somehow owes us heaven. He does not. It is sheer grace and mercy that opens the door of heaven and fellowship with God to any sinner. Only Christ can open that door because only he satisfied the justice of God for sin on the cross. And then, he is our King. He created all things; he is the heir of all things – to him every knee shall bow and every tongue confess. He upholds all things by the word of his power and he is seated – sovereignly enthroned – at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

This is the one through whom God speaks his word of salvation, hope, wisdom, and warning. This is the one to whom “we ought to give the more earnest heed” (Heb. 2:1). Will you hear him? There are so

many voices out there. So many people who are vying for your attention and your trust. But the fact of the matter is, there is no one like Jesus. Therefore, there is no salvation like the one which our Lord gives to those who trust in him. May the Lord draw your heart to him this day!

# CHAPTER III

## CHRIST BETTER THAN THE ANGELS (HEB. 1:4-14)

THERE IS A STORY SET IN THE DAYS when Texas was still very much a frontier state, a story about a town that was in the grip of a riot that had gotten completely out of control. Local law enforcement couldn't do anything about it, so they used the telegraph to send a message to the state authorities asking for help from the Texas Rangers. The reply came back that they would receive help and it would be coming on the afternoon train. Well, the town fathers waited with bated breath for the train to arrive. Finally, the train came puffing into town, but they were immediately crestfallen when they saw just one man step off the train. They approached him and, seeing the Texas Ranger badge on his chest, asked him, "Where are all the others? Why is there only one of you?" The ranger wasn't even phased. He responded, "Well, there's only one riot, isn't there?"

Now that is a legend, although, in my opinion, a good one! However, there is a story in the Bible that is even better than that, and it isn't a legend. It is the story of the Assyrian invasion of Judah in the 8th century B.C. during the reign of good king Hezekiah. You can read about it in 2 Kings 18-19 and 2 Chronicles 32. We are told that the Assyrian king had

invaded Judah, had captured many of its walled cities, and then sent one of his officials to threaten Hezekiah and to bully him into surrendering the capitol city, Jerusalem. This official was so confident of the victory that the Assyrian army would achieve over Hezekiah and his tiny army, he boasted that not even the God of Israel would be able to save them. And that, of course, was his fatal mistake.

I love the response of Hezekiah. It's an example for all of us to follow. He took the communication from the Assyrians and put it before the Lord: "And Hezekiah received the letter of the hand of the messengers, and read it: and Hezekiah went up into the house of the LORD, and spread it before the LORD" (2 Kings 19:14). In other words, Hezekiah sent up a prayer-telegram asking for help. This was certainly out of his hands – he needed God's help.

God helped him, and here is how he did it. We are told, "And it came to pass that night, that the angel of the LORD went out, and smote in the camp of the Assyrians an hundred fourscore and five thousand (185,000): and when they arose early in the morning, behold, they were all dead corpses" (2 Kings 19:35). This is better than one ranger, one riot. Here you have one angel, one army.

There is another story similar to it that is related in the life of the prophet Elisha. This prophet was able to use the supernatural insight given to him by God to tell the Israelite king about the secret plans of the Syrian king and therefore to save the Israelites from disaster time and time again. Finally, the Syrian king got wind of this and sent an entire army to arrest Elisha, who was then at the city of Dothan. When Elisha's servant got up the next morning and looked out, all he could see was the city surrounded by the soldiers and the horses and chariots of the enemy. He immediately got Elisha, and said to him, "Alas, my master! How shall we do?" Elisha simply asked the Lord to open the eyes of his servant, and this is what happened: "And the LORD opened the eyes of the young man; and he saw: and, behold, the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire round about Elisha" (2 Kings 6:15-17). No need to fear when you have angelic chariots of fire surrounding you!

As these stories indicate, angels can be an interesting study in the Bible. They are spiritual beings who, though they can appear in physical form from time to time, are nevertheless “spirits” (Heb. 1:14), or incorporeal beings. But they are not just harmless apparitions; these created spiritual beings possess incredible intelligence and power. We know they are highly intellectual because fallen angels (demons, led by Satan) are able to dupe and deceive even the most intelligent human beings (cf. 2 Cor. 4:3). What is true of fallen angels (namely, great intellectual capability) must be true of unfallen, or elect, angels.

They are also very powerful, as the above accounts confirm. They are said to “excel in strength”: “Bless the LORD, ye his angels, that excel in strength, that do his commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word” (Ps. 103:20). They are called “powers” in Col. 1:16 and Eph. 1:21. The apostle Peter tells us that angels are “greater in power and might” than their human counterparts (2 Pet. 2:11), and when people are confronted by angels, they often are overwhelmed by a sense of their power and might, like the soldiers at the tomb of Jesus (Mt. 28:2-4). They often bring the judgments of God upon the wicked, like Herod, who was struck down by an angel of the Lord because he did not give God the glory (Acts 12:23).

But they also bring God’s mercies to God’s people. We are told that, “He [God] shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways. They shall bear thee up in their hands, lest thou dash thy foot against a stone” (Ps. 91:11-12). In fact, there is this wonderful passage in the text we are considering this morning, which describes angels as “ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation” (Heb. 1:14). An angel not only struck Herod down; it was also an angel that saved the apostle Peter from Herod’s hands (Acts 12:1-17). Though we are not to worship angels or put our trust in angels, the Lord has revealed this aspect of their ministry in order to encourage us. The fact is that we may have many enemies arrayed against us (including spiritual ones, Eph. 6:10-12), yet we need to remember that on our side are all the hosts of heaven. We may not be able to see them, but they



are there and we know that because God's word has revealed it. We should never think we are alone. God is with his people, and his angels are always at his beck and call, to do his bidding for the glory of his name and the good of his people.

Angels are also an example for us. They are those "that do his [God's] commandments, hearkening unto the voice of his word" (Ps. 103:20). When our Lord tells us to pray that God's will is done, he tells us to pray that it be done "in earth as it is in heaven" where the angels are. They perfectly and immediately do his will. John Newton once said something along the lines that if God told one angel to sweep a floor and another angel to rule a kingdom, both angels would do God's will equally cheerfully and it would not even occur to the angel who was told to sweep that he should complain for having the more menial duty. They would both look at their tasks in one light and in one light only: that they were doing God's will. That should be our attitude as well.

Now some people have thought that Hebrews 1 was written to counteract a tendency to worship angels. I doubt that. Rather, what the author is trying to do here is to show that, as great as angels are, Jesus is better. Since the Law was mediated by angels (2:2), to go back to the Law apart from Christ would be to prefer angels over Jesus. So the author does not want them to do this. But to see the force of this argument, we need to really consider, as we have been doing, just how great angels are. I think it was John Piper who said that we should not think of the Seraphim (which I think are a specific type of angel) as chubby babies with wings, floating around God; rather, we should think of them more along the lines of the Blue Angels whose sonic boom shook the temple when they cried, "Holy, holy, holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of his glory" (Isa. 6:3). Even John the apostle fell down on his face and started to worship an angel – not once, but twice – though the angel prevented him from doing so (Rev. 19:10; 22:8-9).

Angels are amazing creatures. But that is what they are: as awesome as we might think that they are, they are only created beings. Jesus is better: "Being made so much better than the angels" (Heb. 1:4). How is

he better? In this text, the author outlines four distinct ways in which our Lord is better than the angels.

### Better in his Perfections

The first way our Lord is better than the angels is in his name: “as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they” (4). Now I say that means he is better in his perfections because the name of God is connected with his glory and his glory is simply the public display of his perfections (cf. Exod. 33:18-19; 34:5-7). So there is this tight connection in the Bible between the name of God and his perfections. To say that Jesus has a better name than the angels is to say that his perfections, his attributes, far excel that of the angels.

What name is this? It is the name of Son, as the following Scripture proofs show (5). We considered last time just what this means in verses 1-3. We saw that the title of Son of God is the title of one who is in fact God. On the other hand, angels are never called by this name: “For unto which of the angels said he [God] at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son?” (5). This proves his point since the author knows that his readers share his conviction that Scripture is the word of God.

He has quoted Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam. 7:14, both texts which were understood to be Messianic: that is, these are prophesies about the Christ. It could of course be argued that both passages are, on one level, about the Davidic king. But the promise to David was that one of his descendants would rule over God’s kingdom forever, and therefore it was understood that promises to the Davidic king are ultimately fulfilled, not in someone like Solomon, but in Christ (see, for example, 2 Sam. 7:16). This is why Isaiah would write about the coming Christ (who would be the Mighty God): “Of the increase of his government and peace there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it, with judgment and with justice from henceforth forever” (Isa. 9:7). And it is the reason why the angel

Gabriel would tell Mary, Jesus' mother: "He [Jesus] shall be great, and shall be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God shall give unto him the throne of his father David" (Lk. 1:32). Although it is true that each of David's heirs were in one sense a son of God in a derivative sense, none of them was the Son of God in the truest and ultimate sense. Only Jesus could truly claim that title. Certainly angels could not.

But how can the author talk about Christ inheriting this name? Or what does it mean that he was begotten on a certain day? Does this indicate that Jesus was not always the Son of God? No. I think both expressions point to the fact that, at his resurrection, the eternal Son of God, who had become incarnate and in so doing had hidden certain aspects of his glory and his divinity for a time, came to possess – as the incarnate Son of God – the fullest enjoyment of his rights as God's only Son.

To see this, note that the one who came to earth did not become the Son of God by the incarnation, for it was the Son of God who came to be born as a man (Rom. 8:3; Jn. 3:16). He was announced as Son at his birth (Lk. 1:32), at his baptism (Mt. 3:17), and at the Transfiguration (Mt. 17:5). But it was his resurrection and ascension that truly revealed him to be what he always was: the Son of God. This is why Paul would write that God's Son was "declared to be the Son of God with power, according to the spirit of holiness, by the resurrection from the dead" (Rom. 1:4). In fact, Paul quotes Ps 2:7 (which our author quotes in verse 5) in his sermon in Acts 13, applying it to the resurrection of Christ from the dead (Acts 13:33). The point is, if there was any doubt that he was who he said he was, the resurrection should have dispelled those doubts forever. What name does Christ possess? It is the name above all names (Phil. 2:9)!

Better in his Praise

However, not only is Christ superior to the angels in his name, he is also superior to the angels in the worship which is given to him. This is

the point of verse 6: “And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.” This is a quote from the Septuagint version of Deut. 32:43 (which is not in the Masoretic Text so it doesn’t usually appear in English translations), although it also sounds similar to Ps. 97:7.

The title “firstbegotten” is a reference to Christ. Our Lord is several times referred to by this title (or something similar) in the NT. For example, in Col. 1:15, our Lord is called “the firstborn [same word] of every creature.” In Rev. 1:5, he is called “the first begotten of the dead.” And in Rom. 8:29, the apostle Paul says the Jesus is “the firstborn among many brethren.” In each of these places, the reference is to the preeminence of Christ. Here, “first” does not point to someone who is first in a temporal sequence, but to someone who is first in rank or honor. In the ancient world, the firstborn son had privileges that none of the other sons had. So when the NT says that Jesus is the first born or the first begotten, it is saying that he holds a position of honor above all of creation.

This is an unmistakable reference to the angelic announcement to the shepherds of the Savior’s birth (Lk. 2:9-14). Even at the very beginning of our Savior’s earthly life, he is worshipped by the angels. When the firstborn is brought into the world, the angels of God obey and worship his Son.

We would of course expect this since he is the one who created all things and upholds all things (1:2-3). We would expect this of one who is the radiance of the Father’s glory as the eternal Son. Because of this, he is – unlike angels – worthy of worship and honor. He is worthy of praise. And this is exactly what we find happening in heaven: the Lamb and Lion is receiving worship. This following description of a scene in heaven is very instructive because here you see angels worshipping Jesus (and not the other way round). You also see our Lord described in terms that only God could be described by: “And I beheld, and I heard the voice of many angels round about the throne and the beasts and the elders: and the number of them was ten thousand times ten

thousand and thousands of thousands; saying with a loud voice, Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power, and riches, and wisdom, and strength, and honor, and glory, and blessing. And every creature which is in heaven and on the earth, and under the earth, and such as are in the sea, and all that are in them, heard I saying, Blessing, and honor, and glory, and power, be unto him that sitteth upon the throne, and unto the Lamb forever and ever. And the four beasts said, Amen. And the four and twenty elders fell down and worshipped him that liveth forever and ever” (Rev. 5:11-14).

Why does God command the worship of Jesus? He does so because Jesus is God; because he is worthy of it. But he also does so because to see the worth of Christ, to see his infinite value and excellence as we should, means that our affections will correspond to that sight of him with awe and love and trembling and rejoicing and reverence. In other words, you cannot see Christ as he really is and not come away worshipping him. To call upon us to worship Christ is simply to call on us to see our Lord as he really is. There is a tasting and seeing that the Lord is good (Ps. 34:8). And this tasting and seeing will inevitably erupt in praise: “Blessed is the man that trusteth in him!” Or, to put it another way, to see Christ rightly means that we will rejoice in him fully, and to tell someone who is rejoicing not to worship is an unloving thing to do. It is therefore both right and loving for God to command the worship of his Son.

We must pause here and ask ourselves a very important question. How do you see Christ? Do you love him? Do you really see him as worthy of your worship? To withhold the worship of our hearts from the Son of God is just another form of rebellion against him. This is not just an intellectual question we are considering here. The command to worship the Son is not just a command for angels. It is a command for us all. You should worship him and you must worship him; it is both right and good for you to do so. To refuse to do so is simply to give your worship to someone or something else and that is treason against God. Listen to how the psalmist puts it in Psalm 2,

which had already been quoted in reference the Son of God twice in Hebrews 1: “Be wise now therefore, O ye kings: be instructed, ye judges of the earth. Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling. Kiss the Son [a sign of submission], lest he be angry, and ye perish from the way, when his wrath is kindled but a little. Blessed are all they that put their trust in him” (Ps. 2:10-12).

### Better in his Permanence

In verses 7-12, we come to another mark of the superiority of Christ to the angels. It is that, in contrast to angels (as well as every created thing), our Lord is eternal. At the same time, our Lord is unchangeable or immutable in his essential being and character. So he is superior to angels in his eternity and in his immutability.

The author begins by pointing out the ephemeral nature of angels: “And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire” (7; quoting Ps. 104:4). The word for “spirits” could be translated by “winds,” which is how the ESV takes it, for example. You might also remember that our Lord compares the work of the Holy Spirit in regeneration, a work in which he is sovereign in drawing our hearts to know and love Christ, to the wind (see John 3:8). In fact, the Greek word *pneuma* can mean both “wind” and “spirit.” In other words, what we have in this verse is a comparison between angels and wind and fire. Now commentators are divided in their opinions as to the purpose of this comparison. Some say that the point is that angels are as powerful as wind and fire. That’s possible. But I think, given the context here, the point is rather that, like fire and wind which are by their very nature changeable and ephemeral and transient and fleeting, so are angels. As powerful as wind may be (just think tornado or hurricane) or fire (think about the forest fires that ravage millions of acres), they don’t last very long. In contrast, our Lord is eternal and unchangeable, and that’s the point of the next few OT references in the following verses (8-12).

In verses 8-9, which is a quotation from Ps. 45:6-7, the argument is that our Lord's throne is eternal and immutable: "But unto the Son, he saith, Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever: a scepter of righteousness is the scepter of thy kingdom. Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows." By the way, in passing I think it important to pause and see that the Son is explicitly called God here. The one who is addressed as "O God" is the Son. Every now and then you will hear some "scholar" claim that the NT doesn't ever explicitly claim that Jesus is God. Of course it does. It does so in Jn. 1:1, and it does so here, in Heb. 1:8. And these are not the only places. There is no question that the NT views Jesus Christ as more than just another prophet. He is the Son of God, eternal and unchangeable, which can only be said of God himself.

Our Lord's throne is eternal which means that, in the end, his kingdom will win. Don't let the present eruptions of wickedness and the prevalence of ungodly attitudes shake your confidence in God's final victory over all his enemies. All the kingdoms of the earth will eventually perish; only God's will remain. As Luther's hymn puts it: "Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also; the body they may kill, God's truth abideth still: his kingdom is forever."

Not only is our Lord's throne eternal and unchangeable, but he is also eternal and unchangeable in his life. That's the point of verses 10-12, which is a quotation from the 102nd Psalm. It's interesting that every other OT passage which is quoted here in reference to Christ, comes from the Messianic Psalms or from a Messianic prophecy. But this Psalm is not a Messianic Psalm: it's just a Psalm which celebrates God as the God who rescues the afflicted. It's like our author doesn't see the need to connect his point to Psalms which are explicitly Messianic in order to demonstrate that the Son shares the nature and the worship of God; he goes directly to a passage about God and applies it to Christ. In other words, he doesn't need to make the point that the Son is God; that point is already made. All he wants to do now is simply to say that

since Christ is God, he possesses all the attributes of God, including his incommunicable ones, like immutability.

He is the creator of all things. He is the one who laid the foundation of the earth and made the heavens (10), but whereas they will perish, he will remain (11). And whereas they will be folded up like a garment and changed, he remains the same and his years will not end (12). All that we see around us is changing and changeable. It is the very nature of the creature to be mutable. The things around us that seem to be the most solid and unchanging are in fact changing. The Rocky Mountains are decaying slowly. Mount Everest, on the other hand, is still growing. And one day, everything in this universe will be changed like a garment and will be succeeded by New Heavens and a New Earth (cf. 2 Pet. 3:13). But God does not change. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (Heb. 13:8). Isn't that comforting? Can you find such a solid foundation on which to rest your hopes in any other place or person? Of course not. Only in God can we find a permanent basis for our hope and trust. Everything around you may change, but God does not change. Trust in him, look to him. "Change and decay in all around I see: O Thou that changest not, abide with me!"

### Better in his Princely Rule

Finally, this chapter closes with one more comparison and contrast between the Son of God and the angels of God (13-14). Here in verse 13, Psalm 110 is quoted, which is one of the most – if not the most – quoted or alluded to Psalm in all the NT. It is explicitly quoted or referred to in a dozen other places in this epistle alone (cf. 1:3; 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:3, 11, 17, 21; 8:1; 10:12, 13; 12:2). It is clear that this Psalm was viewed as Messianic, even by our Lord himself (Mk. 12:35, ff). The point is that no angel was ever invited to sit at the right hand of the Majesty on high (1:3). This is a position of privilege that belongs to Christ alone. He alone is enthroned; he alone is Lord of lords and King of kings. The angels



not only worship him; they also bow down to him and obey him. So should we!

Angels are not sovereign, they are servants: “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?” (14). Our Lord is the author of salvation; but these are the servants for those our Lord has saved.

Now think about this for a moment with me. We began by looking at the incredible power and intelligence of angelic beings. In the presence of angels even the holiest men have been overcome with shock and awe. But what we are told is that, even so, angels are appointed by God to be the servants of his elect and redeemed people. My friends, this ought to amaze us. We are totally and completely unworthy in ourselves. We who are the heirs of salvation are nevertheless messy people with lots of problems. We are dumb sheep. Angels don’t wait on us and surround us and protect us because we are better than they are. That’s not the case. They do so because God loves us that much. And that ought to cause us to thank God for his grace and his mercy and his faithfulness. It ought to cause us to stop doubting his commitment to the good of his people. Angels help us because they are sent by God to help us. They are a window into the love that God has for us. Let that cause us to love him more. He literally moves heaven and earth to give support and help to his people.

Where are you? Are you an heir of salvation? Can you claim such blessings? Not everyone is an heir of salvation. Only those who belong to Christ, only those who relate to the Father through his Son can come to him. Jesus our Lord has said, “I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me shall never hunger, and he that believeth on me shall never thirst” (Jn. 6:35). He went on to say these very encouraging words: “All that the Father giveth to me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out” (Jn. 6:37). Yes, we must affirm that only those who are drawn by the Father effectually through the Spirit can come (Jn 6:44). But that does not mean that you have no responsibility to come. What it means is that those who do come do not have themselves to

praise; God alone ought to be praised for our coming to Christ. That, however, does not mean that you should not come. You should come and come now on the basis of the promise of the Son of God himself: those who come will find life; those who come will never be cast out. May we all take up the confession of the apostle Peter: when our Lord asked him if he also would walk away from him, he responded: “Lord, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Jn. 6:68-69). May the Lord enable all of us to make such a confession!

# THE SON OF MAN

# CHAPTER IV

## A WARNING TO HEED

### (HEB. 2:1-4)

HERE AT CINCINNATI PRIMITIVE BAPTIST CHURCH, we affirm the complete trustworthiness of Scripture. As our Articles of Faith state, “We believe the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament are the revealed and inspired word of God and the only rule of faith and practice.” When I look at the wider Christian world, one of the things I am thankful for about the Primitive Baptists is that one doesn’t have to worry about heterodox doctrines of the Bible in terms of its inspiration and inerrancy. You just don’t see Primitive Baptists waffling on their commitment to the authority of Scripture, and for that I am thankful. However, it’s one thing to affirm the complete truthfulness of Scripture. It’s another thing to hear it as it ought to be heard. In other words, you can have orthodoxy and be missing the corresponding orthopraxy.

As an illustration of what I’m talking about, consider the Pharisees. In terms of overall doctrine, these fellows were conservative and orthodox, especially when compared to the Sadducees. Though the term “Pharisee” has a lot of negative baggage, remember that even the apostle Paul as a Christian confessed himself to be a Pharisee: “But when

Paul perceived the one part were Sadducees, and the other Pharisees, he cried out in the council, Men and brethren, I am a Pharisee, the son of a Pharisee: of the hope and resurrection of the dead I am called in question” (Acts 23:6). In other words, Paul didn’t see anything contradictory about being both a Christian and a Pharisee. I think the reason is that the Pharisees had a fairly orthodox view of truth, including the OT Scriptures.

Nevertheless, our Lord was absolutely unrelenting in his criticism of the Pharisees. He called them hypocrites (Mt 23:13, ff) and blind (Mt. 23:26) and snakes who would not escape the damnation of hell (Mt. 23:33). Why? He did so because, though these people had a very orthodox doctrine of Scripture, they had allowed human tradition to mute what it really had to say. In other words, though they had the Bible they had ceased to hear it. As our Lord himself would put it, “Thus have ye made the commandment of God of none effect by your tradition. . . . But in vain they do worship me, teaching for doctrines the commandments of men” (Mt. 15:6, 9).

I mention this because, whether we realize it or not, we have probably all (myself included) inherited certain views that hinder our ability to hear all the Scriptures as we ought. That especially includes the warnings of Scripture, like the one in Hebrews 2:1-4. So one of my goals here today in this message is to help you and me to hear this passage as we are meant to hear it. For that end, I want to look at this passage from the perspective of three questions: what, how, and why? What is the author saying, how is he saying it, and why is he saying it this way? As we move from the what to the why, we will want to pan out and look at how the warning of Hebrews 2 fits in with the wider theological context of the Bible.

### What: Drifting From the Faith

There is something gripping about the way this text starts out: “Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which

we have heard” (2:1). “The things which we have heard” is, of course, a reference to the gospel. It is a reference to the fact that God has spoken to us in his Son (1:2). The audience is called upon to “pay much closer attention” (ESV) to the message of God’s word to them. What lies behind this exhortation is the fact that they had stopped paying close attention to it. They had grown careless and lax in their profession of the faith. The gospel didn’t have the same meaning for them that it once had; and what was behind that was most likely the unrelenting hostility they had met with in the culture against their faith. It was not something they could walk away from – unless they walked away from Christ. Although it doesn’t appear that they had done that just yet, it does appear that they were on the brink of doing so.

The author of Hebrews is a preacher, giving these folks a word of exhortation. He is not interested in merely conveying information. That was not the point of chapter 1. Note that this chapter begins with the word “therefore” and then follows this stirring exhortation and warning. In other words, the purpose of chapter 1 was to give muscle to the exhortation of chapter 2. So, let’s try to understand what this warning is all about.

First, this is a warning against drifting away from the faith. Though the KJV has, “lest at any time we should let them slip,” almost certainly the correct translation is, “lest we drift away from it [i.e. the message of the gospel]” (2:1). The term used here is a nautical term that conveys the image of a ship drifting off course. So the problem is not so much forgetting the gospel, but rather a wandering away from the faith, “carried by the current” of culture as a result of “the failure to keep a firm grip on the truth through carelessness and lack of concern.”<sup>1</sup>

This is very timely and relevant for our day as well. There was a time not long ago when our culture was much friendlier to the Christian faith. That is not the case anymore. Although for now our religious freedoms are holding up (for which we should thank God), to be a follower of Christ is not going to get you any credit in the public

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<sup>1</sup>William Lane, Romans 1-8 [WBC], (Zondervan, 1991), p. 37.

sphere. There is a lot of pressure to put up and shut up, and there is a lot of pressure to keep our faith private. The problem is, if you take that course, you are already drifting off course. You cannot be a Christian and be private about it. The Christian faith is a public faith. It is a light- shining faith, a salt-of-the-earth faith. Are we in danger of drifting away? Let us be honest about it. We are swimming against the current (the church always has), so if you stop swimming because you are tired or because you just don't think it's worth it anymore, then you are going to be carried by the current in the direction of everyone else. That is what is at the heart of the warning here.

### How: The Urgency of the Warning

But that's not the only thing. There is a reason given in the text as to why this warning is so urgent, and that brings us to the second thing: this warning is urgent ("we ought to give the more earnest heed") because of where drifting away from the faith leads us. I think the word "for" at the beginning of verse 2 stands there to tell us that what follows gives the reason for the urgency.

What is the argument here? Well, notice first of all that verse 2 is about the Law of Moses: "For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast." We've noted that the NT views the Law of Moses as having been mediated through the ministry of angels. So the martyr Stephen would accuse his persecutors of having "received the law by the disposition of angels, and have not kept it" (Acts 7:53). The apostle Paul tells us that the law "was ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator" (Gal. 3:19). Though Exod. 19-20 doesn't speak of angels in the giving of the law, yet when Moses later described what happened on Mount Sinai he does speak of angels being present there (cf. Deut. 33:2 – "saints" or "holy ones" is probably a reference to angels). But what about this law? The thing that is highlighted about the law is that it was "steadfast" – trustworthy, reliable, firm – "and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward" (2:2). That is to say, the law was

inflexible when it came to sin. This is a point which is referred to again in this epistle: the fact that the one who “despised Moses’ law died without mercy under two or three witnesses” (10:28). Those who sinned defiantly died. Those who broke the law were broken by the law.

Here is the argument. Note the conditional statements: If this happened under the law, what do you think will happen “if we neglect so great salvation” (2:3)? If people didn’t escape under the law, how do you think you are going to escape God’s judgment if you sin against Christ? The comparison is important here. The comparison is still between Christ and angels. If you sin against the law, you are sinning against a word mediated through angels. But if you sin against the gospel – which is what is happening when you neglect it and walk or drift away from it – you are sinning against a word mediated through the incarnate Son: “How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord” (2:3).

The point is that you are not going to escape God’s judgment if you drift away from the gospel. Now this might surprise you, because we’ve been told that the God of the NT is a calmer and tamer version of the God of the OT. But this is not the case. The OT and the NT have the same divine author. God is the same; he has not and cannot change. To reject the Law brought God’s judgment; to reject the gospel does the same thing.

Someone may object, however, by saying that the children of Israel were under greater responsibility to believe the law, since they saw so many miracles. The people at the foot of Mount Sinai were exactly those who saw the plagues in the land of Egypt, who walked through the Red Sea, and so on. To this our author responds with verses 3-4: “and [the great salvation spoken by the Lord] was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?” In other words, just as God gave great attestation to the Law, so he has given great attestation to the gospel. Now the church to which Hebrews was written saw the apostolic miracles, even if they never saw



Christ himself. So they had no good reason to walk away as they were beginning to do.

However, someone today might wonder if we stand in the same position, since we have long since passed the days of the apostles. We don't see Mount Sinai on fire as God came down; we haven't seen the many miracles that the apostles were able to perform. Does that mean that this warning does not pertain to us? No, for a couple of reasons. First, God inspired Hebrews and put it in the canon of Scripture; in doing so, he universalized its exhortations and warnings. The fact that God put Hebrews in the NT means that he wants us to hear and take heed to this warning as well.

Another reason why this is still relevant, is the same reason Sinai and Passover were relevant to later generations of Israelites. Just because they weren't there didn't let them off the hook. It is the reason why fathers and mothers were supposed to recount God's wonders to Israel; so that they would obey his law (cf. Ps. 78:1-8). Just because we weren't there doesn't mean these things didn't happen! To say I don't have to believe because I didn't see it with my own eyes is an excuse that people will give but it is no good. We believe all sorts of things that we were never there to witness. Nor is it an excuse to say that to require belief in miracles should require greater evidence. But what sort of evidence? Most of the time, people mean observational, scientific evidence. Do you realize that what you are doing is importing a worldview into the discussion (namely materialism) for which there is no scientific evidence?

No, my friend, treat the history of the Bible as you would any other historical narrative. Weigh it the way you would weigh any other account that claimed to be a genuine telling of facts, and you will find that for those with eyes to see there is a mountain of evidence for the resurrection of Christ in particular that make alternative explanations unthinkable. No, we are still under the same obligations as were the first readers of this epistle.

## Why: The Danger Considered

Now, that brings us to the following consideration: why is the author so urgent? What exactly is the danger that is being warned of here? In other words, what particular form does the judgment of God take on those who drift away from the gospel? As we consider these things, we are going to have to step back and think about how this warning fits in with the wider theological context of the Bible, and we do this so that we will hear this text as we ought.

Let's consider first two wrong ways to look at this passage. One wrong way is to look at it and say something like this: "Because the elect can never be lost, this warning can only involve temporal judgments. In other words, at the end of the day, if you're elect, you can live any way you want in this world and still go to heaven. You can live in all sorts of sin with no eternal repercussions." Now that simply does not do justice to the context of Hebrews. For example, in 3:6, the writer argues that we belong to the house of Christ "if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end." To belong to the house of Christ is another way of saying that we belong to Christ. The author also puts it this way in verse 14: "For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast to the end." Here the description is that of being a partaker or a sharer in Jesus. To be a partaker of Christ means that we share in all his saving blessings. In other words, what is being argued for here is the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It doesn't mean, of course, that good works save us, but it does mean that good works are the evidence of spiritual life and without that we cannot say that we belong to Christ. In fact, quite the opposite. As our Lord put it, you will know the tree by its fruits. Good trees bear good fruit and bad trees bear bad fruit. The fruit doesn't make the tree, but the tree does make the fruit! If you are saved by grace through faith and not of works, you are still ordained by God to bring forth good works (Eph. 2:8-10).

So in this text, we are warned against drifting away from the faith – warned against following the path of Judas and Demas and many others – because those who are truly saved aren’t going to apostatize or walk away permanently from the faith. If you walk away, don’t carry the notion with you that you will be all right in the end, because you won’t. As Hebrews puts it later, “But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (10:39).

There is another wrong way to read this text. It is this: it is to read this as if it were a sword hanging over the neck of every believer. There are some who look at warnings like this and preach them in such a way that it sounds like fear is supposed to be the main motivating factor in the life of a believer. Terror is what motivates holiness in this reading of the text. But that is not a Biblically faithful way of reading this text either. I mean, how can you do that and fit it in with Romans 8? Remember what the apostle Paul teaches there: “For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father” (Rom. 8:15). And to Timothy, Paul would write, “For God hath not given us the spirit of fear; but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). Or as the apostle John would say, “There is no fear in love: but perfect love casteth out fear: because fear hath torment. He that feareth is not made perfect in love. We love him, because he first loved us” (1 Jn. 4:18-19). Clearly, God – who is the perfect Father – does not intend for his children to be tormented into obedience.

What, then, do you do with the warning of Hebrews 2:1-4?

Remember that this text is addressed to professing Christians who were on the brink of apostasy. The writer is not addressing Christians who are wrestling with everyday sin and temptation. He is addressing a particular type of person, and that person is a person who, though they have made a profession of faith, yet they are beginning to waffle on their commitment to Christ. They are thinking about walking away from the faith. They are drifting. So the warning is this: those who drift away from the faith will not escape God’s judgment. Since those who

drift away and draw back, draw back unto perdition (Heb. 10:39), this is a warning with eternal implications.

We are not saying the elect can lose their salvation. That cannot happen. What we are saying is that if you draw back unto perdition, if you completely drift away from the faith and stay there, you prove that you were not elect in the first place and you can expect God's severe judgment upon your life.

This is where I think really having a good grasp on the doctrine of the preservation of the saints is so important. In particular, it helps us to understand why it is right to warn a Christian audience of the danger of drifting away, a danger with eternal ramifications. To do so not only doesn't violate the doctrine of the security of God's elect, but it also supports it.

Now the rub is this. We know the elect will certainly and surely be saved. Suppose someone in the congregation who hears this kind of warning is elect. Is it still right for them to hear such warnings? Is it right for them to take it to heart? Is it right for them to apply a warning of eternal peril to themselves? I would say, yes, if they are one of those who are thinking about walking away from the faith, and I would say that for the following reasons.

First, it is right for a person to hear this warning as a warning of eternal peril, even if that person is elect, because it remains true that all who finally walk away from Christ will perish. That is still a true statement. To hear this warning is simply to believe the truth. An elect person who takes this to heart is not affirming that the elect can lose their salvation. All they are affirming is that those who do not persevere in the faith will be lost. There is nothing wrong in believing true statements. I think some people squirm under the kind of affirmation this text is making here because they really believe that there are elect out there who will live their whole lives apart from Christ or who will walk away from him and will still go to heaven. They don't think that there is any real correlation between election and holiness. But they are mistaken. God chooses or elects his people so that they will be holy (Eph. 1:4). On

the other hand, if you believe what the Bible says, that God chooses us through the sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit (2 Thess. 2:13), then you will have no problem with a text like this telling professing Christians that, if they do not persevere in holiness, then they are not saved.

Second, it is not Biblically sound to reason that, because I'm elect, therefore this warning does not apply to me. That's putting it backwards. How do you have confidence that you are elect? The Bible says that you can have confidence that you are elect – or that you can possess genuine assurance of your salvation – when you heed warnings like this and persevere in the faith. It says that you can make your calling and election sure by looking for the evidence of it in things like faith and love and so on (2 Pet. 1:5-10).

This is one of the reasons why 1 John was written, to give believers true signs of salvation: “These things have I written unto you that believe on the name of the Son of God; that ye may know that ye have eternal life, and that ye may believe on the name of the Son of God” (1 Jn. 5:13). Throughout this epistle we have these signs, or marks, of eternal life, of the new birth. One of those signs is perseverance in the faith: “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith” (1 Jn. 5:4; cf. 5:18).

Now someone may rebut by saying, “But I have the testimony of the Holy Spirit telling me that I am saved, according to Rom. 8:15-16, and so I don't need such outward evidence of the new birth.” But that is not what that text is saying! It is not saying that the Holy Spirit will give assurance of salvation to those who live in sin or who walk away from the faith. Look at the context, especially verses 13-14. Those two verses, taken together, mean that those who are led by the Spirit are precisely those who are mortifying the deeds of the flesh. In other words, I cannot claim to have this Spirit of adoption inwardly testifying that I am a child of God if I am living in unrepentant sin. The Holy Spirit, after all, is holy, and will have no part in participating in giving peace to those who are living in the gutters of sin and wickedness.

Third, it is right for all to hear this warning as a warning of eternal peril because this is one of the means that God uses to bring his elect back from the brink of walking away. In other words, not only do warnings like this not jeopardize the doctrine of the preservation of the saints, they actually are part of God's plan to preserve his people!

It is important to remember that, just because a person is elect, does not mean that they are immune to the attacks of Satan. Satan doesn't know who is elect and who is not – the Devil is not omniscient. He will try to do to us what he tried to do with Peter: to sift our faith and try to make it fail (Lk. 22:31-32). He is a roaring lion seeking whom he may devour (1 Pet. 5:8). And just because our Lord kept Peter from becoming a Judas doesn't mean that Satan was not allowed to do something. After all, Peter did deny Christ three times and he did need to be reconverted!

I think it is also important to note that, when Peter was in the process of denying Christ, he looked little different from Judas at that moment. It was not until he repented and turned that the difference emerged. In the same way, if I have denied Christ, if I am in the process of drifting away, I may not know whether or not I am a Peter or a Judas until I repent. In other words, in that moment, I have every right to consider warnings like this to be directed at me. Again, one of the ways God brings me back to repentance is to remind me what is at stake, to remind me that those who finally walk away are, like Judas, sons of perdition (cf. Jn. 17:12).

Now I'm not saying that God can't bring us back to repentance any other way. Different people require different methods. It's like the apostle Paul put it to the Thessalonians: "Now we exhort you, brethren, *warn them that are unruly*, comfort the feebleminded, support the weak, be patient toward all men" (1 Thess. 5:14, emphasis added). In other words, for some people all it takes is a look from Christ and their hearts melt (cf. Lk. 22:61-62). For some, compassion is all that is needed. But some of us are a little more hard-headed. Some of us need a swift kick in the rear. Some of us need to be called to repentance with a little more urgency. We need to be awakened out of our complacency with warn-

ings like Heb. 2:1-4. Like Lot who was hesitating about leaving Sodom and Gomorrah, he had to be told: “Escape for thy life; look not behind thee, neither stay thou in all the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed” (Gen. 19:17). [This is an especially interesting and relevant passage because God was certainly going to save Lot from Sodom’s destruction – and yet the warning was still a legitimate warning! See 2 Pet. 2:6-9.]

Now it’s clear that the people to whom the writer of Hebrews speaks needed this stiffer, sterner warning. They had become careless and neglectful of their commitment to Christ. The reason is that they had forgotten just how serious this is. Temporal persecution and life’s disappointments had begun to weigh more heavily to them in importance than their commitment to Jesus. And when that happens, you need to be reminded that eternal issues are at stake. Like our Lord put it to his disciples: “Whosoever ... shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mk. 8:38).

### Conclusion

I don’t know where you are, individually. I hope that you are not where these Hebrews were. I hope that you are walking with the Lord and that your commitment to Christ is firm and steady. If it is, thank God for his grace because he is the one who holds us fast! He is the one who keeps us (1 Pet. 1:5). I am so thankful for that reality. I am thankful for the reality of Jude 24: “Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen.” Amen!

But if you are where these Hebrews were, if Jesus just doesn’t seem that relevant to you anymore, if the things of this life are more important to you than the things of God, then you are in danger of drifting away:

And, therefore, you are in danger of God's judgment. If you continue in this path, you will not escape God's judgment. As the writer will later say, "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (10:31). You need to repent and turn back. You need to consider the issues at stake. It is idiotic to sell Christ out for a mess of earthly pottage. It is suicide to sell Christ for a few gold coins. There is no hope there. You might get a buzz out of this world for the next few decades if that's what you live for, but what about eternity? There is no hope for eternity without Christ and, therefore, there is no hope for those who turn away from Christ.

However, the amazing thing about Jesus is that no matter how you have sinned against him, he is always ready to take us back. He took back Peter, who denied him three times. He took Paul, who murdered who knows how many Christians. It is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into this world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). You may have been really tempted by the world. You may have done some really stupid things. But thank God, he receives sinners (Lk. 15:2)! Don't let Satan whisper in your ear that you are not worthy. Of course you're not. God justifies the ungodly! So rest in him, and if you have walked away from him, come back to him today, for our God still receives prodigal sons (Lk. 15:11-32).



# CHAPTER V

## HUMAN DIGNITY

### REDEEMED (HEB. 2:5-9)

WE LIVE IN AN INTELLECTUAL ATMOSPHERE that claims human beings are just here and that's it. There is no ultimate purpose guiding us to a good end; there is no objective meaning to life. The universe came from nothing and will descend back into nothing. It emerged from a big bang and will end in a cosmic yawn. And in the end, when everything dies, it will not have mattered whether or not you existed at all. It's all an accident. It's an accident we are here in any sense. There is no real and objective dignity to man – we are no different in that sense than any other animal or plant or rock, according to the post-modern way of thinking. That is the way our modern society thinks, and these are the convictions that inform its decisions.

If you buy into this, though, there are consequences. If this is true, then there is no absolute right or wrong. There is no ought, there is only is. Values are subjective and truth is relative. There is no real ground for moral accountability and free will is an illusion: as Richard Dawkins famously put it, we are just dancing to our DNA. Hitler was just dancing to his DNA, as were Stalin and Mao and others. Moreover, if you really

believe this and follow it out to its logical conclusion, it also means that love is an illusion, as are all ideas of beauty and honor and nobility. But this is a problem.

The reality is that no one (or, at least, very few people) really thinks this way. It seems to me that most people live as if love and beauty and meaning and truth are real things, as if there are behaviors that are right or wrong, no matter where you live or in what age you live. Atheists and agnostics and other non-Christian folks will argue that you can still get meaning out of life by living for the present and for what pleases you at the moment. But the only way they can do this in any significant way, as C. S. Lewis and others have pointed out, is by forgetting that they really believe that the meaning or beauty or loveliness that they are seeing or experiencing is just an illusion and a biological accident.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the post-modern man or woman can only really enjoy love and beauty and truth so long as they live in denial of the materialist's creed: that they are not in fact objective and real things. That is, you have to lie to yourself in order to make the post-modern accounting of things work. With the emphasis today on being authentic, how authentic is that?

This is a very strong argument, it seems to me, for the Christian faith. How do we know Christianity is true? Well, partly because it fits. What do I mean by that? What I mean is that to be a Christian does not require you to live a lie. It corresponds to reality (which, by the way, is the classic definition of truth). We see beauty and truth and love in the world, but we don't have to pretend that they not are accidents or merely subjective projections of the mind in order to enjoy them – because they are not! We believe that there is actually objective beauty

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<sup>1</sup>“You can't, except in the lowest animal sense, be in love with a girl if you know (and keep on remembering) that all the beauties both of her person and of her character are a momentary and accidental pattern produced by the collision of atoms, and that your own response to them is only a sort of psychic phosphorescence arising from the behavior of your genes. You can't go on getting very serious pleasure from music if you know and remember that its air of significance is a pure illusion, that you like it only because your nervous system is irrationally conditioned to like it.” C. S. Lewis, quoted in Timothy Keller, *The Reason for God*.

and truth in this world. We believe that love is more than the result of a purposeless process involving the accidental collision of atoms in the brain. In other words, the Christian can consistently believe what most other people have to embrace inconsistently: that love is real and truth is real and meaning is real and not merely illusions to make an otherwise unbearable life bearable.

Why are they real? The Bible teaches that they are real because we are made in the image of God. They are real because God is real and God is a God of love and truth and the one who imparts purpose and meaning to this world that he created. Moreover, human beings have real dignity – not a sort of dignity we have because the powers that be agree on it for now – but real, objective dignity. It is not created or legislated by man, but it is God-given. This is what the Bible teaches, and this is what is at the heart of the Psalm that is at the center of attention in the text we are considering today. And that makes this Psalm and this text both important and relevant.

There is another reason this Psalm and its implications are so important. We are not only battling against an outlook that is inherently hopeless and meaningless, but the church is increasingly faced with a hostile culture that is doing all it can to marginalize any influence the church and the followers of Christ have. They even tell us that the battle for the culture has already been lost and that we are on the wrong side of history. They are probably right. But you know what? That's okay because this is exactly where the church was in the first century and where it stayed for about three hundred years. I can't imagine how daunting it must have seemed to be a small house church in the shadow of the might of the Roman Empire, situated there in the capital, Rome. But it was exactly to this kind of church that this epistle and these words were written.

They remind us that the circumstances we find ourselves in by themselves do not determine the future for the church. God is the one who ordains whatsoever comes to pass. He is sovereign, not man. Our future

is ultimately in God's hands, not in the hands of men. That is what this Psalm reminds us. How?

In Heb. 2:6-8, the writer quotes from Ps. 8:4-6. In that Psalm, you have a man looking up into the heavens and being caught breathless by the wonder of it all: "When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; What is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him? (Ps. 8:3-4). In other words, here is that common experience – when a person looks up into the heavens and then compares man to the vast expanse of the universe, man comes off as a tiny and insignificant creature. Which, of course, he really is. Neil DeGrasse Tyson argues that the enormity of the universe compared to the smallness of our earth is an argument against design by a Creator. I think the opposite is the case: the heavens are there in all their seeming infiniteness to remind us that we are not as big or important as we think we are, and that is a needed reminder.

And yet . . . people realize that there is something inherently valuable about mankind in a way that is different from, say, finches. Where does that sense of importance come from? You cannot explain it if you are a materialist. I mean, you cannot posit any real importance or dignity to man. And this is what is at the back of that question: "What is man, that you are mindful of him, or the son of man that you care for him?" (Heb. 2:6, ESV). Man, this tiny creature in the vast expanse of the universe, why would God care about him? What is it that draws the Creator to this dust-bound creature?

The way the psalmist answers this question is almost unexpected. Remember that what led to the question was the comparison between the bigness of the heavens and the smallness of man. The reality, however, is that the universe is actually meant to be subjected to man: "Thou madest him [for a little while, ESV] a little lower than the angels; thou crownest him with glory and honor, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet" (Heb. 2:7-8). What he is saying is that, for all the majesty of the universe and all

the miserableness of the human race, man is meant by God to rule over the universe. Seen in that light, mankind is not as insignificant as first appeared – he possesses a true dignity that is unsurpassed by anything else in creation.

All this is a gift from God. We don't have it because we earned it or because we deserve it. We are gifted with a created purpose: "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth" (Gen. 1:27-28). This is a truth that is underlined in our text: God crowns us with glory and honor; God is the one who sets him over the works of his hands, and God is the one who puts all things in subjection to him. Although the Genesis passage only mentions creatures on the earth, the Psalm expands this to the entire created universe, including the moon and the stars ("he left nothing outside his control," ver. 8, ESV).

However, this is not the only part of the story. The reality is that the Genesis 1 mandate, though it still stands, has been significantly challenged by sin and death. Genesis 1 was followed up with Genesis 3, the fall of man into sin. And sinful humanity cannot rule over God's creation properly. In fact, the created order itself groans, as Paul puts it to the Romans, under the weight of human sinfulness (Rom. 8:19-26). I think this is perhaps pointed to in the fact that, for right now, mankind is "lower than the angels" – lower in the sense that we are sinful and prone to death, neither of which characterize the elect angels. Note what the writer says in verse 9: that Jesus "was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death." But one day, this is all meant to be undone. This is all temporary – it is "for a little while" (ESV, verses 7, 9). In fact, one day God's people will judge angels, according to the apostle Paul (cf. 1 Cor. 6:3).

How does this fit in with the argument of this epistle though? What is the author doing? Remember that he has been arguing in chapter 1 that

Jesus is better than the angels, which set up the exhortation and warning at the beginning of chapter 2. Now, in verses 5-9, he is answering an implicit objection: that the fact that the Son of God took upon himself a human body and human nature is actually an argument against his superiority to the angels. These verses answer that objection. In these verses, we are shown how it is that our Lord's assumption of human nature is no argument against his superiority to angels.

This is where the argument in Hebrews 2 is going. The author is going to argue that the human dignity which was lost in Adam is restored in Jesus Christ. This, by the way, is another way that the Christian message fits with our experience. Though we recognize that humans have this dignity, yet we also see that they act in incredibly undignified ways. This is because, though we are created in the image of God, yet we are sinful and sin. How is paradise lost to become paradise regained? That is the question here, and the answer is that Jesus Christ is the one who regains paradise for us.

How does he show this? He does so in three steps. The argument centers around the quotation of Psalm 8. First, he shows that it is the purpose of God that mankind's inferiority to angels be only temporary, so it is no defeater to the supremacy of Christ over angels for him to become incarnate. It's an argument from the time of fulfillment of Psalm 8. Second, he shows that it is the purpose of God that the transition from "lower than the angels" to "crowned with glory and honor" be achieved solely by Jesus Christ, and, therefore, it is no defeater to the supremacy of Christ over angels for him to become incarnate. This is an argument from the person of fulfillment, namely Jesus Christ. Finally, it is the purpose of God that the way this is achieved is through the death of Christ, and, therefore, this is also no defeater to the supremacy of Christ over the angels since his incarnation and death is the means whereby the incarnate Christ achieves this supremacy over the angels (and we in him). Thus, an argument from the manner of his fulfillment of Psalm 8. Let us look at these three things in turn.

*The time of fulfillment:* “For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak. . . Thou madest him [for a little while] lower than the angels” (5, 7).

It seems true that angels in some sense rule over this present world. We see this in the book of Daniel, for example, when angels are denoted by the human rulers they in some sense influence (cf. Dan. 10:13). This is probably why angelic beings are called “rulers” or “powers” in the writings of the apostle Paul (see, for example, Eph. 6:12). However, this is not a permanent state of affairs, for angels will not be ruling over the world to come. In fact, as we’ve already noted, in the age to come, angels will be judged by the people of God. With Christ, we will share in his victory and kingdom in the New Heavens and New Earth. To those who overcome, our Lord promises that “to him will I give power over the nations: And he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father” (Rev. 2:26-27).

This argument is furthered by the use of the phrase “a little while” in verses 7 and 9. Though this phrase does not occur in the KJV, it is the correct translation of the author’s quotation of Psalm 8: “You made him for a little while lower than the angels” (Heb. 2:6, ESV). This is taken up and applied to our Lord in verse 9: “But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus” (ESV). So the term “little” here is not meant to describe how much lower (“a little lower”), but rather how long he was to be lower than the angels (“a little while lower”). In other words, the inferiority of men to angels was not meant to be permanent. This implies that there is coming a time when men will surpass angels in dignity and honor. Now, I don’t think this means we will stop being human in order to become angels or become like angels. What it means is that, in the resurrection, we will no longer be subject to sin and death, and that we will rule with Christ.

In being born of a woman, our Lord was made subject to death. He who was the Lord of angels, at whose command they marched, became

for a time lower than the angels. Of course, this does not mean that our Lord became less divine or that he for a time shed his divinity. He was and is immutably and eternally the Son of God, even when he was in his state of humiliation. What it means is that, in addition to his divinity, our Lord added “the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3). It was the addition of his humanity in the frailty in which it was clothed that our Lord became lower than the angels. But this was only for a time. When our Lord ascended up to heaven, he ascended in and into glory. The incarnate Christ then became clothed with the glory that he had always enjoyed as the Son of God: “And now, O Father, glorify thou me with thine own self with the glory which I had with the before the world was” (Jn. 17:5).

So you see, being lower than the angels is not something inherent in being human since it is only temporary. It is the result of sin and death, and this is exactly what our Lord came to conquer. Thus, it is not argument against the superiority of Christ to angels that he became human.

*The Person of fulfillment:* “thou crownest him with glory and honor . . . But we see Jesus . . . crowned with glory and honor” (7, 9).

The second step to the argument here is that the way mankind achieves its superiority to angels is through Christ. God has purposed that men and women be crowned with glory and honor, but we have thrown this away through sin. How can God’s purpose, the purpose to crown men with glory and honor, be achieved? In verse 9, we see how it is achieved. It is achieved through Christ. He is the one, ultimately, to whom this Psalm pointed.

You see this hinted at in verse 8: “Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him.” It seems to me that the point being made here is that this Psalm does not yet find its fulfillment in men. We who were made



to be lords of the world which God made are in subjection to it. All things are not under our feet – if anything, we find ourselves often under the foot of the world! Tornadoes and hurricanes and earthquakes and tsunamis and blizzards and on and on – these things constantly remind us that we live in what can be a very deadly world. Then add to that the violence men do to men. No, this is not a tame world. It is a chaotic world, at least from the standpoint of human rule.

However, in verse 9, the truth comes out. Though mankind is still struggling to survive in this world, Christ, though he was for a little while lower than the angels, yet he is no more and is “crowned with glory and honor.” He is the one in whom this Psalm finds its fulfillment. But more than that – he is the one in whom we sons and daughters of Adam are crowned with the glory and honor we have forfeited through sin. The apostle Paul makes a similar point in his great chapter on the resurrection. He also quotes this Psalm and applies it directly to our Lord: “He [God the Father] hath put all things under his [Christ’s] feet” (1 Cor. 15:27). It is because of this fact that we too can share in resurrection glory. Christ has, as the Second Adam, undone what Adam did. In doing so, he has restored us to the position of dominion which was lost by Adam through sin.

It is not, therefore, a mark against our Lord’s superiority over the angels that he assumed human flesh. For it is in assuming it that our Lord fulfills our destiny and God’s intention for men and women to be crowned with glory and honor and to be the rulers over God’s creation (including angels). It is this reality that the apostle Paul is speaking to in Eph. 1:10 when he says that God is going to “unite all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth.” It is only in him that we can achieve this honor and this glory.

*The manner of fulfillment:* “But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (9).

It is not just necessary for our Lord to become a man, to become incarnate, for this Psalm to be fulfilled for us. It was also necessary that, in becoming a man, he suffer death. This is especially the point of verse 9, and this will also lead into the following verses, where our author will elaborate further on why it was necessary for Christ to suffer and die.

In other words, not only is death not a proof against the supremacy of Jesus over the angels, death is the means by which our Lord attains the glory and honor promised in the Psalm. It is not just by uniting human nature to himself that he elevates us, but by dying for us he rescues us from the judgment of God that we so justly deserve. Sin deserves death and so Christ tasted death for his people in order that they might be saved from it. Of course we will still die; but because of what Christ has done, death no longer has the last word. In fact, those who are in Christ go to be with him in heaven immediately after death. Ultimately, resurrection life follows death because of what the Son of God has done for us.

Moreover, death serves the end of his achieving his glory because it is the God-ordained means whereby the grace of God is communicated to us. God's glory is displayed mainly through his grace. This is what the apostle said: God has chosen us in Christ, predestined us and given us the adoption of sons in Christ "to the praise of the glory of his grace, wherein he hath made us accepted in the beloved" (Eph. 1:7). And in the ages to come, God will show us "the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:7). It would never have been possible apart from the death of Jesus, which is why the writer says that it is "by the grace of God" that our Lord tasted death.

However, how can death on the cross bring about the glory of Christ, if he loses anyone for whom he died? And is this not the implication of verse 9: doesn't it say that he died for "every man"? For not everyone is saved. Did our Lord then fail? What about John 6:37-40? We say that Christ is a successful Savior; isn't this an argument against it? No, for the following simple reason. It is no argument against the glory of Christ because we must always observe the context for who is being referred to

by “every man.” In verse 10, they are called “many sons” to be brought “unto glory.” In verse 11, they are called “they who are sanctified.” In verse 13, they are called, “the children which God hath given me.” These are the ones who are being referred to by “every man” or “everyone.” This is not everyone in an absolute sense, but rather all those who are the children of God to be brought unto glory. In other words, yes it is true that all for whom Christ died will make it to glory, will be saved. There is no frustrated Savior here!

Now the reason why so many people have a problem here is that they don’t seem to reckon with the possibility that “everyone” doesn’t have to be an absolute universal everyone. The Scriptures certainly use language like “all” and “everyone” without referring to every single person on planet earth. For example, in Col. 1:28, the apostle Paul says that he was “warning every man, and teaching every man,” but this does not mean everyone on earth. It means everyone to whom Paul spoke, obviously. In 1 Cor. 12:7 the apostle there says, “The manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal,” referring not to everyone in an absolute sense, but every in the sense of every believer.<sup>2</sup> This is perfectly consistent with the way the author of Hebrews uses this term as well. All for whom Christ took the cup of death will certainly and finally be saved.

What will you do with Christ?

One thing I haven’t mentioned yet is the little word “for” at the beginning of verse 5: “For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak.” What is the function of the word “for”? What is the point being made here? What is the argument? I think it ties back to the exhortation of verse 1-4. The apostle is saying that just as the things he said of the Son of God in chapter 1 lead inexorably to the warning of 2:1-4, even so what he is saying here supports

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<sup>2</sup>See the argument in John Owen, *The Death of Death in the Death of Christ* (Banner of Truth, 1967), p. 237-238.

the urgency of heeding the warning which has just been given. We must give the more earnest heed to God's word and gospel for the one who mediates the gospel, the Lord (3), is the one who will rule over the world to come. He is the one before whom all will stand in judgment.

The apostle Paul made much the same point to a bunch of pagans in Athens. After saying that God "now commandeth all men everywhere to repent," he goes on to give the reason why this call to repentance is so urgent: "Because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath raised him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31). Jesus Christ who is proclaimed in the gospel is not an intellectual curiosity. He is your Lord. He will be your judge at the Last Day. The question is whether or not he will be your Savior? You cannot remain neutral before Christ. You will either have him as your Lord or reject him as your Lord. The Bible says that those who reject Christ will only have him as judge. On the other hand, those who believe on him, who submit to him and receive him as Lord and Savior, will find him on that day to their Advocate (1 Jn. 2:2). Who is Jesus Christ to you? May you this day call on his name as your Lord and Savior, for the Bible tells us that all who call upon him as such will be saved (Rom. 10:13).

On the other hand, all who belong to Christ, no matter how insignificant you are now – one day you will rule with Christ over all things. Does that seem far-fetched? Does it seem impossible? Do you say that you are unable or unworthy to be placed in such a position of honor? Well, you feel that way because you are in yourselves unable and unworthy. But, thank God, in heaven we do not enjoy the fruits of our victory, but of Christ's victory over sin and death. We are in him and in him we participate by God's grace in never-ending, ever-increasing joy. Indeed, we are taken aback with the Psalmist: What is man that God is mindful of him, that he cares for him and bestows on him such grace and glory? Left to ourselves, the question would only lead to despair, but through the one who by the grace of God tasted death for us we are raised to

newness of life and crowned with glory and honor. Praise God for such a hope!

# CHAPTER VI

## OUR LORD'S VICTORY OVER DEATH (HEB. 2:10-18)

IT IS OFTEN ALLEGED that religion is simply wish-fulfillment. I think it was the famous physicist Stephen Hawking who once claimed that religion is for people who are afraid of the dark. It is said to be the creation of the minds of people who want eternal life, who want freedom and justice for all, but who realize they can't have it here. Belief in God and in heaven provides them with comfort, and so that's where religion comes from. It isn't real; it is just pie-in-the-sky. Or others say that religion is created by oppressors to keep the serfs obedient – keep them focused on heaven and they won't bother with their earthly chains.

One of the problems with this argument is that it goes both ways. The Oxford mathematician John Lennox responded to Hawking by saying that "Atheism is for people who are afraid of the light." In other words, if religion is wish-fulfillment, it can equally be said of atheism. Maybe atheism is the projection of the minds of folks who want self-sovereignty and don't want to stand to be judged by the living God.

I personally don't buy the wish-fulfillment explanation for religion because it doesn't adequately explain the existence of and many features of religion. For example, I don't know of any religion that comes up with a God who is not also in some sense just. That creates a pretty big problem: it means that just because there is a heaven doesn't automatically guarantee you will make it there; for if God judges us, then that opens the possibility that what is on the other side is possibly worse than what we are dealing with here. This is especially true of the Judeo-Christian worldview which posits a God who is holy and just and will by no means look on evil (Hab. 1:13). There is not only a heaven but there is also a hell. It's frankly hard to see how hell would be a product of wish-fulfillment.

Another thing that the wish-fulfillment hypothesis can't fully explain is the universal desire for heaven and eternal life. If there is no God, why is there this sense of the transcendent? Some people will say that it is an evolutionary trait that allowed the human race to survive. I don't buy it. How does hoping more for the age to come than for this present age aid survival? This idea seems counter-intuitive at best. For example, the Christian religion teaches that giving your life for others (even, or perhaps especially, for the weak) is a good thing. That is not a survival technique; it is the opposite!

C. S. Lewis gave a better explanation in his famous sermon, "The Weight of Glory." I will put it to you like this: imagine waking up in a boat in the middle of the ocean with absolutely no memory of anything that went before. Suppose there is nothing in the boat except yourself. There is nothing around you except ocean as far as the eye can see. Now obviously, you would eventually get hungry. He asks, would it be wrong to assume from the fact of hunger that eatable substances exist – even though you had no observable proof they did in fact exist? Though one in that state could neither prove they existed or, if they did exist, that they would be able to fill their hunger with them, yet it would clearly be a reasonable thing to assume that they do exist. From this Lewis argues that the well-nigh universal longing and hunger for heaven is a good

argument that heaven exists (even though this hunger for the eternal is not necessarily proof that you will enjoy it!).<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, we humans long for eternity because that is what we were made for. Religion exists because God exists, and the soul exists, and heaven and hell exist. As Solomon put it in Ecclesiastes, God has put eternity into the hearts of men (Eccl. 3:11, ESV). We were not made to live under the soul-shrinking philosophy, “Let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). We were not made to be shackled by death.

And yet . . . death is another universal reality. It is a universal reality that seems to stand against our hunger for eternity. If we were meant to live forever, why do we die? Though we have this innate sense that death is not really natural, that this is not the way things were meant to be, it seems that death is more certain and sure than anything else.

So it begs for an explanation. If death is not the way things are supposed to be, how come it is the universal experience of mankind? A closely related question is this: why is the world so messed up, not only by death but by injustice and evil and suffering on every side?

It is the glory of the gospel that it gives us both the explanation as well as the solution to the problem. It not only explains why we suffer and die but also how we can overcome both suffering and death. We see both these things in Hebrews 2, and especially in verses 14-15. In these verses, we have the great blessing of the incarnation given to us, especially in terms of our Lord’s victory over death and sin.

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<sup>1</sup>“A man’s physical hunger does not prove that that man will get any bread; he may die of starvation on a raft in the Atlantic. But surely a man’s hunger does prove that he comes of a race which repairs its body by eating and inhabits a world where eatable substances exist. In the same way, though I do not believe (I wish I did) that my desire for Paradise proves that I shall enjoy it, I think it a pretty good indication that such a thing exists and that some men will. A man may love a woman and not win her; but it would be very odd if the phenomenon called “falling in love” occurred in a sexless world.” From his sermon, “The Weight of Glory.”



## The Explanation for Death

How then does the Christian message account for death? The simple explanation is this: even though God created this world “very good” (cf. Gen. 1:31) with human inhabitants who were innocent and blameless, it did not take long for the first pair to try to wrest sovereignty out of God’s hand through disobedience to the Divine command not to eat of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. We know from Genesis 3 that the serpent deceived Eve, who then tempted her husband. Sin entered into the world. And from sin came death: “for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return” (Gen. 3:19). The apostle Paul sums it up like this: “Wherefore, as by one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). Death, both physical and spiritual, is the inevitable consequence of sin.

We see this in the text. Note that the devil (who is elsewhere identified with the serpent in Genesis 3; see Rev. 12:9) is described in the text as the one “that had the power of death.” Now how can Satan have the power of death? Is not life and death solely in the hands of God? Remember the story of Job – Satan couldn’t even touch Job without God’s permission. How can Satan then have the power of death?

Satan has the power of death in the sense that he tempted Adam and Eve to sin and through sin death came into the world. In other words, though the devil does not have the ultimate power of death, yet he is able to deceive people into sin. And sin brings death. Here is how our Lord put it to the Pharisees: “Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do. He was a murderer from the beginning, and abode not in the truth, because there is no truth in him. When he speaketh a lie, he speaketh of his own: for he is a liar, and the father of it” (Jn. 8:44). Notice what our Lord says here. The devil is a murderer from the beginning – a reference no doubt to the Fall. Satan tempted Eve, Eve enticed Adam, Adam and Eve sinned, and sin brought death.

It is in this way that Satan had the power of death. He is the murderer of the human race.

Thus, when in the text of Hebrews we are pointed to the devil as having the power of death, we are meant to be reminded of the Fall of man into sin. Sin is the ultimate reason for death, therefore, and is the explanation as to why the world is the way it is.

And it's not natural. We can see this from the fact that fear of death brings bondage: in verse 14 we are told that the reason for the bondage was the fear of death, and that this is what we need to be delivered from. Why? Because death is not natural. Our fear of death and the sense of bondage that death brings is a testimony to the reality of sin and its punishment. Death is not part of the original order of things. It is an unholy intrusion on God's good order. It is the punishment for sin. Our hatred and fear of death is a witness to this reality. It is a witness to the fact that the human race is in rebellion against God and under his holy and just wrath.

You see this also in verse 17. There we are told that our Lord Jesus Christ came "to make reconciliation for the sins of the people." Now, as we've already pointed out in an earlier sermon, the verb translated "to make reconciliation" could also be translated "to make propitiation." It refers to the removal of God's wrath against sin. We are reminded again that things are not right with the world, and the reason they are not right is that men and women are sinners by nature and sinners by practice. Sin brings guilt and guilt brings down upon us God's just wrath, of which death is part of the penalty for our sin.

This explains why we fear death and why this fear of death produces bondage for us. We fear death and we feel in bondage to this fear not only because death is not God's original purpose for humanity, but also because we have this innate sense that death is the wages of sin (Rom. 6:23). The apostle Paul thus not only argues for universal sinfulness, but he also argues that there is on some level a universal awareness that our sins deserve death. He said this is true even of pagans who did not have the special revelation of Scripture. He argues that they know "the

judgment of God, that they which commit such things [the sins listed in the previous verses] are worthy of death” (Rom. 1:32). As Paul would put it to the Corinthians, “The sting of death is sin” (1 Cor. 15:56).

We are, of course, aware that there are folks out there who claim very confidently that they do not fear death, even though they want to have nothing to do with the Lord. They may even claim that they believe that there is no afterlife. They say that don’t fear any judgment of God, they don’t fear hell, and they don’t fear ceasing to exist when they die. However, this does not vitiate the argument of Hebrews 2:14. The Bible recognizes that even though we have God’s law written on our hearts and that conscience testifies to this reality (cf. Rom. 2:13-15), yet it also testifies to another reality. It tells us that men can harden their hearts, that they can sear their consciences (e.g. 1 Tim. 4:2) and deaden their responsiveness to this awareness that death is an echo of the Fall and a harbinger of God’s judgment. But it is certainly not a proof that God does not exist or that death is not something to be feared. It is proof that they have willingly deadened their conscience to reality through repeated sin.

People like this remind me of those who are suffering from leprosy. Dr. Paul Brand for many years worked among leprosy patients. He was one of the first doctors to appreciate the fact that one of the main problems with leprosy is that it deadens the nerves and the ability to feel pain. As a result, people with leprosy will do destructive things to their bodies without knowing it, precisely because they do not feel pain. It is not, as is often believed, that they lose limbs as a direct result of the disease; they do so most often indirectly as a result of self-inflicted injuries.<sup>2</sup>

I would say that sin is like leprosy. In fact, I would say that we have OT justification for this. It’s the reason why leprosy is dealt with in terms of uncleanness and ritual impurity (Lev. 13-14). It kept you from God’s presence in the tabernacle under the law of Moses. In the same way, sin is that spiritual leprosy that defiles us and keeps us from God’s

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<sup>2</sup>I highly recommend the biography on Dr. Paul Brand by Dorothy Clarke Wilson, *Ten Fingers for God*.

presence and fellowship. Just because spiritual lepers don't feel the pain caused by the conscience, this is not a sign that they are in a better state of mental health than those who do. On the contrary, they are in a worse state. As a result, they will continue to devastate their souls with the poison of sin without even feeling the sting of it. If that describes you, then you are not to be congratulated; you are to be pitied and wept over.

On the other hand, it is not necessarily a bad thing to be afraid of death. In fact, everyone who is apart from Christ and in their right minds should be afraid of death. It's not a sign of cowardice; it's a sign of moral sanity. Therefore the author of Hebrews does not say that we are delivered from the bondage caused from the fear of death by coming to see that this fear is irrational. It is not irrational; it is a supremely rational fear. Nor does he say that we are supposed to rid ourselves of this fear by feeling better about ourselves. A person whose fingers and toes are falling off should not try to convince themselves that they look better that way. And you shouldn't allow the culture, the devil, and your own sinful nature to convince you that you are better off for losing the propensity to feel the thrashing of your conscience.

What then should we do? How is this fear to be dealt with in a realistic fashion? Our text helps us see how, which brings us to our next point.

### Deliverance from Death and the Fear of Death

If there is one thing that should be patently obvious to each one of us, it is that death is both inevitable and inescapable. We are prisoners awaiting execution. And yet, the Bible describes the godly man and woman as those who do not need to fear death. So you have verses like this: "Precious in the sight of the LORD is the death of his saints" (Ps. 116:15). Or consider the ardent desire of the prophet Balaam, when he considered the death of the righteous: "Let me die the death of the righteous, and let my last end be like his!" (Num. 23:10). Or think about the apostle Paul's estimation of death: "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain" (Phil. 1:21). How in the world can you call death gain,

especially when death is the penalty for sin? If it is right for some to fear death, why is it also right for the righteous to celebrate it, as Paul seems to do?

The answer is to be found in our text. We do not deliver ourselves from the fear of death. We are delivered. The one who delivers us is Jesus Christ: “through death” our Lord was able to “destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15). He is “a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people” (17). Verse 17 tells us how our Lord was able through death to defeat death. He did so by becoming a sacrifice for us, by propitiating God’s just wrath against sin, by taking upon himself the judgment due to sin.

Notice that technically the text does not explicitly say that Christ defeated death. This is, of course, the obvious and clear implication. Yes, he defeated death! Nevertheless, it is important to hear how the author frames our Lord’s victory in terms of what he says explicitly here. What he says explicitly is that our Lord defeated the devil who had the power of death. And then it says that, as a result, we are delivered from the fear of death which brings us into bondage. I do think this is important. Because the fact of the matter is, even believers will pass through the valley of the shadow of death. Unless Christ returns, we will die physically. Our souls will be rent from our bodies. Christ defeated death, but not in the sense that we no longer have to die. What he did is this: he defeated the devil, and he took away the fear of death on the cross. What that means is that the sting of death has been removed. Death is no longer a judgment but an exodus (cf. Lk. 9:31). Death no longer has the final word. For those who are in Christ, death will be followed by resurrection.

We no longer have to fear death because in Christ death is no longer the visible sign of God’s wrath; it is rather the way into his presence. This is why Paul said that to live is Christ and to die is gain. The two go together. If Christ is your life, then death is gain. It is why our Lord was

able to say to his disciples these two seemingly contradictory statements: “and some of you they shall put to death. ... But there shall not an hair of your head perish” (Lk. 21:16, 19). You can die and not lose a single hair because of the reality of resurrection. What is sown (in death) in dishonor and weakness will be raised (in the resurrection) in glory and power (1 Cor. 15:43).

Why then do we not fear death? Let me summarize it for you in the following statements.

We no longer need fear death because, in Christ, death is no longer an instrument of God’s judgment but the entrance into everlasting joy in his presence. Christ died for us and fully took away the punishment we deserved due to sin (including both temporal and eternal punishments). Behind the fear of death is the fear of God’s wrath which was fully propitiated in Christ’s death on the cross. Instead of fear, we are looking at the joy set before us (Heb. 12:2).

We no longer need fear death because the basis for our participation in Christ’s victory is grace not works. What motivated the cross and the redemption and deliverance from death accomplished there was the grace of God: “that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man” (2:9). We have nothing to add: we are simply slaves, “all their lifetime subject to bondage” (15). Christ alone is the champion, the captain of our salvation (10). We don’t approach death wondering if we did enough to balance the scales in our favor; we simply rest in the finished work of Christ for us.

We no longer need fear death because death is no longer final. Death is followed by resurrection. But not just any resurrection. We know that there will be a general resurrection in which the unrighteous and the righteous will be raised. “They that have done evil, [will be raised] unto the resurrection of damnation” (Jn. 5:29). There is no hope in that resurrection. But that is not what those in Christ look forward to: “they that have done good [through grace, will be raised] unto the resurrection of life” (Jn. 5:29). What the wicked are raised to is not truly life; that alone belongs to the righteous.

This not only has implications for the future but for the present as well. This is Paul's point in 1Cor.15:57-58, which reads, "But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory [over death] through our Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." This is a significant statement, because in the previous verses he had argued that if Christ had not risen from the dead, everything is in vain (cf. 13-19). In fact, if that is the case, "we are of all men most miserable" (19). But because Christ rose, and in him we will rise, our labor now is not in vain.

We no longer need fear death because God will bring us through it. I heard a prominent theologian once say that he didn't fear death, but he did fear dying. I concur. It is a fearful process. However, we know that God will not abandon us in death. Jesus is our merciful and faithful high priest; and having suffered the travail of death, he is able to help those who are passing through the veil of death (Heb. 2:18). He will hold us as we die, and he will meet us when our souls have departed these bodies. When Stephen was dying, he saw Christ standing at the Father's right hand, to welcome him as he departed into his presence (Acts 7:56). This is true for all who are in Christ. If you belong to him, if you have repented of your sin and turned to Christ in faith, if he is the captain of your salvation, then you have every reason to hope. There is hope in no other, but there is fullness of hope in Christ. What a Savior! He has conquered death, he has taken away its sting, he has "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Tim. 1:10).

Believer, if this is true, how could we ever turn back to other things? To whom shall we go? Only Christ has the words of eternal life (Jn. 6:68). Shall we turn to a culture which makes science the final arbiter of truth? Then there is no hope for any life beyond the grave. Scientific materialism can not only offer no hope; it tells you that there can be no hope after death. What about other religions? The common theme that ties all other religions together is that, in one way or another, they make

salvation a matter of works. And this inevitably undermines assurance and hope. Standing against its alternatives, Christianity announces sure hope in Christ for all who belong to him. It can do this because salvation is not through our works but through Jesus Christ and what he has done for us by his perfect life and his atoning death. He is the captain of our salvation. Through Christ the Father is bringing many sons to glory. We not only embrace Christ for ourselves, we welcome others to join us. As the hymn puts it,

*Oh who will come and go with us?  
And help us sing that song:  
The song of Moses and the Lamb,  
The song of God's dear Son.*



## CHAPTER VII

# THE HUMANITY OF CHRIST (HEB. 2:10-18)

THOUGH THERE ARE MANY REASONS for us to be discouraged about where our country has been and where it is currently, we ought also to thank God for the many freedoms we enjoy today. These freedoms didn't just drop out of heaven; they didn't appear out of nothing. We ought to appreciate the risk that those men took and the sufferings that they endured by signing their names to the Declaration of Independence. Because of their bold step, they vouchsafed for us the political liberty that we enjoy today.

There is a freedom that the Bible talks about, though, that is infinitely more important than the political freedom we enjoy here today. Paul talks about it to the Galatians: "Stand fast therefore in the liberty where-with Christ has made us free, and be not entangled again in the yoke of bondage" (Gal. 5:1). Paul is not talking there about political liberty; he is rather talking about the freedom we have from the curse of God's law. When the signers of the Declaration put their names to that document, they became at that moment rebels against King George of England. Through our sins, we have become rebels against the King of the universe. Our position is infinitely worse than theirs. Whereas they had a

chance of defeating the armies of King George (and they did), we have no such prayer. In short, there is no lasting hope for any person who is in a state of opposition to God and under his just wrath.

Except that God didn't send his armies of angels to destroy us. Instead, he sent his Son to die for us in order to secure for us the liberty we once threw away through sin. This is what we are talking about here in the book of Hebrews. In particular, it is a reminder to the Hebrew Christians that they were in danger of neglecting and despising the most precious freedom one could possibly enjoy: the freedom of knowing God reconciled in Christ, this "so great salvation" (2:3).

The book of Hebrews is incredibly balanced, at least from a pastoral point of view. The writer not only warns his readers of God's judgment, he also holds up for them the glory of Christ to see so that they will be attracted to it.<sup>1</sup> There is great wisdom in that because you must not only flee from the wrath to come, you must also flee to Christ. There are all sorts of people who are trying to get into heaven – fleeing from the wrath to come – by being deeply religious or spiritual or by doing lots of "good works." But they are not fleeing to Christ, and that's tragic because there is no other name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12). Being religious without Christ has no real value in the end. The apostle Paul lamented that many of his fellow Jews had "a zeal of God, but not according to knowledge. For they, being ignorant of God's righteousness, and going about to establish their own righteousness, have not submitted themselves unto the righteousness of God" (Rom. 10:2-3). Of course, to submit to the righteousness of God is to believe in Jesus (4). Those who do not are not saved (1).

So even though this chapter began with a stern and serious warning of God's judgment on those who drift away from the faith, the writer knows that this is not enough. We need to see the glory of Christ as Lord and Savior in such a way that we are drawn to him. And that is why we have the verses before us. They are meant to help you "taste and

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<sup>1</sup>R. Kent Hughes makes a similar point at the beginning of chapter 5 in his book, *Hebrews: An Anchor for the Soul* (Crossway, 2015).

see that the Lord is good” and that, therefore, “blessed is the man that trusteth in him” (Ps. 34:8).

In these verses, the writer is expanding his argument in verses 5-9. Remember that, in those verses, he was positing that it is no argument against the supremacy of Christ over the angels that he became a man. However, it is one thing to see that there is nothing inherently wrong with the incarnation; it is another thing to see that it was necessary, and this is what is happening in verses 10-18. You see this theme struck both at the beginning and at the end of the text. In verse 10, he begins by saying, “For it became him . . . to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings.” To suffer was a part of the human experience of our Lord. This suffering, our author explains, was fitting and appropriate. Then, in verse 17, he writes, “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like his brethren.” It had to be this way, is what is being said.

Of course, the question is, why was it necessary? The answer is, it was necessary so that our Lord might become the captain of our salvation and God might be able to bring many sons to glory (10). This verse summarizes the argument in the following verses. In these verses, then, we have three things. First, we have the necessity of the incarnation (it became him). Second, we have the extent of the incarnation (to the point of suffering). Third, we have the blessings of the incarnation (he brings many sons to glory). [We will deal with the first two points now, and the third point more fully later.]

### The Necessity of the Incarnation

The necessity is stated at the outset, but the actual reasons for it come in the following verses. The basic argument is this: for Jesus to become our Savior, he had to become one of us. You see this in verse 11: “For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one.” The one who sanctifies is Jesus and the ones he sanctifies are his people. They are said to be “all of one” which means they share a common human

nature. The point is that for our Lord to be the one who sanctifies and cleanses his people, he had to share their nature.

Now why is that the case? Why did our Lord have to become incarnate in order to sanctify his people? The answer is that, in order to sanctify us, he had to participate in our sufferings and die: “Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil” (14). He had to die for us in order to defeat death for us, and that meant that he had to become human and mortal.

Of course, that leads to another question, which is: why did he have to die in order to defeat death? We see the answer in verse 17: “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of his people.” That is a very significant statement. It tells us that we are to interpret what our Lord did on the cross in terms of sacrifice, for he was a priest to God for us. As our priest, he made reconciliation for our sins, or, more accurately, he propitiated God’s just wrath against us on account of our sins. He did this by dying for us, by becoming a substitutionary sacrifice for us. As Paul put it very succinctly in his letter to the Corinthians, he died for our sins (1 Cor. 15:3).

The basic assumption here is, of course, that only someone who shares our nature could stand in our place and satisfy God’s just requirements on our behalf. Our author makes this very point again in 10:4, when he says, “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.” Why is it not possible? It is not possible because there is no real correspondence between an animal and a human. Humans sin, and it is human death, not animal death, which is required by that sin. Only a human could be a substitute for another human.

This is not the only reason why it was necessary that Jesus become incarnate. It wasn’t sufficient that just anyone stand in our place. For

the reality is that any other human would not have gotten the job done. Why? Because any other man or woman would not have been worthy or able to bear the punishment of the sins of the “many sons” who are being brought to glory. Consider, for example, what the psalmist says: “Truly no man can ransom another, or give to God the price of his life, for the ransom of their life is costly and can never suffice, that he should live on forever and never see the pit” (Ps. 49:7- 9, ESV). It is just not possible. No one can bear God’s wrath against sin. Who could do such a thing?

Only one person: Jesus Christ. For he is not only a perfect human being, fit to represent us, but he is also the eternal Son of God, and, therefore, able to bear the infinite punishment due to sin. This is why our Lord is called the “captain” of our salvation. I love that word. It is used in three other places in the NT, every time with reference to our Lord: twice in Acts (3:15; 5:31) where it is translated “Prince” and twice in Hebrews (2:10; 12:2), with the translations “captain” and “author.” It carries the connotation of “champion”<sup>2</sup> and this is what I think best gets at what our writer is saying. Jesus is our champion in battle against sin and death.

Ancient armies used to decide the outcome of a battle by substituting champions who would represent each side, much like the combat between David and Goliath. In our case, the only champion who was able to stand in for us was Jesus Christ, and he has done just that. He has stood in our place and defeated the one who had the power of death, the devil (14). In defeating the devil, he conquered death for us.

Here we see just how important it is that Jesus is both fully God and fully man. If you take away either his humanity or his divinity from him, he cannot stand in for us as the captain of our salvation. Take away his humanity and he couldn’t be a fit representative for us. Take away his divinity, and he wouldn’t be able to fully propitiate God’s wrath against sin. This is the reason why those who reject either Christ’s humanity (like the early Docetists) or his divinity (like the

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<sup>2</sup>William Lane, Hebrews 1-8 [WBC]

ancient Arians or the modern-day Jehovah's Witnesses) end up making salvation a matter of works rather than grace. For if Jesus is not a man, then he really couldn't stand in for us and it still remains for us to make things right with God. If he is not God, then he couldn't have fully satisfied God's justice on our behalf and it still remains for us to make things right with God.

### The Extent of the Incarnation

The next thing we see in this text is the extent of the incarnation. How human did Jesus become? Hebrews tells us that he became fully human. He entered into every aspect of human existence – with the exception of sin – by taking to himself a true human body and soul. He entered fully into the physical and emotional and volitional experiences of mankind. He knows what it is like to suffer, for he became the captain of our salvation “through sufferings” (10). He knows what it is like to die, for he destroyed death “through death,” by dying for us (14).

In fact, the author here quotes several OT passages in order to underline this reality. In verses 12-13, he quotes from Psalm 22 and Isaiah 8. Psalm 22 is one of those obvious Messianic passages. It opens with the words, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Ps. 22:1), the very words that our Lord uttered on the cross as he bore the punishment for sin that we deserved (cf. Mt. 27:46). As you go through the Psalm, we see other ways in which the experience of the psalmist foreshadowed that of the Messiah. The way his enemies mocked him (Ps. 22:7-8; cf. Mt. 27:42-43), the way they parted his garments among them (Ps. 22:18; cf. Mt. 27:35), and the general description of his suffering all point to the death that our Lord suffered on the cross. And yet at the end, there is this note of exultation. Death was not the end of our Lord, for he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. In his state of glorification, he says, “I will declare thy [God's] name unto my brethren in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee” (Heb 2:12; cf. Ps. 22:22). He can call the people of God “my brethren” precisely because he entered

into every aspect of their suffering. He identified with us in the most intimate manner possible.

Then he quotes from Isaiah 8:17-18. In these verses, Isaiah was speaking of himself, his children and his disciples. But the context is a Messianic context. In 8:14, we are told that the Lord “shall be for a sanctuary; but for a stone of stumbling and a rock of offence to both the houses of Israel,” a text which is directly applied to our Lord in the NT (cf. 1 Pet. 2:8). Then in the next chapter (9:6-7) we are told of the Son who would be given who would take the throne of David and rule forever, the Mighty God. This again is another obvious reference to the Christ. It is with that context in mind that the author of Hebrews applies Isa. 8:17-18 to Jesus. The first passage points us again to the humanity of Christ, for although he is eternally God, when he became incarnate, he entered fully into the experience of humanity. As a man, he “grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man” (Lk. 2:52). He learned obedience through the things which he suffered (Heb. 5:8). And in his humanity, he had to put his trust in God the Father for the strength he needed to complete his task: “And again, I will put my trust in him” (2:12).

Passages like this remind us that our Lord didn’t cheat when it came to his humanity. Though our Lord never ceased to be God, he did not allow his divine nature to interfere with his experiencing the limitations of humanity (cf. Phil. 2:8). As a man, therefore, he had to put his trust in God his Father. In verse 14, when our author says that “as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same,” he is underlining as emphatically as he can his identity with us in the frailty of our humanness (excepting sin of course). So, when he was hungry, he experienced hunger like you and I experience it. When he was exhausted, he experienced tiredness the same way we would experience it. When the nails were driven through his hands, he experienced pain in the same way we would have experienced it. Through it all, he put his trust in God for the strength he needed to persevere, just like we must do when we face the storms and trials of life.

It was as a fellow-truster-in-God that our Lord says, “Behold I and the children which God hath given me” (2:12). Here again we see the closest identification of our Lord with his disciples. It ought to remind us of what our Lord himself said in John 6: “I came down from heaven [there is the incarnation], not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which hath sent me, that of all which he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (Jn. 6:37-38). He is able to resurrect us at the last day precisely because he identified fully with us and was, therefore, able in our place to keep God’s law that we broke and satisfy God’s justice that we deserved.

This is also the point of verse 16: “For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham.” The point seems obvious, but there is something we might miss. The point is not only that he could not have redeemed us if he had been an angel (which, by the way, he is not!); he had to become a man. But we might also miss the fact that God didn’t have to save us – for he didn’t save the fallen angels. He left them to perish. So might he have done for us. We should never think that God somehow owes humanity a second chance or that he owes us a shot at salvation. He doesn’t. He could have justly left us to perish. We are rebels, traitors to God. It really ought to surprise us that God has, in fact, saved us, because it required the suffering and the death of the Son of God. Why would God do that for miserable creatures? The distance between you and a worm is not so great when compared to the distance between God and man. And yet, as Isaac Watts put it, God has done all this, “for such a worm as I.”

We see this note sounded again in verse 17: “Wherefore in all things it behooved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people.” He does not want us to think that there is some aspect of our experience that Jesus didn’t enter into as a man. I may have suffered in some ways that you have not; and you will have suffered in ways that I have not. We can sympathize with each



other, but neither of us can really say that we fully understand what the other is going through. But if I understand this text correctly, it is saying that our Lord so identified with us in our pain and suffering (Jesus “took our infirmities and bare our sicknesses,” Mt. 8:17), that we can take them to one who can truly sympathize with us. Isn’t this what our author explicitly says later? “For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:15-16). In all points!

There is another point we need to emphasize. With suffering comes the inevitable temptation to become disillusioned or bitter against God. Then if Satan can’t tempt us away from God through pain, he will try to do it with illicit pleasures. The point is that temptation is often temptation to sin. As it says in Heb 4:15, our Lord was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin. And then in our text, “For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour [help] them that are tempted” (2:18). The question that comes is this: how can our Lord truly identify with us and help us in temptation when our temptation is almost always accompanied by sin, and our Lord never sinned?

The question is ill-informed, however. It turns out that, it is precisely because our Lord did not sin, he can say that he was tempted in all points like as we are. Let me put it like this as an illustration. Suppose you have two prisoners of war, both who are tortured by their captors in order to get information out of them. One of the prisoners eventually breaks and gives the enemy the information they want. He does this, of course, to stop them from hurting him. But the other does not break and so they keep on at him until eventually they have to give up. Which one of the prisoners, do you think, suffered the most? The one who broke or the one who did not break? The one who gave in, or the one who did not give in? Can the one who gave in tell the one who did not, “You can’t really understand what I went through”? No! Actually, the one who did not break is able to say to the one who did, “Though you can’t

understand fully what I went through, I can fully understand what you went through!”

In the same way, when it comes to temptation, our Lord can fully understand what we go through, not because he gave in but precisely because he didn’t. Thank God he was tempted, “yet without sin”! And that means that he knows how to give us help in every hour of need. Do not think that you can bring a problem to the Lord that he does not know how to help you with. He can strengthen you and give you the grace that you need at precisely the point that you need it.

Moreover, it is not just that his experience of shared humanity merely enables him to help us (cf. 18). No, it motivates him to help us. Is this not the point of those words “that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest” (17)? He is merciful, which means that his heart is moved by our afflictions and our suffering.

Now that does not mean that, if we ask him to take them away, he will do so, because he knows that sometimes we need that thorn in the flesh (2 Cor. 12:7-10). Yet we should never impute to the Lord a cold and unfeeling heart. On the contrary, what the prophet says of God’s relation to Israel of old is equally true – if not more so! – of the brethren of Christ: “In all their affliction he was afflicted, and the angel of his presence saved them: in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; and he bare them, and carried them all the days of old” (Isa. 63:9). Or, as the psalmist put it, “The LORD is merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and plenteous in mercy. He will not always chide: neither will he keep his anger for ever. He hath not dealt with us after our sins; nor rewarded us according to our iniquities. For as the heaven is high above the earth, so great is his mercy toward them that fear him. As far as the east is from the west, so far hath he removed our transgressions from us. Like as a father pitieth his children, so the LORD pitieth them that fear him” (Ps. 103:8-13).

We also need to remember, whatever sufferings we are going through, they are at best temporary if we belong to Christ (cf. 1 Pet. 1:6). As the apostle Paul put it, our sufferings are “but for a moment” (2 Cor. 4:17),

especially in light of eternity (18). God knows this. He will never keep his anger forever. Our sufferings will one day fade into forgetfulness as we enter into the joy and glory of our Lord.

Then there is that word “faithful.” He is faithful: he never forsakes his children; he never goes back on his promises. The one who promises us eternal life in Jesus Christ is the one who cannot lie (Tit. 1:2). I love the way the book of Joshua ends: “There failed not ought of any good thing which the LORD has spoken unto the house of Israel; all came to pass (Josh. 21:45). There will never be a moment when the Lord will forsake us, “for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee” (Heb. 13:5). I know that sometimes it feels like the Lord is not with us. There can be very dark times that the Christian goes through. And yet we must not allow our emotions which are so changeable and uncertain dictate to our faith. When we are in darkness, let us follow the exhortation of the prophet: “Who is among you that feareth the LORD, that obeyeth the voice of his servant, that walketh in darkness and hath no light? Let him trust in the name of the LORD and stay upon his God” (Isa. 50:10). We can do this because we have a merciful and faithful high priest.

Let me end with this thought. How do you know that Jesus is for you? How do you know that he is your merciful and faithful high priest? Another way to put that question is: how do I know I am one of the sons God is bringing to glory? To answer that, let’s go back to verse 13: “Behold I and the children which thou hast given me.” As I said before, that ought to remind us of what our Lord said in John 6, for there he also talks about those whom the Father gave to him (Jn. 6:37-39). But who are those people? They are precisely those who see the Son and believe on him (Jn. 6:40), who come to Christ by faith (45), who see him as the bread and water of life (36). Have you come to Christ? Do you believe on him? If you have come and if you do believe: keep coming and keep believing! And if you have not come to Christ, hear his words: “Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me: for I am

meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30). Come to Christ!

## LESSONS FROM A PSALM

# CHAPTER VIII

## THE CLAIMS OF CHRIST

### (HEB. 3:1-6)

FOR ALL THE INDIVIDUALISM OF OUR CULTURE, and all the so-called efforts toward and celebration of self-actualization, the reality is that everyone gravitates toward an authority in their lives. This is true even if they say they are anti-authoritarian, that they are marching to their own drumbeat, taking their own path, the captains of their own souls. You can see this in the fact that culture (even as ours appears to celebrate “diversity”) tends to be monolithic. There aren’t really that many people who are marching to their own tune, if any at all. They are taking their cues from society, from social media, from their friends, from professors, from scientists, from government officials, from philosophers – which in most cases are all saying pretty much the same thing. In every society there emerges a dominant belief system, a worldview, that controls the way people think and see things. No one is really free from this. And this is the authority from which they consciously or unconsciously plot the course of their lives.

I’m not here to claim that Christianity is any different in terms of obedience to an external authority. But my point is that no one is really free from external authority. The question is not whether we are going

to steer our lives by some authority outside of ourselves, but which authority will it be? Will it be the one adopted from the culture? The one that is most popular? Are we just going to live by a belief system that makes us feel good about ourselves? How should we live? What is the authority that you are living by?

This is relevant to what we are going to be considering this morning because the small congregation of Jewish Christians to whom this epistle of Hebrews was written were beginning to drift away from the truth (2:1). One of the things aiding this drift was a failure to appreciate the claims of Christ upon them. In other words, they were facing – whether they in fact had realized this or not – an authority crisis. As a result, they were drifting toward other sources of authority. In particular, they were drifting toward a Christless Law. They were beginning to be tempted to replace Jesus with Moses.

This is, of course, not surprising due to the fact that Moses was the authority figure among the Jewish people. This is illustrated in the fact that the authority of the Books of Moses was one of the few things that the Sadducees and the Pharisees could agree on. Our Lord himself points out that they trusted in Moses (Jn. 5:45). Later, when the Pharisees were disputing with the man born blind who had been healed by Christ, they said, “We know that God spake unto Moses: as for this fellow, we know not from whence he is” (Jn. 9:29). Perhaps the readers of this epistle were beginning to feel this way too.

So the goal of our author in this section of the epistle is to compare and to contrast the claims of Moses and Jesus Christ. As he does so, he will show that Christ is superior to Moses. Basically, the argument comes down to this. They were both faithful in the work for which God had sent them (3:2, 5-6). They share a similarity in that respect, but there it ends. Christ is worthy of more glory (3-4) and the reason for this is that, though Moses was a servant in the community of God’s people, Christ is God’s Son over the community of God’s people (5-6). The obvious implication is that, though the claims of Moses were legitimate in that he was sent by God and was faithful to God in his service for him,

yet the claims of Christ supersede the claims of Moses. The authority of Jesus is not that of a servant but of a Son. It is not the authority of someone who is part of the household, but who is over the household. That is the argument.

The application is also obvious, isn't it? Our author will work it out in the following verses, but you see it at the bookends of this section. He begins with a call to "consider" Jesus (1) and he ends with an implicit exhortation to "hold fast" to the confession of their hope in him (6). In other words, they need to reorient themselves in light of the claims of Christ upon them. They need to consider what they are and then they need to act upon this reality.

Now we may not be in exactly the same condition, but the exhortation to consider Christ and his claims upon us is just as relevant today as it was then. The way our Lord is described here is still the way we need to consider him. For Jesus is "the same yesterday, today, and forever" (Heb. 13:8). Let us, therefore, look at this passage and see what it has to say about our Lord, and what this has to say about the claims of Christ over our lives. In particular, we want to consider the authority and claims of Christ in terms of his origin, his mission, his dedication, and his position.

### The Claims of Christ in Light of His Origin

We see the origin of the authority of Christ in terms of his description in verse 1: he is described as the "Apostle . . . of our profession." This is an interesting description partly because he is never described explicitly in this way elsewhere in the NT. However, it is perfectly consistent with how our Lord describes himself in other places. The meaning of "apostle" is "one who is sent," and this is invariably the way our Lord describes himself, for example, in John's gospel (cf. Jn 6:39-40). The apostleship of our Lord is the basis for the mission of the church: "As thou hast sent me into the world, even so have I sent them into the world" (Jn. 17:18).



This is the author's way of saying that our Lord's authority is an authority from heaven. He did not come to do his own will but the will of him who sent him. And this means that we can bank on his word. His word is the word of the Father. God spoke in many ways and at many different times through the prophets (including Moses), but now he has spoken the definitive word through his Son (Heb. 1:1). What we profess and confess as Christians has the authoritative stamp of heaven upon it.

### The Claims of Christ in Light of His Mission

The next descriptor of our Lord is the term "High Priest." This describes the mission of our Lord, as we have seen in several places already (1:3; 2:17). He made purification for sins; he has made reconciliation for the sins of the people. Our Lord is not merely a guru; his is not just another prophet. He did not come to tell people how to save themselves. No: he came to save his people from their sins (Mt. 1:21). This is something we cannot do; we might be able to ignore guilt or cover it up, but we can never fully expiate it before God. This is what Jesus Christ did on the cross. There is no other person in the universe who has done such a thing. The name of Christ is the only name under heaven given among men whereby we must be saved (Acts 4:12).

To reject Christ is to reject any sure salvation. To reject Christ and to turn to other sources of religious authority means that we are taking it upon ourselves – we who are dust and ashes, we whose righteousness are filthy rags – to make things right with a holy God. To turn from Jesus to Moses, from the cross to Mount Sinai, is to trade grace for works. In truth to turn from Jesus to anything or anyone else is to turn from grace to works, from dependence upon God's free acceptance of us through Jesus to a dependence upon personal performance of some kind.

Both of these terms, "apostle" and "high priest" summarize what the author has carefully argued for Christ in the previous two chapters – hence the word, "Wherefore" at the very beginning of verse 1. If we have paid attention to what has been said, if we consider it carefully, we

will see that these perfectly describe who Jesus is and what he has done, and it will be easier to see why it is folly to abandon the claims of Christ upon our life for anyone else, no matter how great or good they are.

### The Claims of Christ in Light of His Dedication

The one place where Moses and Jesus are at least partially compared and similar is in the term “faithful.” Our Lord was “faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house” (2). This is picked up again in verses 5 and 6. In saying this about our Lord, it is in some sense also a repetition of what has already been said, for he is a “merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God” (2:17).

Even though our author doesn’t highlight the fact, the reality is that surely his readers would have been aware that, although Moses in the main displayed remarkable faithfulness and dedication to the Lord, even he was not without his faults. He smote the rock when he should have spoken to it; he did not treat God as holy before the people, and, as a result, he was forbidden from entering the Promised Land. However, there was no corresponding fault in our Lord. He could say, “Which of you convicteth me of sin?” (Jn. 8:46), a question which remained unanswered. Even in his trial, they could only convict him by condemning him for being who he really was. He was and is “holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens” (Heb. 7:26).

The bottom line for the original reader and for us is this: Jesus was not only sent by the Father to be our High Priest, but he also perfectly fulfilled the mission he was sent to accomplish. Moses didn’t quite make it to the Promised Land; Jesus brings many sons to glory. Look at any great man or woman in history and you will find a flaw somewhere. But look at Jesus and you see only perfection. He was tempted in all points like as we are, yet without sin (2:18; 4:15). There was no one like him and there is no one like him. To reject Christ is to

reject the only one who has perfectly fulfilled God's will upon the earth.

### The Claims of Christ in Light of His Position

This is where the author camps out. It is the main point in verses 3-6. Though Jesus and Moses were both faithful to God, Moses is infinitely inferior to the Lord, and our author explains why in these verses. The main reason, given in verses 3-4 and repeated in verses 5-6, is that whereas Moses is part of the house, our Lord is over the house.

What is meant here by "house"? In this context, "house" refers to the community of God's people. In the OT, this meant primarily being a part of the nation of Israel. In the NT, this means being a part of the church. In numerous places the apostle Paul calls the church the house of God (cf. Eph. 2:19; 1 Tim. 3:15). But this does not mean merely being a part of an external organization. It means belonging to Christ. In verse 6, the author says that we belong to the house of Christ if we hold fast the confidence and rejoicing of the hope firm to the end; in verse 14, he says that we are partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our hope steadfast to the end. This seems to indicate that belonging to the household of Christ and being a partaker of Christ is the same thing. You are truly a part of the NT church when and only when you truly belong to Jesus Christ through faith (cf. 12).

Now what is the argument? In verse 3, we are told, "For [this is the reason why you should consider Christ] this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honor than the house." He then goes on to explain, "For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God" (4). In other words, Jesus, being the eternal Son of God, is the one who built the house in which Moses served. Moses was not the architect of the Old Covenant community of God's people; God was – and that means that Jesus was. Incidentally, here we have another evidence of the Biblical witness to the divinity of Christ. Verse 3 depends on the fact that our Lord is the one who built the house in which Moses served.

Verse 4 says that God is the one who built it, as the one who builds all things. Putting these two verses together indicates again that our Lord is God manifested in the flesh.

Then in verse 5-6, this argument is repeated in different terms. “And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; But Christ [was faithful] as a son over his own house.” Moses was in the house as a servant; our Lord was over the house as a son. The covenant community that Moses administered existed for the purpose of pointing to the future ministry and work of Jesus Christ. God didn’t put Moses in charge in order to have people look to him; he put him in his house in order to point people to Jesus Christ. This is what our Lord said to the Pharisees: “Do not think that I will accuse you to the Father: there is one that accuseth you, even Moses, in whom ye trust. For had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me” (Jn. 5:45-46).

The gist, therefore, of the argument is this: Christ stands over Moses. Christ is the Son of God; Moses is his servant. For the Hebrews to reject the claims of Christ on them to turn to Moses was fundamentally to misunderstand both Christ and Moses. In reality, honoring Moses would mean to honor Christ as the Lord of Moses and the one to whom Moses pointed. Thus to return to a Christless Law would be to gut the Law of its true meaning.

### Christ Over All

Jesus our Lord doesn’t just stand over Moses: he stands over all things (cf. ver. 4). He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Rev. 17:14). If you ask how we know this, it is this fact to which the resurrection points (Acts 2:36; 17:30-31). Our Lord conquered death in his rising from the dead; and this surely points us to one whose supremacy cannot be matched by any mortal man. To substitute the claims of Christ over your life for anyone or anything else cannot enjoy any lasting success. Eventually

we will all have to come to terms with the supremacy of Christ over all things.

And this means that belonging to the household of Jesus Christ and being a partaker in his saving blessings is the most important consideration we can give attention to. You can of course ignore Jesus, but you will not be able to do so forever. So consider him! See the one who is over all things, who is your Lord and King. And that brings us to a very important question: do I belong to house of Christ?

Do I belong to the household of Christ?

The answer to this is at least partly at the end of verse 6: “whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.” Let me begin by saying that this is not just a test of who is a part of the visible church. This is a test for those who belong to Christ. It is correlative, as we have seen, with being a partaker of Christ. It means to be a participant in the saving blessings of our Lord. In other words, it means to be saved. It means being forgiven of your sins and being a child of God. This has eternal implications. This is not just about some temporal blessing. To reduce this text to that is to gut it of its meaning.

At the same time, it doesn't say that we become the house of Christ if we hold fast the hope to the end. What the author says is that we are the house of Christ if we hold fast to the end. That is a very important distinction. He is saying that the sure and inevitable evidence of belonging to Christ is that we persevere in faith and hope to the end. The ground of our belonging to Christ is the grace of God, not perseverance in the faith. But the evidence of our belonging to Christ is perseverance in the faith, and to say that is not in any way to diminish the power or the effectiveness of God's grace or to make it depend decisively upon man. In fact, I would say that to deny the doctrine of perseverance is to diminish the grace of God, for you are essentially saying that the work of God's grace and Spirit in the heart is not effective enough to keep the believer

believing. You do not honor God's grace either in its freeness or in its power by saying that our corrupt human nature is able to overpower God's work in the heart so that we may not persevere to the end.

There is often a hidden assumption lurking in the shadows behind the objection to the necessity of perseverance. That assumption is that any human involvement in matters of eternal salvation is a denial of the freeness of the grace of God in salvation. But that is a false and unbiblical assumption. That is not what the NT Scripture is getting at when it says that we are saved by grace and not by works. Consider Eph. 2:8-10, for example. There the apostle writes, "For by grace are ye saved through faith: and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God: not of works, lest any man should boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus unto good works, which God hath before ordained that we should walk in them." Note that even as the apostle says that we are saved by grace and not by works, he also affirms that this is "through faith." Now I am aware that some people try to make this about God's faith. That's extremely unlikely. We are saved by faith because we are justified through faith, as Paul says repeatedly in his epistles. In Paul it is clear that the faith by which we are justified is our trusting in Christ.

This is beyond dispute, for example, in Gal. 2:16, where Paul writes, "Knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law, but by the faith of Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Jesus Christ, that we might be justified by the faith of Christ, and not by the works of the law: for by the works of the law shall no flesh be justified." (Some people might respond, "But see, he says 'faith of Christ!'" But "faith of Christ" here is a use of what grammarians call the objective use of the genitive case in Greek and could be translated, "faith in Christ" or "faith of which Christ is the object." It certainly doesn't refer to Christ believing or to the faithfulness of Christ.) Note that we believe that we might be justified. Faith here is not the seed of faith or the principle of faith – it is faith in action; it is believing. Notice also that Paul does not in any way think that this gets in the way of God's grace in salvation. In fact, it is because we believe in order to be justified that we are not

justified by works. Salvation through faith is the basis for salvation apart from works.

Going back to Ephesians 2, verse 10 underlines in another way what we are arguing for here. The apostle says that we are God's workmanship created in Christ unto or for good works. We are not created through good works or by good works, but unto or for good works. And this is God's work. He has ordained it. To argue that an elect individual can go through life without ever trusting in Christ or doing good works is to despise God's grace, not to celebrate it.

The human element in salvation, trusting in Christ and growing in grace and persevering in the faith, does not in any way, therefore, undermine the freeness of God's grace. For all this ultimately depends on God, not us. When Paul says, "and that not of yourselves," these words refer to everything in the phrase "by grace are ye saved through faith." Faith is God's work in us. We believe in Christ because God works the faith in us by sovereign grace. To say that faith is not necessary is not upholding God's grace; it is an attack on God's grace.

Suppose you are a wavering Christian. You are beginning to wonder if it is worth it to keep being a disciple of Christ. It is beginning to look like your life would be much easier if you just stopped believing in Jesus. No more persecution that way. No more getting beat up for Christ. No more losing your property or your privileges in society or your reputation because of your association with Jesus. I think that is where a lot of these Hebrew Christians were. What do you say to them? Well, one of the things that our author says to them is that, if you don't hold fast to the hope and the confession of our faith in Christ to the end, you don't belong to Christ. If you don't belong to Christ, you are not saved. In the end, that is infinitely worse than losing earthly goods and comforts and privileges.

That is not, of course, all he says. As we have seen, he is reminding them of other things as well, including the scope and the magnitude of their blessings in Christ. He starts there, in fact. He begins by reminding them that they are "holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling" (1).

He is assuming that they are what they profess to be: genuine followers of Jesus, the people of God. God's people can be called holy brethren because of what Jesus has done for us – he is the one who, through his death, has sanctified us and made us sons and daughters of the Most High (2:11). We have been called by a “heavenly calling,” that is, those who are called by God to faith in Christ have a heavenly inheritance. We are not primarily citizens of this world, but we seek a country that is to come. As we look to heaven and to the glories to come, we are reminded that the sufferings of this time are not worthy to be compared to the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). This hope causes us to purify ourselves even as our Lord is pure (1 Jn. 3:1-3).

This hope, when it is held fast by us, will produce great confidence and rejoicing (6). As we rejoice in hope, we become patient in tribulation (Rom. 12:12).

To be balanced, we need to be reminded of two things – both of which are in verse 6: “if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.” First, if we are to persevere through trials that test our faith and make us want to give up, we need to have this confidence and rejoicing in the hope. To put it in terms of Heb. 11:6, we need to be confident that God is, and that he is a rewarder of those who diligently seek him. Note that this is not rejoicing in any hope – it is rejoicing of the hope. This is a particular hope, a hope which is contained within the boundaries of our confession (1). It is hope in Christ. How then do you maintain and grow in this confidence and rejoicing? You do so by obeying the command of verse 1, by considering carefully Christ Jesus our Lord, who is he and what he has done and is doing.

But that is not the only thing. As we've noticed, there is an implicit warning in verse 6, a warning that will be expanded upon in the following verses. It is that if we don't continue in the faith, if we abandon our confidence and rejoicing in the hope of Christ and his salvation, we are not truly saved. We don't belong to Christ. As we've argued in our message on 2:1-4, warnings like this are here to remind us of the seriousness



of what we are dealing with. It is meant to give us a healthy fear of the consequences of turning away from Christ. And so it is another means that God uses to keep us faithful to him. Warnings like this are not a whip so much as a loving warning from a Savior who genuinely cares for his own. After all, he is the one who warned his own disciples on multiple occasions, “He that endureth to the end shall be saved” (cf. Mt. 24:13).

Let me summarize the argument in terms of Psalm 2. We are to consider the claims of Christ, who is God’s Son, upon us. He is our Lord and King and Savior. How are we to relate to him, especially in light of the temptation to abandon our faith in him? We are to heed the exhortation of Ps. 2:11 – “Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling.” It is not a contradiction to say that we are to rejoice and tremble! We need both. We need to tremble in light of the danger of falling away. But we also need to rejoice in light of the heavenly hope. One without the other will leave us imbalanced. But when we are motivated by both, we will more readily turn from temptation and run to Christ. May the Lord grant us to consider Christ Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, in such a way that we will indeed rejoice with trembling in the hope that we have in him.

## CHAPTER IX

# DO NOT HARDEN YOUR HEART (HEB. 3:7-11)

LAST TIME, WE CONSIDERED HEB. 3:1-6 in light of the claims of Christ. Because Christ is Lord of all, superior to Moses, the eternal Son of God, he is not one to be neglected or despised. He is to be obeyed, and that is the point of verses 7-11. Jesus Christ is not there simply to be admired or to be talked about like some abstract philosophical notion. He is to be embraced as King of kings and Lord of lords. We are to bow the knees of our heart to him. We are to submit to him and to give him our hearts – mind, affection, and will. We are to submit our thoughts to him, our loves to him, and our choices to him. We are to bring “into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:5).

When I say, “we,” I mean we, as in everyone in this room, and everyone out of this room. Jesus Christ is not a tribal deity: he is Lord of the Christian in the pew, and he is the Lord of the atheist or the agnostic who could care less about religion. God commands “all men everywhere to repent: because he hath appointed a day, in the which he will judge the world in righteousness by that man whom he hath ordained; whereof he hath given assurance unto all men in that he hath

raised him from the dead” (Acts 17:30-31). He is not waiting for you to care: you are commanded to bow the knee to Jesus Christ whether you care or not, for the simple reason that Christ’s lordship is not dependent upon your feelings about him. It is the reality that you should conform your feelings to, not the other way round.

Now some folks who love the doctrines of grace get nervous when you say that God commands all men everywhere to repent. They get even more nervous when you say that God commands all men to put their faith in Christ. The primary reason they get nervous and object to this is that they misunderstand the doctrine of total depravity. They believe that, because the Bible teaches that no one can come to Christ or love God or submit to God’s commands apart from grace, to call someone who is dead in sin to faith and repentance would be to say that the spiritually dead can do spiritual things. This is a half-truth. It is true that the natural man does not receive the things of the Spirit of God, neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned (1 Cor. 2:14; Jn. 6:44; Rom. 8:7-8). But it is not true that the natural man is, therefore, off the hook for not believing and repenting, or that they should not be called to repentance and faith.

Why is this? Behind this objection, an objection that is symptomatic of both hyper-Calvinism and Arminianism, is the assumption that ought always implies can. In other words, if I am obligated to do something, I must be able to do it. But this is not always true. For example, just because I can’t pay back a debt, doesn’t mean that I’m not obligated to pay back that debt. There is a moral obligation to pay my debts, even if I don’t have the money in my pockets to pay them back. Think about the parable of the unforgiving servant in Matthew 18. He could not pay back his debt (ver. 25), but that did not release him from his obligation to pay. Now this is significant because our sins are likened to debts (“forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors,” Mt. 6:12). Just because you can’t pay your sin debt (and none of us can) does not mean that you are no longer guilty or obligated by them. Ought does not always imply can.

But, as we all recognize, sometimes it does. So, does it apply to the command to repent and obey? Well, think about the command to love God. Let me ask you this: Is it okay for an unregenerate man to hate God? No, I think all of us would say it is not okay. It is sin to hate God. This is true even though it is a fact that an unregenerate man cannot in any real sense love God. It would always be wrong to give the impression that the ungodly are off the hook for their hatred of God just because they cannot love him apart from grace. Like Joseph's brothers; we are told that "they hated him [Joseph], and could not speak peaceably unto him" (Gen. 37:4). Does the fact that they could not speak peaceably with him mean that it was okay that they could not, or that it would have been wrong to tell them that they ought to have spoken peaceably with him? Of course not!

This is true not only for the command to love God but also to believe the gospel. When our Lord began his ministry, we are told that he "came into Galilee [a place that would ultimately reject him], preaching the gospel of the kingdom of God, and saying, The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand: repent ye, and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:14-15). We are not told that he limited this command to the elect or even to the regenerate. All in Galilee who heard this message were commanded to repent and believe. We don't have to think that our Lord somehow believed that lost men had the ability in themselves to respond to the message. Regardless of the disposition of their hearts, they were still under obligation to repent and believe.

Someone may still say, "Well, I don't see why God would condemn someone for not believing if they cannot." To this I reply that you don't spare a snake because it is its nature to bite; you kill it precisely because it is its nature to bite. (The analogy of the snake is apropos: for didn't our Lord say to the Pharisees, "Ye serpents, ye generation of vipers, how can ye escape the damnation of hell?" Mt. 23:33.) God will not put out the fires of hell because it is the nature of the sinner to sin; he will judge them precisely because it is their nature to sin. It is just for God to hold sinners responsible for their sins even if it is their nature to sin. The fact

that it is their nature to sin and that without grace they will go on in their sin does not excuse it – if anything it makes it even worse. Just because it is not in the nature of the unregenerate to repent does not mean that God cannot hold them accountable for refusing to repent.

Another point of confusion has to do with the doctrines of election and limited atonement. By election we mean that God, from all eternity, unconditionally chose out the human race some to be saved. By limited atonement we mean that Christ died for the elect only. Now here is where the confusion comes in: people will say, “If Christ died only for the elect, how can we call all men to believe in him?” But this objection comes from a misunderstanding of what we are called to believe in the gospel message. What I mean is this: when the gospel comes to me and calls me to believe in Jesus, it is not a call to believe that I am elect or even that he died for me. Neither of those things may in fact be true. Rather, the call of the gospel is a call to embrace Jesus as he is presented to us in the New Testament – as our Lord to whom we must submit our whole lives, and as the only one in whom forgiveness of sins can be found. And the requirement to believe that Jesus is Lord and Savior is completely consistent with the doctrines of unconditional election and particular redemption.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>“Some have maintained that, if the atonement of Christ is not general, no sinner can be under obligation to believe in Christ, until he is assured that he is one of the elect. This implies that no sinner is bound to believe what God says, unless he knows that God designs to save him. God declares that there is no salvation, except through Christ; and every sinner is bound to believe this truth. If it were revealed from heaven, that but one sinner, of all our fallen race, shall be saved by Christ, the obligation to believe that there is no salvation out of Christ, would remain the same. Every sinner, to whom the revelation would be made, would be bound to look to Christ as his only possible hope, and commit himself to that sovereign mercy by which some one of the justly condemned race would be saved. The abundant mercy of our God will not be confined to the salvation of a single sinner; but it will bring many sons to glory through the sufferings of Jesus, the Captain of our salvation. Yet every sinner, who trusts in Christ for salvation, is bound to commit himself, unreservedly, to the sovereign mercy of God. If he requires some previous assurance that he is in the number of the elect, he does not surrender himself to God, as a guilty sinner ought. The gospel brings every

Why am I saying all this? I'm saying this because there are some folks who confuse a general call to repent and believe with a rejection of the doctrines of grace. But that's not based on a Biblical grasp of those doctrines; it is based on a misunderstanding of those doctrines. We affirm, with Scripture, total depravity, unconditional election, particular redemption, effectual calling, and the perseverance of the saints. We also affirm, with Scripture, that all men, regardless of their spiritual condition, are called to repent of their sins and embrace Jesus as Lord and Savior. We do this without retreating one inch from the Biblical insistence that we can only truly love God and repent of our sins and believe on his Son by the sovereign grace of God that gives new life to the spiritually dead.

I'm also saying this because it is relevant to what we are going to be considering in the text of Hebrews today. The central command of this passage is a command to listen and believe the words of God and a warning for those who will not. The reason why what I've been saying is important is that I don't want to give one inch of wiggle room for those seeking to excuse their sin. "I couldn't help it." "I am just too far gone to do what God wants me to do." "I don't know if I'm regenerate, so I don't think I'm responsible to obey God." "I don't know if I'm elect, so I don't think I have to obey God until I know." These are all terrible excuses. But that is just what they are: they are excuses, no more and no less. When God's commands come to us, we are immediately obligated to obey them, all of us, no matter what our spiritual condition is.

Here obedience to the Divine call and command is urged primarily from the hideous example of the Israelites in the wilderness. The verses which we are looking at here are a quote from Ps. 95:7-11, which refers to the events at Massah and Meribah (which mean, respectively, "temp-

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sinner prostrate at the feet of the Great Sovereign, hoping for mercy at his will, and in his way: and the gospel is perverted when any terms short of this are offered to the offender. With this universal call to absolute and unconditional surrender to God's sovereignty, the doctrine of particular redemption exactly harmonizes." J. L. Dagg, *Manual of Theology* (Gano Books, 1990), p. 330-331.

tation” and “striving”) recorded in Exod. 17:1-7. There the Israelites had just left Egypt after seeing miracle after miracle. And yet the first time they lack water, they complain as if God was not worthy to be trusted. They tested him – put God on trial as it were. It was a horrid display of rebellion and unbelief. The Psalm 95 passage also refers to the refusal of the Israelites to enter the Promised Land as a result of their unbelief: “Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swore unto their fathers, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it” (Num. 14:22-23).

We are meant to consider the example of these rebels and be repulsed in our hearts (cf. 1 Cor. 10:11). The Bible not only draws us toward obedience by setting before our eyes the sweetness of faith and obedience; it also seeks to repel us from disobedience by setting before our eyes the ugliness of sin. This is what Heb. 3:7-11 is doing. And that’s what I hope happens today. I want you to look and be revolted by the picture of rebellion painted in these verses. This is not hyperbole; it is a real and true picture of what sin is and what sin does. It’s good because the devil wants to paint sin in false colors. As the Puritan Thomas Watson put it, Satan presents the bait but hides the hook. The point of passages like this is to show you the hook behind the bait.

In my office at home I have a “demotivational” poster. It is a picture of the hulk of a part of a ship sticking out of the ocean, where it has obviously sunk. This wreck is a constant reminder that someone made a terrible mistake. And the caption under the picture is this: “MISTAKES: It could be that the purpose of your life is only to serve as a warning to others.”<sup>2</sup> I have this in my office as a reminder – a reminder that my life could be like that. I don’t want that for me, and I don’t want that for you. But that’s what the wilderness generation of the Israelites are: a warning to all of what following them in their mistakes will do (cf. Ps. 78:6).

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<sup>2</sup>You can see a picture of this at [www.despair.com](http://www.despair.com).

This text basically falls into two parts: it tells us what obedience is and then it tells us what disobedience is. Again, the purpose of this OT quotation is to motivate us to obedience by demotivating us to disobedience. May we by the grace of God be properly motivated and demotivated.

What Psalm 95 tells us about obedience.

It tells us three things about obedience: the urgency of obedience, the condition for obedience, and the terms of obedience. The urgency of obedience is seen in a couple of ways. First, in the fact that the one who is speaking to us, who is commanding us in the words of Scripture, is none other than the Holy Spirit: “Wherefore, as the Holy Ghost saith, Today if ye will hear his voice” (7). The one who is speaking in the pages of Holy Writ is none other than the Spirit of God, and to reject him is to reject God, not man. We must not think that this is a word that God has spoken for another crowd in another day. No, this is a word which he continues to speak to us. As we’ve already had opportunity to notice, this is in the present tense; it is not that the Holy Spirit has spoken but that he is speaking, and he is speaking in these words to us (cf. 12).

Second, we see the urgency in the word “today” in verse 7. “Today, if ye will hear his voice.” This is not something to put off. This is something to hear and to act upon immediately. You may not have tomorrow to act upon it, so act upon it today. As the apostle Paul put it, quoting the prophet Isaiah, “behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Cor. 6:2). The Psalmist shows us how this is to be done: “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments” (Ps. 119:59-60).

There is a “too late doctrine” in Scripture. You see it in parables like the Parable of the Fig Tree in Luke 13: “He spake also this parable; A certain man had a fig tree planted in his vineyard; and he came and



sought fruit thereon, and found none. Then said he unto the dresser of his vineyard, Behold, these three years I come seeking fruit on this fig tree, and find none: cut it down; why cumbereth it the ground? And he answering said unto him, Lord, let it alone this year also, till I shall dig about it, and dung it: and if it bear fruit, well: and if not, then after that thou shalt cut it down” (Lk. 13:6-9). Our Lord spoke this parable immediately after saying, “I tell you . . . except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish” (5). The lesson is clear: don’t put off repentance because there might come a time when you’re cut down and repentance is impossible. If you need to repent, repent today. “Today, if ye will hear his voice:” it’s urgent!

Then there is the condition for obedience: “if ye will hear his voice.” I need to be willing to hear God’s voice. Where we hear it is in the words of Scripture. We are going to see that the Israelites in the wilderness did exactly the opposite. Are you willing to hear God’s voice? Or are you only willing to do whatever seems right to you? Oh that we might have the spirit of Samuel: “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth” (1 Sam. 3:9-10). To refuse to hear God’s word is a serious thing, for it is a sign that we do not belong to him. For “he that is of God heareth God’s words: ye therefore hear them not, because ye are not of God” (Jn. 8:47). And, “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me” (Jn. 10:27).

Third, there are the terms of obedience: “Harden not your hearts” (8). It is here that we come to the heart of the passage. To harden one’s heart means that we refuse to have our affections moved and our minds molded and our wills turned by God’s word. It means that we have become impervious and unyielding to the influence of God’s instruction. It means that we have become “hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (13). On the other hand, the command implies that we become the kind of person who quickly and readily obeys God’s word, who doesn’t question it or doubt it or hesitate about it.

The rest of this passage is meant to illustrate the danger of hardening your heart by pointing to the experience of Israel in the wilderness.

This picture is meant to help you see just how disgusting and dangerous it is to harden your heart so that you won't do it. May we have ears to hear now what this text now says about disobedience.

What Psalm 95 says about disobedience.

In the following verses (8-11), we see four things: God's description of disobedience, God's reaction to disobedience, God's evaluation of disobedience, and God's denunciation of disobedience.

First, consider God's description of disobedience. You have it there in verse 8. What does it mean to harden your heart? Well, a comparison is made. It is as if the author is saying, "If you want to see a visible representation of spiritual hardness, look at the Israelites in the wilderness." So he writes, "as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness." The word "provocation" there means "rebellion." That's the first thing we note about hardening your heart against God's word. It is nothing less than an act of rebellion against God.

We need to remind ourselves often of this. We need to remind ourselves that every sin is an act of rebellion against God. Every sin is an act of treason against the Sovereign of the universe. It does not matter how small or how great is the sin: every sin falls into that category. It is a slap in the face of the Almighty. It is essentially to tell God, in whose hand is our every breath, and to whom we owe every moment of our existence, that we are going to call the shots, thank you very much. When we harden our hearts against God, and refuse to obey his word, we are saying we don't have to obey him, that in that particular instance he is not God, we are.

That makes those who harden their hearts rebels against the God who is infinitely exalted and glorious. In his presence the seraphim bow their heads, and we who are dust and ashes presume to take his throne. My friends, there is only one place fitting for people who harden their hearts against such a God: hell. And one day, our Lord will come "in flaming fire, taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that

obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his might” (2 Thess. 1:8-9). Those who refuse to recognize the glory of his might will one day be crushed by it. What in the world are we thinking about when we provoke God, when we rebel against him!

He goes on to give a further description: “when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years” (9). To test or tempt God is to stand as judge over him. It is an act of defiance. It is to say that you will not come to him on his terms but only on your terms. This is what the Israelites did.

Despite all the miracles they saw, they refused to believe on him. They refused to believe that God was for them and instead they treated God as if he were their enemy. They walk through the Red Sea on dry land, and then come to a place with no water and assault God with the accusation that he had brought them out there to die of thirst! Now I am always tempted to say, “But I would never have been like that.” Really? Apart from the grace of God, everyone of us would have been like that, would have joined them in their rebellion and hardness. How many of us only want to relate to God on our terms? We will commit ourselves to him if . . . Well, then, we are just like the Israelites in the wilderness!

We move on from the description of the disobedience to God’s reaction to their disobedience: “Wherefore I was grieved with that generation” (10). If you are thinking, “Well, but this is the God of the OT...” listen to the words of Mark 3:5: “And when [Jesus] had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts....” Of course the Son of God is going to have the same reaction to disobedience and hardness as his Father. The OT portrayal of God is as relevant today as it was when it was written.

Think about this. When God looks at this – God whose wisdom is perfect and infallible and whose knowledge is exhaustive, who is holy and just and good – he is grieved. His perception is always perfectly accurate. God was not grieved because the Israelites were giving him a hard

time. He was not grieved because their disobedience inconvenienced him. No, he was grieved because their behavior was so incredibly sad to see and heart-breaking to watch. God knows what their end will be, and he is grieved. Just as there is joy before the angels when one sinner repents, even so there is sadness and grief before the angels when sinners harden their hearts. That consideration ought to make us think twice about our sin.

Then notice God's evaluation of their disobedience: "and said, They do alway err in their heart: and they have not known my ways" (10). I think this is an amazing evaluation. Let's take this in reverse order – first, "they have not known my ways." Of whom was this spoken? It was said of the Israelites, the very ones who saw the Ten Plagues in Egypt, who walked through the Red Sea on dry ground, who daily ate the manna that fell from heaven, who saw the pillar of fire over the tabernacle, who experienced miracle after miracle after miracle. How in the world could they not have known God's ways! Well, the reason is that they were blind. That is, "they do always err in their hearts." If your heart is wrong, it doesn't matter what evidence people will put before your eyes. You will always interpret it through the eyes of unbelief. And this is exactly what the Israelites did. Their unbelief made them blind to the most dramatic displays of God's power ever witnessed on the earth up to that point.

This was also true of many of the people who witnessed the miracles of Jesus: "But though he had done before them so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him" (Jn. 12:37). It tells us that miracles and might aren't enough to convince sinners, so blinded are we by our sin. So it is today. People don't reject the gospel primarily because of the intellectual arguments against it. They do so primarily because they don't want to submit to God. They don't want to bow the knee to Jesus Christ. They don't want to humble themselves before God. That's what hardness does. It turns you into Pharaoh who hardened his heart against the God of Israel despite all the wonders that he saw, for the simple reason that he did not want to humble himself before him. Pharaoh

didn't want to give up his gods for the God of Israel; even so, those who are outside of Christ refuse him because they don't want to give up self-sovereignty.

The point is that every sinner is blind. That's what sin does to us. You have to give credit to the devil that he is able to convince people that, by sinning, they see. He makes blind people think that darkness is light. Such is the blindness produced by sin that only the grace of God will open blind eyes.

Finally, consider God's denunciation of disobedience: "So I swear in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest" (11). We know what happened to the rebels in the wilderness. They were prevented by God from entering the Promised Land. This is a picture of what the end is for those who harden their hearts against God. It is a picture of final judgment. We know it's a picture of final judgment because God's wrath is not waged against his people, against those who are saved. God's wrath is against the lost. When the apostle Paul warns, "Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things [the sins of verses 3-5] cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience," he is not talking about a bad hair day. He means, as he puts it in verse 5, that none of these folks "hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God." It means they are not saved. God's wrath is not against his children; it is against the wicked.

We must interpret the "rest" here, not in terms of some earthly blessing merely, but in terms of the rest of salvation in Christ. There is no hope for those who harden their hearts and die in their sins. There is no hope for those who harden their hearts and refuse to submit to Christ, only the promise of judgment.

What does this text say about disobedience, about hardness? It calls it what it is: rebellion against God, something that God perfectly evaluates as grief-worthy, as blindness, and as the herald of future and final judgment. My friends, let God be true and every man a liar. The whole world may rail against this. They may mock it and ridicule it. They may tell us that we Christians are all always afraid. Well, my friends, I am not

afraid for myself because I am in Christ. I am not afraid, not because I'm better than anyone else – for I am saved by grace, not by works – but because of what Christ has done for me. But all who are out of Christ ought to be afraid, and they ought, as John the Baptist put it, to flee from the wrath to come. This is not fear-mongering; it is the sober truth. One day, when we all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, it will be seen by all to be the truth. May God open your eyes to see the disgust of sin and the end of sin and hardness. And may he open your eyes to see the fullness of Christ to save all who come to him. May you experience what Charles Wesley wrote:

“Long my imprisoned spirit lay/ fast bound by sin and nature’s night/  
Thine eye diffused a quickening ray/ I woke, the dungeon flamed with  
light/ My chains fell off, my heart was free/ I rose, went forth and fol-  
lowed Thee!”

Christian, may our obedience be quick and universal. Let us learn to hate sin more and more and to love holiness more and more. As Paul puts it to the Romans, let us “abhor that which is evil” and “cleave to that which is good” (Rom. 12:9). Let us hear, as we ought, the words of the apostle John, “My little children, these things write I unto you, that ye sin not” (1 John 2:1).

## CHAPTER X

### EXHORT ONE ANOTHER

#### (HEB. 3:12-13)

THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS IS A SERMON, a word of exhortation (Heb. 13:22). If you want to know what a first-century sermon looked like, you need proceed no further than this letter. In this sermon, the preacher is trying to encourage these beleaguered saints to hold fast (3:6, 14). To accomplish this, he is helping them to understand the reasons why they should hold fast (theology), and then exhorting them on that basis to hold fast (duty). Now up to this point, he has given several very personal and pointed exhortations. They are to “give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard” (2:1); they are told to “consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus” (3:1); they are exhorted to “harden not your hearts” (3:8). These are things that could be appropriated and applied on the level of the individual. And indeed, we must start there. I don’t follow Christ by thinking only about how his word applies to someone else. Yes, we are to bear each other’s burdens, but at the same time, we must also begin by bearing our own (cf. Gal. 6:2-5). We must take the truths of God’s word and apply them daily and constantly to ourselves.

However, it doesn't stop there. We must not privatize the faith. To do so is to subvert one of the purposes of God in creating the church. When we are converted to Christ, we are not converted in order to live out the Christian life in isolation; we are converted in order to grow in the faith in harmony and unity with other believers. In fact, this is the way that the apostle Peter frames conversion: "Seeing ye have purified your souls in obeying the truth through the Spirit unto unfeigned love of the brethren, see that ye love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1 Pet. 1:22). What is the purpose of conversion (which I take to be referred to by the phrase "purified your souls in obeying the truth")? It is "unfeigned love of the brethren" – note the word unto. This is not a merely emotional thing; it is to be worked out in very practical ways. As we "love one another with a pure heart fervently" (1:22), we are to lay aside "all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings" (2:1). We are urged: "be ye all of one mind, having compassion one of another, love as brethren, be pitiful, be courteous" (3:8). We are to "above all things have fervent charity among yourselves: for charity shall cover the multitude of sins" (4:8). You cannot love the brethren if you are not willing to invest yourself in the spiritual and physical well-being of the brethren. As the apostle John would put it, "My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue, but in deed and in truth" (1 Jn. 3:18).

Nowhere is this clearer than in what the apostle Paul writes about the church in Eph. 4. He begins by talking about the unity that we have in Christ (4:1-6), but then he goes on to talk about the gifts given to the church so that the church will grow (4:7-16). Here is how the apostle puts it in verses 15-16: "Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love" (ESV). In other words, the body of Christ, the church, grows when "each part is working properly" which means that every believer has a place in the life of the church, and,



specifically, in helping the church to grow in grace. This doesn't mean that the pastor is pointless. In fact, in 4:11-12 we have the purpose of the pastor-teacher given in terms of equipping the saints to do the work of spiritual service. The pastor teaches, and in teaching he equips the saints, so that they can exercise their spiritual gifts for the good of the church. You are probably not going to have one without the other.

Or consider the way Paul puts it to the Corinthians. There he is also talking about the gifts of the Spirit. The bottom line is this: "But the manifestation of the Spirit [in spiritual giftedness] is given to every man to profit withal" (1 Cor. 12:7). The ESV translates this as: "To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good." Who has spiritual gifts? The answer: "every man" or "each (one)." In other words, no one has a monopoly on spiritual giftedness in the church. I don't have them all, and neither do you! Now why have we been given spiritual gifts? So we can impress others with them? This is apparently what was happening at Corinth, and it was wrecking the church. No, our spiritual gifts are not given so we can strut around like a barn-yard rooster; they are given to us "for the common good." In other words, the gifts God gives to me, he gives them to me so that I can help others. The others need them, and I need the gifts of others, which is Paul's point about the hand and the foot, the ear and the eye, in verses 15-21.

This purpose of God in the church has often been subverted. It can be subverted in any number of ways. When we begin, for example, to think of church in terms merely of a meeting in which we barely participate, or as a show in which we are only observers, then we cannot do what the apostle envisions for the church in Eph. 4 and 1 Cor. 12. Now I want to make it clear that I am in no way implying that the sermon is not important; it is very important, but it is not the sum and substance of what it means to be a church. If the only place you are being built up in the faith is through the sermon, then something is lacking. Do we need the sermon? Yes (and Hebrews, considered as a sermon, is an argument for its importance). Of course I believe that, or I would not be doing what I am doing! The point is that this is not all that the church

is about. The pastor is not the church; he is simply one member in the church.

This is why the author of Hebrews says what he says here in 3:12-13: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, what it is called today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” He knows that, in order for these embattled saints to persevere, they are going to have to help one another. In other words, they are going to have to be the church. Must we preach to ourselves? Yes. But we must also preach to one another; we must encourage one another in the faith.

What I want to do this morning is to consider the importance and the application of this command to exhort one another. This is not just something that the church there at that time was meant to do. It is something that we are meant to do also. Remember that this is an application of the OT passage from Ps. 95. The Holy Spirit wasn’t just speaking to ancient Israel, he was also speaking to the church to which this letter was addressed, hundreds of years later. Hebrews was inspired by the same Holy Spirit and preserved to be a part of the canon of Scripture, and this means it is just as applicable to us. As a church, we need to be doing this. What then does this look like?

I think a very simple way to sum up the content of this command is to put it like this: we do this when everyone is exhorting each other every day to hold fast to our faith in Christ.

What is the responsibility? Exhortation.

It is to “exhort one another.” What is meant by that? The word used here has numerous connotations. It is often translated in the KJV as “beseech.” “I beseech you therefore brethren” (Rom. 12:1). “As though God did beseech you by us” (2 Cor. 5:20). I like that, for to beseech someone means that I am fervently urging upon them some behavior or action. I am not neutral about it; I am not dispassionate. Rather, I am

fully committed to seeing it done and carried out in them or through them. And this full commitment belongs both to the person I am addressing as well as the action I am wanting to see done.

Of course when you beseech someone, you are wanting to see them do something, change something. Later in Hebrews, we have the same word used again in chapter 10: “And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching” (10:24-25). Here we see that the idea behind exhortation is filled out in terms of provoking (or stirring up) to love and good works. In other places, “to exhort” is combined with building up (1 Thess. 5:11), or with reproving and rebuking and teaching (2 Tim. 4:2). It is also translated in several places as carrying the idea of providing comfort or encouragement (Col. 2:2; 1 Thess. 4:18).

This is a word that can carry a lot of connotational freight. It can mean a lot of things. But this is what is so amazing about why it is used here. It means that there are a lot of ways that we can help each other by this mutual exhortation. We can encourage each other, we can warn each other, we can counsel each other, we can reprove each other, as the case may require.

Underneath all of that is the fact that the most basic thing that we are doing is, we are beseeching others. The point is that you don’t beseech out of anger or from a standpoint of defensiveness. If warning or rebuke needs to happen, we do this in the most loving and brotherly way that we possibly can. This is not a word given to an enemy; it is something spoken to someone that we consider a brother or a sister in Christ, to those who share with us in our heavenly calling.

Let’s examine this a bit more carefully. What are we to do as we exhort one another? What are we exhorting each other to? Let me put it like this: we are to exhort each other to believe the promises of God so that we do not depart from him out of an evil heart of unbelief, and we are

to exhort each other to see through the false promise of sin so that we do not become hardened in a habit of unbelief.

Before we unpack this in terms of the text, I want to notice one way that this is different from what a pastor does. Or another way to put it: how is the exhorting which is done here different from the exhorting which is done in the Sunday sermon? This is particularly relevant because this verb (“exhort”) is related to the way the author here describes his sermon (“a word of exhortation,” Heb. 13:22). I would say that one essential difference is this: one of the primary things the pastor-elder does in his ministry to the church is to authoritatively teach what we believe and why (cf. Eph. 4:11). Of course application comes into this as well, but he is there to teach the church the doctrine which has been handed down from the apostles and prophets. What we are considering here in Heb. 3:12-13 is not so much a teaching ministry as it is applying the teaching which has been given by the spiritual leaders of the church. This is something which we must all be doing. Now let’s consider exactly how we are to do this.

Exhort each other to believe the promises of God.

I get this from verse 12: “Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God.” The danger here was to walk away, to drift from the living God. What the author sees behind falling away is an evil heart of unbelief. The exhortation of verse 12 is clearly meant to forestall this eventuality. Hence, it must mean combatting unbelief, and the way we combat unbelief is clearly through faith.

What is the unbelief referred to here? Well, we must go back to Psalm 95. In that Psalm, we are reminded of the Israelites who hardened their hearts and fell in the wilderness. The unbelief there was a failure to believe the promises that God had given to Israel: “none of the men who have seen my glory and my signs that I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and yet have put me to the test these ten times and have not

obeyed my voice shall see the land that I swore to give to their fathers. And none of those who despised me shall see it" (Num. 14:22-23). God had made a promise to Abraham, a promise which he confirmed with an oath (cf. Heb. 6:17). It is this that they did not believe. They did not believe God's promises to them.

Hence, when I say that we should encourage each other to faith, I think in this context it means that we should encourage each other to believe the promises of God. We are to be reminding each other of God's promises. Like Israel of old, we too have been given a promise of entering into rest (Heb. 4:1), not the rest of a physical inheritance like Canaan, but the spiritual rest that comes through salvation in Christ, a rest which culminates in our eternal enjoyment of God's presence in heaven. It is so important to keep this perspective, to look not on the things which are seen but on the things which are not seen (cf. 2 Cor. 4:16-18). The blessings of the age to come are infinitely better than anything which the world can promise us. Even the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). When we remember this and believe this, we are far less likely to fall to the temptation of unbelief.

Believing the promises of God is important, not only because they are true but because they keep us trusting in God himself. Believing God's promises is the door through which we learn to repose ourselves upon the living God. Remember that the unbelief of the Israelites was a failure to trust in God because they did not remember his promises. We too will fail to trust in God and believe that he is for us if we do not remember his promises. Thank God for his great promises! "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious promises: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world through lust" (2 Pet. 1:4). How can we really think that God is somehow against us, or that he has forsaken us, when he has promised us such things? We know that the God who promises us these things cannot lie (Tit. 1:2).

We should also remind ourselves of the promise that in Christ the throne of God is a throne of grace (Heb. 4:15-16). We can often become discouraged when we begin to believe the lie that God does not hear us, or will not hear us, or cannot hear us. This verse tells us that, if we belong to God through Christ, we have access through Christ by one Spirit unto the Father (Eph. 2:14). Think of it: we can bring every need, every complaint, every want, every worry to the God of heaven. He knows and cares about us. In fact, Jesus our Lord himself prays for us. The Spirit intercedes for us. As Robert Murray M'Cheyne put it, "Distance makes no difference; Jesus prays for you."

Or think about all the explicit promises that God will, in fact, never leave us nor forsake us. "Let your conversation [conduct] be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me" (Heb. 13:5-6). Again, the only reason why anyone would walk away from Christ is if they did not believe that these promises were really true. To walk away from promises of this magnitude for the mere temporary enjoyment of this world is insane.

In being like this, we are like the saints of old. How did they persevere? We are told how in Heb. 11: "These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (13). It is worth it to be a stranger and a pilgrim now when we are looking forward to the sure and eternal enjoyment of what God has promised to his people.

But not only that, but we are to . . .

Exhort each other to see through the false promise of sin.

To encourage belief in the promises of God is important. This is the positive thing. But we must also do the negative thing: we must see through the pretense of sin. This is the point of verse 13: "But exhort

one another daily, what it is called Today; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.” How is it that we are hardened? We are hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. We need, therefore, not only to understand what sin is, but also why it is bad, why its appearance of good is only a mirage, why its promises are all false.

Why do we sin? Well, James tells us: “Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: but every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed” (Jam. 1:13-14). “Lust” of course is desire. We sin because we desire it. We sin because we want it. And the reason why we want it is because we believe it will make us happier if we sin than if we don’t sin. We are deceived.

How then do we get undeceived? Well, I do not pretend that it is easy. The world around us is preaching the gospel of sin and self, and so is our own corrupt hearts. It is a daily battle. Let no one think that they are above the fray. Neither let us get discouraged when we do fall. By grace, let us get back up again, and wade back into battle.

Well, the point of this passage is that, one way we see more clearly and see through the deceptive nature of sin, is by having other people speak truth into our lives. Sometimes, I just need to hear someone else tell me what the Bible says about this or that particular sin with which I am struggling. I don’t know why this is sometimes more effective than just saying it to ourselves, but it is. I think one reason is that we so easily deceive ourselves into believing that we are alright when we are not. King David is a good example here. He was a man after God’s own heart, and yet he apparently convinced himself that what he had done with Bathsheba and Uriah was okay. But when God sent the prophet Nathan to him, to say to him, “Thou art the man,” he was devastated. The house of cards that he had built came crashing down. He was immediately undeceived. Oh may God make us like Nathans, and bring Nathans into our lives!

I need to hear someone else remind me not only that the promises of God are great, but that the return on sin is terrible. To forsake God

for sin is to do what the ancient Israelites did: “Hath a nation changed their gods, which are yet no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which doth not profit. Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate saith the LORD. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns broken cisterns, that can hold no water” (Jer. 2:11-13). We need to be reminded that, “Bread of deceit is sweet to a man, but afterwards his mouth shall be filled with gravel” (Prov. 20:17).

One more thing before we move on from this. The sort of exhortation that will move us to closer obedience can only happen if I am willing to let people into my life. If I keep up a front and a defensive barrier, this can never happen. At least, it won’t happen until things get out of control in my life, and it becomes painfully obvious to everyone around me that I have become hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. What this means is that we all need to be developing relationships in the church in which we can be honest and open with someone about the things we are struggling with. This can be hard. It can be frightening. But I think of all places the church should be the one place where we ought to feel like we can do this. Why? Because in the church we all recognize that we are sinners saved by grace. No one gets to feel superior to anyone else because we all relate to God in exactly the same way: through the sovereign grace of God on the basis of what Christ has done for us on the cross. We are all forgiven sinners, and this should make us willing to be vulnerable – since God has already fully accepted me as a son or a daughter in his Son.

Who should be doing this? Everyone.

Note what is said here. This is addressed to the church as a whole, not to a part, not to the most spiritual, not to the pastors. “Take heed, brethren.” This is a term for the collective body of believers that the NT writers use over and over again. When Paul says in Romans 12, “I beseech



you therefore, brethren,” he also is speaking to the Roman church as a whole, not to a part of it. So the fact that this exhortation is directed to the “brethren” is evidence that this is something that we are all to be doing, if we are part of the church.

Then he says, “lest there be in any of you and evil heart of unbelief.” “Any of you.” No exceptions. The same ones who are addressed as “brethren” are the same ones under consideration here. Certainly the scope of this command is the whole church. No one is excluded here. The same phrase occurs in the next verse as well: “lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.”

The point is that the command to “exhort one another” is not just a job for pastors. It is not something that is done only on Sunday morning by the spiritual leaders. It is being done by everyone, or at least it should be. We should, therefore, look for opportunities to do it.

One of the things I would like to do in the future is to help small groups form that will facilitate this kind of mutual exhortation. I’m talking about men’s groups, women’s groups, and home groups. We’re still in the process of thinking through this, but even though we’re still in the planning stages, if you’re interested in being a part of this, have some thoughts about it, or if you’re interested in helping to lead something like this, please let me know. However this takes shape, we want to be a church where we are being disciplined and are discipling others too. In other words, we want to be a church where we are exhorting one another to remain steadfast in the faith.

How often should this happen? Every day.

I don’t think this means we’re supposed to be in church every day. Nor does this only happen in a semi-formal group setting. But it does mean that I’m giving and receiving this kind of exhortation on a daily basis. It starts at home. Husbands and wives exhorting each other. Parents exhorting children (and sometimes children exhorting parents!). A family worship time can contribute to this. Then we have our brothers

and sisters in Christ who are there for us, and we are there for them. Far from being harder nowadays, it is easier: we have these things called smart phones, after all.

But it does mean that we are looking for opportunities of this sort, not avoiding them. It also means that we want this to happen. This is not meant to be a yoke around the necks of believers. It is meant to be a means of encouragement, comfort, hope-building, and joy-filling in the Lord. It is to stir us up to love and good works (Heb. 10:25). We should all want the church to be a family of hope-filled, joy-exuding, God-centered, gospel- proclaiming people. We should want to live in such a way that people see that we are different and ask about the hope that is ours in Christ (1 Pet. 3:15). One of the ways this begins is by being the kind of people who are obeying the command of Heb. 3:12-13, who are exhorting each other to believe God's true promises and reminding each other of sin's false promises. May the Lord make it so among us.

What does the text say? It says we should do this every day. In fact, he says it twice: "But exhort one another daily, while it is called 'Today'" (13). Now why add the phrase "while it is called Today"? Isn't it enough to say "daily"? Well, one reason could be that he is tying this back to the Psalm 95 quotation: "Today, if ye will hear his voice" (7). This command to daily exhortation is something which a true and faithful application of that text demands and he brings this out by referring to the word "today." Nevertheless, the reality is that there is an emphasis here upon the daily application of the practice of mutual exhortation.

## CHAPTER XI

### WHAT'S THE PROBLEM WITH UNBELIEF? (HEB. 3:14-19)

WE LIVE IN AN INTELLECTUAL ENVIRONMENT that makes faith in God, not to mention faith in the truthfulness of the Christian Scriptures, look uncool and unreasonable. Unbelief in such things is seen today not as the hallmark of wrongful sin but of rational sense. You don't have to look far to hear people say that the existence of God is something that simply has never been and cannot be proven. These are people who think of themselves as modern and scientific. I had a student once who told me flat out that he didn't understand how I could be a mathematician and a pastor at the same time. It boggled his mind that someone could embrace science and faith simultaneously. For him, and for many others, these are irreconcilable contradictions. So for many people around us, religious unbelief is not only not bad, it's good, which makes the passage we are considering this morning very counter-cultural. For the main idea of this passage is that unbelief is not only bad, but that it comes with terrible consequences.

Let's get to the passage itself. In verse 14, we are given a reason why we should exhort one another to persevere in the faith. The reason is that "we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end." This is very similar to the statement in verse 6, that we belong to the household of Christ, "if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end." We've argued that passages like these show that perseverance in the faith is not optional, and we should use every available means that God has given us to press on "toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:14). In verse 15, we are reminded of the Psalm (95) that the exhortation of verses 12-13 is based on. It also provides the context for the following verses (16-19). In these verses, we are told the main reason why the wilderness generation of the Israelites failed, and why they did not end up entering themselves into the Promised Land: because of unbelief.

Verse 16 in the KJV is translated as a statement, but in almost every modern version, it is rendered as a question. So, for example, the ESV translates it this way: "For who were those who heard and yet rebelled? Was it not all those who left Egypt led by Moses?" Now it doesn't materially affect the overall meaning, but I think the modern translations are correct. One of the main reasons why they put this as a question is because of the parallelism in verses 16-18. All three verses are pulling from the imagery and language of Psalm 95, quoted in verses 7-11. Verse 16 corresponds to verse 8, verse 17 to verses 9-10, and verse 18 to verse 11. So if verses 17 and 18 are a question, shouldn't we also translate verse 16 as one? This seems to me to be a very strong argument for rendering it in the same way.

Now you may wonder why this is even a problem. Why not see which verses have a question mark and which ones don't? Problem solved! Well, the reality is that the earliest Greek manuscripts of the New Testament were uncials, which means in part that they didn't have much punctuation. That was added later, and so in some sense question marks are themselves an interpretative addition to the text by later copyists and

translators. That doesn't mean that it is in general hard to discern where they should go. But in a few cases, there can be a question made about question marks! However, I do want to reaffirm that whether or not you put verse 16 as a statement or a question doesn't materially affect the meaning or the interpretation of the overall text. The basic idea remains the same. What is the basic idea? The author is reminding us why the wilderness generation of the Israelites were not allowed to enter into the Promised Land. They weren't allowed to enter because they provoked God by their rebellion (16), because they sinned (17), and because they did not believe (18). What I want to underline here is that all of this is summed up in terms of unbelief in verse 19: "So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief." In other words, their unbelief was the summit of their rebellion and sinning. It was, therefore, their unbelief that was the fundamental reason why God did not allow the rebellious Israelites entrance into the Promised Land.

Now I want to focus on that reality today. In particular, I want to show you why God considers unbelief so bad, and why we should continually maintain and grow in our faith. But to do that, I first need to push back on the idea that faith is bad, that religious faith and faith in the Bible is only for cultural Neanderthals, and that to be intellectually grown up, we have to reject our religious commitments. Having done that, I want to go on to consider what faith is and to think about some reasons for faith as the alternative to unbelief. Finally, I want to show that unbelief is primarily not based on reason but on rebellion against God, and how unbelief, in particular, dishonors God. That is to say, this morning we want to consider the faith of unbelief, the alternative to unbelief, and the evil of unbelief.

### The Faith of Unbelief

As we've already pointed out, a lot of people today will claim that religious faith is untenable today, that the scientific mind cannot con-

sistently be religious. They will triumphantly claim that there is simply no proof for the existence of God, end of story.

Many times, you will find that the argument goes like this: you are religious, and I am secular; you base your ideological commitments on faith, and I base mine on proof. To them, this shows the superiority of the secular mindset to the religious one: science versus faith, proof versus piety. But there is a real problem with this line of reasoning. The problem is that no one has beliefs that can be proven down to the bottom. Or another way to put it: everyone has beliefs that they cannot prove. That is to say: we all live by faith. There are no exceptions to this! The person who rejects Christianity for the secular mindset has not gotten rid of faith commitments. They have simply replaced one set of faith commitments for another.

How is this, you might ask? Well, if someone tells you that there is no proof for God, you might ask them what constitutes proof. For many people, when they say that they want proof for God, what they mean is that they won't believe in God until science proves God. And what they mean by that is that there must be scientific evidence for God that everyone will accept. Or that you must have an argument that everyone will accept, no matter what.

Now I do think science points towards God, and that the universe itself and the laws which govern its motion point to God (of which more later). But that aside, let's consider the problematic statement that one will only accept scientific statements about God. It's a problem because it cannot bear its own burden of proof. What they are essentially saying is that science is the only door to knowledge or that I cannot know anything apart from the deliverances of science. But how do you prove that by science? How do you prove scientifically that science is the only way of knowing? What sort of experiment will you run for that? The answer is that there is none, and there isn't one because to say that science is the only door to knowledge is not a scientific statement; it's a philosophical one.

Or consider the statement that we should only accept propositions that can be rationally proved, like a mathematical theorem. Don't get me wrong: I think reason is good, but again, that's not a statement you can prove. As one theologian has put it, "Obviously, you cannot prove a norm of rational proof without using it. So reason can make a case that it is the way to truth only by appealing to itself."<sup>1</sup> He goes on to write that "both the statement 'there is no supernatural reality beyond this world' and the statement 'there is a transcendent reality beyond this world' are philosophical, not scientific, propositions. Neither can be empirically proven in such a way that no rational person can doubt. To state that there is no God or that there is a God, then, necessarily entails faith. And so the declaration that science is the only arbiter of truth is not itself a scientific finding. It is a belief."<sup>2</sup>

Is secular unbelief better than the Christian faith? Is it a good thing to abandon faith in God? Well, no, and what I am trying to point out is that one of the main reasons that people give for this is inadequate. They think they can prove everything they believe, and religious people cannot, and, therefore, the secular accounting of things is better than the Christian one. But this is false. They, too, accept things which they cannot prove. They, too, live by faith. They, too, accept things without absolute and unassailable proof. It's simply not enough to argue that if I cannot pull God out of a test tube, therefore God must not exist. For you, too, have beliefs that cannot be proven in any laboratory.

Some things that people cannot prove but accept are things like the belief in the progress of civilization, a belief in human rights, a commitment to universal human dignity, and a belief in right and wrong. Today there is a lot of kerfuffle about the environment. Okay, but why should we care about the environment? Why should I care about later generations? Why should I not be selfish, and what makes that wrong? You cannot prove that I should be selfless with respect to the environ-

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<sup>1</sup>Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical* (Viking, 2016), p. 33.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., p. 35.

ment or with respect to anything else for that matter by pointing me to science. Science doesn't tell me what I ought to do; it simply tells me what the material world is like and how it operates. You don't get ought from is, you only get is from is. Why then do you believe that we should protect the environment for future generations, if you don't believe in God, and if the only basis for your beliefs is science? The answer is that you don't get that from science at all; it's a matter of faith.

C. S. Lewis once gave an excellent illustration as to why it is ridiculous to rest everything on science. When the first Russian cosmonaut came back from space, it prompted the Russian premier at the time to say that man had been to space and had not found God. As if a quick trip around the earth was enough to say that God does not exist. Lewis responded that trying to find God in space was like Hamlet trying to find Shakespeare in the attic of his castle. In other words, trying to find God under the microscope or in the telescope assumes that God is part of the furniture of the universe. But he is not! He is not hiding behind Jupiter; he made Jupiter and everything else. If God exists, you will not find him by searching for him among material causes, for he is the one who made the laws of physics themselves. He is not in the attic of the universe; he is its author.

The bottom line is that the beliefs of modern man ultimately rest on faith. Science does not explain everything. It doesn't even explain things that we hold most dear: things like right and wrong, human rights, and respect for the environment. Faith cannot therefore be so bad, and unbelief is not a sign of intellectual maturity. It is not a question of who is a person of faith; it is a question of whose faith fits better with the data of life and experience, and whose beliefs have more internal consistency? I believe very strongly that the Christian accounting of things is better, and I now want to move on to consider some of the reasons.

### The Alternative to Unbelief



Most people think that faith is a leap in the dark. Unfortunately, some Christian thinkers have given credence to this (folks like Kierkegaard, and many of the neo-orthodox theologians). Faith is popularly viewed as something that has no rational basis for it. In fact, faith is almost endowed with creative powers – if you have enough faith, you can bring something out of nothing!

But that's a problem. Who wants to embrace faith when it has no rational foundation? Isn't faith then a sign of credulity and intellectual backwardness?

However, this is not a Biblical view of faith. Nowhere does the Bible tell us to believe things for no reason. You see this in the passage we are considering. Why was the unbelief of the Israelites so bad? It was because, despite all that they saw, despite all the reasons God had given them to trust in him, they still refused to do so. They had plenty of reasons to believe: the Ten Plagues, the Ten Commandments, the parting of the Red Sea, the manna, and on and on. Every day they encountered new miracles. And yet they did not believe. As the Lord put it to Moses, "Because all those men which have seen my glory, and my miracles, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness, and have tempted me now these ten times, and have not hearkened to my voice; surely they shall not see the land which I swear unto their father, neither shall any of them that provoked me see it" (Num. 14:22-23). Of these same folks, the Lord complains, "How long will this people provoke me? And how long will it be ere they believe me, for all the signs which I have shewed among them?" (Num. 14:11). The problem with their lack of faith was not the lack of evidence. The problem was their lack of faith despite the abundance of evidence.

Now I realize that we haven't experienced the same things. So people today might take the approach that they, too, would need to see Mount Sinai on fire before believing. However, though we might not have seen the Ten Plagues, God has not left himself without witness (cf. Acts 14:17). The reason for our unbelief, even now, is not a lack of evidence. God does not ask you to believe something without good reasons.

When I talk about believing, of course I mean the Bible in general and the gospel in particular. The Israelites in the wilderness didn't believe God's word to them, but the author of Hebrews casts this as a rejection of the gospel: "For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it" (Heb. 4:2). Hence the unbelief which is here condemned is a refusal to believe the gospel. So what lines of evidence do we have for that? Now there have been whole books written on this, and I can't reduplicate all the arguments in the short time that we have. I do want to give you some pointers to a few lines of evidence, and if you are interested in pursuing these further, I will be happy to visit with you or to point you to some helpful books.

Let's consider how the apostle Paul does this in his letter to the Romans. I begin where he does there, with the existence of God (cf. Heb. 11:6). He tells us that God's wrath comes upon men who suppress the truth. What truth is this? It is the truth that God exists: "For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse" (Rom. 1:20). The apostle says that there is no reason why anyone should deny the existence of God or fall into idolatry. The evidence for God in the creation of the world is too great to be withstood or to leave folks with an excuse for their denial of the God of the Bible. Now some people today seem to think that science has taken away the need for belief in God's existence, and that religious faith can only shrink as scientific knowledge increases. But this is false. It fails to grapple with the fact that there are different explanations for things and that science has not, and indeed cannot, explain everything about the universe.

John Lennox, an Oxford mathematician, puts it like this. Suppose you ask me to explain the Model T. I say, "It is explained by the principles of engineering that make the internal combustion engine work." Well, that would be true as far as it goes, but it does not completely explain the Model T. Another explanation is Henry Ford himself. These are not

competing explanations: they are mutual and complementary – and they are both true. Saying that physics pushes God out of the equation is like saying that the laws of mechanics push Henry Ford out of the picture when it comes to explaining the existence of the Model T, which is ridiculous.

Creation points to God for the following reason: God exists because things exist, in the same way that the existence of the Model T points to Henry Ford. The key thing to remember here is that the things around us are not eternal; they do not necessarily exist. They are contingent. But for anything to exist, something or someone has to necessarily exist. In other words, for there to be something rather than nothing, God must exist. This is, I think, Paul's point in Romans 1:20. You don't need an elaborate argument for God's existence; just look around you. The things around you are not eternal; they did not always exist. If they began to exist, there must be a reason for their existence over their non-existence and that reason must go back to the existence of a Being outside the universe which necessarily exists, namely God. Physics can indeed tell us how the universe operates; but it cannot tell us why the universe exists, or why there is something rather than nothing. The laws of physics cannot even explain themselves; God is their explanation.

But that's not the only line of evidence. We come next to the presence of a moral order. In the book of Romans, in chapters 1-3, the apostle builds a case for the universal sinfulness of man, culminating in the statement that "all have sinned and come short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23). Along the way, he argues that all men have an innate sense of right and wrong, even those who do not have God's written revelation: "For when the Gentiles, which have not the law [God's special revelation], do by nature the things contained in the law, these, having not the law, are a law unto themselves: which shew the work of the law written in their hearts, their conscience also bearing witness, and their thoughts the mean while accusing or else excusing one another" (Rom. 2:14-15). In other words, we don't just inhabit a physical world; we also inhabit a moral world, a world in which it makes sense to call certain

things wrong and other things right. We inhabit a world with sin and sinners, which is just Paul's point.

No matter how secular the world becomes, it cannot seem to get rid of a sense of right and wrong. There is a reason for that. It is because there is right and there is wrong. But you cannot have right and wrong without a lawgiver, without a standard of justice. Otherwise, everything becomes preference. I know that the problem of evil is a difficult problem, but you cannot have evil without justice, and you cannot have justice without a Judge. In fact, Aquinas made the point that, because evil exists, God exists; not because God created evil, but because you cannot adequately explain the sinfulness of sin apart from the standard of God's holy law.

Then there is the gospel itself, the power of God unto salvation (Rom. 1:16). What is the gospel? Paul gives it to us in Rom. 3:21-26, but he summarizes it succinctly in his letter to the Corinthians: "For I delivered unto you first of all that which I also received, how that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures; and that he was buried, and that he rose again the third day according to the Scriptures; and that he was seen" (1 Cor. 15:3-5). The greatest argument for faith is Jesus Christ himself. Here is the Son of God who died for our sins and rose from the dead. In rising from the dead, he vindicated his claims as God's Son. We have argued recently that the evidence for the resurrection is very strong indeed. To say that we can't trust the record of his resurrection is both intellectually lame and lazy.

In the book of Acts, the apostles continually point to the resurrection of Christ as a reason to believe (Acts 2:24-36; 3:15; 5:31-32; 10:40-42; 13:30-39; 17:30-31). God raised Jesus from the dead, and exalted him as Lord and Savior at his right hand. There were witnesses to this; it didn't happen in a corner. When Paul was presenting the gospel before Herod Agrippa, and was ridiculed as being "mad" by the procurator Festus, Paul responded: "I am not mad, most noble Festus, but speak forth the words of truth and soberness. For the king knoweth of these things, before whom I speak freely: for I am persuaded that none of these things

are hidden from him; for this thing was not done in a corner. King Agrippa, believest thou the prophets? I know that thou believest” (Acts 26:25-27). The gospel was not preached as if it were some kind of gnostic system with hidden knowledge; it was preached as being based on facts that everyone could observe. The gospel spread through the Roman Empire, not because it was false, but because it could be verified as true.

Not only is the gospel based on believable historical realities, but it rings true because it meets one of the most fundamental needs of the human condition and it does so in a way that nothing else can. It is the need created by guilt. How do you deal with your guilt? The world does not know how to do this without projecting it on others, or by denying that it really exists. These tactics are clearly not sufficient. Guilt is real, and it is personal. There are many religious systems that attempt to meet the need created by guilt by making man his own savior. We purge our own sins. But this, too, is insufficient if we are honest with ourselves.

It is guilt that pulls us to the solution presented to us in the gospel. Guilt reminds us that we live in a moral universe presided over by a holy God, by whom we live and to whom we are all accountable. And it also tells us that we cannot atone for our own sins: we need a Mediator. It is the Mediator that the gospel gives us in the person of Jesus Christ. He is able to purge our sins by his atoning death. He could do this because he is both man and God. Because he is man, he can stand in our place, and because he is God, he can fully and completely atone for our sins. The gospel tells us that we don’t deal with our guilt by trying to remove it ourselves, but by trusting in the sacrifice that Christ made for those who believe in him. People all over the world in every generation have found this to be true. They have found it to be so because it is true.

The alternative, therefore, to unbelief is not blind faith. The alternative is faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ, “the words of truth and soberness” (Acts 26:25).

## The Evil of Unbelief

This brings us to our closing consideration. “They could not enter in because of unbelief.” The Bible tells us again and again that the reason why people reject the gospel is not fundamentally because of a lack of evidence. It is because of the condition of the heart, a condition rooted in a commitment to self-sovereignty. If evidence were all people wanted or needed, the Israelites in the wilderness would have been the strongest believers. This is the problem today, as it was in Jesus’ day: “But though he had done so many miracles before them, yet they believed not on him” (Jn 12:37). This is not a problem in Bible times only; it is a problem endemic to the human condition. We are all by nature like that generation of wilderness Israelites.

The unbelief there was rooted in a heart of rebellion and provocation (Heb. 3:15). The rebelliousness of the heart is what led them to moral and spiritual blindness, that left them unmoved despite all the miracles and mighty works of God’s power that they saw. It is the same today. This is one of the reasons why apologetics, no matter how cogently and winsomely presented, can leave people unconvinced. The reasons of a heart committed to doing its own thing and refusing to submit to God’s rule will not be interested in submitting to the righteousness of God in Christ.

And this is what makes unbelief so evil. Unbelief is not merely a psychological description of those apart from Christ; it is sin (cf. John 16:9). What we need to understand is that no one is neutral. The Bible tells us that we are either for God or against him; there is no neutral ground.

This is not to say that doubts are not real, or that, if we deal with doubt, God won’t have anything to do with us. That is not true, either. The greatest saints in the world have had doubts, like John the Baptist. Jesus didn’t rebuke John, but gently reminded him of the reasons to believe. The problem, however, is that we can imagine ourselves in our doubts to be in some objective, neutral position. That is false. Again,

we are never neutral; we are always reasoning in conjunction with our hearts, will and affections. If our heart is against God, is hostile to God, all the reasons in the world are not going to bring us to him. Hostility to God is sin and must be repented of. It is this sin which stands behind so much of the refusal to believe God's word to us.

So how does this relate to you and me? Well, we are being warned here about the evil and the danger of unbelief. The evil of unbelief in that it is symptomatic of sin and rebellion. The danger of unbelief in that it keeps us from experiencing God's greatest blessings. This is true on any number of levels. It keeps those who will not embrace Christ by faith from embracing the only hope of freedom from sin and guilt, which is found in Christ. It keeps them from the rest that can only be found in him. This unbelief is fundamentally rebellion against God, and we must repent of it. But it can keep even true followers of Christ from experiencing God's blessing as we could. Let us not think that unbelief is found only in those who do not yet follow Jesus; even those of us who have come to him can sometimes relapse in certain points to unbelief. It was to his own disciples that our Lord said, "Why are ye so fearful? How is it that ye have no faith?" (Mk 4:40). We, too, often have a reason for repentance. We who have found God faithful again and again, how is it that we fall prey so easily to the sin of unbelief? Oh, let it not be said of us, and of this church, that "he did not many mighty works there, because of their unbelief" (Mt. 13:38)!

How do we challenge the perennial temptation to unbelief? Well, once again, we do so by exhorting one another, by reminding one another of God's promises and his character and his faithfulness. We do so by pointing one another to Christ and to the gospel. What a privilege and a blessing it is to do this. May we all be constantly encouraging each other to faith in the one who is worthy of all our trust, Jesus Christ our Lord.

*Jeremiah Bass*

# REST FOR THE WEARY



## CHAPTER XII

### THE REST OF THE STORY (HEB. 4:1-11)

IF YOU WANT TO READ YOUR BIBLE for the purpose of understanding, one of the things you want to do is to look for key words or ideas. What is the main idea here? Is that idea communicated through key words? Well, here in Hebrews 4, there is no doubt what the key word is. It is the word rest. The noun “rest” is used seven times in the first eleven verses, and the corresponding verb “to rest” is used three times. A similar word for “rest” is used in verse 9. So if we really want to understand what this passage (verses 1-11) is about, we need to really try to wrap our minds around what is being said here about this rest: what it is and why it is so important.

Rest is important, isn't it? I think, in one way or another, everyone is trying to find rest. If we are not seeking physical rest, we are seeking rest from feelings of guilt, from the past that haunts us, from the sense that what we have done with our life is not meaningful. Sometimes the things that nag us are not those things which are wearing us down physically, but the things which are wearing us down mentally and emotionally. We want deliverance from those things; we want rest.

There is rest, and I am grateful that one of the ways that Scripture presents salvation to us is in terms of rest. Isn't this what our Lord did? "Come unto me, all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest" (Mt. 11:28). However, the Bible is equally clear that this salvific rest is not for everyone. The prophet Isaiah tells us, "I create the fruit of the lips; Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the LORD; and I will heal him. But the wicked are like the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked" (Isa. 59:19-21). So if we want true rest, we have to seek it in the way God gives it, and the book of Hebrews helps us here.

The author is still expositing, so to speak, from the ninety-fifth Psalm, which began back at 3:7. In chapter 3, the emphasis was upon the unbelief and disobedience of the wilderness generation of the Israelites. In this chapter, the emphasis is on what they rejected through their unbelief and what we obtain by faith: God's rest. Given the importance of rest, we really need to understand what is being said here about God's rest. With that in mind, there are three things I would like us to consider about this rest. First, I want to show that this is an available rest; second, that it is a heavenly rest; third, that it is an infinitely desirable rest.

God's rest is an available rest.

First, we know it is still available because the rest promised to Israel is the rest promised in the gospel. This is the logic behind verses 1 and 2. In verse 1, the author argues that rest (spoken of in the previous chapter) is promised to us, although it is not an automatic thing and we shouldn't take it for granted, and we should "therefore fear, lest . . . any of you should seem to come short of it." But how is this rest promised to us? It is promised in the gospel, which is the point of verse 2: "For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them."

Now this is interesting because a lot of people have a misconception here. There is this idea out there that people in the OT were saved differently than people in the NT. But this is not the Biblical picture. We are justified by faith in Christ under the New Covenant and folks were justified by faith in Christ under the Old Covenant. You might ask, "How could people believe in Christ before he came?" Well, though it is true that folks who lived before Christ didn't understand fully who he was or exactly how he would accomplish salvation, they did look forward to the promised Messiah, and those who put their trust in him were saved. The way they looked forward to him was through the promise of redemption that God progressively unfolded through history, culminating in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The reality is that the gospel has been present and preached in the world since the Fall of man into sin. It is there in the promise of the Seed of the woman in Gen. 3:15, in the words of God to Satan: "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." It flashes even more brightly in the promise God gave to Abraham: "and in thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). Here is the apostle Paul's commentary on this verse: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8).

Did you hear that? God preached the gospel to Abraham. When did he do that? When he gave him the promises. And when Abraham believed that, he was justified (Gal. 3:6; Gen. 15:6). So you see, people have always been justified by faith in Christ, from the very beginning, even if they didn't know as much about him as we know. Listen to what our Lord said about Abraham. "Your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (Jn. 8:56). If that's not faith in Christ, I don't know what is!

The point is that the gospel has been around for a long time. It is not just a NT phenomenon. It is, of course, much clearer today. It

was presented in the OT period primarily through types and shadows. Through these types and shadows, however, the gospel was preached. In fact, I would say that it is in part because of the types and shadows, especially those under the Law in the sacrifices, that we can make sense of what Jesus did on the cross. We couldn't really understand the gospel apart from the OT. God was building a vocabulary in the law for us to understand the substitutionary work of the sacrifice of Christ. But again, the point is that the gospel was preached long before Jesus was born. It was preached every time the promise of God to Adam and Eve was recited. It was preached every time the promise to Abraham was retold. It was preached in the promises that God made to King David. It was preached in the Law and it was preached in the prophets. When people believed God's promises, like Abraham they were justified.

Thus, even the physical land of Canaan was meant to be a picture of the rest that we have in Christ. When the wilderness generation of the Israelites refused to believe that God was for them and turned away from the Promised Land, they were refusing much more than dirt and earth on the other side of the Jordan River. They were refusing to believe in God's promises, and when they refused to believe, they were in essence rejecting the gospel. What the author has been doing is to exhort the folks in the church there at Rome not to do the same, not to follow their bad example. It is only those who believe – who believe the promise of rest in the gospel who enter into that rest: “For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest” (3).

In the following verses, he essentially seeks to argue why the rest promised to Israel and the rest promised to us is the same rest. That is, he is going to show that the gospel preached to ancient Israel in the wilderness is the gospel which is being preached to first-century Jews in Rome (and to us). Or, another way to put it: how is he justified in using Psalm 95 for a Jewish-Christian audience in first century Rome (or for us)? Up to this point, he has simply assumed and stated the fact; now he argues for it. And this is what he is doing in verses 3-9. Note

the conclusion in verse 9: “There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God.” That is what he is aiming for. How does he justify this conclusion?

The key to his whole argument is to note the way God describes the rest in Ps. 95. It is not just any rest: it is “my rest” (cf. Ps. 95:11). This is God’s rest. To what does that refer? It refers to God’s ceasing his work of creation on the seventh day. This is the point of the end of verse 3 and verse 4. In fact, the author quotes Gen. 2:2 in verse 4: “For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works.”

However, it might seem strange the way this idea is introduced at the end of verse 3: “although the works were finished from the foundation of the world.” Why “although”? What does that mean? Why put this in the form of a concession? Usually, when you use the word “although” it is because what you are about to say seems to militate against it. For example, I might say, “Although I am tall, I am afraid of heights.” I use the word “although,” because you might think that being tall would make a person naturally not afraid of heights! So why would the fact that God’s works were completed on the seventh day be a problem with the promise of entering into God’s rest?

It is a problem because that’s in the past and the rest which is set before us in Ps. 95 and Heb. 3-4 is something into which we can enter now, today (note the present tense in Heb. 4:3). How can this past rest of God’s apply to us in the present? That question is solved for us in the following verses. What is being argued is this: what is past with God is present and future with respect to us.

That it is past with God is the point in verses 3-4. Now look at verses 5-6. “And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest. Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief....” In verse 5, he again reminds us of Ps. 95:11. In this psalm he sees people who are being urged not to follow the example of the wilderness generation of the Israelites, and to enter into God’s rest which they rejected. This

only makes sense if that rest is still available, if we can still enter into it. David wrote this hundreds of years after the Exodus (the Exodus occurred about 1450 B.C. and David reigned about 1000 B.C.), and yet the promise of rest was still intact. Clearly this Psalm wasn't just meant for Israel in David's day, but for succeeding generations as well. In other words, what is past with God is present and future with respect to us.

Then note the argument in verses 7-8: "Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said, Today if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. For if Jesus [that is, Joshua] had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day." David wrote this long after the Exodus and the wilderness journeys. It would not make sense to tell people to enter into this rest if it only applied to the physical possession of the Promised Land in Canaan. Though Canaan is certainly a type of the rest promised here, it is not the rest in its fullness. It was pointing to something much, much better. Hence the conclusion of verse 9: "There remaineth therefore a rest for the people of God."

God's rest is a heavenly rest.

How can we enter into God's rest? How does that make sense? This is explained for us in verse 10: "For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his." In other words, the way we enter into God's rest is by imitating him in his rest. How do we do that? There are several things to note as we think about this. First, the works from which God ceased were good works, not bad works. "And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good" (Gen. 1:31). I note this because it might be tempting to interpret ceasing from our works as no longer relying on our own personal goodness for salvation. "Works" are used that way in Scripture – to refer to things done in order to merit God's favor. Of course we should never trust in our works, in our goodness, as the reason why we think God will accept us into his friendship and fellowship. We must trust only in

Christ and in the grace of God through him. But that is not the meaning here, because those kinds of works are not really good works. It is not a good thing to trust in your works, in your righteousness, before God. Ceasing from that would be ceasing from a bad thing, and it is not the idea here.

What is the idea? I think we get at it in Rev. 14:13. There John writes, "And I heard a voice from heaven saying unto me, Write, Blessed are the dead which die in the Lord from henceforth: Yea, saith the Spirit, that they may rest from their labors; and their works do follow them." Those who die in the Lord rest from their labors. Their works follow them in the sense that the memory of them never dies ("God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love," Heb. 6:10). To rest, then, is to rest from the labors of the good works done now by the grace of God for the glory of God. This is a rest that we really only truly enter into when we enter into heaven. Right now, the Christian life is a life of labor, of blood, sweat, and tears. "We must through much affliction enter into the kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). We must strive to enter in (Lk. 13:24). To follow Christ and to honor him this side of heaven is not always easy. Our Lord described it in terms of dying to yourself, of taking your cross and following him. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer put it, "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die." We are presently to work out our own salvation with fear and trembling (Phil. 2:12). And it is the reason why we read, in verse 11 of our text, "Let us labor therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief." This side of heaven we are laboring, we are striving, we are working. We are not yet resting in the sense of the rest promised here. But for those who belong to Christ, that rest is sure to come. There is coming a day when we will no longer have to fight the flesh, the world, and the devil. Our tears and pain and toil and fears will one day cease and we will enjoy unfettered fellowship with the living God.

This interpretation of rest is supported by what the author has already said in chapter 3. Remember, in chapter 3 he introduced the passage from the Psalm. That Psalm was meant to support statements like

these: “But Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end” (Heb. 3:6; cf. ver. 14). The rest promised corresponds to the hope that we have in Christ, and this hope points us beyond this life into the next. It is the same hope shared by the patriarchs: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having received them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (Heb. 11:13-16). Our rest is in heaven; until then we are strangers and pilgrims upon the earth.

I want to notice something else about this rest. This heavenly rest is not a rest in the sense of total cessation of all activity. Heaven is not going to be a place where we just lounge around. It is not a place where we will just be floating around on clouds plucking at a harp. Frankly, that would be boring after about one minute. No, my friends, heaven will be a place of unceasing activity. When God rested, he did not stop all activity. His work of creation stopped, yes; but he continues to work in providence and salvation. In the same way, our resting means ceasing from one sort of activity (the labor of pursuing holiness under the condition of sinfulness and the opposition of the world) to another (the never-ending, ever-increasing joy of unbroken and unhindered fellowship with God). Heaven, will, I believe, be a place where we will expand the creative abilities given to us by God, only this time without the sweat of the brow. Remember that before Adam sinned, he worked; work as such is not bad, but sin has made it difficult. Our working will not completely cease, but the sin which makes it distasteful and difficult will.



It is important to remember this, because if the only idea you have of heaven is as a place of ethereal existence floating around singing all the time, it will be hard for you to get excited about it. No, we are embodied souls, and we will enjoy eternity in resurrected bodies in a very tangible new heavens and new earth, and worship will be something that will be inevitable because we will not be able to help rejoicing and praising and glorying in the beauty and glory and excellence and majesty of the God whom we will see and know even as we are known (1 Cor. 13:12). Think about all the things that make earth distasteful for you and those will be gone. No more sin, no more worry, no more hurting, no more loneliness, no more rejection, no more failure, no more shame, no more frustration. Pure, unbroken fellowship with God. We will be able to be fully what God created us to be. And that is a reason for hope.

If this rest is a heavenly rest, and we know that the only way we can get into heaven is by the unmerited grace of God, why are we told to labor to enter into it? Why are we told to fear not entering into this rest? How is that consistent with the fact that eternal life is a free gift of the grace of God that not only saves us but keeps us?

Well, it certainly doesn't mean that we are to labor in order to earn it. We can't do that. We are sinners before God and against God. We have given up any chance on earning eternal life. As the apostle Paul put it, "For if Abraham were justified by works, he hath whereof to glory; but not before God. For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness. Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt. But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness" (Rom. 4:2-5). Eternal life is "the gift of God . . . through our Lord Jesus Christ" (Rom. 6:23).

So then, what does it mean to labor to enter it? Well, there is only one road that leads to eternal life. You don't get on that road because you are better than those who aren't. You're there because of the grace of God. The road that leads to glory is a path that involves repentance and perseverance and killing sin and denying self. If you aren't on that

road, you can't say that you are saved. It's what our Lord was getting at when he said, "Enter ye in at the strait gate: for wide is the gate, and broad is the way, that leadeth to destruction, and many there be which go in thereat: because strait is the gate and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it" (Mt. 7:13-14). What kind of road ends in eternal life? It is the road that begins with the strait gate. The road is narrow. The way is hard. It is a road which requires your full attention. It can be very hard and difficult at times. The way of the world, on the other hand, is easy. It is a broad way, an easy way. It lets you be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do. Both these roads end, but what they end in does not end. The broad road ends in eternal destruction. The narrow road, the laboring road, ends in eternal life.

If you want to see what this looks like, consider the example of the apostle Paul. This is what laboring to enter in looks like: "Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended" – in other words, he didn't think he had arrived; there was still much growing to do, much laboring to do. "But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark of the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13-14). Reach forth, pressing forward for the prize – that's what it means to labor to enter into God's rest. Or, as the apostle Peter puts it, "Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God" (2 Pet. 3:12). In other words, all of life is to be lived in light of eternity. My choices and priorities, and the way I spend my time, ought to reflect that. Does it?

God's rest is an infinitely desirable rest.

The fact that we are to fear lest we don't enter into this rest, that we are to labor to enter into it, shows that this rest is an infinitely desirable rest. The fear here is not a fear that the elect will lose their salvation; that is not possible. But it is the fear that I might be a fake. It is that

healthy sort of fear which leads you to examine yourself to see if you are in the faith (2 Cor. 13:5). The fact of the matter is that there are people out there who call themselves Christian and they have never been born again; they have never truly repented of their sins, and they have never truly put their faith in Jesus Christ. When the going gets tough, like Pliable in Pilgrim's Progress, they will leave the faith. This is what the author is saying here. Make your calling and election sure (2 Pet. 1:10). The biggest fear should not be earthly loss. The biggest fear is that my faith is not real and that my hope is the hope of a hypocrite.

Here's the point: I only fear missing out on those things that I really want and desire. I will only put in maximum effort for those things that I find truly valuable. And that's the reason why this text is book-ended the way it is. Fear lest you fail to enter in (1); labor to enter in (11) – why? Because eternal fellowship with God is infinitely more desirable than amassing earthly wealth or growing a business or going on exotic vacations or basking in fame. All those things will eventually rot. You can't take any of them beyond the grave. But you will meet God, and you will either enter into eternal rest or eternal ruin. In light of eternity, God's rest will be seen to be infinitely desirable and every other object of one's desire will shrink into comparative meaninglessness.

So many people labor for that which does not profit. But Christ is infinitely valuable and supremely desirable. The prophet Isaiah put it this way: "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price. Wherefore do ye spend money for that which is not bread? And your labour for that which satisfieth not? Hearken diligently unto me, and eat that which is good and let your soul delight itself in fatness" (Isa. 55:1-2). Without Christ, you are laboring for that which is not bread and does not satisfy. With Christ, no matter what we endure, we know that in the end we will have eternal life and unbroken joy. And you know the amazing thing about this bread and water of life? You can have it without paying for it. For if you belong to Christ, you already have eternal life by virtue of his perfect life and

atoning death. As the hymn puts it, “He paid the price; he bore the burden.”

Another way to put this is, how do we keep the sabbath? The word “rest” in verse 9 is actually a different word from what is used every other time in this chapter(4). It is the word *sabbatismos* and literally means “keeping of sabbath” or “a sabbath rest.” What the context shows is that God’s sabbath points forward to an eternal sabbath rest, this rest to which we are pointed in our text (it is sometimes noted that the seventh day in Genesis doesn’t have an evening to it; that is, it doesn’t end—it too is an eternal rest). This sabbath is kept in Christ. It is to what the weekly sabbath, the resting from physical labors one day out of the week, was meant to point. Christ is the fulfillment of that sabbath, which is why the apostle Paul will tell the Colossian believers, “Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but the body is of Christ” (Col. 2:16-17). We don’t keep the sabbath holy in the New Covenant era by literally physically resting one day out of seven (not that this is bad; it is just no longer part of our obedience to God). However, that doesn’t mean we don’t keep the Sabbath at all – it just means that we keep Sabbath in the truest sense of the word, by finding eternal rest in Christ. He is our sabbath, and we find rest in him by faith (cf. Mt. 11:28-30). So,

*Come, ye weary, heavy laden,  
Bruised and mangled by the fall;  
If you tarry till you're better,  
You will never come at all.  
I will arise and go to Jesus,  
He will embrace me in his arms;  
In the arms of my dear Savior,  
O there are ten thousand charms.*

## CHAPTER XIII

### THE WORD OF GOD (HEB. 4:12-13)

YESTERDAY WAS THE TWENTIETH anniversary of the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers in New York City and the Pentagon and the tragic downing of Flight 93, all orchestrated by Islamic terrorists bent on an agenda of destruction and hate.<sup>1</sup> Twenty years later, our country ingloriously left Afghanistan, the training ground of these terrorists, leaving thousands of people there to the mercy of the Taliban – especially Afghan Christians. One wonders after all this what was accomplished: has anything really been done in the last twenty years to stop the progress of militant Islam? It can be discouraging to dwell on.

However, we need to remember in these uncertain times that God is in control. Tragedies like 9/11 or the abandonment of the Afghan people don't happen because God forgot to keep his hand on the wheel of the universe. God allows things like this to happen on purpose, not because he gets delight out of human suffering or because he doesn't care about justice, but because he is going to bring about something much better out of the rubble and the ashes caused by human evil. Though God allows evil to take place, the reality is that evil will not have the final

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<sup>1</sup>This sermon was preached on 9/12/21.

word. He will make things right. Another way to put this is that God will have the final word, and by this word he will bring about surprising good for his people and surpassing glory for his name.

This is one of the lessons of Psalm 33. There we read about the power of God's word: "By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth. He gathereth the waters of the sea together as an heap: he layeth up the depth in storehouses. Let all the earth fear the LORD: let the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. For he spake, and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast. The LORD bringeth the counsel of the heathen to nought: he maketh the devices of the people of none effect. The counsel of the LORD standeth forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations" (Ps. 33:6-11). The same word that created the universe is the same word that brings the counsel of the nations to nothing. In the end, God's word will stand. His word is a powerful word because the God who speaks is omnipotent and sovereign.

In our text, we are face to face with this powerful word of God. It is the word that the Hebrew Christians needed to be reminded of. They needed to remember that, whatever the difficulties that were making them think twice about their faith in Christ, nothing is able to stop or stand in the way of the fulfillment of God's word, either in his promises to his people or his warnings to his enemies. In the end, God's word will stand. All the voices that have been raised in opposition to God will one day be silenced. All the plans and the counsels devised against the people of God will come to nothing. For only God can speak and it is done, can command and it infallibly comes to pass.

What, or who, is the word of God spoken of here in the text? There actually has been quite a bit of debate over the referent to the "word of God" in verse 12. Some, like the fourth-century church father Athanasius, have said that this has the same meaning as we find in the gospel of John, where we are told that, "the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn. 1:14), clearly referring to Jesus the Son of God. However, given the context, the word of God here clearly means the word

which God speaks, his utterance, and which is communicated to us in the pages of Scripture. The context demands this interpretation. Notice the word “for” at the beginning of verse 12: “For the word of God . . .”. It is the reason why we are to do verse 11: “Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief.” The danger of unbelief is the failure to believe God’s word – both his word of promise and his word of warning.

Again and again we see this emphasis on what God has spoken and said, particularly in Psalm 95. Remember that back in chapter 3 where this Psalm was introduced, it was introduced with the expression, “as the Holy Ghost saith” (3:7). Then, throughout the following verses we have this repeated reminder that God is speaking to us in the words of the Psalm (see, for example, 3:10, 11, 12, 15, 18; 4:2, 3, 4, 7, 8). This is not just a Psalm of David; it is God speaking to us in the Psalm of David (4:7). This is the word of the Lord.

Thus, when we come to the phrase “word of God” in 4:12, the first thought should be the word of God as spoken in the words of Scripture. Though it is true that the word here is *logos*, as in the gospel of John, we also see that *logos* is used in 4:2 – “but the word (*logos*) preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it.” There, in the immediate context, *logos* means the word of God which is preached, and which is identified with the exhortation given in the word of God written (Ps. 95). Note that the word here is likened to a sword – this should remind us of Paul’s description of God’s word in Eph. 6:17, which is surely meant to refer to God’s written word.

However, you cannot separate God’s word from God himself. Thus, when we get to verse 13, “Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do,” we are manifestly getting a description there of the omniscience of God himself. The idea is that God will always back his word. He will not let it fall to the ground. What he says he will do. What he says will stand, even though the entire world of human thought stands against it. “Let God be true, and every man a liar,” as

says the apostle Paul (Rom. 3:4). Thus the prophet Isaiah writes, “So shall my word be that goeth forth out of my mouth: it shall not return unto me void, but it shall accomplish that which I please, and it shall prosper in the thing whereto I sent it” (Isa. 55:11).

In the same way, though I don’t think we should identify the “word of God” here with the second Person of the Trinity, there is an intimate connection between the spoken word of God and the eternal Word of God who is Jesus our Lord. You see it in the vision that the apostle John had of our Lord: “And he had in his right hand seven stars: and out of his mouth went a sharp two-edged sword” (Rev. 1:16; cf. 19:15). The fact that the sword is coming out of his mouth is meant surely to signify his word which is, as here, like a sharp two-edged sword. But again, though we don’t identify the two (the sword is not the Son), neither do we separate them. To reject the word of God is to reject God. To obey God’s word and to believe God’s word is to believe God.

Thus, when we consider what is said here about God’s word, we are made to realize that the reason why God’s word possesses the qualities that it does is precisely because it is the word of God. The qualities which are possessed by the word of God in verse 12 are the qualities of God. The point of the author here is to raise the eyes of the recipients of the letter from God’s word to God himself. The God who spoke in the promises and warnings of his word stands behind those promises and warnings. Again, to reject God’s word is to reject God himself. So if we are looking at this text and asking the question, “Is this talking about God or is this talking about Scripture?” I think we are presenting ourselves with a false choice. This is talking about the God who speaks in Scripture.

However, we haven’t yet addressed the question as to how these two verses are meant to function as a reason why we are to labor to enter into God’s rest so that we don’t “fall after the same example of unbelief” (11). More to the point, how do the qualities attributed to God’s word motivate obedience and faith? To answer this question, let’s look at each of the qualities listed in these two verses. We can



group them under three categories: powerful, piercing, and perceptive.

### God's Word is Powerful

“For the word of God is quick, and powerful” (12). The translation “quick” is the old English word for “living” (it is related to the English word “quicken” which means to make alive). When we are told that the word of God is living and powerful, we are meant to understand that God's word will always do what it promises to do. None of God's promises or warnings will ever fall to the ground. “Not as though the word of God hath taken none effect” (Rom. 9:5). That cannot happen.

This doesn't of course mean that we can use the Bible like a talisman, as if by quoting a Scripture at someone we could cast as it were a magic spell. What this is saying is that nothing can get in the way of the fulfillment of God's word. The “scripture,” as our Lord put it, “cannot be broken” (Jn. 10:35). Or as he put it in the Sermon on the Mount, “Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled” (Mt. 5:18). The point is that we can believe without hesitation all that God has spoken. It is living and powerful; it is not a dead word that promises much and accomplishes little or nothing.

You see this connection between God's word and God's power also in the story of Abraham. Here is the way Paul put it: “...it is written, I have made thee [Abraham] a father of many nations, before him whom he believed, even God, who quickeneth the dead, and calleth those things which be not as though they were. Who against hope believed in hope, that he might become the father of many nations; according to that which was spoken, So shall thy seed be. And being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God; and being fully persuaded that, what he had promised, he was able also to perform” (Rom. 4:17-21). Why did Abraham believe God's promise? He did so because he believed God was able – was pow-

erful enough – to do what he said he would do. In fact, the God who spoke the promises is the one who is able to speak something out of nothing! There is simply no power in the universe that can match or compete with the power of God. What is impossible with man is possible with God. Abraham knew that, and that enabled him to endure through many setbacks and long waiting for the fulfillment of God’s promise.

In the immediate context of Hebrews 4, the point is that these wavering Christians should remember that the promise of entering God’s rest is sure, not because of their power to make it happen but because God’s word is powerful – it will come to pass no matter what kind of opposition the believer encounters. There is nothing and no one that can stand in the way of God fulfilling his word (cf. Rom. 8:31-39). It is when we truly believe that God is fully able to bring his promises to pass that we will persevere through discouragement and opposition and trials.

On the other hand, just as God’s promises are sure, so are his warnings. There is a fearful warning there in the ninety-fifth Psalm: “Unto whom I swear in my wrath that they should not enter into my rest” (Ps. 95:11). In fact, as the author of Hebrews will put it later, “if we sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries” (Heb. 10:26-27). You cannot resist God and, therefore, you will not be able to resist his word – either his word of warning or his word of promise.

God’s word, by the way, doesn’t depend upon us believing it. “If we believe not, yet he remaineth faithful: he cannot deny himself” (2 Tim. 2:13). Just because we have convinced ourselves that God’s word is not reliable doesn’t mean it will not come to pass. A lot of people are like Casey-at-the-bat<sup>2</sup>: they don’t like the way God pitches his word to them and they let it just pass by. But every time, God calls “strike”! and

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<sup>2</sup>See <https://poets.org/poem/casey-bat>

eventually they strike out and it is too late.

### God's Word is Piercing

Next, we read that God's word is "sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (12). Too much ink has been spilled over this verse over the wrong things, as if the point of it is the distinction between soul and spirit. There may be such a distinction. The point, however, is how penetrating and piercing God's word is. It pierces to the level of soul and spirit; it goes beyond the external and pierces to the level of the joints and marrow. It is summarized in the words "and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart." By "heart" is not meant the physical organ that pumps blood, but the totality of the inner man, including the thoughts, the affections, and our volition. In other words, God's word speaks to who we really are; not merely as we appear to be but who we are on the inside – the real me.

There are two ways that this works. First, God's word in Scripture pierces us in the sense that as we read it, the Holy Spirit speaks through it to us – it is the sword of the Spirit – and when he speaks to us he is able to do so in a way that cuts through our hardness and our excuses. There are no blunt edges to this sword for it is two-edged. The Spirit uses God's word to convict us of hidden sins. Or he speaks through it a word of comfort and hope. I am thankful for both. You see how this worked in the early church through the prophets – "if all [the church] prophesy, and there come in one that believeth not, or one unlearned, he is convinced of all, he is judged of all: and thus are the secrets of his heart made manifest; and so falling down on his face he will worship God, and report that God is in you of a truth" (1 Cor. 14:24- 25). Have you not experienced this? Have there not been times when you have been reading God's word and all of a sudden you felt as if God were speaking directly to you and into your situation? Have you not felt as

if the word had discovered the very secrets of your heart? Thank God for that!

There is another way it works. God's word is piercing in the sense that God's word demands nothing less than obedience all the way down to the level of the heart. The commands that come to us in God's word are not meant to make us hypocrites; they are not concerned with merely external obedience. God does not look on the external appearance as man does; he looks on the heart (cf. 1 Sam. 16:7). Even so his words pierce to the heart in the sense of commanding and demanding the obedience and the affection of our inner man. We are to take every thought captive to the obedience of Christ (2 Cor. 10:5).

We run into problems when we begin to treat God's word as if it were just concerned with appearances. We can all keep up a good appearance, even when our hearts are far from God. Like those in our Lord's day, who drew near to God with their mouths but their hearts were far from him (Mt. 15:8). Sin begins in the heart and is only carried on with the permission and consent of the heart. Sin begins in the imagination before it filters into action. Lust precedes sin in the overt act. It is therefore imperative that we keep our hearts with all diligence, for from it are the issues of life (Prov. 4:23). Hence, Hebrews 4:12 reminds us that God's word pierces to the heart, not merely in an experiential way, but in terms of its authority and scope. In fact, the reason why God's word can prick us in the heart (Acts 2:37), is because of the scope of its commands. God's word commands your thoughts, your loves, your priorities. If we are not obeying him on that level, we are in serious danger.

This word which pierces us will judge us accordingly. As our Lord put it, "He that rejecteth me, and receiveth not my words, hath one that judgeth him: the word that I have spoken, the same shall judge him in the last day" (Jn. 12:48). It is true that not everyone who hears God's word responds in repentance. But those who have hardened themselves against it will one day find that it pierces them and discovers the weakness of their excuses as they stand before the Judge of the

universe.

### God's Word is Perceptive

“Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13). Here we move almost imperceptibly from God's word spoken to the One who speaks. Again, we cannot separate God and his word. He always stands behind his word. To reject God's word is to reject God.

Now in a real sense this statement is a confirmation of the previous one. The reason why the word of God is able to discern the thoughts and intents of the heart is because the God of the word is omniscient. However, there is a difference. Whereas the focus of the previous statement was the depth to which the word of God pierces, the focus here is on the breadth to which the God who speaks, sees. It is not saying just that God knows a few people well (down to the depths of their hearts and souls) but that he knows everyone this way (“neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight”). There is no one who can escape God's penetrating gaze: “The eyes of the LORD are in every place, beholding the evil and the good” (Prov. 15:3).

The point is that you cannot escape God. Now these struggling Christians were wanting to escape the suffering that they were enduring. One route they could take was the route of abandoning the faith in Christ. That would have afforded them temporary but immediate relief, and this made it very tempting. How does the book of Hebrews counteract this tendency? It does so by reminding them (and us) that, no matter where we turn, we do not move outside the realm of God's kingdom. He knows everything we do at every moment. We cannot ultimately escape his judgment.

Jonah found this out the hard way, didn't he? God told him to do something that was to him very distasteful, and so he decided that he wasn't going to do it. And so “Jonah rose up to flee unto Tarshish [the

opposite direction from where God told him to go – Nineveh] from the presence of the LORD, and went down to Joppa; and he found a ship going to Tarshish: so he paid the fare thereof, and went down into it, to go with them from the presence of the LORD” (Jonah 1:3). That’s the beginning of the chapter. You know how it ends? “Now the LORD had prepared a great fish to swallow up Jonah. And Jonah was in the belly of the fish three days and three nights” (1:17). You cannot outrun God. You cannot really go from the presence of the Lord. When God had the fish vomit Jonah back up onto land, he simply reiterated his command to Jonah (2:1-2). “So Jonah arose...” (2:3), finally learning his lesson!

In the same way, when God warns us against rejecting his word (like Jonah tried to do), we should not think that we are somehow going to weasel our way out of the consequences of disobedience. It just doesn’t work that way. Now I know that a lot of people will object here and point out all those who are living in abject rebellion against God and seem to be doing just fine. But the judgment of God, like the Christian hope, is something mainly reserved for us on the other side of death: “It is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment” (Heb. 9:27). The reality is not that God doesn’t care about the wickedness of the wicked but that he is giving space for people to repent (cf. 2 Pet. 3:1-9). In fact, to use God’s forbearance – the temporary staying of his hand of judgment – as a reason to go on in sin, only exacerbates our guilt: “And thinkest thou this, O man, that judgest them which do such things, and doest the same, that thou shalt escape the judgment of God? Or despisest thou the riches of his goodness and forbearance and longsuffering; not knowing that the goodness of God leadeth thee to repentance?” (Rom. 2:3-4). Shall we despise the goodness of God by scoffing at his judgment which is temporarily restrained by his mercy?

Note the way God is described at the end of verse 13: he is the one “with whom we have to do.” We can ignore God now; we can deny he exists or doubt it and think that belief in God is irrelevant. That’s the way a lot of folks in our society look at God. However, you will have

to deal with God; it is unavoidable. He is the one with whom you have to do. He is the one to whom we will all have to give an account. He is the one in whom we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). Of him and through him and to him are all things (Rom. 11:36).

Since we cannot run from God, the only logical thing to do is to run to God. This quote in Herman Bavinck's *Reformed Dogmatics* puts it so well:

When you wish to do something evil, you retire from the public into your house where no enemy may see you; from those places of your house which are open and visible to the eyes of men you remove yourself into your room; even in your room you fear some witness from another quarter; you retire into your heart, there you meditate: he is more inward than your heart. Wherever, therefore, you shall have fled, there he is. From yourself, whither will you flee? Will you not follow yourself wherever you shall flee? But since there is One more inward even than yourself, there is no place where you may flee from God angry but to God reconciled. There is no place at all whither you may flee. Will you flee from him? Flee unto him.<sup>3</sup>

This would be frightening if God only revealed himself to us as our judge. But that is not the only way he is the one with whom we have to do. In the person of Christ, God reveals himself to us as God reconciled. We see this in the following verses, which we will (Lord-willing) consider in more depth next time (Heb. 4:14-16). There our Lord is presented to us as a high priest – the function of the high priest being to represent God's people to God and to provide atonement for their sins – so that the throne of God becomes to us in Christ a throne of grace. This is the point of the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthian church: "All things are of God, who hath reconciled us to himself by Jesus Christ, and hath given to us the ministry of reconcilia-

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<sup>3</sup>Quoted in Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (2nd ed.), p. 210-211.

tion; to wit, that God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself, not imputing their trespasses unto them; and hath committed unto us the word of reconciliation. Now then we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God did beseech you by us: we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God. For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him" (2 Cor. 5:18-21). The gospel is the gospel (good news) precisely because in it God comes to us in Christ as reconciled.

It is important, by the way, to understand who it is that needs to be reconciled. The problem is not mainly that we need to lay away our enmity toward God. That is true, of course, and it is important that we do this – we do need to repent of our hostility toward God. But that is not the primary problem! The primary problem with the human race is not man's beef with God but God's holy and just anger toward us. We need to be reconciled to a God who is alienated from us on account of our sin. And the only way this can happen is through Christ who bore the punishment due to sin so that those who believe in him might be made righteous before God and reconciled with God.



## CHAPTER XIV

### HELP FOR HURTING PEOPLE (HEB. 4:14-16)

CHRISTIANITY IS NOT JUST A PHILOSOPHY. It is not something which merely addresses the intellect. It does that, of course, but this is not all it does. Nor is Christianity a self- help program, giving tips so that you can become a better you. Along these lines, it is not like Buddhism, which argues that the way to deal with the suffering which is endemic to this world is to make yourself become dead to it, ultimately by achieving Nirvana. Rather, Christianity addresses itself to hurting and wounded people, to those who are weary and heavy laden, as our Lord put it (Mt. 11:28). It addresses itself, moreover, to people who realize that there are things about their life that they cannot fix, especially when it comes to the brokenness in their lives that is the result of sin. The gospel helps us to recognize that the main problem behind all this is not the horizontal problems that our sins have caused, but the vertical problem of our relationship with God. Sin has separated us from God, and from this comes all the misery caused by our revolt against the Lord.

In other words, Christianity says that we need help, and we need help from outside ourselves. It goes beyond a recognition that I might need

help here and there; it involves a recognition that there is no time in my life that I don't need help. I am not self-sufficient. I am not the master of my fate or the captain of my soul. That kind of talk is crazy talk for delusional people whose perception of themselves and the world has become twisted out of all proportion to reality.

Now I'm not saying that such people can't sometimes achieve a sort of success in this world. The Bible often speaks of the wicked who prosper in this world (cf. Ps. 73:3; 17:13-14). But their success does not go beyond the borders of the grave; they die in their sin (Jn. 8:24). Furthermore, the Bible recognizes what we often see ourselves – that with such earthly success comes a lot of collateral damage as they cause irreversible hurt to those around them in order to get ahead and achieve their own personal dreams.

On the other hand, a person who sees their own vulnerability is much more likely to be sensitive to the vulnerabilities of those around them, and, instead of stomping on them to get ahead, will be much more willing to give a helping hand. In other words, people who recognize that they are not self-sufficient are much more likely to be kind and gracious and loving. When we look around and see all the suspicion and discord and hate, we can readily see that we need more of this sort of person in the world.

This is the kind of person who is addressed in our text. This text is not for self-sufficient people. This is a text for people who find themselves in need of help beyond themselves. In fact, this is a text for people who realize that the kind of help they need is not something that can be given by a mere mortal, which means that this is a text which is for people who see things as they really are. We are people who need help, and we need help that comes from God. If you realize that, it is a good thing, and boy have I got good news for you.

We need help for hurting people.

Note where this text ends: “that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need” (Heb. 4:16). Mercy is for hurting and miserable people. We should remember that this epistle was not written to folks whose lives were just fantastic but who were enduring suffering and persecution. Life was not easy for them. They were hurting; they were wounded. They needed mercy, and this is what is offered to them in this verse. They needed mercy that would come in the form of help. They didn’t just need a pat on the back; they needed support and strength and guidance and comfort and hope. Where would they get that? How would they get that? These verses are about help for hurting people, and how the Bible – God’s word – directs us to it. In them, we see that help comes from grace that we obtain by prayer which is made successful through our high priest, Jesus Christ, God’s Son. And it is all centered around God’s throne which, through Jesus our Lord, has become for us a throne, not of judgment, but of grace.

We need grace.

Grace is something we can give to each other (cf. Eph. 4:29, but even here the grace is grace ministered through the believer but which finds its ultimate origin in God, not man), but in the Bible grace is almost always spoken of in connection to what God gives. In the Bible, grace is not a human gift but a divine gift. Grace is a gift – something freely given to us by God. As Paul puts it to the Romans, we are “justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:24). When he says, “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?” (Rom. 8:32), the phrase “freely give” is a single verb in Greek which could also be translated “to give graciously” (*charizomai* – the verbal form of the noun *charis*, grace). Grace is anything freely given to us by God – which, by the way, is every good thing, beginning with our salvation in Christ. Everything good that we enjoy comes to us as a gift of grace, including mercy and help. This is why the text describes the

help that we receive as “grace to help” and the source from which it comes as “the throne of grace.”

This is good news because we not only don’t deserve mercy and help; we actually deserve anything but. In reality, we deserve to be punished for our rebellion and sin against God. This explains why the good things that we receive are given to us by grace – grace because we don’t deserve them; grace because we don’t merit them and God gives them to us as a free gift.

This is important to remember for a couple of reasons. One reason is that, when we forget that we need grace, out of pride we inevitably adopt an attitude of entitlement. We think we are owed the good things we have, whether they be material things, our relationships with family and friends, success in our endeavors, or even explicitly spiritual blessings. That attitude not only guts a heart of thanksgiving toward God, it also makes us resentful and bitter when things don’t go the way we think that they ought. Grace destroys that sinful sense of entitlement and engenders a heart of gratitude toward God and trust in God.

Second, it is important to remember because we can also be crippled and paralyzed by a sense of our guilt, and think that there is no way we could ever hope to receive anything good from God. Prayer becomes almost impossible in this emotional atmosphere and despair begins to grip our hearts and minds. However, grace reminds us that God does not relate to us with a balance sheet in hand. He justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). He receives sinners. Why? Because God relates to the believing sinner by grace.

The greatest gift of grace is that of our Lord Jesus Christ, because it is in him that we receive everything else – this is, in fact, the very point of Romans 8:32. Chief among all these blessings are the forgiveness of sin and hope of eternal rest. We are saved by grace though faith (Eph. 2:8), and in the ages to come God will put on display the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:7). We must remember that between the initial forgiveness of sin and our final

victory over it in the new heavens and new earth, God continues to give us grace for help in our times of need.

What does grace do for weary and worn people? Well, it gives us help. First and foremost, it brings us into the family of God through Jesus Christ our Lord. We must not think that, having forgiven us all our sins, God leaves us to ourselves. No, grace is something which gives us daily help.

For example, God gives us grace to strengthen us in our infirmities. This is what the Lord told the apostle Paul who was struggling so much against his thorn in the flesh: "And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in necessities, in persecutions, in distresses for Christ's sake: for when I am weak, then am I strong" (2 Cor. 12:9-10). Here we see grace coming in the form of strength and power so that the weak and powerless are able to gladly bear with their infirmities. I think it is important, by the way, to point out that this grace and strength was with reference to a thorn in the flesh. In other words, we don't just go to God for grace to help when the need is explicitly spiritual; we should also do so for physical and earthly trials. There is no problem that is beyond the scope of God's grace for help and rescue.

Grace not only enables us to endure affliction with joy, it also strengthens us to serve others. In times of weakness we often turn inward, but grace turns us outward again. Thus the apostle Peter writes to saints who were also suffering: "As every man hath received the gift, even so minister the same one to another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. If any man speak, let him speak as the oracles of God; if any man minister, let him do it as of the ability which God giveth: that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen" (1 Pet. 4:10-11). God gives grace to us as stewards of his grace, not to monopolize it all for

ourselves but to share it with others through the spiritual gifts which he has given to us.

You see both these things coming together in Acts 4:33 (grace to strengthen in times of weakness and grace to empower for ministry to others). The context of this verse is the prayer of the church after they had received the report of the apostles who had just been examined and threatened by the authorities not to preach the gospel anymore. The church then appealed to God for help; it was a great and stirring prayer (verses 24-30). One of the things they prayed for was that the Lord would “grant unto thy servants, that with all boldness they may speak thy word” (29). God answers almost immediately, and in verse 33 we see part of his answer: “And with great power gave the apostles witness of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus: and great grace was upon them all.” This seems to link, if not equate, grace and power. God’s grace comes upon his church to give them power in their weakness so that they will boldly proclaim the gospel to the lost.

Not only does God give grace to help, but he gives it at exactly the right place and at exactly the right time. Notice how the grace is described: “grace to help in time of need.” Unfortunately, people can disappoint us at this point. They will promise us all sorts of help, but when it comes to crunch time, they are nowhere to be found. I’m probably guilty of this. But not so with God. He gives grace at our time of need. It is gracious help and it is timely help.

The bottom line is this: the help that is promised is help that comes from grace. That means two things. It is help that comes from God, because in the Bible grace is ultimately a gift of God. It is not just another helping hand that is promised here, but help that comes from heaven itself. Second, because this is help that comes from grace, it is not something we have to deserve in order to get it. It is a free gift. It is not waiting for you to pay for it or merit it; it is offered to us freely in Christ.

Brothers and sisters, we all need help somewhere and in some way. And all of us need help that requires more than what another human

can give to us: we need God's help. This may seem out of reach, but thank God, through grace he gives us help: "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble."

"God is in the midst of her [the city of God]; she shall not be moved: God shall help her, and that right early" (Ps. 46:1, 5). This is a promise, my friend; you can bank on it. The question is, of course, how do we bank on it? How do we take advantage of this precious, precious resource? And this brings us to our next point.

We obtain grace through prayer.

Prayer brings us into the very presence of God. This is not something I'm making up: it is right here in the passage: "Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace" (16). The throne here is God's throne, for our high priest ministers now in the heavens (14). How do we come boldly unto God's throne which is also the throne of grace? We do so by prayer.

There is an incredible picture of this in the book of Revelation. There we are given a glimpse of the goings on in heaven, in the very presence of God (8:2), and we see this: "And another angel came and stood at the altar, having a golden censer; and there was given unto him much incense, that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense, which came with the prayers of the saints, ascended up before God out of the angel's hand" (8:3- 4, emphasis mine). What follows is God's intervention upon earth (5, ff), apparently in response to the prayers of the saints which are pictured as incense before God. He hears the prayers of the saints and he acts upon them. They don't just hit the ceilings of our homes and stay there; they come before the very presence of God. Through prayer we really do enter into the presence of God and stand before his throne of grace. Grace is gotten at God's throne, and the way we get it is through prayer.

We can sometimes think that God doesn't hear us, or that talking out our hurts won't be heard by God. Surely he is too busy to be bothered by us. Surely he is too exalted to take notice of us. Surely our problems are too small or too unimportant to get his attention. But that is not what the text says. If you go to God's throne, you will get mercy and find grace to help in time of need. I know that God will hear those who call upon him, when they do so through Christ, with humble and repentant hearts. I know he will because he commands us to pray and he promises to answer when we pray: "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver thee and thou shalt glorify me" (Ps. 50:15).

Our Lord himself reiterates this: "And whatever ye ask in my name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye shall ask anything in my name, I will do it" (Jn. 14:13-14). Now, yes, we should not take this as a blank check to ask things for the fulfillment of our lusts (cf. Jam. 4:3). It is when we pray according to God's will, that he hears us (1 Jn. 5:14). Neither should we sell these verses short. God hears our prayers. The Son of God hears our prayers and he delights to answer them. It was our Lord himself who gave us the parable of the widow and the judge in Luke 18 for this purpose: "that men ought always to pray and not to faint" (Lk 18:1).

What should we pray about? Let the apostle Paul answer that question: "Be careful [anxious] for nothing; but in every thing by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God. And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep our hearts and minds through Christ Jesus" (Phil. 4:6-7). What should be bring to God in prayer? "Everything"!

Again and again, the Scriptures give us encouragement to pray, not as a duty to assuage our conscience, but as a privilege to enjoy as children of the Most High. Our Lord put it this way: "Ask, and it shall be given you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: For every one that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he seek a fish, will



he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Mt. 7:7-11). What an encouragement to pray!

Thus, though we are so often hesitant to take advantage of this privilege to enter into God's presence in order to obtain from him mercy and grace for help, we are not only encouraged to do so, but to do so "boldly" (16), with confidence. This confidence doesn't come from us, for this is again a throne of grace. This is not about putting your game face on or pretending to be something that you are not. No, this entrance into God's presence something which is given to us by the Spirit of God, who enables us to approach God as children would a father. That's where the boldness comes in. A child of a king doesn't worry about the fact that their father is a king; they come boldly in. This is what the apostle Paul is writing about to the Romans: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16). Indeed, for it is through Christ that we have access by one Spirit unto the Father (Eph. 2:18).

If you are still unsure that you can do this, let's look at a couple of examples of folks who did find mercy and grace to help. Sometimes we think that God doesn't hear us if we don't have the right words. My friend, it is not the words that are important so much as the attitude with which we approach him. In fact, Paul himself admits that we don't always know what to say, but that doesn't really matter for the Spirit intercedes for us even in our groaning (Rom. 8:26-27).

Then take the example of the poor publican: "And the publican, standing afar off, would not lift up so much as his eyes unto heaven, but smote upon his breast, saying, God be merciful to me a sinner" (Lk. 18:13). Note several things here. First, he stood "afar off," probably because he didn't think himself to be worthy of being in the presence of "religious" people. In fact, he does not refer to himself as "a sinner" but

as “the sinner” (Gk. to harmartolo). Second, though it was normal in those times to look up when you prayed, he didn’t even feel worthy enough for that. He must have felt embarrassed even to show his face to God. Third, his prayer was very simple and short: it was a simple cry for mercy. Technically, he asks for God to be propitiated – “let thine anger be removed” would be another way to translate that.<sup>1</sup> He understood that he was a sinner who deserved, not mercy, but judgment. Nevertheless, what was the result? In comparison with the Pharisee, who thought he was doing God a favor by praying, our Lord comments, “I tell you, this man [the despised publican] went down to his house justified rather than the other [the proud Pharisee]: for every one that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted” (Lk. 18:14). My friend, it is precisely those who do not feel worthy before God whose prayers are heard.

On the other hand, consider Elijah, as the apostle James tells us to do (Jm. 5:17-18). The fact is that, at the end of the day, Elijah was just another man. He needed grace and mercy too. So don’t cordon off his example as unapplicable to yourself: “Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit.” Why does James say this? Because “the effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much” (5:16). He was like us, says James, and we should expect the same answers to prayer as did Elijah. But how do we get this boldness? How can we say, with the hymn writer,

*Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ, my own.*

That brings us to our final point.

We come boldly because of our great high priest, Jesus Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>See Leon Morris, Luke [TNTC], (IVP, 1999), p. 290

There is no way any of this would be possible apart from Jesus Christ. You can pray and pray all day to God, but it is madness to think that we can approach God on our own terms and in our own way. You wouldn't do that with the President of the U.S., so why do you think that you can do that with God? God makes it clear in his word how we can approach him, and on what grounds we can have this boldness. Any other way of approaching God is presumption and you will meet with the same end as the sons of Aaron who presumed to go into the tabernacle with strange fire (see Lev. 10). He makes it clear right here in the text, in verses 14 and 15. Note that the point in both verses hinges on the fact that "we have a great high priest" (14). In verse 15, if you take away the double negative, you get the same thing: we have a great high priest.

The high priest was the mediator in the OT ritual between God's people and God himself. He was the one who was allowed once a year to enter into the holy of holies on the Day of Atonement. The fact that our author describes Christ in this way shows us that he is the only one who can give us entrance into God's presence, and that the way he does this is through his atoning death on the cross. Remember what has already been said: "Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people" (Heb. 2:17).

The Bible doesn't sidestep the problem of sin. It doesn't pretend away the evil that dwells in every one of our hearts. It doesn't nourish the self-righteousness that turns even secular Americans into Pharisees who look down their noses at "those religious people." The Bible doesn't buy into the fairy tale we tell each other every day: that man is basically good, and, if you just throw enough money and kindness and information at people, they will save themselves.

There are two things that are said here about our Lord that gives us the boldness to enter into the throne room of God. First, we are reminded of the transcendence of our Lord: "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God"

(14). He is not only a high priest, but he is a great high priest. The author of Hebrews will have much more to say on this point later, but the basic idea here is that Jesus is not messing around in some earthly tent or in some building made by hands: he is in heaven, bringing before God's throne the infinite value of his atoning sacrifice once for all accomplished for his people. It is no accident that John saw Jesus pictured in heaven as "a Lamb as it had been slain" (Rev. 5:6). Moreover, the idea here is of a successful Savior. When the high priest emerged from the Holy of Holies, it was a sign that God had accepted the sacrifice. Even so, when Christ emerged from the tomb and ascended into heaven he demonstrated that the sacrifice had been accepted by the Father. Those who come to God by Christ will find God's throne to be a throne of grace because those who do so are covered in the blood of the Lamb. Their sins have been atoned for and all their sins have been forgiven. There is, therefore, no reason why they cannot come before God's throne and come with confidence that God will accept them.

The other thing that is said here about our Lord as high priest is that, even though he is in the heavens, he is able to sympathize with us: "For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin" (15). Another reason one might have for a reluctance to enter before the throne of grace is that we might think that God is so unlike us that he just cannot understand what we are going through. But the Son of God is also the Son of David (cf. Rom. 1:3-4). He who is the eternal Son of God entered into an estate of humiliation by becoming a man. In doing so, he entered fully into our experience, with the sole exception of sin. The result is that he is able to sympathize with us and be touched with the feelings of our infirmities.

One of the most beautiful pictures of this in the gospels is the story of our Lord's encounter – apparently his first in his public ministry – with a leper. As you might know, lepers were separated from the rest of the community; they were not allowed to participate in public worship, and you weren't even supposed to touch them. Here is Mark's account of

it: “And there came a leper to him, beseeching him, and kneeling down to him, and saying unto him, If thou wilt, thou canst make me clean” (Mk. 1:40). Now most people would have already made it home by this point; they would not have stayed around the moment they noticed this guy was a leper. Jesus stayed and listened to him. Then we have this amazing description of what happened next: “And Jesus, moved with compassion, put forth his hand, and touched him, and saith unto him, I will; be thou clean” (41). Note two things here: first, he was moved with compassion – he didn’t just heal him because it was the right thing to do; he did so because he was genuinely touched with the feeling of this leper’s infirmities. Second, the way Jesus healed him is significant: he touched him. He didn’t have to do it that way. Clearly, he could simply have spoken and he would have been healed. But here he was putting his hand on this defiled leper – probably the first time anyone had touched him in years. Because Jesus can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities, he reaches out to touch us with the hand of his mercy and grace. When everyone else forsakes us, then the Lord takes us up.

Where are you this morning? Do you feel overwhelmed? Do you feel like you need help but no one can give it to you, except God? But do you feel that God would never help you because you’ve sinned against him and deserve only his judgment? That is true; we do only deserve his judgment. But Jesus Christ came to be a high priest. He came to offer a sacrifice – his own life – not as a martyr, not as an example, but as an atonement to pay for the sins that we committed and to bring us to God. If you want to summarize in one phrase what our Lord did on the cross, this is it: “For Christ also hath once suffered for sins, the just for the unjust, that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). He came to bring us to God’s throne and to make it for us a throne of grace. If you need help that only God can give, this text is very good news. We can get help through the grace of God, grace which is obtained at the throne of grace through prayer, because Jesus our high priest has made atonement for sins by his death on the cross.

What does this mean for us? Even if your troubles have mounted into the heavens, the place to start is not by dealing with the troubles themselves but by believing on Christ and putting your trust in him. There is one command I haven't dealt with yet: "let us hold fast our profession" (14). The profession, or confession, has as its content faith in Christ. Remember how the author put it back in chapter 3: "Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus" (3:1). We hold fast our profession by holding on to Jesus by faith. Do you? This is where we start and if we start there, the rest of the text becomes a reality for us too. Thanks be unto God for his indescribable gift!

# THE GREATER HIGH PRIEST

## CHAPTER XV

### GOD, MAN, AND SIN (HEB. 5:1)

THERE ARE TWO TITLES that the author of Hebrews attributes to Jesus that are extremely important for our understanding of who he is and what he has done. Those two titles are Son of God and high priest. Both are used in Heb. 5:1-10. In verses 5 and 8, he is referred to as the Son of God; in verses 5, 6, and 10 as high priest. Both titles are Scriptural, that is, they derive from OT predictions concerning the Christ. In this text, the author refers in particular to two Psalms in order to ground his understanding of the Messiah: Psalms 2 and 110.

Christ is the eternal Son of God. Remember that “begotten” in Psalm 2:7 and Heb. 5:5 is not a reference to his birth in the manger or to his becoming a man. Nor is it a reference to his becoming, at some distant point in time in the past, the Son of God. Rather, it is a reference to our Lord’s enthronement in heaven after having conquered death. This does not mean that this is when he became the Son of God, for the Father declared him to be his Son at the announcement of his incarnation, at his baptism, and at the Mount of Transfiguration. It is just that, at his resurrection and ascension, our Lord was invested with the honor



that belonged to him as the Son of God and which he temporarily laid aside in order to accomplish his earthly mission.

You see hints of this in verse 8: “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered”. If the Sonship of Christ were only a reference to his incarnate manhood, then his learning obedience by the things which he suffered would be a necessary part of his Sonship, but in verse 8 it is understood that his obedience and his sufferings were things essentially incompatible with it. This is why the verse begins with “though he were a Son.” In other words, you would not expect that the one who is the Son to have to learn obedience or to suffer. Nevertheless, we are told that he voluntarily took them on in order to accomplish the salvation of his people (cf. Phil. 2:5-11). It was a part of the “becoming poor” of him who was eternally rich, so that we might through his poverty become truly rich (cf. 2 Cor. 8:9).

The Son of God is that name which tells us who the Lord Jesus Christ is in relation to God the Father. It therefore describes an eternal relation. There was never a time when our Lord was not the Son and never a time when the Father was not the Father of the Son. It is not a title that he took on but a description of who he is in an essential and eternal sense. It also points us to his divinity: that he is one with the Father and shares equally with him in the essence of the Godhead.

I recently heard a Muslim preacher say that the reason he was not a Christian was that Jesus never claimed to be God. But this is false, for when he claimed to be the Son of God he was claiming to be God. You see this, for example, in John 10. There, our Lord repeatedly refers to God as his Father (something, by the way, that none of Jesus’ contemporaries did), and then he says this: “I and my Father are one” (Jn. 10:30). To this his enemies responded by picking up stones to stone him – they clearly thought he had just uttered a blasphemy. When our Lord asks them why they are doing this, they respond: “For a good work we stone thee not; but for blasphemy; and because that thou, being a man, makest thyself God” (10:33). In other words, our Lord’s contemporaries

understood the claim to be the Son of God as a claim to be God. But it doesn't keep him from affirming it: "I said, I am the Son of God" (36).

Now some folks will turn to something our Lord says later as a refutation that Son of God implies equality with God. They will refer to John 14:28, where our Lord says, "If ye loved me, ye would rejoice, because I said, I go unto the Father: for my Father is greater than I." However, this is clearly a reference to our Lord's future ascension into heaven ("I go unto the Father") where he will receive the glory that he had laid aside as a part of his earthly ministry (cf. Jn 17:1-3). At the moment when the Lord spoke these words, he was still suffering and learning obedience and, as such, his Father was greater than he – greater in the sense of his exalted status in heaven. In ascending to the Father, he was also ascending to the greatness of the Father, and this was the reason why his disciples should rejoice.

This is very important and grasping the truth that Jesus is, in fact, the eternal Son of God is essential for a true and saving understanding of who Jesus is. To refuse to receive him as such is to reject him, and to reject him is to turn away from the only source of eternal salvation. This is what the apostle John would later write: "Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father; but he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also" (1 Jn. 2:23).

And yet, as important as it is that we embrace Jesus as the Son of God, it is equally important that we understand what he did in terms of his designation as high priest. Alongside the confession of Jesus as God's Son in Psalm 2:7, we also have the confession of Jesus as high priest in Psalm 110:4, "Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchisedec" (Heb. 5:6, 10). God is speaking in this Psalm, and our Lord in the gospels says that the one to whom he is speaking is the Messiah, David's Lord (and thus to himself; see, for example, Mt. 22:41-45). Now we are going to hear a lot more about this mysterious man, Melchisedec, in chapter 7. For now the point is simply that the Messiah, Jesus Christ, was ordained to be a priest, and that to understand who Jesus is and what he does, we need to understand him in the categories of the priesthood.

It is tempting at this point just to skip to verses 11 and following because folks today are just as “dull of hearing” when it comes to the priesthood of Jesus as the original audience of this letter. How many of us read this and think how exciting it is to think about Jesus as a high priest? How many of us understand just how relevant and important this is?

I think there are a number of reasons why we find it hard to engage in any meaningful sense with these verses. One reason is that many of us view the priesthood as belonging solely to the period of OT sacrifice and as, therefore, irrelevant to NT Christianity. Our approach to this chapter is an artifact of a pervasive understanding of the OT as having no relevance for the NT Christian. We think that the Mosaic ritual was for folks before Jesus and for the NT church we don’t need to be bothered about such things. Of course, there is some truth to this; we are not under the Old Covenant but under the New Covenant. We no longer have to keep many of the ordinances and prescriptions of the Mosaic Law, especially the ceremonial aspect of the Mosaic Law. But we must never try to untether the NT from the OT. The fact of the matter is, without the OT, we will never really understand the NT. After all, didn’t Jesus say of himself, “Think not that I am come to destroy the law, or the prophets: I am not come to destroy, but to fulfill” (Mt. 5:17)? In other words, our Lord himself understood what he was doing entirely in terms of the fulfillment of the OT Scriptures. So if we are really going to come to grips with the work of Christ, we must do so in terms of it as the fulfillment of the OT.

Another reason for this lack of appreciation of texts like Hebrews 5 is that careful thinking about the person and work of Jesus is not considered important in our day. We just think that the most general notions of who Jesus is and what he did is sufficient. Although I never want to give the impression that you have to be a systematic theologian to be saved, neither must we go to the opposite extreme and say that it doesn’t matter what you think or how you think about Jesus. The reality is that there is such a thing as preaching “another Jesus” and

“another gospel” (2 Cor. 11:4; cf. Gal. 1:6-9), and this other Jesus is a Jesus taught by false prophets who are ministers of Satan (2 Cor. 11:13-15). We must not think that embracing that Jesus would do us any good. Doctrine matters. What you think about Jesus matters.

So, what does this passage tell us about Jesus? It is all about his being a high priest (Heb. 5:1, 5, 10). A priest was fundamentally a mediator between God and men. You see this in the text in verse 1: a priest, and the high priest in particular, was “ordained for men” –to represent them in their place before God, “in things pertaining to God.” Under the Old Covenant, you didn’t approach God directly; you did so through the priest. He took your offerings and presented them to the Lord. He was your representative before God.

Now this gets at the heart of why we modern people in the Western world are especially unable to understand the importance of a priest. In order to understand the importance of a priest, you have to be able to understand the categories in which the priesthood makes sense. There are three basic things you have to understand correctly if you are going to read this text with any interest. You need to have a correct understanding of who God is, of what man is, and of what sin is.

You see each of these things in verse 1. First, the high priest was “taken from among men” and “ordained for men.” The priesthood is defined here in terms of its relation to men. In other words, there is something about mankind that makes the priesthood necessary. Second, the high priest was “ordained for men in things pertaining to God.” That is, the priest is not representing God to men; it is the other way around. He is representing men to God. He is a mediator between men and God. What makes that necessary is the third thing: sin. The high priest functions “that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins.” I believe that it is precisely because we have become as a culture increasingly alienated from the biblical categories of God, man, and sin that the priesthood of Christ seems so foreign and bizarre to us. What I want to do this morning is to contrast the Biblical accounting of these realities with our own and so show why it is so important that

Jesus not only came to save us from our sin but that he did so as a high priest ordained by God.

Who is God?

What do we normally think of when we think of God? Well, we don't have to wonder what modern American folks, especially those who are younger, think. They've been asked, and their answers have been recorded for posterity. They are consistent enough that the sociologists put a name on it: Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. What is it, you ask? Well, it has been identified by five key beliefs.

As described by Smith and his team, Moralistic Therapeutic Deism consists of beliefs like these: 1. "A god exists who created and ordered the world and watches over human life on earth." 2. "God wants people to be good, nice, and fair to each other, as taught in the Bible and by most world religions." 3. "The central goal of life is to be happy and to feel good about oneself." 4. "God does not need to be particularly involved in one's life except when God is needed to resolve a problem." 5. "Good people go to heaven when they die."<sup>1</sup>

It is called deism because the God of the deists does not get involved in this world; he made it to begin with, but he leaves it up to us to do with it what we will. Now there are all sorts of reasons why people believe that God is this way, but I would suggest that the most plausible reason people see it this way is that this is the kind of God that simply doesn't get in the way – that is to say, this God doesn't get in our way. It's a lot like the constitutional monarchy of Great Britain; they have a monarch, but a monarch without any real power. People want a God, yes; but they want a god that is subservient to the parliament of their own lusts. We want a king, but not a king who really rules over us. The fourth part of the definition goes along with this: that the only time God gets involved in our lives is only when we need him to resolve a

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<sup>1</sup><https://albertmohler.com/2005/04/11/moralistic-therapeutic-deism-the-new-american-religion-2>

problem; and one gets the distinct impression that we (not God) are the ones who decide when God needs to get involved.

Another thing you might notice about this view of things is that God simply wants people to be nice (moral in the vaguest sense). Now I would suggest that what they mean by this has nothing to do with holiness in a Biblical sense. It corresponds to what they think is the main purpose of life: “to be happy and to feel good about oneself.” In other words, being nice to me means allowing me to be happy and to feel good about myself, and you are not nice (and therefore bad) when you do not allow me to be happy and to feel good about myself. It would follow in this worldview that if God is going to get involved with our lives, he would be expected to help us feel good about ourselves.

And, of course, good people go to heaven when they die – and as long as you are sufficiently nice, you don’t have anything to worry about.

What does this tell us about God? It paints a picture of a God who exists to support our own dreams and decisions. We are totally obsessed with ourselves and if we want God at all, we just want enough God to support our own love affair with ourselves. In particular, this is not a God to be reckoned with, this is not a God to be feared, not a God to be concerned about. The focus is not on what God thinks of us; the focus is on how we feel about ourselves. This is the therapeutic part of the modern religion: God exists to massage our egos and to help us feel good about ourselves. In other words, God exists to serve man and his goals, desires, interests, and dreams.

Now if this is the way you think about God, the priesthood of Christ is going to appear bizarre and unnecessary and irrelevant. In Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD), God exists to serve us. But in the priestly view of things, we exist to serve God. In MTD, what matters is what we want. But in the priestly (and Biblical) view, what finally and ultimately matters is what God desires. In MTD, man is preeminent, but in the Biblical world of priests and sacrifices, God is preeminent. In other words, the modern accounting of things is exactly backwards from the Biblical view of things.

The problem with the modern view of things is just that: it is a man-made and modern view of God. It is the human attempt to make God in our image. However, if we really want to know who God is, we need to let him tell us who he is, instead of projecting upon him what we wish he was. He has done exactly that in the Bible. What does the Bible say about God?

First of all, it tells us that God created everything, which indeed is affirmed by MTD, but it doesn't follow through with the implications of this. God is the only Being in the universe that exists necessarily; that is, who does not depend upon anyone or anything for his existence. In a real sense, all of the Bible is simply an unpacking of Gen. 1:1, "In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth." He does not exist in time and he did not ever begin to exist. He is completely self-sufficient. He does not need you or me, and he does not exist to serve you or me.

Some people give the impression that God needed the creation and that's why he created it. But that doesn't even come close. The creation cannot fill a need in God since all the creation depends upon God. Whatever it could be that God gets out of the creation would simply be something that originated in himself to begin with. King David understood this, and this is how he put it when he was preparing for the temple and had received generous gifts from fellow Israelites for that purpose: "Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come of thee and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? For all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee" (2 Chron. 29:10-14).

It is not God who depends upon us; it is we who depend upon God. In him we live, and move, and have our being. He holds our every breath in his hand.

God is holy. In the vision that Isaiah saw of God (Isa. 6) and that the apostle John saw in his own vision (Rev. 4:8), God is addressed as, “Holy, holy, holy.” There is no other attribute of God that is repeated this way, not even love. This suggests that holiness is the fundamental attribute of God, and it is when we consider that holiness is not just a term that points us to God’s moral purity (though it is partly that), but fundamentally to say that God is holy is to talk about the otherness of God, his transcendence. It is the sum of all his glorious attributes (note the second part of the anthem of the Seraphim in Isa. 6: “the whole earth is filled with his glory”). God is not fundamentally like us. Though it is true that we are made in God’s image, this is a far cry from saying that we are like God in every way. We are not. There is and will always be an infinite distance between man and God. He alone is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent. He alone is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable.

In the modern accounting of things, man is primary – his wants, desires, and dreams. We could only begin to say this because we have reduced God to a feathery being who exists just to make us happy. However, the God of the Bible is primary, not man. He does not exist to make us happy – we exist because it pleased him to make us (Rev. 4:11). When we see reality in this way, which is as it really is, what we will inevitably be faced with is that God is the one “with whom we have to do” (Heb. 4:13). We will understand two things: it is infinitely more important for this God to be pleased with me than it is for me to be pleased with myself, and second, that it is folly to think that I can approach him on my own terms.

If this is the case, we need a mediator; we need someone to come between us and God. And, therefore, it is good news to learn that Jesus came to be a high priest – and as such to represent men to God and to



bring us to God.

What is man?

The second thing we need to get right is a proper understanding of man. When you read Genesis 1, you realize that man is not just another animal. I know that is the way modern man likes to speak of himself, and the bad theory of Darwinian evolution has only served to reinforce this wrong idea. But we are not another animal, and this is shown in the fact that man and woman are made in the image of God (Gen. 1:26). Now we must not misunderstand this to mean that we are equal with God, or even that we are made into little “gods.” One of the things it does mean is that we are able to enter into a relationship with God. You can see this in that, unlike the rest of the creation, God enters into covenant with Adam and Eve.

It also means that we have a purpose for existing, and that this purpose is not something that we assign to ourselves but given to us by our Creator. Or, in the words of Psalm 8, we are crowned with glory and honor because God has crowned us with glory and honor – it is not something which we bestow upon ourselves. Just as God is independent of everything outside of himself, including man, man himself is radically dependent upon God for purpose and dignity and identity as well as our very being. It is folly to think that we don’t need God or that we could get along without him. God may not need me but I need God for everything, for life and breath, but especially for eternal life. There is no eternal life apart from a relationship with the eternal God.

This leads to the next point:

What is sin?

“Sin is any want of conformity unto, or transgression of, the law of God.”<sup>2</sup> God, not man, determines the conditions by which we relate

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<sup>2</sup>Shorter Catechism, Q. 14.

to him. He established this at the very beginning with Adam and Eve. In his generosity, God gave them the privilege (it wasn't an inherent right they could demand from God) to eat from every tree in the garden in which he placed them, with the exception of the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If they ate from that tree, they would die. Now there has been a lot of confusion as to the designation "Tree of the knowledge of good and evil." Does it mean that by eating this tree, man would obtain an experiential knowledge of good and evil? No, because by knowing good and evil, men become like God (cf. Gen. 3:22). Rather, it means that, "By violating the command of God and eating of the tree, they would make themselves like God in the sense that they would position themselves outside and above the law and, like God, determine and judge for themselves what good and evil was."<sup>3</sup> Only God has the right to determine what is good and what is evil, and it is rebellion against God when we take it upon ourselves to decide for ourselves what is best and good for us. This is exactly what Adam and Eve did when they took the fruit, and it is what we do every time we sin.

It is evil to sin thus against God. Only our blindness and folly keep us from seeing that such choices merit God's eternal displeasure and judgment. This is what has happened: by our sin we are cut off from God, justly separated from his goodness and love and favor. We can no longer draw near to God. Like Adam, we must hide ourselves at his approach. Thus we see our need for a mediator. This is not something we can fix ourselves; it must be done for us. We need someone who can offer before God and to God an atonement for sin.

Jesus is our high priest.

We will consider in more detail later how Jesus is a better high priest, better than Aaron. For now, I want us to bring together the above considerations so that we can see that we need Jesus to be a high priest for

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<sup>3</sup>Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, Volume 3: Sin and Salvation in Christ (Baker, 2006), p. 33.

us. Because of the transcendence of God, because of the debt we have incurred by our sin against God as those who have defaced the image of God in ourselves, we need someone who can bring us to God, not for judgment but for salvation. We need someone who can become the author of eternal salvation for us (Heb. 5:9).

We need a high priest. I think it is important to see that Jesus is not just a priest, but that he is a high priest. What is the significance of that? It is significant in the sense that it was only the high priest who was allowed to enter the Holy of holies. He was the only one who, once a year on the Day of Atonement, would take the blood of the sacrifice and bring it to the Ark and sprinkle it there in the very presence of God himself. In doing so, the sins of Israel, all of them, were symbolically purged. In fact, in order to make the picture clearer, two goats were chosen, one for the blood sacrifice and then the scapegoat which would be released into the wilderness.

Here is what would happen: "And Aaron shall bring the goat upon which the LORD's lot fell, and offer him for a sin offering. But the goat, on which the lot fell to be the scapegoat, shall be presented alive before the LORD, to make an atonement with him, and to let him go for a scapegoat into the wilderness. . . . And Aaron shall lay both his hands upon the head of the live goat, and confess over him all the iniquities of the children of Israel, and all their transgressions in all their sins, putting them upon the head of the goat, and shall send him away by the hand of a fit man into the wilderness: and the goat shall bear upon him all their iniquities unto a land not inhabited: and he shall let go the goat in the wilderness" (Lev. 16:9-10, 21- 22).

Even so, by designating Jesus as our high priest, we are being told that he has made an atonement for our sins, the thing that separates us from God. He does not do this by simply being a martyr. The cross is not primarily an example of endurance or selflessness or even an example of love for others. It all these of course, but fundamentally, the cross was the place on which Jesus bore the sins of his people, of those who believe in him. Except this time the transfer of sins from us to him was

not symbolic, it was real. He didn't just bear them away into the desert, but he put them away forever.

Now where are you this morning? Do you stand outside the congregation of God's people? For the high priest didn't offer for just anyone; he offered for the people of God. Are you one of his? I will tell you how you know it: do you see that you are a sinner and that you cannot save yourself? Do you see that your sins really do merit God's judgment upon you? Do you loathe yourself for your sin? Then, my friend, the Bible tells you to look to Christ, to trust in him to be your high priest. The Bible also says that all who believe on him will never be ashamed. As the prophet put it, "Look unto me and be ye saved, all the ends of the earth"! (Isa. 45:22).

# CHAPTER XVI

## A BETTER HIGH PRIEST

### (HEB. 5:1-10)

IN HEBREWS 5:1-10, OUR LORD is compared and contrasted with the Aaronic priesthood. In the first four verses, we have a description of this priesthood; what follows in verses 5-10 is the way our Lord's high priesthood corresponded to that of Aaron's. In particular, the author of Hebrews gives us two main reasons why the priests ordained under the Mosaic covenant were fitted for the office to which they were appointed, and then he follows that with our Lord's superior suitability for the high priesthood and how he really is a greater and better high priest for us.

First of all, the Aaronic priests were fitted to their office because they were men (1-2). A priest was ordained for men and, as such, needed to be taken from among men. An angel could not mediate between God and men in this way. Also, because priests were men, they were able to "have compassion on the ignorant and on them that are out of the way." However, part of the reason the priests could sympathize with sinners is that they themselves were sinners, and the "infirmity" of verse 3 is an infirmity arising from the moral frailty of the Levitical priests. Hence,

they not only had to offer sin offerings for others, but they also had to do so for themselves as well (3).

Second, the Aaronic priests were fitted to their office because they were ordained by God to it (4). It was not something you could take upon yourself; priesthood is an office that only makes sense if you are chosen by God to fill the office. After all, priests are mediators between God and man, and if God does not recognize the mediator, what good is it to have one?

The fact that God is the one who ordained the Aaronic priesthood for the two greatest needs of humanity which we have lost as a result of our sinfulness and brokenness, shows us how much God cares about these things. We primarily need to have our relationship with God restored because it has been severed by sin. Hence the need for atonement and hence the need for a priest. We also need to have our relationship with our fellow man restored (cf. Eph. 2:11-22). We need to have God's favor, but we also need human compassion as well. We need God's presence and we need the arm of a fellow human around our shoulder, so to speak. The priest was meant to give both, and God ordained him to give both. We need God's fellowship and we need human fellowship; God knows that and he has provided both.

As good as a priest was, the fact is that he could never provide for either of these things perfectly. The atonement provided in the Mosaic covenant was not sufficient in itself to atone for sins. It was figurative and ceremonial and pointed forward the greater sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The compassion offered by the priest was not only grounded in, but also marred by, his own sinfulness. In both categories, however, we see that our Lord can give what the old high priests could only, at the end of the day, point to. And that is the point of verses 5-10.

Like Aaron, our Lord was ordained by God to be a high priest (5-6, 10). As such, Jesus provided atonement, but not merely a figurative atonement that erased ceremonial uncleanness, but a real atonement that provides "eternal salvation" (9). Moreover, our Lord does not offer a fallible human hand of help, for he was "in all points tempted like as

we are, yet without sin” (4:15; 5:7-8). However, this does not diminish his ability to help; in fact, it increases it.

Our aim in this message is to focus on the way our Lord’s priesthood enables him to have compassion on the ignorant and those out of the way. This is important; just because someone is willing to help or willing to show compassion does not always mean that their help and compassion are what we really need. After all, how many times have we been hurt by the very people we have reached out to? How many times have those closest to us been the ones who hurt us the worst, often because they were so close to us? Or, how often is it that people just can’t enter into the pain we are experiencing, not only because they’ve never walked in our shoes but because they have never experienced the level of suffering we are enduring? It is one thing to endure affliction, but we all know there are various levels of suffering and affliction. Some people at least seem to breeze through life; others seem to be stuck in a kind of quicksand of pain and anguish. Some people seem never to have a sad day in their life; others always to be fighting a losing battle against the swirling mist of depression and despair. Of course, we should be careful not to judge someone by what their experience appears to be to us. Some folks are better at hiding grief and pain than others.

However, the point is, when we are in distress, often the compassion that encourages us the best is compassion coming from someone who has been through the fire – maybe not the same fire, but real and hot fire nonetheless. We tend to listen to the advice of those who have been through the fire, when they share with us how they made it through. When someone comes to you out of the furnace of affliction and you can almost smell their smoke-tinged soul, you are going to listen. They made it through and you want to hear what they have to say about it, especially when you are there as well. Spurgeon understood how suffering equips a Christian, not only for himself or herself, but also in the way it equips us to help others. He wrote,

Isn’t this what the apostle Paul said? “Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of all mer-

cies, and the God of all comfort; who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God” (2 Cor. 1:3-4). I am afraid that all the grace that I have got of my comfortable and easy times and happy hours, might almost lie on a penny. But the good that I have received from my sorrows, and pains, and griefs, is altogether incalculable ... Affliction is the best bit of furniture in my house. It is the best book in a minister’s library.<sup>1</sup>

What does this have to do with Hebrews 5? Again, one of the things I think the author is telling us here is that Jesus can do perfectly what the priests under the law could only do imperfectly. They could have compassion on the weak and ignorant. What about Jesus? This is where verses 7-8 are so important. In particular, they help us to see how it is that our Lord can be touched with the feeling of our infirmities and how he was in all points tempted like as we are yet without sin (4:15). Also, they give us an example for how we should deal with our difficulties as well.

Now I need to say something here about that last sentence. Some Christian writers and thinkers seem to believe that setting Christ forward as an example is always bad. They tell us that this undermines the gospel. They say that Christ did not come to set an example for good works but to provide an expiation for the guilt arising from our bad works. This view is imbalanced. It is true that our Lord is not just an example, and that we should never primarily interpret the cross in that light. But to say that nothing our Lord did is an example that we should follow frankly flies in the face of the NT (see, for example, 1 Pet. 2:21). Although we don’t want to gut the grace of the gospel by making it mainly about becoming better people, neither do we want to go to the opposite extreme and turn the grace of God into lasciviousness (cf. Jude

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<sup>1</sup>Qtd. in <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/charles-spurgeon-preaching-through-adversity>



4). Jesus is our high priest who makes atonement for our sins, and yet, even in that role, he provides for us the best of examples as well.

Very well, then, let's look at these two things. First, we want to consider our Lord's experience and how he entered into our weakness; how this positions him to be the very best source of compassion and encouragement and strengthening and grace. Second, we want to see how our Lord's example shows us the way to deal with the suffering we find in our own lives.

### Our Lord's Experience

Look at verse 7: "Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared." Let's consider a couple of phrases embedded in this text. They are: "days of his flesh" and "strong crying and tears." These two phrases point us to the boiling furnace of suffering that our Lord went through and which uniquely positioned and equipped him to be a high priest who can have compassion on us and be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.

### The Days of His Flesh

We should be careful that we don't interpret this phrase wrongly. It doesn't mean that, after his death when our Lord ascended into heaven, he ascended as a bodiless, ethereal spirit. No, our Lord ascended into heaven in a body. He was able to have the apostle Thomas touch him, after he had risen from the dead. Rather, "flesh" here is a reference to a body which is susceptible to and crippled by the effects of living in a sinful and cursed and fallen world. It means mortality. It means that "the moment we are born we all begin to die." It means having bodies which are broken and susceptible to disease and pain. It means having

minds which are vulnerable to anguish and sorrow and discouragement and depression and even despair.

The apostle Paul uses the word “flesh” in this way to refer to our bodies as they are before their resurrection. It is important to see that resurrection implies that, though there is real continuity between the body I have now and the body I will have after it is raised from the dead, nevertheless there is also real discontinuity – discontinuity in the sense that our bodies then will no longer be afflicted by the ravages of the curse. Hence, Paul writes, “So also is the resurrection of the dead. It [our physical body] is sown in corruption; it [note the continuity – it is the same “it”!] is raised in incorruption: it is sown in dishonor; it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness; it is raised in power: it is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body and there is a spiritual body” (1 Cor. 15:42-44). Then notice what he says in verse 50: “Now this I say, brethren, that flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption.”

There you see that word “flesh” again. The context demonstrates that what flesh means is having a body that is subject to corruption and decay, to dishonor and ugliness, to weakness and sickness and disease. It is called a “natural body” because this is what we are born with; it is contrasted to a “spiritual body” because this is the body we will have as a result of the work of the Holy Spirit raising it from the dead (and not because it is mere spirit).

This is what is meant, then, when we read of “the days of his flesh.” It is a reference to our Lord’s experience of taking to himself a true body that was subject to the ravages of a fallen world, under the curse of death and mortality. Though he never participated in the sin that we are all guilty of, yet he did participate fully in the endurance of sin’s effects in terms of the curse. He was tempted in all points, like as we are, yet without sin. Hence, when the prophet says that “he is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not” (Isa. 53:3), he means that our Lord really did feel the

rejection and the grief. And when he wrote, “Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken of God, and affliction” (53:4), we are to understand that the grief, sorrow, and affliction were very real and not at all imagined. Or, to use the language of Hebrews, “as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same” (Heb. 2:14). “Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God” and thus “able to succour them that are tempted” (2:17-18).

### Strong Crying and Tears

Though “the days of his flesh” is a way of capturing all our Lord’s earthly experience in one fell swoop, this phrase – “strong crying and tears” – captures a particular instance of it. The word for “crying” here is interesting. By itself it could refer not only to crying, but to loud crying. This is not a whimper. But then you add the adjective “strong” to that and you have a picture of someone almost screaming in pain and torment. It is, in fact, the word used in the Septuagint in Exod. 3:7 to describe the cries of the Israelites as they groaned under Egyptian slavery.

Though we can’t be sure it refers exclusively to events in the Garden of Gethsemane right before our Lord was captured, it certainly includes it. One reason for thinking of the events in the Garden is that our Lord is said to cry to “him that was able to save him from death.” It was the prospect of death that he was facing that led him to agonize so intensely in his soul and which squeezed him psychologically and emotionally so hard that he could not help but cry that cry that can only come with tears.

By the way, one thing we do need to write off immediately – that this reference to crying and tears is proof that Jesus was a wimp or that he was what we might sometimes call a sort of cry-baby. Perish the thought! No, even the strongest men and women cannot hold back the tears when

they are face to face with terrible trials. There are griefs that no one can hold within without going insane. It is not necessarily a sign of strength to say that you have never shed a tear. Maybe it is rather a sign that you have lost your humanity, rather than a sign of human strength.

Nevertheless, others have pointed to the fact that our Lord was still not as strong as other men and women have shown themselves to be when faced with death – even Christian martyrs! How many people have gone to their deaths – whether as a martyr or as a soldier on a battlefield – and faced death, even the most painful death, with bravery and a stiff upper-lip? And yet, we have this picture of Christ doubled over with fear and anxiety, begging God to let this cup pass from him: “And he was withdrawn from them about a stone’s cast, and kneeled down, and prayed, Saying, Father, if thou be willing, remove this cup from me: nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done. And there appeared an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in an agony he prayed more earnestly: and his sweat was as it were great drops of blood falling down to the ground” (Lk. 22:41-44). In Matthew’s account, our Lord is recorded as saying, “My soul is exceeding sorrowful, even unto death” (Mt. 26:38; cf. Mk. 14:34). Sorrow, agony, sweat, while begging his Father to avert death on a cross. What are we to make of that?

What we are to make of it is that our Lord faced something no man or woman has ever faced this side of death. I would venture to say that even those in hell have not had to face what our Lord faced. It is one thing to endure something over a long period of time (try eternity!); but to take an eternity of suffering and squeeze it into a few hours on the cross – that no one has ever endured, except Jesus Christ. He looked into the very face of death, death on a cross, death that would come upon him because he would hang there with the sins of men upon his shoulders, and there really was no other way to psychologically anticipate that without strong crying and tears. Unlike some people, Jesus did not avoid reality by denying it existed. He looked hell square in the face, took the cup filled with damnation, and drank it dry. We really have no idea what that was like, the level and intensity of his suffering and pain. You simply

cannot compare Jesus with anyone else, no matter what kind of death they have endured.

Be careful that you do not exhaust the sufferings of Christ in terms of the flogging and the crucifixion. That was a very terrible and painful and shameful way to die – there is no doubt about that. But you will notice that the Gospels don't really do what Mel Gibson did; they don't focus on that. Rather, they focus on the fact that God withdrew his presence – his presence of blessing – as our Lord hung there as the sin offering for men (cf. Mt. 27:45-46; Mk. 15:33-34; Lk. 23:44-46; Jn. 19:30). Our Lord's sufferings were almost surely as unseen as they were seen, and he received the blows not only upon his physical body but upon his mind and soul and spirit.

My friend, here is solace for you and me. Jesus endured this so that his elect won't have to. He went to the cross and went to the utter limits of pain and suffering – physical and mental and spiritual – so that those who receive him as Lord and Savior by faith will not ever have to navigate the infinite ocean of eternal death.

What this means is that there is no suffering that we can bring to Christ and say to him, "You just don't know what it's like to suffer this much." That's foolish talk. That's like comparing a number in the single digits to infinity. In fact, rate your pain and anguish at any number and there is still an infinity of numbers beyond that. Jesus took it to infinity; you cannot justly compare your suffering to his. But it does give us this precious reality: no matter how painful the suffering you are enduring or have endured – and no matter how little understood you feel yourself to be by your fellow man – there is one to whom you may take your suffering. You may take it to Jesus. I may not be able to sympathize with you, but there is one who can – the Lord Jesus Christ.

Our Lord's Example

We not only have our Lord's experience, but we also have our Lord's example. Now the first thing we should always do is not to ask ourselves what we can do about our sin and our suffering, but to take our sin and suffering to Jesus. Let him atone for your sin and let him give you grace for your suffering and hope in your suffering. But that does not mean that we don't also look to him as the supreme example. What did our Lord do when faced with suffering that would end in death? He did three things. What we will see is that these are three things we can do and should do.

First of all, he prayed. He "offered up prayers and supplications . . . unto him that was able to save him from death." If this is a reference to events in the Garden of Gethsemane, then we have even more information about this. We are told that he went and prayed on three different occasions. We are told that he prayed very simple prayers. And we are told that he repeated the first prayer on the second and third occasions.

This is so encouraging to me. So often we think that, unless we come up with very ornate prayers, God isn't going to be interested. Or if we don't pray long prayers (though be careful here – don't take this as an argument against long prayers, for sometimes our Lord prayed all night!), God won't hear us. But he did hear his Son: "and was heard in that he feared."

By the way, what does that mean? He "was heard in that he feared." The word "feared" here is the word *eulabeias* and means "reverence" or "godly fear." It is the same word used in Heb. 12:28, "Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear." This is not, therefore, fear in the sense of terror or being afraid. One way to translate this would be: "he was heard because of his godly reverence."

Now God doesn't hear our prayers because we are "good enough." Because we are righteous in Christ and he is doing a work of grace in the hearts of his people so that they are becoming progressively more holy, God does hear our prayers. At the same time, let us not think that we can sin with impunity and then come to God in prayer when we

need his help. It is the “effectual fervent prayer of the righteous man” that avails much.

So pray, brothers and sisters. When you are faced with painful and grievous trials, pray; take them to the Lord who can truly sympathize and show true compassion.

Second, note that our Lord prayed in faith. You see this in the words, “unto him that was able to save him from death.” In other words, when our Lord prayed to the Father, and brought before him the painful anticipation of death, he did so while trusting that his Father “was able to save him from death.” By the way, we know what happened. God did save his Son from death. Three days later, he rose from the dead.

Our Lord shows us the way we should pray, too. We need to pray in faith. We need to trust in God as we navigate suffering. We may not understand why we are having to go what we are going through. But one thing we can be confident in – that God is in control, that he will work all things for our good, and that the worst thing that can happen to us, eternal death and judgment, has already been decisively dealt with through the person and work of Christ.

Finally, our Lord never stopped obeying his Father, despite the sufferings he went through. In fact, we are told in verse 8: “Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered.” Now we shouldn’t think that learning obedience means that Christ went from being disobedient to being obedient. Rather, this is a reference to the earthly experience of our incarnate Lord which was new to him. As a man, he had to learn obedience and he had to suffer – and he had to learn to carry out his Father’s will through and in suffering. He did it without sin, but he learned it in the sense that this was a new experience for him.

What an example for us. In fact, isn’t this what the apostle Peter points us to? “For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but

committed himself to him that judgeth righteously” (1 Pet. 2:21-23). It is in suffering and trials that the devil puts us on the rack and presses us to deny Christ. He whispers in our ears that it is not worth it to obey God when it brings so much suffering. Let us, as the apostle encourages us to do, take our Lord for an example (cf. Heb. 12:1,ff). Don’t stop obeying, don’t stop believing, don’t stop praying.

Our Lord is the very best high priest. He can do what the Aaronic priests could not. He can do what no other man or woman in history could do. He brings us to God and he supports us with his love and grace and compassion. How could we want to take refuge in anyone or anything else? Let us find our rest and our hope and grace in the only place where we can find eternal rest and hope and grace: in Jesus Christ.



## CHAPTER XVII

### CHRIST DIED FOR THOSE WHO OBEY HIM (HEB. 5:9)

CHRIST IS BETTER. This is the argument of the letter to the Hebrews. He is better than the angels (chapters 1-2), better than Moses (3), better than Joshua (4), and better than the Aaronic priesthood (5). It was the failure of these Hebrew Christians to see this that made them vulnerable to the temptation to go back to a Christless Judaism. We, too, need to see that Christ is better than all his competitors, better than anyone or anything that this world has to offer. For it is only as we are convinced of the supremacy of Christ, that we won't fall prey to all the blingy-yet-bland contenders for our affections and loyalty.

In this fifth chapter, the author is making a case for the supremacy of Christ as high priest. Here in Heb. 5:9, we see just how much greater Christ is than the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priests could never truly take away sins. Not that they didn't function in an important way, but their necessity was grounded in the fact that they pointed forward to our Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, who did, by his sacrificial death on the cross, take away sins. And by taking away sins, he became the author, or the source, of eternal salvation. We need eternal salvation because there is such a thing as eternal death: "And these shall go away

into everlasting punishment: but the righteous into life eternal” (Mt. 25:46). Those whose sins are not forgiven will descend into eternal punishment; those whose sins are forgiven will enter into life eternal. The Bible affirms this truth.

His sacrifice, moreover, was perfect, as opposed to the imperfection of the Levitical sacrifices. The sacrifice that our Lord offered was perfect because he was perfect: “and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation.” Again, we should not interpret this to mean overcoming moral imperfection. The point is just that in order for our Lord to be our High Priest, he had to be equipped for it. This meant becoming a man, the incarnation, and it meant suffering – especially the suffering of death. But at the end, he was able to say: “It is finished!” (Jn. 19:30). His suffering was complete, the sacrifice was finished, redemption had been accomplished and secured. This is what it means that he was made perfect. He was made perfect in that he fully and finally finished the work of redemption on the cross.

It also means that there isn’t anything that we need to add to it. You don’t become saved, or enter into eternal life, by becoming perfect yourself or even by adding to the perfection of Christ. Our salvation doesn’t depend upon our perfection but upon the perfection of our Lord, and we are told that he has already been made perfect. We see this in that he didn’t just make salvation possible, but became the author and the source of eternal salvation. Salvation is not something that we need to complete; it is something which we receive entirely from Christ.

This begs the question: for whom did Christ die? To say that he died for me is really a claim that I am a recipient of the saving blessings of the cross, and thus I am saved. The Bible makes clear that not everyone is saved. So who will receive the incomparable blessing of eternal life? How do I become a beneficiary of the saving benefits of Christ’s death?

There are a number of ways to answer that question. Our Lord himself put it this way, that he came to save those whom the Father had given him: “For I came down from heaven, not to do mine own will, but the will of him that sent me. And this is the Father’s will which

hath sent me, that of all that he hath given me I should lose nothing, but should raise it up again at the last day” (Jn. 6:38-39). Or, in another place, our Lord describes those for whom he died as his sheep: “I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd giveth his life for the sheep” (Jn. 10:11; cf. ver. 15-18). Or the way the apostle Paul put it is that Christ gave his life for the church: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it” (Eph. 5:25). For whom did Christ die? The answer of the foregoing passages is that he died for the elect (those whom the Father gave to his Son to save), for his sheep, and for the church.

Now this is truly an innumerable host. This is one of the points of all the passages that say that Christ died for all, or for the world (cf. Jn. 3:16; 1 Tim. 2:4; 1 Jn. 2:2). The apostles had to help especially the Jewish Christians in the early church understand that God’s gift of salvation was no longer primarily limited to the Jewish world, but that it encompassed the nations – the Gentiles. He didn’t just die for this people group or that people group, but as the people of God sing to Christ in heaven, he “redeemed us to God, by thy blood out of every kindred, and tongue, and people, and nation” (Rev. 5:9). This is the “all” for whom Christ died.

Nevertheless, the blessings of Christ’s death do not encompass everyone, for not everyone is saved. So that leads to a further question: what are some ways that describe to us who the elect are, or the sheep, or the church? What characteristics do they have, and can I identify with them?

Now there are many ways we could work this out. Our Lord himself in John 6 goes on to make it very clear that those whom he described as the ones whom the Father gave him are those who believe in his name (Jn 6:40, 47). And this is an important characteristic: do you believe on Jesus Christ? Do you believe he is the Son of God and Savior of the world (1 Jn. 4:14)? Do you believe that God raised him from the dead? Do you believe that forgiveness of sins is found only in him? This is so important, since we are told that God’s righteousness is imputed to us

“if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead; who was delivered for our offences, and was raised again for our justification” (Rom. 4:24-25).

As important as this description is, it is not the only way we can describe those for whom Christ died. Our passage provides another very important description of those for whom Christ died. It tells us that our Lord is the source of eternal salvation “unto all them that obey him.” This is what we want to consider. In particular, we want to ask the following question: why this description? What we will see is that it serves as a warning for the drifting, as an encouragement for the discouraged, and as a boundary for the disciples.

### A Warning for the Drifting

First and foremost, this serves as a warning for those who are drifting (Heb. 2:1) and was the state of many in the audience to which the author of Hebrews writes. They were moving away from a willing submission to the Lordship of Christ over their lives and hearts. They were moving from a lifestyle of obedience to a lifestyle of disobedience; those, by the way, were the only two options for the recipients of this letter. They are the only two options for you and me. You are either living in a posture of obedience to Christ or you are living in a posture of disobedience to Christ.

Embedded in this description is obviously a warning to those who are disobedient. In other words, the author is communicating the reality that, if you are living in disobedience to God, you will not be saved eternally. Otherwise, what is the point of the description? If there are scads of people out there living in total neglect of the rightful claims of God and of Christ upon their lives, living and doing what they want to do and not living to please the Lord, then what is the point of this passage? If Jesus is also the author of eternal life to many who displease and disobey him, then this is a pointless description. It would be like

saying that you are an American if you inhabit the planet earth. That's true as far as it goes, but yet it's not a helpful description at all!

The point is, if you are not obeying God, you cannot place yourself in the number of those who are saved by Christ. That's the message, plain and simple. It's a warning, but it's a warning some of us need to hear. It certainly was a warning that many in that audience needed to hear.

Now I know that there will be someone somewhere who will trot out the infants at this point. Well, they will say, infants can't obey Christ either, so aren't you condemning all infants dying in infancy to hell? And the answer is, no, of course not. The fact that this is a warning for those who are not obeying, means that infants, who can't obey or disobey, are neither included nor excluded by this description. This passage simply doesn't address the question of infants dying in infancy. Though we have good reasons to believe that they will be saved, we can't go to passages like Heb. 5:9 to adjudicate that question. We can say this with certainty on the basis of this text: if you are living in sin and out from under the authority of Christ, you cannot claim Christ as your Savior.

This is another way of saying what has already been said: we belong to the family of Christ "if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end" (Heb. 3:6). Or, "For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end" (3:14). It means that, if we neglect the great salvation in Christ, we can expect to receive judgment (2:2-3). It means that, if we harden our hearts, as Israel did in the wilderness, we will find God saying to us, as he did to them, that we will not enter into his rest (3:7-10; 4:11).

This is also confirmed by many, many passages in the Bible. Our Lord warned about this in the Sermon on the Mount. Who will enter into everlasting rest but those who did the will of the Father? (Mt. 7:21-23). The apostle John says that this is a sure sign of the new birth, of being made a new person by the work of God's Spirit in the heart: "Whosoever is born of God doth not commit sin [i.e., does not make a practice

of sinning]; for his seed remaineth in him: and he cannot sin, because he is born of God. In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God, neither he that loveth not his brother” (1 Jn. 3:9-10). Do you hear that? He is saying that, if you are born of God, you will not make a practice of sinning. Those who do not practice righteousness are not to be considered children of God.

It is the error of allowing sin so that grace may abound, that the apostle Paul is combatting in Romans 6. His answer to it is this: “How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein?” (Rom. 6:2). For him this is an utter impossibility. He goes on to say, “What then, shall we sin, because we are not under the law, but under grace? God forbid. Know ye not, that to whom ye yield yourselves servants to obey, his servants ye are to whom ye obey; whether of sin unto death, or of obedience unto righteousness?” (Rom. 6:15-16). Sin leads to death, but those who belong to Christ will not serve sin.

Now this does not mean that the Christian does not sin. Each of the previous passages we referenced, such as Romans 6 and 1 John, are incompatible also with that idea. We cannot expect perfection this side of glory. We can never say that we have perfected the Beatitudes. Every Christian is becoming the Beatitudes, and if you are not on that trajectory, you need to do some serious introspection.

Does this do damage to the glories of God’s grace? Does this make it less free? No! In fact, if anything, saying that Christ died for those who refuse to bow the knee to him until they are in heaven is a disparagement of the grace of God. It is to say that God’s grace is neither able nor sufficient nor powerful enough to bring about the conversion and the sanctification and the perseverance of the elect. This kind of argument has more affinities with Arminianism than it does with a firm grasp of the doctrines of grace. To say that is to dishonor God’s grace, not to celebrate it.

Nor does this disparage the freeness of God’s grace. To say that the disobedient will not inherit eternal life does not logically or Biblically

curtail the fact that salvation is free. It is free; we don't receive it because we earn it. Our good works are only good because of God's grace which precedes them and makes them possible. But when God saves a man, he doesn't leave him in the same state in which he found him. No, he makes him a new man, a new creation, and the old passes and the new comes. We have put off the old man and put on the new man, and that is a free gift of God's grace.

There just is no reason to leave hope for those who cling to their rebellion to the end. The Bible doesn't teach it. Grace doesn't imply it. The salvation that our Lord went to the cross to purchase goes in a different direction altogether. He is not about leaving people in their sin, but he is all about rescuing them from it. He is about delivering us "from this present evil world, according to the will of God and our Father" (Gal. 1:4).

### *An Encouragement for the Discouraged*

This passage also functions to provide encouragement to those who are struggling and discouraged by the way. For the reality is that "all that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution" (2 Tim. 3:12). This is what was happening to this house church in Rome. The discouragement was beginning to tell and they were wearing down. And that left them vulnerable and weak and open to the temptation to abandon the faith in order to get some relief from the constant pressure from identifying with Jesus.

How is this an encouragement? It is an encouragement in the sense that our obedience to Christ is not only a reminder of to whom we belong, but also a reminder of the hope that those who belong to Jesus enjoy. Whereas the disobedient cannot wring one drop of hope out of this verse, yet those whose faith is in Jesus and who remain faithful to him can abound in hope. We not only rest in hope and repose in hope, we can "rejoice in hope of the glory of God" (Rom. 5:2). Those who truly belong to Christ and who show they belong to Christ by a heart

that clings to him in faith and faithfulness, can be assured that they will one day enter into the “eternal salvation.”

I am more and more convinced that, to be fruitful Christians, we need to be happy Christians, and to be happy Christians, we need to be hopeful Christians, and to be hopeful Christians, we must have our eyes fixed on the prize set before us. You’re not going to continue laboring if you are not laboring towards the eternal rest which God’s people will certainly receive (Heb. 4:11). Look, God has not promised us that our present trials will end this side of the grave. As Elder Bradley reminded us a couple of weeks ago: it’s groaning now and glory later. The more we fix our hopes on this world, the more our sure hope in Christ will vanish from our sight. Don’t get fixated on things God has not promised because, in doing so, you will lose sight of that which is guaranteed in Christ.

Need I remind you that this is the way that Christians are consistently described in the NT? “For the grace of God that bringeth salvation hath appeared to all men, teaching us that, denying ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly, in this present world; looking for that blessed hope, and the glorious appearing of the great God and our Savior Jesus Christ; who gave himself for us, that he might redeem us from all iniquity, and purify unto himself a peculiar people, zealous of good works” (Tit. 2:11-14). What ought to characterize those who have received God’s grace is not a looking for of a best life now, but that blessed hope which will be realized with the appearing of our Lord when he comes again for the salvation of his church. The Thessalonian believers were similarly described: “For they themselves shew of us what manner of entering in we had unto you, and how ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God; and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

Now that doesn’t mean that God does not give us many good things of this earth. All the health we enjoy, our possessions, the food we eat and the clothes we wear, are all good gifts from our heavenly Father and



it is good and right that we thank him for them. And, it is both good and right to ask our Father for relief from physical pain and sickness, or for a better job, or for food (didn't our Lord teach us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread"?). But never has God promised that we would be able to glide into heaven's shores. We must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God (Acts 14:22). We must; it is not optional. Through much, not some, tribulation. The road is narrow and hard that leads to life. It's the reason there are not many people on it.

Moreover, he has promised to give grace and his presence and his blessing, and we should thank him for this and expect it. We cannot expect to be rid of the sufferings of this life until we enter into the Promised Land. Can we not see that, upon entering that blessed abode, it will have been worth it? Will we ever look back and say we would have wished we had not chosen to obey God? Will any of the trials of this life dull the incomparable thrill the child of God will experience when they hear those words, "Well done, good and faithful servant, enter thou into the joy of thy Lord"? (cf. Mt. 25:21).

That does not mean we have to wait until we die to begin enjoying that hope, however, for the Bible speaks of the firstfruits of the Spirit (Rom. 8:23) and of the earnest of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). In other words, the eternal salvation which was purchased by Christ and is given to us through the Spirit begins to dawn on the believer even this side of heaven. We don't receive it in full, of course, but we do begin to enjoy the first fruits. We are allowed foretastes of glory. And why shouldn't we? for the Spirit who will raise us up from the dead and usher us into the new heavens and new earth is the same Spirit who even now indwells the believer. There is, in other words, an unbreakable cord that unites the child of God on earth to what we will be in glory.

This is not a promise for just anyone who takes up the name of Christ. This is for those who obey God. This is not for the sunshine soldiers who leave the battlefield when the going gets tough; this is for the persevering patriot who, by the help of God's Spirit and grace, weathers the battle and fights to the end. And it is comfort for them.

Hold on and hold fast! Remember the promise; remember what that promise is, and don't give up!

### A Boundary for the Disciples

This is not only a warning for the drifting, and an encouragement for the discouraged, it also functions as a boundary around the disciples. In other words, we should not only hear this as a word to the individual who professes faith in Christ; this is a word to the church. Remember that one of the descriptions of those for whom Christ died is the church. What is the church? It is the community of those who have been called out of the world to obey God, who love Christ, and who keep his commandments. The church is the community of Christian people. This implies that those who make up the church are following Jesus. It means obedience to God, for isn't this what characterized our Lord? "Though he were a Son, yet learned he obedience by the things which he suffered" (8).

This is what our Lord himself said: "He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal. If any man serve me, let him follow me; and where I am, there shall also my servant be: if any man serve me, him will my Father honor" (Jn. 12:2-26). How do you serve Christ? You follow him. How do you follow him? You die to yourself and stop prioritizing the things of this world over the things of the world to come.

You do not belong to the church if you are not willing to take up your cross and follow him. Of course, it goes the other way too: if you are willing to put your trust in Jesus, and to submit to him as Lord and Savior, then you need to be confess Christ publicly and be baptized; you need to join yourself to his church. This is the pattern of the NT church: "Then they that gladly received his [the apostle Peter's] word were baptized: and the same day there were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41). To gladly receive God's word in faith

and repentance as they did is conversion. What do you do then? You receive baptism, and you join yourself to the church. That's the pattern.

Now when we say that this is a boundary for the disciples, it doesn't mean that, if you slip up or mess up, you are out. The church is a hospital for those who are getting well, not a gymnasium for the saints to show off their spiritual muscles. We are here to bear one another's burdens. We are here to encourage each other when we're down and to exhort one another when we're out of the way. However, the point is this: if you discharge yourself from this hospital and refuse the treatment dispensed through the ministry of God's word, well then, you should not be a part of the church. Christ died for those who obey him and, if you will not obey him, then you need not take his name.

I am reminded of a story I heard somewhere (I don't remember the source) about Alexander the Great, the famous military leader who single-handedly conquered the Persian Empire and Made Greece Great Again. During one battle he noticed a soldier running from the fray; he accosted him and demanded to know his name. To which the soldier replied: "My name is Alexander." The great general looked at him with all seriousness and told him, "Soldier, either change your ways, or change your name." My dear friend, do you claim the name of Christ and yet do not walk in his ways? Then either change your ways or change your name!

If you are drifting away, I hope you hear this warning and repent. If you are discouraged, hear this as an encouragement and let your hope be renewed. And as the church, let us be committed to remaining a faithful witness in this world for what it means to follow Christ.

Let's remind ourselves once more about what is promised here: "eternal salvation." In our secular world, there are many who say this is just impossible, that this life is all there is to it. No hope. Nevertheless, even in this post-modern age, religion hasn't gone away, and more and more people are submitting to a new kind of pagan spirituality. I see it in some of my friends. They, too, long for eternal salvation of some sort. But on what basis? On the basis of some guru? On the basis that you believe

you will be good enough? On the basis of what you think it will be like on the other side? What flimsy grounds for hope! My friend, Christ is the only one upon whom we can confidently put our trust. “He that believes in him will never be put to shame” (cf. Rom. 10:12). He is the only one who can guarantee not just life but eternal life, life abundant and overflowing. He is the perfect sacrifice, and we know that God accepted his atonement because he raised him from the dead. Don’t bank eternity on anyone or anything else: Jesus is the way, the truth, and the life, no one comes to the Father except through him – and all who come to him will never be cast away (Jn. 14:6; 6:37).

## CHAPTER XVIII

### A POSTURE OF OBEDIENCE (HEB 5:9)

IN OUR LAST TIME TOGETHER, we considered the meaning and the doctrinal implications of Heb. 5:9. The main doctrine that is being preached in this verse is that obedience is a necessary fruit of genuine Christianity, and that you cannot justifiably say that you belong to Christ or are a participant in his saving blessings if you are living in total neglect of his authority over your life. As I continued to think about this, I realized that more needs to be said. It's one thing to say that obedience is a necessary fruit of the Christian life. But that begs the question: what does obedience to Christ look like? How do we actually apply this to our lives, especially given the fact that we are still sinners? To answer the question, how do we obey Christ is essentially to answer the question, how do we deal with the sin in our lives? This is what we want to deal with this morning. I believe that it is necessary to do this, because there are all sorts of wrong ways to implement the Biblical call to obedience. Let me put it to you in the words of a hymn that we sing:

*From rocks of pride on either hand,  
From quick-sands of despair,  
O guide me safe to Canaan's land,*

*Through every latent snare.*

We need to be rescued from pride on the one hand, and from despair on the other, and these are both temptations to which we are prone, though we may tend more to one than the other. Let me show you what I mean.

First, we can seek to apply the exhortations to obedience with an attitude of pride. What does this look like? Well, I think the best illustration of this comes from our Lord's description of the Pharisees of his day: "Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For ye are like unto whited sepulchers, which indeed appear beautiful outward, but are within full of dead men's bones, and of all uncleanness. Even so ye also outwardly appear righteous unto men, but within ye are full of hypocrisy and iniquity" (Mt. 23:27-28). The Pharisees were proud (one thinks of another description, that of the Pharisee and the publican in Luke 18:9-14, which ends with the words, "for everyone that exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted."), and this pride worked its way out in their religious life in a shallow and superficial obedience. The problem with pride is that it keeps you from being honest with yourself. It keeps you from coming to grips with the evil that is there in your heart. Instead of seeking righteousness in the inward man, we end up being satisfied with external obedience and a rotten heart. Pride glosses over inner sin and is satisfied with an external display only.

This is dangerous because this is obviously not what God is looking for. He looks at the heart. This is what I think is behind our Lord's words in Mt. 5:20, "For I say unto you, That except your righteousness shall exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees, ye shall in no case enter into the kingdom of heaven." He is not saying, as some argue, that unless you are clothed in the righteousness of Christ that you will not be saved – true though that is! What he is saying is that the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees is only external and God expects and demands more than that.

An attitude of pride is dangerous because it warps things. It warps our understanding of the true condition of our own heart and glosses over the evil therein. And it warps our understanding of the demands of God's law by reducing it to a razor-thin veneer of external religious busyness without ever dealing with obedience at the level of the heart. You can see how these two things go together. Reducing the call for holiness to external obedience clearly helps us to evade the corruptions of the heart. On the other hand, an unwillingness to come to terms with inward sinfulness inevitably leads one to define obedience in terms of outward duty only.

Where does this pride come from? I think it comes from the fundamental problem in the human heart: our tendency to worship ourselves rather than God. This tendency inevitably means that, when we hear verses like Heb. 5:9, instead of looking away from ourselves and to the grace of God for the power and strength to obey, we begin by looking at ourselves and saying, "I can do this!" That is really bad, because it not only robs God of the glory, but in order to keep up the charade, you will also have to ignore the true state of your heart as well as the true depth and breadth of the call to holiness.

So that is one temptation we are faced with when we hear a call to obedience and holiness, but that is not the only temptation. As the hymn puts it, we are not only in danger from "rocks of pride," but also from "quick-sands of despair."

Here's how this works. A person hears the call to obey Christ, and he or she thinks, "How can I do that? I've got so much corruption in my heart! I've failed so much! It's impossible!" They sink down in despair. This person is almost the opposite of the prideful person we've been describing above, although we shouldn't think this person has no problem with pride. But it is different because, whereas the Pharisee won't deal with the inward corruption of the heart, the despairing person can't get away from the corruption of the soul. They are obsessed with it. They look within and that's all they can seem to do.

Well, if you're only looking inward, and you're being honest, there is not going to be a lot of hope there. I know that a lot of folks say that Romans 7 doesn't apply to the Christian, but I disagree. These are the words of the apostle Paul in the present tense: "I know that in me (that is, in my flesh), dwelleth no good thing: for to will is present with me; but how to perform that which is good I find not" (Rom. 7:18). No wonder we can often identify with the apostle's mournful cry: "O wretched man that I am! Who shall deliver me from the body of this death?" (Rom. 7:24).

So that is another danger we want to avoid. There is no hint in the New Testament that the call to holiness is a call to despair. Nor is it a call to pride. We need to avoid both. The question is: how? That's what we want to consider together today.

The way I want to approach this is with the phrase, a posture of obedience. The word "posture" is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a conscious mental or outward behavioral attitude."<sup>1</sup> I used this phrase in my sermon last Sunday, and I think it's a helpful way to look at the Biblical teaching on obedience in the life of a Christian.

Here's what I mean by this phrase, first negatively and then positively. By "a posture of obedience" I am not describing sinless perfection. I am not saying that the Biblical commands to obey mean that, unless I am doing this perfectly, I am not a Christian. What I am saying is that a Christian is someone whose overall outlook and basic attitude is one of imperfectly, but consciously, pursuing holiness in the fear of God. Although we certainly ought to have perfect obedience as our aim, that doesn't mean that we will ever be perfect this side of heaven. As I said last time, we will never be able to say this side of heaven that we have become the Beatitudes, but we certainly ought to be saying that we are becoming the Beatitudes, however slowly that process is taking place.

Let me say it again: no Christian can say that they are without sin. The Bible gives us no grounds upon which to say that. In fact, it says the opposite. It tells us that we are to ask forgiveness every day for our

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/posture>



sins (Mt. 6:12). The apostle John wrote, “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8). And, “If we say that we have not sinned, we make him [God] a liar, and his word is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:10).

So posture does not mean perfection. Rather, posture points us to the overall pattern of our lives. However, the question presses in upon us: how do we evaluate our obedience in light of the sin in our hearts and lives? Do we conclude that, because we sin, we are not Christian? Do we conclude that, since everyone sins, it’s no big deal? That I shouldn’t be concerned about the sin in my life? Do we respond with pride and think that we’re okay, no matter how much we sin, or do we respond with despair and throw in the towel? Are we supposed to be constantly doubting our salvation because of the remaining sin in our lives? Surely there must be a better way. There is, and the Bible helps us to navigate between the twin dangers of pride and despair. Here are some questions that I think can help us maintain the posture of obedience in a Biblical, humble, and hopeful way: where are we looking, what are we doing, and to what are we listening?

Where are we looking?

One of the main obstacles to the pursuit of holiness is looking for motivation in all the wrong places. In particular, I’m talking about where we are looking for motivation and inspiration in dealing with the sin in our lives. What drives our response to the sin in our lives? Are we motivated by a merit-based mentality or are we motivated by love of God toward us in Jesus Christ? We should never look to our obedience as the ground of our acceptance with God. Rather, we look solely to Christ and to the grace of God in him. This is a dangerous thing because it can lead to both pride and despair. Those who take a superficial view of the demands of God upon us will end up proud. On the other hand, those who take a more realistic look at themselves will end up in despair,

for they will soon realize that there is no way any of us can commend ourselves to God on the basis of our goodness.

This is not where Scripture tells us to look. We are not to look to ourselves, but to Christ. Remember what God says to us through the prophet: “Look unto me and be ye saved, all the end of the earth: for I am God, and there is none else” (Isa. 45:22), and that means there is really nowhere else to look. We are not to look to ourselves out of pride, nor are we to look in ourselves and despair.

In particular, we are not to be motivated by our works but by his grace. This is how the apostle Paul consistently argues. In Romans 1-11, he unpacks for us the glorious gospel of grace. It is about the righteousness of God, the grace of God, the power of God, the purpose of God for us. Then he gets to what some might call the “practical part” of the epistle. How does he begin? This way: “I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service” (Rom. 12:1). What are the mercies of God? They are contained in the gospel which tells us that we are not justified on the basis of our works but on the basis of the righteousness of God in Christ freely given to those who believe. That’s what ought to motivate you. Are you? Am I? Am I motivated by the mercies of God in the life of obedience or am I more motivated by the demands of the law which I am desperately trying to live up to and merit God’s favor thereby?

You see it in other writings of Paul as well. Ephesians 1-3 are all about God’s sovereign purpose of election, Christ’s saving redemption, and the Spirit’s work in our hearts, raising us from a death in sin and giving us good hope through grace. When we get to the second half of the epistle, again the “practical part,” he begins it with these words: “I therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, beseech you that ye walk worthy of the vocation wherewith ye are called” (Eph. 4:1). Note that word “therefore.” It is there to point us back to chapters 1-3. We are to be motivated by what God has done, is doing, and will do for us in Christ, in whom every spiritual blessing is found (Eph. 1:3).

One indication that we are looking too much to ourselves instead of the grace and love and mercy of God as the primary motivators in sanctification, is that we have become fixated on our past. My friend, beware of looking too much to your own past. When we become obsessed with the past, it is probably because we're trying to weigh whether or not we have messed up too much for God to save us. This means we are trying to relate to God on the basis of merit instead of grace. This is not the Biblical way to look at it. For there is no sinner too far gone that God cannot save him or her. There is no amount of sin that can make you unfit for grace. For it is still true that "where sin abounded, grace did much more abound" (Rom. 5:20). Grace did and it does.

Remember what our Lord said to those who rebuked him for ministering to the publicans and sinners, these people on the margins of society, the despised, those who were considered too far gone. These are the ones Jesus brought into his kingdom. His response to those who rebuked him was: "They that are whole need not a physician, but they that are sick. But go ye and learn what that meaneth, I will have mercy and not sacrifice: for I am not come to call the righteous but sinners to repentance" (Mt. 9:12-13).

Then we have the testimony of the apostle Paul, a man who had been a persecutor and a murderer of God's people. God saved him and made him one of the foremost apostles. Remember how he put it? "This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief" (1 Tim. 1:15). Now Paul wrote this under the inspiration of the Spirit, and so I take it to mean that he really was the chief of sinners. If that's the case, there is no one in this audience who can say that Christ can't save them because they are too bad. In fact, Paul goes on to say this: "Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life everlasting" (16). Even if you feel yourself to be worse than others, that doesn't matter for God saved the chief of sinners and

did it as a pattern. In other words, this is not a rare thing; it is what God normally does. Do you believe that?

It is hard to please God and pursue holiness when you think he is against you. The only way we can truly have confidence that he is for us is if we really believe that all our sins can be forgiven, not on the basis of our goodness but on the basis of the grace of God toward us in Jesus Christ. It is freeing to realize that the only sins we will ever fight as children of God are forgiven sins. Think about that! It's as the hymn puts it:

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free.  
His blood can make the foulest clean,  
His blood availed for me.*

If we really are looking to Christ alone for our salvation and our acceptance with God, we won't become proud and superficial and hypocritical like the Pharisees, nor will we become despairing and hopeless.

What are we doing?

The next question is: what are you doing right now with the sin in your life? We should neither ignore it out of pride, nor should we despair over it. The proper response to sin is to immediately confess it and repent of it. That is what obedience is: it looks like repentance from sin and faith for cleansing on a daily basis. When you get up in the morning, you believe the promise of God toward you in Christ and repent of your sins. As you go through the day, you repent and believe. And when you go to bed at night, you repent and believe. You confess your sins daily. This is very important: it doesn't matter how many times you have messed up or how many times you have had to confess the same sin. It doesn't matter how successful you have been in the past or unsuccessful. The answer is still the same: you need to confess your sin to God and then repent of it.

The point I really want to make here is that a life of obedience to Christ does not mean perfection; it means a lifestyle of faith and confession and repentance. It doesn't mean that you have to have gone 40 days without any big slip-ups in order to qualify for walking in the light. Let me remind you again of these very important words in 1 John: "If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin" (1:6-7). Do you hear that? Walking in the light doesn't mean you are without sin because in that case we wouldn't need this ongoing cleansing from our sin! Now clearly, it also doesn't mean that we are living in sin, or walking in darkness, as it is put in verse 6. It means that our fundamental posture is towards the light, and that means that we are constantly availing ourselves of the cleansing that is in Christ – and that means repentance and faith.

Then there is verse 9: "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins, and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." God does not say that, if we sin, we are out of the game. Instead, he says, if we confess our sins, he will forgive us and cleanse us. That is the promise.

It is important for us to understand this because otherwise we are going to end up in despair if we are honest with ourselves. The presence of sin in our lives is not a reason to despair: it's a reason to repent and come to Christ anew for cleansing and forgiveness. As we just saw in 1 Jn. 1:9, confessing our sins is a part of walking in the light. It's important for us to hear that. It saves us from pride because it reminds us that confessing sin is a normal part of the Christian walk, and it saves us from despair because it reminds us that confessing sin is a normal part of the Christian walk!

What then is the difference between walking in the darkness and walking in the light? I think the primary difference is our fundamental attitude (posture) toward God and our fundamental attitude toward sin. If we are walking in the light and not in the darkness, God is the one we want most to draw near to; he is the one we want to have fellowship

with. Those who walk in darkness are not wanting fellowship with God; they are trying to hide from him. They are trying to hide their sins from him. Does that describe you? Are you trying to hide from God and your sins from God? That is not obedience. But if you are willing to be honest with God, if you can say with the psalmist, “Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts: and see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting” (Ps. 139:23-24), if you are truly confessing your sins and seeking cleansing from them and repenting of them, then you can say that you are walking in the light.

The question is not what have you done or what are you going to do; the question is what are you doing right now? Are you dealing with your sins or are you ignoring them and hiding them? Oh, may God give us the heart of the Psalmist, who said, “I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments” (Ps. 119:59-60).

Do you see how this posture combats both pride and despair? It combats pride because you cannot foster a lifestyle of confession and repentance without coming to terms with your absolute and constant need for God’s free and sovereign grace. And it combats despair because taking this posture means that the answer to our sin is not to give up hope but to come anew to the throne of grace, confessing our sin and turning from it in the real and steadfast hope that God will forgive and cleanse.

To what are we listening?

What is guiding us as we lean into the task of obedience to Christ? What are we listening to? Well, we need to be listening to Scripture, rather than our own hearts. We need to be listening to the word of God rather than a world in rebellion against God. That means we need to hear both the warnings and the promises in Scripture and hold them together in our minds. We must hear the warnings in light of the promises

so we don't despair. We must also hear the promises in light of the warnings so we don't presume. Now I don't deny this can sometimes be difficult! But it is necessary.

Here's what I mean. There are warnings all over the Bible that tell us that, if you abandon a commitment to Christ and never come back, you were never truly saved to begin with and that you can expect future judgment. The book of Hebrews is filled with such warnings. We saw some of them in chapters 2 and 3, and we are about to come face to face with another one in chapter 6. The writer will return to the warnings against apostasy in chapter 10. So this was clearly something they needed to hear, and since God has inspired Hebrews and preserved it for us, these are warnings we need to hear, too. We should also recognize that alongside the warnings are all these amazing and wonderful promises that foster hope. What this tells me is, we need to hear the warnings with the promises and not one without the other. For example, Hebrews 6:1-8, which is a frightful warning, is followed by Hebrews 6:9-20 which is one of the greatest hope-giving and comforting passages in all the Bible!

How do we do this? I am to hear the warnings so that I understand the seriousness of sin and the reality of judgment against those who do not obey Christ. If I take them seriously, I am not going to play around with sin, but I am going to flee from it, as Scripture tells us to do again and again. If I only hear the warnings and don't remember the promises, I will get a warped view of God and a warped view of myself. I will end up with a warped view of God because then I will only see God as judge and not as Savior. I will only see his severity and not his mercy. As the apostle Paul puts it in a different place, we are to behold both the goodness and the severity of God (Rom. 11:22). I will also end up with a false view of myself because I will end up thinking that it is up to me to avoid judgment and make it to heaven. This is false, of course. God is a God of grace and we are people in need of grace.

So I take warnings at face value, but I also am looking to the promises, which are promises of grace and help and strength. The promises remind me that God gives what he requires. The promises remind me

that God will not suffer me to be tempted beyond what I am able (1 Cor. 10:13). The promises remind me of what God has done, is doing, and will do for me in Christ Jesus. The promises remind me that salvation is not a matter of works but of free grace. We are reminded that, in Christ, God's throne is a throne of grace and that we are invited to come boldly to this throne and there to expect help and mercy (Heb. 4:14-16). We fight pride and presumption through the warnings, and we fight despair and hopelessness through the promises.

This is what obedience looks like in the lives of imperfect and struggling sinners saved by grace. These are not perfect people. These are not even people who only sin little sins. These are people who can say with John Newton, "I am not what I ought to be, I am not what I want to be, I am not what I hope to be in another world; but still, I am not what I once used to be, and by the grace of God I am what I am." How do we obey Christ in this world? How do we deal with the sin in our lives? We do so by steering away from the temptations to pride and hopelessness. We do that by looking to Christ and to God's free grace to us through him. We do it by a lifestyle of faith and repentance. We do it by trembling at the warnings and rejoicing in the promises.

No matter how many setbacks we have had, we continue forward. We say with the apostle Paul, "Not that I . . . am already perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Brothers, I do not consider that I have made it my own. But one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:12-14, ESV).



## CHAPTER XIX

### HOW WE NEED TO HEAR (HEB. 5:11-14)

FOR MANY YEARS, I read this passage as an exhortation to the Hebrew Christians to get more Bible knowledge into them. After all, does not the author say that “when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God”? (ver. 12). They need to be taught, there needs to be information transfer. That’s the problem – or is it?

Somehow, though, when you go on to read what follows, this interpretation doesn’t seem to jive with the context. For example, while he complains that their state (which requires further teaching) makes it hard for him to teach them about Melchisedec (10-12), yet that is precisely what he does in chapter 7. Moreover, though he seems to say that they need further instruction in the ABCs of the faith (“first principles of the oracles of God,” ver. 12), he never seems to give them this instruction in the verses leading up to his taking up the theme of Melchisedec. He mentions some of the basics in just two verses (6:1-2) and then moves on – and he expects them to move on with him. Now if they really were deficient in knowledge, this is bad pedagogy on his part. You make

up the deficiency in knowledge by imparting the necessary instruction. Again, there is no real instruction in the ABCs of the faith.

What is there? In chapter 6, beginning in verse 4 and extending to the end of the chapter, you have a shocking warning, a stirring exhortation, and a call to hope. It centers around verses 11-12 where the author appeals to them in this way: “And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” That is very instructive. What is the purpose of an exhortation? What do exhortations do? They stir us up to put into practice what we already believe, while also motivating us.

This indicates that the deficiency addressed in our text is not quite a deficiency in knowledge, *per se*. It is a deficiency in putting into practice gospel realities because they were not motivated to live in light of those realities. That is the problem.

There is a connection between 5:11 and 6:12 that is instructive here. The problem that has led to everything is that they were “dull of hearing” (5:11). That word “dull” is repeated in 6:12: “That ye be not slothful [dull], but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” He diagnoses the problem in 5:11 – dullness of hearing – and urges them to repent of that in 6:12. Note that the dullness in 6:12 does not arise from inadequate knowledge but from a failure to apply that knowledge. That’s what it means to be slothful. Ignorant people need to be taught; slothful people need a kick in the pants, which is precisely what the author does (in a manner of speaking).

You see this further in the analogy of milk and meat. Milk is for babies; meat is for the mature. This admonition is not unpacked in terms of the amount of knowledge, but in terms of its use. Milk is “for everyone that . . . is unskillful in the word of righteousness” (12), whereas meat “belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil” (13-14). Someone who is “unskillful” with the gospel [= word of righteousness] is unaccustomed to living by its principles and in light of its truths.

On the other hand, the mature are those who have “by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.” It’s really a question of application – they have not been applying God’s word to their lives. Why not? Because they are dull of hearing.

Why does he say they need to be taught? Doesn’t that point to a lack of knowledge? No, not necessarily. I think there is some irony here. He is saying that their dullness of hearing has made them no different from people who have never even heard the gospel, who don’t even know the basics. If you don’t apply the gospel that you know to your life, how is that really any different from someone who has never heard the gospel? Well, in terms of what you can see, there is no difference. Notice that the need to be taught is parallel with the need for milk (12). We saw that their need for milk, which really is a way of talking about their spiritual immaturity, did not arise from a lack of knowledge but from a failure to use and apply what they already knew.

The problem addressed in these verses is that the Hebrew Christians were dull of hearing, which led to a failure to apply God’s word to their hearts and lives, and this led them to a failure to value what God valued (or a failure to discern the difference between what is good and what is evil). Of course that led them to the point of being on the brink of abandoning the Christian faith for something else, a terrifying place to be. We will be reminded just how terrifying that is in the next chapter. If we want to avoid getting there, we need to repent of what will get us there in the first place, which is dullness of hearing, not hearing God’s word the way we ought.

This is what I want to talk about in this message: how to hear God’s word – or, how to avoid being dull of hearing. How do we do that?

Fight worldliness.

Well, first of all, we need to repent of whatever it is that makes us dull of hearing. How do we get there? I think there are thousands of ways to get there. For the Hebrew Christians, it was persecution. It had

worn them down. But it was not just persecution; it was the failure to interpret their circumstances in light of God's promises. Instead, they had interpreted God and his gospel in light of their circumstances. Thus, they needed to be reminded of the hope that we have because of the gospel. They needed to say, with the psalmist, "Hope thou in God; for I shall yet praise him, who is the health of my countenance, and my God" (Ps 42:11).

The more fundamental answer is that we become dull of hearing because we have capitulated to worldliness. What is worldliness? It is fundamentally the love of this world, where "world" encompasses all the values, opinions, and philosophies of humanity in rebellion against God. The apostle John reminds us in his first epistle: "Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world. And the world passeth away, and the lusts thereof: but he that doeth the will of God abideth forever" (1 Jn. 2:15-17). What is worldliness? It is that system of values that blinds us to the love of God by replacing it with other things. It is idolatry. It is desiring that which God forbids and loathing that which God loves. Worldliness is placing one's hope in the present order of things instead of looking to that which is unseen and eternal.

David Wells, in his book *God in the Wasteland*, gives a good definition of worldliness that expositors for our day what the apostle was warning about in his. He puts it this way: "For worldliness is that system of values and beliefs, behaviors and expectations, in any culture that have at their center the fallen human being and that relegate to their periphery any thought about God. Worldliness is what makes sin look normal in any age and righteousness seem odd." He then goes on to make this very perceptive observation: "Modernity is worldliness, and it has concealed its values so adroitly in the abundance, the comfort, and the wizardry of our age that even those who call themselves the people

of God seldom recognize them for what they are.”<sup>1</sup> This is the danger of worldliness. Rarely does it come right out and beckon you to abandon the love of God for the love of other things. It steals upon you unawares. It gradually gnaws at your heart and soul until it has replaced Biblical values with sinful and man-centered ones. Before long, you may still be going to church and reading your Bible, but you discover that you have become dull of hearing, and that gospel realities just don’t land on you the way they once did.

How do you know that you are entrapped in worldliness? As Wells put it, you know that worldliness has taken you when sin looks normal and righteousness seems odd. This is something we will all struggle with until the day we die because not only is the “world” in the Biblical sense of humanity in rebellion against God competing for the allegiance of our hearts, but the remaining sin in our hearts is an ally within of the enemy without and makes the arguments for worldliness so often seem very plausible. If we are not constantly fighting against it, we will inevitably fall before it.

The outcome of dullness of hearing, according to our text, is in contrast with the mature who can discern the difference between good and evil. In other words, dullness keeps you from valuing what God values. And yet, even though that is an outcome produced by dullness, I also think it is a condition that leads to this spiritual dullness. The values of this world and God’s values are not compatible. When once you give in to one, you must release your grip on the other. As our Lord himself put it, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24).

The point is, this battle is waged first and foremost on the level of the heart. We must resist anything which makes sin look normal and makes righteousness look strange. That may mean changing some habits. It may mean that we don’t go certain places (whether physical or digital),

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<sup>1</sup>David F. Wells, *God in the Wasteland: The Reality of Truth in a World of Fading Dreams* (Eerdmans, 1994), p. 29.

or watch certain TV shows, or do certain things. Worldliness is caught more than it is taught. So we must social distance ourselves, so to speak, from those things which catechize our hearts towards the values of the world. Do not be surprised if this looks strange to the world; we should expect that, for if worldliness makes righteousness seem strange, then righteousness is going to look strange to the world. In fact, the apostle Peter affirms this in his first epistle: “For the time past of our life may suffice us to have wrought the will of the Gentiles, when we walked in lasciviousness, lusts, excess of wine, revellings, banquetings, and abominable idolatries: wherein they think it strange that ye run not with them to the same excess of riot, speaking evil of you” (1 Pet. 4:3-4). So that is the first step to combatting spiritual dullness of heart: fight the temptation to worldliness.

Put yourself in front of God’s Word.

We cannot benefit from that to which we are not exposed. If you never hear the Bible or read the Bible, you obviously are not going to reap the benefits which come from it. Here’s the deal: we can think that, because we have read through the Bible once or twice (or maybe even more than that), or been to this or that conference or church meeting, or because we have many years of faithfulness stacked up in the past, we can now relax our commitment to hearing God’s word. Beware of this attitude. There is never a time when we can stop hearing God’s word without endangering our souls.

This may have been one of the faults of the Hebrew Christians. They obviously had some knowledge, for the Christology of this epistle is very high and the doctrines dealt with up to this point are rich and deep. But they did not continue in this. They had become dull of hearing. They had stopped listening to the word of God as they should have.

The godly and blessed man is always defined by a commitment to God’s word: “But his delight is in the law of the LORD; and in his law doth he meditate day and night” (Ps. 1:1). In other words, if you

want to be in a healthy spiritual condition, you must make God's truth your daily diet. As the apostle Peter put it, "As newborn babes, desire the sincere milk of the word, that ye may grow thereby" (1 Pet. 2:2). In our day we have no excuses here. Despite the secular culture we live in, we have an abundance of access to God's word: online, podcasts, blogs, books, audio CDs and DVDs, and on and on.

As we said last Sunday, it matters what we are listening to. We need to be hearing God's promises and to take to heart the warnings of God's word. It is only by doing so that we will persevere and grow as we ought. You can only do this if you are intentionally putting yourself in front of God's word. If you don't have time to listen to it, then you need to rearrange your schedule. There is one thing necessary, isn't there? Remember what our Lord told Martha who was loaded down with the cares of this world and angry at her sister Mary for neglecting her duties because she was sitting at the feet of Jesus and hearing his teaching (Lk. 10:39). Coming to the Lord with her concern, and expecting the Lord to rebuke her sister, instead she found herself rebuked: "And Jesus answered and said unto her, Martha, Martha, thou art careful and troubled about many things: but one thing is needful: and Mary hath chosen that good part, which shall not be taken away from her" (Lk. 10:41-42). Do we need to be rebuked as well?

Now, I want to add this. Listen to trusted teachers of God's word, to those who are committed to the authority and truthfulness of the Bible. Listen to those who are committed to a Biblical view of God, man, and sin, who don't preach their own views but give you truths which you can see are coming from Scripture. Hear God's word preached (2 Tim. 4:1-4). There is something about preaching that we need – even preachers! God's word is not just meant to be studied in an academic fashion. It is not just meant to be quietly contemplated. It is meant to be preached, to be authoritatively delivered in the power of the Holy Spirit. Paul told Titus, "These things speak, and exhort, and rebuke with all authority" (Tit. 2:15). Preaching does something that no other venue can do, and we impoverish ourselves when we

downplay the importance of it in our lives and the life of the church. People who replace preaching with dialogue are not doing the church any favors. Consider that the book of Hebrews is essentially a sermon and was meant to be the means under God's blessing of opening their ears and turning them from dullness. My friend, put yourself under God's word preached.

Pray for enlightenment.

We must not only put ourselves continually in front of God's word, we must also pray for enlightenment when we come to it. This was the prayer of the psalmist: "Teach me, O LORD the way of thy statutes; and I shall keep it unto the end. Give me understanding, and I shall keep thy law; yea, I shall observe it with my whole heart" (Ps. 119:33-34).

Why do we need to pray for God to give us understanding? Well, I think one reason God has done it this way is to remind us of our constant dependence upon him. There is also the reality of sin and the devil. Sin blinds us to the glories of God's word. Satan blinds us to the glories of God's word. This is certainly true of those who are not believers: "But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost: in whom the god of this world hath blinded the minds of them which believe not, lest the light of the glorious gospel of Christ, who is the image of God, should shine unto them" (2 Cor. 4:3-4).

It is also true that the believer, who is constantly battling the temptation to worldliness and sin, needs to have his or her eyes enlightened in spiritual things so that, when we read God's word, we profit from it as we should. It's like the windshield on a car. It's there to see through. Sometimes when you drive down the road it gets messy, and eventually, if nothing is done, it can get impossible to see through. God has given spiritual eyes to those who believe, the windshields of the soul, but if we are not washing ourselves by the Spirit who enlightens us, we will eventually find ourselves unable to see what we



ought to see in God's word. So pray and ask God's blessing upon it.

Hear it with an attitude of humility and faith.

It matters how you hear God's word, not only that you hear it. In the parable of the sower (or better, the parable of the soils), in Matthew 13, we are told that the soils represented four different types of hearers and the seed represented the word of God. Of those four soils (hearers), only one was good ground and had a good heart. Of the other three, two received the word in some sense – but did not bring forth fruit to God. So it is not enough that we listen to it, but we must receive it in a spirit of faith and humility.

Both of these aspects are summed up in the way the apostle Paul describes the reception of the word by the Thessalonian Christians: "For this cause also thank we God without ceasing, because, when ye received the word of God, which ye heard of us, ye received it not as the word of men, but as it is in truth, the word of God, which effectually worketh also in you that believe" (1 Thess. 2:13). How should we receive God's word? Not as the word of men. We must be convinced that this is God's word if we are to receive it rightly. That will mean coming to it in a spirit of humility – for who of us is in the position to dispute with God? And it means coming to it in a spirit of faith – for surely God's word of all words is worthy of our trust. When we come to it in this way, it will do in us as it did in the Thessalonians; it will effectually work in us who believe.

It also means being convinced that God's word is not only necessary for spiritual growth but also sufficient for it. It means believing that "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:16-17). For if we think we can get by without the instruction and nurture of God's word, we will. We ought to feel our

desperate need for the Bible and its truth.

Apply its truths to your life.

As we noted earlier, the main problem with the Hebrew believers was not that they had never heard the basics of the faith or even more advanced instruction. Rather, it is that they were unskillful in the word of righteousness. They were not using it; they were not applying it to their life. Oh may we not be like the auditors of the prophet Ezekiel: “And they come unto thee as the people cometh, and they sit before thee as my people, and they hear thy words, but they will not do them: for with their mouth they shew much love, but their heart goeth after their covetousness. And, lo, thou art unto them as a very lovely song of one that hath a pleasant voice, and can play well on an instrument: for they hear thy words, but they do them not” (Ezek. 33:31-32). Let us beware of mistaking an enjoyment of good preaching or good theological books with an actual application of it to your life.

The fact that the Bible warns against this again and again means that it is not an isolated or infrequent problem (cf. Mt. 7:24-27; Jam. 1:22-27). It is so easy to hear God’s word – or even to preach God’s word to others – and yet do nothing with it. It is not merely having God’s word but keeping it that is important: “The law of the LORD is perfect, converting the soul: the testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple. The statutes of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart: the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes. The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever: the judgments of the LORD are true and righteous altogether. More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey and the honeycomb. Moreover by them is thy servant warned: and in keeping of them there is great reward” (Ps. 19:7-11). Do you want the reward of the word? Then you must keep it.

To be dull of hearing is one of the most fearful conditions to be in. Those who remain in this condition are in grave spiritual danger, and

are exposed to God's judgment. Those who do not repent and die in their sin, as our Lord put it in John 8, have no hope either in this world or the next. Here is the tragic thing about it. To have God's word in front of us and to ignore it – that is tragic. There is nothing more valuable than God's word in this world and the saints have always understood that. "More to be desired . . . than gold" (Ps. 19:10). It is true, it is sound, it shows us God and the way to God in Christ.

That is the main reason why God's word is so precious. Paul could speak of the "unsearchable riches of Christ" which he was ordained to share with others (Eph. 3:8). In Scripture, God is mainly speaking to us about his Son and by his Son (Heb. 1:1). The overarching theme of the Bible is not how we make ourselves better but how God has intervened in the person of his Son to bring about the forgiveness of sins, the renewal of our nature, and restoration of fellowship with God. That is the gospel and it is what the Bible is all about. We are to hear this and not to be dull of hearing. We are to receive this message with a repentant and believing heart, for God's saving and gracious promise is to all who believe in God's Son.

God's word is here in our language, speaking in our tongue the things of God. But alas, just as it was on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2, there are some who will say, "we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God" and others who say, "These men are full of new wine" (Acts 2:11, 13). Where are you this day? Do you see that the Scriptures are in fact the Word of God and tell you about "the wonderful works of God"? Or do you look at them and just see in them the babblings of intoxicated men? My friends, let us hear the word of God. Let us not be dull of hearing. Let us repent of our embrace of the values of the world, let us put ourselves in front of God's word, let us pray for eyes to see and ears to hear, and come at it with a spirit of faith and humility, applying its truths to our lives. May God make it so in each of us.

*Jeremiah Bass*

# PERIL AND PROMISE

## CHAPTER XX

### LET US GO ON UNTO PERFECTION (HEB. 6:1-3)

**G**OD DOES NOT WANT YOU to remain stagnant in your Christian life. Rather, we are to “grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 3:18). We are by “speaking the truth in love” to “grow up into him in all things, which is the head, even Christ” (Eph. 4:15). There ought to be progress in the spiritual life of the believer, and when there is not, it ought to cause us to examine ourselves. In fact, the apostle Peter says that we are to be constantly adding to ourselves the Christian virtues of faith and virtue and knowledge and temperance and patience and godliness and brotherly kindness and love, “For if these things be in you, and abound, they make you that ye shall neither be barren nor unfruitful in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. But he that lacketh these things is blind, and cannot see afar off, and hath forgotten that he was purged from his old sins. Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure, for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall” (2 Pet. 1:8-10).

Note what he says. If we aren’t adding and growing and abounding, we will be blind, lacking spiritual discernment. Does that sound familiar? It’s exactly how we are warned in Heb. 5:12-14. Moreover, Peter goes

on to say that by doing these things “ye shall never fall;” that is, you will not stumble and fall into sin. It is not by maintaining our ground but by gaining ground that we are most likely to be preserved from falling into sin. I don’t know how many battles have been lost because an army did not press forward early on to gain the high ground, leaving it to the enemy. Spiritual growth is a sign of spiritual health; those who are not growing are more vulnerable to the assaults of the devil. It was when King David stayed home from the battle that he sinned his great sin. My friends, let us not stay where we are but go forward into battle, armed with the whole armor of God. Let us grow; let us go onto spiritual maturity.

The point is that this is necessary for our spiritual health and safety. Spiritual immaturity is not okay; it is dangerous. Those who are not spiritually mature will be unskillful in the word of righteousness (5:13) and will therefore be unable to “discern both good and evil” (14). They will make unwise and sinful choices. They will be like “children, tossed to and fro, and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the sleight of men, and cunning craftiness, whereby they lie in wait to deceive” (Eph. 4:14). On the contrary, we need to “come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ” (Eph. 4:13).

This is why the author of Hebrews is pressing spiritual growth to his readers: “Therefore, leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection” (Heb. 6:1). Why? The “therefore” at the beginning of the sentence points us back to 5:11-14, where he is confronting them over their dullness of hearing and their apparent immaturity in the faith, a result, as we saw, of not applying God’s word diligently to their lives. If they don’t go on to perfection (here, “perfection” is a reference, not to sinless perfection, but to spiritual maturity), they will remain immature and exposed to the danger of falling away from the faith.

Immaturity, in other words, is not just the failure to be a better Christian. It is not just a spiritual state that lacks the discipline and courage

and joy and holiness of the more mature believer. It is, rather, a state in which we are vulnerable and exposed to sin and Satan, and, as a result, in danger of falling away from the faith. We know this is the danger in consideration here because this is exactly what the author will continue to warn them about in the next verses (6:4-8).

There is such a thing as a “simple faith” that is good. For example, we sing the hymn, “O how sweet to trust in Jesus:”

*Oh how sweet to trust in Jesus,  
Just to trust his cleansing blood  
And in simple faith to plunge me  
‘Neath the healing, cleansing flood.*

I like that hymn, and I love the sentiment expressed there. “Simple faith” there is good because it is a reference to the fact that we are trusting solely in Jesus, not in anything else. It means that the eye of faith is simple in the sense that it is entirely aimed at the person and work of Christ.

However, there is a kind of simple faith that is not good. If our faith is simple in the sense that we have never gone forward from “the principles of the doctrine of Christ,” then we are living in disobedience to God’s intention for us as his people. If our understanding and experience of the faith and of the God of the Bible is the same as it was 10 or 20 or 30 years ago, then something is wrong. This is not good; it is exactly what we are being warned against in this text.

What are we being exhorted to advance from? Well, we see it in verses 1 and 2: “not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.” This is what is meant by “the principles of the doctrine of Christ,” or, as another translation puts it, “the elementary doctrine of Christ” (ESV). In other words, we are not to stay in elementary school; we are to go on to more advanced learning and experience. But what is he referring to exactly?

Well, when he says, “repentance from dead works and of faith toward God,” we are reminded of their conversion to Christ. When Paul preached the gospel, and urged men and women to be converted to Christ, he tells us that he testified “both to the Jews and to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ” (Acts 20:21). Now it is true that faith here is not explicitly said to be in Christ, but you cannot trust in God apart from Christ. After all, these are the elementary principles of the doctrine of Christ, so faith in such a context implies trust in Jesus Christ.

Second, when he says, “the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands,” we are reminded of their public initiation into the faith through the symbolic acts of baptism and the laying on of hands. Now this term “baptisms” has provoked much consternation in the commentaries because the term here is not the normal word used in the NT for baptism, and also because it is used in the plural. However, remember that this is a letter written to Jews, who were used to many different kinds of ritual cleansing rites (see Heb. 9:10, where the same word is translated “washings” referring to cleansing rites in the law of Moses), so when they were taught about Christian baptism, they would have had to be taught about the difference between Christian baptism and these other types of ritual cleansings (which explains both the plural and the more general term used). You actually see this happening in Acts 19, when the apostle Paul has to teach some Jewish disciples the difference between John’s baptism and baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus (Acts 19:1-7). Incidentally, you also see Paul laying hands upon these disciples (Acts 19:6) after baptizing them in the name of the Lord Jesus.

The third element to the elementary principles of the doctrine of Christ is the “resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment.” In this we are reminded of their fundamental change, not only of life but of perspective and purpose. Paul says that, apart from the resurrection from the dead, our faith is vain (1 Cor. 15:12-20), so certainly instruction in this would be part of any elementary teaching. We not only turn from a godless past, but we also turn to live in hope of a certain future. The



description of the conversion of the Thessalonian Christians is a perfect illustration of the first and third couplets in our text: “ye turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:9-10).

The point here is that every one of these things refers to beliefs and actions that we take at the very beginning of the Christian life. But we are not meant to stay where we began! Now of course, “leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ” does not mean to leave them behind. These are foundational truths (ver. 1), and you don’t leave the foundation behind but build upon it the superstructure of the Christian life. It simply means that we don’t stay baby Christians, but that we grow and mature in the faith.

Very well, that is the purpose of this text. It leaves us with the following question: how do we grow in maturity? How do we grow in the faith? That is what we want to consider next. There is something for you to do.

We know there is something for us to do because the text is a call for us to go forward, to leave behind a state of spiritual immaturity. In verse 3, which we will consider in more detail in a moment, we read, “And this we will do.” There is something for us to do.

What? For one thing, we need to know what we are aiming for. What does it mean to be spiritually mature? Primarily, it means that we are becoming Christlike in our character. This is the goal of God’s saving purpose, according to Romans 8:29: “For whom he did foreknow, he also did predestinate to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brethren.” Certainly, any definition of spiritual maturity has to take this as its main goal, since it is God’s goal in our salvation. Also, we have already looked at Paul’s words in Ephesians 4, where he says that the aim of the ministry is to build up believers “unto the measure of the stature of the fulness of Christ.” Christ, not culture, is the standard by which we are to grow. This is the reason why the apostle Peter says that we are to grow in grace and in the

knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ (2 Pet. 3:18), for it only as we come to know Christ more fully that we will become more like him. And how do we come to know Christ more fully? By his word, for it is in his word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, that he both speaks to us and reveals himself to us.

Second, maturity means pursuing all, not some, of the virtues that make us Christlike. Thus we are told to put on the “whole armor of God,” not just one or two pieces (Eph. 6:11, 13). It means manifesting all the fruits of the Spirit in our lives: “love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Gal. 5:22-23). And this means that we hold the virtues in harmony and balance (the word “perfection” carries the idea of perfect harmony), so that we hold them in the right proportions. It is great to be courageous, but if it is not tempered with longsuffering and gentleness, you are probably going to be more of a curse than a blessing to the church. Another way to put this is that our holiness should be attractive, as Paul puts it to the servants in Titus 2: “that they may adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things” (10). In Psalm 96:9 we are told to worship the Lord in the “beauty of holiness.” Holiness is beautiful and attractive; so should we be in our character.

Third, it means more of what we already have. We are not to be content with where we are, but to aim at more consistency in the practice of the virtues, practicing them more often and more fully. As the apostle Paul put it to the Thessalonians, “But as touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more” (1 Thess. 4:9-10).

Further, it means that the practice of the Christian virtues becomes more and more natural to us, so that we are not “unskillful” (5:13) in applying the word of righteousness to our lives. Not that we need to put in less effort, but that the practice of piety becomes more and more the first thing we do rather than something that we only become aware

of later. Let me give you an example. Suppose you encounter a difficult person; it is an easy thing to become angry. Of course, as a Christian, we are to put that away. But the reality is that it is not natural to respond with gentleness and kindness – and yet what we are saying is that, as we grow in grace, it should become more and more natural for us to respond that way, especially since our nature has been regenerated by the Holy Spirit. In other words, what is natural for us should be determined by a changed nature, a nature that is being renewed after the image of God (Eph. 4:24).

Now we achieve this by the means of the word of God, as we pointed out last time. These Hebrew Christians were not mature because they were not applying God's word to their lives. Hence the emphasis in this letter on the word of God. It is that by which the "man of God may be perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:17). We have to be intentional about it.

We depend ultimately upon God for success.

However, what we do is not the whole story. I don't think it's a mistake that the Beatitudes, another great catalog of Christian virtues, begins with, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Mt. 5:3). Why do you think that is? The ancient philosophers put courage as the greatest of all virtues, but our Lord puts poverty in spirit! How countercultural! He is saying that the first and primary virtue is that we recognize our inability to make ourselves good. This seems to be not only countercultural but counterproductive. Why tell people who are being called to be different from the world that they can do nothing in themselves?

The reason is because ultimately it is not us but God who is the reason for any good that is in us. Grace is at the heart of sanctification. Christian character is very different, for that reason, from what the world calls us to do. The world begins with man and what he can do. But the

Scriptures begin with God and what he can do, because we are sinners and, therefore, incapable in ourselves to do anything good.

Two things stand in our way. One thing is the fact that we are not just sinners because we sin, but that we sin because we are sinners. In other words, as the apostle Paul put it to the Ephesians, we are dead in our sins (Eph. 2:1). We are incapable in ourselves to take one step toward God because we are so in love with our own self-sovereignty. We are in our hearts rebels towards God. Or as Paul put it to the Romans, “the carnal mind is enmity against God: for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be. So then they that are in the flesh cannot please God” (Rom. 8:7-8). Being “in the flesh” is not something you have to become – it is what we are all by nature. By nature we are children of wrath (Eph. 2:3). We cannot please God and we cannot keep God’s law – not that we can’t ever do anything good before we are born again; what the apostle is saying is that at the bedrock of our nature is a heart of rebellion against God and all that we do, even the so-called good things, are done from a heart of self-will and self-pleasing. That is not acceptable to God. Even the sacrifices of the wicked are an abomination to the Lord (Prov. 15:8; 21:27).

The other thing that stands in our way is the guilt of our sin. Because God is holy, he will not always pass over our sin. He must punish it. Since we are all sinners, we are all therefore exposed to the just and holy wrath of God. No amount of good works can undo this; our sin must be punished. The problem is even worse than this might seem to suggest, however; for not only are we all exposed to God’s judgment, but the reality is that none of us can pay the penalty our sins deserve. There is just no such thing as doing more good works than you are supposed to do. In fact, our Lord put it this way to his disciples: “when ye shall have done all those things which are commanded of you, say, We are unprofitable servants: we have done that which was our duty to do” (Lk. 17:10).

What then can we do? Well, it is what the author of Hebrews is pointing us to. He is pointing us to Jesus Christ as God’s high priest, the one

who mediates before God for us, and the only one who can bring a sacrifice that will purge our sins. He is, therefore, the only way to God. He alone is the author of eternal salvation (Heb. 5:9). He is the way and the truth and the life; we only come to the Father through faith in him, not trusting in our merits but in the merits of the Son of God, Jesus Christ (Jn. 14:6).

The life of virtue, according to the Scriptures, does not begin with human will-power or human effort. It begins with realizing our own sinfulness, our poverty of spirit, and coming to God relying on his grace and mercy bestowed, not on those who are worthy, but on those who are united by faith to Christ and his worthiness. Our ability to please God does not come from within ourselves, but comes to us as a gift of grace to those who are justified by the righteousness of God in Christ.

This gift is all according to God's sovereign grace. I know that this is very unpalatable for self-centered man, but it is what the Bible tells us. This is why the author of Hebrews, after calling on them to go on to maturity, says, "And this will we do, if God permits" (Heb. 6:3). We will pursue holiness and virtue if God permits; we will go on to perfection if God permits. In other words, it is God who is ultimately and decisively the reason why anyone can go onto perfection. By the way, it's interesting that actually the literal rendering of verse 1 is "let us be carried onto perfection," for the verb there is passive, not active. Even our own effort is in dependence upon God. It's not as if we do some and God does some, but that our success in any spiritual endeavor depends upon God's grace in and through all our actions and efforts. God is working and we are working in one and the same event.

Now it's very important that we don't take this to mean that God keeps people from pursuing holiness! This is not what is meant, "if God permits." It's not as if we are to imagine someone trying to do what is right and God keeping them from it. The reality rather is that we all by nature are pursuing what pleases us, not what pleases God. We are all idolators by nature; our hearts are idol-factories, as Calvin put it. And God did not and does not have to save anyone. We are all

justly condemned. As the hymn puts it, “If my soul were sent to hell, thy righteous law approves it well.” What the phrase, “if God permits” means, then, is that it is owing fundamentally to the sovereign initiative of God, an initiative grounded solely in free grace and mercy, that is the reason why anyone can be converted and then go on to spiritual maturity.

How we put these two things together.

Hence, as we go forward, as we seek to advance in the holiness, we do so trusting in the mercy and grace of God. We do so like Paul, who wrote, “I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the live I now live in the flesh I live by faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me” (Gal. 2:20). My friends, this is the best of news, for if you are honest with yourself, you will realize just how truly poor in spirit you are. If what we are saying is true – and the Bible says that it is – then that means we are not at the mercy of our own resources. Instead, we have the resources of God’s infinite grace strengthening us to grow to spiritual maturity. It’s why the apostle wanted believers to know “what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:19-20). Why is it important to know that? So we never think we will ever be put in a situation where we cannot go forward in obedience to God. “There hath no temptation taken you, but such as is common to man, but God is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way of escape, that ye may be able to bear it” (1 Cor. 10:13).

My friend, where are you this day? Have you yet to repent of your sins and turn to God through faith in Christ? Turn to him this day, for there is no way forward except by beginning right here. “For other foundation can no man lay that that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Cor.

3:11). On the other hand, has this foundation been laid in your life? Well, then, what are you building upon it? How advanced are you? Have you been a Christian these many years and yet there is little more than a bare slab as evidence for it? If that is true, then according to this text, you are vulnerable. You need to go on to maturity. Don't stay where you are, but grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ. This is one of the reasons for the church. It's why the ministry exists, but it's also why each of you have been given spiritual gifts – not just for your benefit but for the benefit of others. So let's not be satisfied with “mere Christianity” but go onto perfection, trusting in God's help and grace as we do so. May God make it so.

## CHAPTER XXI

### HOW TO THINK ABOUT APOSTASY (HEB. 6:4-12)

JOHN MURRAY NOTES THAT, “Experience, observation, biblical history, and certain Scripture passages would appear to provide very strong arguments against the doctrine which has been called ‘The Perseverance of the Saints.’”<sup>1</sup> How do you argue with that? There is no doubt that people walk away from a commitment to Jesus, and that sometimes the people who do so are the last ones you would have thought would have done so. What are we to think about that?

We’ve already encountered this question in this epistle, but it bears reconsidering because the author of Hebrews does so. This was a letter written to folks who apparently were – many of them, anyway – on the verge of apostasy. And so this is a theme the author will return to again and again. Here we are in chapter 6, and we are again faced with one of those warnings, a warning about the consequences of falling away from the faith.

What about people who fall away from the faith? As we begin to consider this topic, it’s important that we understand exactly what we

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<sup>1</sup>John Murray, *Redemption Accomplished and Applied*. This is the opening sentence in his chapter entitled, “Perseverance.”



are talking about. We're not talking about Christians with doubts. Nor are we talking about believers who sin even egregious sins but who repent. Rather, we're talking about people who consciously turn their backs on faith in Christ as he is presented to us in the pages of the New Testament. We're talking about people who knowingly and with eyes wide open reject the message of the gospel after having seemingly embraced it.

One option is to say that these people were saved, but then lost their salvation. The thing that this position gets right is that those who reject Christ cannot be saved in any NT sense. For the apostle John (or possibly John the Baptist) puts it this way: "He that believeth on the Son hath everlasting life: and he that believeth not the Son shall not see life; but the wrath of God abideth on him" (Jn. 3:36). It's not enough that you once appeared to believe, but that you continue to believe (these are present tense participles).

However, what this position gets wrong is the insistence that a person can lose their salvation. This is something the NT just does not teach. In fact, it teaches the opposite. Here is how our Lord puts it, speaking to some people who refused to believe in him, no matter what kind of miracles they saw: "But ye believe not, because ye are not of my sheep, as I said unto you. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand. My Father, which gave them [to] me, is greater than all; and no man is able to pluck them out of my Father's hand" (Jn. 10:26-29). The first thing to note about this passage is that our Lord doesn't say that they were not of his sheep because they didn't believe – they didn't believe because they were not of his sheep. In other words, our Lord is reminding us that being chosen by God before the foundation of the earth to be saved doesn't depend ultimately upon our faith, but that our faith depends upon God's choice of us (cf. Acts 13:48). So our perseverance in the faith is rooted, not ultimately in ourselves, but in God (cf. 1 Pet. 1:5),

and this means that it is not possible for faith which is the fruit of the power of God in the heart to completely shrivel up and disappear.

That is not all our Lord says. He goes on to say that his sheep will never perish and no one will be able to pluck them out of his or his Father's hand. There is a double security here – Christ keeping his sheep and God the Father keeping his sheep, and with one purpose (Jn. 10:30). This is a keeping that shows itself in perseverance. It is a keeping that is always manifested in persevering in the faith, for he says that his sheep will hear his voice and follow him. How do you know someone is one of his sheep? Well, it's easy, isn't it? Do they hear his voice and follow him? Do they believe on him and obey him?

This also answers another wrong approach to apostasy, which is that though those who are genuinely saved can never lose their salvation, nevertheless they can lose their faith in Christ. Or they can remain saved even as they bear no fruit for obedience in their lives. This is an extremely dangerous and unbiblical position. Again, our Lord does not allow that, because he says that his sheep will hear his voice and follow him.

What the Scriptures teach is that God's people will come to faith and be saved, and remain saved, not irrespective of obedience but in a life of obedience, however imperfect this side of heaven (cf. 2 Thess. 2:13-14). They will persevere.

Now let's come to the text of Hebrews 6. This passage is often brought up as evidence against the doctrine of the perseverance of the saints. It talks about those who have every appearance of being saved but apostatize and are never renewed to repentance. In fact, we are told that it is impossible to renew them to repentance. What is this talking about? Is it talking (as I once heard a preacher argue) about God's people who remain saved but who backslide so severely that they can never recover this side of heaven? Or is it talking about people who were once saved but then lost their salvation? I believe both of these positions on the passage are wide of the mark. So let's consider carefully what is being said here.

What we want to do today are two things. First, let's understand what this passage is saying – what is the message we should hear? Then, second, how do we hear this in a way that we are meant to hear it? How do we hear it so that we don't end up denying other doctrines, but at the same time hear it without watering down the impact it is meant to have? Finally, since we are in Advent Season – I haven't forgotten that! – I want to show you the real connection passages like this one have to what we celebrate in the coming of Christ into this world.

What we are meant to hear from this text.<sup>2</sup>

First of all, I don't doubt that the people described in verses 4-6 are people who had been a part of the church and who had every appearance of being saved. They are people who have, at least outwardly, begun well. However, I think some folks make a mistake when they look at the descriptions given in these verses and conclude that they necessarily describe saved people. I don't think so; these are necessary but not sufficient evidences of salvation, and I think the context bears this out.

One position that you sometimes hear from those who do embrace the doctrine of perseverance in its entirety is that the impossibility here is merely hypothetical. In other words, they say that the argument is basically this: if people who enjoyed such blessings were to fall away, then it would be impossible to renew them to repentance, but (so the argument goes) this can never happen. However, the problem with this is that it just doesn't comport with the message being delivered here. These folks are being warned of the genuine consequences of apostasy.

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<sup>2</sup>In my exposition of the text, I am following the exposition of this passage given by Wayne Grudem in *Systematic Theology*, 2nd edition (Zondervan, 2020), p. 979-984.

They are not being warned about something that can't really happen!<sup>3</sup>

The metaphor of the fields (7-8)

What does the context tell us? Before we look carefully at verses 4-6, go down to verses 7-8. In these two verses you have a metaphor of two fields. What they have in common is the rain that falls upon them; where they differ is in how they respond to this rain (one also thinks here of the Parable of the Sower in Mt. 13). One field produces good fruit and receives "blessing from God" (7), but the other field bears "thorns and briers" and so "is rejected and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned" (8).

It is important to remember that, in the NT, a tree that bears good fruit is always representative of a genuine believer, whereas a tree that consistently bears bad fruit is always representative of being lost and unsaved (cf. Mt. 7:15-20). How does this relate to the previous verses? Well, clearly apostasy – deconstructing the faith and abandoning Christ for something else – is bad fruit. It corresponds to the thorns and briers of verse 8. And it receives judgment from God, which corresponds to the impossibility to be renewed to repentance in verse 6. They will die in their sins. Again, the point is that the metaphor is a sure indication that the people being described in the previous verses are not saved. Did they receive blessings from God? Yes, many! These blessings are

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<sup>3</sup>Philip Edgcombe Hughes makes this trenchant observation in his commentary, speaking of those who argue that this is merely hypothetical: "This is then taken as an indication that his warning about the impossibility of restoration for the apostate does not answer to reality and is little better than the invention of a bogey for the purpose of frightening them into being better Christians. But the end does not justify the means, and to resort to subterfuge and deception, and that too within so solemn a context, would be subchristian and incompatible with the whole tenor of the epistle. What, in any case, would be the point of warning them of the danger of apostacy and then assuring them that, after all, they are in no danger of falling into apostacy? Any such procedure would be self-defeating." P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 212.

listed for us in verses 4-6, just like the field in verse 8 received rain from heaven. These folks are like that field also in another way; they didn't end up bearing good fruit but bad fruit and, as a result, fall under the curse of God (not a place where God's elect will end up, cf. Rom. 8:1!).

Better things that belong to salvation (9)

Then there is verse 9: "But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak." Here the author speaks of things which he is hopeful characterize his audience. These "things" have two qualities: first, they are better things, and second, they are things that accompany [or "belong to"] salvation. The question is, what are these things?

Better than what? It is often said that the comparison here is between salvation which is hoped for and the judgement which is threatened in verse 8. In Hebrews "better" is most often a comparison,<sup>4</sup> not between something bad and something good, but between two good things, one of which is better than the other (see, for example, 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:27; 10:34; 11:16, 35). So this indicates that we should be looking for good things in the context that these "things" are better than. What things would that be, other than the blessings mentioned in verses 4-6? Whatever else we can say, it is a good thing to be enlightened and to taste of the Holy Spirit and the good word of God and the powers of the age to come.

However, they are not saving things in and of themselves, good though they are, for they are contrasted to "things that accompany salvation" in verse 9. This comparison indicates that you can possess all of the things listed in the context and yet not be saved. What would the better things be? The context (esp. ver. 10-12) indicates that perseverance in the faith is the key identifier: "And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of

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<sup>4</sup>Heb. 12:24 might be an example where something good, the gospel, is compared to something bad, the word of Abel, because it called out for blood and judgment.

hope unto the end: that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience [the word there is “endurance” or “perseverance”] inherit the promises” (11-12).

#### The Judas Christians (4-6)

With the context before us, let’s now come back to look at the individual descriptors in verses 4-6. Here we have people who “were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come.” In verse 6, since it says that it is impossible to renew them to repentance, it follows that they had also experienced repentance on some level. It sure sounds like this is a description of the genuinely saved!

However, on closer inspection, no, it doesn’t. This is a description of people who were indeed professing Christians and who seemed to belong to the church. We all know that professing to be a Christian and being a Christian is not always (unfortunately) the same thing. Here are people who were enlightened, who had received the knowledge of the gospel, who have come to understand and know the way of righteousness and then turn away from it (2 Pet. 2:20-22). They had tasted of the heavenly gift, and the good word of God, who had come, on some level at least, to a temporary appreciation of the gospel. Like Simon the sorcerer in Acts 8, who is said to have believed and was baptized (13), and yet the apostle Peter later warned him that he was in danger of perishing, and that he had “neither part nor lot in this matter: for thy heart is not right in the sight of God” (20-21). Herod loved to hear the word of God preached by John the Baptist – right up until he had him beheaded in prison (Mk. 6:20).

These are also people who were made partakers of the Holy Ghost and who experienced the powers of the world to come – regenerated, right? Not necessarily. Remember, that miracles were performed in the power of the Spirit (cf. Heb. 2:4), and yet we know that not everyone

who performs miracles in the name of Christ is saved (Mt. 7:21-23). Balaam prophesied in the Spirit, and yet there is absolutely no indication that this false prophet should be considered in the category of the saved (cf. Num. 24:2; 2 Pet. 2:15-16).

What about the fact that these people had repented? To this we must say that there is such a thing as a repentance which is not the fruit of the new birth. Esau was said to repent (Heb. 12:17), but he was not a recipient of God's saving grace. Here is where I think we must remind ourselves of the example of Judas Iscariot. Here was a man of whom it was said, "it had been good for that man if he had never been born" (Mt. 26:24). Now you can't say that about a single person in heaven. And yet he is said to have repented (cf. Mt. 27:3). He was clearly enlightened, and tasted the good word of God, for he preached the gospel. He also was a partaker of the Holy Spirit and the powers of the age to come for he performed miracles and cast out demons. And yet he turned from Christ and betrayed him and gave his heart to the devil.

In other words, the people here described are Judas Christians. It is important to remember that Judas looked every bit like one of the other apostles. He didn't have horns in his head and he didn't cackle and ride on a broom like a witch. In fact, he looked so much like the other apostles that when our Lord basically told everyone that Judas was the one who would betray him, the others still didn't see it! Even so, the people described in Hebrews 6 looked like Christians. They had every appearance of belonging to Christ. But when they walked away, when they rejected Christ and his gospel and crucified to themselves afresh the Son of God and put him to an open shame (Heb. 6:6), there was no more possibility that they could recover and be saved.

Now that doesn't mean that genuine Christians can't lapse or doubt or sin. Peter denied Christ at the same time that Judas betrayed him. There was a great difference. Judas was a son of perdition whereas Jesus interceded for Peter. Judas' apostasy was not given in a moment of weakness like Peter; he had been, after all, pilfering the money bag for some time. John says that he was a thief. Judas then sinned after much

deliberation and with his eyes wide open, whereas Peter fell in a moment of weakness. Also, the repentance of the two is different. Judas had a worldly sorrow that produced death; Peter had a godly sorrow that produced a “repentance to salvation” (2 Cor. 7:10).

So this passage is not about genuine Christians who lose their salvation (or some temporal blessing). It is about Judas Christians who look like genuine Christians for a while until they fall away and permanently reject the gospel. Such people will share in the end of Judas, and that is the danger of which we are warned in this text.

How we are meant to hear the message of this text

So far I have tried to establish a couple of things. First, that this passage is a genuine warning against apostasy. Second, that this passage is fully consistent with a conviction that God’s elect can never lose their salvation. However, that leads to the following question. How are people who call themselves Christian, and who have every hope that they really belong to Christ and are elect, how are we to hear this text in the way it was meant to be heard? How is this supposed to land on us; how is it meant to motivate us and to what is it meant to motivate us?

The problem is this: how is someone who is elect meant to apply a warning against apostasy? How does that work, especially since the elect cannot lose their salvation? Now we know that the author believed that at least most his audience were genuinely saved even as he gave them this severe warning, for in verse 9 he calls them “beloved” and says that he was persuaded that they were in fact saved. Nevertheless, that didn’t keep him from warning them about the dreadful consequences of turning away from Christ. Should a genuine believer ever be motivated to persevere by the danger (which is an eternal danger) of falling finally away? I think so, and I think this is precisely the intention of this text. So how does this work?

First of all, let me just say that we are not to be motivated by believing something that is not true. In other words, the motivation here is not



that the elect might lose their salvation if they don't persevere. That's not at all the thought process the reality of apostasy is meant to provoke. I am not to think, "If I don't endure in the faith, I might lose my salvation; therefore, I should continue in the faith!" No, we are never encouraged to think that way or to be motivated that way. God never encourages his saints to persevere by believing a lie!

Rather, the thought process should be something like this: "How do I know that I am elect? How do I make my calling and election sure? I can't look into the Book of Life and I don't have a special revelation from God that I am elect. The only way I can know I am elect is through the witness of the Holy Spirit to his fruits in my life, and one of the main fruits of the Spirit's work in my life is perseverance in the faith. Therefore, I must persevere, because if I don't – if I apostatize and walk away from the faith after coming to a knowledge of the gospel as I have – then the Bible says there is no place of repentance for me and I will prove that I was never saved. And that is indeed a terrible and terrifying place to be. It is not a place I want to be. Let me therefore take courage and stand against the wiles of the devil. Let me with faith and patience inherit the promises. For there are no promises for those who do not persevere!"

In other words, the motivation is not that the elect might lose their salvation. The motivation stems from the necessity of perseverance, since as it is the evidence and fruit of the Spirit in the life.

What about assurance?

Now someone might respond to that and say, if this is really the case, then no one can have assurance at all, because if only those who persevere to the end are saved, then we can't really know we are saved until we die and have persevered unto the end. Now that obviously can't be true. For the NT clearly teaches that assurance is possible.

The problem with this thinking is that it fails to appreciate the fact that perseverance is not the only fruit of salvation; it is one, but it is

only one. There are other fruits as well. The Bible talks about the witness of the Spirit in our hearts (Rom. 8:14-18), about the earnest of our inheritance (Eph. 1:14). As we are walking with the Lord in obedience to his word and in faith upon his promises, the Spirit witnesses with our spirits that we are the children of God. Assurance is something you can have now; and this is partly because it is not just a function of final perseverance.

No, it's not as if we can't have assurance until we come to the very end of our life and are still faithful. There are many things (love to God and his people, obedience to his commandments, and so on) that help us to make our calling and election sure (see a list of such things in 2 Pet. 1). The doctrine of perseverance doesn't work as an exclusive test of our election, but as one of many tests. What this does mean, though, is that those who do abandon the faith prove they were never saved to begin with. This is what the apostle John was saying when he wrote, "They [the antichrists, the false teachers] went out from us, but they were not of us; for if they had been of us, they would no doubt have continued with us: but they went out, that they might be made manifest that they were not all of us" (1 Jn. 2:19). The doctrine of perseverance tells us that if we don't remain a believer in Christ, the supposed evidences we thought we had were subterfuges after all.

All this perhaps misses what ought to be the true confidence of the believer. At the end of the day, my main confidence ought not to be in myself but in God. The requirement of perseverance is only a problem for assurance if the decisive basis of perseverance is your own fickle will and weak heart. But it is not. The decisive basis of perseverance is not my will but God's power: "who are kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:5). I am reminded of something that John Piper has said. He writes,

I often ask people, How do you know you will wake up a Christian tomorrow morning? The bottom-line answer is that God will cause you to wake up a Christian, or you won't. God will be faithful. God will keep you. Everything

hangs on the faithfulness of God to his promise: “Those whom he called . . . he also glorified.”<sup>5</sup>

What is our confidence? It is that God will remember his people, he will never lose sight of them, he will never let go of them. I think this is partly what the author is getting at in verse 10: “For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labor of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister.” God will not abandon his people, and because of that reality, they won’t abandon him either. I love the modern hymn, “He will hold me fast.”<sup>6</sup>

*When I fear my faith will fail  
Christ will hold me fast  
When the tempter would prevail  
He will hold me fast  
I could never keep my hold  
Through life’s fearful path  
For my love is often cold  
He must hold me fast*

So how are we meant to hear this warning? We are meant to hear it as a full-throttled warning that those who deconstruct their faith after having come to the knowledge of the gospel and embraced it, cannot come back and will die in their sins. We are meant to be shaken by this reality and awakened to the necessity of perseverance. Most of all, it is meant to make us fly into the arms of Jesus Christ our Savior who holds his people fast and will not let them go.

What has this to do with Advent?<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup><https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/will-you-wake-up-a-christian-tomorrow>

<sup>6</sup><https://sovereigngracemusic.bandcamp.com/track/he-will-hold-me-fast>

<sup>7</sup>This was preached during Advent 2021.

Now, has this anything to do with Advent? I think so: it is meant to remind us again that there is no hope outside of Jesus Christ and that is exactly what Advent tells us. Those who crucify him afresh and put him to an open shame, who reject Christ as Lord and Savior after professing faith in him, reject any hope of salvation. They will die in their sins because they have rejected the only one in whom salvation can be found. So when we walk away from Jesus, we walk away from hope, the very hope proffered in the advent of our Lord.

The perfect foil for apostates who came to profess the gospel and then rejected it is the apostle Paul. He says that he “was before a blasphemer, and a persecutor, and injurious: but I obtained mercy, because I did it ignorantly in unbelief” (1 Tim. 1:13). Now Paul’s persecution of Christians was sinful; he is not denying that. But he was ignorant; he really did believe he was doing God a service. In contrast, the apostates of Hebrews 6 knew what they were rejecting. That is why Paul received mercy and these apostates have no hope of mercy. It is impossible to renew them to repentance because their unbelief wasn’t an unbelief of ignorance.

What was the cause of Paul’s mercy? It wasn’t anything in himself; rather, it was the grace of God in the coming of Jesus Christ to do for us what we couldn’t do for ourselves: “And the grace of our Lord was exceeding abundant with faith and love which is in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying, and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners; of whom I am chief” (14-15). Advent reminds us that God has come into this world, not to make good people better but to give hell-bound people grace, grace that brings with it the forgiveness and freedom from sin and fellowship with God forever. This grace only comes through Christ, and in no other way: “For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17).

The good news is that it was not just grace for Paul but for all who trust in Christ as Lord and Savior: “Howbeit for this cause I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might shew forth all longsuffering, for a pattern to them which should hereafter believe on him to life ev-

erlasting” (16). Let Paul be your pattern, and then let us say with him: “Now unto the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only wise God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen” (17).

## CHAPTER XXII

### THE FULL ASSURANCE OF HOPE (HEB. 6:11-20)

THE GOAL OF THIS LETTER of exhortation is not only to motivate people by the fear of apostasy, dangerous though this is, and vital though it is that we pay attention to these warnings. More importantly, he also wants his audience to come “to the full assurance of hope unto the end” (11). It is not the fear of negative consequences that will get us to the end victoriously so much as the joy and confidence that comes from the full assurance of hope.

It is this “full assurance of hope” that will create people who are “not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (12). The fact that we must “through faith and patience” inherit the promises is just another way of saying that those who are saved will persevere. We don’t inherit the promises this side of eternity. Our inheritance (cf. Eph. 1:11) is yet to come and it is entered into through a life of faith and patience (endurance). This also indicates that the path to the inheritance is not an easy path. It is one which involves a life of faith, believing God’s promises even when external circumstances make them look impossible (cf. Rom. 4:17-24). If you want to know what a life of faith looks like, peak ahead to chapter 11! We

walk by faith, not by sight (cf. 2 Cor. 5:7), and sometimes that is hard. Now this doesn't mean that we walk in blind faith, as if there is no basis for it. We will come to this in a moment. But that does not mean that faith is not faith – we are required to look outside of ourselves and our resources and our circumstances for the confidence that we will finally inherit God's promises and that undoubtedly can be sometimes very difficult.

Also, there is that word “patience.” It is translated “long-suffering” in Eph. 4:2, and it is used in Jam. 5:10 in the context of enduring affliction. It means that we have to take the long view as we follow Christ. In the short term we have to deny ourselves, and sometimes this can feel unbearably long. We must be patient, however, for at the end is the inheritance.

All in all, we are exhorted to be diligent in pursuing this full assurance. It takes effort to acquire the “full assurance of hope” – it does not just happen by accident. You just won't wake up one morning to discover you are holy. You won't just become the kind of person who endures. If we want to be that kind of person, we must apply God's word to our lives. We must be men and women who live by the truths that we claim to believe.

What is this hope we are encouraged to pursue? Hope in the book of Hebrews is never something merely subjective. It is especially not to be thought of in the sense of wishful thinking. Rather, Biblical hope is the joyful and confident expectation that God will keep his promises. Hope, therefore, is fixed on something outside of us, not on something inside of us. This is why the author of Hebrews describes it as “the hope set before us” (18). Hope is not grounded by anything within us or about us; it is grounded in something outside us. In this passage, we have ground after ground for the hope to which we are called. God does not ask you to hope in nothing. He doesn't ask you to rest your confidence upon the vacuum of positive thinking. Instead, what we are shown here is that the Christian has the very best reasons to be hopeful. In this text, we have the foundation and the fruit of the full

assurance of hope. We will look at both of these things, but before we do so, let's consider the setting.

### The Setting of God's Promise to Abraham

In these verses, we are reminded of the reaffirmation of God's promise to Abraham in Genesis 22 after he had shown himself willing to offer Isaac upon the altar. I find this fascinating that the oath appears for the first time here, after Abraham's radical obedience. Abraham received God's promise in Genesis 12 and 15, but God did not attach the oath to the promise until this point. This is the record of the event in Gen. 22:15-18: "And the angel of the LORD called unto Abraham out of heaven the second time, and said By myself have I sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all the nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice." This is the Scripture referred to in our text: "For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater, he swore by himself, saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise" (13-15). The point of verse 15 is not that Abraham obtained the fulfillment of the promise, but that he obtained the promise itself – not indeed that God had not promised these things to him already, but that he had not given him the promise in this particular form, namely, a promise with an oath.

There is such a lesson for us here. God had given Abraham many reasons to believe that he was going to come through, including the symbolism involved in the covenant ceremony in Genesis 15, where God by walking through the pieces of the animals (which had been part of the sacrificial offering attached to that ceremony) was basically saying that he was willing to subject himself to their end if he did not hold up



his end of the covenant. The fact that God gives him an even greater reason (the oath) to believe after his remarkable example of obedience shows us that God often seals our obedience with even greater assurance: which means that, if you are struggling with assurance of God's favor in the present, the problem is not God, but the problem may be a lack of obedience in your life.

I think this is one of the reasons why Paul will write, "And not only so, but we glory in tribulations also: knowing that tribulations worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope: and hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:3-5). You see the progression here? Tribulation produces endurance which in turn produces experience [approved character], and experience produces hope. There it is again. Hope doesn't just turn up out of nowhere – most often it is produced by the faithful endurance of fiery trials. But the progression doesn't stop there – the Holy Spirit blesses those who have gone through the fire and come out on the other side with new and fresh inundations of the love of God in the heart. And that is the ultimate experience of hope, when we become utterly and deeply convinced that God loves us. We need Christians like that; we need that ourselves, for this is the surest way to produce bold and courageous men and women for Christ. If the history of the church has shown us anything, it has shown us over and over again that the boldest believers have always been those who are absolutely confident of Christ's love for them.

#### The Foundation: Four Reasons to Hope in God's Promises

##### God's Word (13-15)

The main point of the text is that Abraham's hope was not based on his own wishes but on God's word, a word which came to him in the form of a promise sealed with an oath (13, 17). But this is not only

true for Abraham, it is true for us as well. The point I want to make at this juncture is that our hope ought to be based on God's word to us. It is not something we come up with. It is not based on our wishful thinking. It is based upon God's objective and sure and steadfast word.

This was not just a promise to Abraham: it is promise to you and me as well. Those who belong to Jesus by faith in every age are among those who are "the heirs of promise" (17): "which hope we have" (19). This phrase leads to the question: how can a promise which is recorded in an ancient text (in the case of Genesis, 3500 years; and in the case of Hebrews, 2000 years) give me confidence that I am actually hearing the word of God? Do we really know that we have God's promise today in the Bible? How do we know that Moses was actually relaying factual information about God and Abraham and these promises?

I would remind you that we have two reasons to be confident: the witness of Christ and the witness of the Holy Spirit. We have the witness of Christ to the authority and dependability of the OT, vindicated by his miracles and ultimately by his resurrection from the dead. And we have the witness of the Holy Spirit to the authority and dependability of the OT to all who have been born again. He is a witness to this word (cf. Heb. 3:7).

Because of the witness of the Holy Spirit, this is not just a word which God spoke to Abraham thousands of years ago, but it is a word which he continues to speak for those who have ears to hear. Let us not be "dull of hearing" (5:11). Let us eagerly hear the promises which God has made to those who believe in his word.

What is the promise? It is this: "Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee" (14). Now strictly speaking, that was a promise to Abraham. But all who belong to Christ are heirs of this promise in the sense that they inherit the blessing which ultimately comes through Jesus Christ, the seed of Abraham. This was the apostle Paul's point in his letter to the Galatians. He writes, "Know ye therefore that they which are of faith, the same are the children of Abraham. And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through

faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all the nations be blessed” (3:7-8). He then goes on to say, “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (3:13-14). In other words, this is the promise of salvation from sins through Jesus Christ unto eternal life.

Surely there is no greater blessing than this. In fact, all mankind’s hopes are empty buckets compared to salvation.

The first point I want to make here is that the content of our hope, if it is to be Christian, must be based on and determined by God’s word. It is to the Bible that we must look if we would have solid and lasting and true and courage-building and joy-sustaining hope. But this is not the only foundation we have for hope in this text.

#### God’s Heart (16-17)

We noted that God’s word which creates our hope comes in the form of a promise sealed with an oath. God did not have to give the oath; his mere promise would have been sufficient. But God gave Abraham – and us – multiple places on which to rest our hope in him. In other words, the foundation for our hope is not only God’s word but also God’s heart. We see here a willingness on God’s part, his desire, for those who follow his Son to have hope. This desire tells me that, if you are a believer in Christ, God does not want you to go around wondering whether he loves you and will keep you. He wants you to be secure in him.

You see this in the next couple of verses: “For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath is to them an end of all strife” (16). Why do we have to raise our hands and swear to tell the whole truth? Why do men (at least, in days past) swear by God that their word is true? The whole reason for this lies in the necessity of giving people a reason to believe what you are about to say is, in fact, the truth. We attach penalties to

lying under oath – we want people to understand that this is a serious thing. Why? Because we want words spoken in the context of the oath to be “an end of all strife” – “final for confirmation” (ESV). The purpose of the oath is to encourage people both to speak the truth and to believe what is spoken.

Now God does not need to be encouraged to speak the truth. He always does that; it is impossible for him to lie (18). So why append the oath? Our author tells us why: “Wherein [that is, in giving the promise] God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath” (17). God doesn’t do it for himself; he does it for our sakes. The promise is there and the oath is there because God is more abundantly willing (not barely willing, not doing this because he has been cajoled to do so) for the heirs of promise to see how trustworthy his promise is. He doesn’t just want us to be aware of his promise, but he wants us to bank our lives on it; he wants us to do so in a way that glorifies and honors the reliability of his word.

In other words, God’s heart is not for you to be dangling at the end of despair, barely hanging on to a thread of hope. Rather, his heart for you, believer, is to have a robust and steadying hope as you endure through faith in the promise. Beware of judging God in the wrong way: beware of thinking that he doesn’t care about you and your joy, or that he somehow gets some kind of delight over the depths of sorrow that you have had to navigate. He does not: he wants the heirs of promise to delight in the surety of their hope in his word.

But even this is not all that we are pointed to for the basis of our hope. Not only are we called to hope in God’s word, not only by God’s heart, but also by God’s truth or faithfulness.

### God’s Truth (17-18)

As we’ve already noted, God’s word alone is enough. The promise guarantees that it will be performed. God never goes back on his word.

However, he wants to give us many proofs of his faithfulness. He wants to give us more than one reason to believe that he will keep his word. He wants us to rest completely in his faithfulness to his promise. So we have “the immutability of his counsel” (17) which is then confirmed by an oath, “that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (18).

“Two immutable things.” How many things do you know that are unchangeable? In this world, everything is characterized by mutability. But there is one thing we can bank on remaining unchanged and that is God’s word. His word is true and remains true. “Let God be true and every man a liar” (Rom. 3:4). There is nothing that can happen which can unravel God’s plans. There is no power that can force him to take back his word. There is no wisdom that can outmaneuver God. God himself is unchanging (Mal. 3:6). Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever (13:8). There is nothing within God that will cause him to change. He will never change in his affections toward his people or in his faithfulness or in doing good to them.

#### God’s Son (19-20)

All of this would not be possible apart from the work of Christ. Our hope is a gospel hope. There is no hope apart from hope in Christ. This is why the apostle Paul will write that those who are “without Christ” also have “no hope” and are “without God in the world” (Eph. 2:12).

We actually stand in a better position than Abraham. The promise and oath pointed forward to Christ. Abraham could only look ahead and long for the coming Christ, but we can look back and see that promise fulfilled: “which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the forerunner for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest forever after the order of Melchisedec” (19-20). Jesus has come in fulfillment of the promise and on the cross he purchased the blessing promised to

Abraham: “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ who hath blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ” (Eph. 1:3). He has come and finished his work, and has entered into the inner sanctum, into the very presence of the Majesty on high, there to intercede for us and to present the eternal efficacy of his work before the Father for us.

Abraham had great reason for confidence in God’s promise to him. He obtained the promise itself; we have the fulfillment of it in the person of Christ. We have even greater reason to hope.

Why is Christ our hope? Why does Paul describe Jesus to Timothy as “our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1)? He is our hope because all the promises of God are yes and amen in him; in other words, all the promises of God for our good find their fulfillment in Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). God cannot be good to wicked and evil men and women; our sins must be atoned for. He cannot stand to be defiled by our sin; our sins must be removed and their power over us crushed. We need to be forgiven and to be justified and we need to be made holy. We need this, not merely to assuage a guilty conscience and to free us from bondage inducing sins, but so that we might have the freedom of access into the favor and fellowship of God forever. Only Jesus Christ our Lord can make that happen. He not only can make that happen but he also has made that happen by becoming the perfect priest and the perfect propitiation. That is why our hope is in him. That is why your hope should be in him. It is why the Heidelberg Catechism opens this way:

Question 1. What is thy only comfort in life and death?

Answer. That I with body and soul, both in life and death, am not my own, but belong unto my faithful Saviour Jesus Christ, who, with his precious blood, hath fully satisfied for all my sins, and delivered me from all the power of the devil; and so preserves me that without the will of my heavenly Father, not a hair can fall from my head; yea, that all

things must be subservient to my salvation: and therefore, by his Holy Spirit, he also assures me of eternal life, and makes me sincerely willing and ready henceforth to live unto him.<sup>1</sup>

Now what can of fruit does this kind of hope produce? Well, the point of Hebrews 6 is that we need to navigate the dangers of apostasy and apathy and spiritual dullness. How do we do that so that we through faith and patience inherit the promises? What kind of people do we need to be? What kind of fruit of hope produces the kind of person that perseveres? Let me put it to you in two words: solace and stability.

### The Fruit of Our Hope

*Solace.* “That we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us” (18). Not just consolation but strong consolation! Not just assurance but full assurance! If we really believe that God has promised eternal salvation in Christ, and that all who believe on him are heirs of the promise, not because of anything good in them but because of the sheer mercy and grace of God in Jesus, then we don’t just need to be getting by. If we know that God will surely keep his word and keep his people, then we don’t need to be living in fear of men or devils.

There is a great picture here in the text. It is the picture of someone fleeing to one of the cities of refuge. Do you remember what he is talking about? Under the Law of Moses, there were six cities total that were cities of refuge: three on one side of the Jordan and three on the other side. They were spaced out so that you could get to at least one of them in a day’s journey. They were for those who killed someone unintentionally – the example given in Exodus is two men chopping wood and

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<sup>1</sup>Zacharias Ursinus, Commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism, trans. by G. W. Williard (P&R, reprint, 1852), p. 17.

the axe head accidentally flies off the handle of one of the axes and kills the other man. Such people were allowed to flee to a city of refuge and remain there; as long as they remained there, the “avenger of blood” was not allowed to take their life. They were safe as long as they stayed there.

In the same way the Christian is one who has fled for refuge. Even though it is true that “here we have no continuing city, but we seek one to come” (Heb. 13:14), and that in the strictest sense the believer is still “looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God” (2 Pet. 3:12), and so in that sense we are still fleeing for refuge, yet in another sense, we have already obtained it, and I think that is the sense of the text here in Hebrews 6. Our refuge is in the hope that we have in Christ. Having laid hold of that, we have found refuge. We are like that manslayer who would have had to live in perpetual fear outside the walls of the city of refuge. Having found his place in it, he finds solace and comfort and peace and joy. That is what we find when we repose ourselves and our hopes in the Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Even though this hope is not in this world (for it “entereth into that within the veil” – a reference to the Holy of holies which was an earthly representation of God’s heavenly abode), yet this hope securely links us to that heavenly abode. Why? Because Jesus has gone before us and for us – he is the “forerunner” who has gone to prepare a place for us and to take us to himself (Jn. 14:1-3).

Our solace lies in the fact that our eternal future is not only secure, but it is supremely satisfying. The fact is, between here and there, between now and then, God is working all things for our good and his glory. God is for us; who can be against us? What greater solace could there be? He is our only hope in life and death – not our circumstances, not our accomplishments, not our earthly comforts and pleasures, not other people – but Christ, and Christ alone.

We need this solace because a person who is characterized by such consolation and peace will be exactly the kind of person who perseveres when he is surrounded by the threatening clouds of trials and tribula-



tion which so often pressure us to jettison our faith and hope in Christ for something else.

*Stability.* Our hope in Christ not only gives us solace but also stability. It gives us moral courage, and firmness when everything around us is giving way to fear and unbelief and sin. This hope is “as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil” (19). We don’t fix our hopes to changing things, which is what inevitably happens when you put your hopes in this world or in any aspect of this world. Rather, our hope is in Christ who changes not. Our hope is in heaven which is “an inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4). No matter what changes here, no matter how many of our plans are thwarted, no matter how many times we are disappointed by the people around us, God remains the same for us.

Because of the stability that our hope in Christ brings, let us endure. This is the argument in Hebrews 12: “And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: for our God is a consuming fire” (27-29).

It is exactly why Martin Luther prevailed through all the obstacles to his faithfulness. As he put it in his hymn,

*Let goods and kindred go,  
this mortal life also*

– why would you do that? Well, here is the reason:

*The body they may kill  
God’s truth abideth still  
his kingdom is forever.*

May the Lord make us more and more this kind of person: a person whose hope is an anchor for the soul, a hope which is grounded in the

sure realities of God's word, God's heart, God's truth, and God's Son. And may it produce in us that solace and stability so that we become the kind of person who through faith and patience inherits the great and wonderful promises of God.

# AFTER THE ORDER OF MELCHIZEDEK

## CHAPTER XXIII

### THE MYSTERIOUS MELCHIZEDEK (HEB. 7:1-10)

A FEW WEEKS AGO, I watched part of a video by a guy who claimed that Jesus was nowhere to be seen in the Old Testament, and that Christians are simply mistaken to think that their religion has any real connection to the faith of Abraham. There are many who would say that what Christians consider to be prophecies which Jesus fulfilled during his earthly life and ministry all admit of other interpretations, and that Jesus is not in fact pointed to by any OT Scripture.

However, there is a problem with this kind of approach to the connection between our Lord and the Hebrew Scriptures. The problem is that such claims start off by assuming that Jesus is not the Messiah, and if you assume that, of course you are going to be able to come up with alternate ways of reading OT passages that Christians say point to Jesus. An alternative is to look at Jesus himself, his life, and his claims, and especially his death and resurrection. We believe that Jesus rose from the dead and therefore vindicated his claims. What were his claims? He claimed to be the Son of God, the I AM from Exodus 3, the way, the

truth, and the life. These are not claims of a mere ordinary man. Moreover, his life as well as his death matched such claims. Someone who gives sight to the blind and raises the dead is no mere ordinary man. This is the Christ, the Son of the living God.

If you start there, and then look back into the Old Testament, you are going to find many, many pointers to our Lord. It is clear that this is the way the apostles worked with their Bibles. They didn't arrive at the conclusion that Jesus is the Christ by simply reading their Old Testaments and then figuring out that Jesus matched the description of the Messiah. It was mostly the other way round: they first realized they were face to face with the Messiah, and then read the OT in light of that reality.

It makes sense to look at it this way. If we suppose that salvation history is being gradually unfolded over time, from less clear to more clear, then it makes sense to read the OT in light of the NT. As it has often been said, "The New (Testament) is in the Old concealed; the Old is in the New revealed." It is a sound principle of interpretation to read the less clear in light of what is clearer.

At the same, that doesn't mean that the OT doesn't help to illuminate the NT in any way. It's not that the OT is opaque and the NT is transparent. In fact, the OT is crucial in understanding the NT, especially the work of Christ. The entire sacrificial system of the Mosaic covenant gives us a vocabulary with which to understand what happened on the cross when Jesus died. In the same way, the person of Melchizedek helps us to understand who Jesus is and why the Levitical priesthood was always meant to be a temporary institution. This is what our author is doing with the mysterious person.

These verses are basically an exposition of Gen. 14:18-20 and Ps. 110:4. Christ is the one being spoken of in Psalm 110, a Psalm that at least in our Lord's day was generally acknowledged to be about the Messiah (cf. Mt. 22:41-46). In that psalm, which is repeatedly referred to in the epistle to the Hebrews (cf. 5:6, 10; 6:20; 7:17), we are told that the Messiah is to be a priest after the order of Melchizedek (Ps. 110:4). This helps the argu-

ment of the epistle in the following way: it shows that the priesthood of the Messiah is not a Levitical priesthood and, therefore, the coming of the Messiah means the abrogation of the Mosaic Covenant. Furthermore, it shows that Jesus is superior to the Levitical priesthood because his priesthood, like that of Melchizedek, is eternal, whereas theirs was ended by death. To abandon the gospel is therefore to abandon Christ and to revert to an inferior state of affairs.

So what we have here in our text is this back-and-forth mutual illumination of the OT and NT. Since Jesus is the Christ, we now know who is being spoken of in Psalm 110: a case of the NT illuminating the OT. At the same time, the person of Melchizedek helps us to understand some things about the priesthood of Christ, especially as it relates to the priesthood under the Mosaic covenant and the superiority of the priesthood of our Lord in terms of its eternality: a case of the OT illuminating the NT.

However, to see how this works in this passage, we need to understand what is and is not being said about this strange fellow Melchizedek. In other words, we need to understand the first 10 verses of chapter 7. In particular, what we want to do in this message is to answer the following two questions: who is Melchizedek and what is his purpose in the OT Scriptures?

Who is Melchizedek?

There are only four verses in the entire Old Testament written about Melchizedek. There are three verses in Genesis 14 (ver. 18-20), and then there is Psalm 110:4. That's it. Here are the verses in Genesis, which, as Heb. 7:1 indicates, tell us about an incident that took place immediately after the slaughter of the kings by Abraham and his makeshift army. These were the kings who had previously defeated the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah and had taken Abraham's nephew Lot captive: "And Melchizedek king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed

be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: and blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he [Abraham] gave him [Melchizedek] tithes of all.”

Then there is Psalm 110:4, which reads, “The LORD hath sworn, and will not repent, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek.” The context of the psalm is telling of the one who is David’s Lord as well as David’s Son, to whom God will say, “Sit thou at my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool” (1).

And that’s it.

However, these few verses still tell us something and in the first three verses of Hebrews 7, our author explains what these OT texts reveal to us about this man. The big picture is that this man is one of the few individuals in the OT who was both a priest and a king. This comes out immediately in verse 1, where he is introduced to us as “Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the most high God.” In sum, he was a monarch, he was a minister, and he was mysterious.

He was a monarch.

First of all, he was a king. To be specific, he was the King of Salem. There has been some dispute about the location of this place, but the fact that in Psalm 76:2 Salem seems to be synonymous with Jerusalem tilts the scales in favor of the city which would later become the seat of the Davidic kingdom. In verse 2, the author goes on to explicate the significance of his role as king: “first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of Peace.” The name Melchizedek itself means “king of righteousness.” Then we are told that “Salem” means peace.

He doesn’t spell it out for us, perhaps because he knows that his audience is well acquainted with the OT identification of the Messiah in these terms. But these are terms that clarify the mission of the Messiah. So the prophet Isaiah writes, “For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given: and the government shall be upon his shoulder:

and his name shall be called Wonderful, Counselor, The mighty God, The everlasting Father, The Prince of Peace. Of the increase of his government there shall be no end, upon the throne of David, and upon his kingdom, to order it, and to establish it, with judgment and with justice from henceforth ever forever. The zeal of the LORD of hosts will perform this” (Isa. 9:6-7). In the same way, the prophet Jeremiah writes also about the Messiah: “Behold, the days come, saith the LORD, that I will raise unto David a righteous Branch, and a King shall reign and prosper, and shall execute judgment and justice in the earth. In his days Judah shall be saved, and Israel shall dwell in safety: and this is his name whereby he shall be called, THE LORD OUR RIGHTEOUSNESS” (Jer. 23:5-6). What is especially significant about these prophecies is that they tell us that the Messiah would not simply be a king himself characterized by righteousness and peace (though that is true), but the one through whom righteousness and peace would be brought into the world. By bearing these titles, Melchizedek was pointing not so much to himself as to the person and work of Jesus Christ who is King of Kings and Lord of lords.

He was a minister.

He was not only a king, but he was also a minister, not in the sense in which we often use that term today, but in the sense of a priest of the “most high God.” He was not a pagan priest, but a priest of the true God. It was in this capacity that he gave a blessing to Abraham (1, 6, 7). It was also in this capacity that he received from Abraham the tithe of the spoils of war (2, 4, 6, 8, 9). The author is intent on pointing out that the giving of the blessing and the receiving of the tithe prove that, as great as the patriarch Abraham was, Melchizedek was greater (4, 7). Indeed, we are told to “consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils” (4).



He was mysterious.

So far so good! But there are other things predicated about this man that are a little more puzzling. The fact of the matter is that this guy is just plain mysterious. Our author is going to build on that and make an important point about him. It comes in verse 3: Melchizedek, we are told, was “without mother, without father, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually.” At first, this looks like our author is saying that Melchizedek was never born and never died. In fact, in verse 8, we are told “And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth.” When you add to that the witness of Psalm 110:4, where the point of contact between the Messiah and Melchizedek is in an eternal priesthood, it sure sounds like Melchizedek was never born and never died. In other words, that he was not just a man.

Now the truth of the matter is that, throughout history, some Biblical interpreters have said just that. Some have identified him with an angelic figure. However, though Melchizedek was in several important ways greater than Abraham, he was just a man, which means that he had a father and a mother, a beginning and an end on this earth. There is no indication in the text that this was some angelic figure. No, he was a man like Abraham.

Others have tried to say that this was an example of the pre-incarnate Christ, which is tempting, given the numerous points of contact between the two. However, the problem with this theory is that our author precludes its possibility in verse 3, when he explicitly says that Melchizedek was “made like unto the Son of God.” “Like unto” is very different from “equal to” or “identical with,” which is what we would have to say if he was the pre-incarnate Christ. If he wasn’t an angel and he wasn’t a pre-incarnate Christ, then what is meant by all this language about having no parentage and no end of days and so on?

The key is that the phrase “without descent” really denotes “without priestly genealogy.” There is also evidence in ancient Greek literature that “without father” can mean “father unknown,” and so “without mother” would then mean something similar.<sup>1</sup> In other words, the point being made here is not that he literally had no father and mother, but that his father and mother were not recorded in any known genealogical record. Thus, his priesthood did not depend upon some genealogical succession. Now it is noteworthy that in Genesis where genealogical succession is so important (we can trace Abraham’s back to Adam!), nothing is said about Melchizedek. There must have been a reason for this, especially given the fact that we are told that he was a priest of the most high God. In other words, our author is not stretching the canons of Biblical interpretation by putting so much importance on the silence of the text about Melchizedek’s origins. This was a point meant to be made by the text itself.

We should then interpret the statements about his apparent deathlessness in the same way. It is not that Melchizedek never died; it is just that the text never reports that. The only time he appears in the text, he appears as a living man and that is the only way we meet with him in the history of Abraham. In other words, the way he is presented in the text of Scripture, where nothing is said about his parentage and nothing is said about his origin and nothing is said about his demise, all this is meant to make a point. The point being made is that this man was meant to be a type of Christ, who really does have an eternal priesthood.

The mystery of this man thus sets up an important contrast between Melchizedek – and thus the Christ – and the Levitical priesthood. The Levitical priesthood depended upon genealogical succession (cf. Ezra 7:1-6). It also ended upon the death of the priest. The Levitical priests don’t carry their office into eternity. So the fact that the Messiah would be like Melchizedek means that his priesthood could never be merely an extension of the Levitical priesthood. It was radically different – dif-

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<sup>1</sup>William Lane, *Hebrews 1-8* [WBC, vol. 47A], (Zondervan: Grand Rapids, 1991), p. 158.

ferent especially in terms of its origin and different in terms of its continuance.

So all this is meant to make two big points. The first big point is that Melchizedek was like Jesus in his priesthood, and the second big point is that he was different from the Levitical priesthood. Putting those two things together, our author will be able to make his main point in the following verses: that the Levitical priesthood is inferior to the priesthood of Jesus. Melchizedek was like Jesus in that his priesthood was a type of Christ's eternal priesthood. And he is different from the Levitical priesthood in that he does not have a succession-dependent priesthood. He is also like Jesus in that he is greater than Abraham – although of course Jesus is ultimately greater than Melchizedek himself! This truth also makes him different than the Levitical priests since being greater than Abraham makes him also greater than Abraham's descendants.

Now all of this will be unpacked further in the following verses. We simply want to point these things out as we explore what our author has to say about this mysterious person. But this leads us to our next main point.

Melchizedek tells us something very important about the purpose of the Old Testament.

It is sometimes easy to see the OT as a series of disconnected stories about interesting and sometimes very colorful people. The reality is that all the OT is meant to tell one story, and that story is the story of the redemption of sinful humanity fallen in Adam. It is the story of how God is working out his plan of redemption in history through the family of Abraham in accordance with the promises God made to him. Two things are, therefore, happening in the OT: first, God is working in history to bring about a Savior, a Savior who will be a descendent of Abraham. Second, God is progressively unfolding his plan of redemp-

tion, beginning with the books of Moses and then through the Prophets and the Psalms.

This being the case, the OT is really essentially unified around God's plan of redemption, which comes to us in its pages in God's words and works. The purpose of the history it relates and of its ethical teaching and doctrinal instruction is all meant to bring about faith in the God of Abraham who saves. This history and teaching will continue in the NT in the person and work of Jesus the Son of God, the son of Abraham, and in the teaching of his apostles. This is what the book of Hebrews teaches: the NT is the continuation of the message of the OT (Heb. 1:1). This means that, ultimately, the whole Bible, OT and NT, is about the person and work of Christ.

We see this illustrated in the man Melchizedek. His brief appearance in the pages of Scripture is not to satisfy morbid curiosity but to point us to Jesus Christ. His being a king points us to the righteousness-imputing and peace-bringing Savior. His being a priest points us to our Lord's atoning work on the cross to purge the guilt of our sins and to intercede for us in heaven. Even the mystery behind his origins and his future is meant to point us to the never-ending and eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ.

Now this doesn't mean that we read the OT allegorically, as if every detail was meant to convey a specific spiritual truth. For example, I'm not meant to read the story of David and Goliath and interpret the five smooth stones in terms of the Five Points of Calvinism! This would be to turn the OT into a nose of wax. But it does mean that we should read the OT in light of its overall purpose – to read it and to interpret it in light of God's overarching purpose of redemption in Christ. Thus the history of the OT shows us the faithfulness of God in keeping his promises, promises which all ultimately find their yes and amen in Christ. The teaching of the OT is meant to point us to the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man so that we will see our need of a Savior.

So the story of Melchizedek shows us how we should read our OT. It shows us that we should read it with a gospel focus, which means two things: we read the OT in light of NT realities, and then as we read the OT, we are seeking to understand how a particular text connects to the bigger story of redemption in Christ.

Of course, we can't do this if we don't read the OT! I often hear people say that the book of Hebrews is hard. Perhaps one of the reasons we find it difficult is because we spend so little time in Genesis – Malachi. We need to read the stuff before Matthew: remember that this is primarily what the Scriptures were for the early church. When Paul tells Timothy that all Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable, he was primarily referring to the OT (2 Tim. 3:16-17). What was profitable for Paul should be profitable for you and me!

It also shows us something else: that even the details of the OT are important! Four verses in the OT provide important and critical information about the person and work of our Lord. Even the silence about Melchizedek's origins is important! No space is wasted in the OT, indeed, in all the Bible. Beware of scanning over verses that may not seem important. Rather, pray for insight and ask the Lord to help you see the meaning and importance even of those obscure passages in the Bible. For there are no vestigial passages in the Bible.

So what's the bottom line here? The bottom line is that God is speaking in the Scriptures. That's what makes all this important. That's why we are seeking to understand the intricacies of the interpretation of this passage. It's why we're interested in the person of Melchizedek; it's because he is in the Bible and everything in the Bible is important. On the other hand, if God is not speaking in the Bible, then we're just wasting our time here. Who cares what this author thought about some mysterious character who barely shows up in the OT if it is not the word of God? The whole reason why you should be interested is because whatever God says, it's important, whether I see it at first or not, whether I see the relevance of it or not, whether I feel the reality of it upon me or not.

There are so many people talking today, so many blogs, so many podcasts, so many messages on social media. Most of it has very little, if any, real value or substance, but the claim of the Bible is that, in its words, God speaks. He is speaking from the first words of Genesis to the last word of Revelation. He not only spoke it into existence in the past, but the Holy Spirit continues to speak through it today, which means that this word is worthy of your most serious attention. I fear for those who yawn their way through the Bible, who think it is not important for them. Does that describe you? How much thought have you given to the claims of the Bible upon your life?

When you hear the Bible, you are hearing the word of God to you. You need to understand that, and you need to do something with that (cf. Mt. 7:24-27). Most importantly, you need to understand this word is not here to make you a self-righteous religious person who is a Bible expert; it is meant to tell you about the Son of God, Jesus Christ, so that you will trust in him as your Lord and as the only one who is able to wash away your sins, so that when you stand before God most high on the Day of Judgment you won't be trying to find a hole to crawl into or a mountain to fall on you, but find him to be for you the Rock of Ages. As the hymn puts it,

*While I draw this fleeing breath  
When mine eyes shall close in death  
When I soar to worlds unknown  
See Thee on Thy judgment throne  
Rock of Ages cleft for me  
Let me hide myself in Thee.*

God is speaking in all of Scripture the sweet and satisfying story of the gospel. It's in the Garden of Eden when man fell, in the promise of the serpent-crushing seed of the woman. We see it in Noah's ark. We see it in Melchizedek. We see it in the lamb slain on Passover night. We see it in the reign of David. We see it in the predictions of the prophets and the longings of the psalmists. All the music of the Bible is there for

you to hear, and it is gospel music, inviting you to see and savor Jesus Christ. Oh, taste and see that the Lord is good! Blessed are they that put their trust in him (Ps. 34:8).

## CHAPTER XXIV

### A NEW PRIESTHOOD (HEB. 7:11-19)

THERE ARE TWO THINGS HAPPENING in the verses of our text. First, in verses 11-17, we are given three pieces of evidence that the Levitical priesthood (and thus the law of Moses) has been exchanged for a new priesthood. The reasons are, because of (1) the time in which the order of Melchizedek is reestablished (ver. 11-12), (2) the tribe from which the order of Melchizedek comes (ver. 12-14), and (3) the type of priest which describes the order of Melchizedek (ver. 15-17).

The second thing that is given here is the reason why the priesthood is being changed (ver. 18-19). The fundamental reason, as we shall see, is that the law made nothing perfect. This argument actually bookends the text in verses 11 and 19 and so constitutes the main and fundamental idea in this paragraph.

We need to step back and ask ourselves why this is relevant for the twenty-first century person. Why should anyone care about some arcane argument about orders of priesthood and why one is passing away and giving place to another? Why should we care about the passing away of the Mosaic institution of the Aaronic priesthood? It doesn't seem to be important or relevant – maybe what is more important are issues



like social justice and poverty and drug abuse and so on. Why don't we deal with that instead? Aren't we wasting time here? Well, obviously, I don't think we are wasting time in considering the argument of this text, and I want to show you why it is not only of interest to theologians but vitally important for everyone in this room.

Evidence the priesthood is being changed:

First of all, let's consider the argument of the text. What is the author saying here? He has just been telling us what sort of person Melchizedek was, and how he differed from the Levitical priesthood (1-10). He is now going to work out the implications of the Biblical text, especially that of Psalm 110:4. The main, overarching theme here is that the priesthood of Aaron is being replaced by the order of Melchizedek. We have statements like that in verse 12, "For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law." Or that in verse 18, "For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof." In both of these passages, the point is that the Levitical priesthood and the laws in the Mosaic covenant that established it are being changed and replaced by a different priestly order, namely, the order of Melchizedek.

That is a huge thing. For the Law of Moses was sacrosanct to the Jew. This was the word of God spoken to Moses on Mount Sinai. There was no doubt about that to these folks. So if the law of Moses is being changed in any sense, you had better have some good pieces of evidence for this. Our author has some, three in fact.

Evidence 1: the time in which the order of Melchizedek is reestablished (11-12)

The first piece of evidence is that, according to Psalm 110:4, which was written hundreds of years after the establishment of the Levitical priesthood, there would arise a new priest, a Messianic priest, after the order of Melchizedek: "If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was

therefore that another priest should rise after the order of Melchizedek, and not be called after the order of Aaron?” (11). The fact that a different order of priest is predicted to come indicates that the Levitical priesthood was not perfect. For if it were, why would there be any need for a priest from a different order? Why fix something if it isn’t broken?

In verse 12, we note in passing that you cannot change the priesthood without changing the law which establishes it – in this case, the Mosaic Law. This argument is going to be further developed in the next chapter, that the Christian does not relate to God through the Mosaic (or Old) Covenant but through the New Covenant established through the redemption accomplished by Christ.

Evidence 2: the tribe from which the order of Melchizedek comes (13-14).

The next line of evidence that something is changing is that the priest after the order of Melchizedek does not come from the line of Aaron. This is something that has already been said (6), but it is reiterated here: “For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah: of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood” (13-14). Now the point is basically that the order of Melchizedek is just that: it is the order of Melchizedek and not the order of Aaron. The Levitical priesthood depended on one being related to Levi, and in particular to Aaron. The order of Melchizedek is not related to Aaron in any way. Moreover, the author points out that the Messiah comes from Judah. He is not only referring in verse 14 to prophecies which foretold this fact, but to the historical fact itself. The Messiah, the Lord, had come, and he had arisen from the tribe of Judah. He is the son of David, not the son of Aaron. So his priesthood is a different priesthood and necessitates a change in the law.

Evidence 3: the type of priest which defines the order of Melchizedek (15-17).

The whole Levitical institution was an institution based on “the law of a carnal commandment” (16). The word “carnal” means “made of flesh or human.” In other words, it was a merely human institution in terms of who served as priests, and as such it was defined by the one thing that all humans experience, namely, death. That death is in view here in the word “carnal” [so that it carries with it the idea of mortality] is seen in what it is contrasted with: “the power of an endless life” (16).

In contrast with the Levitical priests who die, the Melchizedekian priest is a priest who is made so “after the power of an endless life.” The reference is to Psalm 110: “For he testifieth, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (17).

When you look at it this way, the contrast between priests who die and a priest who lives forever, it is obvious, “yet far more evident” (15), that the Levitical priesthood must make way for the order of Melchizedek and the ministry of Christ. That which is subjected to death must inevitably be replaced by that which is characterized by an indestructible life.

Very well, so the Levitical priesthood is going to be replaced and changed. There is ample Biblical and historical evidence for that. Now the question is, why? Why would God replace something he put in place to begin with? And that brings us to our next point.

Why the priesthood is being changed.

As we’ve noted before, the reason for this is stated at the beginning and at the end of this paragraph. In verse 11, the author implies that perfection is not by the Levitical priesthood. In verse 19, he states it outright: “for the law made nothing perfect.”

In verse 18, we see what is meant by this lack of perfection: “For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weak-

ness and unprofitableness thereof.” The law – and the priesthood defined by the law – could make nothing perfect because it was weak and unprofitable (“useless or harmful”).

Why was an institution as divine as the priesthood under the Mosaic Covenant weak and useless? This seems to be a problem – God doesn’t create worthless institutions; it would be blasphemous to say so. So the fact of the matter is that we must never think that the Levitical institution as such was weak or worthless and that it needed replacement like our current tax code with its many problems needs to be replaced. No, the problem is not with the priesthood itself.

The weakness of the law comes from its being used in ways it was not meant to be used. The Levitical priesthood is weak when it is looked to for that which it cannot deliver. A butter knife is good if you use it to cut butter, but try using it to cut down a Redwood and it is weak and unprofitable. The law in terms of the priesthood and the sacrificial system was only meant to be temporary and to point ahead to the coming of Christ, who would do what the law could only prefigure. For that, it was perfect, but it was never meant to be something which, by itself, could deliver a person from their sin and guilt. People were not saved under the Old Covenant by keeping the law; they were saved when they looked through the law to the One foretold who would come and take away their sins.

This point is made throughout the book of Hebrews: the law cannot bring perfection in the sense of our conscience before God. So, in 9:9, we read that in the tabernacle “were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience.” In 10:1-2, “For the law having a shadow of things to come, and not the very image of those things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. For then would they not have ceased to be offered? Because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins” (see also 10:14-18). The law and the priesthood cannot truly take

away the guilt of our sins and, therefore, cannot provide any real and lasting relief for consciences burdened by sin.

On the other hand, Christ has decisively dealt with our sin and guilt by taking our guilt and bearing it and purging it by his sacrificial death upon the cross for us. The Son of God who has become for us sinners a priest after the order of Melchizedek brings in for us “a better hope . . . by the which we draw nigh unto God” (19). The priesthood is being changed, not only because the Levitical order is weak but because Christ is a priest according to the power of an indestructible life who can do what the law cannot do (cf. Rom. 8:3).

Now why is this relevant?

Why should you be interested in this? You should be interested in this because the passing away of the Levitical priesthood means that the reality to which it pointed has come. That reality is Jesus Christ. He is of ultimate and supreme importance because he is the only one who can bring in this “better hope . . . by the which we draw nigh unto God.”

This is relevant for those of you who feel that any type of spirituality is all a person needs in order to live a life that is pleasing to God. Or that any type of spirituality is evidence of belonging to God and being saved. The author of Hebrews is saying that this is just not so. Here were people who were thinking about abandoning the Christian faith – which is the fulfilment of the OT faith – for Judaism without Jesus. Maybe one of things they were thinking is that at least that religion was divinely sanctioned and, if they go back to that, it must not be all that bad.

Here’s the thing: now that Christ has come, to forsake the reality and go back to the shadows is an act of unbelief and even of rebellion against God. Even abiding by the terms of the Mosaic religion apart from faith in Christ is now an act of disobedience to God since he has abrogated it and annulled because his Son has fulfilled its types. To honor God we

must honor his Son and you cannot do that in a Christless Judaism. As the apostle John puts it: “Whosoever denieth the Son, the same hath not the Father: [but] he that acknowledgeth the Son hath the Father also” (1 Jn. 2:23).

Hence, we must not think that God accepts just any type of spirituality. This is so easily believable here in the West because our culture has programmed us to believe that we get to decide “our truth.” We’ve come to believe that it is impolite to say that another person’s religion is wrong or false. But here’s the thing: even the claim that “because truth is relative therefore all religions are relative and are different ways of relating to God” is itself a claim that poses as absolute truth.

It’s like the problem of the parable of the blind men and the elephant. In the parable, one blind man holds the elephant by the trunk and says that elephants are like snakes. Another blind man holds the elephant by the ear and says that elephants are like leaves. Another holds it by the leg and says that they are like trees. And so on. The lesson is that all the blind men are saying true things about the elephant and that different religions relate to God the way these blind men relate to the elephant. The problem with this parable is that it requires the person telling it to see the whole elephant. In other words, the parable only makes sense if one knows what an elephant looks like to begin with. In the same way, to say that all religious beliefs have a claim on the truth about God supposes that you know the whole truth about God. If you claim that no one can know what God is really like and that all religions approach God like blind men to an elephant – how do you know this? For you are claiming to know something about God, not in a relative way but in an absolute way. You may argue that any religion which claims to be true to the exclusion of other religions is being arrogant, but how can you escape this arrogance as well? For you too are making a claim that poses as an absolute and exclusive truth claim.

No one can escape making truth claims that are in some measure exclusive. So it does not follow that the exclusive claim that Christ is the only way to God must be false because it is so offensively exclusive. What

we should really ask is not whether the Christian religion is making exclusive truth claims, but whether or not there is evidence that they are true.

This is what we ought to be seeking. Not whether a religion – or the lack of one – makes us feel comfortable, but whether or not this religion is true. We shouldn't therefore judge the quality of a person's spirituality by their zeal (cf. Rom. 10:1-2) or even by their good works (cf. Galatians). We should judge the quality of a person's spirituality by whether or not that spirituality actually brings them into a relationship with the true God.

The Christian faith is a faith which is based upon the historical reality that Jesus Christ rose from the dead. When the author of Hebrews says that "it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Judah" (14), he is referring to historical realities. It's not based on a vision some guy had in secret. It is not based on theories that can't be tested or proven. If it could be proved that Jesus never rose from the dead then, as the apostle Paul himself put it, our faith would be in vain (1 Cor. 15:13-19). But when you consider the evidence for it – if you don't assume a world-view (like philosophical materialism) that automatically rules it out – then I believe the evidence for it is overpowering. There is no better explanation than the physical resurrection of Jesus from the dead for the facts surrounding the death of Jesus and the empty tomb and the post-mortem appearances of Jesus to the disciples and the courageous boldness of the early church beginning in first-century Judea.

If Jesus rose from the dead – and he did! – then there is no alternative to the Christian religion if you truly want to have a relationship with God. As he himself put it, he is the way, the truth, and the life, and no one comes to the Father except through him (Jn. 14:6). And as the text of Hebrews puts it, Jesus brings a "better hope" that enables us to draw near to God.

This is also relevant for those of you who feel that a merely formal Christian faith is enough. What do I mean by "a merely formal Christian faith"? I mean a person whose faith is nothing more than an intel-

lectual adherence to certain truths of the Bible, but whose heart knows nothing of real love to Christ and devotion to him. The apostle Paul speaks of those who have a form of godliness but deny the power thereof (2 Tim. 3:5). This is a person who is all about being orthodox but who doesn't understand the necessity of a prayer life, who knows how to hate false teachers but who doesn't know how to love God's people, let alone God himself.

There is a picture of this kind of person in 3 John. The apostle John writes about a man named Diotrephes. This is what John says of him: "I wrote unto the church: but Diotrephes, who loveth to have the pre-eminence among them, receiveth us not. Wherefore, if I come, I will remember his deeds which he doeth, prating against us with malicious words: and not content therewith, neither doth he himself receive the brethren, and forbiddeth them that would, and casteth them out of the church. Beloved, follow not that which is evil, but that which is good. He that doeth good is of God: but he that doeth evil hath not seen God" (3 Jn. 9-11). Here was a man who was "evil" and had "not seen God," and yet who held a prominent position in the church – just where he liked to be! Here was a man who apparently knew how to be orthodox in doctrine but whose life did not reflect that doctrine. That is what we mean by a merely formal Christian faith. It is not a saving faith, but it is a look-alike in the sense that a person can say all the right things without those things ever really getting into the heart and changing the affections of that person.

What does this have to do with our text? Well, the fundamental thing that Jesus Christ does as our high priest is that he brings us near to God (19). Now it is not that no one in under the Old Covenant could draw near to God. But those who did, did so because they were able to see the grace of God in a coming Messiah, the one pointed to in the law and the priesthood. The law itself reminded people of their distance from God. The very fact that there was a priesthood that had to interpose between people and God and the division of the tabernacle and Temple which kept even the priest out of the immediate presence of God except



once a year – all this was there to remind people of the sin that separated them from God and kept them at a distance from him. All that has been changed in Christ. He tore the curtain between the holiest place and the rest of the Temple, and he makes his people a kingdom of priests unto God.

That is not just a positional reality but a reality that every child of God experiences in some way. So ask yourself: do you draw near to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ? Do you walk with him and before him? Can you say, with the psalmist, “But it is good for me to draw near to God: I have put my trust in the Lord GOD, that I may declare all thy works” (Ps. 73:28)? Is it good for you? Or is it a chore for you?

Now I’m not saying that this all comes down to prayer or that this means that a true Christian always finds prayer to be easy. I think it was Martyn Lloyd-Jones who said that prayer is one of the most difficult things a Christian can do. I have found that to be true. But the difficulty should not lie in a lack of desire to do it. If you’re a child of God, you should want to be near your Father. There is, in fact, some inevitability to prayer in the life of a true Christian; John Gill said that prayer is the breath of a regenerate man. Does that ring true with you? Or can you go through your whole day, day after day, with never a thought about God or a desire to please him and to be in his presence? If so, you need to examine yourself, to see whether you are in the faith. A mere intellectual faith is neither pleasing to God nor saving.

This is also relevant for those of you who feel that your sin and your weakness overwhelm you and that you cannot find your refuge in a holy God. Jesus is the one by whom we can draw near to God. He does not just make it possible; he doesn’t just put us in a position where we can try to make it up to God on our own – no, he himself brings us into the presence of God, not to be our judge but to be our Father. He gives us hope, a better hope. This is not describing just a feeling that a person experiences, or even a powerful spiritual experience. All sorts of people can have those sorts of things and be completely lost. No, my

friend, quite apart from your own feelings, whether you feel yourself to be spiritually whole or spiritually inept, Jesus Christ brings those who put their trust in him into the presence of God.

We draw nigh, not by a reliance upon our goodness but by a reliance upon his goodness. In the Bible, coming to God through Christ is a coming by faith in Christ (Jn. 6:35; Heb. 11:6), and this is a faith which does not look to ourselves but which looks away from ourselves. This is a faith which is the hand of the beggar opened toward the grace and mercy of God in Christ. This is a faith which recognizes that God does not justify the godly but the ungodly because there is a righteousness outside of ourselves which satisfies the just claims of God upon us (Rom. 4:5). So let us be like Paul, who said of himself – and may we join him! – that he wanted to “be found in him [that is, in Christ], not having mine own righteousness, which is of the law, but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness of God by faith” (Phil. 3:9).

So how should we respond to this text? Let us not respond by saying that this is of no relevance, for it is eternally relevant! Neither let us respond by thinking that we can approach God on our own terms and in our own strength and goodness. No! Let us rather respond with faith in Christ, in his merit and in his mediatorship, in his priesthood and in his promise. For it is through him that we have the inexpressible privilege of drawing near to God as our Father and friend.

## CHAPTER XXV

# JESUS: OUR ONLY HIGH PRIEST (HEB. 7:20-28)

WHAT IS ALL THIS TO-DO ABOUT PRIESTS and priest-hoods in the book of Hebrews? It sounds so unmodern. Or perhaps it even sounds like a foreign religion. Maybe to some of our ears it sounds Roman Catholic or Greek Orthodox. However, the reality is that the message of the New Testament and the message of the Christian church and the gospel is incomprehensible apart from the realities behind and around priests and their responsibilities and functions. If we really want to appreciate the message of our text, we need to remind ourselves what a priest is and why we need them.

A priest is fundamentally a person who stands as a mediator between men and God. If we think in terms of the Old Testament priesthood, a priest was someone who took an offering, a sacrifice, and offered it to God for you, so that God would accept it from your hands. There were many reasons an Israelite would offer a sacrifice: there were sacrifices of thanksgiving, sacrifices of consecration to God (burnt offering). And then there were offerings that were explicitly sin and trespass offerings. The reality is that every offering, no matter what the reason for it, was an acknowledgement of sin. This is what our author says, for example,

in Heb. 10:3. Every time you offered an animal sacrifice, you put your hand on the animal as the priest killed it and offered it to God (see Lev. 1:4; 3:2, 8,13; 4:4, etc.). Why would they do that? They did that because it was an acknowledgement that this animal was dying in their place, an acknowledgement of both their sinfulness and that this animal's death was happening because sin has to be purged by death. The wages of sin, as the apostle Paul puts it in Romans, is death, and the debt of sin must be paid (Rom. 6:23).

Nevertheless, why would people think they needed a priest and needed to offer blood sacrifices? The reality is that blood sacrifices were part and parcel of the ancient world, whether inside or outside of Israel. Animals were slaughtered by the thousands for religious purposes in the ancient world. The meat in the meat markets were often left-overs from religious ceremonies in pagan temples – it was this fact that led to some difficulties for early Christians who weren't sure whether or not they should eat such meat. But why would people think they needed to do all that?

The main reason people offered sacrifices is, they believed that God (or the gods) needed to be appeased and the way they appeased God (or the gods) was through blood sacrifices. Ancient people didn't generally offer these sacrifices themselves directly to God; they did so through priests. This is because people who lived in the ancient world understood something that modern man has somehow forgotten: there is a gulf that separates man from God. This distance that separates us from God is not a distance created by God being unknowable but it is a distance created by God being holy and unapproachable.

In other words, especially in light of the Biblical teaching, the reason for priests is sin. And sin is a problem because God is holy. God is holy and God is just; he cannot fellowship with sin and he must and will punish sin and the sinner. As the prophet Isaiah put it, "Behold, the LORD's hand is not shortened, that it cannot save; neither his ear heavy, that it cannot hear: but your iniquities have separated between you and

your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isa. 59:1-2).

The fundamental property of sin is that it is against God. Sin is rebellion against the Creator. It is refusing to bow the knee and acknowledge his rights over us. It is a refusal to obey the One to whom we owe our obedience. It is trying to define reality on our own instead of conforming ourselves to the reality that God has created. Like saying that a man can be a woman or a woman can be a man. Or saying that we get to decide when a human being gets the right to live. Or saying that if something feels good to us, then for that reason it must be good. All this is sin and rebellion against God’s rightful sovereignty over us. God will have none of it.

Such is the blindness and treachery of our willful rebellion against God that, instead of owning up to and admitting our guilt and sin, we ignore it or cover it up. Worse still, we turn the tables and try to blame God. It is a fool’s errand.

Our culture sees no need for a priesthood and priests because we want the wrong person to be justified. What I mean is this: we are so consumed with the “problem” of evil and suffering, and the injustice of it all, that we have missed the greatest problem of all, our own sin. We spend our days either condemning or denying God on account of “injustices” that we no longer see our own condemnation and the infinitely heinous injustice we have perpetrated against God in our sin. We think God needs to be justified. We have forgotten that we are the ones who need to be justified.

Further, God does not need to justify his ways to us. Why does he allow so much suffering? Why did he allow sin to come into the world in the first place? Of course, many will say that God must be either unloving or not sovereign. God’s own word tells a different story, of course, which leaves us with perplexing questions: how can such a good and holy and omnipotent God rule over so much chaos and criminality? God’s word denies that he is unloving or unholy or unable. He could have kept the world in sinless perfection if he had wanted to. But he

does not tell all us the whys or hows. And he does not have to. Because he is God, and you are not.

Whereas God does not have to answer to you or me, we have to answer to him. The fact is, we are traitors. We owe God everything, and we have taken his good gifts and turned them into idols. We have not been thankful. We have not been good. Our minds and thoughts and affections have been very much anti-God. Why should he have to answer to us? We must answer to him. And we are sinners, naked before the eyes of him with whom we have to do.

God does not need to be justified. You do. How will you appear before God? With arguments and accusations? I dare say, all your accusations will appear criminal in themselves when you are finally confronted with the holiness of God. Until we drop our frivolous case against God and realize that we already stand justly condemned in the court of the Sovereign of the universe, we will never truly understand or appreciate the gospel. We need to stop trying to get God to justify himself, and face the reality that you need to be justified by God.

It is when we understand this that we will see the need for a mediator. Whether or not we put it in priestly language does not matter. We will see that we cannot justify ourselves, and therefore we cannot approach God on our own. We need someone to interpose for us. We need a priest.

This is what the gospel is fundamentally about. It is the good news that we can approach God, that we can in hope draw near to God, that we can be at peace with God, because Jesus Christ came to be our high priest. The gospel says this: it is the good news that God has come into the world, not to be justified, but to justify. He has come to make sinners right with himself. And the way he has done that is through his own Son, Jesus Christ, who took our sin on himself and paid the debt in our place. He became simultaneously the priest and the offering. He was everything the OT priesthood pointed toward. When a sinner places his or her faith in the Son, God's word says that they are justified, and that is what every single human being on earth needs right now.

The best news in the world is that Jesus Christ is a high priest. However, in light of the thousands of priests that have existed in the history of the world, why Jesus Christ? Why is he not only a superior priest, but also the only priest that we need? This is the issue our text addresses. In particular, it gives us three reasons why you should look to Jesus Christ and to Christ alone as your priest before God. These three reasons can be briefly summarized in the words promise, perpetuity, and purity. These three realities in turn are tied to three acts of God in history: revelation, resurrection, and incarnation.

Promise anchored in Revelation (20-22)

The first reason you should embrace Jesus Christ as your priest before God and no one else is because of the promise of God ordaining him as such. I am using the word “promise” but the actual word used in the text is “oath.” However, the two words are related: an oath, after all, is by definition simply a solemn promise. What raises Jesus Christ above all other priests is that he was made a priest by God the Father with a promise-oath, which distinguishes him not only from the Levitical priests but from every other kind of priest as well. This is the argument of verses 20-22: “And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: (for those [Levitical] priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord swore [an oath] and will not repent, Thou art a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek:) by so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament.”

We noted in our message on the last part of chapter 6 that God really doesn’t need to give oaths. We give oaths in solemn venues, like a court-case, because men are basically liars. We can’t be trusted to tell the truth. So we are put under oath in order to put some kind of external pressure on us to tell the truth. But God always tells the truth. He doesn’t need any arm-twisting to speak the truth. Nor does he ever go back on his word or fail to keep his promises. Hence, the reason for the oath is not for his but for our sake. God gives these promise-oaths in order to help

us understand just how committed he is to doing what he has said he will do.

Thus, by this oath our Lord becomes the “surety” or “guarantor” of a better covenant (the Greek word is *diatheke* which can mean both “testament” or “covenant”). Jesus is the personal guarantee that God will bring about the promises of the covenant through his priesthood because God has appointed him as priest by an oath.

We will look at this in more detail in the next chapter, but the reference here to the “better testament” is the new covenant foretold by the prophet Jeremiah in the 31st chapter of his prophesy. The fundamental promise of that covenant is, “I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people” (Heb. 8:10). In other words, the covenant is all about God bringing sinners into a saving relationship with him. The fact that Jesus is the surety of the covenant means that he is the one whom God has appointed to satisfy the conditions upon which this amazing promise becomes a reality. The way he satisfies those conditions is through his office as a priest – in other words, by his atoning death on the cross.

So why should we approach God through faith in Christ? And why should we eschew any other way of relating to God? We should do so because God made him alone to be our high priest and he did so with an oath. In doing so, he abrogated the Levitical priesthood by the priesthood of Christ. Any other priest is just a phony.

How do we know that God did this? We know it because God has revealed it to us in Scripture. Remember, where is this “said”? It is said in the book of Psalms, in Psalm 110. It is said and written in the Bible. I’m not now making an argument for the authority of Scripture. I’m assuming it. Right now, I’m speaking to folks who agree that the Old and New Testaments are God’s inspired and inerrant word to men. We believe that what God speaks in the Bible is true. And what he has said there is that there is one and only high priest through whom we can approach God and relate to God, and that is Jesus Christ. God the Father put his own Son in that office and no one else. The Bible is not about what we do to make ourselves worthy of God. It is about what God has



done in Jesus Christ to make us worthy before God by his own perfect and saving righteousness.

If someone claims to be someone who can represent me before a judge in a court of law, I want to know that that person is properly qualified. I might want to peek at his or her law degree, for example. I might want to know that they are a licensed attorney. It is infinitely more important to know that someone who claims to be able to represent me before God is qualified. There are so many charlatans out there, false Christs. Jesus is the Christ and he is absolutely qualified – precisely because the Judge of all the earth, God the Father himself, made him so, and has made it known to us in Scripture. Look to Jesus and look no further!

#### Perpetuity revealed by Resurrection (23-25)

This is one the big points of this chapter: according to Psalm 110, our Lord is not only a high priest ordained by God with an oath, but he is so forever. “And they [that is, the Levitical priests] truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: but this man, because he continueth forever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them” (23-25).

Now it’s not that Jesus didn’t die! He did die, and in that way he is like these other priests. By the way, Islam, which claims to believe that Jesus was a prophet and even the Christ refuses to believe that he died. They reject this about him, and they do so because they don’t believe that he is the Son of God who came to earth to atone for the sins of his people. But he did die and was buried in a tomb. There is no way the Romans would have had him taken down from the cross if he had merely looked dead or had fainted. Remember that one of the soldiers put his spear through the side of Christ to make sure that he was dead. Make no mistake: Jesus died.

However, the difference between our Lord and the Aaronic priests (and every other priest as well) is that he rose from the dead, never the die again. Here we have another evidence that his atoning work, his sacrifice, was accepted by God. If he had not been successful in bearing and purging the sins of men, he would never have arisen and ascended to heaven to be seated at God's right hand. But he did rise and he did ascend and he is seated at God's right hand!

The great significance of this is underlined in verse 25. Because Christ is an everlasting priest with an unchanging priesthood, that means that "he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them." I take this to mean that the perpetual priesthood of Christ is a guarantee that those who trust in him ["come unto God by him"] will never be lost. This is because he not only died for them and put away their sins forever in one sacrifice, but also continues to intercede for them and to present before the Father the eternal efficacy of his finished work.

To see how this works, consider what our Lord told the apostle Peter. Peter, our Lord knew, was about to deny him and Satan was behind it. The devil was going about like a roaring lion, seeking to devour this apostle, but he would not be successful. Why? Because Jesus was praying and interceding for him. "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: but I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Lk. 22:31-32). In other words, the fact that Peter didn't finally fall away is due ultimately, not to Peter's own resilience, but to the intercession of Christ for him. It follows that if the Savior who intercedes for his people never dies and ever lives to make intercession for them, they cannot fall finally away. (It also follows, by the way, that to deny the final perseverance of the saints is to derogate the work of Christ for them.)

There is a great illustration of this in *The Pilgrim's Progress* by John Bunyan. While in the Interpreter's house, Christian is shown a fire in a fireplace, and in front of the fire was a man throwing water on it,

trying to put it out. However, the funny thing was that the fire, instead of being quenched, burned “higher and hotter.” Then the Interpreter took Christian around to the back, and there was a man pouring oil on the fire. The interpretation was this: the fire represented the grace of God in the heart of man. The devil was the man trying to put the fire out. Why then did it burn higher and hotter? Because Christ is on the other side pouring oil on the fire, even though he did so behind the fireplace unseen – representing the fact that often we know not where the grace comes from that keeps our hearts in tune. He is there, praying for us and working in us by his Spirit and word. He not only saves those who come unto God by him, he saves them to the uttermost. He saves us from every sin and he keeps us saved – to the uttermost!

This is the reason why Paul exults in the intercession of Christ for his elect as the crowning glory of his redemptive work: “What shall we say to these things? If God be for us, who can be against us? He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things? How shall lay anything to the charge of God’s elect? It is God that justifieth. Who is he that condemneth? It is Christ that died, yea rather, that is risen again, who is even at the right hand of God, who also maketh intercession for us?” (Rom. 8:31-34). It is a reason we should exult too.

Why should you come to God by Jesus Christ and by Christ alone? It is because he is the only one who stands between men and God in an unchangeable priesthood. He ever lives to make intercession for them. Therefore he is able to save us with an eternal salvation.

#### Purity exercised through Incarnation (26-28)

Finally, the sinless purity of our Lord is highlighted in these verses. You know, the thing about the ancient gods is that so often they were just like the people who were supposed to worship them (if not worse!). But not so our Lord. He is very much unlike us in this way, and you see this partly in the reactions of people to Jesus in the gospels. Often

their reaction is one of fear, because we fear that which is not like us. However, like the lion Aslan in Lewis' *Chronicles of Narnia*, our Lord is not tame by human standards, but he is good. And in that lies his supreme fitness to be our Savior.

This is the point of verses 26-28: "For such an high priest became us" – let's stop here for a moment. The language here does not mean that Jesus became us in the sense of becoming human. He did so, of course, a point that is made at length in chapter 2. The meaning here is that it was fitting for Jesus to be our high priest. In other words, he is the perfect high priest for us. Now the question is, how does the author make the case that he is the best and most fitting priest of us sinners?

Let's read the rest of the passage. Our Lord is the best and most fitting priest for us because he is "holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for their own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated forevermore" (26-28).

The obvious emphasis in these verses is on the purity of our Lord. He is separate from sinners, not in the sense that he has nothing to do with them for he is the friend of sinners, but because he is "holy, harmless, undefiled." He doesn't need to make an offering for his sin because he never sinned. He was made sin for us who knew no sin that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21). It was because he knew no sin that he was able to be made sin for us – not by being made sinful but by becoming our substitute before God, our sin offering, and bearing the punishment due to our sin. This makes him very different from the Levitical priesthood – and every other type of priest in any religion – for they are characterized by "infirmity" (28), which, as we've noted before, is not just physical infirmity but also moral infirmity and weakness. Not so Jesus.

Of course he did this as a true man. “The only Redeemer of God’s elect is the Lord Jesus Christ who being the eternal Son of God, became man, and so was and continues to be God and man in two distinct natures and one person forever” (Westminster Shorter Catechism). He wrote the law but he was born under the law so that he could keep it in our place. He did so perfectly. Having fulfilled the law in its demands for obedience, he was then able to fulfill the law in its demands for justice. As such he is our perfect high priest.

So what should we do? How should we respond to this? In verse 19, we are told that Jesus Christ brings a better hope by which we draw near to God. In verse 25, we are told that he saves to the uttermost those who come unto God by him. How do we draw near to God? How do we come to God? We do so by Jesus Christ and by Christ alone. There is no other way, yes. This is not bad news; this is the best news. God did not have to provide a way back to him. But he has. It is not the way that so many religions dictate – by becoming a better person – rather, we come to God through Jesus Christ who as our high priest is the one mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:4). So we sing, as we do in the hymn,

*Come ye sinners, poor and needy,  
Weak and wounded, sick and sore,  
Jesus ready stands to save you,  
Full of pity, love, and power.  
I will arise and go to Jesus  
He will embrace me in his arms  
In the arms of my dear Savior  
Oh, there are ten thousand charms!*

*Jeremiah Bass*

# A NEW COVENANT

## CHAPTER XXVI

### CHRIST'S HEAVENLY PRIESTHOOD (HEB. 8:1-5)

WE COME IN THESE VERSES to what our author calls “the sum” of “the things which we have spoken” (1). There are several meanings that this word “sum” can have, as in a sum of money or the main point or essence of an argument. However, there is another meaning which it can take, and that is the idea of the summit of an argument. I think that very well may be the idea here: what we have in these verses is not only the sum of the argument but the summit of the argument. It is the summit in the sense that, at this point in the epistle, we are brought to the pinnacle of our Lord’s priesthood. We are not to find the capstone of our Lord’s work on the cross or in the tomb but in his position as the ascended Lord of lords and King of kings.

The main idea, therefore, that our author is asserting in the first five verses is that our Lord’s priesthood is a heavenly priesthood, in contrast with the earthly ministry of the Levitical priests. Thus we are told, “We have such an high priest” – this is a reference back to 7:26-28, where our Lord is described in terms of his purity (26) and in terms of the perfection of his offering (27-28) – “who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; a minister of the sanctuary,

and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man" (8:1-2). The "sanctuary" and the "true tabernacle" is a reference to heaven, where our Lord now ministers as our high priest, where he continually is presenting the blood of his offering before his Father for our sakes and interceding for us (7:25). The tabernacle in which he now ministers is "true" in the sense that the tabernacle and temple on earth pointed to it.

In this heavenly tabernacle, Jesus ministers: the word in verse 2 (*leitourgos*) is a word that refers to the work of a priest, and priests offer sacrifices. This involves not only killing the sacrifice but also, as in the Day of Atonement, taking some of the blood and bringing it into the Holy of Holies and sprinkling it upon the Mercy Seat, the lid on top of the Ark of the covenant. This is what verse 3 picks up on: "For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer." What is our Lord doing in heaven? He is doing what the Levitical high priest merely prefigured: he is presenting the efficacy of his redemptive work upon the cross in heaven. He is not bringing into the true Holy Place the blood of goats and calves – he is bringing in his own blood (cf. 9:11-14). This is the picture which we get in a very symbolic fashion in Rev. 5:6: "And I beheld, and, lo, in the midst of the throne and of the four beasts, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent forth into all the earth." How does our Lord present himself in heaven? He does so as the "Lamb as it had been slain."

This is all in contrast with the Mosaic institution of the priesthood in two very important ways. Their priesthood was merely an earthly priesthood: "Now if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law" (4). Their priesthood was merely a figurative priesthood: "Who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount" (5).



Jesus, on the other hand, ministers in heaven as the true priest offering the true sacrifice in the true sanctuary.

All this assumes that heaven is the ultimate destination of the people of God. As our author will go on to say, “For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (9:24). Our Lord appears in the presence of God – in the true, heavenly sanctuary – for us, not only as our advocate but as our forerunner (6:20). Jesus is the perfect high priest because he is actually able to bring us into the very presence of God reconciled. We can now appear before him as our heavenly Father. This is something the Aaronic priesthood was never able to accomplish.

In other words, the reason our Lord’s heavenly priesthood is so important and meaningful is because heaven is our ultimate destination. If this were not so, if in this life only we have hope in Christ, then we are, as Paul put it, of all men most to be pitied (1 Cor. 15:19). Of course we must not think of heaven merely in terms of golden streets and pearly gates. Heaven is heaven because heaven is the place where God most fully reveals his presence to bless. Heaven is heaven because it is there that we see God’s glory most fully revealed. It is the hope of the Christian that we will see him (Mt. 5:8; Jn. 17:24; 1 Jn. 3:2-3). But where this happens most perfectly and fully is in heaven. This is why we long for heaven and this is why our Lord’s priestly ministry being in heaven is the pinnacle of his saving work. He is in heaven to bring us to heaven and that is our hope: “In my Father’s house,” he told his disciples, “are many mansions: if it were not so I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (Jn. 14:2-3).

Today I would like us to consider, in light of our Lord’s heavenly ministry, why our hope should be set on heaven. In particular, I would like to give you four reasons why you should set your hopes in heaven. These reasons are the price of heaven, the person of heaven,

the perfection of heaven, and the perspective of heaven.

### The Price of Heaven

First, you should set your hope on heaven because it took the blood of Christ to give us access to it. We see this in the text, because our Lord continues to function as a priest in heaven on our behalf, presenting not the blood of animals but his own blood (2-3). This shows that it is his blood that gives his people access into heaven and the presence of God.

One way to gauge the value of something is to ask how much money was spent to purchase it. Though this is not, of course, a universally valid way to determine the value of something, generally the more valuable something is, the more money it is worth. It is reasonable to conclude, therefore, that introduction into heaven and into the presence of God's eternal favor and blessing is something which is infinitely valuable, for it took the blood of Christ to give us access to this grace. As the apostle Peter put it, the gift of God cannot be purchased with money (Acts 8:20). In fact, he will say this in one of his epistles: "Forasmuch as ye know that ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain conversation received by tradition from your fathers; but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Pet. 1:18-19). The value of the blood of Christ is such that all the gold and silver in this world is a "corruptible thing" – a perishable thing – in comparison. On the other hand, it is a serious thing to discount the value of the blood of Christ. To count his death and sacrifice as nothing, to tread him under foot and to count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing brings down the fiercest wrath and judgment of God (cf. Heb. 6:6; 10:29). God counts it as supremely valuable, and if he does, then of course so should we.

Why is the blood of Christ so valuable? The answer of the Bible is that it is the blood of the Son of God. In fact, Paul will put it this way to the Ephesian elders: "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all

the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). The Son of God, the God-man, is the one who hung on the cross, but he is not just another man. The blood shed was real, human blood. In that sense, it was no different from yours or mine. Jesus was fully human. He was also fully God, and the two natures, human and divine, are perfectly united in the one person of Jesus Christ. So, in that sense it is right to say that God purchased the church with his own blood. What or who can be more valuable than God? God is the basis of all reality – the Creator of the universe. He alone is infinite, eternal, and unchangeable. He alone is self-existent. Everything else is a shadow in comparison with God. In fact, I would say that there is nothing – absolutely nothing – that has intrinsic value, except for God. Whatever value anything has, it has in reference to and in connection with God. It follows that the blood of Christ is infinitely valuable, being as it is the blood of one who is himself infinitely and incomparably valuable.

The blood of Christ is not only valuable because of its intrinsic worth, but also because of the way it was given. Jesus did not give his blood in a blood drive. He shed it on a cross. He was crucified and his body was tortured, his soul weighed down with the weight of our sins. “This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins” (Mt. 26:28). He endured unutterable agony for the sake of sinners. We will sometimes speak of the cost of freedom, and, when we do so, everyone understands that we are talking about the men and women who have given their lives for this country. But what of the cost of redemption? It took the death of Christ. His blood was shed, drained out of his body, in the most humiliating and devastating way that the art of human malice and evil could devise. This is what it takes for sinners to enter heaven. My friend, heaven must, therefore, be a place of indescribable worth.

Let me put it one more way. A fool may spend a lot of money on frivolous things. As they say, a fool and his money are soon parted. A wise man, because he is a wise man, spends his money on things that

have real worth. God is infinitely wise. The fact that the Son of God spends his own precious blood so that redeemed men and women can spend eternity with him in heaven indicates that this is something which is truly priceless, and something in which we should therefore invest our deepest hopes.

### The Person of Heaven

Second, you should set your hopes on heaven because it is there that our Lord Jesus is physically present. Christ did not ascend into an airy nothing, into an ethereal mist of ghosts and shadows. No, he physically ascended into heaven, which tells me that heaven is a place. It is not merely a state of mind. It is a place in which our Lord is present, and which will come down to earth when God creates new heavens and a new earth. It is the place where our spirits will dwell before the final resurrection and the place where we will dwell in renewed bodies and souls after the resurrection.

Again, we see this in our text. For Christ is in heaven as our high priest, to bring us into heaven. This is our hope: “which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; whither the forerunner is for us entered, even Jesus, made an high priest after the order of Melchizedek” (Heb. 6:20). He is in heaven, and he is in heaven to bring us to heaven.

The point I primarily want to make here is that heaven is heaven because Christ is there; those who have been redeemed love Jesus and want to be with him. As the apostle Paul put it, “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” – why? Because “I am in a strait betwixt two, having a desire to depart, and to be with Christ, which is far better” (Phil. 1:21, 23). Those who live for Christ will find death to be gain because they will spend eternity with the one they love above all things. To be with Christ is far better than any other thing. It doesn’t matter what earth can give; it can give nothing like the enjoyment of the immediate presence of our Lord Jesus Christ.

This is what our Lord himself prays for: “Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovest me before the foundation of the world” (Jn. 17:24). To see the glory of Christ must be something which will eternally satisfy us in ways that nothing else can. Consider this: everything else, like the moon, has a borrowed glory. But from what does everything else get its glory? From Christ. He is the creator of all things. The Grand Canyon is glorious because Christ is glorious. So with everything else. Jonathan Edwards once said that just as the flowers and the trees and the grass receive their glory from the sun, even so heaven receives its glory from the Son of God, Jesus Christ. Isn’t this what the apostle John himself saw? “And I saw no temple therein: for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are the temple of it. And the city had no need of the sun, neither of the moon, to shine in it: for the glory of God did lighten it, and the Lamb is the light thereof” (Rev. 21:22-23). Heaven is heaven because Christ is there. What Christ told the thief on the cross is the very best news: “Today thou shalt be with me in paradise” (Lk. 23:43). Heaven is paradise because we are with him.

Now I know that we have Christ’s presence now (cf. Mt. 28:20), and that is a glorious reality. The Holy Spirit mediates the presence of the risen Christ for the church. We do not now have his presence most fully to bless. God in his wisdom and goodness has chosen for the present to give us a foretaste, “the earnest of our inheritance until the redemption of the purchased possession, unto the praise of his glory” (Eph. 1:14). We have to await the fullness for the future. Though we enjoy “the firstfruits of the Spirit” yet we now “groan within ourselves, waiting for the adoption, to wit, the redemption of our body” (Rom. 8:23). We are grateful for “joy unspeakable and full of glory” yet for now we await yet greater joy and glory (1 Pet. 1:8). That happens when we are with Christ in heaven. Therefore, let us long for and look toward heaven where we will be with Christ.

## The Perfection of Heaven

Third, we should put our hopes in heaven because it is in heaven where we shall be made perfect. What our Lord as our high priest purchased by his blood was not just the forgiveness of sins but also freedom from the power of sin and eventually freedom from the very presence of sin. We have freedom from the penalty and power of sin now, but we still wait for the time when we will be free from the presence of sin. That happens in heaven, for heaven is described as the place where “the spirits of just men made perfect” dwell (Heb. 12:23).

If sin is ultimately the cause of all our sorrows and pain and grief, then to be free from the very presence of sin must be a state characterized by unceasing joy and peace and love and contentment. When you are sick, you look forward to a time when you will be well. The more sick you are, the more you long for freedom from whatever disease it is that plagues you. How much more should we then long for heaven and for the time when we will no longer have to fight with ourselves? When we will no longer be betrayed by our own hearts and desires? When we will no longer have to worry about the temptation to sin?

Not only so, but we also long for heaven as the place where we will spend eternity, not only in sin-free souls, but also in redeemed bodies. To be glorified in the Biblical sense of the word is to have a sinless soul inhabiting a resurrected body. Presently, our bodies are decaying. They are defined by corruption. Yet that is not the final word, is it? “Behold, I shew you a mystery; we shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed, in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trump: for the trumpet shall sound, and the dead shall be raised incorruptible, and we shall be changed. For this corruptible must put on incorruption, and this mortal must put on immortality. So when this corruptible shall have put on incorruption, and this mortal shall have put on immortality, then shall be brought to pass the saying that is written, Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is thy sting? O grave, where is thy victory? The sting of death is sin; and the strength of sin

is the law. But thanks be to God, which giveth us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Cor. 15:51-57). How could we not long for this?

### The Perspective of Heaven

Fourth, we should put our hopes in heaven because it is by keeping this eternal perspective that we are enabled to grow in grace and holiness and fruitfulness. Do you want to be Biblically motivated to pursue holiness and more Christlikeness? Then look to heaven. We read earlier from 1 Cor. 15, ending in verse 57, about the resurrection. The next verse says this: “Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord” (1 Cor. 15:58). The apostles do not motivate us primarily by earthly blessings. They motivate us primarily by an anticipation of the age to come. Thus Paul says in his next letter to the Corinthians: “For which cause we faint not” – well, how do you do that, Paul? He answers: “but though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory; while we look, not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

In the same way the apostle John writes, “Beloved, now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure” (1 Jn. 3:2-3). What kind of hope purifies a believer? It is the hope that we shall one day be like Christ and be with him in heaven.

This is the apostle Peter’s point as well in 1 Pet. 1:3, ff. He speaks of their heavenly inheritance (4), and then reminds them that it is as they rejoice in this reality that they are enabled to endure through these refining trials (6-7). Then notice what he says in verses 13-16: “Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the

grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ; as obedient children, not fashioning yourselves according to the former lusts in your ignorance: but as he which hath called you is holy, so be ye holy in all manner of conversation; because it is written, Be ye holy; for I am holy.” Again, it is important that we see the tight connection there is between the call to holiness and the call to hope to the end for grace which is to be brought to us at the coming of Christ.

Why this connection? I think it is for this reason: you become what you hope in. If your hopes are in earthly riches, you will become a greedy and covetous person. If your hopes are in human praise, then you will become a people-pleaser and a manipulator. If your hopes are in earthly comforts, then you are going to become the kind of person who makes decisions based on what you think will maximize your earthly comforts. The problem is that you cannot be holy if you are that kind of person. On the other hand, if your hope is in being with Christ and seeing his glory, if your hope is in heaven where you will be made perfectly holy, then that perspective is going to have to affect the way we live now and the priorities we choose for ourselves. The reality is that it is those who are the most heavenly minded who are the most earthly good.

One last thing: how can we know that heaven-focused hopes will not be in vain? They are not in vain because Christ rose from the dead so that all who trust in him will one day rise from the dead, not to be condemned but to enter into the joy of the Lord. We began this morning with John 14, where our Lord told his disciples that he was going to prepare a place for them in heaven and then come back for them so that where he was, they would be also. He then told them, “And whither I go ye know, and the way ye know.” Thomas, however, wasn’t sure, and asked him: “Lord, we know not whither thou goest; and how can we know the way?” To which our Lord answered: “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (Jn. 14:4-6). Jesus is the way to heaven, the surety that we will fully inherit the new covenant blessings in a new heaven and a new earth. It reminds me of what our Lord said to Martha after her brother Lazarus



had died. “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (Jn. 11:25-26). Indeed, do you believe this? Believe it, for it is true, and in trusting in Christ you will find him to be the very door to Paradise.

## CHAPTER XXVII

# THE MEDIATOR OF A NEW COVENANT (HEB. 8:6-13)

WHO IS JESUS CHRIST? He is the Son of God who upholds all things by the word of his power, who eternally shares the very nature of God the Father, so that he is co-equal and co-eternal with him (1:1-3). If that was all that Jesus was, we would be left with what some theologians call “a theology of glory”<sup>1</sup> – a theological perspective that sees man saving himself by ascending up to heaven on the basis of his own righteousness and insight and wisdom and power. That is, on the basis of human glory. But there is no hope in that, and all the human efforts just to achieve utopia on earth have always ended in totalitarianism and gulags and concentration camps, in other words, in abject failure. We can’t even get heaven on earth right, let alone ascend into the presence of God. History and experience and Scripture join hands here to argue that any theology of glory is fatally flawed.

I think one of the reasons God gave us the Law of Moses, which is here denoted by the first covenant (7) and the old covenant (13), is to show us how impossible a theology of glory is. In fact, another way

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<sup>1</sup>A phrase that I understand was coined by Martin Luther in 1518 in the Heidelberg Disputation.

to express the idea behind the phrase “theology of glory” is the phrase “salvation by works.” The Law of Moses shows us that this is impossible. For what does the Law of Moses say? It says this: “Ye shall therefore keep my statutes, and my judgments: which if a man do, he shall live by them: I am the LORD” (Lev. 18:5; cf. Rom. 10:5; Gal. 3:12). The basis of blessing in the Old Covenant is obedience. By the same token, the basis of condemnation and the curse is disobedience: “For as many as are of the works of the law, are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is everyone that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10). Because we are by nature and by practice sinners, as many as seek to relate to God on the basis of their worth and works are bound to be under the curse.

Hence, when the author of Hebrews refers to the Mosaic covenant, he reminds us of its flaws. It was not “faultless” (7). However, the reason was not exclusively with the covenant itself, but with the people with whom the covenant was made: “For finding fault with them” (8). In what sense did God find fault with Israel? We are told in verse 9: “Not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the LORD.” The problem was that they simply did not keep the covenant. This was not God’s evaluation of a single generation, but of the entire history of Israel from start to finish. The records of Old Testament history back this up. It is a tragic telling of human disobedience, of crime and punishment.

We cannot ascend to God. This is not just a problem with the Jewish people; it is the problem with the human race, Jew and Gentile. Every Tower of Babel must always end in confusion. Rather, we need God to descend to us, to save us, and this is what Christ came to do. He who is the Son of God became Son of man, and as both Son of God and Son of man became a high priest for us. He became someone who could mediate between God and man, who could bring us to God. This has been the main point of this epistle and the burden of its argument. We

can't ascend to God so God descended to us. Instead of a theology of glory, we are presented with a theology of the cross and salvation by grace.

Central to the theology of the cross is that Jesus has become our high priest. Our Lord on the cross was both the priest and the sacrifice. Again, the cross is not there simply to elicit our sympathy or to present an example to us, but to accomplish something for us. One way to put this is that, on the cross, he inaugurated a new covenant. He expressly says this in the institution of the Lord's Supper: "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:28). His blood is not just blood, it is the "blood of the new covenant."

As our high priest, our Lord has "a more excellent ministry" because he brings about a "better covenant." It is better because it "was established upon better promises" (6). These promises are better than the promises of the old covenant, and when we look at verse 9, we are meant to see that the new covenant is better in the sense that it can really do what the old covenant could not do. What was the old covenant powerless to do? It was powerless to keep the people in the way of faith and faithfulness: "they continued not in my covenant." As a result, God cast them off: "And I regarded them not."

When we look at the rest of the New Testament, and especially the writings of Paul, we see that the reason the Old Covenant was powerless is that it was merely external. It called the people to obedience to God's law from without. It wrote it on tablets of stone. It preached it to them. Note the contrast Paul makes between the old and new covenants in 2 Cor. 3: God, he says, "hath made us able ministers of the new testament [covenant]; not of the letter, but of the Spirit:<sup>2</sup> for the letter killeth, but the Spirit giveth life. But if the ministration of death, written and engraven in stones, was glorious, so that the children of Israel could not

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<sup>2</sup>The KJV translates this and several of the following instances of *pneuma* with a lowercase "s," but this is almost certainly not a reference to our spirit but to God's Spirit. See 2 Cor. 3:3.

steadfastly behold the face of Moses for the glory of his countenance; which glory was to be done away; how shall not the ministration of the Spirit be rather glorious? For if the ministration of condemnation be glory, much more doth the ministration of righteousness exceed in glory” (6-9).

Note the contrasts in that passage. The old covenant is a covenant of letter, written on stones. In other words, it was an external covenant. It is contrasted with the ministry of the Spirit. In verse 3, Paul had written: “Forasmuch as ye are manifestly declared to be the epistle of Christ ministered by us, written not with ink, but with the Spirit of the living God; not in tables of stone, but in fleshly tables of the heart.” As a result, this covenant is designated a covenant of death and condemnation, for the precise reason that it could not create what it demanded. It demanded obedience but it produced sin and death.

There is a reason why God’s glorious law produces death. It is not because God’s law is bad. This is Paul’s point in Romans 7. The reason is in us. God’s law is not bad; we are. When sinful men and women are confronted with God’s law, our native tendency is not to obey it but to rebel against it. We want to be sovereign; we do not want to cede the illusion of our own sovereignty to God. This is what Paul is getting at, I think, when he explains why we need to be delivered from the law in order to bring forth fruit for God: “For when we were in the flesh, the motions of sins, which were by the law, did work in our members to bring forth fruit unto death” (Rom. 7:5). When our flesh, our sinful nature, meets up with the law of God, it responds in sin rather than in obedience.

So you see, the problem is not God’s law at all. The problem is us. The problem is in our hearts. It is not God’s law that needs to be changed; it is our hearts that need to be changed. Again, why would God give this external covenant that stopped short of doing something in human hearts so that the people would gladly obey God? I think one reason God did this was to show us how impossible it is, how really bankrupt is any theology of glory and system of salvation by works. We can see in

the tragic history of Israel our own history and the history of our own people. The conclusion we need to draw is not that we can do better, but that we can't save ourselves at all. We need God to do something in us and for us.

He has done this by Christ. So Jesus is not only the Son of God, but as our high priest he has become "the mediator of a better covenant" (6). The New Covenant is God's promise to do in us and for us what the Law of Moses could not do: "For what the law could not do, in that it was weak through the flesh, God sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, condemned sin in the flesh: that the righteousness of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not after the flesh, but after the Spirit" (Rom. 8:3-4).

Why has God revealed the New Covenant to us? What are we supposed to do with it? Well, I think the main thing it is meant to do is to make us see how utterly dependent we are upon Christ, and it is meant to show us how completely sufficient Christ is to save. By his death he has inaugurated a New Covenant; by his death he is bringing about the reality that these New Covenant promises point to. He is the mediator of the New Covenant: all its blessings come to us through him.

In other words, we must beware of a danger which even Christian people can be guilty of: that of looking at this or that aspect of salvation apart from Christ. It is possible to think about the new birth, about justification, and adoption, and so on, and to think of them abstractly. The New Testament never encourages this outlook: we are always to be drawn back to Christ and look to him for our life and our salvation. We are not saved because we understand the order of salvation. We are not saved because we hold a certain view about grace. We are saved because we are united to Christ by faith. If we trust in Christ as he is presented to us in the gospel, then we can say that we are saved. That is the important thing: upon whom does your soul find repose?

I want us to look at the blessings of the New Covenant and to do two things: I want us to see our bankruptcy and I want us to see Christ's sufficiency. We see both in the four promises of the New

Covenant, which I am referring to as regeneration, relation, revelation, and restoration.

Regeneration: Jesus solves the problem of our hostility toward God.

The first promise of the New Covenant, the first blessing, is that of regeneration or the new birth: “For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts” (10). This same blessing is variously described elsewhere in the prophesies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel. For example, in Jer. 32:40, we are told by God, “And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from them, to do them good; but I will put my fear in their hearts, that they shall not depart from me.” Or Ezek. 36:25-27: “Then will I sprinkle clean water upon you, and ye shall be clean: from all your filthiness, and from all your idols, will I cleanse you. A new heart also will I give you, and a new spirit will I put within you: and I will take away the stony heart out of your flesh, and I will give you an heart of flesh. And I will put my spirit within you, and cause you to walk in my statutes, and ye shall keep my judgments, and do them.” This latter passage is probably behind our Lord’s words to Nicodemus in Jn. 3, when he is talking to him about the necessity of the new birth: “Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born of water and of the Spirit, he cannot enter into the kingdom of God” (Jn. 3:5).

The first thing I want to say here is that this is not the same thing Paul is writing about in Romans 2 where he talks about God’s law written on the hearts of Gentiles by which they are accountable before God for their actions (Rom. 2:14-15). Paul is not talking about regeneration there, but about the conscience and the natural knowledge that all men have of good and evil. It is universal, not something special to the elect, which is true of the New Covenant blessings. Also, the law Paul is talking about in Romans 2 is connected, not to God’s blessing in Christ, but to his judgment (Rom. 2:12, 16).

So there is a sense in which God's law is written on people's hearts apart from the new birth. What then makes the promise of the New Covenant special? It is that, in this writing of God's law upon our hearts, our hearts are changed so that we want to keep God's law. You see this especially in the way it is described in Jer. 32 and Ezek. 36. God puts his fear into our hearts so that we do not depart from him. By putting his Spirit within us, he causes us to walk in his statutes (law). In other words, when a person is born again by the grace of God writing his law into our hearts, there is a fundamental shift in one's affections so that what we once hated we now love.

The problem is that we naturally hate God's law. Not that the ungodly never do anything good: that's the point of the Romans 2 natural law. Natural men can do good things, but their hearts are still alienated from God. What good things people do apart from the new birth, they do only because it fits their own agenda, not because they love God and submit to him. But when we are born again, that all changes. As Paul put it, "I delight in the law of God after the inward man" (Rom. 7:22). That is a change in affections that can only happen in the new birth, which is a blessing that comes from the new covenant in Christ. When we say that men are passive in the new birth, we are underlining the fact that it is Jesus, not man, who solves the problem of our hostility toward God. The Spirit who gives us new birth is the Spirit of Christ (Rom. 8:9-10).

We need the new birth because one of the things we are faced with, if we are honest with ourselves, is that our nature is fundamentally fallen and sinful. Yes, we are real moral agents with significant freedom, and this freedom gives us accountability and responsibility for our actions. But our freedom is still tied to our nature, and our nature, apart from Christ and the new birth, is at its core wicked: we are dead in sins (Eph. 2:1-3). Our affections are tainted with the fact that we are depraved. Our hearts are deceitful above all things and desperately evil (Jer. 17:9). We inevitably end up freely choosing that which is contrary to God's law and God's will.



One of the things this means is that we can have real and strong desires for things that are totally bad for us. For example, when a person has same-sex attraction, we don't want to deny the reality of that struggle, but we must and have to stand on the Biblical witness and say that those desires should not be acted upon; if they are acted upon, you have sinned. Those desires are real, but they are also wicked: both these things can be affirmed because of the Biblical witness of human fallenness and depravity. If we are fallen, we should expect to have desires that are fallen and not right.

Neither do we want to deny that such desires can be very strong. Now a lot of people are arguing that these sorts of strong desires should be affirmed rather than suppressed. It is argued that to suppress such desires is to deny who we are. The question really ought to be: are we going to affirm our depravity or are we going to affirm the goodness of God's law and God's will for us? You can follow your heart, but if you do so, you will end up affirming a lifestyle that in the end will not bring you fulfillment but judgment.

I say all this because this is where the reality of the new birth is so important. New birth, of course, does not take away totally the effects of inward sin. It does give us new power to pursue obedience to God's law with joy and hope even in the face of real and powerful lusts. Hear what Paul says: "For sin shall not have dominion over you: for ye are not under the law, but under grace" (Rom. 6:14). The solution to sinful desire is not, at least not fundamentally, therapy. Nor is it to give into those desires out of despair. Rather, the solution is a radical change of heart by the grace of the Holy Spirit who sovereignly comes to us because of what Jesus did on the cross.

The reality of the new birth points us to the power of God in breaking the power of sin over us. This power doesn't just begin the Christian life, but it defines the Christian life. As believers in Jesus, we come again and again to the fountain of his grace which empowers us to deal with the sin in our lives.

Are you struggling with powerful sinful desires? Do you feel enslaved by your lusts? The wrong response is to give up or to give in. Rather, you should look to Jesus Christ. Hope in him, for it is in him alone that the power of sin is broken. Jesus solves the problem of our hostility toward God.

One more thing before we move on. You will notice that in the New Covenant God is writing his law on our hearts! There is no antinomianism in the gospel. The gospel does not free us to live however we want. Rather, it frees us to obey God, and we obey God by listening and conforming ourselves to God's law.

Relation: Jesus solves the problem of our alienation from God.

The next promise is what I am calling the blessing of relation. It has to do with our relationship with God: "and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people" (10). Now this is a promise which occurs in various covenants in the Old Testament, not only in the Abrahamic Covenant, but also in the Mosaic Covenant (Gen. 17:7; Exod. 6:7). The difference was that, under the Old Covenant, this relationship was again external. God became committed to guide and bless and preserve the nation of Israel. It was above all exemplified in his giving them his law (Rom. 3:1). Nevertheless, it did not guarantee the salvation of any individual Israelite. In that sense, the Old Covenant version of this promise was merely typical and pointed forward to the promise of the New Covenant in which God's relationship with his people would be a saving one, a relationship that would be ultimately fulfilled in the New Heaven and New Earth (cf. Rev. 21:3).

You see, the problem is not merely that we are hostile toward God. The bigger problem is that God is alienated from us. As a result, we are all trespassing on God's creation. We are breathing borrowed air. We are awaiting a sentence of condemnation.

All that changes in Christ. Jesus brings those for whom he died into the bonds of family, into the family of God: "But as many as received

him [Jesus], to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (Jn. 1:12). Regeneration is followed by the blessing of adoption into the family of God, which is what John Gill called “an instance of surprising grace.” It is the crowning glory of the Christian, the sum and substance of all other blessings, that he or she belongs to God the Father as their Father, and to Christ as their Elder Brother (cf. Rom. 8:29). That God would welcome rebellious creatures back into this presence is staggering, but this is exactly what the gospel promises: “Therefore being justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, by whom also we have access by faith into this grace wherein we stand, and rejoice in hope of the glory of God” (Rom. 5:1-2). I think this is best summarized in the words of Paul in Romans 8: “If God be for us, who can be against us?” (Rom. 8:31). When God declares that he is our God and we are his people, that is just another way of saying that God is for us. Who then can be against us? No one!

Again, how do we receive this blessing? We receive it in Christ (cf. Rom. 8:3-34). God only becomes our God in Christ. Every blessing, including the blessing of adoption into the family of God is a blessing that we receive because of our union with Jesus (Eph. 1:5). We receive it because he is the mediator of the New Covenant.

This speaks volumes to the issue of the assurance of our salvation. Even those of us who believe on Christ sometimes find ourselves doubting whether or not we are saved. In other words, we wonder: is God really our God? Is he really for us? These doubts come most often because we have become more aware of our own sinfulness. This is good, not bad. However, it can become bad when our sins cause us to lose sight of Christ. We need to remember that our goodness is not the reason why God makes us members of his family; it is because of what Jesus Christ did on the cross, bearing our sins so that his righteousness might be freely given to us by faith. Another way to put this is that God is not for us because we are for him; rather, we are for him because

God is for us in Christ. Look to Jesus!

Revelation: Jesus solves the problem of our blindness to God.

The next promise is one of revelation: "And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest" (11). Again, there is a sense in which all men know God in a Romans 1 sort of way. It is a knowledge which men suppress, but they have it, nonetheless. That's not what is being promised in the New Covenant. The knowledge here is a saving knowledge. It is the kind of knowledge that our Lord is talking about in John 6:45, when he says, "It is written in the prophets, And they shall all be taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh to me." It is to know God in such a way that we come to him through Christ in living faith.

This is a knowledge that involves union and communion and fellowship with the Holy Trinity. There is a sort of ascending ladder in these blessings, so to speak: we go from dropping our hostility towards God's law to being embraced by God in the bonds of family to being drawn nigh unto God himself in vibrant fellowship. God loves us and manifests his love to us, not only in the cross but in the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in our hearts: "And hope maketh not ashamed; because the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Ghost which is given unto us" (Rom. 5:5). We are able to draw near to God in prayer and to approach his throne as a throne of mercy instead of judgment. We are not only adopted into the family of God, but we receive the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father (Rom. 8:15-16).

In this communion and fellowship with God, God is revealing himself to us. We know God, not because we found him but because he found us and revealed himself to us. We were blind to his glory, and he has taken off the blinders and enabled us to see him for who he is. It is what our Lord is referring to when he says, "I thank thee, O Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because thou hast hid these things from the

wise and prudent, and hast revealed them unto babes. Even so, Father: for so it seemed good in thy sight. All things are delivered unto me of my Father: and no man knoweth the Son, but the Father; neither knoweth any man the Father, save the Son, and he to whomsoever the Son will reveal him” (Mt. 11:25-27).

This is a knowledge that all who belong to Christ enjoy. It is not something reserved for the super-spiritual. It is not reserved for some remnant. It belongs to all those embraced by the covenant, “from the least to the greatest.” It is no longer just the high priest who enters into the presence of God; it is no longer the prophet who hears a word from God, but every believer is privileged with the blessing of being able to draw near to God and enjoying fellowship with him. All know him.

My friends, the greatest privilege and honor any person could possibly have is to know God. I think it would be something to say I knew the President (past or present) or some great official. Perhaps some of you know a famous athlete. But to know God is infinitely greater than the privilege of being known by any man or woman. Here is unassailable privilege and honor, and what this promise is saying is, if you are a believer and belong to Christ, then that honor is yours.

Restoration: Jesus solves the problem of our guilt before God.

This honor is not all. There is one more promise here, which I am calling the promise of restoration. In some sense, with this blessing, we come to the foundation of the other blessings (note the word “for”) – the blessing of the forgiveness of sins: “For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (12).

Our sin comes with a lot of baggage. Unfortunately, we often don’t get past the horizontal dimension of sin, perhaps because the destructiveness of sin is frequently more immediate in its horizontal dimension. The fact of the matter is that the greatest destruction sin has caused is in our relationship with God. It has separated us from God and all his

blessings. God's wrath is upon us because of our unrighteousness and ungodliness (Rom. 1:18). God's law has been broken, his character impugned, his rightful rule defied, his glory trampled in the dust by our sin and rebellion. We are justly exposed to eternal judgment.

That means, before any other blessing can come to us, our sin has to be dealt with. This is why the New Covenant is a mediated covenant. We cannot purge our sins and God cannot ignore our iniquity. This is why we need a theology of the cross. This is why Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant. This is why his blood is the blood of the New Covenant.

How can God be merciful to our unrighteousness? It is not because God merely forgets them. Something has to be done to rectify the situation created by our sin. This is the genius and grace of the incarnation. By becoming a man, the Son of God came to fulfill the law in our place and on the cross to satisfy the demands of justice in our place. He took our sin so that we could have his righteousness. We make a great exchange every time we sin: we exchange the glory of God for the glory of the creature. On the cross another exchange was made, an exchange that undoes our tragically exchanging the Creator for the creature, for on the cross Christ was made sin for us, who knew no sin, so that we might be made the righteousness of God in him (2 Cor. 5:21).

The Bible tells us that if you believe on Christ, if you have received him as Lord and Savior, then his righteousness is credited to your account, and you stand fully justified before God, not because you were righteous but because Christ is righteous. This is why God remembers our sins and iniquities no more. He remembers them no more, not because he has no more memory of them – how could an omniscient God do that? – but because sin and guilt no longer has any claim over those who belong to Christ. What a blessing! What a Savior! “I have written unto you, little children, because your sins are forgiven for his name's sake” (1 Jn. 2:12).

So here are the blessings of the New Covenant. Here is Jesus the mediator of the New Covenant. Let's come back to the question: why are

the blessings revealed to us? For two reasons: so that we see our own insufficiency to save ourselves but also so that we will see the sufficiency of Christ to save. By his death, Jesus purchased these blessings: regeneration, relation, revelation, and restoration, and he will have the price of his death. It means that you should never look to yourself to commend yourself to God.

Are you? Look to Christ, not to yourself, all of you – old and young, men and women, children and adults – look to Jesus Christ! Here he is passing by this morning in the glory of his gospel, and will you yawn and walk away? Are you more excited about football than the King and Savior? Will you not cry out, “Jesus, Son of David, have mercy on me?” Will you not climb into a tree to get a better glimpse of this God-man? Oh, do not walk away! Do not say you have more important things to do or consider. Rather:

*Children, if your hearts are warm  
Ice and snow can do no harm  
If by Jesus you are prized,  
Rise, believe, and be baptized!*

*Jeremiah Bass*

# THE HOLIEST OF ALL



## CHAPTER XXVIII

### THE WAY INTO THE HOLIEST OF ALL (HEB. 9:1-10)

IN THE FIRST TEN VERSES of Hebrews 9, we have a description of the tabernacle in the wilderness, which was a precursor to Solomon's temple. Thus, the paragraph begins, "Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary" (1). It is "worldly" not, of course, in the sense of being sinful (it is called a "sanctuary" or holy place, after all!), but in contrast to the heavenly sanctuary in which our Lord now ministers (cf. 8:1). In particular, in what follows we have a description of this "worldly sanctuary" belonging to the old covenant in terms of the pieces of furniture in the tabernacle as well as how they were arranged. The author of Hebrews is going to make a major theological point here about the division of the tabernacle into a front and second compartment, which he will continue to apply in the following verses (11, ff).

The construction of the tabernacle is dealt with in the latter half of the book of Exodus (chapters 25-40). There we learn that it was a framed structure covered by various animals' skins. The tabernacle

proper was about 45 feet long by 15 feet wide and 15 feet in height. This was located inside a larger courtyard which was about 75 feet wide by 150 feet in length and surrounded by a wall comprised of hangings of fine twined linen. In the courtyard there was the bronze altar on which the sacrifices were offered and the bronze basin for ceremonial washing. This is not dealt with by our author, however, because he is interested primarily in the way the tabernacle proper was arranged and divided. In particular, in this paragraph the author of Hebrews gives a description of the tabernacle in verses 2-5, followed by the duties of the priests in verses 6-7, and then finishes with the doctrine of the ritual – what all this was meant to teach us – in verses 8-10.

### The Description of the Tabernacle (2-5)

In verses 2-5 we are given a tour through the two compartments of the tabernacle. The word “first” in verse 2 is not a reference to the first of two tabernacles, but to the first of two compartments of a single tabernacle, called the Holy Place (“sanctuary,” ver. 2, KJV). The Holy Place was 15 feet wide by 30 feet long by 15 feet high. In this compartment, there was “the candlestick” (or rather, the lampstand), which was made of beaten gold, with three branches coming out of either side of a central stem. It had seven lamps which were kept burning day and night. The lampstand stood on the south side of the Holy Place. On the north side stood the table, made of acacia (“shittim” KJV) wood covered in gold, on which was laid the “shewbread” or “Bread of the Presence,” in two neat rows of six loaves each. This bread was replaced each Sabbath day with fresh loaves.

“And after the second veil” – the first has not been explicitly mentioned, but you had to pass through the first veil to enter into the Holy Place – “the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all” (3). With these words, the author ushers us into the “Most Holy Place.” This second compartment of the tabernacle was a cube, each side approximately 15 feet in length. It was the Holy of Holies with which the most sacred of

the tabernacle furniture was associated: the golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant (4-5).

Now in our version, we read that the Holy of holies “had the golden censer” (4). The Greek here (*thumiaterion*) has been interpreted this way by a number of commentators throughout history, including notable Biblical interpreters such as Anselm, Aquinas, and Luther.<sup>1</sup> However, most modern interpreters translate this as “golden altar of incense.” Either way, however, there appears to be a problem. If you translate it as in our version, then our author has left out one of the most important pieces of furniture in the tabernacle (the altar of incense), which seems very unlikely. Also, there is no golden censer mentioned at all in the description of the tabernacle in Exodus (those kinds of instruments were bronze). On the other hand, if you translate it as referring to the altar of incense, there is also a problem because this altar was in front of and not behind the second veil.

What is the solution? I think that Philip Edgcumbe Hughes and others are probably right when they posit that the point here is not so much the precise location of the altar as its association with the Most Holy Place.<sup>2</sup> A theological point is being made here. For it was placed immediately in front of it the Most Holy Place so that, when the high priest entered there on the Day of Atonement, he would take burning incense from this altar which would fill the Holiest of all “that he die not” (see Lev. 16:12-13). The incense from the altar along with the blood sprinkled on the mercy seat were together a part of the most important event in the religious life of Israel.

We come then to “the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; and over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercyseat” (4-5). It was a wooden box covered in gold, measuring 2.25 feet wide, 3.75 feet long, and 2.25 feet tall. Inside

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<sup>1</sup>See P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 311.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.* p. 320-321.

this box, three things were placed: a golden pot with manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant on which the Ten Commandments were written by the finger of God.

This box had a lid, also covered with gold, called the mercy seat. The term our author uses here is the usual way the Septuagint referred to the lid on the ark. The Hebrew is a bit more prosaic, simply meaning "covering." However, it is significant that, when the Bible speaks of our sins being forgiven, it often uses the language of our sins being covered, as in Psalm 32:1 – "Blessed is he whose transgression is forgiven, whose sin is covered." So even the description of the lid in terms of a covering was meant to say something very important. It was on the lid of the ark that the blood of the atoning sacrifice was sprinkled so that the sins of God's people would be covered and forgiven. Just as significantly, the Greek word used here – *hilasterion* – is the word used to describe our Lord's atoning work on the cross in multiple places in the NT (Rom. 3:25; 1 Jn. 2:2; 4:10). It is the word translated in those places by the word "propitiation." Here again we see just how every part of the tabernacle was pointing in some way to Jesus Christ and to his atoning work on the cross for sinful men and women.

Also on the lid were two cherubim of beaten gold, looking inward toward the mercy seat. They were "cherubim of glory," not because they were necessarily glorious in themselves, but because between them the glory of God, the *Shekinah* glory, dwelt: "And there I will meet with thee, and I will commune with thee from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubims which are upon the ark of the testimony" (Exod. 25:22).

### The Duties of the Priests (6-7)

In the next two verses, we come to the duties of the priests. The tabernacle was not a museum; it was a workplace for priests. "Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle [i.e. the Holy Place, the first compartment], accomplishing

the service of God. But into the second [i.e. the Most Holy Place, the second compartment] went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors [unintentional sins] of the people.”

The point here is that the first compartment, the Holy Place, had a lot of traffic, day in and day out. The priests were “always” there. However, the Holy of Holies was different. No one could enter into this place except once a year on the Day of Atonement, and only the high priest could do that, and only with the blood of a sin offering. On that day, the priest would offer a bull on the bronze altar and take some of its blood along with incense from the golden altar and sprinkle the blood upon the mercy seat for his own sins. He would then take the blood from one of a pair of goats (which had been killed) and sprinkle it upon the altar for the sins of the people of Israel. After accomplishing this, he would come out and confess the sins of Israel over the head of the other goat, symbolically transferring the guilt of Israel to the goat, which was then led out into the wilderness, never to be seen again (see Lev. 16).

#### The Doctrine of the Ritual (8-10)

Now all this had a meaning. We are told in several ways that the tabernacle was symbolic, that it was meant to be a parable. Thus the author says, “The Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as yet the first tabernacle was yet standing: which was a figure for the time then present” (8-9). In other words, there is an inspired doctrine to the description of the tabernacle and the duties of the priests. The word “figure” in verse 9 is the term “parable.” All this is meant to be a parable for us of spiritual realities. The main reality that all this was meant to preach is that “the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest.”

By the way, I think it’s important to notice the restraint of our author when it comes to interpreting the meaning of the significance of

the tabernacle. In fact, he says that of the things in the tabernacle, “we cannot now speak particularly” (5); that is, he is not going to squeeze some type of spiritual meaning out of every detail of the tabernacle’s furniture. This restraint has not always been shared by Christian interpreters, unfortunately. For instance, one interpreter from the past said that “the almond-shaped cups [of the lampstand] . . . are the saints who are fitted to receive and transmit to others the oil of grace.” Now that’s a nice thought but it is hardly warranted by the text! Another said that “the table is Holy Scripture which supplies the food of life. The loaves are the twelve apostles and their vicars who offer the incense of prayer to God.” He goes on to squeeze meaning even out of the dimensions of the ark, for example, and says that the length of the ark (which was two and a half cubits long) is to be interpreted this way: “One cubit of its length signifies perseverance in doctrine, and the other cubit perseverance in labor, while the extra half-cubit signifies the imperfection of human capacities. . . .”<sup>3</sup> Such interpretations are laughable, at best.

There is no need to do any of this anyway, because as we’ve noted above, the Spirit has already indicated the lesson we are to learn. Arguing from the division of the sanctuary as well as the deficiency of the sacrifices, our author shows that the old covenant worship was imperfect in the sense that its rituals could never actually in themselves give us access to God. The division of the sanctuary into two compartments so that only the high priest could enter once a year into the Holy of Holies was meant to show that the way sinful man may have access to God had not yet been fully revealed (8). On the other hand, the deficiency of the sacrifices “which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances” (10) was manifest in that they “could not make him that did the service perfect as pertaining to the conscience” (9). They could not actually take away sin.

Nevertheless, underneath these deficiencies that led to the retirement of the old covenant is mankind’s unchanging need. The old covenant may be transitory, but the human problem it points us to is not. The

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 318.

two things above together clearly demonstrate our need for atonement in order to have access to God. They demonstrate that the only way that this can happen is through the shedding of blood. They demonstrate that this atonement, though prefigured in the sacrifices of the old covenant, had not actually happened yet.

So let's not miss the great point here. All this assumes our great need of access to God, to find a way into the holiest of all. In particular, I think it is important for us to see that access to God doesn't just happen anywhere and in any way. There were many temples in the ancient world, but this is the only place God said that he dwelt. In the tabernacle itself, it wasn't the courtyard that was the place where God revealed his glory, or even the Holy Place, into which only priests could enter. It was the Most Holy Place, and there alone, in which God's presence was most manifest. It was over the ark of the covenant, above the mercy seat, between the cherubim, that the Shekinah glory of God shone forth. It was there that God's glory was revealed, that God's fellowship was enjoyed, and that God's forgiveness was imparted. And it is there that our need for Jesus Christ is so abundantly manifest.

So here we have our great need laid out before us. I think it is worthwhile meditating together for a few moments upon these three themes: our need for God's glory, God's fellowship, and God's forgiveness.

### Our need for God's glory

The highlight of the book of Exodus is not really found on the top of Mount Sinai, but at the end of the book when the tabernacle was finished. For there we are told that "a cloud covered the tent of the congregation, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle. And Moses was not able to enter the tent of the congregation, because the cloud abode thereon, and the glory of the LORD filled the tabernacle" (Exod. 40:34-35). Did you notice, the fact that God's glory filled the tabernacle is mentioned twice? It was a big deal.

It was a big deal because God's glory in his tabernacle was the visible symbol of God's presence and blessing upon Israel. It is why Moses begs God after the children of Israel had sinned in the incident involving the golden calf, "I beseech thee, shew me thy glory" (Exod. 33:18). He wasn't asking for some personal ecstatic religious experience; he was essentially asking that God not remove his presence and blessing upon the nation. More importantly, he was asking that all that God is be for Israel. What I mean by this is that God's glory is the public and visible display of his attributes. To speak of God's glory is a summary way of referring to the fullness of all that God is. So to say that we need God's glory is just to say that we need all that God is to be for us. We need God.

That God's glory is the sum of his attributes is clear in God's answer to Moses' request for God to show him his glory. "And the LORD descended in the cloud, and stood with him there, and proclaimed the name of the LORD. And the LORD passed by before him, and proclaimed, The LORD, The LORD God, merciful and gracious, forgiving iniquity and transgression and sin, and that will be no means clear the guilty: visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children, and upon the children's children, unto the third and fourth generations. And Moses made haste, and bowed his head toward the earth, and worshipped" (Exod. 34:5-8).

We need God in the fulness of all that he is. We need the glory of God. We need to see it and to experience it. It is for this reason that the psalmist prayed, "O God, thou art my God; early will I seek thee: my soul thirsteth for thee, my flesh longeth for thee in a dry and thirsty land, where no water is. To see thy power and thy glory, so as I have seen thee in thy sanctuary" (Ps. 63:1-2). The glory of the Lord is the salvation of his people: "The heavens declare his righteousness [which is often displayed in the rescue of his people], and all the people see his glory" (Ps. 97:6). When the Lord builds up Zion, it is then that he appears in glory (Ps. 102:16).

So let me sum up this point by saying it this way: we need the glory of God because we need God. We need God in the fulness of all that he



is: not just this or that attribute, but every attribute – his love and his justice, his holiness and his mercy, his righteousness and his wrath, his power and his gentleness. You were made, my friend, to know God in this way. You were not made for money. You were not made for human fame. You were not made for sex. You were not made for food. You were not made for earthly comforts, gifts though they are from God. No: you were made for God. As St. Augustine put it so memorably, God made us for himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in him. And as the Lord says through the prophet, “Fear not: for I am with thee: I will bring thy seed from the east, and gather thee from the west; I will say to the north, Give up; and to the south, Keep not back: bring my sons from far, and my daughters from the ends of the earth; Even every one that is called by my name: for I have created him for my glory, I have formed him; yea, I have made him” (Isa. 43:5-7).

The fact that there was a Holy of holies in the tabernacle was an indication both of the fact of our need for the glory of God as well as the fact that the way to this glory had not yet been manifest. That comes in Jesus Christ.

### Our need for God’s fellowship

The Holiest of all was also meant to point us to our need for God’s fellowship. We are meant to have communion with God. It is the tabernacle, God says to Moses, “where I will meet you, to speak there unto thee. And there I will meet with the children of Israel, and the tabernacle shall be sanctified by my glory. And I will sanctify the tabernacle of the congregation and the altar: I will sanctify also both Aaron and his sons, to minister to me in the priest’s office. And I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will be their God. And they shall know that I am the LORD their God, that brought them forth out of the land of Egypt, that I may dwell among them: I am the LORD their God” (Exod. 29:42-46).

In other words, we don't only want God to be for us, we also want God to be with us. We want his glory to be displayed on our behalf, and we want his presence to be enjoyed in our midst.

To be sure, there is joy in the presence of God. A number of the psalms testify to this fact, as the following examples show. "There be many that say, Who will shew us any good? LORD, lift thou up the light of thy countenance upon us. Thou hast put gladness in my heart more than in the time that their corn and their wine increased" (Ps 4:6-7). "Thou wilt shew me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore" (Ps. 16:11). "Whom have I in heaven but thee? And there is none upon earth that I desire besides thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever. ... But it is good for me to draw near to God" (Ps. 73:25, 26, 28). "How amiable are thy tabernacles, O LORD of hosts! My soul longeth, yea, even fainteth for the courts of the LORD: my heart and my flesh crieth out for the living God. ... For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand. I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness. For the LORD God is a sun and a shield: the LORD will give grace and glory: no good thing will he withhold from them that walk uprightly. O LORD of hosts, blessed is the man that trusteth in thee" (Ps. 84:1-2, 10-12).

As human beings created in the image of God, we are meant to live in society, not alone. As God declared of Adam, it was not good for him to be alone, and Eve was created from Adam and for Adam and marriage was established at least in part to meet this fundamental need for fellowship. But the family is but a mirror of a deeper relationship we are meant to have with God. After all, we are created in God's image, and this means at least that if we are created for fellowship, we are created for fellowship with God. It is the tragedy of sin from the very beginning that it cuts us off from this fellowship and communion with God.

However, the tabernacle was meant to point men and women to the possibility of this fellowship with God. At the same time,

it also showed that the way into the holiest of all was still barred. It is this barrier which is undone in Jesus, and when he died, the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place came down.

### Our need for God's forgiveness

Above all, the tabernacle was a place that pointed to man's need for forgiveness and atonement before God. The tabernacle was a bloody place, and when the high priest did go into the Most Holy Place, it was always with blood (Heb. 9:7). This is because without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins (Heb. 9:22).

The various barriers of the tabernacle reflected this need. Israelites could enter the courtyard, but only the priests could go into the tabernacle proper. Only the high priest could enter into the holiest of all, and that only one day in the year. All this was meant to point to our sin. It also pointed to the fact that the sacrifices that were offered could not in themselves take away that sin.

In other words, it is our sin that keeps us from having God for us and having God with us. It is our need of forgiveness that is our basic need in the sense that we must have this before we can have anything else.

Thank God, the tabernacle is pointing us forward to Jesus Christ. In the following verses, we are going to see how that Jesus fulfills the reality that the tabernacle pointed toward. He is the one in whom we are granted forgiveness and by whom we can enter into the presence of God. We can have "boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh: and having an high priest over the house of God; let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our conscience sprinkled from an evil conscience [compare to 9:9!], and our bodies washed with pure water" (Heb. 10:19-22).

Jesus Christ, the Son of the living God, gives us entrance into the presence of God by becoming for us a propitiation. He is the mercy seat, the one who stands between God's law broken by us and the glory

of God between the cherubim. In Christ, the glory of God becomes for us, not that which destroys us, but that which saves us. “For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:18). He is the way to God. His blood purges our sins and his righteousness gives us right into God’s presence with joy. Would you enter in? Come and welcome through Jesus Christ!

# CHAPTER XXIX

## THE REDEMPTION ACCOMPLISHED BY CHRIST (HEB. 9:11-14)

WHEN GOD MADE MAN, he put him in a perfect world in a perfect garden. Everything was good and very good. But God, in asserting his rightful sovereignty over mankind, put just and good limits upon him – in particular, he commanded Adam that he must not eat of a certain tree in the Garden of Eden, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. If Adam chose to act like God in deciding for himself what was good and what was evil by eating of that tree, then God said that Adam would certainly die. We all know the story: Adam decided to act like God and as a result he died. He immediately died spiritually – he was cut off from fellowship with God, shown in the shame and the hiding when God came to confront him – and he began to die physically. So we read, “And all the days that Adam lived were nine hundred and thirty years: and he died” (Gen. 5:5).

As a result of Adam’s sin, death has come into this world. Here is how the apostle Paul put it to the Romans: “Wherefore, as by one man [Adam] sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed

upon all men, for that all have sinned” (Rom. 5:12). This world, which when God created it was vibrant with life, with men and women who had the potential to live forever, is now characterized by human death. We see it all around us. We are seeing it in the awful deaths piling up in Ukraine as Russian forces become more and more brutal and less careful about civilian casualties. We are surrounded by it no matter where we live. Death is part and parcel of the world we inhabit.

We see death in other ways as well. The evil that destroys the soul and minds and families and robs children of their innocence is a form of death. It is spiritual death, and it is just as much a consequence of the evil that Adam brought into this world as is physical death. Paul describes it in Ephesians: “And you . . . were dead in trespasses and sins; wherein in times past ye walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience: among whom we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind; and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others” (Eph. 2:1-3). As a result, death is not just something we are marching toward; death is a part of everything we do.

The author of Hebrews understood this. In verse 14, he talks about “dead works.” What constitutes “dead works”? Well, since the blood of Christ purges our conscience from dead works (9:14), and we are to repent of dead works (6:1), dead works are sinful works, but why are they considered “dead”? P. E. Hughes (following John Owen) suggests that works are dead when they (1) proceed from people who are spiritually dead in sins, (2) are accompanied by sinful (dead) fruit, and (3) end in eternal death. Everything we do, apart from the saving grace of God in Christ, is a dead work in some sense. That doesn’t mean that everything we do is explicitly sinful, nor does it mean that lost folks can’t do just and beautiful things. What it does mean is this: so long as we, on account of sin, are not in a saving relationship with God, everything we do can have no lasting significance or value or benefit for us. All our works are dead works because by them we are doing things that can have no eternal or

spiritual value. Even “the sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD” (Prov. 15:8; 21:27), and “the plowing of the wicked is sin” (Prov. 21:4).

There is another indication of this truth in the text. In verse 13, our author refers to “the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean” that “sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh.” He is referring to the ceremony described in Numbers 19, in which a heifer was killed outside the camp and its body completely burned. As it was burning, cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet yarn was put into the fire, and the ashes would then be collected and used along with water to cleanse someone who had become ceremonially defiled (unable to enter the tabernacle and worship God there) through contact with a dead body. For those who were thus defiled by death, water mixed with these special ashes would be sprinkled on the defiled person and they would be cleansed and allowed again to participate in the worship of God in the tabernacle.

We too have been defiled by death. We are not only going to die, but we carry with us “the body of this death” (Rom. 7:23). We can’t get away from it. Like the ancient Israelite who had been defiled through contact with a corpse, we also are defiled, unable to enter into the Holiest of all because of sin and death.

Death is a signal that this world is not the way it’s supposed to be. No one looks at death and thinks, “Well, we’re all just part of the circle of life and so I guess it’s okay.” No one gets up and sings the theme song to “The Lion King” when a loved one dies. Instead, we weep and groan and lament. I think this is one reason why the belief that this world is just the way it is and there is no explanation for it falls flat. We all intuitively know that sin and death are intruders, and we are not okay with injustice and evil because that’s not the way this world is supposed to be. Atheism can’t account for that universal intuition, apart from saying that for the sake of survival evolution has programmed us psychologically to believe something that is not really true. I, along with many others, do not find that explanation convincing at all. (Maybe evolution programmed us to believe that atheism is true when it’s not?)

Now we do try to drown this out. We do it by keeping ourselves frenetically busy with work or by keeping our noses in our phones and our eyes glued to the computer or the television screen. We don't allow ourselves to think about it. I heard a preacher years ago say that we're like a herd of cattle in a field. One day, the farmer comes out, puts a rope around the neck of a cow, and leads her off to be slaughtered. The other cows look up for a few brief moments but then go back to grazing as if nothing has happened. We do the same thing; we don't allow death to inconvenience us too much.

Death, like it or not, is a reality. The question is, how are we going to face it? Now there are a lot of people who respond by saying that you just have to face the reality that beyond death is nothing. You need to live your life in light of the reality that, when you die, that's it. They would say there is no hope; there is only despair. I want to argue this morning that this is exactly the opposite course that you should take. Death is an undeniable reality, yes; but there is also another reality, the reality of the redemption obtained and secured by Jesus Christ. In these verses before us, we are being encouraged neither to despair nor to look to ourselves to deliver ourselves from the specter of death, but to look to Jesus Christ and to the superiority of his redemption as our only hope in life and death. In other words, to respond properly to the reality of death, we need to consider Jesus Christ and his redemption as the object of our faith and the superiority of his redemption in giving us the confidence of our faith.

### The Object of Faith: Christ and his redemption

We are called to believe in Jesus Christ as the one who saves us from death. He is the one to whom the law and the prophets pointed. He is the one who is the fulfillment of the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law. What was only typified and pointed to in the Old Covenant is realized and embodied in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Hence, in verse 11, we read that Christ has "come an high priest of good things



to come.” The law pointed to good things: things like remission of sin, although it couldn’t actually bring it by itself. It pointed to access to the presence of God, even as it barred the people of Israel from it. What the author of Hebrews is saying is, Jesus has come and actually procured those things for us. He ministers, not in an earthly tabernacle, but “by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building” – he ministers for his people in heaven, in the very presence of God, for them and to bring them into God’s presence with exceeding joy (cf. Jude 24).

However, it is important that we see how he has done this. Jesus did not come in order to become a new Moses or to give us a new law. He didn’t come to merely “show us the way.” He came to do something that no one else can do: he came to save us from our sins (Mt. 1:21) by bringing about “eternal redemption” (12). Now I want you to hear that carefully. Eternal redemption. In other words, Jesus came to save us from death, for the fact that his redemption is eternal means that whatever else this redemption does, it at least gives us eternal life. How else could it be called eternal redemption? What Adam introduced, Jesus has come to destroy: “For if by one man’s offense [Adam’s] death reigned by one; much more they which receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness shall reign in life by one, Jesus Christ” (Rom. 5:17). I love the way John Stott explains the significance of what Paul says there: “What Christ has done for us is not just to exchange death’s kingdom for the much more gentle kingdom of life, while leaving us in the position of subjects. Instead, he delivers us from the rule of death so radically as to enable us to change places with it and rule over it, or reign in life.”<sup>1</sup>

It bears repeating: he has saved us from death by securing redemption for us: “neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (12). All this talk about redemption and blood is significant because it means that our Lord is dealing with the funda-

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<sup>1</sup>John Stott, *Romans: God’s Good News for the World* (IVP, 1994), p. 156.

mental problem behind death. The wages of sin is death (Rom. 6:23). Sin requires a payment to be made in order for us to be freed from its claims upon us, and Jesus Christ made that payment. By making that payment, he delivered us from the claims of death upon us.

How did he make this payment? What was the cost to Jesus? Our author, and the rest of the New Testament – indeed, the whole Bible – makes it very clear. The price was the blood of Christ. The blood of animals could never redeem us, so Christ came and shed his own blood for us (12, 14). In other words, what we have here is redemption in terms of a substitutionary sacrifice. We have sinned against God. We are therefore justly exposed to God's judgment and that means we must die: spiritually, physically, eternally. Jesus came into this world to take our place and to suffer the consequences of sin for us. We deserved to die and so our Lord suffered death in our place.

It is important for us to see that. A lot of people throughout the ages have wanted to interpret what happened on the cross any way other than as a substitutionary sacrifice. So people will say that Jesus died on the cross as a martyr. Or they will say that Jesus died on the cross as an example for us to imitate in terms of moral courage or in terms of love for others. I'm not saying that any of those things are false. What I'm saying is that neither martyrdom nor example get at the heart of what happened at the cross. The heart of the blood-shedding of Jesus, his death, is that he died to atone for the sins of others. He died to purge our sins.

It follows that the result of his death is the forgiveness of sins. The apostle Paul makes this connection with redemption explicitly both in his letter to the Ephesians and to the Colossians. "In whom [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of his grace" (Eph. 1:7; cf. Col. 1:14). This is obvious if Christ died as an offering (cf. ver. 14) for sin. The result of a sin offering was the forgiveness of the sin for which the offering was made. Even so, Christ has obtained eternal redemption for us, final and complete forgiveness of sins. And having purged our conscience from the guilt

of our sins, we are no longer captives to death. Those who belong to Christ are now in possession of eternal life through Christ who is the resurrection and the life.

The Confidence of Faith: the superiority of Christ's redemption

It is not just that we are pointed to the fact that Christ died and obtained eternal redemption for us. The author of Hebrews wants us to see how superior Christ's sacrifice is to the Levitical sacrifices. Whereas the latter could only sanctify "to the purifying of the flesh" (13), the blood of Christ is able to actually "purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (cf. 10:1-3). This emphasis comes out in the words "how much more." If the Mosaic offerings could accomplish ceremonial cleansing, how much more can Christ's death accomplish real eternal redemption which gives us the forgiveness of sins.

The point here is not just to increase our knowledge about Christ and the redemption he came to accomplish but also to increase our confidence in Christ and the redemption he came to accomplish. There are four ways our author does this in verses 11-14.

We can have confidence in the redemption accomplished by Christ because it was achieved through the blood of the God-man, Jesus Christ. Who stood in our place? Not merely another man. No mere man can atone for the sins of others. I can die for someone else, but I can never stand in their place before God. But the blood of the God-man has infinite value and is able to cleanse away the guilt of all the sins of all for whom he died. "Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world" (Jn. 1:29). Because he is truly man, he is able to stand in the place of other men; because he is God, he is able to bear fully the infinite weight of the wrath of God which is justly against our sins.

Here we see again why it is so important to embrace both the full divinity of Christ and the full humanity of Christ. Take away either and you no longer have someone who is able to bear away our sins and save us from death.

We can have confidence in the redemption accomplished by Christ because it was achieved “through the eternal Spirit” (14). Now this is not an expression that occurs anywhere else in the New Testament. Some take this to be a reference to the divine nature of Christ. Others take this to be a reference to the third Person in the Trinity, the Holy Spirit. Personally, I incline to the latter interpretation. But either way, this means that what happened on the cross was the work of God. Jesus did not go to the cross, and he didn’t endure the contradiction of sinners against himself, because he was forced to do so. It was his hour and God’s will. It was planned by God and carried out by God. Our Lord himself said, “Therefore doth my Father love me, because I lay down my life that I might take it again. No man taketh it from me, but I lay it down of myself. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it again. This commandment have I received from my Father” (Jn. 10:17-18). Twice in the book of Acts we learn that God ordained the events of the cross: “For of a truth against thy holy child Jesus, whom thou hast anointed, both Herod, and Pontius Pilate, with the Gentiles, and the people of Israel, were gathered together, for to do whatsoever thy hand and thy counsel determined before to be done” (Acts 4:27-28; cf. 2:23-24). The redemption accomplished on the cross was no mere work of a man. It was the work of God himself. We can have great confidence therefore in the redemption accomplished by Christ for the cleansing of our sin and guilt.

We can have confidence in the redemption accomplished by Christ because it was achieved “without spot to God” (14). In the OT, only those animals that were without blemish could be used as offerings. This was a picture of Christ, who was without sin (cf. 7:26). Of course, as God he is perfectly holy in his divine nature. But the reference here is to his humanity. He was fully God, yes; but he was also fully man, born of a woman and made under the law (Gal. 4:4). He was subjected to the temptations of the devil and of the world, all the while “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Rom. 8:3) – that is, he had to endure all that while in the weakness of human frailty. Although it is perfectly true to

say that in a real sense he could never have sinned, and that in fact he never sinned, yet it is also true to say that it was not easy for him. He had to learn obedience by the things which he suffered (Heb. 5:8). Yet when he came to the cross, he came perfectly holy, without having ever sinned or done a single thing that displeased his Father. The one who stands in our place is perfectly righteous. This is so important because, on the cross, our Lord was not doing something to make it possible for us to please God with an imperfect righteousness. He was dying so that we could have his righteousness, the righteousness of God (2 Cor. 5:21; Rom. 3:21-22). What greater reason could we have to be confident than to be able to stand before God, dressed in the robes of the righteousness of the Son of God?

We can have confidence in the redemption accomplished by Christ because he rose from the dead and ascended into heaven, thus showing that the Father had accepted the sacrifice of his Son. “He entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us” (12). He entered into the Holy of holies – into the reality to which the tabernacle pointed, into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God for us. He did this once; he did not have to keep repeating it, because he had finally and fully accomplished what he had set out to do.

Once again, we come to the centrality of the resurrection of Jesus from the dead. Our whole religion hinges on it. Why do I believe there is life after death? Well, a big reason is because Jesus rose from the dead and promised to bring his people with him to heaven. To Martha he said, “I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: and whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die. Believest thou this?” (Jn. 11:25-26). To which I say: Yes!

Now some folks will come back and say that the claim that Jesus rose from the dead is an extraordinary claim that demands extraordinary evidence, and they don’t see this extraordinary evidence, so they see no need to believe it. I think this is a cheap way to wiggle out an excuse not to believe the evidence that is there: the empty tomb, the

post-mortem appearances of Christ to the disciples (including at one point to over 500 people), the emergence of the early church in the very place where these claims were made, and so on. I think when people say this is an “extraordinary claim”, they are smuggling in their own unproven assumptions: like the assumption that we live in a closed system where miracles can’t happen. They have stacked the deck. They ask for scientific evidence, but they have so defined science that it can’t even discover a miracle if it slapped it in the face. No, the best evidence for the empty tomb and the appearances of Christ to the disciples and the emergence of the early church is the fact that Jesus did in fact rise from the dead. And having risen from the dead, we have every reason to be confident in the redeeming power of his blood.

We can have confidence in the redemption accomplished by Christ because it actually achieves cleansing and conversion: “how much more shall the blood of Christ . . . purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” My friend, here is the bottom line: we do not preach a religion, the value of which merely lies in its ability to psychologically manipulate you into a state of inner tranquility. That’s therapy, not the Christian faith. Rather, we preach a person, Jesus Christ, who is actually able to give you real forgiveness of sins and who is actually able to free you from the power of sin and give you the ability to live for God when once you lived for yourself.

We all have committed real sins and we have to deal with real guilt and real shame. There are ways of getting around this, like searing your conscience, telling yourself there is no God, or that you are just a victim, and the fault of your sins lies with others. If you really want to get rid of your guilt, you are going to have to deal with God. However, God is holy, and he will not forgive the guilty. He is of purer eyes than to behold sin and he cannot look upon iniquity. The idea that God could just forgive sin and look the other way is ridiculous: in that case, he would neither be just nor holy. The only way you can ever have real confidence before God is if your sins have been purged. That is exactly what Christ did on the cross. He purges our conscience from dead works; he deals with

us on the level of the guilt of our sins because he has obtained eternal redemption for us.

Not only that. He not only cleanses us; he also converts us. His blood also enables us “to serve the living God.” This is just as much a result of Christ’s atoning work as is forgiveness. There are those who think they are praising God’s grace by claiming that people can be saved whose lives are never changed. That claim separates what God has joined together and does not take the whole Christ. Listen: the work of redemption not only gives us the forgiveness of sins so that we can approach God with boldness and confidence, but it also gives us a new nature so that we will want to serve him and live for him. The grace of Christ really does free us from sin’s bondage. He can take the drug addict and free him from the iron grip of addiction. He can take the alcoholic and free him from the power of drink. He can take the man who feels enslaved to porn and give him new freedom. He can take the man who is completely self-absorbed and make him into a sacrificial husband and loving father. Now I’m not saying he makes it easy. I’m not saying it’s automatic. I’m not saying that we become freed this side of heaven from bodies and minds that are defined by the fact that we live in a broken and sinful world. But, my friend, the reality is that those who are redeemed by Christ have died to sin so that “sin shall not have dominion over you, for ye are not under the law but under grace” (Rom. 6:14). The unregenerate man is lying there on the floor and the flesh has its foot on his neck. He cannot move! When Jesus comes, he frees us from its dominion, and now we are able to put our foot upon the neck of our lusts. Do you believe that? I sometimes wonder if we do. But isn’t that what this text is saying? “How much more shall the blood of Christ ... purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?”

What are we supposed to do with this? Remember that the author of Hebrews was writing this because some of his audience had lost sight of the superiority of Jesus and his work and were drifting off into other things. He was writing this epistle to turn their eyes to Jesus. That’s what I want and hope to accomplish through the power of the Holy

Spirit this morning. I'm not preaching merely to remind you of correct doctrine. I'm hoping that you will also see the superiority of Jesus, that he has what no one else has, that he has a complete and perfect redemption. He can do what no one else can do: he can deliver us from death. We've sinned and sin demands a payment. Christ had made the payment by dying for all who trust in him.

Where are you this morning? Do you feel dirty and defiled from sin? Does your conscience rise against you and condemn you? Christ is able to cleanse your conscience from your sins, dead works that they are. Do you feel helpless and unable to lift a finger against the power of the sins in your life? Do you feel enslaved to sin? Christ is able to break those chains and take those who were the slaves of sin and Satan and make them joyful servants of the living God. Isn't that an amazing contrast? To go from producing dead works to serving the living God! What a transformation!

All this is in Christ. Look to him and trust in him! Embrace him as your Lord and Savior, for the Bible says that all who put their trust in him will never be put to shame.



## CHAPTER XXX

### THE CHRIST OF THE COVENANTS (HEB. 9:15)

HOW OLD IS CHRISTIANITY? If you were to say that Christianity is about two thousand years old, there is a real sense in which you would be absolutely right. The religion of Jesus Christ, as such, dates back to his earthly ministry, which goes back to the beginning of the first century A.D. But there would be another sense in which you would be totally wrong. For Jesus did not come to create a new religion. As he put it in the Sermon on the Mount, he did not come to do destroy the Law of Moses or the Prophets (Mt. 5:17). In other words, the religion of Christ is the religion of the Old Covenant; the religion of the New Testament and the Old Testament is the same religion.

And yet, not exactly the same in every way. For there is a New Covenant, and it has genuine newness. Where does the newness lie? What are the differences between the covenants? Another question is, if they are different, in what ways are they the same?

I think this is important because sometimes the newness of the New Covenant can be emphasized in such a way that it makes it sound like none of its blessings were available to people living under the Old Covenant. The Old Covenant could not create new hearts, for example,

but God promises in the New Covenant to do exactly that. Does that mean then that people before Christ couldn't be regenerated? What about the forgiveness of sins? On the other hand, if these things (new heart, new status, etc.) were available before the inauguration of the New Covenant by Christ, what was the point of the New Covenant? These are important questions we are going to have to answer if we're going to be able to make sense of our Bibles.

What is new and what is old?

These are some of the questions I want to deal with this morning. Let me start with my conclusion and then show you how the Bible gets us there, especially in terms of the passage we are considering. My conclusion is this: there has ever only been one way of salvation presented to sinners from the beginning of time, and this salvation has ever only been received by faith in God's promise of salvation which is brought to fruition in the person and work of Jesus Christ. So the unity of the Bible – the unity of the covenants and the unity of the testaments lies in the way of salvation through Jesus. There has ever only been one plan of salvation and one way by which sinners are saved. There was not a way for OT saints to be saved and now a new way for NT saints to be saved. There has always been one way, and that way is the grace of God through Jesus Christ. This way of salvation did not begin to be announced during the earthly ministry of Jesus; in fact it finds its origins in human history in the Garden of Eden. In that sense, we can say that Christianity is as old as the human race. It predates every other religion, whether Islam or Buddhism or Hinduism or animism or anything else. Actually, it is even older than that: for it has its ultimate origins in the eternal covenant and plan of the Trinity for the salvation of God's people. Jesus is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.

However, there are differences between old and new covenants. One difference is the way in which this one way of salvation has been progressively revealed in history. God has not revealed the fulness of the gospel

all at once; he has revealed it in stages. There is an historical unfolding of God's one plan of redemption in Christ, and one of the ways God has done this is through the progressive unfolding of this redemptive plan in covenants. These covenants begin in the Garden of Eden, with the promise of the seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. In the covenant with Abraham, God reveals that this seed of the woman is the seed of Abraham who will bring blessing to the nations. In the covenant God made through Moses with the nation of Israel, we see type after type pointing to the person and work of the Messiah. In particular, we see how it must be through a substitutionary atonement that our sins are purged. In the covenant God made with King David, we learn that the Savior will be the son of David, who will rule the nations with a rod of iron. And then in the prophets, God reveals the new covenant, a covenant that we see is mediated by Christ himself. It is in the new covenant that the gospel is most fully revealed, and it is secured in the coming of the incarnate Son of God. God who spoke at various times and in many ways through the prophets has climactically and ultimately spoken to us in his Son (Heb. 1:1). It seems that this is the reason for the progressive unfolding of God's plan in history: he did so, so that the fulness of gospel revelation would coincide with the fulness of times in the coming of his Son to redeem us (Gal. 4:4-5).

Therefore, there necessarily will be differences between the covenants, differences that emerge from the historical place and purpose of each covenant in the plan of God. These covenants differ partly from the place they occupy along the timeline of redemptive history. They differ because God is not only progressively revealing promises of redemption, but he was also preparing the way in history for redemption to happen. A failure to see this is one of the chief reasons, in my opinion, where the continuity and the discontinuity between the covenants lie.

There is another difference between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant. Remember that the Old Covenant is the Mosaic Covenant, revealed in the Law of Moses, and expounded in the books of Exodus through Deuteronomy. This covenant differs from the New Covenant,

not only in the amount and clarity of gospel revelation, but also in the fact that the Mosaic Covenant was a conditional covenant. It was conditioned on obedience (see Exodus 24:3). On the other hand, the New Covenant is a covenant of grace because God is the one who guarantees that its conditions will be met. “The law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17).

Now that doesn’t mean that the Law was meant to give people a way to get saved by works. The apostle Paul himself discounts this. He says that the Law is not “against the promises of God . . . for if there had been a law which could have given life, verily righteousness should have been by the law” (Gal. 3:21). In other words, the Law was never meant to be a means to gain eternal life before God. It was never posed as an alternative way to be saved. But its promised blessings, which were primarily earthly and temporal, did depend upon the obedience of the Israelites. The reason why God’s judgment came upon Israel again and again was because they didn’t obey. They failed to receive the blessings because they didn’t meet the conditions for the enjoyment of them.

So then, we might ask: why then the law (Gal. 3:19)? If the Law did not give life and if the Law by its being conditioned on human obedience was prone to be broken, what was its purpose? Why did God give the Law of Moses?

The apostle Paul answers this question to the Galatians, who had been tempted to see the Law of Moses as a way to be justified before God (cf. Gal. 5:4). He writes, “Wherefore then serveth the law? It was added,” he says, “for transgressions, till the seed should come to whom the promise was made [this is a reference to Christ, see ver. 16]” (3:19). Or, as Paul puts it to the Romans, “Moreover the law entered, that the offense might abound” (Rom. 5:20). When you put these two texts together, it seems that the apostle is saying that one of the main reasons for God giving the Law was to convince us of our moral frailty, to show us our sins so that we would see that we need a Savior. As Paul put it later in Galatians 3, “But the scripture [the Law of God] hath concluded [imprisoned] all under sin, that the promise by faith of Jesus Christ

might be given to them that believe” (3:22). This is meant to shut us up to God’s grace in Jesus Christ: “Therefore by the deeds of the law there shall no flesh be justified in his [God’s] sight: for by the law is the knowledge of sin” (Rom. 3:20).

Let me sum up: the unity of all the covenants from Adam to Christ lies in their common witness to salvation by grace in Jesus Christ, who is revealed progressively as the seed of the woman, the seed of Abraham, the prophet like Moses, the king who will reign in the lineage of David, the mediator of a New Covenant.

However, there are differences and the differences in the covenants lie in several things, which I will summarize with the words perspicuity, place, and power. First, we can see it in the perspicuity of the covenants, or in the amount of information revealed about Jesus, from the twinkling of light in the proto-evangelion of Genesis 3 to the blaze of the glory of God’s revelation in the person and work of the incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Through the covenants, God was progressively revealing the gospel.

Then, there is difference due to the place each covenant occupies in the historical unfolding of God’s redemptive plan in Christ. For those covenants that came before Christ’s incarnation, it was necessary that the physical seed of Abraham be separated from the nations. This was done by circumcision in the covenant God made with Abraham, and then in constituting his family as a distinct nation through Moses. God’s revelation was primarily to and through Israel before Christ; but since Christ has come, the gospel is for the nations, and this of course has implications on how God’s plan of redemption is administered in the New Covenant.

Finally, when we look at the New and Old Covenants in particular, we see that there is another dimension to this set of differences, for the Old Covenant was a conditional covenant, whereas the New Covenant, like the Abrahamic covenant, is a covenant of promise. The former is characterized by law whereas the latter is characterized by grace. The way we can characterize this difference is in terms of Hebrews 8 and

Jeremiah 31, or in the power of each covenant. The Old Covenant, depending as it did on human obedience for its blessings, was ultimately powerless. All it ended up doing was bringing down judgment. On the other hand, the New Covenant is a powerful, successful covenant, for in it God himself is bringing about the promises through Jesus his Son.

How were Old Testament saints saved?

I don't want to stay on the differences here. My main purpose is to highlight the continuity between the covenants, and in particular between the old and new covenants. You see it in the passage we are considering. Though our Lord is described here as "the mediator of the new testament" [or "new covenant" – the Greek word *diatheke* used here can mean both], nevertheless, the redemption obtained by him is said to be "for the redemption of the transgressions that were under [or, during – Gk. *epi*] the first testament." The first testament? How is the mediator of the new covenant a redeemer for those under the old covenant?

To answer this question, note that the author of Hebrews has been saying that the offerings under the old covenant, the Mosaic law, were insufficient. They could not really free the conscience from the guilt of sins (Heb. 9:9; 10:1-4). However, this is exactly what the death of Jesus can do (9:14). So one might wonder what happened to people before the death of Jesus? How were they saved? Well, the author tells us: they were saved by Christ's atonement. They couldn't be saved by the sacrifices of the old covenant; they must be saved by Christ. In other words, the effectiveness of the death of Jesus goes forward and backward. It reaches forward to those who came after he died to those who believe in him. It reaches backward to God's people who lived before the physical coming of Jesus and his earthly ministry. The apostle Paul says something very similar in his epistle to the Romans. There he tells us that "God hath set forth [Christ Jesus] to be a propitiation through faith in his blood, to declare his righteousness for the remission of sins that are past, through

the forbearance of God; to declare, I say, at this time his righteousness: that he might be just and the justifier of him that believeth in Jesus” (Rom. 3:25-26). Jesus died so that past sins – sins committed before he came to the earth and died – might be forgiven and sinners justified. He died so that present sins (and, by implication, future sins) might be forgiven and sinners justified. The atonement reaches backward and forward.

So the first answer to the question, how were OT saints saved, is to say that they were saved by the death of Jesus Christ, just like we are today.

I want you to notice also how folks who lived under or during the administration of the old covenant are described in Heb. 9:15. They are described by the phrase “they which are called.” What does that mean? The only other place in Hebrews where the author says something similar is in 11:8, concerning Abraham. Here is what he says there: “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he was going.” What is significant about this verse in comparison with 9:15 is that, in both places, God’s call is connected to God’s promised inheritance. I don’t doubt that, first of all, the patriarch Abraham is one of those considered in 9:15, but I think it also shows us what it means to be called.

To be called here is a reference to what theologians call the effectual call. It is called effectual because the call issued brings about the response intended. When God called Abraham, Abraham responded in faith. This is what the apostle Paul is referring to in Romans 8:30, when he says, “whom he [God] called, them he also justified; and whom he justified, them he also glorified.” This is clearly saying that everyone who is called by God will be finally saved, or glorified.

A call to what, though? To what was God calling the folks under the old covenant? Look at the text: “they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance.” (This is still referring to those under the Old Covenant; the verb “are called” indicates action in the past with

results continuing into the present.) They were called to receive God's saving promise. This was true with respect to Abraham. In the Abrahamic covenant, God gave Abraham promises of blessing, which the NT interprets in terms of salvation, the gift of the Holy Spirit, justification before God, and an eternal inheritance. "In thee shall all the nations of the earth be blessed" (Gen. 12:3). It was the promise of salvation that would come about through Jesus Christ, although he was not fully revealed at this point. Nevertheless, it could be truly called the gospel, and this is exactly what the apostle Paul says to the Galatians: "And the scripture, foreseeing that God would justify the heathen through faith, preached before the gospel unto Abraham, saying, In thee shall all nations be blessed" (Gal. 3:8). Our Lord himself said, "Abraham rejoiced to see my day: and he saw it, and was glad" (Jn. 8:56). How did Abraham see the day of Christ? He saw it in the promises which God gave to him and which he received with faith and gladness.

When God called Abraham, he was calling him not only to wander about in the land of Canaan, but he was called to believe the gospel, which he did because, when God calls a man like he did Abraham, the call creates the response. Just like today. When Paul is talking about the conversion of the Thessalonian Christians almost two thousand years after the call of Abraham, you have something very similar: "But we are bound to give thanks always to God for you, brethren beloved of the Lord, because God hath from the beginning chosen to you salvation through sanctification and belief of the truth: whereunto he called you by our gospel, to the obtaining of the glory of our Lord Jesus Christ" (2 Thess. 2:13-14). God called Abraham by the gospel in terms of the promises given to him in the Abrahamic covenant. God calls us by the gospel in terms of the promises given to us in the New Covenant.

What is God doing in the call? He is creating in us the faith to receive the promises (note how this is true both in Abraham's case in Heb. 11:8, and in the Thessalonians' case in 2 Thess. 2:13-14), and by doing this we come to have a personal interest in the eternal inheritance. In other words, Jesus died so that our sins might be forgiven and so that we might



be able to enter into eternal life. The way the accomplished redemption becomes applied to us personally is by the call of God through the Spirit. The Spirit applies the work of Christ to us by creating in us a new heart and calling us to faith in Jesus by the gospel.

It's interesting that when Paul develops the gospel in Romans, he says that "now" – in contrast to the time under the law (3:19-20) – "the righteousness of God without the law is manifested, being witnessed by the law and the prophets" (21). In other words, there is a difference; the gospel was not manifested under the law the way it is so clearly today, although even the law and the prophets pointed to it. However, when he comes in chapter 4 to illustrate what faith in Christ looks like, where does Paul go? He goes straight to the OT, to Abraham and King David. In fact, Abraham's faith is the exemplar for NT faith (4:17- 25). Paul ends that chapter by reminding us that Abraham's faith was imputed to him for righteousness (which I take as another way of saying that he was justified by faith), and then he says this: "Now it was not written for his sake alone, that it was imputed to him; but for us also, to whom it shall be imputed, if we believe on him that raised up Jesus our Lord from the dead, who was delivered for our offenses and raised again for our justification" (23-25).

So how were OT saints saved? They were saved in the same way NT saints are saved: by the redemption accomplished by the Son of God on the cross and by redemption applied by the Spirit of God in the effectual call. It is true that there are differences in the content of the promise we are called to embrace, but whether before Christ or after Christ, the promise received is a promise that points to and depends upon what Jesus did upon the cross.

How are we saved?

All this, of course, has implications for us. If there has only ever been one way of salvation – by grace through faith in Christ (Eph. 2:8) – then that means there is only one way for you and me. And that is the way

of the Bible from beginning to end. We are saved by the grace of God in Jesus Christ, and the way we come to have a personal interest in it is by faith in Christ, which God calls us to by a work of sovereign and efficacious grace.

When it comes to talk about being saved, there is often a lot of talk about what we are supposed to be and what we are supposed to do. This is misguided. Now there is a response demanded of us: we are to repent of our sins and to believe the gospel. We must be careful that we don't end up treating the gospel like a new law and thinking that we are the ones who have to make ourselves worthy for God. The whole point of this verse is to help us to see that Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant and he is that because he is able fully to purge our consciences from dead works to serve the living and true God (Heb. 9:14). He is the one who brings about the blessings of the gospel for us and to us. We are meant to look to him, to focus on him, to love him, to embrace him. We are to see his sufficiency to save, his worthiness and glory and loveliness. If we really see that, we will want to follow him and obey him. We won't want to live in sin. We will mourn our failings and repent of our rebellion. If we start with ourselves, and we focus on ourselves, we will end up in despair. The solution to self-despair is not to put forth a greater effort to fix ourselves, but to repose ourselves entirely upon Christ. May the Holy Spirit enable each of us to do that this very day!

# CHAPTER XXXI

## THE NEW COVENANT-TESTAMENT (HEB. 9:16-22)

IN THE TEXT, YOU WILL NOTICE that the word “testament” is used. The Greek word is *diatheke*, and in the first century A.D., it almost universally carried the meaning “testament.” However, in the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was used by the early church, the same word was used to translate the Hebrew word (*berith*) for “covenant.” It turns out that the King James Version translates *diatheke* as “covenant” also. In fact, in the book of Hebrews, it translates this word as “covenant” a total of 11 times, and as “testament” a total of 6 times (as “covenant” in 8:6, 8, 9, 10; 9:4; 10:16, 29; 12:24; 13:20, and as “testament” in 7:22; 9:15, 16, 17, 20). Why translate a word in two different ways, especially when a covenant is not the same thing as a testament? Which is it?

In verse 15, I argued that the word should be translated as “covenant.” Indeed, Jesus is the mediator of the new *diatheke*, and you don’t generally have mediators for testaments or wills, but you do have mediators for covenants. Interestingly, 8:6 reads that our Lord “is the mediator of

a better covenant,” instead of “mediator of a better testament.” Again, you wonder why. The reason is that the Old Testament passage (Jer. 31) upon which this is based tells of covenants, new and old. So this would seem to indicate that this is way we should translate the word, as “covenant.”

However, it is hard to understand other parts of our text in this way. When the author of Hebrews writes that “where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator” and that “a testament is of force after men are dead” (16, 17), this seems to indicate very strongly that our author understood the word in the sense of a testament, or will. A will certainly comes into force when the one who made the will (the testator) is dead. So this would seem to indicate that this is the way we should translate the word, as “testament.”

Well, I think this can be confusing to us because our words for covenant and testament signify two different things. It is true that they both refer to legal arrangements that are in some sense binding. Beyond that, there are more differences than commonalities. A covenant is an agreement between two or more parties, and the covenant or compact dictates the terms of a relationship between the parties who enter into it. One thinks of the marriage covenant, for example, when a man and a woman enter into a binding relationship based on promises and vows made to each other. Or we might point to the Mayflower Compact, which was a covenant that the first settlers of Plymouth Colony made in order to determine the political arrangement for the colony.

On the other hand, a testament or will determines the beneficiaries of an inheritance and perhaps the terms upon which they will receive the inheritance. It doesn’t establish a relationship per se but bequeaths an inheritance. One can see that often a big difference between the two is that a covenant is a two-way agreement or a bilateral enactment, whereas a testament or will is more or less a one-way thing, a unilateral enactment.

In New Testament times, although the word *diatheke* primarily referred to a testament, the connotation was still wide enough to refer

to either covenant or testament. This is why the author can switch between the ideas of covenant and testament using the same word. But it turns out that, in the case of the covenants between God and man, and certainly in terms of the New Covenant, this is especially fitting. In other words, it's not either-or, it's both. It's a covenant-testament. We need both ideas to really understand the nature of God's promises to save us in Christ. Now this is fitting because God's covenants with man can take on the character of a testament in the sense that they are unilateral enactments by God for the good of man, and God alone determines the conditions by which we enter into a relationship with him. Unlike a human covenant, we don't enter into the New Covenant as if we were on equal terms with God; far from it. Nor does our relationship with God depend upon our promises to him, but in the New Covenant we see that our relationship with God depends entirely upon his promises to us (cf. Heb. 8:10-12).

There is another sense in which the New Covenant is like a testament: it lies in the fact that it was inaugurated upon the death of our Lord. Now a covenant is not generally enacted upon the death of one of the folks who make it, but a testament is. The text is very clear on this: the way our Lord is the mediator of the New Covenant is by dying: "And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance" (15).

Even though the Old Covenant was a genuine covenant, it pointed to this aspect in the way it was inaugurated. For it too was enacted by the death of a sacrifice, and this is the point of verses 16-22. The author goes back to Exodus 24 when the children of Israel formally entered into covenant with the Lord. God had given them his terms, particularly in the Ten Commandments, and they responded with the promise to obey (ver. 3). However, this is not all that happened, and in verses 5-8, we read this: "And [Moses] sent young men of the children of Israel, which offered burnt offerings, and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen unto the

LORD. And Moses took half of the blood, and put it in basons: and half the blood he sprinkled on the altar. And he took the book of the covenant, and read in the audience of the people: and they said, All that the LORD hath said will we do, and be obedient. And Moses took the blood, and sprinkled it on the people, and said, Behold, the blood of the covenant, which the LORD hath made with you concerning all these words.” This is the primary text that is behind our author’s words in Heb. 9:18-21. They show us that, just as a testament is inaugurated by death, even so the Old Covenant was inaugurated by death.

Not just any kind of death: the death that brought the Old Covenant into being was the death of a sacrifice, and, as we have seen, the entire sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law was there primarily to point to the person and work of Jesus. Just as the sacrifices of the Old Covenant were meant to bring about ceremonial cleansing from sin, even so our Lord’s willing sacrifice of himself for us purges our conscience from dead works to serve the living God (9:14).

On the other hand, the New Covenant really is a covenant because in it God is establishing a relationship with us in Christ. He is binding us to him in an everlasting commitment of love and grace. He is not simply handing us an inheritance and then walking away; he is drawing us to himself by the Spirit so that we respond to his call in faith and love and obedience. He who is faithful is calling us to the fellowship of his Son (1 Cor. 1:9).

The character of the New Covenant as a covenant-testament is rich with important implications for the gospel and our hope. That is what we want to look at together this morning. In particular, I want us to consider the melding of these two ideas in the covenant God makes with us in Christ. Because it is like a testament, it is something which is bestowed upon us and something which bequeaths an inheritance to us. And because it is like a covenant, it is something by which God binds us into a saving relationship with himself. Because it is inaugurated by death, because it is blood-stained, it simultaneously takes on both the character of a testament and will. My prayer as we

consider these things is that we will more fully appreciate the richness of God's promise of salvation to us in Christ.

The New Covenant is bestowed.

When I say that the New Covenant is bestowed, I mean that it is something gifted to us by grace. It is not something we create. It is not something we earn or merit. It is not grounded in our commitment to God; rather, it is grounded in his commitment to us. Like a testament, God's covenant with man is a unilateral enactment. It is his purpose in which it was originated, his promises which determined its character, and his power which brought it into being.

We need to be reminded from time to time that God did not have to save us. I think sometimes we can slip into an attitude that thinks God owes us something, that of course he would have saved us, and that it would have somehow been wrong if he had not. This idea is entirely false; in fact, it is wicked to think that. It makes me think about the old Puritan minister who, in order to determine where they were with God, would ask his children if they thought they deserved to go to hell. When they responded that they truly believed this, that is when he knew that God was doing a work in them. Indeed, it does take a work of grace in our hearts to turn us from our pride and overweening confidence in ourselves. We are so blind to the ugliness in our hearts.

If you call yourself a Christian, it should absolutely amaze you that the God of heaven would stoop down to save a wretch like you. We sing "Amazing Grace" by John Newton, but do we really believe what we are saying?

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound  
That saved a wretch like me.  
I once was lost, but now am found,  
Was blind, but now I see.*

Wretched, lost, and blind: is that how we see ourselves apart from Christ? Does the weight of that land on us the way it ought? Even apart

from our sinfulness, we who are creatures of the dust, why should we think that God would ever take notice of us? Like the Psalmist put it, “When I consider thy heavens, the work of thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which thou hast ordained; what is man, that thou art mindful of him? And the son of man, that thou visitest him?” (Ps. 8:3-4).

The reality is, we are not only fragile creatures whose every breath is in the hand of God, but we are sinful, treasonous, rebellious against God. We who owe God everything, deny him, are ungrateful, and disobedient. God, who is holy, would of course be entirely just to destroy us forever. It would not be a mark against his love or kindness to do this. It does not make a judge unloving to uphold the law. God’s goodness would not be one whit less for doing so. His justice and his power would be magnified. The angels would praise him for his righteous works in the judgment of sinners.

And yet, despite all that, God has not only chosen to save sinners, even the chief of sinners, and he has done so at the unfathomable cost of his own Son. It boggles the mind! What should really amaze us is not that God doesn’t save everyone but that he saves anyone. It should stagger us to think that he would save us. Our salvation being entirely of grace should be an end to all our pride and arrogance and high-mindedness. God didn’t save us because we were good; he saved us despite the fact that we were very bad. God justifies the ungodly (Rom. 4:5). God’s covenant is a reminder of his sovereign and matchless grace. It is a reminder that the provision for our salvation does not lie in us but has come to us entirely from the riches of God’s grace and mercy.

The New Covenant is blood-stained.

At the end of the text, in verse 22, the author makes this trenchant observation: “And almost all things are by the law purged with blood: and without shedding of blood is no remission.” The great point of these verses is that the covenant could not have been inaugurated apart



from the death of Christ. In this way, it is like a testament or will, in that Christ who is the testator had to die for its provisions to take effect.

The point of verse 22 is to remind us why Christ had to die: he had to die because one of the chief provisions of the New Covenant is that of the forgiveness, or remission, of sins. In quoting the terms of the New Covenant, we are reminded of this: “For I [God speaking here] will be merciful to their unrighteousness and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more” (Heb. 8:12). In the New Covenant, God promises to forgive the sins of his people; forgiveness cannot be achieved apart from blood-shedding; hence, Christ had to die in order for God’s people to have it.

Now I know that a lot of people will scoff and ridicule the gospel because of its insistence upon blood- shedding for atonement. They will say, “Why didn’t God just forgive sins? What is the purpose of all this blood? This is more pagan than enlightened. It is not worthy of God to imagine him demanding blood as the price of human sins.” To this I only say that to have such an attitude is just a reflection upon their lack of appreciation of the holiness of God and the sinfulness of sins. Those who take such a position have never really reckoned with the utter despicableness of their depravity. That really is because they have never truly reckoned with the utter transcendence of the holiness of God. To say that this is unworthy of God is just to reveal that you have really no idea who God is in the first place.

In the New Covenant, therefore, we see both the necessity and the sufficiency of the blood-shedding of Christ for the forgiveness of sins. If you would have the forgiveness of sins, you must come through Christ. There is no other way. As the apostle Peter would put it to the Sanhedrin, “Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved” (Acts 4:12).

We must not only see the necessity of his death for us, but also the sufficiency of his atoning sacrifice. What I mean by this is that his blood really does cleanse us from all our sins. As the apostle Paul put it in his sermon in the synagogue in Pisidian Antioch: “Be it known unto you,

therefore, men and brethren, that through this man is preached unto you the forgiveness of sins: and by him all that believe are justified from all things from which you could not be justified by the law of Moses” (Acts 13:38-39). How many condemning things are we justified from? All things! Or as the apostle John put it: “But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 Jn. 1:7). From how much sin does the blood of Christ cleanse us? From all sin!

What does this mean? It means that, if you are in Christ by faith, there is not one sin that you have to atone for, not one sin that you have to make right, not one sin that you must erase or purge. Now of course we are called to repentance, and we must repent. There is no salvation for those who refuse to walk away from their sins. But our repentance does not contribute one whit to our justification before God. We are justified and forgiven on the basis of the righteousness of God in Christ alone. As Charles Wesley put it so well,

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin,  
He sets the prisoner free,  
His blood can make the foulest clean,  
His blood availed for me.*

The New Covenant binds.

Covenants bring multiple parties into a binding relationship. The New Covenant is no different. In the New Covenant, by the means of the death of Christ, we are brought into a binding relationship with God: “I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: and they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest” (Heb. 8:10-11). Thank God, this relationship is based, not upon our worth and merit, but solely upon God’s promise in Christ. What binds us together in a relationship with God is not the steadfastness of our commitment to him but rather the steadfastness of his commitment

to us. Because this covenant is a unilateral enactment, the relationship that it creates is a relationship based on grace. And being based on grace, it is a relationship that will endure.

So here you have a characteristic of the covenant-testament that is more covenantal in nature than it is like a will. As we pointed out, the purpose of a will is not typically to establish a relationship between the testator and the heirs of the testament, but this is exactly what a covenant tends to do. Hence again we see how we are not just dealing with a covenant or a testament but with a *diatheke*, with a covenant-testament.

In binding us to himself, God has adopted us into his family. He has made us heirs of God and joint-heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:17). God the Father becomes our Father, and Christ our Brother. To claim this would almost be unthinkable if God had not revealed it to us, but this is exactly what God has said. What does this mean? It means that God loves us with all the tenderness of a father, only in this case our Father is perfect and holy and without fault and folly. This is the uniform testimony of Scripture: "Like as a father pitieth his children, so the Lord pitieth them that fear him" (Ps. 103:13). Or as our Lord put it: "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good gifts to them that ask him?" (Mt. 7:11). It is no wonder then that the apostle John exclaimed, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God!" (1 Jn. 3:1).

Some may complain, however, of the ways in which they think God has unjustly treated them, and think that there is no way that God could be a loving Father given what has happened to them (or perhaps what they have seen happen to others). What I would say to this person is, first of all, look to the cross. God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (Jn 3:16). In the cross, you have the ultimate example of innocent suffering and what must have seemed at the time to be utterly

meaningless, but you also have the ultimate example of the love of God shining through for our salvation.

I would also say that you have not seen the whole story and you need to wait patiently to the end. This is what the apostle James tells us, for example: “Behold, we count them happy which endure. Ye have heard of the patience of Job, and have seen the end of the Lord, that the Lord is very pitiful, and of tender mercy” (Jam. 5:11). How do you see the pity and mercy of the Lord? By seeing what the Lord will do in the end. When we are in the middle of a trial, or when we are looking back on a tragedy and can only see all the hurt that it has caused, we are not in a position to judge either the wisdom or the love of God toward us. The Scripture is still true: all things work together for good to those who love God (Rom. 8:28), and though this doesn’t mean that all things are good in themselves, it does mean that God will work them out for good. In the perspective of eternity, we will see it to be so.

In the meantime, God gives grace. Our good Father never forsakes his children. He is with us each step of the way. All the trials he brings us through are meant to refine us, to perfect us, to enlarge the capacity of our souls to enjoy God and see the glory of God. I’m not saying that this makes things easy. I’m not saying that we will not go through things that may leave scars on our souls as long as we are in this world. Like Paul, many followers of Jesus can say, “From henceforth let no man trouble me: for I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus” (Gal. 6:17). What I am saying is that God has promised grace now, however painful the trials we are going through, and glory to come. The glory we will enter into in the age to come will be all the sweeter because of (not in spite of!) the trials we go through now. Why? Because God loves his children with a never-ending and unbreakable love. He has proven it by the New Covenant that brings us into his family through Jesus and keeps us there. We are bound to him with the unbreakable cords of covenantal love and faithfulness.

The New Covenant bequeaths.

As heirs of God, we receive an inheritance. The covenant gives it to us. The blood of Christ gives it to us. The apostle Paul talks about “the riches of the glory of his [God’s] inheritance in the saints” (Eph. 1:18). When God speaks to us about our inheritance that he has laid up for us, it is in terms of riches and glory. Whatever poverty and loss we experience, it will give way to riches untold and unlosable. The riches we lay up right now we will inevitably lose. But not the riches of heaven. Whatever shame or lowliness we experience now, it will give way to glory undimmed and unfading. Glory now is fading and often even damaging. Not so the glory to come. “The blessing of the LORD, it maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it” (Prov. 10:22).

The Bible tells us that we will receive an inheritance in a New Heavens and New Earth wherein dwelleth righteousness. It tells us that we will enjoy God’s presence with an immediacy and joy and clarity that we simply cannot know now. In the age to come, the poverty gives way to riches, mourning gives way to gladness, want and hunger give way to fullness. Brothers and sisters, we will inherit the earth.

How do we know this? Because the cost at which the New Covenant was inaugurated was itself the greatest gift that God could have given, and having given this, we can be sure that God will give us everything else. This is the glorious logic of Romans 8:32, “He that spared not his own Son, but delivered him up for us all, how shall he not with him also freely give us all things?”

We are meant to live in light of this. We are meant to live in light of eternity. As Jonathan Edwards put it, “Lord, stamp eternity on my eyeballs!” Live in expectation of the inheritance. When the apostle reminds the Colossian believers that the “Father . . . hath made us meet to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light” (Col. 1:12), he is expecting them to let that reality aid them “that ye might walk worthy of the Lord unto all pleasing, being fruitful in every good work, and increasing in the knowledge of God” (10). You cannot live the way the

NT calls us to live without having an eternal perspective. But you cannot live out the practical implications of this eternal perspective apart from the hope of the future inheritance. You cannot have this hope if you are not utterly and unshakably convinced that God has promised it to you. If you are in Jesus, the mediator of the New Covenant, he has.

What shall we say to these things? Again, we are pointed to Jesus. How are these things given to men? Through the death of Jesus Christ for our sins, and in no other way. You must come to the Father through him. You that are weary and heavy laden, come! Our Lord himself beckons you. The gospel tells us that those who trust him and receive him as Lord and Savior, to them all the blessings of the New Covenant belong. It means that you are a recipient of sovereign grace. It means that you are covered in the blood of Jesus and that all your sins are forgiven. It means that you have been adopted into the family of God. It means that you have been given an eternal inheritance that is “incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4).

God has not been miserly in his promises to us. On the contrary, they are breathtaking in their magnitude. They are hope-inspiring and joy-giving. In them the grace of God in Christ shines forth. Let us live in light of this covenant-testament with joy and peace and hope and love and faith and obedience.

## CHAPTER XXXII

### CHRIST: PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE (HEB. 9:23-28)

TIME IS SUCH AN UNWIELDY COMMODITY. We cannot change the past, the present is slipping through our fingers faster than we might wish, and the future is out there unknown and unknowable. The problem is that this unwieldy commodity is also often weighted down with actual and potential sources of worry and concern. We can be haunted by our past, stressed by the present, and anxious about our future. Nevertheless, time is something none of us can escape, however unwieldy or threatening it might be. We are all growing older. We all have a past, present, and a future.

You can tell a lot about a person, and even a culture, in the way they try to relate to the flow of time. There's not much doubt that older cultures tended to worship the past and to define the present and the future entirely in terms of the past, although you actually see this today in many of the Islamic cultures of the Middle East. This overemphasis on the past is stultifying, making it hard to pursue genuine progress in the present toward a better future. The thing about this present gen-

eration here in the West is that it does the opposite: it fights the past, fixates on the present, and forgets about the future. We are living in a time which takes as its motto the very thing that the apostle mocks in his letter to the Corinthians: “Let us eat and drink; for tomorrow we die” (1 Cor. 15:32). We have trivialized ourselves as people who have no grand hopes for the future and are content to settle for nice lunches in the present.

Because this culture has jettisoned absolutes, it has no respect for the past. Our generation is not conservative because it doesn’t see anything of value to conserve. For the same reasons, it simultaneously has also lost any hope in the future, especially when it comes to life after death. We are now as a culture defined by nothing more than our constantly changing desires. The only thing that is fixed is our refusal to be fixed by anything. We have nothing from the past to inform us and nothing in the future to invite us. By this way of thinking, we pay a price: we can no longer have any real connection to the past or to the future, and the present we have embraced is a shapeshifter, an amorphous ill-defined thing that refuses to be defined clearly by anything outside itself.

Christianity, on the other hand, enables a person to relate in healthy ways to past, present, and future. We don’t worship the past, but neither do we jettison it. We recognize God’s hand in the history that has gone before. We aren’t called to stress about the present, either, but neither do we waste it, for it is given to us by God, and the Christian is called to redeem the time (Eph. 5:16; Col. 4:5). Moreover, we are called to live in light of the future, a future which is bright with hope for the child of God.

The reason for this is our Lord Jesus Christ. In our text, we can see why. Christ is connected to our past, present, and future. In the verses we are considering, we see three ways in which Jesus has appeared and will appear for us (I am indebted for this insight to P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Eerdmans, 1977], p. 384). In verse 24, we are informed that “Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are figures of the true; but into heaven



itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us.” In verse 26, we are told that “now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself.” And in verse 28: “So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.” You can see how each of these appearings variously relate to our past (ver. 26), our present (ver. 24), and our future (ver. 28). In these verses, we see that our Lord appears now “in the presence of God for us” because he appeared once “in the end of the world to put away sin,” so that those who eagerly await his coming will be able to welcome him when he appears the second time without sin unto salvation. This is important because, if there is any reason why a person can have peace about their past, contentment in the present, and hope for the future, it is precisely because of who Jesus is and what he has done, is doing, and will do for us. It is this that we want to consider together.

### The Present Appearing of Christ (23-24)

In these two verses, notice the emphasis on heaven. The Mosaic institution had all sorts of cleansing rituals which have been highlighted by the author at various points. These purifications were only “patterns of things in the heavens.” Moreover, “the heavenly things themselves [are consecrated] with better sacrifices than these” (23). Then, in verse 24, we are reminded that our Lord’s priestly office is not exercised in an earthly tabernacle, but in “heaven itself” where he is “now to appear in the presence of God for us.” These verses are not the first time this point has been emphasized. Throughout this letter, we are reminded that our Savior is even now in heaven as our forerunner (6:20), our interceder (7:25), and as our King enthroned with majesty (8:1).

The point is not just the location of Christ. The point is why he is there and what he is doing there. He is there for believers. He is ministering there for them. He is advocating for them (1 Jn. 2:1-2). And he is doing this now. If you are one of God’s elect, which you are if you are

united to Christ by faith, then this is true of you. Our Lord is even now in the presence of his Father to represent you and to intercede for you. The Bible tells us about this because it is good for us to know it and to meditate upon it. So let's consider what our Lord is doing in heaven and how our Lord's present appearing in heaven can strengthen our faith.

First of all, our Lord is in heaven as our representative. He is the representative for those who are united to him, who are "in him" in the Pauline sense of the phrase. If we have union with Christ, that means that his victory over sin and death is also our victory over sin and death, which means that his presence in heaven in the present secures our presence in heaven for the future. This is what the apostle Paul says, for example, in his letter to the Ephesians. There, he reminds the believers in Ephesus that God "raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus: that in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6-7). The "together" means "together with Christ." In his role as Redeemer, Jesus didn't act for himself, but for his people, for those the Father gave him. Hence, when he died, they died; when he rose from the dead, they rose from the dead; when he ascended into heaven, they ascended with him.

Now it is true that we are presently on earth and our Lord in heaven. We are not personally in heaven or in possession of the fulness of our salvation. We are not yet among the saints made perfect. What this tells us is that this future is guaranteed for us. We will make it into heaven to enjoy perfect fellowship with God because Jesus is already there for us. He is the first fruits, and we will certainly follow after. This is why Jesus is called our forerunner (Heb. 6:20). He has gone into heaven, not only to prepare the way for us, but to personally bring us there. This is what our Lord himself said: "In my Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also" (Jn. 14:2-3). What should

be our response to this? Well, it should be the response that our Lord intended: “Let not your hearts be troubled” (Jn. 14:1). This is something that cannot be taken away from us. Our possession in heaven is sure because it is kept for us by Christ himself. My friends, there are many things that can be taken away from you: your health, your friends, your jobs, and many other things. No one can take us out of Christ, and if he is in heaven and I am united to him, then it is a sure thing that I will one day be in heaven. Let this fact encourage your heart and build up your faith and hope in God. Set your mind on things above (Col. 3:1-3).

Not only is Christ there as our representative, but he is also there to intercede for us. This is stated several times in Scripture (Isa. 53:12; John 14:16; 17; Rom. 8:34; Heb. 7:25). This is also implied in his role as our “Advocate with the Father” (1 Jn. 2:1).

Now someone may ask, “Why does Christ need to intercede for us? I mean, if God knows our needs before we ask, and if the Father doesn’t need to have his arm twisted to do us good in the first place – what is Jesus doing?” If it is not to inform God and it is not to motivate God, then what is it for?

It is not for God’s sake, but for our sake, that this is done. And it is to remind us of the love and concern that our Savior has for us. It is to assure us of the certainty of our salvation (Heb. 7:25). It is to remind us that our Savior is a present help in time of trouble. He is not simply waiting for us on the other side; he is presently in heaven for us and for our blessing and benefit. If the Savior is interceding for you, it means that you are not alone, you are not forsaken. As John Murray put it so well in his commentary on Romans, “nothing serves to verify the intimacy and constancy of the Redeemer’s preoccupation with the security of his people, nothing assures us of his unchanging love more than the tenderness which his heavenly priesthood bespeaks and particularly as it comes to expression in intercession for us” (Romans, Vol. 1 [NICNT], p. 330).

It means, in particular, that there is no sin that has not been taken care of, and no threat to your faith that is not being taken care of. The

fact that our Lord is there in the presence of the Father means that all the resources of heaven are being marshalled for your good and the salvation of your soul. Is this not a reason for hope and joy and peace? Our present burdens and worries and concerns can weigh us down and burden our hearts. Let us remember that, no matter where we are at or what we are going through, Christ is presently in heaven in the presence of God for us. Perhaps you look at where you are now and are just disappointed and discouraged. My friend, don't be discouraged. At this very moment, if your hope and faith are in Jesus, you have a friend and an Advocate at God's right hand. Should this not bring us great contentment, no matter what is our present condition?

#### The Past Appearing of Christ (25-26)

The present appearing of Christ for us in heaven is based on the past appearing of Christ for us on earth, which is what these verses address. The point is that our Lord does not have to shuttle back and forth between heaven and earth to offer himself continually, as the high priest under the Mosaic institution had to do (25). Rather "now once at the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself" (26).

Let's first consider this phrase "the end of the world." It sounds apocalyptic, doesn't it? This is not so much a statement about the earth or even the cosmos, but a statement about time. It literally says, "the end of the ages" (ESV). The way the NT authors looked at things is that the coming of Christ marked "the last days," not necessarily in the sense that the Second Coming is next week, but in the sense that the next big redemptive event will be the end of history as we know it with the Second Coming and the Final Judgment. We are living in the last days, although again we need to keep things in perspective by noting that this does not mean that the Second Coming is right around the corner. After all, a thousand years is with the Lord as a day (cf. 2 Pet. 3:8).

Why did Christ appear at the end of the ages? It was “to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (26). To put away sin means that he has borne away the judgment due to sin. It means that he has dealt with sin and all its consequences definitively (note the word “once”!). Sin’s guilt and sin’s defilement and sin’s end (death) have met their defeat in Jesus Christ.

How did he do this, though? Verse 28 tells us that he accomplished this as an offering, “to bear the sins of many.” In other words, he didn’t put away sin in some abstract sense. Nor did he put away sin for some amorphous group of people. Rather, he put away the sins of the many, and he put them away by bearing the punishment due to those people’s sins upon himself. If you ask who the many are, the answer is ready: they are those whom the Father gave the Son to save (Jn. 6:38-39; 17:9). That is to say, Christ died for the elect, and all for whom he died will be saved, precisely because their sins have been put away. Now if you ask how do you know if you are among those for whom Christ died, the answer is also ready: do you believe in the Son? Do you trust in him as your Lord and Savior? For this is also what our Lord said, “For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life” (Jn. 3:16). The reason why the Son was given and the reason why he died was so that those who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life.

To believe in Christ simply means that you receive him as he is presented to us in the pages of Scripture. It means that you embrace him truly as your Lord and Savior. It means that you don’t have to do something to make yourself worthy for God. It means that you don’t have to purge your own sins, but simply to rest in his finished work. God does not ask us to contribute to redemption, because sin has already been put away. There is no more work to be done! Hence it is that the apostle Paul can say, “For by grace are ye saved, through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Here is the key to having peace about your past. You won't have peace about past sins and failings if you think that the responsibility to purge your sins falls on you, that you have to be punished somehow in order to get right with God. That is not the case. To say that is basically to say that Jesus didn't get the job done on the cross. These verses we are considering, and indeed all the NT, say that our sins are finally, once-for-all, put away in the substitutionary death of Christ for us.

Now that doesn't mean we don't have to repent of our sins. Yes, we must turn from all our idols to serve the living and true God. Yes, we must turn from our sins. Yes, we must pursue righteousness. Without holiness no man will see the Lord (Heb. 12:14). In fact, you won't have peace if you remain in your sins: there is no peace to the wicked (Isa. 57:21). We don't repent of our sins in order to get God's acceptance; rather, we repent from God's acceptance. Our works are not the basis of our justification; they are the fruits of it. Are they evidences of salvation? Yes. The reason is that Christ does not present himself to us as a Savior only from the guilt of sin but also as a Savior from the grip of sin. Those who come to him must receive all of him, not just part of him. Those who receive Christ receive him not only to save them from sin's punishment but also from sin's power. Good works are the evidence of God's work in us (Eph. 2:10), but they are not the meritorious basis of our salvation. The key to peace with God is resting in the work of Christ for us, and in that alone (Rom. 5:1-3).

### The Future Appearing of Christ (27-28)

In verse 27, the writer says, "And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment." This is meant to be an analogy for our Lord's redemptive work. Just as men die once, even so our Lord died only once. This is because when he died, he fully satisfied God's justice with respect to sins and, therefore, he won't have to die again. This is the point, I think, of the phrase "without sin unto salvation" in verse 28. He is not referring to our Lord's sinless state; rather, he is referring

to the fact that when our Lord returns, there will be no more sin to deal with, for it was finally and decisively dealt with in the once-for-all offering of Jesus upon the cross. He won't be coming back with our sins still hanging about his neck; for they have all, as it were, been dumped into the sea, never to be brought up again (cf. Micah 7:19). And so, our Lord's finished work on earth means that he is not in heaven still trying to atone for the sins of his people, for that is already done. Rather, as we are reminded here in our text, he is in heaven on the basis of his finished work interceding for and blessing his people.

Here we get to the reason for the past and the present appearances of our Lord: it is so that, when he appears "the second time without sin unto salvation" (28), we will be able to welcome him with gladness and open arms. With respect to this future appearing, our author refers to it as "the second time" he shall appear. There is no "first time" explicitly mentioned in the context, but he clearly is referring to our Lord's first appearing on earth. Now this is important because it shows us the continuity and the similarity between the two. In other words, just as our Lord's first coming was a real, physical, historical, visible coming to earth, even so our Lord's second coming will be a real, physical, historical, visible coming to earth. It reminds us of the words of the angels to those who watched the Lord ascend into heaven, who said, "Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? This same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11). The Second Coming is not meant to stand for some "spiritual truth." It is a real, future event for which we ought to be looking, waiting, expecting.

The focus of the verses is certainly on the future. In verse 27, we are reminded of future judgment, and in verse 28, of the future coming of our Lord. Now there are some folks who think that Christians will escape the judgment. We will not. Matthew 25 doesn't have the sheep looking on as the goats are in the judgment; they are all in the judgment together. The point is not that the elect will escape the judgment itself, but that they will escape the wrath of God as the sentence upon them

on that final day of days. Or think about what the apostle Paul says to believers: “But why dost thou judge thy brother? Or why dost thou set at nought thy brother? For we shall all stand before the judgment seat of Christ. . . . So then every one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Rom. 14:10, 12). The point that needs to be made here is that everyone will give an account of their life to God. No one will escape the coming judgment.

Also, this verse indicates that there are no do-overs for anyone. You die, and then the judgment. No second chances. The state in which you die is the state in which you will spend eternity: if you die a saved person, you will survive the judgment; if you die a lost person, you will not.

That does not mean, however, we have to spend our lives wringing our hands in worry. No, the whole point of these verses is the hope that the believer in Christ has because of his completed and finished work! We flee from the wrath to come by fleeing to Christ. Having fled there, we have need of no more fear. In fact, this description of God’s people is so good: they are not people worrying about the Second Coming; they are people looking for the coming of their Savior. “Unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.” This is, of course, a looking with anticipation. This describes people who are eager for Jesus to return, who say with the apostle John, “Even so, come, Lord Jesus” (Rev. 22:20). Or as the apostle Peter put it, “What manner of persons ought ye to be . . . looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God?” (2 Pet. 3:11-12).

Why do believers look and long for the Second Coming? The apostle Paul provides the answer. As he put it to the Philippians, “For our conversation [citizenship] is in heaven; from whence also we look for the Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall change our vile body, that it may be fashioned like unto his glorious body, according to the working whereby he is able even to subdue all things unto himself” (Phil. 3:20-21). Or, in the single word summary of our text: “Unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.”



Now perhaps you are puzzled at that word. Aren't God's people already saved? Yes and no. Salvation is of a piece, and I worry about those theologians who want to rend the fabric of salvation into half a dozen different pieces. Nevertheless, there are aspects of this one salvation that we haven't experienced yet, and there are aspects of salvation that we have experienced. For example, the Bible says that if your faith is in Jesus, you are justified before God, and that this is a once-for-all event that never needs to be repeated. Regeneration also happens just once. Sanctification, on the other hand, is an ongoing event. However, the reality is that none of us are glorified – and hopefully I don't have to establish that! Glorification is what the author of Hebrews is referencing. Our salvation will not be completed until we are glorified, and that will coincide with the coming of our Lord.

What is the essence of glorification? Well, I would say it is sharing the glory of Christ and being with him forever. "Beloved," the apostle John writes, "now are we the sons of God, and it doth not yet appear what we shall be: but we know that, when he shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is" (1 Jn. 3:2). To see Christ and to be with him, in other words, will be a transforming event, and that is the goal of all our salvation: to be with Christ. The apostle Paul ends his description of the events of our Lord's Second Coming with these words: "and so shall we ever be with the Lord" (1 Thess. 4:17). That is the pinnacle of our hope and salvation.

So here is a call to hope. Here is a call to live in light of our future salvation. Here is a call to look for the appearing of our Saviour when he shall come without sin unto salvation. This is what a Christian is: a Christian is someone who lives in light of the resurrection and coming of the Lord, and whose daily demeanor and decision-making reflects that hope. Does it for us? Do we live this way?

Do we live in light of our Lord's past, present, and future ministry? Does the cross give us peace, the intercession contentment, and his future coming hope? I hope you see that these are not just truths to file away in the "I gotta believe this" category, but then go out as miserable,

guilt-ridden, anxious, and discontented people. That's the opposite of what these realities ought to do! If we are this way, I submit that we have never truly believed them. If, on the other hand, we do believe them and take the Lord at his word, then how can we but be holy, happy, and hopeful people? May the Lord make it so in each of us!

# ASCENDING THE SUMMIT

# CHAPTER XXXIII

## WILL OUR SINS BE REMEMBERED OR FORGOTTEN? (HEB. 10:1-18)

PEOPLE GENERALLY DON'T WANT TO BE TOLD they are wrong. This is not just a modern thing; it is embedded in our natures as sinful human beings. It is a part of the human desire for self-sovereignty which refuses to be told what is right and what is wrong. Our present culture especially doesn't like to be told what is right and wrong from any religious authority, and most especially from the Bible. In fact, we are often told that religious authority belonged to a previous generation and is inherently oppressive and the sooner we get rid of it, the better.

One of the inevitable results of this outlook is that modern men and women often will do all they can to suppress or ignore feelings of guilt. Now I do recognize that we can sometimes have feelings of guilt that are misplaced. It is a fact that we can feel guilty for some things that we aren't necessarily responsible for, and I'm not arguing that we should

hold on to that. But if we live in a moral universe where the rules are determined by God and not by us, and if we break God's rules – his laws, his commandments – we are not going to be able to get off scot-free. One of the things we will inevitably end up with is a guilty conscience. Still, we don't want to acknowledge that we have done anything wrong and so we try to silence our conscience. Sometimes people are actually pretty successful in this endeavor, and the apostle talks about those whose consciences are seared as it were by a hot iron (cf. 1 Tim. 4:2). In fact, there are a number of ways that we try to silence our consciences.

We do it by denying that the guilt points to anything real. If this is the path we take, then we are claiming it is a figment of our imagination, or a phantasm put upon us by moralistic people who just want to make us feel bad. But this seems to me a bad approach. For one thing, guilt is not something which always or even primarily comes from without. Guilt is registered in our own consciences which is a part of who we are as human beings. I don't see how a denial of guilt is really any different from saying that illness is imagined and that the best way to deal with an illness is to imagine it away. (There are people who say just that, by the way.) Rather, the wiser thing to do is to ask what it is that is causing the guilt-feelings to be there in the first place, and to reckon with the possibility that we have, in fact, done something wrong and bad.

We do it by blame-shifting and finger-pointing. On the other hand, we may not be one of those people who deny that we live in a moral universe, but when push comes to shove, we tend to want to deny that we're the problem. In contrast to Chesterton, who upon reading in the newspaper a question posed by a writer, "What is the problem with the world?" answered with a one-sentence reply: "I am. Respectfully yours, G. K. Chesterton."

If we're honest, we all fall in this category, at least to some extent. We tend to want to blame our sins and failures on others: our parents, our spouses, our children, the sins of others. Or we want to blame the environment we are in, the circumstances in which we find ourselves. We want to play the victim card. "I couldn't help it; it wasn't my fault;

the devil made me do it.” This goes back all the way to the first sin in the Garden of Eden. When God confronted Adam, he blamed Eve. Then when God confronted Eve, she blamed the serpent. Did that relieve them from their guilt? No, and the fact that we are embedded in a family with a problematic history and an environment which is often unsympathetic and unhelpful does not relieve us of ours either.

We do it by comparing ourselves with others. When my wife was in college, she shared an apartment with three other girls. One of them told her that she enjoyed watching reality TV shows because it made her feel better about herself! We can all be guilty of that very mentality. We are too often like the Pharisee praying in the Temple, who prayed and said, “God, I thank thee, that I am not as other men are, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even as this publican” (Lk. 18:11). Note the end of the parable. It was not the Pharisee who went down to his house justified; it was the publican (14). By the way, the Pharisee no doubt felt justified in his own mind, but that is not what counts – what counts is whether or not we are justified in the sight of God.

The apostle Paul put it this way: “For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves: but they measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise” (2 Cor. 10:12). Again, the point is that our fellow human beings are not the standard. God’s law is the standard and God’s law is that by which we will inevitably be judged, not our fellow man. It doesn’t matter if I feel that I am “better than most.” The reality is that I have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23), which is the standard we have all miserably failed to meet. As one preacher put it, you may stand at the top of an Alp, and another man at the bottom of a mine, but you are as unable to reach the stars as they.

We do it by doubling down on making ourselves a better person. Whether by religious work, charitable work, or by becoming a social justice warrior, we think we can atone for our sins, past, present, and future. This doesn’t even work in the realm of secular justice. It’s not

enough to become a better person, but the debt we owe to society on account of our sins must be paid. Sin, however, is not primarily against society; it is primarily against God (cf. Ps. 51:4). Our debt to God must be paid, and that cannot be done by just becoming a better person. How does one pay one's debts to God? How do we take sin which is infinitely heinous (as it is against a Being of infinite majesty and authority) and pay it? The nagging guilt is really a reminder that we cannot, not that we haven't done a good enough job yet.

So how can we forget our sins? How can we be released from our guilt and therefore from our guilt- feelings? That is the question of the hour, and that is the thing our text deals with. It starts with "in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again of sins every year" (Heb. 10:3), and ends on the note, "And their sins and iniquities will I remember no more" (17). How do we go from having our sins brought up again and again and again to having the memory of them blotted out, never to be brought up again? How does our text address that? To these questions we now turn.

In our text, we see the two main avenues that people often take to deal with their guilt (when they aren't trying to avoid it or ignore it or pretend it isn't there): merit-making performances and mediating priests. What the author says in the first four verses strikes a blow at folks who seek to deal with their sins through religious works (or, if they're not religious, by being good according to some standard). Then, in verses 5-10, he contrasts the failure inherent in such works with the finality and sufficiency of the person and work of Christ. In verse 11, on the other hand, the target is not so much the inadequacy of religious performance as it is the inadequacy of the Levitical priesthood. By extension, we are pointed to the inadequacy of all those authorities through whom we seek to approach God apart from Christ. Finally, in verses 12-18, we are again pointed to Jesus who is a successful and triumphant priest and mediator between God and man.

We can summarize the point of these verses in the following way: you will never be able to truly be rid of your sins and the remembrance

of them and the guilt to which they testify if you seek to rid yourself of them apart from Christ. In Jesus Christ, we find a perfect, final, complete, sufficient atonement for our sins. Those who come to him will find their sins purged and forgotten by God himself. Let's see how this is worked out in the text of Hebrews 10:1-18.

#### The Inadequacy of Merit-making Performances (1-4)

The theme of these four verses can be summarized in the fourth verse: "For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins." You can't get more inadequate than "not possible." Now when I call these sacrifices "merit-making performances," I'm not claiming that God intended them to function that way. He intended them to point people to his mercy through a Messiah. Remember to whom the author of Hebrews is writing. At least some of these folks were wanting to rest in a Christless Law. They would then be seeking their relationship with God to be actually mended with these sacrifices; they were seeking to get rid of the guilt and the remembrance of their sins this way. In that case, these sacrifices do become – in their estimation at least – merit-making performances. The author of Hebrews is trying to warn them off this path, that these works they are seeking to rest in, these blood sacrifices and so on, are simply inadequate to take away their sins. Let's see how the argument works out.

The proof for the inadequacy of the sacrificial system in the Mosaic Law is based on the principle that, if you have to keep repeating something, it is inherently imperfect. That is the main idea. These are "sacrifices which they offered year by year continually" (1), in which "there is a remembrance again of sins every year" (3). On the other hand, if they actually did take away sin, then there is no reason why they "would . . . not have ceased to be offered" (2).

Now if there is anything that would have the potential to be a merit-making performance, it would have been these sacrifices, for God himself ordained them for his people and as part of the worship of Israel.



These were not sacrifices, blood offerings for sins, which were made up by men but which had the imprimatur of God upon them. And yet, though they could effect ceremonial cleansing, nevertheless as the text points out, they could not actually achieve the forgiveness of sins. How do we know this? Because they had to keep repeating them. Again, this is because the Israelites were not meant to find their consolation in the sacrifices themselves, but in the grace and mercy of God and in his Messiah to whom the sacrifices pointed.

At this juncture an objection could be lodged against the argument of our author. Someone might say, "Yes, but the reason they had to be repeated is not because they didn't actually take away sins, but because they could only take away the sins that had actually been committed up to that point." In other words, the counterargument is that the sacrifices only dealt with past sins, and that is the explanation for their repetition, not because they didn't actually take away sins.

What can we say to that? Well, first, this objection doesn't adequately explain why you had the sin sacrifices on the Day of Atonement which were meant to cover all the sins of all Israel for the whole year, when you also had many other sin offerings. In other words, in the Law you have sacrifices stacked on each other, as it were. Just because there was this great offering on the Day of Atonement did not take away the need for all these other sin offerings. That points to the fact that the yearly sin offering on the Day of Atonement (which is what is spoken of here in Hebrews) did not really take away sin.

Perhaps a better question to ask is, why would a sacrifice only work backward? Why wouldn't it work forward as well? If a sacrifice works for a particular sin for which it is offered, why not for another sin? Why couldn't the offerer simply appeal to the previous offering? What is it in a sacrifice that doesn't allow it to cover multiple sins, past, present, and future? It really does seem to indicate an insufficiency in the sacrifice itself. This seems to be the point in verse 4 – however humble and sincere the repentant sinner is who offers his sacrifice, he is offering something which does not and cannot correspond to the moral debt

owed: “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats should take away sins.” The blood of animals simply doesn’t correspond to the debt owed by creatures made in the image of God.

Before we go to the next point, I think it is worth dwelling on the fact that the point here is that you cannot obtain forgiveness from God or even enter into his fellowship through keeping the Law of God. I know there are a lot of people who will say that it’s not important what kind of religion you follow (or don’t follow), as long as you are sincere and try to be a good person. Hear what is being said in this text: you can be as sincere as the day is long with respect to the keeping of God’s law – even the law that God himself commanded and had written down and desired to be kept. If hope is in your performance of the law, you’re sunk. We are not justified by law-keeping. We are not justified by being sincere. We are not justified by merit-making performances.

### The Inadequacy of Mediating Priests (11)

It’s not just that we seek to relate to God through good works and sacrifices in order to be done with the remembrance of sins. Sometimes we try to relate to God through mediating priests. Whereas these folks were tempted to rely on the Levitical priesthood that was ordained by God, in our day the temptation is to substitute other authorities, with far less warrant to be trusted than Aaron and his sons!

It seems to me that perhaps one of the biggest mistakes people have made in our day has been to elevate scientists to the level of priest. Now I’m not saying that all religious authorities are good: they aren’t. But this does not mean we are better off with guys and gals in lab coats as the ultimate authorities either. The reason why we are so apt to make this mistake is because science has been so successful in making our lives easier and in creating all these cool and clever gadgets. So we make the mistake of thinking that science can deliver truth on the matter of our souls and ultimate things as well. This is a problem as well as a leap of faith. The reality is that science cannot provide a basis for the most

important things in our lives, like meaning and love and moral value and human dignity. Science is not the final or only arbiter of truth. As Oxford mathematician John Lennox has pointed out, statements by scientists are not always statements of science. When a scientist tells you, for example, that Darwinism proves God doesn't exist, he is not giving you a statement of science, and he is not telling you the truth.

Scientific materialism is an acid for religion, but the religion of Christ is an acid for scientific materialism. They cannot coexist. Which one should you choose? Well, the great and deceptive marketing scheme that the materialists use in order to convince you to choose theirs is that theirs is the position of logic and science and reason, whereas the position of religious folks is one of myth and fairy tales and blind faith. That is a total caricature. Here's the truth: both scientific materialism and the Christian religion make claims that you cannot prove by science and logic and reason. They both proceed on certain axioms that no one can prove. Here's an example: when someone claims that everything that is "real" is, at the bottom, made up of atoms and material stuff, that is a claim for which there is absolutely no scientific support. (Think about it: how would you prove such a statement scientifically?) It is a philosophical claim, a faith commitment. The reality is that the folks of science who decry faith are themselves committed to faith.

A better approach is not to ask which position is one of faith and then to reject that, for if you go that direction you will have to end up a radical skeptic doubting everything. The better question to ask is which worldview fits the data best? Here's the relevance of all this to what we are talking about in our text. The high priests of our day tell us that there is no God to whom we are accountable, no judgment, no heaven, and no hell. This means that our sense of moral accountability and our guilt feelings are not grounded in anything real. They are psychological states and nothing more. According to our modern priests, the guilt feelings may be real enough, but there is no transcendent reality (God's law, for example) that grounds our guilt and makes it meaningful.

These modern priests cannot, therefore, take away guilt because they think it is ultimately an illusion. They will at best prescribe a therapy to help you feel better about yourself, but they will never get rid of the guilt because they will not talk about God and his law and sin. There is a parallel here to the priests under the Mosaic Law: “And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins” (11). The Levitical priests could never stop working, they could never stop offering sacrifices, because those sacrifices could never take away sins. The fact of the matter is, if you go through our modern priests and try to unload your guilt apart from Jesus Christ, you are in for a never-ending task for the simple reason that Jesus is the only one who can take care of your sin and purge it completely.

It’s interesting that the writer here begins by describing the sacrifices of the law as being “a shadow of good things to come” (1). The modern methods are a shadow as well, but they don’t even have the pretense to be a shadow of good things to come – they are just shadows, and nothing more. How then are we justified? Or rather, in terms of our text, how can we make the remembrance of our sins go away? In these verses, we are pointed in a Trinitarian direction: to the will of the Father in the plan of redemption (5-10), to the victory of Christ and the proof of redemption (12-14), to the witness of the Holy Spirit and the prophesy of redemption (15-18). The will of the Father and the victory of Christ and the witness of the Spirit all say the same thing: those who are in Christ are forgiven. Their sins have been forgotten, the memory of them gone.

### God the Father and the Plan of Redemption (5-10)

In these verses we learn that it was never God’s intention for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sin. It was always God’s intention for the first covenant to be replaced by a new covenant (9). This is the point of the quotation from Psalm 40. In this psalm, we are reminded that God

does not place ultimate value in sacrifices and offerings: “Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me: in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God” (5-7, quoting Psalm 40:6-8).

Now King David, the author of this psalm, was reminding himself of the inadequacy of sacrifices and of the importance of obedience. He is expressing his desire not to rest in outward religious performances but to do God’s will. Perhaps he remembers King Saul who was rejected, not because he didn’t sacrifice, but because he disobeyed God.

David is a type of Christ, especially because of the covenant that God made with him in which he promised to establish his kingdom forever. Christ is the one who brings the fulfillment of that promise to fruition. The author of Hebrews has no problem in taking David’s words to God and applying them to Christ. Understood in this way, we are eavesdropping, so to speak, on a conversation between the Son of God and his Father as the Son embarks upon his saving mission. As he comes into the world to accomplish the Father’s will to save his elect, Jesus says, “I come to do thy will, O God” (8-9).

In these verses, we are made aware that Jesus did not come down in an ad hoc fashion. He came to earth to do the Father’s will. He came to accomplish the work of redemption which the Father gave him to do. What was God’s will for Christ? It is that, in giving his body up to death (5, 10), he would be an offering that would sanctify God’s people “once for all.” Unlike the sacrifices under the Mosaic Law (or any sacrifices, for that matter), our Lord’s sacrifice works for all time. It doesn’t have to be repeated. Whereas the Levitical sacrifices could not take away the consciousness of sins (2), Jesus’ atoning death actually sanctifies God’s people.

By sanctify here, we shouldn’t understand “making holy” in the sense of Jesus bringing about the repentance of sins and creating people who pursue holiness in the fear of God. In other words, progressive sanctifi-

cation is not under consideration here, for what is under consideration here is a one-time event. Now progressive sanctification is a necessary effect of this sanctification by the death of Christ. But here we should understand this in the more basic sense of “set apart for God,” by being cleansed from the guilt of sins. By his death, Jesus purged our sins. Note the contrast between verses 4 and 10. Whereas the sacrifices under the law could not “take away sins,” that is, their guilt, yet by the offering of Jesus Christ “we are sanctified . . . once for all.” In other words, being sanctified is the solution to the problem left by sacrifices that could not take away sins. You also see this contrast in verses 11 and 14. We see that priests offer sacrifices “which can never take away sins: but this man [Jesus] . . . by one offering . . . hath perfected forever them that are sanctified.” To be sanctified, then, means to have your sins taken away. It means to be cleansed from the guilt of sins. In this the work of Christ is absolutely decisive.

So how can we know that our sins can be forgiven in Christ? Because it is the will of God the Father, and “he hath done whatsoever he hath pleased” (Ps. 115:3).

### God the Son and the Proof of Redemption (12-14)

Christ our Lord, God’s Son, came to accomplish redemption, and he did so. We are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all time (10).

How do we know that? What is the proof? How can we know that Christ’s work is finished? How do we know that “by one offering he hath perfected forever them that are sanctified” (14)? The answer is the resurrection, isn’t it? This is the evidence pointed to in verses 12-13: “But this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool.” Of course, in verse 12, he goes from the passion of Christ to the session of Christ, but to get from one to the other, you have to have a resurrection. Jesus Christ is seated triumphantly at the

Father's right hand because he triumphed over death. That means that his death was accepted by God the Father as an adequate and full and complete and final atonement for sins.

In contrast to the Levitical priests who stand daily at their work offering sacrifices that can't take away sins, Jesus is seated at the Father's right hand having finished his work. Note that the extent of our Lord's saving and redemptive work doesn't just stop at the forgiveness of sins for his people. That's the starting point but it's not the ending point. The ending point is this: "From henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool" (13). This is a reference to the complete and final victory of Jesus Christ over all his enemies, including death. Listen to the way the apostle Paul put it in his letter to the Corinthians: "Then cometh the end, when he shall have delivered up the kingdom to God, even the Father; when he shall have put down all authority and power. For he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy that shall be destroyed is death" (1 Cor. 15:24-26). There is coming a day when the saints will inhabit a new heavens and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13), and for that hope we look for and long. We can know that our hope is not vain in the Second Coming of Christ because he has already come and proven his word by rising from the dead and by being seated victoriously at the Father's right hand. We can know that our sins have been forgiven if we are in Christ because he didn't stay dead. He was raised again for our justification (Rom. 4:25).

### God the Spirit and the Prophecy of Redemption (15-18)

There is one more witness to this and it is the witness of the Holy Spirit in Old Covenant prophecy of a New Covenant. In verses 16-17, we are reminded of the prophecy and promise of a new heart and the forgiveness of sins. Again, note how this is framed: "Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us" (15). Let us never forget that when the prophets speak, the Holy Spirit speaks, God speaks. What are the Scrip-

tures of the Old and New Testaments? They are God's inspired word, breathed out by him (2 Tim. 3:16). They are infallibly true. They are inerrant and trustworthy.

At no time can we appreciate this fact more than now. Think about all the misinformation out there. You've probably heard that the government is establishing a Disinformation Board, which I doubt anyone really believes is going to be objective and help us get to the truth. We are awash in information and misinformation, and it is virtually impossible always to discern one from the other. Thank God, we have his word. Whatever else may be true, we know the Bible is true.

How can we know that we can have the forgiveness of sins? Because he has said so. God has promised it to us in his word. We have it in the New Covenant, which means we have it in Jesus Christ who is the mediator of the New Covenant. If you trust in him, all your sins will be forgiven. That is not my promise; that is God's promise, and he always keeps his word. You can bank on it. So we come to verse 18: "Now where remission of these [sins] is, there is no more offering for sin." Praise God!

### Conclusion

If you don't think you need Jesus or you don't even think you're a sinner who deserves eternal punishment, then you might think this is so much bunk because you aren't bothered by your sins to begin with. It doesn't matter in the end what you think of your sins; what matters is what God thinks of them. One day you will die and stand before your Maker and the blinders will come off and your mouth will be silenced, and you will stand guilty before God with absolutely no hope. Oh my friend, do not stay in a denial of your sinfulness, but flee to Christ!

If you are united to Christ, then your sins are forgotten insofar as they are obstacles to your relationship with God and entrance into his favor. Now this doesn't mean that we don't continue to deal with our sins and ask for their forgiveness and to repent of them. When the text says



that our sins are remembered no more (17), this is a reference to God, not to us. If you are a Christian, even the way we remember our sins changes, for now we remember them as we remember Christ. Should we remember our sins? Yes, but we should also remember Christ and to continue to come to him for cleansing from the guilt and pollution of sin in our lives (cf. 1 Jn. 1:7, 9). This is the purpose of the Lord's Supper, isn't it? "This is my blood of the new testament, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Mt. 26:28). "This do in remembrance of me" (Lk. 22:19). Don't look at your sins without looking to Christ.

Let me therefore end with a quotation from that holy man Robert Murray M'Cheyne, which I think is a fitting conclusion to all that we have said here:

"Learn much of the Lord Jesus. For every look at yourself, take ten looks at Christ. He is altogether lovely. Such infinite majesty, and yet such meekness and grace, and for all sinners, even the chief! Live much in the smiles of God. Bask in his beams. Feel his all-seeing eye settled on you in love, and repose in his almighty arms. . ."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup><https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/the-purifying-power-of-delight-in-christ>

## CHAPTER XXXIV

### THREE THINGS TO DO WHEN YOU'VE SCALED THE SUMMIT OF HEBREWS.

(HEB. 10:19-25)

WHAT IS THE BOTTOM LINE HERE in the book of Hebrews? What is being offered to us? What is being set before us? What has the argument been driving at all along? It is this: that through Christ we have “boldness to enter into the holiest” (19). By “the holiest” is a reference to the Most Holy Place, as we saw in previous chapters (see 8:2; 9:3, 8, 24), the place into which the high priest was allowed to go only once a year, and not without blood. It was the place where the presence of the God of the universe was especially manifested in the shekinah glory that shone between the cherubim above the ark of the covenant. Whereas under the Old Covenant the people had been barred from entering into God’s presence and were in fact being taught that “the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing” (9:8), now in the New Covenant we have access into the presence of God.

We can have “boldness” as we enter. We don’t have to come in trembling and wondering if God is going to accept us. We don’t have to come in fear and doubt, because of Jesus. In other words, the believer in Christ is not being presumptuous as he or she claims to have union and communion with the Almighty, and the reason is because they have a “great high priest” (10:21), whose shed blood (19) and broken body (20) have opened the way for them. Our boldness is not, therefore, a product of our holiness or goodness or worthiness in any way. Our boldness is solely the product of the sacrifice of Christ on our behalf.

Jesus is the way into the presence of God to bless, and he is the only way. There is no other way. There was no other way into the Most Holy Place, except through the veil, which the author likens to the body of Christ broken for us and for our salvation (20). If you will have God’s blessing and favor, if you want to be accepted by him and to be received into his friendship and fellowship, there is only one way you will find it: in Jesus Christ. He is the “new and living way” (20), “living” because he is the way, the truth, and the life (Jn. 14:6). In him we have eternal life: he is the “living way” because, though he died, he rose again and lives forevermore, having conquered death for all who are united to him by faith.

All throughout this epistle, the author has been laboring to convince his audience of the supremacy of Christ and of his sufficiency to save. He does this because he knows that a person’s commitment to Christ will not endure if that person is not fundamentally convinced of two things: first, that they need a Savior, and second, that Jesus is the only one who can save and who will save those who come unto God by him (7:25). He hasn’t needed to spend too much time on the first thing since presumably his audience was already convinced of that fact, so he has labored hard on the second.

My friend, if you have never embraced Christ in faith as your Lord and Savior, you too need to be convinced of your need of a Savior. For our Lord did not come to save the righteous but sinners. And that is all of us, for “all have sinned and come short of the glory of God” (Rom.

3:23). You also need to be convinced that you cannot save yourself, that you cannot deal with the sin that separates you from God. You cannot free yourself from its grip and you cannot atone for your guilt. Nor can any other prophet, priest, or king. Only Christ can save, and he does save. Indeed, he saves all who come to him, who put their trust in him, who receive him as Lord and Savior. He promises, "All that the Father giveth me shall come to me; and him that cometh to me I will in no wise cast out" (Jn. 6:37). Do you wonder that Christ will push you away if you come to him? He won't because he has promised he won't. Indeed, "as many as received him" in his day, and as many as receive him in our day, "to them gave he [and continues to give] the power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name" (Jn. 1:12).

All this is wonderful and good news, because the summit of privilege and blessing and honor is this: to find the way open into the very presence of God and then to make your way in. That way is open, and it is open in Christ. That is what the book of Hebrews is about: it is about helping you find your way to that summit.

You will notice that what is offered to us in the gospel is not the goods of this world, or even that of the next. What is offered to us in the gospel is God. Everything in the Holy Place was about God. God is the gospel. He is the ground of all reality and therefore of all real happiness. Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God (Mt. 5:9). You won't find this kind of joy or peace in anything else. Nothing else is lasting. Nothing else is substantial in comparison. So when we are told that God is the blessing given to the believer, may we never view this as a sort of second choice or as a substitution for earthly blessings we would rather have but can't get. No! Anything else is the substitution, and an infinitely cheap one at that. When Solomon says, "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" (Eccl. 1:2), he is not talking about God – he is talking about everything else. He was talking about whatever exists "under the sun." God alone is not vanity. God alone is "worthy . . . to receive glory and honor and power" (Rev. 4:11). The gospel does not invite us to a cheap banquet of human praise and physical stimulus and riches that rust. It invites us

to the only One in the universe who can give us peace and satisfaction and joy, precisely because he gives us himself. “Come unto me,” says our Savior, “all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn of me; for I am meek and lowly in heart: and ye shall find rest unto your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light” (Mt. 11:28-30).

Let us draw near to God through Christ (22).

It is one thing to know that the way is open; it is another to personally enter in and to draw near. Have you? We are encouraged to draw near to God, and the way we do this is “with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water” (22). Here we see once again that the way we appropriate these wonderful and glorious realities for ourselves is by faith. We are saved by grace through faith (Eph. 2:8). We are justified by faith (Rom. 5:1). We are risen with Christ by faith (Col. 2:12). If we would be found in Christ, it is not by having a righteousness of our own, “but that which is through the faith of Christ, the righteousness which is of God by faith” (Phil. 3:9). In fact, the entire Christian life is one of living by faith in Christ (Gal. 2:20).

What is faith? Well, it is not blind faith. It is not believing something for which there is no evidence or believing something in spite of the evidence. Rather, Biblical faith has three elements: knowledge, assent, and trust. As such, faith involves the whole of the inner man: mind, heart, and will. There is knowledge, the intellectual content of faith, by which we understand what the gospel is and the reasons to believe. Then there is the aspect of assent, the hearty consent of our hearts to the truths we are being called to believe. Finally, there is trust, which is the soul’s reliance upon the object of faith. Gospel faith therefore involves understanding what the gospel is (which is Christ, his person and work, bringing us to God), finding our hearts drawn to him, and finally reposing ourselves upon him, receiving him as Lord and Savior. I like to illustrate this by Hebrews 11:13, which says, “These all died in

faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them [there is knowledge] afar off, and were persuaded of them [there is assent], and embraced them [there is trust], and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.”

We are not just encouraged to enter in by faith, but “in full assurance of faith.” We want a robust faith. Although it is not the amount of faith that saves, but the object of faith that saves, yet we don’t want to remain among those with “little faith.” Let us grow in faith, and in our confidence in Christ as our high priest. For he is a “great priest” (21, Greek is *hieria megan*), and is worthy of great faith. However, note that the confidence of our faith is not rooted in our own goodness or merits, but in the person and work of Christ. We don’t come having washed ourselves from our sins but having been washed by the blood of Christ. Just as the ark of the covenant was sprinkled with the blood of the sin offering, even so our hearts have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ – showing that we don’t draw near to God except through the atoning work of Jesus.

Let us take this one step further: practically, what does it mean to draw near to God? Let me suggest the following four things, all which come also from the book of Hebrews.

First of all, let us draw near to God for salvation. Listen to what the author of Hebrews says in 7:25, “Wherefore he [Jesus] is able to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them.” This verse says that Jesus saves, and that he saves those who come to God by him. How does a person know that he or she is saved when they come to God through Jesus? They can know it because God has said it. Those who come unto God through Jesus, he will save. Not only will he save them, but he will save them “to the uttermost.” How much more assurance do you need?

Second, let us draw near to God for help. Remember what was said in 4:16, “Let us therefore come boldly [the same language is being used here as in our text] unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need.” We should, because no one can

help like God helps. No one else, for example, knows exactly what we need, when we need it, and in what proportions we need it. No one can meet the needs of soul and body as God can. No one else is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent as God is. When I think of this, I think of the way Psalm 23 opens: “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.” Our Lord is the good Shepherd, and he knows his sheep intimately, will never forsake them, and will always guide them and provide for them in the very best way. Yes, my friend, draw near to God for help. He knows what things we have need of before we ask him, and he has promised to take care of us.

Third, let us draw near to God for sympathy. For in those same verses in Hebrews 4, we are told that “we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feelings of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin” (15). We are therefore invited to approach the throne, not of a stranger, but of one who has intimately entered into all the vicissitudes and trials and changes of this life that are the sources of our anxieties and griefs. He knows your grief and is willing to take your burden, so cast it upon the Lord and let him sustain you (Ps. 55:22). Fourth, let us draw near to God for reward. I get this from Hebrews 11:6 – “But without faith it is impossible to please him [God]: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” As we’ve already said, those who come to God understand that he is the treasure, he is the pearl of great price. He is our reward, for what God said to Abram the man of faith is also true of all who share his faith: “Fear not Abram: I am thy shield, and thy exceeding great reward” (Gen. 15:1). Those who know this are willing to sell everything else for it. We don’t come to God in order to be deprived, but to receive “all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

Let us draw near to God for salvation, help, sympathy and compassion, and for reward. Let us continue to draw near, which brings us to our next point, and the next verse.

Let us hold fast the profession of our hope (23).

I translate this, not as “the profession of our faith,” but as “the profession [or confession] of our hope” because the word used here is not *pistis* (the Greek word for faith) but *elpis* (the Greek word for hope). I’m not sure what the KJV translators intended when they translated it this way. Certainly, we recognize that there is a strong and close connection between faith and hope. After all, in 11:1, we are given a sort of definition of faith as “the substance of things hoped for.” Nevertheless, they are not the same (actually, as the definition in 11:1 shows, since you don’t define a word by the word itself!). Such a translation also conceals the connection that the author is making between the triad faith, hope, and love, and these exhortations. Thus, the exhortation to draw near is exercised by faith, the exhortation to hold fast is exercised with hope, and the exhortation to consider one another is exercised by love.

Here again we have a call to perseverance, a call to endure. Not, by the way, a call to remain secretive about our faith, but a call to profess and to confess it. Note that, whereas God is the one to whom we draw near in verse 22, our brothers and sisters in Christ the ones we consider in verses 24-25, in this verse (23) it is the world to whom we confess and profess our faith. This world can be very hostile at times. As the apostle Paul reminds Timothy, “All that will live godly in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution” (2 Tim. 3:12). He would ask the Thessalonian Christians to “pray for us . . . that we may be delivered from unreasonable and wicked men: for all men have not faith” (2 Thess. 3:1-2). It is this world that, either through the temptation of pleasure or the fear of pain and loss, will tempt us to leave the faith. But we must not; we must hold fast.

I have been listening to a podcast recently on the history of the early church; the last episode I listened to was on the martyrdom of Perpetua, an African Christian woman who was killed in Carthage in the year 203 for being a Christian. She had an infant son that she dearly loved and a father who kept begging her to burn incense to the gods and to



think about her son. And yet, when asked by the Roman proconsul whether or not she was a Christian, she did not hesitate to say yes, and by that answer sealed her fate to die in the coliseum from wild beasts and gladiators. When I hear about the martyrdoms of Christians like that, it makes me wonder if I would endure. Do I love Jesus Christ that much? Am I willing to lose all for his sake? For we are called to do so, aren't we? We must not put even our children or our dearest relatives above our allegiance to Christ. Jesus told us to count the cost, and that "if any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple" (Lk. 14:26-27).

How do you do that? How do you hold fast? Indeed, it is not just that we are called to hold fast, but to do so "without wavering." Let your hope be such that you are not even for a moment seduced by the promises of earthly comfort and safety to abandon your faith in Christ. Now we may not be called upon to be martyrs. The Hebrew Christians themselves had "not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin" (12:3). There are many ways the devil and the world can pressure us to leave the faith. We've all seen it, haven't we? There is the love of the world as well as the hatred of the world that can lure us away from a steadfast love to Christ. We don't want to bite down on that lure. So we ask again, how do you become that kind of person?

The answer is in the last part of verse 23: "for he is faithful that promised." This is why our hope is so important. Our hope is built on the faithfulness of God to his promises. We can be enabled to persevere even through very difficult times because God has promised that all who endure to the end will be saved (Mt. 24:13). The promises of eternal blessing await those who remain faithful to Christ, and they are sure. On the other hand, there are no promises for those who do not persevere, except promises of judgment, as we will see in the following verses (10:26-39), and as we have already seen in previous passages (as in chapters 2 and 6).

Please understand that I am not in the least bit indicating that a true child of God will lose their salvation because they didn't remain faithful to Christ. What I am saying is that God will preserve his children so that they do persevere. The perseverance of the saints is not what saves them, but is a certain and true evidence that they are saved. That is the reason we persevere: not because we are so reliable, but because God is. When I become afraid at the thought of whether or not I might falter if I were called to be a martyr, this is what I remember: I am "kept by the power of God through faith unto salvation" (1 Pet. 1:5). Christ is faithful, not just in the promise of heaven, but also in the promise of all the grace we will need to get us there.

Let us consider one another (24-25).

We are not meant to just hold fast ourselves, but we are also meant to encourage our brothers and sisters in the faith to hold fast too. That is the purpose of this exhortation: "And let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the Day approaching" (24-25).

Remember what our author has already said in this connection. He has already said this in chapter 3, and he considers this to be so important that he is repeating it. Thus, in 3:12-14, we read, "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called, To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end." It's the same thing here. In verse 23, we have been exhorted to persevere, to hold fast. Now we are told to encourage others to persevere as well. In doing this, we are not only helping our brethren to hold fast, but we are also helping ourselves to hold fast. For it is in the context of considering and exhorting others to love and good works that we ourselves are also considered and exhorted.

So here we are reminded again of the importance of the church, and especially of the importance of the gathering of the church. A church that never gathers is like a soccer team that never comes together for a game. It doesn't deserve the name! For it is as we gather and assemble, that these things (being stirred up to love and good works) take place. We've been praying for Pastors Timothy and Zach Guess. They traveled to Nicaragua to help a church get established there. In a recent update, Elder Timothy Guess said this, after describing some of the interactions they have been having with the believers there: "These kinds of conversations remind me of why it is important to regularly make these trips. There is something about face-to-face conversations that can't be duplicated with technology." Exactly!

Now I'm not saying that these things can't happen to some extent over the phone or even over the internet. But the fact of the matter is, if you are not in person with other believers, then you are not gathering with them, and you are forsaking the assembling of yourselves together. Let's just call that for what it is: it is nothing more and nothing less than sin. If you call yourself a Christian and regularly make excuses for not coming to church and gathering with the saints, you need to repent.

Some folks have gotten the idea that God will bless them whether they come to church or not. Then they wonder why they have so many problems in their spiritual life: they pray and read their Bibles, but they can't seem to draw closer to the Lord. The reason is because they aren't using all the means of grace which God has given them. It's like the person who was trying to escape a flood and who prayed that God would save them, and then rejected all the help (helicopter, boat, etc.) that God sent their way. Well, my friend, God has given you other believers for your help. You may not think you need them, but you do. God made believers to grow as they help one another and minister to one another. This is the way we hold fast. This is the apostle's very point in Eph. 4:15-16, where he says that, "speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped,

when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love” (ESV). The body, that is, the body of believers in Christ, builds itself up and so grows up into Christ.

Unfortunately, there have been several events and cultural and technological changes that have made it easier for people to stay home and not gather with other believers. One of these changes is the internet. Now I am thankful for live-streaming options. A big reason I’m thankful for it is that we have several in our church who are shut-ins and this is the only way they are able to join with us. I’m certainly not saying that they should ever feel guilty for not gathering with the saints, because they want to, but cannot. (They don’t need to come to us – we need to go to them! If you haven’t visited with some of our shut-ins, I highly recommend that you do so.) Although I am thankful for live-streaming options, this should never be used as an excuse to get out of coming to church. If you are not a shut-in, if you can get out to the store or go to work or go out to visit with friends in their homes, and so on, then you don’t have an excuse for not coming to church. At this point (for most of us, at least), Covid is no longer a valid excuse either. It really comes down to how important you think it is to grow in grace and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It really comes down to how much you love God’s people (and according to Scripture, you can’t love God and not love his people) and want to help each other be more Christ-like. It really comes down to how dangerous and destructive you think sin is. If you have an unbiblical view of sin and a small view of Christ and a small view of his church (that for which he gave his life!), then you will find all sorts of excuses not to gather with the saints. My friend, if that describes you, you are not in a good place.

I can say from experience and observation that almost every time the first step to apostasy is failing to obey this very simple directive in Heb. 10:24-25. Sheep don’t do well on their own. Those who wander off usually die from exposure or get gobbled up by the wolves. As Spurgeon once put it, it’s not the sheep who go alone, it’s the wolves. God didn’t make us to be Lone Rangers. If you think it’s okay for you to not invest

yourself in a local congregation of believers, you are on the road to a very bad place. It wouldn't surprise me if one day you end up denying the faith altogether or at least becoming spiritually estranged from it. I shudder to think of such an end! It is incredibly grievous and sad.

Now notice the last part of verse 25: "and so much the more, as you see the day approaching." I heard one preacher say once that "the day" in verse 25 is a reference to the Lord's day, or the day on which the saints gather. But that would be to say that they are to gather as they see the day to gather approaching. That doesn't make even a little sense. Others (like John Gill) say that this is a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem. This view assumes a Palestinian provenance for the epistle, which is doubtful (I argued for a Roman provenance in our first message on this epistle). So what "day" is this? Well, if you look at the next few verses (27, ff), it's obvious: it is the day of judgment, which will coincide with the Day of the Lord (cf. 2 Pet. 3:10-12), that day of days, the last in our current age, when the wicked and the righteous will be gathered before the throne of God. There the chaff will be separated once for all from the wheat (cf. Mt. 13:37-43). There the hypocrites will be exposed. There those who apostatized will be punished with eternal judgment.

In other words, the Day of the Lord should bring to our hearts and minds two reactions. One reaction should be the reaction of hope-inspiring courage which causes us to hold fast. We persevere and encourage each other to grow in grace, in love and good works, because we know that whatever we endure for the Lord, all the sufferings of this life are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us (Rom. 8:18). The hope of glory doesn't make us cowards for Christ; if we really have this hope it will make us lions for our Lord. Thus it motivates us to gather with the saints and to encourage one another in light of this future and glorious day.

On the other hand, there ought also to be the reaction of healthy fear which causes us to flee sin. Listen to what the author will say a few verses later: "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (31). This is not the sentiment of an unbeliever, but of a believer.

He looked at the coming judgment and was afraid: Not because he believed the elect would be lost, but because you cannot consider the future judgment of the wicked and not be moved to tremble. As such it acts as a means that God uses to help his saints persevere – we are helped not only by seeing how glorious is the reward of God’s people, but also by how awful is the punishment of the wicked (cf. 2 Thess. 1).

## Conclusion

Doctrine is the fuel that makes the Christian life go, as it were. The exhortations help us to steer the Christian life in the right direction. You need both: fuel to go and steering to go in the right direction. A vehicle without fuel just sits there. A vehicle without steering will careen off into a ditch, or worse, over a cliff. Here in the epistle to the Hebrews you have both. Doctrine and duty, teaching and exhortation. If you want to be a healthy Christian, you have to embrace both. It’s not enough to understand the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ if you are willing to draw near and hold fast and consider other believers to stir them up to love and good works. We need to apply what we know. One of the places to start is by obeying the text and by listening and applying these three exhortations. Brothers and sisters, let us draw near to the throne of God by faith in Christ. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope before the world. And let us consider one another to stir each other up to love and to good works, not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together.

## CHAPTER XXXV

### A WARNING AGAINST ENTRENCHED UNBELIEF (HEB. 10:26-31)

HERE WE ARE AT THE FOURTH WARNING against apostasy in this epistle. The three previous are found in 2:1-4, 3:6-4:13, and 6:1-8. The final warning will come in 12:25-29. We've noted that these warnings, which punctuate the letter to the Hebrews, indicate that at least some of the recipients of this epistle were on the verge of apostasy, and that this letter was sent to keep that from happening. To that end, the author not only gives them positive reasons for remaining faithful (the superiority and sufficiency of the Son of God as our great high priest) but also warns them as to the consequences of leaving the faith.

Now I don't think that our church is in the same place as the church to which this letter was initially sent. Of course, I can't see into everyone's heart, but from what I can see, I am encouraged to think that our church is by and large in a good place, and hopefully we are all growing in grace together and headed in the right direction. In other words, the purpose of my preaching through Hebrews is not because I think you

are all on the brink of leaving the faith! So why preach through a letter like this, especially when there are 65 other books in the Bible?

Well, there is the obvious reason that whatever is in the Bible is for our profit. All Scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable (2 Tim. 3:16). Still, that doesn't in itself answer the question why this particular book? There are several of answers. The first one is something that I said at the beginning of our series, which is that Hebrews is the best one book summary of both the Old and New Testaments in the entire Bible. If you want one book that gives you the essence of both testaments, and how they relate to one another, this is the place you want to go. That in itself is a good enough reason to tackle Hebrews.

A second reason is that there are few books in the Bible that deal at such length and depth with the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Since the author's intention is to show the superiority of Jesus to the Mosaic Law and the Levitical priesthood, he deals at great length with the person and work of Jesus, and he does this at a depth that is possibly unrivaled by any other book in the Bible. In it, we learn that he is the Son of God and the true high priest who offers a once-for-all sacrifice that truly purges our sins before God. Again, that in itself would be a good enough reason to preach through this book.

However, there's a third reason I'm doing this, and this does have to do with the warning sections. Although we may not currently be in the place or on the brink of apostasy from the faith, yet it is still good and instructive for us to take heed to these warnings. In other words, by considering the folly and the hideousness and the danger of spiritual drift, we should be motivated to deepen our own walk with the Lord so that this doesn't eventually happen to us.

We have to be careful that we don't become presumptuous. Listen, even though that hardness which comes through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:12) doesn't happen overnight, that makes it all the more dangerous. It comes in little steps, until we are no longer in the right path. Think, for example, of the church at Ephesus. Here was a church founded by the apostle Paul; and we know from the book of Acts that



he spent several years just at this one place. Later, when he wrote his epistle to the church, it doesn't deal with any particular problems in the church, by which we can surmise that it was a good and healthy church at the time. And yet, around forty years later, in the book of Revelation, Jesus rebukes the church by saying that they had left their first love, and if they didn't repent, he was going to remove their lampstand (Rev. 2:1-5). If it can happen to an apostolic church, it can happen to us. Let us be forewarned – and let the one who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall (1 Cor. 10:12). To be forewarned is to be forearmed, and that surely is a good thing.

Now I have argued before, and will argue this morning, that apostasy – permanently repudiating a previous profession of faith in Jesus – leads to eternal destruction. Some would argue that, since the elect can't be lost (and I agree with that statement), it is wrong to tell people that they should beware of apostasy, since certainly the elect can't be lost and therefore the elect can't apostatize. On the other hand, the non-elect are going to be lost anyway, so what's the point in warning them? How is it right to warn people of an eternal danger, when either no such danger exists (as in the case of the elect), or it is inevitable anyway (as in the case of the non-elect)?

Well, it is right to warn people of the danger of eternal destruction, even the elect, if for no other reason than the Bible does so. It does so right here. Paul does it in Ephesians (of all places) when he says, "Let no man deceive you with vain words, for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience" (Eph. 5:6). The wrath of God that falls on the children of disobedience is meant to function as a motivation not to follow them in their sins.

In any case, here is how it works (I am repeating myself here, from messages we gave in the second and sixth chapters): we are not called in these warnings to believe a lie; we are simply called to believe that those who apostatize will be finally lost. That is a Biblical truth. Second, this is meant to motivate us to not pursue the path of apostasy by helping us see the need for perseverance. The more convinced we are that we

must persevere, the more deliberate we will be to do it. That is not only a Biblical motivation; it is one of the means God uses to bring about the steady faith and obedience, especially in the face of opposition, that constitutes perseverance in the faith.

This is what we want to deal with this morning. As we look again at one of these warning passages, my hope is not to discourage you, but to encourage you to keep on the way of faith and holiness. I don't want to put a weight on your shoulder, but rather a hopeful determination in your step. My goal in this message is to help all of us – myself as much as anyone else – to fall out of love with sin and to become more deeply committed to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To that end, I want to consider three things that this paragraph invites us to consider. In it, we are given a description of apostasy, which I am calling “entrenched unbelief.” Then we will look at the danger from entrenched unbelief. Finally, we will consider our duty with respect to entrenched unbelief.

### A Description of Entrenched Unbelief

The way that apostasy is described in this passage is primarily in the phrase to “sin willfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth” (26). This is amplified in verse 29 in three ways. First, those who sin in this way are described as treading underfoot the Son of God. Second, they are described as those who count the blood of the covenant by which they are sanctified an unholy thing. Finally, they are described as those who despise the Spirit of grace.

Why am I calling this “entrenched unbelief”? I am calling it unbelief because to sin after receiving the knowledge of the truth means to fundamentally reject the truth, and this is the essence of unbelief. It is entrenched, because we are not talking about a temporary lapse into unbelief, but something that persists, something for which there is no sacrifice for sins (26), and which will result in falling into the hands of

an angry God (31). One writer describes this as “a calculated, persistent renunciation of the truth.”<sup>1</sup>

It is entrenched because of the attitude that is behind this species of unbelief. The word “willfully” (26) is particularly important here. It denotes “a conscious expression of an attitude that displays contempt for God.”<sup>38</sup> This is akin to what is spoken of in the Mosaic Law of presumptuous or high-handed sin: “But the soul that doeth ought presumptuously, whether he be born in the land or a stranger, the same reproacheth the LORD; and that soul shall be cut off from among his people” (Num. 15:30). In his letter to the Galatians, Paul talks about folks who are “overtaken in a fault” who can then be restored (Gal. 6:1). The kind of sin that the author of Hebrews is talking about is not like that. This is not being overtaken in a sin. This is the deliberate, conscious, and persistent rejection of the truth of the gospel. This is not talking about someone who walks away from the faith for a time but then comes back. This is talking about a kind of person who walks away and never comes back.

When you compare this to Hebrews 6, what we see is that we are getting another description of what I there called “Judas Christians.” Judas Christians are not people who lose some temporal blessings of salvation because they messed up. Rather, they are people who professed to be Christians but were never really born again. They didn’t lose their salvation in any sense, for they were never saved to begin with.

Let’s look down at verse 29 and see further how these people are described.

They tread underfoot the Son of God.

Of course, no one can literally do this. Jesus was crucified once at the hands of wicked men, but he will never again be dishonored in this way. Instead, this is talking about an attitude that treats Jesus with utter contempt. This reminds us of what the author had said in chapter 6:

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<sup>1</sup>William Lane, *Hebrews* 9-13 [WBC], p. 292. <sup>38</sup> Ibid.

“If they fall away, [it is impossible] to renew them unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame” (6:6). This does not describe someone who is just plagued with doubts or is struggling with sin; this is a description of someone who hates Jesus, and that is not the description of a saved person. As the apostle Paul would put it to the Corinthians, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus, let him be Anathema” (1 Cor. 16:22) – “anathema” is Aramaic for “accursed.” If you don’t love Jesus, you are cursed, not saved. Or as he will put it to the Ephesians, “Grace be with all them that love our Lord Jesus Christ in sincerity” (Eph. 6:24). Who are the recipients of grace? Those who truly love Jesus. Those who do not love him cannot count themselves as the recipients of his grace: it’s as simple as that.

They count the blood of the covenant as an unholy thing.

There is terrible irony here. If there is anything holy in this world, it is the blood of Christ, by which he brought into being the New Covenant along with all its blessings. The apostle Peter calls it “the precious blood of Christ” (1 Pet. 1:19), but here are people who consider that which is holy as unholy.

Now there is this phrase, which has given some folks considerable trouble: “wherewith he was sanctified.” This is sometimes used to argue that a person can lose their salvation. Some folks say it proves a person can lose their eternal salvation. Other folks say it proves that a person can permanently lose temporal blessings this side of heaven. Both are certainly wrong.

You can’t lose your salvation because you can’t lose what you don’t have. As we’ve already argued, this is not talking about people who were truly saved, but people who professed Christianity when they had never been really born again. Because they had professed faith in Christ, they had at one time professed to be sanctified by him (see 10:10, 14), even if they hadn’t been sanctified in reality. This is again where the

irony comes in. The author is wanting us to see how incredibly sad this is. They were treating as unholy that which is most holy. When they did this, they were rejecting the only thing that could sanctify them. This is why in verse 26 the author had said that for these people there remains no more sacrifice for sins. This is because they have rejected the only thing that could truly take away their sins.

They despise the Spirit of grace.

When Stephen confronted his religious opponents, he said that they were “stiffnecked and uncircumcised in heart and ears,” and that they “do always resist the Holy Ghost” (Acts 7:51). In a similar fashion, here were people who had experienced some of the blessings of the Spirit (cf. Heb. 6:4), and yet afterward rejected and resisted him. They had seen “signs and wonders, and . . . divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost” (2:4). And yet for all that, they still turned away, not because they were saved, but precisely because they were not saved.

This is a terrible place to be. To despise the person of God’s own Son, his blood, and his Spirit, to treat him with contempt, is horrific. It is to be blind and deceived. It is to be spiritually deranged. It is to be foolish and spiritually reckless. It is to reject the only one who can save us. As Paul would say to those who rejected the gospel in Pisidian Antioch, “seeing you put [the word of God] from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles” (Acts 13:46). To turn away from the word of God, as these people had done, is to turn away from everlasting life.

I hope you can see that this is not a description of a backslidden Christian. That is a genuine thing, I know, we all know, because every Christian experiences times when we are going backward instead of forward. But what is being described in these verses is in an altogether different category. This is not a Romans 7- like description of the struggle every believer has with sin. Rather, this is a description of persistent,

entrenched unbelief – a species of unbelief that brings with it terrible and irremediable consequences.

And that brings us to our next point.

### The Danger from Entrenched Unbelief

There is a real sense in which we can say that we reap what we sow. Sometimes our sins carry with them their own punishment. But we must not take that too far. For there is also the reality of an objective, future judgment at the hands of God (cf. Heb. 9:27). And that is what is being warned about here. There are at least five things that are highlighted here with respect to God's judgment upon apostates.

It is a certain judgment (27).

“There remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries” (26-27). It may be future, and something which is looked for, but it is certain. We can be sure that, just as God's promises for good will come to pass, so will his promises for justice. We must remember that God is holy, and that the height of sin is sin against God. It must be punished, and it will be punished. Thus, those who set themselves against God as his adversaries will be surely devoured by his judgment and fiery indignation.

It is a fiery judgment (27).

It is described as “fiery indignation.” In the Scriptures, fire is often associated with God's judgment. It is not incidental that Sodom and Gomorrah perished when fire reigned out of heaven upon those cities. In fact, the apostle Jude says that this is a foretaste of that future and final judgment: they are “set forth for an example, suffering the vengeance of eternal fire” (Jude 7). John the Baptist said that those who do not

bring forth good fruit for God will be hewn down by God's judgment and thrown into the fire; indeed, that the chaff will be burned up "with unquenchable fire" (Mt. 3:10-12). The apostle Paul, in speaking of future judgment, describes it in terms of "flaming fire" by which God will take "vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power" (2 Thess. 1:8-9). In the book of Revelation, we read that those who worship the beast "shall be tormented with fire and brimstone in the presence of the holy angels, and in the presence of the Lamb: and the smoke of their torment ascendeth up forever and ever: and they have no rest day nor night, who worship the beast and his image, and whosoever receiveth the mark of his name" (Rev. 14:10-11).

Now it is true that fire is perhaps a metaphor for the judgment of God which, like fire, will "devour the adversaries." But that does not make the future punishment of the wicked any the less severe; if anything, the reality is certainly more terrible than the metaphor. In other words, we shouldn't read this and not tremble. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. It is an eternal judgment (28-29).

How do we know this is not just describing some temporal judgment? Well, for one thing, because this is a description of people who are not saved. These are people who, to use our Lord's words (Jn. 8:24), will die in their sins; there is no sacrifice for them (Heb 10:26). But another way to see this is how it is compared to punishments under the Mosaic Law: "He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God?" (28-29). The punishment that belongs to this entrenched unbelief is compared with punishments under the Mosaic Law. How is it compared? It is "sorer." It is worse. Worse than what? Worse than physical death. In fact, worse than being stoned to death. This tells me that this is not some temporal judgment, for the Mosaic Law did that. This is something not only worse, but far

worse, something from which you cannot escape by physical death. It is, therefore, an eternal judgment. Our Lord reminded his disciples of this reality, when he said, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell” (Mt. 10:28). That is terrifying. For those who are teetering on the brink of apostasy, it is meant to be, I assure you.

It is a predicted judgment (30).

It is not as if God has hidden this. In some sense, the reality of future judgment is even embedded in our consciences, for the apostle Paul says of the pagan society of his day, that they know the judgment of God (Rom. 1:32). He has made it even more plain in Scripture. Here, in verse 30, the author quotes from Deuteronomy 32:35-36. The two verses read, “To me belongeth vengeance, and recompense; their foot shall slide in due time: for the day of their calamity is at hand, and the things that shall come upon them make haste. For the LORD shall judge his people, and repent himself for his servants, when he seeth that their power is gone, and there is none shut up, or left.” (Interestingly, the phrase “their foot shall slide in due time” was the text that Jonathan Edwards took for his famous sermon, “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God.”). The remarkable thing is that in these verses, God is speaking about the children of Israel. They were his covenant people, under the Mosaic covenant. They had so many privileges. And yet many of them sinned in the wilderness and were destroyed (as we have seen in Hebrews 3-4). God’s judgment, his vengeance and his recompense brought about their calamity. The application is both obvious and pertinent. In the congregation to which the author is writing, there were those who were outwardly at least part of the New Covenant community and yet they were also poised to depart from the faith. Make no mistake, the author is saying, you can expect God to bring his judgment upon you as well.



It is a fearful judgment (31).

This paragraph ends with the sobering comment, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.” When we look at the danger to which entrenched unbelief exposes people, we too should fear. Have you ever looked over the edge of a cliff and felt the chills go down your spine? Well, here we have been invited to look over the cliff and to imagine what it would be like to throw yourself over, which is what apostates do, in a sense. It is a terrifying thought.

Please listen: everyone is on a path, and that path will end before God. He is the one inescapable reality that we will all eventually face, one way or another. God will be for every son and daughter of Adam either eternal blessing or he will be for them eternal destruction (Mt. 25:46). According to our Lord, there are only two paths: the narrow path and the broad way (Mt. 7:12-14). The narrow path leads to life and the broad way to final and eternal destruction. We should be sobered by a reflection upon that reality. We should feel that chill going down our back. If we don’t, it doesn’t mean that we have attained some level of spirituality that makes us immune to such fear; it really means that we have become spiritually insensitive to the holiness of God and the danger posed to everyone who flaunts their sin in the face of this holy God.

I think it is worth pausing at this moment to consider why these individuals will be judged rather than saved. Why is it that for them “there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins”? Is it because the blood of Jesus didn’t take the first time? Of course not! What we need to see here is the connection that there is between faith and forgiveness. What the argument here assumes is that because they did not believe, they did not receive the benefits of Christ’s death. No faith, no sacrifice, no forgiveness.

This does not mean that our faith, in and of itself, is what makes us righteous before God. But God saves us, and justifies us, and forgives us, when we believe. This is why the Scriptures uniformly say that we are

saved by faith. Not on the basis of faith, not on the grounds of faith, but through faith. Faith is the means by which we personally appropriate the benefits of Christ's death. God guarantees that his elect will receive the benefits of Christ's death by giving them faith. This is one of the implications of Eph. 2:8, "For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God."

Now that we've seen a description of entrenched unbelief as well as its danger, what should be our response? For this was written to elicit a certain response from the readers, and it should have the same kind of effect on us as well. But what kind of response? This leads us to our next and final point.

### Our Duty with Respect to Entrenched Unbelief

There are at least four responses that we should have to the picture which has been painted in these verses with respect to apostasy.

If we love Jesus and remain faithful to him and to his gospel, we should be thankful to the Lord for preserving us from the fate and end of unbelief. If you are not where these people were, then you have the Lord to thank for it. He is the one who is able to keep us from falling (Jude 24). He is the one who keeps us in the faith (1 Pet. 1:5). He is the one who restores us, like Peter, when we fall away. He is the one who is effectually praying for his elect that they might be kept, and that their faith fail not (Luke 22:32; John 17:15).

Moreover, you might be there, and the Lord can often use warnings like this to wake us up and turn us from a course of self-destruction. These warnings are not just meant to be descriptions of non-elect apostates, but they are meant to awaken slothful and slumbering Christians to the fate of those who do fall away, so that they won't. God knows our personalities, and he knows that some of us need to be awakened from sleep. These warnings are sometimes what we need. This is not, therefore, an indication of God's harshness, but of his kindness in turning us from sin to a greater commitment to him. For that we should be

very thankful, as well as encouraged, that our Father will never let us go. If he has to warn us, he will. If he has to chastise us, he will, and it will yield in time the fruit of holiness in our lives (cf. Heb. 12:11).

We should be comforted in light of the fate of the wicked. One of the reasons it is important for us to contemplate God's judgment on those who walk away from the faith is to remind ourselves that our own sufferings in this life aren't a reason to join them in turning our backs on God because, no matter what we endure here, it is to be followed by eternal glory, whereas the wicked will have their temporary ease replaced by eternal destruction. This is the argument of Psalm 73, for example. The psalmist saw the ease and the riches of the wicked, and it tempted him to think that his faith in God was useless. This all changed when he was reminded of the end of the wicked. I think that is one of the things we should be reminded of when we read passages like Heb. 10:26-29. However bad it might be for us now, we need to have an eternal perspective, and passages like this can help us to maintain that perspective. It helps us to live in light of our future hope and to be comforted in the expectation of the coming glory.

We should be disgusted and repulsed at the thought of what entrenched unbelief does. What does it do? It despises the person of Christ, his blood, and his Spirit. If you love Jesus, that ought to disgust you. It ought to repulse you. It ought to make you never want to get there, or even get close to there. It ought to make you jealous over your heart, that you reverence Christ, value his atoning work, and grieve not his Spirit. One of the strategies for this is by seeing the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ. Another strategy is by seeing the ugliness and vileness of unbelief.

We should be afraid at the thought of where entrenched unbelief leads. Please don't misunderstand me. I'm not saying a believer can't have assurance of their salvation. Nor am I indicating that the elect can be lost. What I am saying is that something is wrong with us if we can contemplate the end of the wicked and not feel something of fear. There is something wrong with us if this does not motivate us to flee from the

wrath of God (cf. Mt. 3:7; Eph. 5:6-7). It means that we have not really reckoned with the extent and the intensity and the severity of God's judgment. We are not only meant to behold the goodness, but also the severity, of the Lord: one should lead to a godly and holy joy and the other to a godly and holy fear (Rom. 11:22). This fear ought to motivate us even further to be rid of every inroad that sin has in our hearts and lives.

We should hate the thought of what entrenched unbelief makes us. It turns us into the adversaries of God! I can't think of anything more foolish. What are the wicked like? They are like chaff which the wind will blow away (Ps. 1:4). The ungodly will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous (5). The way of the ungodly will perish (6). Entrenched unbelief makes a person the object, not of God's love, but of his derision (Ps. 2:4). We should hate that.

At the same time, though we hate the idea of ourselves ever becoming like that, this doesn't mean that we ever look down on others. We should rather grieve for those who remain in unbelief, and like the psalmist, let rivers of water run down our eyes when we see those who do not keep God's law (Ps. 119:136). We know that, if anyone cannot see the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ, it is because they are blinded and, as of now, the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ has not shone unto them (2 Cor. 4:3-6).

This passage is meant to have an effect on us. It should make us more thankful for the Lord who saves us, and more disgusted with our sin. It should draw us closer to Jesus and put distance between us and the world and the devil. It should help us to see how hateful sin is because all sin is sin against Christ, the Son of God, and the only one in whom we can be saved. Let us resolve, brothers and sisters, to love Jesus more and to hate sin more, to be more holy, to persevere in the faith, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith.

## CHAPTER XXXVI

### HOW HEAVEN HELPS US TO HOLD ON (HEB. 10:32-39)

EVERYTHING IN THIS PARAGRAPH POINTS to the last part of verse 34, and to the reality which had animated the lives of these Hebrew Christians in the past, and to which our author was calling them again: “knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” It is what they are called to remember (32), what they are called to cast not away (35), and that for which they are called to endure (36-37). It is a part of the future grace (to use a favorite phrase of John Piper) to which our faith is directed (38-39). It is the central thesis of the passage. It is around this reality that all the exhortations, either explicit or implicit, hang. Heaven helps us to put things in perspective, which is the burden of verses 32-34. It strengthens and makes meaningful our confidence in Christ (35). It creates patience for the way (36-37). It inspires a faith that endures (38-39).

Note that our author keeps coming back to this theme. What he calls “heaven” in verse 34, he calls the “great recompense of reward” in verse 35, “the promise” in verse 36, and “the saving of the soul” in verse 39. All of these things are pointing back to this “better and an enduring substance.”

They all tell us something very important about heaven. In particular, note those two words: better and enduring. We've noted throughout Hebrews that there is this running comparison throughout the letter showing that Christ is better than the angels, Moses, Joshua, the high priest, and the sacrificial system of the Levitical priesthood. But here it is heaven that is called better. Of course, it is better surely because Christ is there (cf. Phil. 1:23).

Heaven is also called enduring. It goes without saying, that without the "better" part, the "enduring" part wouldn't be good at all! Heaven is a place of eternal and increasing blessing and joy and happiness. When everything else has passed away, heaven will still be beautiful and glorious and breath-takingly wonderful. It will never grow old or become boring or desolate. There will always be a newness to it. It will never become a place from which you would want to leave. When I was in grad school in Texas, I knew of a guy who lived in Hawaii who desperately wanted a job at my school. At first I wondered, "Why would a guy in Hawaii want so badly to live in Texas?" I mean, I liked my town, but I couldn't imagine why someone would want to change addresses from Hawaii to Texas! Then he explained: as great as Hawaii is, it is still a tiny island many miles away from the mainland, and eventually it wears on you. He was far away from family and it was always a big undertaking just to visit. It underlines the fact that there is no place in this world that is like heaven. Eventually, some aspect of the fallenness of this world will catch up with you. But in heaven, the fall will be a long-forgotten memory.

In addition, this paragraph underlines several other important features of heaven.

Heaven is a reward (35). Now we shouldn't take this to mean that we deserve heaven, as if heaven is given to those who merit it. Heaven is indeed a "great recompense of reward," but not in the sense of "you earned it" (cf. Rom. 4:1-5). Nevertheless, that does not mean that we shouldn't see heaven in terms of reward, since the Bible does this repeatedly. It refers to it in terms of the "prize of the high calling of God

which is in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 3:14). The apostle tells Timothy as he is awaiting his death, that “there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8). Our Lord tells us in the Beatitudes, that when the saints suffer, they should “Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Mt. 5:12).

Heaven is indeed a gift of grace, but we must recognize that it is also a reward given to those who endure. We endure by grace as well, so in the end, it is just God crowning his own work. I think William Tyndale put it best, when he wrote, “All that I do and suffer is but the way to the reward, and not the deserving thereof.”<sup>1</sup> That is the way to look at it: the doing and the suffering of the Christian is the way to the reward, but not the meriting of the reward (cf. Acts 14:22). It is a reward in the sense that it follows the finishing of a life of faith, just as the crown follows the finishing of a race.

It is also called a reward in part because it is so desirable. It will be an eternally pleasing refreshment of the soul after life’s long combat with sin. It is called “rest” in Hebrews 4. It is worth enduring all that this fallen world throws our way, and with Moses, to choose “rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season: esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompense of the reward” (Heb. 11:25-26).

Heaven is a promise (36). “In hope of eternal life, which God, that cannot lie, promised before the world began” (Tit. 1:2). In the next chapter, we read of the “heirs of promise” (Heb. 11:9) who “looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (10). Indeed, “now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them

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<sup>1</sup>William Tyndale, Prologue to the Book of Numbers, in *Works*, I (Cambridge, 1848), p. 434 [qtd. in P. E. Hughes, *Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 432].

a city” (16). Unlike man’s promises, God’s are never characterized by deceit (heaven will be exactly what he says it will be) or by a failure to follow through (all to whom God promises heaven will get there). This means that heaven is not only a reward, but it is a sure reward.

Heaven is the place where our salvation will be finally realized. There is a real and true sense in which we can say that we have been saved (cf. Eph. 2:8). But there is also a true and real sense in which we can say that we are not yet saved (cf. Rom. 13:11). We are not yet saved in the sense of being perfected and in the presence of Christ in heaven. We are not yet glorified. This is the sense here. When we are told of them “that believe to the saving of the soul” we are meant to see this in terms of future and final salvation. One way to see this is the contrast between salvation and perdition in verse 39. In the Bible, perdition is used to refer to the end of Judas (Mt. 17:12). It is used to describe the non-elect, “vessels for destruction” in Rom. 9:22. In Phil. 3:19-20, Paul contrasts those whose end is “destruction” or perdition with those whose citizenship is in heaven. In 2 Thess. 2:3, it describes the end of the antichrist. So over and over again we see this word used in reference to final and eternal destruction. Hence, to be saved here is a reference to final and eternal salvation. Heaven is the goal of our salvation. God is bringing us to himself and that means bringing us to heaven where we will see his glory in ways that we have never yet experienced or can in this present mortal clod even imagine.

It is in light of this reality that we are called to live. There are four ways in this text that we are encouraged to respond to it.

Look at your sufferings in light of eternity (32-34).

He tells his readers to “call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were enlightened, ye endured a great fight of afflictions: partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions, and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of



your goods, knowing that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” Here he is referring to their past, when, shortly after their conversion they had begun to endure a lot of suffering for the cause of Christ. They had suffered the loss of property and possessions. Things had been unjustly and unlawfully taken from them, and there was nothing they could do about it. Also, they had lost their reputations – they had become a gazingstock (“publicly exposed to ridicule” as translated by William Lane<sup>2</sup>). They were reproached. Like their Savior, they were despised and rejected by men. To lose your stuff is one thing, but to lose your name along with it is altogether another level of loss. But that was not all: some of them at least had suffered imprisonment.<sup>3</sup> Think about what this means: many of them had lost their possessions, their reputations, and their freedom, at least for a time. This is not a little thing. They had endured all this tremendous amount of pain and suffering as a result of their faith in Christ.

Note how they had endured all this: not with moaning and groaning, not with a “woe is me” attitude, not with a bitter and miserable and accusatorial spirit. With reference to themselves, we are told that they “took joyfully the spoiling of your goods”! (That seems very strange indeed!) But that is not all: with reference to others who suffered, there was this remarkable and admirable selflessness and caring, a genuine Christlikeness (the verb “had compassion” in verse 34 is the same used of Jesus in Heb. 4:15, to “be touched”) for they “became companions of them that were so used” and “had compassion” on those who were imprisoned. In doing so, they exposed themselves to further persecution and ridicule.

Contrast this with where they were now. Like Job, the sufferings had worn them down. They no longer had this exuberant faith, and they were now willing to consider the possibility of leaving a commitment to Jesus for the comfort and security of another religion that would not

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<sup>2</sup>William Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* [WBC] (Zondervan, 1991), p. 274.

<sup>3</sup>The KJV has “on me in my bonds” but the better translation is probably “on those in prison” (cf. ESV).

expose them to any more persecution. So the question is, how do you take people that have gotten into this condition and turn them around?

The author does this, not only by warning them of the dangers of apostasy (see previous verses), but also by reminding them how they had held up in the past and by encouraging them to keep doing what they had already done (a “You can do it!” type of motivation): “knowing that in yourselves ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” They needed to regain a proper perspective, in other words; they needed to look at their sufferings in light of eternity. Whatever you might lose, you can’t lose heaven. And whatever you presently have or might have in the future here on earth, heaven is infinitely better. In other words, if you belong to Christ, people can take away your earthly possessions, but no one can take away your most precious possession, which is in heaven. No one can take away your life in Christ. No one can take away your place in heaven. No one can take away the love that the Father has for you. You can only lose that which isn’t going to last anyway, but you can’t lose that which will last forever and is infinitely superior to every earthly possession.

In the same way, we need to keep this eternal perspective. It is so easy to become focused on the hard things we are going through so that we forget all that God has promised to give us, and which will certainly be ours, not because of what we have done, but because of what Christ has done for us. Whatever we might gain or lose in this world, this is always true of the child of God: they have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

Don’t cast away your confidence in light of the reward (35).

“Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.” The confidence here does not mean confidence in ourselves, which is what our culture is constantly preaching at us to get and maintain. Now of course, I don’t mean to imply that a total lack of self-confidence is a good thing. Not at all. But self-confidence is not

what you need to endure through the rough and difficult patches of life. What we need, when the bottom seems to fall out, and when all earthly hope is gone, is confidence in God and in his only-begotten Son. Go back up a few verses, to verse 19. The word “boldness” there is the same word as “confidence” here. You will note that our boldness to enter in and to draw near to God is not based on who we are or what we have done, but completely on the basis of “the blood of Jesus Christ.” It’s not self-confidence that is commended here, but Christ-confidence.

So this not only tells us what the basis of our confidence is, but also what our confidence is in: it is in the fact that we have access to God through Christ. We don’t want to throw away that confidence, which is what we will do if we walk away from Jesus. Jesus is the only way to the Father. He is the curtain through which we enter into the Most Holy Place (cf. 20). He is the door of the sheep (Jn. 10:7). No one comes to the Father except through him (Jn. 14:6).

Now, we want to be careful that we don’t make faith somehow the ground of our salvation. We are not saved because our faith – even faith in Christ! – makes us worthy. We are saved totally on the basis of the righteousness of God in Christ. I think one of the most important passages in this regard is Rom. 4:5, that God justifies the ungodly. This is the reason for Martin Luther’s memorable phrase describing the Christian: we are *simul justus et peccator* (“at the same time just and sinful”). We are simultaneously righteous and sinful, except that the righteousness here is not ours but Christ’s, whereas the sinfulness is not Christ’s but ours.

Nevertheless, we don’t want to go into the other ditch, either. Saying that faith is not the basis of our justification does not warrant saying that faith has nothing to do with justification. The Bible says over and over and over and over again that we are justified through faith. Paul said that we believe that we might be justified (Gal. 2:16). Faith is not the ground, but it is the means by which we are justified. God is pleased, in other words, to justify those who believe in his Son. This is the reason why our Lord himself said, “He that believeth on him [on the Son] is not

condemned: but he that believeth not is condemned already, because he hath not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God” (Jn. 3:18).

Hence, what the author of Hebrews is saying here is that if you walk away from Jesus, if you tread him under foot and count the blood of the covenant an unholy thing, then you are casting away your confidence in him. In doing so, the implication of the rest of this verse is that you don’t get the reward. You cannot have the reward if you don’t have Christ. If you don’t have faith in Christ, if you consciously and purposefully reject the gospel, then you can’t have the confidence or the reward. There is no salvation for those who are unbelievers.

Of course, the motivation here is primarily positive: think of the reward! Those who trust in Christ will never be ashamed (cf. Rom. 10:11). Our confidence in him can never be misplaced. So don’t cast it away (cf. Heb. 3:6, 14).

Be patient in light of the promise (36-37).

“For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry.”

The patience to which we are exhorted here is not primarily a psychological state of mind. Rather, it is a lifestyle of endurance in obedience to God. That is what we need. We need to endure. Why? Because it is through enduring in a life of obedience and faith that we receive the promise, the promise of a city which has foundations whose builder and maker is God.

The promise is that which will come to fruition at the Second Coming. This is almost certainly what is being referred to here in verse 37. Who is “he that shall come”? It is Christ. When will he come? When he comes again, of course! We need to be like the Thessalonian Christians who were waiting “for [God’s] Son from heaven, whom he raised from

the dead, even Jesus, which delivered us from the wrath to come” (1 Thess. 1:10).

Why can we wait? How can we endure? These questions are especially critical when we are going through the furnace of tribulation and affliction, especially for Christ’s sake. The answer is two-fold. First, those who endure receive the promise. Like Abraham, of whom it was said, “And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise” (Heb. 6:15). In the same way, we are encouraged to “be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (12). Endurance is the path to the promise. The promise of eternal life and glory is attached to endurance through suffering – again, not in terms of merit but in terms of the way to it. As the apostle Paul put it to the Roman Christians, that we are “heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ; if so be that we suffer with him, that we may be also glorified together” (Rom. 8:17). Then there is the fact that the promise is worth whatever suffering we must go through to get there. If you keep reading in Romans 8, you get to the next verse: “For I reckon that the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us” (18).

The second step to the answer is that the promise is sure. How do we know it? Because God keeps his promises. He has already brought his Son into the world to be the redeemer of sinful men and women. So we can be sure that the Coming One will come and will not tarry. Again, if you bank your life on the promises of God, you are not making a gamble. You will never be disappointed.

Live by faith in light of the saving of the soul (38-39).

In verse 38, the author quotes from Habakkuk 2:4 (he had just quoted from Hab. 2:3 in the previous verse). It is a text that the apostle Paul uses many times in his epistles in order to illustrate the principle of justification by faith. However, here the point is that the just, the saints, are characterized by lives of persevering faith. Those who have faith

are also faithful. They live by faith; they are not “of them who draw back unto perdition, but of them that believe to the saving of the soul” (39). God is not pleased with those who draw back, who apostatize. As we will see in the next chapter, without faith it is impossible to please God (11:6). Note that this is not just saying that unbelief means that God is not pleased with what we do, but that he is not pleased with the unbeliever: “my soul shall have no pleasure in him” (10:38), something that is clearly not true of God’s children. Those who are united to Christ by faith are united to him of whom the Father said, “This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17). Being united to him, we also become in him those with whom the Father is well pleased.

As we will also see from the next chapter, this faith is primarily future oriented. Now of course there is a very important past dimension to our faith. We look back to the cross. We look back to God’s purpose of redemption in eternity. We look back to God’s works in history. As it is put in 11:1, “faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” That we walk by faith and not by sight (2 Cor. 5:7) does not mean that we live with our eyes closed to reason and evidence. All it means is that we are meant to live in light of God’s future promise, and that our faith is fixed on that. We don’t yet see it, but faith connects us to God’s promise now and gives present substance to that which is yet in the future. This is how we are to live. This is what is supposed to define and flavor our lives as Christians.

Again, it is important to point out that our faith terminates, not in ourselves, but in God and in his Son. In faith, we don’t look to ourselves. Faith is not a mirror in which we look back at our works and worthiness. Rather, faith is that by which we see the trustworthiness of Jesus Christ and rest in him. God is pleased to create this faith in his elect so that by faith they taste and see the sufficiency and supremacy of Christ. For those who believe, who look outside of themselves to Christ, God is pleased to grant his own righteousness to their account so that they are no longer condemned but justified. He is also pleased, not only to give them this faith, but to keep them in it. This is why the text says that we

“believe to the saving of the soul.” Not because believing itself saves but because Jesus Christ sovereignly saves those to whom he gives this faith.

So faith looks to heaven as it looks to Christ. We don’t look to ourselves. We don’t glory in ourselves. We don’t trust in ourselves. We don’t boast or have confidence in the flesh. Let the one who glories, glory in the Lord (1 Cor. 1:31).

So the hope of heaven ought to create in us these four things: an eternal perspective, a prized confidence in Christ, patient endurance for the promise, and future-oriented faith and faithfulness. A Christian is not a person who lives for the present but a person who lives in light of his or her hope in Christ. The question is, do we? Do the decisions we take and the choices we make reflect the fact that we put greater value on eternity than on the present? That’s not to say that the present is unimportant. Of course it is. But the way we best use our time now is by living in light of heaven. Otherwise, we end up with a perspective whose horizons don’t rise above the sun, and in terms of Ecclesiastes, that’s a vanity of vanities perspective. Let’s hear what Hebrews has to say. Let’s live by faith in the promise. Let’s not allow the sufferings of the present to rob us of our hope and joy or to derail our patient endurance as we pass through this vail of tears. For on the other side is fulness of joy and pleasures forevermore at God’s right hand.

*Jeremiah Bass*

# THE FAITH HALL OF FAME



## CHAPTER XXXVII

# FAITH IS THE SUBSTANCE OF THINGS HOPED FOR (HEB. 11:1-3)

THIS CHAPTER IS WELL-KNOWN AND WELL-BELOVED by Christians. It has been called the “Faith Hall of Fame,” for it is filled with example after example of those who lived “by faith.” In fact, the word faith occurs 24 times in this one chapter alone. Now the question is: how does this fit into the overall narrative? Why spend so much time on these examples of faith and faithfulness?

To understand the significance and function of this chapter in the book of Hebrews, let us begin by remembering where we are in the development of the argument of the epistle. We have argued that in 1:1-10:18, the author is developing the main theme of the epistle, that Christ is better: better than the angels, Moses, Joshua, Aaron, and the Old Covenant along with the entire Levitical sacrificial system. He is doing this because his audience had been tempted to go back to a Christless Judaism. His argument is essentially this: you are going back to the shadows, going back to the types, and which all pointed to Christ. By abandoning Jesus, you are actually in a worse position than the OT saints, who by their faith in the Promised One had what essentially was

a gospel faith. By consciously rejecting the reality to which the shadows pointed, these folks wouldn't even have that.

Along the way he is warning them that this change would not be a slight tweak in their theology, but one which demonstrated that they were not saved to begin with. This is a serious thing, not a mere difference in theological perspective. There is no salvation for those who reject the salvation which is in Christ alone.

Now that he has finished the burden of his argument for the supremacy of Christ's person (as the only begotten Son of God) and the sufficiency of Christ's redemptive work (as the only true high priest who brings us into God's presence), he is now urging them to apply these realities to their lives. This is what he begins to do in 10:19, with the words, "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus." He continues to press the application up to the end of this epistle in chapter 13.

However, here's the problem: doctrine is never applied in a vacuum. We are not called to believe merely on an intellectual level. A faith that does not make its way into the particularities of our lives is not a real faith. A faith that just says, "Depart in peace, be ye warmed and filled; notwithstanding ye give them not those things which are needful for the body; what doth it profit?" (Jam. 2:16). Indeed, it does not; it is a devil's faith and no more (Jam. 2:19). The faith we are called to exercise is faith in a world that does not share our faith (2 Thess. 3:2). It is a world that will use persecution or pleasure to woo the Christian away from Christ. It is a world that is fallen and where things do not always work out the way we would like them to. It is a world in which we are exposed to a million things that can stretch and weaken and threaten our faith: cancer and viruses and depression and loneliness and rejection and wayward children and chronic pain and loss and abandonment and joblessness and financial woes and many other things too numerous to list. The question is, how do you live by faith in those kinds of situations? How do you live by faith when it's not easy to live by faith?

As we noted last time, these Hebrew Christians were not living in the best of circumstances. They had been persecuted for their faith. They had endured the loss of property, reputation, and freedom. Apparently things were still hard because they were thinking about abandoning the Christian faith, most likely because identifying with Christ brought with it all kinds of problems.

So how do you motivate people in this condition to stay true to the faith? Well, we've noted several methods the author has used to do this up to his point, including warning them of the danger of apostasy on the one hand, and holding up the promises of God before them on the other. Another way to do this is by helping them to see that they are not alone. They needed to see that what can seem like the long and lonely life of faith to which they were called is something to which God's people have been called in every age. They needed to see that they weren't the first to have to go through hard times in living out their faith in Christ. In other words, they needed a "great cloud of witnesses" to help cheer them on (Heb. 12:1), and that's exactly what he gives them in this chapter.

We too need this. Here we come to the importance, and indeed the necessity of, Biblical history. That's what this chapter is: it is an inventory of people and events in Biblical history. I think it is important before going further to consider how important this is for us, not just Biblical history, but the history of God's people in every age. In writing this chapter, our author also demonstrates the importance of the history of God's people in every age, including that of the church since the book of Acts. In particular, I want us to consider three things. First, I want to look at the importance of church history for the people of God. Second, the importance of people in the plan of God. Third, the importance of faith in the pursuit of God.

The importance of church history for the people of God

The history of the church is so important for many reasons. Let me give you four reasons, though this is certainly not an exhaustive list. First of all, it helps us to keep things in perspective. It helps us to see that we're not the first to have gone through hard times, and that in fact others have been through much worse than we have. It keeps us from the tyranny of the present. It keeps us from believing that the church has never been worse than it is right now. In fact it has, and the reality is that God has brought the church through many, many times that were far more serious (both in terms of doctrinal error as well as persecution) than anything we have seen. The church still lives and thrives.

Church history also helps us to stay balanced in terms of doctrine and practice. One of the things you will notice is that modern heretics are almost always resurrecting an ancient heresy, although usually in a way more acceptable to their modern audience. C. S. Lewis once said that for every present-day author you read, you should read three other authors from an older generation. His reason was that if we only read from our generation, we will never get past the blind spots of our times. Older generations can help you think from a different point of view; they didn't share our blind spots, even though they certainly had their own. However, the point is that it is usually easier to spot their blind spots than it is ours, and they can help us to see ours.

There is another advantage to reading the history of the church, especially when you read broadly. That is, it will help you keep from becoming a theological or a denominational snob. It will help you to see how God has worked through believers in different traditions and places and times. It will widen your understanding of the church in healthy ways. Don't get me wrong; I'm not arguing that we shouldn't be careful and circumspect in our definition of what constitutes faithfulness to Christ and his word and worship. But sometimes I think we draw the circle around ourselves too tightly, and like Elijah are wont to think we are the only ones left in this world, when in reality God has seven thousand knees (previously unknown to us) who have not bowed the knee to the image of Baal. The history of the church – that is, of the whole church

– can help to correct this misperception and help us to see those seven thousand knees that have not bowed the knee to the false gods of ours or past ages.

Perhaps the most important reason that we should read church history is that it is flat out enjoyable and courage-building and hope-inspiring. Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say that, when he felt spiritually dull, he would go to the eighteenth century. By that he meant the history of the great revivals in America and England during that time. He found them to be refreshing and invigorating, and he said that apart from theology, church history was the important important thing a preacher should read. Don't think this just applies to preachers: we can all benefit in this way from the reading of the history of the church.

Biographies of godly men and women can help us to realize that we have settled for much less than what is possible for those who put their faith in Christ. Recently, Sarah and I read the biography of Amy Carmichael by Iain Murray. I haven't been more convicted and inspired in a long time. There are so many, and like the author of Hebrews we have to say, "And what more shall I say? For the time would fail me" to speak of all the men and women of faith who have made a definite mark upon my own heart and soul for good. I remember when I got to the end of Arnold Dalimore's biography of George Whitefield, I wept. It created in me such a hunger and a thirst for the outpouring of the Spirit as he experienced in his own ministry and life. I am so thankful for the impact of the biographies of John Calvin and Martin Luther and Martyn Lloyd-Jones and William Carey and Charles Spurgeon and many others have had upon my life.

May I encourage you to take up a good biography or a good history of the church, and read? If you need recommendations, I am ready to help! Of course, the very first place to start is simply to know Biblical history and the history of the men and women of the Bible. Read your Bibles! Know its history. There is a reason why the Bible is not just a series of doctrinal books. It is full of the history of God's acts through his people, both Old and New

Testament. We are meant to know the doctrines, yes; but we are also meant to know its history, too. In some ways, doctrine is nothing more or less than God's interpretation of Biblical history. So read it! Of course, one of the best places to start is with this chapter, Hebrews 11.

### The importance of people in the plan of God

There is another very important thing that chapters like this can teach us, and that is the role that individuals play in God's plan for the church. People are important to God. He doesn't do his work on earth apart from us; he does it through us. Not that he needs us, but because he wants to bless us in allowing us to be "laborers together with God," as Paul put it to the Corinthians (1 Cor. 3:9). So when we look through the verses of this chapter as it unfolds, what we see is a list of people. God does not work out his plan for the church in history apart from real people who live in real places and do real things. What this means is that, as God's people, our lives are never insignificant. Now that doesn't mean the world will recognize you. You probably won't get a movie made about you, or books written to celebrate your life. You probably won't be given any rewards by the important people in our culture. But that doesn't matter. Noah was mocked by his generation, but they perished and Noah's name endures. My friends, let's not go for the praise of this world, but let us live for the kingdom of God; let us seek first his kingdom, for in this way we really make our lives matter.

Another thing to notice about the people who are listed is the fact that while some of the names are unsurprising, others are very surprising. I think this may be like a preview of heaven: we may not be surprised at some folks who are there, very surprised that others are there, and maybe the most surprised about some who aren't. Here in Hebrews 11, Samson is listed, along with Rahab (the harlot) and Gideon and Barak, none of whom were exceptionally great role models, to say the least. All of them made tragic choices in their lives, and yet here they are, listed alongside the great examples of men of God like Abraham and Moses

and David. It tells us that they are not listed because they had the best record or because they made the fewest mistakes.

Nor again are they listed for the relative impact they made. Enoch, for example, has very little written about him in the Biblical record. Neither does Abel; the only two things we really know about him is that his sacrifice to God was accepted and that he was killed by Cain his brother. All this begs the question: why put them here, then? What kind of individual is the author of Hebrews wanting to set before us? Here we get to what's at the heart of this chapter.

### The importance of faith for the pursuit of God

The thing that all these people here in Hebrews 11 have in common is faith. God does his work through people of faith. More than that, the reason that these folks are on display is not only because they had faith, but because of what faith is and does. The author of Hebrews wants his readers (and us) to see what kind of life faith inspires because he is calling us to that kind of life. He wants us to endure; he doesn't want us to be among those who fall away to perdition, but to be among those who believe to the saving of the soul (10:38-39). So how do you endure? You endure by faith.

It's important for us to see how faith does this. In other words, we not only need to see that the Bible says that faith is necessary, but also how the Bible says that faith works. That is what Hebrews 11 is all about. It's about how faith enabled generations of godly men and women through hard times and trials. Sometimes you will hear the phrase "perseverance in the faith." Well, we might as well say, "perseverance through the faith," because it is by faith that we endure to the end.

How does this work? To answer that question, let's turn directly now to the first three verses of Hebrews 11. In these verses, which function as an introduction to the rest of the chapter, we see three things. We see that faith looks to the promises of God (1), that faith looks to the approval of God (2), and that faith looks to the power of

God (3).

Faith looks to the promises of God

In verse 1, we read, “Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Though this is not meant to give an exhaustive definition of faith, it does say something very important about it. In this verse, the author of Hebrews is really saying the same thing twice. “Substance” is parallel to “evidence” and “things hoped for” is parallel to “things not seen.”

Let’s start with “things hoped for” and “things not seen.” These two phrases point to the fact that faith is future focused. The apostle Paul makes a similar point about hope in his letter to the Romans. There, he says that “hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we will patience wait for it” (Rom. 8:24-25). Hope is centered on the unseen, but not unseen in the sense of fairy tale or something that just doesn’t exist. Rather, the unseen is something that you must wait for – it is real, but it is future. That’s also the point of Heb. 11:1. The faith that God is calling us to looks to that for which you must wait.

In other words, faith is centered on the promises of God. The promises of God point us to the future fulfillment of his redemptive promises. Now, a big point here in Hebrews 11 is that the people listed were not even in as good a position as we are. They all lived before the first coming of Christ. They had not yet seen the fulfillment of God’s promise in terms of the one who would come and bruise the serpent’s head by his death upon a cross. They were not in the position of knowing that Christ had not only come but also had risen from the dead. Think about Abraham, for example. He lived over four hundred years before the Exodus. Most of the miracles in the Bible occurred long after he lived. And yet, when God made a promise to Abraham, he believed it. The things God promised to him were all unseen. It is well for us to consider that many of the things God promised to Abraham we have



seen. Yes, there are still unfulfilled promises. We await the resurrection. We await the Final Judgment. We await the New Heavens and New Earth. We are on the other side of the fulfillment of so many of God's promises. Should we not also have faith? Do we not have even more reason to believe?

Then consider the words "substance" and "evidence." What is communicated by these words? Well, they tell us how faith connects us to the promises of God. One false idea we need to dispel here at the outset is that faith is what makes God's promises real. We must not say that because faith does not create spiritual reality. It is not what gives "substance" to the promises of God in the sense of bringing them into being.

Rather, the meanings of these words point us to the confidence that we have in the promises of God. The point is not that faith brings the promises of God into being, but that faith rests upon the faithfulness of God in bringing his promises to pass. In fact, the word "substance" is used several times in the New Testament for confidence and assurance. In 2 Cor. 9:4, it is used to translate the phrase "confident boasting." In 2 Cor. 11:17, it is the word "confidence" alongside another word for "boasting." In Heb. 3:14, it again translates the words "confidence." So you see that is most likely the meaning here. Many other translations use the word "assurance," which really comes to the same thing.

The word for "evidence" has a similar meaning. In the NT, it is used only here. The ESV translates this word as "conviction." Faith looks at God's word, at God's promises, and is utterly convinced that God will bring his word to its appointed fulfillment. Philip Edgcumbe Hughes writes that this "is not a static emotion of complacency but something lively and active, not just a state of immovable dogmatism but a vital certainty which impels the believer to stretch out his hand, as it were, and lay hold of those realities on which his hope is fixed and which, though unseen, are already his in Christ."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 440-441.

Faith, in other words, means taking God at his word, and in particular his promises. It means banking on the faithfulness of God for our future. It is an evidence of the new birth which gives us this faith that we do so. For the apostle John writes, “They [the false prophets] are of the world: therefore speak they of the world, and the world heareth them. We are of God: he that knoweth God heareth us; he that is not of God heareth not us. Hereby know we the spirit of truth and the spirit of error” (1 Jn. 4:5-6).

It is important for us to see that the reason why people do not believe God’s word is not because there aren’t good reasons to do so. The reason why they don’t is because they don’t want to relinquish control of their own lives. To put your future into the hands of God, which is what faith does, means giving up control over your future. In our sinfulness, we don’t want to do that. We want to say, at the end of the day, that we are the masters of our fate and the captains of our souls. That thinking is antithetical to faith. I want you to see that: it is not that people don’t believe because they have higher standards for the evidence required to believe. It’s that they will refuse any evidence that points in the direction of God’s right to rule over our lives. Faith, on the other hand, is willing to let God be God, and to put our souls and our futures entirely into his good and wise and holy and sovereign hands. Faith is the assurance that God will bring his hoped for promises to pass; it is the conviction that his yet-unfulfilled and yet- unseen promises will one day be completely fulfilled and truly seen.

Faith looks to the approval of God.

In the next verse, the author points us to this very important dimension of faith: “For by it the elders obtained a good report” (2). This is an example of what has been called a divine passive. In other words, it is understood that the one who gives the “good report” is God. The one who witnessed with favor the deeds of the elders is God. That is the point here, and it is taken up several times in the following verses. It is

in this sense that Abel “obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts” (4), that Enoch “had this testimony, that he pleased God” (5), and of all the people of faith mentioned in this chapter, who “obtained a good report through faith” (39).

Faith has a certain focus. It is not focused only on the present, but on the future, which is the point of verse 1. It is also focused on God and his approval instead of men and their approval, which is the point of this verse. In fact, our Lord himself put it this way to the Pharisees of his day: “How can ye believe, which receive honor one of another, and seek not the honor that cometh from God only?” (Jn. 5:44). You can either seek man’s approval or God’s approval, but you cannot seek both. As the apostle Paul put it, “if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ” (Gal. 1:10).

This focus is important because the life that faith calls us to is not popular with the world. We noted last time that these Hebrew believers had become a “gazingstock,” held up to mockery and reproach (Heb. 10:33). Christians have all along had to wrestle with misunderstandings from a hostile culture, even in times when our religion was more acceptable. For when the Christian religion was more acceptable, it was always a more formal version of it, rather than the living faith that God calls us to live out. Believers in Christ do not therefore look to this world for acceptance, but from God who promises to reward those who trust in him with everlasting life.

How much better it is to do this anyway, for how fickle is the opinion of men! They will often only grant you their approval so long as it is in their benefit to do so. God is not like that. He does not turn his back on his people. Nothing can separate us from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35). His own Son died for us when we were his enemies (Rom. 5:9-10), so we can be sure that, having reconciled us to himself, he will never stop loving and caring for his people.

Faith looks to the power of God (3).

Finally, in verse 3, we read, “Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.” We should connect this back to verse 1 and to the “things unseen” mentioned there. We should also connect this to Romans 1:20, which says that “the invisible things of him [God] from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, even his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.”

Note that the connection between faith and the creation of the world is not meant to communicate a sort of blind faith, for that is the very opposite conclusion that Romans 1:20 is meant to lead to. In Romans, the apostle Paul is saying that there is plenty of evidence from the physical world pointing to God’s existence and power, so that people are without excuse when they reject it. Hence, we are not meant to take Heb. 11:3 as if it were saying, “Believe that God created the world, no matter what the evidence (scientific or otherwise) says.” Rather, it is pointing to the fact that the power which created the world is a power we can’t see with our physical eyes. (Also there is the obvious fact that no one was around when the world was created, and being a one-time event lies outside the realm of testable science.) God’s word is not a physical, material thing, but it is the reality which lies behind all physical and material things. “By the word of the LORD were the heavens made; and all the host of them by the breath of his mouth” (Ps. 33:6), a reality testified to by the first chapter of Genesis and the repeated phrase, “And God said” (Gen. 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 22, 24, 26, 29).

We therefore take this on faith because God’s word is not a visible thing. Faith is that by which we see the unseen (Heb. 11:1). That is not the same thing as saying that faith is unreasonable. Faith in the power of God’s word is the most reasonable response to the fact of the universe. The fact that our universe is clearly not self-existent, that it had a definite beginning, and that the life that is here can only be properly explained by an intelligent designer, point us to the fact that someone outside our universe must be responsible for its existence and its continuance.

Note the principle here: it is the unseen that explains the seen, and it is by faith that we lay hold on this explanation. It is the unseen word of God that is the explanation for the created world of God. Just as God's future promises are yet unseen, and by faith we lay hold of them and give them a sort of present substance, even so the word of God is invisible to us and yet by faith we are led to understand that what we see is explained by this unseen word of God.

In other words, it is by faith that we recognize that there is more to this world than the physical and material creation. We shouldn't try to explain everything in terms of what we can see and touch. Rather, by faith we understand that there is a greater reality that gives us a better explanation to everything else, namely, the word of God. By faith we look to the unseen word of God to explain what we see. Hence in verse 3 we are given a parallel between faith and the word of God which created the world, and faith and the promise of God which defines the life to which we are called. By faith, we are not closing our minds to evidence, but opening our minds to the most satisfying and encompassing explanation to the facts of this world and our existence.

In all of this, faith lays hold of the word of God and the power of God. It is the power of God that framed the world. And it is the power of God that will bring about the fulfillment of God's promises. Just as God's word acted upon a world that was "without form and void" (Gen. 1:2), making it into a paradise, even so God's word and power continue to act upon this fallen world, twisted and corrupted as it is now by human sin, so that one day it will once again be a paradise and a place where we will again enjoy uninterrupted and eternal fellowship with God.

How then does faith help embattled saints to persevere? It helps us because faith is focused on the promises of God. Those who believe God's word of promise are precisely those who are assured and convicted that they are true. Faith gives present substance to the future promise of God. It reminds us that our present trials are not the final or ultimate reality. Our present sufferings will not have the final word: God will.

We persevere because we believe that on the other side of affliction is the eternal kingdom of God.

Faith also helps us to persevere because faith is focused, not on man's approval but on God's. We aren't living to make a splash in this world, but to please our Heavenly Father. By faith we are like Enoch and walk with God and before God. It is by faith that we live a God-centered life. Surely many of our problems are the result of living man-centered and self-centered lives. Faith turns our attention from ourselves to the only one who matters, and the only one in whom we are truly blessed, God.

Finally, faith helps us to persevere because faith focuses us upon the reality of God's word and God's power. It reminds us that what is seen is not the ultimate reality. The chaos that is this world will one day through the providence and salvation of our God lead to a new and eternal paradise. No matter how bad things get, nothing is outside the power of God to change.

So we hope. Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things unseen. Our hope is not in ourselves, our wisdom or power or goodness, but in the wisdom and goodness and power of God. Those who have this hope endure. They do not draw back to perdition but believe to the saving of the soul (Heb. 10:39). Let us then be men and women of faith. Let us not be characterized as "little faiths" but as those with great faith, not in ourselves, but in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

# CHAPTER XXXVIII

## ANTEDILUVIAN EXEMPLARS OF FAITH (HEB. II:4-7)

WHAT IS THE FAITH TO WHICH the Bible calls us? What is Biblical faith? What is saving faith? Or does it even matter what kind of faith you have? Maybe just as long as you have some flavor of faith, is that all we need to have? These are questions which are squarely confronted in the eleventh chapter of the book of Hebrews. In particular, this chapter shows us that it matters what you believe, and it matters how you believe. It matters because, as we are told in the sixth verse, Biblical faith is the only faith that pleases God. The reality is that God is the only one that matters when it comes to how we evaluate our faith. You may be pleased with your faith, but if God isn't, that's not going to matter in the long run.

What we are going to see in the following verses is that faith believes certain things and faith does certain things. It believes certain things: it believes that God exists (6), that his promises are trustworthy and true (1), and that he is the rewarder of those who diligently seek him (6). It also does certain things: it brings an offering to God (4), it walks with

God (5), and it heeds the warnings of God's word (7). Faith also receives certain things, one of the most important of which is the righteousness of God. Those who trust in God's saving promises are accounted as righteous, like Noah, who was an "heir of the righteousness of God by faith" (7), and like Abel who "obtained witness that he was righteous" (4).

The key verse in this part of Hebrews 11 is, I think, verse 6: "And without faith it is impossible to please him, for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him." Brothers and sisters, we should want, above all else, to be people who please God. The problem is that so often we end up seeking to please men instead of God. God is really the only one for whom this matters in any ultimate sense. What does it matter if the whole world stands against you if God is for you? In fact, as the apostle Paul puts it in Romans 8, if God is for you, no one can be against you in any lasting or meaningful way (Rom. 8:31-33). So we should want to please God, not the world. We shouldn't want to be a friend of the world, for to be a friend of the world is to be the enemy of God (Jam. 4:4).

How do you please God? Well, Heb. 11:6 gives us a necessary condition: "without faith it is impossible to please him." Let that word "impossible" land on you the way it ought. You cannot please God, no matter what else you do, apart from faith.

Again, at this point it is a temptation to pour into that word "faith" what we want it to mean. For some people, "faith" is just an optimistic attitude about life. For others, faith is believing in yourself, a confidence that you will be able to overcome whatever obstacles life puts in your way. Then there are those who think that faith is just some vague spiritual feeling that we are dependent somehow on some force or power outside of us.

That is not what we see here, however. That is not the faith that pleases God. The fundamental and primary feature is that Biblical faith is centered on God, not on ourselves. Moreover, Biblical faith takes God at his word. In other words, there is a God-centeredness about the kind



of faith that is celebrated in the Scriptures that sets it apart from its imitators. We will see this as we look together at the first three examples here in the Faith Hall of Fame: Abel, Enoch, and Noah. What we will see in these three men is that faith secures God's approval, it seeks God's fellowship, and it submits to God's word.

As we look at the lives of these men and the faith they displayed, my prayer is that we will be encouraged to imitate their example. For that is the purpose of this chapter, isn't it? Let us beware of thinking that Biblical figures are superheroes that we can admire but not imitate. They are not. They are like Elijah, who the apostle James tells us "was a man subject to like passions as we are" – in other words, he was just like us (Jam. 5:17). Just as the example of prayer in the life of Elijah was meant to be an encouragement to pray, so the life of faith here exhibited through Abel, Enoch, and Noah, is meant to be an encouragement to live a life of faith just like they did.

Abel: faith securing God's approval (4)

In verse 4, we read, "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh." This verse is a commentary on the history of Abel recorded in Genesis 4:3-5, which reads, "And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the LORD. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the LORD had respect unto Abel and to his offering: but unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell."

There have always been two questions that people have asked of this text. First, why was Abel's offering accepted by God when Cain's wasn't? And second, how did they know that God accepted Abel's offering but not Cain's? Starting with the second question, a tradition developed that the way the brothers knew whose offering God accepted

was that fire came down out of heaven and consumed Abel's offering while Cain's offering was left as it was. Of course, the Biblical record doesn't say this, so it's speculation, although God did do this very thing at the tabernacle, Solomon's temple, and with Elijah's sacrifice on the top of Mount Carmel. Perhaps that's where the tradition came from, but we have to be content to simply say that the text doesn't say. God did communicate to both of them in some way, however, and that's apparently all we need to know.

As for the first question, it has long been conjectured that God accepted Abel's sacrifice because it came from the flock, whereas Cain's was from the fruit of the ground. The problem with this interpretation, however, is that in the Law of Moses God required food offerings as well as animal sacrifices. Again, we could speculate that Abel understood the need for a sin offering and Cain did not, and that's what set them apart, but again we would just be guessing. However, we really don't need to guess as to why God accepted Abel's offering and not Cain's. Our text tells us, doesn't it? "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain." What set the two brothers apart was not so much what they offered but how they offered it. Abel offered his in faith. Cain offered his with a wicked heart: "Cain . . . was of that wicked one, and slew his brother. And wherefore slew he him? Because his own works were evil, and his brother's righteous" (1 Jn. 3:12).

Faith is what set them apart. Now of course, this means that faith is more than a bare belief that God exists. We see from verse 6 that this is obviously necessary, but the faith that secures God's approval is not a bare notion that God exists. Saving faith is more than not being an atheist. Devils know that God exist too, and they tremble (Jam. 2:19). In fact, Cain not only knew God existed, he talked with God!

Not only so, but Cain's offering also shows that saving faith – I'm using this phrase to distinguish it from a dead and useless faith as James describes in his epistle (Jam. 2) – is more than just religious service. Cain was a religious man. Cain made an offering to God, but he was rejected, and Abel was accepted.

So what did Abel have that Cain didn't? What was it that made Abel a man of faith and Cain not a man of faith? To answer that question, we have to understand what is at the essence of faith. It is this: it is to put your trust in God, rather than in yourself. Trust is at the heart of true Biblical faith. I like to illustrate this sometimes with John 2:23-25, where the gospel tells us that many people believed in the name of Jesus when they saw his miracles, but that Jesus "did not commit himself unto them." To "commit" in verse 24 is the same verb as "believe" in verse 23. Some translations have it as "entrust." That's what it means to have faith in God: it means to commit oneself wholly and entirely to God and to his mercy and grace. It means to look outside of myself for salvation and hope and to God and his grace alone.

Cain didn't have faith, which means that he must have believed at some fundamental level that he didn't need God. Yes, he would offer something to him to get him off his back, but he didn't really believe that God was the great need of his soul. The Bible makes it plain that he was a wicked man, that he murdered his brother because he couldn't stand to be around a righteous man. He didn't want to submit his life to God. He wanted to be his own God. He didn't have faith.

What was the outcome? What is the author of Hebrews holding out for us as the incentive to live lives of faith? It is this: Abel was accepted by God; Abel received God's approval. You see it in the words: "more excellent sacrifice." It was more excellent, not because of anything in the sacrifice itself, but because this is what God thought of it. It's God's opinion, not ours, that makes a religion true or false. You also see it in the words, "by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying to his gifts." Who is the witness here? It is God. Who is the one testifying to Abel's gifts? It is God. In fact, the word "witness" and the verb "testifying" both carry the connotation of divine approval. The ESV translates it like this: "he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts." It is by faith that Abel obtained God's approval when Cain did not.

Of course, every now and then you will hear someone say that they don't care what God thinks. They don't care whether they have his approval or not. Well, it is easy enough to say that now. But there is coming a day when there are going to be a lot of people who realize too late that it's only what God thinks that ultimately and eternally matters. God's approval matters. God's commendation matters. Nothing else does in the final analysis. It doesn't matter how many ribbons you have on your wall, how many trophies, or how high you are in the company. What matters is God's approval. Are we pleasing him? The only people who please him are those who entrust themselves to the God who reveals himself in the Bible, as the Triune God: Father, Son, and Spirit. It means approaching him, not on the basis of the spoiled fruits of your past and present or on the unripe fruits of a promised future, but on the basis of his grace alone through Jesus Christ. It means laying down your quest to be Lord of your life and surrendering that to Christ.

By the way, note the last words of verse 4; they are important: "and by it he being dead yet speaketh." God approved of Abel, but Cain didn't. He killed his brother. Just because God loves you doesn't mean the world will also love you. In fact, the Bible teaches that if God loves you and you love God, it is almost certain that the world will hate you. Our Lord put it this way to his disciples: "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you" (Jn. 15:18-19). It follows that there are not always happy endings in this world even for those who live by faith. But Cain's revenge was not the end of the story. Abel to this day speaks to us and encourages us to live by faith. The reason you want to listen to his words is because his physical death was not the end of his story. Abel lives on in glory and in the presence of God. We need to remember that. This is, in fact, a very important aspect to our next character, Enoch.

Enoch: faith seeking God's fellowship (5)

In the next verse, we read: "By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God."

Enoch shows up in Genesis 5, in the midst of a long list of names in a genealogy starting with Adam and going on to Noah. In verses 21-25 we read this: "And Enoch lived sixty and five years, and begat Methuselah: and Enoch walked with God after he begat Methuselah three hundred years, and begat sons and daughters: and all the years of Enoch were three hundred sixty and five years: and Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him." The only other place in Scripture that we can glean more information about this mysterious man is in Jude, where we read, "And Enoch also, the seventh from Adam, prophesied of these [false prophets], saying, Behold, the Lord cometh with ten thousands of his saints, to execute judgment upon all, and to convince all that are ungodly among them of all their ungodly deeds which they have ungodly committed, and of all their hard speeches which ungodly sinners have spoken against him" (14-15).

It is interesting to note that our author says that Enoch pleased God; the Genesis text says that he walked with God. Of course, one implies the other: you cannot walk with God if you do not please him – he wouldn't allow it! What we learn from this is that Enoch was a godly man – he clearly hated ungodliness – who walked with God and sought fellowship with God. The words "walked with God" are exactly the words used to describe Noah in contradistinction from the world of the ungodly taken away by the flood: "Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God" (Gen. 6:9).

This is the impact of a life of faith. Do you want to know what a life of faith looks like? It is the kind of life that walks with God, that seeks communion with him, that knows what it means to have fellowship with God. That means it is a life that seeks holiness, that hungers and

thirsts after righteousness. For you cannot have fellowship with God in any meaningful sense apart from holiness. “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Mt. 5:8). This is what the apostle John teaches us in the first chapter of his first epistle: “That which we have seen and heard declare we unto you, that ye also may have fellowship with us: and truly our fellowship is with the Father, and with his Son Jesus Christ. And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all” (1 Jn. 1:3-5). John goes from inviting his readers to have fellowship with God to telling them that God is light and has no fellowship with darkness. He goes on to say, “If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (6-7).

Those who live lives of faith, who walk with God and please God show that they are the children of God. Of course, I am not saying that we commend ourselves to God on the basis of our works. That is not possible. Any good works are the result of the grace of God in our lives (Eph. 2:10) and God gets the credit, not us. If we are holy, it is because of the sanctifying work of the Spirit of God who is communicated to us on the basis of the redemptive work of Christ for us. The one who glories, let him glory in the Lord.

Good works are evidence of grace, and they separate the people of God from the world. In the case of Enoch, God did something that set him apart from literally everyone else. For we are told that God translated him: God took him out of this world and into the next without death intervening. This is the explanation of our text: “Enoch was translated that he should not see death.” Enoch is one of only two people that Scripture tells us did not see death. The other guy was Elijah, who was taken up into heaven in a chariot of fire. What makes this especially remarkable in terms of Enoch is that in the fifth chapter of Genesis,

every other person listed there is also said to have died. “And he died” is a recurring phrase in Genesis 5: with the exception of Enoch.

What was God doing? What was being communicated to us in Enoch’s translation? Well, I think one of the things being communicated to us is the significance of walking with God. Enoch is also the only one in this list of whom it is said that he walked with God (with the exception of Noah, of whom it is recorded in the next chapter). The author of Hebrews connects this to faith. By faith Enoch walked with God. God is giving us a preview, so to speak, of the future resurrection in the translation of Enoch. What Enoch experienced is what all God’s people will experience when Christ returns: “Then we which are alive and remain shall be caught up together with them in the clouds, to meet the Lord in the air: and so shall we ever be with the Lord” (1 Thess. 4:17). Those who trust in God are those who will be resurrected in the last day. Our Lord put it this way: “Jesus said unto her, I am the resurrection, and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live: And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die” (Jn. 11:25-26). In other words, those who by faith look to Christ will experience resurrection life, which is what Enoch was given without having to experience death.

Noah: faith submitting to God’s word (7)

In verse 7, we read, “By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.”

Here we note the connection between the description of Noah’s faith and the definition given in verse 1: “Faith is . . . the evidence of things not seen.” Thus it was by faith that Noah was “warned of God of things not seen as yet,” namely, the flood. Noah believed God’s word, seen by his being “moved with fear” so that he “prepared an ark to the saving of his house.” In doing so, he “condemned the world,” who obviously

did not believe that this would happen. The ungodly refused to believe that God was going to destroy the world with a flood. Nothing had ever happened like that before; I'm sure they mocked Noah the entire time he was building the ark. Why spend so much time preparing for something that was not going to happen? It sounds a lot like the mockery of the wicked today. They mock us for living in light of eternity. The apostle Peter himself draws the same connection:

Knowing this first, that there shall come in the last days scoffers, walking after their own lusts, And saying, Where is the promise of his coming? for since the fathers fell asleep, all things continue as they were from the beginning of the creation. For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men. But, beloved, be not ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance. But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up. Seeing then that all these things shall be dissolved, what manner of persons ought ye to be in all holy conversation and godliness, Looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat? Nevertheless we, according to his promise,



look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness. Wherefore, beloved, seeing that ye look for such things, be diligent that ye may be found of him in peace, without spot, and blameless. (2 Pet. 3:3-14)

I want you to note in particular the connection that Peter makes between the word of the Lord spoken to Noah and the word of the Lord spoken to us: it is the same word (see verse 7). And just as Noah believed and submitted to God's word, so it befits us to believe and submit to God's word. At the same time, we can expect the world to mock us for believing it. They will say there is no evidence that a final judgment is going to happen; that it is all just wishful thinking, pie-in-the-sky type stuff. The reason for believing it is that it is the word of God. It doesn't matter if what God tells us is going to happen has never happened before. God does not do things according to statistics. We believe it because God said it. His word is faithful and true and sure.

Although Noah, I'm sure, had many good reasons for believing God's word, we have even more. We look back on the flood, on the judgment against Sodom and Gomorrah, on the judgment against Jerusalem. We also look back on all the promises of God that he has fulfilled. Most of all, we look back on the resurrection of our Lord. We are not left with a paucity of reasons to believe but with a panoply of reasons to believe.

That's what faith does. It believes and submits to the word of God. Not an empty, intellectual believing that has no effect upon the life, but a living faith that transforms the life.

One more thing: I want you to notice that phrase, that Noah "became heir of the righteousness which is by faith." As one commentator put it, this is almost Pauline and strikes a note that that apostle sounds again and again in his epistles. Noah received the righteousness of God by faith; so do we. We inherit God's righteousness; it is given to us by grace so that the only appropriate way to receive it is by the open hand of faith. Would you be right with God? Well, you don't become right with God by being good enough. Now of course we ought to live righteous and holy lives, but that is not the point here.

We are not justified before God by our righteousness, but solely by the righteousness of Christ, a righteousness which he performed and purchased on our behalf through his perfect life and sacrificial death, and which he gives to all who trust in him. “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (Gen. 6:6), and that grace was communicated to him through faith on the basis of the future work of Christ. It is the same way for all of us.

What is it that compels faith to act in these ways?

You may have noticed that although I said that verse 6 was the key and central verse, I still haven’t come to it to deal with it in depth yet. That is because it seems to me to stand behind the faith of these three men (and including everyone else mentioned in this chapter), and so I wanted to wait until we had dealt with all three so we could see how the reality spoken of in verse 6 motivated the faith and faithfulness of Abel and Enoch and Noah. What was it exactly that motivated Abel to seek God’s approval, even when it cost him his life? What motivated Enoch to seek God’s fellowship in a world that was increasing alienated from him and hostile to him? What motivated Noah to endure the reproach of sinners against himself as he prepared an ark for the saving of his house? Verse 6 gives the answer. Verse 6 flows from verse 5, of course, which says that Enoch had this testimony that he pleased God. Then we read, “But without faith it is impossible to please him, for he that cometh to God must believe that he is and that he is the rewarder of them that diligently seek him.” What we see from this verse is that Biblical faith produces a life rooted in the conviction that God is our incomparably great reward.

It’s important that we see that faith is not about seeking God as a means to an end. We don’t seek God so that we can get some reward from him. We seek God for God’s sake. If we read the verse carefully, we can see that. For whom or what does faith come to? It comes to God. God is not the rewarder of those who seek him for a reward outside of

himself, but he is the rewarder of those who seek him diligently. Faith sees God as its shield and its exceeding great reward (Gen. 15:1). Faith speaks in the language of the psalmist: “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion for ever” (Ps. 73:25-26).

You can see why Abel was willing to risk his life for the sake of seeking God’s approval. God was more precious to him than life itself. As Paul would say many years later: “For me to live is Christ, and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). And you can see why Enoch sought the fellowship of God. For if God is your reward, if you treasure him above all things – and that is the only way to properly honor him – then you will desire to walk with him more than all the praise and riches and power that this world can offer. You can see also why Noah would heed God’s words, despite the ridicule and the persecution. If God is your treasure, his words will be your treasure too. In fact, you can tell just how much one treasures God by how much they treasure his word. You see this over and over again in the 119th Psalm. When you see that God is blessed, you will want to learn his statutes (Ps. 119:8). When he is your portion, you will keep his words (Ps. 119:57). “The law of thy mouth is better unto me than thousands of gold and silver” (Ps. 119:72).

God is pleased – indeed, he cannot be pleased in any other way – when we find him to be our reward and our treasure, because that is what he is. God is not a cosmic killjoy. He is not out there to destroy true joy but to uproot out of our hearts false pleasures that kill us in the end. The world can give you a high; there is no doubt about that. But that high will addict you and enslave you and will finally destroy you. On the other hand, “The blessing of the LORD maketh rich, and he addeth no sorrow with it” (Prov. 10:22). And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free. . . . If the Son therefore shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed” (Jn. 8:32, 36). There is everlasting joy and eternal pleasures at God’s right hand (Ps. 16:11).

So brothers and sisters, the fight of faith is a fight for joy. It is a fight for the true and better and lasting reward. Though we are called to deny ourselves, self-denial is not ultimate. We are simply denying ourselves lesser and destructive pleasures for the sake of better and life-giving and eternal pleasures. May we therefore imitate these examples of faith and, like them, seek God for his approval, his fellowship, and his word.

## CHAPTER XXXIX

### THE FAITH OF ABRAHAM (HEB. 11:8)

ONE MIGHT GET THE IDEA that Abraham, who is called “the father of all them that believe” (Rom. 4:11) as well as “the friend of God” (Jam. 2:23), was born a man of strong and impermeable faith. But this is not true. In fact, as Joshua reminds us, Abraham did not come from a long line of preachers but from a long line of idolators: “Your fathers dwelt on the other side of the flood [i.e. the Euphrates River] in old time, even Terah, the father of Abraham, and the father of Nachor: and they served other gods” (Josh. 24:2). Abraham was born in a pagan city (Ur) and into a pagan family. He was not brought up fearing the true God.

And yet, God got his attention. He called him to faith and Abraham responded: “Now the LORD had said to Abram, Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee: And I will make of thee a great nation, and I will bless thee, and make thy name great, and thou shalt be a blessing: And I will bless them that bless thee, and curse him that curseth thee: and in thee shall all families of the earth be blessed. So Abram departed, as the LORD had spoken unto him; and Lot went with him: and Abram

was seventy and five years old when he departed out of Haran” (Gen. 12:1-4).

Now it isn’t a surprise that Abraham comes into the Faith Hall of Fame. After all, if a Jewish man or woman had been asked (then or now) to think of the personification of faith and faithfulness, they would have immediately thought of Abraham. Not only does Abraham get a verse or two, but basically verses 8- 19 are devoted primarily to him (though specifically in 8-12 and 17-19). In other words, what our author is saying is, if you want to know what a life of faith looks like, look to Abraham. Incidentally, the apostle Paul does this also in his epistle to the Romans. He had spent a lot of time in chapters 3 and 4 dealing with the importance of faith in justification. That begged the question, the apostle must have known, as to what justifying faith looked like. So Paul points his readers to Abraham in Romans 4:17- 24 as the quintessential example of what true faith looks like.

Not only is Abraham an example of what godly faith looks like, he is also an inspiration to follow him in his faith. He is not meant to be a museum piece. As Paul puts it in Romans 4:12, Abraham is the father of those who “walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham.” However, one of the ways he is inspiring is not only in the fact that he lived a life of faith but also (frankly) in the fact that he doesn’t come across as a flawless example of faithfulness. Abraham wasn’t perfect. He lied about his wife on at least a couple of occasions, not a stellar moment, and definitely not a moment in which he was living by faith. So when we talk about living by faith, we shouldn’t think that if we ever stumble and fall into unbelief that we must give up the fight. We must not think that just because we have given up on God in our past that God has given up on us. What is most encouraging is that when the apostle many years later apprises Abraham’s life, he describes him – despite his failings – of “being not weak in faith” (Rom. 4:19), that “he staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God” (20). God doesn’t hold our mistakes against

us. We can, like the father who approached Jesus on behalf of his son, say, “Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief!” (Mark 9:24).

So I don’t want us to consider the life of Abraham and get discouraged. That would be to defeat the purpose of this chapter. The point is that we be encouraged to imitate the faith of Abraham, just as we’ve been encouraged to imitate the faith of Abel, Enoch, and Noah. In order to do that today, I want to drill down and consider a single verse. We haven’t done this often; but occasionally there is something in just one verse that begs for more attention. Verse 8 is one such verse. There’s a lot here, and I think it will be beneficial for us to hear it on its own merits. Here is verse 8: “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went.”

What I want to notice particularly about this verse is the link it establishes between faith and obedience. Faith produces obedience to God: “By faith Abraham . . . obeyed.” But that’s not all that needs to be said. I not only want us to consider that Abraham obeyed by faith but also how he obeyed by faith. As we consider these two things, I hope that we will be convicted and motivated and encouraged to follow Abraham in the footsteps of his faith.

### Faith obeys God

Abraham’s faith motivated him to obey God. He obeyed God when God first told him to leave his homeland and to go to a land which God would show him. Obedience didn’t just mark out the first part of the patriarch’s life. His life was continually marked by believing obedience. In verses 17-19, we are reminded of the time God told Abraham to offer up his son Isaac, an unimaginable sacrifice on Abraham’s part, but he did it. The Lord responded to his faith and obedience with a reaffirmation of his promise to him: “By myself I have sworn, saith the LORD, for because thou hast done this thing, and hast not withheld thy son, thine only son: that in blessing I will bless thee, and in multiplying I

will multiply thy seed as the stars of the heaven, and as the sand which is upon the sea shore; and thy seed shall possess the gate of his enemies; and in thy seed shall all nations of the earth be blessed; because thou hast obeyed my voice” (Gen. 22:16-18).

However, you may wonder if this is always the case. That is, does faith always create the fruit of obedience in the life of believers? Maybe it did in the life of Abraham, but maybe it doesn’t always come out. Maybe some people can be true believers but not bear the fruit of obedience to Christ in their lives.

The answer to this question is no. Faith always, in some way, in some measure, will produce obedience; otherwise it is not true faith. You see this in a number of ways demonstrated in the Bible. For example, the apostle James tells us that “faith, if it hath not works, is dead, being alone” (Jam 2:17). Now what does James mean when he talks about a “dead faith”? Well, clearly, he means that it is worthless. That is to say, it is worthless in every sense of the word. It is not an evidence of salvation at all; in fact, this is the kind of faith that devils can have (2:19). Incidentally, I think it is interesting that James goes on to produce Abraham as an example of a faith that works, and he does so as a pattern for all of us. In other words, if your faith does not mimic Abraham’s faith, then it is a dead faith.

Unfortunately, some folks will latch on to the fact that James tells us Abraham was justified by his works and not by faith only (2:24) in order to say that we are justified – that is, declared to be forgiven and righteous in the sight of God – by faith and works. In other words, there is an opposite ditch we can fall into. On the one side is the ditch of a dead faith, and to say that true faith does not have to make a difference in a person’s life. Such folks will rail against what they call “lordship salvation.” On the other side is the ditch of works-based salvation. These folks, basing a person’s acceptance with God on their works, make salvation to be a matter of trying rather than trusting, of doing rather than depending. We need to avoid both ditches. So on the one hand, we want to affirm that true faith – saving faith – necessarily produces the fruit of obedi-



ence. On the other hand, we also want to affirm that we do not depend upon our works at all for the basis of our acceptance with God, but rather entirely upon the finished work of Jesus Christ. We don't trust in our righteousness, but in the righteousness which God provides for us which he gives us through union with Christ. Jesus Christ obeyed God perfectly and his righteousness is freely given and imputed to those who belong to him by faith. Jesus Christ also suffered the punishment which our sins deserve, and his payment for sin is accepted in our place for those who belong to him.

What do we do with James's language? Doesn't it mean that our works play into our acceptance with God? Doesn't it contradict the apostle Paul, who said plainly that we are not justified by works but by grace through faith (Gal. 2:16)?

The answer to this is to recognize that James and Paul are doing two different things. They don't contradict each other; they complement each other. Paul is talking about our legal status before God when he talks about justification. He is talking about the justification of our person before God. He is saying that God declares the believing sinner to be righteous, solely on the basis of God's righteousness (not man's) received by faith. James, however, when he talks about justification, is not talking about the justification of our person, but rather the justification of our faith. Paul is answering the question: "How does a sinner get right with God?" James is answering the question: "How does a person determine whether or not their faith is living or dead?" Hence the answers are different because the questions are different. If you want to know how to get right with God, the answer is to look to Christ and receive God's righteousness in him, an act of faith. If you want to know if your faith is living or dead, you need to look to your works, because if your faith is real, then it is going to produce good works.

Even in Romans and Galatians, where the apostle Paul proclaims justification by grace through faith, you see a faith that works. In fact, in Gal. 5:6, Paul says that "faith . . . worketh by love." In Romans, Paul

begins and ends the epistle with references to the obedience of faith (Rom. 1:5; 16:26).

This can also be seen in the nature of faith. The faith to which we are being called is not a bare intellectual acceptance of certain facts. It is the embracing of Christ as Lord and Savior and to entrust and commit ourselves to him as such. We not only embrace him as Savior but as Lord. He is not one to you if he is not the other. Hence it is that the apostle John writes that all who are begotten of God believe; and all who believe overcome the world (1 Jn. 5:1-4). Surely, we can see that it is impossible to live in disobedience and overcome the world. If fact, to be called a child of disobedience, according to the apostle Paul, is to put yourself in the category of those upon whom the wrath of God shall come (Eph. 5:6).

So yes, the faith which is a product of God's work in the heart will always manifest itself in works of obedience. It is inevitable. Like Abraham, this doesn't mean perfection. It doesn't mean that we won't sometimes slip into a mindset motivated by unbelief. It doesn't mean that we will never sin. What it does mean is that it is impossible for the work of the Spirit of God in the heart to be so muted that it never manifests itself in holiness and hungering and thirsting after righteousness. The faith God gives us is living, not dead, and it would be blasphemous to imagine otherwise.

### How faith obeys God

The really exciting part of this verse, however, is not just the reminder that faith produces obedience. It is rather the way in which Abraham's faith manifested itself in obedience. So now let's look at the different ways in which Abraham's faith produced a lifestyle of obedience to God. In particular, I want us to notice that Abraham's obedience was immediate, directed, sacrificial, unconditional, and hopeful.

Again, as we look at these things, I hope we are being encouraged and motivated to follow Abraham's example.

### Immediate obedience

The grammatical structure of this verse in the Greek implies that as soon as God called Abraham, he obeyed. It is the immediacy of his response of obedience that is being underlined here. Philo, the first century A.D. Jewish philosopher, wrote of him, "Abraham departed the moment he was bidden. . . . Taking no thought for anything, either for his fellow-clansmen, or wardsmen, or schoolmates, or blood relations on father's or mother's side, or country, or ancestral customs, or community of nurture or home life, all of them possessing a power to allure and attract which it is hard to throw off, he followed a free and unfettered impulse and departed with all speed from Chaldea, a land at that time blessed by fortune and at the height of its prosperity."<sup>1</sup>

You see this also in the incident involving the sacrifice of Isaac. We are told that after God gave him the dreadful summons, "Abraham rose up early in the morning" in order to go to the place God told him to go. If there was ever a reason to drag your feet on something, it would at least have been understandable in that instance! And yet, even then, Abraham not only obeyed God, but obeyed him quickly.

Brothers and sisters, God calls us to obey quickly. Think about your life. What matter of obedience are you not doing? If you are dragging your feet over an issue of obedience to God, then you need to repent and obey and obey now. Slow obedience is often just plain disobedience. Let the words of the psalmist be your words: "I thought on my ways, and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste, and delayed not to keep thy commandments" (Ps. 119:59-60). Let us run to God's commandments.

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<sup>1</sup>Qtd. in P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Eerdmans, 1977), p. 466.

## Directed obedience

Another very important feature of Abraham's faith was that it was a directed obedience, in the sense that it was directed by the word of God. "When he was called," the text says – this is the word of God to Abraham. He didn't just decide it was a good idea to leave home and go off into the unknown. It wasn't an adventurous spirit that made him decide to go. It wasn't after carefully thinking through his options that he went. No, it was God's word and God's word alone that determined the path that Abraham took. Now we have God's written word to us, a word which the apostle Peter says is "a more sure word of prophesy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place" (2 Pet. 1:19). As John MacArthur says, if you want to hear God's word, read the Bible out loud. In other words, just as Abraham heard God's word and obeyed, so we too hear God's word in Scripture and ought to obey.

We need to be careful that we don't evaluate our obedience on the basis of what we think is best for us. God does not call us to direct ourselves, but to be directed by him. "Trust in the LORD with all thine heart; and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths" (Prov. 3:5-6). "Commit thy way unto the LORD; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass" (Ps. 37:5). We are to let God's word be the lamp unto our feet and the light unto our paths (Ps. 119:105).

We are to let every aspect of our lives be governed by the word of God. Although it is true that God's word doesn't speak to every detail of our lives, it does give principles which ought to govern every thought we think, every decision we make, and every project we begin. It is by the word of God that we become "perfect, thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Tim. 3:17). The only good works are Biblical ones.

So let me repeat: if you want to know what God wants you to do, what God's will is for your lives, then read your Bibles. By the way, God is speaking to us in the Bible whether we read it or not. You can

either listen to him there or choose to ignore him. You cannot silence him; we either obey his word or disobey it.

### Sacrificial obedience

Another aspect of Abraham's obedience was its sacrificial nature. To leave your homeland for an unknown place is an amazing act of faith. Note the way the Genesis text puts it: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will shew thee" (Gen. 12:1). Your country: that is, your homeland, the place you grew up. Familiar places, customs, language – all gone. Your kindred and your father's house: your family, the people who mean the most to you, and the people who care for you the most, and exchanging that for a strange land full of strange people who don't know you or your history. Though it is true that Abraham took Lot with him, that was it. He never went back home. The moment he left Ur, and then Haran after his father's death, he never visited his native land again. I think many of us know something of what that must feel like. What God told Abraham to do must have been hard. It was hard. And yet Abraham did it.

Let us beware of thinking that faithfulness to God is always going to be an adventure and accompanied always with excitement. Sometimes the reality is that obedience to God might be the very hardest thing you have been called to do. For our Lord, obedience to his Father's will meant going to the cross. Although we cannot imitate our Lord in giving our lives as an atonement, that does not mean that we are not called to bear a cross. We are. That is the meaning of discipleship: a willingness to bear your cross, die to yourself, and follow Jesus. Let us remember what our Lord told the people following him: "And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple. . . . So likewise, whosoever he be of you that forsaketh not all that he hath, he cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:27, 33).

Now one of the points of this epistle is that this is absolutely worth it. There is no sacrifice you will ever make for Christ that you will end up regretting in the end; on the other hand, there is no sinful comfort this world offers that will ever be worth it in the end. For we have in heaven a better and an enduring substance (Heb. 10:34). Our Lord put it this way: "If any man will come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross, and follow me. For whosoever will save his life shall lose it: and whosoever will lose his life for my sake shall find it. For what is a man profited, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? For the Son of Man shall come in the glory of his Father with his angels; and then he shall reward every man according to his works" (Mt. 16:24-27). It is in losing our lives that we find them.

Nevertheless, it is sometimes easy to forget this in the heat of the battle. Obedience is often sacrificial and can be very painful. But Abraham endured. We should endure as well. Don't give up when the going gets hard.

### Unconditional obedience

Here is where we get to the most amazing part of Abraham's obedience. You see it in the words: "and he went out, not knowing whither he went." God did not tell Abraham where he was going. He simply told him to leave his land "unto a land that I will shew thee." He didn't leave with a handful of brochures in his hand. No way to do an internet search for Canaan and look at some images. No way to look at Google maps. I'm not even sure the Lord even told him Canaan was the final destination at the beginning. He was just to leave, and as he left, he was in a very real sense walking out in blind faith.

Now you know I don't really like that term, "blind faith." I don't like it because it is used by people in the West to describe a kind of religious credulity, a faith that does not take into consideration any kind of evidence. Indeed, it is often pictured as if faith means to believe despite

what the evidence says. However, that is not what Christian faith is. We are not told to believe in things that are not true. We are not told to believe something for which there is no evidence. Our faith is based on God's word, for which there is plenty of evidence of its truthfulness and trustworthiness. So our faith is not blind if by that you mean a faith that is unreasoning and unthinking.

There is another sense – a different sense altogether – in which faith is often blind. After all, this is the implication of Paul's description of him and others: "for we walk by faith and not by sight" (2 Cor. 5:7). Paul was talking about heaven there, and just like Abraham was on his way to a place he had never seen, every believer – including Abraham himself – sees himself or herself on the way to a "city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (Heb. 11:10). What God has promised us we cannot now see (11:1). That doesn't mean it is unreasonable to believe what God has promised; indeed, it is most unreasonable to doubt God's word. But the fact that we cannot now see it means that our faith is blind in that sense. "We are saved by hope," Paul says to the Romans, "but hope that is seen is not hope: for what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it" (Rom. 8:24-25).

However, this can be hard. To trust on the bare word of God can be difficult for the flesh. It is difficult precisely because it means that we have to die to ourselves; we have to die to the proclivity that we have to control things. We want to be our own masters and commanders; we are loathe to turn the reins of our lives over to God. We want to know what is going to happen. We don't want to go blind into an unknown future, even though God has told us to go there.

This is what Abraham did, isn't it? This is what I mean by unconditional obedience. Abraham put no conditions on God when he received the command to go. He simply obeyed. He didn't say, "Yes, Lord, I'll do what you tell me to do, but please let me know a little about the way I am to go and the place I am to go to. Help me to see that it is a good thing

for me to be leaving my homeland and my family.” Abraham didn’t do that. God told him to go and he simply went.

We need to be careful that we do not condition our obedience to God on anything other than the trustworthiness of his word. If God tells us to do something in his word, then we ought to do it, if for no other reason than God says to do it. If you are waiting until you feel better about it, then you are wrong. That is not obedience. If you are waiting until it is a better time to obey, then you are not obeying. If God tells us to do something, we ought to do it immediately and without conditions.

So let me ask all of us, myself included: what conditions are you placing on your obedience to God? Perhaps it is something very hard for you to do and you don’t want to do it. You think that if God really wants you to obey him, he will make it easier for you. Do you see what you are doing? You are putting conditions on God. You are tempting him, and that is never right. Be like Abraham: obey God without placing conditions on your obedience to him.

Well, how do we do this? How do we maintain ourselves in an obedience that is immediate, directed, sacrificial, and unconditional? We do it by being hopeful, hoping in God, and that is our final point.

### Hopeful obedience

Abraham’s obedience was determined by hope because it was determined by faith: “By faith Abraham . . . obeyed.” And “faith is the substance [assurance] of things hoped for” (Heb. 11:1). As we noted there, this demonstrates the forward-looking nature of faith, and the fact that faith is firmly fixed on the sure promises of God to us. As Calvin put it, “faith properly begins with the promise [of God], rests in it, and ends in it.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 1, edited by John T. McNeill (Westminster: Philadelphia, 1960), p. 575.



We can go into the unknown because God has called us. We can endure sacrifices because God has promised something so much better for us. Our hope is not in ourselves, but in God, and if that is the case, we ought to be willing to do whatever he asks and to go wherever he calls.

The problem with us and our lack of obedience is that our hope is not centered on the promises of God, but on some other promise – a promise of this world, the desires of the eyes, the flesh, or the pride of life. These things will pass away, brothers and sisters, whereas the one who does the will of God will abide forever. Let us therefore not love the world, but rather let us obey and love our Lord (1 Jn. 2:15-17). As the author of Hebrews will go on to say, Abraham endured because he had his eyes set on the promise, which he knew God would come through on. We must be the same way. Let us endure in light of God's promise. Let our lives be characterized by a firm and unshakable confidence in God's word.

Let us, in other words, be like Abraham. Let our faith be like his: immediate, directed, sacrificial, unconditional, and hopeful. And if you are not walking in the footsteps of Abraham, if your life is not based on trust in God and in his Son Jesus Christ, there is only one way that will lead, to destruction. For there are only two paths: the narrow way (the way of faith and dependence on Christ) and the broad way (the way of self-determination). Oh, may we all be following Christ, for his yoke is easy and his burden light. The way may be hard now, but it leads to everlasting rest.

## CHAPTER XL

# THE VICTORY OF FAITH (HEB. 11:9-19)

IN THE BIBLE, GREAT PROMISES ARE GIVEN to those who conquer. “To him that overcometh [conquers] will I [King Jesus] give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God” (Rev. 2:7). “He that overcometh shall not be hurt of the second death” (2:11). “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it” (2:17). “And he that overcometh, and keepeth my works unto the end, to him will I give power over the nations: and he shall rule them with a rod of iron; as the vessels of a potter shall they be broken to shivers: even as I received of my Father. And I will give him the morning star.” (2:26-28). “He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels” (3:5). “Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of the city of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new

name” (3:12). “To him that overcometh will I grant to sit with me in my throne, even as I also overcame, and am set down with my Father in his throne” (3:21). “He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son” (21:7).

When you consider that there are no promises for those who do not conquer (in Rev. 21:7-8, those who conquer are contrasted with those whose end will be in the lake of fire), it makes overcoming all the more important and serious. We really should want, therefore, to answer the question: overcoming what? The answer is that those who overcome, who win the victory, are precisely those who overcome Satan and all that he stands for (cf. Rev. 12:10-11; 15:2). In other words, the victory here is victory over the devil and the world as it joins Satan in opposition to God. Being victorious means not joining the enemy of God by giving in to his deceptions and his flattering and his enticements.

That naturally leads to another question: how do you do this? The answer to that is: you do it by faith. “For whatsoever is born of God overcometh the world: and this is the victory that overcometh the world, even our faith. Who is he that overcometh the world, but he that believeth that Jesus is the Son of God?” (1 John 5:4-5).

Here’s the deal: those who overcome are those who endure to the end (Mt. 24:13). You don’t win the victory until you can say with Paul, “I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith: henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:7-8). We are not urged to win Pyrrhic victories. Or, to put it the way our text puts it, those who are victorious are just those who die in the faith (Heb. 11:13), not out of it.

I want to die in faith, not out of it. I don’t want to be like those whose faith was overthrown (2 Tim. 2:18), or like Hymenaeus and Alexander who didn’t hold on to their faith but put it away and made shipwreck (1 Tim. 1:19-20). No, I want to be like Paul, and I want you to be like

him, too. I want us to be like Abraham and Sarah and Isaac and Jacob. Let it be said of us that, like them, we died in faith.

We have had occasion to notice that there is in our day a lot said about certain deconversion stories, people who once claimed to follow Jesus, sometimes with large public followings, and then have fallen away (often also very publicly). Even though such stories generate a lot of publicity, these are not the people you should really focus on. The reason is, for every deconversion story, there go unnoticed by our secular media a thousand faithful believers whose entire lives to the very end were one fragrant offering to Christ, who were the salt of the earth and the light of the world. People like James Meece, Ernie Godbey, and Lois Sargent. They give the lie to the argument that there is nothing to Christianity. I want to be like them, and I want you to be like them, and like Abraham.

We have already been encouraged in the book of Hebrews to follow the faith and example of Abraham: “That ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:12, and the next verses 13-17 are about God’s promise to Abraham). We are being encouraged again here to be like him in our faith. Now last time we noticed that Abraham’s faith produced obedience to God (11:8), and how it did so. Today, we want to look at verses 9-19 and ask the question, “What was it about Abraham’s faith that sustained him through so many trials, setbacks, and difficulties, so that he persevered in the faith to the end of his life and overcame and won the victory of faith?” To answer this question, I want us to notice two things. First, I want to look at the ways that are highlighted in this text in which Abraham’s victory over the world was shown. And then I want to look at the ways that his faith enabled him to do that.

The ways in which Abraham’s victory over the world was shown

First of all, it was shown in his not making Canaan his homeland. Now this might seem strange, because God promised to give Canaan to Abraham’s seed (cf. Gen. 13:14-16). And yet we are told that Abraham

“sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange [foreign] country” (9). Note that: he was living like an exile in the land God had promised to him! Abraham and his family “confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (13).

Now brothers and sisters, the people of God have always been like this since the fall of man into sin. The meek shall inherit the earth (Mt. 5:9), but not yet. We are told that there will be a regeneration for the physical universe (Mt. 19:28), when all things are renewed. It is for this that our world groans and travails in pain until now (Rom. 8:22). There is coming a New Heavens and a New Earth wherein dwelleth righteousness (2 Pet. 3:13). But this is all future. However, the fact of the matter is that we are walking on an earth that will one day belong to the people of God. We are living on our land. Now we have to do so as strangers and foreigners, as pilgrim people. That means we need, like Abraham, to retain a pilgrim mindset. We need to remind ourselves that our inheritance is future, but that does not make it any less certain!

What this means is that we need to be careful that we don’t settle for less. That is what worldliness does for you. It makes you settle for less because you are settling on this world. Of course, those who are worldly will laugh at this. They will tell you that you are the one missing out. They will point to their possessions and power and prestige, and then point to you and ask you: who has it better? Well, they often have a point. They often do have it better now. (By the way, I’m not suggesting that riches are indicative of godlessness or that poverty is a sign of piety. Abraham was a wealthy man in his day. Nevertheless, he probably could have had more riches and more power, but he never sought to possess as much of this world as he could – see Gen. 14:22-24). Let me ask you this: who would you rather be like – Lazarus or the rich man (Luke. 16)? You see, what really matters is how you end up, and God’s elect will end up with immeasurable riches in eternity that will make this world’s pleasures look like mud cakes in the slum. It isn’t even a contest (cf. Rom. 8:18).

Abraham didn't settle for less. He never put down stakes, even in Canaan. Did you notice that? He lived in tents his entire life (Heb. 11:9). He never lived in a house with foundations. He never dwelt in a city. He was a nomad, a sojourner, on purpose, because he was living in light of the promise. We should do so as well.

Second, it was seen in his doing what was impossible, humanly speaking. The Lord promised Abraham and Sarah a son, long after it was physically impossible for this to happen. This is highlighted in verses 11-12. Sarah herself "was past age" to have children (11) and Abraham was "as good as dead" (12). Nevertheless, Sarah "received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child" so that there "sprang . . . even of one . . . so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable." This language is similar to that of the apostle Paul's, who said that Abraham, "being not weak in faith, he considered not his own body now dead, when he was about an hundred years old, neither yet the deadness of Sarah's womb: He staggered not at the promise of God through unbelief; but was strong in faith, giving glory to God" (Rom. 4:19-20).

God loves to call us to do the impossible, too, at least from a human standpoint. I know that Paul says that God "will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able" (1 Cor. 10:13), but we must remember that our enabling comes from the Lord, just as Sarah received strength to conceive. This is why Paul goes on to say that the Lord "will make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it." Our strength doesn't come from within but from God. This is why it's not a contradiction when Paul wrote later of some "trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life" (2 Cor. 1:8). Yes, it was beyond Paul's resources, but not beyond God's, a lesson he was meant to learn and a lesson we all have to learn as well through trials that are above our capacity to meet on our own terms and strength: "But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God, which raiseth the dead" (9).

It is the victory of faith when we follow through in a path of obedience that seems beyond our own resources or wisdom or power to accomplish. And yet Abraham and Sarah show us it can be done. Thousands of others throughout history have demonstrated this as well.

Third, it was shown in his not returning to his homeland. In verse 15, we are told that Abraham didn't spend his life grumbling about what he had been told to give up: "And truly," we read, "if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned." They didn't because they didn't even think about it. Abraham moved on; he didn't look back. Neither did Sarah. It reminds me of the way J. I. Packer comments on Paul's relationship with his past. The apostle wrote, "Yea doubtless, and I count all things but loss for the excellency of the knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord: for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and do count them but dung, that I may win Christ" (Phil. 3:8). On this Packer comments: "When Paul says he counts the things he lost as rubbish, or dung (KJV), he means not merely that he does not think of them as having any value, but also that he does not live with them constantly in his mind: what normal person spends his time nostalgically dreaming of manure?" [Packer, J. I., *Knowing God* (IVP: Downers Grove, 1973), p. 25.] Paul and Abraham were cut out of the same cloth. Abraham wasn't mindful of the land of Ur of the Chaldees because it was no longer of any value to him; it was like dung to him, and he wasn't going to go around nostalgically dreaming about manure.

What a lesson we could learn from both Abraham and Paul! Our Lord has called us out of darkness into his marvelous light (1 Pet. 2:9). We have been called to live separately from this world. Though it is true that we are in this world, yet we are not of it (Jn. 17:15-16). Though it is true that we are called to go into the world, not retreat into Christian enclaves, yet the Christian is always to appear as different from the world in its tastes and values and thinking. As the apostle exhorts the Corinthians, "Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive

you. And will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty. Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God” (2 Cor. 6:17-7:1).

The victory of faith is shown when we don’t go back, and that we don’t spend our days wishing we were back in Egypt. It is heart-rending to hear of those who do go back, who like Lot’s wife look back. That’s what apostasy is. It is forsaking the work of the Lord for the love of this world, like Demas.

I am convinced that the main reason people grow cold in the walk with the Lord and distant from the church is not because they are convinced by the arguments of a godless culture but because they are in love with the world. The mind is convinced because the heart is captivated. If you love the world, you will find a reason to justify your love to it. Our Lord put it this way: “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one and love the other; or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon” (Mt. 6:24). Now that doesn’t mean that we don’t engage with the world on an intellectual level. Of course we do: “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war after the flesh: (For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strongholds;) Casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:3-5). It means that no amount of argument is going to change a person if their heart is enslaved to the lusts of the eyes and the lust of the flesh and the pride of life. We need to have a genuine love to Christ if we are going to remain successfully faithful to him. Otherwise we will end up going back. It is the victory of faith that we keep loving Christ over this world.

Finally, another way we see Abraham’s faith comes in verses 17-19. We had occasion to look at them last week as well. It is seen in Abraham giving up his most precious possession, his only begotten son Isaac. We are specifically told that his faith was tried (17). Yet Abraham did what



God asked him to do, however painful and confusing this must have been for him.

What we see in this instance of Abraham's faith is an illustration of the principle that God calls all his people to hold the things of this earth loosely. Of course, that means that we give them up when God takes them from us. For Abraham, God gave his son back to him before he was able to follow through with the sacrifice. Abraham was certainly willing – the knife was in his hand, and it was stretched out to give the killing blow (cf. Gen. 22:10). For others, what God takes isn't given back this side of heaven. Maybe it's your health or your possessions or your reputation or something else. Fill in the blank. What will you do in that moment? Will your faith be victorious or not?

How faith enabled Abraham to achieve the victory

How do you live like a stranger? How do you adopt a pilgrim mentality? And how do you stay like that? How do you become the kind of person who holds things loosely, and gives them up when God takes them from you without becoming bitter and turning away from the faith? How do you live a life that constantly demands from you what seems impossible and beyond you?

Another way to put this is: what is it about faith that enables us to overcome and obtain the victory? That is what we want to look at now.

First, let's look at Abraham's pilgrim mindset. What enabled him to live in those tents in the land of promise? What kept Abraham from putting down roots? Well, the reason is given for us in verse 10: "For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God." That word "looked" points us to Abraham's faith. It is by the eyes of faith that Abraham looked for that city, for it was not something to be seen with his physical eyes. It was Abraham's faith in the promise of God.

Consider this. God promised to Abraham the land of Canaan for his posterity. He also promised that through his seed all the nations of the

earth would be blessed. I think Abraham saw through that promise a promise of a renewed world, and it is that insight that I think is behind how Paul describes the promise to Abraham: “For the promise, that he should be the heir of the world” (Rom. 4:13). Abraham didn’t settle for less by refusing to settle for this world. The reason why he was able to dwell in foundationless dwellings – aka “tents” – is because he looked for a city which has foundations laid down by God himself. Abraham wasn’t giving up anything, really. He was giving up this world in hope of the next.

We need to be the same way, don’t we? We can be exiles in this world because we won’t be in the next. It is faith in the sure word of God that gives this to us: “These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced [greeted] them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth” (13). You won’t confess yourself a pilgrim until you have by faith seen and greeted the promise of the future inheritance.

What was it that kept Abraham from going back to Ur? Well, we are told throughout these verses – it was the promise of a better land. Not only a sure inheritance, but a better one: “And truly if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better country, that is an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (15-16). You know why they were not mindful? Because they desired a better country – heaven. It is faith in God’s word that enabled them to see the beauty and the superiority of that country. The power of perseverance, brothers and sisters, is not learning to be hardened to hardship, being a Stoic – it is seeing that what God gives us in Jesus Christ is infinitely better than anything a life lived in independence of God can give.

What was it that enabled Abraham to follow through with the impossible task of founding a people – even though he was 100 and Sarah 90? It was because he believed God – “he was persuaded that what he

had promised he was able also to perform” (Rom. 4:21). When Jesus called Peter to go out on the waves, it wasn’t Peter’s dexterity and nimbleness on the water that kept him afloat – it was his sight of Christ and his confidence in him; when he put more stock in the winds and waves than he did in Christ, that was when he went down. I don’t know what God has called you to do that seems impossible to you, but rest assured that the power doesn’t belong to us but to God.

He has promised it. This is not just for guys like Abraham. It’s for everyone who belongs to Jesus. You are to know “what is the exceeding greatness of his power to usward who believe, according to the working of his mighty power, which he wrought in Christ, when he raised him from the dead, and set him at his own right hand in the heavenly places” (Eph. 1:19-20). “Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to power that worketh in us” (Eph. 3:20). Lay hold on these promises, lay hold on the power of God! Yes, we are full of infirmities, but God is greater than them all. The Lord loves to use little children and their lunches to feed five thousand men. He loves to use tiny armies to defeat large ones. He loves to do great things with little ones.

Finally, what was it that enabled Abraham to be willing to sacrifice his son? It was this: he accounted “that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead, whence also he received him in a figure” (19). What the author means by that last phrase is just that it was as if Isaac had actually been killed and had been raised from the dead. What happened there upon the mountain was a miracle of no less amazement than if Isaac had been killed and raised from the dead. So what enabled Abraham to hold loosely the one he loved so much was the fact that he knew that God raises the dead.

Brothers and sisters, God raises the dead. God will renew all things. He will put all things right. Hold this world loosely; hold your loved ones loosely. We can do this because we serve a God who is the God of resurrection. Jesus Christ is God’s Son who died and rose so that those who belong to him will be raised again. He will restore all things. There

is nothing you can lose here that you will not in the age to come be recompensed infinitely times over.

Above all things, we must remember the background of Hebrews 11. It is Hebrews 1-10. In those chapters, the central figure is Jesus Christ the Son of God and our High Priest before God. By his perfect life and his perfect sacrifice he opened the way into the very presence of God. Through Jesus Christ we have access to God the Father and into his love and fellowship. It is by faith that we receive this – which means that we aren't looking to ourselves but away from ourselves to Christ. It means that we are not trusting in our goodness or righteousness but in the goodness and righteousness of Christ. It means that we don't see our salvation in our trying but in trusting in Christ. We don't depend on our doing but on Jesus. And this is not something that we've cooked up – this is something which God himself reveals to us in the gospel. It is not something that we become worthy of, for God justifies the ungodly in Christ.

How does this play into the victory of faith? Well, clearly it does, as John tells us (1 Jn. 5:4). Those who overcome are those who believe in Jesus. This is so because it is by faith that we receive Christ and in receiving him we receive a right standing before God along with every other blessing needed to continue to the end and overcome. This is the reason why John would say in his Revelation of the saints who went to war with the beast, "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death" (Rev. 12:11). It is always by the blood of the Lamb that we overcome. It is his sacrifice for us that is the basis of all our victories.

In other words, the call to enduring faith in Hebrews 11 is not a call to look to yourself and your resources and your worthiness but to look to Christ and his grace and his worthiness for you. You won't make it to the end if your focus is on yourself. Hope in God; hope in his Son. Look to Jesus and rest your soul in him and in him alone and, in doing so, you will find the victory.

## CHAPTER XLI

### FAITH AND THE FUTURE (HEB. 11:20-22)

IN THESE THREE VERSES, WE ARE GIVEN what are essentially brief bullet points on the faith of Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph. But I want you to notice that there are a number of common themes to all three accounts. First, all three accounts are about what these patriarchs would say when they knew they were near death. For example, Isaac wanted to bless his first-born Esau because, as he put it, “I am old, I know not the day of my death.” He went on to say that he wanted to bless him before he died (Gen. 27:2-4). Of course, through the trickery of Rebekah and Jacob, he ended up blessing Jacob instead, which is why in the text it has Jacob before Esau.

Both verses 21 and 22 explicitly mention the fact that Jacob and Joseph were dying when they pronounced their blessings.

Then there is the common theme of the future promise of God, which is also a major theme of this whole chapter. Isaac’s blessing was “concerning things to come” (20). Joseph talked about the future exodus and even left instructions that his bones were to be removed to Canaan when the exodus of Israel from Egypt did happen (22). Although we are not told the content of Jacob’s blessing in verse 21, we

can read about it in Genesis 48:15-17, and there we discover that it, too, is a reference to the future blessing of God upon the descendants of Israel.

I think it is a remarkable thing that on their death beds, these men didn't spend a whole lot of time dwelling on their past. It's not because their past wasn't worth talking about. And they did refer to it some: Jacob, for example, points Joseph to "God, before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac did walk, the God which fed [shepherded] me all my life long unto this day, the Angel which redeemed me from all evil, bless the lads" (Gen. 48:15-16). So there is a pointing back to the past – but it is only to provide a context for the blessing which points to the future: "and let my name be named on them, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac; and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth" (16).

What exactly was the nature of these promises? Well, there was an element that pointed to the near future. There was this promise of the inheritance in the land of Canaan, which would be fulfilled, as we are told quite explicitly by Joshua, when the land of Canaan was conquered by the Israelites after the Exodus (cf. Josh. 21:43-45). This would not happen for another several hundred years, but it did happen. It was in this context that Joseph's commandments concerning his bones were fulfilled. When Israel left Egypt 430 years later, we are told that "Moses took the bones of Joseph with him: for he had straitly sworn the children of Israel, saying, God will surely visit you; and ye shall carry up my bones away hence with you" (Exod. 13:19). Then in Joshua 24:32, we read, "And the bones of Joseph, which the children of Israel brought up out of Egypt, buried they in Shechem, in a parcel of ground which Jacob bought of the sons of Hamor the father of Shechem for an hundred pieces of silver: and it became the inheritance of the children of Joseph."

Then there was the element of the promises to Abraham that pointed to the coming of Christ and to the redemption that he would accomplish by his perfect life and atoning death, by which "the blessing of Abraham" would be given to the nations (Gal. 3:14). This is, of course,

the linchpin of all the promises. Canaan was given to Israel in order to preserve a place for the family of Abraham from whom the Messiah would come. It was not an end in itself; it promoted a purpose, a purpose which was fulfilled in the person and work of our Lord. All the promises of God to the patriarchs ultimately point to Jesus Christ and the salvation from sin which he came to accomplish. All the promises of God find their yes and Amen in him (2 Cor. 1:20).

There is another aspect to these promises which is still future. As we saw last time, the promise was that Abraham (and hence Isaac and Jacob and Joseph) would be the heir of the world (Rom. 4:13). This is more than a promise of a patch of land on the shores of the Mediterranean: it is a promise of a world renewed by the grace and power of God for his chosen people. This was not only future to the patriarchs, but it is also future to us as well.

As these men neared their deathbeds, they were thinking about the future, not obsessing over the past; not a totally unknown future, but a future defined and expected by the promise of God. It is this God-given future to which they pointed their heirs. In particular, they pointed them to the word of God, given to Abraham and passed down through the generations.

As I read this, it hit me that this is surely an important lesson for us as well. Now we are not in the same position as those men. But we are in a similar position, in this sense: as the people of God, we still possess the promises of God in Christ, promises like the one in Col. 3:4, founded on the reality of the redemption and resurrection of our Lord: "If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth. For ye are dead, and your life is hid with Christ in God. When Christ, who is our life, shall appear, then shall ye also appear with him in glory" (Col. 3:1-4). We are to live in light of these realities. And we are to die in light of these realities. More than this, we are to be concerned to pass on these promises to the next generations, just like Isaac and Jacob and Joseph did. We are to orient our children to

a future defined by the promises of God, promises given to us in Christ and authoritatively recorded in the Scriptures.

Just like the promises given to the patriarchs, there are various ways in which God's promises come to us. In fact, as Paul tells us, if we believe in Christ, then we too are sons and daughters of Abraham by faith and heirs of the world with him (Rom. 4:11-16). There are promises for the forgiveness of sins in Christ, received by faith. There are promises for daily grace and strength. There are promises for the presence and provision of God. You might call these present and near future promises. There is the promise concerning the church, that the gates of hell will never prevail against it (Mt. 16:18), a promise that will reach all the way to the end of human history. (Do you want to be on the right side of history? Then be on the side of the church!). Then there is the promise that, when we die, we immediately go to be with Christ. Finally, there is the promise that at the very end of the age, the people of God will be resurrected, their souls and bodies reunited in glory, and so shall we ever be with the Lord. We ought to be living in light of these realities and pointing our children and our friends to them as well.

What should be the object and purpose of this sermon, in light of these verses? Well, it is this: the life of faith is not just about me and my times. It is also, and primarily so, about the future of the kingdom of God. The life of faith does not exist primarily for short term gains, but it plays the long game. This is because the life of faith lives in the refreshing shadow of the future-oriented promises of God in Jesus Christ, God's Son, and our Savior. This faith should be shown, not only the life we live, but also in the words we speak, which is the focus of these three verses. What the patriarchs said to the next generation was meant to confer upon them a confidence in God's Word so that they would faithfully endure in obedience to it. We should follow their example.

Will we do this? Will our lives and our words encourage the next generation to press into the future in faithfulness to Christ and his word? Will we teach them to orient themselves in light of the future fulfillment of the promises of God? Will we teach them to look outside



of the box that defines the values and priorities of this present evil world? Will we show them how not only to look along the horizontal axis of this age but also along the vertical toward heaven as well?

How do we do this? How do we bestow upon the next generation an eternal perspective, a perspective shaped neither by the demands of the present nor by the pressures of the world in its opposition to God? Well, I think we do what Isaac and Jacob and Joseph did. We point them to a future which is guaranteed to them by the promises of God.

We will never do this unless we ourselves are convinced to play the long game in light of the faithfulness of God to his word. I want to do two things this morning. First, I want to remind you of the terrible waste that results when we live entirely in response to the pressures of the present, a present which presses in upon us and wants to consume completely the horizons of our perspective. Second, I want to remind you of the benefits that inevitably result when we bequeath to our children and the next generation a future-oriented perspective defined by the promises of God in Christ.

The price we pay when we lock ourselves (and the next generation) into the present

Again, what do I mean by this? What does this look like? Let me present before you a few scenarios to illustrate what I am talking about.

It's the man who is so consumed with pleasing his boss or getting ahead or making his business a success that he ignores the Bible and prayer and the fellowship of the saints and kingdom service. He may know that the Scriptures are important, but the Bible on his shelf is not going to pay the bills, and so he neglects the care of his soul for the sake of making a few more dollars. Over time, his soul shrivels as he spends more and more time on the pressing needs of the present and neglects his soul. Prayer falls off, and eventually he rarely darkens the door of the church. Or if he does continue to come, it is only in and out as quickly as possible, for he has more important and pressing obligations.

Do you see what is happening? He is living in the tyranny of the present. It is this world and its priorities, not God and his kingdom, that are defining this man's decisions and the way he spends his time. He is not living in light of the future, but entirely in light of the present. He has become a slave to what the apostle Paul calls, "the rulers of the darkness of this world" (Eph. 6:12). And this has terrible consequences. It must inevitably lead to departing from the faith unless God in his sovereign mercy awakens this man to the tragic state of his soul.

Or it's the parent who is so consumed with having successful children as the world judges success that everything, including the cultivation of the heart and soul with the truths of God's word, is subordinated to that. Sports and homework and extracurricular activities dominate to the neglect of the things of God. Church is an interruption in the course of life's more important events. College is more important than conversion. Now, don't get me wrong – I'm not for a moment against any of these things. They are all well and good in their place. The problem is, what is the priority? In the rearing of our children, are we seeking first the kingdom of God or the kingdom of men? Are we raising children who will be able to endure persecution or who will join the persecutors? Do they see that our homes have Christ and his glory and his person as the center around which everything orbits and turns, or do they see themselves and the worldly ambitions we have for them as the center?

Or it's the church and church leaders who are so attuned to the culture that they end up mimicking the culture. They are so caught up in the thought patterns of the world that they end up, sometimes unconsciously, adopting them. This is sometimes obvious, as when denominations become overtly liberal and heterodox. When a denomination starts embracing not only sinners but also their sin. When it ordains homosexuals to the ministry or promotes the murder of innocent children under the banner of healthcare. Or doctrinally, when churches begin to deny orthodox doctrines like that of penal, substitutionary atonement, the inerrancy of the Scriptures, and so on. Why does this happen? Well, it doesn't happen overnight. Almost all of these denominations start

out Biblically faithful and intended to stay that way. They didn't and the reason they didn't is because, over time, the present and the world came to have more weight upon them than the word of God.

Listen, this can happen more easily than you think. Don't think that just because this church doesn't use musical instruments and is overall very conservative in its outlook and practice that it can't happen to us. We are not immune from the siren song of the fallen world we inhabit. Do you remember what our Lord said to Peter, when Peter rebuked him for foretelling of his death? "Get thee behind me, Satan, for thou art an offence unto me: for thou savourest not the things that be of God, but those that be of men" (Mt. 16:23). This is a tremendous statement because just a few verses earlier our Lord had praised Peter for his Great Confession (16-19). Here is my point: we can be perfectly orthodox on big and important doctrines. However, that doesn't mean we can't become tools of Satan, and in so doing start to savor the things of men, the things of the world. I don't doubt that this attitude is partly what played into Peter's denial of Christ later on – and if it hadn't been for Christ interceding for him and the sovereign interposition of the grace of God in his life, he would have been lost forever.

What is the price we pay when we are captured by the spirit of the age, when the horizons of our perspective are limited to the present order of things? Well, it is always apostasy, whether that of individuals or that of groups. It inevitably means walking away from faithfulness to Christ. You can see why the author of Hebrews is telling them these things. You need to have a future perspective, or you will drift away. You not only need to have it for yourself, but like these three patriarchs, to pass it on to your children, the next generation, and that brings us to our next point.

Why we need to equip the next generation with a future-oriented, promised-based mindset

Here I want to answer the following questions, questions like, what is the point of teaching our children and others about the faithfulness of God to his word? How important is the role of the promises of God here? How does pointing to the future as it is revealed in God's word help our families and our churches thrive?

First, it teaches them not to define success in terms the world dictates. My friends, I'm not saying the world can't give you success. It can, and that is what makes it so tempting to follow its advice. The success it promises you is immediate and instantly gratifying. It plays also on our self-centeredness and our pride. It doesn't prune you; it preens you. But that is also the problem. The success that the world gives does not go beyond the borders of the grave. You cannot carry its riches with you. In other words, for all the niceness and attractiveness of the world's rewards, it comes with a significant cost. The cost is short-term gains in the place of eternal riches. Isn't this the point of the story of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke 16? It is also the point of the examples and lessons the author of Hebrews wants us to learn. We will see this point further illustrated in the example of Moses in the next few verses, who, because of this eternal perspective, left the treasures of Egypt in order to suffer with the people of God. Why? Because "he had respect unto the recompense of reward" (Heb. 11:26).

Don't you want your children to be like this? Don't we want the next generation to be like this? Don't we want them to be like Daniel and not like Demas? Then teach them that success is not ultimately defined by the standards of broken image bearers and their books but by the God of heaven and his Book. Unless they are shaped by the promises of God, they will be molded according to the pattern of this world. Unless they can see a future sovereignly ruled over and guaranteed by Christ, they will bow to the dictates of the present.

Of course, brothers and sisters, they must see it in us first. They must see that we are men and women who live in light of God's promises. This was true of these three men. Isaac and Jacob and Joseph lived this way, and their children could not have helped but to have seen it. I love

the way Jacob refers to God to Laban: he calls him, “the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac” (Gen. 31:42). Can our children say that of us?

Second, it teaches them to have a heavenly perspective. The promises of God in Christ are not promises of health, wealth, and prosperity now. We remember what the apostle Paul said, that he had suffered the loss of all things and counted them as dung that he might win Christ (Phil. 3:8). For Paul, gaining Christ meant losing everything else. He was able to do this in light of the future resurrection: “That I may know him [Christ], and the power of his resurrection, and the fellowship of his sufferings, being made conformable unto his death; if by any means I might attain unto the resurrection of the dead” (10-11).

Nor are we to say to the next generation that, if they just have enough faith in Christ, they will be able to go through life without any worries or stresses, they will always be happy, they will never have to struggle with anxiety or depression. Rather, we are to “gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought to you at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet. 1:13).

In other words, the promises of God point us to our heavenly reward, and in doing so they steel us against the winds and waves and earthquakes that beat upon us in the present. It is only as we are able to look beyond the trials and temptations of the present and into heaven that we will be able to persevere and not give up. This is why our Lord says what he says in the Beatitudes: “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake;” and if you stop there, that doesn’t make any sense. How do you put blessing and persecution together? It’s insane. But not if you keep reading: “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely for my sake. Rejoice and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven: for so persecuted they the prophets which were before you” (Mt. 5:9-12).

Third, it teaches them to be patient and to play the long game. We don’t want the next generation to burn out and give up. Of course,

that is the temptation when things get hard. That's the temptation when you are despised and rejected of men. That's what you want to do when the fierce heat of persecution beats down upon you and wears you down. We will be tempted to give up when there isn't the fruit that we wanted and expected. Look, you don't have to be a prosperity preacher to fall into this trap, for even Elijah succumbed when the victory on Mount Carmel didn't turn out the way he expected.

How do you keep from doing that, and how do you instill this kind of endurance in the next generation? How do you teach them to value the little victories and not to become depressed when nothing big happens? Well, again, you do it by instilling in them a commitment to God's promises. You tell them to hang their hopes on God, not on their own meager efforts. God is playing the long game. He took almost 2000 years from the promise to Abraham to the coming of Christ. Think about all that happened in the middle. Think about the ups and the downs, the terrible period of the Judges, the promising reigns of Kings David and Solomon followed by the rending of the kingdoms, the apostasy of Israel and its deportation, and so on. The entire Old Testament is a roller-coaster ride, and if you focus just on a particular moment, it might look as if God had completely forgotten about his promises (in fact, the psalmists say this very clearly). But he hadn't, and we need to remember again and again what Peter reminds us: "The Lord is not slack concerning his promise, as some men count slackness; but is longsuffering to us-ward, not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Pet. 3:9).

Fourth, it teaches them to have hope in God when all seems lost. By pointing ourselves and others to the promises of God, it forces us to look up. The events of this world are not to be understood in a merely this-worldly perspective. That is one of the reasons why I think Biblical books like Daniel and Revelation are so important. In those books the curtain is drawn back, and we are able to look into heaven, a heaven very concerned in the affairs of men. The Biblical reality of which we need to remind ourselves and our children is that future does not belong to

Satan, it belongs to God. The promises of God remind us of that. The Biblical story reminds us of that. It also reminds us that the present is never the interpretive grid for the future. For when did Isaac come? When his father was 100 and his mother 90. Impossible! Yes, but not with God. When did Jesus come? Not at the height of Israel's power and influence, but at its nadir, when it was subservient to the pagan empire of Rome. We need to be like Abraham, and we need to teach our children to be like Abraham, "who against hope believed in hope" (Rom. 4:18).

Fifth, it teaches them to be willing to be unnoticed. How do holding onto God's promises do this? In two ways. First, by helping us to see that we are really only a small part in a grand scheme. God's promises pass from eternity past through the entirety of human history and into eternity future. I am but a dot on that continuum. Now it doesn't mean that I don't play a part – of course I do – but it is only a part, and I am really not that big of a deal. God doesn't need me; I need him. The perspective of the Bible helps us to see that. And we need that. We need, each of us, as the apostle puts it in his letter to the Romans, "not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith" (Rom. 12:3). We need to not take ourselves too seriously. It is when we do think we are more than we really are that we start doing damage, and turn ourselves into modern equivalents of Diotrophes who loved to have the preeminence (3 Jn. 9-10). May God save us from that!

The promises also help us to be willing to go unnoticed because they promise us something much better than human praise could ever give to us: they hold out for us the promise of the fellowship and friendship of God. Away with the praises of men! "Not unto us, O LORD, not unto us, but unto thy name give glory" – and then notice the motivation here – "for thy mercy and for thy truth's sake" (Ps. 115:1). Or, as the ESV translates it, "for the sake of your steadfast love and your faithfulness." Faithfulness to what? Faithfulness to his covenant, of which his steadfast love and mercy is a witness. Faithfulness to his promises. He

gives himself to us in his promises to be our help and our shield and to bless us (10-15). It is when we have this perspective that we will “bless the LORD from this time forth and forevermore” (18), not our own name.

Above all, it teaches us to have a Colossians 3 mindset and to set our minds on things above where Christ sits at the right hand of God. It is the only thing that makes the gospel make sense. The promises of God find their yes and amen in Christ (2 Cor. 1:20). Jesus Christ is the one to whom all God’s promises point. If you don’t see him in them, you are not looking at them correctly. The promises of God fuel our hope; but there is another name for hope: Jesus – the “Lord Jesus Christ, which is our hope” (1 Tim. 1:1).

How is it that a single promise of God, promises for good and eternal blessing, can come to pass for creatures such as ourselves, not only tiny and insignificant, but traitors and rebels against God, dead in trespasses and in sins, foul and stinking and putrid in our iniquity? There is only one way. It is because Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (1 Tim. 1:15). It is because in his office as Mediator between God and men (1 Tim. 2:5), he did for us what we could not do. He kept God’s law perfectly so that his flawless obedience could be counted for those who are united to him by faith (Rom. 5:19). He suffered God’s just wrath against sinners in his own body on the cross so that we can have everlasting mercy instead of eternal misery.

In other words, the promises of God are not for people who have made themselves fit for him, but for sinners who believe in him. We are told in Gen. 15:6 that Abraham, as he heard the promise of God, “believed in the LORD; and he counted it to him for righteousness.” That is to say, Abraham was justified before God, and he didn’t create his own righteousness through good works but received God’s righteousness through faith. It is the same today: “the righteousness of God . . . is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe: for there is no difference: for all have sinned, and come short of the glory of God; being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is



in Christ Jesus” (Rom. 3:22-24). That is the gospel, the good news. Do you hear it as such? My friends, be not among those who do not receive Christ, but be among those who receive him, to whom God gives the right to become the children of God (Jn. 1:11-12).

Let us then, brothers and sisters, pass on to our children and the next generation a perspective shaped by God’s word of promise so that they will endure and persevere in the faith. Let us be like Isaac and Jacob and Joseph. Let us say with the psalmist, “We will not hide them from [our] children, shewing to the generation to come the praises of the LORD, and his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done. For he established a testimony in Jacob, and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers, that they should make them known to their children: that the generation to come might know them, even the children which should be born: who should arise and declare them to their children, that they might set their hope in God, and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments” (Ps. 78:4-7).

## CHAPTER XLII

### THE FAITH OF MOSES (HEB. II:23-29)

**M**OSSES IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT FIGURES in the Bible, if not in all of world history. Already in this epistle, we have learned that “Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after” (Heb. 3:5). He is the author of much of the material in the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, often called the Book of Moses (2 Chron. 25:4; 35:12; Ezra 6:18; Neh. 13:1; Mark 12:26). When we think of Moses, we think of the burning bush and the flaming Mount Sinai, the Ten Plagues and the Ten Commandments, the parting of the Red Sea and the giving of the Manna. It is of Moses that God himself said, when Aaron and Miriam complained of his leadership over Israel: “If there be a prophet among you, I the LORD will make myself known unto him in a vision, and will speak unto him in a dream. My servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches: and the similitude of the LORD shall he behold: wherefore then were ye not afraid to speak against my servant Moses?” (Num. 12:6-8). Later, in recording the death of Moses we read, “And there arose not a prophet since in

Israel like unto Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face, in all the signs and the wonders, which the LORD sent him to do in the land of Egypt to Pharaoh, and to all his servants, and to all his land, and in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses shewed in the sight of all Israel” (Deut. 34:10-12). Moses was a man apart. He was a miracle-working man, a patient man, a courageous man, a faithful man, a meek man – a great man, a man of God. He was a prophet, statesman, warrior, judge, and leader.

It is, therefore, easy to over-romanticize the life of Moses. While there were certainly triumphant moments, like that on the other side of the Red Sea as the waters came crashing down over their enemies, much of Moses’ life was very difficult. I’ll never forget a comment that the late Kentucky Baptist pastor Henry Mahan once made about Moses, to the effect that God had to kill half the Israelites just to keep them off Moses’ back. But it didn’t start in the wilderness. Like our Lord, his life almost didn’t even begin, as we are reminded in verse 23, with Pharaoh seeking to kill all the male children of the Jews. Then, even after he had been adopted into the royal family, he had to flee for his life into the desert and live in exile for many years after standing up for one of his brethren. Even when he came to lead the children of Israel out of Egypt, it was not all fun and games. I would not have wanted to be Moses. Staring down Pharaoh must have been difficult, and we shouldn’t wonder why Moses begged God to send someone else. Then the treachery of the spies and the 38 further years of wandering in the wilderness could not have been terribly exciting. And yet that is where Moses spent the rest of his life, since God did not allow him to enter the Promised Land on account of his failing to honor the Lord at the waters of Meribah (Num. 20:12).

Although we are apt to overdramatize and over-romanticize his life, this is a mistake, because it keeps us from seeing very valuable and important lessons that there are in his life and story. More importantly, it keeps us from being encouraged by his life and walk of faith. If we think he is so different, we are apt to think there is nothing we can learn from him, which would defeat the very purpose for which this

chapter was written. In this message, I want us to be guided by Moses and encouraged by Moses. To that end, I want us to see the good news in how Moses is like us as well as how he is different from us. Most of all, I want you to see how Moses points us to Jesus who is also both like us and different from us in the most important ways possible. Moses points us to Jesus, in what he said and in what he taught and in what he did. In that way, his faith points us not to himself but away from himself to the God in whom he trusted and in whom we also are called to trust.

Moses is like us, and that is good news.

It is easy to look at the life of Moses and to think that there is just no way his life could be a model, let alone a source of encouragement, for us. As we have seen with all the saints listed so far in this chapter, they are just like us in many ways. At this point in the chapter, one of the things we can really begin to see is the number of parallels between the men and women of faith whose lives we are called to view. One of the things this teaches us is that these are things we should expect of anyone who aspires to a life of faith in Christ. It teaches us that we should look for these characteristics in ourselves.

Moses is like us in the sufferings he endured.

Moses and Abraham were both called to a life of sacrifice and faith. Abraham was called to a life of sacrifice in being called away from his homeland and to a pilgrim lifestyle and then later in being told to sacrifice his son. Moses was called to a life of sacrifice in being called to give up the treasures of Egypt, the temporary pleasures of sin, in order to suffer affliction with the people of God.

It is this way with so many of God's servants. One of my heroes, John Calvin, was constantly surrounded by enemies near and far. He was sometimes saddled with unfaithful friends. Though his position as

a Reformer and minister of Christ in those troublesome times required a great amount of boldness and fearlessness, Calvin was constitutionally timid – so it’s not like this work was naturally easy for him. He was poor – I mean, really poor – all his days. Pope Pius IV is reported to have said, after Calvin died, “The strength of that heretic came from the fact that money was nothing to him.”<sup>1</sup>

If that wasn’t enough, he was plagued with terrible health for most of his days. One author speaks of severe hemorrhoids or “the knifing pains of kidney and gallstones” that “would torment him. If his hemorrhoids were bearable, he would take to his horse and gallop as fast as he could, hoping to jolt loose the stones for which his day knew no surgery. Headache – was he ever free from it? Sometimes he was blinded by the pain or kept awake all night. Many times Calvin ate only one meal a day. Cramps, indigestion, influenza were regular problems.”<sup>2</sup> And yet it was out of this furnace that came spiritual renewal in Geneva and theological truths written down for the ages. To this day, five hundred years later, people are still reading and profiting from his sermons, letters, and above all his famous Institutes of the Christian Religion.

Brothers and sisters, I am saying this because this is normal for the Christian life. Lots of faith and spiritual wisdom and kingdom energy don’t get you a Learjet. The most productive Christians have always been the most afflicted and tried Christians. In fact, the apostles told the early Christians that “we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God” (Acts 14:22). The apostle Peter told the early Christians, “Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ’s sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad with exceeding joy” (1 Pet. 4:12-13). It’s not strange, it’s normal that we suffer. It is the furnace through which the dross is melted off and a life is lived to the utmost for the glory of God and the advancement of his kingdom. Actually,

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<sup>1</sup>Van Halsema, *Thea, This Was John Calvin* (Baker, Grand Rapids: 1959), p. 164.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 184.

we should be perhaps a little worried if nothing ever happened to us. If we were always grinning and never groaning, that would be a problem. The kingdom of Christ does not belong to his world and its gifts; neither do his people.

He is like us in his dependence upon the God of promise and grace.

Both Abraham and Moses endured the trials they faced by looking forward to the sure fulfillment of the promises of God and by seeing that what God promised was infinitely better than anything that this earth could give them.

We've noticed this already with respect to Abraham, but you see it again here in Moses. They endured because they didn't think they were really making any kind of ultimate sacrifice. I think if you had pressed them about what they had to give up, they would have described them as short-term sacrifices for long term gain. Hence, we are told that Moses "refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter" and to "suffer affliction with the people of God" and to endure "the reproach of Christ" not just because it was the right thing to do (though it was), but because he understood that what the world could give was just "for a season." In contrast, he had "respect unto the recompense of reward" (which was not just for a season) and even the reproach of Christ was seen to be "greater riches than the treasures of Egypt." He "endured, as seeing him who is invisible." God was greater, more central, more glorious to Moses than was Pharaoh, and God's grace more precious than the king's gifts. In other words, we are again reminded of the central importance of faith in God's word, his word of promise and reward and hope and grace. They were convinced that faithfulness to God was better than the best the world could give. That was the key to their endurance, and it is the key to ours as well.

Remember what the author of Hebrews had said to the saints to whom he was writing? "For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that

ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance. Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise” (Heb. 10:34-36). It’s the same thing. They were to endure by “knowing . . . that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.” It’s the same for us today as well. If you want to endure well and finish well, you have to have this perspective of faith. Will the words “by faith” be written over our lives, as it was the patriarchs and Moses and all the saints whose names grace the record of Hebrews 11? May it be so!

We need to remember that Moses wasn’t a great man because he was a great man. He was a great man because he fully followed and utterly depended upon God Almighty, the God who created the world, guides its every revolution and orbit, and who saves a people by sovereign and omnipotent grace. He is like us in the mistakes that he made.

Another thing you will notice about Moses, as well as the rest of these saints, saints who persevered in faith and finished well, is that they nevertheless were not perfect. Abraham and Sarah both fell temporarily into unbelief. But they didn’t stay in that mindset; there was a pattern of true faith that characterized their lives. The same can be seen with respect to Moses. There is an illustration of this principle in the way our author describes the way Moses left Egypt in order to escape Pharaoh, and the way this is described in the book of Exodus. In Exodus, we are told that after Moses realized that others knew about his having killed the Egyptian, he “feared, and said, Surely this thing is known” (Exodus 2:14). Our author writes, “By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible” (Heb. 11:27). This has caused much consternation among the commentators. Which was it? Did he fear or did he not?

Some get around this difficulty by making Heb. 11:27 not about Moses leaving Egypt after killing the Egyptian but about Moses leading the children of Israel out of Egypt. This is the solution for which even so great a Bible scholar as the puritan John Owen settles, for example.

The problem, though, is that it destroys the linearity of the passage: the author seems clearly to be tracing the history of Moses in an historically linear fashion, from his birth in verse 23 to the crossing of the Red Sea in verse 28. Since verse 27 comes before the Passover which came before the Exodus, it is best to see verse 27 about Moses fleeing from the wrath of Pharaoh when the king discovered that Moses had killed an Egyptian.

What you have here is not a contradiction, but faith overcoming fear. It's not that Moses was never afraid, but that he didn't allow fear to paralyze him. He overcame his fear, and it was the courage of faith in God that led Moses to leave Egypt and the only life he had ever known to go into exile in a strange land. I believe this is very similar to what a lot of us experience – we are confronted with something fearful, and our first tendency is to be afraid. Then as the Lord reminds us of his promises and his faithfulness and his goodness and his sovereignty, our hearts are strengthened and we are made courageous – valiant for truth.

You see, my friends, the call to endurance, the call to perseverance, is not – as some of its detractors seem to make it out to be – a call or claim to perfectionism. None of the people here in Hebrews 11 were sinless or perfect. You cannot expect yourself to become perfect this side of heaven. “If we say that we have no sin, we deceive ourselves,” the apostle John tells us, “and the truth is not in us” (1 Jn. 1:8). What that means is that we should not respond to our failures – whether it is the failure of faith or purity of heart or whatever – by thinking that God can no longer do anything with us. Rather, we should not respond to our failures by despondency but by repentance and faith. We must never forget that as sick and bad as the church of Laodicea was, our Lord issued this amazing and stirring invitation to them: “Behold, I stand at the door and knock: if any man hear my voice, and open the door, I will come in to him, and will sup with him, and he with me” (Rev. 3:20). Who is our Lord talking to here? He is talking to people he had just a few verses before described as “wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked” (17)! So let us not let our mistakes discourage us from



coming to Christ for new repentance and faith and grace and mercy. His throne, brothers and sisters, is a throne of mercy.

Moses is like us, and that is good news. It is good news because it means that “whatsoever things were written aforetime were written for our learning, that we through comfort and patience of the Scriptures might have hope” (Rom. 15:4). It means that we can learn from his life and example lessons that we can appropriately apply to ourselves. Above all, it means that the God of Moses is our God; that God’s power extended over the Red Sea is the same power that watches over us. It means that the God who glorified himself through Moses is still glorifying himself in the church today. God’s kingdom is advancing and will advance, and it advances through the lives of men and women who, like Moses, trust in the God who saves.

Moses is different from us, and that is also good news.

There are also ways – obvious ones – in which Moses is not like us. This is also instructive. Even though we should expect there to be many similarities between the men and women of faith in every age, nevertheless, there will also always be plenty of differences. These differences will in some respects be the result of personality, the culture and the times in which they lived, as well as the part they were meant to play in God’s providential dealings. Above all, these differences are rooted in God’s different purposes for different people. Though it is true that saints like Moses are held up for us as an example and as an encouragement to our faith, we shouldn’t think that God deals with his people in a one-size-fits-all approach. You see this clearly illustrated in this chapter.

Moses is different in the particular ways in which he experienced suffering.

Even though it is a fact that suffering is normal for the Christian life doesn’t mean that we all suffer the same way or to the same extent.

Again, think about Joseph and Moses: Joseph started out as a slave and ended up in the palace with the Pharaohs. Moses started out in the palace with the Pharaohs and ended up in the desert with a bunch of ex-slaves who wanted to pin his hide to their tent walls. So whereas Joseph went from the furnace of affliction to the throne of Egypt, Moses' life went in the opposite direction. After a bumpy start, he spent the better part of his youth in the courts of Pharaoh. Instead of staying there or getting better, Moses traded all that for a life of toil and care in order to serve Christ.

As a result of such differences, there is a danger, I think, to look at other Christians, either past or present, and to compare our lives with theirs in a way that is unhealthy and unproductive. The temptation is to evaluate these differences and to end up thinking that God is unfair in his dealings with men in general or with us in particular. For example, we may look at someone who is suffering in ways that we can't even imagine. We don't understand how they could be coping with such a trial. Why is God treating them like that, and me better than them? How is this possible or just or right? Or we may be on the end of suffering that others aren't experiencing and wonder how it's fair for God to be dealing out this kind of pain and difficulty to me when other believers seem to have it easier. What makes it harder sometimes is that it doesn't seem to matter how faithful a person is. The providential dealing out of pain can seem arbitrary, and this can lead to bitterness and unbelief.

What we learn from Joseph and Moses is that their particular sufferings served God's purpose and the good of his people. Joseph's sufferings would not have necessarily served the advance of God's cause in Moses' day, and vice versa. It would not have been right for Moses to consider Joseph's sufferings and to fault God for treating him so differently, because what God was doing in Joseph's day was different from what God was doing in his day. In Joseph's day, it was for the good of God's people that they come under the shelter of Egyptian protection. That meant that Joseph needed to have some influence in the courts of Egypt (and it took his sufferings to get him there!). In Moses' day,

however, it was for the good of God's people that they leave Egypt, not only to rescue them from the slavery into which they had come, but also to fulfill the promise God made to Abraham. In other words, it isn't right for us to look at others and think that our sufferings are somehow arbitrary. They may indeed look that way sometimes, but that doesn't mean that they are that way. God doesn't do things except in accordance with his wise and just and good and holy purpose, a purpose which is for his glory and our good and the good of his people.

Brothers and sisters, God is sovereign. What that means is, nothing happens that is apart from the purpose of God, including our sufferings as well as our blessings. This is precisely what the apostle Paul says, for example, in Eph. 1:11, where we learn that the God who predestines his people to their inheritance is the God "who worketh all things after the counsel of his own will." In other words, whatever comes to pass (all things) does so because God brings it about (worketh) either directly or indirectly (and without in any way becoming the author of sin), and he does so in accordance with his own free and sovereign purpose (after the counsel of his own will). Practically, this means that the suffering you and I have to endure, whatever it is, comes to us in accordance with the will of God. It is planned suffering, planned so that it is working for our good (Rom. 8:28).

The apostle Peter put it this way: "Wherefore let them that suffer according to the will of God, commit the keeping of their souls to him in well doing, as unto a faithful Creator" (1 Pet. 4:19). I love that. How do we suffer? "According to the will of God." I know that doesn't make it easier. Suffering is still suffering and no amount of right knowledge about it is going to change that. But it does provide a context for understanding how our sufferings are meaningful. They are meaningful because God meant them which means that, as they come from the God who is holy, wise, and good, our sufferings will redound to his glory and good. There is no such thing as meaningless suffering. Remember that you are not the one who ascribes meaning to your hardship. God does. Even if we cannot see why, it

doesn't mean there isn't a reason, or that the reason isn't good and wise.

Moses was different in the particular ways in which he experienced God's blessing.

Suffering can make people bitter and broken, but blessing can make people envious and jealous. We may not be suffering, but we can see how other people are being blessed and think that God is holding out on us. We may think that we have done more for God and his people and his kingdom, and yet there are so few returns for all our effort, whereas others seem to enjoy greater blessings without a fraction of the effort. We may wonder why some can be so successful in their businesses when we struggle to make ends meet. We may wonder why some can be so fruitful in ministry – especially those who don't seem to have it all together on the truth or who employ unbiblical methods – when we labor and labor and there doesn't seem to be any fruit at all. We look at Moses – what a life! As we are reminded in Scripture, there was not another prophet in the same category. And yet, Moses was just a man. So why him? Well, there is only one answer to that: because God chose him!

When we look at others, let us be careful that we do not compare ourselves in such a way that we begin to think that God is being unkind or unfair in withholding certain blessings or experiences from us. First of all, we don't deserve any particular blessing, do we? Is this not the lesson of the Parable of Laborers? "Is it not lawful for me," says the Lord to us, "to do what I will with mine own? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" (Mt. 20:15). Or as Paul puts it, "For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory, as if thou hadst not received it?" (1 Cor. 4:7). We are sinners, who deserve nothing but wrath. Any blessing short of hell is infinite mercy. Second, whatever we do have is itself a gift of God. We must not think that God is holding out on us. When we begin to focus on others, this tends to make us forget that God has already been so good to us. What have we

received? Every spiritual blessing in heavenly places in Christ (Eph. 1:3)! Exceeding great and precious promises (2 Pet. 1:4)! Brothers and sisters, we have nothing of which we have a right to complain.

Moses' similarities and his differences point us to Jesus Christ, and that is the best news.

Moses, though he was the Lawgiver and is often contrasted, even in Scripture, with Jesus (e.g. Jn. 1:17), nevertheless, he is also a type of Christ and points us to him. When Peter preached the gospel in Acts 3, he said this about Moses and Jesus: "For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you" (Acts 3:22). This quotation from Deut. 18:15, 19, was meant to substantiate his witness to Jesus from the previous verses. In other words, Jesus Christ is the ultimate prophet, the one to whom Moses pointed and of whom Moses spoke. Our Lord himself said, "... had ye believed Moses, ye would have believed me: for he wrote of me" (Jn. 5:46).

Moses was different from all of us because we could never be a prophet like he was. But Moses himself said that the Messiah was a prophet different from and greater than himself. Our Lord is the ultimate Prophet, the one through whom God speaks, for he is the Son of God, the Word of God (Jn. 1:1, 14, 18). As we are reminded at the very beginning of Hebrews, "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds" (Heb. 1:1-2). Do you want to know the will of God for your salvation? Then look to Christ.

Moses was similar to us in many ways. He was, in the end, just another man. In the same way, this points us to Christ as well, who as the Word became flesh and dwelt among us (Jn. 1:14). Again, as we are reminded in the book of Hebrews, "Forasmuch then as the children are partakers

of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage” (Heb. 2:14-15). Jesus Christ the eternal Son of God became man by taking to himself a true body and a reasonable soul, being conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the virgin Mary and born of her, yet without sin (cf. Shorter Catechism, Q. 22).

Of course, the great way in which Moses pointed to Christ was not so much even in himself but through the institution of the Passover. This is spoken of in verse 28: “Through faith he kept the Passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them.” This was God’s answer to the last plague, the death of the firstborn. It is interesting that everyone was exposed to that terrible destroyer, Egyptian and Israelite. The only way you could be protected was through the sprinkling of blood, the blood of the Passover lamb. I don’t wonder if this is what John the Baptist was referring to when he pointed to Christ and said, “Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world!” (Jn. 1:29).

We recall that God told Moses that the angel of death would come to Egypt and take the life of every firstborn. Even so, we are all under sentence of death: “the wages of sin is death” (Rom. 6:23). We have all sinned and come short of the glory of God (Rom. 3:23). Our sin makes us obnoxious to God. He is of purer eyes than to behold sin and iniquity. There was, though God didn’t owe anyone this, a miraculous interposition of mercy. There was a way of deliverance. It was this: they were to kill a lamb and to take its blood and put it on the doorposts of every Israelite home. When the angel of destruction came through and saw the blood, he would pass over. This is all pointing to the death of Jesus on the cross, and when his blood is sprinkled and applied to you through faith in him (Rom. 3:25), the angel of death passes over. How do you escape the judgment of God? Not by looking to your good works, but by looking to the atoning work of Jesus Christ. When his

blood of atonement is applied to you, the destroyer cannot touch you. You are safe in the arms of Jesus Christ.

At the end of the day, we don't look to Moses or anyone else for salvation. Moses is in many ways a great example and a great encouragement. But he is not our Savior. For that, we look only to Jesus. I am always touched by the description given by John Bunyan in his *The Pilgrim's Progress* of how Faithful – one of the characters in the allegory – came to meet Jesus. He met him after first meeting Moses and getting beat up by him. That's what the law of God does – it beats us up mercilessly. Here is the exchange between him and Christian:

FAITH. So soon as the man [Moses] overtook me, he was but a word and a blow, for down he knocked me, and laid me for dead. . . . He had doubtless made an end of me, but that one came by, and bid him forbear.

CHR. Who was that that bid him forbear?

FAITH. I did not know him at first; but as he went by, I perceived the holes in his hands and in his side; then I concluded that he was our Lord.

That's who Jesus Christ is: he is the one whose hands and sides were pierced for our transgressions. His body was broken so that ours would not have to be in the judgment. His blood was shed so that we might be saved from God's eternal and just wrath. That's what we celebrate every time we take the Lord's Supper.

So brothers and sisters, be encouraged by the faith of Moses. But more than that, look to one to whom Moses himself looked – to Jesus Christ.

## CHAPTER XLIII

### “OF WHOM THE WORLD WAS NOT WORTHY” (HEB. II:30-40)

**A**LTHOUGH VERSES 30-31 BELONG to a different paragraph from 32-40, since the former deal with specific instances of faith in Joshua and Rahab, whereas the latter are a summary of the acts of faith from the history of God's people in the Old Testament era, we will consider them together. One way to look at these verses is to think of 30-35a as showing us what faith can do, and verses 35b-40 showing us what faith can endure. To put it another way, verses 30-35a show us that there is no earthly obstacle that is worth giving up to, verses 35b-40 show us that there is no earthly opposition that is worth giving in to.

In verses 30-35, we see what faith can do. It brings city walls down and delivers from death. It subdues kingdoms and works righteousness and obtains promises (King David) and stops the mouth of lions (Daniel). It quenches the violence of fire (Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego), escapes the edge of the sword (e.g. the prophet Jeremiah), out of weakness is made strong (Samson), waxes valiant in fight and turns to flight foreign armies (many examples of this in the OT narrative). It receives



the dead back to life (one thinks of instances in the lives of the prophets Elijah and Elisha).

On the other hand, in verses 35-38, we see what faith can endure. Faith endures torture, cruel mocking and scourging, imprisonment, stoning, and being sawn in two (Jewish tradition says that this is the way the prophet Isaiah was killed). It endures a multitude of temptations, the sword, exile into the wilderness and the mountains and dens and caves, “destitute, afflicted, tormented.” Many of these things happened to the faithful during the terrible persecutions in the reign of the Seleucid ruler, Antiochus Epiphanes. Whereas the folks in verses 30-35a achieved earthly victory, the folks in verses 35b-38 did not. And yet they did not give in to the opposition. They did not believe that it was worth it, even though in many cases the trials they were called to endure were brutally severe.

The reality is that in both lists (if you divide them up in this way) you have people whose faith faced tremendous trial and difficulty. Yes, it is true that by faith Daniel stopped the mouths of lions, but there is no indication that he knew this going in. It is truth that his three friends quenched the violence of fire, but again, there is no indication that they knew that would happen either.

In other words, what you have in this Faith Hall of Fame are men and women who thought that the kingdom of God was worth whatever difficulty or suffering or hardship they were called to endure. Their examples preach to us that the kingdom of God is not only worth living for, but also worth suffering for and even worth dying for.

That’s what I want to consider with you this morning. How do we see the cause of God and truth in this way so that instead of becoming bitter for having to endure hardship, we become like those in verse 35 who “were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection”?

We all intuitively understand to some extent that it is a great honor to make a great sacrifice for a great cause. I think you see this illustrated especially in times of war. Those who sacrifice their lives for their coun-

try are universally honored. We recognize the value of valor; there is a certain charisma to courage. On the other hand, we despise the cowardly and the soft. The ancients in fact thought that courage was the noblest and highest of all the virtues because courage secured the rest of the virtues. The thing is, you cannot have courage where there is not at least the possibility of suffering and loss and difficulty. Courage cannot be put on display on soft couches. Courage is on display on battlefields and hospital rooms and in a thousand other hard places.

We don't sing songs about people who live in castles as much as we sing about those who storm castles. We don't erect monuments to people who go through life on beds of ease; we do so for those who overcame tremendous difficulty to do something great.

This is the reason why Churchill was able to say, at one of the most difficult hours of the Second World War – in fact, as France was falling to Germany, and Britain was standing alone in the world against the Nazi regime – “Let us therefore brace ourselves to our duties, and so bear ourselves that, if the British Empire and its Commonwealth last for a thousand years, men will still say, ‘This was their finest hour.’”<sup>1</sup> Why would he call that the “finest hour” of the British nation? He did so because it was precisely at that point that the British people were being called upon to make the greatest sacrifices for a great cause and against a great evil, in order to prevent what Churchill called “the abyss of a new Dark Age made more sinister, and perhaps more protracted, by the lights of perverted science.”

It was during this very difficult period that the Prime Minister's old school, Harrow, decided to write a verse about his exploits. They would do this for former members of the school who had gone on to achieve greatness. The school kids would then sing about them and hopefully be stirred to greatness themselves. One of the lines of the verse to Churchill talked about the times in which they lived as “these dark times.” Churchill wrote back and told them not to say “dark times”

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<sup>1</sup><https://winstonchurchill.org/resources/speeches/1940-the-finest-hour/their-finest-hour/>

but – I can't remember the exact word he substituted for "dark" – but something along the lines of great or tremendous times.

I was talking to someone about this the other day, and they had a hard time understanding that: why would Churchill say those were great times? Isn't that glorying in war? No, not necessarily. Few knew better than Churchill how awful war could be – he had fought in the trenches in the First World War, after all. They were great times because they were times that presented a unique and unparalleled opportunity to make a courageous stand for good against evil.

Even if we can't understand why times of war can be occasions for greatness, why can't we see that this is the case for the Christian faith? Why can't we see that it is the greatest honor to make the greatest sacrifices for the greatest cause in the universe, namely, the cause of God and truth? Or to put it in the language of Scripture, why are we not willing to rejoice to be counted worthy to suffer shame for the name of Christ (Acts 5:41)? Why should we think that God is being unjust or unkind by giving us the opportunity to be courageous for him in difficult and hard times? Why should we think that the call to sacrifice and endure hardness as a good soldier of Jesus Christ (2 Tim. 2:3) is a bad thing? Why do we recoil at the notion that God is calling us to suffer for the sake of his kingdom, or to do without for him, or even perhaps to die for him? Why do we equate God's blessing with success and ease and comfort and earthly peace and pleasure? Why do we not want to take our cross to follow the Lord?

The folks in Hebrews 11 clearly thought the prize was worth the price they had to pay. Here's where verses 39-40 come in. They read, "And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect." I think sometimes people read this and think that the author of Hebrews is telling his audience that the OT believer didn't receive the promise at all, and, in particular, wasn't saved. Of course that's not what he was saying: I can think of nothing more depressing and defeating than that! Rather, what he is saying is

that the promises of God were not fulfilled during their lifetime, and they would not be fulfilled until Christ came. That is one of the major points of this epistle. Christ having come, he will give salvation to all who trust in him no matter when they lived – before or after his earthly ministry. Another way to put verse 40 is that the OT saints will be made perfect with us in the age to come as a direct result of what Christ has done for us in his redemptive work.

The point of these two verses is this: the fact that the OT saints were able to achieve all they achieved and to endure all they endured without having seen the fulfillment of God's promises in the person and work of Jesus Christ is a great rebuke to us if we are unwilling to do and to die for God's kingdom, we who live on the other side of the cross and resurrection and ascension of Jesus the Son of God. We have so much more reason to endure and to be faithful. The OT saints are there to remind us that they did it without the fullness of the revelation that we have in Christ. So what excuse do we have for faithlessness? None!

Coming back to our question, how do we become like this? How do we so value the kingdom of God that we are willing to endure hardship without becoming bitter and losing our faith? How do we become courageous for Christ? That's what I want to be like, and that's what I want you to be like, too. Well, I think this wonderful parenthetical phrase in verse 38 helps us. I don't wonder that it is where it is. He didn't put this phrase up there in describing the earthly victories of the OT believers but right here in the middle of those which describe the earthly sorrows of the OT believers: "of whom the world was not worthy."

What is it that made these believers too good for this world? It is important for us to see that, for when we see it, we will understand why it is that the opportunity to show courage for Christ in the face of opposition is a privilege rather than a punishment. To see this, I would argue that world was not worthy of these precious believers for four reasons – in comparison to those who belong to this world, these believers had a greater Captain, a greater Cause, a greater Kingdom,

and a greater Conquest. Let us consider these things in turn.

### A Greater Captain

These folks weren't serving the kings of this world. If they had, their lives would have been very different. Daniel would have stopped praying when the king told him to and avoided the lions. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego would have bowed down to the image of Nebuchadnezzar and avoided the flames. They weren't worthy of this world because they weren't ultimately serving earthly masters. Their ultimate allegiance was to the God of the Bible. You see this in the fact that he is the one, not the world, who gives them this appellation in verse 38. The world didn't think that – the world thought these people were menaces and obstacles to good order. It was God who said that the world was not worthy to have such people. It was God who gave them their good report (39). They served God, and in doing so they were serving Christ. Christ was their Captain.

Think about all the leaders in the history of the world that have inspired people to follow them. Some have been good and noble, like George Washington. Some have been great military leaders, like Napoleon Bonaparte. Some have been evil and wicked, like Adolph Hitler. It is amazing who people will follow, sometimes for good and sometimes for ill. Of all the Germans who followed Hitler in WW2, I can't imagine many of them thinking it was a good thing by May of 1945. The reality is, no matter what man or woman we choose to follow, they all have feet of clay. They all have faults and character flaws. None of them are worthy of your uncritical or unreserved commitment.

Unless you are talking about Jesus Christ. It is amazing to me how Napoleon was able to get so many soldiers to die for him. Although Jesus calls upon his disciples to take the cross, it is only because he has taken it first, and the cross he carried bore all our sins upon it – infinitely more weighty and awful than any cross we will ever be called upon to bear. And though Jesus calls upon us to go into the world as sheep

among wolves, he is only calling us to do what he has already done. The call for Christian discipleship is to follow Christ. I think one of the most moving things I have ever seen was a video of an infantry officer under fire in Afghanistan who needed to get his men to a better position, but the way he did this was not by just telling them where to go but by shouting, "Follow me!" and then jumping up and leading the way as bullets were spraying all around. You can be sure that whatever your Lord calls upon you to do, he has done something far more difficult.

Our Lord told his disciples, "If the world hate you, ye know that it hated me before it hated you. If ye were of the world, the world would love his own: but because ye are not of the world, but I have chosen you out of the world, therefore the world hateth you. Remember the word that I said unto you, The servant is not greater than his lord. If they have persecuted me, they will also persecute you; if they have kept my saying, they will keep yours also" (John 15:18-20). You see that? He is not calling us to endure anything he has not already endured.

He is always the example. How are we to love one another? The way Christ loves us "and hath given himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God, for a sweet-smelling savour" (Eph. 5:2). When we are told to put others before our own interests, again Jesus is the great example: "Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross" (Phil. 2:5-8). How is the saint to endure suffering? Like Jesus: "...but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God. For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow in his steps: who did no sin, neither was guile found in his mouth: who, when he was reviled, reviled not again; when he suffered, he threatened not; but committed himself to him that judgeth righteously" (1 Pet. 2:20-23). We could go on enumerating such examples.

He is also a great Captain – the greatest Captain – in that he takes care of his own. I love the way this is described in the book of Ephesians: our Lord “gave himself for it [the church]; that he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, that he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Eph. 5:25-26). We are told that “in the ages to come” God will show “the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us in Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7). He is always in the thickest part of the fight and when the victory is won, I cannot help but see him there, washing the feet of his disciples and tending to their wounds. In the age to come he will wipe all tears from their eyes and give them ever-increasing and never-ending joy in his presence forever.

My friend, why serve anyone else? There is no Lord and Savior like the Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Why not enlist under his banner? Why not take his name upon yourself and follow him with all your heart?

### A Greater Cause

I think another reason why the faithful in Hebrews 11 did not give up, even in the face of all the hardships they were called to embrace, is because they recognized that the cause they represented was worth all the indignities and the sufferings they had to endure. They were not simply seeking to advance their own cause and advantage, but they were standing in the army of the Lord and fighting for the cause of God and truth against true evil. One of the things soldiers have to struggle with is the morality of their cause. Are they on the right side? Who is waging the just war? Is the spilling of blood worth it? In many conflicts, this can be hard to discern. One of the things about World War 2 is that once the Allied soldiers discovered the Nazi extermination camps, they had no doubt that they were fighting a just war.

The Christian need not wonder about the morality or the justice or the necessity of their cause. We are not just fighting evil; we are fighting

against the blackest and darkest and most malevolent evil this world has ever known or ever will know. For we are fighting against Satan: “For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places” (Eph. 6:12). As Paul will put it to the Corinthians, “For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds; casting down imaginations, and every high thing that exalteth itself against the knowledge of God, and bringing into captivity every thought to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor. 10:4-5).

Since the beginning of human history (Jn. 8:44), humanity has been involved in this conflict between ultimate good and evil. It is not a conflict between nations and tribes, but a conflict between the followers of Christ and the servants of the devil. As Paul will write the Romans, “And the God of peace will bruise Satan under your feet shortly” (Rom. 16:20).

Here’s what this statement means. When you live out the Christian life, the life of faith, you are engaged in this most important of all conflicts. You are part of an army, and you are fighting in a war. You don’t do this by fighting with guns and bombs but with the weapons of righteousness, by being salt and light in this world, by living out and speaking the gospel to those around you. There will be pushback; there will be persecution. The enemy will fight back. The question is, will you throw your weapons down? Will you withdraw from the fight? Or will you be so convinced of the justice of this cause that you will be willing to lay everything down for it?

I’m a Texan, and I have always been moved when I go to the Alamo and see the list of the names of the men who died there. They made a conscious decision to do so; they knew they were going to die. They believed in the cause of Texas independence enough that they were willing to give “the last full measure of devotion” for it. Will we be convinced of the goodness and the righteousness and the justice and the value of the cause of Christ that you will endure to the end for it? My friend,



there is no greater cause for which to give your life. A life lived for Christ and a life given for Christ is never wasted. Let us be able to say with the apostle Paul, when we get to the end of the way, "I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

### A Greater Kingdom

Not only is our cause greater, but the kingdom for which we live is greater than any earthly kingdom. The kingdom to which the Christian belongs is not an earthly kingdom. As our Lord told Pilate at his trial, "My kingdom is not of this world" (Jn. 18:36).

One of the ways in which the kingdom of Christ differs from all earthly kingdoms is in its durability. All earthly kingdoms will eventually perish. The Roman Empire lasted over a thousand years, but now we can read Gibbon's *The Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Hitler proclaimed a thousand-year Reich, but it only lasted about twelve years. Not so the kingdom of Christ. We read in Psalm 145:13, "Thy kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, and thy dominion endureth throughout all generations." In the book of Daniel, there is this prophesy of Christ, in which we find, "I saw in the night visions, and, behold, one like the Son of man came with the clouds of heaven, and came to the Ancient of days, and they brought him near before him. And there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom, that all people, nations, and languages, should serve him: his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom that which shall not be destroyed" (Dan. 7:13-14). In Peter's second epistle we are told, "Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fall: For so an entrance shall be ministered unto you abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Pet. 1:10-11). Then, in the book of Revelation we see this: "And the seventh angel sounded; and there were great voices in heaven, saying, The kingdoms of this world are become

the kingdoms of our Lord, and of his Christ; and he shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 11:15).

Another way the kingdom of Christ is better than the kingdoms of this world in that its character and nature is infinitely better than any earthly kingdom. When God showed Daniel the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and its interpretation, the kingdoms of men were likened to this statue of varying constituent parts, from the head of gold all the way down to the feet of clay. No kingdom of man is perfect. This is true of the U.S., and it is true of any country. Some may be better than others, but none is perfect – they are all defined in some respect by the fallenness of their inhabitants. There will never be a utopia this side of the Final Judgment. On the other hand, God’s kingdom is holy and good: as the apostle will tell the Roman Christians, “For the kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and joy in the Holy Ghost.” (Rom. 14:17). Another way to see this is that the kingdom of God is the kingdom of heaven. All the goodness and joy of heaven is the goodness and joy of the kingdom of our Lord.

This motivated these OT saints. Why were they willing to be exiled into the deserts and caves and mountains? Why were they willing to even endure torture, not accepting deliverance? It was because they recognized that they belonged to a kingdom which cannot be moved (Heb. 12:28). And this should motivate us to “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”

### A Greater Conquest

Though now the saints have to endure hardship, it will not always be the case. Those who were tortured rose to a better resurrection. The apostle Paul fought a good fight, but that was not the end of the story: “henceforth there is laid up for me a crown of righteousness which the Lord, the righteous judge, shall give me at that day: and not to me only, but unto all them also that love his appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8). There is a “better thing” that God has provided for them and for us (Heb. 11:40).

The kingdom of God has not yet come in its fullness, but when it does, death will be done away and the people of God will rise to newness of life. They will enter into an “inheritance incorruptible, and undefiled, and that fadeth not away, reserved in heaven for you” (1 Pet. 1:4).

One of the things that can be disheartening for any cause is the lack of hope that ultimate victory will be won. Here’s the thing: for the Christian, ultimate victory is guaranteed. The unstoppable decree of God guarantees it. The finished work of Christ on the cross guarantees it. The powerful work of the Holy Spirit guarantees it. We are not fighting a resurgent enemy; we are fighting a defeated enemy. I love the way the apostle Paul described what happened on the cross to the Colossians: our Lord blotted out “the handwriting of ordinances that was against us, which was contrary to us, and took it out of the way, nailing it to his cross; and having spoiled principalities and powers, he made a shew of them openly, triumphing over them in it” (Col. 2:14-15).

How does it end? Well, it ends like this: “And he shewed me a pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the throne of God and of the Lamb. In the midst of the street of it, and on either side of the river, was there the tree of life, which bare twelve manner of fruits, and yielded her fruit every month: and the leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations. And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever” (Rev. 22:1-5).

## Conclusion

Now we must not think that our sufferings are only valuable insofar as they are the direct result of persecution. Remember who our enemy is: Satan. He is too cunning to reserve all his energies in seeking to overthrow your faith for outright persecution. He attacks believers in a

multitude of ways – not only through sinful men but also through sickness and illness, like Job. He not only attacks the body, but he attacks the mind. Anything that he can use to discourage you and to draw you away from a willing and joyful discipleship is an enemy to your faith and is part of the battle. In those moments or hours or years of discouragement, remember the believers of Hebrews 11. Remember why they endured and let that be an encouragement to you. We serve the very best Captain, we live for the most just of causes, are citizens of an heavenly kingdom, and will one day enjoy the fruits of eternal conquest in Jesus Christ our Lord.

# THE CALL TO A PERSEVERING FAITH

## CHAPTER XLIV

### THE CHRISTIAN RACE (HEB. 12:1-4)

IN OUR LAST MESSAGE, as we finished out the eleventh chapter of Hebrews, our aim was to inspire courage for Christ so that you might endure to the end as the Old Testament saints had endured. To-day, my aim is to inspire joy in Christ so that you might endure to the end as the Old Testament saints had endured. We need both of those things – courage because of opposition, and joy because of temptation – if we will persevere. Opposition requires courage to overcome. On the other hand, temptation requires being in the possession of a superior joy so that we see through the false seduction presented in the temptation and hold fast to our preference for the path of faithfulness.

Make no mistake about it, perseverance in the faith is the aim and the goal of this epistle. We are exhorted to it in verse 1, in the central exhortation of this passage: “let us run with patience the race that is set before us.” That word patience means, quite simply, perseverance or endurance. You see it not only in the exhortation but in the example of Christ: “who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross . . . . For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds” (2-3). To endure is

to persevere. The Greek verb there in verses 2 and 3 corresponds to the noun “patience” of verse 1 (hupomene – noun; and hupomeno – verb).

Why this emphasis? Why does the author return to this again and again? He does so, not only because the saints to whom he was writing were wavering, but also because it is a fact that many who begin the Christian life don’t finish well. And this is like a race: not all who enter the race cross the finish line. The apostle Paul himself made this very point in his epistle to the Corinthians: “Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize? So run, that ye may obtain” (1 Cor. 9:24 and then compare with 10:1,ff).

Now again, neither Paul nor the author of Hebrews is saying that a true believer can lose their salvation. What they are saying is that staying in the race is the evidence that one is truly saved. Therefore you want to make sure that you are staying in the race – not in order to keep your salvation but in order to make your calling and election sure. Also, though all the elect will eventually cross the finish line, that doesn’t mean there aren’t times they might temporarily wander or careen off the track for a time. Sin does that, and it doesn’t only affect you but it affects the people around you also. You want to run well, not only for your own sake, but also for the sake of those who are running with you.

The Christian life is indeed like a race. How so? Well, it is in the fact that there is a starting line, a path to run, and a finish line. The Christian life begins with the starting line of conversion to faith in Christ, begotten in us by a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit, and then we live out the life of faith (Gal. 2:20). In death, it ends when the saint crosses the finish line into glory (2 Tim. 4:7). This is the prize that Paul exhorts us to obtain in 1 Cor. 9:24.

It is also like a race in that it is hard and requires discipline and hard work in order to run it well. I appreciate the fact that the witness of the NT is in universal agreement on this point. It is the witness of our text: the “race” of Heb. 12:1 is a word which can double for “fight.” It is related to our English word “agony.” Because it is hard, it requires discipline. The apostle Paul will go on to make this point further in 1

Cor. 9: “And every man that striveth for the mastery [competes for the prize] is temperate [self-controlled, disciplined] in all things. Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown; but we an incorruptible. I therefore so run, not as uncertainly; so fight I, not as one that beateth the air: but I keep under my body, and bring it into subjection: lest that by any means, when I have preached to others, I myself should be a castaway” (25-27). You don’t just skip into heaven. I like the way Matthew Henry put it in his commentary on Matthew 7:13-14, “They are not got into heaven so soon as they are got through the gate.” In other words, there is a narrow and hard way that follows a narrow door and gate. You won’t manage it well if you are not all in. You have to be focused. We have to be like the Israeli bomber pilots in the Six Day War who flew below radar in order to avoid Egyptian radar detection, only a few hundred feet above the ground. I remember one pilot who was interviewed for a documentary recalled that every muscle in the hands that gripped the stick was strained, and all the attention was fixed on the horizon because it didn’t take much for a jet at that speed and at that very low height to crash.

Yes, we want to run well and we want to finish well. We want to be among those for whom “an entrance shall be ministered . . . abundantly into the everlasting kingdom of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ” (2 Pet. 1:11). Do you want to so finish your race on earth so that you receive, not just an entrance, but “an abundant entrance” into the kingdom of our God and of his Christ? I hope you do; so do I. Our text gives us some extremely helpful guidance on how to do this.

There are three main ways in which we are encouraged to run the race. First of all, we are encouraged to consider the cloud of witnesses (1a). Second, we are encouraged to cast off all hindrances (1b). And third, we are encouraged to keep our eye on Jesus (2-4), which is the main point of these verses.

### Consider the Cloud of Witnesses



“Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses . . . let us run” (1). Now we have spent seven messages “seeing” these witnesses – these are the believers from chapter 11. The author imagines these OT believers as if they were fans in the stands of a sports stadium. The readers of this epistle are pictured as in the arena competing, and OT saints are up there, not only watching but cheering them on. That is the picture here.

People talk about home-field advantage. It is a well-documented fact. The main contributor to home-field advantage is what is called “crowd effect.” The cheering can help the home team do better, while making the visiting team feel isolated and alone. The booing can also get a home team that’s not doing so well back on track! Crowd effect also apparently has some effect on referee bias – in favor of the home team, of course.

Well, the fact of the matter is, the Christian can feel as if they are the visiting team. We are probably all aware of the fact that in past history Christians have been, not spectators, but actual victims to the cruelty of the Roman gladiatorial games. In those cases, the crowds were cheering, not the Christians, but the lions or the gladiators who would end up killing them. Even if we are not standing in the arena about to be killed by pagan persecutors, we can still feel as if we are isolated and alone. As our culture becomes more and more secular, being a Christian can feel like a very lonely proposition.

What we are reminded of in these verses is that there is more than one crowd out there. On the one hand, it is true that we are pilgrims and foreigners and exiles, and so in that sense we don’t have home-field advantage. The world is against Christ, and therefore against his followers. They will not cheer you on, and if you only listen to them you are bound to become discouraged. That’s the problem with some of us; we tend to listen to the wrong folks all the time. What we need to remember is that there is another crowd out there, and they are looking on you from heaven, as it were. The saints of old are cheering you on, and you need to remember that. The crowd effect of this cloud of witnesses –

a cloud because there are many of them, not just a few, from all ranks and conditions of life – is bound to encourage you. As we run the race of faith, let us remember those who have gone before. We are not trail-blazers here; we are not having to chop our way through a wilderness through which no one has ever passed. Rather, we are running down a well-run path. Many have gone before. Many have not only run this path but have made it to the end and crossed the finish line. We are meant to remember that and to consider that.

I don't think it's just the past saints that we are to look to. On several occasions in this epistle, we are told to encourage one another, to provoke unto love and good works (Heb. 10:24), and to exhort one another daily lest we be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin (Heb. 3:13). We are to surround ourselves by other believers who are presently running alongside us and fighting beside us. That doesn't mean that we go out of the world or isolate ourselves. It doesn't mean that we can't work with unbelievers or have non-Christian friends, for how can we be witnesses to people that we never rub shoulders with? It does mean that our true support system doesn't come from those who are committed to the values of the world but from those who are fellow disciples of Christ with us.

It means, as the apostle Paul put it, that we are “not unequally yoked together with unbelievers: for what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? And what communion hath light with darkness? And what concord hath Christ with Belial? Or what part hath he that believeth with an infidel? And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols? For ye are the temple of the living God; as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them; and I will be their God and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you, and ye shall be my sons and daughters, saith the Lord Almighty” (2 Cor. 6:14-18). The corollary of this passage is that we yoke ourselves to believers and find true fellow-

ship and communion and concord with those who belong to Christ, with those who with us make up the temple of God.

The surest way to fade out and to falter is to think that you are alone. Brothers and sisters, you are not. That's what this great cloud of witnesses reminds us. People – many people! – who were very much like you and in very similar circumstances have been where you are and through faith in Christ they persevered to the end.

Cast off all hindrances

Next, we are encouraged with the exhortation, “let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us” (1). In the ancient world, athletes competed naked. In fact, the word gymnasium is related to the Greek word *gymnos* which meant “naked.” So in a very real sense the athletes of the ancient Olympic games laid aside every possible weight and obstruction that might impede their ability to compete. The author of Hebrews is picking up on this and applying it to the Christian life.

Now he is not of course commending literal nakedness. It is a metaphor. We can see the way this metaphor is applied in the phrase “and the sin which doth so easily beset us.” In other words, sin is what weighs the Christian down. I saw this quote today, from Robert Murray M'Cheyne: “Above all things, cultivate your own spirit. A word spoken by you when your conscience is clear, and your heart full of God's Spirit, is worth ten thousand words spoken in unbelief and sin.” To have a clear conscience and your heart full of God's Spirit will give wings to your feet and speed you on the way. Even good words spoken and good deeds done in unbelief and sin will weigh you down and cause your chariot wheels to drag in the mud.

This is why the apostle Paul wrote the following words to Timothy: “But refuse profane and old wives' fables, and exercise thyself rather unto godliness. For bodily exercise profiteth little: but godliness is profitable unto all things, having promise of the life that now is, and of that which

is to come” (1 Tim. 4:7- 8). How do you exercise? How do you make yourself fit for the Christian race? You do so by exercising yourself unto godliness. You do it by becoming more and more holy. You do it by applying God’s word to you and yourself to God’s word.

Now we have to be careful here. It is true that sin easily besets us. There is a category in the Bible for besetting sins. In other words, though we are all sinful, we are all constitutionally different in terms of our temperaments and so on. That means that what might be a temptation to me might not be to you and vice versa. One person may be more vulnerable to greed, another to lust, another to laziness, and another to pride.

We must never think that, because a sin is besetting, I have an excuse for it. However, that’s what we tend to do, don’t we? We think, “Oh well, that’s just my besetting sin. I can’t help it that I’m angry, that’s just the way I am. I can’t help it that I got drunk, that’s just the way I am. I can’t help it that I looked at porn, it’s my besetting sin. God will understand. I couldn’t help it.” This is not to think Biblically, is it? No, for we read here that we are to “lay aside . . . the sin which doth so easily beset us.” Yes, the Bible talks about sins which easily beset us, but it also in the same verse says that we are to lay them aside. We get no help with our excuses when it comes to besetting sins! Lay it aside. Pluck it out. Cut it off. Mortify it, kill it!

We can’t blame God for a bad race when we aren’t listening to his instructions for running it. We need to get encouragement from the right people, and we need to lay aside the sins to which we are vulnerable. We are not to make provision for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof (Rom. 13:14). These are all necessary and essential elements to running our race well. The most important thing we are to do is found in verses 2-4, and that brings us to our final point.

Keep your eyes on Jesus

“Run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God” (1-2). To look to Jesus here is not just a passing glance. The word means to fix your gaze, your attention, upon him.

How are we to look to him? What about Jesus are we to look? Well, I think there are at least two ways this text indicates. First, we are to look to him as our Redeemer, and second, we are to look to him as our Forerunner.

First, as our Redeemer. Don’t look to Jesus just to see an example. He is one, as we shall see. If that’s all he is, then he is little different from the cloud of witnesses we are pointed to in verse 1. However, he is not just an example, for we are told that he “endured the cross.” He did not go to the cross just an example or as a martyr; he went, as he himself put it, “to give his life a ransom for many” (Mt. 20:28).

He despised the shame – yes, it was a shameful thing to be put on the cross. We must not think that the shame came only from men, who heaped all that hateful malice and scorn upon him from mouths full of cursing and bitterness. It was above all things the result of his carrying the sins of his elect, becoming sin for them that they might be made the righteousness of God in him. It is because he bore our sins and our shame on the cross that we can have freedom from the guilt and shame of our own sins. Freedom from sin and shame doesn’t happen because I have somehow propitiated the gods through my pain and suffering; it happens because God in his grace pardons those sinners who trust in his Son, and he is able to do so fully and completely because Christ died for those who trust in him (cf. Jn. 3:14-17), bearing away all their sin and shame. I like the way that Philip Edgcumbe Hughes put it: “The cross assures us that Christ, in suffering, the Righteous for the unrighteous (1 Pet. 3:18), plumbed the furthest depths of human shame and that, consequently, there is no person, however debased by sin and guilt, who

is beyond the reach of his pardon and grace” [A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews, p. 524-525].

Look to him as the enthroned Redeemer, the one who is “set down at the right hand of the throne of God.” His session at the Father’s right hand is proof that he has certainly and fully “obtained [not just made possible] eternal redemption for us” (Heb. 9:12). Those who trust in him are cleansed from the defilement and shame of their own sins, and will therefore never be put to shame before God at the Final Judgment when all shall appear before God to give an account.

Look to him also as “the author and finisher of our faith.” Faith, which figured so prominently in the previous chapter, and in which we are being encouraged to persevere, and by which a successful race is run, is something which is not in the final analysis a product of free will, but is the gift of God (Eph. 2:8). Jesus is the author of our faith – it is his gift. It is by the Spirit of Christ that we are enabled to believe. That is encouraging because, if our faith is God’s gift, it will not be so easily taken away. We are further convinced of this fact because our Lord is not only the author but also the finisher of our faith. The one who begins a good work in us will finish it at the day of Christ (Phil. 1:6). He will hold us fast. Is faith necessary? Yes. The enduring nature of this faith does not depend upon my fickleness but upon the rock-solid foundation of the person and work of Jesus Christ, and that is encouraging, isn’t it?

Also look to Jesus as our Forerunner. This also figures very prominently in these verses, and we are told in verses 3-4, “For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.” The Hebrew Christians were weary and faint. One of the reasons was that they had not kept it before them that their Savior himself endured so much more than they would ever experience. He went to the cross; they had not yet resisted unto blood. They had forgotten the example of their Savior.

In a few years, they would; what then? What about those saints that were martyred? What about the saints mentioned in the previous chap-

ter? How is this fact about Jesus' suffering an advance upon the encouragement we might derive from other believers?

Well, it goes back to something we said last week. He would be a poor Captain that simply told his troops to go into battle while he stood by and watched. The best leaders in war have always been those who lead into battle. This is what our Lord has done. He doesn't just call us to bear a cross; he bore a far heavier one. He doesn't just tell us to suffer; he suffered himself. The fact of the matter is, no matter how much we think we have suffered – and it may really be far more than anyone else you know here on earth – we have not suffered even close to the extent that our Lord has.

This is helpful to remember, especially when questions about the justice of it all comes crashing in upon us. We can often feel crushed by the weight of the objection: why would an all-powerful and just and good and holy God allow such suffering to happen to me or to others? The fact of the matter is, this is a very hard question to answer, especially at a level that is emotionally satisfying. What has helped me is the following reality: Christ, the Son of God, came to suffer for us. He never had to do this. There was nothing in heaven or on earth, apart from his own will, that compelled him to do this. Nevertheless, God the Son chose suffering for himself. I know that God will never choose anything for himself except from the best and most holy and just reasons. And so, if God chose suffering for himself, I can be okay, at least on some level, if he chooses suffering for me (cf. 1 Pet. 4:19). The cross is the answer to my cross.

This is not the only way the example of Jesus helps us. In particular, here we notice the way he endured the cross and despised the shame. He did it "for the joy that was set before him." That is crucial. Remember: Jesus is our example. What this means is that at the end of the way, at the conclusion of this race that you are running, God is bringing you to joy, too. The aim of God is to bring you eternal and increasing joy.

You see this all over the Scriptures, don't you? This is wonderful news because the joy that God gives is infinitely better than the best joys of this

world which are at best temporary pleasures. "Thou hast put gladness in my heart, more than in the time that their corn and wine increased" (Ps. 4:7). "Thou wilt show me the path of life: in thy presence is fulness of joy; at thy right hand there are pleasures forevermore" (16:11). The Bible talks about the countenance of God which makes his people "exceeding glad" (21:6). We are told that God delights in the welfare of his servants (35:27), and that "light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart" (97:11). We may weep tears now, but joy will come in the morning (126:5-6). The joy of the Lord is our strength (Neh. 8:10). The kingdom of God is not meat and drink, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom. 14:17). The fruit of the Holy Spirit is joy (Gal. 5:22). If you think the religion of the Bible is about keeping people miserable and gloomy and morose, you have not read your Bible correctly. If you think God is primarily about keeping people sad, you do not know the God of the Bible.

Hence it should not surprise us that when the saint enters glory, they enter into joy: "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy, to the only wise God our Savior, be glory and majesty, dominion and power, both now and ever. Amen" (Jude 24-25). And oh! to hear those words: "His lord said unto him, Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Mt. 25:21, 23).

That truth is all important to see. Our joy is the "joy of thy Lord." It is not only joy from God, it is joy in the presence of God. It is joy in seeing Christ glorified. Our Lord put it this way: "Father, I will that they also, whom thou hast given me, be with me where I am; that they may behold my glory, which thou hast given me: for thou lovest me before the foundation of the world" (Jn. 17:24). Our joy will be in seeing the glory of Christ.

So how do you run a good race? Run it well by seeking encouragement from the people of God. Run it well by laying aside the sins which do so easily beset us. Above all things, run it well by looking to Christ,



the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, despising the shame and is now set down at the right hand of the majesty on high.

## CHAPTER XLV

### GOD'S FATHERLY DISCIPLINE (HEB. 12:5-11)

IN THESE VERSES, WE ARE REMINDED once again of the high view that the New Testament authors give to Old Testament Scripture. In verses 5-6, we have a quotation from Proverbs 3:11-12. When our author quotes it, he quotes it as a very relevant word to his audience, even though it had been written several hundred years before. Not only was it seen to be relevant, but also Regal: it was the word of the King of heaven and earth. When Solomon wrote this, he was writing it to his son, and so when he said, "My son," he was referring to the relationship between himself and his son. However, note the way the author of Hebrews quotes it. He quotes it as a word from God to them, so that the appellation "my son" now is no longer a reference to the relationship between an earthly father and his son but a reference to the relationship that exists between God and his children. In other words, we are reminded once again that God is speaking to us in the Scriptures, not only of the Old but also of the New Testament. That's important because it affects the way we read our Bibles. This is not a dictionary or a history book or a book of morals. It is primarily a word from a Father to his children. God is speaking to us in the pages of this book, and we

need to take the attitude of the child Samuel who was instructed by Eli to say, when he heard God speaking to him, “Speak, Lord, for thy servant heareth” (1 Sam. 3:9-10).

Another thing we learn from the introduction of the Proverb into the teaching of this letter is that the Scriptures are not something you graduate from, but its contents are meant to be revisited again and again, as the first Psalm commands and commends. At least some of our problems can be traced to forgetting what the Scriptures say. That was the case here: “And ye have” – or maybe this was a question rather than a statement – “And have ye forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children?” (5). Whether a statement or a question, that was their problem, and, as a result, they had put a different interpretation upon their predicament than they would have found in God’s word.

What was their predicament? Well, it was the hardness of the times in which they lived, which involved persecution from a hostile world, and through which they were called to endure. That is the context. They are to endure like their Lord. He had a cross and they have theirs. “If ye endure chastening” (7): there’s that word “endure” again. They were to “run with patience” (or rather, “endurance”) the race that was set before them (1). What required the endurance was the hardness, the trials, the afflictions, the persecutions. Some of them wanted to quit and our author is trying to encourage them to stay in the game.

Speaking of games, that is the metaphor our author introduces in verse 1. He has not given up on it. In verse 11, we are reminded that discipline is for those who “are exercised thereby,” and that word “exercised” is again a reference to the metaphor of the games, which brings us back to verse 1 and the idea that we are to endure like an athlete in the games, to run the race with endurance so that we cross the finish line and win the crown.

So what was the interpretation these Hebrew Christians had put upon their predicament, their trials and tragedies? It was this: they thought this meant that God had abandoned them. They thought this

meant that God didn't care for them. They thought that this meant that God either didn't or couldn't love them. This, of course, is the way men usually tend to think of these things. If you get into trouble in some way, it's karma for something bad you've done. We are like the disciples who passed by the man born blind, whose first question was to ask who had sinned, the man or his parents, so that he was born blind (Jn. 9:1-2)? This attitude not only undermines a commitment to love your neighbor as yourself (for they are just getting what they deserve), but it is also an incredibly discouraging outlook on life. The idea that, if I am hurting or hurt in any way, it's because of something bad I've done, is not a Biblical one. In some ways, the book of Job was written to remind us that this is not true.

The Hebrew Christians had forgotten that; they had almost certainly embraced a karma approach to suffering. As a result, they were depressed and faint. Their hands were hanging low and their knees were feeble (Heb. 12:12). So they are reminded of the word from their Father to them: "My son, despise not the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou are rebuked of him: for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth" (5-6). What follows is in some sense a short exposition upon this text in verses 7-11, and the significance of this proverb is unpacked there. What I want to do is to consider how the author of Hebrews does this. As we do, we'll learn some very important things about God's discipline for his children and how this ought to encourage us when we face hard things through which we must endure. In particular, we will see three things about God's discipline: (1) the extensive reach of God's discipline [verses 7-8], (2) the proper response to God's discipline [verse 9], and (3) the wonderful results of God's discipline [verses 10-11].

#### The extensive reach of God's discipline (7-8)

By quoting the Proverb, our author is interpreting the sufferings of the Hebrews believers in this house church in Rome through the lens

of God's fatherly discipline. He's going to show that this discipline is not bad but good, and that their response to it ought to be different from the one they were currently embracing. However, what he does in verses 7 and 8 is to show that discipline is necessary. It is necessary in the sense that, if you are a child of God, you must experience some sort of discipline in your life. The reason you must is, if you are God's child, then he is your Father, and a good Father always disciplines his children. Always. That means that the reach of God's discipline extends to every one of his children. He is not a neglectful or an unwise or overly indulgent parent. He loves his children, and so he disciplines them.

We read, "If ye endure suffering, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? But if ye be without chastisement whereof all are partakers, then are ye [illegitimate children] and not sons." In these verses (7-8), the "for" of verse 6 is being unpacked. Why are they not to despise or faint at God's chastening hand (5)? It is because "every son whom he receiveth" and loves is a son who gets disciplined (6). There are no other options. Hence the extensive reach of God's discipline (every child) implies the necessity of it (1 Pet. 1:6 - "though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations").

One of the things this means is that, if you are a child of God and are suffering in some way, it's not like God is targeting you for being worse than others. It isn't proof that God doesn't love or care for you. It doesn't mean that you don't belong to him. Rather, it means that God is bringing discipline into your life precisely because you are one of his. All God's children get discipline; we shouldn't be surprised when it happens. This is similar to what the apostle Peter wrote: "Beloved, think it not strange concerning the fiery trial which is to try you, as though some strange thing happened unto you: but rejoice, inasmuch as ye are partakers of Christ's sufferings; that, when his glory shall be revealed, ye may be glad also with exceeding joy" (1 Pet. 4:12-13).

On the other hand, if we never have any discipline – well, that's when we should be concerned! For "if ye be without chastisement, then are ye

[illegitimate children] and not sons.” That doesn’t mean, of course, that if you are a child of God then you must always be suffering or that you can’t ever enjoy any rest and peace in this world. But the reality is that we are all sinners. We are all going to go out of the way. We are all like sheep gone astray. We are all prone to wrong attitudes and ill choices. We therefore need discipline, and God will wisely and lovingly administer it to us. Because all God’s children sin, they all need discipline, and God will not withhold from them what they need.

In the Twenty-third Psalm, we are comforted by the fact that, “The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” God provides our needs. Well, one of those needs is correction and discipline. We shall not be in want of that! Hence, “his rod and his staff, they comfort me” (4). I am told that one of the most common uses of a shepherd’s rod was for discipline. God is the great Shepherd who cares for his sheep; he is a great Father who cares for his children. His rod ought to comfort us rather than scare us away. It is a measure of his love, not his anger.

Nor must we think that the Lord is careless in the way he dispenses his discipline. He will give it to us in precisely the measure and amount and way that we personally need. Our afflictions may look different from those of others, and one of the reasons for this is that we are different, and the Lord knows that what might be good discipline for one person might not be for another. There may be something in my character that needs to be corrected, or some defect in my attitudes that makes me more vulnerable to a certain set of temptations – the Lord knows that; he knows our deceitful hearts better than we do, and he fashions our trials for us so that we are refined and corrected and put back in the right way. This is the reason why the psalmist wrote, “I know, O Lord, that thy judgments are right, and that thou in faithfulness hast afflicted me” (Ps. 119:75).

To sum up, the experience of affliction and trials is a part of God’s Fatherly discipline; it is not proof that God despises us but that he loves us and is taking care of us. It is a sign of our status as children of the Most High. That being the case, it warrants not a despising and

fainting attitude, but the attitude that a child ought to have toward his or her Father, and that brings us to our next point.

### The proper response to God's discipline (9)

In the next verse, we read, "Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?" (9). Notice that the author of Hebrews doesn't say you have to enjoy the discipline! He does say that we should submit to the discipline of our Heavenly Father with an attitude of reverence. In fact, since we afford this to our earthly fathers (or ought to), the argument is that we have an even greater reason to do the same for our Father in heaven, the Father of the spirits of all flesh.

What does this look like? Well, look back to verse 5; verse 9 is a response to the bad attitudes listed there. In verse 5, we are encouraged not to despise the discipline of the Lord. Again, the opposite of this is not to enjoy it. We don't have to pretend that pain and suffering and trials are good in themselves. It is rather to recognize that our Father is good and wise and that he has good and wise reasons for the trials through which we are passing.

We therefore despise the discipline when we question God's heart and wisdom toward us in the trials we are going through. This is often shown in a bitter attitude towards God. I think you can have a very robust view of God's sovereignty in these matters, and yet forget that the sovereign God is also always wise and always good. We must not only submit to his sovereignty, but we are also called to trust in his love towards us. If we are his children, God's love never fails us. He never abandons us. It may feel like it at times. We may, like David in Psalm 22:1 think that God has forsaken us. The reality is that God never abandons his children for the very reason that on the cross our Lord endured that kind of desolation so that we would never have to. Again, it may feel like it at times, but we must remember that our feelings are not the best

barometer for reality. We need, especially at these moments, to bank our lives on the promises of our faithful Father, promises like Hebrews 13:5-6, where the Lord tells us, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.”

We are also told not to faint when we are rebuked by him (12:5). To despise God’s discipline is to question God’s wisdom and goodness. To faint is often the result of failing to trust in God’s power to sustain us in our trials. If you are only looking to your own resources, you will almost certainly feel overwhelmed. The reality is that you are right to feel that way when you are only looking at your circumstances and yourself. Like the apostle Paul, you may find yourself in a situation where you are “pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life” (2 Cor. 1:8). Why does God do that? Paul answers in the very next verse: “But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us” (9-10). Note that with respect to himself, the trial was above Paul’s ability to cope (“above strength”), but this was to make him look away from his own meager resources to Christ. He ends by affirming his trust to be in the Lord and in his confidence that the Lord would deliver him. This is also the way we need to deal with our suffering. If you are only looking to your strength, you will faint. Instead, look to the Lord. Trust in him and rely upon his grace for strength.

Don’t become bitter but remember that God has a good and wise purpose in the discipline. And don’t become faint but remember that God’s power and grace will carry you to the good purpose that he has for you.

What good end is that? That is our final point.

The wonderful results of God’s discipline (10-11)



In the next two verses, we read, “For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.”

I want to say in passing here that the author of Hebrews assumes that the fathers are the ones who take the lead in discipline. Dads aren’t to take the back seat to this and leave it to the moms. At the same time, the parents together are meant to reflect God’s fatherly discipline toward us. However, we do it imperfectly because we are imperfect people. This is the idea behind the words “after their own pleasure” or “at their discretion.”<sup>1</sup> Too often, the discipline is administered in anger, or without carefully determining what actually happened, or by not fitting the punishment with the offense. We are not omniscient and often read the situation wrong. We have to admit that often we are more concerned with our own profit and pleasure than we are with the nurture and admonition of our children. In other words, we often sinfully administer discipline because we administer it selfishly.

This is not how God does it. There is never a time when he brings discipline into our lives apart from a good purpose that has its origins in his infinite wisdom toward us and his unchanging love for us. We do it for our (selfish) pleasure, but God does it for our profit and good.

What good is that? It is spelled out here in verses 10-11. It is so that we might be “partakers in his holiness” (10). In verse 11, it is called the “peaceable fruit of righteousness.” The aim of God’s discipline in our lives, which often comes in the form of trials through which we have to endure, is holiness, godliness, and conformity to the image of God’s Son.

Now think about the logic of this passage. God disciplines his children for their good. He always does this, for all his children, for the purpose of holiness, or sanctification of life. Now one conclusion we may take from this is that this discipline is the best way by which we

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<sup>1</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* [WBC, vol. 47B], (Zondervan, 1991), p. 424.

grow in grace. God doesn't do things haphazardly or without purpose or unwisely. That means, if the Lord has sent suffering into my life to discipline me so that I can grow in holiness, then that is the best way for growth to happen. It means that there are ways in which I would not be growing more Christlike if I didn't have to endure these trials in my life.

It would be nice if you could become a great runner by just watching videos of runners, but that is not the way it works, is it? You have to discipline yourself, and exercise, and put in a lot of hard work to become a great runner, especially if you want to be able to compete at the Olympic level. No pain, no gain. It shouldn't therefore surprise us that, if we want to be more holy, we are going to have to be willing to be put through the furnace of affliction to get there. In fact, this is the way the apostle Peter put it: "Wherein ye greatly rejoice, though now for a season, if need be, ye are in heaviness through manifold temptations: that the trial of your faith, being much more precious than of gold that perisheth, though it be tried with fire, might be found unto praise and honour and glory at the appearing of Jesus Christ" (1 Pet. 1:6-7). If you want your faith to be found unto praise and honor and glory, it needs to be tried in the furnace of affliction. There is no other way, and that is why God disciplines us.

Holiness is the end, and holiness is worth it. Holiness is not a life of gloom and doom as some want you to believe. Holiness is not getting rid of all the happiness in your life. Holiness is about getting rid of all the junk in your life that parades as pleasure but is really weighing you down and killing you. Holiness is about mortifying the parasites in our souls that keep us from pure and true and lasting joy. Sin leads ultimately to misery and death. Holiness is life: "shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live?" (9). "Light is sown for the righteous, and gladness for the upright in heart" (Ps. 97:11). It is the reason our Lord said that those who are pure in heart are blessed (Mt. 5:9), and why those who hunger and thirst after righteousness are filled

(7). It is the reason the psalmist wrote, “It is good for me that I have been afflicted; that I might learn thy statutes” (Ps. 119:71).

Holiness and righteousness ought to be our aim because there is no real fellowship with God apart from it. We really ought to be willing to do whatever it takes to root the sins out of our lives, for sin is insanity, a trading of the true and living and glorious God for the vanishingly small ends of self-gratification through poisoned lusts and ambitions. Thus, the apostle John writes, “And these things write we unto you, that your joy may be full. This then is the message which we have heard of him, and declare unto you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all. If we say that we have fellowship with him, and walk in darkness, we lie, and do not the truth: but if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship one with another, and the blood of Jesus Christ his Son cleanseth us from all sin” (1 John 1:4-7). Do you want fullness of joy? You won’t find it through serving self, but in glad obedience to Christ. You will only find it in fellowship with the living God and he is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

Brothers and sisters, we have to take the long view here. The problem with worldly wisdom is that it is always short-sighted. It doesn’t look to heaven, and it doesn’t look to eternity. It doesn’t even look down the road beyond what it can see at the moment. Right now, it is true that pain and suffering are “grievous, not joyous.” But “afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness to them that are exercised” by the discipline of our Father.

We can see here just how truly blessed is the righteous man and woman. For righteousness is always accompanied with peace: “And the work of righteousness shall be peace; and the effect of righteousness quietness and assurance forever” (Isa. 32:17). All humanity seeks for peace. The only way to find it is through that of which it is the effect – righteousness. This is why we read in the prophesy of Isaiah: “I [God] create the fruit of the lips; Peace, peace to him that is far off, and to him that is near, saith the Lord; and I will heal him. But the wicked are like

the troubled sea, when it cannot rest, whose waters cast up mire and dirt. There is no peace, saith my God, to the wicked” (Isa. 57:19-21).

The apostle Paul quotes from this passage in Isaiah in his letter to the Ephesians. He says, “But now in Christ Jesus ye who sometimes were far off are made nigh by the blood of Christ. For he is our peace, who hath made both one, and hath broken down the middle wall of partition between us; Having abolished in his flesh the enmity, even the law of commandments contained in ordinances; for to make in himself of twain one new man, so making peace; And that he might reconcile both unto God in one body by the cross, having slain the enmity thereby: And came and preached peace to you which were afar off, and to them that were nigh. For through him we both have access by one Spirit unto the Father” (Eph. 2:13-18). I want to end with these verses, because they are a good reminder that, though trials lead to holiness and righteousness and peace, they don’t do that because our suffering merits God’s favor. Our trials are not there to justify us before the Father. Our trials become blessings of peace because Jesus Christ has already purchased peace for us on the cross. The peace that he obtained through his suffering is the basis for all God’s saving blessings to us, including righteousness and peace which are often fruits of the trials God sends our way.

What should be our response to suffering in our life? We should first of all see it for what it is: if you are a believer, see it as loving and good and wise discipline from your heavenly Father. And see it for the fruit it produces: holiness and righteousness and peace. Therefore respond to it, not with bitterness and fear and faintheartedness, but with faith and hope and courage. May the Lord do that for all of us, so that our knees are not weak, nor our hands hang down, but may we run the race before us and endure to the end, looking to Jesus the Author and the Finisher of our faith.

# CHAPTER XLVI

## THE NECESSITY OF HOPE AND HOLINESS (HEB. 12:12-17)

WHAT BEGINS AT 12:12 and goes basically to the close of this epistle, are a series of practical exhortations to apply the great truths of the previous verses and chapters. You see this in the word, “Wherefore,” at the beginning of verse 12. Not that application begins here. In fact, we noted that, though application has been happening throughout the epistle (especially in the warning sections), there was a definite sea change at 10:19, from exposition to application. However, the extended illustration of persevering faith in chapter 11 gives itself to further exhortation, and that’s how we should see these and the following verses. We are to take the examples of faith and faithfulness so carefully set before us in the Faith Hall of Fame (chapter 11) and seek to imitate and be inspired by their lives.

Two aspects of this application are in the verses before us, first, as it applies to our hope in Christ, and second, as it applies to our personal walk with the Lord. You see the first in verse 12, and the second in verses 13-17. However, both these things have to do with one overarching

concern, and that is the concern over apostasy. In other words, we are to walk in hope so that we don't give into despair and fall away from the faith, and we need to walk in holiness so that we don't give in to the deceitfulness of sin and fall away from the faith.

### The Necessity of Hope (12)

#### Hanging Hands and Weak Knees

When the author encourages his readers to “lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (12), he is using language from the prophet Isaiah. Here is what the prophet said: “Strengthen ye the weak hands, and confirm the feeble knees. Say to them that are of a fearful heart, Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come with vengeance, even God with a recompense; he will come and save you” (Isa. 35:3-4). The language of the prophet makes it very clear that the reference to weak hands and feeble knees is an illustration of the posture of people who have become thoroughly discouraged through fear and despair. They lacked the courage and hope needed to face the future. It's all been taken out of them. So when we read in the epistle of Hebrews to lift up hanging hands and to strengthen the feeble knees, we should read it as a call to courage and hope.

Certainly the examples of past faith and faithfulness should be an encouragement to us. We can think that we have been given too much to handle or that we are just not good enough to face a foreboding and uncertain future. However, when we read the record of history, we find that some of the brightest examples of faith were not spiritual giants but rather ordinary people, even people with troubled pasts! They were not perfect at all. To be honest, I don't think I would have put Samson or Barack or Jephthah in Hebrews 11, but there they are. You have people like Rahab the harlot whose knowledge of the God of Israel was only through what she had heard of the reports of Israel from other pagans – and yet she believed and perished not.

Then you have the examples of all those unknown saints at the end of the chapter who endured those terrible trials and persecutions and yet persevered to the end. We may think we have it rough, but when we look at what they had to endure, most of our trials pale in comparison. You have people with problematic pasts and people facing overwhelming odds, and the commonality among all of them is that they endured in the faith. Don't let your personal failures cause your hands to hang down, and don't let the greatness of the burden weaken your knees. Fear not, trust in God and be strong – for at the end of the day it is not even our faith that is the great resource but our great God who saves those who trust in him.

Another reason to be discouraged is to misread our trials as if they were proof that God has abandoned us. That is the immediate context (verses 5-11) and we dealt with that last week. We argued that, if we see that our trials are part of God's training for us, and if we see them in the context of his Fatherly discipline and as an expression of his concern and care for us, we need not be discouraged. For we can be sure that the trials God has sent our way for our good will not overwhelm us in the end. So lift up the hands which hang down. Strengthen the feeble knees. Be strong in the Lord and in the power of his might.

We need hope and this is a call to hope based upon the realities which are presented to us throughout this epistle. However, the main concern of this passage has more to deal with holiness than hope. One of the reasons for this is that you cannot sustain hope in Christ while living in sin. I know a lot of people in our day have said that they are no longer Christian because of this thing the church has done or that thing the church believes. If you pry into their lives, however, I think you'll find that for many folks those are just excuses for the love of sin. They don't have the Christian hope because they don't want the Christian's holiness.

### The Necessity of Holiness (13-17)

Brothers and sisters, we must be holy. We need to understand not only the benefits of holiness but also the necessity of it. We need to grasp the fact that without holiness no one will see the Lord. I am increasingly concerned that in our day the devil's cunning strategy is to lull people to sleep by getting them to affirm all sorts of orthodox things about Jesus while they yet functionally deny his Lordship. I am concerned that the fundamental problem with the modern evangelical world is calling him, Lord, Lord, and not doing the things which he has commanded to be done (Lk. 6:46). It doesn't matter how many creeds you say you believe if you are living in sin. It doesn't matter if you affirm the Nicene and Athanasian and Apostle's Creeds, or the Westminster Confession or the 1689 Baptist Confession, if at the same time you willingly embrace and affirm things that you know are contrary to God's word.

How does this passage command and commend holiness to us? I'll put it to you this way: it tells us to look down, to look around, and to look up. That is, we are to look down to our feet, we are to look around to the people who are running around us and with us, and we are to look up to the Lord whose race we are running and for whose kingdom we are living.

Look down and make straight paths for your feet.

In verse 13 we are commanded to "make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way, but let it rather be healed." The idea here is probably going back to the sports analogy and so the concern here is that the runners stay in their lane. You don't want to be running all over the track, wandering here and there, for if you do, you will use up energy needlessly and you might end up wandering off the track altogether.

What does it mean to stay in the lane? How do we apply this to our lives? Well, I think we can be helped once again by considering the Old Testament background to these words. In Proverbs, Solomon writes to his son (remember, the author of Hebrews had just quoted from



Proverbs chapter three): “Ponder the path of thy feet, and let all thy ways be established [or, “all thy ways shall be ordered aright”].

Turn not to the right hand nor to the left: remove thy foot from evil” (Prov. 4:26-27). What this implies is that making straight paths for your feet is analogous to walking in obedience to God’s law, to his will for your life as it is expressed in the Bible. To be turned out of the way, on the other hand, is to wander off into disobedience and rebellion.

Of course, the way we stay in the lane is by conforming our lives to God’s word. The runners don’t get to decide where to run. It’s laid out for them. The same is true with us. Let the word of God guide you. Read the Scriptures and obey them.

Here we see the concern with apostasy. To be turned out of the way is another reference to that fearful reality that the author of Hebrews never tires of warning his readers about. In other words, we are not dealing here with temporary lapses into disobedience, but with people who end up settling into a mindset of hostility to the Lord and to his doctrine.

To see this, note that the Greek verb here is used several times in Paul’s letters to Timothy with this same concern in mind. For example, in 1 Timothy 1:5-6, we are told that “the end of the commandment is charity out of a pure heart, and of a good conscience, and of faith unfeigned: from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling.” He is referring to false teachers who were seeking to draw Christians from the faith. In 5:15, he says, referring to certain women in the church who had abandoned their commitment to Christ (cf. 5:12): “For some are already turned aside after Satan.” In 2 Tim. 4:4: “And they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and they shall be turned unto fables.” When we read in Heb. 12:13, that the alternative to staying in the path of obedience is being turned out of the way, we should hear our author’s concern that they do not end up abandoning the faith.

Again, how do we keep from doing that? We do so by following in the paths determined and outlined by the Scriptures. We don’t

conform ourselves to the world but to the word of God.

Look around and pursue peace with all men.

Then we read in verse 14: “Follow peace with all men.” The word follow there is perhaps better translated pursue. It is, in fact, the same word that is sometimes translated persecute! In other words, this is a relentless following, a pursuit that presses on to the end. What we are to press for, to follow, to pursue, is peace with all men. It should not surprise us that we are encouraged to pursue this, especially when we have just been told in verse 11 that the effect and fruit of God’s discipline in our lives is “the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” God has put us at peace with himself, and having done that, he makes us peacemakers who are called the children of God (Mt. 5:11).

It is also important for us to note that an essential part of holiness is being peacemakers. That’s why this is part of the Beatitudes, and why the apostle puts things like “revilers” in the list of things that keep people from inheriting the kingdom of God. You can be orthodox to the hilt, but if you hate the brethren, you are not in Christ. This is one of the major emphases of John’s first epistle. Loving the brothers and sisters is an evidence of salvation – and without it, we cannot say that we are saved at all.

Now to follow peace with all men is clearly a corporate, not a private, concern. It is a reminder that we are members of a community, especially the community of the church. However, we need to be careful that we don’t end up still making this a private thing. We can think that we have fulfilled this command as long as we keep to ourselves and stay out of other people’s business. Now certainly we are not to be busybodies; the Bible forbids that too. This verse doesn’t say to follow peace by being apart from all men, but to pursue peace with all men. This is a very corporate, interpersonal command. We aren’t obeying it when we go off and hide from everyone, as much as some of us would like to do that.

Now what about that word “all”? Is this for all men everywhere? I’m not sure that it is. The word “men” is not in the Greek text and the referent to all is meant to be supplied from the context. What does the context say? In verses 6 and 8, the “all” are all God’s children. Now we are certainly to be at peace with all men, whether they are believers or not. The apostle Paul will write, “Provide things honest in the sight of all men. If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men” (Rom. 12:17-18). I think perhaps the emphasis here is on the pursuit of peace with fellow believers, and that doesn’t mean just avoiding conflict. It includes that, of course. In the Bible, the concept of peace is so much richer than that. To have peace is to have the fullness of blessing from God. When Paul sums up the blessings we have in Christ, it is usually in the words grace and peace. To pursue peace, therefore, we are seeking the spiritual wellbeing of our brothers and sisters in Christ. We are seeking to help them run the race set before them, looking to Jesus.

Of course, that means that we are constantly seeking to live in harmony with one another. It means that we are striving to work together and to be of one mind. That is the way that we persevere in the faith. Not simply not being mad at each other, but actively seeking to promote unity and harmony in the faith once delivered to the saints. That is the environment in which perseverance in the faith is best nurtured.

Look up and pursue the holiness without which no man will see the Lord.

We are to bear one another’s burdens. We must also bear our own (Gal. 6:4), and if we are not doing the latter, we cannot do the former. We don’t need unholy men and women scolding others over their sins and failings. We need holy men and women showing others how to live and being a good example. And that brings us to the last part of our text: we are to pursue the holiness without which no man will see the Lord. This is the main thought for verses 14-17. Everything else hangs

on this, as we shall see. We are not only to pursue peace with all, but we are to pursue holiness. Again, this is a relentless pursuit. You aren't going to catch holiness like you catch the cold. You are going to have to make every effort to put the sin in your life to death and to put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

The reason we should pursue holiness is that, apart from it, we will not see the Lord. Let's meditate on that for a bit. What does that mean? When we consider Mt. 5:8 ("Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God") and 1 John 3:2-3 ("...when [Jesus] shall appear, we shall be like him; for we shall see him as he is. And every man that hath this hope in him purifieth himself, even as he is pure."), I take this to mean that holiness in the present is inseparable from heaven in the future. Or, to put it another way: those who live and wallow in their sin will not be saved.

You need to understand that there are damnable behaviors. Yes, there are damnable heresies, but there are also damnable behaviors. Thus the apostle Paul writes, "For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolator, hath nay inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience" (Eph. 5:5-6). Or, as he put it to the Corinthians, "Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolators, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind [those last two phrases describe men who practice homosexuality], nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11). It really does matter how you live. This is not legalism. This is not works-based salvation. It is simply the Biblical teaching that grace changes people, that Christ did not come to save his people in sin but to save them from sin. It is saying, "Little children, let no man deceive you: he that doeth righteousness is

righteous, even as he is righteous. He that committeth sin is of the devil; for the devil sinneth from the beginning. For this purpose the Son of God was manifested, that he might destroy the works of the devil” (1 Jn. 3:7- 8).

Now to show you this in the text we are considering here in Hebrews 12, it is important to note that everything that follows verse 14 hinges grammatically on this verse. We are to pursue holiness – how do we do that? Well, these verses tell us that we do so by “looking diligently” or by “being careful” of three things: we are look carefully that (1) no one fails to attain the grace of God, (2) no one becomes a root of bitterness and defiles many, and (3) that no one is like Esau, as a fornicator and a godless man.

Now that last part is very important here. Those who are unholy are like Esau. Of course, one of the things about Esau is that he is unmistakably an example of one who is non-elect. We know so because the Bible says so: “Jacob have I loved, but Esau have I hated,” says the Lord (Rom. 9:13). This statement tells me that, when Hebrews 12:14 says that without holiness no one will see the Lord, it is not just talking about missing out on some earthly or even spiritual blessing this side of heaven. Rather, this is a clear warning that those who persist in their sins can have no real assurance that they will enjoy the eternal salvation which our Lord purchased for his people.

I want you to notice how holiness is motivated. It is motivated both positively and negatively. Positively, in terms of seeing the Lord. Negatively, in terms of the bitter fruit of apostasy and sin.

The positive motivation to holiness (14): “without which no man shall see the Lord.”

The primary motivation to holiness is to see the Lord. Now there is a real sense in which all men will inevitably see the Lord. But they will not want to see him. They will have to be dragged before his presence as they cry to the rocks and the hills to cover them and to hide them

from the wrath of the Lamb of God. That is clearly not what is being thought of here. Rather, this is a seeing with delight and anticipation. This is the hope behind “we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is.” It is the hope of being with the Lord forever, expressed by the apostle in the words, “I have a desire to depart and to be with Christ, which is far better.”

This desire is because the saved are those who love God, the God of the Bible, the Triune God – Father, Son, and Spirit. They are animated by this love, as Paul was – “For the love of Christ constraineth us” (2 Cor. 5:14). This love will compel them to obedience, not primarily because they have to, but because they want to. They want to please the one they love above all earthly loves. As our Lord himself put it, “If ye love me, keep my commandments” (Jn. 14:15).

I think one of the reasons we often fall into sin is because we forget our Lord and do not keep him before our minds and hearts. We start getting impressed with trivial things and forget about the infinite majesty and loveliness of our Savior, like a little kid who gets obsessed with a video game when the Grand Canyon is right there before him. We need verses like this to remind us that, when we sin, we are turning from the Lord, and we are putting our lot in with those who don’t want to enjoy his fellowship and don’t want to see him. May it never be with us! May we constantly keep the Lord before us.

#### The negative motivation to holiness (15-17)

There are three reasons why we should not want to walk away from the Lord.

(i) First, we are to look “diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God” (15). Now I want you to notice that this verse does not say, “lest any man lose his salvation.” That’s not what it says. Rather, “lest any man fail of the grace of God,” or, if you prefer, “lest any man miss or fail to reach the grace of God.” You cannot lose the grace of God, at least not in the sense of losing the saving blessings of grace in Christ.

Now the apostle Paul did tell the Galatians, “Christ is become of no effect unto you, whosoever of you are justified by the law; ye are fallen from grace” (Gal. 5:4). However, this falling from grace is a reference to a rejection of the doctrine of salvation by grace by embracing a scheme of salvation by works of the law. Paul is not saying that you can lose your salvation; he is saying that if you reject grace in favor of works you are rejecting Christ, and that there is no salvation for those who do so.

We can’t lose what God preserves. He keeps us in the faith (1 Pet. 1:5). He tells us that his sheep will never perish and that no man can pluck them out of his or his Father’s hands (Jn. 10:27-29). No one can separate God’s elect from the love of Christ (Rom. 8:35-39). All who are predestined will be glorified – it is an unbreakable chain of saving blessings (Rom. 8:29-30).

So what is meant by failing or missing the grace of God? Well, I think he means that those who apostatize from the faith, who walk away from Jesus as Lord and Savior and reject him as such, will not be saved. It is grace that saves us (Eph. 2:5, 8); to miss it is therefore to remain unsaved. Again, not to lose salvation, but rather not to get it in the first place. This is a terrifying supposition, and it ought to make us tremble. It ought to remind us that at the end of the wide gate and broad path is destruction, eternal and unchangeable. It ought to make us flee, not fritter with, the wrath to come.

(ii) The second bitter fruit of apostasy is pointed out for us in the second part of verse 15: “lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled.” Once again, it is helpful to note the Old Testament background to this phrase. In Deuteronomy 29:18, Moses warns the children of Israel not to worship the gods of the nations around them, “lest there should be among you man, or woman, or family, or tribe, whose heart turneth away this day from the LORD our God, to go and serve the gods of these nations; lest there should be among you a root that beareth gall and wormwood.” A root of bitterness is therefore a reference to a kind of person, a person who walks

away from the true God for false gods and who corrupts those around him – “and thereby many be defiled.”

One of the things about becoming hard to the things of God and soft to the things of this world in rebellion against God is that it not only affects us but those around us. Don't ever think that your sins just affect yourself. They don't; when you decide to part ways with faithfulness to Christ, you become a root of bitterness, and those who share the fellowship of our life and choices will be poisoned by them. In fact, note the word many. Sin ought to repulse us, not only in terms of what it does to us, but also what it does to those around us. This is the opposite of pursuing peace with all – it is a course of personal and public ruin. It not only destroys our own lives but our marriages and our families and our churches and our friendships. It turns hopeful prospects into barren and deserted wastes. May God prevent us from going down that road.

(iii) Finally, we come to verses 16-17 which describe the bitter fruit of sin and apostasy in terms of Esau and his lifestyle and choices. We've already noted that this is an enlightening reference because we know Esau was not saved. We are warned against being like Esau, who is described as a “fornicator” and a “profane person.” More importantly, he is the one “who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright.”

This is a reference to Genesis 25:29-34, where we are told that Esau came in from the field one day very hungry and Jacob made a deal with him: Esau would sell Jacob his birthright and Jacob in return would give him a meal. Esau agreed, and in the words of the Genesis text, “thus Esau despised his birthright.”

Now what is the significance of this incident? Well, you need to understand that the birthright was the thing that allowed one of a man's sons, usually the oldest, to receive the inheritance and to lead the family after the passing of the father. You also need to realize that more is going on here than just physical possessions. Isaac was the inheritor of the blessing of Abraham. That blessing was a witness to the gospel. It was a part of the unfolding of God's redemptive work in human history.



So Isaac was going to pass that heritage on to his son Esau through the birthright, but Esau despised that. He thought more of a quick meal than he did of the promise of God to Abraham and Isaac. He rejected that. And so there is a religious significance to this. That's why Esau is called a profane person, an irreligious person, an unholy person. In doing so, Esau is the quintessential example of the worldly man who sells his soul for the things of this world and neglects the infinitely more important and valuable things of the kingdom of God.

You also see this in the blessing, which is mentioned in the next verse: "For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected." This is the blessing that was meant for Esau, but which Jacob ended up receiving (cf. Gen. 27). Although it is true that Jacob got this through deceit, the Biblical text makes it very clear, without excusing the deceit, that it was God's plan all along to give the blessing to Jacob. Why? Because Esau was a profane man, a man of the world. The Lord was not about to let him receive the blessing of Abraham through Isaac. In fact, we are told that "he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears."

Esau was like so many people today. They want the blessing, but they don't want the holiness. They want heaven, but they don't want the God of heaven. They may weep when they realize what are the consequences of their sins, but they don't want to part with their sins. Their heart is in the world. Bread and potatoes are more important to them than the fear of God. Paul describes the Esaus of his day: "whose end is destruction, whose god is their belly, and whose glory is in their shame, who mind earthly things" (Phil. 3:19).

The point of this, and the way this is meant to function to motivate us to holiness and away from apostasy, is to see the dreadful exchange we make when we lay up riches in this world and are not rich toward God. It is consummate folly (Lk. 12:15-21). To reject the gospel and to go back to the world is like Esau selling his birthright for a bowl of beans.

## Conclusion

Hope and holiness go together. Those who lift up their hands and strengthen their knees and who hope in God and remain courageous are precisely those who are unwilling to sell their souls in order to gain the world. Holiness doesn't come easily. It is possible for the Christian because of what Christ has done in them and for them. But it is still something that must be pursued relentlessly. We need to be reminded of its necessity and the terrible fruit that comes when we harden our hearts to the things of God. Don't become like Esau. He is the ultimate antihero to all the men and women of the faith in chapter 11 whose lives are meant to inspire us. Brought up in a godly home, he nevertheless rejected the inheritance of his fathers – an inheritance that spoke of the gospel and the hope in a coming Messiah who would bring blessing to all the world – for the pleasures of this world. We know the end of Esau. “Jacob have I loved, and Esau have I hated,” says the Scriptures. “What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?” asked our Lord. “Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul? Whosoever therefore shall be ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation; of him also shall the Son of man be ashamed, when he cometh in the glory of his Father with the holy angels” (Mk. 8:36-38).

## CHAPTER XLVII

### THE TWO MOUNTAINS (HEB. 12:18-24)

HOW DO YOU CONVINCE Jewish Christians to remain faithful to Christ, when they are under tremendous pressure to abandon their faith for a Judaism without Jesus? One way you do it by showing that Judaism without Jesus is not a religion that provides for salvation from sin. And you do it by showing that Jesus does provide full and certain salvation because he is the Son of God who is also the true high priest before God who accomplished redemption and atonement. That is what our author has been doing throughout this epistle.

He comes back to that now in the verses before us, and the way he does this is to use a Biblical metaphor that contrasts Mount Sinai to Mount Zion. Both of these mountains were of tremendous significance to the Israelites. On Mount Sinai the people of Israel received the Law of God. Mount Zion, the location of Jerusalem, was the symbol of the nation of Israel and its strength. It was also a symbol for the eternal city, not Rome but heaven. You see this in Galatians, where the apostle Paul contrasts the earthly Jerusalem with the heavenly Jerusalem: the former symbolizes Sinai and the Old Covenant and the latter the New Covenant (Gal. 4:21-31). You also see this in the book of Revelation,

where heaven comes down to earth in the form of the heavenly, or new, Jerusalem (Rev. 21:1, ff).

You will also remember that the gathering of the Israelite nation before Sinai was on the front end of their wilderness journeying. During the wilderness era, the thirty-eight years following their refusal to obey God to go in and conquer Canaan, most of the men perished. We've seen that recounted in chapters 3 and 4 of this epistle. Even though they received the Law, they remained in unbelief, and they suffered the consequences of God's wrath. They never entered into God's rest. You can see how Sinai can be a symbol for judgment, not salvation. That is how it is pictured here.

It is not that God's Law is bad. As the apostle Paul will put it to the Romans (Rom. 7:9-13), God's law is holy. We are the problem. We are sinners, and when you put sinners who want self-sovereignty in front of the demands of God's Law, what happens is the push-back of rebellion and more sin. What this shows is that Sinai is insufficient to save. It can reveal to a man his sin but apart from a Mediator, apart from a true sacrifice for sin, he will perish. The author does not want them to go back to a Christless Judaism, for that would be to abandon Jerusalem for Sinai. Instead, he wants them to go to Mount Zion (indeed, he is hopeful that is where they already are!), where Jesus is the mediator of a new covenant.

Now we can read these verses and think that they are not really relevant for us. We might think or say that we really don't care about either of these mountains. Like the Samaritan woman who encountered our Savior at Jacob's well, we might have our own mountain at which we worship (cf. John 4:20). What I want to argue this morning is that everyone will face one of these two mountains. You will either end up at Sinai or you will end up on Mount Zion. I am, of course, speaking figuratively, but that for which the figures stand are of infinite consequence to you and me.

The text of verses 18-24 is clearly divided into two parts. In verses 18-21, the readers are told that they have not come to Sinai, and what follows

are seven things that characterize Sinai. Then in verses 22-24, they are told that they have come to Zion, and what follows are seven things that characterized Zion. There could not be any greater difference between two mountains!

What does it mean here to come? Every other time this word is used in this epistle, it is a reference to drawing near to God. In 4:16, it is coming boldly to the throne of grace. In 7:25, it is coming to God by Jesus. In 10:1 it is coming to the worship of God in the old tabernacle. In 10:22 is drawing near to God "in full assurance of faith." In 11:6, it is coming to God by faith. So the coming here in verses 18 and 22, is a coming before God. Here is what I want to argue for in this message: that these two mountains show us that we will and must appear before God, either at Sinai or at Zion, and that Zion is infinitely to be preferred to Sinai. The only way we can go from Sinai to Zion is through Jesus. It follows, then, that it is incredible folly to abandon Jesus for that would put us back at Sinai; and, on the other hand, if we find ourselves at Sinai, we should make our way to Jesus as quickly as we can. With these thoughts in mind, I want to make the following observations on this text.

*Where we think we are going and where we are actually going are not necessarily the same thing.*

The Hebrew Christians who were thinking about leaving the Christian faith for a safer Judaism might have thought this was a good choice. For them, it meant leaving a religion whose legality was in doubt for one which had the protection of the Roman Empire. It meant leaving a religion with a huge credibility deficit for one which was at least tolerated. It meant leaving stigma and persecution behind for acceptance and safety. All in all, a good choice! The author of Hebrews wants them to realize that they are leaving Zion for Sinai. They are leaving Jerusalem for judgment.

There is a similar pressure upon Christians today. One of the complaints about the Christian faith is that it insists upon certain things: a certain set of values that are now fundamentally at odds with modern American culture, and a certain set of beliefs that are seen to be outdated and unscientific. So people leave to embrace the cult of modernity and they think they have made a great choice. Now they can be more inclusive and loving, as the world sees it. They are embraced instead of shunned. They are honored instead of hated (where is all that love in the world, again?).

So people leave Mount Zion; they leave the Christian faith. They set out for a mountain of their own imagination, of their own creation. Or at least they think they do, but they will only end up at Sinai. The reason they will end up there is because, at the end of the day, they do not get to choose reality. Only God gets to do that.

Now it is true that, if this world is the product of undirected natural processes, if there is no God, then life truly has no meaning. If that's the case, the only meaning there is, is the meaning that you arbitrarily assign to it (although, you can't think too hard about that, or you will realize that your "meaning" is really meaningless). Or, to put it another way, there are no mountains. Nothing is fixed, but we live upon ocean, ever changing and always unstable. Why should we think that? Why should we believe that there is no God? Why should we believe there is no meaning? I know the common answer is that evolution proves this. But how so? Apart from the problems with evolution – and more scientists are beginning to see that the neo-Darwinian synthesis has too many problems to be sustainable as a viable theory for the complexity of life on earth (witness guys like the Yale scientist David Gelernter) – the fact of the matter is that it is fundamentally illogical to think that unguided processes can produce order and logic and life. It is not science that gives us this; it is atheism, which is fundamentally a philosophical position, not a scientific one.

We don't live, in any case, in a world where people really think that there are no mountains. Everyone believes in some sort of absolutes.

The thing is, if there are mountains – if there is this absolute reality out there – then you don’t get to define it. Only the one who made the mountains gets to define it. Only someone who stands outside the created order, who is not a piece of furniture in the universe, can tell us where the mountains are and what they mean.

That someone is God, and God has spoken; he has spoken in history and in the person of his Son. He has spoken in the Bible – we know this because Jesus – God’s Son – accepted the authority of the Old Testament and gave authority to the writers of the New. He tells us there are only two mountains. Our text tells us there are only two mountains. If you leave Zion, you will only find yourself at Sinai. There are no other options.

*Sinai represents reality apart from Christ.*

It is only judgment, darkness, and fear. In verses 18-21, the author recreates for us the experience of Israel gathered before Sinai. The “mount” in verse 18, is Mount Sinai. There are seven aspects of their experience that he highlights in these verses. First, there was the fact that it “might be touched.” What is meant by this? When you compare what is said about Mount Sinai with what is said about Mount Zion, you will see that many of the realities referred to that characterized Zion are not yet tangible. The innumerable company of angels, the names written in heaven, the spirits of men made perfect. That doesn’t mean they aren’t real, but it does mean that they are not yet tangible. Faith is “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen” (Heb. 11:1). I think one of the points being made here is that Sinai represents the tangible, the present order of things, but it is an order that is passing away (cf. 26-27). And it is passing away because of sin. Death is a part of the warp and woof of this world because of human sin and rebellion. It is why the apostle Paul said that “we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen

are eternal” (2 Cor. 4:18). That’s what this world is apart from Christ; it can be touched, yes, but it is passing away. If you want to grasp it, go ahead, but you will only have to give it up.

Second, Mount Sinai “burned with fire.” In Exodus 19, we read, “And Moses brought forth the people out of the camp to meet with God; and they stood at the nether part of the mount. And mount Sinai was altogether on a smoke, because the LORD descended upon it in fire: and the smoke therefor ascended as the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mount quaked greatly” (17-18). Fire in the Bible is very often the symbol of the judgment of God. Fire can purify, yes; but it can also consume. It purifies gold; it burns up chaff, and it will consume all who are outside of Christ. His “fan is in his hand, and he will thoroughly purge his floor, and gather his wheat into the garner; but he will burn up the chaff with unquenchable fire” (Mt. 3:12). It is not for no reason that hell is described in terms of fire. Even so, Mount Sinai burned with fire. If you are outside of Christ, this is what you will face – though not the fire that quickly passes away and burns itself up, but the fire that is unquenchable.

Third and fourth, we are told that Mount Sinai was shrouded in “blackness” and “darkness.” This is emphasized in Deut. 4:11 – “And ye came near and stood under the mountain; and the mountain burned with fire unto the midst of heaven, with darkness, clouds, and thick darkness.” King Solomon said that God said that he would dwell in thick darkness (2 Kings 8:12). But it is darkness only because he who is light cannot reveal himself to sinful men without consuming them. It is our sin that brings the darkness. It was darkness that covered Egypt in the plagues, and it was a darkness that could be felt. Even so, our sin brings darkness. Our sin separates from God. Our sin blinds us to the glory of God. Thus it is that the apostle tells us that to walk in sin is to walk in darkness and to walk with God is to walk in the light (1 John 1). Darkness is again a sign of God’s judgment.

Fifth, there was a “tempest,” or a whirlwind. This was no quiet fire, nor peaceful darkness. It was a storm of fire and smoke and darkness.



The mountain was shaking. It was as if the entire landscape transformed suddenly and apocalyptically into a furnace to burn away all the enemies of God.

Sixth, we are alerted to the “sound of a trumpet.” “And when the voice of the trumpet sounded long, and waxed louder and louder, Moses spake, and God answered him by a voice” (Exod. 19:19). The trumpet was calling the people to attention. There was no avoiding this confrontation. There was no ignoring it. This was not a trumpet call you could pretend not to hear. God’s judgment is like that. The Lord may allow people to go on in their sins for a time. He may give them mercy for many years in fact. But there is coming a Day of Reckoning. There is coming a Day of Judgment, and the wicked will not escape it.

Seventh, there was “the voice of words.” Now this might seem anticlimactic in contrast to fire and tempest. The point is, whatever else they saw, the children of Israel didn’t see the form of God: “And the LORD spake unto you out of the midst of the fire: ye heard the voice of words, but saw no similitude; only ye heard a voice” (Deut. 4:12). This is not only to prevent them from future idolatry; it was also to underline their distance from God. This is further reinforced in the rest of verse 19 and also 20 (of Heb. 12): “which voice they that heard intreated [begged] that the word should not be spoken to them any more: for they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart.” The voice of God is frightening apart from Christ, for it will finally convince us of our sins when we have spent our entire lives denying it. Those who spend their days denying their need of salvation will one day have their mouths shut as they are arraigned in the presence of the living God (cf. Rom. 3:19).

Now to understand just how awful this experience was, listen to the testimony of Moses: “And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake” (21). This was Moses, the man of God. Here was a holy man, a chosen man. And yet he did not look at this as if it

were some fireworks display. He didn't find this exciting. He found it utterly terrifying. What makes us think we will find Sinai any different?

Listen, if you've had even a small realization of just how holy God is and how utterly exposed you are to his wrath, you would be right where Moses is. If you've ever experienced this, thank God. So many people today shrug this off. They say that it is a bad thing that Christians tell others about the judgment of God and that they should be afraid of it. But if you are not afraid of it now, you will be later, only then it will be too late. You ought to thank God for his mercy if you have ever found yourself in front of Mount Sinai. Only when you realize that, will you flee for mercy under the refuge of Mount Zion.

Do you know that you are a sinner? Do you know what that means? If you think you're alright, why do you think that? What standard are you judging yourself by? Your own? What makes you think God will use your standard? My friend, God has revealed his standard. You will find it trumpeted on Mount Sinai. You will find it in his law, not in the licentious libertinism of our day and age. You will find it in a law that judges your motives and your thoughts and your dreams as well as your words and actions. Think about it: how embarrassed and humiliated would you be if everyone else could see your thoughts? What makes you think, then, that God – whose word will penetrate to the very depths of your inner self – will think you are okay? I can tell you on the basis of God's own word, he will not! You are there before Sinai, and you will not solace for your fears or atonement for your sins. You will only find darkness, fire, tempest, and judgment.

*Zion represents reality in Christ.*

It is this reality that is portrayed for us in verses 22-24. You see that in verse 24, where Jesus is the mediator of the new covenant. There are seven things about Sinai we should fear; even so there are seven things about Zion we should cherish.

First, Zion is called “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” When you come to God through Jesus, this is where you come. This is the city that Abraham looked for: “But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (Heb. 11:16). Whereas Sinai points to the present order of things, Zion points us to the future. It points us to heaven. It points us to a place: “I go to prepare a place for you,” our Lord told his disciples, “And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto myself; that where I am, there ye may be also” (Jn. 14:2-3). This is not a city that you come to apart from Christ; you only get to this through him (6).

Cities in our day have a pretty bad rap, not all of it undeserved, because they can be places where people are not safe, where there is more pollution, more poverty, more trash, more disease, less space, and less privacy. But in the ancient world, you were generally safer in a city. Cities had walls; villages didn’t. When our Lord says that he is preparing for us a place in a city, we should not think so much of the bad things we associate with the modern metropolis, but with a sense of belonging and safety. That is what our Lord provides to those in Christ.

Because it is the city of the living God, we can be sure that we will be forever safe there. In the book of Revelation, when Satan is released from his prison and gathers his armies together to fight against the Lord, they “compassed the camp of the saints about, and the beloved city.” What was the result? Did their siege work? Is the city of God safe? Of course it is! “And fire came down from God out of heaven, and devoured them. And the devil that deceived them was cast into the lake of fire and brimstone, where the beast and the false prophet are, and shall be tormented day and night for ever and ever” (Rev. 20:9-10).

What is this city like? The apostle John tells us: “And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth were passed away; and there was no more sea. And I John saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down from God out of heaven, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a great voice out of heaven

saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself shall be with them, and be their God. And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away” (Rev. 21:1-4). This is very unlike Sinai! Sinai was a place to flee from; this is a place to long for, to hope for, to anticipate, a place given to us by Christ.

Second, Zion is the place of “an innumerable company of angels.” Now at this point, I need to address a translation issue. The KJV puts “general assembly” with “church of the firstborn.” However, if you look at the structure of the text, the word “and” seems to indicate where the commas should go (with the exception of the first, which seems to act in the sense of “even”). Hence, the seven things associated with Zion are (1) the city of the living God, the new Jerusalem, (2) and the innumerable company of angels in festal gathering (the meaning of the term “general assembly”), (3) and the church of the firstborn, (4) and God the judge of all, (5) and the spirits of just men made perfect, (6) and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, (7) and the blood of sprinkling. So I take “general assembly” with the “innumerable company of angels.”

Two things are mentioned about the angels. First, they are an innumerable company. The heavenly armies of God are not thin in the ranks. Second, they are gathered in heaven in joyful worship: the term “general assembly” is the Greek word *panegyris* and refers to “a joyful gathering in order to celebrate a festival”<sup>1</sup> – hence we could translate this as “an innumerable company of angels in festal gathering.” Again, this is a stark contrast to Sinai. Although angels were viewed as being at Sinai (cf. Ps. 68:17), they were not there to celebrate but to give the law. Here they are celebrating over the works of God in redemption: “there is joy in the presence of the angels of God over one sinner that repenteth” (Lk. 15:10). Heaven is not a place of gloom and darkness and fear, but a place of worship and joy and celebration.

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<sup>1</sup>William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* [WBC, vol. 47B], (Zondervan, 1991), p. 467.

We need to remember that we come to this when we come to Christ. The church on earth is united with the angels in heaven in the worship of the living God. It is easy to forget that, especially when we are small and of no account in this world. Imagine how small and powerless the members of a small house church in Rome must have felt! We are reminded here that every Christian church, no matter how small, is an outpost for the kingdom of heaven in this world. We have angels on our side. Greater is he that is with us than he that is in the world. When we worship in our closets and in our families and in our Sunday gatherings, we are joining the angels in festal gathering in heaven. Don't forget that. In particular, don't run from that back to Sinai.

Third, we are told that we come to the "church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven." Whether the word "church" here is used in a technical sense or in an informal sense, the reality is that this is pointing to believers who are viewed as belonging to one another because they belong to Christ. They are the "church of the firstborn" because they belong to him who is the firstborn from the dead (Col. 1:18). Whereas Esau gave up his rights as the firstborn, the church can never lose its inheritance. That is the idea in the phrase "which are written in heaven." What is written in heaven is written and cannot be erased. Again, we are reminded of the security that we have in Jesus, not just a temporal security, not just something that gives you earthly pleasures and comforts, but an eternal security which cannot be taken away.

Fourth, when you come to God through Jesus, you come to "God the Judge of all." Now this might at first seem out of place, especially considering the contrast with Sinai, and especially given what has just been said about festal gathering. We don't usually associate judgment with joy! But we must also remember that the church on earth is a persecuted church. Like their Lord, believers will be despised and rejected of men, whether you live in a religious world (like Jesus did) or in an irreligious one (like we do). That means that the church will suffer injustice in the present. The believers in Egypt have been treated as second class citizens for over a thousand years. We must not think that, if we just

communicate the gospel carefully and winsomely, the world will recognize the wisdom of God. It won't; it will hate it and persecute it. In the West, we have been living in a bubble that I think is bursting, and it will shock us if we are not prepared to accept the fact that in this world we will not always be treated fairly. So it is therefore a great comfort to know that the God of the church is the God of justice. That the throne of God will not only be the place at which the Lord says, "Come to me" to his elect, but at which the Lord will say, "Go away from me" to the wicked. We may not have justice now, but we will have it in the end – perfectly and finally. God will have the last word, not men.

Fifth, we come "to the spirits of just men made perfect." If "church" is a reference to the people of God presently on earth, this is a reference to the redeemed who are already in heaven. They are just because they are justified by the righteousness of Jesus Christ and they perfect because every moral and ethical and spiritual flaw has been cast out. To be in heaven is to know nothing more of sin. It is to be done with imperfection forever.

At the same time, the fact that this is a reference to "spirits" is also an indication that they have not yet been glorified. That will happen when their souls are reunited with their bodies in the resurrection. And yet, even though they are not yet glorified, this text does indicate that between death and the Second Coming of our Lord, the elect do not merely sleep – no, they are in heaven with God the Judge of all, and with the innumerable company of angels. It wouldn't make sense to say we come to a bunch of spirits in sleep. Rather, these are the souls of departed saints who are presently enjoying being with Christ in the Paradise of God.

Sixth, we come to "Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." Zion was the capital city of Israel and Judah under David and his heirs. Jesus is of course the ultimate Son of David who even now "holds his throne and sits in judgment there." To come to Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem is to come to Christ. It is to come to him as the mediator of the new covenant, and to find in him the fulfillment of all its promises. The

law of God written in the heart, having God as our God, having the forgiveness of sins, these blessings come to us in Christ and because of who he is and what he has done.

Finally, we come to “the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel.” In 11:4, Abel speaks of the faithfulness of God to those who trust in him. This is different here: this is a reference to Genesis 4:10, where Abel’s blood is crying to God for vengeance after his murder by Cain. So when we read that the blood of sprinkling (which is the blood of Jesus, the fulfillment of all the Old Testament sacrifices) speaks better things than that of Abel, we should interpret this to mean that the blood of Jesus doesn’t cry out for judgment, it cries out for mercy and grace. In fact, he becomes the mediator of the new covenant by his blood, so that it is because Jesus took the punishment in our place that we can get true peace with God.

So where are you? Are you at Sinai or are you at Zion? You will be at one or the other. If you think you can get into heaven on your own merit, if you think you can make it in because you are good enough, then you are at Sinai. Or you may think you don’t have to worry about Sinai or Zion – you are imagining yourself at a mountain of your own making. The reality is, if you have not come to God by Jesus Christ, you are in front of Sinai. There is no salvation there, my friend, only judgment. There is no hope there, only darkness and gloom and tempest. We can only find salvation in Jesus Christ and in him alone.

Have you come to Zion? Then rejoice! And thank God for his grace, his sovereign grace, that brought you there.

## CHAPTER XLVIII

### STEPS TO SERVICE (HEB.

12:25-29)

WHEN I TAUGHT AT THE UNIVERSITY, one of the challenges I had to deal with (and I think this is common to most, if not all, teachers) was the failure on the part of some students to actually learn what I had taught them. This was true even sometimes of students who came to class every time. They would sit there and take notes and nod their heads in agreement, but when it came to applying that knowledge to specific problems on an exam, they just couldn't do it.

What was the problem? Well, one of the problems is that some students think that seeing something is the same thing as truly knowing and understanding it. They've seen a particular problem worked on the board and were able to follow the steps and so on, and they think that's all there is to it. But it isn't. What I had to keep reminding my students was, if you really want to learn the material, you have to do the homework. This is true in most subjects; it certainly is true in mathematics. It is not a spectator sport; if you want to learn it, you have to be able to do it on your own. This is true also in the sports arena. You don't learn tennis by watching tennis but by playing tennis. You don't become a



Lebron James by just watching every basketball game that James has played. You have to play the game. You have to take knowledge and apply it.

As we get to the close of the book of Hebrews, we have to admit that we've been taught a lot. There is a lot of information here. There is a lot about the glory of the person and work of Jesus Christ. There is a lot about the promises of God to the believer. There is a lot about the privileges that God's children have. There is also a lot about the dangers that await those who abandon the faith. But all this was not simply information to take in. It was all meant to be applied. Doctrine is supposed to lead to duty, exhortation to application. The application was meant to be perseverance in the faith as opposed to abandoning the faith. The duty was steadfast love and loyalty to Jesus their Prophet, Priest, and King.

However, sometimes it can seem difficult to know how, specifically, to apply truth to our lives. It can, therefore, be very helpful when we are given concrete steps that show us the way. I think that this is sort of what is happening here in the verses before us. The point is about application. How do I go from halting between two opinions to being determined to follow Jesus, no matter what the cost? What practical, concrete steps can I take to apply God's word to my life?

In these verses, we have what I'm calling three steps to service. The first step is to hear God's word. You see this in verses 25-27 and 29. The second step is the response of gratitude. You see that in verse 28. Then what follows from that is service and worship. You see that in verse 28 also. I think these steps are not only important in and of themselves, but also their order is important. Let's consider these three things together and in their proper order.

We must hear God's word (25-27).

You might remember that one of the points I made in our very first message on this epistle is that it is bookended with emphases on the

fact that Jesus the Son of God is speaking to us and we need to hear him. In 1:2, we are told that “in these last days” God has “spoken unto us by his Son.” Now in verse 25 of chapter 12, we are told, “See that ye refuse not him that speaketh.” In that verse, the one who is speaking is also Jesus, for it is his blood that “speaketh better things than that of Abel” (24). So he has spoken, he is speaking, and he will speak (26-27). The problem with the Hebrew Christians appears to be that they had stopping hearing him as they should, and the author of this epistle is trying to awaken them to their need to listen to him. They have been listening to all the wrong things; they need to turn to eyes and ears to Jesus.

The same thing is often true of us. Too often we just end up listening to the world, a world that is alienated from God. This is a world that tells you that making money and keeping money is more important than laying up treasure in heaven. We listen to a world that tells us momentary comfort is more important than eternal life. It tells you that self-care is more important than loving your neighbor as yourself, and it has absolutely no category for the love of God. This is a world that tells you in fact not to listen to anything else or to give anyone or anything ultimate authority over your own heart. Of course, hopefully you see the irony in this. We end up thinking we are self-determining our own destiny and identity, but what we are really doing is just doing what the wider culture approves that we do. We are slaves, but only slaves to a society in rebellion against God, and that is not going to turn out well.

We need to listen to the Lord. So how do we do that? Well, first of all we need to know where to find the word of the Lord. The point of our text is that it is found in the words of Jesus. And that, in turn, tells us we ought to value the authority of the Holy Scriptures because our Lord himself accepted the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God and gave his authority to his apostles who in turn gave us the New Testament. We can have confidence in the Scriptures because we have confidence in Jesus, and we have confidence in Jesus because he

rose from the dead and vindicated his claim to be the Son of God and Savior of the world. If you are a Christian, you have experienced his power already in raising you from spiritual death to newness of life in Christ. What I am saying is, if you have a high view of Jesus, you must have a correspondingly high view of the written word, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. They go together; you really cannot have one without the other. You should in fact look with skepticism upon anyone who claims to honor Jesus but who then downplays the teaching of the Bible. Would you hear the Lord? Go to the Bible!

We not only need to understand where to find the word of the Lord; we also need to understand the seriousness of what the Lord is saying to us. This is something that the author of Hebrews has labored to get across throughout the pages of this epistle. It is a fact that just because something is serious doesn't mean people will take it seriously. If that were the case, there would probably be a lot fewer wars. Parents spend a lot of their time trying to convince their children that certain things are more serious than their kids think they are. Even so, the reality is that sometimes we don't take God's word seriously because we don't understand just how serious the issues are that it speaks to.

The seriousness of God's word to us in Christ is underlined in verses 25-27. There we are brought again before Sinai. When we read, "him that spake on earth" (25) and "whose voice then shook the earth" (26), we are meant to imagine Sinai. At Sinai, God's words literally shook the earth. That should have gotten the attention of everyone present. But it didn't and the reason why we know it didn't is that many of those same folks went on to rebel against God's word. They refused to obey. They turned back from Canaan in unbelief. Thus, as we have already been reminded in chapters 3-4, they came under the wrath of God. They rejected God's word, but that didn't mean they escaped God's judgment. They most certainly didn't. Their carcasses fell in the wilderness as a warning that those who turn their backs on God's command will face his unremitting judgment.

Note how the argument turns here. It is again an argument from the lesser to the greater. We saw this back in 2:3; we see it again here: “much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven” (12:25). What is the point being made here? The point is that the one who is speaking to us now is Jesus the Lord, enthroned at the right hand of the Father. He is risen and to him all power in heaven and earth has been granted. Jesus is speaking to us, but he is no longer speaking to us, as God did at Sinai, on the earth, but from heaven. He is speaking to us as such, as the risen Lord, in the gospel. He is speaking to us as such in the pages of the Scriptures. That’s why the apostle Paul could tell the Ephesians who had never personally met Jesus, “But ye have not so learned Christ; if so be that ye have heard him, and have been taught by him, as the truth is in Jesus” (Eph. 4:20-21). When we hear the gospel being preached in Spirit and in truth, we are hearing Christ. When we do so, we should not imagine him in his weakness. No, he is the King; he is your King and mine. The words of Christ are words from heaven: “Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly, that God hath made that same Jesus, whom ye have crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36).

There is a difference between God speaking on the earth at Sinai and God speaking from heaven in Christ. Sinai promised the children of Israel good harvests and healthy children and secure borders if they obeyed. The gospel promises real forgiveness of sins and joy in the presence of God forevermore. The blessings of the gospel are not material; they are spiritual. In other words, the difference between God speaking on earth (Sinai) and God speaking from heaven (in Christ) is the difference between the temporal and the eternal. Jesus did not rise from the dead and ascend into heaven in order to grant you a better life now. He did it so that those who believe in him will have eternal life. What the gospel promises is not health, wealth, and prosperity in this sad world, but life in the world to come. It doesn’t promise worldly success; it promises restoration into God’s fellowship. It means being justified be-

fore God and accepted with God on the basis of the grace of God in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

You see this also in verses 26-27: “Whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.” This is a quotation from Hag. 2:6, but the point is that at Sinai only the earth shook. Sinai only shook up the present order of things, so to speak. What the gospel points us to is something more permanent and more stable and more enduring. It points us to the eternal order, an order that will still remain when God rolls up this sin-sick earth and brings about the new heavens and new earth (cf. Heb 1:10-12). God’s voice will one day not only shake mountains but the very earth itself and remove anything that is not eternal, and only those who are in Christ will survive.

That means, to turn away from the gospel is to turn your back on the eternal, the most valuable. It is to turn your back on God’s Son himself, and that merits an even greater punishment than what happened to those who turned their backs on the God of Sinai. That is the point here. When you reject the gospel, you are not rejecting someone else’s recipe for a better you or for a better career or better earthly prospects. You are rejecting him who speaks from heaven, whose blessings are spiritual and eternal and whose authority is that of the risen and enthroned King of kings and Lord of lords.

Now please don’t misunderstand me here. I’m not saying that any of God’s elect will be lost or that God ultimately depends upon our response. God’s elect will not be lost, and God’s purpose of grace will stand. But what I’m saying is that Christ is Lord, and that he is the Lord of every single person on this planet, past, present, and future. It doesn’t matter who you are; he is your King, and because of that it is wicked to refuse to hear him. On the other hand, it is eternal life to hear him. So what should be our response to this? It should be to do what verse 25 says to do: “See that you refuse not him that speaketh”!

Just to underscore this admonition, the author comes back to it in verse 29: “For our God is a consuming fire.” God will shake loose all that is not eternal, and he is a consuming fire to destroy all who are not in Christ, “when the Lord Jesus shall be revealed from heaven with his mighty angels, in flaming fire taking vengeance on them that know not God, and that obey not the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ: who shall be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of his power” (2 Thess. 1:7-9). If that doesn’t show you how serious this is, I don’t know what can.

If you are convinced of the seriousness of the word of Christ, the gospel, how should you hear it? Well, you should receive Christ as Lord and Savior – that’s the language of Scripture (Jn. 1:12; Col. 2:6) – which is really just to recognize him for who he really is in fact. Trust in him as your Lord to rule you, and your Savior to redeem you. Stop living as if you called the shots; submit to him. Stop thinking that you are good enough or can become good enough; rest in the finished work of Christ. If you trust in Jesus as Lord and Savior, to see him as the one who has the right to rule over you and as the only one in whom you can find the forgiveness of sins, I can promise you on the basis of Scripture that you are saved, forgiven, and justified before God in Christ.

Then, don’t stop there. Preach the word of Christ to yourself on a daily basis. Meditate upon them. Apply them to your life. Pray God’s word. Take the language of Scripture and make it your own. Take the epistles and ask the Lord to make the commands a reality in your life. Ask him to help you to appropriate his promises for yourself. See that you refuse not the one who speaks from heaven. That’s the first step.

We must be grateful for God’s gifts (28)

The second step is gratitude: “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace” (28). Now this word “grace” here should be taken in the same sense as when we “say grace” at the table. We all recognize that to “say grace” is the same thing as to “give

thanks.” This is sometimes how the word grace is used in the New Testament. For example, in 1 Tim. 1:12, we read that Paul writes, “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord,” but the Greek literally says, “I have grace with Christ Jesus our Lord.” The translation “I thank Christ” is of course the correct one. To have grace in this sense is to be thankful. And so when our author says, “let us have grace” he means, “let us be grateful” (ESV).

Now this must follow, for to hear God’s word correctly, by the Spirit working in our hearts, means that we will receive it with hearts of gratitude to God. Those who hear God’s word and reject it and suppress it do the opposite. They become hardened in ingratitude. This is what the apostle says, for example, in Romans 1: “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold [down] the truth in unrighteousness . . . because that, when they knew God, they glorified him not as God, neither were they thankful; but became vain in their imaginations, and their foolish hearts were darkened. . . . who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshipped and served the creature more than the Creator, who is blessed forever. Amen” (Rom. 1:18, 21, 25). Here we see the opposite trajectory than we see in our text. In our text we see hearing God’s word leading to thankfulness leading to service and worship. In the Romans text, we see suppressing God’s word leading to unthankfulness leading to idolatry.

How does this work? Well, if you understand the seriousness of the danger we are in through our own sin and rebellion against God, and if you understand the grace of God which comes to us freely through the redemptive work of Christ on the behalf of sinners, and which is not received by works of righteousness but simply by faith, then you cannot but be grateful and thankful. You cannot help but say with the apostle Paul, “Thanks be unto God for his unspeakable gift!” (2 Cor. 9:15). (Incidentally, the Greek here also reads, “Grace [charis] to God for his inexpressible gift!”). The grace of God towards us must inevitably lead to the giving of grace back to God in expressions of gratitude and thankfulness. The relief that one feels when they understand the twin

truths that (1) they deserve God's judgment and (2) that God has freely by grace averted his judgment by placing it on Christ instead, must lead to the love to God and joy in God.

We see this in the very terms of the text before us. First, if we belong to Christ through faith, we should be thankful to be in God's kingdom, the kingdom of his dear Son. Paul wrote to the Colossians, "...giving thanks unto the Father, which hath made us meet [worthy] to be partakers of the inheritance of the saints in light: who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins" (Col. 1:12-14). If you are not in the kingdom of Christ, then you are under the power of darkness, ruled over by Satan and his emissaries, walking "according to the prince of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2), "taken captive by [the devil] at his will" (2 Tim. 2:26). To be translated into God's kingdom is to be delivered once and for all from the malign presidency of Satan over the soul. Thank God for that!

It also means that we are now living under the rule of God, that we are citizens in his kingdom. When Paul says to the Philippians in Phil. 3:20, "For our conversation is in heaven," that word conversation means citizenship. He is saying that the believer's ultimate citizenship is not in some earthly state or kingdom or empire but in heaven. As citizens of heaven, we are privileged with all the rights and responsibilities and the benefits that belong to such. It means that we have the Spirit of Christ. It means that we have access to the throne of grace to obtain mercy and help in time of need. It means that we are under the protection of the King of heaven and earth. What blessings we have! Not because we made ourselves worthy but because Christ made us worthy by his righteousness and blood. How thankful therefore we should be.

Second, if we belong to Christ through faith, we should be thankful for an unshakable kingdom. We have not only received a kingdom, but a "kingdom which cannot be moved." This world and all that is in it will one day be moved. That is the point of the previous verses (26-27). God's word which once shook Sinai will shake the universe to its very



foundations and remove everything sinful and corrupt. As the apostle Peter put it, “For . . . by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: but the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men” (2 Pet. 3:5-7). What this word of God will do, the apostle goes on to tell us: “But the day of the Lord will come as a thief in the night; in the which the heavens shall pass away with a great noise, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat, the earth also and the works that are therein shall be burned up” (10). We are those who are “looking for and hasting unto the coming of the day of God, wherein the heavens being on fire shall be dissolved, and the elements shall melt with fervent heat” so that “we, according to his promise, look for new heavens and a new earth, wherein dwelleth righteousness” (12-13).

Think about it: why are we so often sad? Where does much of our grief come from? It often comes from losing (or perhaps failure to attain) a good and valued gift. The kingdom of God, on the other hand, is a kingdom that, when it comes in its fulness and when we experience the new heavens and new earth that replaces this current order, will come with pleasures forevermore and joys undimmed by the passage of time. This is a kingdom where we really will live happily forever after. Why do you think we like stories like that? We like them because we were made for them. That’s what God gives us freely in Christ Jesus. We don’t have to be afraid of death or ignore the fact that we are going to die because, for the Christian, this is a door to be with Christ which is far better than any other alternative.

Third, we should be thankful for receiving this kingdom. Don’t miss this. “Wherefore we receiving a kingdom.” This is not something that we buy or merit or get on our own. It is not something that we work for. It is not something that we conquer or achieve, it is something we receive; it is a gift. This is grace.

Why? Because of the person and work of Jesus. He is the only reason anyone gets into this kingdom. “For by grace are ye saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God. Not of works, lest any man should boast” (Eph. 2:8-9).

Now suppose you are someone who is just realizing the danger to which your sins expose you. Suppose you want to flee from the wrath to come, but you don’t know where to run. What do you do? Do you set out reforming your life so that God will receive you? Do you work on cleaning yourself up first? Do you make yourself acceptable to God? Do you try to make yourself righteous?

No. For that is just the same as saying that it is your works that bring you into the kingdom. But that is not how we get in. We get in through grace. We get in not because of what we do or have done but solely on the basis of the righteousness of God in Christ. The apostle Paul explains, “But after that the kindness and love of God our Savior toward man appeared, not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy he saved us, by the washing of regeneration, and renewing of the Holy Ghost; which he shed on us abundantly through Jesus Christ our Savior; that being justified by his grace, we should be made heirs according to the hope of eternal life” (Tit. 3:4-7).

This is why the Bible says over and over and over and over again that we receive God’s gift through faith. Faith is the hand of the beggar. It doesn’t bring anything to God to give; it only opens to receive. As Toplady put it so well:

*Nothing in my hands I bring,  
Simply to thy cross I cling.  
Naked come to thee for dress,  
Helpless look to thee for grace;  
Foul I to the fountain fly:  
Wash me, Savior, or I die.*

If you see yourself to be a wretched sinner in need of salvation, if you ask me, as the Philippian jailor asked Paul, “What must I do to be

saved?” Then I can only answer as Paul did: “Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:30-31).

Now don’t misunderstand me. The call to Christ is also a call to repentance. It is a message of repentance and faith (cf. Acts 20:21). You don’t come to Christ to keep your sins, but to turn from them. You not only receive him as Savior but also as Lord. So you must turn from your sins. You need to understand that repentance is not the ground of your salvation. Only Christ is. You don’t trust in your repenting. You don’t even trust in your faith, but solely in the person and work of Christ. Don’t look to yourself but look to Christ. “Look unto me, and be ye saved all the ends of the earth: for I am God and there is none else” (Isa. 45:22).

Thank God this is not a kingdom achieved, but a kingdom received. Do you believe that? Then cultivate the attitude of gratitude.

We must serve the Lord with reverence and godly fear.

If we are truly thankful for the grace of God toward us in Christ Jesus, this will lead to a heart that wants to serve and worship him. Hence it is that we read, “let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (28). The word serve here is synonymous with worship. To serve God is to worship him. Those who will not hear God’s word and be grateful for his gospel will end up serving and worshiping the creature rather than the Creator (Rom. 1:25). On the other hand, those who hear his word and are thankful will turn from idols to serve the living and true God (1 Thess. 1:10).

So we must not think of this only in terms of doing stuff for God. This is more than just deeds and duty. This is primarily about a heart of devotion to God. You see this in the way our service to God is described: it is “with reverence and godly fear.” So this is not just doing stuff for God, it is a lifestyle of walking with God and before God. In particular, it is living out the realities that we say we believe. We believe we have received a kingdom. Very well, that means God is our King, and we are

his servants: let us therefore serve him. Let us seek his kingdom first, even before seeing to the needs of our food and clothing (Mt. 6:33). Above all, what this means is that we cultivate a sense of the presence of God in our lives.

Now this is what the author wants to encourage in the members of this little house church in Rome. It is the opposite of apostasy. They must not to turn back to a Christless Judaism. Nor should they turn to idols. Rather, they should be steadfast in serving the true and living God.

What about the words: “with reverence and godly fear”? Doesn’t this seem to point to a joyless, “why- so-serious” kind of religion? How is that attractive? Especially when it is motivated by verses like 29: “For our God is a consuming fire.” How is that consistent with a heart of thankfulness? How do we put these two things together? How do you have a person whose heart is brimming with gratitude to the Lord for his grace and at the same time filled with godly fear because God is a consuming fire?

Well, you really need to have both godly fear and gratitude. In reality, you can’t have one without the other. Take away the “our God is a consuming fire,” and you take away the breathtaking wonder that is salvation from sin. In other words, you take away any real grounds for gratitude. People who never take God’s justice and holiness and justice and power seriously, who never want to think about hell and the eternal punishment of the wicked, cannot have the kind of deep thankfulness that is commended in our text. They may smile but theirs is a thin smile pasted on a face that will not withstand the winds and waves of trouble and trials. Their joy is a thin joy, and their love is a thin love. Those who really stand before a holy God, who like Isaiah and Moses know what it means to tremble before the living God, they will never reach the bottom of the wonder of the grace and mercy and love of God. They will be forever grateful and thankful. As a result, their worship will not be something they have to do but a spontaneous and willing response

of a joyful heart to the grace of God in Christ. Their joy will be “joy unspeakable and full of glory” (1 Pet. 1:8).

So let us hear the word of God. Let us take it seriously. And let its truth cultivate the deep gratitude of faith in Christ, so that we worship and serve him, so that we serve the Creator rather than the creature, so that we serve him with our lips and lives, with our words and works, with reverence and godly fear.

# FINAL EXHORTATIONS

## CHAPTER XLIX

### LET BROTHERLY LOVE CONTINUE (HEB. 13:1-3)

AS WE COME TO THE END of this epistle, we see that the author is closing with a number of brief yet important imperatives and reminders. The great burden of the argument of the epistle is concluded. And yet, even though there is one main concern that is pursued throughout the pages of this letter (preventing apostasy from faith in Christ), the pastoral heart of its author cannot let himself end without encouraging them here at the end on a wide array of issues that concern the living out of the Christian faith in day-to-day life.

Verse 1 says, “Let brotherly love continue.” These words are simple yet profound. It is a short, terse sentence, and yet it contains an imperative of the greatest magnitude. This is, of course, tied in a very important sense to the rest of this epistle. In the chapters up to this point, they have been encouraged to continue in the faith. Here, in this verse, the believers are now being encouraged to let their love to one another continue. The connection, which we have in some sense already seen, is that perseverance in the faith is really impossible apart from persevering in our love for people in the church. If you don’t have that kind of brotherly love, you will never be able to live out Heb. 3:13 or 10:24.

People who stop loving other believers probably won't last long in the faith.

These three verses here at the beginning of Hebrews 13 are really all about loving those who are in the household of faith. Verse 1 is an explicit command to love the brothers. Verses 2 and 3 go on to give some concrete examples of how this is to play out in the day-to-day life of the church. Verse 2 tells us to practice hospitality, to "be not forgetful to entertain strangers." Now this almost certainly is a reference to other believers that we don't know, for example, to travelling evangelists. Thus the apostle John commended his friend for doing this very thing: "Beloved, thou doest faithfully whatsoever thou doest to the brethren, and to strangers; Which have borne witness of thy charity before the church: whom if thou bring forward on their journey after a godly sort, thou shalt do well: Because that for his name's sake they went forth, taking nothing of the Gentiles. We therefore ought to receive such, that we might be fellowhelpers to the truth" (3 John 5-8).

Then the author encourages them to practice this hospitality because, by doing so, they are putting themselves in the position of receiving unexpected blessings from God: "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares." He is probably thinking there of Abraham entertaining the angels in Genesis 18. However, I don't think the point is that every time we welcome a guest, we should hope it's an angel. Rather, the point is that Christian hospitality becomes a sacrament, in the sense that it becomes a channel of God's grace and blessing. You don't have to have angels for that to happen. As someone who grew up in a home that was always very welcoming and hospitable, I can attest to the blessing that I received growing up in that environment. We should all aspire to the same.

Then in verse 3, you have another way that love to the brothers works its way out in practical terms: "Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves in the body." This is illustrated quite well in 10:34; they had been this way, but they needed to be called back to it. They are being called to



be like Onesiphorus, who sought Paul out when he was in Rome and was not ashamed of his chains (2 Tim. 1:16-18). In particular, they are being called to sympathy: “as being yourselves in the body.” Those who are mistreated, who are imprisoned, are suffering bodily. The point is that they should regard with sympathy those who are suffering, and to be moved by their sufferings so that they will readily and willingly and courageously meet their needs.

A way to put this in perspective is to look at this from the vantage point of Matthew 25. Jesus commends the righteous for feeding the hungry, giving water to the thirsty, clothing the naked, and taking in strangers, and visiting the prisoners (25:34-36). What is our Lord doing there? He is commending them for loving the brethren, and the way that love is manifested was in these very concrete ways. By the way, I think it is important to point out that “the least of these” is a reference, not to society in general, but to the children of God, to those for whom the kingdom of God has been prepared before the foundation of the world. Our Lord really is commending them for doing Heb. 13:1, and the way he commends them is by pointing out deeds that fit into the categories of 13:2-3.

This is a command, not a suggestion. Although it is clear that the Christian does not need to be taught how to love (1 Thess. 4:9), we still need to be encouraged to love because we are apt, in our sin, to sabotage this fruit of the Holy Spirit through selfishness and worldliness. Andrew Murray’s melancholy comment is unfortunately still true: “The command of our text reminds us of how love may wax cold, and how it may be sadly wanting in the church. In divisions and separations, in indifference and neglect, in harsh judgments and unloving thoughts – alas, how little has Christ’s church proved that it has its birth from the God of love, that it owes its all to Him who loved us, gave us the new commandment of love, and asked us to prove our love to him by bestowing it on the brethren.”

So that is what I want to do: I want this message to be a message to myself and to all of us to encourage us to love our brothers and sisters

in Christ. To that end, I want to consider the following three points: the importance of brotherly love, the identity of brotherly love, and finally the inculcation of brotherly love.

### The importance of brotherly love

Brotherly love is important, first, because it is an exhortation from the lips of our Lord. Our Lord said to his disciples, and to us through them, “These things I command you, that ye love one another” (Jn. 15:17). In fact, he had earlier said, “A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (13:34-35). I think this is why the apostle James calls the law of love the “royal law” in James 2:8. It is royal because it is a command issued from the throne of the King of the universe. To reject this is essentially to reject Christ. It is a fundamental contradiction when someone says that they love Jesus but then turns around and hates their brother or sister in Christ.

Second, not only brotherly love, but love in general, is important because love is of the essence of virtue. What I mean by this is that the Scriptures teach that love is the chief and underlying element in every virtue. Without love, you have nothing. Isn't this what the apostle Paul said? “Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal. And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and have not charity, I am nothing. And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing” (1 Cor. 13:1-3). It is why love is “the bond of perfectness” (Col. 3:14). Curtis Vaughan explains, “Love is the perfect bond in the sense that it embraces and completes all the other virtues.” It is the thread that is entwined throughout the

entire fabric of the Christian ethic. Without love, our ethic falls apart like a garment poorly sewed together.

It is why the apostle exhorts the Corinthians, that church that had been rent apart by sad divisions, “Let all your things be done in charity” (1 Cor. 16:14). Not some things, not most things, but all things. It is why Paul calls love “a more excellent way” (12:31), because all our spiritual gifts are pretty much worthless without it. Love must therefore permeate all that we do; it must be the atmosphere in which we live. It is why in Heb. 6:10 the labor of Christian service is called a labor of love. It is why Paul says that this one command, to love our neighbor as ourselves (Rom. 13:8-10) summarizes all the law. As William Hendrickson put it, “Love is the lubricant that enables all the other virtues to function smoothly.”

Brothers and sisters, there are a lot of things to be concerned about when it comes to being a church. One of the most important things of all is loving one another. If this is the essence of our virtue, let it therefore be the chief concern of our hearts. Let us be diligent to show love to one another. Let us not simply say it, let us actually live it out. Let us not love in word only, but in deed and in truth (1 Jn. 3:18).

Third, this love is the evidence of true Christianity. This is one of the great concerns of the apostle John in his first epistle: “We know that we have passed from death unto life, because we love the brethren. He that loveth not his brother abideth in death. Whosoever hateth his brother is a murderer: and ye know that no murderer hath eternal life abiding in him. Hereby perceive we the love of God, because he laid down his life for us: and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren. But whoso hath this world’s good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him? My little children, let us not love in word, neither in tongue; but in deed and in truth. And hereby we know that we are of the truth, and shall assure our hearts before him” (1 Jn. 3:14-19).

It must be this way, because the God who regenerates us, who gives us new life in Christ, is by his very nature love. Why is this relevant? It

is relevant because as Peter puts it, we are being made “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4); to be born of God must at least mean that we are being made partakers of his nature (in terms, of course, of his communicable attributes). If God’s nature is a nature of love, how can we legitimately say we are born again if we are fundamentally unloving? This is precisely how John goes on to reason: “Beloved, let us love one another: for love is of God; and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not knoweth God; for God is love” (1 Jn. 4:7-8).

We must go further: we will not only be loving; we will love the brethren in particular. You see, you can’t get away with saying you are a loving person, but this or that particular believer over there is just unlovable. No, you can’t do that. Why? Because if you are born of God, you are going to love what God loves and love who God loves (and also hate what God hates): “Whosoever believeth that Jesus is the Christ is born of God: and every one that loveth him that begat loveth him also that is begotten of him. By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments” (1 Jn. 5:1-2).

Now this is so serious that Christ told the church at Ephesus that though they were doing a good job at staying busy for him and combatting heresy and hating the deeds of the Nicolaitans, yet the fact that they had left their first love meant that, unless they repented, their candlestick was going to be removed (Rev. 2:1-8). They knew how to hate but they didn’t know how to love. As I’ve already said, there are some things we must hate. “Abhor that which is evil” (Rom. 12:9). “Ye that love the LORD, hate evil” (Ps. 97:10). Yet if you can only hate the evil but can’t love the brethren, there is something terribly wanting. Love is the evidence of true Christianity and of a true church.

Fourth, love is the element essential to fellowship. This is the point of Eph. 4:1-3, which we looked at recently, so I won’t linger here. Let me just remind you that an essential element to keeping the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace is doing verse 2: “With all lowliness and meekness, with longsuffering, forbearing one another in love.”

Very well, hopefully we all agree that love is important, and in particular, the love of the brethren. It's important because it is an exhortation from the lips of the Lord, the essence of virtue, the evidence of the new birth, and the element essential to fellowship in the church. Let us next consider the identity of brotherly love.

### The identity of brotherly love

What do we mean by this? I think on some level every true Christian really does know on an intuitive level what it means to be loving (cf. 1 Thess. 4:9). However, sometimes it can be helpful to set the definition of it before us so that we can more carefully evaluate our own attitudes and actions. For the sake of clarity, I offer the following definition: love is the delightful commitment to the happiness of another. I say it this way because the pattern for Christian love is the love of Christ, and this seems to me to be an accurate description of Christ's love for his church. This is important because the basis of brotherly love is adoption into the family of God, and that only happens because we are united to the Son of God by faith (Jn. 1:12). Our love depends on Christ even to exist, and it should not surprise us that it should, therefore, be modeled after him as well. What then does our Lord's love look like?

First of all, it is characterized by radical commitment. Commitment is certainly a crucial aspect of love – this can be seen in the fact that his love is always characterized by sacrifice (Eph. 5:1-2, 25-27). It is not just the willingness to sacrifice for the object of one's love; it is also a delightful commitment. For our Lord did not come because he had to but because he wanted to (Jn. 10:18). He is the Good Shepherd, not a hireling. Our Lord loves his sheep and willingly gives his life for them. No one can separate them from his love (Rom. 8:28-39).

But it's more: it's the delightful commitment to the happiness of another. Now it is important to note that I am using the word happiness here in the more objective sense of what is for one's ultimate and eternal good. God works all things for the good of his people because he loves

them. His people are truly blessed, and he showers blessings upon them because he loves them. The Beatific Vision, the seeing the glory of God in the presence of Christ is the apex of blessing, and this is what he gives us through his sacrifice for us, because he loves us.

When we think about what it means to love others, we want to be like Christ. He loved us graciously, sacrificially, and willingly. We want to love like he loved, as far as it is possible for us to do so. It means that we will aim to be committed, to the point of sacrifice if necessary, and yet happily so, for the good of my brother or sister.

If you want to see how this works itself in very practical terms, we can come back to verses two and three. In verse 2, love works itself out through hospitality, especially to strangers. That means the willingness to open up our homes, our cupboards, and our schedules to others. It means the willingness to do it for strangers, for those whom we aren't close to, whom we aren't necessarily most comfortable around.

Now I know there are wise and unwise ways to do this. This is not an exhortation to be foolish or unwise stewards of what God has given us. But if you cannot think of a scenario in which you would be willing to open up your home to other believers, then the implication of this text is that you are not loving in a biblical sense. In fact, we ought to be happy and willing to be this way. God doesn't let introverts off here: this is for all of us, no matter what our personal inclinations are.

Then there is verse 3: loving the prisoners. Now, I do believe in prison ministry, and am happy for those who do this sort of thing. I am also happy for ministries like Voice of the Martyrs who try to support and minister to those who are suffering around the world for the name of Christ. These are good ministries, and worthy of your support. The application here, as I indicated earlier, is a willingness to sympathize with those of the household of faith who are suffering so that we are willing to meet their needs, no matter how difficult that might be for us.

To see this, we note that those in chains here in Heb. 13:3 are fellow believers. They are there languishing in a prison, and in the first cen-

tury many of their personal needs would have needed to be met through the care of family, and in this case, the church. However, the problem was that this exposed those ministering to them to imprisonment themselves, not to mention assaults on their reputations and reproach and other persecutions. This in turn would have presented such people with the temptation to avoid being seen with them and thus to refuse to take care of them. That is what they are being told they must not do at all costs.

The application, then, for us is that we don't just minister to those whose needs are easy to meet, or who impose no burden on our lives. We are to be willing to go, as it were, to places that we don't want to go, to help people who can't help themselves but whose help imposes tremendous burdens on our lives. The Christian who lives out the principles of this text not only does this but does it willingly. They show mercy without grudging and with cheerfulness (Rom. 12:8).

We can also fill this out in terms of the "one anothers" of the New Testament epistles. In other words, if we will love one another (Jn. 13:24; 15:12, 17) by preferring one another (Rom. 12:10), receiving one another (15:7), serving one another (Gal. 5:13), bearing one another's burdens (6:2), forbearing with one another (Eph. 4:32), forgiving one another (Col. 3:13), admonishing one another (3:16), comforting one another (1 Thess. 4:18), edifying one another (5:11), consider one another (Heb. 10:24), and exhorting one another (10:25).

Or another way to put shoe-leather on this, so to speak, is to look at love in terms of 1 Cor. 13:4-7. I don't know about you, but sometimes Paul's description of love here is like a splash of cold water in the face if you really are serious about implementing what he is saying here. For example, one of the very first things he says here is the love suffers long and is kind (4). I think some people need to just stop there and focus on that for a few months. Are you kind? Of course Paul is not saying that kindness is love, but he is saying if you are loving you will be a kind person. Am I? These are good questions to ask of oneself. Do people consider me to be a kind person? Paul goes on to say that love is not

envious, isn't arrogant or boastful, it isn't rude ("doth not behave itself unseemly"), isn't selfish or doesn't insist on its own way, isn't irritable and easily provoked, isn't resentful ("thinketh no evil"). This is a really good checklist because we can sometimes think we are loving persons and yet if we are constantly irritable and rude and unkind, well then, Paul is saying that you are not in fact a loving person really at all. I think where you start out is by thinking about your own home. Does your spouse think you are these things? Do your children?

As we close this point, let me note a few final characteristics of Christian and brotherly love. It is to be "without hypocrisy" (Rom. 12:9), for God knows our hearts. It is to be genuine and authentic. It is to be fervent and earnest (1 Pet. 2:22; 4:8). Our love is neither to be half-hearted, nor is it to be like a shooting star, else it is false love. Brothers and sisters, let us love one another with a pure heart fervently; let us let brotherly love continue.

### The inculcation of brotherly love

So what are we to do with this? Well, we don't want to assume that we are where we ought to be. We can all be certain that there is room for us to grow. Sin is selfishness, and as long as we are sinful, we will be selfish. That means, for all our lives this side of heaven, we will be battling the tendency to love ourselves but not others.

I like the way the apostle Paul put it to the Thessalonians. He said, "But as touching brotherly love, ye need not that I write unto you: for ye yourselves are taught of God to love one another. And indeed ye do it toward all the brethren which are in all Macedonia: but we beseech you, brethren, that ye increase more and more" (1 Thess. 4:9-10). If you are a believer, you have been taught by God to love the brethren. Paul does not reason from that to say that they didn't need any further encouragement to love others. No, he beseeches them to love the brethren more and more. In the same way, we need to have this attitude. No matter



where we are, we need to increase in our love our fellow brothers and sisters in the Lord and to love them more and more.

How then do we do this? How do we go about the inculcation of brotherly love? Let me close with three brief exhortations. First, pursue personal communion with Christ. Be filled with his love. Meditate on his mercy. Read his word and spend time in prayer. To be like the Lord you must first be with the Lord. Second, pursue purposeful commitment to the Church. Spend time with the saints. Worship with them. Be discipled by and with them. Meet their needs and allow them to meet yours. You can't love people you are unwilling to be around.

Third, pursue a perpetual caution against those habits of the mind which tend to stifle love. Two of the greatest enemies are pride and selfishness, which are stems of the same sinful weed which, if allowed, will wrap its roots around the flower of love and choke it until it dies.

Brothers and sisters, let us love one another; let us increase in it more and more.

# CHAPTER L

## THE VALUE AND VANDALISM OF MARRIAGE (HEB. 13:4)

WHAT DOES MARRIAGE HAVE TO DO with the book of Hebrews? Why would an epistle that deals with the supremacy of Christ as the Son of God and perfect High Priest for the people of God insert anything on the subject of marriage? Well, it has a lot to do with it, actually.

The burden of this epistle, this word of exhortation, is to encourage the saints to whom this letter was written to continue in their faithfulness to Christ and to his gospel, not to sell Christ out for this-worldly hazard-reducing, security-enhancing choices. But faithfulness to Jesus doesn't just mean dotting all the correct doctrinal I's and crossing all the correct doctrinal t's. It also means conforming our lives to his will for us. Apostasy doesn't just mean apostasy from pure doctrine; it also means apostasy from holy living.

The vandalism of marriage through sexual immorality and unfaithfulness is one of the main ways rebellion from Christ and his Lordship is lived out. We see this in the example of Esau, who is held up to these

believers as the example of Old Testament apostasy: “lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright” (Heb. 12:16).

However, there is another connection between doctrinal faithfulness and holy living. Maybe not always, but very often one of the reasons people become heterodox in their doctrine is because they have already become unholy in their living. You see that connection in 12:16: profane people are the kinds of people who sell Christ out for morsels of worldly philosophy. Do you want a worldview, a philosophy of life, that will support an immoral lifestyle? You can’t be a Christian, at least not an honest one, and live in sin. If you want to sin and feel good about it, you are going to have to sell out the Christian faith. And so, such a person will collect what he or she thinks are good reasons that Christianity is not true. They will then celebrate their conversion to reason and science. But they have not succeeded in showing Christianity is not true; all they have really done is to justify themselves in their sin.

Marriage falls under the Lordship of Christ. It is valuable and precious and dear because it is ordained by God. Therefore, the vandalism of marriage through acts of sexual immorality desecrates what our Lord has honored; they are acts of defiance against his sovereignty over us. If we would be faithful to Jesus, we must be faithful to him in the arena of marriage.

More than that: as Christians we are claiming that we can see the true value of marriage only as we see the supremacy of Christ. As we’ve noted, the supremacy of Christ is a very big part of the message of this letter; it’s at its heart, actually. What do I mean by this? Remember what the apostle Paul wrote to the Ephesians: “This [marriage] is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church” (Eph. 5:32). The reason Paul puts the church and Christ as models for the relationship between husband and wife is because marriage was meant to point to that ultimate and eternal relationship. Marriage points to Jesus and his love for the church and his saving and sanctifying the church.

Two things follow from that. First, it means that marriage must be really, really wonderful if it is God's intended vehicle for communicating this reality. Paul is not saying that the church decided for marriage to mean this, for when he calls it a "mystery" he is explicitly saying that this is a revelation from God himself (cf. 3:4-5). Nothing is more wonderful and exciting and precious than the union the church has with Christ. Therefore the mystery of marriage must be meant to reflect that wonder and excitement and preciousness.

Second, it means that the desecration of marriage must be really, really bad. It should not surprise us that, when marriage is dishonored in individual lives or in the culture in general, it will bring with it some very undesirable consequences.

Both the value and the vandalism of marriage are addressed in the words of the text of Hebrews 13:4. The value can be seen in the words: "Marriage is honorable in all, and the bed undefiled." The vandalism can be seen in the words: "but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge." We want to admire the value and avoid the vandalism, and it is to that purpose that we will address ourselves in the rest of this message.

## The Value of Marriage

### What is marriage?

What is meant by marriage? First of all, we must begin by saying that marriage is an institution given to us by God. This is what the Genesis text says, and it is how our Lord interprets the Genesis text. In Matthew 19, our Lord confronts the Pharisees on the issue of divorce. To do that, he goes back to first principles and to the institution of marriage with Adam and Eve. Here is what our Lord says about that: "Have ye not read, that he which made them at the beginning made them male and female, and said, For this cause shall a man leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife: and they twain shall be one flesh? Wherefore they are no more twain, but one flesh. What therefore God hath joined

together, let not man put asunder” (Mt. 19:4-6). Note the words, “God hath joined together.” God did this. It wasn’t just for Adam and Eve; this is the template for every other human marriage since. Marriage is something given to us by God and God does not give cheap gifts.

Therefore, only God has the right to tell us what marriage is. In other words, marriage is not just another human institution. It is not the result of men coming together and figuring out how best to flourish in society. It is a wonderful and valuable gift given to us by God.

Second, as we listen to what God has said about marriage, we see that it is the one flesh union of a man and a woman for life. The two shall be one flesh, and this is the result of God joining them together. It is between one man and one woman. God didn’t bring multiple women to Adam; he brought just Eve. God didn’t make a mistake here; this was intentional and purposeful. This is implied in the words of our Lord. A man shall leave his parents and be joined to his wife, not wives.

Of course we know that polygamy was allowed and regulated under the Law of Moses. But nowhere does Scripture indicate this was God’s original purpose or that this is best for human flourishing. In fact, the very first mention of it is in Genesis 4:19-24, and in the text there seems to be a conscious link between Lamech’s murders and his polygamy. Also, we can see throughout the history of OT Israel that polygamy is invariably linked with apostasy, hostility in the home, and innumerable other troubles. So when we get to the NT and our Lord’s teaching, it should not surprise us that he returns us to the original intention and institution: one man and one woman for life. You see that reflected in the apostle’s teaching on the qualifications for elders. The elder is to be, literally, a one-woman man, “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2). Since the elders are meant to be examples for the church – the believers are meant to follow their example (4:12) – it follows that monogamy, not polygamy, is God’s purpose for marriage.

It also follows that homosexual marriages are not marriages in any real sense of the term. God does not recognize them, whatever human courts

may say. Again, we need to hear what God has to say about marriage since he is the one who created the institution for us.

It is for life. It is true that divorce is allowed in certain circumstances, but it is because of the hardness of men's hearts (Mt. 19:8). "What God has joined together, let not man put asunder." Or, as the apostle Paul put it, "The wife is bound by the law as long as her husband liveth" (1 Cor. 7:39) – and of course that goes both ways!

Why is marriage?

To see the value of marriage, however, we must not only ask what is it, but also why is it? Why did God institute marriage among men? Well, again we must go back to the beginning. In Genesis 1:27-28, where we have the record of the creation of male and female in God's image, we read that they are told to be fruitful and multiply. Though marriage is not explicitly mentioned there, it is implied (since the Scriptures forbid sex outside of marriage), and it is therefore significant that the first mention of marriage is connected to the propagation of the human race. Certainly, one of the reasons for marriage is to have children, and then to bring those children up in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

Incidentally, sometimes you will hear well-meaning people push back against the Christian's insistence that gay marriage is wrong. They will ask, "But why should you care, as long as they love each other?" One of the responses to this, apart from the fact that it normalizes sinful behavior, is the fact that children flourish best in homes with a mom and a dad. Not a mom and a mom or a dad and a dad, but a mom and a dad. Thus sociologist Mark Regnerus, appealing to hard facts and empirical data, explains that "children appear most apt to succeed well as adults—on multiple counts and across a variety of domains— when they spend their entire childhood with their married mother and father, and especially when the parents remain married . . ."<sup>1</sup> This is a very

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<sup>1</sup>[https://www.markregnerus.com/\\_files/ugd/0595d1\\_f3ab7aff28744ad1af85b47353d90f7d.pdf](https://www.markregnerus.com/_files/ugd/0595d1_f3ab7aff28744ad1af85b47353d90f7d.pdf)

unpopular idea, but not because it is false. It is unpopular because it goes against the grain of our culture's program to push marriages and lifestyles forbidden in Scripture. However, the data should not surprise us because, if God created marriage to be between a man and a woman, and if one of the reasons he created it is for the nurturing of children, we should expect children to flourish best when God's institution is adopted, and in the way he intended it to be adopted. Why should we care about who gets married? Well, one reason to care is because we care about the next generation.

Incidentally, this explains why every human society up until two minutes ago has traditionally only recognized marriage as being between a man and a woman. It is because they all recognized that marriage is intrinsically designed and ordered to procreation and biological family and thus to be the place in which future citizens would be raised. You don't want the state regulating your other relationships, do you? So why this one? States have a real interest in the institution of marriage (understood as the place where children are raised by moms and dads) because the state cannot exist without healthy and productive future citizens. And future citizens are best raised, not in homes with gay marriages, but in homes with moms and dads who are committed to each other for life.

Nurturing children, of course, is not the only reason marriage exists. If we keep reading in the book of Genesis and make our way to chapter 2, we see that another chief reason for it is companionship. God said of Adam, after he had created him, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him an help meet for him" (2:18). The text goes on to argue (in not so many words) that dog may be man's best friend, but a dog – or any other animal for that matter – cannot be a wife for Adam (19-20). So we go on to read: "And the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept: and he took one of his ribs, and closed up the flesh instead thereof; And the rib, which the Lord God had taken from man, made he a woman, and brought her unto the man. And Adam said, This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she

shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. Therefore shall a man leave his father and his mother, and shall cleave unto his wife: and they shall be one flesh” (2:21-24). In other words, marriage is not just about the creation of a community of parents and children; it is first and foremost a community of husband and wife. Loneliness is not solved by having lots of kids; it is solved by a husband having a wife and a wife her husband. Thus, as one commentary on the Heidelberg Catechism puts it, marriage is “a society of labors, toils, cares and prayers, between persons living in a state of matrimony.”

It is interesting to me that in our day, when marriage is so vilified, loneliness is a problem of epic proportions. Middle English didn’t even have a word for loneliness, and I wonder if one of the reasons for that is that in those days a person’s life inevitably centered around family. You couldn’t be lonely; it was simply impossible. It makes me wonder if a lot of people are lonely because they are running away from God’s solution to loneliness.

Now I know that a lot of people in our day assume that marriage makes people miserable. It can, of course; we all know that. In general this is a myth, an urban legend, for the data actually demonstrates the opposite. Tim Keller, in his book *The Meaning of Marriage* (which I highly recommend), writes, “All surveys tell us that the number of married people who say they are ‘very happy’ in their marriages is high – about 61-62 percent – and there has been little decrease in this figure during the last decade. Most striking of all, longitudinal studies demonstrate that two-thirds of those unhappy marriages out there will become happy within five years if people stay married and do not get divorced.”<sup>2</sup>

Marriage therefore not only provides the happy place where children are born and nurtured, but fundamentally it is meant to be the place where some of us at least will find our truest and closest earthly companion, where our house is made a home.

I need to say here, however, that the Bible also makes it clear that marriage is not the only solution to loneliness. Our Lord and the apostle

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<sup>2</sup>Timothy Keller, *The Meaning of Marriage* (Dutton, New York: 2011), p. 25-26.



Paul also say clearly that it is the gift of God that some remain single and celibate throughout their lives. Paul in fact doesn't just begrudgingly admit the point, he positively celebrates it. I don't want to give the impression that, if you're not married, you can't be happy. God's gift to some is marriage, and that is to be celebrated. God's gift to others is singleness, and that too is to be celebrated.

I will add one more thing to this. Marriage is not only meant for companionship and children, but it is also meant to be the safe place where men and women learn self-mastery in ways they could not otherwise. The apostle points in this direction when he writes to the Corinthians, "Nevertheless, to avoid fornication, let every man have his own wife, and let every woman have her own husband" (1 Cor. 7:2). I think the principle in this verse goes beyond lust, though it certainly applies immediately to that. In general, marriage is that safe place which becomes for us a school for character.

I am ashamed to say it, but when I was a bachelor, I thought I was a pretty good guy. Marriage has happily – and I mean it when I say "happily" – divested me of those delusions of grandeur. Marriage has helped me to see how selfish I really am, and children are an even greater help in that arena. I thank God for that. I thank God that I am not the same man that married my wife; I hope I am better, and I hope my wife is better too, that we are more godly and Christlike as a result of our marriage. For that reason, young men, don't avoid marriage because you don't want to be changed. The fact of the matter is that you should want to be changed. If you stay where you are you will probably remain a spiritual midget.

It is because people today have jettisoned this aspect of marriage that they actually do make it a miserable place. Today, people want to marry their soulmate, by which they mean that perfect person who will meet all their needs all the while placing little to no demands on their own agendas and plans. It's all about self-fulfillment and self-actualization and self-love – which is to say, self-worship. If this is the way you approach marriage, if you demand your spouse to put you in the place of

God, you will destroy your marriage, for no one can bear that kind of burden. You are asking of your spouse what neither you nor any other merely human person can give.

Instead of this impossible program, let us find our joy in giving ourselves to others – first of all to our spouse. The God who made us knows what will give us true joy and fulfillment and happiness: it is to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and then to love your neighbor as yourself. As Martin Luther pointed out long ago, since your spouse is your nearest neighbor, he or she ought to have your greatest and most constant love.

Here is how the apostle Paul put it: “Wives, submit yourselves unto your own husbands, as unto the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, even as Christ is the head of the church: and he is the saviour of the body. Therefore as the church is subject unto Christ, so let the wives be to their own husbands in every thing. Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish. So ought men to love their wives as their own bodies. He that loveth his wife loveth himself. For no man ever yet hated his own flesh; but nourisheth and cherisheth it, even as the Lord the church: For we are members of his body, of his flesh, and of his bones. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and shall be joined unto his wife, and they two shall be one flesh. This is a great mystery: but I speak concerning Christ and the church. Nevertheless let every one of you in particular so love his wife even as himself; and the wife see that she reverence her husband” (Eph. 5:22-33).

Marriage is undeniably valuable and precious because God made it, and because he made it for human companionship, for children, and as a school for character.

## The Vandalism of Marriage

Unfortunately, man has marred this precious gift. A couple of the ways he has marred it is given to us in the next words: “But whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.”

However, before I get to that, let me come back to the words, “and the [marriage] bed [is] undefiled.” Now there have been times in which the church has been unfaithful to this teaching and has taught a sort of asceticism that is false. Paul himself mentions this in his instructions to Timothy: “Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils; Speaking lies in hypocrisy; having their conscience seared with a hot iron; Forbidding to marry, and commanding to abstain from meats, which God hath created to be received with thanksgiving of them which believe and know the truth. For every creature of God is good, and nothing to be refused, if it be received with thanksgiving: For it is sanctified by the word of God and prayer” (1 Tim. 4:1-5). Marriage is good, and the marriage bed is good. The Bible is not squeamish about sex. It doesn’t teach that it is bad or that the celibate life is a more holy life. Married life is not the path to second-rate spirituality. The marriage bed is holy. In fact, part of what makes the marriage bed so sweet and wonderful is that it is the marriage bed. It is in the context of a life-long covenantal commitment that the one flesh union is experienced, and it is in that context that it becomes more than just the effervescent indulgence of physical desires. It is in the context of marriage that this becomes a physical expression of true and enduring love.

The devil loves to try to replace God’s design with a cheap replacement. That is what is being referred to in the words “whoremongers and adulterers.” These two words together refer to all sexual activity outside the God-ordained parameters of monogamous marriage between husband and wife. Of course, the world will tell you that this is unnecessarily prohibitive, and that true freedom is going wherever your

passions lead. Sexual immorality is to the marriage bed what graffiti is to the Mona Lisa. It is the vandalism of God's good design.

However, in the text that is not the main argument against this kind of sin. The main argument is that "God will judge" it. It doesn't matter how pleased you are with your lifestyle; I can guarantee you that nothing will make standing under the judgment of God worth it. If you are wondering what kind of judgment this is, let me refer you to the following passages.

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not commit adultery: But I say unto you, That whosoever looketh on a woman to lust after her hath committed adultery with her already in his heart. And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell. And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off, and cast it from thee: for it is profitable for thee that one of thy members should perish, and not that thy whole body should be cast into hell" (Mt. 5:27-30).

"Know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, Nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye are washed, but ye are sanctified, but ye are justified in the name of the Lord Jesus, and by the Spirit of our God" (1 Cor. 6:9-11).

"But fornication, and all uncleanness, or covetousness, let it not be once named among you, as becometh saints; Neither filthiness, nor foolish talking, nor jesting, which are not convenient: but rather giving of thanks. For this ye

know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God. Let no man deceive you with vain words: for because of these things cometh the wrath of God upon the children of disobedience” (Eph. 5:3-6).

These passages stand alongside Hebrews 13:4 to teach that those who continue unrepentant in sexual sin will suffer the wrath of God in hell and will not inherit the kingdom of God.

Now it is true that no one gets into heaven because they are sexually pure. I can tell you on the authority of God’s word that no one will get into heaven if they remain sexually immoral. There is grace for sins, all sorts of sins, sexual and otherwise. But as Paul put it to the Corinthians, salvation means being saved from sin, not only from its guilt but also from its grip. “Such were some of you” is the description of all who are washed, sanctified, and justified by Jesus and the Spirit.

On the other hand, there is no sin that cannot be washed away by the blood of Jesus. That includes the sins mentioned in our text. The reality is that we are all sinners, and we have all sinned and come short of the glory of God. No one gets into heaven because they are good enough. We are all worse than we think. Left to ourselves, we would all fall under the judgment of God. On our own, we are all justly exposed to his wrath.

The amazing news given to us in the gospel is that Jesus Christ the Son of God came to live the perfectly righteous life that we couldn’t live and to suffer the just penalty for the sinful lives that we did live, and he did all this not for himself but for sinners. He did it so that those who by his grace repent of their sins and believe on him can have their sins taken away and his righteousness credited to them. Free and sovereign grace is given to us in Christ, grace not only to forgive our sins, but grace to deliver us from the pollution and the power of sin.

The words “God will judge” the sexually immoral and the adulterers are not words for self-righteous people to utter as if they were better,

for apart from the grace and mercy of God in Christ, those are words for all of us. In the same way, that judgment has fallen on Christ so that no matter how bad we are we can find grace and forgiveness in him.

So marriage is valuable, and the violation of the marriage bed is vandalism not only because of what marriage does but fundamentally because of that to which marriage points: it points us to the gospel, to Jesus. As I close let me repeat the words of the apostle Paul: “Husbands, love your wives, even as Christ also loved the church, and gave himself for it; That he might sanctify and cleanse it with the washing of water by the word, That he might present it to himself a glorious church, not having spot, or wrinkle, or any such thing; but that it should be holy and without blemish” (Eph. 5:25-27).

## CHAPTER LI

### CONTENTMENT IN CHRIST (HEB. 13:5-6)

APOSTASY COMES IN MANY DIFFERENT FLAVORS. One flavor is the flavor of doctrinal apostasy: the embrace of wicked and false ideas about God and his ways. Another flavor is the flavor of ethical apostasy: the embrace of wicked and false ideas about the good life and what it looks like. One way this ethical apostasy is lived out is in terms of verse 4, through sexual immorality. Another way this is lived out is in terms of verse 5, through covetousness. It has been observed that there is often in Scripture a connection between these two things, and that where you see the love of the flesh you will also see the love of money. The seventh and eighth commandments live next to each other. So, for example, the apostle Paul writes, “For this ye know, that no whoremonger, nor unclean person, nor covetous man, who is an idolater, hath any inheritance in the kingdom of Christ and of God” (Eph. 5:5). Or, as he puts it to the Colossians, “Mortify therefore your members which are upon the earth; fornication, uncleanness, inordinate affection, evil concupiscence, and covetousness, which is idolatry” (Col. 3:5). The apostle, in fact, warns Timothy of the danger inherent in covetousness, and it is the danger of apostasy: “But they that will be

rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition. For the love of money is the root of all evil: which while some coveted after, they have erred from the faith, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows” (1 Tim. 6:9-10).

We must not divorce this text from the larger context of the book of Hebrews. This is still about warning these believers of the danger of apostasy. At the same time, I also want to be faithful to the balance of this epistle. The overwhelming emphasis of this letter is not on this or that particular sin or sins but upon the person, worth, and work of Jesus Christ the Son of God our High Priest. The reason for this is, if you just focus on particular sins, you are cutting yourself off from the life that makes Christianity what it is. Christianity is not primarily about getting your life cleaned up. It is primarily about getting right with God and walking with him in worship and fellowship. Now this doesn't mean that dealing with specific sins is not important – it is. But the reality is that you will never properly deal with the sin in your life apart from Christ. Unless your sins have been washed in his blood, unless you have been given his Spirit, you will never be able to deal with sins in a way that pleases God. You will not protect yourself from the danger of apostasy primarily by focusing on keeping commandments but by embracing and believing the gospel, which is the good news that, for all who repent of their sins and turn in faith to Jesus Christ, his righteousness is credited to them, and their sins are washed in his blood.

On the other hand, we also have to be careful that we don't water down the gospel so that it becomes just about believing right things about Jesus without having any practical effect upon the life. Jesus is Lord and you cannot come to him as Savior unless you are also willing to bow before his scepter and obey his commands. And to do that, we do at some point have to get concrete with sins. It's not enough to say we are sinners. For if you cannot point to specific sins that you need to repent of, then the fact of the matter is that you don't really believe, at



the end of the day, that you are a sinner. Well, that is why we should thank God for the specificity of Scripture. It doesn't just wax eloquent about sin in general; it points us to specific sins and calls us to repent of them.

The specific sin that we are called to repent of in our text is the sin of covetousness. It is the sin of the love of money, this root of every kind of evil. However, I am thankful that our text doesn't just tell us what we are to repent of, but it also tells us how and why, and then what this should look like in our lives. To see this, I invite you to look with me at Heb. 13:5-6 and to consider the following three things. First, we see a blessed resolve: "Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have." Then we see a Biblical reason: "For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee." Finally, we see a bold response: "So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me."

### A Blessed Resolve

The resolve is this: to fight against covetousness and to fight for contentment. These are opposite states of mind. If you are covetous, you are not content. On the other hand, if you are content, you will not be covetous. Now in our version it says, "Let your conversation be without covetousness." The word conversation there is used in an archaic sense of the word. It doesn't have reference so much to our manner of speech; it means conduct or way of life. The writer is telling his audience to make it their resolve to let their life be free from the love of money.

You can therefore see what covetousness is by considering what is its opposite, which is contentment. I call this a "blessed resolve" because to be content is to be blessed. To be content means to be satisfied with what God has given us, to really believe that you have enough. It's what Paul is getting at when he tells Timothy, "But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into this world, and it is certain we

can carry nothing out. And having food and raiment let us be therewith content” (1 Tim. 6:6-8).

Contentment for the Christian doesn’t just mean that we have enough when we think we have enough. It doesn’t mean setting a goal for the way you think your standard of living should look and only being satisfied once you get there. It means believing that God is good no matter what your external circumstances are. This is certainly what contentment looked like to Paul. He writes to the Philippians, “Not that I speak in respect of want: for I have learned, in whatsoever state I am, therewith to be content. I know both how to be abased, and I know how to abound: every where and in all things I am instructed both to be full and to be hungry, both to abound and to suffer need. I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me” (Phil. 4:11-13). To be content like Paul means that we are able to enjoy plenty when we have it in such a way that we aren’t desperately grasping on to abundance with a death grip so that it can’t slip away. It means that we are able to enjoy with an open hand all that God in his generosity gives to us. But it also means that we are able to trust God when the pantry is bare and when we are in want. It means that, when we are abased, we aren’t questioning God’s goodness to us.

Jeremiah Burroughs, a seventeenth century English Puritan, wrote a whole book on this entitled *The Rare Jewel of Christian Contentment*, which I commend to you. Here is how he defines contentment: “Christian contentment is that sweet, inward, quiet, gracious frame of spirit, which freely submits to and delights in Gods’ wise and fatherly disposal in every condition.” As he also points out, this doesn’t mean that we can’t try to better our condition. Poverty is not a necessary condition for it. Contentment is not an excuse either for laziness or for being a spendthrift. It doesn’t mean that we don’t work hard at our jobs or that we fail to try to improve our skills and our knowledge and our effectiveness. It doesn’t mean that we don’t try to be good stewards with what God has given to us.

What it means is that we aren't grumbling against God at the state we are in. We aren't murmuring against him. Instead, we are freely submitting to and delighting in God's wise and fatherly disposal of us in every condition in which we find ourselves. It means that we aren't anxious and fretful and so vexed by our circumstances that we are neglectful of our duty to God and to others.

I'll tell you what contentment looks like. It looks like Jesus in John 13. Here is how the apostle John sets up the scene for us: "Now before the feast of the Passover, when Jesus knew that his hour was come that he should depart out of this world unto the Father, having loved his own which were in the world, he loved them unto the end. And supper being ended, the devil having now put into the heart of Judas Iscariot, Simon's son, to betray him; Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God; He riseth from supper, and laid aside his garments; and took a towel, and girded himself. After that he poureth water into a bason, and began to wash the disciples' feet, and to wipe them with the towel wherewith he was girded" (Jn. 13:1-5). Here was a man who knew that he was about to be betrayed by Judas, abandoned by his other disciples, and handed over to the Romans for crucifixion. Here was a man so content – a contentment that was not determined by his external circumstances, which couldn't have gotten much worse, but one that was grounded in the love that his Father had for him – that he was not wrapped up in his own desperate situation but had the presence of mind and heart to meet a need created by dirty feet.

That's convicting, isn't it? Because often we beg off helping others and living sacrificial lives because we think our trials and problems are bigger than other people's dirty-feet-sort-of-problems. You know how you learn to love people like Jesus does? You learn to love them in part by being content in God. This was the secret of Jesus: "Jesus knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he was come from God, and went to God." This is what Paul had learned: "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me."

So let's be clear: this is contentment in God. We are able to be content with such things as we have because we know that our lives don't consist in the things we possess (cf. Lk. 12:15). This is what we are to resolve. For, as our Lord put it, "No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. Ye cannot serve God and mammon" (Mt. 6:24). Therefore, "Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal: For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also" (6:19-21). So let us be content and "take no thought, saying, What shall we eat? or, What shall we drink? or, Wherewithal shall we be clothed? (For after all these things do the Gentiles seek:) for your heavenly Father knoweth that ye have need of all these things. But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you" (6:31-33). This is the blessed resolve.

### A Biblical Reason

The Lord generally doesn't just tell us to do things; he gives us reasons in his word and explains why we are to do them. Here we have a reason to pursue contentment in God, and once again it is a Biblical reason. This is a quote from multiple places in the Old Testament: "For he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee" (cf. Josh. 1:5, along with Gen. 28:15; Dt. 31:6; 1 Chron. 28:20). We can add to this the testimony of our Lord to his church: "and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Amen" (Mt. 28:20).

The author piles up negatives here to make his point, sometimes with double and even triple negatives, so that we have here an "emphatic future negative" (William Lane). This is about as strong a negation as you can get in Greek, and what the author is reminding us is that God will never leave or forsake his people or abandon them in trouble. It is

utterly impossible that this should happen. It will not happen because it cannot happen. It cannot happen because God has given his word on it, and as we have already read in this letter, God is a God who cannot lie (Heb. 6:18).

Now think about both the meaning and the magnitude of this promise. We are not promised piles of money, nor are we promised the finest of health. We aren't promised fame. We aren't promised success in our business. We aren't promised that our families will always give us reasons to smile. No, we are promised something infinitely better: we are promised God himself.

Of course, as Paul put it, if God is for us, who can be against us? If God is for us and with us, then we can be certain that whatever happens, it will happen for our good and his glory (Rom. 8:28-31). This is why our contentment must rest in God, for that is, in fact, the basis for it given here.

This is a superior blessing. There is no greater blessing than this. Take, for instance, the blessing of answered prayer. As great a blessing as answered prayer is, God is better. When we pray, the greatest thing is not that God gives us what we want every time and when we want it. Sometimes we pray for stupid things, not realizing that, if he gave those things to us, it would hurt us in the long run. So God doesn't always give us what we pray for, and that is a good thing. We shouldn't, therefore, judge the benefits of prayer or the usefulness of prayer on the basis of whether or not God always says yes to us when we pray. Thank God that in prayer we don't come to a cosmic Coke machine! No, the greatest blessing is that when we pray, God hears us. This is part of what it means that God is with us. There is no prayer, no matter how feeble, no matter how meager, offered by one of his people, that he does not hear. This is what the psalmist rejoices in: "I love the LORD," he says, "because he hath heard my voice, and my supplications. Because he hath inclined his ear unto me, therefore will I call upon him as long as I live" (Ps. 116:1-2).

Now it is true that God very often does say yes to our prayers. He delights to do so. He does so for the same reason he says no: because he loves us and is with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He hears our cries when we cry to him and we can be sure that he will always act for us with love and wisdom and grace.

Not only is this a superior blessing; it is also a strengthening blessing. When you look at the Old and New Testament passages that give us this promise, what you also see is that God will always enable his children to do what he has asked them to do. He doesn't give us a task and then leave us to fend for ourselves. So when God addresses himself to Jacob who was fleeing out of the land of promise in order to avoid being killed by his brother Esau, God promises that he will be with him and part of that meant bringing Jacob back to the land of promise. This is exactly what happened. When Joshua was about to enter Canaan, he was entering into a land where he was vastly outnumbered and outgunned (so to speak), but God promises to be with him, and that meant giving the armies of Israel victory over their enemies. That is exactly what happened. When David gave Solomon the task of building the temple, one of the ways he encouraged his son was that God would be with him. And God was with him and enabled him to build that incredibly beautiful temple.

So when our Lord gives the Great Commission to his church in Matthew 28:18-20 and tells us to make disciples of all the nations, he immediately follows this by saying that he will be with us to the end of the age, meaning that he will always be present in the church enabling and empowering us to do what he has asked us to do.

Now how does this relate to contentment? It means that, if by believing the promise that he will be with us, we find our treasure in Christ and don't go off, like Demas and Balaam and a thousand others, looking for it in human praise or earthly wealth or temporal comforts, then we are going to be truly content. We ought to find our contentment in Christ. As St. Augustine put it, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in God. Since he never leaves us or forsakes us, our content-

ment does not need to depend upon our external circumstances. This again connects to the overall theme of perseverance because few things will undo our commitment to Christ faster than the love of the world and the love of money (cf. 1 Jn. 2:15-17; Jam. 4:1-4). Those who are content in Christ will not quickly walk away from Christ.

What does contentment in Christ look like? What we are exhorted here to do is to be content with what we have. The reason we are to do this is that God promises to give himself to us and never to leave us. This also gives us the how: we find contentment by finding it in God. We now come to the question: how do we know that we have found this contentment? What kind of person does it make us? And that brings us to our last point.

### A Bold Response

The result of believing the truth of verse 5 is verse 6: “So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.” The outcome is courage and boldness and fearlessness. Because God is with us, he will help us. We will find grace to help in time of need (Heb. 4:16). Those who know they have God for their help cannot help but be confident. It is not in ourselves but in the Lord that we are strong and in the power of his might (Eph. 6:10).

You would think that the author would go on to say, since this is about fighting covetousness and inculcating contentment, that the effect of believing that God is our treasure is that we are not afraid of losing our earthly possessions. In other words, you might expect him to say, “The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what material things I can lose.” But that is not what he says. Instead, he says that we will not fear what man can do to us. Why would he say it that way?

Well, one reason might be that he is quoting from Ps. 118:6, “The LORD is on my side; I will not fear; what can man do unto me?” The first part of this quote connects quite well with verse 5: because God is with us, he is on our side and we need not fear. So maybe he just

completes the quote and that is the reason this thing about not fearing man is there.

I think there is another reason. I think it is this: the things that produce covetousness in us are things that men can take away. What do we covet? It is more wealth? Well, men can take that away from us. Is it a better job? They can take that. Is it more fame, being better liked by others? You can get canceled. Is it more earthly security and comfort? People can take that from you, too. In fact, men can take your life: “For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter” (Rom. 8:36). Those who are covetous are those who are at the mercy of men. But when our hope is in God, when our contentment is in Christ, that is something that no one can take away. It is why our Lord said, “And fear not them which kill the body, but are not able to kill the soul: but rather fear him which is able to destroy both body and soul in hell” (Mt. 10:28). He goes on to say, “Are not two sparrows sold for a farthing? and one of them shall not fall on the ground without your Father. But the very hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear ye not therefore, ye are of more value than many sparrows” (29-31).

We often fear because we seek in men what we can only find in God. However, when we find our contentment in God, when we find sufficiency and strength and stability and sweetness in Christ, we obtain what no man can take away. That is the kind of thing that makes for courageous Christians. These are the kinds of people who are willing to sacrifice for the Lord because they already have their most precious possession and it can never be taken away, not even by death.

What does a content person look like? Well, we’ve already considered the example of our Lord. Let us also then consider the apostle Paul, this man who had learned the secret of contentment. He put it this way to the elders of the Ephesian church: “Ye know, from the first day that I came into Asia, after what manner I have been with you at all seasons, serving the Lord with all humility of mind, and with many tears, and temptations, which befell me by the lying in wait of the Jews: and how I kept back nothing that was profitable unto you, but have shewed you,



and have taught you publicly, and from house to house, testifying both to the Jews, and also to the Greeks, repentance toward God, and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ. And now, behold, I go bound in the spirit unto Jerusalem, not knowing the things that shall befall me there: save that the Holy Ghost witnesseth in every city, saying that bonds and afflictions abide me. But none of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God” (Acts 20:18-24). I want to be like that, and I want you to be like that: men and women who do not count their lives dear to themselves in order to serve Christ and be his witness in a fallen world.

At the end of the day, that is the test of whether or not we have truly attained this contentment and whether or not we have truly avoided the perils of covetousness. It is proved in a life of courageous faith for Jesus.

I wonder if there are some here for whom this is hardly appealing. I wonder if there is someone here who has no desire to seek this kind of contentment, at least not the kind commended in this text. You have no desire to seek contentment in Christ. You have no desire to say with Paul, “For me to live is Christ and to die is gain” (Phil. 1:21). You might think that loving money is just fine. In fact, you prefer money to God. Well, I have just one word to say to you: you are not saved. You are yet in your sins and if you die in that condition, all the money in the world will not alleviate the just punishment you will receive in the age to come. To turn your back on God, to yawn at his glory so that you can pursue the trinkets of this world is an evil of infinite proportions. Yes, there is a hell, and it is not only a hell for those who refuse to repent of their sexual immorality, it is also a hell for those who refuse to repent of their greed and love of the world: “But they that will be rich fall into temptation and a snare, and into many foolish and hurtful lusts, which drown men in destruction and perdition” (1 Tim. 6:9). Do you know to whom our Lord told the parable of the rich man who “in hell he

lift up his eyes, being in torments” (Lk. 16:23)? It was to the Pharisees “who were covetous” (16:14). May the Lord open your eyes to see your danger and above all to see the value of God and that in comparison to him everything else is dirt. If you are convicted this morning that you have not sought first the kingdom of heaven and that instead you have preferred the things of earth to the things of God, then praise the God of sovereign grace for that, and repent of your sins and turn to Christ in faith. For it is only his blood that can cleanse us from our sins and his righteousness that can put us right with God and only his Spirit who can give us holy desires and enable us to order our affections so that we will know true joy and blessing and contentment. And that is what we should all do. Paul, having spoken about being content, said, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” We should all look to Jesus our Lord and find grace to help in every time of need, to find the resolve to be content, to believe the reasons in Scripture given to motivate us to do so, and to find the holy boldness to live out a sacrificial life of joy and service in the name of Christ for others.

# CHAPTER LII

## SPIRITUAL LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH (HEB. 13:7,17)

I THINK WE ALL RECOGNIZE that good leadership is important in almost every facet of human endeavor. Whether it's a family, or a sports team, or a business, or a military unit, or a political party, you need good leadership in order for each group to obtain the maximum benefit. It should not surprise us, therefore, if this is true of God's people. And it is. It was one of the lamentable and tragic effects of poor and wicked leadership in the nation of Israel that led the prophet Ezekiel to write, "Thus saith the Lord God unto the shepherds; Woe be to the shepherds of Israel that do feed themselves! should not the shepherds feed the flocks? Ye eat the fat, and ye clothe you with the wool, ye kill them that are fed: but ye feed not the flock. The diseased have ye not strengthened, neither have ye healed that which was sick, neither have ye bound up that which was broken, neither have ye brought again that which was driven away, neither have ye sought that which was lost; but with force and with cruelty have ye ruled them. And they were scattered, because there is no shepherd: and they became meat to all the beasts of the field, when

they were scattered. My sheep wandered through all the mountains, and upon every high hill: yea, my flock was scattered upon all the face of the earth, and none did search or seek after them” (Ezek. 34:2-6).

Some might think that the best solution to bad leadership is no leadership, and that the best thing is to go off by yourself and do your own thing. But that is not good for God’s people, either. In fact, one of the things that Ezekiel mourns is that this is the result of bad leadership, that the sheep end up fending for themselves. Our Lord made a similar observation in his day: “But when he saw the multitudes, he was moved with compassion on them, because they fainted, and were scattered abroad, as sheep having no shepherd” (Mt. 9:36).

It is therefore to be expected that one of the very first things the apostles did when they constituted churches was to ordain elders, spiritual leaders, in every church. It was with respect to the apostle Paul’s first missionary journey that it is written, “And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed” (Acts 14:23). Paul didn’t wait until the second or third journey to do this; he ordained good leaders from the start. Paul writes to Titus with a bit of urgency, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee” (Tit. 1:5). What this tells me is that a church without elders is a church out of order.

So it also should not surprise us that believers who are weak and wavering are believers who are not relating correctly to the spiritual leadership of the church. If, as it seems, elders are important for the health of the church, then to be without them, or to relate poorly to them, will only leave the church in a weak and unhealthy position.

This seems to be at least one of the reasons we have the verses before us. The Hebrew Christians in Rome were in danger of veering off the path of faithfulness to the Lord in part because they weren’t listening to and following the example of the spiritual leaders in the church. They were like sheep who didn’t believe there were any wolves around and so

they went off to do their own thing, and lo and behold, they ended up getting chased around and wounded and killed by the wolves after all.

It is therefore important for us to ponder the meaning of verses like 7 and 17, for they tell us that a healthy church is a church with good leaders. These verses are also important for at least a couple of other reasons. First of all, they are important because in pointing out their spiritual leaders, the author tells us who they are and what they do, and in doing so gives us a Biblical portrait of what a godly leader looks like. In other words, these verses give us Biblical parameters for the expectations we are to have of our spiritual leaders. This is important for a second reason: not only do these verses address themselves to the responsibilities of the shepherds for the flock; they also address themselves to the responsibilities of the flock towards the shepherds. The leaders are to lead, and the church is to follow, and these verses tell us both how the leaders are to lead and how the church is to follow. It is to that end that we want to address ourselves to this text.

### How the leaders lead

First of all, I think we need to address ourselves to the question of who these guys are. They are described as “them which have the rule over you” (7, 17). Who is this describing? Well, from what I have already said, you have probably guessed my take, that these are the elders of the church. I want to start by defending that interpretation.

Let’s begin with the word itself, for the phrase “them that have the rule” actually translates one Greek word, and it’s the root behind the English word hegemony, which, as you know, refers to the leadership of one group over another. This word is used in Acts 15:22 to describe Barsabas and Silas, who were chosen by the church to bring the decision of the church of Jerusalem to the Gentile churches abroad and are called “chief men” (KJV) or “leading men” (ESV). They were leaders in the church, and it is in this sense that the word is used in Heb. 13:7, 17, 24.

This word is also used in Mt. 2:6, where we have a quotation from the prophesy of Micah describing the birthplace of our Lord. It reads, “And thou Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, art not the least among the princes of Judah: for out of thee shall come a Governor, that shall rule my people Israel.” Now in that text, the word Governor is the word which is translated in Hebrews 13 as “them that have the rule over you.” This fits well with the fact that a governor, according to Mt. 2:6, is indeed someone who rules: “that shall rule my people Israel.” What I want to notice here is this other word which helps us to understand the function of a governor, and it’s the word *poimaino*, translated “rule” and which literally means to shepherd. This is what I’m interested in, here in this verse, because that word (“to shepherd”) is used of elders in Acts 20:28 and 1 Pet. 5:2. Let’s look at those texts.

In Acts 20:28, Paul is speaking to the elders in the church of Ephesus, and this is what he says to them: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed [that’s the word, to shepherd, trans. in Mt. 2:6 as to rule] the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” Spiritual leaders are like shepherds, and the way they lead or rule is by feeding the flock and guarding them from the wolves. As Calvin put it, “The pastor ought to have two voices: one, for gathering the sheep; and another, for warding off and driving away wolves and thieves. The Scripture supplies him with the means of doing both.”

Then in 1 Pet. 5:2, the apostle Peter exhorts his fellow elders to “feed the flock of God which is among you.” Once again, we see that the word “feed” here means to shepherd. This is how spiritual leaders lead and govern: they do so by feeding the flock of God which is among them.

Incidentally, the verb to shepherd is *poimaino*; the noun shepherd is *poimen*, which is translated in Eph. 4:11 as “pastor.” A pastor is a shepherd; a shepherd is a leader. These are just all different ways of describing the elders of the church: elder, overseer (bishop, 1 Tim. 3:1; Acts 20:28), pastor-shepherd, leader.

When we look at the way these leaders are described in the text, we see further that these guys (and they are guys, not gals) are the elders of the church. For one thing, they are men who preach the word. They are to remember their leaders, and they are described as those “who have spoken unto you the word of God.” They are told to follow and to imitate their faith. In verses 17, they are described as men who “watch for your souls.” In other words, the author is not describing a boss or a political leader here. He is describing their spiritual leaders, their pastors, their elders. These are shepherds who feed the flock of God which is among them.

I don't think there's any question here that these are the elders or pastors of the church there in Rome. By the way, I find it interesting that it was only the spiritual leaders in the church of Rome who went by the title “them which have the rule” in later years. According to all the available evidence we have in later Christian ecclesiastical literature, no other church used this title for their leaders except the church in Rome, which gives credence to the argument that the epistle to the Hebrews was in fact written to a house church there.

Now, that having been established, let's ask ourselves the question: what do these two verses have to say about how the leaders lead? To answer that question, I want to notice three things about them from these two verses: (1) their task, (2) their character, and (3) their authority.

### The task of the leaders

There are two main tasks of the pastors. They are to preach the Word of God and to watch over the souls of God's people. The pastor pastors in the pulpit and he pastors one-on-one. He pastors in the proclamation of the word of God to all the congregation and the pastors in personal discipleship. That is the task of the pastor.

First of all, he is a man who preaches, not his own word, but the word of God. Do you remember what Paul told Timothy? They are inspiring and convicting words: “I charge thee therefore before God,

and the Lord Jesus Christ, who shall judge the quick and the dead at his appearing and his kingdom; preach the word; be instant in season, out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine. For the time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine; but after their own lusts shall they heap to themselves teachers, having itching ears; and they shall turn away their ears from the truth, and shall be turned unto fables” (2 Tim. 4:1-4).

According to Paul, a good minister of Jesus Christ (1 Tim. 4:6) is one who preaches God’s word, and he does so in a personal, convicting, experiential way. He speaks words of reprove, of rebuke, of exhortation, and he does this clearly and distinctly and lovingly, grounding his exhortations in the teaching of Scripture. He patiently explains the path the saints are to take by painstakingly showing them from God’s word that this is the way to go. A good minister is someone who doesn’t convince people to go down a certain path on the force of his own personality; he does so on the force of the authority of God’s word. He doesn’t rouse them into action on the basis of an emotional appeal but by the force of the power of the gospel. It’s what Paul is getting at when he told the Corinthians, “And my speech and my preaching was not with enticing words of man’s wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power: that your faith should not stand in the wisdom of men, but in the power of God” (1 Cor. 2:4-5). I don’t want your faith to stand in my wisdom, for I have none to give you; I want your faith to stand by the power of God, as he witnesses by the Holy Spirit to the wisdom of his word.

Or think about the words of the prophet Jeremiah. They too are riveting, as they contrast the empty words of false prophets who only give people their own minds and the words of God: “I have not sent these prophets, yet they ran: I have not spoken to them, yet they prophesied. But if they had stood in my counsel, and had caused my people to hear my words, then they should have turned them from their evil way, and from the evil of their doings. Am I a God at hand, saith the Lord, and not a God afar off? Can any hide himself in secret places that I shall not



see him? saith the Lord. Do not I fill heaven and earth? saith the Lord. I have heard what the prophets said, that prophesy lies in my name, saying, I have dreamed, I have dreamed. How long shall this be in the heart of the prophets that prophesy lies? yea, they are prophets of the deceit of their own heart; Which think to cause my people to forget my name by their dreams which they tell every man to his neighbour, as their fathers have forgotten my name for Baal. The prophet that hath a dream, let him tell a dream; and he that hath my word, let him speak my word faithfully. What is the chaff to the wheat? saith the Lord. Is not my word like as a fire? saith the Lord; and like a hammer that breaketh the rock in pieces?" (Jer. 23:21-29). Faithful, good pastors, preach God's word which is like wheat to fill the hungry soul and like fire to burn away lies and sin and like a hammer to break the hard hearts of hard people. Why would you preach anything else? Don't go for preachers who preach themselves or about themselves. Don't go for preachers who entertain you with funny anecdotes or seek to move you through tear-jerking stories. Rather, listen to men who preach Christ and give you his word.

These are men who don't preach themselves but Jesus Christ (2 Cor. 4:5). They don't present themselves as the solution to the problems of others; they give them Christ, because they know both by experience and by the Scriptures that we are all sinners before God and that it is only by the free and sovereign grace of God given through the person and work of Jesus Christ, received by faith, that we can be saved and have our sins forgiven and be made members of the family of God.

Of course, behind every message should be a man of prayer. The apostles told the early church, "But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:4). In other words, you don't want a company man, you don't want a man whose primary interest is to promote denominational differences. You want a man of God, who knows God, who walks with God, and who preaches God's word.

The other part of his task is that of personal discipleship, the one-on-one aspect of the pastoral role. This is described in the words, “for they watch for your souls” (17). They don’t just throw the feed out and then go back to doing their own thing, but they observe each sheep to know its state. So you don’t just want someone who is good in the pulpit, but someone who knows how to pray at the bedside of the dying. You want someone who can counsel God’s word to particular people in particular predicaments. You want someone who loves people and who is available. You want someone, in other words, you are like Timothy, whom the apostle recommends to the Philippian church in this way: “But I trust in the Lord Jesus to send Timotheus shortly unto you, that I also may be of good comfort, when I know your state. For I have no man likeminded, who will naturally care for your state. For all seek their own, not the things which are Jesus Christ’s. But ye know the proof of him, that, as a son with the father, he hath served with me in the gospel” (Phil. 2:19-22). You want someone who doesn’t do this because he has to, but because, like Timothy, he wants to – it’s natural to him.

### The character of the leaders

But you don’t just want men who fill a certain role well; you need men of character. You see this in the descriptions of these men in our text as well. Their lives are worthy of imitation: “whose faith follow” (7). It is noteworthy, I think, that in both lists of qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, only one of the qualifications is related to a task, and it’s the fact that an elder needs to be able to teach. All the other qualifications are character qualifications. Thus, the apostle writes to Titus, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: If any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of riot or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God; not selfwilled, not soon angry, not

given to wine, no striker, not given to filthy lucre; But a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober, just, holy, temperate; Holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to convince the gainsayers” (Tit. 1:5-9).

In other words, they need to be men who are not only good in public but above all good in private. They are not something in the pulpit and another thing at home or when they are alone. What you see is what you get. These are the kinds of men that you want as pastors and elders. These are how the Bible describes spiritual leaders.

It is a common consensus among commentators on this text that verse 7 really is directed towards their past spiritual leaders, whereas verse 17 to their present. The reason for this is that in verse 7, their ministry of the word is spoken of in the past tense, “who have spoken unto you the word of God.” It also makes more sense to say of the past, “Remember them.” These were men, in other words, whose memory was worth preserving. Their lives were good to the very end. Like Paul, they had finished their course, fought a good fight, and kept the faith. So the author says that of such the church should consider, “to look back carefully upon,”<sup>1</sup> “the end of their conversation” – that is to say, the outcome of their lives here upon the earth. They were men who were faithful to the end.

Certainly the present pastors were meant to be like that as well. We need men of such character that they are not like a shooting star that burns out and burns up. No, we need men of faith to the end. That is the kind of pastor you want as a shepherd.

### The authority of the leaders

Now there is no doubt that these pastors are leaders because that is the very word that is used to describe them. Pastors are shepherds and

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<sup>1</sup>P. E. Hughes, *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*, (Eerdmans: 1977), p. 569.

shepherds lead. But there are right ways to lead and there are bad ways to lead. How then do godly leaders lead the church?

It seems to me that there is a problem in many churches in our day on just this issue. It stems partly from a reaction to the past. In the past, many churches had pastors that didn't really lead and didn't really provide spiritual oversight in any significant sense. So people, desiring to recover a Biblical vision of the church, looked at the text of Scripture and noticed that in the NT the churches has multiple elders who really did lead the church. So in response to this, some churches have gone to what is sometimes called an "elder-rule" policy. Now I believe in elder rule to a point, but I believe it has been abused in many churches. What has happened is that some churches have opted for a system of church government where the elders make all the decisions, and the congregation has no say. They've flipped the system, do you see?

I don't think this is wise. It's like these churches have adopted the Presbyterian system on a local scale without any of the checks and balances of the global system of Session, Synod, and General Assembly. These churches have a cabal of elders who make all the decisions. All the authority is concentrated in the hands of a few men.

I don't think that is wise or Biblical. The Presbyterians do have checks and balances for their system, but they do this by pushing the authority and the accountability up, ultimately to the General Assembly. In other words, the local elders are held accountable by other elders outside their own group. That is one way to do it, but I think the congregational model is best. Baptist churches are congregational churches. In our setting, we push the accountability down rather than up, down to the congregation. In the NT, the deacons were chosen by the church, not just by the apostles. Silas and Barsabas were also chosen by the Jerusalem church for their mission representing them, even though they were leading men. In other words, the elders, even though they lead, are ultimately accountable to the congregations which they lead. This seems to me to be the most Biblical and wisest policy.

So how do the leaders lead? How do they exercise their authority? Well, look at the text of Scripture. They don't do it by beating the members of the church over the heads with the stick of authority. They do it by the examples of their lives and by persuading them from the Word of God. You see this here in Hebrews 13. In verse 17, the word for "obey" is a word which can often refer to the effort to persuade. Thus, the chief priests persuaded the crowds (same word in Mt. 27:20) to choose to release Barabbas instead of the Lord. In Heb. 13:18, in fact, the word is translated "trust;" here it has the meaning "to be persuaded."

Now that doesn't mean that the church is not really to submit to the teaching of the pastors. The text clearly says that. However, it is not so much a submission to the authority of the pastor as it is a submission to the authority of the Word of God which they speak. They lead by persuading the people they lead that the path they are leading them down is not a path they have chosen but the path God has marked out for them in his word. Thus Peter exhorts elders in his day to take the oversight of the church (1 Pet. 5:2) – they really are to lead – but they are to do without abusing this authority. So he goes on to write, "Neither as being lords over God's heritage, but being ensamples to the flock" (3).

A wonderful illustration of this is given in a book I've recently gone through.<sup>2</sup> A group of tourists in Israel were told by their guide on a tour bus that in Israel shepherds always lead their flocks from the front; they never drive them from behind. As he was saying this, the people in the bus noticed some sheep being driven from behind. They asked about this, so the guide got out of the bus and went to investigate. He came back with a smile on his face and explained that the man wasn't a shepherd; he worked for the slaughterhouse and was sending them there! Pastors don't drive, they lead the way.

Another way to illustrate this is in the relationship between husband and wife. In Ephesians 5:22-24, wives are exhorted to submit to their

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<sup>2</sup>Timothy Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (P&R, 2010).

husbands. Husbands are told, on the other hand, to love their wives as Christ loved the church (25-33). In other words, the submission envisioned here is a willing submission on the part of the wife to loving leadership on the part of the husband. In such a context, it seems to me to be quite incongruous for a husband to be always having to remind his wife of his authority. If he is having to do that, I would bet the problem is not with the wife as much as it is with the husband. I'm not saying that there aren't women who might need to be reminded of this, but I would bet that nine times out of ten a wife that has a hard time submitting to her husband is because the husband has abused his authority in some way. In the similar way, a pastor who is always holding forth the stick of his authority and waving it in the faces of his people is probably a bad shepherd. Good pastors lead by example and persuasion so that the congregation willingly follows.

The opposite problem can occur too; congregations can take on an attitude that resists any effort on the part of the pastors to get them to change. This is probably in fact what had happened in this church in Rome, and which is why our author is having to remind them to obey and submit to the leadership of their pastors. There are people and even congregations that take on an attitude that no one is going to tell them what to do. Every pastor knows people like this, and it is incredibly sad. It is sad because they know what is going to happen to this person, and it is not good. A healthy congregation is one in which there is mutual trust and respect between the pastor and the congregation so that where the pastor leads, the congregations follows willingly and joyfully.

It is really a bad thing when this atmosphere of trust and respect does not exist. It's why we go on to read, "for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you" (17). Churches that refuse to follow their spiritual leadership make life miserable for their pastors. Some in the church may just want to do that! What this verse says is that you are not helping yourself when you do this; you are hurting

yourself. It is not profitable for you to have a pastor or pastors whom you have made miserable in their task.

Now we are told that the pastors “must give account.” It is important to remember that here the account is not given to the church but to God (cf. 2 Tim. 4:1). But that does not mean that the church gets off scot-free, does it? We will all give an account to God. Beware how you treat God’s servants, for you will give an account of this before God.

This of course leads naturally to our next and final point.

How the faithful follow

First of all, they are to respect their spiritual leaders. This is the clear implication in the exhortation to remember them (7). Now this is a respect and a trust that is earned. It is not something that they can expect just because of their position. Verse 7 is really dealing with past leaders whose lives can be seen in terms of their total outcome. In other words, they had demonstrated by their very lives that they were faithful. It is such men that the church is to respect. Of course, even for present leaders, there must be some measure of trust in order for him to lead effectively. A church needs to cultivate constantly this spirit of mutual cooperation and trust and respect in order for the mission of the church in this world to be effective.

Second, follow their faith. Look at their lives, and insofar as they follow Christ, you follow them. As Paul put it to the Corinthians, “Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ” (1 Cor. 11:1). Their faith in Christ will also make them faithful to the words of Christ and will make for healthy preaching. You need to listen to Bible-centered, Christ-exalting, God-centered preaching. If I ever stop preaching the word of God, then you need to stop listening to me; in fact, you should remove me from this pulpit. As long as I – or anyone else in this pulpit – is preaching the Bible, then you need to listen, regardless of how much you like it or not! Both Elder Bradley and I make it a point always to ground everything we say in the Scriptures. At the end of the day, we

refuse to be wedded to a particular theological or denominational system, for our allegiance is to Christ and his word. Listen to God's men who preach God's word. Remember that one of the main problems of this church in Rome is that they had stopped listening to God's words, and one of the main ways they had stopped listening is that they had stopped hearing it communicated through their pastors.

So, brothers and sisters, "Let a man so account of us, as of the ministers of Christ, and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor. 4:1). The ministry does not exist for its own sake, but for the good of the church. Let us therefore work together. Hold us responsible to preach the Bible. As the pastors of this church, we will faithfully seek to preach God's word and live it out in faithful obedience to the Lord who gave his life for the church, who loves his church and has given her pastors and teachers so that it is built up in love and faith.



# CHAPTER LIII

## THE EXCLUSIVE AND SUPERIOR PRIESTHOOD OF JESUS CHRIST (HEB. 13:8-16)

AS WE COME TO THE END of this letter, what we find is that the author is summarizing the argument of the whole in these final verses. What we find here are several of the great themes of the epistle in the compass of a few short verses. We see the priesthood of our Lord underlined once again in verse 12, where we are reminded that he is the one who sanctifies his people by his own blood. Indeed, he is the altar of verse 10. We also see the superiority of Jesus, especially over against the claims of a Christless Judaism. In fact, as we shall see, this is the burden and heart of this paragraph. Finally, we see the exclusivity of Jesus, for we are told, “We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle” (10). “Those who serve the tabernacle” is shorthand for those who reject Jesus and his New Covenant in favor of the Old Covenant. The author of Hebrews is arguing that those who do so have no right to our Lord’s altar and sacrifice. In other words, the

benefits of the atonement of our Lord are exclusive in the sense that those who reject it have no rights to it. There is no other way to the Father apart from Christ (cf. John 14:6).

Now we live in a world which frankly rejects this. It rejects the exclusivity of the claims of Christ and argues that any kind of vague spirituality will do when it comes to relating to God. It also rejects the superiority of Christ and argues that the Christian religion in particular is a relic that needs to be discarded into the wastebin of history. Of course, the world in which we live generally does not see any need for an atonement for sins before God, for it has no categories for a Biblical understanding of who God is and what man is, what sin is, and the need for cosmic justice.

Over against the culture's rejection of Christ and his claims, I want to hold up through the lens of Hebrews 13:8-16 our Lord's exclusivity and his superiority in light of his role as our priest before God. I hope that you will see this and be so convinced of the greatness and goodness of Jesus that you will not be tempted by desires and hopes for other saviors and salvations. My desire is that you will see Christ today and hear him today through his word and that, in seeing and hearing, you will love him and trust him and obey him as your priest before God.

### The Exclusivity of Jesus

To see this emphasis in these verses, I think it will be important for us to consider the background to the text before us. What is meant by the reference to foods in verse 9? What is the reference behind verse 11, and how is Jesus being compared to that in verse 12? Well, to understand this, we need to understand the Day of Atonement and what happened to the sacrifices on that day. This feast is one of the most holy days in the Mosaic calendar and it is chronicled for us at length in Leviticus 16.

As you might know, it was on this day, and on this day only, that the High Priest went into the Holy of Holies, that inner chamber of the tabernacle or temple where the Ark of the Covenant lay. On that day, he

would take the blood of a bullock and the blood of a goat and sprinkle their blood on the Mercy Seat as a sin offering. In this way, the sins of Israel were ceremonially cleansed, and the Israelites were granted the favor of God's continuing presence in their midst.

Now usually, the priests ate a part of the sin offering (cf. Lev. 6:26, 29; 10:17). But not so on the Day of Atonement; on that day, the entire sacrifice was burned up. Not only was it burned up, but it was burned outside the camp. The key text is Lev. 16:27 – “And the bullock for the sin offering, and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall one carry forth without the camp; and they shall burn in the fire their skins, and their flesh and their dung.” Of course, the way this would have worked in the days when the Jerusalem temple had replaced the tabernacle, the offerings would have been burned outside the city.

This is the background to our text. It illuminates the reference to foods in verse 9 as well as the following verses. All this is a reference, in other words, to the rituals surrounding the Day of Atonement in particular and to the Law of Moses in general. In other words, those folks who “have been occupied” with “meats” are folks who are concerned with keeping the food laws of the Old Covenant. They are concerned with what was clean and unclean, as set down by Moses. In other words, these are people who are trying to relate to God, not through Jesus Christ, but through their keeping of the Law of Moses. It is for this reason that we read in verse 9, “For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.” The Law came by Moses; grace and truth by Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17). Those who reject Jesus but keep the Law are left with nothing more than various food laws and other religious regulations than cannot give heart-establishing grace.

Moreover, those who do so have no right to Jesus (10). He is the altar at which every believer in Christ worships and approaches God. Those who “serve the tabernacle” in this context are those who keep the Law while rejecting Jesus. Thus “they have no right to eat” at this altar. They

have their own meat and food, but it is not the food that gives life. Do you remember what our Lord said? “I am the living bread which came down from heaven: if any man eat this bread, he shall live forever: and the bread that I will give is my flesh, which I will give for the life of the world” (Jn. 6:51). The altar is Jesus, and his flesh is the food that gives life, the very thing that those who served the tabernacle rejected.

In verses 11-12, the point is that Jesus is the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement. He is the one to whom the entire holy day pointed. It is his blood and his sacrifice that it pointed to. But more than that: it pointed to the fact that he would suffer outside the city walls of Jerusalem, just as the bodies of the sacrifices were burned outside the camp.

So with all that in mind, there seems to be two big points that the author is making. First, Jesus is the fulfillment of the Law of Moses and in particular of the Day of Atonement. Second, it is in light of this fulfillment that he can say that it is at the altar of Jesus that God’s people find food that gives eternal life, whereas those who reject Jesus for the Law are left without. They have “meats,” but this is not the food that gives life, for that can only be found in Jesus. Just as the priests on the Day of Atonement couldn’t eat those sacrifices, even so those who clung to the Old Covenant while rejecting Jesus couldn’t eat of his sacrifice.

In other words, our author is establishing through the language of OT figure and type the exclusivity of Jesus. Those who reject Jesus have no right to eat at the altar of his sacrifice (10). Who then has this right? The apostle John answers the question, doesn’t he? “He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he the power [authority or right – same word as in Heb. 13:10] to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name” (Jn. 1:11-12). Our Lord had explained it this way in John 6: those who eat his flesh and drink his blood – in other words, those who partake in the benefits of his sacrifice – are those who believe in him. As he puts it in John 6:35, “And Jesus said unto them, I am the bread of life: he that cometh to me will never hunger; and he that believeth in me shall never thirst.”

Why is the exclusivity of Jesus so important? You might say, “So what? I don’t care whether or not I have the right to eat at his altar.” Well, let’s consider what you can only get through Jesus, and in no other way. It is here that we now meet with the superiority of Jesus.

### The Superiority of Jesus Christ

What I next want to point out from these verses is that Jesus gives us three things that no one else can give. Each of these three things depends fundamentally upon an even more basic and wonderful attribute of our Lord: his unchanging character. This is highlighted in verse 8, “Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today, and forever.” In an ever-changing world, these are sweet, sweet words. As the hymn-writer put it:

*Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;  
earth’s joys grow dim, its glories pass away.  
Change and decay in all around I see.  
O thou who changest not, abide with me.*

This reality is especially sweet when we see what they are connected to. We see from these verses that our Lord is unchanging in the grace he gives, in the atonement he provides, and in the city he builds. Jesus is unchanging in the grace he gives.

Recall verse 9: “Be not carried about with divers [varied] and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.” The different and strange teaching to which the author alludes is the effort of some to draw these believers away from Christ and his saving work and to rely instead upon their identity as Jews and their keeping of the Law of Moses. But the Law does not give grace. It can provide a witness to Jesus, but if you don’t acknowledge him, it’s not even good for that. On the other hand, Jesus gives grace. In fact, all grace from God comes through Jesus Christ (Jn. 1:17). The “exceeding riches of [God’s] grace in his kindness toward us” are “through Christ Jesus” (Eph. 2:7).

The thing is that you don't have to be a first-century Jew to feel the pull towards the Law as the basis of your relationship towards God. Ask most people why they think God will let them into heaven, and the most common answer will be something along the lines of, "I've been a pretty good person. God knows my heart. He knows that I've always tried to be kind to others." In other words, they are not really banking on grace; they are trusting in their own righteousness. They believe that their good works will get them into heaven.

The problem with that is, when we trust in our good works, we aren't thinking of our responsibility before God on the terms that God demands. We are only thinking of how we treated people, and we are only doing so in comparison to other people. We treat escaping God's holy and just wrath the way we might treat escaping the claws of a bear: as long as we can outrun other people, we'll be okay. So we think that as long as we are as good as, or maybe a little better than, most people, we won't have to worry about the judgment of God.

This is tragically wrong on a number of levels. First of all, our main problem is not how we treated other people; our main problem is how we've failed to love God with all our hearts. We haven't been thankful for God's gifts. We don't care about God's law; we have been a law unto ourselves. We may profess with our lips that God exists and even call ourselves "spiritual," but unless we have been changed by a miracle of the heart-renovating work of the Holy Spirit, unless we have been born again, we will live as if God doesn't even exist. Second, there's a problem with our standard. The standard is not how we compare with other people. The standard is the perfection of the holy law of God. Being better than others won't get anyone into heaven; only perfect obedience will. God is holy; why should he let a sinner into heaven?

You might reply, "Because God is loving." Yes, God is loving. But God's love is a holy love. It is also a sovereign love, and he is under no obligation to love a corrupt and wicked worm. We cannot get away from the fact that God is holy and that our sins bring us under his just and holy wrath.

This is what the Bible says about those who try to relate to God on the basis of their own goodness: “as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse: for it is written, Cursed is every one that continueth not in all things which are written in the book of the law to do them” (Gal. 3:10). This verse is just saying that God only accepts perfect obedience and that anything else brings you under his just curse. Who can say that they are perfect before God? No one can! For as the Scriptures teach, and as our own consciences testify, “All have sinned, and come short of the glory of God” (Rom. 3:23).

So if you’re hoping that “being good enough” is all you need to guarantee eternal life, you are grievously mistaken. No one can be justified before God on the basis of good works. No one.

How then are people rescued from the eternal consequences of their sins? The apostle Paul tells us: “Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: that the blessing of Abraham might come on the Gentiles through Jesus Christ; that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Gal. 3:13-14). What this verse is saying is that Christ suffered the curse of the law in the place of his people, “the just for the unjust that he might bring us to God” (1 Pet. 3:18). He is the fulfillment of the Day of Atonement; he is the sin offering whose blood is sprinkled before God for the forgiveness of sins. He is the sacrifice on whose head the sins of his people are laid, enduring the punishment for their sins, so that they might be released from the penalty of their sins. “For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him” (2 Cor. 5:21). As our text puts it, he sanctifies the people with his own blood (Heb. 13:12).

Why go through all this? Well, for one thing; it’s the good news of the gospel. You need to understand this if you really want to understand what grace from God really is. Biblical grace is gospel grace; there is no other kind (cf. Acts 20:24). What grace means is not just that God goes easy on you. It’s not just that you don’t get what you deserve. It’s much, much more than that. To have God’s grace, you must belong to God’s

Son, to Jesus Christ. If you belong to him, it means that he took all your sin, and it means that you get his perfect righteousness credited to your account. How do you know you belong to him? The answer to that question is the answer to this one: do you believe in the Son? Do you trust in him? Have you received him as Lord and Savior? That is the test.

Now if this is true of you, it means that there is nothing for you to do to merit God's favor. Did you hear that? Nothing! It means that there is no sin that threatens your acceptance with the Father, and that there is no good work that you need to do to keep that relationship with the Father. The child of God doesn't work for God's favor; he or she works from God's favor. We only fight forgiven sins:

*He breaks the power of cancelled sin;  
He sets the prisoner free;  
His blood can make the foulest clean;  
His blood availed for me.*

This is what it means to be a recipient of God's grace. Grace doesn't mean that Christ did most of the work of salvation and now the rest is up to you; no, it means that all the righteousness needed for the everlasting favor of God is found in Christ, not in us. So you see that grace is not just God looking the other way; nor does it mean that God just goes easy on us. It is that all the demands and requirements of justice have been fully satisfied in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Moreover, this is grace from him who is the same yesterday, today, and forever. The grace of our Lord doesn't wear out or grow old. He doesn't change, which means that he is always gracious towards his people. It is the backdrop of passages like Heb. 4:14-16, "Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession. For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need."



These verses also show that grace doesn't just mean that God is favorably disposed towards us; it also means that he moves to our help. That is the sense in our text: God's grace establishes our hearts. He cleanses and purifies them; he unites our hearts to fear his name. The fact that God calls the help he gives us grace is a reminder that the help we ask for is not help we get because we deserve it but help we get because we are in Christ.

So go to Christ for grace. And go and go and go, because his grace is an unchangeable grace, it is a never- ending grace.

Look, there is no one and no place you can go for this kind of grace. You won't find it in people; you won't find it in any religion apart from Christ. He is superior to every competitor, for his grace is greater than all our sin.

Jesus is unchanging in the atonement he provides

Our Lord sanctifies his people by his blood. He is the altar at which we find peace with God. He is the one by whom we find redemption. By him we can be released from the penalty and power of sin. By him the guilt of our sin is fully dealt with. By him we can be reconciled to God, so that we who were once enemies can now be friends. By him we can be released from the holy wrath of God against our sin.

This atonement our Lord provided is not something that has to be achieved over and over again. Remember the words of this epistle in chapter 10: "By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all. And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified" (10-14). In other words, the atonement is unchanging in its effectiveness. Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever in terms of his ability to save all

who come to him. There is no need to add to his work; no need to contribute to our own redemption.

Jesus is unchanging in the city he builds.

I love verse 14: “For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.” It is the city that Abraham sought: “By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (11:8-10). And, “But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city” (16).

We may be strangers and pilgrims in this world, but we have an eternal home. It is an inheritance which is both imperishable and unchanging, reserved in heaven for those who belong to Jesus (1 Pet. 1:4). The greatest inheritance in this earth will be taken away. Death allows us to take nothing with us. As the apostle Paul put it, we came into this world with nothing, and we will go out with nothing (1 Tim. 6:7). But for the Christian, death is only the door to glory. It is the entrance into our eternal home.

I think it’s important for us to also remember the first part of this verse: “For here have we no continuing city.” He has not promised that, if we have enough faith and keep our noses clean, we will have a nice life or achieve the American Dream. Our Lord’s life was not like that; the apostles’ lives were not like that. So we shouldn’t get upset with God if our dreams for this life aren’t coming true. He hasn’t promised you a nice ride this side of heaven. What he has promised is an eternal city in the presence of God forever. There is no bait and switch. He hasn’t promised earthly health, wealth, fame, and comfort, so if we don’t have

that it's not because God is unfaithful. He is faithful. If you belong to Jesus, you have a city, a home in heaven, a place prepared for you.

In these three ways, our Lord demonstrates his superiority over his competitors. No one gives grace like Jesus, provides an atonement like him, or prepares a city for his people like he does.

How we should respond to these truths

On the one hand, we should not think that we relate to God and gain his favor through sacrifices that we make. On the other hand, there is a kind of sacrifice that pleases God. They are not sacrifices to gain his favor, but rather sacrifices in response to his grace. Three are mentioned in verses 13-16.

The first is the sacrifice of the self, the taking of the cross to follow Jesus. You see this in verse 13: "Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach." The language here carries the exact same meaning of our Lord's words to his disciples that to follow him they must take their cross. Jesus took a cross; so must we. Jesus endured the reproach of sinners outside the city gates; so must we. We must be willing to be considered outsiders because we are. We have no continuing city here, but we seek the one that is to come.

It is only when we are convinced of the exclusivity and superiority of Jesus to everyone and everything else that we will take our crosses and follow him like this. Why would you otherwise? If there are other options out there, why would you follow Jesus? If it doesn't matter if you follow him or not, why would you? But the exclusivity of Jesus as the only way to the Father shows us that this is not optional. On the other hand, if there are better options out there, why would you follow Jesus? If something else can give you something better, why not go for that? But no one can give you gospel grace. No one can give you salvation from sin that you didn't merit. Only our Lord can do that. No one else can truly and fully atone for your sins in your place. No

one else can give you an inheritance in heaven; only Jesus Christ can do that. He is the exclusive and the superior way to the Father.

Then there is the sacrifice of praise. You see that in verse 15: “By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name.” Of course, the language of sacrifice here is not to indicate that praising God is a hard thing! Rather, the language of sacrifice is used in the sense of something offered to God. It’s praise, not propitiation. Again, we don’t offer to God to get his favor or to merit his love. We offer praise to God in response to his grace towards us in and through Jesus Christ. In fact, the only appropriate response to the gift of God to us in Christ is to receive it with faith and thanksgiving.

Note that word, continually. Paul wrote the Corinthians and warned them, in light of the example of the Israelites in the wilderness, “Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer” (1 Cor. 10:10). Murmuring is never good because it betrays a lack of contentment in God. It shows that we do not believe the Lord is taking care of us. It is the evidence of a lack of faith and joy in God. Hence, what should characterize us is therefore continual praise, an ongoing recognition that God is good and that God is faithful. It means that our praises should not be determined solely by our emotions, but that our heart should be calibrated by the doctrines we believe. Do you believe that by grace you have been saved, through faith, and that not of yourself; do you believe that salvation is from beginning to end a gift of God? Then praise him!

Finally, there is the sacrifice of good works. Note the order, this is so important. We don’t do good works to atone for our sins. We do good works because we have been atoned for our sins. Hence, we go on to read, “But to do good and to communicate [share, the word here is *koinonia*] forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased” (Heb. 13:16).

Good works should be the outflow of grace in the life. It will be, in fact. Where there are no good works, you can be sure that there is no

grace. In particular, one good work that is mentioned is that of sharing what you have. If you are a recipient of God's free and sovereign grace, and knowing that you have received salvation this way, how can you not want to share freely what you have with others? Is it not incongruous for a person to say that they believe in salvation by grace and yet be selfish and stingy? Sharing is the natural outflow of God's grace in the life.

This is in fact how the apostle Paul sought to motivate the Corinthians to contribute for the poor saints in Jerusalem. In fact, he calls it a grace. He speaks to them "of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia" and goes on to describe how "that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded unto the riches of their liberality" (2 Cor. 8:1-2). "Therefore," he writes, "as ye abound in everything, in faith, and in utterance, and knowledge, and in all diligence, and in your love to us, see that ye abound in this grace also" (7). He not only motivates them by the example of the Macedonians; above all, he points them to the grace of Christ: "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (9). We show grace in concrete and specific ways because we have been given grace in Christ.

So, brothers and sisters, let's not just get by. Let's abound in grace and in the showing of grace. Let the praises of God be often on our lips and always in our hearts. Let us be willing to lay down our life for our

Lord and his kingdom. Why? Not to earn salvation, but because in Jesus it is the gift of free and sovereign grace.

## CHAPTER LIV

### A PRAYERFUL CLOSE TO A POWERFUL EPISTLE (HEB. 13:18-25)

WHAT IS THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS? What was the author trying to do? Well, he tells us in verse 22, when he writes, “And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in a few words.” It is fundamentally a word of exhortation. That is, it is not something just to read and move on; this is meant to move the audience to action. It is very much like a written sermon with the same ends that a sermon has. A sermon doesn’t just attempt to inform, though it should do that. Nor does it just attempt to move a person emotionally, though it ought to do that. A sermon is a word of exhortation, a message whose content is intended to change the life.

As we have moved through this letter, I hope you have seen that the main thing the author has tried to exhort his readers to do is to persevere in their hope in Christ, despite all the discouragements they are facing. To do that, he has argued for the supremacy of Christ. To do that, he has argued that Christ is the eternal and unchangeable Son of God, and that

he is also the Son of Man who has become our High Priest before God. As such he is better than the angels (chapter 1-2), better than Moses (chapter 3), better than Joshua (chapter 4), and better than the priests and the sacrificial system they served (chapters 5-10). In calling them to persevere in their hope, he reminds them that they are not alone in the arduous journey to heaven, that there are generations of faithful and believing saints that join him in encouraging them to endure to the end (chapters 11-12).

We come to the end of this great letter in chapter 13. As we come to the end, I want you to notice that it essentially ends in prayer. In verses 18-19, the author asks his audience to pray for him. Then in verses 20-21, he prays for them. Though it is true that verses 22-25 deal with some final bits of information for the audience (such as the release of Timothy from prison), the real conclusion of this epistle comes with verses 18-21, which are all about prayer. Of course, the formal conclusion of the letter is a prayer in itself: “Grace be with you all. Amen” (25).

This is the right way to end. It is the right way, because God is the only one who can accomplish the ends for which this epistle was written. God is the only one who can open blind eyes to see the glory of Christ and change hearts to receive him as Lord and Savior. And God is the only one who can guarantee our perseverance in the faith to the end. As we end our consideration of this epistle, I want us to consider the importance and place that prayer ought to have with us. Then I want to close by considering what kinds of prayer are requested and offered so that we will pray these kinds of prayers too. Or, to put it a bit differently, I want to consider why we pray, and then for what we pray.

Why we pray

Because God commands us to pray.

The fundamental reason we pray is because God commands us to pray. There is no better reason than this! “Call upon me in the day of trouble,” says the Lord, “I will deliver thee, and thou shalt glorify me” (Ps. 50:15). Our Lord talks about “when ye pray,” not “if ye pray” and teaches us how to pray in Matthew 6:6-15. One of his parables in Luke 18, the parable of the unjust judge, was told “to this end, that men ought always to pray, and not to faint” (1).

The apostle Paul writes that prayer is the way we wear the Christian armor: “praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints” (Eph. 6:18). He exhorts the Thessalonians, “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thess. 5:17), and to Timothy he writes, “I exhort therefore, that, first of all [meaning: of first importance], supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks, be made for all men” (1 Tim. 2:1), and goes on to say, “I will therefore that men pray everywhere, lifting up holy hands without wrath and doubting” (8).

On the other hand, a lack of prayer is a sign of godlessness. The prophet Isaiah lamented over the apostasy of his day, and this is the way he lamented: “And there is none that calleth upon thy name, that stirreth up himself to take hold of thee: for thou hast hid thy face from us, and hast consumed us, because of our iniquities” (Isa. 64:7).

Because God promises to bless those who pray.

We pray because we are commanded to pray, but that is not the only reason to pray. God gives us many encouragements to call upon his name. There are great and breathtaking promises attached to the call to prayer. In fact, you see it there in Psalm 50 – God promises to deliver those who call upon his name. This promise is not in one or two places; it’s all over the Bible. For example, our Lord put it this way to his disciples: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, He that believeth on me, the works that I do shall he do also; and greater works than these shall he do; because I go unto my Father. And whatsoever ye shall ask in my



name, that will I do, that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If ye ask anything in my name, I will do it" (Jn. 14:12-14). A few verses later, he essentially repeats this promise: "If ye abide in me," he says, "and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you" (Jn. 15:7).

Or there are several promises in the Sermon on the Mount. For example, in Mt. 6:6, our Lord tells us, "but thou, when thou prayest, enter into thy closet, and when thou hast shut the door, pray to thy Father which is in secret; and thy Father which seeth in secret shall reward thee openly." Or this: "Ask, and it shall be given unto you; seek, and ye shall find; knock, and it shall be opened unto you: for everyone that asketh receiveth; and he that seeketh findeth; and to him that knocketh, it shall be opened. Or what man is there of you, whom if his son ask bread, will he give him a stone? Or if he ask a fish, will he give him a serpent? If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children, how much more shall your Father which is in heaven give good things to them that ask him?" (Mt. 7:7-11).

The apostle James reminds us of the promise for wisdom to those who ask (King Solomon is an example of this!): "If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him" (Jam. 1:5). At the end of his epistle, he gives this advice: "Is any sick among you? Let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. Confess your faults one to another, and pray one for another, that ye may be healed. The effectual fervent prayer of a righteous man availeth much. Elias was a man subject to like passions as we are, and he prayed earnestly that it might not rain: and it rained not on the earth by the space of three years and six months. And he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain, and the earth brought forth her fruit." (5:14-18).

The God who cannot lie has given us these promises. Let us therefore bank on them!

However, there is an implicit warning in the above promises that we must not miss. If God promises to bless those who pray, if he promises to give to those who ask, seek, and knock, what about those who never ask, seek, or knock? What about those who do not pray? What about those who take God's blessings for granted? These promises don't mean anything if it doesn't matter whether we pray or not. God commands us to pray, he expects us to pray. And that means we can expect to not expect more blessings when we don't pray. Now God is a good Father. He will not let his children down, even if they are too stupid to pray. Those who refuse to pray are keeping themselves from wonderful blessings that they might have had otherwise. But what about unanswered prayer?

One of the arguments that Richard Dawkins gives in his book *The God Delusion* against the existence of God is the fact of unanswered prayer. In his book, he cites a study that was done in which some folks were tasked to pray for selected sick people in a hospital, and notes that prayer really did not give any statistical advantage to those who were prayed for. Even apart from arguments from guys like Dawkins, I think a lot of us know by experience the reality of unanswered prayer. In fact, it's in the Bible. Every time a Biblical writer cries out, "How long, O Lord?" he is giving witness to the painful reality of unanswered prayer (cf. Ps. 13:1-6; Hab. 1:2). God just doesn't say yes to every prayer. In fact, the apostle Paul himself gives witness to this as well: "And lest I should be exalted above measure through the abundance of the revelations, there was given to me a thorn in the flesh, the messenger of Satan to buffet me, lest I should be exalted above measure. For this thing I besought the Lord thrice, that it might depart from me. And he said unto me, My grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness. Most gladly therefore will I rather glory in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me" (2 Cor. 12:7-9). God said no

to Paul's prayer; he didn't relieve him of the thorn but gave him grace to bear it.

Now some will say that prayer is unanswered because of little or no faith. There is some truth to that: our Lord could not do many mighty miracles in "his own country" "because of their unbelief" (Mt. 13:58). The Lord will not honor unbelief (cf. Jam. 1:6-7). However, that doesn't quite explain it, for surely we cannot say that Paul's thorn didn't get removed because of his unbelief! No, the fact of the matter is that God doesn't always say yes to our prayers, no matter how much faith we have.

On the other hand, God seems often to give great blessings to those who are ungodly, who may in fact never pray! Our Lord himself said that God gives rain on the just and the unjust (Mt. 5:45). The psalmist noted: "For I was envious at the foolish, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no bands in their death: but their strength is firm. They are not in trouble as other men; neither are they plagued like other men. Therefore pride compasseth them about as a chain; violence covereth them as a garment. Their eyes stand out with fatness: they have more than heart could wish. They are corrupt, and speak wickedly concerning oppression: they speak loftily. They set their mouth against the heavens, and their tongue walketh through the earth. Therefore his people return hither: and waters of a full cup are wrung out to them. And they say, How doth God know? and is there knowledge in the most High? Behold, these are the ungodly, who prosper in the world; they increase in riches" (Ps. 73:3-12). These are not praying people, for they don't think God notices or cares about humanity, even if he does exist. These are prayerless people who nevertheless get on quite well without prayer, thank you very much!

What are we to say to that, especially in light of the promises we've considered? The problem of unanswered prayer is really only an apparent problem which you get when you get the purpose and method of prayer wrong. The following principles need to be regarded.

First, the promise of answered prayer is always associated with asking in the Lord's name, with abiding in him and in his word. We should not think of asking in the name of the Lord in terms of a mere formula. This is praying so "that the Father may be glorified in the Son" (Jn. 14:13). In other words, there is a type of prayer to which the promise is attached: it is the kind of prayer that brings glory to the Father in the Son. Not every prayer we pray does that, and we should thank God he does not answer those types of prayers. God would neither be wise nor loving to do so. The apostle John puts it this way: "And this is the confidence that we have in him [Christ], that, if we ask anything according to his will, he heareth us" (1 Jn. 5:14). Not every prayer is a prayer according to his will even when it is prayed by someone with a lot of faith.

Second, the purpose of prayer is not so that we can make our lives as comfortable on this earth as we can possibly be. If that were the case, then perhaps the problem of unanswered prayer and the prosperity of the wicked might be a problem. But that is not the only or even the main reason we pray. We pray because God is our Father through Jesus Christ our Lord. We pray because it is natural for children to bring their burdens to their father. We pray because it is right for us to express our dependence upon Christ in every way and at all times. We pray because it is in prayer that we experience fellowship with God. In other words, the main purpose of prayer is to express through praise, confession, thanksgiving, and supplication our relationship with God as our Father through the Son by the Spirit. This is the point that the apostle makes in his letter to the Romans: "For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father. The Spirit itself beareth witness with our spirit, that we are the children of God" (Rom. 8:15-16).

There is another roadblock to praying. This doesn't come from a lack of belief in God but from a very robust view of God. It comes from the conviction that God is sovereign and that whatever he ordains comes to pass. The question is then asked: if God is sovereign, why

pray? Won't his will get done anyway?

So what about the sovereignty of God?

I believe that God's decree is sovereign and all-encompassing. I believe this because this is what the Bible teaches: "in whom [Christ] also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestinated according to the purpose of him who worketh all things [not some or most but all] after the counsel of his own will" (Eph. 1:11). I also believe that prayer is effective and necessary, and that it is right to say that certain blessings depend upon our praying for them. But how do we put both these things together?

Well, let me put it to you in the words of C. H. Spurgeon. He put it this way, and I don't think I can improve upon it, so I'll give it to you in his own words:

Why should the Church continue in prayer? For several reasons, and the first is, God will answer her. It is not possible that God should refuse to hear prayer. It is possible for him to bid the sun stand still, and the moon to stay her monthly march; it is possible for him to bid the waves freeze in the sea, possible for him to quench the light of the stars in eternal darkness, but it is not possible for him to refuse to hear prayer which is based upon his promise and offered in faith. He can reverse nature, but he cannot reverse his own nature, and he must do this before he can forbear to hear and answer prayer. The prayers of God's Church are God's intentions—you will not misunderstand me—what God writes in the book of his decree, which no eye can see, that he in process of time writes in the book of Christian hearts where all can see and read. The book of the believer's desire, if those desires be inspired of the Holy Spirit, is just an exact copy of the book of the divine decree. And if the Church be determined

today to lift up her heart in prayer for the conversion of men, it is because God determined from before all worlds that men should be converted; your feeble prayer today, believer, can fly to heaven, and awake the echoes of the slumbering decrees of God... Prayer is a decree escaped out of the prison of obscurity, and come to life and liberty among men. Pray, brother, pray, for when God inspires you, your prayer is as potent as the decrees of God.<sup>1</sup>

Do you hear what he is saying? If God has ordained that something should happen, he will put it in the hearts of his people to pray. You see, it is precisely the sovereignty of God that makes our prayers both effective and necessary. We pray, not in spite of the fact that God is sovereign, but because he is sovereign!

What we pray for

Well, let's look now more particularly at the content of the prayers here at the end of Hebrews 13. I want you to notice that he requests prayers from them (Heb. 13:18-19) and then prays a prayer for them (20-21). Let me just notice in passing that these are prayers from the saints for the saints. We need to pray with each other, and we need to pray for each other. Let's beware of becoming entirely self-focused in our praying. It's not for no reason that our Lord teaches us to pray with plural pronouns: Our Father, give us this day our daily bread, and so on.

The prayer from them

"Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly. But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner" (18-19). You might think that since each believer has God for his or her Father, it makes no difference whether

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<sup>1</sup>Metropolitan Tabernacle, vol. 7. Sermon No. 354, "A Sermon for the Week of Prayer"

we pray for them or not. After all, won't God take care of them? Yes, of course he will. But again, this mistakes the meaning and purpose of prayer. We don't pray to inform the Father of our needs or the needs of others, for he already knows our needs before we ask (cf. Mt. 6:8). Instead, we should see prayer for each other as an important way our mutual dependence upon God is expressed and as an important way that our hearts are united together. For that reason, God is pleased to hear the prayers that the saints pray for each other. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "For we would not, brethren, have you ignorant of our trouble which came to us in Asia, that we were pressed out of measure, above strength, insomuch that we despaired even of life: But we had the sentence of death in ourselves, that we should not trust in ourselves, but in God which raiseth the dead: Who delivered us from so great a death, and doth deliver: in whom we trust that he will yet deliver us; Ye also helping together by prayer for us, that for the gift bestowed upon us by the means of many persons thanks may be given by many on our behalf" (2 Cor. 1:8-11). Thus, the apostle asks the Roman Christians to pray for him: "Now I beseech you, brethren, for the Lord Jesus Christ's sake, and for the love of the Spirit, that ye strive together with me in your prayers to God for me; That I may be delivered from them that do not believe in Judaea; and that my service which I have for Jerusalem may be accepted of the saints" (Rom. 15:30-31).

The fact that he encourages them to pray for him because (for) "we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly [well, good]" probably indicates that he wishes them to continue to pray that these things would be true of him. He is asking them to pray for him so that he will be able to continue to have a good conscience and in all things to live well before God (cf. Acts 24:16). He wants to be holy, and he is asking the saints to pray for him to that end. This is how we ought to pray for each other. Let's pray that God's kingdom come more and more in our lives, that his will be done more and more in our homes and in our church. That's not to say we can't pray for other things (like physical healing or a better job, etc.), but this ought

to be the main thing we pray for each other (think about how Paul prays for other believers in his letters and let this also be a pattern for us).

### His prayer for them

Verses 20-21 is one of the great doxologies of the New Testament. But it is also a prayer: “Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, Make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (20-21).

What is he praying for? He is praying that they would do God’s will more and more, indeed, that God would equip them with everything they need to do this. He is praying that they would do what pleases God. Just as he desires to be more holy himself, he prays for them that they too would be holy.

In other words, he is praying that they persevere in holiness. Not just that they barely make it over the finish line, but that they flourish in their walk with the Lord and bear much fruit for his glory. This final prayer really is therefore connected to the overall burden of this epistle. For at the end of the day, perseverance in the faith to the end is not just a matter of focusing on the end; it’s also a matter of daily life. It’s a matter of daily dying to sin and self and living to God. It’s a matter of daily refusing to be conformed to the world in the little things as well as the big things. It’s a matter of daily being transformed by the renewing of their minds (Rom. 12:1-2). Thus, it’s a matter of daily holiness and of growing in holiness. So the prayer that they are made perfect in every good work to do God’s will really is a prayer that they would persevere in faith and holiness to the end.

Prayers like this are very instructive, theologically. The object of the prayer is that they would do something, namely, God’s will. He is hardly imagining them passive in this. This is something they are very active in



doing. They are the ones doing God's will, but the one making them, equipping them, is God. The one working in them so that they work, is God. What they are praying for is a reminder that we are active and responsible to live holy lives. Who they are praying to is a reminder that God is ultimately decisive in enabling us to do his will. It is the prayerful expression of Phil. 2:12-13, "Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of his good pleasure."

Hence, we notice the basis of our confidence in prayer. It is not confidence in man but in God through our Lord Jesus Christ. It is confidence in the grace of God over our sin (for the blood of Christ was shed as a sacrifice for sin), in the victory of God over our death (for Jesus who died was raised from the dead), and in the faithfulness of God over our broken promises (for the blood is the blood of the eternal covenant). It is the benevolence and love that our Lord Jesus has for us, for he is the good shepherd of the sheep. He gives his life for them so that they might have eternal life. This reminds us that God desires to and in fact will save and sanctify his people. This is therefore no idle prayer.

Over it all stands the God of peace. For the Christian, God is the God of peace, for he has through Jesus his Son brought those who believe in him into fellowship and friendship with him.

It is ultimately a prayer for the glory of God, which is why it is also a doxology. God is glorified in us when the good in us is the result of his work for us and in us. God gets the glory for the good works of his people because we are his workmanship created in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:10). God gets the glory because he doesn't just put us in a position where we can on our own please him – he actually recreates our hearts so that we willingly please him and do his will. We don't, therefore, praise ourselves but the Lord from whom all our good comes.

Brothers and sisters, this is why, despite the opposition of Satan and a hostile world, and despite our own weakness and frailty, we can have confidence that we will glorify God through lives that please him. We

can have confidence because God is the one who enables us to do so. And the end of God-pleasing lives is the glory of God which is the end for which God has created everything. You can be sure then that God will do it. The book of Hebrews ends on prayer because prayer centers the heart and mind on God through our Lord Jesus Christ. Prayer takes the doctrine of Jesus Christ as the Son of God and Savior of the world and makes it personal. In prayer, we call upon the name of the Lord and are saved. We are saved because the God to whom we pray is the sovereign God, the gracious God, the promise-keeping God, the eternal God, the unchanging God.

## APPENDIX A

# WHY I AM A BAPTIST - AND WHY YOU SHOULD BE ONE, TOO

A Baptist is a Christian who (among other things!) believes that the rite of baptism is administered properly only to disciples who trust in Christ (subject) by an immersion of that disciple in water (mode) as a part of their profession of faith in Christ. Thus, we differ from paedobaptists<sup>1</sup> in the matters of the mode and subjects of baptism. Whereas they believe baptism is for disciples and their children, we believe it is for disciples only. Whereas they believe that it is properly administered by sprinkling water upon the subject, we believe that it is only properly administered by immersing the subject in water.

In my interaction with Reformed paedobaptists, both personally and in the literature, it seems to me that there is one main argument for paedobaptism. It is made through an appeal to the covenantal structure of the Bible. (Note: for the purposes of this article, we will be interacting almost entirely with the Reformed tradition. There are other

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<sup>1</sup>Paedobaptist comes from two Greek words which mean “infant” and “baptism,” hence, it refers to people who embrace the practice of infant baptism.

traditions, like the Roman Catholic tradition. This tradition does not appeal to the Biblical covenants, but rather to its view that baptism actually confers salvation and washes away original sin.) In particular, in this argument, paedobaptists argue that the New Covenant is essentially the same as the Abrahamic covenant (see Gen. 17). Since the sign of the Abrahamic covenant was given not only to Abraham but also to his children, it is argued that the sign of the New Covenant should also be given to believers and their children, especially since (they argue) there is no abrogation of the principle “believers and their children are in the covenant.” Along with this is the fact that, in the New Testament, baptism and circumcision are parallel and point to the same realities; therefore, there is a strong presumption that the subjects of circumcision (believers and their children) should also inform how we practice baptism (also believers and their children).

There are other arguments as well, such as the practice of household baptisms in the book of Acts, and the example of the practice of infant baptism very early in the history of the church. So it is argued that the facts of church history, both Biblical (Acts) and later on (beginning in the second century), support the argument from the covenants of the Bible.

Do the Biblical covenants support this argument? Should we baptize, not only disciples, but also the children of disciples? I think not, and I would like to give you the reasons why I think the Baptist position is the Biblical position.

Before I do so, however, I want to make the point that this is not a primary doctrinal difference. In other words, genuine brothers and sisters in Christ can differ about how to practice baptism. Some of my favorite theologians were and are paedobaptists. I think of guys who like Augustine the fourth century African bishop, John Calvin, many of the English Puritans (like John Owen), Jonathan Edwards and George Whitefield, J. C. Ryle, John G. Paton, John Murray, and many others whom I respect, were all paedobaptists and greatly used of God. Appar-

ently, the Lord does not think that this difference over baptism is as big a deal as some folks (on both sides of the debate) make it out to be.

Furthermore, you might wonder why I am addressing this issue at this time, especially when there are much more pressing issues confronting the church in our day. Well, I agree that this is not the most important issue of our day. But baptism is a Biblical issue, and it is an ordinance that our Lord gave the church. Baptism, therefore, should be accorded our due attention as Christians because we want to honor what the Lord has ordained for his church. Though we don't want to make it more important than it is and dishonor our Lord by neglecting his people, neither do we want to make it less important than it is and dishonor our Lord by neglecting his will.

So how should we respond to the argument from the Biblical covenants? Since we have just looked at the New Covenant in Hebrews 8, I think it is appropriate to consider this argument now, and especially since I think that the terms of the New Covenant – though they don't address the issue of baptism directly – they do bring with them strong implications for believers' baptism (in my opinion!). Incidentally, I will not here be addressing the issue of the mode of baptism, only the issue of the subjects of baptism. In this message, I want to start with the New Covenant as the main point, but then also append two other arguments that I think support the Baptist position.

### The New Covenant Argument

Let me get down to brass tacks. In Heb. 8:11, which is a quotation of Jer. 31:34, we read, "And they shall not teach every man his neighbor, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest." There it is. The New Covenant is characterized by this fact: "all shall know me, from the least to the greatest." The "all" here means "all who are New Covenant members." The New Covenant is characterized by the fact that every covenant member will know the Lord. As we saw last time, this is a knowing which is sav-

ing, as in John 17:3 – “This is eternal life, that they may know thee, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent.”

Just to underline the fact, the Lord says this is not “all” in the sense of “most but not everyone,” but this is an “all” in the sense of “from the least to the greatest.” In other words, there are no exceptions to this rule. If you are embraced by the New Covenant and belong to the New Covenant community, then you know God.

However, if this is the case, then it follows that the sign of the New Covenant belongs only to those who are saved. We should give the sign of the covenant, not to infants who cannot give a credible profession of faith, but only those who can give a credible profession of faith, that is, to disciples.

What about the Abrahamic Covenant?

Now, at this point, the Abrahamic covenant is inevitably appealed to by our paedobaptist friends. They will say that these two covenants are essentially the same. Therefore, what is good for the goose is good for the gander: if infants are included in the Abrahamic covenant, they should also be included in the New Covenant. Moreover, they will appeal to the promise in verse 10 (“and I will be to them a God and they shall be to me a people”; see Gen. 17:7) as a reason to put an equals sign between the two covenants. In both covenants, God is setting apart a people for his name. In other words, Baptists are rebuked here because they do not see the continuity between the two covenants.

We do agree that there is significant continuity. We also agree that believers in Christ are embraced in the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant. The apostle Paul makes this point in Rom. 4 and Gal. 3-4. However, that does not mean that every aspect of the Abrahamic covenant carries over into the New Covenant. For example, God very specifically promises Abraham the land of Canaan, which is not something that is incorporated into the New Covenant. Also, in the Abrahamic covenant, God is separating Abraham’s physical offspring from

the nations, and he does this in part by the rite of circumcision (one of the things incorporated into the Law of Moses which theologians often call “boundary markers”). In the New Covenant community, however, the rite of baptism goes in the opposite direction: it is for all the nations (cf. Mt. 28:19). In other words, though we agree there is significant overlap between the covenants (and we should expect this since both covenants are a part of the unfolding of God’s one plan of redemption in Christ), there is also discontinuity, discontinuity that is owing to what God was doing as a part of the historical outworking of his plan to bring his Son into the world through the family of Abraham.

In particular, we can see that there was a specific reason for the incorporation of Abraham’s physical offspring into the covenant; it was to set apart the physical family of Abraham from the nations so that the Messiah promised could be identified as the son of Abraham (see Mt. 1:1). Now that the Messiah has come, there is no longer any need to do this. Circumcision as a boundary marker has fulfilled its purpose and has passed away with the coming of Christ. But it seems to follow that this aspect of circumcision, which incorporated not only Abraham but also his physical offspring into the covenant, has passed away. We should not, then, look to circumcision as a reason to embrace believers and their children in the covenant community.

So my objection is that our paedobaptist friends don’t properly understand the discontinuity between the covenants. Nevertheless, I would also argue that they don’t properly understand the continuity, either. The continuity is not found in the principle of “believers and their children.” Rather, the continuity is this: the blessings of the Abrahamic covenant are for the sons of Abraham. According to the apostle Paul, these blessings, insofar as they are incorporated into the New Covenant, are for the children of Abraham by spiritual descent (that is, by faith). Note well how the apostle Paul puts it to the Romans: “And he [Abraham] received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness of the faith which he had yet being uncircumcised: that he might be the father of all them that believe, though they be not

circumcised; that righteousness might be imputed to them also: And the father of the circumcision to them who are not of the circumcision only, but who also walk in the steps of that faith of our father Abraham, which he had being yet uncircumcised” (Rom. 4:11-12). Of whom is Abraham the father? He is the father of all of them that believe. Paul will put it this way to the Galatians: “And if ye be Christ’s, then are ye Abraham’s seed, and heir according to the promise” (Gal. 3:29). You must belong to Christ if you would inherit the promise of salvation which is promised in the Abrahamic covenant, and Paul makes it very clear that “ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus” (26). In other words, again and again, in the New Covenant, the promises are always attached to personal faith, not the faith of the parents. Abraham is your spiritual father if you trust in Christ and in no other way.

What about circumcision?

What about the parallel between circumcision and baptism? At this juncture, Col. 2:11-12 is often appealed to: “In whom [Christ] also ye are circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, in putting off the body of the sins of the flesh by the circumcision of Christ: Buried with him in baptism, wherein also ye are risen with him through the faith of the operation of God, who had raised him from the dead.” In this text, both circumcision and baptism point to what is essentially the same reality: the reality of our union with Christ in his redemptive work. That’s all well and good: but it does not therefore logically follow that the practice of circumcision defines the practice of baptism. Even so, the text itself points in another direction: in verse 12, baptism and faith are once again put together. If you are buried with Christ in baptism, you have also risen with him through faith. This is not an argument against believer’s baptism, it’s an argument for it.

In any case, we do not define the church in terms of the way the community of Israel was defined by the Abrahamic covenant



(and, later, the Mosaic Covenant). The church is not the physical seed of Abraham; the church is made up of the spiritual seed of Abraham, which the New Testament defines in terms of faith in Christ.

What about the promise of Gen. 17:7?

What about the promise in Heb. 8:10 which is so like the promise in Gen. 17:7? Doesn't this mean that the New Covenant community is simply an extension of the community created by the Abrahamic Covenant? For our paedobaptist friends argue that because the promise "I will be their God" is part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 17:7), the New Covenant is essentially the same covenant as that established with Abraham. It is further argued that this phrase points, not necessarily to a saving relationship with God, but to the establishment of an external covenant community (see, for example, Exod. 6:7). Therefore, it follows that the descriptions in the New Covenant are compatible with being a community in which not all its members are actually regenerate, forgiven, and saved.

In response to this, I first note that there seems to be a failure at this point to see the connection between Old Covenant and New Covenant in terms of type/shadow and fulfillment. The type is analogous to the reality it represents. In the same way, the description of Israel being the people of God is analogous to the church being the people of God. But analogies are not meant to be one-to-one correspondences. The family of Abraham which would be constituted under Moses as a nation was constituted as the people of God in a very real sense, but only as a type and a shadow of the community constituted by Christ in the New Covenant. Similarly, the forgiveness offered through the Old Covenant ritual sacrifices did grant ritual cleansing but not real forgiveness (unless the one who offered the sacrifice was connected by faith in God's promise to the benefits of Christ's future redemptive work). However, it did point to the one, final sacrifice that our Lord offered on the cross.

There is some correspondence, true, but not a one-to-one correspondence.

Thus, it is simply a mistake to say that the phrase, “I will be their God and they shall be my people” must be understood in exactly the same way, whether you are talking about the Abrahamic Covenant versus the New Covenant, or the Old Covenant versus the New Covenant.

This is actually something the terms of the New Covenant demonstrate. Who are God’s people in the New Covenant? Not believers and their children. There is not a word of that. The New Covenant community is composed of those who are regenerate, who know God in a saving way, and whose sins are forgiven.

In order to get around the clear implications of these realities, it seems to me that paedobaptists have to downplay the descriptions of the New Covenant promises. So, they will say that to have God’s law written in the heart is only a difference in the form the law will take in the New Covenant. This is the argument that Presbyterian pastor Guy Richard makes in his book on baptism, for example.<sup>2</sup> (Though to be honest, what exactly he means by that, I do not understand.) The New Covenant is a promise that God will write his law on his people’s hearts. Now this happened under the Old Covenant, so there is no difference in that sense, but it was not guaranteed to all the Old Covenant members. Just because you were an Israelite did not mean you were born again! (If you don’t believe me, read about King Ahab.) However, the New Covenant does embed that guarantee in this promise. If you are a New Covenant participant, you are born again. To say anything less than this is to water down and to misinterpret the promise.

In the same way, Richard says that the promise that all will know God is simply a reference to the fact that all God’s people in the New Covenant will have access to and knowledge of God’s law, and not just the privileged few, like priests and prophets in the Old Covenant. He also says that the New Covenant is different in the clarity it provides.

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<sup>2</sup>See his book, *Baptism: Answers to Common Questions*, (Reformation Trust Publishing, 2019).

Now, I'm not disputing that we are made a kingdom of priests by Christ. Nor am I disputing that the New Covenant provides greater clarity. But to reduce the promise here to that is, to say the least, to impoverish its richness. To know God is to be saved (Jn. 17:3). This is what is promised in the New Covenant. It is not a promise that your children might be saved, or that you should hope that they will be saved since they are "covenant children," but a promise that everyone – from the least to the greatest – in the New Covenant will be saved, for they will all know God.

In the same way, the promise of the remission of sins is a promise of real forgiveness to all who belong to the New Covenant. It is not simply saying that the blood of Christ is superior to the sacrifices of the Old Covenant. That is true, of course. However, that is not all that is being said here. It is not that the remission offered is superior, but that the real remission of sins belongs to everyone in the New Covenant: "For I will forgive their iniquities, and I will remember their sin no more." This is the promise of the personal forgiveness of sins to all who relate to God in the New Covenant, not simply the promise that the fulfillment of the type is coming or has come.

It's hard for me to see how we can look at these promises, promises which define those who belong to the New Covenant community as regenerate and saved and forgiven, and go away with the impression that it is okay to include as visible members of the New Covenant community those who display no evidence of an internal work of God's Spirit upon their hearts. The character of the New Covenant community is such that only those who are true believers belong to it. Therefore, baptism, the sign of the New Covenant, belongs only to those who are true believers.

## Two More Arguments

Why not grandchildren?<sup>3</sup>

With this question, we come back again to the Abrahamic Covenant and notice that the argument from the Abrahamic Covenant, if it were consistent, would actually not only include children but also all the physical descendants of believers in the covenant community. This is because God did not just command Abraham to circumcise Isaac. Rather, the covenant required all his male offspring to be circumcised: “This is my covenant, which ye shall keep, between me and you and thy seed after thee; Every man child among you shall be circumcised” (Gen. 17:10). So actually, there is no principle of “believers and their children” by which is meant “children but not grandchildren.” The principle of the Abrahamic Covenant is “Abraham [the Believer] and all his physical seed.”

In fact, you see this played out as Israel is about to begin the conquest of Canaan. In Joshua 5:2-9, we read how Joshua had to have all the males in Israel circumcised. It is because “all the people that came out of Egypt were circumcised: but all the people that were born in the wilderness by the way as they came forth out of Egypt, them they had not circumcised. For the children of Israel walked forty years in the wilderness, till all the people that were men of war, which came out of Egypt, were consumed, because they obeyed not the voice of the LORD: unto whom the LORD swore that he would not shew them the land, which the LORD swore unto their fathers that he would give us, a land that floweth with milk and honey” (5-6). Why were these fellows circumcised? Not because their parents were believers. Their parents had perished in the wilderness because of their unbelief. They weren’t circumcised on any principle of “believers and their children.” They were given the sign of the covenant because they were the physical descendants of Abraham.

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<sup>3</sup>This is an argument that I borrow from Gavin Ortlund. See his argument here: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/why-not-grandchildren-an-argument-against-reformed-paedobaptism/>

So why not grandchildren? If we really want to press the continuity between the covenants in this way, it would seem to be a legitimate question. However, as we have already seen, the real parallel is not “believers and their children.” The parallel is “Abraham and his seed:” in the Old Covenant, this meant the physical seed of Abraham, and in the New Covenant it means the spiritual seed of Abraham.

### The Great Commission

For our last argument, we come to the Great Commission, where our Lord gives these instructions to his apostles: “All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and teach [make disciples of] all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: Teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world” (Mt. 28:18-20). This is a commission to the New Testament church. It is a commission to declare the word of Christ and to make disciples. There are two things we are to do with those who become disciples: we are to baptize them, and we are to teach them all that Christ has commanded.

However, the main thing I want to point out is that this is the only commission in the Bible that gives the church the authority and the right to baptize. There is no other commission. The fact of the matter is that the only commission to baptize in the New Testament is a commission to baptize disciples. There is no word here about baptizing disciples and their children, though it would have been incredibly easy to say that here. You will look in vain for a commission to baptize infants because there is none.

It won’t do to appeal to the Abrahamic Covenant and “just and necessary inference” because, as we have seen, there is no just and necessary inference from the Abrahamic practice of infant circumcision to the New Testament practice of baptism.

It won't do to appeal to the book of Acts for the necessary justification. The household baptisms are inconclusive either way. It is at best an argument from silence. There is just no clear example of an infant being baptized in the book of Acts, or anywhere else in the Bible for that matter.

It won't do to appeal to early church history as a justification for infant baptism. I gladly grant that infant baptism began very early, as far back as the second century. What I do not grant is that the early church got everything right. If you read early church history, it becomes painfully obvious that the church embraced elements of a sacramental system of salvation very early.

Even so, it can be established that infant baptism was not a universal practice at the beginning. In fact, the first undisputed reference to infant (or child) baptism is actually an argument against it, not for it. It is by the second/third century theologian Tertullian, and here is what he said in his book *De baptismo*:

According to everyone's condition and disposition, and also his age, the delaying of baptism is more profitable, especially in the case of little children. For why is it necessary — if [baptism itself] is not necessary — that the sponsors should be thrust into danger? For they may either fail of their promise by death, or they may be mistaken by a child's proving of wicked disposition. . . . They that understand the weight of baptism will rather dread the receiving of it, than the delaying of it. An entire faith is secure of salvation! (Chapter 18)<sup>4</sup>

This is an argument, whether you agree with it or not, in which Tertullian is arguing that baptism should be delayed, especially in the case of little children.

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<sup>4</sup>See <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/how-old-is-infant-baptism>

## Conclusion

One thing we don't want to do here is to conclude that, because there is so much disagreement on the issue, we shouldn't have to decide either way, or that it doesn't matter. Because this is an ordinance given by our Lord to the church, we don't have the luxury to ignore it. Here is what Jesus said to do: make disciples, baptize them, and teach them. We can't ignore baptism because people disagree about it anymore than we can ignore evangelism or discipleship because people don't agree on the best way to do those things either.

Also, it means that if you believe in Jesus Christ, if you have embraced him as Lord and Savior, if you believe that God raised him from the dead – in other words, if you believe the gospel and if you love Jesus as he is presented to us in the Bible – then part of your obedience to Christ is to go public with your faith and to be baptized and to join the church. This is the consistent message of the New Testament: believe the gospel and be baptized. “Then Peter said unto them, Repent, and be baptized every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sins, and ye shall receive the gift of the Holy Ghost” (Acts 2:38). Over and over again you see the pattern: people believe and are baptized. It is the same today. It is part of our glad obedience to Christ.

If you ask: but why is baptism so important? What's the point? Well, I'm glad you asked. At this point I will say something about the mode of baptism. Baptism is by an immersion of the body in water. That is just what the word means. Baptism no doubt points to the cleansing which we receive in the forgiveness of sins (and what better way to do this than by immersing the body in water!). But it does more than that: it points to our union with Christ in his death, burial, and resurrection (cf. Rom. 6:3 and Col. 2:12). Baptism symbolizes that reality. In doing so, we are celebrating in a very vivid way our participation in these redemptive events. As we do so, our faith is helped and strengthened through this act. It also strengthens the faith of the church as we rejoice with those

who have come to faith in Christ and see again a physical picture of a wonderful spiritual reality.

So, if you are a believer in Jesus and have not yet been baptized, there is one thing for you to do: confess your faith in the Lord by being baptized.