

HEBREWS

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HEBREWS

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All lessons are written by SBC students unless noted otherwise

1

LESSON

Did You Hear God's Voice?

BY MENNO KROEKER

Hebrews 1:1-14

Key Verse: "The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven".

Hebrews 1:3

Bible Truth

In Jesus, God has spoken a message far beyond what prophets and angels envisioned.

Life Response

The aim of this lesson is to guide the student into an awe-inspiring exposure to the glory and majesty of Jesus, the Son of God.

James I of Scotland often traveled about his kingdom in disguise in order to acquaint himself with the real needs of his people. He disguised himself as a farmer and went under the name of "The Good Man of Ballengiech." Over the years he developed close friendships with humble people who never dreamed that he was the king. During one of his disguised travels, the king was befriended by a poor countryman who risked his own life to do so. Later the same countryman was summoned to Stirling Castle where the king kept mid-winter court. Naturally the poor fellow was horrified, because in those days to be summoned to the king's court usually meant one would be condemned for some crime. Little did the poor fellow know that the king before whom

he was to appear was one and the same with “The Good Man of Ballengiech.” Imagine the surprise on the face of the poor countryman when he looked up into the eyes of the one sitting on the throne, fearing that he would hear a condemnation of death and seeing instead that the king was an old friend. The summons to the king’s court was not for condemnation but for reward.

(James Hastings.ed., “The Epistle to the Hebrews,” in The Speaker’s Bible. Grand Rapids: Baker,1961, p.13)

1. In what ways has Jesus come to us much like James I came to his people?
2. As a Christian can you identify with the countryman in our story? In your fellowship with Jesus have you experienced Him as a close friend? Have you ever feared Him for His word of condemnation?

Read Hebrews 1:1-3

God Speaks

The Book of Hebrews begins quite differently from other New Testament epistles. Notice that there is no designated audience to whom he is addressing the letter. Neither is there any salutation or stated purpose for the letter. For this reason it has been debated if the Epistle to the Hebrews is, in fact, a letter or rather a statement of Christian doctrine for a wide Christian audience.

The letter begins with an emphatic statement of fact about God — He has spoken. He has spoken to His people in times past and He continues to speak. This abrupt beginning reminds readers that they have a long history as subjects of God’s speech. It was, of course, assumed by the Jews that God had spoken to them in the past but whether God was still speaking to them in the way that the writer is proposing was disputed.

3. How had God spoken to the fathers in the past?

4. How does God speak to you today?

These opening three verses lay the groundwork for all that follows in the book. These verses also supply the basis for what is known as the “progressive revelation” of God in the Scriptures. This means that God reveals Himself to His people one step at a time at a rate where they would be able to understand the message. Obviously sin had affected the minds of men to the extent that they were very slow in understanding God’s truth. This is seen especially in the unfolding of the salvation story throughout the Bible. God also uses means other than verbal communication to teach people that they need to deal seriously with their sin. The Old Testament sacrifices, even the journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, were a part of that learning process.

Very significant, as well, were the prophets who spoke God’s message to His people. Verses 1 and 2 take us in one great leap from “long ago” to “these last days”. Note that “long ago” there were prophets who spoke the message in many different ways. In contrast in these “last days” there is only one Son through whom God is speaking. This introductory note at the beginning of the book sets the tone for what follows in the succeeding chapters. All that the many different prophets sought to convey as God’s spokespersons “long ago” has now been consummated in what God has spoken through one Son. This Son will be portrayed again and again as “better” than what preceded Him.

After introducing the Son as the One through whom God has spoken “in these last days” the writer goes on to describe His office and exalt His grandeur.

First of all, God has appointed Him as “heir of all things.” Because God has only one Son there can only be one heir. It is true that Christians are also called ‘sons’ but they are that solely by virtue of their connection with the only Son. It is in His redemptive role as Saviour that Christ is said to be the

exclusive heir. He is the One who inherits the innumerable company of those who have been reconciled to God through the mission of the Son.

Secondly, the Son is described as the One through whom God made the world. This establishes the truth that the Son has been from the beginning and that from 'everlasting to everlasting' He too is God. His role is not confined to that of redemption alone; He was present as well at the dawn of creation.

Thirdly, the Son also reflects the glory of God. It is this part that appears to elicit the writer's sense of awe and leads him to portray the majesty of the Son in the most highly exalted terms. This majestic description puts the Son high above all the prophets who preceded Him. It also establishes emphatically that the Son's role is better than that of the prophets - a theme which is confirmed repeatedly in the Book of Hebrews. The Son is portrayed as reflecting God and being an exact representation of God's nature and very much a participant in God's power. This description is then brought to a high point as well as to a point of finality by referring to the Son as the One who purifies from sin. It was only when this part of His mission was completed that He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on High. This exaltation emphasizes that the Son's mission has come to a point of completion. He has finished what the Father sent Him to do in the world and has now taken His rightful place as the Son of the Most High.

5. Does "in these last days" include the whole time period starting with Christ's first coming and ending when Christ returns? In the interim, is there any room left for "others", that is, authoritative spokesman for God, i.e. someone like Joseph Smith?

6. Many of the Old Testament stories might well give us the impression that people in that era had a closer relationship with God than we enjoy in the Christian era. How does your own personal experience indicate that Christ is indeed superior to the prophets?

Read Hebrews 1:4-14

The Son is Superior to Angels.

The rest of this first chapter of Hebrews is taken up with the topic of angels. We note in verse 4 that this theme is introduced with the assertion that the Son is much better than angels and has inherited a more excellent name than any of them. We might well ask why so much emphasis is placed on the idea that Christ is better than or superior to angels? Was there a danger that some of the readers would elevate angels to the level of Christ? There are some words of warning in the New Testament about followers of Christ worshipping angels. In Colossians 2, Paul emphasizes the superiority of Christ when he says, "For in Him all the fullness of Deity dwells in bodily form." He then includes the word of warning in verse 18, "Let no one keep defrauding you of your prize by delighting in self-abasement and the worship of angels." It is likely that Christ's humanity led some to believe that the angels, who were heavenly beings, were in some way superior because they were not subject to any human imperfection.

The writer reinforces the superiority of Christ over angels by raising the rhetorical question whether any of the exalted references to the Son in the Old Testament scriptures can apply to angels. Each of the questions cited in verses 5-13 emphasize the sovereign and exalted role of Christ as the Son of God and therefore pose a string of emphatic answers to the rhetorical question, in the negative. The Son alone stands above the world as its creator and protector.

7. In what specific ways is the Son of God presented as superior to the angels in the O.T. quotations cited?
8. From our present day perspective do we give too little or too much recognition to angels?
9. Why might angels be more inviting beings to worship than Christ Jesus?



Read Hebrews 1:14

Angels are Ministering Spirits

This last verse of the first chapter indicates that there is a marked contrast between the angels whose role is to serve and the Son whose role is to reign. Of course, the Son also came to serve. But once His mission was completed He took His place of former glory at the right hand of the Majesty on High. This thought, emphasized in verse 3, is again alluded to in verse 13 and serves to remind the readers that the Son's servant role has given way to the role of a reigning King.

Angels, on the other hand, are committed to the servant role and will never take the position of kingship. Far from diminishing the servant role though, the writer brings it right back to the readers when he says that they serve "for the sake of those who will inherit salvation." The reference to inheriting salvation may be put that way for the benefit of the Hebrew readers who were familiar with the covenant route of passing on the faith to the next generation.

By portraying Christ in this first chapter as the exalted and majestic Son of God and going to great lengths to describe Him as superior to the prophets as well as to angels, the writer has laid the groundwork for the main themes that will be pursued in the rest of the Book of Hebrews.

10. According to the Gospel record, what service did angels render in the salvation story? See Matt. 1:2; Lk. 1:2; Matt. 4:11; 28:1ff, 13:36-43; 2 Thess. 1:5-10.
11. What ministry do angels have in the present-day church of Christ?

Through this week...

Think about the Christ to whom you owe your salvation as now sitting at the right hand of God. What implications does this have for you personally as you seek to walk in His ways and to serve under His lordship?

Take some time to think about the ministry of angels. Has an angel ministered to you recently?

2

LESSON

Pay Attention

BY HENRY DUECK

Hebrews 2:1-18

Key Verse: "We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away".

Hebrews 2:1

Bible Truth

Jesus, who is superior to angels, men, and all things, has come to bring salvation, how can we neglect that salvation?

Life Response

The aim of this lesson is to understand and respond to the great salvation Jesus has provided.

I believe we all remember our parents saying to us, "Now would you listen please!" If you are a parent you may have said it yourself to your children. What is really intended with that statement is, "Son/daughter, will you do what I've asked you to do?" The child has heard but not obeyed. That is the tone of today's lesson.

In March 1998, boxing champion George Chuvalo stopped in Winnipeg on a cross country tour fighting a war against drugs. Why? Drugs took three sons and his wife from Chuvalo. The three sons were heroin addicts. Two died of heroin overdoses and one committed suicide. His wife also committed suicide because of the toll drugs had taken on their family. Chuvalo ended his presentations to young people with these words, "If you're ever tempted to do drugs I hope you think of me, George Chuvalo, and what drugs did to my family".

Will young people listen? One of the sponsors of this tour said that if only one young person is saved from a life of drugs their investment was worthwhile.

1. Why did young people listen to George Chuvalo's story?
2. Why do young people still do drugs?

Today's lesson also has a warning. It tells the story of someone "who had been there," Jesus the Son of God.

In lesson one we took note of the way the writer opens this book: in the past God spoke in different ways through the prophets, now he has spoken through his Son. What has the Son done? The Son came to live among us. He became one of us. He had a message for us. Have the people listened? Let's find out.

Read Hebrews 2:1-4

Warning to Pay Attention

This paragraph begins with a "therefore" which means that something very important has been said, and something very important is about to follow. The readers are warned in v.1, "do not drift away," and the next warning in v.3 is in the form of a question, "How shall we escape if we ignore such great salvation?" What's the story? (How has this come about?)

The salvation which the writer is talking about (vs.3-4) was: 1) announced by the Lord (Jesus), 2) confirmed by witnesses (disciples), 3) attested to by God with signs, wonders, and various miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit.

1) The announcement the writer is talking about is the coming of Jesus. In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus is identified as, "Immanuel, God with us" (Matt. 1:23). In his ministry, Jesus clearly identified himself and his ministry, "I am the way, the truth and the life, no one comes to the Father but by me" (John 14:6). To Zacchaeus Jesus said, "For the Son of man came to seek and to save what was lost" (Luke 19:10).

2) Confirmed by witnesses. It is obvious that the writer to the Hebrews had not personally heard Jesus. Someone had been faithful and shared the story of Jesus with him. He heard the testimony from witnesses. He was possibly a second generation believer who had experienced the transforming power of the gospel by hearing it from someone who had heard Jesus. John, the disciple whom Jesus loved, puts it this way "The life appeared; we have seen it and testify to it, and we proclaim to you the eternal life which was with the Father and has appeared to us" (1 John 1:2). Jesus was faithful in revealing God the father. The disciples were faithful in passing on what they had seen and heard. Being a faithful witness is important for those who hear the testimony.

3) God confirmed the testimony of his great salvation with signs, wonders, and miracles, and the gifts of the Holy Spirit (v.4). That has happened throughout the history of the church. It is happening today. God is always at work in the world and in the lives of people. God is at work in our experience. Active encounter with God never becomes old, it always remains new. Hence the need to continue to witness remains.

The message always needs to be translated into the culture in which it is shared. As people hear and respond to the message they too become part of the "cloud of witnesses." What remains constant is that Jesus came once and for all. That is what the writer of Hebrews repeats again and again. That is the great message he does not want his readers to miss.

The writer is obviously disappointed with the lack of response and the spiritual immaturity in his readers. The tone he sets here is stated more explicitly later in the book. In 5:12 he writes, "...you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!"

Was the writer's disappointment warranted? The Jewish Christians to whom he was writing were very familiar with the salvation concept. The stories they had been told as children were filled with events where God had saved, the most notable being the deliverance from Egypt. The exploits of David, the man after God's own heart, and wise Solomon were well known stories. Their hope was in a much larger deliverance with the coming of Messiah. Now that Messiah had come, many Jews didn't recognize him, and those who did didn't

pay attention to the message. How could they neglect such great salvation?

3. If we know the truth, if we have heard the question, if we have heard the command, why is it so difficult to obey?
4. Verse 3b & 4 is a little lesson in apologetics. Has the salvation message been duly attested? What else are people waiting for?
5. Have you been in a situation where you have been warned but failed to listen/obey/respond? What were the consequences?

Read Hebrews 2:5-18

Jesus Made Like His Brothers

God/Jesus, angels, man. Who is superior? Obviously the writer's mind is made up. God is first, angels next, but men and women have been made stewards of the created world. What is most significant is that we see Jesus. Eugene Peterson translates v.9 this way: "What we do see is Jesus, made 'not quite as high as angels,' and then, through the experience of death, crowned so much higher than any angel, with a glory 'bright with Eden's dawn light.' In that death, by God's grace, he fully experienced death in every person's place" (The Message). Jesus tasted death for everyone. Having made that statement the writer finds it necessary to show that Jesus' "bringing many sons to glory" could be effective only because he had been on their level.

Identification now becomes an important principle. Jesus, who came to save us, has suffered like we have. The writer says that God made "the author of their salvation perfect through suffering" (v.10). That does not mean that Jesus was imperfect. His incarnation was completed (perfected) when he experienced suffering. "Both the one who makes men holy, and those who have been made holy, are of the same

family. So Jesus is not afraid to call them brothers” (v.11). Jesus had become part of our family. He quotes the Old Testament here, both with family references, Ps. 22, and Is. 8. “I will declare your name to my brothers”, and “Here am I and the children God has given me”.

Two sets of teaching emerge in verses 14-18 to enlarge what the writer has just introduced. One is the focus on Christ’s humanity. We read phrases like:

- ◆ “Jesus is not afraid to call them brothers” (v.11)
- ◆ “he too shared in their humanity” (v.14)
- ◆ “For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way,” (v.17)
- ◆ “he himself suffered when he was tempted,” (v.18)

On the other hand, because Jesus as the Son of God, higher than angels and higher than men, his death became the once for all sacrifice for sin. His sacrificial death was effective because Jesus was both God and man. Take note of the following phrases:

- ◆ “that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death—that is, the devil” (v.14)
“free all those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death” (v.15)
- ◆ “that he might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in service to God” (v.17)
- ◆ “that he might make atonement for the sins of the people” (v.17)
- ◆ “he is able to help those who are being tempted” (v.18)

The following action words describe God’s activity: destroy, free, become merciful and faithful, make atonement, help. Jesus as the Son of God had a very specific task that He came to do.

The humanity and the divinity of Jesus has made Jesus the effective salvation for the sins of the world. “Because he himself suffered when he was tempted, he is able to help

those who are being tempted". Jesus was there, he felt the full impact of being human. He suffered, he was tempted, he died. His ministry was and is effective because he suffered as a man. There is a saying in Africa which says "the Bible is true because it is written by humans." As our great High Priest, Jesus is effective because he has identified with us, he was one of us. He suffered. He died. But God destroyed the power of the devil by raising Jesus from the dead. That was God's victory over the power of the evil one.

So the book of Hebrews champions Jesus. "But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might suffer death for everyone"(v.9). The Apostle Paul puts it this way, "Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him a name that is above every other name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"(Phil. 2:9-11).

6. Could God have secured salvation for us without the incarnation? In what ways has the writer to the Hebrews made that point clear?

7. Much of today's Christian ministry is done from a position of privilege, e.g. education, and power, e.g. finances. What implications does Jesus' becoming man have for Christian ministry?

8. The Christian church has grown rapidly in places like China, Russia, and Ethiopia, after Christian missionaries were removed from the scene. The Lord empowered local Christians to spread the witness without assistance from "outsiders." What implications does that have for our "philosophy of ministry?"

9. Our key verse cautions against “drifting away” as a result of not hearing. In the Christian church today, what signs of drifting away do we observe?

Through this week...

This brings us back to the title of this lesson—Pay Attention, for “how shall we escape if we ignore such great salvation?”

Today this message is for us. We have almost 2000 years of historical lessons to look back on. Have we paid attention? How can we pay attention during the coming week?

3 LESSON

Turning a Profit

BY MARVIN THIESSEN

Hebrews 3:1-4:13

Key Verse: "For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard." Hebrews 4:2

Bible Truth

To make the life in God worthwhile one must follow Him in daily life.

Life Response

To make sure that we profit from our investment of believing the gospel and enter God's rest.

Mac was a Texas oilman who knew what it took to turn a profit. His sprawling ranch and million dollar home along with the new four-wheel drive vehicles and the Ferrari kept for the occasional joyride gave proof to his successful ventures in the oil industry over the previous decade. Many times he had purchased a piece of land and drilled test wells. Frequently the test wells had been dry, but when they appeared promising, Mac worked hard to ensure the profitability of his ventures.

He wasted no time in making sure that all legal matters regarding the purchase of the land were settled. He made contributions to his local senator's political campaigns and paid several political lobbyists well to ensure that his ventures would meet with little resistance.

Several times, environmental groups had attempted to block one of his drilling operations, but his political contributions had served him well as governmental agencies rapidly cleared the way for his operations to continue. He was also a decisive man, moving quickly when he believed he had a promising site. Drilling equipment and crews setting up the required pumps and pipelines would typically be in place the day after oil had been found. Mac believed in working hard to ensure profits once he had made an investment.

1. When we think about investments in life, we can go beyond the world of business. What are different life investments we make?

2. How would you say you attempt to ensure the profitability of your life investments?

As the New American Standard Bible's translation of Hebrews 4:2 implies, those who have had the good news of Jesus Christ preached to them have the responsibility to make sure that they profit from hearing it. Several concepts in the larger passage shed light on that charge. One is the idea that if the Israelites were expected to be faithful with Moses as their leader, current believers are expected to have even greater faithfulness since Jesus Christ is their leader. Another is the reminder that the Israelites of long ago were careless and did not profit when they had the opportunity to turn a big profit. Believers today have even more reason to ensure the profitability of their faith investments than had the Israelites. The third concept is that the reward for making sure of our investment is great. Entering God's rest is a very significant reward for the believers who guard their investment carefully.

Read Hebrews 3:1-6

Christ, the Greater Faithful One

The author of Hebrews argues that Jesus is greater than Moses as a leader of a people. He looks at the Israelite failure to believe in God and follow His direction and declares that the Israelites should have done better. If his readers have a greater leader than the Israelites, then the expectation that they will be faithful is even greater.

Essentially Jesus is greater than Moses because, as God, He is the maker of His people. The people of God are compared to a house and Moses, as a servant, was faithful in leading the household of God. Jesus Christ, though, is the builder of that house. In comparison to the servant Moses, Jesus is the Son who owns the house and is faithful to that house, which is God's people. The author further states that believers can only be fully recognized as God's people, God's house, if they persist in their faith.

3. In what ways was Moses faithful as a leader of the Israelite people? How was Jesus Christ faithful to the people of God? In what ways can it be said that Jesus is superior to Moses as a faithful leader? Why should the faithfulness of Jesus to the people of God inspire us to be faithful?

4. In some faith traditions, believers live unsure of their salvation. They live, hoping that they will do well enough to achieve eternal life. Most Christians, however, would say that they can be sure of their eternal destination. How does verse six square with that belief? Does it suggest that we cannot be entirely sure of our destination?

Read Hebrews 3:7-19

A Warning from the Israelite Experience

The “therefore” at the beginning of verse 7 connects the following section with the previous verses. The following verses stand as a warning to the Hebrew readers that they are in danger of falling short of entering God’s rest just as the Israelites fell short of entering the promised land. The connection between the two sections indicates that the earlier verses were also a warning to the Hebrew Christians.

The author looks back on the Israelite experience and recalls the Israelites poised on the verge of entering Canaan, God’s promised land, in Numbers 14. Upon hearing a pessimistic evaluation on the likelihood of success in capturing the land, the Israelites decided not to attempt an invasion of Canaan. God was angry with the Israelites for not following His directions and for not trusting Him and declared that the adults who disobeyed Him would never enter Canaan. They were sentenced to wandering in the desert until their generation died off and their children would have the opportunity to enter the land.

That example is applied to the Hebrew Christians. Just as the Israelites were expected to exercise faith and obedience to God, the Hebrew Christians are expected to maintain faithfulness in obedience to God. Verses 12 and 13 form the practical application. The believers are enjoined to watch carefully that they don’t develop an unbelieving heart. Every believer is responsible for his own heart’s direction and is accountable for his own pursuit of the living God. But other believers also have some responsibility. Verse 13 calls us to encourage one another regularly so that we don’t wander into sin. Christians need to be alert to each others’ propensities to sin and help each other remain faithful.

5. What stood in the way of a faithful and obedient response by the Israelite people? What kinds of things keep us from following through on our life investments?

6. What kinds of steps can we take to ensure that our hearts remain in tune with God and to keep from falling away from God?

7. To what extent are we responsible to watch out for other Christians who might be careless about sin? How do we decide when the time is right to approach such people and how do we go about giving encouragement and/or warning?

Read Hebrews 4:1-13

Entering the Rest

As the Israelites had the promise of entering God's rest in the land of Canaan, so the promise for the Hebrew believers is that God has a rest for them to enter if they remain faithful. What was the rest that the author referred to? Throughout the passage our lesson covers, rest for believers is compared to the Israelites entering Canaan. Translated into the lives of believers many centuries later, that comparison suggests an entering of God's greatest riches. Entering heaven after a life of work on earth compares well with entering Canaan and appears to be what God's rest is for believers.

But verse three indicates that those who believe already enter that rest. That makes it sound like the rest is present. Verses four through ten speak of the rest for believers as being a Sabbath rest, comparable to God resting from the work of creation. Commentators suggest that this Sabbath rest is a peace and security that the believer has in God. The cares of life can be entrusted to God. The surety of salvation can be left in God's hands because He has the power to keep us.

How should we understand this rest? Likely, the author has a combination of these two ideas in mind here. New Testament authors often refer to our experiencing the benefits of heaven while still on earth, at least partially. We already experience the goodness of the kingdom of God, but wait for the full experience of that goodness in our final heavenly home. With that in mind, the author of Hebrews seems to

urge his readers to hold on to their faith to make sure of their heavenly home. At the same time, he would understand that they could live with an incomplete experience of that rest already in the present. As believers persist in obedience to God, they already partially know that rest.

The author concludes with what appears to be a final word of warning in verses twelve and thirteen. Verse eleven calls again for believers to take care so that they will enter God's rest. He reminds them in verses twelve and thirteen that they can't fool God. His word cuts right through pretense and show and reveals the state of the heart. Because God knows the human heart, Christians are reminded to be careful with their lives to ensure their rest—the profit on their investment.

8. Think about the implications of the concept of Sabbath rest. How does God's resting from His creative work relate to our lives? What kind of rest is it that God is holding out to us? If we understand that rest as somehow already present and available for us, how would you describe the state of rest for yourself here and now?

9. Verse 11 enjoins us to make every effort to enter that rest. What are the things we need to do to make sure we enter the rest?

10. Can we view verses 12 and 13 as a positive thing rather than a fear-inducing thing? Explain how God's perfect perception of our hearts and motives can help us as we work at entering God's rest. How can we understand that in a positive way?

11. Verses 11-13 are a candid warning to Christians. Frequently we respond negatively when others warn us about our choices. How can we develop a more positive response to others' warnings? What can we do to make our hearts receptive to God's warnings about our life choices?

12. We have talked about ensuring the profitability of our life investments. Reconsider that theme and discuss what our most important life investments are and what we can do to ensure their profitability. Think about your answer to the second question. Are you doing enough to ensure the profitability of your investments or do you need to commit to working harder by doing some of the things you have just considered here?

Through this week. . .

Remember your investment daily.

Remind yourself that you can't just sit and wait for it to grow. You need to make conscious choices each day to ensure the profitability.

Ask yourself what those choices will be today.

4 LESSON

Bold Approach

BY HARVEY PLETT

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Key Verse: "Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."
Hebrews 4:16

Bible Truth

We can boldly approach the throne of grace because Jesus, our high priest tempted in all points like we yet without sin, understands and listens to us.

Life Response

Learn to approach God without fear yet in humble faith and submission so that we may receive help in time of need.

A young American man was studying in France. At the same time he pastored a small group of Protestant Christians. Once a week he would walk to a neighbouring village for an instruction class. The priest from that village did the same except in another village. The preacher and priest passed each other as they traveled to their respective destinations. They stopped to visit every once in a while. Eventually they met regularly. In their conversation they talked about their respective faiths, how they were similar and how they were different. One day the priest asked, "Why do you not pray to the saints?"

The Protestant preacher asked, "Why should we?" The priest then explained how one might get to have an interview with the president of the French Republic. To do this one would go to one of the ministers or cabinet members who might be

able to get the interview with the president. Similarly he said, one needed to pray to the saints in order for God to hear one's prayers.

The Protestant preacher responded, "Sir, suppose I am the son of the president and live with him in the presidential palace. I eat breakfast with him, kiss him good-bye when he goes to his office. However if I want to see him I have to go to one of the ministers who in turn will ask someone close to my father and make an appointment for me to see my father."

The priest was surprised and realized that made no sense. The Protestant minister added, "I am a child of God, heir of God and joint-heir with Christ. Through the death of the Saviour I have become a son with immediate access to my heavenly Father. Therefore when I pray I go directly to my heavenly Father as any son does to his earthly father. I have no need for any intermediaries when I want to talk to God."

1. How is access to our heavenly Father similar to our approach to our earthly father?
2. Why do we not fear to approach our earthly father for whatever we need?

Read Hebrews 4:14-16

Jesus Was Tempted in All Points Like We

The "Therefore" in verse 14 indicates that what is about to be said is related to the preceding passage. In the previous verses the writer has encouraged the readers to be faithful. They are reminded of the dangers of falling away as well as the consequences of not responding to the Gospel. Therefore they are now called to obedience (4:11).

That exhortation to faithfulness is based on the fact that Jesus "has gone through the heavens." Being faithful is pos-

sible because there is help available in Jesus who is willing to give what we need if we come to Him, (v. 16).

Jesus is able to help us because He is our high priest. The high priest was the one who sprinkled the blood on the altar on the Day of Atonement. This sprinkling of the blood brought forgiveness to the people. Jesus has sacrificed Himself and that makes it possible for Him to help us.

Jesus is also able to help us because He has gone through the same temptations and trials that we do, without yielding to them. Jesus demonstrates that it is possible to be tempted without yielding to sin. He also sympathizes with us, knows how we feel, because He has faced the same issues that you and I face.

Therefore we do not need to be afraid to approach God. He is not an angry judge waiting to pounce on us. Much more He is a God who is anxious to help us in our time of need if we will but come. And so the writer invites Christians "to come boldly" to God for whatever help they need because Jesus is our high priest.

3. What does the writer mean when he says (v. 14) "hold firmly to the faith we profess?"
4. How does the idea that Jesus was tempted yet remained without sin encourage us in approaching the throne of grace?

Read Hebrews 5:1-3

The Earthly High Priest

In these verses we have the high priest chosen from among men compared and contrasted to Jesus as high priest. The high priestly functions are the same. They are to offer sacrifices and offerings for sins. Like Jesus the Levitical high priest dealt gently with those who were going astray because he understood what they were going through for he was subject to the same weaknesses as they and at times yielded to temptation. Jesus however was subject to the same weak-

nesses, yet he did not submit to them.

Since the earthly high priest gave in to temptation he had to offer sacrifices not only for the sins of the people but also for his own. In this matter Jesus is totally different. Jesus was a high priest who remained without sin and therefore needed no offering for any sins of His own.

5. In v. 2 the writer refers to those who are "ignorant and go astray." By saying "go astray" it is implied that he is talking of Christians who are leaving their faith. Is this correct? If it is, does this suggest that chapters 4 and 5 are written to back-sliding Christians? How does this make a difference in how we understand and apply these chapters?

Read Hebrews 5:4-6

Appointing the High Priest

Because of the significance and importance of the role of a high priest, no one could take this honour on himself. God chose him. God chose Aaron to be the first high priest in Israel and then gave directions on how succeeding high priests were to be selected. Thus the Levitical or Aaronic high priest was appointed by God.

The writer argues that in the same way Jesus was appointed by God to be high priest. Two Old Testament references are cited as evidence that God had appointed Jesus. The first one recounts words from Ps. 2:7. In part, the verse reads, "You are my son..." One way to interpret this phrase is that God became the father through the miraculous conception of Jesus.

The second citation comes from Gen. 14:18. Not only is God the father of Jesus but Jesus, on the authority of God, is a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek. (More about Melchizedek when we study chapter seven.)

Thus Jesus was chosen high priest by God just as Aaron had been, only more so.

6. Why does the writer make so much about the choosing of a high priest, especially in connection with Jesus?

Read Hebrews 5:7-10

High Priest and Source of Salvation

The writer continues the theme of Jesus as high priest by referring to Christ's earthly life and death. He notes that Jesus prayed in great agony to be saved from death and God heard Him. The answer was that Jesus would be the sacrifice as well as the high priest. Christ learned obedience through His suffering. Once He had been perfected - crucified, buried, raised, and ascended, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him.

The writer concludes this section with the further note that God had designated Jesus as high priest after the order of Melchizedek. The text suggests that the appointment to the order of Melchizedek was possibly done after Christ had been made "perfect." v. 10.

7. Verse 9 says that Jesus is the source of salvation to those who "obey" Him. How do you harmonize this with the truth of salvation by faith?
8. How do you respond to the idea of Jesus as high priest? Is it relevant and meaningful or do you feel indifferent about it? Discuss reasons for your sentiments.

This lesson teaches us that Jesus is our high priest. He qualified as high priest because He was appointed by God, identified with mankind and was sensitive to human need. He was victorious over sin, obedient to the divine purpose, and willing to die to effect salvation for mankind. Finally, He was glorified when He was exalted.

His designation as high priest by God means He is completely qualified to mediate our eternal salvation.

The writer has been concerned to show that Jesus is our true high priest and that we are invited to come to Him for grace in time of need. He is encouraging those who are drifting from Christ to review who this Jesus is and not to harden their hearts against the Lord but rather respond.

Jesus saves all who respond to Him but they must respond.
Jesus helps all struggling believers who respond to Him but they must respond.

Where are you in your response to the One who is high priest forever, and that, after the order of Melchizedek?

Through this week...

How do I come to the throne of grace?

What is meant by “come boldly”?

Come boldly to the throne of grace today and through the week to receive grace and power for your needs.

5 LESSON

A Call to Spiritual Growth

BY JASON FRIESEN

Hebrews 5:11-6:20

Key Verse: "But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish from good and evil." Hebrews 5:14

Bible Truth

In order to grow in Christ we must learn discernment.

Life Response

Learn what it means to be a mature Christian.

When I was youth pastoring in a small country church, one of my youth leaders, who was excellent with the kids, came up to me and explained his frustrations. He said that one of the youth had mentioned that, "You're so cool, you're just like the rest of us."

At first he took this comment as a compliment, but he stopped to think that maybe he was in fact trying too hard to be like the kids—immature. That interfered with being the type of leader that could teach and encourage the youth to be more mature in Christ.

1. Was the youth leader accurate in his analysis of his situation?
2. What would you suggest to the youth leader in order to overcome the problem?

Read Hebrews 5:11-14

Failing to Grow

According to these verses the recipients of the letter faced the problem of immaturity. Most of them should have been teaching about Christ, but instead, they didn't even apply the basics of Christianity to their own lives. For some reason they were afraid to move beyond the elementary doctrines.

Just like the youth leader, in order to grow spiritually, we must learn discernment. We must train ourselves to tell the difference between good and evil and then decide to do this right.

3. What problem(s) is addressed in this section of Scripture?
4. How do Christians grow according to this passage?
5. Share with the class how you have grown by making decisions about right and wrong.

Read Hebrews 6:1-3

Elementary Teachings

There are of course some elementary teachings that are a must for all Christians. The writer encourages his readers to go beyond the foundational doctrines. He suggests that by continuing to focus on elementary doctrines they are continually laying the foundation again and as a result continue to be immature.

What are those elementary doctrines? The writer mentions the following: 1) Repentance from dead works. That is repenting again and again in order to save oneself. 2) "Faith in God." This is the other side of repentance. There is no value in saying, "turn to God in faith" again and again once you have done it. 3) "Instruction in baptism." It is not clear what

is meant but possibly the writer refers to clarifying the difference between Christian baptism and Jewish ceremonial washings, as well as clarifying how John the Baptist's baptism related to Christian baptism, and how different Spirit baptism was. 3) "Laying on of hands." Again the meaning is uncertain. Laying on of hands occurred at ordination, healing services, and other ritual times. We are not sure what is intended. 4) "Resurrection of the dead." This is the hope of the Christian and part of the Gospel. 5) "Eternal judgment." This refers to the foundational truth that we will have to be judged. However, it seems likely that resurrection and judgment speak of heaven and hell. If that is the case then we have in 4) and 5) a reference to the two eternal destinies of mankind.

These are the elementary doctrines on which the readers had been focusing. Obviously they are foundational and are necessary to begin salvation, but being a Christian is more than just being saved. It is also a life lived for God. The recipients of the letter had failed to do this. They are encouraged to live for God.

6. Why do you think the author emphasizes this particular topic?
7. What are two reasons why Christians need to move beyond elementary teachings?

Read Hebrews 6:4-12

Turning Away

In the church I was involved with I saw some youth who turned their face from God, youth who decided that either they didn't need God or they were perfectly comfortable where they were—lukewarm. Working with such people can be frustrating. But it's not a new problem. This paragraph addresses that problem. However, it is difficult to interpret.

The writer says it is impossible for a person who has...
...been enlightened,

...tasted the heavenly gift,

...shared in the Holy Spirit,

...tasted the goodness of the word of God, and

...(tasted) the powers of the coming age,

to be renewed or brought back to repentance if they fall away.

This is because...

...they are crucifying the Son of God again, and

...they are subjecting Christ to public disgrace.

The following points should be noted:

a) The person described is a Christian.

b) The person described can apostasize or fall from the faith. Thus a Christian can be saved and then leave the faith and be lost again.

c) The writer says such cannot be renewed because of what they do to Christ.

This is a serious warning about leaving the faith. This is not back-sliding, like Peter denying Jesus. It is forsaking the faith, apostasy. It is like Judas Iscariot rejecting Christ at the Last Supper and then betraying Him. A backslider confesses his/her sin and finds her/his way back into full fellowship. Apostates leave the faith—reject it. This text seems to say it is impossible for an apostate to come.

We need to note, however, that the Bible also speaks of the return of those who have rejected their faith. For example, in James 5:19-20, we are told that if a person who wandered from the truth is brought back he/she is a sinner saved from death.

One possible way of looking at the passage is to note that “crucifying” and “subjecting to open shame” are present tense participles, which indicate continuing actions. This suggests that apostasy is a continual crucifying of Jesus. But once they return to the truth they stop treating Jesus in this way. Another suggestion is that apostasy describes a person who persists in rejecting Christ and dies in that state. Such a

person has sinned away his day of grace.

Note that:

- a) to forsake the faith once it has been embraced is very serious and to return to the faith becomes difficult.
- b) the difference between backsliding and apostasy is important. Both are sin but one has more serious consequences.
- c) Since we cannot look into the heart of the individual we need to offer grace and forgiveness in Christ to whomever we meet.

The writer illustrates with a lesson from farming. Land may be productive or unproductive. In the end the one will be blessed and the other will be destroyed. Believers therefore ought to remain faithful. Apostasy is dangerous.

8. Is the distinction between backsliding and rejecting the faith a valid distinction?

9. How should we respond to a former Christian?

Read Hebrews 6:9-13

Words of Encouragement

The writer is aware that he has given his readers some difficult material. But his intention is to encourage faithfulness.

He does this by...

- a) Telling his readers that he does not believe that they have committed apostasy (vs. 9).
- b) Commending the readers for the love and help they have given to those in need.
- c) Reminding them that God will not forget their faithfulness.

Then he gives them words of encouragement:

- a) Continue in this faithfulness to the end, until you die,

and in this way make your hope, going to heaven, sure.

- b) Don't be lazy but imitate those who have been faithful to the end and have inherited the promise of eternal life.
10. Do the words of encouragement of Heb.6:9-12 help us to understand verses 4-6?
11. What does the writer mean when he calls the readers "lazy?"
12. Are we "lazy" in the sense that the writer uses the word? If we are, what is the remedy?

Read Hebrews 6:13-20

A Sure Hope

After encouraging believers not to be lazy but to go on to maturity he concludes by reminding them of God's faithfulness. What God promises He does.

To confirm the utter trustworthiness of God he further points out that God did two things to demonstrate His faithfulness. First, He delivered on Abraham's promise. He promised that Abraham would have many descendants and he has. Second, God swore an oath by Himself, since there was no one greater by which He could swear, to do what He promised. An oath provides surety of what is being said or promised.

These two deeds make it impossible for God to lie. These two illustrate God's faithfulness. We can therefore accept the hope that God offers in Christ. Because the hope is sure it becomes the foundation on which we can build our Christian life.

The writer observes that accepting this hope is like the high priest entering the holy of holies. The believer's heart is the holy of holies and Christ enters it and cleanses us from all sin. For He is a priest forever after the order of Mechizedek.

13. Does the utter faithfulness of God encourage you to leave the elementary doctrines and go on to maturity? What are some things you can do that will help you?

Through this week...

This is a serious lesson. First it reprimands those who fail to grow in their spiritual life and then it warns against the danger of apostasy. But it also encourages the believer to walk confidently in hope, for the God he serves is faithful. To be a Christian is to follow the Lord in obedience.

Take stock of where you are in your spiritual walk.

Pay attention to the moral decisions you face and make them opportunities to grow spiritually.

Check out whether you are stuck at the elementary doctrine stage or whether you can include some “meat” in your spiritual diet.

Take a moment to reflect on God’s faithfulness to you.

Make a daily conscious decision to cling to God because He is concerned for you and is completely trustworthy.

LESSON 6

The Better Hope

BY TIM NEUFELD

Hebrews 7:1-18

Key Verse: "The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God." Hebrews 7:18-19

Bible Truth

Christ supersedes all the priesthoods that have passed before and he gives us the ultimate hope of drawing near to God.

Life Response

If Christ is truly the supreme and perfect High Priest we should respond with love, devotion, testimony, and service.

When I was in Africa, I took a picture of two young women, smiling and beautiful with flowers in their hair. They were pointed out to me because they were twins—the first twins ever permitted to grow up in that part of Africa. To many Africans, the idea of twins is horrifying. Even today in many African tribes, twins are killed at birth because they are thought to be a bad omen. But in this instance the gospel of Jesus Christ had come to the tribe some thirty years earlier. Shortly after the parents were saved, the Lord gave them these twin daughters. Their new found faith was strong enough to resist the public outcry against the children, and they were allowed to live. When they reached womanhood, they married two fine young men of the tribe, also Christians. The twins stood before me, living proof of the hope that is in Christ, and I rejoiced in this hope that so transforms individuals and even tribes and nations.

1. Why did the African tribes kill all sets of twins immediately after birth?
2. Why were the two girls allowed to live?
3. Have you ever faced a tough situation which you were able to get through because you had a better hope?

Read Hebrews 7:1-10

Melchizedek the Priest

In this first section of chapter 7, the greatness of Melchizedek is explained. He is a mysterious figure who just appears as Abraham returns from saving Lot and does not reappear until he is mentioned in the Psalms. The background of this chapter is Genesis 14:1ff where Abraham gathers a band to rescue Lot and others taken captive by the kings of the surrounding area. After Abraham returns from this battle, he has the historic meeting with Melchizedek. Scholars almost unanimously agree that the Salem referred to in this text is Jerusalem.

4. What is the meaning of the word patriarch? Why does Abraham pay Melchizedek a tithe of the spoils?
5. In what two ways does the author show that Melchizedek is superior to Abraham (vs 4,7)?

Read Hebrews 7:11-17

Jesus Compared to Melchizedek

The writer of Hebrews begins with a rhetorical question, "If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood, why was it necessary for Christ to come?" In this section the author shows the Levitical system could not provide the way of salvation; rather it pointed toward Christ as the better hope.

By pointing out all the similarities between Christ and Melchizedek, the author of Hebrews makes it clear that Christ, as a priest after the order of Melchizedek, is far superior to the Levitical priesthood. In order for the new covenant to be established, there must be a change in the priesthood, and in order for the new priesthood to be instituted, the law had to be changed. The argument that the law had to be changed indicates that the transition to the priesthood of Christ is a major one. In this section, the author argues that the Old Testament priesthood provided a faint glimmer of hope while Christ threw the door wide open as the perfect, permanent priest.

6. What are the main similarities between Christ and Melchizedek? See also vs 2-3.
7. Why/how is it significant that Christ came from the tribe of Judah rather than the tribe of Levi?
8. Why does the writer quote Psalm 110:4, "You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek." (Heb. 7:17)

Read Hebrews 7:18-28

Jesus the Perfect High Priest

This final section explains why Christ is the better hope. The author effectively contrasts the weaknesses of the O.T. law and the priests with the perfection and permanence of Christ. When God swears an oath He is letting His people know of the crucial and central importance of a particular promise within His purposes. Since Christ is absolutely permanent and eternal, His priestly ministry on our behalf is never ending and our salvation is absolute.

In the last verses, Christ's perfect character is stressed. It is not just because He lives forever but also that He is the sinless Christ that makes Him the better hope. Christ is also the better hope because He has accomplished our salvation once for all. The human priests had to sacrifice day after day, for themselves as well as the people, but Christ was the supreme sacrifice once for all. Verse 23 highlights Christ as the better hope by contrasting the mortality of the priests with Christ's permanent and eternal priesthood.

9. What are the main problems with the law?

10. What four reasons does the author give why Jesus is the better hope?

11. What is the difference between a human oath and a divine oath?

12. What are the key differences between the human priesthood and the priesthood of Christ as highlighted in this passage?

13. In what way is Christ different from sinners?

This chapter contains some of the most liberating insights in the Bible. Since Christ has fulfilled the Old Testament and brought in the new covenant, we have a better hope through which we can now draw near to God. Through Christ, we have been liberated to enjoy a fulfilled life in thankful service to God. We have a choice, we can choose to become excited with the writer of this passage and rejoice or we can take this incredible message of the better hope for granted, forget about it and just go on with our lives. Always remember, we have a better hope!

Through this week...

What does it mean to you to draw near to God?

How do you respond to this knowledge of the better hope?

Do you think that you respond with the same reaction to the news as the original readers? Why or why not?

What reasons does this chapter give you to feel secure with Christ? Consider all the words in this chapter that point to the eternal priesthood of Christ.

How can you live out the fact that you have the better hope of Christ in your heart? Think of some specific ways.

7

LESSON

The New Covenant

BY DALE DOERKSEN

Hebrews 8:1-13

Key Verse: "But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on a better promise." Hebrews 8:6

Bible Truth

That Christ is the minister of a better covenant.

Life Response

Gain a clearer understanding of Christ as our superior High Priest and learn to trust in his love and care.

Two different schools, facing the same problem, came up with clearly contrasting solutions. Both Bible colleges had a problem: a large segment of the student body would no longer adhere to school policy. Certainly, some of the rules were archaic and somewhat irrelevant, but now the entire student manual was being called into question. School #1 decided to get tough. They would enforce the rules as published and would serve notice to the students that disobedience would not be tolerated. If it meant losing one quarter of their student body, they would remain firm in their resolve.

School #2 decided on a different approach. They began by explaining why rules were needed, including Biblical guidelines for decency, morality, respect, etc. They invited student input as to a list of rules that would best accomplish those aims. The various committees put together a list very similar to the present one, with some minor, (though in the students'

eyes, significant) revisions. The result was a student body which believed in the rules and obeyed them not because of outside pressure, but because they wanted to. The rules were not just written on paper, but also on their hearts.

1. Which response do you believe would be most effective?
2. How do we get to the place where God's word is "written on our hearts" and we will want to obey, rather than feeling it is imposed upon us?

Read Hebrews 8:1-6

Jesus the Superior Priest

The writer of Hebrews continues the theme of revealing the superiority of Christ in relation to all that has come before. He now begins to show how this "greater" high priest is responsible for initiating a superior covenant. Covenant language is very important in Scripture, especially where the writer, as he does here, compares the old covenant established with Israel (the law) with the new covenant established in the blood of Christ.

Definition

Covenant – a solemn legal agreement between two parties in which each party agrees to fulfill certain obligations. It differs from a human contract in that it is never a negotiated settlement between equals. God initiates the covenant, lays down its terms, and gives the human party the opportunity to accept or reject it but never to amend it.

3. How does the writer show that the priesthood of Christ is superior to the old one? (vs. 1-6)
4. The earthly tabernacle is said to be a "copy and shadow" of what is in heaven.
 - a. What is the worth of a copy of a great work of art in comparison to the original?

- b. How clear and distinct is a shadow compared with the actual object casting the shadow?
 - c. How do these images help us understand the difference between the earthly and heavenly sanctuaries?
5. I've always been amazed at the detail God gave to Moses in designing the earthly tabernacle. Why he was so specific and intricate?
- a. How does understanding that our earthly tabernacle is a copy of a heavenly one help explain that detail?
 - b. What does this imply about the majesty of the heavenly tabernacle?

Read Hebrews 8:7-13

The Better Covenant

As a bridge to this second section of the chapter the writer states that the covenant of which Jesus is mediator is "founded on better promises". The essence of the covenant remains the same, "I will be their God and they will be my people". However, this new covenant is better in that it involves a level of relationship not experienced under the old covenant. The new covenant involves worshipping "in spirit and in truth" and is released from dependence on religious externals. God is more concerned about our heart attitude than simply about our actions.

- 7. How does the life and ministry of Jesus illustrate this point? Give some examples where simply showing up for church and going through the motions, without our heart being in it, is meaningless in the eyes of God.
- 8. If what we are is so important to God, how can we be more effective in promoting true worship and discipleship in our churches?

The second covenant was necessary because the first covenant did not succeed in its objective of reconciling a people to God. The writer of Hebrews uses a quote from Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is in a section that speaks of the restoration of Israel, to describe the new relationship contained in this second covenant. The new relationship involved three things:

A. The implanting of God's law in their hearts (vs 10).

This was not simply a code of laws to be memorized but the placing of a new nature within them which knows and loves the will of God and has the power to obey it.

9. According to verse 9, who was to blame for the failure of the first covenant?

10. Do you believe God wants us to succeed in our spiritual walk or has He deliberately set the bar too high and made it so we all will fail?

B. The knowledge of God as a matter of personal experience (vs 11).

After Joshua's generation died out, there arose another generation that did not know God, nor the work He had done for Israel (Judges 2:10). The new covenant would involve a personal knowledge of God possessed by each member of the covenant community.

11. Looking at the imagery contained in this section, what kind of relationship does God want to establish with us?

12. How does verse 11 speak to the issue of access to God and the need for mediators? (See Heb 3:16). Why is this significant? How could it be abused?

C. The blotting out of their sins (vs 12).

In Hebrew thought, remembering was more than mental effort; it carried with it the thought of doing something to the advantage or disadvantage of the person remembered. If people's sins are remembered by God, His holiness must take action against them; if they are not remembered, it is

because in His grace He has taken action to forgive them. Any covenant between God and man must be based on the mercy of God. Man could never achieve favour with God on his own.

14. Notice the wording in vs. 12. Does a perfect God “forget” our sins or does He choose not to remember them? How is this instructive in our forgiveness of others?

Through this week...

Think about what it cost God to establish a new and better covenant with mankind.

As you face difficulties remind yourself that God loves and cares for you and has initiated this personal and intimate covenant with you.

What reason can you find not to trust this kind of God?

8 LESSON

Christ's Superior Sacrifice

BY JASON PLETT

Hebrews 9:1-28

Key Verse: "How much more, then, will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! " Hebrews 9:14

Bible Truth

Christ's sacrifice accomplishes what the old sacrificial system could not.

Life Response

To live more fully for the living God, as we realize the superiority and all-encompassing nature of Christ's redeeming sacrifice.

There once was a very famous and respected king. All of the surrounding kingdoms knew fully the greatness and superiority of this neighboring king. He had shown his greatness in many battles and built up his land and his people into a strong country. This kingdom lived at peace with its neighbours and everyone seemed to be happy. People who came from this land, were respected much more than regular travelers when traveling to other kingdoms. These people were treated so much better than other people that they needed proof of their citizenship to this mighty kingdom. To prove they lived under the great king they each owned a small hand painted portrait of the king, done by the best artist in all the land. As you can imagine the artist was very busy making copies of the portrait, for there were many people in the kingdom.

As the months and years went by the artist began to tire and the quality of his pictures deteriorated. One day a man who had a poor copy of the picture was traveling in a neighboring country and he was thrown in jail for breaking the law. He realized his mistake and knew that if it were not for the portrait of his king he would never be released. When his case came before that kingdom's officials, he presented them with his portrait. They scoffed, however, making note of its poor quality and called it a forgery. With little deliberation the man was sentenced to spend the rest of his life in prison there. News of this case spread all over the land.

The man was heart-broken, as he sat in prison, nothing he could say could convince his captors that he belonged to the strong neighboring country. Then one day the guard opened his door and told him he was free to go and that they were very sorry for the misunderstanding. Dumbfounded, the man walked out of his cell and to his astonishment standing there, in person, was the mighty king himself.

1. Why was the king's presence superior to the man's picture?
2. How would the king's arrival have changed the man?
3. How would the kingdoms view the portrait, once they heard what happened to this man?

Read Hebrews 9:1-10

Regulations of the First Covenant

A lamp stand, a table, consecrated bread, alters, jars, and many other items furnished the earthly tabernacle of the Old Testament. God did not set up a low-grade, simplistic system for the ancient Hebrews. To come before God required much discipline, preparation, and wasn't to be taken lightly. The central function of the tabernacle was to allow a person to

come before God for the sins he had committed. And, as it appears in Scripture, God was very strict about how precisely one had to follow the tabernacle regulations.

If the author of Hebrews had wanted, he could have gone into much greater detail. Through the sacrificial system, God was trying to point the people of Israel towards the future where Christ would come and fulfill the pattern which the priests had started. As the passage states, following these rules, even if done perfectly, could not in any way cleanse a person's conscience. For it is inherent in man to feel guilty as a result of sin committed against the God of the whole universe. The rules and regulations of the tabernacle were only external measures to cleanse ritually. God wanted Israel to see that forgiveness must reach to man's very heart.

1. Why must our consciences be cleansed from the sin we commit?
2. In what ways does the Old Testament system point to Christ's act of redemption?
3. Could the Israelites look forward to Christ's heart-cleansing sacrifice in the same way that we look back on it? Explain.

Read Hebrews 9:11-22

The Shed Blood of Christ

Jesus came to earth to serve as a High Priest. In the Levitical system, the high priest was to be the representative of Israel in closest contact with God when entering the Holy of Holies. The High Priest would consider this action with great seriousness. He always had to purify himself before he could enter the Holiest of Holies. Of utmost importance was the shedding of the blood of a sacrificial animal.

God says that the shedding of blood is necessary when dealing with the atonement of sins. But, in contrast to the tabernacle priests, Christ entered God's presence, the spiritual

Holy of Holies, and offered his very own blood, not just that of an animal. Christ's sacrifice was perfect, completely effective not only in atoning ritually, but also in cleansing a person's heart. Christ, God in human form, offered himself, not involuntary and uncomprehending like the animals sacrificed at the tabernacle, but of his own accord.

4. How is Jesus' death like a ransom?
5. What are some reasons why our consciences must be cleansed before God?
6. What are some reasons why the acts of sinful man can be considered "dead"?

Read Hebrews 9:23-28

Once and For All

These verses stress that the tabernacle and its contents were copies of heavenly things. Both these copies and the actual heavenly things needed to be purified with sacrifices. Christ's actions were similar but on a different level than those of the earthly priests.

Christ didn't just enter a man-made room; He entered heaven itself. There, He appears for us before God fully justified, His task completed. Again Christ's sacrifice is superior in that, unlike the old priestly sacrifices which had to be repeated over and over again, His sacrifice needed to be offered only once, and its consequences would last eternally.

A true understanding of Christianity should lead believers to realize that, as humans we are worthy of death. Christ took away our sins in one fell swoop. His one act of perfect love was all that is necessary for removing all the death and guilt that is found in the human heart. To experience this, you must receive Christ's sacrifice by faith.

7. Why is it significant that Christ needed to die only once?

8. Why is it important that Jesus appears before God on our behalf?

9. How is Christ's sacrifice superior to the animal sacrifices?

Through this week...

As you begin your work week on Monday think back to this lesson.

What implications for your work and daily life does your acceptance of Christ have?

Ask this question as you begin each day.

9

LESSON

The Shadow and the Real

BY HARVEY PLETT

Hebrews 10:1-18

Key Verse: "And where these (sins) have been forgiven, there is no longer any sacrifice for sin." Hebrews 10:18

Bible Truth

Christ's death replaces the Old Testament sacrificial system and provides the once for all sacrifice for sin.

Life Response

Accept that once for all sacrifice for your sins and then rejoice in the salvation that Christ has brought you.

Have you ever been annoyed by the abundance of worms in your garden and vegetables? You spray with insecticide seeking to get rid of as many as possible.

Finally fall rolls around and as you look under some old boards or under the eaves you see little grayish-brownish bulges. In my youth we would at times destroy them. Later we learned that these were cocoons woven by those unwanted worms. From these, come spring, butterflies emerge, in all their colour and beauty.

When you see the butterfly you wonder how such an ugly unwanted worm could be transformed into such a delicate beautiful creature. The worms are a shadow of that which is to come.

1. Pause for a few minutes to marvel at God's wondrous creation. Share some of your feelings about the natural world which God created.
2. Compare the worm as a shadow of the butterfly with the Levitical offerings as a shadow of Christ's sacrifice. In what sense is the one a shadow and the other the reality?

Read Hebrews 10:1-5

Ineffectiveness of the Shadow

The Old Testament sacrificial system was an object lesson. As such its ceremonies and sacrifices were repeated annually. Repetition was necessary because it was only a shadow of that which was to come and as such could not accomplish what it foreshadowed—forgiveness of sin. This image of the law being a shadow is a forceful way of saying that it is ineffective in achieving salvation. A shadow is merely a dark image cast by a real object. It has no substance of its own. It is like the beautiful pictures advertising mouth-watering food. Those pictures are merely images, shadows of the real. The real is the actual food. -

However, it must be remembered, a shadow does say something about what produces the shadow. It hints at "good things to come."

What does the shadow in these verses tell us?

It tells us at least the following:

1. Sin is a serious matter. The shadow tells us sin is so serious that animals were sacrificed to atone for it.
2. Animal sacrifices foreshadow the one and only life and sacrifice, Christ, who will atone for sin once and for all.

The writer tells us that the ineffectiveness of the shadow is evident in the need to repeat the sacrifices. This means they do not adequately cleanse from sin. The animal sacrifices were a constant reminder of the guilt of sin as well as the impossibility that an animal sacrifice could remove that guilt.

3. The Old Testament demanded sacrifices. How do you harmonize that with what the writer is saying in the verses found in Leviticus 16:1-34, esp. vs.34?
4. To study the concept of "shadow" further, see Heb. 8:5, 9:23; Col. 2:17.

Read Hebrews 10:5-10

Setting the Shadow Aside

In these verses the writer to the Hebrews seeks to demonstrate that the law is a shadow by citing Ps. 40:6-8. The wording follows the Septuagint (Greek OT) rather than the Hebrew text. This explains why in our Bibles which are based on the Hebrew Old Testament, the Psalms passage reads differently.

Hagner suggests that the quotation stresses that God's concern is not sacrifice but obedience. The psalmist says, "I have come to do your will." The psalmist acknowledges the inadequacy of the shadow, which foreshadows Christ. For the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews, Christ was the goal of the Old Testament Scriptures. In quoting Psalm 40, the writer suggests that the shadow of the Levitical sacrifice was fulfilled in Christ's obedience and sacrifice.

There is another truth that needs to be mentioned. In the Old Testament, sacrifices were acceptable not just because they were offered in the correct ceremonial way. Far more, it was the heart and attitude of the offerer that made the sacrifice acceptable to God. (See Isa. 1:10-17.) Thus the heart attitude of the one sacrificing the animal made the ritual effective and not the ritual itself.

By Christ's coming to do God's will (v. 9) the shadow is removed and the real comes. The reality is the once for all sacrificial death of Christ. By Christ's obedience unto death the shadow has been set aside and the real is present.

5. Is it true that God did not want animal sacrifices? Why then the detailed Levitical instructions for sacrificing animals? How does the shadow reveal the reality?
6. How are obedience and animal sacrifice related according to the Old Testament? Compare 1 Sam. 15:22; Isa. 1:12-17

Read Hebrews 10:11-14

The Two Kinds of Priests

In these verses the priests who bring the sacrifices are contrasted. The Old Testament priest offers the same kinds of sacrifices again and again because they cannot permanently remove the guilt of sin.

On the other hand, when Christ had sacrificed for sin it was a once for all sacrifice and could not be repeated. His sacrifice differs from the Old Testament ritual. Christ was both the priest and the sacrifice.

This sacrifice makes “perfect,” that is saves people.

Verse 14 also tells us that we are in the process of becoming holy. Sanctification is both fact and process.

The salvation that Christ brings is eternal. Here is the promise of life beyond this life. Christ’s death has opened the door to heaven. The statement that Christ is waiting for the enemies to be made His footstool informs us that an end is coming to the enemies of God even though they are still active today. Because of this hope we need to keep on keeping on.

7. How should we understand the phrase, “he sat down at the right hand of God” (vs. 12)?

Read Hebrews 10:15-18

The Witness of the Holy Spirit

These verses summarize the effects of Christ's sacrifice.

First notice that he quotes Jer. 31:33-34. Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant. The Hebrews writer says this has now come to pass. Jeremiah 31:33f has been fulfilled in Christ.

Second, the writer tells us that the Holy Spirit testifies to this truth. Jeremiah 31 is saying what the Holy Spirit says.

Third, while at one time God's laws were written on tablets of stone, they are now written on the hearts of believers. That is, there is a shift of focus to the heart and an emphasis on the motives for our actions. External obedience is still necessary but our obedience is judged by motive.

Fourth, the once for all sacrifice of Christ has erased God's memory of the sins of believers. This amnesia regarding sin happens through forgiveness. The Levitical system kept reminding people of their sins and did not remove them.

Fifth, because of this forgiveness and with the removal of all guilt and memory of sins, no other sacrifice is needed. Christ's sacrifice is sufficient. The shadow has been fulfilled in the reality.

7. What conclusion concerning the authority of the Old Testament can be drawn from Hebrews 10:15-17?
8. What is the covenant referred to in verse 16?
9. What implications does this section have for Jewish-Christian relations?
10. What does this paragraph imply about forgiving our fellow believers?

The writer to the Hebrews has presented a closely argued case that in Christ the real has come. With that he sets aside the whole sacrificial system as outlined in the Old Testament. This was difficult for the Jews to accept on the one hand, while on the other Gentiles became equal in the eyes of God with the Jews. It is the burden of the writer to prove to the Jews that their belief system was right but that its hope was realized in Christ.

The coming of the real has not reduced the requirements of obedience, rather it has intensified them. In the new covenant, God's main concern is with inward motivation, a pure heart.

Through the Week...

How real is the forgiveness of Christ to me?

Am I responding from my heart in obedience to Christ in accepting what He has done to bring forgiveness?

Am I responding from my heart in obeying His commandments?

10

LESSON

Never Give Up

BY BLAINE FRIESEN

Hebrews 10:19-39

Key Verse: "Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful."

Hebrews 10:23

Bible Truth

Faith should be practiced as well as professed.

Life Response

To keep strong in your faith, even through the tough times.

A number of years ago in Elkhart, Kansas, two brothers worked at the local school. Early each day their job was to start a fire in the wood stove in the classroom.

One cold morning, the brothers cleaned out the stove and loaded it with firewood. Grabbing a can of kerosene, one of them doused the wood and lit the fire. The explosion rocked the old building. The fire killed the older brother and badly burned the legs of the other. It was later discovered that the kerosene can had accidentally been filled with gasoline.

The doctor attending the injured boy recommended amputating the young boy's legs. The parents were devastated. They had already lost one son, and now their other son was to lose his legs. But they did not lose hope. They asked the doctor for a postponement of the amputation, the doctor consented. Each day they asked the doctor to delay, praying that their son's legs would somehow heal. For two months, the parents and the doctor debated on whether to amputate.

They used this time to instill in the boy the belief that he would someday walk again.

They never amputated the boy's legs, but when the bandages were finally removed, it was discovered that his right leg was almost three inches shorter than the other. The toes on his left foot were almost completely burned off. Yet the boy was fiercely determined. Through excruciating pain, he forced himself to exercise daily and finally took a few painful steps. Slowly recovering, this young man finally threw away his crutches and began to walk almost normally. Soon he was running. This determined young man kept running; and those legs that were to be amputated, carried him to a world record in the mile run. His name? Glenn Cunningham, who was named athlete of the century.

—The Spectator's source book

1. Why did the parents ask for a postponement of the amputation?
2. What do you think gave the boy the determination to walk?
3. What things can we do for others, when they're in difficult situations?

Read Hebrews 10:19-22

Christ Superior as a New and Living Way

In verse 19, the author explains that under the old covenant, animal sacrifices could never completely atone for sin. However, under the new covenant, Christ made the perfect sacrifice by shedding his blood on the cross, atoning for sin once and for all.

Verse 20 speaks about our access "through the curtain." This allusion refers to the curtain which shut off the holy of Holies

from the holy place in the Levitical sanctuary and symbolized the exclusion of sinful mankind from the presence of God. However, when Christ came and forgave us our sin, the way that was formerly closed was now open. We read that at the time of the crucifixion "the curtain was torn from top to bottom." (Matt. 27:51)

Verse 21 gives us confidence in approaching the throne of God's grace because Christ our great high priest opened a new and living way for us into the sanctuary of God's presence.

Verse 22 speaks about various ceremonies done under the old covenant. The ceremonies however effected no more than an external ritual purification. The blood of Christ in the new covenant effects the purification of the conscience from dead works; it effects the hearts of those who have been cleansed of their sin.

4. What are the four conditions given for drawing "near to God"?
5. Why are these conditions important?

Read Hebrews 10:23-39

A Call to Persevere

In verse 23 the author speaks about "the confession of our hope." Confession refers not to some detached formula or document, but to the important personal witness of the Christian believer. As Aquinas says "It is not sufficient to have hope in the heart, but it must be confessed with the mouth as well."

Verses 24-25 tell us that we are to be thoughtful and have a loving concern for fellow members of the Christian community. This may have been written to the church because there were signs of a weakening of the bonds of Christian fellowship, resulting from a deficiency of the love that should unite those in Christ. This also may have caused a failure to do those compassionate deeds by which Christian love expresses itself.

In verses 26–27, the author gives a serious warning about believers continuing in sin. The warning is that if we have accepted Christ but then continue to sin, we will lose our salvation. We will ultimately be condemned because we are rejecting Christ’s atonement. There is no other atonement for sin. This tells us that faith which does not result in a changed lifestyle will not save us. It also tells us that we can receive the knowledge of the truth and then lose it. This reminds us of the exhortation in verse 24 where we are told to “spur one another on to good works and love.”

Verses 28-31 remind the reader of how under the Mosaic system, violations were punished with an extreme penalty. Then the readers are asked the question, “How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished, who has trampled the Son of God under foot,…”

6. What two things are we to do that will help us persevere?
7. What is the danger if we do not persevere?
8. Why is it important that we meet together (vs. 25)?
9. What good will come from our perseverance?
10. In much of Hebrews 10:19-39, God is shown to have grace, mercy and faithfulness. What other divine attribute do we learn about in verses 30 and 31?

Through the Week...

Reread verses 32-34. The author refers to Christians that were sharing their faith with others, and because of this they were persecuted and insulted.

Think about instances where the opportunity to share Christianity with others was missed because of your fear of what others might think or do.

Write down some things you can do to overcome the fear you may have about sharing Christianity with others.

11

LESSON

The Way of Faith

BY SHERYL LOEWEN

Hebrews 11:1-40

Key Verse: "Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

Hebrews 11:1

Bible Truth

The faith provided in this chapter of those found to be faithful.

Life Response

To live each day with greater faith in God.

The late evening air brought much relief from the scorching heat of the day in this small Mennonite community. And yet, not much relief came to Eli as he sat pondering what all it would mean for him, his wife Miriam, and their young family now that he had told the community of their decision to leave the local church.

It was not as though he wished for this but he felt the church's restrictive regulations were too often in conflict with the Word of God and with how he had come to understand faith through the Scriptures. But was it really worth risking everything? Already his business was suffering. How would he take care of his family if he could not even make ends meet?

Interrupted by the flash of headlights shining into the kitchen window and loud voices from outside, Eli hurried to see what the commotion was about. Shouts rang out from the driveway as clumps of dirt shattered upon impact with the house. "Come out and face us, Eli, or we will come in after you, you

coward!", bellowed the men who Eli recognized from the community.

Seeing Miriam's panicked expression as she tried to calm their baby, now awake from all the racket, Eli prayed in earnest to God for protection over himself and his family. Then he went to the door and stepped outside to meet his taunters.

As Miriam listened with fearful anticipation, comforting the child in her arms, she heard the roar of an engine and then its fading into the distance. Just as she reached for the door it began to creak open, it was Eli. "Praise God!", exclaimed Miriam at the sight of her husband without even a scratch. "Yes, my dear wife, when we are faithful, the Lord also is faithful."

1. In what ways was Eli faithful?
2. What are some examples from your own life where being faithful meant risk? How was God faithful in those situations?

Read Hebrews 11:1,2 (consult both NIV and RSV)

Definition of Faith

In these verses the author of Hebrews provides both a concise definition of faith as well as the source from which it is derived.

From the first verse we may conclude that faith is having the assurance and conviction of the promises of God, what we hope for and do not see. As becomes evident throughout this chapter, God's promises are not limited in scope. Rather they include anything from the promise of rain (vs.7) to the promise of a heavenly city (vs.10,16).

In verse two the writer points to examples of "the ancients", those in the Old Testament who were commended for their faith. Our understanding of faith is based on such examples.

3. According to these verses, how do you suppose the writer understood faith?
4. How does this understanding of faith challenge or affirm your own understanding?

Read Hebrews 11:3–31

Living By Faith...In All Aspects of Life

Here the author takes stories of faith from the lives of particular individuals in the Old Testament.

In verse 37, there is reference to faith regarding our understanding of creation as well as in the experiences of those living before the time of the Patriarchs. If we consider in greater detail the events surrounding each of these experiences we will notice God's promises and the individual's faithfulness in response to those promises.

Then in verses 8–12 we have the first mention of Abraham. These verses speak of the promises of land, seed and descendants made to Abraham by God (Genesis 12:1–3). Having faith, Abraham acted in accordance with the promises and so aided in bringing them to fulfillment.

In addition to providing specific examples of faith heroes, the writer creates a brief diversion in verses 13–16 to reflect on some of their implications. From verse 13, the "things promised" seem to be those promises not yet revealed in the world (i.e., Christ). However, it appears that even the ancients had a sense of and appreciation for those promises in spite of the fact that during their earthly lives they would not themselves become the beneficiaries. In verses 14–16 their apparent desire for eternity seems to be rooted in the fact that God had prepared a city for them in that heavenly country they so longed for.

In verses 17–19 there is yet another illustration from the life of Abraham involving his only son, Isaac. Having been promised that through Isaac he would become the father of count-

less descendants, Abraham proceeded in faith to sacrifice the very means by which the promise was to be fulfilled. However, God spared Isaac, and as we see in verses 20–22 he went on to have sons of his own, receiving the promise.

The author shifts his attention in verses 23–28 to the life of Moses. For Moses' parents, and later for Moses himself, the path of faith would not be an easy one. And yet, Moses chose the path God called him to with the understanding that whatever he suffered for the sake of the anointed one ("Christ") was of much greater value to God and eternity than any earthly treasures.

Finally, in verses 29–31 we have reference to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea during the Exodus from Egypt, their encounter at Jericho upon entering the promised land, as well as to the prostitute Rahab who, against all odds, proved her faithfulness and was spared.

5. What characteristics of faithfulness are evident through the lives of the people mentioned?
6. How might we integrate those characteristics into our lives?

Read Hebrews 11:32–34

Living By Faith...In Glory

In this passage, the writer briefly lists some examples from the Old Testament of individuals who had experienced many a triumphant conquest through faith. These were judges, kings and prophets who overcame great odds to accomplish what they set out to do. By faith, they were able to claim victory on many an occasion.

7. How might we associate faith with our successes whether they be in business, school, relationships, etc.?
8. What should be our response when our faithfulness brings success?

Read Hebrews 11:35–38

Living By Faith...In Persecution and Death

This section reflects mostly on individuals who experienced immense suffering because of their faith, even to the point of death.

In verse 35 the writer contrasts the dead who had been resurrected back to their earthly lives (1 Ki.17:1724; 2 Ki.4:837) and those who died under persecution, going on to “gain a better resurrection”, a heavenly one.

The various kinds of persecution mentioned in verses 36–38 illustrate the severity of what some endured because of their faith. Even more significant is the statement that the world was not worthy of them. Their fate did not depict their true value. They were deserved far better than anything this world had to offer.

9. In what ways might we face persecution? How do our experiences compare with the examples in this passage?
10. What should be our response when we encounter suffering or persecution in our own lives? In the lives of others?

Read Hebrews 11:38,39 (consult both NIV and RSV)

Something Better

Here the author of Hebrews sums up the various illustrations by returning to what was stated in verse 2, that all of them were commended for their faith. However, it is also made clear that the need for faith does not stop with those individuals because God already had in mind something better for us. That something, being Jesus Christ, would unite us with those living before the time of Christ in order that all who have been proven faithful would be made perfect.

11. What was the response of those who did not receive what had been promised? (see verses 13–16)

Through this week...

Think about the role faith has played in your own life. In what ways would God find you faithful?

How have you responded to God's promises? Those you have already received? Those you have yet to receive?

Think about the fact that these Old Testament saints all had faith and showed this by their lives. Do our lives show our faith or is it mere mental assent to God's Word?

12

LESSON

Running the Race

BY BRAD UNGER

Hebrews 12:1-29

Key Verse: "Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us." Hebrews 12:1

Bible Truth

God teaches us to be better witnesses through His discipline.

Life Response

To understand that we need to be responsive to God's discipline and accept it.

About 25 years ago, the Winnipeg Blue Bombers were one of the finest football teams in the Canadian Football League. They had a tremendous offense and a good quarterback, but it was their halfback who really stole the show. He was a young man by the name of Jim Thorpe. He came into the league with the expectation of becoming one of the finest halfbacks in Blue Bomber history. He was well on his way to accomplishing that goal when he made a big mistake. Jim and another player were caught smoking marijuana.

Jim's coach was faced with a big decision. He could punish the players or let them off the hook. The coach decided that because of the players actions, they would have to face certain consequences. Both players were kicked off the team. The coach reasoned that although both players might never

commit the offense again, they had been looked upon as heroes and role models by the people who watched them. He wanted to send out the message that actions have consequences and that these consequences are to help us become better people as well as better models to those looking up to us.

1. Do you think the coach made the right decision? Why or why not?
2. What do you think would have happened if Jim Thorpe had not been punished?
3. Think of a time in your own life when you were punished for doing something wrong. What did you learn from the punishment?

Read Hebrews 12:1-4

Example of the Witnesses Who Have Finished the Race

We live in a world where modeling has a powerful effect. As Christians we have the very important job of living for God. We are His witnesses to an unbelieving world. Once people find out we are Christians, they watch to see if we make mistakes and how we react when we do. We need to remember what Jesus did for us. He endured the cross for us despite the pain and the shame. He didn't care that he would have to suffer torment and humiliation for us. The least we can do is live for Him. Somebody is watching how you react to different circumstances each day. They probably know you are a Christian and are waiting to see how you will respond to the problems that lie ahead. They want to see if you will handle them like everybody else or if there will be something "different" in your attitude.

Hebrews 12:1-4 is an encouragement to run the Christian race with patience for there is a cloud of witnesses who have

preceded us. Their example is to encourage the readers.

Who are these witnesses? They are the ones mentioned in chapter 11. They are witnesses in that they have lived a life of faith and are now models for us to follow. The writer could have said, "Look how faithfully they lived. With such examples before you, put everything aside and run the race of faith."

As we follow these models, others are to follow us.

1. Can you think of other witnesses that encourage us to be faithful?
2. According to Hebrews 12:2, what is our motivation to be witnesses for Christ? What are some things that prevent you from being an effective witness?
3. Why should "fixing our eyes on Jesus" make such a difference in our lives and in our attitude?

Read Hebrews 12:5–11

The Father's Encouragement to Run

Just as Jim Thorpe's coach disciplined him for his mistake, so also our "Coach" disciplines us for our sins. It is important to remember that God disciplines us to teach us, not because He is mean. We need to accept our discipline and learn from it. We are God's children. God wants us to have a Father/child relationship with Him. It is up to us to go to Him and take Him up on His offer. You can rest assured that if you enter into the Father/child relationship with God He will be there to help you through any problems you face. Just like our earthly fathers, God nurtures us through fair discipline.

What is the discipline that WE are to endure?

Verse 7 says, "Endure hardship as discipline." This suggests that hardships that come our way because of our faith is the way God disciplines His children. In verse 4 he has said that his readers have not yet struggled against sin to the point of shedding their blood. Verses 5-6 then speak of discipline of

the Lord and this is followed by the statement of vs.7. This verse suggests that hardship is the discipline we endure.

Thus hardship because of obedience to God is a sign of sonship. As vs. 8 says, if we are not disciplined we are not sons. This theme is elaborated in verses 8–11.

The result of being disciplined is: a) pain while it is happening, and b) a harvest of righteousness and peace. The latter only happens if we respond appropriately to the hardship. A proper response is taking hardships as opportunities to let the power of God work rather than as occasions for complaining.

Thus the discipline of God is not God giving you a spanking but rather the negative reaction of others when you live for God. Whether the discipline is effective or not is determined by our response.

1. Based on your reading of Hebrews 12:5-11, how is God like our human father?
2. Discuss the difference between punishment and discipline?
3. What are some of God's reasons for disciplining His children?

Read Hebrews 12:12–17

Therefore Keep On Running

Because hardships are discipline from God and because they produce positive results in the lives of believers, the readers are now encouraged to take up the race and run it for all they are worth. Recognizing that readers will feel weak, the writer encourages them to strengthen their arms and feet and to make their path straight so the lame won't fall.

The writer then lists several areas of ethical concerns. His readers are to live in peace with others, strive for holiness, be careful not to miss the grace of God, avoid bitterness, sexual

immorality, or carelessness about God's gifts.

Verses 18–24 again tell us that words of encouragement are possible because of the better sacrifice in Christ who was the mediator of our salvation.

There is much more to God's amazing plan for us than just disciplining us. God is there to offer us strength. He wants us to make the best effort that we can to follow Him and to serve Him. Not only does He want us to make a great effort but He expects this effort to be a holy one. We aren't expected to "be" perfect but we are supposed to strive for perfection. If we break the "rules" it will displease God.

This passage bluntly warns us not to lead others astray. Weaker brothers and sisters and the unsaved are all watching to see how we conduct ourselves. Will we cut corners to get ahead in life or will we act out our faith in every circumstance? The eternal fate of many people is resting in our hands.

1. According to these verses, why is it important that we follow God?
2. How will our obedience affect those around us?
3. What warning does the story of Esau give us?

Read Hebrews 12:18–24

Strength from Mount Zion to Run

Before we even begin to live for God in the world He has made some promises to us. This passage mentions the two covenants that God has made with His people. The first one was made to the people of Israel when they were on their trek through the wilderness. The second concerns us as it was made concerning our futures. If we are Christians living for Christ we will inherit eternal life in heaven someday. Jesus is the mediator of this new covenant and we can only get

to heaven through Him. We can now go into the world with complete confidence that God will be with us because of His promise to us.

1. Compare the two covenants in this passage.
2. What emotions do you feel as you read this passage? Read it again. How does it feel to have such a covenant with such a powerful God?

Read Hebrews 12:25–29

Warning about Failing to Run

In these last verses of chapter 12 we are once more warned about failing to listen, to obey. Hebrews has many such warnings and the reader is wise to give heed to them.

The first warning is one of contrast: “If ... how much less,” vs.25. God warned Israel through Moses but they didn’t listen and so were prohibited from entering the promised land. Now He has spoken from heaven, that is through Jesus. (Compare 1:1) If we fail to listen we will not escape condemnation.

The writer notes the impact of God’s voice when He made the two covenants. At Sinai only the earth shook but now the heavens will also be shaken, indicating that all created things will be removed. This will leave that which cannot be shaken, that is the Kingdom of God. It is for this reason we are not to refuse the One who is speaking, for the consequences will be serious.

Verse 28 is a mixture of encouragement and warning. We who are believers are in the process of receiving the Kingdom that cannot be shaken. Here is the “yet not yet” quality of the Christian faith. We are tasting the powers of the age to come in a measure now, but will experience a much greater power when Christ returns.

15. Rejecting Christ has major consequences, yet people do it every day. Give some examples of how people reject Christ in their everyday lives. If you are guilty of any of these infractions, think of ways to avoid these pitfalls.

16. Based on verse 28, how should we be living our everyday life?

Through this week...

When you return to work on Monday take time to reflect about how you are "running the race".

How are you responding to the hardships you encounter because you are a believer?

How are you strengthening your spiritual muscles?

What ethical questions are you facing?

Are you listening to the One that is speaking from Sinai?

13

LESSON

Encourage One Another

BY COLIN LOEWEN

Hebrews 13:1-25

Key Verse: "Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith."

Hebrews 13:7

Bible Truth

Good Christian leaders should be respected, obeyed, and imitated.

Life Response

To develop integrity as well as an encouraging attitude toward our leaders.

T

his fall when you see geese flying south for the winter in V formation, you might consider what science has discovered about them. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates an uplift for the bird immediately following. By flying in V formation the whole flock adds at least 71% greater flying range than if each bird flew on its own. When a goose falls out of formation it suddenly feels the drag and resistance of trying to go it alone and quickly gets back into formation to take advantage of the lifting power of the bird in front.

When the head goose gets tired it rotates back in the wing and another goose flies point. Geese honk from behind to encourage those up front to keep up their speed.

When a goose gets sick or is wounded by gunshots and falls out of formation, two other geese fall out with that goose and follow it down to provide help and protection. They stay with the fallen goose until it is able to fly or until it dies. Only then

do they launch out on their own or with another formation to catch up with their group.

1. Why do geese not fly on their own?
2. What are the advantages if a goose stays in the V formation?
3. Who does the encouraging? Why?

Read Hebrews 13:1-6

The Essentials

This passage contains five basic ethical precepts in the Christian life. First, there is love. The Greek word for love used here is the love of friendship. It includes an active interest in the welfare of fellow Christians. This love was often lacking in the church's effort to keep the Christian faith as pure as possible. The writer exhorts his readers to balance brotherly love while seeking to keep Christianity pure.

Secondly, there is an exhortation to be hospitable, especially towards fellow Christians. The custom at the time was to entertain strangers or travelers in homes. A commitment to hospitality was crucially important to the success of early Christian missions. There were many traveling preachers and they relied on the hospitality of Christians for board and bed. This exhortation is a plea for unselfishness.

Thirdly there is an exhortation to have sympathy for those in trouble. Many Christians found themselves in difficult circumstances because of their faith and needed the encouragement of their brothers and sisters.

Fourthly there is an exhortation for marital purity. Many thought that marriage was not honourable anymore because of the lax morals among Gentiles (Acts 15:20) and the prevalence of divorce among Jews (Mt.5:32). The exhortation in this passage is to honour marriage and to recognize the sacredness of sexual intimacy within the marriage bond.

Fifthly, there is an exhortation to be content. The writer to the Hebrews encourages them to remember that God is all they will ever need. The fact is that God will never change and therefore Christians can be free from the love of money and content with what they have.

4. What are five basic essentials in the Christian life according to this passage?
5. Why is it important to be hospitable to strangers and travelers?

Read Hebrews 13:7–16

Advice to the Church

This passage is an exhortation to the church. The first exhortation concerns the leaders. Obviously the leaders had been examples of faith. Some of them had already died. Readers are encouraged to imitate their faith. “Remember” is used here in the continuous present tense which means to remember and keep on remembering. The duty of the leaders was to show people the way to God. They were to be a witness to Christ by the way they lived. They were also to remain loyal to the end, even if it meant death. Their duty was to leave an example and inspiration for other leaders and Christians. The readers of the letter had exemplary leaders and are encouraged to follow them. Here we see the influence of good modeling.

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever. What Jesus did for them He will do for their descendants. We should therefore be encouraged to be faithful, for Jesus will continue to be as faithful to us as He was to our predecessors.

Second, there is a warning against “strange teachings.” These teachings could refer to a Jewish teaching, for it speaks of “ceremonial foods.” On the other hand it could also refer to a pagan cult that was teaching wrongly about ceremonial foods. The warning stands: “Do not be carried away”; rely on the grace of God.

Third, there is another reminder that Christ is greater than the priests of the Jewish system. Christ is compared to the sacrifice on the day of atonement. We have a higher privilege than the priests had under the Old Covenant. Under the New Covenant Jesus is the only priest. The sacrifice on the Day of Atonement was to be outside of the city. Christ was also crucified and killed outside of Jerusalem. The writer reminds the readers that our ultimate hope is in the future, "we are waiting for a city that is to come."

Because of Christ, readers are encouraged to offer a sacrifice of praise with their lips, to do good to others, and to share with others, for this pleases God.

6. Why were the readers to remember their leaders?

7. Why is Christ better than their leaders?

8. What is meant by the phrase "a sacrifice of praise?"

Read Hebrews 13:17–25

Final Exhortations

First of all, readers were called to obey their leaders even when they did not agree with them. This is not unconditional obedience but a carefully thought about submission. The leaders were those who watched over them because they were accountable for them (Acts 20:28). Their leaders would consider their work joy if the people obeyed, but if they did not obey they were harming themselves and making things difficult for the leaders.

Second, the writer requests prayer for himself. The writer is hindered from being present with the readers and requests prayer that he may be restored to them.

Third, God is a God of peace and life. He has conquered death and offers peace. It is only because He conquered death that He is a God of life and can offer peace.

Finally there is a closing salutation or greeting. The readers were familiar with Timothy and would have been happy to receive news that he had been released. There is also a greeting from Christians in Italy who must have had some connection to the readers.

9. What attitude should the readers have toward their leaders? Why?

10. Examine the prayer in verses 20-21. Who is this God? What does He do in the lives of Christians?

Through this week...

The recipients of this letter had been given solid biblical food. In this final chapter they are given specific instructions on how to relate to each other. They were to love, remember, obey, and pray for their leaders.

As you walk through this week ask yourself:

Do I show disrespect towards Christian leaders because I do not agree with everything they say? Sometimes these differences are valid but sometimes they are petty and cause division.

Am I praying for and encouraging the leaders of my church?

List some ways in which you can encourage the leaders in your church.

Now do it!