

# HEBREWS

LEADER'S GUIDE

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STEINBACH BIBLE COLLEGE

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# LESSON PREPARATION GUIDE

## PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE STUDY

*"All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work." 2 Timothy 3:16-17, NIV*

The Bible is God's Word to us. It is the final authority in all matters of faith and practice. What we believe and what we do is to be governed by the Bible. It is the touchstone for truth and error. Therefore it is important that any one teaching the Bible or leading a Bible study has an understanding of the key principles that undergird its interpretation.

In 2 Timothy. 2:15 Paul says, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth." This implies that there is a correct and an incorrect way of handling the Word of God. The following instructions are designed to help you, the teacher, "handle the Word of God correctly."

1. Use two or three good translations, such as the NIV, RSV, and NASB. Most of us do not know the original languages in which the Scriptures were written and so we rely on translations. Because all translations have their limitations, using several translations makes us aware of alternative interpretations and facets of meaning.
2. Read the text and supporting Scriptures over several times in various translations. All deeper understanding of the Scriptures begins with careful reading and rereading.
3. Develop an outline of the text to determine the thought pattern or development of the passage. The writers of Scripture, as a rule, wrote systematically and orderly. It is the job of the interpreter to discover the thought pattern underlying their writings. Ask yourself, "Why is the author saying what he is saying?" Identify the main points and if possible, sub points of the text.

4. Determine the literary form of the passage, e.g. poetry, parable, prophecy, prose, allegory, etc. Apply the principles governing the respective literary form in your interpretation. A parable, for example, teaches one primary lesson. Seek that lesson and do not read into it ideas the writer did not intend.
5. Look for key words that are pivotal for understanding a passage. Determine their meaning in this context. Even a familiar word can take on unfamiliar meanings in different contexts. Ask, "What meaning does the writer intend by using this word?"
6. Seek to understand the circumstances in which the passage was written as well as the circumstances of the people to whom it was written. A good Bible dictionary will provide you with relevant information.
7. If you have difficulty understanding a passage, examine other Scriptures that address the same subject. Cross-references noted in most Bibles are often helpful. A Bible commentary may also provide good suggestions on how to make sense of a difficult text.
8. Now bring your findings together and summarize what the passage is saying to the original recipients.
9. Finally ask, "What is the lesson for today?" Remember that the Scriptures were written to specific situations. Therefore the lessons of Scripture are the principles that are taught in the passage. Determine what the principles are and apply them to your present situation. Some passages may be applied literally. However, even these teach principles that need to be applied. It is the principles of the Bible that are binding for us, not the particular circumstances it describes.
10. It is important to have reference resources apart from different versions of the Bible to help in your study. These should include: a Bible dictionary, a commentary or two, a concordance, and an atlas. A book on principles of Bible interpretation would also be beneficial.

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# INTRODUCTION

## THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

### Introduction

To study the Epistle to the Hebrews is to learn how Jesus fulfilled the Old Testament. The epistle also indicates how we are to understand the unity of the two covenants. Although it does not say everything that needs to be said about the relation of the two testaments, it is a major contribution toward clarifying that relation.

To understand any book of the Bible there are a few introductory questions that help to move the interpretative and teaching process forward: Why was it written? Who wrote it? To whom was it written? What were the circumstances of its recipients?"

### Why was the Epistle Written?

The writer of Hebrews does not specifically say why he is writing the letter. The purpose must be inferred from its content.

First, notice that in chapter 1 the writer emphasizes the superiority of Christ in terms of God speaking to the human race. The superiority of Christ and the new covenant is emphasized (see 1:1ff; 3:3; 7:20ff; 8:6). This is an obvious attempt to show that Christianity surpasses Judaism.

Second, the many warnings and applications (see 2:1-3; 3:6, 12-13; 6:1-12; 10:26-31, 35-39; 12:3-17; 13:9) suggest the writer is warning his readers about the danger of falling from the faith as well as exhorting them to faithfulness.

Third, the writer seeks to combat a false teaching, which seems to be some form of Judaism. See e.g. 4:1; 8:1-7.

Hebrews is, therefore, a powerful explanation and defence of the Christian faith. Its strategy is to show that Christ fulfils the Old Testament and to draw a sharp contrast between Judaism and Christian faith. The Epistle to the Hebrews is an attempt to demonstrate the superiority of Christ.

### Who Wrote the Epistle?

The writer of the epistle is not identified, which has fuelled speculation about authorship. Suggestions include: Barna-

bas, Luke, Silvanus, Philip, Clement of Rome, Epaphras, Priscilla, even the Virgin Mary.

Hebrews found a secure place in early lists of the books of the Bible because it was attributed to Paul. Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 200) was one of the first to argue that Paul was its author.

Because the style of the Greek found in Hebrews is quite different from that of Paul's other epistles, some have conjectured that Paul wrote the epistle in Aramaic and that Luke later translated it into Greek. Origen, although denying Paul's authorship, argued that the content of the letter was essentially Pauline. The belief that Paul was its author was not questioned again until the time of the Reformation when Luther, Erasmus, and Calvin challenged it.

What are the reasons for questioning Pauline authorship?

1. Unlike Paul's other letters, Hebrews is anonymous. Nor are there any personal allusions in Hebrews while Paul's other epistles contain many direct references to his life.
2. The author aligns himself with those who have second-hand knowledge of Jesus (2:3). Paul vehemently argues that his knowledge of Christ is firsthand (Galatians 1:12; 1 Corinthians 9:1).
3. The style of the Greek in this epistle is elegant in contrast to the unadorned Greek in Paul's epistles.
4. The theological differences between Hebrews and Paul's letters are significant. For example, the high priesthood of Christ is of major importance to the writer of Hebrews, but is completely absent from Paul's writings.

In summary, the author of Hebrews is not clearly identified. Whoever he was, the writer had exceptional knowledge of the Old Testament, interpreted the Old Testament in terms of Christ, knew Greek well, was probably a converted Jew, and was most likely a member of the Pauline circle.

Beyond this, nothing is certain. As Origen said in the 3rd century, "But who wrote the epistle, in truth only God knows."

## To Whom was the Epistle Written?

The title of the epistle (to the Hebrews) suggests that the letter was addressed to Jews or Jews converted to Christianity. The title as we have it today can be traced back to the last quarter of the 2nd century. Before that time it had a different title. It is possible that because the letter was included in the Pauline corpus it was given a name consistent with the other epistles (e.g. "to the Romans"). If this is true, the title is an editorial label attached to the letter for convenience and therefore provides little reliable information regarding the recipients of the letter.

We need to establish the identity of the recipients on the basis of internal evidence, i.e. the content of the letter itself. The internal evidence suggests the readers were familiar with the Old Testament and the Levitical ritual. The writer's insistence that the old covenant has been replaced with the new suggests an audience that was disposed to live under the old. The frequent appeal to the Old Testament presupposes an audience that knows the Old Testament well.

F.F. Bruce sums up what we can know from the scanty evidence:

*The addressees appear, then, to have been a group of Jewish Christians who had never seen or heard Jesus in person, but had learned of Him from some who had themselves listened to Him. Since their conversion they had been exposed to persecution . . . but had not yet been called upon to die for their faith. Yet their Christian development had been arrested; instead of pressing ahead they were inclined to come to a full stop in their spiritual progress, if not indeed to slip back to a stage which they had left. . . We may infer from the epistle that they were Hellenists (Greek speaking Jews); they knew the Old Testament in the Greek version. It is also implied that their knowledge of the ancient sacrificial ritual of Israel was derived from the reading of the Old Testament and not from firsthand contact with the temple services in Jerusalem.*





*(This summary is based on the following texts:  
Hebrews 7:5; 7:27; 9:4, 19, 21; 12:21).*

We do not know where the recipients lived. Scholars have suggested Syrian Antioch, Colossae, Ephesus, Alexandria in Egypt, and Rome. The evidence is too indefinite to draw a firm conclusion.

### **When was it Written?**

Since the recipients cannot be clearly identified, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific date. The letter was written during the first century since Clement of Rome (c.96 AD) refers to it. The reference to Timothy's imminent release from prison suggests a date during his lifetime, though we do not know the date of his death either. It appears that the temple had not yet been destroyed which would make a date prior to 70 AD likely. (10:1ff has been used to support this.)

### **Summary**

The question of the canonicity has not been discussed and is left to the teacher to research. We accept the "Epistle to the Hebrews" as part of the New Testament. It is God's Word and must be studied and applied as such.

The teacher is encouraged to consult the following resources for a fuller discussion of introductory details, and for scholarly commentary on the content of the book.

### **Selected List of Commentaries**

The following is a basic list of commentaries that the teacher may find helpful. If the teacher is interested in buying a commentary, the first recommendation would be Hughes commentary and second choice the one by Hagner.

Bruce, F.F. Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964. NICNT.

Hagner, Donald A. Hebrews. Peabody: Hendrikson Publishers, 1990. New International Biblical Commentary Series.

Hughes, Philip Edgcumbe. *A Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993 reprint.

Kistemaker, Simon J. *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984. *New Testament Commentary Series*.

Wilson, R. McL. *Hebrews*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987. *The New Century Bible Commentary Series*.

### **Teacher Tip**

To prepare your lessons take time to pray, study the materials, and ask the Holy Spirit to guide you.

# Lesson 1 • Did You Hear God's Voice?

Hebrews 1:1-14

## Overview

As you prepare to teach, read the text several times and develop an outline of the passage. Below is an outline for Hebrews 1:1-14. Use it as a sample to make your own outline for the remaining lessons.

### Theme: Jesus Compared & Contrasted with Angels

- I. God's Speech in "these last days." 1:1-4
  - A. How He spoke in the past v 1
    1. In various ways
    2. By prophets

BUT (contrasts the present with the past speech implying an improvement.) v 2

- B. In these last days spoke by a Son v 2
  - Who
    1. is heir of all things v 2
    2. created the world v 2
    3. reflects God's glory v 3
    4. bears God's nature v 3
    5. sustains the universe v 3
    6. provided purification of sins v 3
    7. sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven v 3

SO - (Introduces a conclusion as well as how the Son is superior)

8. is superior to angels as His name is superior v 4.

FOR (Introduces a further contrast) v 5

- II. Christ's Superiority further illustrated— 1:5-14
  - A. Ascriptions of Christ which do not belong to Angels—
    - To Whom has He said:
      1. You are my son and I am your father v 5
      2. Let angels worship Him v 6
      3. His throne is forever & righteousness is His sceptre v 8
      4. Loves righteousness but hates evil therefore set above others v 9
      5. He was creator v 10
      6. Creation will disappear but Christ remains forever v 11
      7. Sits at the right hand of the Father & enemies made His footstool v 13
  - B. Who are Angels?
    1. Wind, flames of fire v.7
    2. Minister to the heirs of salvation v.14

### Definition of Key Words

In order better to understand the passage a few key words from 1:1, 2 need defining. Remember that each word has a particular meaning in a particular context. Also remember that if we do not know what meaning the writer intends we will miss what he is trying to say.

- ◆ "Various ways" —God used various means to communicate to His people, including dreams and visions. The expression also includes the idea that the communication was partial and fragmented, thus not as clear or complete as people might have hoped.
- ◆ "Past" —This refers to the time before Christ, back to the very beginning of Genesis.
- ◆ "Prophets" —These were God's most frequently used spokespersons. Prophets spoke the message God gave them. But even their communication was partial.

- ◆ “But” —The writer contrasts the communication from God in times past to that in Christ. It focuses on the fact that we have a clear and final message in Christ.
- ◆ “Last Days” —These are the days since Christ was born. In the Greek Old Testament these words are used to designate the eschatological time of the Messiah. See Jeremiah 23:30; Ezekiel 38:16; Daniel 10:34. By adding “these” the writer is emphasizing that the age of the Messiah has arrived.

The phrase “last days” is used in the New Testament to refer to the time between Christ’s first coming and His second coming. See Acts 2:17; 1 Peter 1:10f, 20; 1 Corinthians 1:10; Hebrews 6:5, 9:26; 1 John 2:18; Galatians 1:4. The “last days” will end when the “last day” arrives. See John 6:39, 40, 54, 11:24, 12:48. The “last days” are at times spoken of as the “end times” which will end in the “last time.” (1 Peter 1:5). Thus it is helpful to distinguish between the “last days” and the “last day.” The “last days” begin with Christ and the “last day” is yet to come. The “last days” are the beginning of the end time with the first advent of Christ, and the “last day” brings the end time to a close with Christ’s return.

- ◆ “Son” —This word refers to Christ in contrast to prophets and other messengers from God. Christ is the final Word (message) from God. God can speak no more clearly than by His personal presence, and Christ is that personal presence. Think of communicating with your spouse or significant other. You can write, call, or use e-mail, but nothing is as clear as when you speak face to face. This is what the passage means when it says God spoke in His Son. No communication can be more plain. This is the final and ultimate revelation. As the lesson indicates, Christ is the culmination of progressive revelation.

This teaching has implications for the question of whether or not the canon is closed. Any so-called communication from God stands or falls on whether it corresponds to the message of Jesus. He is the final test for any so called divine messages.

The writer then lists a series of phrases in 1:2b-4 that describe Christ:

- † Christ is appointed heir and will receive everything that God has.
- † Christ created the universe.
- † Christ shows us the radiance of God's glory and is the exact image of God. John puts it this way when he quotes Jesus, "anyone who has seen me has seen the Father." John 14:9. See also 2 Corinthians 4:4; Col 1:15, 19. The words used for "exact being" can be understood to mean "substance" or "essence".
- † Christ sustains the universe by His word. (See also Colossians 1:16.)
- † Christ provided purification for our sins - here is a simple but profound expression of the saviourhood of Christ.
- † Christ sat down at the right hand of the Father—This refers to the ascension but is also a statement about the completion of the work Christ came to do. He came from the Father and has gone back to the Father.
- † All this is summed up by the conclusion that Christ is superior to the angels because no angel did or does what Jesus did or does. He is superior since being Son is superior to being an angel (messenger).

This Christological prologue introduces the theme of the epistle and sets the tone for the rest of the letter. It must inform our understanding of all that follows.

"The Son is set forth as the embodiment of the three main offices of the Old Testament: prophet (speaking for God), priest (accomplishing forgiveness of sins), and king (reigning with God at His right hand). (Hagner, 26)

- ◆ "Angels" —In verses 5-14 the writer expounds on the superiority of Christ to angels. In Philippians 2:9 Paul comments, "therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name".

To make his point as strongly as possible, the writer quotes seven Old Testament passages. The writer of Hebrews assumes the readers will understand the quotations for he does little to explain them. To him their meanings are self-evident.

Note that the writer's approach to the Old Testament is Christocentric both here and throughout the book. The Anabaptist approach to the Old Testament is similarly Christocentric. That is, it regards Christ as the ultimate meaning of the Old Testament.

*The first Old Testament quotation* (v. 5a) is taken from Psalm 2:7. The Psalm was composed for the coronation of some Israelite king but also carried messianic connotations for the Hebrews. Thus the historical king was a foreshadowing of the Messianic King who was the Son of God.

*Quote 2* (v. 5b) continues the theme that Christ is a special Son. It is taken from 2 Samuel 7:14 where the immediate reference is to Solomon, builder of the temple. In using that passage as a prophecy of Christ, the writer obviously sees a deeper significance than that probable historical reference.

These first two quotations are used to establish the unique sonship of the Christ and, with that, the superiority of the Son on the basis of Scripture.

*Quote 3* (v. 6) comes from Deuteronomy 32:43 in the LXX (Septuagint), the Greek Old Testament. The God angels are to worship is the Lord, or Yahweh. That is, the Son is here identified with Yahweh (Jehovah) of the Old Testament. Though the words are primarily addressed to angels, the deity of Jesus is clearly implied.

*Quote 4* (v. 7) is from Psalm 104:4, as it appears in the LXX. Angels are here compared to natural elements such as wind and flames which function at God's bidding. This comparison emphasizes the subservience of angels.

*Quote 5* (vv. 8-9) is taken from Psalm 45:6-7. Scholars believe these words were originally used at a royal wedding. The spiritual interpretation of these words applies them to the Son of God. There is no direct reference to angels in these verses but, as used in the epistle, little question remains that once again the superiority of Christ over the angels is being stressed.

*Quote 6* (vv. 10-12) is taken from Psalm 102:25-27. The psalmist praises the Lord for His permanence and security in the midst of uncertainty. Again the writer applies the words, ascribed to Yahweh, to Jesus. The Hebrews writer emphasizes that the Son is eternal while everything else is transitory. There is no reference to angels in these verses and the focus is on the fact that the Son is God.

*Quote 7* (v. 13) is taken from Psalm 110:1. The ascension in view here was already mentioned in v. 3. The contrast with angels is obvious. The ascension of Christ gives Jesus an unparalleled position of honour and authority which no angel can claim. He is presently reigning in heaven and will ultimately reign over all when His enemies have been made His footstool.

Although the writer emphasizes the inferiority of angels to Christ, they have a significant place in the story of God's people. Hebrews 1:14 says they are "ministering spirits sent to serve those who will inherit salvation." God provides salvation in Jesus, man experiences it by accepting Christ, and the angels minister to those who are saved. This view of angels is consistent with the Hebrew concept of personal aid from angels as found in Psalm 91:11. Note also the ministry of angels in Jesus' life as found in Matthew 4:11, 26:53. In our lives angels protect and help, usually in an unnoticeable manner.

These are obviously words of comfort and encouragement. Jesus is the Son of God who sustains the universe while angels minister to those who are saved. It is also a word of warning about worshipping angels. They are not God. They are servants. There is only one God, Jesus Christ, and He alone is worthy of worship.

The original readers thus received, first, an exposition on who Christ is, and, second, an explanation of how He is different from and superior to angels. They are to turn their eyes upon Jesus, not upon angels.



## Summary and Application

Chapter 1 teaches that Christ is the pre-eminent one, the Son of God and is alone worthy of worship and obedience.

The chapter accentuates the difference between Christ and angels, teaching that angels are spirit beings but are not to be worshipped.

Lead your students to discover the supremacy of Christ and to give Him the supremacy He deserves. Sensitize them to the ministry of angels. Even though we may not be aware of their ministry, we need to be aware that they are ministering to those who believe.

### Teacher Tips

1. Ask a student to do a study on angels and make a presentation to the class.
2. Assign the first four verses to the class and ask them to present their own interpretation of the prologue.
3. Ask the class, "What is the main purpose of Chapter 1?"
4. Keep a notebook on key themes that will emerge as you go through the book. For example, list everything it teaches about Christ. As your study proceeds you will add to what you have found. Use a loose-leaf binder so you can add new pages under the same topic. Another topic in this chapter is angels.
5. Use the questions found in the student lesson book. They should be helpful in stimulating reflection on the message of the letter and on the application of its truths.

# Lesson 2 • Pay Attention

Hebrews 2:1-18

## Introduction

Chapter 2 addresses the theme of salvation and the need for hearers to respond in order to experience salvation. It is also where the first of many warnings about drifting from the faith appears. (e.g. 4:1; 6:4; 10:26ff.)

### 2:1-4 —A warning issued

The writer begins with a “therefore” which points back to chapter 1, where the greatness of Christ and what He has done was the main focus.

The theme of angels reappears in this chapter. When the various intelligent beings are ranked in descending order God occupies the highest position, followed by angels, and then humans. Verses 6 and 7 reiterate this order.

The warning to which we must pay careful attention takes its seriousness from the importance of the message. The message of Christ is more important than that of angels. The message angels delivered was not heeded and resulted in retribution. The “message” of the angels possibly refers to the various ways God spoke in the past. For example, angels mediated the law to Moses.

If disobedience to the angelic message resulted in condemnation, how will we escape if we neglect the message Jesus brought? The implied answer is, “We won’t”.

The message of Jesus is validated first by being of greater significance than that of angels. Jesus proclaimed it Himself, saying in Mark 1:15 “Repent for the Kingdom of God is at hand.” The exalted Lord described in chapter 1 Himself proclaims the message; no secondary means are used.

Second, the message is validated by the apostolic eyewitness account of the message. (This indicates the writer did not himself hear Jesus.)

Third, the message was validated by “signs, wonders, and various miracles”. This expression refers to the miracles that

Jesus performed and perhaps also to the miracles of the apostles which validated their message. The “signs”, “wonders”, and “various miracles,” should be taken as synonyms.

The same formula is used in Acts 2:22 where it refers to the miracles of Jesus. In 2 Corinthians these three words are used by Paul to describe the miracles he did as evidence that he was an apostle. The expression “signs and wonders” is used eleven times in the New Testament. (See Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; John 4:34; Acts 6:8.)

The word “sign” suggests that a miracle is not merely an ostentatious manifestation of power, but also points beyond itself to the reality of the mighty hand of God at work. “Wonder” speaks of the fact that the miraculous event excites awe and amazement in the beholder. “Miracle” emphasizes the dynamic character of the event with particular regard to its outcome. “Various miracles” indicates the diversity of these powerful manifestations.

Finally, the message was validated by “spiritual gifts.” This term reminds us of the day of Pentecost in Acts 2 as well as Acts 8 and 12, but also of 1 Cor.12-14. “Spiritual gifts” were evidence of the new age and confirmed the message of Jesus. In Acts 2, Peter makes this point most emphatically.

It should be noted that the gifts are distributed as the Holy Spirit wills. There is no one gift for all, and no one decides which gift they will receive. Rather, there is to be a humble submission to receive what the Spirit decides to give.

But exactly what is the message Christ delivers? These four verses do not tell us. The “therefore” of v.1 gives us a clue. In 1:3 the writer mentions that Jesus provides “purification for sins.” Thus it is salvation in Christ that is being discussed. The message is, “There is forgiveness of sins through the name of Jesus” (Acts 10:36-43).

The warning against ignoring God’s salvation in Christ compares the neglect of the message of angels which brought retribution with the neglect of the message of salvation proclaimed by the One who is superior to the angels. It can be interpreted in two ways. First, it motivates believers to follow through on their commitment. Second, it urges the wavering person to accept salvation. The latter is the primary emphasis here since the letter is addressed to Jewish Christians. It

## Teacher Tip

Ask your students if they are neglecting the salvation in Christ.

is likely that some believers were still somewhat unsure of the salvation in Christ and so needed this nudge.

### 2:5-9 —The World Subject to Christ

In these verses the writer again contrasts angels and Jesus. He applies Psalm 8:4-6 to Christ to indicate how God subjected everything to Him. Having made Christ a little lower than the angels, He then crowned Him with honour and glory and put everything under His feet. Here we have a short commentary of the incarnation: Christ's earthly life and ministry, His death, and then His ascension to the right of the Father.

However, there is a slight problem. We do not yet see everything subject to Him. The writer says we are not to worry and then repeats the Psalm referring to Christ's humiliation (see Philippians 2) and exaltation. The writer adds that Christ was exalted because He suffered death and the death He died was for everyone. By Christ's death our redemption, the forgiveness of sins, has been achieved. Notice the universality: "taste death for everyone." Christ makes salvation available to everyone; there is no such a thing as limited atonement.

The "already and not yet" theme emerges here. The Psalm suggests that everything was made subject to Christ but not everything is subject to Him now. In redemption the reign of Christ has begun; it will be complete in God's time.

### 2:10-14 —The Family of God

The question implied by these verses is, "Why did Jesus have to suffer?" He brought "many sons to glory," meaning that many will experience salvation because Christ provided it.

What does the phrase, "made perfect through suffering" mean? The word "perfect" means completeness rather than moral perfection. "Made perfect" refers to Christ achieving His purpose through suffering. That achievement involved three steps: 1) being victorious over every temptation (4:15) he qualified as the offering on the cross, as the spotless

Lamb of God in place of sinners (1 Peter 1:18f, 3:18). 2) because of His suffering and death on the cross, the power of Satan was annulled and “many sons” were set free, destined for glory (see vs. 14). 3) Christ’s experience of suffering enabled Him, as a compassionate high priest, to aid and strengthen at all times those who are afflicted with trials and temptations (v17, 4:15f, 5:8).

Note that Christ is described as the one who sustains the universe as well as provides salvation.

Because of Christ’s redemption, we are family. Christ is not ashamed to call us His brothers. This truth is further substantiated by quotes from Psalm 22:22, 68:26; Isaiah 8:17; Isaiah 8:18.

The writer paints a warm picture of family at this point. Christians are family regardless of race or tribe because they belong to a common Lord.

## 2:14-18 —Christ the Sacrifice

In this passage we have an apology for the incarnation. Christ became man so that He might save us and defeat Satan. This was the only way our salvation could be accomplished. How did Christ’s death defeat Satan? By dying He paid the price of sin. As Paul says, “the wages of sin is death.” When Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden they died in the sense that they were separated from God. Christ now took that penalty and offered forgiveness. By doing this the devil’s hold was broken and people could and can be set free by accepting Christ.

The writer emphasizes that Christ’s work of redemption is not for angels but for the sons of Abraham, that is, Christians.

Because Christ was fully human, tempted in all points like we yet without sin, He can now help us as we struggle with temptation.

As the sacrifice for the atonement for the sins of the people, Christ performed His services as a merciful and faithful high priest. It is the function of the priest to bring sacrifices for the sins of the people. Christ did just that. He offered a sacrifice and He was that sacrifice. **Oh what love!**

## Summary

This lesson focuses on a recurring theme in Hebrews, namely, Christ being the sacrifice for our sins. It is set in the context of family which suggests warmth and security in Christ. Now the hearers of the message must respond. Their response is vital since failure to respond positively to the message of Christ will bring greater condemnation than failing to respond to the message of angels. The invitation to the readers is to join the family of God.

### Teacher Tips

1. Add the theme of warnings to your notebook.
2. In addition to the questions in the lesson book, discuss the question, "How does Jesus' temptation enable him to help those who are tempted?"

# Lesson 3 • Turning a Profit

Hebrews 3:1–4:13

## Introduction

The writer continues to appeal to his readers to take their faith seriously, but now by using another analogy and comparison. He compares Moses and Jesus, sabbath rest and salvation, and disobedient Israel and the Christian. The writer's concern is that the readers of his letter participate fully in what God has done for them and enjoy His blessing. Hence the title of this lesson, "Turning a Profit."

## 3:1-6 —Jesus Greater than Moses

The "therefore" of v 1 suggests that the nature of Christ's atonement logically leads to the comparison found in this section.

The readers are called "holy brothers" (sanctified brothers and sisters), indicating that they are believers. The writer addresses the followers of Jesus of both genders. They share, he says, in the "heavenly calling," the vocation of being Christian, which comes from heaven. The phrase may also suggest the idea of being called to heaven as one's final destination. Elsewhere the New Testament speaks of a "holy calling" (2 Timothy 1:9), and "upward calling" (Philippians 3:14). (Compare also Romans 1:7, 8:28,30; 1 Peter 1:15.) The church, in turn, is the community of those whom God has called (Hebrews 9:15; Ephesians 4:4; Colossians 3:15).

*Therefore the warnings in this book are directed to believers unless otherwise indicated.*

Because of who Jesus is and what He has done, believers are to give thoughtful consideration to Him. Jesus is here described as "the apostle and high priest whom we confess." This is the only reference in the New Testament to Jesus as an apostle. Apostle means "sent one" and Jesus is the supreme apostle having been sent by God to bring salvation. Jesus is the first apostle, the greatest apostle, the source of all apostleship. (Compare John 20:21; 17:18)

At this point, Jesus & Moses are compared and contrasted. Both were faithful. But Jesus has more glory than Moses, just as the builder has more than the house. That is, Jesus is the creator (builder) while Moses is the created one (the house). Further, while Moses was a mere servant, Christ is the son. Moses spoke of things to come while Jesus is what was to come.

The writer then adds the important statement that we are God's house. (Compare Galatians 6:10; Ephesians 2:19; 1 Peter 4:17) Thus Moses served in the physical tabernacle while Jesus serves in the hearts of His people. Again the writer suggests that being "God's house" is not automatic but conditional. We must hold fast our confidence and our hope. To be genuine, a person's profession of faith must be undergirded by the quality of his or her life. (Compare John 8:31)

### **3:7-19 —Do not Harden your Heart**

The exhortation to "hold fast" is supported with a quotation from Psalm 95:7b-11, as found in the LXX (the Greek Old Testament). The passage reminds readers of the rebellion of their forefathers in the wilderness at Massah, (meaning testing) or Meribah, (meaning embitterment), when Israel wanted water. The Israelites continually went astray, in spite of seeing God at work for 40 years. Finally, God said they would not enter His rest. Those 20 years of age and over when they left Egypt, were not allowed to enter the Promised Land, also known as "rest." The word "rest" is used in various ways in the Bible. In Psalm 95 "rest" refers to the Promised Land, while in Hebrews it refers to salvation.

The quotation from Psalm 95 conveys at least three truths: 1) The Old Testament is the Word of God, it is what the Holy Spirit says. 2) While God is gracious, the day of grace can be squandered until it is too late. 3) Israel saw God at work but ultimately could not enter the rest. Even those who had experienced God could not follow Him into His rest.

Verse 12 warns against "fall(ing) away from the living God." This falling away comes as a result of an unbelieving heart. Believers are encouraged to be faithful so as not to lose their relationship with God. They are also warned how deceitful sin is and that it can harden hearts. They are to avoid such a



snare, for they are responsible if their hearts are hardened. By refusing to respond to God, people harden themselves and God will ultimately accept that refusal, confirming that hardening. No one will be forced to accept Christ. Hardening occurs when believers do not obey God, or act in unbelief. Those who act in unbelief or disobedience will not enter the rest of Christ.

#### **4:1-13 —The Warning continued**

These verses elaborate the warnings of chapter 3. On the possibility of losing one's rest, the writer now warns that the opportunity to enter will only be for a time. As the Israelites failed to heed the message given to them, so we may fail. Only if we respond to Christ's message is salvation possible. Simply knowing the truth is not sufficient.

Chapter 4:3b tells us that Christ's work of salvation was finished from the foundation of the world, and vs. 6 tells us that the Israelites in the wilderness had the Gospel preached to them. They missed their opportunity to enter the rest through disobedience or unbelief. (See 3:19)

Note that the writer uses faith and obedience and unbelief and disobedience interchangeably. This has implications for how we understand faith, which will be discussed in chapter 11.

The writer now contrasts Joshua and Christ. He argues that if Joshua, who led the people into the Promised Land, could have given them "rest," God would not have spoken of the "rest" of another day.

Note that God's seventh day of rest at creation is here used as an analogy of salvation. Verses 9-10 speak of future salvation, when Christ returns. The exhortation "to strive to enter" follows immediately. We must respond in order to be saved.

Finally, the writer emphasizes that we cannot escape from God. He can see our innermost being and nothing is hidden from Him. This becomes another argument for striving to enter the "rest." We are better known than we know ourselves. God knows all and to Him we will give an account. Therefore we must be wise and seek His face.

## Summary

The writer urges his readers to remain faithful and to benefit from their salvation, both now and for eternity. Failing to be faithful (obedient) will result in exclusion from God's rest.

The warning is serious. By failing to heed God you will lose your relationship with God.

Heeding God involves knowing the Good News, but it also requires action. Obedience and faith are intertwined. You cannot truly have one without the other.

# Lesson 4 • Bold Approach

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

## Introduction

In the previous lessons we have noted that Christ was and is superior to the angels, to Moses, and to Joshua. The writer now returns to a theme introduced earlier and elaborates on it. The priesthood of Aaron is compared to and contrasted with Christ's priesthood.

## 4:14-16 —A Sympathetic High Priest

To speak of Christ as High Priest focuses attention on our access to God. Christ has provided the access to God by His death and resurrection.

The phrase, "passing through the heavens" means that just as the high priest went into the holy of holies, so Christ by His ascension has entered directly into heaven before God to present this sacrifice there. The earthly high priest imperfectly models the perfect heavenly high priest.

"Jesus the Son of God" refers to Jesus' humanity as well as His deity.

The phrase, "hold fast our confession", signifies both acceptance of faith in Jesus and the public, outward confession. Believers are encouraged to remain true to the faith in spite of other false religions seeking their attention and commitment.

Christ has fully identified with us by being tempted in all points as we are, yet He did not sin. Thus, Christ can sympathize with our weaknesses. We are therefore exhorted to come to God with confidence so that we may receive mercy and help in time of need.

You may wish to emphasize to your students that Jesus feels with us and is anxious to help us. He will help us if we approach the throne of grace. He will help us with kindness and love. The throne of grace is a type of the mercy-seat in the tabernacle.

A question sometimes asked is, "Could Jesus have sinned when He was tempted?" Several responses may be made

to this query. First, whether He could have or not, the point is that He didn't. Second, some say, "Since He was God He could not have sinned." Third, others say, "As Son of God He couldn't yield to temptation but as a human he could have." Fourth, still others maintain that temptation is not true temptation if the person tempted does not have the ability to yield. The best answer is perhaps a combination of the first and fourth responses.

### **5:1-4 —Appointing the Levitical High Priest**

To show the significance and difference of Christ's high priestly office, the writer contrasts the appointment of the two. Every high priest is chosen to perform the priestly duties of bringing offerings and sacrifices for sin to God. Since he is a fellow human, he can empathize with the one bringing the offering. However, being human, he must also bring a sacrifice for his own sins. Moreover, appointment to the office of high priest is made by God and is not an honour one assumes by oneself. God appointed the descendants of Levi for the earthly priesthood.

### **5:5-10 —Christ Appointed as High Priest**

The phrase "so also" introduces a comparison. As the earthly high priest was appointed by God, in the same way Christ was appointed high priest by God.

To make his point the writer quotes Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4. Jesus was God's Son by decree and, as such, a priest after the order of Melchizedek. Psalm 110:4 indicates that the one spoken of is Jesus. (More about Melchizedek in a later lesson.)

What are the prayers that Jesus offered as mentioned in vs.7? They may be the agonizing prayers in the garden of Gethsemane just prior to His arrest. Jesus prayed, "not my will but thine be done" and God answered that prayer. Jesus had to die on the cross.

Jesus learned obedience through suffering. He discovered and did God's will even though it meant the death on the cross. Through this death came the resurrection and the final victory over sin and death. For once the death, resurrection,

and ascension had been completed (or as the writer says "made perfect") Jesus became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him. He was designated high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

In 2:10 Jesus is described as the author of salvation. The phrase, "source of eternal salvation" indicates that the salvation Christ brought is the definitive salvation needed by mankind. It also tells us that salvation comes from God and no one else. It is eternal in the sense that it can never be repeated and is valid for all time.

In the phrase, "all who obey him", the tense of the verb "obey" is the continuous present and carries the sense of constant compliance. B. F. Westcott says, "continuous active obedience is the sign of real faith." To have faith and to obey are, thus, almost synonymous. To have faith is to obey God and to obey God is to have faith. We will define faith more precisely when we examine chapter 11.

In this phrase, "designated by God to be high priest forever", the writer points out that God appoints the high priest. This is not only true of the Levitical priest but also of Christ. Since Christ is also God, this appointment is a mutual decision of the Trinity. Once appointed, there was no replacing of this high priest. He is priest forever, replacing the Aaronic or Levitical priesthood. We again meet Melchizedek. What do we make of him? More on this in Lesson 6.

## Summary

This lesson focuses on Christ as the high priest who replaces the earthly high priest. He is superior because He knows how to deliver us, which the earthly priest did not.

# Lesson 5 • Go On To Maturity

Hebrew 5:11-6:20

## Introduction

Following the warning that some may fail to enter the rest of the Lord, the writer explains why the warning is necessary and urges an even stronger faithfulness. The warning is addressed to those who have become Christians but seem to have difficulty maintaining their faith.

## 5:11-14 —Immaturity Described

A note of frustration becomes evident as the writer realizes he should say more about Christ being a priest after the order of Melchizedek. But he knows his readers will have difficulty understanding any further explanation because of the immaturity of their faith.

In rather direct words he tells them their problem. (You may wish to discuss with your students the question of when is it appropriate to confront people in this way.) The Hebrew believers are dull of hearing, unable to comprehend what they are being told.

Incapable of building on what they know, they need to be taught elementary truths again. That is, they have not applied the truth to their lives and thus are still babies in the faith, needing spiritual milk. They have been believers long enough that by now they should be eating solid spiritual food.

To live on milk means to be unskilled in the Word. A person unskilled in the Word is a child, immature. Maturity is described in verse 14 as a state of having the faculties trained by practice in distinguishing between good and evil. Those unskilled in the Word, then, fail to make such decisions in harmony with the Word. On the other hand, as individuals make ethical and moral decisions they learn more about the Word, learn how to apply it, and increase their understanding of the Gospel. They mature in the faith.

Thus the problem with the Hebrew readers is that they have failed to live their faith, failed to make decisions about right

and wrong, failed to mature as believers. This explains why the writer urges again and again that they should strive to enter the rest of God. They are suffering from arrested spiritual development.

## **6:1-12 —The Danger of Losing your Faith**

These verses have generated considerable controversy among interpreters. Briefly, two main positions have emerged regarding the possibility of losing faith. The Calvinistic approach denies the possibility that saved persons can ever truly lose their faith in Christ. Calvinists suggest that Hebrews 6 is a hypothetical warning. The so-called Arminian approach holds that it is possible both to lose your faith and to return to the faith again. The Anabaptists are and were identified with the Arminians.

First, believers are encouraged to go on to maturity by leaving elementary doctrines behind. "Repentance from acts that lead to death" simply refers to the act of repentance from sins when a person becomes a Christian. Sinful acts lead to death. (Romans 6:23)

Second, the phrase "faith in God" means accepting Christ by faith. As Paul says, "We are saved by grace through faith." (Ephesians 2:8)

Third, scholars generally believe that the "instructions about baptisms (absolutions)" refer to the various Jewish absolutions which Christianity removed. Converts from Judaism were probably instructed in the various Jewish rituals, of which water baptism is the only one remaining. Some commentators suggest that foot-washing instructions may also have been included in this phrase.

Fourth, the phrase, "laying on of hands", is more difficult to define. In the New Testament, the ritual of laying on of hands does not seem to play a role in elementary teachings. It is, however, done when praying for healing (James 5) and during special commissioning ceremonies (Acts 6:6; 1 Timothy 5:22). The phrase may refer to instructions in these areas.

Fifth, "resurrection of the dead" refers to Jesus' resurrection as the first fruits of the resurrection to follow at the end of time. John 5:24 teaches that there will be a general resurrec-

tion of the good and the evil. Thus an elementary teaching is that we will all some day be raised.

Sixth, “eternal judgement” indicates judgement, as described in Revelation 20 and Matthew 25. Our life here on earth has consequences in the eternal life beyond. Judgement will confirm salvation and award degrees of rewards and punishments.

And last, “And God permitting, we will do so” is another way of saying that with God’s help we will do this.

Here is a lesson for us. Do we endlessly review the fundamentals of the Gospel and thereby fail to grow in our spiritual life?

How can we get beyond these elementary doctrines? If we focus strictly on them, we are in the same danger as were the original readers of this epistle.

A serious warning is issued concerning apostasy. We are told that it is impossible to restore those who have once been enlightened and then leave the faith. Are those who leave, in fact genuine Christians? Such individuals are described as:

1. “those who once have been enlightened”, that is, people who had received and understood the truth.
2. having “tasted the heavenly gift”. This phrase refers to the blessing that one experiences as one accepts Christ. Could this be the forgiveness of sins? The word “tasted” is a metaphor suggesting “experience to the full”. In 1 Peter 2:3 we read “you (Christians) have tasted the kindness of the Lord.” (See also Psalm 34:8.)
3. having “shared (been partakers) in the Holy Spirit”. Sharing presupposes that they have received the Holy Spirit. Romans 8:9 tells us that those who have the Spirit are children of God.
4. having “tasted the goodness of the word of God”. Only those who have heard the Word and accepted it have “tasted” what the Word can do in a person’s life, namely bring peace, joy, and forgiveness.
5. having “tasted the powers of the coming age”. When Jesus began His teaching He said “the kingdom is at hand.”



The “age to come” had invaded “this age”. Thus to taste (experience) the powers of the age to come means that the person is walking in the power of the Spirit.

It is obvious that the person being described is a Christian. The encouragement to go “on to maturity,” as well as the warning that follows verse 5, apply to such a person. Both are spoken to believers.

- ◆ “if they fall away,” The RSV reads “if they commit apostasy.” Apostasy is a decisive turning away from the faith.
- ◆ “It is impossible . . . to be brought back.” Anyone who apostasizes turns away from God and cannot be brought back. The statement seems to allow little room for an interpretation other than the obvious one.
- ◆ “because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace.” Apostasy is such a disgracing of the Son of God that it ranks with His crucifixion in seriousness. Apostates will not be brought back to repentance because God, who can bring them back, cannot forgive such an insult to His graciousness. However, other interpretations are possible. (cf. Chapter 10:26-31.)

“Sin,” “crucifying,” and “subjecting” are present tense verbs suggesting continuous action. The bringing back may be impossible only while they are maintaining the “fallen away” condition. In *Life in the Son*, Robert Shank puts it this way: “The impossibility of renewal to repentance and salvation rests, not on the mere fact of a past act, but on the fact of a present condition of opposition... . The present condition of deliberate, open hostility may conceivably be remedied and the persons renewed to repentance and salvation.” (p. 318) Paul seems to say the same thing concerning the Jews in Romans 11:23: “And even the others, if they do persist in their unbelief, will be grafted in, for God has the power to graft them in again.” James 5:19-20 expresses similar thoughts.

In summary, it is a very serious and dangerous thing to abandon the faith. You lose your salvation, your relationship with Christ. It will be difficult to turn back to God, but by the grace of God it is possible.

The recipients of Hebrews have not rejected Christ but are in danger of doing so. The writer, in strongest terms possible, warns about the possibility and danger of doing so.

Verses 7-8 explain the danger of falling away with an illustration from agriculture. Land that receives rain and brings forth fruit is blessed, but land that brings forth thorns and thistles risks being cursed. In the end, if things don't change, it will be burned. This takes us back to verse 1. Failure to mature is compared to land that produces thorns and thistles. Such failure leads to apostasy and curse. On the other hand, a fruitful life, like the land that produces fruit, is a picture of a mature Christian who manifests growth and development.

Verses 9-12 are words of encouragement. The recipients of the letter are not yet apostate. As a matter of fact, the writer finds things to commend them for. They are helping people and continue to do so, and the writer praises them for this. Then he urges the faithful to show diligence to the end so that their hope may be sure. Again, it is stressed that faithfulness to the end indicates we are Christians and this is the condition for entering the "Promised Land." As people follow in faith and patience they will inherit what has been promised.

### **6:13-20 —God's Promise Stands**

The Hebrews are now reminded of the father of their faith, Abraham, and God's promise to him. Abraham believed and waited patiently and God kept his word. Isaac was born. God, to make His word sure to His hearer Abraham, affirmed what he had promised by an oath. God guaranteed His trustworthiness in two ways: 1) By making a promise of seed to Abraham; 2) By swearing an oath that He would do what He promised.

Why is this significant? The writer appeals to the utter trustworthiness of God. He affirms that Christ is the ultimate object of true faith. Christ has entered the holy of holies and offered the "once for all sacrifice" as a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Therefore, the author urges, leave the elementary doctrines and go on to maturity.

## Summary

1. Failing to grow in our faith is dangerous for it may result in apostasy.
2. To apostasize is to renounce your faith and become unsaved again.
3. While persisting in your apostasy you cannot come back into the faith.
4. God is utterly reliable. What He says, He will do.
5. Now grow in your faith by making decisions about right and wrong.

### Teacher Tips

This is a difficult lesson. Focus on the seriousness of apostasy, for that is the point of the writer. Not every student will agree with the interpretation of apostasy given here. I encourage you to emphasize that as long as there is a wooing of the Spirit, there is opportunity for repentance.

# Lesson 6 • The Better Hope

Hebrews 7:1-28

## Introduction

Melchizedek has been mentioned in passing several times already but it is in this segment that the focus is directly on the priestly line “in the order of Melchizedek”. Here the writer points out that Christ is a priest, not from the Levitical line but from that of Melchizedek and therefore offers a better hope than did the Levitical priests.

## 7:1-10 —Who was Melchizedek?

The story of Melchizedek is found in Genesis 14:13-24. Lot had been taken captive by King Kedorlaomer and his allies. When Abram heard about this he pursued captive Lot and rescued him. On his way back several kings come to meet him, among them the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah. Melchizedek, king of Salem brings out bread and wine and goes out to meet Abram.

Melchizedek is described as “king of Salem and priest of the most high God.” Verse 2 defines the meaning of both names of the king. Melchizedek means “king of righteousness,” and king of Salem means “king of peace.” These names and his designation as “priest of God Most High” identify Melchizedek as a follower of the God of Abram. Abram also worships “God Most High”.

Melchizedek is, thus, a follower of the true God but not of the Israelite nation. The writer makes much of the fact that we know nothing of Melchizedek’s origin, which stands in sharp contrast to our knowledge of any member of the Hebrew nation. The writer draws a parallel between Melchizedek’s origin and Christ’s. Like Melchizedek, Christ’s origin is hidden from carnal eyes and he too is a priest, a priest forever.

The greatness of Melchizedek is further emphasized by the fact that Abram gave him a tithe of his plunder. The author parallels Melchizedek with the Levitical priests who were responsible to collect the tithe from their brothers, the Isra-

elites. Abram, who had received the promises of God, paid his tithe to a stranger who could not trace his lineage to the line of Abram. Further Melchizedek blesses Abram, indicating his superiority over Abram. (In ancient Near Eastern culture, a blessing is always conferred by a superior individual on an inferior one.) Furthermore, since Levi was still in the loins of Abraham, the author says, Levi in a sense paid a tenth to Melchizedek. This makes Melchizedek superior to Levi and the Levitical priesthood as well.

Why this lengthy excursus on such an obscure king? The purpose is to prove that the priesthood of Jesus and what He does as priest is superior to the Levitical priesthood. Having established that Melchizedek is: 1) a priest from a different lineage than Levi, one that is not known, 2) a priest superior to Abraham, the father of the Israelites, because he receives his tithe and blesses the father of faith, and 3) a priest and king, whose beginning and end cannot be traced, the author parallels these features with Christ, showing that He, too, is different from as well as superior to the Levitical priesthood.

### **7:11-19 —The Aaronic (Levitical) Priesthood compared to Christ's**

"A new priesthood was needed" because the Levitical priesthood was deficient. It could not provide "perfection." To attain perfection means to have achieved the desired end or in this context, full salvation. Since the Levitical Priesthood did not achieve full salvation, a new priesthood from a new lineage was needed. Since the Aaronic(Levitical) priesthood's regulations were insufficient, a new law was needed as well.

Christ is the new priest. He is from the tribe of Judah and no Israelite priests came from that tribe. Likewise in the Old Testament there is also a priestly line outside of Levi, that of Melchizedek. This priestly line however, is not based on genealogy but is spiritual in nature. Like Melchizedek Christ became a priest not according to the legal regulation, but "on the basis of the power of an indestructible life."

To underscore this point, the author quotes Psalm 110:4. Not only Christ's life but also the Scriptures identify Christ as a priest. It should be noted that Christ is a priest like

Melchizedek. There are parallels between the two. Christ's priesthood is forever and so there is no need for regulations relating to succession.

In Christ, the former Levitical priesthood is set aside and is no longer valid. Verse 18 says "the former regulation is set aside." It was set aside because it could not achieve the perfect forgiveness of sin. Law is a principle of life only to the one who fulfils the righteousness it prescribes (Romans 10:5). To the law-breaker it becomes an instrument of death (Romans 7:10-12; 2 Corinthians 3:7ff). The human predicament is that of the law-breaker and the law cannot remedy it.

With the new priesthood, a better hope is introduced. That hope is direct access to God through Christ rather than through the Levitical priesthood and the sacrificial system.

### **7:20-28 —Superiority of Christ's Priesthood**

To establish the superiority of Christ's role, the author cites two Old Testament passages: 1 Samuel 15:29 and Psalm 110:4. Christ's priesthood was established with an oath as already noted in 6:13ff, and the assertion is made once again here. The oath emphasizes that since God has declared it, it is secure and not subject to change. God's promise is absolutely reliable and firm.

The priesthood of Melchizedek and the promises to Abraham were likewise established by an oath; that is, they are as sure as God. Under these two, all the gracious promises and prophecies which precede the coming of Christ are gathered and with the Incarnation both the new (evangelical) covenant and the new (evangelical) priesthood burst into view (Hughes, 267). Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Verses 23-25 portray Christ as the better priest because He doesn't die and therefore can continue His priestly ministry forever. On the other hand, there were many Levitical priests, but they all died and so had to be replaced. It is the permanent priesthood of Christ that makes it possible for Him to save those who come to God through Him. He continually intercedes for those who come to Him, in contrast to the temporary work of the Levitical priests.

Verses 26-28 further elaborate the nature of Christ's priesthood. He is holy in person and character, without sin, blameless, set aside for a specific purpose. He is free from all that is evil and harmful, both in action and motivation. He is pure, undefiled, He was tempted but did not sin, and does not belong to the category of sinners. He is "exalted above the heavens", an expression that embraces the triumph of Christ's resurrection, ascension, and glorification, and portrays the supreme perfection of our ever living High Priest in the sanctuary above.

Christ, in contrast to the Levitical priests, needs no sacrifice Himself. The Levitical priests offered daily sacrifices for themselves and for the people, and once a year the atonement sacrifice was again offered for themselves and the people. Christ, on the other hand, offered Himself for the sins of the people "once for all." After Christ no further sacrificing was needed.

## Summary

With Christ, a priest after the order of Melchizedek, the Levitical priesthood is now set aside, replaced by a new, better and more effective sacrifice and priest. The author argues that Christ's lineage is not from Levi, indicating that the new is here and the old law is being replaced. Note that the "old law" that has been removed is the ceremonial not the moral law.

The Son "has been made perfect forever." The word "perfect" is in the perfect tense suggesting action completed in the past with results that continue into the present. Thus, Jesus, having accomplished his "once for all sacrifice", has fulfilled God's saving purposes, all of which produces a state of completion and permanence, in contrast to the law (7:19), which could contribute nothing to this completeness and fulfillment (Hagner, 114ff ).

# Lesson 7 • The New Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

## Introduction

In the previous lesson the author of Hebrews established the uniqueness of Christ's priesthood in relation to the Levitical priesthood. In chapter 8 he discusses the matter of the covenant mediated by this better high priest.

### 8:1-7 —The New Covenant better than the Old

We are first told that our high priest is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven. Jesus' work on earth is finished and He has ascended. His ascension indicates that His sacrifice for sin is complete.

Christ ministers in the "sanctuary and true tent." The temple was the old sanctuary while the new sanctuary is established by God. The new sanctuary and tent is Christ's presence before God in heaven. Jesus is there interceding for us, performing His priestly function. (See also 9:24.) "What took place in that ritual of the historical tabernacle only through pictures and symbols actually takes place in the sacrificial work of Christ. The work of our high priest, therefore, concerns not pictures and symbols, but ultimate reality—the reality of God." (Hagner, 117)

The offering mentioned in verse 3 is not clearly identified until 9:14.

Verse 4. It would be impossible for Jesus to do his priestly work in the earthly "tent" because He did not come from the correct tribe. Moreover, the Levitical high priest was limited to members in the lineage of one family.

Verses 5 ff contrast the earthly sanctuary with the heavenly. The earthly is a copy of the heavenly while the heavenly is the real or anti-type. The real is always superior to the copy. Jesus brings a better covenant based on better promises than the old. If the old had been adequate no new covenant would have been needed.



The new covenant is better because Jesus is a greater mediator than Moses, who mediated the old. The better promises are elaborated in verses 8-13. The idea of the “new covenant” is not original to the author of Hebrews. Luke 22:20, 1 Corinthians 11:25, 2 Corinthians 3:14, and Galatians 4:24-26 all suggest that in Christ God establishes a new contract with His people.

### **8:8-13 —The Better Promises**

The author quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 to suggest what the better promises of the new covenant are. Only here do we find both the Jeremiah passage as well as the argument built on it. The better promises are those given in the new covenant that supersede or surpass the ones in the old. Jeremiah envisages a new kind of living, a new spiritual possibility, and a new experience of a definitive forgiveness of sins.

The law is internalized, and an intimate view of relationship between God and his people becomes possible. Knowledge of the Lord becomes the possession of all, and the cleansing of sin becomes a reality at the deepest level. This is what Jeremiah looked forward to, and this it is what believers experience in Christ.

Verse 13 summarizes the previous discussion and underscores its main point. With the advent of the new covenant the old becomes obsolete. Jesus was anticipated by the old and, now that He has come, the former covenant is no longer in effect. It has been superseded.

At the time Hebrews was written, the ritual requirements of the Old Covenant were still being practised. That is, the sacrifices were still being done. But it would only be a matter of time before the old would vanish. In 70 AD, when the temple was destroyed the offering of sacrifices ceased, and they have never been re-instituted.

The New Covenant is not only better but it makes the old obsolete. The latter is no longer binding. But the moral law which God established with the Old Covenant is not obsolete, unlike the ceremonial law which was abolished. That morality has been enhanced is implied by Jeremiah when he speaks

of the “law written on their hearts”. This is further reiterated by Jesus in Matthew 6-7. It is principally the ceremonial ritual of the Old Testament that is obsolete.

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## **Additional Notes on Covenant**

What is the content of the Old and the New Covenants? The writer to the Hebrews does not clearly tell us. He emphasizes that the new is better than the old and that the new replaces the old. But that still leaves such questions as, “Is the content of the Old Covenant also replaced?” “What is the difference between the content of the old and the new?”

The contents of the old and the New Covenant are the same. It is the ritual and outward symbolizing of the covenants that differ.

The idea that “Jesus was slain from before the foundation of the world”, may be a clue to the answer. (See John 17:24; Ephesians 1:4; Hebrews 4:3; 1 Peter 1:20; Revelation 13:8, 17:8.) The phrase suggests that in the heart of God, Christ had been slain for the sins of humankind as soon as they sinned. God loves and in loving He forgives. A similar idea is expressed in Ephesians 1:4 where being chosen before “the foundation of the world” and names written in the Book of Life before the “foundation of the world” are referred to.

So, in the heart of God redemption had been provided, but it would have to actually occur in history. As in Eden, the wrong choice resulted in the Fall, but there was the hope of redemption. Redemption in the heart of God would require a response by the being that had said “No”, in the first place. God decided to bring redemption—forgiveness of sin, in three steps or stages.

The three steps are: 1) the Pre-Abrahamic drawing of people, 2) the call of Abraham and the establishing of the first or Old Covenant with redemption portrayed through ritual and symbol, 3) The coming of Christ to fulfil the symbol by bringing salvation down to man’s understanding and once more giving humankind an opportunity to choose. The book of Hebrews is the clearest New Testament statement of this fulfilment and of the need to remove the old.

The following illustrates that the essence of the covenants remains the same:

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## CONTRAST and COMPARISON of THE OLD and THE NEW COVENANT in the Book of Hebrews

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### The CONTENT of the two Covenants

#### Old Covenant

*Ex. 19:5ff—If you obey me and keep my covenant, you shall be my possession. Affirmed by the people in Ex. 24:1-8*

*Jeremiah. 7:23—I will be your God and you shall be my people.*

#### New Covenant

*2 Corinthians 6:16—I will be their God and they shall be my people. Cf. 1 Peter 2:9-10*

*Jeremiah 31:31-34—God's law will be in their hearts, knowledge of God as personal experience, and their sins will be blotted out.*

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THE ESSENCE OF THE TWO COVENANTS IS THE SAME

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### The DIFFERENCES between the two Covenants

#### Old Covenant

- ♦ earthly day
- ♦ earthly
- ♦ shadow of the real
- ♦ many priests, succession necessary
- ♦ sprinkling of animal blood
- ♦ cleansed the external, symbolic
- ♦ animal sacrifices did not bring forgiveness
- ♦ only High Priest annually enters Holy of Holies,
- ♦ bulls & goats couldn't do God's will
- ♦ testator of will still alive, so will not in effect

#### New Covenant

- ♦ heavenly sanctuary, hearts of people
- ♦ Christ the once for all offering
- ♦ the real
- ♦ Christ High Priest, no succession needed
- ♦ Christ's blood
- ♦ cleansed the heart from sin
- ♦ Christ's sacrifice brought forgiveness
- ♦ curtain of Holy of Holies torn, altar open
- ♦ Christ came to do, and did God's will
- ♦ testator died so will of God in effect

## Summary\*

The essence of the Old and the New Covenant are identical and have the same goal: to bring people into a relationship with God. Both required faith. The old could not fully achieve the intended purpose because its ritual was but a shadow, an object lesson. It was only Christ who could bring forgiveness and thus reconcile God and humankind. The new brought a new heart, cleansed by forgiveness while the old brought forgiveness symbolically by offering animal and agricultural sacrifices as an act of faith.

The old ritual performed in faith saved the offerer because Christ had been slain from before the foundation of the world. The New Covenant worked out in history what had happened in the heart of God. It was fully accomplished when Jesus ascended into heaven. The old ritual could only touch the external with the ritual. The new worked inwardly on the heart. The new fulfilled the old. The new brought "Christ slain from before the foundation of the world" into personal historical experience. The old had the ritual, the new had the reality symbolized by the ritual.

F.F. Bruce summarizes the relation between the two covenants in this way: "But while the 'formula' of the covenant remains the same from age to age, it is capable of being filled with fresh meaning to a point where it can be described as a New Covenant. 'I will be your God,' acquires fuller meaning with every further revelation of the character of God; 'you shall be my people' acquires deeper significance as the will of God for His people is more completely known." (Bruce, Hebrews, Eerdmans, 1967, NICNT, 173-174)

\* The idea that Christ had "been slain from before the foundation of the world," is difficult for us because we can think of time only as past, present, and future. For God there is only an eternal present. Therefore our references to time do not apply to God. However, God works with us within time where He has placed us. So we could say, with God, "before the foundation of the world," is now, during the period of the Old Covenant it was now, Christ's sojourn on earth was now, our time now is now for God, and when Christ comes a second time it is now. Thus the historical reference is meaningful for us as humans, because we live within the limits of time, although God doesn't.

# Lesson 8 • Christ's Superior Sacrifice

Hebrews 9:1-28

## Introduction

The previous lesson dealt with the New Covenant. This lesson focuses on the sacrifices connected with the Old and New Covenants. The author points out that the sacrifice of the New Covenant is superior to the sacrifices of the Old Covenant.

## 9:1-10 —The Levitical Sacrifices

The author briefly outlines the tabernacle, which later became the temple worship pattern. He also outlines the arrangement of the various courts and the furniture and items in each. The teacher should be sure the students understand the arrangement. The writer of Hebrews outlines the structure and the various contents but has no intention of allegorizing or finding all kinds of meaning in these at this point. He simply gives us a description and says, "But we cannot discuss these things in detail now."

Verses 5-10 give an outline of the activity of the priests. The "outer tent" is also called the "holy place". This is where the priests performed their daily ritual duties. There were three rituals in particular that were performed here:

### Teacher Tip

In order to understand the old sacrificial system better, it will be helpful to get a picture of the tabernacle and its furniture. There is a video\* that shows and explains the temple system. Since it would take a whole class, you may decide to spend two classes on this lesson. To understand Hebrews it is imperative to understand the Old Testament sacrificial system. You can also effectively use pictures to illustrate that system.

\* The video is available from Harvey Plett, 1-204-326-1438

1) the tending from evening to morning of the golden lampstand to ensure that its lamps were kept burning without interruption (Exodus 27:20ff); 2) the burning of incense on the altar of incense each morning and evening when the lamps were dressed (Exodus 30:7ff); and 3) the weekly replacement, on every Sabbath day, of the loaves on the table of showbread (Leviticus 24:8ff). Leviticus gives detailed instructions concerning the functions and duties of the priests. A summary can be found in 1 Chronicles 23:24-32.

In the “second (tent)” or “holy of holies” there was activity only once a year, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16. Note verse 29). This place was entered only by the high priest and only when he was carrying the blood of the sacrifice. He could not on his own merit enter the holy of holies for he needed atonement for his sins as much as did the people.

The Day of Atonement ritual was very impressive, leaving the people with the awareness of the awfulness of sin, the impossibility of dealing with sin on their own, and the realization that God would have to forgive or they would be lost.

Verse 8 tells us that as long as there was a curtain between the various parts of the tabernacle, the way into the sanctuary was not yet open. Access to the mercy seat was still limited to the high priest. The ritual and offerings given were various animals, food, drink, and ceremonial washings, but they did not cleanse the conscience in a final way. This was a temporary measure until the true sacrifice would be made.

### **9:11-14 —Christ the Sacrifice**

This segment starts with a “but”, which serves to contrast what follows with the preceding sacrifice. Christ has now fulfilled what was foreshadowed in the Levitical system. He took His own blood, came before the Father and thereby secured eternal redemption. The sprinkling of the blood of bulls and goats sanctified the flesh, the outward. The sacrifice of Christ sanctified and purified the conscience, the soul, removing the guilt of sin. Christ’s sacrifice was without blemish, purifying us from any illusion that we can save ourselves by works.

## 9:15-22 —The New Covenant Validated

Christ's death made it possible for people to receive the promised eternal inheritance. The "inheritance" seems to refer to the promise given to Abraham in Genesis 12 and involved offspring, land, and being a blessing. This promise has now found its fulfillment in Christ. The inheritance is received by all who are called by God, that is, those who accept Christ.

Christ's death also redeemed humanity from the transgressions which were inevitable under the first covenant. Christ's redemption effectively delivers people from the demands of the law, which no one could keep. And it retroactively delivered those who trusted the promises prior to their historical fulfillment in Christ.

The author now introduces the analogy of a will (verse 16). A will takes effect only upon the death of the testator. The author implies that the will of God to bring salvation can only take effect by a death as well. That is why the first covenant

### Teacher Tip

It will be helpful to turn to Leviticus 16 and review the ritual of the Day of Atonement with the class. A bull was offered as a sin offering by and for the high priest at the brazen altar. Taking some of the blood of the bull and in a cloud of incense, the high priest sprinkled the blood on and in front of the mercy seat. Then one of a pair of goats was sacrificed as a sin offering for the people. The high priest took some blood from this goat and again sprinkled it on the mercy seat. The high priest then returned to the remaining goat, laid his hands on its head and confessed "all the iniquities of the people of Israel, and all their transgressions, and all their sins." The goat was then led into the wilderness, symbolically bearing all the sins of the people, never to return. This sacrifice for sin was repeated annually by the Levitical priesthood. It would continue until the priest "after the order of Melchizedek" would come to make the once for all sacrifice.

needed to be ratified by the blood of animals. Similarly the New Covenant was ratified by blood, not of an animal but of Christ. Hence verse 15 says “he is the mediator of a New Covenant.”

Why must a will be ratified by death? Why are objects purified in worship by blood? Forgiveness demands it. In order for humankind to be reconciled to God, the broken relationship had to be mended. But only forgiveness could restore it. Vengeance destroys. In broken human relationships, only by forgiving each other can both parties continue to live in harmony and avoid destroying each other or, through bitterness, themselves. Similarly, our relationship with God could only be restored by God forgiving us.

Forgiveness means the person wronged suffers the wrong done and allows the doer of the wrong to go free. We had sinned against God. The consequences of sin is death (Romans 3:23). Therefore God had to take upon Himself the consequences of our sin (death) in order to forgive us. Amazing grace! He did it in Christ. And so God’s will to save mankind could only become effective if there was a death, if blood was sprinkled on the mercy seat.

Forgiveness can only be offered by the one wronged. That is why the blood of bulls and goats cannot cleanse us from sin. We did not sin against them and they are not capable of forgiving. We sinned against God and that is why He had to pay the ultimate sacrifice.

And so the analogy of the will fits amazingly well. Forgiveness also explains why blood was needed. The Levitical sacrifices foreshadowed Christ and the need to deal with sin by forgiveness.

In the light of Christ, the meaning of the Old Testament sacrifices become understandable. They were pictures, ceremonies depicting forgiveness.

## **9:23-28 - Christ the Once of All Sacrifice**

Not only did the earthly things have to be cleansed, but the heavenly as well (verse 23). Christ’s death did that. As the earthly items in the temple were cleansed by the blood of bulls and goats, so the heavenly temple was cleansed by the blood of Christ.



The author reminds us that Christ's sacrifice was brought before God in the eternal sanctuary, and it was a "once for all sacrifice" because it dealt with sin by requiring the wronged party to die. There is now no other sacrifice that can bring this kind of a blessing. Christ's sacrifice was thus a "once for all" act.

Verse 26 describes forgiveness under the old system. Christ was slain from before the foundation of the world. Thus the Old Testament sacrifices were a symbolic re-enactment of what happens in eternity. What had happened before the foundation of the world had to happen in history. The Old Testament prefigured it and Christ's death brought it into history. As already noted, forgiveness requires one death by the one sinned against, and since that happened when He died, the requirements was met. The death had occurred in the heart of God and so the one sacrifice had happened.

At the end of the age Christ appeared "once for all" and forgiveness was granted.

Verse 27 gives us a word of warning and a word of hope. It reminds us that everyone will die and after death face judgement. Judgement means we are accountable for what we do with our life as well as how we respond to Christ. Our response has eternal consequences. Verse 28 gives us the glorious hope that when Christ comes a second time, it is not to deal with sin, but to bring final and full salvation to those who are eagerly waiting for Him.

Note that verse 28 is the only place in Scripture that refers to Christ's coming as a second coming.

## Summary

In chapter 9 the writer of Hebrews focuses on the fact that the sacrifices of the Old Covenant did not bring forgiveness, but prefigured the true sacrifice, Christ. Only Christ could bring forgiveness and purification for it was against Him that humankind had sinned. With the death of Christ, animal sacrifices are no longer needed. The "once for all sacrifice", Christ, has been made. People need to receive by faith the forgiveness of sin.

# Lesson 9 • The Shadow and the Real

Hebrews 10:1-18

## Introduction

This lesson continues to develop the theme that Christ is better. Again we find repeated such expressions as “once for all,” “not made perfect” “cannot take away sins,” etc., almost ad nauseam. The repetition underlines the importance of the point being made as well as the dullness of the readers (5:11ff).

### 10:1-4 —Ineffectiveness of the Shadow

Shadows are fun. As the sun sets in the west you see your distorted, elongated shadow. However viewed from the right angle the shadow copies the outline of the real and tells us things about it.

In these verses the author gives us four specific ways in which the old order was incompetent in comparison to the uniquely adequate priesthood of Christ.

First, to view the law as a shadow suggests that the pre-incarnate Christ casts a shadow forward over the unfolding drama that prepares the ground for the gospel. On the other hand, the exalted Christ casts a shadow back over those

centuries that led to the advent of the Saviour. The shadow consisted of the law, a priesthood, a promise, and a prophecy. Since these are shadows they are not of the substance. The regulations of the old are distinct from the reality of which they are a shadow.

Second, the repetitive nature of the old sacrifices clearly teach there is no finality in the shadow. An action that is final is not repeated. Because the sacrifices were

### Teacher Tip

To illustrate some truths about a shadow take an object, a lamp, and a white wall. Create a shadow on the wall. By looking at the real object and then at the shadow discuss what you can learn about the real as you look at the shadow.

repeated they were unable to make perfect, to bring salvation. They could not finally remove sin and its consequences. For had it been the real sacrifice the readers would have “no longer felt guilty for their sins.”

Third, the Levitical sacrifices were an “annual reminder of sins.” In this sense they were a shadow. The real would deal with sin once and for all. The word used for “reminder” suggests not only that the sacrifices reminded people of their sins, but also that God remembered them. Thus, sins were atoned for temporarily at best.

Fourth, the blood of beasts is ineffective. Brute beast by its very nature is unqualified to serve as a substitute for humans, the crown of God’s creation. Beasts lack volition and rationality; they are passive and inarticulate, and therefore incapable of the spontaneous declaration, “Lo, I have come to do thy will,” (v 7). Only a human, who is a volitional, rational, articulate, and responsible being, can serve as the proper equivalent and substitute for man. This is why the incarnation was necessary and why Christ, human and sinless, could properly stand in man’s place and absorb the punishment due to man’s sin (2:14-18; 4:15f; 5:8-10; 9:26). Only the one who by His resurrection from the dead has been vindicated as the Lord of Life, and who lives forevermore, can be our eternal High Priest and guarantor of everlasting salvation (1:2-4; 6:20; 7:16, 24,25; 8:1; 9:12; 12:12; 13:8).

We may ask, “If this is so, why were the Israelites given the whole sacrificial system?” The old system was divinely instituted (3:2ff; 8:5; 12:18ff) and thus served a useful purpose. It drew attention to the seriousness of sin, the reality of the righteousness of God, the necessity of atonement, and it prefigured the achievement of full and final expiation through the Lamb of God.

### **10:5-10 —Setting the Shadow Aside**

The author points to Psalm 40:6-8 to show what kind of a sacrifice could take away sins. The Psalm contrasts the animal sacrifices with an acceptable sacrifice. The author says that the animal sacrifices were required by law but the real sacrifice was the sacrifice of obedience. That was the sacrifice

Jesus gave, "I have come to do thy will, O God." In Gethsemane He prayed, "Not my will but thine be done."

By bringing the sacrifice of obedience, Jesus set aside the "first", the Old Covenant and established the "second," the New Covenant. Please take note of this truth of fulfillment. Setting aside the Old Covenant is at the heart of the whole argument in Hebrews. Christ has brought in the New; the old ceremonial requirements are no longer necessary. Animal sacrifices are finished. The once for all sacrifice has been made. Judaizers found this difficult to accept. What had always been required now was obsolete. They failed to grasp the character of the Old as a fleeting shadow, destined to disappear with the advent of the real.

### **10:11-14 —Two Kinds of Priests**

The author contrasts the priest who must function daily with Christ who brought the sacrifice and then sat down at the right hand of the Father because sin was atoned for. A seated priest is the guarantee of a finished work and an accepted sacrifice.

Christ now waits for "his enemies to be made his footstool." In 2:8 we read that not everything is subject to Him yet. When Jesus was on earth he overcame the world (John 16:33) and Satan was defeated by the cross (John 12:31; 16:11). But why the delay?

Second Peter 3:9ff says, "The Lord is not slow about his promise as some count slowness, but is forbearing toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance. But the day of the Lord will come." Paul says the last enemy to be destroyed is death (1 Corinthians 15:26). The war has been won but we are still mopping up.

The sacrifice of Christ "made perfect" those who are being made holy. We have encountered the word "made perfect" a number of times. It should be remembered that this does not refer to moral perfection but to the complete realization of God's saving purpose. Salvation is now a reality, it is no longer a shadow. "Being made holy" refers to the process of sanctification.

## 10:15-18 —The Witness of the Holy Spirit

Finally the author appeals to the witness of the Holy Spirit to confirm that the work of the new priest is effective. He quotes Jeremiah 31:33-34 and claims that this is what the Holy Spirit says about Christ and His sacrifice. Jeremiah makes the following key points:

1. God will make a New Covenant with His people
2. Outward conformity to ritual will fall away and obedience of the heart will be of final significance.
3. Sins will be remembered no more.

As noted previously, in Christ all this is accomplished. Once more we have a clear statement that the old has been replaced by the new.

A final word is that sins which Christ has forgiven need no more sacrifice. Indeed no sacrifice atones for such sins because they are no more.

### Summary

When sins have been forgiven they are taken care of and should be left covered. It is improper to revisit or re-live sins that have been confessed and forgiven. Christians who continue to experience guilt need to learn to accept the forgiveness from God and forgive themselves.

The end is coming but is not here yet. Christ's enemies have been defeated but they are not yet His footstools. Therefore the Christian life is still a war against evil. Being saved puts us into the midst of the battle. Nevertheless, the salvation in Christ is complete. Nothing can be added or subtracted.

# Lesson 10 • Never Give Up

Hebrews 10:19-39

## Introduction

In these verses the author turns to a practical exhortation: persevere in the faith. In light of what the new order has brought us, believers are encouraged to continue to be faithful. A warning is also given if the follower will not persevere.

### 10:19-25 —Draw near with the Assurance of Faith

“Therefore” - Because of what the previous lesson has taught us about Christ, we are asked to respond.

The exhortation (cf. 4:16) is to “draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith”. In the old economy only the high priest could draw near to God. But now everyone is invited to do so and is able to do so because of what Christ has done.

The curtain that divided the “Holy Place” from the “Holy of Holies” where the mercy seat was located and where they drew near to God on the Day of atonement is now torn open so that everyone can go in. At the time of Christ’s crucifixion the veil of the temple was torn from top to bottom. (See 9:3; Mark 15:38. Cf. Matthew 27:51 and Luke 23:45). The way

to God was opened and restrictions no longer applied. The new had set the old aside. We can now approach God with confidence because Jesus opened the way.

Drawing near to God is described as “enter[ing] the Most Holy Place.” The earthly temple is used to picture our coming before God

### Teacher Tip

The exhortation to provoke one another to love and good works is a practical one. Discuss how we may apply it in our daily life. Your class could choose a person and consider how they could spur him or her to love and good deeds.

directly. The drawing near is also described as a “new and living way” in contrast to the “old and dying way” of the Levitical system.

But there are conditions attached to approaching God in this way. We must:

1. Come with hearts that are sincere, that is, hearts that have a singleness of purpose and dedication.
2. Draw near with hearts “in full assurance of faith”, that is, hearts that are unwavering and firm in trusting God.
3. Have our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. Using the terminology of the Old Covenant, the writer of the epistle is saying that we are to have the inward spiritual cleansing that Christ brings when we accept Him.
4. “Have our bodies washed with pure water.” Paul says, “Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her to make her holy, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word” ( Ephesians 5:25-26). The ritual use of water to cleanse the body is here used to symbolize spiritual cleansing. Many commentators suggest this phase may refer to water baptism. The intended meaning is not that baptism cleanses but that it is symbolic of the Christian’s spiritual and visible identification with Christ.

A second exhortation in verse 23 urges, “Let us hold unwaveringly to the hope we profess.” We have already seen the exhortation to hold fast in 3:6, 14; 4:14. “The hope we profess” refers to the faith in Christ and its results in our lives—forgiveness of sins, strength for living and the hope of eternal life. We are encouraged to continue to be faithful. The exhortation implies that there may be danger of wavering in the faith.

The reason for the exhortation is the faithfulness of the One who promised the spiritual blessing. In other words, God is faithful; He will do what He has said He would do.

A third exhortation is found in verse 24. “Let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds.” The word “consider” means that we are to give careful thought to what we will be doing, that is, pay thoughtful attention to

the issue at hand. It is a word that was used of spies who paid close attention to the information they wanted.

In the KJV “spur one another on” is translated “provoke” while in the RSV it is “stir.” The word is often used in a negative sense. For example, Paul and Barnabas were provoked at each other over taking Mark along on the second missionary journey (Acts 15:39). In other words we are to be involved in prodding one another.

The phrase “to love and good works” refers to love seeking the other person’s welfare regardless of personal cost. To stir up a person who has been cheated and is very angry would mean to seek to help him forgive rather than let him continue being angry and slowly become bitter. “Good works” are the kind of deeds that we as Christians do to those around us. (Cf. 1 John 4:7-12.)

A fourth exhortation provides a contrast. On the one hand, believers are not to “give up meeting together” while on the other hand they are to “encourage one another.” The Greek word for “not give up” is a present active participle and thus suggests that the Hebrew believers were forsaking attending the assemblies. The author instructs them to stop giving up the congregational meetings. The word “meeting together” is a combination of two words, “synagogue” and “in addition.” This suggests that possibly the original readers were attending a synagogue service and in addition attended the Christian worship services. It is these Christian services that they were missing and the encouragement is to stop forgoing them.

Rather they are to encourage one another. Here again we find a very practical truth. If the first part of this exhortation is negative, the second is very positive. We are not to put each other down but rather rally around each other and cheer each other on.

The reason for this exhortation is that Christ’s second coming is near. The word “Day” refers to that eschatological day, a day of reckoning and judgement. Again, attention is called to the fact that our response to the truth of God has consequences not only in this life but also in the life to come.



## 10:26-31 —The Danger of Deliberate Sinning

In chapter 6 a warning was given against rejecting the truth. A similar theme is developed here. If we have received a knowledge of the truth and keep on sinning, there is no sacrifice for sins. This is logical. Christ died for my sins, to provide forgiveness. If I reject that gift there is nothing else that will help.

Could the writer be talking about Judaizers who sinned despite knowing the truth about Christ? Were they hoping they would find forgiveness after the old pattern? If that is the case, the author brings them up short. The only result is a “fearful expectation of judgement and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God.” To live in reliance on the old system makes you an enemy of God.

He reminds his readers of the strictness of the Law of Moses. If a person violated it, he could be executed on the basis of two or three witnesses. Then comes the question, “How much more do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot?” The implied answer is much more. Therefore do not toy with the grace of God.

One who has “treated as unholy the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace,” that is, a believer who decided to leave the Christian way, will fall into the hands of the living God, and that is something dreadful. Believers are warned that it is God who will avenge and repay such betrayal.

It must be noted that the individual spoken of continues to sin deliberately. This is not inadvertent sinning but an intentional rejection of what is known as the truth. It is a person who insists on living in sin that is in trouble. The person who repents will find the grace abundantly sufficient and forgiving.

## 10:32-39 —A Reminder of Faithfulness under Pressure

This strong warning is followed by a word of encouragement. The author is concerned about his readers. He reminds them of the suffering they have had to endure for their faith, and that they stood firm. They had experienced public insults or

stood with those who were thus treated. They had sympathized with those in prison and had joyfully accepted confiscation of their property because they knew they had better and more lasting possessions in Christ.

In light of all this they are encouraged not to throw their faith away. If they remain faithful they will be richly rewarded. A theme that we have encountered before is, “you need to persevere, so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he promised,” (10:36). The appeal to faithfulness is based on the ultimate results of being faithful—being richly rewarded and receiving the promise. The only way to receive what is promised is to continue in faithfulness.

Finally, the writer of Hebrews encourages believers with the hope that Christ will not delay His coming. Paraphrasing Habakkuk 2:3-4, he encourages the faithful with the hope of Christ’s soon return but then adds the warning that if we shrink back God is not pleased.

## Summary

The writer concludes by affirming that we, he and his readers, do not shrink back for that would mean their destruction. We believe, and therefore we are ultimately saved.

# Lesson 11 • The Way of Faith

Hebrews 11:1-40

## Introduction

The writer of Hebrews argued strenuously that the Old Covenant and all its rituals have been fulfilled in Christ and the New Covenant. In chapter 11 he takes time to teach what it means to have faith by telling stories of the heroes of faith of the past. His slow learners should have no difficulty understanding him.

## 11:1-2 —What is Faith

The previous chapter ended with “But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe (faith –RSV) and are saved.” Our author now turns to the concept of having faith and being saved.

His definition has two parts. First, “being sure of what we hope for.” The Greek word translated “Being sure” (hypostasis) carries two meanings. In 1:3 the word is used of Jesus to convey the idea that He is of the same essence or substance as the Father. This means faith is the essence of what is there and not what seems to be so. As Hughes says, “Faith lays hold of what is promised and therefore hoped for, as something real and solid, though as yet unseen” (Hughes, 439).

“Hypostasis” also carries the idea of an inner assurance and confidence that what we hope for will become reality.

Perhaps it is most accurate to the writer’s intended meaning to include both senses of the word. Both point to “the same central idea of something that underlies visible conditions and guarantees a future possession” (Hughes, 440).

Second, the phrase “certain of what we do not see” indicates that there is n

### Teacher Tip

You may assign a student to prepare a study on “Creation and Evolution” or do one yourself.

doubt that what we do not see is real. The content of “what we do not see” is not given but can be implied from the larger context. It includes that Christ is the Son of God, that Christ’s sacrifice supersedes and replaces the old sacrifices, that Christ will return, and that we have forgiveness of sins.

Put another way the phrase means “Though the blessings promised are not yet revealed, the man of faith is convinced of their reality” (Hughes, 440).

These two phrases ultimately confirm each other. The second phrase is not really an expansion of the first. Faith is lively and active, a vital certainty which impels the believer to lay hold of those realities on which his hope is fixed and which, though unseen, are already his in Christ. The Christian is animated by the conviction that it is the very things not yet seen, those things which he appropriates by faith, that are real and permanent. The believer walks by faith not by sight (2 Corinthians 4:18; 5:7).

### **Faith is acting in accordance with what one accepts as true.**

Men and women in the Old Testament had nothing but the promises of God to rest upon without any evidence that these promises would ever be fulfilled; yet so much did these promises mean to them that they regulated the whole course of their lives. The promises related to a state of affairs belonging to the future, but these people acted as if that state of affairs were already present. (Bruce, 277). They were men and women of faith.

#### **Teacher Tip**

Discuss the question, “Is there a God?” Alternatively, ask your students to do research on this question and report back to the class.

“Their faith consisted simply in taking God at His word and directing their lives accordingly; things yet future so far as their experience went were thus present to faith, and things outwardly unseen were visible to the inward eye.” (Bruce, 277)

## 11:3-31 —Faith in All Aspects of Life

With verse 3 we have a “by faith” litany. Having defined faith the author now abundantly illustrates it by selecting saints of the Old Testament and showing how they exercised faith.

Verse 3 is a pure statement of faith. It says we act in accordance with the truth that God created the universe by command. The author is obviously aware of Genesis and the recurring phrase “And God said .... and it was so.”\*

The author concludes, “so what is seen was not made out of what was visible.” That is, what is visible did not come from other visible phenomena. But did the creation come from other invisible phenomena? None existed apart from God. The unseen reality that lies behind and permeates the whole created order is that of the power and energy of Almighty God.

Creation is the bringing into existence that which was not previously in existence, the cosmic system in its entirety.

The author obviously did not adhere to any kind of evolutionary, spontaneous generation theory. For him God created by His command and he accepted it and ordered his life accordingly. There is a creator and sustainer behind the universe.

As you read through the list of the heroes of faith, pause at as many as you can and examine their act of faith.

Abel

He offered a better sacrifice, not because his was an animal sacrifice and Cain’s was an agricultural one, but because he offered in faith. In the Old Covenant there were many offerings that were non-animal and God was pleased with them. The pleasure or displeasure of God was determined by the attitude of the heart.

Enoch

You cannot have faith in God if you don’t believe He exists. That means you have to decide whether there is a God or not. If you decide there is, you will begin to act in accordance with that faith.

\*For a good discussion on this verse in relation to creation see P.E. Hughes, *A Commentary to the Epistle to the Hebrews*, Eerdmans, 1977. pp. 443-452.

## Noah

This man built a boat when there was no water in sight. He acted in the belief that God had spoken to him, and he did what God asked him to do. It should be remembered that God's word to Noah did not come in a vacuum. He, like the other ancient saints experienced God in many ways and learned to hear His voice. He also discovered that a blessing came with obedience.

## Abraham

Consider the steps of faith Abraham took: he left an advanced civilization to go camping the rest of his life; he accepted that he would have a son despite being past child bearing age; and he was willing to sacrifice Isaac.

## Isaac

Nothing is said of the deception of Jacob and Rachel. The author emphasizes that Isaac blessed both sons and that the blessing related to the future. Jacob would be in the lineage of the Promised One and Esau would serve his brother.

## Jacob

His blessing of Joseph's sons is taken as evidence of faith. By doing this Jacob showed his confidence in the reality of all that God had promised. His grandchildren would continue the faith.

## Joseph

Joseph expected his brothers and descendants to return to the promised land and wanted his remains to be taken along. This was an expression of trust and confidence in God and His promises.

## Moses' Parents

By hiding the infant Moses, his parents demonstrated faith in God. They acted not only because they feared the death edict but also because they saw in their son something extraordinary. They acted on the conviction that God had plans for their son.

## Moses

Moses decided to identify with his people and the treatment they received rather than being a son of Pharaoh. He believed what God had said and acted on that belief despite of the allure of becoming a leader in Egypt.

## Exodus Faith

It was faith that God would hold the waters back that caused the Hebrews to walk through the Red Sea on dry ground. It was faith that caused them to go around Jericho as instructed despite how foolish it might have looked.

## Rahab

Hiding the spies was an act of faith. Rahab knew she was endangering her life by doing so, but she also knew the God of the spies and acted in harmony with that faith. As a result she and her family were saved and not destroyed with those who were disobedient. She is listed in the genealogy of Jesus.

## 11:32-34 —An Abbreviated List

The author has selected some of the best known heroes of faith and lists a few more with short references to their acts of faith. If we arrange the names into three pairs, the two men in each pair are named here in the reverse order to that of their Old Testament appearance.

## Gideon

With his 300 men, Gideon was Israel's champion against the Midianites. Of course we also know him for using a fleece to determine God's will.

## Barak

As commander who led Israel against Sisera, it is of interest to note that Barak's name is mentioned rather than the prophetess Deborah or Jael. The faith of Barak may have been demonstrated in his insistence that Deborah go with him into battle. In this way he exercised faith in the God whose servant and spokeswoman Deborah was.

## Samson

The mention of Samson raises some questions because he was rash with his Nazirite vow. However, in Judges 11:14-27 we sense his confidence in the God who led his people into Canaan.

## David

Like all the others, David was far from perfect. His faith is seen in various ways but perhaps most of all in his humility and readiness to repent and seek pardon from God when he sinned. Also his Psalms express a strong trust in God's providence and faithfulness.

## Samuel

Much could be said about Samuel. Perhaps it is sufficient to note that he made an annual circuit as a judge, performing priestly functions in Israel.

## The Prophets

The prophets and their deeds are referred to in general terms without specifying which prophet is connected with which event. (It may be worthwhile to take a concordance and look for these events and identify the prophets associated with each.)

## 11:35-38 —Living by Faith in Persecution and Death

Up to this point our hearts have beat with excitement. The people of faith were victorious. But that is only half the story of living by faith. In these verses we have illustrations of what faith does under pressure. We also see that Jesus' words to His followers, "In the world you will have trouble" were true already in the Old Testament. In this section we have a short Martyrs Mirror with no mention of the names of specific martyrs.

The listing begins with the miracle of receiving your loved one from the dead, but then quickly adds, others were tortured but refused to compromise their faith. They believed in a better resurrection. That is, these Old Testament saints knew that those who remained true would someday be raised



to be with God. Believing this, they acted accordingly and were willing to die.

A list of various tortures follows: being jeered, flogged, chained, imprisoned, stoned, sawed in two, executed, having insufficient clothing, persecuted, mistreated, and having no place to live safely (verse 38). This was not a very comforting list. I believe we agree when our author says, "The world was not worthy of them."

### **11:39-40 —Something Better**

We are now reminded of verse 2 where the author says the "ancients were commended for their faith." However, none of the above received what had been promised. God had planned something better that included them and us. It is "to be made perfect." "To perfect" means to bring to conclusion or achieve fully. Bruce puts it this way: "They and we together now enjoy unrestrained access to God through Christ, as fellow-citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. The 'better plan' which God had made embraces the better hope, the better promises, the better covenant, the better sacrifices, the better and abiding possession, and the better resurrection which is their heritage and ours" (Bruce, 344).

### **Summary**

This chapter in a very powerful way tells those who are wavering about Christ that He stands in the tradition of the Israelite heroes of the faith. To reject Christ is to misread and misapply the Old Testament.

This chapter leaves no room for cheap believism. It tells us our faith is evidenced by our life. Faith without works is dead. It is impossible to say, "I believe" but then live a life denying Christ.

We are also taught that the Old Testament saints were saved by faith, not by keeping the law. The law outlined what a life of faith entailed. The ceremonial law focused attention on the sinfulness of sin and the greatness of the grace of God in working towards final forgiveness in Christ. But as the author says, "without faith it is impossible to please God."

This chapter illustrates that faith and obedience are virtually synonymous. Obedience was their step of faith.

Finally I repeat my rather simple definition of faith:

**Faith is acting in accordance with  
what you accept as true.**

### **Teacher Tip**

Read sections from the *Martyrs Mirror* to the class. Get the class to share personal experiences of opposition for their faith. Have the class share positive experiences of faith.

# Lesson 12 • Running the Race

Hebrews 12:1-29

## Introduction

Having argued how much better Christ is than the Old and having shown that the Old Testament saints stand in continuity with the gospel of Christ, the author once more appeals to his readers to respond. Our writer has been concerned that his hearers have been dull of hearing and so once more encourages them to look to Jesus.

## 12:1-3 —Run having your Eyes Fixed on Jesus

These three verses contain four exhortations on how to live the Christian life. To make his point the author compares the Christian life to a race. Each exhortation relates to this metaphor.

First, throw off. The Christian is to lay aside every thing that might hinder his Christian life. Literally the Greek word translated “hinder” means “every weight” or “every impediment.” As an athlete, who removes every piece of extra clothing that may slow her down in a race, so we are to remove any and every hindrance to the Christian life. The writer does not specify any impediment and so the reader is left to determine what hindrances might be removed. (For some concrete ideas see Luke 21:34; Colossians 3:8; James 1:21; 1 Peter 2:1; 1 Corinthians 9:25, 27.)

The runner is also to throw off “the sin that so easily entangles.” This phrase probably explains “that which hinders.” Sin is like a shackle to the runner. Sin entangles the Christian life as Adam and Eve discovered when they ate the forbidden fruit. This phrase should not be construed to refer to a person’s pet sin as some interpret the words “besetting sin.” Any sin slows down the Christian race in terms of victory, joy, or witnessing. It must be removed.

Second, we are exhorted, “let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.” The encouragement to “run” indicates that the Christian life takes effort. We noticed the same

theme in chapter 11. It is not the effort that saves us but without our effort God's grace can not work.

The word "perseverance" tells us that the race is not easy. The recipients of the Hebrews letter had made a good start (10:32-34), but were slackening in the will to persevere. Their effort was decreasing (2:1), and sin was holding them back (3:17-4:1). They needed to recover their intensity of purpose (4:11), to shake off the sluggish mood into which they had fallen (6:11f), to regain their confidence (10:35, 39) and their competitive spirit (12:2). How does this apply to our lives today?

"The race marked out for us" suggests that it is a race that has rules and parameters. The Christian life is not haphazard. It is very specific and outlined in Scripture. The race is the totality of the Christian life.

Third, "let us fix our eyes on Jesus." A runner has a single-minded focus on the finish line and runs with total concentration on that goal. The Christian race is no different. Our goal is conformity to Christ in this world and to be with Him forever. Thus, with singleness of purpose and undistracted by all surrounding events, the Christian fixes his gaze on the One who is the goal and the prize.

Verses 2-3 briefly describe the spiritual significance of Jesus. He is the originator of our faith. He is also the perfecter of our faith; that is, He brings us to our intended goal.

The next words are an abbreviated statement of the crucifixion, resurrection, and ascension of Christ. The joy spoken of is the joy of completing the work of reconciliation He had come to perform for our eternal benefit and to the glory of the Father's Name (cf. John 12:28).

The encouragement is to look at Jesus and how He ran faithfully. Follow Him.

Fourth, we are exhorted to consider Christ as a model to emulate in persevering. We are to note that Jesus experienced intense opposition from sinful men yet kept on going and ultimately won the victory. Believers who are growing weary are to look at Jesus and take heart. He did it and He will help us to do it too.

Finally, we are given the reason for running. There is a cloud of witnesses who show us the way (v 1). The writer says, "Look at the many who ran faithfully. They did it and now it is your turn. They could do it and so can you." Some suggest the cloud of witnesses is the picture of a grandstand with the departed saints watching with bated breath as they observe us running the race of life. It is more likely that the writer refers to the saints of chapter 11 as witnesses or models of how to run the race. We stand in their heritage when we now run as they have run.

### **12:4-11 —Handling Hardship in the Race**

In this section, believers are reminded that even though things may have been difficult, they could be worse. No one has yet given their life for the faith. With that word of encouragement he elaborates a theology of difficulties in the life of the Christian.

The writer's concept of how to handle difficulties is summarized in verse 7. It reads, "Endure hardship as discipline." Here is a positive approach to difficulties in our path. They are to serve as discipline. Who causes the difficulty is not important. What is significant is how the sufferer responds.

Discipline is a positive thing. It seeks to help a person move in the right direction. Hardship because of our witness is to be treated as God seeking to help us become stronger Christians. Instead of asking, "Why Lord?" we are to ask, "How can I respond in a Christlike way to this difficult circumstance?" Peter encourages the same truth in 1 Peter 4:12-14.

The author then makes the provocative statement that if we are not disciplined, we are illegitimate children, that is, not children of God. That means we are to expect opposition if we expect to experience growth. Just as our earthly fathers disciplined us for our good, much more so do hardships become God's discipline for His children. This makes good sense. Persecution confronts us with the decision whether to depend on God or turn away from Him to avoid the difficulty.

We are encouraged to walk through the difficulties with God and produce a harvest of righteousness and peace.

The phrase “for those who have been trained by it” tells us that the discipline through hardship is a learning process and that we will not arrive at maturity in one instant move. The same truth is echoed in 5:11ff and in James 1:2-18.

## 12:12-17 —Keep on Running

Verses 12-13 encourage believers to move ahead courageously in light of the truth that hardship is discipline from God. But they also include a call to do well so that we will be models for others.

A series of admonitions that flow from the truth that “hardship is discipline” follow.

1. “Live at peace with all men.” Paul says the same in Romans 12:18. Peace is to be pursued. This will be the reaction to hardships; peace rather than hitting back. (cf. Matthew 5:9)
2. “Be holy, without which no one will see the Lord.” Holiness is first a quality of the heart. Pure motives result in pure living. (Cf. Matthew 5:8) “Not see God” refers to the seeing of God when Jesus comes again. We are to respond to “hardships” with holiness so that we will go with Jesus when He comes. Pure motives and pure living (separateness from sin) is not an option, but essential, for the Christian.
3. “See to it that no one misses the grace of God.” The phrase “see to it” comes from the same word as “overseer”. The whole community is encouraged to play an oversight role for others so no one will miss the grace of God. Everyone is responsible to help each other along to grace.
4. “See to it . . . that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many.” Hardships make one bitter or better. Believers are warned not to let difficulties make them bitter. The admonition is given to the whole community of faith to take care that bitterness will not develop. This end can be accomplished by reminding each other that “hardships are discipline” and not punishment from God. Believers are also warned that bitterness is very destruc-

tive, destroying not only the one who is bitter but also creating problems for others related to that person. The word, "defile", refers to moral defilement. In this context it could refer to giving in because of hardships or possibly to following false teachings. Bitterness destroys.

5. "No one is sexually immoral or godless like Esau." Not every commentator believes both ascriptions belong to Esau. Grammatically it reads best if both are applied to Esau. Esau's immorality may have been the two foreign wives he took which created problems for Isaac and Rebekah. Jewish thought on Esau indicates that they thought of him as a man with sensuous passions. And he was godless in selling his birthright for a single meal.

The birthright was a privilege that belonged to the first-born male in a family. It gave him a double portion of inheritance but also the responsibility to be head of the family. This was a serious matter. Ever since the firstborn was saved in Egypt he was considered as belonging to God. Esau trampled all this underfoot for his physical appetites. In this sense, he was godless.

Later he was sorry and sought to regain his birthright but it was too late. That is what is meant by the phrase "he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears" (RSV). The warning to not be godless like Esau refers to being careless about the grace of God. A time will come when it will be too late.

## **12:18-24 —Strength from Mount Zion**

The new and the old are again contrasted in these verses, this time with reference to two mountains - Sinai and Zion. The latter is better than the former. Israel came to Sinai; you have come to Zion. Consider how much better Zion is than Sinai. Each has seven descriptions:

*see next page*

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## Mount Sinai

1. "can be touched"
2. "burning with fire"
3. "darkness"
4. "gloom"
5. "storm"
6. "trumpet blast"
7. "a voice"

## Zion

1. "heavenly Jerusalem"
  2. "many angels"
  3. "assembly of firstborn"
  4. "God, judge of all"
  5. "spirits of men"
  6. "Jesus"
  7. "sprinkled blood"
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In comparing the two it is obvious that we are not dealing with opposites. Rather, the writer has chosen to emphasize what he thinks will highlight the superiority of Zion. Sinai is gloomy, dark and fearsome. Zion in contrast is attractive and welcoming.

### 12:25-29 —Warning Against Failing to Run

The comparison of the mountains continues. If the Hebrews did not escape God speaking from Sinai (earth) how much less will we escape the One from Zion (heaven).

At Sinai the earth shook. God will shake the earth once more. But this second shaking will remove what is created. This seems to refer to the second coming of Christ when the elements will melt with fervent heat (2 Peter 3:12).

The unshakeable which remains is the kingdom. We are in the process of receiving it and will receive it in its fullness on that day.

Because the end will come and that which is not secure in Christ will be removed, believers are exhorted to be thankful and worship God "acceptably with reverence and awe." Failing to respond means we will meet God as a "consuming fire."



## Summary

Hebrews 12 is a call to decision. Count hardship as discipline from God and run the race, laying aside any hindrance and enjoying the kingdom. On the other hand, if you consider hardship as unfair, it will cause you to be bitter and you will experience God as a consuming fire.

### Run the race

because of what Christ has done,  
because the cloud of witnesses show it can be done,  
and because it will make a difference in eternity.

# Lesson 13 • Encourage One Another

Hebrews 13:1-25

## Introduction

In chapter 13 our author makes some final exhortations. With the number of admonitions here, one gets the impression that the writer realizes his epistle is long enough, yet he has much to say and so, in summary fashion, gives a series of encouragements. Chapter 13 is almost an appendix. This does not mean the material is not related to the rest of the epistle. The writer's main concerns are again addressed but in a different way.

## 13:1-19 —Essentials of Christian Living

1. It appears that the recipients of the letter were not only flagging in zeal for the Christian life, but also in their ardent love for each other. Hence the word of encouragement, "Keep on loving each other as brothers." Love is expressed in continuous concrete acts.
2. Be hospitable. The words "entertain strangers" are literally translated, "love strangers." "Do not forget" could also read "Do not neglect." Apparently the original readers were slack in taking care of strangers. This was important because: 1) homes served as motels at that time; 2) it was an opportunity to share the faith; and 3) at times they were entertaining angels when they took in strangers.

The idea of entertaining angels reminds us of Genesis 18, where Abraham entertained angels when he invited the three men to stay for a meal. This may also have happened with Gideon (Judges 6:11-22), Manoah and the mother of Samson (Judges 13:3-21). The Didache, an early 2nd century Christian writing, encourages hospitality to travelling preachers and prophets but also gives instruction to safeguard abuse. For example, it suggests if a prophet stays more than three days he is a false prophet.

3. "Remember those in prison. . . and those mistreated." It appears that some of the believers were imprisoned and

the readers of this epistle are encouraged to show love to them as if they themselves were co-prisoners. That is an expression of love which in turn may also involve some danger because they are Christian and could also be imprisoned. In a similar way they are to help those that are being mistreated. Doing so could also result in mistreatment for them because of their faith.

We do not know the reason why some of these Christians were imprisoned or mistreated. But the way the writer encourages his readers suggests that it was because they were Christians. However, with the emphasis on being hospitable to strangers, it is not impossible that this is also an encouragement to help anyone who is in prison or being mistreated.

4. Keep the marriage bed pure. Two problems seem to underlie this exhortation. First, marriage seems to have been held in low esteem. The attitude that prevailed, so common in our own time, was that to be married was no important matter. "We'll stay together as long as we love each other." This is not a Christian attitude. Marriage is part of God's plan for us (Genesis 2) and should be held in honour.

Another attack on marriage may have been the philosophy of asceticism which said, "Marriage is a concession to the flesh. We are to deny our flesh and so it is better not to marry." Paul responds to this kind of false teaching in 2 Timothy 4:3ff.

Second, the problem underlying the exhortation is that of unfaithfulness to one's marriage partner. The writer says that the marriage bed is to be kept pure. Committing adultery, being unfaithful to the wedding vows, being sexually immoral, and engaging in sex outside of marriage, both heterosexual and homosexual, will incur the judgement of God. Marriage is honourable and sexual faithfulness and purity are the biblical norm. (Cf. 1 Thessalonians 4:4-7.)

5. Avoid greed. The antidote to "love of money" is contentment. The greedy person is never content; ungenerous and grasping, he always wants more and is always afraid

of losing what he has. In contrast the Christian finds his security in God who will never forsake him and doesn't fear what others may do to him. Paul knew what this meant. In Philippians 4:1 he says, "I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content." Jesus says, "A man's life does not consist in the abundance of his possessions."

Paul tells us that, "God will supply our every need according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 4:19). Here is a call to discern what is transient and what is eternal. Material possessions will vanish but one's soul will never die.

6. "Remember your leaders." Note that the function of the leaders was to speak the Word of God and to model a life patterned after that Word. Believers are to consider the life of their leaders who have already died and imitate their faithfulness. The outcome does not refer to martyrdom but to faithfulness. As Jesus helped those leaders, he will help believers, for "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever."

In verse 17 we find a further exhortation concerning leaders. Believers are to obey and submit to their present leaders. This implies that there were some who did not. The work of leaders described here is the watch-care over the saints as men who must give account for those under them. By obeying their leaders, believers will make the work of leadership a joyful task rather than a burdensome one.

The authority of the leaders is not arbitrary and authoritarian but rather a function of their roles as the providers of pastoral care and preachers of the Word. These two sections on church leadership indicate that leaders are to lead and people are to follow.

7. "Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings." This admonition follows logically the call to consider the task of faithful leaders. Again the writer speaks out against what he calls "strange teachings" which could be the teaching of the Judaizers.

Ceremonial foods may feed the body but they do not strengthen the heart. For that we need the grace of God.

Using some of the rituals of the Old Covenant the writer once more points out that Christ is their fulfilment and it is to Him we should go to find grace. As the sacrificial bodies were burned outside the camp so Christ was crucified outside the city to make the people holy through His blood. That is where the truth is. Any teaching must be tested against Jesus. Believers are also reminded that the followers of Jesus have no permanent abiding place here but are looking for a city that is to come.

As a summary, the writer exhorts the believers in verses 15-16, to bring a sacrifice of praise, do good and share with others. Such activity is pleasing to God. The sacrifice of praise is singing but it is more. It is a life that continually praises God by the way it is lived. Those who "confess his name," that is, those who are followers of Jesus and those who help people in their time of need offer up this kind of sacrifice.

8. Request for Prayer (vs.18-19.) The writer requests prayer for himself and his unidentified companions. The prayer is to be for a clear conscience, that their conduct will pass the scrutiny both of man and God, and that they will live honourably in obedience to the Word. He also asks that his readers pray that he may be restored to them soon. This suggests that the writer has had previous contact with his readers and that he is, at the time of writing, far away.

### 13:20-25 —Final Words of Farewell

1. The author prays a benediction on his readers. God is identified by what He did in Christ. He is the God of peace and through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is described as "that great Shepherd of the sheep." This is a powerful image of Jesus and His love for His people. He cares for them as a shepherd cares for his sheep.

The benedictory prayer is twofold: a) may God equip believers with what they need to do His will; and b) may God work in us what is pleasing to Him through Jesus Christ. Believers are to be conformed to the image of Christ.

2. Verse 22 appeals to readers to indulge the writer and pay heed to what he has written. It is only a short letter,

he says, suggesting he had much more to say. It should not be so difficult for them to consider his exhortations prayerfully.

3. Obviously his readers knew Timothy. Apparently Timothy had been imprisoned but had been released. If Timothy will come to join the writer, they will come to visit the “Hebrew” Christians addressed in the letter.
4. The writer then greets the leaders and the people and sends greetings from Italy. This suggests either that the writer is writing from Italy or that there were many believers from Italy at the place the writer is penning the letter.
5. In the final farewell he wishes the people God’s grace. What more can one wish anybody, than the grace of God?

## Summary

One cannot help but feel that the writer of Hebrews ends his epistle with a list of key Christian practices that he does not have time nor space to explain further, and yet feels the readers need to be reminded of them. This last lesson is somewhat of a smorgasbord of issues, all important and all relevant, but only mentioned briefly.

# Your Feedback

We would appreciate your comments that would help us improve the study guides for future publication. We plan to prepare one guide each year. Continue on back if needed.

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