

The Chapel Ministry



The Book of Hebrews

Magnifying Christ, Maturing Believers

Russ Kennedy

*S*avoring the *S*upremacy of *G*od
*S*tudying the *W*ord of *G*od
*S*haping the *P*eople of *G*od
*S*preading the *G*ospel of *G*od
All for the glory of Christ.

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Introduction

The following is an overview of the book of Hebrews adapted from *Walk through the Bible*.

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| | 1:1-1:3 | 1:4-2:18 | 3:1-4:13 | 4:14-7:28 | 8:1-8:13 | 9:1-10:18 | 10:19-11:40 | 12:1-12:29 | 13:1-13:25 |
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The following is adapted from *Bible Exposition Commentary* by W. Wiersbe

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The following is from *Explore the Book* by J. Sidlow Baxter

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Acknowledgments

No series like this is truly “original”. We come to our study with years of reading and reflecting on the texts before us. I have relied heavily on two very special men.

The Puritan, John Owen whose books brought me to the Doctrines of Grace and whose works have nurtured my mind and spirit for almost my whole Christian life. His massive seven-volume work on Hebrews has been usefully condensed and was constantly in my hand as I wrestled with difficult texts. Any direct quote or paraphrase will be referenced by (Owen).

Dr. John Piper preached an extended series at Bethlehem Baptist just about a year before I began the development of this series in 1997. The manuscripts to those sermons were constantly referenced for his careful analysis and the clarity of His articulate exposition. I have quoted or paraphrased him extensively and will be referenced by (Piper). I owe a debt to Dr. Piper in this series and in my joy that cannot be measured or repaid.

The Supreme Finality of Christ's Exaltation

Hebrews 1:1-3

Introduction What is the most important message Christians need to hear today? I've thought a lot about that because I must preach to you regularly. What is it that you as a Christians need to hear from God?

Think About This

An observer of preaching today would be led to think that the church (and maybe non-believers as well) need to hear:

- That their greatest need is to find ways to deal with all the mental, emotional and psychological scars they are carrying that makes them feel bad about themselves. They need to see how the Bible is particularly related to their **significance**.
- That their greatest need is to find practical ways to carry on "Christian living" in the church, the home, the job and the society. They need to see how the Bible is particularly related to their **relationships**.
- That their greatest need is to find ways to deal with all the difficulties and stresses that are bringing pressure on in their lives. They need to see how the Bible is particularly related to their **problems**.
- That their greatest need is to find ways to deal with all the social and cultural ills that are so pervasive, particularly as we view ourselves as having some semblance of a moral consensus. They need to see how the Bible is particularly related to their **society**.

The subject matter and the message of most modern preaching are all about our significance, our relationships, our problems and our society. We are making a fundamental mistake in thinking that since the Bible is written **to** us, it is written all **about** us.

Though each of these areas may be important to some degree, they are not the primary message of the Bible. The Bible was not primarily written to tell us how wonderful we are, how we ought to relate to one another, how we can solve all our felt needs and problems—the Bible's primary message to all peoples of all cultures in all times in every situation is *the superiority and supremacy of Jesus Christ, the Son of God*.

And no book presses this home more than the book of Hebrews. Now make no mistake. This book is to be heard in the midst of the mess. It was written to Christians who had been converted out of apostate religion, Judaism. They lived in a depraved culture driven

by the athleticism of the Romans and the arts of the Greeks, which wound themselves together into a violent and pornographic society. At every turn they faced sensual attractions, greed and graft at every level of business and government. The politicians were utterly corrupt. Home life had disintegrated under the pressure of making a living, keeping up appearances and paying taxes. Personal and national debt in the civilized world was estimated to be multiple times the gross national product. Christianity itself was coming under the censure and condemnation of both the religious (idolatrous) and political worlds. They were losing their homes, possessions and lives all for affirming that Jesus Christ was the one and only and true God. They were being tortured for their faith and tempted to return to the relative safety and comfort and security of their previous religions.

To Christians in these situations comes the message of Hebrews: *magnifying Christ and maturing saints*. So we had better pay attention to this message. It may not fit our categories and our preconceptions, but it is vital for our spiritual welfare.

These opening verses of Hebrews are grand with the majesty of God and the preeminence of Christ. They are elegant in their construction and musical in their language. The concepts appear at first to be simple and yet are weighty with the words and wonders of God. So bear with me as we pan through this text, both to see its flow and to mine out the golden nuggets that make up its truth.

To magnify Christ, the author is going to use the word “better” over and over. He is at pains to show the superiority of Christ over the prophets, over angels, over Moses and Aaron and Joshua. Christ is better in His sanctuary, in His sacrifice, in His priesthood and in His New Covenant. When Christians, no matter what their life circumstances, have their minds filled with the truths of the superiority and supremacy of Christ then their affections will go out to Him in sacrificial love and their wills are turned to obey Him. But all of this means communication and revelation. This is what the 1st four verses are all about and why Hebrews begins as it does.

God's Revelation Spoken in Christ

(v.1-2)

There is no salutation as was common in their day. We simply open with a wonderful statement that basically says, “God has spoken.” This is because this is a sermon, not a letter. It has a postscript once it was ready to be distributed – but this is a sermon in the synagogue form. Thus the opening is meant to draw the speaker into the subject and the issues while holding up the Lord Jesus Christ to be admired and acclaimed. The human author is unknown to us. The situation of the hearers can be seen through the book itself, particularly the final chapters point to the pressure and persecution in which they were faltering and failing. So this sermon will have two major threads running through it: instruction and exhortation. It will hold up this glorious Redeemer in all His perfections and then warn us and exhort us and call us to faith, to cling to Him in His promises even until death.

The Diversity of the Former Revelation (v.1)

Notice that God is the One speaking. God is the subject of the both of the verbs: God then spoke and now has spoken. This assures us that God is a self-disclosing God. He is a person who intends to reveal Himself and then does communicate. He is not absent. He is not silent. He is not dumb or mute like idols. He is not an impersonal force. He has spoken. If it is true that this is God speaking, what should that mean for our listening? Much noise goes on around us all the time. But let the tornado alarm moan its loud warning and it arrests our attention. So even against the constant clamor of the world's compelling noise, we had better give His speaking our attention.

That revelation was characterized by being a PROGRESSIVE revelation. I get this from the words "at many times and in many ways." These words signal that the revelation came over time and through various means. This is very important to understand, both in our grasp of the Bible and in our grasp of Hebrews. God has been progressively revealing Himself to us through time – each bit adds or explains or interprets the bits that went before. Yet we must never think that earlier revelation is wrong, rather it is limited. So when we come to the New Testament and we come to Christ, we have the fullness and fulfillment. It has also been noted that the variety of the means of revelation (through different times, writers, styles and situations) encourages us and helps us to understand the Bible. What we might not get in one place, we may understand in another.

That revelation was characterized by being a PROPHETIC revelation. It came from God through fallible, sinful men. It was mediated by fallen but redeemed men. Yet, the fathers (probably patriarchs) heard God speaking. Though the bearers of the message may be weak and frail in their sin, yet the message is pure and powerful.

That revelation was characterized as PROPOSITIONAL. Without a doubt, the author intends to show us that human language was the divine vehicle to carry the thoughts of God from the mind of God into the soul of man. God spoke, not in vague feelings or strange inner motivations, but in words and sentences and paragraphs as the Spirit imparted the images and realities that God wanted to say.

The Decisiveness of the Final Revelation (v.2)

There is a great sense of the "then and now" between verses 1 & 2. The decisive finality of this revelation is seen in that there is no third phase. The speaking that God has done in these last days is not followed by another era of further revelation. Why is that so?

Because God has spoken in His Son. To be more accurate and to reflect the Greek more correctly, we should say that God has spoken in a Son kind of way. It is a Son-kind of speaking. It is like Philippians chapter 2, where Jesus humbled Himself even to the point of a cross-kind of death. So the final voice of God is spoken "Son-ly". Do not confuse this with the Logos of God in John 1. There, Jesus is the Word of God. He is the content of what God has to say. That is not quite the point here. Here, Jesus is the character of how God spoke.

I am struck by the similarity of this text with the thought and thrust of Colossians 1:15-20. Ponder these words as well.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. 16 For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things were created through him and for him. 17 And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. 18 And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. 19 For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. [ESV]

This revelation then is characterized by being PERSONAL. God has spoken in Son. It is more than words, it is a person. God's speaking is never merely words, merely information, merely data—it is the Son. It is the difference between my sending you an e-mail message and my sending you one of my children. God has spoken in verbal and written communication. He has also spoken in His Son.

This revelation is characterized by being PERFECT or complete. Here is a rebuke that we all need. There is no further revelation to be given than that which is given in Christ. For us, we have an inspired, written record which is sufficient for us. The Bible is an interpretation. This written record we call the Bible has perfectly interpreted what God has spoken in His Son. Even throughout all eternity, we will look no further than Jesus Christ for the final word from God. Yet, how many today are listening for another word, a clearer word, a different word and are returning to the mingled and mangled aspects of a prophetic word. O, loved ones, "Here I stand on the once for all delivered faith, On the Word He exalts above His holy Name. Here I stand, never changing one command, on the pure, sufficient Word of God. Here I stand!" (*Here I Stand*, Steve Camp).

This revelation is characterized as being PURPOSEFUL. Why does the author make these two assertions about this Son, this One who is the decisively final, spoken word of God? Why point out that Jesus is both the heir and the creator of all?

- It points to the centrality of Christ in all the purposes and pleasures of God. All that is not God, exists in the end for Christ and was brought into existence by Christ. He is the end and origin of all the cosmos, all the heavens and all the inhabitants of them. If Christ is central to their purposes and pleasures, then how else is God to reveal that *but by finally and fully speaking of those purposes and pleasures in Christ?*
- It also indicates that the end of the story is more important than the beginning, but you cannot understand the end fully until you know the beginning. This is why Jesus' being an heir is first, before His being the creator. He has been appointed by God to be the center of attention at the end. He is the heir. But to keep us from making a mistake and saying then that He is merely a man, who had a beginning and was elevated to this position, the author says that He created all things. God's purpose and pleasure was to magnify Christ by making Him the point of all things. And in doing so, God also created everything by Him as well.

To us in the midst of our mess, God has spoken with great variety, clarity and authority in the Scriptures. He has spoken with great finality in His Son in this age in order to show His supremacy and supremacy. Do you need a word from God? Are you looking for a voice behind you saying? Are you hoping that the next book, the next author, the next gift will give you a new word? Then hear this: God still speaks ... through what and Whom He has spoken. Let us hear Him in the Word. For Christ is the source, substance and sum of everything God has to say.

Christ is supreme not only because of God's revelation spoken through Him, but because of the revelation of God that Christ is in His very nature.

God's Reality Shown through Christ (v.3a)

Here I want to tread very carefully for we are coming onto hallowed ground. Before the wonder of these realities, angels shroud their dazzled faces. Here are three assertions which show how Christ is supremely the manifestation of the reality of God.

Now to understand this, we must first begin with a few Biblical truths.

- God is spirit. This means that His divine essence is not physical. He is incorporeal and therefore invisible. He is uncreated and unmade. He has no source or origin outside of Himself. He has neither beginning nor end. He is the environment and atmosphere, the sea on which the bubble of all created reality rests.
- God is truth. This means that everything that God is, thinks and does is totally without error. He makes no mistakes. He thinks no error. He sees both Himself and everything that is as it really is. There is neither self-deception nor self-delusion. God's self knowledge is utterly pure and perfect.
- God is holy. This means that God is utterly separate from all that is against His nature. He is wholly and completely devoted to His own glory and majesty and pleasure and it is totally right that this is true. To be unholy is to be devoted in any measure to anything besides the glory and majesty and pleasure of God.

So why are these truths foundational to these assertions? Listen to them. Christ is:

God's Glory Radiated

Jesus **is** God's glory radiating out from the Father. The author has in mind the sun. The sun is a brightly glowing object in the sky. In the sun is a process which causes light to radiate outwards in all directions. When we see the radiated light, we have seen the sun.

So Jesus is the glory of God radiating out from the Father. When we see Jesus, we see the glory of God. When His grace and truth shine brightly in the eyes of faith, we have seen and felt the glory of God. God dwells in light unapproachable, so Jesus shines on us bringing to us the very glory of God. And seeing that glory, seeing Christ, transforms us to be like Him.

God's Essence Represented

Jesus is the exact representation or image of God's nature. God the Father and God the Son (and God the Holy Spirit) are exactly alike in their essence and nature. God's essential nature, resident invisibly in the Person of the Father, is stamped by God's thought and word in the person of Christ. Think of it this way, as Jonathan Edwards did. God the Father's self-knowledge and self-idea is so true, so accurate, and so comprehensive that it is another Person, the Son. If you want to know what God is like, learn about Christ.

So these two statements go together to show us that Jesus is the exact representation of the nature and character of God, not like a painting or a photograph, but like the rays of the sun cause us to see the sun.

God's Power Revealed

The words here are a complement to those in the end of verse 2. Jesus not only brought all things into existence but He carries them along and sustains them for the end to which they were created. I was helped by one author to think about how Christ is supreme when God's power is revealed.

- **JESUS IS POWERFULLY PRESERVING EXISTENCE.** Now this sounds strange to modern ears. Since childhood, we have absorbed the idea from science that the foundational reality of existence is physical, energy in various states. The Bible tells us that the foundational reality is spiritual—it is Christ and His Word. What we think is so real, is, in fact, very fragile and hangs by a slender thread on the brink of extinction. All that is would cease immediately to exist if Jesus stopped thinking about it and stopped sending out His sustaining Word to preserve it. (Piper)
- **JESUS IS POWERFULLY GUIDING PROVIDENCE.** The word used here literally means “to be carried along, to be held up.” I see in these words that Jesus is working through His power to unfold in time and eternity the purposes and pleasures of God. We are used to thinking that what happens is solely the product of chance or choice. God has designed the flower of history, folded it in the bud of the past, and opened it petal by petal by the powerful Word of Christ so that in full bloom, the supremacy of God in Christ will be fully revealed. And the fragrance will be sweet while the colors will be bright with glory.

God's Redemption Secured by Christ (v.3b)

Christ is also superior in the redemption He has accomplished. A great section of Hebrews is devoted to unfolding the full meaning of these two phrases. But even here, let us ponder the final superiority of Christ in His redemption and reign.

Jesus the Savior - Its Essential Character

I want us to think about what this wonderful phrase implies.

- The main problem human beings have is **sin**. I am afraid that we have lost sight of that today. If you ask most people what is man's greatest problem, few people professing Christianity will say that it is sin. We think that our problem usually has to do with psychological, relational or physical categories. Jesus' redemption is first and foremost His dealing with our sin.
- Sin stains, mars and corrupts. I get this from the word "purify" or "purge". It tells me that sin is more than an honest mistake. It is a terrible stain on our lives. It is a corruption at the core of our being. It is constantly compared to leprosy. It spreads and deadens and eventually brings death.
- Redemption purifies and purges. Jesus' work on the cross actually deals with our sin. If sin is a stain, redemption purges. If sin is corruption, redemption purifies. All that sin is and does to us, the redemption of Christ reverses.

Let us not lose sight that this redemption is in Jesus Christ alone. There is only one salvation. It is in Him, and Him alone. There is no other name under heaven whereby you may be saved.

Jesus the Sovereign - Its Necessary Consequence

I love the image of this phrase. I imagine the Lord Jesus Christ, after His resurrection and ascension, marching with great accomplishment to the throne and turning and looking out over the sea of glass. And amidst the shouts and praises and songs of redeemed souls and elect angels and principalities and powers, HE SITS DOWN.

- He sits down to show that what He has accomplished is finished. The superiority and supremacy of Jesus is seen in these grand words—He sat down. The work of redemption has been accomplished and finished forever. No one can add to it. No one can take from it.
- He sits at the right hand of the Majesty *because He Himself is majestic*. He has a right to sit there. His glory and brightness and wonder is the shining forth of the Father.
- He sits on the throne because He is the sovereign. He is the ruler. Having finished the work of salvation as the savior, He now sits down to rule as the sovereign.

Listen to the Word of God. If you are going to trust Christ to save you, you must also bow to Christ to rule you. The purifying work of Jesus' redemption is designed to bring us under Jesus' rule. If you will not have Him as your Lord, you cannot have Him as your Savior.

Finally, let me show you how important it is that Jesus has sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on High. The writer originally penned this verse as one clause with one subject and one main verb. Everything else serves to shed light on that one main assertion. The subject is “He” (or “who” in the original) that is the Son of God, Jesus Christ. The one main verb is “sat down.” So the one main clause of the verse is: “He sat down at the right hand of Majesty.” Everything else in the verse serves that assertion and sheds light on that.

John Piper suggests that the way to hear this is to translate it like this:

- He...being the radiance of God’s glory...sat down on the right hand of majesty.
- He...being the exact representation of God’s nature... sat down on the right hand of majesty.
- He...upholding all things by the Word of His power.. sat down on the right hand of majesty.
- He...having made purification of sins sat down on the right hand of majesty.

So here are the reasons for the final supremacy of Jesus’ exaltation:

- He is the radiance of God’s glory— so He sat down on the right hand of majesty.
- He is the exact representation of God’s nature— so He sat down on the right hand of majesty.
- He is upholding all things by the Word of His power— so He sat down on the right hand of majesty.
- He made purification of sins— so He sat down on the right hand of majesty.

- Christ’s three offices are seen here.

Prophet He is superior as both the final revelation and full reality of God.

Priest He is superior as the final redeemer and purifier of sin.

King He is superior for He is seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

- The superiority and supremacy of Christ is eternally demonstrated.

- Final revelation
- Full reality
- Finished redemption

Conclusion

I close this morning by commending this great Person to you that you might trust in Him, and love Him and worship Him. He is alive and sitting at the right hand of God with all power and authority and will one day come in great glory. He has that exalted place because He is Himself, God the Son; and because He upholds you and me by the Word of His power; and because He made a perfect purification of sins.

O, my friend, would you not come to know the One who has made you; who upholds your existence; who reveals God to you the way light reveals the sun; who has made purification for your sins and has gloriously ascended to heaven and is now, SEATED for you?

The Exulting Worship of Ministering Spirits

Hebrews 1:5-14

Introduction Somehow, the church and in the world today are fascinated with angels. It had also for those to whom the book of Hebrews was written. There are many ways that we can think wrongly about angels.

- We can believe all sorts of myths about angels. Some common myths have continued from time immemorial. But what and who angels are is very clear in the Scripture. I will speak more about this in just a moment.
- We assign them a greater role than they actually have. Many cults have elevated angels by making Jesus Christ just another angel. Many so-called Christians pray to angels and worship angels, a practice *absolutely forbidden in the Bible* however attractive it may be to us. (Col. 2:18; Rev. 22:8-9)
- We do not care about them at all. This text will speak powerfully as to why we must care a great deal about angels.

Now this text speaks to us very powerfully about all these three possibilities when it comes to angels.

But before we do, let me address for a moment some truths about angels which are not spoken of here but are clearly revealed in other texts in the Scripture. If we are going to think properly about angels, we must begin with a Biblical doctrine of angels.

- Angels are created beings. Like all created beings, they have a beginning and also are endowed with eternal spirits. They are ultra-intelligent, powerful and yet are neither omniscient nor omnipresent. Each angel has a locus of existence which can be only be in one place at a time. They are not the spirits of departed humans. (Neh. 9:6;)
- Angels are spiritual beings which are given human appearance, particularly that of young men. Angels never appear in the Scripture as women nor children, nor do they have wings. Cherubim and seraphim have wings, but they are not angels. Much of the common conception is mythological and not Biblical. (Ps. 104:4, Gen. 19; Judges 2:1; 6:11-22; Mt. 1:20; Lk 1:26; Jn 20:12)
- Angels are heavenly worship leaders, messengers and warriors. Throughout Scripture they are seen worshipping before the throne, running errands for the Lord, delivering messages and fighting in the spiritual warfare going on in the cosmos. They have ranks and orders and are overseen by Michael, the archangel. They will appear when Jesus comes and are involved in the awful judgements of that day. (Jude 9; 1 Thess. 4:16; 1 Pet. 3:22; Col.1:16; Rev. 7:1;8:2)
- 2/3 of all the angels who were created were chosen by God not to fall. The remainder followed Satan in his rebellion and was cast out of heaven. Note that Satan is not an angel—he was the covering cherub who disguises himself to appear as an angel of light. (Ezek.. 28:11-19; Is. 14:12-17; 2 Pet. 2:4; Jude 6; 2 Cor. 1:13-15)

Why would converted Jews of Paul's day attach a wrong importance to angels? What do they bring to the table that was causing their thinking on angels to go astray?

- Angels were involved with giving the Law (Deuteronomy 33:2; Psalm 68:17; Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19).
- Angels were involved with protecting Israel (Psalm 34:7; 2 Kings 6:17)
- Angels were involved in the on-going process of revelation (Ezekiel, Daniel).

So it is important that we measure our thinking by that of the Scripture. Its importance is seen in that starting from verse four through to the end of chapter two, the author is dealing with angels. It is an important issue to set straight. But more than that, if you have eyes to see, this text helps us to join with angels who worship Jesus and shows us that angels are sent to serve us, even today.

What about us today? What has pushed this whole idea of angels all out of Biblical proportion?

- Ignorance – often people are badly misinformed.
- Gnosticism – an ancient heresy which has made a reappearance in the church, even in evangelicalism.
- Charismaticism – they have almost an obsession with them.
- Catholicism – they worship angels.
- Christian novels and books – inculcating error about angels using novels as the vehicle
- New Age speculations – modern gnosticism which affects the above.

Jesus is Superior as the Son

(v.4-6)

It is possible to become so used to, so familiar with a truth that it appears common place. We can be like a person who loves the quick easiness of McDonalds so much that we are uncomfortable and do not appreciate the pleasures of fine food at an excellent restaurant. For your appetite for worshipping and honoring and magnifying Jesus says more about you than anything else. I want to stir you up from familiar truths to see and enjoy how much better Jesus is.

In His Reputation

(v.4)

Here is our opening assertion. *Jesus is as much better than angels as His Name is more excellent.* Now reflect on that for a moment. Having been seated on the throne at the right hand of majesty, He is as superior to angels as His Name, His character, reputation and fame, are. In other words, what we must think about most is how great Jesus is, not how great angels are. So it is very important that we hear this today. However wonderfully mysterious and powerful and beautiful angels are to you, Jesus is to be as much more wonderful and great and precious as He deserves to be. And He deserves to be because He is the final Revelation, Reality, Redeemer and Ruler.

In His Resurrection

Psalm 2:7 (v.5a)

So he goes on to show why this is true. If we are going to think rightly about angels and Jesus we must do so from the Word. What was the more excellent name that Je-

sus inherited? The superior name is *The Son of God*. While angels may be called *Sons of God* collectively (and they are in Job 1:6) only Jesus can be called this *individually*.

Now what does this quote from Psalm 2:7 tell us about the greatness of Christ? Why quote it now? Because this word *begotten* here is not being used to point to a time when Jesus was made, but to the time when Jesus was resurrected. Turn with me to Acts 13:32-34. Here in this text, Paul says that the promises made to the Patriarchs were fulfilled when Jesus was raised up from the dead. Then he quotes this same Psalm as a proof text. Clearly then, the New Testament interprets Psalm 2:7 as a reference to the resurrection. This is not a new idea for Paul says in Romans 1:4 that Jesus “*was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead.*”

So Jesus is the Son of God, not only from all eternity, but manifested to be so in a special way when God raised Him from the dead. This is not true of any angel. So worship Jesus.

In His Relation

2 Samuel 7:13-14 (v.5b)

Jesus is to be worshipped as the Son because of the special relationship He has with the Father. This verse is taken out of the covenant God made with David. Listen to the words, “*I will raise up your descendent after you, who will come forth from you and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for My Name, and will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him and he will be a son to me...*” Now these words are spoken immediately of Solomon. But one greater than Solomon is in view. God affirms His relationship as Father to Jesus His Son because of the Kingdom and the throne and the house of God that will be established, which house we are as living stones. These great words were never spoken to angels or about angels. They were only spoken to and about Jesus Christ. So He is to be worshipped because God has affirmed that Jesus is His Son.

In His Return

Psalm 97:7 (v.6)

It is possible to take the word “again” as the NIV does. If so, then the reference here is to Jesus’ incarnation. That Jesus is superior and greater than the angels is evident from the Gospel records. For when Jesus was born, the angels filled the night sky with their brightness and the cold Judean morning with their song and shepherds with fear and wonder. And their song rang out, “Glory to God on the Highest.” So Jesus is greater than angels in His incarnation and humiliation. Just imagine, even as Jesus was a baby, an infant cooing in His mother’s arms, He was still greater than the angels.

But I believe, as do a number of scholars and translators, that the word “again” modified “brings”. So this ought to read, “And when He again brings the firstborn into the world.” So it is a reference to Jesus in His return. He is greater in the work He did here on earth, in the resurrection and in His ascension into heaven. But He will be magnified even more when He returns. Than everything in heaven (angels) and on the earth (humans) and under the earth (demons and Satan) will exclaim that Jesus is Lord. (Owen, Piper)

Either way, Jesus is greater than angels, whether in the humiliation of His incarnation or in the exaltation of His return.

Jesus is Superior as the Sovereign (v.7-9)

Now the author begins another tack. In verses four through six, the superiority of Jesus is seen in that the *angels worship Him*. Now His supremacy is seen in that the *angels serve Him*.

In this quote in verse seven from Psalm 104:4 we see that angels are servants. As Warren Wiersbe put it, “Angels minister *before the throne*; they never *sit* on the throne.” (*Bible Exposition Commentary* p.281). In this Psalm which evokes in magnificent imagery the creation of the cosmos and angels and the world we live in, angels are seen as being made or created to serve. But not so of Christ. When we are thinking of angels and Jesus together, we must be thinking of those who serve before the throne (angels) and the One who sits on the throne (Jesus).

In His Rule Divinity (v.8)

This verse has two amazing purposes.

- To leave no doubt as to the DEITY OF CHRIST. “To the Son, God says, your throne, O God, is forever.” Now mark it. This is said to the Son. But He is addressed as God by God. So we cannot make a mistake that says the person was wrong in affirming Jesus as God for it is God who said so. And the word cannot be translated as “Divine throne” as in some cults, for how can a throne be “deity”.
- To leave no doubt as to the AUTHORITY OF CHRIST. To this Divine Son, God says that His throne is forever. It will never end. There will never be a time again when Jesus will give up the free exercise of His deity and authority. His throne will never be overthrown, it will never be threatened, it will never end.

So angels serve Jesus for He is their Divine ruler and ours.

In His Righteousness Desire (v.8b-9a)

Jesus is superior to angels not only because He is their ruler, but because He is righteous and loves righteousness. Now is this to say that angels do not? No. But the elect angels were preserved from falling, have never known sin, and do not experience temptation. But Jesus has. He has lived among men and experienced what it is like to be tempted. Yet in all of it, He loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.

- In our ruling and managing and overseeing, is our headship and leadership done with righteousness as its primary objective? Jesus rules with righteousness. This is what His kingdom is known for. And angels serve Him with glad hearts for His scepter is true and just.
- Do we worship and trust and treasure Jesus with a heart that loves righteousness and hates sin? Listen to me. I am fearful for myself. How easy my pride and self and sins overwhelm me. And I am fearful for some of you. You are crowding up close sin and the world. You let its values determine the choices you make. Having is absolutely *nothing*. Being is everything.

In His Rejoicing**Delight (v.9b)**

But that brings us to a most precious sentence. Because Jesus is God, and because He has an eternal throne and because He loves righteousness, Jesus was anointed with “the oil of gladness”. Jesus is supreme as the sovereign in His *divinity*, in His *desire* and now in His *delight*.

This quote in verses 8-9 is drawn from Psalm 45:6-7. Time would fail us to survey the splendor of the imagery of this Psalm. Behind the shadows of David and his queen ascending in great pomp and circumstance to the throne to be admired and applauded shines the bright glory of Jesus and His bride. The scene moves poets, stirs humble hearts and draws homage and delight from pure hearts.

And the emotional atmosphere is filled with heart soaring gladness and joy and happiness. For the author of Hebrews, he sees the angelic hosts in breathless praise. But Jesus has been anointed with gladness even above them. So no matter how high the praise and deep the passion, Jesus’ is greater. And this because His God, Jesus’ God, His Father, has reached into the deep well of joy in his own being and taken that gladness like a rich, sweet perfume and poured on Jesus’ head.

An amazing truth emerges from this text. There is no contradiction between holiness and happiness. The rule of Christ in righteousness, the delight of Christ in righteousness is the ground on which God gives the rejoicing. What a vision the Bible has of God: immeasurably holy and intensely happy.

Jesus is Superior as the Creator**(v.10-12)**

The author takes Psalm 102:25-27 and applies them to Christ. This is to once reinforce what has been said before. Jesus is the creator.

In His Works**(v.10)**

The heavens and the earth in the Bible comprise all the cosmos. In the beginning all that is not God came into existence by His creating word and power.

In His Essence**(v.11-12)**

The contrast set up here is the eternalness and unchangeableness of Christ over against the constant change and failing feebleness of an aging universe. There will come a day when the clothing of the physical will be removed from the spiritual and new given. So Jesus is the creator and sustainer of what He has made in the beginning and what He will bring about in the end.

Do you worship Jesus Christ as the creator, sustainer and sovereign over all? Do the vast ocean of stars and the bright faces of flowers and the rolling grandeur of mighty rivers and the clapping hands of forested hills and majestic anthems of whale song all turn our hearts to marvel at and worship Jesus?

Jesus is Superior as the Victor**(v.13-14)**

Psalm 110:1 is the author's source for this quote. That Psalm will be drawn from again later. But now, the angels are to worship Jesus because to Him and for Him God is bringing about victory.

Jesus is the Master**(v.13)**

He returns in this verse to what He started in verse 3—Christ sat down at the right hand of Majesty as the King of the universe and as the Son of God in power and as Heir of all things and as God, verse 8. This seat *beside* God is the seat *of* God. So he comes back (in verse 13) to this triumphant place of the Son. (J. Piper)

This has never been said of any angel and no angel has ever seated at the right hand of God. Now Lucifer, the anointed covering cherub had designs to not only sit on the throne, but to be elevated above the throne. Because of his pride and his self-conceit and self-worship, he became the enemy of God. Jesus, on the cross and through the resurrection has brought the power of Satan to an end. In Satan's foul rebellion, one-third of the heavenly hosts followed them to their own doom.

That is why these two verses are placed side by side.

Angels are His Ministers**(v.14)**

Verse 14 tells us that angels are sent to serve the church. This statement is the summation and conclusion of the argument. Jesus Christ is the King *over* the church; angels do His bidding *for* the church.

But we must lose the connection between these two. *How* do the angels serve us? While we are waiting the day for the triumph of Jesus to be realized, we are surrounded and beset by enemies. And God accomplishes two things through this ministry of angels. (1) He sends them to serve us so that we will persevere in faith and inherit our salvation and (2) in the angel's serving us, the enemies of God are made a footstool for Christ's feet. So Jesus sends His angels to serve us and to bring us safely home.

Now I have pondered a question. If Jesus is greater than angels and all that God accomplishes from beginning to end He does through His Son, why bother with angels at all? Why create them? Is not the worship and service of men and women and children enough to satisfy the glory and greatness and gladness of God?

The answer is quite remarkable. For angels have a role, a God ordained and magnificent role. Toward Christ, the role of angels is to worship Christ (v.6). Toward the people of Christ their role is to serve and help us reach salvation (v.14). In John Piper's familiar language, "God created angels that His son might be glorified and His people might be satisfied."

Conclusion

- The supremacy of Jesus is seen, for the angels:
 - *worship* Him by exalting Him
 - *serve* Him by ministering to us
- We learn that worshipping and serving are two wings on which soaring hearts magnify God. We must never forget this. Jesus is greater because He is worshipped and served by angels. Jesus is magnified when He is worshipped and served by Christians. May this be so among us today.

I want you to go home this morning with this truth ringing in your heart: Jesus Christ is infinitely superior to angels. They were created, not to compete with Christ, but to worship Jesus and to magnify Him for all He is worth. And the chief way they do that on the earth is by serving us so that we hold fast to Christ and trust Him and love Him and treasure Him and finally reach Him in the fullness of our salvation. So angels were created for Christ's everlasting [glory] and our everlasting joy—which as we have learned over and over again, are not contradictory aims.

As one author wrote on this text, “The universe is filled with angelic helpers. By their ministry to you, Christ wants you to be encouraged and hopeful. For these heavenly worshippers are all—all of them—sent to serve you and to bring you safely home to worship Jesus.”

The Eternal Danger of Spiritual Drift

Hebrews 2:1-4

Introduction I am sure that all of you have said to someone else, “Please pay attention.” It is even more likely that you have heard these words with varying emphasis and strength from parents or teachers or coaches or bosses. We know how important it is to pay attention.

- Not paying attention to instructions can ruin meals, destroy equipment or give us green hair.
- Not paying attention can cause car accidents and life wrecks. It can bring wrong answers on quizzes and failure in life’s tests.
- Not paying attention can flaw the multi-million dollar Hubble telescope mirror and can sink the Titanic.

Now all of these things strike us as being terribly important in their context. But, this passage tells us that if chapter one is true (and it is), then there is an immense danger that is constantly threatening men and women, teens and children.

The Description of Our Danger

(v.1-3a)

Our responsibility to the Word we hear.

If Jesus is all that chapter one says He is, if Jesus is greater than the prophets and greater than the angels in His deity, if Jesus is the final and decisive Word of God in His revelation, redemption and rule, if angels worship and serve Him, if all that God has, is and will reveal has been spoken in Christ, then *we had better pay attention*.

As a Duty

(v.1)

The first duty in the book of Hebrews is to *listen*—that is to say, to hear and to heed what this immensely important revelation of God that Jesus is means for us.

Now the words here tell us that it is exceedingly important that we go on listening, learning and living God’s revelation, redemption and rule in Christ. It is not something we can be casual about. It is of vital importance to God and to us. For if I understand this whole text, a constant and ongoing inattention to the Word exposes you to the judgement of God and unmasks you as an unbeliever.

It is a sad fact that the words here clearly identify Christians today, yes even many of you.

Where We are Inattentive

You are not giving serious attention Jesus and to the Word.

It is something that we are hearing. Now it is something we are hearing because it is what God has spoken. And through the Scriptures, God continues to speak. So then are we hearing the Word? Do we listen to it daily? Do we see it as important to us as our food and our water?

WE ARE INATTENTIVE IN OUR READING OF THE WORD. I dare not ask this morning for a showing of hands as to how many of you have even merely read a portion of the Word (not read about a portion of the Word) 4 times this week. In fact, when was the last time, apart from church or family devotions, you read the Bible with prayer and serious attention? Loved ones, this Book is how we know Jesus. It is how we worship Jesus. It is how we love Jesus. It is how we hear Jesus.

WE ARE INATTENTIVE IN OUR HEARING OF THE WORD. O we come to church. We find our Bibles (because we can't remember where we left them last Sunday instead of where we put them this morning) and we sit and watch the people or the clock or whatever it is that can be seen from our vantage point. We sleep. We think about the week, the afternoon, the meal. And, yes, I am being rude. And no, I am not exaggerating for I have done all those things myself and I can see many of you doing them even now. Ultimately the attention you give to the Word here reflects the attention you give to the Word morning by morning and evening by evening.

WE ARE INATTENTIVE IN OUR USE OF THE WORD. When sin and trouble and difficulty come, do we instinctively go to the Word for our solution? When joys and gladness and good things come, do we express them and enjoy them in words and ways informed by the Word? When our child disobeys, or our spouse angers us or our finances frustrate us, do we search through the Bible for what God has spoken in Christ about that trouble? And do not say to me that you do not know enough about the Bible to do that—where do you think it is going to begin? Do you think that God leaves a seeking saint whose eyes are fixed on the Word struggling without answers?

So what does this bring about? What is the consequence of not paying attention to the Word, to Christ?

Where We are Drifting

This is terrifying is it not? Not paying attention to the greatness of the revelation, redemption and rule of Jesus produces drift. And this is an amazing and terrible danger.

Hebrews says that if we do not vigilantly pay closer attention to the Word of God, we will float by—we will drift away from God and His Word. We all know people like this. Some are in this room. There is no urgency. No vigilance. No focused listening or considering or fixing our eyes on Jesus. And the result is not a standing still, but a drifting away.

For you see, there is no standing still. This life is not a lake, it is a river—a torrent flowing downward toward destruction. If you do not earnestly listen to Jesus, then you will go backward. You will float by.

O listen to me. You must see that the greatest danger to you becoming comfortable, respectable and passive in your Christian life. When you think that you have enough momentum in the minimal of ministry to carry you along. Where you once were faithful to every service, now you come when it suits you. When once you served with all your heart in all you were gifted to do, now you are content to

sit. Where once you struggled against every weed of sin and cultivated all of God's graces, your garden is now choked with cares and pleasures. Loved one, you are drifting.

And in your drift you are nearing the rapids. There is in your ears the thundering roar of your life rushing over the edge. But the waters now are still calm. You are resting on your oars. You comfortably look back at where you have been instead of giving attention to where you are heading. Wake up! I say to you, wake up!

Here is God's solemn invitation to be satisfied in Jesus so that we do not drift downstream into deceitful desires. Here is God's serious command to listen, to pay attention, to firmly anchor yourself on Christ in heaven so that *you do not drift*.

As a Warning

(v.2-3a)

We are alerted to our danger, not only by being told what our duty is, but also by a stern warning. This warning comes to you as condition in verse 2, "if these things are so," followed by the consequence in verse 3. Once again the author wants to press home very forcibly how infinitely dangerous all this is.

In its Content

(v.2-3a)

Let us think of this as an assertion and then draw the consequence from it. Every word that God spoke through angels and prophets in the Old Testament has been demonstrated over and over again to be inflexible, unalterable and surely ended in the just recompense on every single violation and transgression. What God gave, what God spoke in many portions and many ways, that divine revelation could not be ignored with impunity. Even in its greater weakness and variety and diversity, it had to be obeyed. It was quite literally a do or die situation.

If the revelation of the Old Covenant, if that Word spoken by God through angels exacted that kind of judgment, then what do you think will be the judgment as a result of the greater, final and decisive revelation in Christ and His Word?

In its Consequence

Now think about these words in verse 3. It is question. It is meant for our minds not merely hear that it is impossible to escape, but to actually say, "I cannot escape" in response to the question.

What is our second danger here in this paragraph? Neglecting our salvation. Piper put it best in the following words.

"Now this is a sobering word for the world and for the church, because most people *do* neglect the greatness of salvation. How many people do you know who give serious, sustained attention to the salvation accomplished by Christ—who love it, and think about it, and meditate on it, and marvel at it, and feel continual gratitude for, and commend it to others as valuable, and weave it into the lesser things of their lives and set their hopes on it? Do you live this way? Do I? It is not astonishing how neglectful we can be of our great salvation?"

"Is there a sense of greatness in your mind about your salvation? Do you respond to the greatness of your salvation? Of do you neglect it? Do you treat your salva-

tion the way you treat your will or your title to your car or the deed on your house? You signed it once and it is in a file drawer somewhere, but it is not really a very great thing. It has little daily effect on you. Basically, you neglect it. So this an astonishing word to us. To neglect our great salvation is to come into judgment and there will be no escape.

“And this message is not just for us. It is for the world. This great salvation is the good news, the gospel of the glory of the blessed God. It is the salvation (and the only salvation) that brings man to God. The world neglects this salvation to its eternal peril.

“Well, what is it—this great salvation? What He’s saying is: Don’t neglect being loved by God. Don’t neglect being forgiven and accepted and protected and strengthened and guided by Almighty God. don’t neglect the sacrifice of Christ’s life on the cross. Don’t neglect the free gift of righteousness imputed by faith. Don’t neglect the removal of God’s wrath and the reconciled smile of God. Don’t neglect the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and fellowship and friendship of the living Christ. Don’t neglect the radiance of God’s glory in the face of Jesus. Don’t neglect the free access to the throne of grace. Don’t neglect the inexhaustible treasure of God’s promises. This is truly a great salvation. Neglecting it is very evil.”

Is your life covered with the dust of neglecting your salvation?

So here are the great and terrible dangers.

- Not paying attention to the Word with the consequence of drift.
- Neglecting our salvation with the consequence of judgment.

But what is it that makes our response to the Word of Jesus and His salvation so important?

The Reason We Are In Danger

(v.3b-4)

The reliability of the Word we have.

Now let me ask you. Did you feel a strong command to give attention to every word, every sentence, every pronouncement that President Clinton said and a grave danger if you neglect the hopes and salvation he offered? Absolutely not. Why is that so? Because we learned that his promises and pronouncements were unreliable. Today’s truth is tomorrow’s lie.

But when we come to the Word, we come very differently. We come to what we are absolutely sure is reliable and authoritative and sufficient. The author here is answering a very important question. In fact, this very same question is being asked today, not only by unbelievers, but by professing people within the church.

How do I know that the Scriptures are the revelation of Christ? How do I know that the message given and commands required and the principles verbalized and the God revealed in its pages is trustworthy?

Spoken by Christ**(v.3b)**

The New Covenant revelation we have begins with the life and ministry and teaching of Jesus Christ. The great New Covenant truths which tell us how great our salvation and our Savior are were first taught by Jesus. Those words which we now read were then spoken by our Lord. But we were not there. So how can we be sure?

Confirmed by the Apostles**(v.3b)**

What Jesus taught was confirmed to the author and others who did not walk and talk with Christ on a daily basis, by those who did. So the author of Hebrews and others who came to Christ after His resurrection were utterly convinced of those truths because they were taught them by men who walked with Christ.

Attested by God**(v.4)**

But how could we be sure that what they were saying about God and about Christ was true? What would authenticate their testimony seeing that Jesus was ascended into heaven? God authenticated their exposition and explanation of the words and works of Christ by signs and wonders and various miracles and by distributions of the Spirit.

In other words, we know the New Covenant is true and reliable and worthy of our attention and trust as the revelation of Christ because God gave these signs and wonders and miracles to the apostles and prophets who were the instruments of that revelation.

So we had better pay attention to this Book and to the greatness of the salvation and the Savior it speaks of because we can trust its accuracy and authority.

Now, I said that some are still asking this same question today. There are many ways of making the Word secondary, insignificant and insufficient. But one of the most appalling ways is to add to its truth and to claim that you have the same authenticating signs as the apostles and prophets *when all the verbs of this text are in the past tense*. Signs and miracles and wonders and distributions of the Spirit were given to those who were writing the Scriptures. Their authenticity and authority was therefore attested to. But not so today. This Book is finished. What God has spoken and what He yet speaks, He does so *in this Book*.

- One of the signs that you may not be born again is that you hear what I am saying and see no danger in drifting nor feel a desire to guard against drifting and are not really gripped by how great your salvation really is. May God's Word cut like a scalpel deep into your hard heart and open it up so that you will feel with amazing pain how awful your sin really is. Then may you turn to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith. May you trust Him.
- And one of the signs of hope this morning is that many of you may be startled up to realize the danger you are in. You have suddenly come to realize that you are drifting. You have a rising desire to set your eyes on Jesus, to give attention to His Word and to stop neglecting the greatness of the salvation with which you were redeemed.

Conclusion

Pay attention to the Word so that you do not drift. Do not neglect your salvation so that you are not judged. And do so because Jesus is infinitely superior over prophets and angels and is the full and final revelation. The danger is great. And, O, the delight is even greater.

The Crowning Glory of Suffering Death

Hebrews 2:5-9

Introduction Hebrews flows from the pen of its author into our lives to magnify Christ and to mature saints. To that end, the opening paragraphs declare the great supremacy of our Lord Jesus Christ.

- He is supreme for His is a greater revelation. That revelation is so great that Jesus is the final deposit of all the wealth of God's being and glory and self-disclosure.
- He is supreme for He is greater than angels. The angels were mediators of the Old Testament revelation. Jesus is greater in His Deity for angels worship Him and do His bidding.
- If Jesus is the final and full revelation of God and if Jesus is greater than angels because He is worshipped and served by them, then we have better hear and heed because we are faced with two immense dangers: that we will drift and that we will neglect our great salvation.

Now the author turns to deal with a question which probably not too many of us in our world and in our time would ask. You see for us, it makes all the sense in the world that Jesus would become human. Not just because we are on the fulfillment side of it but because we think so much of ourselves. For us the question is not, "Why in the world (or better in the heavens) would Jesus stoop to become human?" Our question to this text is, "Well of course, why not?" For you see, "the atmosphere of our age is too dense with man and too distant from the sweet sovereignty of God." (Piper)

But Jesus did become human. And even in the humiliation of becoming human, He is still greater than angels. Now the author wants us to see through to the end of chapter 2, how Jesus is superior in His humanity. Jesus is greater than angels for His humanity enabled Him:

- To regain man's lost dominion (v.5-9);
- To bring many sons to glory (v.10-13);
- To disarm Satan and deliver us from death (v.14-16);
- To be a sympathetic High Priest to His people (v.17-18).

Our Grand Prospect**(v.5-8a)**

At first, it appears that this statement simply is an assertion that takes us off on a new track. Closer examination though shows us how it is connected to the context.

- The verse has in its beginning the word “for”. Some translations do not have it and that is unfortunate because we then lose a sense of its connection to previous paragraph. The central flow of thought runs like this, “Since all these things are true about the supremacy of Jesus, you better listen to the Word unless you drift (2:1) and neglect the greatness of your salvation (2:2) that is coming to you like an inheritance (1:14) because God did not put the coming age under the rule of angels. (2:5)” In other words, there is something about hearing the Word with diligence and holding our hearts to treasuring our great salvation that is related to the glorious age when our salvation reaches its consummation. Listen, it is not angels who will be ruling the world to come, so you better not drift and you better not neglect your great salvation.
- The first word in the verse is a negative. It would be like rendering this as saying, “NO, not to angels is the world to come subjected.” (Owen) In other words, the author is very emphatic. It is very important then that we think about and reflect on and even anticipate with real hunger the grand prospect this text is indicating.

And maybe the reason we drift and neglect the greatness of our salvation is that we really are not gripped by how great it really is.

Who Does Not Rule**(v.5)**

I know that angels are glorious creatures. I know that their voices fill heaven’s halls with thunderous cascades of praise. I know that their serving hearts send them tearing across the cosmos at the slightest bidding of their Sovereign to serve saints. I know that they look down in wonder and amazed joy at what is unfolding in the drama of redemption. But I know that they do not rule heaven; they do not rule earth; and the Eschatological Age of the glory of Christ is not subject to them.

So who is it subject to? The answer to that tells more about why our salvation is so great and why it is so important that we do not neglect it.

Who Will Rule**(v.6-8a)**

Who will rule is the great promise and prospect and purpose of God drawn from Psalm 8. There, David surveys the vast hosts of heaven, the sea of space and stars, the advancing arch of the universe, his face bright with the glory from the majesty enthroned above it all and suddenly wonders, “What is man that you would give attention to him and be concerned about him?” We are so small and so fragile and so weak in the light the greatness of all that is, why should God give us a day of His time?

But verse 7 is the hinge on which the Author's thought turns. Man is lower than the angels and is that by God’s design and purpose. Yet man is crowned with glory and honor because he is to have dominion over what God has created. So we may be lower in scale of being but we have been placed higher in privilege and position. Angels do not rule the world; man was created and designed to.

The Author's comment on this in verse 8 extends the verse to all things. The future that our salvation will bring us to is that of being vice-regent over creation with God. That hope is part of our great salvation—that someday those who have held fast to their great salvation will be revealed as the children of God and all creation will serve them for joyful ends.

Our Current Problem

(v.8b)

But all this is not what we see now. That which we are supposed to be ruling with joy now ravages us with sin, sorrow and sadness. What was to be a glad chorus of harmony is now a terrible jumble of discordant noise. What was to be a great fruit of our walk with God has fallen to be a grinding frustration of our union in Adam.

Why is it that what was promised as a wonderful prospect in the creation and in Psalm 8 simply is not so.

We Do Not Rule

Everywhere we look, if we are realistic, we are not victorious over the natural world we live in; we are victims to tornadoes and hurricanes, and floods and diseases. We are subject to the creation in all sorts of dreadful ways. We strain to persuade ourselves that we are gaining ever more control over our fate. We think our technologies will bring us the dominion we seek. We create computers and lasers and heart valves and exotic drugs. We do genetics and make much of cloning and dream in our science fiction that we will not only rule here but in worlds and over peoples not yet known.

And the brutal reality is that we are finding that our solutions to the disasters of the curse are only breeding worse enemies. We now have viruses and bacteria that not only are resistant to our medicines but actually feed on them. We think we have eradicated one disease and we pour billions into efforts to beat cancer only to wake up one day to know that only a very few cancers are beatable.

Further, all our technologies cannot hold back the rains that come at just the right times to cause rivers to swell and sweep away our hopes and dreams and the fragile bubble of material things on which we have banked our hopes.

Death Rules Us

All the ways in which creation is not subject to us eventually lead us to the problem that most concerned the writer of Hebrews, *death*. Whatever we have been able to conquer as human beings, we have not conquered death. It is a simple and inevitable reality that everyone dies. Death triumphs everywhere. It strikes all ages. It scoffs at our medicines and surgeries and diets and vitamins and exercise programs. When all is said and done, men and women, boys and girls die. Period.

Death is not subject to man. And therefore *nothing* is ultimately subject to us. It is only a matter of time and change and decay until what we think we have mastered will be ripped out of our hands by the cold specter of death. This is what we are brought to be painfully aware of in the end of verse 8. The Psalm says that and Hebrews confirms that we have a destiny so great that it boggles our imaginations. But not yet...not yet.

But even in the midst of all this disaster, death and potential for despair, there is one little word that is a telescope to see the far horizons of when all this will be different. That is the word “yet”. We do not *yet* see this now. That brightness of that hope sometimes makes the shadows we live in bearable.

But how does that *yet* come to pass? How does the author rescue this great prospect and glorious promise and the meaning of Psalm 8 from the ravages of our cursed reality and the despair of death?

Our Glorious Provision

(v.9)

By looking to Jesus. What we cannot see as true for *us* now, is actually true for *Jesus* now. What we see in Psalm 8 has been fulfilled for Jesus. Man’s wonderful prospect and God’s thrilling promises are now resting in the Amen, the “so be it” of the crucified and resurrected Son of God, Jesus Christ.

Seeing Jesus (2:9), and considering Jesus (3:1) and fixing our eyes on Jesus (12:2) is how He is magnified and how saints are matured. When all seems lost, when we are failing and falling, we must set the gaze of the eyes of our soul in Jesus Christ. This shows us two things we are to understand when we see Jesus.

The Purpose in Christ’s Humiliation

“We see Jesus ranked for a little while lower than the angels so that by the God’s grace He might taste death for all or every [one].”

Here is one reason—and there will be several more to come in this chapter—that Jesus in taking on humanity become lower than angels. He did so that He might taste death. Jesus in His Deity could not die. He is life itself. But in taking on His humanity, He became subject to death. It became a possibility.

Why should He taste death? How is it possible that He could taste death? What should sustain Him at the moment of death? He tasted death for the same reason we all do—sin. Now not His own sin. But our sin. The sins of the many sons He planned to bring to glory. He took their penalty and punishment and bore it on Himself on the cross. He stood in front of the wrath of God and shielded His children from it. He passed through the cold, dark waters of spiritual and physical death.

What was it that both brought Him to this and sustained Him through it? The grace of God. Don’t miss this. It is because of God’s grace that man is saved through Jesus death. And it was through God’s grace that Jesus was sustained through death. And so we must pay close attention to the Word and not neglect the greatness of the salvation which brought Jesus to death and sustained Him through death all so that we might not see death and might see the fulfillment of our glorious dominion

Now I come to a sticky point. Because I want to ask a question about the purpose of Christ’s humiliation and His tasting death. For whom did Christ taste death? Well, you answer, everyone. In what way did He taste death for everyone? I believe—and I am utterly convinced that the Bible fully teaches this—that Jesus tasted death for saints in one way and for everything and everyone else *in an entirely different way*. Jesus tasted death for sinners and it brings them laughter, and warm rain, and finan-

cial prosperity and temporal blessings, but not salvation. Jesus tasted death for all creation that now stands on tiptoe in breathless anticipation of a full restoration to God's original and final purpose and design when Christians are turned from caterpillars to butterflies (Romans 8:18-25). And Jesus tasted death for His own to redeem, propitiate, reconcile, regenerate, justify, adopt, restore and to deliver them from the bondage of spiritual and physical death.

And that is why, if we are not to neglect the greatness of our salvation, we had better come to grips that Jesus will bring every one of these many sons to glory—no more and no less. And the greatness of our salvation does not lie in the temporal blessings we receive but in the eternal pleasures we are brought home to enjoy.

The Preeminence in Christ's Exaltation

“We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because He experienced the suffering of death.”

All of our attention on the humiliation and condescension of Jesus must bring us to His exaltation. We must not only see the cross of Jesus but His crown as well.

But look at the wording carefully. Now He is crowned with glory and honor *because* of the suffering of death. The emphasis of the writer is on what was suffered. And because of what was suffered, we now can see Him crowned as a victor. He has received the victor's wreath having overcome death by virtue of His resurrection.

So Jesus has gone through the suffering that sin and death brings and has already received the glory and honor as the victorious conqueror. Now He has everything put under His feet, though we do not see it yet in its fullness. But, O, the day is coming. And when that glorious day comes, we will rule and reign with Him.

And now we can understand why it is that Psalm 8 begins and ends with these familiar words, “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your Name in all the earth.” Not just because of the magnificent destiny and majestic dominion promised to the saints, but also because, when it seems hopeless because we are so helpless, we see Jesus crowned with glory and honor. “O Lord, our Lord, how majestic is Your Name in all the earth.”

- Be very diligent over your heart to hear and heed the Word. So many of us are in danger because we are drifting. We are drifting into unbelief and sin. **Conclusion**
- Do not neglect the greatness of your salvation. You are destined by the grace and gladness of God for the glory of God to rule and reign with Him. All things will serve your great good. All things, without any mixture of pain or sorrow or regret will manifest the glory of God to you and through you.
- Put your faith in the promise of this great grace—that what you can only see dimly in Christ today will one day be seen and experienced by all. Fix your eyes on Jesus, not on the pain and futility and frustration and sickness and death of this age. They will not have the last word. Jesus is the final conqueror. Think on Him. Consider Him. Look to Him.
- In the face of every calamity and every frustration believe that Psalm 8 is your destiny. Believe it because it is true. Believe it because you can see that Jesus has made it true.
- Jesus is utterly supreme. Though He has become less than angels by becoming human, He was enabled to suffer death by God's grace. And now we see Him by faith crowned with glory and honor.
- Worship Jesus. Worship Jesus because He superior to the prophets. Worship Jesus because He is the superior revelation. Worship Jesus because He is superior to angels in His deity and humanity. Worship Jesus so that we do not drift. Worship Jesus so that we do not neglect the greatness of our salvation. Worship Jesus.

The Perfected Leader of Glorified Sons

Hebrews 2:9-18

Introduction In the early frontier when the West was being settled, the difficulty of the journey and the dangers along the way made it necessary for most to travel west by wagon train. The settlers would arrive at certain frontier towns which were jumping off places and form up the convoys there. To guide these wagon trains, men who knew the trails and had experienced the dangers were hired as scouts and wagon masters. Because they had gone over the trails over and over again, they were trusted to bring the settlers safely to their destinations. Their experience on the trails qualified them to lead the wagon trains. That they had dealt with the difficulties and dangers brought a sense of help and hope on the long and wearying way.

There is a sense that this is what these paragraphs are all about. They are all about someone pioneering the way ahead and dealing with the dangers and difficulties all along the way so that he might be able to better run to their rescue and to bring them safely home.

Now I must say this. We are not given as a people to think much about death. It was probably not foremost on your minds when you arose from your sleep his morning. And probably not one of you thought that today you would hear a message on death. But then again, on days and at times and in seasons when we least expect it, death intrudes on our lives. So it is only appropriate then, that we take up this text. For how we face death is a part of the greatness of our salvation and sadly, an often neglected part.

Verse 9 puts us on our track. "We see Jesus crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death..." So Jesus has come to glory through experiencing the suffering of death. His becoming human enabled Him to do that. And in doing that we see what God has wrought through Christ for his children.

A Leader Who Is Perfect**(v.10-13)**

Now verses 9 and 10 are connected by a little word, “for.” So verse 10 is the *because of* verse 9 or it is the *explanation of* verse 9. Now notice something carefully. Jesus comes to His glory (v.9). And God is bringing many sons to glory (v.10) How is this going to happen? For Jesus it was experiencing the suffering of death. Loved ones, it is how we come home to glory as well.

Its Statement**(v.10)**

“It was fitting to perfect the author [pioneer, leader] of their salvation through suffering.” We must not neglect the greatness of our salvation because Jesus’ suffering in death made Him the perfect leader of the sons going to glory.

Now, this verse raises two questions we need to answer.

- What does it mean, “It was fitting?” It simply means that it is appropriate; it fits in with the way God is; there is a sense of balance and symmetry that is congruent with God’s character.
- How can Jesus be “perfected?” Does this imply that Jesus was in some way imperfect or sinful? No, both the witness of the rest of Hebrews and the greater witness of the Scriptures make that impossible. It means that Jesus came through an experience He had never had as either God or man—he died. So there is a completeness brought to His experience. Jesus can remember what it was like to die.

So what is the Author saying to us? It is just like God to complete Jesus’ résumé as the trailblazer to glory by suffering death. So Christ experiences as well what every human experiences—death.

But that is not all. That He has pioneered the way to glory by blazing a trail through death *is all a part of our salvation*. Further, the greatness of this salvation shines forth in the glory of the One from whom and to whom are all things.

Think of it this way. Why is it fitting or symmetrical or beautiful for Jesus to suffer death?

- Because He is bringing many sons to glory in the same way;
- Because it completes in His experience (and we will have more to say about this in a moment) what we experience;
- Because it glorifies God.

But how can this possibly be so?

Its Reasons

(v.11)

There are three reasons imbedded in this verse. Let me mine them out and put them to you. The reason that it is exactly right and congruent and yes, even beautiful is that:

- We have one purpose – holiness. God is sanctifying and we are being sanctified. Now Jesus is sinless; we are not. God, in bringing sons to glory must do so along the trail of sanctification.
- We have one Father – Jesus addressed God as Father; and so do we. Jesus is declared the Son of God by the resurrection from the dead; we are born the sons of God by regeneration from the dead.
- We are one family – Jesus is not ashamed to call us brethren.

So our union with God in His sanctifying purpose as our Father makes it possible for Jesus to unashamedly call us His own family. Since we are a family and Jesus is our brother, then it is fitting that all of us, His human children and His divine Son come home to glory along the same trail.

The Author cites to two texts that illustrate his point.

Its Illustration

(v.12-13)

The first text is from Psalm 22:22. This Psalm speaks about the death of Christ. Not only because the language is specifically fulfilled, but also because Jesus quoted it on the cross (Matt. 27:45-46). For three long, agonizing hours the opening words of this Psalm were ripped from the heart of Jesus. For the first time in all eternity, God the Father separated Himself from Jesus, pouring out His wrath on Him. The sight was so awful that even creation turned away its light and the sun hid its face and the earth trembled. Can you hear it? *My God, my God. Why have you forsaken me?* This loved ones, is the suffering of death that Jesus experienced. O, the thorns and stripes and the nails and the nakedness and thirst and wracking torment of ragged breathing while hanging on a tree and a criminal's execution were suffering. But nothing, *nothing* compares to those hours of utter spiritual aloneness and abandonment and horrendous burning as the consuming fire of the holiness and wrath of God fell like brimstone on Jesus' soul.

And all of this that He might sing in the congregation with those whose names He calls out as brothers and sons in glory.

The second text is from Isaiah 8:17-18. Imagine. Because Jesus has suffered death and when we having passed through death enter the glory of heaven, Jesus presents Himself before the Father and announces, "Here I am, and the children You have given me."

So, do not neglect the greatness of your salvation, for it was just like God to bring Jesus as our perfect leader to glory through death because we will also.

So Jesus is greater than angels in His humanity because He is our perfect leader in bringing us home to glory.

An Enemy Who Is Defeated

(v.14-16)

The great reality is that all along the way, we face terrible difficulties brought by dangerous enemies. Jesus became human so that by dying He might defeat Satan and deliver us from the fear of death.

The Danger that Enslaves

We have an enemy who seeks to enslave us. In fact, He has enslaved us to sin and to its wages. We are depraved and we are dying. And most of you are enslaved to the fear of dying. You do not think about it, are surprised when it touches your life, insulate yourself from its cold touch under layers of passing pleasures and frown at preachers who disturb your comfort and security by confronting you with its inevitability.

These verses clearly say that when we fear death we are enslaved to Satan's power. How is this so? Is it not sin that is the visible chain shackling us to the power of Satan? Bear with me for a few minutes. Because the next paragraph shows how sin enslaves us to the fear of death.

The Deliverance that Frees

But Jesus has died. He has experienced death. And He is no longer dead. He is raised from the dead. He has broken the bindings of sin that enslaved us to Satan. He has done so by taking Satan's own weapon and turned it against him to defeat Him. Satan has been disarmed and defeated. So Jesus has freed us from the fear of death.

Notice carefully the language of verse 15. Fearing death is a lifelong slavery from which Jesus has freed you. Now I must ask you a plain and simple question. *Is this true of you?* Do you fear dying?

Why do we? What is it that causes death to become an enslaving fear?

- Because this present world and its passing pleasures are too important to us. We believe that dying will take us away from all that we want and have worked so hard to amass and maybe have not yet fully enjoyed.
- Because death is suffering. Quite simply, we have no theology of suffering that will sustain us even in the midst of suffering. Most of us can barely hold up under a headache. So the immense suffering of death frightens us into unbelief that Jesus' suffering in death brought good for us and glory for Him and it will bring us to glory.
- Because we know that we will face God. The Scripture tells us that the wrath of God is revealed from heaven to every living creature. Every man knows whether he has a Bible or Christian knowledge or not, that he will one day die and will one day face God. Now man goes to immense lengths to suppress this knowledge. But it is still a fact. Since death is the gateway into the hall of God's judgment, we fear it.
- Because we will face God with our sins. If we fear death, this is really the bottom line. We will face God with our sins and God will deal with us. It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of a living God.

So Jesus becomes human and dies to defeat Satan and deliver us because it is humans Jesus is helping and not angels. The angels who sinned are still enslaved to Satan's power and will one day face the awful judgment of God. Jesus has made no effort to save them. His chosen angels were kept from falling and preserved in innocence and have no fear of death.

But, Satan uses the power of sin to enslave us to death and to the fear of death. But Jesus has died and therefore freed us. How then does Jesus' death disarm and defeat Satan? That is why we are brought in our text to the next point. We are not to neglect the greatness of our salvation for in bringing us to glory we have a leader who is perfect, an enemy who is defeated and a priest who is merciful and faithful.

A Priest Who Is Merciful and Faithful

(v.17-18)

The greatness of our salvation is in bringing sons to glory. The sons He is bringing are human. And because they are human, Jesus must be like these brothers in every way.

The Purposes of Jesus' Humanity

(v.17)

Do you see the *that's* in this paragraph? Jesus became human so as to be:

A Sufficient Priest

Jesus is our high priest. We are to think of Him as a priest just as the Old Testament saints would have thought of theirs. The point of the Old Testament is to give us Biblical categories in which to think of Christ. He is our priest. He is our only priest. And we must think of no one else as our priest. These great truths will be unfolded like some great flower petal by petal in the chapters to come. But for now, Jesus has become human so that He might become a priest.

He has not just become any sort of priest. He is one who is merciful and faithful in His service to God. Now what does this mean? Again, we have here in just a few words what a great deal of Hebrews is all about. Briefly, Jesus is merciful and faithful as a priest who offers up *himself* to God. So He is not only the priest, but He is the sacrifice. In Jesus the sacrificer and the sacrifice merge into one.

A Satisfying Propitiation

It is unfortunate that the translators chose in the NIV to render it "make atonement" The word here is *propitiation*. And that is most important to both understanding why Jesus is our High Priest, how He has disarmed Satan and when He comes to our aid.

Propitiation means to satisfy or to appease or to turn away someone's wrath. The Bible is full of the idea that God is angry with our sin and sins and that Jesus has satisfied that wrath by taking it on Himself. So Jesus has dealt with our sins by satisfying His Father in taking our punishment for us.

Let me put this in just a few sentences that I hope will capture it for you.

- Jesus became like us to help us;
- Jesus became a merciful and faithful high priest;
- In mercy, Jesus propitiates the Father's wrath against our sins;
- In faithfulness, Jesus defends us against sins.

This last statement is what verse 18 is all about.

The Provision of Jesus' Help (v.18)

To help us with this, I want to change the translation a bit. Some translations reverse the clauses and thus shift the meaning. The impression we are left with then is that temptation caused Jesus to suffer. While this may be true, it is not accurate to this text. Listen to this rendering carefully.

For since He Himself {note the emphatic} was tempted in what He suffered, He is able to run to the cry of those who are in danger, aiding those who are tempted [in what they suffer]. (Expanded NASB)

You see right away that this is saying something quite different. In the course of what Jesus suffered, He was tempted. And having experienced that, He runs to our aid when we are tempted in the same kind of suffering.

Two questions emerge: what did Jesus suffer? What is this temptation?

- Jesus suffered death. Verse 9 makes this emphatic statement and therefore colors every reference to Jesus' death in verses 10 and 14. The suffering referred to here is the suffering of death.
- Jesus was tempted in suffering death. In the garden of Gethsemane, that temptation was verbalized. "Let this cup (of suffering death) pass from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours be done." The contemplation of sin being laid on Him and suffering the agony of physical and spiritual death wrought such a struggle in Jesus as a human being that He sweated blood. But He submitted. He trusted. He did not fear.

So there we have it. When we die, and we are tempted not to trust Jesus in those moments and not to submit to God's will, Jesus will run to our aid as a merciful and faithful High Priest to help us.

But that is not all. We have no need to fear death, to be enslaved to it for Jesus has defeated Satan and delivered us *because He has dealt with our sins*. When I close my eyes in this life and open them as a son coming home to glory, I will not face God with my sins. The frown of His wrath because of Jesus has been turned to the smile of His forgiveness. And because that is true, I will not fear death.

Conclusion

- Why does the Author say these things to this people?
 - They were facing the possibility and reality of a terrible and painful death for their faith. For them, death was the horrible consequence of saying “Jesus is Lord.”
 - Death was being used as a threat against them. The fear of dying was being used to tempt them to deny their faith. Deny that Jesus is the only God and Lord or you will die. This is only a threat and a temptation *if we fear death*.
 - So death is not a threat—do not fear:
 - Jesus is bringing you to glory;
 - Jesus has defeated Satan;
 - Jesus has dealt with our sins.
- We can hardly relate to that. We do not face the possibility of facing death if we deny Christ. As a result, we deny Christ in all sorts of subtle ways that show in the long run why we fear death so much. And that is because we not sons, we are not going to glory, Satan still enslaves and we feel much too often the frown and wrath of God.
- May I bear my heart before you for just a moment? Loved ones, I want to die well. Yes, I want to live well too. But most important of all, I will not fear death. Jesus has become human, and has experienced the suffering of death. In doing so, I will not fear death because Satan cannot use my sins separate me from God. I will believe and trust that Jesus has covered and cleansed my sins and has satisfied the Father’s anger against my sins. I will believe that Jesus will run to my aid in the temptations that the suffering of death will bring. I will be free in life. I will be free from fear in death. Because, if Jesus is for us, who can be against us?
- Some this morning need to come to Jesus, to confess that He is their Lord—that they will obey Him and submit to His authority. You need to believe that Jesus has died and was raised so that you may be saved. You need to call out in desperate need because you are sinking in your sins and if you died today you would face, not the smile but the awful frown and horrifying wrath of justly offended God. This may be the day of your salvation. Trust and treasure Christ today.
- Some this morning know that you fear death. You know that the pleasures of the world, the things you are amassing, the relationships you prize are all chaining you to the fear of death. Some well know that if you died now, you have unconfessed sins either committed or contemplated in your hearts. Let us take these paragraphs as true. Let us forsake the sins that so easily weigh us down. Let us see Jesus. Let us not fear death.
- You have this word from God this morning. That in the moment of your dying, when you are tempted to question, to despair, to deny, to anger and self-pity, Jesus will run to your aid because He has gone through death and in doing so knows exactly what you are experiencing. He will help you to endure through till you open your eyes in glory.

Do not neglect the greatness of salvation. For how else will you escape?

The Steadfastness of a Firm Hope

Hebrews 3:1-6

Introduction What difference would it make in your life if you did not believe in Jesus? What difference would it make if you did not believe that He is superior to all other gods, philosophies, sciences and religions?

Our author speaks eloquently to powerfully persuade us of the Superiority of Jesus. He is Superior to the Prophets, to the Angels, to Moses (3:1-6), to Joshua (3:7-4:13), to Aaron (4:14-5:10). He writes to a people who were being pressured and persecuted into returning to Judaism or pluralism. They had to say that Jesus was no greater than the heroes of Old Testament, that He was just another prophet, another leader in the long line. Or, they had to say that Jesus was a King, but He was not the Sovereign and sole authority over all.

Today, the superiority of Jesus needs to be asserted against the rise of Ecumenicism and Pluralism. People tell us that it is OK to believe in Jesus and the Bible, *as long as we do not insist that believing in Jesus and the Bible is the only way*. And it may well be that we will one day suffer loss for a faith that insists on the exclusive authority and superiority of Christ. That is why the Chapel exists. We exist so that *by God's grace and through His Word, we will cultivate in the hearts of God's people a passion for the supremacy of God magnified in love for Him and manifested in love for one another*. In other words, we exist as the covenant people of God to proclaim the superiority of Jesus Christ.

To many, that might sound arrogant. To God, this is the sweet music whose text runs through the paragraphs before us. For when Jesus is magnified, saints will be matured.

Christ Centered Design

(v.1)

So what is it that we need? We as humans need to know what it is that God requires. We need revelation. We need a word from God. And, we need to know how we can come to God to worship Him and to fellowship with Him. We are very far from God as we all well know deep in the depths of our souls. So we need a way to God. That is why the author of Hebrews now presents Jesus to us as our Apostle and our High Priest.

For, as one writer stated, "Jesus is our Word from God and our Way to God." [Piper] That He is the Word from God means that we must fight unbelief (3:7-13). That He is the Way to God means that He is our great High Priest (3:14-10:18).

So Christ is the center of a true Christian's attention.

Our Calling

We are partakers of a heavenly calling. Here is God's Divine initiative to bring us to Him. We share in God's summons to salvation with the effect that we are now holy in standing before God and brothers in our relationship to one another.

Our Consideration

Though we have been brought to salvation, we must go through a process of transformation to turn our position of being holy in Christ into the practice of holiness in life. This process *begins* with fixing our thoughts on Jesus. The constant appeal of Hebrews is for us to “see Jesus” (Heb. 2:9), to “fix our thoughts on Jesus” (Heb. 3:1); to “fix our eyes on Jesus” (Heb. 12:2). This appeal rings out to us from Colossians 3:1-2 where we are to “set [our] hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set [our] minds on things above” so that we “have the attitude of Christ” (Phil. 2:1) can say with Paul, “I want to know Christ” (Phil 3:10).

Fixing our thoughts on Jesus is faith acting. We cannot see Him, yet we love Him now and in believing in Him we are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy (1 Peter 1:8). We must understand how important it is to fight against unbelief. We tend to think that believing in Jesus is a once for all act that takes on a life of its own. We constantly talk about when we believed. Brothers and sisters, you had better be believing now with greater clarity and a stronger embracing of Christ. You have to discipline your mind to turn its inner gaze again and again to what you know to be true of Him.

So, do we set our minds on Christ? Let me suggest to you a few practical suggestions that believers over the years have found in their Bible and in their experience to be helpful.

- **FIXED TIMES OF BIBLE READING.** It is quite impossible to set your mind to thinking about something or someone of whom you are ignorant. I can think about my German friend, Diethelm, you cannot. Without regular reading of the Bible, you frankly will find it very difficult to think about Jesus.
- **FIXED TIMES OF PRAYER.** We must fix for ourselves regular times when we set our minds and hearts to talk to God in prayer. Think of it as a conversation where you hear Him through His Word and you respond to Him in prayer.
- **DISCIPLINE OF MEDITATION.** We must hold our minds to the task (and it will become a delight from which you will turn with real pain) just to think about and reflect on Christ. These may be quiet times when you sit or kneel. They may be times in a car. But make time to meditate. Now I am not talking about emptying your mind; Bible meditation is to be engaged in a process of thinking about the truth of God, the person and work of Christ and so on.

You cannot be deeply affected by something you do not think about. You cannot think about something you do not know.

And this is precisely our problem. We are being deeply affected by the world because we think about it; spend a great deal of time pursuing and a great deal of our treasure investing in it. So our hearts go running after our treasure. That is why we must pursue the Kingdom of God first. **FIX YOUR THOUGHTS ON JESUS.**

Our Confession

What then is the link between our heavenly calling and our earthly considerations? It is our confession of Christ. Since we have been called by God, we then confess Christ. The word *to confess* means *to say the same thing about, to agree*. So Jesus is the one about whom we say the same thing as God does. We agree with God. No one—and I mean absolutely, no one—can claim to be a holy brother sharing in God’s heavenly calling who does not agree with all that God the Father says about Jesus the Son.

The heart of our confession is that Jesus is our Apostle and our High Priest. Jesus is our Word from God and our way to God. And since God has said that Jesus is *the only Word from God and the only way to God*, then we must confess—that is to say, we must completely agree with God about that.

Just as Christians cannot exist without confessions, neither can Christianity. We are confessing Christians and we are a confessing church. We have a body of belief that we confess. We confess that what the Bible teaches is absolutely certain and true. Thus, we as a church confess the Word from God as the Way to God. And this whole body of truth and belief rests in the truths about Jesus Christ.

Maybe the reason we struggle to fix our thoughts on Jesus is because we have never agreed with God about Jesus.

So, what features of God’s declaration about Christ are brought to the fore for us to agree with?

Christ Honoring Declaration

(v.2-4)

The Author, in writing to Hebrew Christians, asserts the Superiority of Jesus over Moses. In doing so, he does not say that Moses was nothing and Jesus is everything. He asserts that Moses was great, but Christ is immanently superior. Verses 2-4 tell us *that* Jesus is superior while verses 5-6 tell us *how* Jesus is superior.

How They Are Alike

(v.2)

We have here a comparison of Moses and Jesus. I get that from the words “just as” in the center of the verse. We are brought then to what will be a growing emphasis on *faithfulness*. What is meant by Jesus being faithful to God (the One who appointed Him) unfolds in how Moses is faithful in God’s house.

This statement is a quote from Numbers 12:6-8. I believe this text is so important for us to understand the point the author is making that we need to turn there and that we read Numbers 12:1-8. This is God’s declaration to Miriam and Aaron when they rebelled against Moses’ leadership. They challenged Moses as the only one who represented the word from God and the way to God for Israel. What they put forward as the problem really hid the real reason—they were bigots. They did not think that Moses could truly represent God since he had taken a Cushite wife who would have been black. And God heard it.

Here is God’s point to Miriam and Aaron in verses 6 to 8. “With everyone else, I reveal myself indirectly. But Moses is faithful in all my house; to Moses I speak face to

face and he sees my form.” Don’t miss it now—God is saying that Moses’ faithfulness is part of his speaking with God face to face and seeing God’s form.

How does that relate to Christ being faithful? Moses faithfully spoke and showed who God was and what God wanted—the Word from God and the way to God. So is—not does, *is*—Jesus.

How Jesus is Greater

(v.3-4)

Moses and Jesus are alike in that they faithfully spoke and showed the Word from God and the way to God. But Jesus is greater than Moses. You see, Moses was a part of God’s household. Moses was a sinner saved by grace. He was a part of God’s people. He was a living stone in God’s building. But Jesus is worthy of greater glory because of two related facts:

- HE IS THE BUILDER (v.3). Jesus is not the house. He is not a sinner saved by grace. He is the builder of the house. He is the one who builds up the people of God into a household and He is the one who put Moses into it. He is the Savior
- HE IS THE CREATOR (v.4). It would be like sitting around in a locker room arguing over who is the best runner. Each one can put forward their achievements. Yes this one is good and that one is great. But when we come around to Jesus, He simply says, “I selected you for this team. And I made each one of you. I made your arms and legs and feet and brain—I made you.” The question of who is superior is over. He is the Sovereign. (Piper)

It is not just enough for the Author to show us *that* Jesus is superior, but he goes on to show us *how* Jesus is superior to Moses.

Christ Exalting Demonstration

(v.5-6)

The Author exalts Christ by elegantly demonstrating the greatness of Christ. He makes a statement about Moses and a statement about Jesus and the difference is those statements is how Jesus is superior.

The Presentation of the Argument

(v.5-6a)

Moses is faithful, and so is Jesus. That we have already seen.

Moses is faithful as a servant; Jesus is faithful as a son. Moses stands to the house as a servant, owning nothing but humbly serving the master’s wishes. Jesus stands to the house as a son. Jesus is greater as the owner of it all. It will all be His by inheritance.

Moses is faithful as a servant *in the house*; Jesus is faithful as son *over the house*. Moses is faithfully serving as a part of the household. Jesus is greater as the ruler over the house

So, Jesus is superior to Moses for He is the builder, the owner and the ruler of the household of God. In the moments we have this morning, I can only say to what Paul told Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:7. “Reflect on what I am saying, for the Lord will give you insight into all this.” Set your mind to think about Jesus. Think about what it means that He is the builder. Let your mind reflect on 1 Peter 1-2. Think about Jesus

bringing each living stone to that which He is building and fitting it perfectly so that in the end He has the Temple *of His own people* in which to live. Think of Jesus as the owner of the house. He has the sovereign right to do as He pleases with His own for we are not our own, we have been bought with the price of His blood. Think about what it means for Jesus to be our ruler. We cannot make the laws on our own. We must obey His rule, no more and no less. We must submit the greatness of His Word from God and embrace Him as the only way to God.

Loved ones, let us think about Jesus.

The Conclusion of the Argument

(v.6b)

So what conclusion does the Author draw from what he has said. If Moses was faithful in the house, and Jesus is faithful over the house, then we will be faithful as the house.

This sentence is the first of a cluster of sentences in Hebrews that have become very controversial. We are confronted with the second of a series of warnings to the hearers. Each of the warnings escalates in tone and terror, in how sharply it words its warning and how great it frames the consequence. We have already come through the first one in Chapter 2 which warns us against casual drift from what we have heard. The last warns against defiant refusal to heed Christ speaking now.

At one level, we can deal with these exhortations and warnings without dealing with their thorny theological implications. The effect then is like hearing a siren while we are driving – we pull over because we know something is wrong and we need to pay attention and pull over and get out of the way. But it seems to me that we need to understand these warnings a bit better than that if we are going to profit from them and respond to them in faith.

There are two classic positions taken and they tend to reflect the theological framework brought to the text.

THE FIRST POSITION reads this to say, “We will continue to be God’s house if, and only if, we do not lose our confidence and our confession.” In other words, some have used them to teach that it is possible, once having become a son of God, the house of God, the people of God, you can lose that standing. Those who say that make this verse say this, “If we do not hold fast on to our courage and the hope of which we boast, then we will not be God’s house anymore.”

THE SECOND POSITION reads this to say, “Holding fast our confidence and confession shows whether or not we are God’s house.” In other words, some have used this primarily as an evidence of those who are truly a son of God, the house of God, the people of God, since you cannot lose that standing. Those who say that make this verse say this, “We know that you are truly one of God’s own, if you hold fast and if you do not, you were never one of God’s own to start with.”

Now, before I go on, let me make something very clear –I do not believe it is possible for a person to lose their salvation, to lose their standing as sons, to be ‘unborn’. I believe that the Bible teaches that faith or belief is an ongoing action (not a one time de-

cision) that is sustained by the Spirit of grace through the Word. In other words, you must persevere and God is enabling your perseverance.

This raises an important question that is directly related to these warning texts. How does God enable your perseverance? Does it depend entirely on you or entirely on God? The answer of the Scripture is both. You persevere because God causes you to persevere. How? By giving you the enabling grace to persevere through the inward work of the Spirit using the Word of God. God enables you to hold fast your confidence and your confession by your hearing the Word of God.

But, He has also designed certain types and parts of the Word of God to be particularly suited to produce perseverance. These are His promises and His warnings. You will be able to see this so very clearly through the rest of Hebrews. But here, we have a warning whose function is to enable perseverance. In other words, through hearing a warning and an exhortation to hold fast to your confidence and your confession you actually do hold fast in the midst of great distress, difficulty and trial.

So here is the way God has ordained that it *function*: He intends for his own to persevere ⇒ He gives them warnings to persevere ⇒ they hear the warnings to persevere and thus ⇒ are enabled and do persevere.

So, Russ, you have not answered whether or not Hebrews 3 (and the other warnings) teaches that we can lose our confidence and confession and thus not be his house anymore. My response: you are asking a question this text does not answer nor is its **purpose** to answer. So, we must not use this text that way at all. When I come to these warning texts, I hear them with joy and faith and cling to Christ, keep my confidence in Him and keep on confessing my hope in Him with the result that I persevere through a faith God gives and enables.

So again, when one of God's own, threatened to drift, doubt, disbelieve and despair, hears the exhortations and warnings to hold fast their confidence and their confession, they are strengthened *by the very warning itself to keep on and not fail*.

I pray you see this – God has provided an unfailing resource so that we will never fall. It is not only His grip on us, but His grace to us through the means He has ordained. Is there a danger? O yes, my brothers and sisters. The great danger is that I am not His house and then I will drift from what I have heard and will not hear the Word and do not listen to these exhortations and warnings. Then trials and hardships and threatening come to one who is not freed from the fear of death and I lose confidence and I give up my confession. But I am a part of God's house and God has purposed that I do persevere and therefore I hear the warnings and do persevere.

Now listen to me – let me give you the framework and the text.

- God's people are held in the grip of God – they cannot fall.
- God gives grace so they will not fall.
- God gives that grace through the exhortations and warnings not to fall.
- All those who are His own, respond to the exhortations and warnings and do not fall.

So, you are God's house, if indeed you hold fast your confidence in Christ and your confession of hope and thus, you hear the warning and do persevere.

So, when trials and testing and troubles come and you begin to slide and slip, then open to texts like this and hear them and run to Jesus and cling to Him and brag up your hope and you will persevere. You believe you are God's if you persevere and so you do persevere.

So to a people who were being persecuted into denying Jesus and to us who being pleased into it, comes this stirring exhortation. We stir up our faith and hope and courage through these warnings to hold firmly on because we are God's house. At the root of all this is faithfulness and the fight against unbelief. That is what we will see next week.

Conclusion Let us stir up our faith, set our minds to think about Jesus, fight with all our might against the unbelief that manifests itself in sin. Let us think about Jesus as the builder and the owner and the ruler of His house. Let us think about Jesus as building and owning and ruling us.

May these thoughts of Jesus build faith so that you will hold fast to your confidence and your courage as you wage war against self and sin. And may we fight the good fight of faith, right up to the end. May we be found faithful as servants in God's house until the Master comes.

May we set our minds and our affections on Jesus to magnify His worth and to mature us.

The Peril of an Unbelieving Heart

Hebrews 3:7-19

Introduction

There is no greater danger than be in the place where most of you are, week after week after week. You are here at church to hear the Word of God, to be near the people of God, to experience the power of God and hopefully to enter into the blessings of God. You have seen changed lives and heard faith building testimonies and edifying sermons. Your heart was tender and open to the things of God.

But not now. You know that serving God has become dry and deadening. Church is boring and at times an irritating interruption to what, in your heart of hearts, you really want to do. The Bible no longer seems to be real to you. God seems distant to you. You try to worship, to pray, to study—and it all seems empty. And it seems so hard to understand, because you just know you are a Christian and this is not how Christians ought to be feeling. What is wrong?

These paragraphs address what may have gone wrong. Spiritual dryness has many causes: unconfessed sin, bitterness, hurts and wounds from the past, lack of use of the means of grace, testing from the Lord. But this text speaks clearly and I pray with real encouragement in its hope giving and faith sustaining truth.

These paragraphs were addressed to men and women who were under pressure and persecution in their lives like we little know. They were being sorely tempted to reject their faith and return to the security and comfort of their former religion in order to avoid the pain and pressure they were under. So these are not hammer blows to take away their confidence and destroy their assurance. These exhortations are meant to stir up and feed and sustain faith so that they will hold fast. For sin and unbelief are vital issues for everyone in the church.

Hear this: God does not sustain our faith by grace in a vacuum. He feeds and strengthens and sustains our belief by the Word. We cannot have saving nor sanctifying faith apart from the Word. We must be constantly hearing the Word. What is heard must be addressed at the point of our weaknesses. It is utterly foolish to shore up a toppling building at its strongest points. No, the joints and beams that are failing are the ones built up and strengthened. So, if what has been said so far describes you, then you need to hear this Word, and that is why our Author begins with the Word as he does.

The Scriptural Example

(v.7-11)

“Since it is important that we hold fast, hear what the Spirit says in Psalm 95.” That is the connection the author is making. I want each of you to turn in your copy of God’s Word and begin reading in verse 6. Recognize this? We sing this text often—have we ever thought about the relation of verses 6-7 with verses 8-11?

Now listen to Hebrews 3:6ff. “We are God’s house if we hold fast.” So, here is what the Holy Spirit says. “Come let us bow down in worship, let us kneel before the Lord our

Maker; for He is our God and we are the people of His pasture and the flock under His care. Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your heart.” So those who are bowing down in worship as God’s people must, if they are hearing the Word, not harden their hearts.

So, what is the Spirit saying through this text?

Explains the Disobedience of Israel

Imagine, Israel had been led by God to the point where they stood a river apart from seeing the fulfillment of all the promises God had made. They had received the Law of God, were worshipping in the Tabernacle of God, were eating the manna from heaven, and had seen water from the rock. They had heard the voice of God on the mountain and in the tabernacle and in the Scripture.

Yet because of the unbelief of a hardened heart, they were more than just a river from the Promised Land, they were 40 years and a generation away. They were the unbelief of a hardened heart away.

Speaks to Israel of David’s Day

Now remember, what is being quoted here is in the Psalms. So David is penning these words as an instructive song to exhort the people to enter into the rest of God *in David’s day*. So Israel of David’s day also must enter into God’s rest *by hearing the voice of God in the Word and believing*. They who are in the land can actually miss the rest by the unbelief of a hardened heart.

Warns Us Today

There are huge spiritual lessons for us in the life and times of Old Testament Israel. That they stood on the verge of experiencing the victory of God’s promises to them and turned away comes to us as a deep warning that we can do the same today.

That is precisely what the Author does. What makes this a challenging text to exposit is that it is itself an exposition of a text—it is a mini sermon itself. Look at the geography of this massive text.

- The topic sentence is in 3:6. We begin with “holding fast”
- The text of the sermon is in verses 7-11, as he quotes the Scripture.
- Then, by way of exposition, he draws out 3 exhortations from the truth of Psalm 95. If we must hold fast and if we must battle the unbelief of a hard heart, then:
 - Let us see to it that we do not have evil unbelieving hearts (3:12-19);
 - Let us be careful that we do not come short of entering God’s rest (4:1-10);
 - Let us make every effort to enter that rest by faith’s obedience (4:11-13).
- The conclusion is reached in 4:14-16. Therefore, we must hold fast for Jesus is praying for us in our time of need.

Notice once again the parallels in the two arguments of the first four chapters of Hebrews.

- From chapter 1 through the first part of chapter 2, Jesus is greater than the prophets and the angels therefore we must not *drift from the Word* and we must not neglect *the greatness of our salvation* in Christ.
- In chapters 3 and 4, Jesus is greater than Moses therefore we must not *doubt [disbelieve] the Word* and we must not neglect *the greatness of our rest* in Christ.

Now I cannot take and unpack all of the Author's exposition of Psalm 95 this morning. We will do that next Sunday, by God's grace. So we will be leaving some questions open. For example: what is this *rest*? How can I know if I have a hard heart? What help is there for us to trust God's Word and to enter into His rest?

This morning, let us take up only the first exhortation that comes from this massive text in Psalm 95.

The Sustaining Exhortation

(v.12-13)

"Belief is a group project." (Piper) "Take care, *brethren*, that there not be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart that [turns]away from the living God." (NASB) Know why this is so? Because the sinful tendency of any group is toward doubt. Think about it. Over a million people believed the evil report of the ten and doubted the promises of God *and never entered into those promises*. So that is why we are told to "see to it", to "take care".

The Commands

(v.12-13a)

What are we to give our attention to?

Examining Ourselves

(v.12)

We have an individual responsibility that comes first. That is why God always has his Caleb's and Joshua's who believe God and trust His promises *and enter into rest long after everyone else has passed on*. They had taken care that they themselves did not have evil unbelieving hearts, even if everyone else did.

Now notice with me in the words of Warren Wiersbe, "At the heart of every problem is a problem with the heart." See? It is an evil or sinful heart that is unbelieving. Let me put this more pointedly. It is sin in the heart to not believe God. Why? Because we will believe and trust and treasure something. And if we disbelieve God, we will turn away from Him who is living to rest our trust in what is dead. Now, hang onto that thought. Write it down. Because this will be critical to understanding what our *rest* is.

How is it that we can turn away from God?

- Because the sinful unbelieving heart is one that has never been converted by grace. We have been near the things of God, the people of God, the power of God and even the Word of God. But we have never actually experienced the saving grace of God. So what we have here is a falling away from a fiancée, not a turning away from a spouse. (Piper)
- Because we have made it a practice to turn again and again from believing and trusting and doing God's Word to hungering after passing pleasures of the

slavery of Egypt. Or we turn away from liberating truths to the bondage of the religion of the past.

We had better be giving attention to our hearts to see if we are turning away from God in unbelief. This can be a disturbing and discouraging exercise. We all can see some risings of sin and unbelief in us. How do we then keep from sinking into despair and actually turning away from the sweetness and hope of God's promises because we are overwhelmed?

Then we have the next thing we are to give attention to.

Encouraging One Another

(v.13a)

“But encourage one another daily.” Here is how we turn belief into a group or community or church project. We encourage and exhort and enable one another. We constantly tell one another what God says in His Word; we quote promises to one another. We keep turning one another back from Egypt to the living God. We tell each other faith building stories of how God has kept His promises. We pray with and for one another. We stretch one another's understanding of the Word and sharpen one another's obedience to the Word.

And we do it daily. Let me say this to you. Please understand that it is not possible, in a growing congregation, to cultivate Biblically intimate and faith encouraging relationships if all you do is come to church. Fellowship is important to us here. But the services of the church are designed for worship and exposition. If you are going to believe that faith is sustained by encouragement—and that is what this is saying—then you have to give yourself to encouraging and exhorting others. Don't pursue it for yourself. Don't go out looking for someone to encourage you. You just pour out your life into the lives of others. You know what happens? Your own belief and obedience will be sustained and strengthened as others pour their lives into you.

This is what flock groups are supposed to be all about. And we are going to be re-evaluating them to see if they are actually achieving their purpose. This is part of what Men and Women's Ministries is all about. For every evidence that God is using our fellowship together to build believing obedience, we praise God and we pray for grace for more of it.

One last thing that the Spirit is saying to us in these words. If we are to be encouraging one another in the direction of believing obedience from hearts that are tender towards God and hear God's Word, *then we must stop the gossip and backbiting and criticism of one another at the personal level that destroys and devours one another and discourages our faith.* It was the constant bickering and grumbling of Israel that turned them over and over again back to Egypt and away from the promises of God. And so it is with us. If we must encourage one another daily, then we must not destroy one another daily. And some of you hearing this today need to believe God and not harden your heart and repent and confess your sin to the one you've wronged and then lay down your life to encourage one another.

What is it that makes this absolutely necessary?

The Cause

(v.13b)

We must examine ourselves and encourage one another because sin hardens us in self-deceiving ways.

- Sin hardens us like calluses so that we are no longer sensitive to God. We are constantly rubbing up against the passing pleasures of the world so that our souls are callused and no longer open and tender to breath-taking wonder of God.
- Sin hardens us like fossils. What once was living and vibrant slowly sinks into useless stone. The settling sediment of sin hardens hearts into petrified wood.
- Sin hardens us like slowly baked soil. Under the bright light of sin, the soft soil of our heart hardens so that the seed of the Word of God does not grow and flourish and bear fruit.
- Sin hardens us like ruts. Sin runs over our lives again and again like the semis on a highway. Its constant passing wears deep ruts into the habits of our lives so that we find it difficult to break free.
- Sin hardens us like arthritis. The harboring of sin in the heart hardens us so that we become stiff and inflexible and brittle and fragile and full of pain.

The hardening of sin affects our ears so that we do not hear God, our eyes so that we do not see God, our mouths so that we do not speak of God, our hands so that we are limited in our service for God. Sins hardening deceits fool our minds into thinking we are knowing God when we don't, our hearts into believing we are loving God when we don't, our souls into experiencing God when we aren't. The hardening of sin deceives us into believing that just because we can talk about Christian truth that we have experienced it.

The Spirit has gripped me with the fact if we are not encouraging one another, we will become hard and callused and rutted and arthritic *and we may not even know it*. The hardening effects of sin are part of its deceptiveness. And I have only had to look into the mirror of the Word of God to find all of these reflected in my heart.

- Sin deceives us into valuing things instead of treasuring God.
- Sin deceives us into doing what we want instead of what God wills.
- Sin deceives us into immediate gratification without regards to long-term consequences.
- Sin deceives us into thinking no one knows when God always sees.
- Sin deceives us into thinking that we are being sanctified when we are merely being sanctimonious.
- Sin deceives us into living for ourselves when we ought to be dying for others.
- Sin deceives us into spending when we ought to be giving.
- Sin deceives us into lusting when we ought to be loving.
- Sin deceives us into depression when we ought to be delighting.
- Sin deceives us into doubting when we ought to be trusting.
- Sin deceives into thinking we know God when He doesn't know us at all.

Therefore, the encouraging affect of exhorting one another daily is to keep us from the self-deceiving effects of sin's hardening.

The Solemn Explanation

(v.14-19)

Verses 14-18 are explanations of why we must give attention and take care to examine ourselves and to encourage and exhort one another. I get that because both 14 and 16 should begin with the word "for".

Two Classes of People

(v.14-18)

The Author reminds us that there are two classes of people who are standing at the Jordan with all the promises of God stretched out before them.

Those Who Partake of Christ

(v.14-15)

"For we are partakers in Christ." Here again is that same conditional construction we have encountered in Hebrews. We are not confronted with the frightening prospect that we might lose our salvation. But that having shared in or partaken of Christ, we will hold fast. Partaking of Christ enables holding fast. Hearing these exhortations and warnings and encouragements is how God causes us to hold fast.

So there are those who hold on to their confidence in the promises of God in the face of apparently insurmountable obstacles because they have truly partaken of Christ.

Those Who Provoke God

(v.16-18)

"For who are those who provoked God?" Now the Author places all of us on the skewer of his questions.

- Who had provoked God? All of the Israelites who came out of Egypt led by Moses.
- Who had angered God? Those who sinned and wandered around and eventually died in the wilderness.
- Who never entered God's rest? Those who disobeyed.

So there are those who may be with the people of God but because of disobedience provoke and anger God and never enter God's rest.

One Cause of Failure

(v.19)

They are not able because they do not believe. Those who have partaken of Christ have believed. Those who never enter the rest, don't because they do not believe. This is radical for us because we do not see unbelief as the root of our failure. We do not understand that sin is the result of unbelief. When we reject the greatness of God's promises and refuse to believe them in an obeying way, then we have turned from God Himself. We will not enter God's rest. We will begin wandering in the wilderness.

Conclusion

Now, I am constrained to flesh this out for you a bit. In closing, I need to show you the relationship between disobedience and unbelief.

There are two sins which are brothers, one is something we ought to do and the other is something we ought not to do. They are both fruit of the same tree of unbelief. They are giving and worrying.

Now there are many of you who do not give and many others who give, but not proportionately. This sin—and it is a sin because the Bible tells us that Christians are generous and grateful and receiving grace and giving glorifies God and is commanded in His Word—comes because you do not believe the promise that God will supply all your needs (Philippians 4:19). If you believed in an obeying way that God will supply all your needs, then you will give. That you do not give means that you do not believe God's promise. So, many of you are wandering in the wilderness of want and debt. And many who have much less are resting in the promises and are seeing astounding victories in God's provision. I say again to you: if you believe God's promise to supply all your needs, you will give. So do not harden your heart: believe God in an obeying way that gives and trust Him to provide.

This also works out with worry. Many of you worry. This sin—and it is a sin because the Bible tells us not to worry—comes because we have little faith (Matthew 6:25-34). We worry because we do not believe that God will take care of us. If we believe God in an obeying way then we will seek His kingdom first and bank our hope on the promise that God will take care of us today and tomorrow and all our tomorrows. We worry because we do not believe in God's goodness, His providence and His purposes. That is what Jesus said in Matthew 6. So many of you are wandering in the wilderness of ulcers and cares and concerns about food and clothes and shelter and cars and computers and stereos and retirement. And many who have little are resting in the promises and are pursuing God and loving ministry more than life. So do not harden your heart: believe God in an obeying way that pursues God's will in every area and trust Him to care for you.

Loved ones, let us examine ourselves and encourage one another so that we will not be hardened by sin's deceitfulness, so that we will believe God in an obeying way that brings us into the rest of God's promises.

The Believing Obedience of Entering God's Rest

Hebrews 4:1-13

Introduction What is your Christianity like to you?

- Is it marked by calm, trusting assurance and confidence that is believing and obeying with an eye on heaven?
- Or is marked by the frantic doing that looks and feels like a hamster on its exercise wheel: round and round but getting nowhere?

The difference between the two is a matter of the heart. It is a matter of believing in an obeying way that trusts God's promises till heaven.

A Warning to Heed

(v.1)

We once lived in the village of Dalzell, Illinois. The east side of our village was bordered by a highly trafficked road called Dalzell or Meridian Road. Just north of us, that road T's into the access road along the Interstate. When we first moved here, there was just a stop sign and a T sign telling you to stop. And people ran through it all the time, destroying the guard rail. Soon, there were more signs up, warning that you had to stop and you had to turn. Still, people kept running through and hitting the guard rail. Now, you have several large signs and the unnerving strips that thunder as you run over them to alert you to the danger ahead. (Amazingly, people still went through and destroyed the guard rail again.)

This verse ought to come to us like large signs and unnerving strips in the road to alert us to a danger ahead. Let me put this verse to you in the way that it is phrased in the Greek so that it grabs our attention. "Let us fear, therefore, lest being left with a promise to enter His [God's] very own rest, anyone of you seems to have come short [of it]."

The Word of that Warning

Strange is it not that the Bible tells us, in fact commands, us to fear? The word is *phobaethomen*, from which we get our word, phobia. Now a phobia is an unreasonable and irrational fear of something. We can think of claustrophobia or arachnophobia or hydrophobia. These are paralyzing, crushing fears of small spaces, spiders and water.

But the fear we are warned to have here is the opposite. It is a rational, thought out fear that comes from seeing a desperate danger ahead. It is not inner sense of crawl that comes with soft squishy bodies and hairy legs. It is the sense of careful caution that comes from bright yellow and red signs and thrumming from our tires. It should cause us to take our foot off the gas and put it on the brake and to look earnestly ahead for we are at a place where many have failed to heed the warnings and have made desperate crashes of their lives.

The Reason for that Warning

Here it is: there is a promised rest that we can miss. Our author is going to unpack the three aspects of this statement which will concern us as well. Before we press on, just note them.

There is a rest for us.

That rest is related to promises.

It is possible to come short of entering the rest.

We must remember that this text was originally addressed to Jewish converts who were facing the temptation of going back to Judaism in order to avoid the pressures and persecutions they were facing. They had borne well so far, but the prospects were dimming by the moment. We are not as far removed from their reality as it might appear. If I state their case another way, it will ring true to many of you: we have been converted out of a religious system that had, while we were in it, all appearances of being Biblical. Now we know from the Scriptures that it is not. And we face the difficult pressure from family and friends to go back to it or to bring its errors into our present situation. This is exactly what the Jewish converts face and what many of you are struggling with.

A Principle to Understand

(v.2-3)

So the author gives us the simple principle by which we enter God's rest and to avoid falling short of it and returning to the wilderness.

Its Historical Background

(v.2)

He neatly ties together the situation of the Jews in Moses' and in his own day. This could easily have been translated, "We, both have been thoroughly *good newsed*." (Piper) In other words, if they failed to enter the rest it is not because they did not know better. We, all of us, the Jews of Moses day, the converts of the Author's day and us today, have been thoroughly good newsed. The message of the promises of God and the evidences of the power of God are on public display in the Word and in the lives of transformed men and women.

The problem with the Jews of Moses' day was that they did not hear the message with faith, with belief. They did not have the "O, I see" when hearing of the promises and when seeing the power of God. They did not come to the point to where the promises they heard were being believed in an obeying way. Here is the land of promise, believe God and enter it. But no, the obstacles are too big. So, they do not enter because of the principle which follows.

Its Biblical Expression

(v.3a)

"We who have believed enter that rest." Now to many of us, this is an accepted dictum of Christian doctrine. To enter God's rest, we must believe. Believing is an entering. But I wonder if we could interview the Israelites that stood at the edge of Canaan if they would say, "I believe that God is going to give us the Promised Land, but since it is impossibly hard now, I will not go in." This is exactly what we try to do today. "I believe God's promise of _____, yet it is impossibly difficult now so I won't do _____."

Please understand. Believing in the Bible is never the mere mental assent to truth. It is an embracing of the truth with our minds, our wills and our affections. Believing hears God's promises, sees what they promise to bring, values it as God's, understands the obstacles but trusts God to deal with consequences and obeys its conditions. That is faith. That is the believing that enters rest.

So what is that rest? The Jews associated it with the land, the kingdom and the Temple. We tend to argue (at the least the commentators do) whether it is heaven or salvation or victorious Christian living. In doing so, we have, all of us missed the point of the argument of verses 4 through 8.

An Argument to Follow

(v.4-8)

Frankly, the intricate logic of the argument of this paragraph can be like a Rubik's cube. Remember them? They were a cube of small cubes each face having one of six colors. The object was to twist and turn this thing so that all the cubes on a face were one color. You could play with thing for days on end. And in the end, even if you could solve it, there remains a huge question, "So what? What in the world have you accomplished?"

I suspect that this is true here as well. This paragraph is a marvelous example of intricately argued rhetoric. We are not used to following such detail in our processes of thinking today. Some of you are familiar with satellite navigation systems for airplanes. The plane has a starting point and a destination. It will fly a particular route. In order to follow that route, way-points are placed in the nav system. These way-points are where the pilot must either make changes in direction or make certain of his direction so that he stays on his route to the destination. In tracking a flight, it is possible to follow the plane through every point on its route. But it is also possible to track the plane as it hits each way-point. As long as the plane hits them and we see it, we can track the progress of the plane until it arrives at its destination.

So let me give you the way-points on the journey of the Author's argument so that we may track him from his starting point to his destination.

The Rest of God at Creation

(v.3b-5)

God's rest is not related to Canaan or to the Temple. God's rest came because the work was completed. Genesis 2:1-3 emphasizes *the completeness of the work* so there is a *finality to the rest*.

The Rest not Entered under Moses

(v.6)

Although God had entered His rest, they never entered the land and never entered the rest. So under the Mosaic Covenant the rest was not entered. Therefore, there is a rest remaining.

The Rest Available in David's Day

(v.7)

They were still being offered rest and warned about not entering rest in David's day in Psalm 95 *even though they were in the land*. So, even though the Mosaic and Davidic Covenants were being fulfilled, there was still a rest to be entered.

The Rest by Joshua in Canaan

(v.8)

Even though Joshua brought them into the land, that was not the all that the rest involved. God marked out a time in David's day, generations later, called "today", a when that the rest is still available.

So what is the point? God's rest is marked by the completed aspect of its work and the finality of its rest. All that made Judaism what it was, its Law, its Temple, its land and its King, were incomplete works and not final. They were pointing to a person, the Messiah, the Lord Jesus Christ. Here is the argument in a nutshell: if God's rest is marked by completeness and finality, neither of which were experienced by Israel at any point in its redemptive history, and, if that rest is being offered anytime it is "today", then we can only reach a very powerful and wonderful conclusion.

A Conclusion to Accept

(v.9-10)

There remains ahead a Sabbath rest for God's people.

I must point out that the phrase here "Sabbath rest" is actually one word in the Greek. There remains a *Sabbatismos*. It is not the word used for rest anywhere else neither in this book nor in the whole of the Bible. This word is utterly unique. And to argue, as many do, that we have a Sabbath keeping in the church and for God's people today is to utterly miss the point. Neither the Holy Spirit nor the writer is arguing for Sabbath keeping.

Now is when we ask a very important question, "If we have rest left over for us that is like God's rest at creation, is constantly offered to God's people in flow of life, WHAT IS THAT REST?"

God's rest is **all that He is for us in Christ made available by believing and obeying His promises until they are completely fulfilled in eternity.** Let me use two illustrations to help us here.

Its Realities in the Present

Imagine with me a large box. This box is addressed to all of God's people. It is labeled as *God's Rest*. It is filled with envelopes all addressed to different groups: some envelopes are addressed to Abraham, some to David, some to Israel, some to the church, some to Paul, some to the apostles and some to all of God's people. When we open the envelopes, inside are descriptions of what God has done for the addressee, how it relates to Christ and directions as to what we must do if this is true. Wrapped around the envelopes is a statement saying that everything inside each envelope has been (from our perspective now) signed, sealed and delivered by the death and resurrection and glorification of Jesus. Now, we start opening the envelopes and discover that what God has done in Christ that He will do for us now requires from us what often appears to be impossibly difficult or costly or risky. But we believe God, start following the directions and start receiving what was promised. But, loved ones. If all we do is read, and memorize and hold the envelope, we don't get what was promised. When we believe in an obeying way what each envelope says then we are moving into God's rest.

Its Prospects in the Future

There is something else about entering the rest that comes out from this text and from the Bible at large. When Esther and I were engaged, we had together all the promises of what marriage is all about. Some things we could begin to enter into. We had long talks and hours together. We could buy things for our home. But there were some things that were reserved for after the marriage. So it is with our rest. We are in the engagement period now. We have all the promise of what it means to be married to Christ. But some things are going to have wait until the marriage. We will not have them today. But O the sweetness of holy anticipation when ALL that God is for us in Christ is fulfilled in glory.

An Exhortation to Obey

(v.11)

What is our responsibility in the light of this? Make every effort to enter the rest.

Practice – What We Must Do

Make every effort – be diligent. Are you bending every fiber of your being to believe God's promises in an obeying way? Or are we opening the envelopes, admiring their contents and then just putting them in our spiritual pockets. Beloved, if we do not do what we say we believe, then we do not believe. I may know exercise is good for me, but I don't believe it until I start exercising. As soon as I start exercising, I begin to receive the benefits that exercise brings.

Purpose – Why We Must Do It

We do not fall by the same example of disobedience. The word here is the same one as in 3:17. It conveys the picture of being strewn across the wilderness. We had better be giving attention to believing God in an obeying way lest we become wilderness wrecks.

Conclusion

- In the particulars of our situation, this principle holds true:
we must believingly obey to enter into the rest of God's promises.
- What applications can we make of this?
 - Let us hold fast to our profession of faith. Let us believe God's promise of salvation in an obeying way. Let us not go back to the Egypt of our former religious beliefs and pagan practices.
 - Let us believe God's promises for our every moment, for every "today" and do so in an obeying way. Let us understand the descriptions of God's promises, embrace their delights, follow their directions and anticipate their future fulfillment.
 - Let us, in our salvation and in our sanctification, rest in what Christ has completed for us. Let us stop working to earn the benefits of God's promises. Let us be diligent to enter the benefits that Christ has already earned for us.
 - Let us press forward in spite of the giants and the castles and the obstacles and problems because God has said He will do it and wine and milk and honey of that land are ours just for the believing obedience.
- Psalm 95:6-7

Oh come, let us worship and bow down;
let us kneel before the LORD, our Maker!
For he is our God,
and we are the people of his pasture,
and the sheep of his hand.

The Penetrating Power of God's Word

Hebrews 4:11-13

Introduction We have been following the Author in the presentation of his case. He has argued for the utter supremacy of Jesus, *so that we can completely trust Him*. Jesus is superior to the prophets and to the angels, so you must not drift from God's Word nor neglect the greatness of your salvation. Jesus is superior to Moses and to Joshua, so you must not doubt God's Word nor fail to enter the greatness of your rest.

Interwoven through the paragraphs from 3:7-4:11 are the strands of the **proof** of an Old Testament text, the **peril** of a hardened and unbelieving heart and the **privilege** of a rest to enter. Chapter 4:1-11 drives home that God's rest is for us. Entering that rest looks like believing in an obeying way. It looks like trust.

How Trust is like Rest So how can trust be like rest? *{Fill in illustration of trusting Admin Assistants and good cars and good leadership.}* Trust and believing obedience are an ongoing confidence in God and His Word and His commitment to keep His promises because of Jesus.

So the superiority of Jesus Christ demands that we be vigilant in our fight to believe God's Word in an obeying way. In other words, magnifying Christ matures saints *in their believing obedience to the Word*.

The Metaphors for Scripture The Scriptures contain within them powerful testimonies and descriptions of what the Word is. The Bible is God-breathed. It is a seed from which spring spiritual life producing fruit. It is a lamp whose light turns away the darkness and brightens the path for our feet. It is milk for spiritual babes. It is meat and manna to strengthen and sustain growing saints. It is an anchor for heavenly souls to keep them from sinful drift. It is a guidebook whose directions point us heavenward and whose commandments shape our love for God and man. And it is a sword: the sword of the Spirit.

It is as that metaphor that the Word of God comes to us in this paragraph.

The Connections to the Context

for

Verse eleven opens with the word *for*. So listen to what he is saying. "Let us, therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience because the Word of God is all that this verse says it is."

So that leads me to ask the following:

Whose Example of Disobedience?

The example is that of Israel in the wilderness. Israel threw away their opportunity to enter God's rest. They did so because they would not believe God's Word in an obeying way. So our disobedient unbelief follows Israel's example. The clear implication is that we will also suffer their fate. Now, he has made it very clear that he is not equating the rest with any physical or geographical reality. It is the spiritual reality of believing God's promises and moving forward in obedience in a way that enters into the work that God through Jesus Christ has already completed.

Disobedience to What?

What then did Israel disobey? They did not believe and obey the Word. Look carefully at verse 2. "For we also have had the gospel preached to us, *just as they did*; but the message [word] they heard was of no value to them because those who heard did not combine it with faith [believing obedience]." The unbelieving disobedience then is to the word (*o logos*) they heard and we have. What was the word they heard? It was good news: the good news that God would fulfill all His promises to them of salvation, sanctification and glorification. It was good news that they could now begin to possess that which could only be fully realized in eternity. It was not something dimly heard or barely understood. They had been thoroughly good newsed.

So what was the problem? The word did not profit them because they did not believe it. So the exhortation comes to us that we must be diligent to hear the word. We must give all our energy to believe in it, to trust it, to embrace it, to obey it and to be satisfied by it so that we do not murmur and want to turn away from God and go back to the Egypt of sin. So today's text is an argument for why we should be so diligent to enter God's rest by hearing and believing in an obeying way God's word. (Piper)

The Problem

Some of you are *analyzing* people and some are *synthesizing* people. Some like to probe into the details and some like to see the big picture. So here is the big picture as summarized ably by John Piper.

The Big Picture

- The great aim of life is to enter the rest of God so that His worth is magnified and His happiness enjoyed.
- We do that by trusting God.
- The focus of our trust is in believing God's Word and promises in an obeying way.
- Therefore, we must fight with all our might to hold our mind and spiritual attention to the Word of God.

Peter emphasizes this same truth in 2 Peter 1:2-4. The power of God for everything we need for life and godliness comes to us through the promises of God believed and acted on. This is entering God's rest. This is why so many of you are troubled and stressed and

depressed and carnal—you are not believing God’s promises and acting on them. One of the most distressing things as a shepherd is to keep giving you the Scriptures, to keep bringing you to the green pastures and still waters of God’s Word and to watch many turning to dry husks and muddy waters hoping for something familiar, easier and better. And it is one of our greatest joys to see sheep deeply satisfied with God’s pastures and diligently laboring to enter today the rest that future grace will bring.

What is it then that makes the Word important to those with hardened unbelieving hearts and to those who are making every effort to believe God in an obeying way? It is the characteristics of the Word.

The Characteristics of the Word

(v.12)

Its Amazing Attributes

Two words here are used to describe what the Word of God actually is. They may be metaphors, but they are ways in which we are to think of the Word.

- The Word is **alive**. What we handle physically here in paper and ink is not all there is to it. The truth in these words is the very living mind and thoughts of Jesus Christ inscripturated. It may only look like a book, but it is alive. A seed may appear to be just fibrous tissue, but it is alive. And because it is alive, it can be life giving.
- The Word is **active**. The word is *energeo*. The Word is an energizing force, a power. It is like a wire conduit. It may appear to be only plastic wrapped wire, but flowing in it is the energizing power of electricity. So the Word is flowing with the power of the Spirit. And because it is active, it can be enabling.

So, all of you. Pick up your Bible (and shame on you if you do not have yours with you.) Imagine. The Word is alive and thrumming with God’s power. Your soul is the socket and the promises of God are the plug that brings that living and energizing power into your life.

So what we have in the Word is not merely talk written down, but living power pulsating with spiritual potential. Is that how we think of God’s Word? The Author also wants us to think of the Word in another way: As a sword.

Its Penetrating Power

There are two basic sword designs. There is the long, thin rapier design familiar to us in fencing. Even as a weapon it is designed to cut and scratch and pierce. Its chief advantage is speed and weight and reach. It is a sword used with the tip in mind. There is also the short broadsword. It was wider and was fought as an edge. It required much more strength to wield. In some armies in the ancient world, this sword was used primarily to hack and maim and thus was often curved.

The sword described here would be familiar to anyone in Roman days. The Romans had perfected the idea of an edged sword. It was wider out toward the tip than at the base yet had a point to it. As a result, it had a natural swing to it. Yet, it was double edged almost its whole length and was immensely strong and powerfully used for penetrating thrusts. This is the image given to us here of the Word of God.

Now why do we need the Word to be a sharp double-edged sword whose calculating design is for powerfully deep thrusts? Because we have hard, tough fibrous hearts, thickly callused by unbelief and disobedience and self-deception. Like a sword designed to penetrate through the body, the Word is designed to penetrate the soul.

When it penetrates the soul, it assesses and weighs and judges what it finds there. It evaluates our thinking processes and our heart attitudes. It is alive and active and powerfully penetrating to the uncovering of our deepest rationalizations and motivations. It has the Spirit given capacity to get through the surface externals and get at the vital internals of whom and what we are. Its living, penetrating power critiques our unbelief and our disobedience. Its vital truth rips the pleasant mask off the ugly face of sin. (Piper)

This is important to understand at a very practical level. One of the reasons you sin is because you are deceived at some level. You start believing the lies of sin instead of the promises of God. Further, Piper has written:

Sin whispers through the desires of the flesh and the rationalizations of the mind, your only hope of future happiness is to have an abortion. It whispers that you will not have a chance in the future if you don't cheat on this test. It says that you won't be noticed and liked if you don't dress provocatively. It says, you will lose the one person who seems to care for you if you don't compromise your sexual standards. It says that you won't have job security if you speak up about the dishonest practices at work. It says your life will be wasted in this relationship if you don't get a divorce. It says that only a fool would go on looking weak instead of getting some kind of revenge. Every one of these statements is a lie. It is what Hebrews 3:13 calls the 'deceitfulness of sin.' Now these lies sometimes lodge themselves so deep in the heart as thoughts and intentions that seem unshakably true because of the hardness of deception that encloses them like a dark, sealed casket. ... The Word of God is our only hope. The good news of God's promises and the warnings of His judgment are sharp enough and living enough and active enough to penetrate to the bottom of my heart and show me that the lies of sin are indeed lies. ... The Word of God's promise is like throwing open a great window of bright morning sun on the shiny-back roaches of sin masquerading as satisfying pleasures in our hearts. (Piper)

So let us make every effort to believe God in an obeying way because the Bible is alive with spiritual power and sharp with penetrating power. It has the capacity to enable us to enter God's rest and the sharpness to expose the deceits of sin and the rationalizations of my heart that cause me to be seduced by sin and not prize God's promises.

The callus hardness of our hearts and the deceitfulness of sin and the sin-rationalizing thoughts and motivations may lie deep and be buried under years of sediment so that we need the word to expose us to our selves. But this is not so with God.

The Accountability to our God

(v.13)

This verse is shatteringly graphic in how it portrays our vulnerability and accountability to God.

The General Statement

No created thing is hidden from God's sight. The all seeing and omniscient eye of God sees everything. He knows when we sit down and when we get up. He knows our thoughts before we think them. He knows the when and what and where and why of everything about us. There is no escaping this. So we are utterly open and naked and bare before God.

The Graphic Metaphor

This next phrase is an idiom in the Greek. The image turns on the word *trachelizo* from which we get our word *trachea* for throat. The word means literally to seize by the throat and to bend so as to bare it and expose the jugular to the knife. The word was first used when bringing a sacrifice. The lamb's neck was bent and exposed to the sacrificial knife. The Romans used the word in their gladiatorial combat when one gladiator would hold and turn his opponent in such a way as to expose his throat to a killing stroke. Thus, the word came to mean laid bared and vulnerable. We are not only visible to God but we are horribly vulnerable to God.

The Gripping Consequence

What is the consequence of being visible and vulnerable to God? We will give an account. Curiously, the word translated *give an account* is the word *logos*. We have seen that word in verse 2 (message) and in verse 12 (word) and now verse 13 (account). So the truth of God to us uncovers the truth about us so that we will respond in truth to God.

Words like this are the reason Peter says in 1 Peter 1:17 that we are to live our lives, to conduct ourselves in *reverential fear*.

But I want to say this as well. This paragraph comes to us as a strong and gripping and powerful exhortation. We must make every effort to believe God in an obeying way because the Word penetrates our sin justifying deceptions and motivations and because we are utterly visible and vulnerable to God. To many, that sounds threatening. And in some ways it is.

To me, it is what I want. I purpose to expose my callused and hard heart to the sword of the living and powerful Word so that I will feel with real pain and with repentant change my unbelieving disobedience. And I will so bend my stiff neck and be gripped by the hand of God's grace so that I am totally vulnerable and open and bared to the laser-like probing of His eyes. I believe in those moments, my believing obedience will be rest.

- This is why the Bible is not like any other book. No other Book has within it the **Conclusion** power to penetrate and transform.
- This is why, week after week, service after service, I will simply exposit the Bible to you. I will expose it to you. And I will expose you to it.
- What is the conclusion of the matter? Let us turn from the deceptive promises of sin and trust the all satisfying promises of God. Let us because of the Word of God, believe God in an obeying way.

The Enabling Help of Drawing Near Hebrews 4:14-16

Introduction Have you ever asked yourself the question, “Why did God wait so long to send Jesus into the world? Why didn’t Jesus come after the flood, or in Abraham’s day? Why is there this long (and somewhat tedious) history with Israel?”

One answer is **not** to say that history runs on its own power at God had to wait for that to unfold. No, God **rules** history. He has ordained and is directing along the map of His plans to the destinations of His purposes. No also, because God planned before history ever started that Jesus would be born and live and die and be resurrected for the sins of His people. God has composed a magnificent symphony in which Jesus is the melodic theme and which even the discords of Satan and sin and self are woven until the growing theme of the cross ends in the triumphant anthem of the crown.

So why this long wait? Why the Old Testament?

Though Piper makes this same analogy and reference to New Tribes Mission, it is something I have held and intended to do before reading his sermon.

One answer is that we needed categories in which to think of Jesus so that we could make sense of the amazing work that He has and is doing. There needs to be context that interprets why He is here and what He is doing. Imagine going into a village where no one has ever heard of God, creation, the fall, Israel, the tabernacle and try to tell them the gospel. You try to tell them about priests and sacrifices and prophets and kings and law and grace. How would they ever make sense of it all? Well, New Tribes Missions has come to understand not only the problem but God’s solution and has written an “evangelistic strategy” called *Firm Foundations*.

If you ignore the Old Testament and interpret Jesus culturally within in your own context you may make Him a coach or a therapist, or a guru or a good example or a mentor or a trail-blazer. There may even be some truth in each of these. But when you skip the Biblical-historical context and categories, you are not thinking of Jesus in the true and deep and authoritative and helpful way the Bible wants us to.

“Therefore, we have a high priest, one who is great and who has passed through the heavens.” So what does that mean? We don’t have high priests today so why don’t we think about Jesus as a defense attorney? We don’t’ because when we jump immediately to contemporary analogies we lose the deep and wonderful and vital truths that shape our thinking about Jesus. Our history and our culture is simply too shallow and provincial to give us the categories to really grasp who Jesus is and what He has done.

Jesus being a priest means what it does in the light of the Old Testament Biblical-historical framework. We understand the priesthood of Jesus in the thought and words and actions of Old Testament Priests. So we will, over the next months (for this is the meat of Hebrews) sit in the school of the book of Hebrews and we will move from classroom to classroom learning how we are to think about Jesus. This will be done so that in magnifying Jesus we will be maturing as saints.

What has the Author been arguing up to this point? He has been showing how Jesus is superior to prophets, and angels and Moses and Aaron. He is showing us what that supe-

riority means in the greatness of our salvation and the importance of the Word. We have faced the enormity of entering God's rest—that is, that we believe God in an obeying way. We understand that we have hard and unbelieving hearts thickly callused with years of rubbing up against the deceitful pleasures of sin. And we know that we have the living and penetrating power of the Word which exposes us to ourselves and drives home with real pain that we are utterly visible and vulnerable to God.

So what we desperately need is some way to approach God whose laser holy eyes shred all our self-deceiving masks of sin and receive help to believe in an obeying way. This is why this paragraph brings Jesus forward as our High Priest.

The Great Realities of Our High Priest (v.14-15)

The role of the Old Testament priest was to serve God and His people by bringing the sacrifices for sin. They were the visible mediators when unbelief led to sin and sin required sacrifice. They were there Sabbath after Sabbath to meet God's people bringing sacrifice for sin. Once a year, one of them, the High Priest, entered into the inner room of the tabernacle or temple and if the sacrifice was accepted he came out otherwise he died.

The Superiority of Jesus as Our Priest (v.14)

So Jesus is superior in three crucial ways.

He is Superior in His Position.

He is *great*. The word here is *megan*. In modern vernacular, He is a mega-high priest. He is not just a priest; He is not just one of many high priests. He is the great high priest. He is unique in His excellencies.

He is Superior in His Place.

He has passed through the heavens. The image here is that of the priest passing through the veil to enter the holy of holies. His was a horizontal event. His was one that expected an immediate return.

These few words bring before us the great reality of Jesus' resurrection and ascension. Jesus, unlike any priest before or since, has lived died and is now alive having passed through the heavens. The language is meant to convey that heavenward procession of Jesus as He went to the Father having triumphed over Satan and sin. He is leading His Old Testament saints in triumphal procession out of Paradise into Heaven. He has made a grand vertical ascent showing the fullness and finality of the sacrifice His priesthood brings.

The verb *passed through* is one which shows a completed past action with a permanent present result. He has passed through the heavens in redemptive triumph and unlike every priest before, He is still there. We are not waiting for Him pass back through the veil to see if the sacrifice has been accepted. That fact that God raised Him as set the Father's seal of approval on His Son's sacrifice.

He is Superior in His Person

What makes Jesus' priesthood so amazing is that in Christ we have God and man brought together. Not that God has been reduced to humanity or that man has

been elevated to deity, but that in Jesus Christ there is a hypostatic union of the divine and human in true union yet without mixture. This is the great doctrine of the incarnation. This is the point on which many have failed and fallen. Jesus is God, the very Son of God, the second person of the Godhead. This gives His sacrificial work and infinite worth and eternal value to save sin-laden souls.

So Jesus our High Priest is superior because He is great, because He is risen and ascended—He is alive, and because He is God.

But if this were all there were, Jesus would then seem to be inaccessible and unsympathetic. If He is great, ascended and God, how can He possibly know what I am going through? How can He possibly know what it means to face the temptations of unbelief that lead to sin?

The Sympathy of Jesus as Our Priest (v.15)

Because we have a sympathetic High Priest, He is sympathetic in three crucial ways.

He is Sympathetic to Our Weaknesses

He has lived in the frailty and weakness of a human body. He knew what it was like to be hungry, to thirst, to have no permanent home, to be subject to all the cares and woes and diseases of a cursed earth. He knew what it was like to be surrounded by sinners and religious hypocrites and unfaithful disciples and even a traitor. He knew what it was like to wrestle his body out of bed in the morning to pray. He wearied under the constant onslaught of Satan and his minions. He knew what it was like to be rejected, misunderstood, slandered, vilified, misrepresented. He knew how all the weaknesses of the human condition in a cursed environment and being surrounded by sinners threatens trust and shakes believing obedience.

He is Sympathetic because of His Temptations

He is sympathetic in the experience of temptation. He was surrounded as a man with all the temptations that allure us, all the external incitements to not believe God in an obeying way. As one writer has observed, He was tempted:

- to lie (to save His life)
- to steal (to help His poor mother when His father died)
- to covet (all the nice things Zaccheus owned)
- to dishonor His parents (when they did not understand Him)
- to take revenge (when He was wronged)
- to lust (when Mary wiped His feet with her hair)
- to pout in self-pity (when His disciples fell asleep at prayer)
- to murmur at God (when John the Baptist died at the whim of a dancing girl)
- to gloat over His accusers (when they could not answer His questions) (Piper)

All the powerful magnetism of sin's draw, from the world and the flesh around Him and Satan's attacks on Him, bombarded the powerful purity of His divinity.

He is Sympathetic in His Sinlessness

He also knows what it is like to stand unflinchingly true in the face of the howling gales of temptation. In fact, Jesus knows what it means to be tempted in a way that none of us do: He never gave in. So how can He be sympathetic if He never sinned? He has led a sheltered life. He doesn't really know what temptation is like and is out of touch with how strong temptation can be."

C.S. Lewis responded to that objection in these words:

A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. This is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... A man who gives in to temptation after five minutes simply does not know what it would have been like an hour later. That is why bad people, in one sense, know very little about [temptation]. They have lived a sheltered life by always giving in... Christ, because He was the only man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only man who knows to the full what temptation means—the only complete realist.

If you think your temptations are great now, what would they be like if you *never* gave in to them? Jesus knows. He knows the battle. He fought all the way to the end. And at that end, having never ever succumbed to sin Himself, He bowed low to shoulder our sins and carried them to the cross.

So Jesus is sympathetic as our high priest. He does not roll His eyes at your pain nor cluck His tongue at your weakness nor turn away from your struggle against sin.

The Great Responsibilities to Our High Priest (v.16)

This leads us to this great, practical, relevant contemporary conclusion. Because Jesus is our high priest: a great, living, divine, one who is in the presence of God and full of sympathy for His people, *therefore* two things:

Hold Fast to Your Hope (v.14b)

The way we are threatened to let go is different from their situation to ours. They were being threatened with death if they did not deny Christ. It was a tangible threat that came at points of conscious decision. This is not generally so for us.

We must hold fast to our confession against the tide of indifference, apathy and a lack of spiritual fervor. We simply drift into not gripping tightly and passionately to our agreement with God. So, because we do not think about the supremacy of Christ in any area, we drift from the Word, we neglect the greatness of our salvation and the nearness of God's rest. Our outward religious practice has very little inward reality. So what we are doing is not believing obedience.

But how do I do that? How do I fight against the numbness in spiritual things that hardens into unbelief and disobedience and not entering into a trust that looks like rest?

Draw Near to Your Help

(v.16)

I once heard this paragraph preached by a man who, just an hour earlier, had received word from his home across the country that his wife suffered a massive stroke. In all the devastation of his life, the awful tearing of his emotions, the utter darkness of what lay ahead, the horrendous temptation to doubt God and His goodness, he believed God in the obeying way of drawing near and found help. Because he held fast to what He knew to be true, he had confidence to come to God.

And so can we. Our need is great. We have hard, callused, unbelieving hearts. We do not trust in a way that looks like rest. We feel the awful self-disclosing exposure of the penetrating power of God's Word. We shudder at the thought of our utter visibility and vulnerability to God. **BUT**, we have a superior and sympathetic High Priest who is alive and is in heaven and is there knowing how we feel. So we draw near to the Throne of Grace. We pray.

The Precept of Drawing Near

This command comes to us when we are tempted to doubt God, disobey God and not enter rest. I know that we tend to think of this text in the circumstances of my illustration. Yes, we know we must draw near when seizures come, and wives and mothers die, and businesses fail, and spouses abandon. But we also must draw near when lust burns, and materialism chokes, and apathy deadens. We must draw near when jealousy and anger and envy and coveting all boil up out of the ferment of our old natures under the heat of temptation.

The Privilege of Drawing Near

In trial or temptation, we come to a throne of grace with confidence.

- It is a **throne**. So expect that our King-Priest is going to tell us what to do. When we draw near, we do so on God's terms. This is what Israel failed to understand and did not enter the land. This is what we fail to understand and we divorce obedience from belief. It is useless to believe there is a throne of grace if you never draw near. And never drawing near shows that you do not believe there is a throne of grace.
- It is a throne of **grace**. It is a rule by our High Priest who is superior and sympathetic. It is grace in that God from this throne leans down with empathetic interest to the approach of believing saints.
- It is with **confidence**. The exposure of the Word and my visibility and vulnerability keeps me from coming with arrogance. The superiority and sympathy of my intercessor motivates me to come with confidence.

So in the dark strains of God's providence when trials tear and temptations test then let us draw near to God on His throne where He will magnify His worth by giving us the right and power to delight in God through believing obedience that is an entering into rest.

The Purpose of Drawing Near

From God on His throne of grace flows mercy and enabling grace. Listen to me loved ones. I see a subtle shift in Christianity today that is affecting us as well. We are thinking that what we receive from God somehow is how it ought to be—somehow we deserve it. We usually say it or think it this way, “Why would God allow this to happen?” May I say that the question from sinners and saints ought to be, “Why not?” Again, this is why the Word must penetrate our hearts and expose us to ourselves so that we will see how desperate we are for the *mercy* of God. We deserve nothing. All of the treasure of God’s goodness to us in Christ *was, is and will ever be a measure of the mercy of God.*

When I draw near to the throne of grace and receive mercy, then enabling grace flows into my inner person so that I am helped. Grace is the power of God to change me, not necessarily my circumstances. In my time of need, when I stand in each “today” with all of God’s promises before me, I will draw near to God and from His mercy flows grace to enable my believing obedience. Approach the throne, not in the hope to see circumstances change, but in the confidence that God will help you and change you and enable believing obedience.

Loved ones, there are many of you this morning who need this Word. You are frustrated, hurt, fearful. You are not sure of the road ahead. The “today” of your life is filled with giants and obstacles and overwhelming problems. You need to know that Jesus is your superior mediator and sympathetic priest-king. You need to hold fast to your agreement with truth. You need to draw near to God. You need do so in order that God will lean over in mercy and with grace change **you**.

Let us hear this Word this morning with believing obedience. May we be stirred up to hold fast to our hope and draw near to our help. May we do so in trials. May we do so in temptations. May we do so with a trust that looks like entering God’s rest.

Conclusion

The Suffering Obedience of Our Interceding Priest Hebrews 5:1-10

Introduction

The argument of the Author has been building to this point.

- **Opportunity** – We may enter God’s rest by trusting Him.
- **Responsibility** – We must believe God in an obeying way.
- **Difficulty** – We have hard and callused hearts prone to drift and disbelief.
- **Accountability** – We have the self-exposing power of the Word and our utter visibility and vulnerability to the Lord.
- **Accessibility** – We have the superior and sympathetic priest who leans over from the throne of grace to give mercy and enabling grace.

The Author has been very concerned that we do not neglect the greatness of our salvation. Much of what he writes is to help us to think seriously and deeply about the salvation Jesus has purchased for us. This is a salvation from the condemnation and power of sin, from the wrath of God, from the fear of death and from a life of grinding, meaningless work. This salvation comes to us from the Son of God who is superior in every way and sympathetic to us.

Now he is going to make connections to their own religious past—to the Judaism they were converted out of. For many of you, we must do just the opposite and be sure that you are thinking of priests and sacrifices in Old Testament terms and not in Catholic terms. If a Catholic priest comes to mind when you hear about priests in the Bible and when you hear that Jesus is a priest, *you are not thinking Biblically at all*. So do your best to push away thoughts of men in backwards collars and surplices and bring to the front thoughts of Jewish men in Aaron’s family serving by actually butchering sacrifices, carrying real, steaming blood and splashing it on alters lit with roaring fire.

If Jesus is a superior and sympathetic priest, how can that be seeing that He was not born a son of Aaron and is not in the priestly lineage. In fact, He is in the royal lineage that were expressly forbidden from intruding into the priesthood and severely punished when they did? How then can Jesus be a priest? Before answering this and telling us how Jesus could be a priest, he wants to show us the connection between the saving and the priestly work of Jesus.

The Problem of the Earthly Priesthood**(v.1-3)**

So he begins by pointing several important features of the human priesthood. They were characteristics that gave worshipping men and women hope that they could approach God and would be heard by God.

The Purpose of the Priest**(v.1)**

Priests were selected with the express purpose of representing men before God. They had a distinctly mediatorial function. They came to plead man's case before God on the grounds or based on the arguments that God had Himself provided.

So the priests had this mediatorial function of offering up gifts and sacrifices. When an Old Testament saint came to worship, he could not come directly to God. He could not bring his gifts and his offerings himself. He had to come to the priest who would take the gift or the sacrifice and would offer it to God on the worshipper's behalf.

The primary purpose of priests was to deal with sins. They had to maintain the tabernacle, to keep the incense burning, to be sure the showbread was in its place, to judge matters in the camp. But day after day, they labored because of the devastating effects of sin. They saw men and women and children morning and evening who brought sacrifices *because of sin*.

The Practice of the Priest**(v.2-3)**

But the priests were not exempt from the very sins of the people coming to God through them. The frail humanity and sinful nature of the priests was both their strength and their weakness.

The Strength of their Ministry**(v.2)**

It was their strength because in it they could identify with the struggles of the worshipper. They had these same struggles. They fought doubt and apathy and spiritual boredom. They lusted and coveted and thought thoughts of God that were true to Him. When the sinning Israelite came with his lamb, and then leaned his hand on its head as he spoke his sins—he knew in his heart that he was little different. So then he could give the word of encouragement and counsel.

He could empathize with both groups of people: those who were ignorant and those who went astray. He knew the temptations that came to those who knew little and therefore acted in ignorance yet incurred the judgment of God. He also could identify with those who knew, but just simply wandered and went astray in spite of their better knowledge.

The Weakness of their Depravity**(v.3)**

This strength in their relationship with man was a significant weakness in their relationship with God. That he was weak and frail and sinful, meant that he had to deal with his own sins as well. Every sin-offering brought must have reminded him over and over of his own sins and sinfulness.

Let us remember that we have neither priests nor priestly class today. Preachers are not priests and no elder stands in relation to you as a priest. You may come to God directly in your prayer and you may do so *because Jesus is our final and superior High Priest*.

So the Old Testament priests were there because of sin—to offer up gifts and sacrifices for sins. Not only for those of the people, but also for their own. But if they were sinners, how do they become priests?

The Privilege of All Priests (v.4-6)

Being a priest was a tremendous privilege. They were charged with the daily handling of things divine. It was a grand ministry full of honor and glory.

Human – By Divine Appointment (v.4)

The human priests were appointed by God. Not just anyone could serve God in this way. In fact, their appointment was hereditary. God appointed after the order of Aaron, Levi and his children. The sons of Levi served. So God brought men into the priesthood by causing them to be born into the Levitical line. So there was no self-honor. No one could simply choose to be a priest. No one could simply say, “Well, I’m not a good potter. My farm has failed and my flocks are pitiful. I think I’ll be a priest.” Those who entered the Levitical priesthood were called by God by virtue of their birth. It was a divine appointment carried out generation after generation.

Jesus – By Divine Announcement (v.5-6)

In the same way, Jesus’ being a priest was not for self-honor or self-glory. He did not decide that this would be the best way. He was our High Priest by divine decree, by divine announcement. That is the point of these two texts quoted from the Psalms. The first from Psalm 2:7 is used over and over again to refer to the resurrection. So our great high priest has passed through the heavens being a resurrected and ascended King-Priest.

But Jesus was not born a Levite. How could He be a High Priest? Because His priesthood was not in the Aaronic order, but after the order of Melchizedek.

While earthly priests have the great privilege of divine appointment in the order of Aaron, Jesus has the glorious honor of divine proclamation in the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus’ priesthood is final and superior not only because there has been a change of order, but because of the perfection of that priesthood.

The Perfection of Jesus’ Priesthood (v.7-10)

Human priests were familiar with the human condition. They understood why mediating was necessary because they themselves sinned. But what about Jesus? How does Jesus really understand the human condition that made priests able to understand the ignorant and those going astray? The author shows us that Jesus as a priest was perfect:

In the Intercession He Offered (v.7)

Jesus knows what it meant to pray. Now we understand that Jesus’ praying would have been powerful and intimate in ways that we can hardly fathom. The disciples heard Him pray and asked Him to teach them to pray like that. That praying was what it was because Jesus was the Son of God.

That is not the praying the Author has in mind here.

- Its **duration**. It was over his whole lifetime. Note that he says “in the days of Jesus’ life.” This praying here was not just in the Garden of Gethsemane. Nor was it just the praying on the cross. It was a lifetime spent in this sort of praying.
- Its **expression**. The whole language here means to convey the idea of sacrifice. He offered up—this is sacrificial language. He offered up prayers and petitions. He did so with loud cries and tears. This praying is torn from the depths of the soul. It is not ashamed to cry and pray loud. Why?
- Its **cause**. He wanted to be saved from death. Now I have to stop and think about what he means here by this death. Either Jesus prayed for something that was not answered (because He did die, physically and spiritually) or He was saved out of the condition of death into which He had passed (the problem with this is that it was a one time event, not a life long one) or death here means more than we think. I am inclined to think that Jesus knew that there was a greater death than dying. There was the immeasurably terrible death of disobedience, of sin. For His whole life He faced the onslaught of sin and never ever succumbed. At times, the trial and temptation pressed tears and loud crying from His soul. He would not sin and because of His reverent submission to God, His prayers to be protected from disobedience and sin were heard.

Do we pray like this? Do we handle temptation and sin like this? Do we even care like this? Do you think of disobedience as death? When was the last time you cried out to God with real pain and tears in your fight against unbelief and sin?

In the Obedience He Learned

(v.8)

Jesus is our perfect High Priest because of the obedience He learned in the furnace of suffering. Jesus learned obedience in the crucible of suffering. This does not mean that He moved from being disobedient to being obedient. It means He learned obedience in an experiential way. He moved from being untested to being tested and proven. He moved from obeying without temptation and the pressure of suffering to obeying through unspeakable suffering. It means that the gold of His natural purity was put in the crucible and melted down with white-hot pain, so that He could learn from experience what suffering is and prove that His purity would persevere. (Piper)

In the Salvation He Provided

(v.9)

Within the confines of our own church communion, we might feel that we have really grasped that Jesus is the only source of eternal salvation. But let me ask a very important question. Do you believe that is true *for every human being on the face of the earth today*? It has been amazing to me to realize that many people believe that Jesus is the only source of salvation *to those who get to hear about it*. In other words, if you grew up in India or the Amazon or the Congo and you had never heard the gospel and therefore had no opportunity to believe, you could go to heaven (as though that is what salvation is all about) by believing something that approximates the gospel.

Listen to me loved ones. The Bible is utterly clear that all men everywhere in all times, whether they have a clear knowledge of God or not, are lost, condemned and

will die in their sinful rebellion against God and perish in an eternity of hell *unless* God in His mercy and electing love sends them the gospel so that they hear and repent. In this day of Ecumenicism and pluralism, we must proclaim the absolute necessity for men to believe the saving message of the gospel. The gospel that Jesus Christ, the incarnate Son of God, as revealed in all the Scriptures, is the only way to God and the only Name by which men are saved. It does not matter whether it is men in loincloths praying to a wooden idol, or in robes and caftans praying to Buddha or in business suits praying to Mary or in Bible believing churches not praying to anyone or anything at all. Jesus, and Jesus alone in the dignity and eternity and purity of His saving work is the only way anyone comes to God. (Piper)

It may be laudable humanism that says, “They had no chance. They are good people. They are sincere.” But it is a God-honoring theism and Biblicism that affirms and believes and trusts in this One who learned obedience in life of suffering, who died a substitutionary death for His people, who was raised by the power of God for their justification and who has passed through the heavens in victory to sit on the throne of grace as our Priest and King. He, and He alone, for men and women and boys and girls from every tribe and tongue and people and nation, has become the source of their eternal salvation. May God in heaven be praised and magnified.

In the Designation He Received

(v.10)

He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

A note on verse
10

The words of Heb. 5:10 are repeated in 6:20. They frame a parenthetical section in which the author, given the difficulty and scope of his subject, confronts his readers with their relative immaturity. They are not ready to hear the doctrine of the Priesthood of Jesus Christ in the Order of Melchizedek. And we must face this issue head-on in coming weeks as well.

Jesus is the source of our salvation:

- ☞ Having been appointed by God (v.5-6)
- ☞ Having entered into our experience (v.7)
- ☞ Having learned obedience by suffering (v.8)

Thus He is perfect.

- Conclusion**
- Jesus' reverent submission. In the trials and temptations that squeezed tears and loud prayers from His suffering soul He believed God in an obeying way. Do you? To those whom Jesus has saved from sin, has He saved you from sinning?
 - Let us come to this perfect priest. Let us worship Him in His dignity and eternity and purity. Let us strive against unbelief and sin until we cry out to God that we might live. For we will be heard. And our believing obedience will be a trust that looks like rest. Because Jesus has labored for us.
 - Is Jesus the sole and only source of *your* salvation? Do you sense the enormity of your sin and rebellion against this great King? Have you ever seen in an understanding way that Jesus is precious and a treasure above all price? Do you believe the gospel in an obeying way? My plea with you as an ambassador for Christ, be reconciled to God through Jesus. Believe Him. Trust in His salvation. Bow to His Sovereignty. Do not let the cares of the world, its fleeting pleasures and passing attractions and choking desires turn you away from being satisfied with Christ. Believe Him today.

The Danger of Dullness

Hebrews 5:11-14

Introduction

Sometimes preaching and teaching and instructing people in the Bible is amazingly hard work.

- Sometimes it is hard because *there is much to say*. The simple truth is that Truth is not simple. Tozer reminds us that those who bleat for simplicity usually get fed error. So we have this massive body of Truth in 66 books written by numerous authors in two major languages all expressing the mind of God. The writer of Hebrews faced this. There is much to say.
- Sometimes it is hard because *it is difficult to explain*. Literally, it is hard of interpretation. In other words, the author is proclaiming the truth of the Word by interpreting, explaining and applying what it means for Jesus to be our Priest in Melchizedek's order. Any of you who teach know how this is. You have what is so clear in your own mind, but it just doesn't come across. (Frankly, this is why I have followed the counsel of men I mentor under to write a manuscript- "Write yourself clear..." [Kent Hughes].) A great number of the nourishing truths of the Bible are not easy to explain.

The Author here faces an even more difficult situation. He has much to say and it is difficult to explain *because his readers and hearers are so dull of hearing*.

The author of the Book of Hebrews is deeply concerned about our response to the Word. His first warning was that we must not **drift** from the Word and neglect the greatness of our salvation. Now, he warns us about **dullness** in our hearing of the Word and our neglecting the importance of maturity. I have reflected much on these two terms in relation to Christian living—drift and dullness. I'll share some of that at the end.

The Problem – Disease

(v.11)

The author has been laboring to exhort and warn his hearers. The promises of God are great because of the supremacy of the person of Jesus, so we must hear and hope and hold fast. We must believe them in an obeying way. And frankly, this has been argued, not because it is good for us or will make us into better people or even get us anything. No, it has mostly been argued because Jesus is superior.

But I hear the Author sort of sigh. He is like many preachers—what he has in mind and in his heart is going to simply not going to be clear as it should because people are slow to learn or dull in their hearing. This is what all the exhortations and admonitions have been about: Pay close attention! Consider! Don't harden your heart! Fear! Be diligent! Hold fast! All of these are the doctor's prescription for the disease of drift and dullness.

So I have an urgent question: Do you have this disease? If so, how do you cure it? Well before we cure something, we need to understand it as thoroughly as possible. So let's take the two key words here: dullness and hearing and see what they mean.

Dullness

Slow (NIV)

The word itself means, “sluggish or slow”. It is connected to the word lazy. It is used one other time in the New Testament and that is in Hebrews 6:11-12., “*We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end in order to make your hope sure. We do not want to you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised. We do not want you to become lazy.*” Same word.

The opposite of dullness or sluggishness, is diligence. The opposite of dullness of hearing is diligence in turning the message of faith into the assurance of hope. The problem is not with your physical ears but with your heart. You do not treasure nor prize nor value the Word and the promises it brings and so you do not give your time and energy to pay attention. And so, there is no faith and no patience. There is not a trusting obedience that looks like rest. And ultimately, there will also be no inheriting of eternal life—which is why the Author wrote this book and why I preach this sermon. It is an incredibly dangerous disease, this dullness of hearing—this slowness to learn.

Hearing

To learn (NIV)

The second of these words used to describe this disease occurs one other time in Hebrews 4:2, “*For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard [same word] was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith.*” The same problem there: a word of good news—the message of the promises of God, a hearing but no faith. The word goes into the ears, and comes to the heart, and meets dullness and slowness and hardness. So the opposite of dullness of hearing is hearing with faith—believing in an obeying way.

We can see this same thing in Hebrews 3:18-19, “*And to whom did God swear that they would never enter His rest if not to those who **disobeyed**. So we see that they were not able to enter, because of their **unbelief**.*” See the switch from *disobedient* to *disbelieving*? The root of all disobedience is unbelief—a lack of trust in the promises and person of God.

So, which ever way you look at it—whether “dullness” or “hearing”, you come to the same conclusion, “dullness of hearing” is, in John Piper’s words, “*hearing without faith and the moral fruit of faith.* It’s hearing the Bible or preaching of the Bible the way you hear the freeway noise of [I-75], or Muzak in the office or the recorded warnings at the airport. You do, but you don’t.” We all know this, those of us who have children. Children have a remarkable capacity to even acknowledge what you say to them without their truly hearing what you said. And so do Christians.

We have “grown dull to the sound. The Word heard does not awaken anything or produce anything.” (Piper) At then end of the parable of the four soils in Luke 8, Jesus gives us this very serious warning in verse 18. “*Therefore consider carefully how you listen. Whoever has will be given more; whoever does not have, even what he thinks he has will be taken away from him.*” These are serious words. It means that if you hear the word with careful diligence to obey, then you will receive further grace for even greater believing obedience. But if you are dull and negligent you will find even what little you have taken away.

Listen to me loved ones. I beg of you to be diligent and earnest in how you hear. Lazy, drifting, passive—dull—listening is massively dangerous. Jesus and the Author are making the same point. If you want more grace to hear better, begin to listen with careful attention and diligent commitment to obedience. (Piper)

The Proof — Symptoms

(v.12-13)

How does the author know that they have this disease? What symptoms is he observing that causes him to make this diagnosis?

Their Lack of Sharing God’s Word

(v.12a)

His meaning is quite clear. The symptoms are right there for all to see. There has been the proper passage of time for them to have become familiar enough with the Bible that they can comfortably share its truths. Careful now. He is not saying that at some point, every believer can mature into becoming a skilled, formal teacher of the Word. That is a spiritual gift. But every believer can reach a point of maturity in which he can comfortably instruct the lost and new believers in the basics of Christianity.

Now there are two possible failures that have led to this: they may have never been adequately taught or they have been slow to learn. The failure is quite evident. They have been adequately taught. But they have been dull and slow and sluggish in their hearing and learning of the Word.

Their Lack of Mastering God’s Word

(v.12b)

I get this from the phrases “you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God’s Word all over again. You need milk, not solid food!” They were unable to take the Word in and to master it. I am well aware that all of us are in different place on the line from ignorance to glory. But have we diligently applied ourselves to gain a working knowledge of the Bible and have as an attainable goal the mastery of the Word? Do you even care to go on to the deep truths and the solid food?

Their Lack of Experience with God’s Word

(v.13)

Someone may object that I have been comparing this to a disease when the Author compares it to being infants or immature. We would all recognize that anyone who was old enough to eat meat and was still being bottle fed *has a serious problem*. In other words, there is a disease that causes older believers not to mature and that disease is called *dullness of hearing*.

So we have a third symptom. The NIV renders the key phrase “not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness.” That leaves us the impression that they were just simply ignorant. That is not quite what the Author has in mind. The ESV has it right. They are “unskilled in the word of righteousness.” The idea here is that they have had *no experience* with the word or message [*logos*] of righteousness.

This is easy to illustrate. I am trying to improve my golf game. I have a very good instructional book at home. I love to sit in the evening and read that book. It tells me all about the components of a good swing. It tells me how to hold to club, how to position my feet, to keep my knees bent and my eye on the ball. It gives all sorts of neat

aides that can correct all sorts of nasty ruinations of a pleasant day on the course. I can hear Alister Begg, who is an avid golfer, say, “Let the club head do the work.” But when does all this really profit me? When I am sitting in my lounge chair dreaming of not double bogeying every hole on the course? NO. All of this is profitable to me only when I go out to the driving range or out to the course and begin to experience what all those wonderful techniques really mean when a club head traveling at, in my case at best, 50 miles an hour, impacts a loaded golf ball on an effective surface of less than ¼ square inch. It is when that happens that I am acquainted with the word of instruction about golf.

So it is here. They had become arm chair believers. They were exposed to the Word and were being instructed in the Word. They just had not gone out onto the golf course and gotten some real experience with life. They were living on the milk.

I do not want this message to discourage those of you who are new to the faith or you who have been inadequately taught over the years. May this message challenge you to sharp and focused and obedient listening that hungers to move from milk to meat. But to many of you who have been believers for years and ought to be able to instruct others and ought to have a good mastery of the Word, I want this message to shake you to the depths of your soul—to so pierce hard, dull and slow hearts that the Word begins to awaken desire in you and begins to bear fruit in you.

You must not respond to this with such excuses as “I don’t have time. I am not well educated. I am a simple person.” Because as we will see next, being slow to learn is not a mental problem, but a moral issue.

The Prescription – Cure

(v.14)

So what is the remedy to this disease? Why are some Christians stuck at the baby stage of development with disease of “dullness of hearing” and what is the cure?

The Way Healthy Christians Are

(v.14a)

The Author tells us what healthy Christians look like. They are mature in their experience and taking in the meat of the Word. There is a grown-up-ness to them. They regularly feast on difficult doctrines and can hear them with profit and share them with clarity and use them with confidence. So this is what we are striving for. Mature saints who hear the greatness of the promises of God and the glories of the person of Christ and love them, and embrace them and believe them in obeying ways.

So how do we get there?

How Christians Become Healthy

(v.14b)

Well, we do not get there by jumping immediately from milk to meat. This is a very common mistake. There is a bent to the old nature that thinks that education and information can solve everything. “The solution for immature Christians is to begin eating meat.” But that is not what this text says.

You become mature with milk. The question is, do you become mature with meat? Or do you become mature with milk so that you can eat meat?

The problem is not that milk is weak or that babes can't eat steak. The problem is that the babes are not exercising with the milk they have. See in the verse? “ The mature, *who by constant use* [of milk] have trained themselves [spiritual senses] to distinguish good from evil.” It is not that exercise with milk produces spiritual muscles. Exercise with milk produces spiritual minds: minds that can discern between good and evil.

As one writer expressed it:

Now this is amazing. Don't miss it. It could save you years of wasted living. What verse 14 is saying is that if you want to become mature and understand the more solid teachings of the word, then the rich, nutritional, precious milk of God's gospel promises must transform your moral senses—your spiritual mind—so that you can distinguish between good and evil. In other words, getting ready to feast on all God's Word is not first an intellectual challenge; it is first a moral challenge. It is not a matter of mental ability, but of moral obedience. If you want to eat the solid food of the Word, you must exercise your spiritual senses so as to develop a mind and heart that discerns between good and evil.

The startling truth is that, if you stumble over Melchizedek, it may be because you watch questionable TV programs or movies. If you stumble over the doctrine of election, it may be because you use some shady business practices. If you stumble over the God-centered work and supremacy of Christ in the cross, it may be because you love money and spend too much and give too little. The pathway to maturity and to solid Biblical food is not first becoming an intelligent person, but becoming an obedient person. What you do with alcohol and sex and money and leisure and food and computer have more to do with your capacity for solid food than with where you go or went to school or with what books you read. (Piper)

So the key to maturity and the remedy to dullness of hearing is the way you drink milk. So let me close with three steps that Piper unpacks in how to grow with milk to maturity.

Conclusion

- **You drink in the milk.** That is, you listen to the milk of the Word—the message of God’s promises in the gospel. You read them for yourself in the Bible and you sit regularly under the expository exultation of the Bible and the systematic teaching of the Word. And you give heed. You are alert and earnest and diligent to apply your heart and mind to what is being said. You are not passive or cavalier or indifferent. Babies long for milk and are incredibly focused when they are thirsty.
- **Savor and swallow and digest and are satisfied.** This is vital. If this stage does not happen then the next will not either. God gives you by grace a love for the milk: “Taste and see that the Lord is good.” (Psalm 34:8). And when the promises of God and the God of the promises are tasted, the milk satisfies. And when it satisfies, it transforms your values and priorities.
- **With a heart satisfied with God, discern good and evil.** There are hundreds of decisions you must make day in and day out which are not spelled out explicitly in the Bible. You are not told what TV to watch, what political positions to take, what vocation to enter, where to live or vacation, what to drive, how much to own. It doesn’t take discernment to know what’s wrong if you have a list from God. Knowing when to murder and steal and lie and commit adultery and worship idols takes no discernment. So verse 14 is talking about decisions that are not laid down specifically in a list.

How does this discernment, this ability to distinguish between good and evil come? It comes from habitually (by regular practice) nourishing and shaping your spiritual senses by the Word of God until that word is to you a discerning power, a word producing righteousness in the mature. Discernment is what you do when the milk of God’s promises is so savored and so satisfying that it gives you the mind of Christ. (End extended quote from Piper)

May God firmly anchor us that we will not drift from the Word and fully enable us that we will not be dull in our hearing of the Word.

Let us seek and savor the milk of the Word.

Let us become satisfied with God and His promises.

Let us regularly distinguish good from evil with the truth we know.

Let us become mature with milk of the Word so that we can enjoy and profit from the meat of the Word.

The Foundational Importance of Growing Up Hebrews 6:1-8

Introduction *Addendum: We come to one of the most controversial texts in the entire Bible. More than possibly any other, this text has been bent and twisted and crammed like round pegs into square holes of theological presuppositions. As soon as someone says, “We all know that this text cannot mean this” you know you are about to hear some theological squirming. Sadly, the controversy over whether one can fall or not fall from a state of true salvation that has emerged from this text probably has ruined the Spirit’s intended affect of the text. Our understanding of the Scriptures is that true believers who are regenerated by the Spirit of God are kept by God’s power through sanctification until God glorifies them. And God causes them to persevere in believing faith by giving them enabling grace through strong exhortations.*

Many of us have lasting memories etched like Durer engravings in our minds. They are moments of feeling and experience that we can replay with amazing clarity. When I was 8 or 9, we boarded the HMS *Staatendam* in Southampton, England to cross the Atlantic and come to the United States. I have a very strong memory of that liner leaving the quay and going out into the English Channel. I had a sense of leaving a life I had always known and going to a life that would be all new and very different. And this ship across all these unknown waters was going to bear me along to the future. Sometimes, 9 year old hearts can sense and feel things much larger on the inside than they are on the outside.

This text opens with words that sound to me like that experience felt. “Let us leave ... and go on.” There is a departure from that bears us along to something greater and wider and larger than where we are now. That we do this: that we leave some things and move onward and upward to greater things is vital. It presses upon us the foundational importance of growing up.

The Foundational Imperative (v.1-3)

We are beginning at a conclusion that flows from what he has said in chapter 5. The Hebrews were dull of hearing and in real need of getting experience with the milk they had so as to reach a maturity that could feast on meat. In the light of that, then here is what we must do.

Its Command (v.1a)

What we must do is given in two verbs: leaving and going on. In these two verbs is actually a single action. To go on, I must leave. To come to church, I must leave my house. To go on to maturity I must leave elementary teachings.

This is a command. Maturing as a Christian is a foundational imperative. Why it is foundational is the argument of verses 4-6. That it is an imperative is the argument of verses 1-3. So don’t miss this. Christians ought to be growing up. Christians ought to be exercising with milk so that their spiritual senses are trained to discern good and evil. And I can say to each of you who hear me this morning that you ought to grow

up, that you must be ever maturing in your understanding and believing of the Word in an obeying way.

What is interesting here is that “going on to maturity” is in the passive voice. It has the sense of being borne along, of submitting to the maturing influences. I got on the boat with my mom and dad and the boat carried me along to its destination. Now hold that thought because the author comes back to it in two ways, which we will see.

Its Clarification

(v.1b-2)

Maturing requires going on and leaving something. It is called “the elementary teachings about Christ.” What is this? Literally this reads, “The beginning words about the Messiah.” This would ring true for Jewish people who had professed Christ out of Judaism. For them, an elementary assertion of the gospel is that Jesus is the promised Messiah. For them, this was a big step and one that we don’t resonate with much. The underlying truth is that Jesus is God and therefore is both Sovereign and Savior.

Further, the Author clarifies what those foundational truths are that do not need to be laid down once again. They are given in three sets of couplets.

- Truths relating to personal salvation – The foundational truths are repentance from dead works and faith towards God. These are essential to saving belief. We turn away from a principle of works and we turn to a trust in God whose promise and provision of salvation is seen as real and trustworthy.
- Truths relating to public confession – Foundational truths relating to baptisms and to the setting aside of believers for special service or offices. Our understanding of baptism and church offices is foundational truths on which we move on the personal and corporate maturity.
- Truths relating to basic eschatology – While our understanding of the schema of eschatology may differ, we all must agree as foundational that we will be resurrected from the dead and that there is eternal judgment. If there is no resurrection then what is the use? And since there is a resurrection, then there are eternal consequences arising from the matrix of God’s decrees and our choices.

Two important things strike me from these words:

- These elementary principles would be understood in either the Old or New Testament. Each of these 6 labels designates lasting principles, but changing uses. For example: the word for baptisms here is not the normal form used to describe Christian baptism. It is a more general form of the word that encompasses both the Levitical washings as well the New Covenant baptism of believers as an outward confession of faith. So these foundational truths are not unique in and of themselves to New Testament Christianity.
- They are unique however when they are related to Jesus Christ. These elementary truths must be understood and accepted and embraced *as they stand in relation to Christ*. This was the heart of the matter for these Jewish Christians. Profession of belief meant that all they knew from the Old Testament now had to be understood in the light of Jesus’ coming as the Messiah. There could be

no going back. If Jesus had come, then these things now must relate to Him and not to Moses.

So the text is clear. If you are going to grow up, there are certain foundational truths that you must grasp and on which this maturity rests. You must believe in an obeying way that Jesus Christ is the center of all that it means to be a Christian. You must turn away from a reliance on works and on a law principle and trust Jesus to save you. You must understand the importance of publicly confessing your faith through baptism. You must understand the foundational truths that relate to being in submission to the elders and being served by the deacons. You must believe that what you are doing now matters because you will come to life after death and you will experience either conscious eternal punishment or conscious eternal blessing. And if you are going to grow up, you must begin using these truths to discern right from wrong and go on the meat of the Word.

Its Condition

And this is precisely what the Author is going to do. He is going to move beyond the elementary truths and explain meaty truths in showing how Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all the Old Testament Levitical system.

But there is a condition and frankly, a startling one. We will do this “if God permits.” Now wait. Does this just mean that if God permits me to continue to write and finish this letter? Or does this condition modify the whole? In other words, leaving elementary truths and moving on to maturity will happen if God allows it.

What is being driven home once again is our utter dependence on God. God is governing the steps and stops of our growth in grace towards glory. He is sovereign over both our salvation and our transformation. That we grow is enabling grace. It is moving forward as God permits. So we must at all points hear and exhortations to grow up, to move on, to change all the while humbly confessing our dependence on God for each step.

The Frightening Impossibility

(v.4-6)

In the light of what we have just said, the next paragraph suddenly becomes quite clear. If moving on to maturity is commanded and under the sovereign control of God, what about those who not only do not go on, but actually fall by the wayside? In other words, what danger lies ahead of a person who is professing to be a believer and then rejects Christianity?

This paragraph poses immense exegetical problems. Who are the people he has in mind? What action does “falling away” describe? What is impossible? Why is this an impossibility? I am not going to wade through all the thorny issues here. My approach to this text is governed by several principles:

- True believers are constantly portrayed in the Scripture as being sustained in their faith by the keeping power of God. True children of God cannot be unborn.
- The purpose of the book of Hebrews is to exhort those who are faltering to hold fast. Those who hold fast do so because they receive grace through the exhorta-

tions to hold fast. That they hold fast is the evidence that they are believers. It is unbelievers who let go and will fall away.

- The context drives me to the conclusions I draw. After these frightening words, the author expresses his confidence that the conditions he has just described are not true of them.

So we must come to this with a very serious attitude.

Its Basic Assertion

Here is the core sentence from this paragraph. “It is impossible to renew to repentance those who fall away.” There is a category of people who, if they fall by the wayside (this is not the word usually used for apostasy) cannot be brought back to a place where they will have a true change of heart and mind. Now if you want to say that it is Christians who are falling from grace, then there is no second chance. It is irreversible.

Its Shared Experience

These people are described as sharing in the experiences of Christianity. They have had high religious experience. They have been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, shared [or become partners] of the Holy Spirit, tasted the goodness of God’s Word and experienced the miracles that will be a part of the eschatological age. Whether these are true believers are not *cannot be determined from the description of their experiences*. After all, there will be people sent to hell who preached and cast out demons and did miracles in Jesus Name (Matthew 6:21-23). So loved ones, sharing in high religious experiences is not how you know if you are believer.

The Puritans had a category called, “awakened sinners.” Awakened sinners are those who are affected by spiritual things, awakened by the Spirit and truth, have spiritual experiences but have never been regenerated and converted. But, they wither, fail, fall, don’t hold fast and may even do so over and over again. But at the end, they love their sin and pursue and let go of their confession of Christ.

Its Crucial Step

Here is how you know if you are a true believer. Do you fall by the wayside? Do you reject the truth of the Word? Having heard and experienced and shared in the goodness and glories that are our present privilege and our future hope, you turn away from them and leave them and do not continue to embrace them. You turn aside from being carried along by the sovereign providence of God towards continuing in your faith and you abandon the faith.

Its Justifying Reason

If they, the Jews to whom this was addressed, turned away from Christ, they would be themselves siding with the crucifiers of Jesus. It would be just the same as though they had stripped him of his clothes and jeered at the exposure of His nakedness. While they are doing this, they cannot be brought to a place of true repentance.

Is this possible for us as well? I believe so. Because you are in the ongoing act of affirming that Jesus is not a treasure, that He is not who He says and what He promises

will not come true and those who nailed Him to the cross were justified. Your turning away and falling aside subjects our glorious Sovereign and precious Savior to public humiliation.

This is serious stuff. And this is not the last time the author of Hebrews is going to screw this terrible truth deep into hard hearts and dull ears. In Hebrews 12:14-17, Esau is brought forward as an example of this. He thought so little of his position and privilege that he sold it for a Big Mac. And then when he wanted the blessing, it was too late. Israel learned this lesson at Kadesh Barnea. They made a decision that was irrevocable and left them dying in the wilderness no matter how much they thought they wanted to enter the land.

The Familiar Illustration

(v.7-12)

That this is what the author intends is clarified by the familiar illustration.

His Assessing Contrast

(v.7-8)

The soil all looks the same. This illustration is different from the parable of the sower. There, it is the different kinds of soil and the different environments that determine the harvest. Here, the soil seems to be the same. And those lands both receive the same rain.

It is what is produced that makes the difference. One produces good crops and thus is useful to the farmer and is blessed. The other is useless in the thorns and thistles it grows and is still under the curse and eventually will be judged.

His Assuring Comfort

(v.9-10)

His assurance to them turns on the word “but”. In contrast to what he has described, he has an informed confidence that they are and will prove to be different.

The encouragement comes in the tender use of the word *beloved*. It is the only time in the whole treatise that it is used. It is from the word *agape* which means more than just dear friends. Though he is speaking some difficult things, he does so out of a heart of love, yea even a sacrificial love that is willing to die for them.

We must also learn to hear challenging and correcting words from people who love us. Hopefully they will be words of truth framed with wisdom and spoken from hearts that are concerned for your welfare. Preaching is often like this. Words that go forth whose first penetrating power wounds and then whose effect is to heal.

The encouragement also comes in the use of the word *better*. What he observed in their lives was so much better than those whose profession of faith was not sustained by the grace of God. Thus, grace was producing in real believers those things that accompanied and came along and flowed from true salvation.

How can he say this? Because of what was true about the character of God. Now we usually think of God’s justice as meeting out the proper punishment to those whose sinning offends the holiness and majesty of God. But notice that this turns the justice of God in another direction. God’s justice also means that He is righteous in rewarding godly works. Now don’t misunderstand me. God is just to reward godly works

because He is the author and sustainer of those works. But that God is just in this way comforts and encourages us as we know that His righteousness will reward what His purpose has designed and His power is accomplishing in us. So my godly conduct stirs up an assured confidence because of the character of God.

What then had he observed in them that motivated this encouragement? I would summarize what he found in these words: *they were savoring God by serving saints*.

- **SAVORING GOD** – I get this from the phrase which ought to be translated *the love you have shown to His Name*. This is not love to God as just a deserving object. This is not a cold rational turning of small affection to God. This is a passionate reveling in the character and attributes and majesty and supremacy of God – all that we are shown that God is by the revelation of His Names. Here is a self-losing, self-sacrificing passion for God that plunges into His deep wells and refreshing fountains and satisfying springs with glad abandon. This is the affection for God that comes with trembling pleasure to the knowledge of God and finds at the foot of the thundering cataract of God’s character a pool of delight. To you I say with all my heart: plunge in! Savor God!
- **SERVING SAINTS** – Now get this. They were savoring God while serving saints. You cannot escape this. All true godliness that has a passion for God also will have a compassion for people. The word *ministering* here helps capture some of this. The word is simply *servicing*. In our world we define serving in ways that fit what we are willing to do. But in Bible days, servants were common. Many people had them. And many people in the church were servants in their everyday lives. So when they heard this word, they associated it with a reality that is hard for us.

Their passion for God motivated and empowered them to serve people. Further, their savoring of God *sustained* their serving of people because they were still doing it. Are you?

His Arousing Challenge

(v.11-12)

His comfort of them leads him to challenge them. He is constrained by their depravity and their difficulties to press them forward, to motivate them to continued diligence in these encouraging things.

What he says to them emerges from two important words: diligence and assurance.

- **DILIGENCE** – This is what he desired of them. Against the downward pull of indwelling depravity and distressing difficulties we must exert continuing diligence. We must commit ourselves by the Word and worship and fellowship, to fanning up in us the heat of our passion for God that moves us to keep right on serving God. How we need diligence. We need diligence when we are tired. We need diligence when we are criticized. We need diligence when the task seems too large. We need diligence when others falter. We need the kind of sacrificially sustained commitment to savoring God and serving saints that caused Jim Eliot to say, “He is not so foolish to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.” Loved ones, this diligence only comes when we turn away from serving

self and nursing our wounds and promoting our preferences to joyfully living for God and others.

- ASSURANCE – Do you know what grace produces in diligent believers? An assured hope. When you are diligent in savoring God and serving saints then grace grows in you a sense of confidence and assurance that banks your hope on the person and promises of God. Some of you are faltering and failing in your relationship with God and in your responsibilities to God. You have lost your confidence and your hope. May you show the diligence in savoring God and serving saints that is the spring for a growing confidence in future grace.

How long must this be true? Till the end. Show diligence to gain assurance all the way to the end.

The author unfolds his purpose. This is what he expects will flow out of this exhortation.

- YOU WILL NOT BE SLUGGISH – This is the way a lot of Christians are. They are savoring God and serving saints like that taste in our mouth and the wool in our brains when the alarm rings at 4:00 AM or after a huge meal at noon. They are like a slow moving river, full of silt and mud and garbage that is deposited all along the bank.
- YOU WILL MODEL FAITH'S PIONEERS – Listen to these words, “Who through faith and patience inherit promises.” There it is. Faith and patience must be married together in the heart of diligent Christians. The fruit of that union will be realized promises. I wonder how many savoring and serving saints faltered just on the brink of seeing God's power extended in fulfilled promises. Are you mixing your obeying belief with patient diligence that presses on in difficulty and seeing within you a growing assurance that God will do what He said? When you do this, you are following the model of faith's pioneers in the Scripture and down through church history.

Conclusion

- Here is the point of all this:
 - 1 – If you continue in infancy;
 - 2 – If you are comfortable with dullness
 Then you are in danger:
 - 1 – Of never growing up; or
 - 2 – Having never been saved.
 But you may have assurance:
 - 1 – To savor God and serve saints;
 - 2 – To be diligent to the end.
- Those who savor God by serving saints and are diligent at it, find in them an emerging confidence the God who promises.
- I'm going to adapt something very personal from one of Piper's sermons to give this its sharpest point. "If over the next years, Russ Kennedy begins to cool off spiritually and to lose interest in spiritual things and become more interested in making money and using computers and playing golf and soccer; if I buy into the lie that I need a new wife and that my children are not important and that church is blasé and that Christianity is boring. If I come to believe that the Bible is not true and that Jesus was just a man and not God and that all that matters is what happens in this life and so let us eat, drink and be merry—if this happens, then know this. Russ Kennedy was mightily deceived the first 40 years of his life. His faith was an alien vestige of his upbringing. His fidelity to his wife was a product of peer pressure and social norms. His fatherhood was just genes and natural instinct. His preaching was driven by love of words and crowds. His ministry was an expression of a passion for power and pre-eminence. And his praying was the deepest delusion of all —to get God to supply the resources of his vanity."

"If this possibility does not make me serious and vigilant in the pursuit of God" to magnify and enjoy Him, what ever can?

And what will for you too?

But in the end, these powerful words that expose false professors are turned into comforting words that encourage true believers.

The Patient Waiting that Inherits Promises

Hebrews 6:12-20

Introduction We live in a day and time when there are many discouraging things. We can become discouraged and depressed so easily.

- There is the discouragement of our cultural and political situation. We watch moral decay set in at all levels of life. Common decency and integrity are rare.
- There can be the discouragement of our financial pressures. Too much work with too little return on the time invested. Too much debt to live at the material level we expected or wanted.
- There can be the discouragement of seeing life's plans and goals and expectations thwarted or destroyed. What you have lived for and hoped for has been slowly eroded or suddenly taken. Maybe your children didn't turn out like you hoped. Maybe your retirement wasn't what you thought it would be. Maybe your marriage has gone stale. Maybe a relationship you prized has been broken.
- There can be the discouragement of failure and futility. You have lost a sense of meaning and purpose for living. It seems that you are just going around and around without accomplishing much.
- There can be the discouragement of losing the battle with sin and guilt. We know what the Bible expects of us and see ourselves falling short over and over. Sometimes ministry is frustrating. Sometimes Christian friends aren't all that they ought to be.

We all face discouragements. So did the believers to whom Hebrews was written. The paragraph we studied last time was written to stir up diligence in the face of being sluggish. This paragraph is written to encourage in the face of overwhelming discouragement (v.18). But the two paragraphs are connected – the author desires that they will have a *to the end* kind of assurance, that they will then be diligent and not falter because of what he is going to say about two important and connected ideas – we have a God who promises and we have a need for patience.

My prayer is that God by His Holy Spirit will lift up your spirit with encouragement so that you will be diligent to hold on to your hope and arrive safely at heaven's home.

A Pattern that Models**(v.13-15)**

For our encouragement, the author presents an *example* of how faithful God is to fulfill His promises. He takes us back to Genesis 22:15-17 and the promise God made to Abraham

The Scriptural Illustration**(v.13-14)**

Recall that Genesis 22 is the story of Abraham being tested by God in the offering up of Isaac as a sacrifice. God had promised Abraham a son and a land. He waited for years for that son to come. Now that Isaac had been born and was grown into a young man, God tested to see if Abraham loved God more than his son. Abraham passed the test, doing all that God required. In the very act of raising the knife to slay Isaac, God stopped Abraham and pointed him to the substitute ram and promised him great blessing. In doing so God, pointed Israel to substitute sacrifices until the true Son came as a sacrifice.

In this story, the Author homes in on the fact that God underwrote His promise with an oath. God swore. God swore that He would surely bless Abraham. And God swore by Himself.

Now why does God swear by Himself? Because there is no one greater to swear by. There is nothing more sacred, more hallowed, more honored, more treasured than God Himself. Just as we place our hand on the Bible to promise to tell the truth, God places His hand on His very eternal essence and promises to bless.

The Practical Observation**(v.15)**

Now don't misread this verse. Abraham's patient waiting actually brought the promise. Do you see it? He had the commands of God and the initial covenants that God had given. He had left his home, wandered through land promised him and after long many years, fathered his promised heir. Now, he is tested by God to see if God's promised blessing would not become an idol – will Abraham love what God gives more than he loves God, the giver?

And he obeys. He is earnest and diligent in careful, yes even, radical obedience. He is called "patient" in this. He is not merely resigned. He is not passive. He is actively engaged in obeying God, even if it means that he will kill and God will then raise his son. So Abraham is being tested and tried. Make no mistake, this is hard but he is full of faith. Genesis 22:16-17, the Angel of the Lord says that *since* Abraham has not withheld his only son, *then* God will surely bless him and through him all his offspring.

Well, with that promise in hand, is it no wonder that Abraham patiently waited? He understood that the very nature and character and reputation and fame of God was at stake in this and ultimately, in all of God's promises. And having staked his future and his hope on those promises, God brought him through this test. "Do you love Me more? Do you believe My promises so much that you are willing to put an end to your hopes and dreams and paternal joys, just on my word?"

Now listen to me loved ones, I do not know how much you have staked on God. I have everything. My eternal future, my present joys, my hopes, dreams are banking

on the surety of God's promises. But will I patiently believe and obey *even through the most difficult of trials?*

So we are encouraged to see that God will do what He says and we just need to be patient. But how can this be an encouragement?

A Principle that Shows

(v.16-17)

So we have an *explanation* of how God encourages us by His promises. He develops this idea of an oath from things we are familiar with.

The Power of Human Oath

(v.16)

We can understand quite simply what he is saying. When we want to guarantee our word, we swear by someone or something greater than ourselves. When we make this solemn oath, we are confirming what we have said and that ought to bring an end to any question or discussion about whether we are going to keep our word.

(It is a sad commentary today that the only word and oath that is accepted today is something signed that will hold up in court.)

The Purpose of Divine Confirmation

(v.17)

So God did the same. He used what Abraham and what each of us is familiar with because He wanted us to be very clear about His promise. Further, He wanted and desired that we would see with startling clarity that God has an unchanging purpose towards those to whom the promise comes.

So here is the Divine logic: "My purpose towards you will not change, so my promises to you will not fail. You can be just as sure of this as I God, I do not change. I will stake all that I am on this, my word to you."

Now, is it clear to us? If not, it is our fault and not God's! Just because the window is dirty doesn't mean the sun isn't shining! Why did God do this? What does He expect to come from it?

A Purpose that Encourages

(v.18)

An *exhortation* that encourages us in our hope. "God did this", the author says on purpose. He expects that this will impart real encouragement.

The Powerful Reason

God cannot lie

God cannot lie. God is truth. God cannot act contrary to His own holy nature. He cannot change and He cannot lie. Now notice this. It is not that He won't just because God has set His mind to it. This not an act of God's determination; it is an outcome of His very nature. God CANNOT lie. To say, "if God could lie, He would no longer be God", is to make an absurd statement. So God cannot change and will always keep His promises and carry through His purposes because He cannot lie. What God has said, He will do.

The Previous Requirement***taken refuge***

For whom is this true? Who are the recipients of this unchanging purpose and sure promises? We who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us. So there is a condition. This encouragement is not just for anyone. It is for those who have banked their lives, present and future, on God. We are looking constantly for His sovereign provision of sustaining and enabling grace. We have already fled to Christ. We have already sought refuge in the God of our salvation. In other words, this encouragement is to those who have embraced Christ and bowed to Him and hid themselves in Him.

The Personal Responsibility***take hold***

But even further. We have not only fled to Christ and taken refuge in Him, but we have also taken hold of the hope offered to us. We have understood the preciousness of Christ and have banked everything on His promises and have committed everything about our future to His care and provision.

Maybe this is why discouragement and depression are so prevalent, even in Christian circles. We have not taken hold of the hope offered to us. We have staked our hope and our joy and our fulfillment in things present. And to our dismay, we find that them fleeting and frustrating and failing. You see, there is not such a thing as being hopeless for everyone has their hope in something or someone. Discouragement and depression and even despair come when that on which we have rested our hope fails.

So may I exhort you this morning: to flee from the allurements of hoping in this world and its pleasures and to pursue your hope and purpose in God and His promises. Why? Because we have the sure anchor of a heavenly hope.

A Privilege that Anchors**(v.19-20)**

How does the Bible describe people's hope? There are those who have:

- No hope – Ephesians 2:12-13 As the condition of the lost.
- Wrong hope – 2 Timothy 6:17 Those who placed their future confidence in temporal and passing things.
- Inadequate hope — 1 Corinthians 15:19 Many who placed their confidence and desire, even in Christian truth, as being for this world only.

We see the consequences around us of all three of these.

- Men and women who have come to the point of hopelessness. They have lost everything and are scrabbling for bare sustenance on the streets of many American cities. We have all seen the photos of children and men and women suffering the ravages of starvation and deprivation throughout the world. That they have no hope is engraved with a tool of suffering on their faces. Their eyes are pools of hopelessness.
- All around us we see men and women who have placed their desire and confidence of future happiness and blessing on wealth and power and position. These things may give immediate pleasure, but they fail and rust and decay and leave us with ashes in our mouths.

- So many Christians have placed their hope and trust in Christ *for the blessings and health and wealth* that will come to them now. They, unlike Job, are truly serving God for what it will get them now. “What a pity”, Paul says of them.

So what about us? Will we hear from this text an encouraging word that will show us our hope and cause us to lay hold of that hope?

Our Anchoring Hope

(v.19)

In the midst of the turbulence and winds and drifting tides that pull at us, we have an anchor.

IT IS A FIRM AND SECURE ANCHOR. That means there can be not drift. It means that I can rest assured that the passing pleasure of earth’s pursuits will not cause me to drift. The anchor of our soul is a good one. It is firm and strong and reliable. It is sturdy and capable. The anchor is crafted and designed to be big enough and strong enough for the task.

Imagine the anchor that you may have in your boat. They come in all sorts of designs. We are familiar with the traditional anchor and there are newer designs. But an anchor that will keep a 17 foot fishing boat safe from drifting would be wholly inadequate for a battleship or an ocean liner. We would be horribly risking our lives to cast over this anchor in the midst of the storm if we are in a large vessel.

So your hope is sufficient for anchoring your souls. It is not a small and puny and insufficient anchor. It is magnificently capable of securing your soul against eternal destruction and spiritual drift. Our anchor is crafted by God to be more than sufficient for the worst and the greatest of our sinning need. But more than that, our anchor is secure. It has been firmly grounded so that it can never be removed.

IT IS AN ANCHOR FOR THE SOUL. Its primary stabilizing effect is inward. It is meant to bring stability, security and safety to our inner man, to our thoughts and wants. This future and upward confidence in God’s person, purposes and promises so holds sway over our thoughts and wants that we diligently and obediently believe and obey, no matter what.

IT IS A HEAVENLY ANCHOR. This anchor is cast, not downward into the water to the bottom, but upward to the heavens. Now think of a boat. You come to the cleat and going away from it out into the water and down to the anchor is a rope. It connects the boat to the anchor. You can follow the rope right down to the anchor. Just so, we can follow the rope of verses 19b-20 right up to our anchor. It winds to heaven and into the throne room and enters behind the veil and runs right up to the mercy seat and is tied to the Lord Jesus Christ.

A Greek stoic philosopher once wrote, “One must not tie a ship to a single anchor, nor life to a single hope.” Such is the world’s wisdom. We have tied ourselves to a single anchor and our lives to a single hope. The hope of a Christian: our desire and expectation, the one in whom we have a confident expectation, the one on whom our confident expectation is grounded and the one who gives us a confident expectation of eternal good and heavenly blessing is Jesus.

Our Advancing Help

(v.20)

INTO HEAVEN – The imagery here is drawn from the Old Testament tabernacle. The inner Holy of Holies was hidden by an immense curtain that blocked access. No one except the High Priest and he only once a year on the Day of Atonement, could enter. But Jesus has died as our substitute and has been raised and has ascended into heaven and entered into the real in heaven of which those things were mere copies on earth. In the act of His sacrificial death, the curtain has been removed showing that we can now come to God. Here is our saving hope.

BEFORE US – He has pioneered the way. He has blazed the trail. Again, even when the deepest water we pass through is death, Jesus has gone this way before we do.

FOR US – Jesus is our High Priest. He is our mediator. He is there in the presence of God interceding for us. He is doing so as the One in whom God has invested all of His purposes and promises. He is in heaven to help us. He has gone there on our behalf. He helps us from His throne of grace by showing us His mercy and giving us His grace.

But most of all, He is there as the never changing one whose purposes and promises towards us are utterly sure.

We all are encouraged by different things:

- We are encouraged by words of fellowship and friendship. People with their kindness and their loving truth, encourage us.
- We are encouraged by prayers from supplicating saints. I tell you, nothing lifts me up more than to know that people pray for me.
- We are encouraged by the fruit of our life's ministry. We begin to see all that we have worked for come about in God's timing and God's way.

I pray that we will be encouraged by this: God has an unchanging purpose that He shows us in His promises. That He will do what He has said is as sure as that He cannot change and He cannot lie. Do you believe this in an obeying way that encourages your hope?

- Conclusion**
- Three principles emerge which encourage me while I am patiently waiting for fulfilled promises:
 - There is a patient faith that sees promises fulfilled.
 - There is a kind of promising that encourages our hope.
 - There is a hope that anchors souls in heaven.
 - Am I so sure that God's promises will be fulfilled that I am willing to hope them even to the point of death?
 - Where is the anchor of our hope? What are you hoping in? Have you laid hold of the hope that is offered to you? Is your hope in Jesus? Is your desire and confident expectation in Jesus a soul anchoring hope that saves and sanctifies and will one day, glorify when Jesus comes?
 - May we battle the discouragements of life with the encouragement of hope: I will patiently wait for what God has promised.
 - For trembling, discouraged saints whose hope is fading:
 - **Cast your anchor upward.** Set your mind and your affections on Jesus and on those heavenly realities and sure promises and unchanging purposes.
 - **Keep your focus forward.** Deal with the past, yes. But keep your hope and expectation and excitement for what God is going to do.
 - **Make your progress onward.** With all the diligence God's enabling grace gives, lay hold and hold fast to your hope. Read about it, Think about it. Share it. Embrace it. Be passionate about it. Press forward with all the disciplines and means of grace to see it fulfilled.

2 Thessalonians
2:16-17

May our Lord Jesus Christ Himself and God our Father, who loved us and by His grace gave us eternal encouragement and good hope, encourage your hearts and strengthen you in every good deed and word.

The Power of an Indestructible Life

Hebrews 7:1-25

Introduction This begins a new section in the Book of Hebrews. To this point, our author has been arguing for the Superiority of the Jesus' Person. Now, he turns to arguing for the Superiority of the Jesus' Priesthood.

- Chapter 7 – Because of a Better Order: Melchizedek, not Aaron
- Chapter 8 – Because of a Better Covenant: New not Old
- Chapter 9 – Because of a Better Sanctuary: Heavenly not earthly
- Chapter 10 – Because of a Better Sacrifice: Jesus, not animals

As he has all along, proving the superiority of Jesus' Person and Priesthood also demonstrates the permanence and power and perfection of the new and living way.

This text intertwines the answer to two important questions:

- Why do we not live by Law now?
- Why do we not have priests now?

The Old Testament had Law and Priests, why don't we? Most religions have priests and even some religious groups within Christendom have priests, why don't we? What about Catholicism and Greek and Russian Orthodox with their priests and even Protestant churches whose pastors many times are fulfilling priestly roles?

Well, this text provides for us an unending and unassailable reason why there are to be no more priests. That is because Jesus has come as the final priest whose office extends forever. Those who want to continue the priesthood, whether in paganism, or Judaism or in Christianity, are taking away from the finality and sufficiency and majesty and glory of the Jesus Christ.

The Author's argument hinges on this mysterious person coming to us out of the mists of the Old Testament. As we follow our author in his development of his thesis, I want us to not only revel on the grand truths he unpacks, but also to reflect on the way he handles the Bible.

Historical Argument

(v.1-10)

The author begins by identifying who Melchizedek is and establishing his importance for Jesus' priesthood. This person appears in Genesis 14 as Abraham is returning from rescuing Lot. Turn with me and read that account from **Genesis 14:17:-15:1**.

Personal Identity

(v.1-3)

Who is this person? He was King of Salem which means peace. Scholars believe that he was the ruler of what later became Jerusalem. His name means "righteousness". And he was a priest of the Most High God. Now don't miss this. *This is the only time in all of Scripture that any one besides Jesus Christ is both King and Priest.* This is the point of verses 1-2. Here was a character in the Old Testament *who could not possibly have been under the Law.* In this Melchizedek, righteousness of character and peace in his rule come together in this King-Priest.

In the Old Testament, important people are usually identified by their family or tribal heritage. Developing and maintaining one's family tree is not a new idea. Verse three observes that according to the Scriptural record, he had no recorded genealogy, no mother, no father, no birth nor death. He simply appears on the scene. He engages Abraham. He disappears with only a trace in Psalms 110:4. There, the Messiah, the Son of God, is declared to be a priest forever under God's oath.

We do have a mystery here, one that has led to varying opinions. Some believe that Melchizedek is Jesus Christ. That Jesus Himself is the one who met Abraham. Others believe that this was a man whose life and historical record were providentially directed so that he was like Jesus in anticipation of the coming of the Law and the Levitical priesthood. I believe that this is what is indicated by "like the Son of God" in verse three and the "this man" of verse 6. Therefore the author is making a connection through a Biblical type.

Permanent Importance

(v.4-10)

But why is this man important? Why does the Old and New Testament identify the priesthood of Jesus as being in the order of Melchizedek?

- MELCHIZEDEK RECEIVED TITHES which was a uniquely priestly function in the Old Testament. Only priests were authorized to receive the tithe. It was a part of the public recognition of their office.
- MELCHIZEDEK BLESSED ABRAHAM establishing that he was greater than Abraham. This is another of those "if that, then how much more than that" arguments of the New Testament. If Abraham was great, then how much greater is Melchizedek. If Levi was a great priest, then how much a greater priest must Melchizedek be. If Melchizedek is a great priest, then how much greater is Jesus.
- On the principle of Headship, LEVI (AND ALL ABRAHAM'S HEIRS) PAID THE TITHE through Abraham. In the Bible, certain people are designated by God whose actions are imputed to their descendents accounts. Adam, Abraham and Jesus Christ are clearly functioning in this way. In Adam, all sinned. In Abraham, his descendents paid tithes. In Jesus Christ, we have died to sin and have been raised to newness of life.

So we have this mysterious person. He is like Christ as King and Priest. In him righteousness and peace are brought together. On the record, he has no genealogy, no birth or death. He receives tithes and imparts blessings. And his priesthood is both before and apart from the Law and from Levi. And his priesthood is the order in which Jesus Christ exercises His own priesthood.

Expositional Argument

(v.11-24)

Having established the historical existence of this person, his identity and importance, our author now takes up Psalm 110. From this text he begins to develop his interpretation of the Genesis account through a Christ-centered, New Covenant lens. Please turn to **Psalm 110:1-4** and let's read it as our author does so we can follow the argument he makes.

As the author follows the trajectory of a Canonical Theology, He does what the Scriptures always demand that we do: what we formulate in doctrine always is developed directly from the time and space facts of the Biblical record. Logic and reasoning must be tied to and never separated from the inerrant and infallible Word of God. The New Testament is an interpretation – it is taking the Old Testament record, getting it right in its setting, establishing connections through other texts pointing to Christ and then interpreting them in a New Covenant framework. Thus the Bible writers establish and model a hermeneutic *that we are to follow*.

The Problem Asked

(v.11)

The question simply asks: if the Old Testament system was perfect, why is Jesus a priest in another order?

You know, we come to the Scriptures often with our own questions. We want the Scriptures to answer our questions. But it is very important for us to take careful note of the questions the Scriptures ask. We hear this question and its answer in our day and basically it looks to us like a given. But, of course, to a Jew living in 70-80 AD, this was a fundamental question. What happened to the Old Testament system? How can Jesus be a priest when He was from the wrong tribe?

But look carefully at how the question is phrased: “If perfection could have been attained...” There you have it. Can any other system of religion apart from the New Covenant sacrifice of Jesus Christ, our Prophet, Priest and King bring perfection? Now that is a powerfully relevant question for Jews in the 1st century and Gentiles in the 21st century.

Because the answer is, “No, nothing has or can bring perfection except the life, death, resurrection and reign of Jesus Christ.” Now how can I say that? On what principles does this simple affirmation rest?

The Principles Argued

(v.12-24)

Many of us have lived to see amazing changes in our lifetime. In a hundred years we have come from the thrill of Kitty Hawk to the wonder of Saturn fly-byes and now, a solitary Voyager is trekking across the vast interstellar plains beyond our system. We have gone from typewriters to word processors. I have a computer in my briefcase that would have occupied this room 15 years ago.

Nothing in our world, as amazing and breath-taking as it may be, is as important as the change that occurred in the 33 ½ years of Jesus' life.

Melchizedek, not Aaron

(v.11-14)

The first change is the **family** of the priesthood. For 2,000 years, men and women and children who wanted to draw near to God brought sacrifices, were met by priests and were barred from physical nearness by a massive curtain. Day after day, Sabbath after Sabbath, priests ministered. To be a priest, you had to be a Levite. You were ordained in Aaron's line. But Jesus, God's final High Priest, was in the tribe of Judah and ordained in the line of Melchizedek.

Life, not law

(v.15-19)

The second change is in the **foundation** for the Priesthood. The Old Covenant system of Law was knit together with the priesthood in an indivisible fabric. There could be no change in one without a change in the other. One could not exist without the other. But, Jesus comes as a priest, not on the basis of the Law, but on "the power of an indestructible life."

Verse 18 is the heartbeat of our author's point and our message. The system of Law and priests was permanently set aside because it was weak and useless. It could not bring the perfection, the mature and finished product that was the point of God's purposes. It could not bring sinners into the actual presence of God and interposed a regular system of sacrifices, a retinue of priests and a myriad of detailed legislation which only one single person in all of human history has ever kept. Romans 8:3-4 argue this same point.

Jesus is our perfect priest and sacrifice on the principle of life. He lived without sin, was sacrificed for sin, was raised from the dead to destroy sin and rules and reigns forever *on the basis of an indestructible life*. This gives us the better hope by which we draw near to God. Beloved, you do not come to God on the basis of Law and legislation. You come to God on the basis of Life. You do not serve God on the basis of Law and legislation. You serve God on the principle of life.

Oath, not office

(v.20-22)

The third change is the **filling** of the office. No Old Covenant Mosaic Law priest was sworn into his office. He was a priest because of heredity. He entered the office as long as he did not personally disqualify himself. And he could be barred from office for any number of offenses.

Jesus is a priest forever. God has sworn that this is so. He has covenanted and promised and then driven the stake deeply into the rock of His character by taking an oath. He has risen from His throne, raised His left hand to all eternity and placed His right hand on His own holy and unchanging character and sworn that Jesus is a priest forever.

What does this mean for us? That the indestructible life of Jesus Christ and the inviolable oath of Almighty God guarantee the New Covenant. All that God is for us in Christ as expressed in the New Covenant will without fail, come to fulfillment.

Permanent, not passing**(v.23-24)**

The fourth change is the **finality** of the office. Old Testament families watched the passing of priests. Maybe they had familiar and favorite ones. Often, they sat down to fellowship around the meal made from the sacrifice. But, sometimes they came to the Tabernacle or the Temple to be greeted by sad news and new faces. The Old Testament priests could not sustain their efforts forever. Weariness, sickness, senility and finally and inevitably, death ended every single ministry.

But this is not so with Jesus. He continues because He never dies. He lives forever. We can never come to the mercy seat and find there a new face. It is and will always be Jesus whose sacrifice and intercession greets us with mercy and grace.

Here then is why we have no priests here. This is why pastors are not priests. This is why Catholic Fathers are not true priests. This is why trying to return to earthly priests is folly. Simply because of Jesus. His priesthood is sufficient and final because it is Melchizedek not Aaron, life not law, by oath not office, and it is permanent, not passing.

Practical Conclusion**(v.25)**

So what conclusion are we to draw from all this? Two faith sustaining, hope giving truths emerge. Jesus is able:

To Save Completely

In other words, what the law could not do in its weakness and powerlessness and uselessness because of our sinful nature, the power of Jesus' indestructible life has wrought. He is able to save completely. What a word! What a hope! What an assurance!

But notice: this is true of those who come to God through Him. For the recipients of the book of Hebrews, they must leave the Old Testament system and embrace Christ. They must no longer come to God through animal sacrifice and human priests. They must come to God through Jesus Christ.

And so must you. You cannot come to God on any other principle or any other person or by any performance and be saved completely except through the cross and the resurrection.

To Intercede Eternally

That Jesus can save completely is because He does intercede eternally. This will only be a life-transforming reality for us when we recognize that our major problem is not finances, or health, or friends, or psychological wholeness or fulfillment or meaning in life. When, by grace through the Word, the Spirit unfolds to us our surpassing sinfulness, then we will cling with obeying trust to the sustaining power of Jesus continuing intercession.

- Some of you are a bit uncomfortable with such a clear and edged attack on a religious system on which some of your friends and family are relying to draw near to God. Beloved, the Bible tells us that Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God by Jesus alone. These are serious and sobering words. And it is my fervent hope that they will stir up in you courage and clarity about the eternal condition of much of the community which surrounds us.
- How do you draw nigh to God? On the principles of the Old Mosaic system? Are you relying on priests or law or religious office or human effort? Or do you draw near to God on the power of Jesus' indestructible life and eternal mediation?
- Jesus is our sufficient and our final High Priest. He is able to save completely for He intercedes eternally. Let us draw near to God through Him, and Him alone.

Conclusion

The Eternal Perfection of the Once for All Offering **Hebrews 7:25-28**

Introduction “He sacrificed for their sins, once-for-all.” I want this morning for this phrase to grip us with the mighty hand of its truth. What Jesus did in His earthly death and resurrection was a once-for-all sacrifice for sin. It was sufficient and final. His sacrifice on Calvary was the great reality which cast its shadow in the Old Testament sacrifice. So the author of Hebrews keeps asking us, “If this is the final, sufficient and superior sacrifice, why are you returning to the weak and powerless shadows?”

But there also remains a very important question for us this morning as we come to the Lord’s Table. Why do we do this? Precisely because Jesus is that sacrifice. We come, not to crucify Him again, not to actually ingest Christ in a crassly physical way, but to remember, to recall and to reflect. We gather here with these elements as physical reminders and memorials of the superiority and finality and sufficiency of the sacrifice of Jesus.

So let us, as we prepare for the Lord’s Table, reflect together on the eternal perfection of the once-for-all offering.

His Majestic Purity

(v.26)

The priesthood of Jesus is superior because of Jesus’ holiness. If Old Testament sacrifices had to be without spot or blemish, how much more must the final sacrifice be utterly perfect. And this is what we need – this kind of priest.

His Sufficiency

The sacrifice of Christ meets our need. Don’t miss this. I do not know all the hungers of your heart. But this one thing I am absolutely sure of: Jesus our priest meets our need.

This phrase is often translated “It is fitting for us to have this kind of priest.” What does that mean? It is just like God to give and it is just like us to need this kind of priest. Jesus is exactly suited both to the character of God (v.26) and to the need of man (v.27).

His Characteristics

Jesus is exactly suited to meet our need because of these characteristics. When you go to apply for a job, they want to know what qualifications you have for the job. They also are looking for certain kinds of people with certain characteristics to work there. So be clear about this: for Jesus to be our sufficient high priest, He had to meet these qualifications.

- Holy – Here is that inner quality and power of God’s central attribute. Holiness could not be merely added to Him like one adds clothes. Holiness had to be His skin, and bones and blood. This was not holiness in theory or in prospect or in hope. It was a bright reality. We know that this was so for even at His birth, Mary was told that He would be “that holy one conceived in her.”

- Innocent – He must also be blameless, not guilty of any charge against Him. If holiness is His internal character, then this is His outward conduct. Many may be ready to charge Him with wrong doing, but investigation reveals that what He was on the inside directed every choice He made to actually glorify God.
- Undefiled – Our sufficient priest must live among sinful humanity, but must not be contaminated by contact with it. Imagine what it was like for Jesus to walk among sinful men and women and children as the holy and blameless one. All of His rubbing shoulders with sinful humanity did not defile or contaminate or corrupt Him.
- Separate – The phrase here refers to His not being connected with their depravity. It does not mean that Jesus lived in isolation from sinful people. It is quite evident from the Gospel records that Jesus spent a lot of time with sinners. What this means is that Jesus was not connected to the root of depravity inherited from Adam. Being virgin born, He is set apart from the whole of men and women born in sin.
- Exalted – Finally, our sufficient priest must have God’s seal of approval. This God did in the resurrection and ascension and exaltation of Christ.
Illus: software with the seal of authenticity
FDA seal of approval on food.

Jesus is superior in His sacrifice because He Himself was, in all ways, without sin.

His Final Sacrifice

(v.27)

The priesthood of Jesus is superior because of Jesus’ sacrifice. If verse 26 speaks of what we need then verse 27 speaks of what Jesus did not need.

How It Is Different

We must understand how Jesus’ sacrifice is different from the Old Testament. This difference also sets it apart from all other religious sacrifices as well. Do not think that this is merely a message for Jews. No beloved, this is a message for pagans, for anyone who brings anything anytime in anyway to gain access to God and His favor other than the final and sufficient work of Christ. And I am talking to each of you just as this text talks to me.

It may be daily or weekly or monthly or only at Christmas and Easter, but there is this sense of coming to God at this time and in this way because God will be pleased that I am here. Well, I have bad news for you. If you are even here this morning to draw near to God on any other grounds than the final sacrifice of Jesus, you may be near geographically but you are still distant spiritually.

- It is different in that it is NOT DAILY. All systems of religion including the Old Testament bring sacrifices on some regular basis. It is something I have seen in Africa. It is something we read in the Scriptures. And for many even in our day and time, people still try to do. And this kind of religion is weak and wearying. What a great thing it is that Jesus’ one sacrifice of Himself put an utter end to all

sacrificing that follows. May God be pleased to open eyes to see and hearts to feel and wills to embrace this saving truth. Jesus' sacrifice is not and cannot be, daily.

- It is different in that it is NOT FOR HIMSELF. All of us know that all men we know have erred and sinned and have fallen short of the glory of God. In the Old Testament, when the High Priest came on the annual Day of Atonement to sacrifice for sin, he had to offer sacrifice first for his own sin so that his offering up of the sacrifice for the nation could be accepted and he could enter the holy of holies. But this is not so with Jesus. When He was sacrificed, the sin He bore was not His own. He had none. The sin He bore was that of His elect people. Their sins were rolled on Him and He was sacrificed on the cross as our sin-bearer.

So these blessed, saving truths show us how the sacrifice of Jesus is sufficient and superior: not daily and not for Himself.

How It Is Final

There are phrases that uniquely identify products. We associate (and advertising makes sure that this is so) these phrases with these products. We all know what "the real thing" is and who has "a better idea". So we must always associate this phrase with the cross: "The once-for-all sacrifice." Now be clear about this once-for-all. It does not mean "once for everybody." That is an accident of the English. What it does mean is "once for ever never to have to be done again." It is final, finished, done. No priest has since nor ever can again offer sacrifice for our sins. I say again with all the passion coming from a soul that has banked his eternity on this: this is the finished work of Jesus.

That Jesus' offering of Himself is final also shows us what man's problem really is. Man's problem is *sin*. What we tend to think of man's problems in social, emotional and psychological terms. Man is lonely, alienated, unfulfilled, sick, searching for meaning and hope and purpose. While these all may be true, they are not the root of the problem. Jesus came to deal with sin—to deal with at its root. Consequences of sin are dealt with in the process of sanctification.

Do you understand? Beloved, Jesus is all we need. He is our sinless sacrifice. Rest your soul in Him.

His Eternal Appointment

(v.28)

Jesus is superior as our priest because of His sinlessness, His sufficient sacrifice and because of His appointment. He was appointed as a Son. This sentence shows us two important truths about His eternal appointment as our priest.

The Weakness of Men

We have already seen that men are weak. They are weak in their sin. And yet the Law appoints them as priests. In the shadow lands of the Old Testament, this is what was done as a pointer to that which was to come. Those shadows were like this Table, they and it have no saving benefit in itself. It is only as these things actually point us to Christ. It is only when we trust and embrace and obey Him in faith that those Old Testament sacrifices and this New Testament ordinance serve in the way God ordained.

The Perfection of the Son

What the Law could not do, God did in the accompanying of His New Covenant with an oath. He appointed His Son as the final High Priest who would offer the final sacrifice. He was perfect. He was the perfect Son. And God's oath made Him a priest. We then truly honor Christ and glorify Him when we lean with all our trust on Him.

So I invite you today in this moment to do that. Trust and treasure the One whose offering of Himself is the once-for-all final sacrifice for your sin. **Conclusion**

The Heavenly Reality of Jesus' Ministry

Hebrews 8:1-6

Introduction Sometimes, Biblical truth seems so – theoretical. We might even be tempted to say, unreal. The Bible describes images and realities that are too often unseen and distant from us. Now this often leads us not to really believe many things the Bible tells us is so. Since they have little bearing on the day-to-day realities of my life, so what?

This next section of Hebrews is addressed to people who would have felt and thought this in a more piercing way than we do. Most of them had professed Christ out of a religious system that the Bible had established with its solemn feasts and majestic rituals and priests in their vestures and the warm blood of real sacrifices. Their worship of God would have been very present and tangible and real and physical. It smelled and tasted and touched and was seen.

Now, they must believe what they cannot see. The New Testament is shatteringly silent about worship places and times and things. It still speaks of great realities, but they tend to be invisible. This led them and sometimes leads us to a basic question: “Why is this better?”

John Piper helps us with this illustration: Imagine for a moment that you are a child. In fact, children, imagine for a moment that you are lost in a large store. We've all seen this happen. The child peering up into faces, wandering aisles accompanied by plaintive little cries of, “Mommy...Mommy.” But then around the corner you spy your mother's shadow. And you are glad. You know it's her. And you run towards the shadow and then there she is in all her comforting and possibly even scolding presence. You see, why would you only be satisfied with the shadow? This is the message of this huge section. We now have the eternal reality—why go back to shadows?

Greatness of His Present Ministry

(v.1-2)

Don't miss the author's main part. In all of the details of his argument, don't lose sight of Jesus who is just this kind of High Priest.

It seems to me that this is a very important principle for us in our own approach to the Word. As we study, learn, and communicate God's Word, there are a myriad of sometimes confusing details which support and strengthen what we believe. Depending on your gifts and abilities, you may or may not be able to understand or retain all the details. *But we must hear and understand and retain the main things.* In all of the complex discussion about unbelief and rest in chapters 3-5, we must remember the main thing: *that we must believe God in an obeying way that looks like rest and trust.* If I may make it even simpler: *you do what you really believe.*

So in all of this long discussion on the Old Testament Levitical priesthood which seems to so distant from us and the arguments so trivial, let us not forget the main thing: *Jesus is just this kind of High Priest-Sovereign, sufficient and sympathetic.*

Its Majesty**(v.1b)**

We've already seen this phrase. We understand that it is rulers and kings and sovereigns who sit on thrones. Here is the majesty of our priest. He has been exalted above the heavens and is seated on a throne.

This means He will command us and will rule us. The sufficient and sympathetic High Priest is still also our Sovereign. *And none of these are in tension.* What He has told us to do He identifies with us in our weakness to do them and in our failures to obey them and is utterly sufficient to cleanse and forgive.

Don't ever forget this when sometimes the commands of Jesus appear harsh. Don't forget this when people want to disobey Jesus because, well, He is so gentle and sympathetic. And don't forget this when the accuser and your conscience reminds of sin in the past and wants you to not believe that Jesus' sacrifice really does deal with them.

Its Ministry**(v.2)**

Jesus serves or ministers in the heavenly tabernacle. Heaven is a real place. It was made by God. It is somewhere we go and something He will bring to us at His appearing. It is where angels and cherubim and seraphim and saints are. And there in some amazing way, Jesus is and being there serves as the finished sacrifice.

Another contrast is highlighted here. Not only is Jesus seated and serving in the true tent or heavenly tabernacle, but it is the one set up by God and not by Moses. Moses was to make the Old Covenant tabernacle after the pattern given him and he was responsible to erect it in the precise way God ordered. But the place of Jesus' superior priesthood is greater because God has erected it. He has created it by His own word and power. Thus, point by point, the superiority of Jesus' Priesthood is argued.

And so we have verse two. He sat down in verse one and He serves in verse two. We have a sovereign who serves. This is not what we expect and yet it is just like what the Bible pictures. Jesus in His regal majesty and magnificent greatness serves His own. Is this not a pattern and motivation for us? I do not see here that Jesus just serves good Christians. He serves his people. He is great as God. He is great as the God-man, His incarnation. He is great in His resurrection. He is great on the throne. But it may be the most amazing greatness of all – He sat down and He serves.

Permanence of His Present Ministry**(v.3-5)**

Jesus' ministry is great and it is permanent. This is argued against the passing nature of Old Testament shadows. The shadows are passing and insubstantial. The reality and substance and permanent reality have come in Jesus. Now what is it that makes this ministry of Jesus permanent?

Its Purpose**(v.3)**

Priests exist to offer sacrifices and offerings. This enduring principle means that Jesus came as a priest, He also had to offer a sacrifice and offering. He had to have something to sacrifice. And this was Himself.

Its Problem**(v.4)**

But there is a problem. Jesus could not be the priest because there were already other priests ministering. God only recognizes one order of priests and their sacrifices at a time. If the Levitical system was permanent and unchanging and irreplaceable, then Jesus' sacrifice was not legitimate.

Its Pattern**(v.5)**

Here is the solution. Earthly priests minister a shadow and copy, not the reality. They should have understood this because Moses was warned to follow exactly the pattern or blueprint which came from the reality shown him on the mountain. This warning comes because of two things:

- They were to follow the pattern exactly. They must not deviate in any thing. What was built was to meet the precise specifications.
- They were to realize that what they built was an earthly copy of a heavenly reality. What they worshipped in was not the real thing.

The inevitable conclusion then is that they served as earthly priests in the copy of the heavenly reality *as a visible, but passing model* of what was to come at the cross. And once the sacrifice of Jesus has come, there is no more need for the shadow.

Therefore, we are not coming to an earthly priest, but to Christ, our heavenly priest. Drawing near to God is based on unseen realities not outward structures. This is the ever transforming truth of New Testament worship. That is why the only statement Jesus ever made about worship itself is that it must be in spirit and truth.

Jesus' heavenly ministry is great. It is permanent. And finally, it is superior.

Excellence of His Present Ministry**(v.6)**

The rest of chapter eight and nine are going to show us all the sparkling facets of the diamond of the excellence of Jesus' ministry. I will save all of that for the proper time. From this verse, be gripped by how much superior the sovereignty, sufficiency and sympathy of Jesus are.

Better Covenant

Here is the standard of measurement. Jesus' heavenly ministry for us is *just as superior* to the Levitical ministry as the New Covenant is the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. And He will drive this home with great force by making contrast after contrast between the Old and the New Covenants.

Better Promises

The richness and greatness and betterness of that New Covenant rests on its richer and greater and better promises. If Old Testament saints were to believe God promises in an obeying way, then how much more must we to whom are given so much better promises?!

Now, listen to me. When we either deny that we are a part of the New Covenant or shift the focus of our relationship with God to other emphasis, we are not only doing something the Bible does not, but also devaluing the greatness of what Christ has done. When we honor the New Covenant we exalt the Lord Jesus. The New Covenant is not just for Jews, it is where the saving work and promises of God are located. But we will talk more about that next week.

- It is evident that we need to screw these simple truths deep into our hearts. The story is told of Greg Norman, the great Australian golfer who is known for his stoic and aloof presence during the game. He entered the final round of the 1996 Masters with a 6 stroke lead over Nick Faldo. In 18 holes, he blew that lead and watched his victory roll away on a 16 foot putt on the 18 green by Faldo. When that shot dropped in along with Norman's heart, Norman went to Faldo looking to shake his hand. To Norman's surprise, he was embraced with tears. And his own tears flowed. Later he related, "I did not cry because I had lost. I've lost a lot of golf tournaments before. I'll lose a lot more. I cried because I'd never felt that from another man before. I've never had a hug like that before." We often try to go through life as Christians, just a little stoic and a little aloof. We need the embrace of our great High Priest. We've never before had one quite like it—one that is great, permanent and superior. For in it, a sovereign serves.
- So then, be satisfied with Jesus. Be satisfied with Him:
 - When you go to work...
 - When you go to school...
 - When you work at home...
 - When you are tempted...
 - When you feel alone...

pray.

Conclusion

The Newness of the New Covenant

Hebrews 8:6-13

Introduction Promises. All kinds of people are making all kinds of promises.

- Politicians – It seems any more that there are two things that make politicians click: raising money to spend in all sorts of foolish ways and making promises they have no intention to keep.
- Companies – How many contracts and agreements do companies break. They say this is what they will do and then try to get them to do it.
- Individuals – Too often we find people’s word to be unreliable. They make promises that they never carry out. In fact, that this is so at the personal level is why it is true at the business and government levels as well.
- Marriage – Most, if not every one of us entered marriage through a marriage vow, a covenant. The terms were read to us by the minister and we said, “I do.” And we usually covenant with our spouse “till death do us part.” Yet, one out of two *Christians* will break their marriage vows either by adultery or by divorce.

God makes promises. God relates to people through the promises He has made. Most of these promises come in packages called Covenants. Now if our regular experience is that people break their promises, what happens to the Covenants between God and people? This is the heart of what our author is dealing with here.

God made a Covenant with Abraham. God promised Abraham that his descendents would be a nation. When that nation left Egypt going to the Promised Land, God covenanted with them and gave them the Law. The Law is part of the Mosaic Covenant. In it, God promises blessing and prosperity for Israel if she will keep the Covenant.

But even in the Old Testament, we find references to a New Covenant—to something that was coming later and would be better. Verse 6 tells us that Jesus is just as superior as the New Covenant is superior to the Old Covenant. If we are going to appreciate all that this means, we need to understand how the New Covenant is superior to the Old. All the while, we must remember that we have a sovereign, sympathetic, superior and sufficient High Priest. We are digging into the treasures of the New Covenant in order that we might value Jesus.

The Limitations of the Old Covenant

(v.6-9)

If there is something better and something superior, then there must be limitations and possibly even problems with the current. Verse 7 even tells us that there must have been something wrong with the Old Covenant in order for there to be a reason for God to make a new one.

What is it that makes the promises of governments and companies and advertisers and even marriages undependable? Is it that government is bad? Or the company is bad? Or that being married is bad? Is it that what is being promised is a bad thing?

Usually not. What is being promised is usually perceived as what we want to hear, what we want to receive. There usually is nothing bad about the company. The promises they make are often designed to get us to buy the product or support the candidate.

So it is with the Old Covenant. It is not that God is bad for making promises. It is certainly not that the promises and commands that God made were bad. No, the limitations of the Old Covenant—the relationship that God had with people through the Mosaic Law—was limited by three important things.

The Movement of God's Plan (v.6)

The Old Covenant was a part of the flow of God's saving plan that unfolded in redemptive history. It was moving toward the excellence and superiority of Christ all along. Now that He has come, we can both see what was being unfolded more clearly and appreciate the "more excellent character" of what God has done.

The Design of God's Purposes (v.7)

The Old Covenant was designed to bring God's people out of paganism. It was designed to show how a people were to understand holiness: its commands and its consequences and its cure. It was designed to reveal sin and require sacrifice. All of its features were signposts and roadmaps pointing and leading to Jesus.

This covenant was conditional. That is, God promised blessing for obedience and punishment for disobedience. It came down to "do or die."

The Failure of God's People (v.8-9)

There then is the rub. Just like in government, or business or marriage, it is the badness and sinfulness of people that make promises fail. It was not with God or with the covenant itself, it was with the people that God finds fault. They failed. They did not obey. They were unfaithful. They mistook shadows for realities, outward pretense of obedience for inward inclination. Instead of being satisfied with what God had promised and what God had provided, they were constantly hankering for something more, something different, something else.

So it was not that God had made bad promises or commands-
It was that people had bad hearts. What was wrong with the Old Covenant (v.7) was the fault He found in the people (v.8-9).

There is an awful lot of preaching on the Law nowadays. We in the church tend to turn more and more to Law as we see greater and greater corruption around us. I want to say this. The Law clearly shows us what sin is. It codified *THE WHAT* God had built into creation and into man's consciences. *But it lacks the power to make men perfect.* Every single human being who has ever lived, except one, has failed to keep the Law in both attitude and action. And so have you. And so have I. We know this. We have failed in every moment in every way to show how great and supreme God is. We have failed to love God and love neighbor.

But not Jesus. Jesus completely kept the Law. The Old Covenant reached what it was designed to produce *only* in Jesus Christ. There was no fault in Him. So He fulfilled the Law.

But what about us? What about each one of us who are promise breakers and covenant failures?

The Perfections of the New Covenant (v.10-12)

This is why we have the New Covenant. We are not left without hope or help. The New Covenant is better and superior *because what it does for the sinful, bad heart of men and women and children*. The superiority and finality of the New Package of Promises, the New Guarantee, the New Covenant is in two areas:

In its Specifics

God promised that He would do some very specific things which He did not do in the Old Covenant in the same way.

- Internal transformation – God would internalize His Word by giving the Holy Spirit. He would write His Word on the very hearts and minds of His people. He would give them new hearts.
- Unconditional relation – God simply affirmed that they would be His people. It was no longer conditional. The conditions were all met in Jesus’ obedience and that obedience is put to our account. Under the Old Covenant it was do or die—now it is done and live.
- Eternal salvation – No longer or ever again would God remember their sins. They would be forgiven. Their sin would not be held against them. Their spiritual debt would be put on Jesus’ account and He would pay it on the cross. There would be a full and final release from their guilt.

In its Scope (v.11)

All through these verses runs the “everyone” theme. Here is the heart of what makes the New Covenant better. Everyone that God has chosen to make a part of this covenant will receive its benefit. This is what verse 11 is talking about. It is not saying that we will not need to evangelize. That is what they had to do in the Old Covenant. Not every person who was under the Old Covenant really knew God, was forgiven by God or had a relation with God. Numerous Jews who lived under the Law died under the judgment of God. They failed and were unfaithful. Not so with the new. If you draw a circle which is the New Covenant, you will in there *all* true believers and *only* true believers. All and only – that is the preciousness of the New Covenant.

Not just that God brought about *realities* in place of the shadows, but that He *made them real* to us.

The Relationship between the Two

(v.13)

What this verse indicates has for us already taken place.

On Friday, August 9, 70 AD, the Roman general Titus overthrew the defenders of the Temple in Jerusalem. His soldiers carried off every piece of furniture in it. Then, they burned it to the ground. In the remaining days, the stones in the walls were dismantled to retrieve the gold that had melted into them. Jesus' prophecy and the words of this text came to pass. What was obsolete and aging had finally disappeared.

The Judaism practiced today is not the Judaism of the Bible. There is no Temple. There are no sacrifices. There are no more the annual Sabbaths where every Jewish male attends. This is the judgment of God on the fault and failure of the Old Covenant. And it is the grace of God in the fullness of the New Covenant.

- This means that God's promises are sure and reliable. We live in the age of the New Covenant. Here we have better promises. Now we have this superior High Priest, the Lord Jesus, who is sovereign, sufficient and sympathetic.
- We are also a covenant people. We are a community, the people of God. We need to think about this more. We need to act like this more. And we need to invite people to enter this New Covenant community under our Savior and Sovereign. I invite you now.
- We need to be promise keeping people. Yes, we have a whole men's movement today with its 7 promises. Listen to me beloved, keep your word. Keep your word with God. Keep your word with your church. Keep your word with your spouse.
- Let us seek after Jesus who has brought this New Covenant to us by His sacrificial death on the cross. Bow to Him and trust Him. He will forgive and you will be free from your guilt.

Conclusion

The Present Importance of Obsolete Symbols

Hebrews 9:1-14

Introduction Many people today do not sleep well. They go to bed and toss and turn, finally falling into troubled sleep. Some try new ideas for beds: new mattresses, water beds, air comfort mattresses. Others turn to alcohol or drugs. Some put blinders over their eyes and cotton in their ears. Others give up and get up, turn on the tube or a movie and sit in dazed stupor until sheer exhaustion drives them under.

And frankly, the problem is not bad beds, or noise, or caffeine. What is keeping many a Christian awake at night is not outward discomfort, but the quiet and persistent voice of a condemning conscience. All of us have had times like this. We kept hearing in our inner voice that we are wrong in this attitude or in that action. So we try to quiet it, or ignore it and eventually we get used to it.

I have tinnitus. Probably most of you would not know it. I have a constant ringing in my ears. One evening, we were sitting at the table and the noise in my ears just seemed to become unbearable. I put my head in my hands and commented on it (probably, more like, I complained about it). The family all laughed and said, "It's the crickets. We all are hearing the noise because the crickets are making a racket." So, I have the constant chirping of crickets in my ears everywhere I go all the time. There are times when I want to think or meditate or pray, that I just long for quiet. I never truly have it.

I do not know one person who does not hunger for quietness of conscience. Yet we are constantly thinking and doing and feeling in ways that wake that persistent ringing in our souls that gives us no peace and no rest and no quiet. Don't you long for quietness and clearness of conscience? How do we get it, then?

This is the present importance of these obsolete symbols: we can have a clear conscience.

The Sanctuary

(v.1-7)

We read these words with a tremendous sense of foreignness. These are old and dusty and difficult to imagine. The whole idea of worshipping around a tent sounds weird. It has little connection to the concrete realities in which we live. How do we deal with the difference and distance we feel from its oldness and strangeness?

- **Ignore it.** We dismiss such ideas and considerations as irrelevant to us, our day or our situations. In this day of computers and airplanes and antibiotics and cloning, why should I care much about something so obsolete and passing that it is no longer around today?
- **Idealize it.** We can search through its typology for transcendent principles that apply, not only to them, but also to us. We look for eternal significance divorced from its historical setting.
- **Learn from it.** We approach it saying that this is Scripture, this is redemptive history that has been and still is, under God's sovereign control. Through these

passing and obsolete symbols, God is establishing categories and truths and object lessons which point to Christ and which Christ illuminates.

So let's not choke on the dust nor turn away in frustration at the difference. Let us listen carefully to see if God will tell us what the design of all this has to say.

Its Covenant Principle

(v.1)

God made an agreement, a contract - what the Bible calls a Covenant - with God's people. In that contract, God gave precise regulations for worship. They knew exactly what was required. In order to be near to God and His Presence, they had to follow these regulations exactly. Part of these regulations was a tent or tabernacle. Later, Solomon took these instructions and built a Temple.

There was no escaping the fact that God had prescribed exactly how this was to be built and exactly what was to happen in it.

Its Physical Structure

(v.2-5)

These verses summarize for us the construction of the tent. In fact, let me play tour guide for a moment and let's walk through it. Around the tent was a courtyard marked off by a fence. There was one gate. As we walk through this gate, we come immediately to a large altar. Here is where we would bring our sacrifice. As we walk past the altar, we come to large bowl set on a pedestal somewhat like an immense cup and tea set. From it, we can see water pouring out of sockets and the priests wash there. Next, there is the tabernacle. It is like an oblong box over 8 feet high with a large covering over its top and going down on either side. As we enter the door, we come into a room that is 2/3 of the whole. On our right, by the wall, is an ornate table with twelve dishes, each one containing a loaf of unleavened bread. On our left, is a large lamp stand with seven branches. At the end of each branch is a cup for lamp oil and a burning wick floating in it. In front of us is a double curtain. Standing in front is a small altar designed to burn incense on it.

If we go through the curtain, we would come into a smaller room called the Holy of Holies. This room contains only one piece of furniture. It is a gold box, with a cherub on each side of the top whose wings arch over the lid of the box and touch over its center. Inside this box, the Ark of the Covenant, are two tablets of stone on which are written the Ten Commandments, a golden pot of manna and a walking stick with small knobs all over it where it once had budded.

And I can only echo with our author: we cannot go into detail about all of this now. For this structure was gaudy, elaborate and rich in artistic detail. There were all sorts of fancy instruments and bowls and pans and utensils designed to assist and aid in their worship.

Its Priestly Service

(v.6-7)

Next, we are told what went on in this place of worship. The priests sacrificed at the altar in the courtyard. They washed at its fountain. They entered the outer room to eat or change the bread daily. They maintained the lamps on the lamp stand. They cleaned and replenished the incense. But they never ever went into the inner room.

Once a year, on a special day called the Day of Atonement, the High Priest offered a sacrifice at the altar and sprinkled its blood for himself. Then he offered another sacrifice and took its blood into the tabernacle, passed through the double curtain and sprinkled the blood on the lid of the Ark of the Covenant. If God accepted that sacrifice, then the High Priest was allowed to return to the people, otherwise, he died.

Now we must never imagine the Old Covenant believer entering the Tabernacle to worship. No, at best, he entered the courtyard around it and offered his or her sacrifice there. But the tabernacle, the tent itself, was off-limits to everyone except the priests.

So what does all this mean? One thing for sure. It tells us that worship in the Old Covenant had exacting details and difficult rituals and precise places for its worship. The detailed instructions were almost wholly taken up with the external and the physical.

So why should we care about all this?

The Significance

(v.8-9)

What makes all this significant are two key phrases:

- The Holy Spirit *was showing* (v.8).
- This is an illustration *for the present time* (v.9)

So all of these obsolete and passing rituals were very important because the Holy Spirit wanted us to see something and feel something very important. He was doing “show and tell” with the regulations and the sanctuary of the Old Covenant. I can stand up here and talk about what it is like to be around a 15 or 20 foot python or a 2 ton Cape Buffalo. But let me bring in 15 feet of skin or a massive set of killing horns, and you will see and feel with greater power what I am trying to say. So it is with what God through the Holy Spirit was doing. And all of this was not just for their day (v.8) but is an illustration for ours (v.9).

So what is it that these external, physical rituals and sanctuary were teaching them and us?

No Personal Access

(v.8)

While an earthly tent or temple or sanctuary stood, the way for everyone into the very Presence of God *was blocked*. The very externals that were given by God so that men and women and boys and girls could express their faith and deal with their sins, also kept them from entering into the Presence of God.

Imagine the frustration. Suppose that God Himself lived in this *in a physically visible way* which in the Old Testament was called the Shekeinah Glory of Cloud. But you cannot enter this room. In fact, you cannot enter the narthex. You come to worship and to sacrifice and to be near God, but you have to stand in the parking lot. And yet, just through two sets of doors is GOD HIMSELF.

This was the day in and day out experience of Old Testament saints.

No Purified Conscience**(v.9)**

Not only could they not come into the presence of God, they went away with their conscience still stained by their sins. That internal voice was not silenced or appeased by animal sacrifices nor the spilling of hot blood. What we experience and actually may have relief and release from, they did not. Even when they did exactly what God prescribed, God was satisfied, but their consciences were not silenced.

It really opens up for us the anguish and wrenching cries of the Psalmist, doesn't it. They who believed God heard them and accepted them and fellowshiped with them did so with a grace enabled faith that shames us. For the very externals of their religion showed them what they were missing and barred them from nearness and inner wholeness.

No Permanent Effect**(v.10)**

These things were merely external. They were structures and forms and rituals. They were in place only until the time of the new order. They were to be ending when the age in which we live began. This age of the New Covenant began with the birth and life and death and resurrection of Jesus. The old age was passing away and disappeared at the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem in 70 AD (Heb. 8:13).

All of this is to bring us to Jesus Christ. Verses 11-14 show us is that what the external religion of the Old Covenant could not do, Jesus Himself has done.

The Sacrifice**(v.11-14)**

Jesus came to bring us the good things we already are now experiencing. We do not have access to God and purity of conscience through the old ways of external rituals and sacred tents or temples. We have access and purity through the sacrifice of Jesus - through the outpouring of His life in His blood on the cross.

Its Contrasts

Two major contrasts are drawn here.

- **Where He went** - Jesus does not enter an earthly physical temple to offer sacrifice. No, He entered the eternal, heavenly Temple that is not man-made. He entered heaven for us.
- **How He went** - Jesus does not sacrifice an animal and then takes its blood. No, He sacrificed Himself on the altar at Calvary. He enters heaven, not because of animal blood, but because of His own.

Now notice carefully verse 12. Do not misread this. And certainly do not misuse this. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus entered the heavenly place with a human body *by* not *with* His blood. We must not think in some slavishly literal way that Jesus gathered up every drop of the red liquid flowing through His veins and took it into heaven in a bowl and there splashed it on the throne of God.

The words on the cross were, "It is finished." There, the life and blood of Jesus was both shed and sprinkled. The punishment for sin was done. The purification of conscience made possible. The way to heaven opened as Jesus entered heaven as our

priest and our mediator. It is that He is alive and living there that we have all these good things now.

Its Finality

(v.11-12)

The stress in verses 11-12 is the finality, the completeness of what Jesus has done. He *went through*... He *entered*... He *obtained*... and all these completed action verbs are *once for all*. What Jesus has done in dying and living for us is done. It is completed. That is why there are no more earthly sanctuaries or priests. There is nothing more to be done.

Its Sufficiency

(v.13-14)

Our author uses one of those wonderful “how much more” that brings home to sin-sick and conscience stricken souls the release so hungered for. The argument runs like this: “If the external, physical rituals made sinners outwardly clean, then how much more will the sacrifice of Jesus make sinners inwardly clean.”

The sacrifice of Jesus is entirely sufficient to pardon sin and purify consciences. Our sins are not just covered as they were in the Old Covenant--no they are cleansed. They are washed away.

I cannot move on without pointing out to learning saints the Trinitarian aspect of Jesus' sacrifice. Verse 14 says it is the blood or sacrifice of Christ - here is the Son. He offered Himself through the Spirit - here is the Holy Spirit. He offered Himself to God - here is the Father. So the sacrifice of Jesus was *of* the Son *by* the Spirit *to* the Father.

How can people with stained consciences draw near to God? We know that what keeps us away from God is not dirty hands or wrong clothes or long hair or contemporary music or even physical distance from an altar or a priest. What keeps us from God is real sin echoing in a condemning conscience.

And we know that the presence of sacred rituals and formal worship and proper external structures do not bring us the purity of conscience that allows us to draw near to God. In fact, those very externals may be guarding the way to real personal access and real inner peace. What allows us to draw near to God is the sinner's soul purified by the final and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Christ.

Here is why many today - why I spent many of my teen years - why many of you - do not have the freedom in drawing near to God. You are trying to deal with your condemning conscience *in Old Covenant ways*. You have all sorts of regulations and external rules that bind you tight to law living and hinder you from worshipping in spirit and truth. You have little freedom of conscience that gives you freedom of access. Some of you may still be trying to come to God and be accepted by God on your own goodness or your own works. And no matter how good you are and no matter what you do, that small still voice shouts through your quiet moments that *all is not well*.

So what must we do? We must abandon all that is passing and obsolete and failing and cast ourselves on the mercy of God and He will cleanse your conscience by the blood of Jesus so that you will have the fullness and freedom to draw near to God. In fact, your

conscience will be cleansed from all your dead works so that you may serve the living God.

Let me bring this all home with a couple of very important conclusions.

Conclusion

- While the focus in the Old Testament is on all the exact and right and strict rules and regulations on worship, the New Testament is stunningly silent on it.

There is no text that describes a worship service in its entirety. There is nothing about worship places, worship times, worship dress, worship music, length of sermons, or worship order.

All of this frees us and frightens us.

- Frees us to find time, place, dress, style, music and order that radically orients us to the supremacy of Jesus.
- Frightens us because the way we put worship together - the way each of the Biblical parts is related to the whole - is culturally shaped rather than Biblically commanded.

Why do we tend to create, in their absence, external and concrete and unchanging forms and structures for worship.?

- Human nature is wired so that we construct as quickly as possible, a manageable, man-made religion.
- Old Testament had all this prescribed in amazing detail. So we think that we must have some sort of transcendent, unchanging structure in which to express our worship, failing then to realize that even God-ordained structures became obsolete and passing.

Why does this amazing freedom exist in the New Covenant?

Because the New Covenant is a missionary faith. It is going to all cultures and people groups with the good news that Jesus is Savior and Sovereign. So the grace of God is calling out God's chosen from every language and culture and ethnic background to worship God in spirit and truth. So almost all the mandated, ritualistic, formal, external aspects of public worship are gone. What is left is the passion and purity of people loving God and neighbor in every sphere of life - at home, at work, at play, at church. (Piper)

- We must recognize that our consciences are trained to condemn us based on what we perceive is right and wrong.

The condemning effect of conscience is called guilt. When your conscience announces a verdict against you, what you feel is guilt.

The conscience does not know the difference between breaking God's law - sin - and breaking our own personal law - standards. When either is violated, our conscience condemns and we feel guilty. This is easy to illustrate.

If I have taught my conscience that stealing is wrong, then when I steal my conscience will condemn me and will make me feel guilty. This is what it is supposed to do.

If I have taught my conscience that drinking from clear plastic glasses is wrong, then my conscience will condemn me and will make me feel guilty. This is what it will do.

But there is a very important difference. Stealing is sin; drinking from clear plastic glasses is not. But I will feel equally guilty. Both acts will keep me from drawing near to God because of my conscience. The sacrifice of Jesus deals with both. It has atoned and redeemed and paid the penalty for sin. It has released us from of universal, external rules and rituals and given us amazing freedom to obey God with a clear conscience.

In matters of sin, purify your conscience by coming to Jesus and receiving from Him the pardon and cleansing that His final and sufficient sacrifice has purchased for you.

In other matters, keep heeding your conscience *all the while retraining it with the Word*. Keep your conscience tender toward sin, but free in all else.

Here is the challenge for you today. Draw near to God with a conscience cleansed by Jesus' sacrifice. Trust Him. Bow to Him. Be cleansed by Him. Serve Him today with all your heart.

The Present Importance of a Promised Inheritance Hebrews 9:15-22

Introduction I was just reading an exciting mystery by Dick Francis. In it, there is this very rich gold trader who has had two attempts on his life. He is an older man with many heirs. He has begun to spend his money in a way that he never did before. The heirs are trying to get him to stop spending their inheritance away. As the story unfolds, each heir is revealed as having enormous present financial need that provides a motivation at least for stoppage of the spending, or at worst, murder. The solution to the problem? Distribute some of the inheritance now to remove the motivation. It turns out that his wealth is growing faster than most human beings could spend it anyway and their inheritance was never in jeopardy to begin with.

Sort of reminds of a bumper sticker I saw recently on a very expensive motor home. It announced, "I'm retired and I'm spending my children's inheritance." The story is told of a family gathered in lawyer's office in breathless anticipation of the reading of a rich grandfather's will. "Being of sound mind and body, I spent it all."

We also have a spiritual inheritance. The Bible often refers to the promise of the wonders and wealth to be inherited by God's people. And our text this morning refers to it as well. "Those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance" (v.15). But to be frank, we really don't care too much about it, do we? When was the last time you sat down and thought about this eternal inheritance, what might be in it and what it might mean to actually receive it?

I want to strengthen your faith by showing you the present importance of our promised inheritance in the New Covenant.

Its Purpose

(v.15a)

The present importance of our promised inheritance is seen in its purpose.

In the Person of Christ

Jesus is the mediator of the New Covenant. All of the attention is to be focused on Him. Our author wants to be sure that we do not lose sight of the superiority and supremacy of Christ *in all of God's doings and dealings*.

Now we need to think clearly about this idea of Christ being a mediator.

- Modern – We think of a mediator as someone who is called in to settle conflict by negotiating a contract. Usually, both parties have to compromise until an agreement is reached that satisfies both parties.
- Biblical – Jesus is a mediator as the one who comes in between the sinner and a holy God. He does not negotiate. He Himself fulfills the terms of the contract

In the People who are Called

The superiority of the New Covenant is shown in that there are a particular people who are going to receive the benefits of it. This is not a contract or an agreement or a will that is for just anybody. It is for those who are called. Now who are these who are called? We know from Hebrews 3:1 where the Author writes, “Therefore, *holy brothers*, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus.” Those who receive the promised inheritance are those whose summons from heaven transforms them into holy brothers.

In other words, God has chosen a people to whom He sends a Divine and irresistible summons (a call). When they respond, they become holy and brothers, finding their names already were written on the Divine Covenant, the Heavenly Will and begin immediately receiving the benefits promised in the inheritance.

In the Promises that are Received

Time does not permit me to unfold what is encompassed by the promised eternal inheritance. It reaches back to Abraham and David. It lived and died and lived again in Jesus. It is the package of all the good that God is for us in Christ. And we will actually receive it.

How is this purpose possible? How is it that God’s called people are going to receive the promised inheritance? How is it that the Jews were going to see the fulfillment of all their expectations? How is it that people from every tribe and tongue and people group were going to receive an eternal inheritance?

Its Provision

(v.15b)

Because of the provision in the New Covenant, in the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ.

In the Ransom that was Paid

Here is the necessity of redemption. Our sin and transgression incurred a debt we cannot pay. It sold us into the slavery of sin. It corrupted us to the very core of our beings. So Jesus died. He gave up His life on the cross. His death paid the price, bought us from slavery and delivered us from the power of sin. His death satisfied the just demands of God.

In the Freedom that was Given

But notice the backward (as well as forward) effect of His death.

- It set the Old Testament saints free from the sins they committed while living under the Old Testament. Now get this. Sins in the Old Testament were simply covered until Jesus died. Since He has died, they are washed away.
- It sets New Covenant saints free from their sins. You can be free from your sin. You can be free from its addictive power. You can be free from its accusing stain. You can be free from its corrupting disease. This is what the sacrifice- the death and blood of Jesus has done for the ones God calls to salvation.

Now I know that in this modern day it is usually not acceptable to talk about Christianity in terms of death and sacrifice. “We have to change our way of talking about the life and death of Jesus so that we will gain a hearing and be accepted by people today.” *To the degree that we do that, we change the gospel so that it is no longer the gospel and is in fact, a false gospel.* Listen, if people reject the message that they are sinners who have not magnified the worth of God in every choice and decision of their lives, in every attitude and action and that Jesus’ death and resurrection is the only solution to the immense problem of their sin and God’s holiness, then they are simply lost and damned. I make no apology for declaring to moderns here in the 21st century that your salvation comes only through the sacrifice of Jesus. For I know that those with a heavenly calling will hear with born again ears.

Its Perspective

(v.16-17)

Our author has talked about the New Covenant in terms of death and an inheritance. When we talk like that, immediately the idea of a will comes to mind. This is the comparison he makes. The New Covenant is not only a contract, but it is also a will.

In the Reasons for the Comparison

Why can we think of the New Covenant like we think of a will?

- Because the Greek word here was commonly used that way. That is why some translations refer to it as a will, a covenant or a testament.
- Because a death makes the New Covenant come into effect. When Jesus died and rose again, the New Covenant then began to be executed or carried out.
- Because even the first covenant was associated with death. It anticipated and pointed to the realities that would come in the New Covenant.
- Because what the New Covenant promises and brings to us is referred to as an inheritance. We can all see that if there is an inheritance, then there must be some kind of last will and testament that tells who the heirs are and what inheritance they get. This is what the New Covenant does.
- Because a will is not something heirs negotiate about. (Piper) It is decided by the one who writes it and the heirs simply receive what is promised. The new covenant is drawn up by God without consulting anyone. It is a sovereign expression of God’s will, not a negotiated agreement.

You can see that all these reasons flow like an exhilarating river of sparkling truth through this text.

The Requirements of the Comparison

When does a will take effect? When a person has died. This is point of verse 17. A will comes into force or is executed when a person dies. Most of you have wills (or you ought to). The provisions of that Testament will become valid upon your death.

So it is with the New Covenant. It is a testament in the sense that its provisions and promises will be executed upon the testator’s death. Christ has died. He has not only simply passed away, but has died as a substitutionary sacrifice. Upon His death, the

New Covenant comes into force. And the amazing thing about this Covenant, this Testament and Will is that it has provision in it for the sins and transgressions of all of God's saints *even back under the Old Covenant*. Their sins were simply being held in escrow, put on the debit book and then the full measure of them paid as well.

Let me bring out more fact about a will that makes the New Covenant amazing. It is not possible that the testator of a will to also be the executor of the will. The one who has died cannot then after his death, administrate the execution of that will. *But this is not so with Christ*. Christ is supreme as both the testator, the maker of the will, and its executor. How is this possible? Because He has not only died, but He has risen again. What His death purchased for the chosen and called, He distributes by His Spirit in their lives and out into eternity.

Verse 16 also says that not only must death occur, but there must be proof of death. When someone dies, the coroner's office issues a death certificate. This certifies that the person is actually dead and this can be legally proven.

Its Proof

(v.18-22)

In the entire Bible, blood is the symbol of life. Blood was the proof that a life had been ended. The blood of Jesus is the unalterable and irrefutable proof that Jesus sacrificed His life for us. One of the primary reasons for the long years of bloody sacrifice of innocent lambs and goats and calves and pigeons in the Old Testament was to establish categories to understand the death of Jesus. That is the heart of what the author is arguing in this paragraph.

In Its General Impact

(v.18)

Even the first covenant required that death occurred and that it be validated by blood. The people of Israel, and through them, we are taught to think of Jesus as a sacrifice. Now most of us don't even see animals die. Most of you probably have not seen a live animal killed. None of you have seen an animal brought to an altar and watched its throat slit and seen its blood caught and watched it sprinkled. We are very distant from what were daily realities to people living in the Bible (and too many cultures today.)

In Its Specific Illustration

(v.19-21)

Our author goes back to the time when the Old Covenant was to be executed in Israel. The terms and promises of the Covenant had been read. Now, for the Covenant to come into force, blood was shed and then sprinkled on the Scriptures, the Tent of Meeting, the altars, the tables, the bowls, the knives—everything that would be used in the carrying out of the Old Covenant.

We are shown this so that no one can say that this whole understanding of Jesus Christ is new or different or unnecessary. That Moses did this under the Contract or Agreement of the Old Covenant means that it must certainly be true under the New Covenant as well.

It is so important that we understand this sacrifice of Christ on the cross.

- This whole passage back to the beginning of chapter 9 and forward to chapter 10 shows us the supremacy of Christ's sacrifice. This text actually divides into two distinct divisions. Verses 15-17 talk about death. Verses 18-22 talk about blood. It is the substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus that saves. That sacrifice involves death – the pouring out of His life and blood – the proof that death occurred.
- Not only must there be death and the proof of that death: there must be blood shed, there must also be the blood sprinkled. It must be applied in order for there to be cleansing. The Puritan, John Owen writes, "We are saved by the blood as shed; we are sanctified by the blood as sprinkled." It is the application of sacrifice of Jesus to us that we receive all that Jesus' life, death and resurrection mean.

In Its Supreme Importance

(v.22)

How important is the blood as proof of sacrifice and death?

- **Without it there is no cleansing.** Even in the Old Covenant under the Law nearly everything was cleansed by blood. Why is it only "nearly everything"? Because there was one thing left uncleansed by the sacrifices of the Old Covenant: their consciences. Hebrews 9: 14 and 1 John 1:9 assures us though that the blood of Jesus cleanses our consciences.
- **Without it there is no forgiveness.** Let us be clear about why this is so. Our sin becomes a debt held against our account. We owe the penalty of death for having sinned. Jesus' death is the payment of that penalty and debt. Since that debt has now been paid and proof is shown in His blood, then that debt is no longer held against us. It is *forgiven*.

In the Old Testament,
faith saw the blood
and believed
that a death *will occur*.
In the New Testament,
faith sees the blood
and believes
that a death *did occur*

Conclusion

- Here is what the New Covenant brings to believers:
 - We have *an inheritance* of all the promises God makes to us. We are to obeyingly believe what God has guaranteed to us because of Jesus' sacrifice and resurrection.
 - We have *freedom* from the enslaving power and burden of our sins. Sin does not have to control us or enslave us. The addictive power of each of our sins is broken.
 - We have *forgiveness* of the debt owed due to our sins. What we owed God because we sinned has been paid and is no longer held against our account.
- The challenge and invitation for many of you today is simply this: Is God calling you to Himself? Do you sense how you have offended God? Do you believe Jesus' sacrifice could be for you? Will you bow to Him as King and Lord. Today is the day of salvation. Make it so.

The Eager Anticipation for the Sufficient Savior **Hebrews 9:23-28**

Introduction Stars make appearances. Famous people like to show their importance by appearing at all the right events. I am intrigued by the notion today that some people are not famous for anything substantial—they are famous for being famous. One of the controversies that is raging through the golf and tennis worlds recently is the paying of appearance fees. An athlete who is famous and followed is paid money simply to be at an event. Easy to see why. How many more people attend an event in which Tiger Woods is playing?

Now we come to this text and suddenly Jesus is making appearances. See in verses 24, 26 and 28? What is the author talking about? Is Jesus' appearing like that of mega-stars? Does He attend these events in these places at these times because He is famous? Has someone paid Him an appearance fee so as to draw the crowds? I think not.

Jesus is making these appearances because we, every one of us, face the enormous problem of sin, death and judgement. At the end of the day, what the New Covenant and its superior and sufficient sacrifice bring us, is Jesus appearing to deal with man's greatest problem and need.

The question being asked all through this text is simply this: how are sinful and sinning people welcomed in heaven?

Our Present Need

(v.23-24)

Our author has been unfolding for us the superiority and sufficiency of the Christ in the New Covenant. In His priesthood, worship and sacrifice, Jesus brings to us what the Old Covenant could not. His sacrifice, its provision in death and proof in blood, brings the reality of forgiveness, freedom and cleansing we so need. From that truth we get this conclusion.

For Jesus' Cleansing of Heaven

(v.23)

Listen to what this is saying. It was necessary that the earthly tabernacle and priests and utensils be cleansed with the blood of sacrifices. In contrast, the heavenly must be cleansed with better sacrifices. Now stop just a moment and think about what he is saying.

- Heaven must be cleansed. How can that be? Why would heaven, the place of God's holy abode need cleansing? How could it be defiled? Because *we* are going to be there. The answer then is not complimentary. But it is wonderfully hope giving. If you want to be made much of, rather than having the mercy of God made much of, you will not want to listen to this. But if you love the mercy of God and admit the misery of your own condition, you'll love this. For Jesus meets us there to cleanse us there. To the degree that we might defile heaven, to that degree Jesus cleanses heaven. (Piper)

- With better sacrifices. This is how it is possible. Sinners are welcomed in heaven because Jesus is their better sacrifice and He meets them and cleanses them and forgives them. Here again the mercy and grace of God is magnified. He is exonerated and exalted. Heaven is cleansed with better sacrifices to welcome sinners.

For Jesus' Entering Heaven

(v.24)

Jesus never entered the earthly Temple to offer sacrifice. The hand of God at the hour of Jesus' sacrifice only entered the earthly Temple to tear the veil closing off the Holy of Holies in half. Jesus' New Covenant sacrifice is not about entering copies and reproducing shadows and maintaining what was passing away. It is about realities and entering heaven and fulfilling and finalizing salvation's work. Jesus finished His sacrifice on the cross. He was buried and rose again. Weeks later, He ascended and entered heaven's hallowed halls.

There He appears. The word here means to exhibit by appearing in person. He showed by His appearing that the sacrificial work of salvation was done.

Now listen to this. He speaks to us who feel so dirty and deeply bad that we could only pollute heaven if we were there. We who have been stained and soiled by our sin- we have here an invitation. Come to heaven. For Jesus is there. He did not die in vain. His sacrifice was not for nothing. He will meet you there and cleanse you there. (Piper)

Jesus is now appearing in heaven, in the very presence of God, *for us*.

His Past Provision

(v.25-26)

How can we possibly have this amazing present reality? Because of the description of what Jesus achieved.

In Its Contrast

(v.25-26a)

What Jesus has done for us is mercifully different. Notice that the author says that not only did Jesus not appear in earthly copies, but He also does not have to be sacrificed over and over again. The annual repetition was designed to remind that this was not yet the reality. If Jesus had to do what the Old Covenant priests did, then He would have had to suffer in sacrifice over and over again since the very beginning.

What was for Old Testament saints a daily or weekly or yearly event, has become for us a heresy. Jesus no longer must be sacrificed again and again. I want you to understand that those who in the mass offer Christ up again in an unbloody sacrifice are denying the sufficiency and finality of Jesus' sacrifice on the cross. Why is this so?

In Its Completeness

(v.26b)

Because the massive concern of the Author here is to show that Jesus' sacrifice is a once for all event. He appeared at the consummation of the ages once and forever to do away with sin by the one time sacrifice of Himself.

You see, when we come to heaven, to the presence of God, we come to a just and omnipotent Presence blazing with holiness. And we come sinful and stained and cor-

rupted and defiled. So we must believe in Jesus, not in a soft-fuzzy way. But in the concrete reality of truth. Let's look together at those statements of truth.

- He has appeared once. The word here means to make visible. It is a reference to His incarnation. He took a body and made the invisible spirit that is God forever visible. He did this once. It is not repeated. He came in physical form in human body. He does not come to us in dreams or visions or in bread and wine. In His body He died. His body was raised from the dead and was glorified. In that human body He ascended into heaven. There He appears for us. Precious truth this.
- What He did in that appearing is once for all. It is final and finished. There is no more sacrifice for sin. The effect of Jesus' sacrifice is so perfect, so complete, so final that its effect goes on and on century by century and rises up into eternity.
- What He did brought history to a climax. The first and second coming of Jesus are seen as the end of the age. What is stretched out between them is a kind of extension of the end- it is the mercy and grace of God calling out the elect to inherit the blessings of those comings. So the cross to the crown is not merely another human event. It is the climax of history.
- What He did took care of sin. I pray that you see this with eyes of faith. The substitutionary sacrifice of Jesus dealt with sin. It paid its penalty and debt. It crushed its power. It will consummate in freeing us from its presence. What an encouragement this is to each of us who struggle so much with our own sin and weakness.
- What He did was to sacrifice Himself. He gave up His life. It was not the death of bulls or goats or pigeons. It is not the sacrifice of chickens or grain. It is not the sacrifice of religious routine that saves. It is not even our own sacrifice. It was and is and is eternally, the full and final and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus Himself and Himself alone.

Jesus' past provision is in one, supreme, sufficient and final sacrifice of Himself that dealt with sin.

Our Future Hope

(v.27-28)

This text brings us face to face with the greatest problem of person's life. What do you think is your greatest problem? You probably thought about your finances, or a physical problem, or a spiritual struggle. Maybe you feel like your children or teens – or maybe your parents. Some may point to spouse or job. Maybe you think church is your greatest problem. I am sure that some would think somewhat more Biblically and say, "Sin is my biggest problem."

Loved ones, all of these are sometimes distracting or destroying difficulties which consume our time and attention and efforts. But, we all, each one of us from the youngest child here to the oldest seasoned saint here, faces an enormous problem. And what makes it all the more difficult is that there is no escaping this problem.

In Its Principle**(v.27)**

For you see, verse 27 says that man is destined or appointed to die and then to face judgement. Here is our biggest problem. We all will die. And when we die, we will face judgement. Princess Diana knows this well. John Denver knows this well. Malcolm Forbes has faced his maker.

- It is a divine appointment. Death is not the end of a natural process but at a God appointed moment. Death is inevitable because God has appointed the day of our birth and the day of our death. A certain number of days have been set for by God—not Satan, not my enemy, not cancer and not me. God works this appointment into the fabric of all His sovereign purpose and planning. (Piper)
- You will die once. Let us put away any thought of reincarnation. You are not coming back with hope of doing better next time. You will live. You will die. You are not coming back to die again.
- After death, judgment. This is the most terrifying prospect in all the universe—that we might be met after death with a holy and angry and omnipotent God holding us accountable for whether we trusted Him and treasured Him and worshipped Him and followed His ways in this life. In this text at this point, the judgment following death is a terrifying and furious fire, a great act of divine justice and vengeance on those who may claim to be God’s people but are only external Christians. Judgment will be eternal torment in the fire and brimstone of hell where there is weeping and wailing and gnashing of teeth.

But this is not the end of the story.

In Its Provision**(v.28a)**

For our salvation and encouragement and hope, this text tells us that Jesus joins us in death and judgment. Just as man dies and is judged, so Jesus. Jesus’ death is judgment. His death is a sacrifice to take away the sins of many people.

- It is a sin-bearing work. This is the heart of Christianity, the heart of the gospel and the heart of God’s great work of redemption. When Jesus died, He bore sins. He took sins on Himself and then received the judgment that was due for sins Himself. He became the substitute for our sin and our judgment.
- It is a substitutionary work. This is not the popular gospel today. But it is the truth of the Word of God. Jesus bore the sins of many. Those whose names were written down in the book of life had their sins placed on Jesus. That is why here and in other texts, the *many* are referred to. I do not like the term *limited*. But I love the term *particular*. Jesus took the sins of the many for them. Jesus took my sins for me.

Jesus dies and comes to judgment. But not on His own account. What He did was done for us—the many, the ones that He now appears in heaven for.

In its Prospect**(v.28b)**

Jesus appears in heaven now for us because He appeared once and for all to deal with sin at the cross. Having done this, He will yet appear, not to judge sin in us, but to rescue and save us from judgment upon sin. As one translation puts it so well, “Not to bear sin, but to bring salvation.”

Here is the life transforming hope. Jesus will appear a second time to bring salvation. In His first coming He dealt with sin. In His second coming, He delivers His own.

But notice carefully the wording here. It answers a very important question—who are *the many* in the first part of verse 28? For whom is He bringing His salvation at His appearing? The answer is given at the end of the verse. He is coming for those who “are eagerly waiting for Him.”

If you ask me how you can know if you are going to be welcomed in heaven; how you can know that your sins are dealt with; how you can know that Jesus is appearing in heaven for you now; how can you know that you will be shielded from the awful wrath of the judgment of God and be brought into eternal life, I have the answer. Here is the answer: *trust Jesus in a way that makes you eager for Him to come.*

This eager expectation for Jesus is simply a sign that we love Him and believe in Him authentically. There is a phony faith that wants only escape from hell and entrance to heaven and access to blessings, but has no desire for Christ Himself. That kind of belief does not save you. It does not produce an eager expectation for Jesus to come. It would rather that Christ would wait as long as possible so that you can have as much of this world as possible. But the faith that really holds on to Jesus as a treasure and hope and joy is the one that makes us long for Jesus to come. That is the faith that saves.

Conclusion

- What faith building and hope giving words these are:
 - Jesus is now appearing in heaven for us. This gives us freedom of access and conscience into the very presence of God.
 - Jesus has appeared and once for all, dealt with sin. What a balm for sin-weary souls.
 - Jesus will appear to bring the full reality of salvation to the many, to you who trust Jesus in a way that makes you eagerly anticipate your sufficient Savior.
- I urge you and plead with you to turn from the world and from sin and to Christ. Take Him, not just as your fire insurance policy, but as your eagerly awaited friend and bridegroom and Lord. (Piper)

The Final Perfection of Sanctified Saints

Hebrews 10:1-18

Introduction Jesus is superior in the book of Hebrews as both our Savior and our Sovereign. The superior and sufficient sacrifice of Jesus has brought us cleansing and forgiveness. This was seen in our salvation in chapter 9 and now in our sanctification in chapter 10. The sacrifice of Jesus is how sinners can be welcomed in heaven. The sacrifice of Jesus is also how sinners can be perfectly holy.

How can those who draw near to worship be made perfect? Do you ever feel discouraged by the difference between what the Bible says your Christian experience ought to be and what it really is?

Don't you want to be perfect? Now I am not talking about being a perfectionist. Not the kind of perfect that never wants to use an eraser, or lines up the edges of magazines or is frustrated at mistakes, oversights and lapses of memory. I am talking about the perfection of never sinning.

Now think for a moment.

- We often invest enormous thought and effort in being without mistakes or perfect in a fallen world. Heaven forbid that we should make some error in judgment that rattles the standards of perfectionists.
- We are too often rather casual about our holiness. Do you ever wonder what it would be like to live without sin? Have we become so used to the reality that we do sin that we do not even strive for it anymore?
- We are bombarded today with expectations *that have little to do with Biblical holiness*. We are seriously distracted into striving to achieve things as men and women, as husbands and wives that are more common sense than Christian sanctification.

Christians have always struggled with the distance between the holiness we desire and the sins we too often do. Even Christians in the New Testament era. A careful study of the New Testament shows us that Christians tend to resort to two different extremes.

- License – We redefine what sin is and excuse our practice of it. We stop focusing on the practice of believing obedience. Frankly, the effect often leads people to replace concrete obedience with mystical experience.
- Legalism – We try to be holy by means of law keeping. We know that you can't be saved by keeping the law. But we believe that we can be sanctified by keeping the Old Testament Law. This was a constant struggle for early Jewish Christians.

How then can those who draw near become perfect?

The Problem in the Old Covenant

(v.1-4)

Certainly not through the Old Covenant. The Law itself simply could not make worshippers perfect.

In Its Character

(v.1-3)

The basic nature of the Law, the Old Covenant, made it impossible for it to perfect God's people. There were three major aspects of the Old Covenant that posed a problem if saints were to be perfected.

It is a Ritual

(v.1)

The Old Covenant was not the reality. It was only the shadows of the all the good things that were yet to come. The word *realities* here is a word meaning icon or image. The Old Covenant could not even give us the distinct edges of what God was going to do. It was the dark and fuzzy and indistinct images of future and heavenly realities.

It is Repeated

(v.2)

If it could actually make them perfect, then it would not need to be repeated. There is no need to continue offering a sacrifice for sin when the person has been forgiven and cleansed forever. Don't you love the heavenly logic? Having read the book up to now, don't you sense already what is coming?

It is a Reminder

(v.3)

Rather than cleansing them from an awareness of sin or a feeling of guilt, it constantly reminded them of their sin. It brought it before them over and over. The very sacrifices they brought kept pointing them to their sin.

Do you hear these words, loved ones? It is not possible that your obeying the law, your religious rituals, your good works, your baptism, your *what ever it may be*, can perfect you. At the heart of all human effort at being right with God is the problem of repetition. If your good works could bring you forgiveness and cleansing from sin, you would only have to do them once. As soon as I say that, you can see the absurdity of it. If the prescribed obedience and sacrifice of the Old Covenant cannot make people perfect, neither can all your good works. Somewhere in your conscience, you know that is so.

In Its Cause

(v.4)

Why could the Old Covenant **never** bring about the realities? Because the Old Covenant sacrifices were animals and grain. The blood of animal sacrifices cannot take away sins. We are not in a time and place where we bring sacrifices in order to be accepted by God. In many cultures today, what is being said here rings like a fire alarm in the ears of those who bring chickens or goats or bulls to try to appease the wrath of a holy God.

What is the proof of this? How can the Author here assert these truths? Is all of this such a new idea that Old Testament saints were utterly without a clue? Not at all!

The Proof in the Scriptures

(v.5-10)

The Author sets out here to show how we know that there is hope. From the Old Testament Scriptures themselves, he makes his argument.

The Text He Draws From

(v.5-7)

This quote is taken from the Septuagint translation of Psalm 40:6-8. But as we always should do with Old Testament quotes, we should read the verses around the quote to get a sense of context. The marvelous thing here is to see the CONSEQUENCES of the salvation God gives (v.1-3). Here is what God has done for believers. Then he responds by COMMENDING that salvation to others (v.4-5). He calls on people to trust in God and to tell about God's great saving works. David then points to the CHARACTER of the salvation God provides (v.6-8). Through the desire for obedience over sacrifice and New Testament use of this, the Messiah will bring the redemption that is commended by being both the Person and the perfection required. He also announces the CALL to the congregation (v.9-10). The need for these great truths to be announced in the congregation *still holds true for New Testament believers as well*. So the sermon we know as the book of Hebrews is the preacher telling the good news of deliverance in the midst of the congregation.

As the author draws from this stanza, he does two marvelous things.

- He shows that Old Testament saints had a sense of the limitations and imperfections of the Old Covenant. After all, this *is* David speaking in this Psalm. So David in penning these words understands that God desired obedience rather than sacrifice. The truths that the writer of Hebrews will develop from this text were at least available if not actually understood by Old Testament saints.
- He puts these same words in the mouth of Jesus Christ when He came into the world. While our disobedience brings about the need for sacrifice, Jesus' obedience qualified Him to be our sacrifice. What David expected, Jesus experienced.

The difference in texts, "my ears you have pierced or opened" is replaced with "a body you have prepared me" is the difference between David and Jesus. David comes to God as a sinner needing opened ears. Jesus comes to earth as a Savior requiring a prepared body. The author of Hebrews sees the implication that the Messiah must have a body as he follows the Septuagint rendering of the text.

The Truths He Develops

(v.8-10)

Our author develops this text by:

His Observations

(v.8-9a)

He observes carefully that all the categories of Old Testament sacrifice were not the permanent desire of God. The Law required them, yes, but God had a higher priority. That priority comes in the next observation, that David and later, Jesus, came to do God's will.

His Conclusions**(v.9b-10)**

In effect, the Author says, “I see these two statements in this text. They follow one another. They press me to these two conclusions.

- God sets aside the Old Covenant sacrifice to establish New Covenant obedience. The shadows are gone; the reality is here. The Old was not only fading away on its own, but it was doing so because it had been abolished by God. The Law showed Old Covenant believers that God was not pleased with sin and that He had made provision for their sin; but, He would rather have their obedience.
- God’s will is to make us holy by the once for all time sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ. Through the cross we have been set apart from sin and unto God. Jesus’ dying for our sins is once and for all applied to us. Jesus’ doing of God’s will is once and for all applied to us.

Loved ones, hear this with hope. The realities and principles of the New Covenant are ours. Why would you ever go back to the shadows of legalism? We do not need to go back to Moses for sanctification. God has determined to make us holy *by the cross*.

How does all this develop for us?

The Principles in Christ**(v.11-14)**

I see so clearly in these verses another repetition of the superiority of Jesus as Savior (v.11-12) and as Sovereign (v.13-14). The great themes of the cross and crown structure these verses. There are also here several very important principles the encouragement of our sanctification.

There is a contrast between the Old and New (v.11-12)

Old Testament priests stood to minister. There were no chairs in the tabernacle. There was no place to sit. But Jesus, having finished His sacrificial work, sat down in heaven at God’s right hand. This is significant for two reasons:

- GOD WAS SATISFIED WITH JESUS. God accepted as full and final the sacrificial work of Christ so that He could be seated in heaven. Over against the constant repetition of the Old Testament sacrifices and against the backdrop of pagan sacrifices, the sacrifice of Jesus is once for all time. There is no continuing sacrifice. There is no offering of Jesus again. His sacrifice is completed, done, over. This is very important to see. If Jesus’ sacrifice is not a final and sufficient one, then we are not cleansed nor forgiven.
- GOD EXALTED JESUS TO THE THRONE. It is the place of honor that Jesus takes. Philippians makes this so clear. God has given a Name above every Name and exalted Him above all.

If God is satisfied with Jesus and has honored Him, ought we not to also?

There is an *already* and a *not yet*. (v.12-13)

Jesus is in heaven. Jesus is our King and Priest. He is both Savior and Sovereign. He has the ultimate right to rule over all the cosmos. In the quote from Psalm 110:1, our author underscores this core principle in the entire Bible. There is an *already* sense in that Jesus is seated. And there is a *not yet* in that Jesus is waiting.

There is a *perfection* and a *process*. (v.14)

Look at verse 14 carefully. “He has made perfect forever those who are being sanctified.” There it is, many would say. Just as there is an *already* and *not yet* for Jesus (v.12-13), there is a *perfection* (made perfect forever) and a *process* (being sanctified).

Now, I want to stop here just for a brief lesson. The Bible teaches that we have been sanctified in a once for all act of God. Through the cross and at conversion, we are once for all set apart from sin and unto God. This is a definitive work that the Bible calls sanctification. It is definitive, one time action at your salvation. You have been sanctified. This is what this verse is talking about. God has perfected those He has set aside for Himself, He has made holy. This is like exactly the same as Hebrews 2:11, “He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all of one.” It is a designation of the community of faith. Paraphrasing William Lane further: God confers on His people a definitive consecration through Christ, the consecrator par excellence, by His atoning death on the cross. (Lane, *Hebrews*, Vol. 2, p.268)

But these perfected, sanctified, made holy people still sin and still need to change. How is this possible? Because they have a heavenly perfection that is in earthly process. The earthly process the Bible calls transformation, growth and “from glory to glory.” While we have already been made perfect in the heavenlies, we still in the process of change and growth in the earthlies.

The sacrifice of Jesus Christ has guaranteed the eventual perfect holiness of those who are in the process of becoming holy. Is this true of you? You can know if you have been perfected, if you are in the process. You can know if you have a holy standing in God’s sight if you are progressing in holiness now.

How do I know this is true both objectively and subjectively?

The Provision for Christians (v.15-18)

The Holy Spirit witnesses to it. He testifies to the truth of this:

In the Scriptures

This is where faith comes in. The Holy Spirit speaks to us as we listen to the truths of the Word. He tells us three important things from this Old Testament text:

There is WHAT GOD PROMISES (v.15-16). This is the definitive action by God in the new covenant. He will do these things in His people. He will change them with the Word applied through the Spirit. This is what God promised and what He is even now, conversion by conversion, doing.

There is WHAT GOD PERFORMS (v.17). Here is how God deals with our sins. He not only moves to make us holy by His Word, He also forgives our lawlessness. He will remember our sins no more. Until our holiness is complete, our sins will be forgiven.

There is WHAT GOD HAS PROVIDED (v.18). To make all this possible, God has provided the once-for-all sacrifice. And there is no longer any more need of offering because forgiveness is complete. We have been forgiven.

One further note: the Holy Spirit is speaking and is an external, objective revelation in the Bible. What God promises, performs and provided is truth revealed in the Bible and illuminated in our souls by His Spirit so that we believe.

In our Experience

What is woven through the objective revelation in the Scripture is a subjective disclosure in our experience. I believe that God has made these promises. I believe that God will perform these works. I believe that God has made this provision. I believe because God has written His law in my heart and mind.

These two together, the objective witness of the Holy Spirit in the Scriptures and my experience of those realities become an assurance giving confidence as I, a sinner, draw near to worship.

Conclusion

- Last week we wrestled with the question: “Does your faith cause you to eagerly desire for Jesus to come back?” We must trust and treasure Jesus in such a way motivates us to eagerly anticipate His return.
- This week, I have a final closing question: “Does your faith make you eager to forsake sin and make progress in holiness?” The kind of faith and belief that saves is one that moves you to greater and greater holiness. Jesus has perfected forever those He is in the process of sanctifying.
- This week, in moments of sin and imperfection, here is the cry, not of proud hearts, of humble and sin-burdened souls, “God, today I have sinned. But I hate my sin. You have written Your law in my heart and I long to do it. And so I hate the sinful thoughts I contemplate and the sinful things I do. In this hatred of my sin and in my meager progress in obedience, I will rejoice and embrace the truth of Hebrews 10:14, that I have been perfected forever by the sacrificial offering of Jesus Christ.” (Piper)

So trust in Christ today in such a way that you walk with God in holiness and long for His coming.

The Continuing Responsibilities of our Present Privileges

Hebrews 10:19-25

Introduction Hebrews is like land with broad, deep valleys of doctrinal foundations, hillsides dotted with God-centered, Christ-exalting motivation, topped with peaks of practical exhortation and personal examples. The writer teaches us about God and what He has done to secure precious and very great promises for us. Then He tells us the kind of behavior that grows up from faith in these promises and God submitted desires. So we are being practically called to affections and acts of real love, *on the basis* of promises. These promises are that God will be all we need in midst of the mess. (Adapted, Piper)

Connection to the Context Verses 19-21 remind us and point us back to the wide valleys of truth we have just passed through. “Since we have...” This has been the focus of chapters 9-10. Since we have these amazing privileges which are summed up in these two phrases.

- **Access** – Our confidence to enter. This privilege rests on the sacrifice of Jesus. It is what He has done in providing a new and living way which has opened the curtain into the Holy of Holies, the very Presence of God. What only one priest in the Old Covenant could do and did with great fear and trembling, every New Covenant believer may do with confidence and assurance.
- **Advocate** – Our High Priest over the church. This privilege rests on the person of Christ. He is our High Priest, not just over the New Covenant church, but over all the house of God of all the ages. We have no junior priests and certainly no pope or cardinals. We have one great high priest. This is not a burden to us, but is the essence of the gladness of our living sacrifice.

I pray that you have been hearing with understanding hearts all that the Author has been telling us about these wonderful privileges. We have the privilege of entering the Presence of God because there we have our great High Priest who has done everything that is necessary to give us an assurance to draw near.

But with all privileges come responsibilities. Since all these things are so, then here is what follows. Hear me, loved ones. We have wonderful freedom and forgiveness under the New Covenant. But that does not mean that we do not have obligations. Out of New Covenant privileges emerge Biblical duties. In order to do our responsibilities with regularity and delight, we must develop the disciplines that go support them. So there are duties and disciplines.

- **Duties** – These are what God requires. Not doing them is sin. They are measures of our spiritual maturity.
- **Disciplines** – In order to cultivate regular obedience, there are habits of Christian discipline which will help us to be consistent. They are how we translate the commands of the Bible into regular practice. They do not measure, but they develop our spiritual maturity.

If we are New Covenant Christians with these privileges, then what are our duties?

Commune with God**(v.22)**

“Let us draw near!” The first of our responsibilities is wrapped up in this phrase, “draw near.” This phrase is the enticing label on the package of worship in Hebrews.

- Hebrews 4:16 – Draw near to the throne of grace with confidence.
- Hebrews 7:19 – Draw near to God through a better hope.
- Hebrews 7:25 – Draw near to God in a secure salvation.
- Hebrews 10:1 – Drawing near requires perfection (sanctification).

Its Great Reality

What does it mean, “to draw near to God?” Let me put it this way. This is a command. The “Let us” here is not a suggestion like, “Let us go to Pizza House for supper.” So if it is a command, *how do you know when you have obeyed it?*

There are two clues that come out of verses 19-21. Drawing near is what we do when we understand that we can enter the Presence of God and we have a Priest with God. Drawing near then is something that involves the God’s Presence and God’s Priest.

Now it is not necessarily a physical act. It’s not something you can always see immediately on the outside. Drawing near is not moving from one place to another. So drawing near is not coming to a church building nor walking an aisle. It is an invisible act of the heart that can be done in your car, your home, your cubicle at work or even in your seat at church. It is a directing of the heart into the Presence of God who is as distant as the Holy of Holies in heaven and yet as near as the door of prayer entered by faith.

Drawing near is a conscious inner effort to focus your attention on God and to worship and fellowship with Him by Jesus Christ. This is easy to illustrate.

Think of the name of someone you really love. Now think of the thing you like most about their character. Think about something special they have done for you. Think about a really difficult time you went through together. Do you see how all of this is *an inner act of the heart?* If you were in the presence of this person looking into their eyes with your thoughts resonating together, this would be called “communing” with them. This is what it means to draw near to God.

Its High Requirements

The text states this in the positive. When we draw near, we must have a true heart, genuine faith, cleansed consciences and purified lives. But let me show you how not having these things is the reason we don’t draw near.

- We do not have a true heart for God. What we do in our religious stuff is simply an outward form without the inward reality. If your heart is wrong, then what you are doing is not pleasing to God. Does that mean I stop doing until I feel right in my heart? No, you change your heart.
- We do really believe that all this is really so. I am convinced that some listening to me this morning are right here. You do not draw near to God because you are not sure that it really happens. So you replace the inner realities with outward shadows and frustrate yourself and anger God. Drawing near to God *is an act of*

faith. It is the obedience that follows believing that I can come and do actually come into the Presence of God by Jesus Christ.

- We have not had our consciences cleansed or our conduct purified. We are barred from drawing near when we are not clean. Yet, when we ask for mercy to be cleansed, that in itself is an act of drawing near.

Now I must not leave this on a negative note. Let us draw near to God in a heart that is true, convinced that it is so having been cleansed and washed. Let us draw near with sincerity, conviction and inner and outer purity.

So I must ask you. Do you draw near to God?

Sadly, even here in corporate worship, some of you are not drawing near to God. You find it very difficult to focus your attention on God when gathering with His people *because you rarely do it alone.* Loved ones, the more you discipline yourself to turn the inner focus of your attention on God and think about Him and talk to Him and commune with Him, the richer will be your personal and our corporate drawing near.

How many of you were glued to the TV watching the International Cup in professional Cricket? For many of you, drawing near to God is sometimes like watching cricket or soccer. You have little experience with it, so you have little enjoyment of it.

Do you have a passion for drawing near to God? We should not draw near lukewarmly, or indifferently. Even when we feel dull and lifeless, we should say, “O God, I am dull and lifeless and there is only one hope for me, nearness to You. I come. Have mercy on me. Give me life in Your Presence. Open my eyes to see Your glory in Jesus.” That is what this is calling for, a zeal and passion for the nearness of God. (Piper)

John Owen, that great Puritan drawer near to God wrote, “What better preparation can there be for [our future enjoyment of the glory of Jesus Christ] than in a constant previous contemplation of that glory now.” There it is for us: our present reflection on the glory of Christ prepares us for a greater enjoyment of it later. Our present drawing near expands our capacity for future delight. This present commitment for future glory brings us to the next exhortation.

Cling to our Hope

(v.23)

Embrace your hope! Hold unswervingly to the hope we profess. Here is an individual responsibility (hold, cling, embrace the hope) in the midst of community (the hope we profess). So this is not just any hope. And it is eternally important that we do what this text commands.

Its Biblical Meaning

The words here command us to cling to something with all our might. I do not think it means to convey an act of desperation, like clinging to a life jacket or a rescuing rope. No, it is the grace enabled holding fast and embracing of something that is vital and sustaining.

- Hebrews 3:6 – Holding fast to our hope shows that we are God’s house.
- Hebrews 6:11 – We must be diligent to make our hope sure. We must not be inattentive or sloppy about our hope.

- Hebrews 6:18 – We must take hold of hope that is offered to us in the promises of the God who cannot lie.
- Hebrews 6:19 – This firm and secure hope anchors our soul in heaven.
- Hebrews 7:19 – This better hope is how we draw near to God.

So our hope is a conviction and assured belief about the promises of God for the next moment all along the way to eternity. We hear God's promises, we believe them, we take hold of them for ourselves, we work hard to make them real in our lives, we refuse to let them go so that eventually they become treasured possessions to which we cling and which anchors and draws our souls heavenward to Jesus. Obeying this command all the way through death shows that we are God's people. God's people will cling to their hope.

Its God-centered Motivation

Hold fast to your hope in the future grace of God by His promises for this reason: God is faithful. The quality of our hope is related to clarity in our understanding the character of God. From this point forward, this is the powerful thrust of the book of Hebrews. If we are going to hold fast to our hope in God's promises when the crunch time comes, then we must be absolutely convinced that God is true to Himself and His Word.

Now loved ones, we too often turn away from the promises of God and embrace promises held out to us by the world. God says, "I will never leave you nor forsake you" and yet we feel lonely and so seek out wrong relationships. God says, "I will provide your every need" and yet we try to amass what wealth we can and bank our future on it. God says, "Sin will stain and corrode and corrupt your soul" yet we are addicted to its pleasures. God says, "Confess your sins and I will forgive and cleanse" yet we often hide them and quiet the insistent voice of conscience in alcohol, or TV, or music or hobbies.

The promises of God are the common possession of His people. The more we speak of them and praise God for them and share how God has helped us by them, the more we will be encouraged by these continual demonstrations of the faithfulness of God. We will hold fast. We will refuse the weak and feeble and faddish substitutes held out to us. That is why this is addressed to you. YOU must hold fast to the hope-giving promises WE profess and possess.

This is something you do with your heart. You cannot go to the kitchen or the office to embrace your hope. Clinging with trembling joy to the future expectation of all a faithful God promises is **DONE WHEN WE DRAW NEAR!**

But we have already begun to sense a moving from the private to the corporate aspect of these exhortations. The text is moving us from thinking about our relationship to God, to our relationship to one another.

Care for One Another

(v.24-25)

I have spent an enormous amount of time digesting and reflecting on these 2 verses. I want then this morning to bring us face to face with both the need for and the necessity of careful, grace enabled obedience to this exhortation.

I want to suggest to you that the heart-beat of these two verses is authentic care for one another.

The structure of the text is somewhat as follows:

- The Precept – “Let us consider one another.” Here is what is actually commanded and commended to us.
- The Purpose – To what ends are we to obey this exhortation? We are shown what is to be achieved by authentic love making sacrificial choices for one another.
- The Process – For those with an NIV, it looks like two more commands. Actually these ought to be translated “Not forsaking” and “but encouraging.” They convey an on-going sense of how purpose filled obedience to the exhortation is fleshed out. It is how we go about it.
- The Perspective – As the end of the eschatological age comes, what motivation and perspectives are we to bring to our obeying this exhortation.

What is being commanded here is authentic care and concern for one another that translates our savoring of the supremacy of Christ into sacrificial deeds of love for one another. So we must commune with God, cling to our hope, and now finally, care for one another.

By Knowing One Another

I get this from the phrase, “let us consider one another.” I see this because *one another* here is the receiver of the action of consider.

Now the Author has used this word before in the epistle. In Hebrews 3:1, we are to “consider” or to “fix our thoughts on Jesus.” Same word. Same structure. If we are to consider by focusing our thoughts and attentions on Jesus in such a way that we learn of Him and know Him and cultivate a relationship with Him, is that not what is in view here? In Hebrews 3:1, consider Jesus; in Hebrews 10:24, consider one another.

So we must know one another. What is actually commanded here is a focusing of our attention on one another that grows and develops our relationships and our knowledge that is like the way we are to develop our relationship with Jesus.

By Motivating One Another

The word here is to stimulate, to provoke, to stir up. We can think of prodding someone along. The idea of these two is captured by our translations. We need to care for one another by knowing each other so well that we can motivate and stir one another up.

By Having Biblical Objectives

To what end are we to study people in order to know how to stir them up. What is it that we are trying to motivate people to do?

Well, here it is. We are to study and know people well in order to stir them up and motivate to love and good works. We want to be pushing people in their loving and in their serving. We want to know what hot buttons in people's lives stir up the grace of God in them so that they are energized to deeds of sacrificial love for one another.

Do you know 5 people in this church well enough to do this?

- Spouses – husbands and wives, is this true of you? Do you know what it takes (not necessarily what it ought to take) to energize and excite your spouse for sacrificial giving and serving?
- Parents – Apart from simply commanding it (which is not at all what is in view here), do you interact with your children in such a way that they are motivated to love and do well?
- People – I must focus this on our ministry together as a church. If we *must* draw near to God, if we *must* cling to our hope, then we *must* do this as well. Disobedience cannot be excused. To say that you are not a people person is neither an excuse nor is it commendable.

What is it going to take for this to happen?

By Faithfully Meeting Together

We learn to know each other well enough to motivate one another to love and good works in gathering together to encourage one another.

- Not forsaking – We must not abandon our gathering together. There is first a forsaking of it in our attitude. We do not value being together as God's people. Then we forsake it in our action. We bit by bit become less and less engaged in the life of God's people *together*.
- But encouraging – The word here is also translated *exhorting* in some contexts. The point is that we are to actively engage in helping one another along in the process of growing in grace. Whether it is encouraging or exhorting, it pictures people actively engaged in one another's lives.

What *gathering together* does the Author have in mind? Even a brief look at the book of Acts depicts a church life quite different from ours today. There is an emphasis on daily and weekly. There is a definite rhythm of one-on-one, small group and then corporate gathering. It certainly means the regular and faithful participation in the gatherings of the church. Note that I did not say *attendance*. Simply being here is not the point. You must be actively participating in the gathering: simply showing up is not what God has in mind.

Is this the only purpose of gathering together? No, it is one of the purposes that we gather as a church. We gather as a church for outreach, worship, fellowship, discipleship and ministry. Encouraging and exhorting one another is the task of the purpose of fellowship.

What must we do to foster this? I am utterly convinced that we must get beyond the superficial talk that we do and call fellowship. There is a necessary but insufficient surface talk we all engage in. But do we get beyond this to priority issues. Do you talk about your temptations and struggles? Do you share insights you learned? Do you hold one another accountable for regular Biblical disciplines? Let me say this: I have not greater (nor lessor) obligation for this as your teaching elder than you do for each other. If I understand the language of this exhortation, all of you are to be initiators. If you are simply passively waiting for someone to engage you, then you are disobeying this exhortation.

I know all the objections. We are all very busy. But I am going to say this carefully because it impacts me as well. If you are too busy to be actively engaged in each other's lives *then you are too busy*. The devil has tricked many of us into thinking that everything else is more important. It is not.

Finally, he brings some real perspective. As we come upon the end of the eschatological age, we must do this more. We must gather more, consider more, encourage more and be more faithful. And yet, it is just the opposite of what is happening. It is the pain and persecution and suffering that comes upon us in the last days that frames the expectation that we will do this even more.

Conclusion Loved ones, here is God's Word to you this morning:

- Draw near to God. Commune with Him. Turn the inner eyes of your soul in delighted reflection on Jesus.
- Hold to your hope. Never let go of the promises of God. Fight unbelief with the Word. Do so because God is faithful.
- Care for one another. Give time and attention to be actively engaged with one another to motivate one another to love and good works. Do this by not forsaking our gathering together in all the ways we do and at all the times we do.

Do it all the more as we come to the end this age.

Notes

The Terrifying Prospect of Willful Sinning

Hebrews 10:26-31

Introduction What is the most terrifying thing you can think of? I can well remember my most terrifying moment. (Relate the story of being attacked by a mad dog.) Loved ones, the most terrifying moment for most will not come in this life. It will come when you awake in eternity and are faced with a God who is burning with anger at your sin.

Do you want to hear all the truth there is about God? Today, few really do. We want our God-talk to be positive and motivational and encouraging. As one preacher said, "And, what's most appalling-though very few regard it as most appalling-is that when it comes to God, all we want to hear is the sweet side-the tender side, the warm side. We believe that the only good motivation comes from hearing about grace, not judgment. And little by little we let that motivational conviction (as unbiblical as it is) creep into our view of God Himself, until we have no categories anymore to understand, let alone love, a God whose wrath is a fury of fire against sinners. But the writer of this book of Hebrews will not be silent about the wrath of God." (Piper)

What is the connection between the following somber words and the hope giving exhortations that have gone before? Why does this paragraph (at least in the original) begin with the word "for"? How we answer that shapes what our gathering together in encouraging and exhorting one another is doing. We are to stir up one another towards love and good works because if we keep on sinning when we know better, we can reach a point of no return. That is the connection. Do you care enough about one another to take the love-driven risks of keeping one another pressing on in hope and moving away from sin?

Its Fearful Expectation

(v.26-27)

The opening words to this paragraph have rung over and over and over again in my heart this week. They have shaken me to my core and then have become enabling warnings in my own struggles against sin. And it is sin that we are talking about here.

Its Conditions

(v.26a)

Now we must understand all that is said here. We must do that lest we destroy the faith of some or encourage the failure of others.

- The sin here is **deliberate** - It is when we plan for it, and make room for it, and organize it so that no one will see it. In contrast, we are not going to all the extremes that are necessary to avoid sinning.
- The sin here is **continual** - It is sin that has become so engrained in our thinking and doing that its roots are wrapped tightly around our hearts. We have modern word for the effect this sin has: we are hooked on it. On-going sin has a horribly addictive power.

- The sin here is **against knowledge** - It is sinning deliberately when we know better. We have received a certain and clear knowledge of what the truth is about this sin. And in spite of that knowledge, we simply go on practicing it.

Certainly this sinning is the on-going, deliberate rejecting of the gospel when it has certainly been made plain to us what the truth is. But it is not all this passage has in mind.

Its Consequences

(v.26b-27)

This text sets before us the only possibilities when it comes to the consequences of our sin: there must be judgment or there must be sacrifice.

Before you is placed these two possibilities. Our sin and sinning has to be judged. It must be dealt with. God cannot simply pass it by and overlook it as though it has not happened. He must respond and does respond with fearful wrath and anger. Look at the categories under which the righteous and holy God responds to deliberate sinning.

- Legal - It is judgment. This is the word for an action in a court. It is God's sentence against sin and its corrupt violation of the purity of God.
- Emotional - It is a raging fire. Literally, this means "a zealous burning." It points to the emotion of God. He is trembling with violated outrage and burns with passion anger against you and your sin.
- Physical - It is a consuming of enemies. The word here should not give us the picture of a consuming that ends in annihilation. This great heresy has awakened from hibernation and now prowls about seeking to enter God's flock. No, the idea here is that the adversaries of God are swallowed up in suffering forever.

You want to see how terrible deliberate sinning really is? Look at how God responds to it. We need to fill out our understanding of God in our day. We need to hear this. Now we must hear this in the same way we can be terribly frightened of the awesome destructive fury of a massive hurricane. But we had better seek shelter from it and not stand out in its face.

That is why there is sacrifice. That is what this book has been all about. The everlasting sentence of God's court, the massive passionate fury of God, the consuming punishment was all poured out on Jesus Christ, the perfect, innocent substitute. In this sacrifice, there is refuge from the wrath of God.

But there is the possibility of going too far. Now, because of the clear teaching of the rest of Scripture, I believe this only possible for professing, but not possessing, Christians. If you keep on deliberately rejecting the gospel and keep on sinning, you may well cross a line God has drawn in the sand. You are only assured of God's mercy whenever you can say, "It is Today." If you keep on sinning and you are professing to be a Christian, dear one, I beg you to wake up. You may soon become like Esau who sought the place of repentance but could not find it. That loved ones, in the face of the doom that hangs over us, is a terrifying prospect.

Its Cause**(v.27; Isaiah 26:11-12)**

This last phrase is a paraphrased quote from Isaiah 26:11-12. Isaiah in this Song of Praise says that the zeal of God for His people is one of His motivations for consuming the wicked. When the wicked are punished, the people groups learn God's righteousness (v.9b).

In contrast to those who deliberately keep on sinning, notice what God's people do. They walk in His ways (v.8); they wait for God (v.8); they desire His fame and reputation (v.8); they yearn for God in the night (v.9) and long for Him in the morning (v.9). This hungering and thirsting after God only comes in hearts that treasure Him above all. A hungering after God replaces a hankering for sin that causes us to go on sinning with deliberateness when we do know better.

Its Greater Severity**(v.28-29)**

Remember that our author is writing to Jews who had professed Christ. They were familiar with the Law. What he was about to say would ring true in their hearts. If we are familiar with the immense severity of Law in its "do or die" principle, then we will better understand the vileness of deliberating sinning.

Sometimes, people want to argue - maybe even some of you are starting to recoil at this vision of God. Particularly, that God would burn with a passion for judgment which would end in everlasting, conscious suffering. Today, as I have already mentioned, it is being suggested that this is an open question. I say without reservation, that it is a closed issue. Everlasting conscious punishment is clearly taught in the Scripture. Let me deal with two objections to this doctrine at this point.

- Objection 1: It is not congruent with the nature of God. God is love. How can a God who is loving condemn a person to eternal suffering? We respond this way: Love is not the central, all encompassing attribute of God. Holiness is. God's love is a holy love. God's wrath is a holy wrath. Everlasting punishment is an expression of God's holy wrath against sinners and God's holy love for His own.
- Objection 2: How is it fair that sinners are eternally punished for only a lifetime of sin? We respond that it is not the duration of sin that the Bible is concerned for, but the glory of the One sinned against. That God punishes eternally for a lifetime of sin is a measure of the incomprehensible glory against whom we have sinned.

How then does the Author argue for it in this text?

Its Old Covenant Precedence**(v.28)**

He begins by reminding us that under the Old Covenant, under the Law, people who rejected the Law, who set it aside and refused to acknowledge its binding authority over their lives by a conscious deliberate rebellion, were put to death. There was no mercy to be shown. They were taken out and stoned to death. God's people cannot have among them those who deliberately and choosingly continue to set aside God's rule over them by the Word.

Its New Covenant Reality**(v.29)**

Here is the *how much more* argument. If they died, how much greater punishment is deserved by those whose deliberate sinning is actually like the following? What is really going on when those who profess Christ go on sinning willfully when they know better?

Stomped the Foot on God's Son

The word here means "to raise the foot against." It is an act of rebellion. When we keep on sinning, we treating Jesus like a bug and stomping down hard on the precious Son of God.

Demeaned the Blood of the Covenant

This means to count as not having worth or value. It means to treat the blood of Jesus by which our New Covenant salvation is purchased - to treat it as though it were common and ordinary. It's like drinking the cup at the Lord's Table and saying, "Nice juice" and then going and sinning. (Piper)

Insulting the Spirit of Grace

This is what our sin does. It insults and scorns and offends the gracious Holy Spirit. It is a backhand across the face of the third person of the Godhead.

So this is what deliberate sinning when we know better actually is doing: it stomps on Jesus, spits on the blood and slaps the Holy Spirit. *Is it no wonder then that wrath of God burns with fiery passion to consume those who would do such a thing?*

Why do we do it then? Because we really do not believe this is what our sin is like. And we do not believe this is what God is like.

Its Utter Surety**(v.30-31)**

We cannot escape judgment because we know exactly what God is like. See how he says this? "FOR, we know Him." We know that God will move against our sinning because we ought to know what God is like.

And what God is like in being against our sin is clearly declared in Deuteronomy 32. This is the great Song of Moses in which he closes his last sermon to the people of Israel.

Its Repaying Vengeance**(v.30a; Deut. 32:35)**

Here is the fury of God against sinners who do not repent. Now these words are spoken to the congregation of the people of Israel. They were a mixed lot. Some were believes, most were not. So these awful words are spoken about the nations around them and to the people of God themselves. God will exact His vengeance and His anger. He will do so with passion and righteousness. There will be no escaping the wrath of God on that day.

For the way of escape is through Jesus and Him alone. This awful wrath has already been poured out on Him. Has it been poured out on Him for you? You can know that by coming and trusting and bowing to our Sovereign and our Savior.

Its Chastening Judgment

(v.30b; Deut. 32:36)

But that is not just what this text is about. It is not just a word of warning to professing Christians. It is not just powerful words to describe the terrible plight of wicked people who deliberately reject Jesus and His blood and His Spirit. This is also a word to God's people.

Now we are fond of thinking that we have wholly escaped the edge of these texts. Yes, we will never know eternal conscious punishment. Jesus took that for us. But we may well know present conscious chastening. God will judge sin in us. I am convinced that all our sinning as Christians is dealt with in this life. We will be dealt with as children who are loved. It is that holy love that moves against sin in our lives to correct and chasten so that we will have the real, living and practical aspects of holiness without which none of us will see God.

Lest you think this is not so, look at what happened to Moses. At 120 years old after 40 years of walking with God in the wilderness leading this miserable, stiff-necked, God denying bunch; after these massive three sermons which come to us as the book of Deuteronomy, after this wonderful Song of Praise - on that same day, God takes Moses up to see what he will never enter because he deliberately sinned against better knowledge. *Moses never entered the land*. Now listen-we do not think that sin is serious any more. We do not like to hear messages against it. We do not like to have people point it out in our lives. We are not fighting sin with all the resources God has given us. And so we suffer. There were Christians in Corinth who were sick and some were even dead because they did not come to the Lord's table when they should and when they came, they came for wrong reasons and in wrong ways. Ananias and Sapphira died because they lied to the church and to God about their giving.

These are sobering words to us. What conclusion should we draw?

Our Response "It is a fearful, dreadful, terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God." It is a dreadful thing when people who know better keep on sinning and trample Jesus, belittle the blood and insult the Spirit. It is utterly terrifying to realize that this is the kind of living God with whom we have to do.

Now what do we do about it?

Conclusion

- Do not run from this kind of God. There is no where to go. The best thing to do is to run to this God, for in the center of the whirling hurricane of His fury, there is the calm eye of His mercy in Jesus.
- Stop sinning. If you cannot, you need to come to God and plead for His mercy to save you. John assures us that genuine believers do not keep on sinning. If you are utterly and always overwhelmed with your sin, you need the powerful, delivering freedom of saving grace.
- Meet together to exhort and encourage one another to stop sinning. I bring you once again to the connection. We must not forsake our gathering together in corporate worship and small groups so that we can stir one another up for love to God and one another that keeps us from sinning when we know better.
- Hear me, beloved. In this day where we want a soft, tame God-hear these words: "it is terrifying to fall into the hands of the living God." Most of us have the dream in our sleep where we are falling. It is a terrifying experience. But we always wake up and we are safe. As genuine believers, this is the way it is for us. It is a terrifying fall, but the waking up in the safe security of Jesus is sweet.

Notes

The Present Power of a Future Possession Hebrews 10:32-39

Introduction We have been thinking together about how we ought to stir one another and motivate one another to love and good works. We do so to warn one another about the deceitfulness of sin and the delight of obedience. We study each other and give time and thought and reflection on how we can prod people on to these Biblical objectives.

One of the reasons we need to do this is because the love and good works we are pressing people on to may be sacrificial and costly. It is easy to love people like me who are beautiful, clean and nice people like I am. It will cost me - my pride, self-importance, social standing and possibly even my health - to love all kinds of people. It is a simple fact that our self-serving, soft generation is not producing saints with a sacrificial passion for the gospel and a people who endure as missionaries in the midst horrendous trials. If you think that is not so, when was the last time you risked embarrassment to speak to a neighbor or a lost friend about Christ?

The terrible price that can be paid by God's people expressing sacrificial love in risk-taking deeds is evident in this text. Beloved, we must hear these words in ways that stir us up to concerted action for the gospel to people in the coming months and years. Without this regular encouragement and stirring up we all drift toward apathy and comfort and security. But in a world like ours, love and good works will be costly. Love is not cheap. And good works are sometimes dangerous and costly. One author has posed the question this way, "How do we become a kind of people who break out of apathy and throw off the need for ease and plenty, and risk our possessions and our lives in the cause of love and good deeds?" (Piper)

We have seen how we as a body of people together are to commune with God, cling to our confession of faith and care for one another. These responsibilities are designed to powerfully sustain love and good works in the midst of the danger of willful sin (v.25-31) and now in the danger of personal suffering (v.32-39). We need each other when we are tempted by sin and when we are tested by suffering. Here is the deep reality of God's people in a fallen world – there will be mingled grief and grace. There will be words that confront and words that commend. This is where meeting together to both exhort and encourage is modeled in the text before us. The clarion call here has been to watch out for sin and now to keep on in suffering.

Noting the Excellence of their Past Conduct(v.32-34)

To stir up their commitment to love and good works, our author begins by calling on them to remember what was once true about them. He points to their past as being full of the kind of sacrificial ministry that glorifies God and encourages saints.

Its Characteristics

(v.32)

He takes the jewel of this memory from their treasure chest and holds it up for admiration. Their Christian life at that point sparkled brightly with excellence.

- It was early in their Christian life - The words here convey that it came upon them after they believed, was connected to the fact of their believing and came soon after they believed.
- It was a standing fast - They had a commitment to what was true and how that truth was to be lived regardless of the apparent consequences. They endured.
- It was a conflict - Don't let the simplicity of these words fool you into thinking that this conflict was simple and easy. The description that follows shows how terrible a struggle it had become.
- It was suffering - It cost them dearly in terms of pain and loss. It was dramatic and difficult, scarring deeply.

When they were young in the Lord, they endured a severe test of suffering.

Its Cost

(v.33-34a)

How can we possibly resonate with this text? What was a real memory in their personal experience is dim and distant for us. This simply is not the life we live now. But listen to it and allow yourself to be gripped by what their Christian lives cost them.

- Spectacles in public - They were put up for public ridicule and scorn. They were exposed to slander and insults and persecution. There was a very real sense in which they were paraded around for their faith in ways that would cause mortified embarrassment.
- Shared with persecuted - They chose to take their stand along with others who were suffering the same fiery trial. They did not turn away, nor ignore them nor leave them to suffer alone. They did not just admire them and honor them from a safe distance. They shared by standing along side them.
- Sympathy to prisoners - Even when it was costly to do so, they went and visited and identified themselves with those believers who were imprisoned for their faith. They identified themselves as being related to these *criminals*.
- Seizure of property - Their public testimony and sharing with suffering saints cost them their possessions, their homes, their livelihoods. We do not know whether it was confiscated by the government or seized by others. We only know that it left them physically impoverished and socially outcast.

All of this is to provide the dark background against which to show the bright threads of their response. It is wrapped up in two words: *accept joyfully*. I am struck once

again by the importance of joy and gladness to suffering believers. There is a strength of character and quality of faith here.

This was not a grudging, dour, sad suffering. It was joyful. This was being made fun of for being a Christian and connecting yourself publicly with those who were being attacked. This was going to visit imprisoned Christians and coming home to find your windows broken and your furniture stolen and graffiti sprayed on your house, "Christian, get out!" Or it was coming home to a subpoena or a government issued padlock on your door and everything gone. You then did not mainly feel sad or discouraged or angry, but rather called your flock group together and sang songs of praise and thanked Jesus for the privilege for suffering for His Name. (Piper) Sufficient grace gladdened a suffering heart.

This however is so incredibly distant from our own experience we can hardly grasp it. That this is not our experience is not due to the happy smile of the world around us on truth proclaiming Christians. Loved ones, the reason this is distant from our experience is that we almost never do anything to incur it! Frankly, most of you will be loathe to leave the comfort of whatever you are doing this afternoon to return for worship this evening. And what would happen to us if we began to publicly, house to house, declare that if people did not repent and believe in Jesus alone and turn away from Catholicism as apostate and God-abandoned (modern equivalent of their Judaism) they would die in their sins and face the wrath of a living God forever? Do you think that we would begin to experience what came upon them?

Now I want to ask you a question that should be reverberating in your mind. How could they accept joyfully all this? Where does this sort of gladness come from? How, for the sake of heaven, does one turn away from valuing and prizing earthly possessions so that the loss of them fuels praise?

Its Cause

(v.34b)

They accepted this with joy because of what they knew! Now understand what he is saying here. They were joyful, not just because they were supposed to be. The idea here is not that they sat around and muttered Christian slogans to one another or manufactured outward expressions that look like joy. Their affections (emotions) responded to outward experience based on inward knowledge. The loss and cost brought joy because they knew:

- They had something **better** - They believed in an obeying way that they had better possessions. The loss of all their earthly goods for the Name of Christ only caused their hearts to turn with rising gladness to treasure and value the things which no earthly means could destroy. They had their treasure in heaven and the earthly loss only loosened happy hearts to run forward to possess it.
- They had something **lasting** - They believed in an obeying way that they had eternal possessions. They understood by faith that all the world tends to grasp for and cling to and clutch at is fleeting, passing, decaying, rusting, and rotting. They had weighed each thing they owned in the balance of eternity and held fast to that eternal weight of glory with glad abandon.

Their joy came because of what they believed, not how they felt. Joy may be an affection, but it bubbles like a spring in the pool of a heart believing the truth. O, that this were true of us. How I yearn in my own heart to be free from the grasp of material possessions and gripped by the better and eternal possessions that I can just see by faith and hope for in my heart and lean toward in my affections.

One great preacher has expressed it in words like this. *Knowing*. Here's the key. You must have this confidence. It is the deep confidence about your future that frees you from the fear and greed that kill love and make you into a cookie-cutter person who has to have security and safety and ease and comfort. Where does this confidence—this knowing—come from? It comes from Christ. It comes from understanding what He has done in the cross and the resurrection, what He is doing now for us in heaven, and what He will do for us at the Second Coming and throughout eternity. It is a knowing confidence in Jesus, for all that we ever hope for is owing to Christ. We receive it, not by meriting it or earning it, but banking on it. If we love it above all that earth offers, it is ours. So when verse 34 says that the key to indomitable joy in the face of suffering and earthly loss is *knowing we have a better and lasting possession*, it means that we know this because of Christ. Jesus is the seal and the guarantee of our hope in all the promises of God. (Piper)

Hearing the Exhortation to Future Confidence(v.35-39)

In the light of all this amazing exhibition of gladness in the midst of terrible suffering, what must they be on the alert for? What warning would such a people with such a past need?

Its Caution

(v.35)

The Author warns them not to throw away their confidence! Stop and think about that. The soul threatening danger that faced them was a temptation to discard the very thing that had made them accept with joy their suffering loss. They were on the verge of throwing away the confidence that came from knowing the future the promises of God would bring.

Now this is an important warning for us as well. All of us who have had some measure of spiritual blessing and experienced the maturing and sustaining enablement of sufficient grace are in great danger of drift. If all we can do at this point is *to remember* the glory days and we have ceased to experience them, we must be sure that something terrible has not happened in our lives. We must be sure that we have not discarded the very confidence in Jesus that fueled joy and glad obedience.

Its Condition

(v.36)

Look at how this is picked up. What is needed is endurance. What is needed is perseverance. We need a stick-to-it-tiveness that is so often woefully absent. What is not in view here is a stubborn adherence to what has been shown to be wrong or false or in need of change. That is not the perseverance the Author has in mind. What is needed is an inner determination to do God's will.

See how this is actually put in the past? What is need is endurance so that there will be reward and reception of promises *after we have persevered in doing God's will*. This has been a powerful antidote to discouragement and depression in my life. There are many choices and plans that are before me that are open to change. And there are many that are not. They are God's will because they are what the Bible says I must do. And by the grace of God, I am pressing forward with His strength to possess the reward and receive the promises.

And I am afraid for me. As I am for all of us. If we fail and quit and do not endure and find little grace in us for persevering when it is relatively easy now, what will happen to us when we are called on to stand in the face of real, terrible, soul wrenching suffering?

Its Consequence

(v.35b, 36b)

What motivation does the Author use to stir up his readers to love and good works? To persevere in them and not throw away or discard their confidence as a disposable commodity? He motivates them in this way: the reward is sure (v.35b) and the promises will be received (v.36b).

We must not think of these as though they are separate things. Dear ones, the reception of all that God promised to be for us in Christ is our reward. The promises of God and the reward of Jesus are powerful magnets that draw us forward and heavenward in difficult times. Here is the present power of a future possession. It enables glad acceptance and confident endurance in the midst of the great contest. It looks beyond the present exposure to insult and ridicule and opposition in great expectation. It accepts with joy present loss and suffering because it values its heavenly treasure. It reaches out with risk-taking love to share with Christians who suffer. And it sets itself to endure it all for the glory of its author and finisher, Jesus.

Its Content

(v.36-38)

Where does all this come from? From the Word of God. These verses are a quote from Habakkuk 2:3-4. What we are remembering (v.32-34) and what we must press on towards (v.35-36) is a life of faith. It is a life that listens to the Word of God, believes in an obeying way and pleases God until Jesus comes. (It is my intent to take the whole book of Habakkuk in the evening's service.) The argument of Habakkuk, his complaint and God's response are the answer to the agonizing question raised when these two paragraphs have become our life experience, "Where is God when it all seems to be falling apart?"

What is he saying here? Listen to Piper's words.

Conclusion

Don't look at the temporary cost of love and shrink back from confidence in God's infinitely superior promises. Not only will you lose out on the promises; you will be destroyed. Hell is at stake here, not just the loss of a few extra rewards. If you shrink back from the description of this as a life of faith, then you are shrinking back to destruction. That is eternal judgment. So we warn each other: don't drift away. Don't love the world. Don't start thinking nothing huge is at stake. Fear the terrible prospect of not cherishing the promises of God above the pleasures of sin.

But mostly we must focus on the preciousness of the promises and help each other value above all things how great the reward is that Christ has purchased for us. It is eternally important that we use our corporate gatherings, our flocks and our personal fellowship and friendships to help people see the greatness of what Christ has purchased. We must help one another to value it above the world. We must so exhort and encourage people to see and savor Him, to believe in God and trust His promises. We want love and good works to arise in such a way that God's superior worth shines in their satisfaction and the sacrifices that come from it.

So the question is: will we embrace this? Will we bank all our future in trust in Jesus? Will we wake up from the trance of this stupefying world and see and believe and rejoice and love? And suffer with joy?

The Transforming Power of a Genuine Faith

Hebrews 11:1-7

Introduction What kind of life does God hold up for us to strive for? There are many visions of what the Christian life is supposed to be like. Some are strange, bizarre and unbiblical. Some call for sacrifice and suffering. Some mix both. How do we move through a text like Hebrews 11 with some sense of reality? You may remember that some Christians were imprisoned and the others made the hard decision to identify with them and risk their property and lives. Verse 34 tells what happened. “For you had compassion on those in prison, and you joyfully accepted the plundering of your property, since you knew that you yourselves had a better possession and an abiding one.”

This is the kind of life the whole book of Hebrews is aiming to produce—a life that looks at the high cost of love (the seizure of our property, perhaps, or some kind of other calamity or abuse or price to be paid) and then, accepts that possibility *joyfully* and does what love demands, no matter what. That’s the life Hebrews wants us to live. All the glorious truth we have seen about Christ—in all the ways Jesus is supreme, all this great truth that we have been reveling in is aimed at practically making us into this kind of people. People who will risk life and property to bring the love of God to others. People who do not look for comforts and ease and security as a necessary thing in life. People who are not driven by style and safety and wealth and leisure. People who know there is one life to live and only what’s done to magnify Jesus in His Name and for the eternal good of others will count in the end.

The only way that such a life comes about is by an unshakable hope in God beyond this life. The power to be joyfully sacrificial in love for others is in knowing that you have a better and lasting possession. If you do not live by this great confidence, you will be continually thinking about how much you are losing out and how much it is costing you each time you sacrifice for others. But if you are living now to be prepared for eternity then you are free to risk your life and property and time and all that matters because the present sufferings are not even worthy to be compared to glory that is coming.

We have access to God and an advocate before God. Therefore, we are to come to God, cling to our hope and care for one another. We must do this because of the temptation of willful, deliberate sin and the testing of painful and costly suffering. In all of this we are to believe God and His very great and precious promises so that we persevere. We do not throw away our confidence in God. We hope for what He will bring. Thus, we are to live by faith as Habakkuk taught. We will not be a people who shrink back through sin or suffering, but rather are a people who keep on believing God.

Now the author is going to show us that this is not unusual or strange. All through redemptive history we have men and women who have clung to God in His promises and have persevered through enormous suffering. And every one of them did so through faith, through believing God even when it seemed like it was not coming to pass. This is meant to deepen your confidence in God’s promises so that you turn from the passing pleasures of sin and live out a sacrificial love for the glory of Jesus and the good of others.

The Greatness of Faith's Description

(v.1-3)

Chapter 11 begins with a description of faith that links it with hope and then shows us how this hope empowers obedience. There's the link. Faith is the essence and evidence that what we are straining for and cannot yet see is real. So here is a catalogue of people who illustrate this kind of faith, who lived and died in the assurance and confidence of glory and gladness to come.

It seems that this paragraph is supposed to be a natural bridge between 10:36, "for you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised." We are supposed to travel across this bridge on three strong pillars.

Faith as Confidence

(v.1)

What is he saying here? First, I do not believe that this is meant to be a definition of faith. It is meant to describe how faith connects our future hope to our present sacrificial love. So what are we to make of this? If you want to know how difficult it is, just pick up older and now newer translations and see how they struggle with what is here. Our problem here is the words that get translated "assurance" and "conviction". These words are very difficult to represent in English and the construction of this sentence is difficult.

First, faith is such a strong confidence in the person and promises of God that we put our hopes in who He is and what He says. The deep inner assurance that our hopes are well founded is a facet of faith. Where ever that assurance, that confidence is, there is faith.

Second, faith is a strong conviction that the invisible is real. This is why faith is the opposite of sight, "we walk by faith, not by sight." We have a deep conviction that God and His promises are real, even when they are neither visible to us nor tangible to us. Where that conviction is, there is faith.

Faith has a sense of an active, confident affirmation that what is either future or spiritual is *real*. It has substance and life changing power because it is believed. What is future to us in the promises and what is invisible to us in God and His promises is seen by souls with the eyes of faith so that we can truly say, "These things are so."

So, faith is believing God and His promises in such a way that what is evident in us is an assurance and conviction of the eternal and invisible. That should be enough to free us from the fears and greed and worldliness that destroys radical, risk-taking love. If we have a strong conviction that God will care for us and bring us to glory and fulfill all His promises to us forever then we will be free from self-indulgence and free for serving others.

And this is right where many of you are. You are caught in the knowing that you ought to be dying for one another. But you have a taste for passing pleasures. The price you have to pay for sacrificial serving is simply greater than you are willing to pay. What is it then that we are missing about this kind of faith?

One more thing seems to ring true with this sentence. You can represent these words with two other English words – essence and evidence. Faith has in it the essence of what we hope for and faith is evidence of the invisible. Now we are starting to fill in

the colors of our picture. Faith believes God and trusts Him and understands so powerfully what God has promised that believing brings the glory and gladness that having will.

You know what it is like. I can come home from a long day and open the front door and O, my, Esther has been cooking. And I smell Brazilian rice and Cordon Bleu and biscuits fresh from the oven and what happens. My mouth waters. My senses are telling me that something good and wonderful is about to happen and I am so sure that I can already taste it. In the smelling of the delicious meal is still the essence of what it will be like to actually sit down and eat it.

This is what faith does. Faith doesn't create what we hope for—that would be magic and occult. Faith is not bringing this into existence. And faith is not imagining what is not real as though it were true. That is wishful thinking and some so-called Christian groups are quite adept at it. What they talk about is not authentic faith. Real faith is based in Truth.

Faith is the spiritual seeing, apprehending or perceiving or tasting or sensing of the beauty and sweetness and preciousness and goodness of what God promises — especially the enjoyment of His Presence and perfections. It smells the biscuits in the oven and causes the mouth to water.

Faith as Commendation

(v.2)

Why is understanding this description of faith so important? Because the men of old were approved and commended by God for this sort of faith. This sort of faith transformed them into the people who lived and loved and served and died in Hebrews 11. They themselves became the surrounding cloud of witnesses that press us on to endure.

By faith the believers of old were commended. I am struck by what he says here - notice it is *by* faith and not *because of* faith. So here he is saying something that we need to get a hold of. The believers were commended, not because they exercised faith, but through faith itself. Faith is always both an organ of sight – it sees – and an conduit of grace – a channel, a wire, a pipe. How did believers in the Old Covenant know they were approved by God? By faith. Faith conveyed God's approval to their hearts so that their souls saw it, believed it. Because they both saw and received that commendation through faith, they were enabled to move forward with assurance and confidence even in the shadows and dimness of the Old Covenant.

It is clear then that if they were commended by faith, so are we in the New Covenant. We are aware of God's external approval and internal affirmation because we believe the Truth of God's Word. This inner "Yes" from God and in our souls is real when we by faith believe God and His promises. And when we have that by faith, we have an unshakable hope and confidence so that our lives are radically changed.

Faith as Comprehension

(v.3)

How do I know then that this faith is grounded in truth and not a feeling? Because that faith is how we understand what the Bible tells us. The author shows that it is by faith that we understand. That inner comprehension, that inner sense of the realities of real things is conveyed to us and apprehended in us by faith. But it is not a blind leap nor some mystical thing arising from nowhere – rather, it is an understanding of what the Bible says. Here, the Bible says that God created all that is made by His very own speaking. This is something we can only know from the Bible. Yet not everyone who reads or even knows the Bible, believes in an understanding way this truth. What is the difference between those who do and those who don't? The gift of faith by God. It is not because they are more intellectual or less sinful. It is sheer grace giving faith so that by it, we understand.

Further, faith helps draw conclusions from that understanding. Here, faith enables Divine logic. If God, who is invisible, made all the cosmos which is visible, then faith causes understanding to affirm that what is visible arises from the invisible. Now we are right back at verse one, are we not? Genuine faith is assured of and convinced by the Genesis record that God created everything. Since all that is seen was created by all that is unseen, then the unseen is real. You must never equate unseen with unreal. That is doubt. Faith is unseen is real. So, God exists. God made. God promises. God describes what I cannot see and what I do not yet have and yet it is real and will come to pass.

And it is so real, that I sense its flavor, its smell, its taste, its sense right now. This all not because you dream it up or conjure it up by human effort or imagination or technique. But rather you read it in God's Word. You believe it because of God. Then what the Word of God speaks of is real—broken like sweet bread and poured out like refreshing water and the spiritual taste of your heart is awakened. All that God promises and gives you are experiencing now in a way that gives you confidence and assurance.

That is why Psalm 34:8 says;

O *taste* and *see* that the Lord is good;
How happy is the man who takes refuge in Him!

The Greatness of Faith's Declaration (v.4-7)

The lives of the Old Testament saints are illustrations of this kind of faith. They are not proof of it. They demonstrate it. They live out this faith in the midst of the mess.

Warren Wiersbe ways, "The best way to grow in faith is to walk with the faithful." In each of these through the rest of the chapter, you find these essential elements in their faith:

- God spoke to them through His Word;
- They were changed or challenged inwardly;
- They obeyed God;
- God showed that He was pleased with them.

How do these people demonstrate that faith is the essence and evidence of our hope and unseen realities?

Abel – The Worship by Faith (v.4)

How is Abel's a better sacrifice? Why is it not the "perfect" or "correct" or "required" sacrifice? Why does our author say, "By faith Abel offered a *better, a more acceptable* sacrifice than Cain?" Yes, Abel offered a blood sacrifice. As far as we know, he brought what God required. Is that really what Hebrews has in mind?

All through the Book of Hebrews, Jesus has been "the better". He has been the better revelation, the better sacrifice, the better high priest, the better sanctuary and administrator of the better covenant. And in this flow of thought, Abel offers a better sacrifice. He sacrifices a lamb and does so by faith — that is his offering of the lamb has in it the essence of his hope and is the evidence what is not seen.

When Abel brings his sacrifice, he knows for sure that what he is doing is pointing forward and higher to something to come later and is yet unseen. He does not expect this lamb he has brought to save, but he is utterly convinced with an unshakable assurance that God will send a Lamb. On that and with this lamb, he sets his hope.

Abel comes to worship God in God's way. He brings a sacrifice. He knows that he will only be accepted because of God's own provision of sacrifice. His faith and faith alone brings into his soul the affirming and commending testimony of God that he stands righteous in God's sight.

How is it that Abel still speaks? He speaks through the Word. We read his story in the Word. We believe it is true. We see the story line leading us to Jesus, the Lamb come to take away the sins of the world. We see Him crucified and resurrected. And it is real in our souls – so real we rest on and hope in that work alone for the saving of our souls. Genuine faith then conveys to our souls a sense of assurance and confidence that we are saved now and will be saved in the day of judgment. All because we have understood that the Word is still speaking – it is alive and thrumming with life changing power.

Enoch – The Walk of Faith**(v.5-6)**

By faith, Enoch pleased God. How did he please God? Genesis 6:21-24 says that Enoch walked with God. God publicly commended Enoch's pleasing walk by taking him out of the world, but not through death. Now again notice, by faith Enoch's walk with God had in it both the essence of pleasing God and the evidence that pleasing God is worthwhile. His walk with God had the fragrance of heaven and proved that God was real. It pleased God and delighted Him. So God rewarded Enoch's faith by taking him directly to paradise.

Imagine having the kind of communion and fellowship and walk with God that has in it here on earth the essence of heaven. How amazing it is to know, to having an unshakable assurance that we are living in such a way that it brings pleasure to God. When we live like this we show that pleasing God is better than pleasure and God puts His stamp of approval on it.

Is your life a walk with God that brings Him pleasure?

Noah – The Witness of Faith**(v.7)**

The faith of a believer affects him in his whole person.

- Mind – He was warned. He heard God's Word.
- Affections – He was moved with fear. What he heard moved
- Will – He built a boat

Noah was warned about something he had never seen – a flood and possibly even, rain. He believed God about what he could not see and bowed in holy fear before the promises and the power of God and built a boat. Noah's obedient faith was a witness. Now we know Noah preached and proclaimed and warned. But what he said was backed up by how he lived. He was utterly convinced that God was going to do what He said He would and had an unshakable assurance that this boat he was building was how God would deliver him and his family.

Now, we must not think of this as being the first boat. The Bible nowhere indicates that what he built was incomprehensible in its function. The ridicule and derision was heaped on him due to his preaching and warning of why the boat was necessary. Noah's obedience saved him and his family while leaving the world to be destroyed in condemnation.

Noah's boat building faith and world warning witness had in it the substance and essence of God's holy and soon coming wrath. It smelled of judgment waiting in the oven. It stood off the page of the chaos and evil around him as evidence that God existed and that all the world must answer to Him. What he did showed that he was an heir of righteousness.

Conclusion Now we have met three men who are said to have done what they did in the way they did it, *by faith*. Abel offers a better sacrifice, Enoch pleases God in His walk and Noah builds an ark. Now I want to show you how important it is that we know our Old Testaments and that we always go back to look at texts that are quoted by New Testament writers. Do you know the surprising thing when you go back to these accounts in Genesis? *Not one of them mentions faith.*

Now that is a problem. How does the author know these men did what they did by faith? Remember, he is not arguing for the nature of faith from these texts. He is not saying, “Because I find faith mentioned in these stories, therefore faith must be the way they please God.” His argument is just the opposite, in fact. He sees faith in the stories, not because it is mentioned, but because these men did please God. There is no other way to please Him than by faith.

Listen to the Divine logic here:

- Assertion: Only when we believe God in an obeying way do we please God. Faith is the only way to please God.
- Observation: Enoch pleased God because God took him up to heaven.
- Conclusion: Enoch had faith.

Why have we skipped verse six. Because there our author pivots his argument. I want to close with this truth.

There are two parts to faith in this verse, which shows why it pleases God. First, faith believes God exists. Second, faith believes that God is a rewarder of those who seek Him. Because faith is these two things, it pleases God. He doesn’t say why this is so. He just says it is. There is something about the nature of God that makes this obvious.

Let me say this another way. What pleases God is when we show by our life that God *exists* and that He is *excellent*. Our believing obedience displays how *real* God is and how *rewarding* He is. God is like this: it brings Him pleasure when we trust Him and when we treasure Him.

Here for me is one of the most important lessons about faith. The nature of faith and the vitality of faith is rooted in what God is like, not in what we are like. Faith is what it is because of what and who God is. The more you know what God is like, the more conformed to His greatness will be your faith. Your trusting obedience will have in it the essence of God’s promises and the evidence that He is real and He is rewarding.

May our worship have the fragrance of heaven and the life of sacrifice. May our walk with God fill Him with pleasure and delight. May our witness have a sense of authenticity and reality. May we live and die to wonderfully display that God is real and that He is rewarding.

The Persevering Grace of Looking Forward

Hebrews 11:8-16

Introduction All of us are tempted at times to quit, to give up believing in God in the midst of the temptations to sin or the testing and trials of suffering. Persevering in faith is one way important piece of why we must magnify Christ and mature as saints. This persevering is sustained by coming to God, confessing our hope and caring for one another. From all this encouragement and exhortation comes the kind of faith that is the essence of what God has promised and a display of the excellence of the God who promises. At the center of a persevering faith is an unshakable conviction and confidence that God is real and a rewarded of all who keep on drawing near to Him. So we will trust and treasure Him all the way through to the end.

There are three basic ways of looking at life.

- Looking backward – There is a way of living that primarily looks back at the past. There are some of you whose primary view of life is all about what has happened to you.
- Looking around – There is a way of living that looks primarily at what we think of as the present. It is primarily focused on the immediate, the now.
- Looking forward – There is a way of living that looks, not only forward, but actually sees beyond the death line and lives for the realities that are promised.

The last is the way of faith. Now let me say this. Living by looking forward has profoundly affects the way you view your past and present. That is what this text is all about.

The Examples

(v.8-12)

The best way to see how faith is the essence and evidence of future promises is in the lives of people. Abraham and Sarah are great examples of receiving the promises of God, believing in them and then longing for what God has promised. Their faith produced obedience in their lives and hope for their future.

Faith's Patience

(v.8-10)

He Leaves by Faith

(v.8)

The Word of God comes to Abraham, telling him to leave the land he is in and to travel to a destination that would be identified later. By faith, Abraham obeyed and went, going to what was promised not knowing where it was.

This is the kind of call every person who becomes a Christian receives. The Word of God (now located in the Scriptures, tells us to leave our sins, our security, our safety, our wealth, our pleasures and to begin a risky, dangerous, hard, and joyful journey to another land. It is a place we do not know where it is, what it really looks like and getting there will eventually require dying. But, it is the

land where God is, where we will see and dwell with God, the land where all that He promises us will be. And so, by faith, we believe and obey. We forsake houses and lands, if necessary family and friends and we head heavenward. And we patiently persevere and do not go back.

He Lives by Faith

(v.9)

Abraham arrived and lived as a stranger and an alien in the very land he was promised. He witnessed to the temporary nature of living in the land by living in tents. After all, this was the promised land, but not yet. Do you see? Though he was an heir and owner, he was living in between the promise and the fulfillment. He lived it and so did his sons.

And so do we. We, like Abraham, are living in between the promise and fulfillment. This life we live now by faith, we live here constantly in transition, never really being settled down and at home. We, if you will, spiritually live in tents. We are sojourners, aliens, away from home. And we must pass this way of living on to our sons and daughters, to the next generation of believers.

He Looks by Faith

(v.10)

What is it that drives this kind of living? Abraham lived his whole life, moving about in Israel, quietly marking off his heritage and the boundaries of his promise, *while his gaze was fixed on the city God designs and builds*. He lives with superb joy between the promise and the fulfillment because the eyes of his faith can see what God has promised and is still yet preparing. Because he is looking forward, he is neither distracted by the present nor tempted to return to what he has left.

Here is the lesson the author intends for us. Those whose faith leaves and lives with a strong sense of being a pilgrim will find the gaze of their souls fixed on their Redeemer and His heavenly reward. Because we are looking forward by faith to the fulfillment, we will persevere with grace enabled patience in the temptations to sin and the testing of suffering. What we have left we will not go back to. And what surrounds us now will not distract us. We will live now with our eyes set on Christ and our hearts fixed on heaven.

Faith's Power

(v.11-12)

Now, faith has the element of perseverance towards a future and unseen goal. But that faith may also receive foretastes of those future realities. So, Sarah will bear a son who is the evidence of her faith and has in him the essence of the future Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Its Character

(v.11)

Sarah's faith is grounded in the character of God. She heard a promise of her having a son. She carefully evaluated the faithfulness of God. She believed God and received the power to open her womb and bear a child. As is evident all through the Bible, the enabling power of God, that is, His grace, flows through faith to people.

What is being highlighted here is her consideration of the faithfulness of God. She studied and weighed the integrity of the God who made the promise (and yes, laughed at her own age and inability). But her belief was not just a fantasy wish, nor did it create the reality hoped for. It had content – you will bear a son. It had an object – a promising God who has integrity and is faithful. It weighed carefully the impossibility of her situation and the greatness of her God, then believing that God was real and rewarded, she got pregnant.

Its Consequence

(v.12)

Here is the grand thing about this kind of faith – it may receive what is promised in the moment and it may bring an immeasurable result later. So through this faith in the faithful God who promised came first a son, Isaac and many sons. But greatest of all, came the Son of God who is the fulfillment of what God promised. (Galatians 3:15-18). Even in this we have an already and not yet. Abraham and Sarah believe and receive a son, but not yet, not the Son who would be born thousands of years later.

The Explanation

(v.13-16)

This is so amazing—that faith is both patient and powerful when believing God’s promises—that the author explains how important this living by a forward looking faith is.

Faith’s Principles

(v.13-16a)

The reason they lived like this and persevered as they did and as we should, is because their faith was real. We know it was real because of the affect it had. Or, to put it another way, what came from that faith had in it the essence of what was believed and evidence that the unseen was real.

- Faith can wait till after death for the fullness of what is promised (v.13). It knows that we are living between the promise and the fulfillment and perseveres until the fulfillment actually happens.
- Faith sees what God promises from a long way off. It welcomes it, or greets it from afar. Faith is like knowing your loved one is coming and you long for it and wait for it and welcome it and all of that makes the way you live now sweeter and better and fuller. But she is not home yet.
- Faith is seeking what is promised. Faith desires what is promised. So often our trouble is that we don’t really care about that which God has promised: we don’t long for it and hunger for it, so we don’t have it.
- Faith talks about these things so that there is real clarity about them in our souls. Faith confessed and discussed and lived profoundly shapes us for heavenly mindedness and earthly usefulness.
- Faith presses forward even when opportunities are there to return to the past way of living. Faith keeps firm grip and ever upward climbing the heavenward cast anchor.

See how the author is calling us to persevere by faith? See how this connects to chapter 10. What we are to do in gathering together is to stir up this kind of faith. We are to so speak about God, His person, perfections and promises so that we see them in our souls, welcome and say, “Hellooooooo” to them even when we know they are afar off. We do this together because we are pilgrims and are living in spiritual tents. Then there will come that day when we will arrive at the homeland.

Faith’s Product

(v.16b)

God is not ashamed to be called their God. When we live committed to God’s promises, confessing that we are just passing through and hungering and thirsting for our heavenly home, then we bring pleasure to God. But when we don’t bank our hope in God’s promises and live as though we need everything now and are not longing for heaven then we embarrass God. We bring Him shame.

What a great thing it is when is God is not ashamed to be called, our God.

Is God ashamed to be called your God?

Conclusion

- Does your faith obey even when you cannot see how it will all turn out?
- Does your faith see this life and as short and temporary and to be lived utterly for heaven and God?
- Is yours the kind of faith that holds fast even when there is the possibility of never receiving what is promised in this life? Is your faith patient?
- Does your faith see the realities that God has promised, and embraces them even from a distance?

If so, God is not ashamed to called your God.

The Power of Faith in the Face of Death

Hebrews 11:17-22

Introduction Faith has a great focus on the future. It hears and embraces what God promises and leans toward God's promises. But there is an unalterable fact about everyone's future. That fact is death. So, how will faith behave when facing difficulty, decline and death?

We noted that the author is challenging the believers to persevere by faith. They were to be vigilant in the temptation to sin and joyous in the trails of suffering. Many of them were facing the great testing of suffering death. Violent, painful death may have visited the congregation leaving chairs empty. These were a constant reminder of the danger facing them.

So in the author's catalog of faith's examples, he now brings forward several who demonstrate the power of faith in the face of death. From these we are to draw courage, conviction and confidence that God's promises will sustain us and His purposes will direct us.

We must continue to believe God in ways that clearly shows that we are treasuring His promises.

Faith Obeying God's Precepts (v.17-19)

Here is faith in the face of what seems like an impossible command, "Go and sacrifice your son." What will Abraham do? Will his faith in God's promises cause some kind of tension or difficulty when God calls for real obedience?

The Trial that Examines Faith (v.17-18)

We see that this is test, a trial. It is God moving to examine Abraham's heart. As James 1 says, these kinds of tests often will involve temptations. God is testing – but it is almost certain that in the testing by God, Abraham was tempted to disobey God. The rationalization would have been easy. He could have said to himself, "Human sacrifice is immoral. God would either never command it or the test here is whether I will not do what I know is wrong even when I think God is commanding it." Many reading the Old Testament come to this story with a real sense of shock. God has asked Abraham to sacrifice a human.

Without trying to answer all the objections that people raise, let me point out that human sacrifice is wrong because God said so, not because there is some moral principle outside of God that He governs according to. So if God commands Abraham to sacrifice a human, then Abraham must obey God at this point over this command.

Another interesting thing that we find in the Old Testament account in Genesis 22:1-10 is a lack of turmoil and anguish. We do not see him wrestling with his decision. He gets up early in the morning. He loads up the donkey, gets the servant and the boy, and heads off on a three day journey to where God sends him. We know that he has settled in his mind what he believes and how he will obey before he moves on with

just boy. He turns to the servant and says, “Wait here. I and the lad will go and come again to you.” You wait; we will go; we will sacrifice; we will return.

Now, we need to think carefully about the testing of Abraham. By faith, when tested, Abraham obeyed. So what was this really a test of?

It was a test of Abraham’s *treasure*.

Would he sacrifice what was nearest and dearest to his heart? Most of us can feel this in some way. Here is your favorite child, the son of your old age, the center of your hopes and dreams – and you must give him up. Not that he is going to just leave and go out on his own. Not that he is going off to college. No, he is being taken and sacrificed.

Here is what God is testing: where is Abraham’s greatest treasure – is it God or is it Isaac? We all know child centered homes and people. Their children are their greatest treasures. It is evident because of what they will sacrifice and give up for their sake. It is evident from the trade-offs and compromises they make. It is evident from the emotions that boil up when their child is hurt, or challenged, or thwarted in some way.

Family and children can be enormous treasures and they can become disobedience fueling idols. Yet here Abraham moves with a sense of sure poise. He simply rises up to obey God. So will we obey God when what we really treasure is being tested? Will we make the right choices that at times will look simply like having certain priorities?

It was a test of Abraham’s *trust*.

Would he sacrifice what was clearly the promised one that God had given? Remember, Isaac is not just any child. He is the promised son. He is the one that he and Sarah had waited long years for. He is the direct result of the miraculous intervention of God through Abraham and Sarah’s faith. Sometimes faith is a matter of trusting in God, and sometimes it is a matter of trusting God.

Let me illustrate. If you are getting ready to take a 3 week vacation and do a driving tour of the United States, one question you will probably ask is, “Do I trust my car? Will it do the job?” Another way to think of this is when you are approaching a strange dog, a big, fierce some, growling dog. Do you trust that dog. It is in this sense that I think we often fail. We say we trust in God so we believe in Him – but we are not so sure that all points, we trust Him, we believe that He knows what He is doing. So, does Abraham trust God? Abraham’s obedience by faith is visible, is displayed through the test. Even more, the test is the opportunity for faith’s obedience.

When we are being tested and tried (and we all are), will we patiently persevere with confidence and commitment to God’s promises? I do not know what the test may be. It may be dramatic and public. It may come as just another choice in the stream of life. Or it may be played out in the quiet battlefield of home or heart.

We will all be tested and tried. Our character, our likeness to Christ is shaped by the sharp application of the chisel of testing under the hammer of hardship. But it

is guided by the Master Craftsman who is lovingly working to produce magnificent works of grace.

The Trust that Exhibits Faith

(v.19)

Abraham's faith *reasoned*.

He had God's promise and God's precept. The only thing that Abraham could figure out was that God would have to raise Isaac from the dead. His faith, his belief had God's promise of Isaac. And his faith had God's command to sacrifice him. So his faith reasoned based on the faithfulness of God, on His integrity and His covenant keeping character. Since this son (not another one) was the son of promise and obedience would end that life, then faith rested in the life giving, resurrecting power of God.

Beloved, we need to recognize that true faith *reasons*. It hears what God says, believes what God promises, is poised to obey what God requires and then launches out with a well-reasoned argument from the Word of God. Faith is not the suspension of our minds; it is the use of them to argue in trust from God's Word towards obedience and submission.

Abraham's faith *received*.

His sacrificial obedience became the essence and evident reality of the sacrificial death of one who was yet to come. Our author speaks of Abraham figuratively receiving Isaac back from the dead. Abraham's faith and trust in God were so strong that his obedience before the sacrifice had the essence and evidence, had the confidence in God and the conviction of the resurrection, something he had never seen so that he received his son back as if from the grave.

Think over the areas in which you know you are being tested? Do you believe God's promises and obey God's commands? Has God been at work over the last few days, weeks or months to show you things in your life where you treasure something or someone too much? Maybe one way to begin thinking about this is to answer this question: where in choices do I feel a tension in priorities? Where am I making a compromise in one thing in order to gain something in another? The answer may point to where God is at work to help you treasure Him above all things and trust Him in the midst of anything.

Faith Anticipating God's Purposes

(v.20-22)

In the next part of the paragraph is faith in the face of impending death. All three of these people do what they do on their deathbeds because they have heard, believed and embraced God's promises. Faith here is not being tested, but is banking on the facts of God's promises to say and do things that please God.

The Pattern They Left

Isaac blessed seeing the person who would inherit the land. The blessing he inherited from Abraham he passed on to Jacob. His focus is on the *great provision* of God (Genesis 27:27-29). By faith, this dim sighted, near death patriarch, being deceived by a sinful son, serves God's hidden purposes and blesses the younger instead of the older. His blessing is simply a transmission of God's promise to Abraham to his son. He does so because he believes what God has said. What he says in the blessing highlights that God is one who provides.

Jacob blessed seeing the blessing that would come in the land. In Joseph's place, he blesses his two sons, Ephraim and Manasseh. His focus is on the *sure protection* of God (Genesis 48:15-16). God has been His shepherd and his sustainer his whole life. Believing that God is like this and will keep his promises, he anticipates the fulfillment and blesses accordingly.

Joseph left instructions seeing that they actually would enter the land. His focus is on the *delivering promises* of God (Genesis 50:24-25). Here, Joseph's faith believes that Egypt is not the homeland. He is so convinced of what God has promised and so confident that God will bring it to pass that he makes them promise to carry his bones out and to bury them in Canaan. So in the face of death, God's promises are so real that he binds future generations to a promise of their own.

The Principles We Learn

- Physical weakness need not be a deterrent to strong faith. All of these men were failing physically: they were blind, weak and frail. Yet, they believed God and acted on His promises.
- Overwhelming difficulty cannot thwart the purposes of God. Neither the sinning of Jacob nor the exile in Egypt can keep God from doing what He has said.
- God-exalting worship should be framed and fueled by the blessings and promises of God gripping our souls.
- God was not ashamed to be these people's God because by faith they anticipated in practical ways the purposes of God. Their faith heard God's promises and moved them to act. God was pleased.

Conclusion

- Faith obeys God regardless. When we say we have faith and continue to live faithless lives, we are fooling ourselves.
- Faith sacrifices for God. When we believe God, sacrificial service will be demanded in testing.
- A believer's faith can reason through the problems of obedience in the face of the promises of God.
- Faith can see what God has promised and act on it, even when it will not be realized before death.
- Faith worships God as the highest prize and worthiest treasure and sought for reward.

The Enabling Power of Seeing God

Hebrews 11:23-29

Introduction How is your life different since you believe in God? No, we are so familiar with that question asked that way, let me ask it differently. How would your life be different today if you did not believe in God? I don't mean for you to answer that question in terms of the church activities of your faith. I am thinking about the rest of your life. Do you live the way you do because of God? Or is your life largely the flow of wants and choices that establish spheres of comfort and security all coated with enough Christian vocabulary to make it appear legitimate?

Just think if you could go back to the Hebrew Christians and to these examples of living faith in this book and ask them the same question? Do you think that they would have an answer very different from most of us today? Does it ever strike you how different God-pleasing living looks from the way we live? How would Noah answer that question? How would Abraham and Sarah? Believing in God dramatically changed their lives. Going back was, in their mind, not an option because of the greatness of what was ahead.

On this Sunday where we emphasize the power of God through face to face ministry of the Word to change lives, I want to bring us to this text. Each of these situations are little snapshots of crises in which people find themselves needing help. Ungodly authorities demanding sinful actions, the temptations of fleeting pleasures, the hesitancy to move forward in obedience in the face of danger and risk and simple trust in God and the gospel when all is at stake. These are life situations where Christians struggle, sin, suffer and seek for counsel, seek for help and hope.

How do Christians today meet crises in their lives? What do you do in the crucial moments when life changing choices may be being made? When life is just too hard or choices are too unsettling, do we seek the temporary, substitute and sometimes soul destroying offerings of the world?

Our author wants us to see how faith encounters crises. In the life of Moses, we are shown how believing God and treasuring Christ enables us to meet crises. And meeting crises with faith and believing obedience is how Christ is magnified and saints are matured.

Now, I am struck by how each of these crises comes because of Egypt. You could almost title these paragraphs, "The Problem of Egypt." Don't miss this. Egypt in the Bible hugely represents the allurements and entrapments of the world, its values and its promises. The problem of Egypt, of the world, is that it attempts to pour us into its mold, to ensnare us with its power, to entice us with its baubles. And so we need counsel. And we need the kind of counsel that helps people believe God like these people do.

Its Loving Wisdom**(v.23)**

The faith of Moses' parents enables them to deal with the sinful commands of evil kings.

In Risk-taking Love

They will not kill him because they see how beautiful children are. They know that they cannot kill the child and their heart is knit in love to the child. So, in utter disregard for the danger to themselves, they spare him and do not kill him. They are not afraid of the Pharaoh for themselves. They face life and risk death, by faith.

What is being believed and desired here that moves with such poised obedience? First, the child is wanted and desired as a gift from God. The baby stirs his parent's heart so that they will move to hide him. They are motivated by simple human love for a beautiful child. Second, they believe God in such a way that they do not fear what the Pharaoh threatens. Such confidence in God is the fruit of believing in the sovereign governance of God over all. They live in a world where their God is large.

In Reasonable Wisdom

And, they do hide him. Here is where courage and wisdom meet. This is not an expression of a lack of faith, but of faith acting in wisdom. So we may love the lost in Africa and Burma and choose to go there in disregard of the danger to ourselves; but we still give our children vaccinations. We may show love by working in an AIDS clinic, but we still wear surgical gloves, layers of them.

There may be tension between these two; there is no contradiction. Believing God means we will risk ourselves for the sake of love and take all the precautions wisdom calls for in a fallen and sinful world. This is a good and clear word to many who struggle with danger, sometimes real and sometimes imagined. Many Christians all over the world face life like this every day. Yet, they obey God and hope in Him. Some Christians, even in the relative ease of our culture, seem overwhelmed and stricken with anxiety and panic attacks. The contrast is quite simply in what they believe to be true of God. Distorted, diminished, deficient views of God cause anxiety, fear, disobedience and trembling. You cannot live any higher or better than your view of God.

So Moses' parents move in love and wisdom to hide him.

Its Purifying Power**(v.24-26)**

I want us to sort-of take a deep breath before we reflect together on this text. More and more, understanding this text has become a focal point for decision making.

The Crises**(v.24)**

Our author connects this with his general theme of maturing saints by showing us that it was when Moses grew up that he faced this. From our study of the Old Testament, we know that Moses would have been approaching 40 when these events unfolded.

Moses reached a point where he had to be identified as either an Egyptian because he was the Pharaoh's grandson or as one of God's people. By default, he could just go on living as he had. Every one knew him as the son of Pharaoh's daughter. He had

grown up in their house, attended their schools, spoke their language and wore their clothes.

But he came to a point in his life where he had to make a choice.

The Choice

(v.25)

Moses turned his back on palace and throne to choose to be known as one of the slave people. He turned his back on power, prestige, privilege, position and pleasure to choose to be persecuted and mistreated along with the hated of his society. Now, do you see what kind of choice this was and still can be for us?

The problem for us today is that too many have simply Christianized Egypt. There is no real choice now because the passing pleasures of Egypt are wrongly labeled as Christian. Christians have not turned away from these things but rather are actively pursuing them in their hearts and with their lives.

Make no mistake about this. Sin is pleasurable. Sometimes Christians portray sin in such ways that real people doing real sins simply recognize as false. Sin brings pleasure and satisfaction and delight. Otherwise, there would be no real attraction to it. Choosing to turn away from the pleasures of sin sometimes mean choosing to embrace suffering and ridicule and misunderstanding. It might mean bricks without straws and terrible taskmasters and deadly threats to children. And sometimes it means choices that we simply will not make. Often this choice is the one Jesus points to in regards to money. But it may involve sex, or computers or career or sports or children or just spending or keeping up appearances.

What is the fundamental motivation that drives Moses' (and our) choice?

The Cause

(v.26)

What would motivate this kind of choice in any one's life? It seems to me that this essential motivation determines which choice we will make.

Moses had done some spiritual accounting. He considered or reckoned that humiliation with Christ was more valuable than the treasures of Egypt. He treasured and valued Christ more than the riches of sin and Egypt. This is a potent verse.

- It tells us that men and women and families who choose to pursue the passing pleasures of wealth and privilege and power and materialism and sin do not prize Jesus. Our sophisticated Christianity where simplicity and sacrifice are not valued simply exposes us as esteeming ourselves more than we treasure Christ. What have you ever sacrificed for Jesus? What has loving Jesus and living for Jesus and treasuring Him ever really cost you?
- It tells us that men and women and families who love and treasure and trust Jesus value even disgrace for His Name more than comfort and pleasure and ease. This is what motivates people to leave the comfort of home and embrace the danger and difficulty of mission. It is what drives people to simplify and sacrifice for the sake of Christ. It measures our strength and matures our souls and magnifies our Savior.

Where is faith in all this? How does all this simply not become another manifestation of legalism and works?

“He was look ahead to his reward.” He was not gripped by the worth and value of what he was turning away from. He was gazing with delighted desire on a higher and heavenly reward. He treasured Christ. I do not know how clear all this was. It is stupendous that he was driven by treasuring Christ in an age *when there was no Scripture as of yet*. While here we are, surrounded by this great cloud of witnesses and having the full and final Scriptures on our own language and vernacular and we find ourselves besotted with the momentary and the passing.

The ministry of counseling often is dealing with people who have failed to trust and treasure Jesus and now are in the harvest of sinful choices. Some of you are even this week going to face this crisis. You will have choices to make that will show what you treasure. May God cause us to see the reward that awaits us in heaven. May that treasure be God, Himself.

Its Persevering Vision

(v.27)

What we have here appears to be a contradiction. Look at Exodus 2:14-15. In verse 14, he is afraid because what he has done is now public knowledge. In verse 15, there is the attempt on his life by the Pharaoh and he flees. Yet, Hebrews tells us that he left Egypt not fearing Pharaoh’s wrath but rather seeing the unseen God. What are we to make of this?

His Circumstance

Understand that this situation is how he chose to be identified with Israel instead of Egypt. He had killed an Egyptian defending his own. He confronted two Israelites who were fighting. But their challenge to him caused him to fear that his killing would become public knowledge. Yet when the Pharaoh moves to punish him, he flees. According to Hebrews, he flees, not in fear but in faith.

I believe that Hebrews is telling us that there is actually something happening between verse 14 and verse 15 of Exodus 2. What is happening there is faith. The situation he has got himself into is causing fear, but faith is why he flees.

His Commitment

How? Because he has committed himself to a course in which he is going to *endure*. What he has chosen in verses 24-26, he will endure. He will endure by faith and flee because beyond the immediacy of the wrath of the Pharaoh is the greatness of the God he loves and treasures.

What was at first fear was turned into faith because of the enabling power of seeing God in his circumstances.

Its Saving Protection

(v.28)

Imagine for a moment that we were told, all over this country, that on a certain evening, a massive cloud of poisonous gas is going to go over our state. All we have to do is to pur-

chase a simple mask, and then wear it on that evening. This is what Israel and Egypt faced.

Sacrificial Requirement

Putting on the masks would be an act of ordinary belief—it is easy to see why masks are required in the presence of gas. But the sacrifice of a lamb and the sprinkling of blood would be an act of God-given faith. The saving protection of a slain lamb comes to those who believe God’s warning words and act on it.

Sparing Reason

This verse is full of allusions to the cross. There is blood and wrath and first-borns slain. There is faith and lambs and sprinkled blood. But most of all, there is a hiding place from the wrath of God.

We no longer celebrate Passover, for the paschal lamb has come. We celebrate the cross in the Lord’s Table. In the saving work of Christ, I by faith hide myself from the wrath of God against me, a sinner. And though I tremble, I do not fear. For God’s firstborn has died in my place.

Now this is stunning. There are times when faith faces a dangerous threat, and motivated by great love, acts with wisdom and hides an infant boy. There are times when faith faces a dangerous threat, and motivated by loving a great God, acts with wisdom and flees the wrath of the King. There are times when faith faces a dangerous threat, and motivated by the provision of God, acts with trembling trust and simply obeys.

These are important lessons for people in the midst of trouble. No matter what the varieties of situations and the character of the danger, faith is the essence and evidence of what we believe and want. We will act driven by our treasures and our trusts. We will need wisdom to act by faith, and not always in the same way.

Its Steadying Victory

(v.29)

It is Moses’ faith that is spoken of here. He is the one who comes to God and receives the instructions. He is the one who stretches out the rod. And it is God whose power opens the way in the water on dry land.

An Assured Deliverance

This text communicates none of the desperation of the moment. The sea ahead, the enemy behind. What do we do now? Will we go to God to believe and do what He says. It may not be a parting of the Red Sea or even the Mississippi River, but we will walk through right in the midst of great trouble with calm assurance.

An Absolute Destruction

Just as Egypt plunged after God’s people in arrogance and sinful pride and was swept away under the billows of God’s powerful wrath, so there will come a day when sin and sinners will be utterly judged. By faith my eyes can see the scenes described in Scripture. And their doom is sure and their damnation is just.

By believing and trusting God, going through the Red Sea was no different than walking home.

How do we meet crises and live lives of believing obedience that shine with the treasure of Christ? **Conclusion**

- We will always choose risk-taking love in the face of danger while exercising prudence and wisdom in the midst of a fallen world.
- We will choose sacrifice and shame rather than the passing pleasures of sin because we value Christ above riches.
- We will choose to endure because we see the invisible and are looking ahead to our reward, God.
- We will choose to live by grace, trusting always in the provision of the cross to meet the need of sin and sanctification.
- We will choose to believe God in an obeying way so that we have an assured calm even in the midst of enormous difficulty and danger.

A final word of exhortation. Does every choice you have made this past week and past month show how much you treasure and trust Jesus? What about this coming week?

Faith to Be Strong and to Be Weak

Hebrews 11:30-40

Introduction *I have been helped and have relied heavily on John Piper's message on this text. It was preached on 8/10/97 at Bethlehem Baptist in Minneapolis, Minnesota. His manuscript is available on-line at DesiringGod.org.*

What do you think the Christian life really is like? People, both believers and non-believers often have very distorted view of the Christian life. Many of the modern distortions are centered on faith, what it is and what it produces. So, we have a tremendous task in our preaching. We must help people understand what faith is and what it is not. And we must take up the task of our author as well, that is, call you to keep on believing with true, God-given, Holy Spirit enabled faith.

As one preacher said on this, "Preaching the word of God aims to bring our views of God and his ways more and more into line with the truth. We do this for unbelievers so that you can embrace Christianity on the basis of a true picture of it, rather than a distorted one; and we do it for believers so that you can live your lives on the basis of true views of God and his ways, rather than distorted and deluding and discouraging views."

One of those views common today is that a life of faith will bring health, wealth and prosperity. Another, is that by confessing our faith, saying what we believe, we bring into existence the thing we believe for. Both of these are dangerous and delusional. Neither square with the life of Jesus, Paul or the rest of the saintly sufferers through the Bible. Both will lead to terrible discouragement and difficulty. They cannot and will not produce the kind of saints this text is challenging and calling for us to be.

Now, we do not come to these paragraphs as though they were dropped in on us like a block of ice from a roof of melting snow. It has contours that are shaped by its context. Faith has been shown, first in principle and then by illustration, to be the essence and evidence of that which is believed. It takes what is invisible and sees it by trusting the One who reveals it and rewards those who believe. This functional description of faith comes as a challenge to people who are tempted to intentional sin and tested by intensive suffering. They are being called on to endure, to believe in God and His promises with persevering patience.

So the preacher, the author, is brining us to the thundering exhortation of Hebrews 12:1-2, "Therefore, lay aside weights and sins and run with endurance." So how will we hear and understand these verses so that we will do exactly that? How has the author designed what he is saying so that these paragraphs motivate us for the "therefore" and its exhortation? He does so by illustrating three important principles that illuminate faith for us.

Now, again, this is not faith in faith. It is not the horrible view of faith today that is really just magic. This is tough times with trusting people who keep on regardless. This is faith in God and what He says so powerfully transforming that they are commended.

The Saving of God's People

(v.29-35a)

What we find here is that God moves to save His people by faith. Through their believing in His Word in an obeying way, He moves through both miraculous power and through ordinary providences to deliver His people. Now notice that I am not using the word "save" here necessarily in a soteriological sense. This is broader. It involves saving from sin and it involves saving from harm and disaster.

Through His Power

What I see here is that God sometimes does works of miracles through His people's faith. Now, I know that many say this is no longer true. I am not personally among that number. I believe that God can and sometimes helps His people who call on Him in believing prayer through unusual intervention or interruption of the ordinary way things work.

Now don't fret that I have gone off this week past for a conference on exposition and in some way have been captured by error. I like to say that I believe that God still does miracles; I don't believe in miracle workers. God still heals; I don't believe in healers. Further it is important to say that we must always keep a Biblical definition of miracle. A miracle is a supernaturally caused and extraordinary interruption of the natural way cause and effect works. When we misuse the word to describe something surprising or unexplainable, we both trivialize where and when God actually works and falsely extend the miraculous to that which is not.

Now what were some of the miracles alluded to here? There is the dividing of the Red Sea (verse 29) and the falling down of the walls of Jericho (verse 30) and the shutting of the mouths of lions when Daniel was in the lions' den (verse 33). There is the quenching of fire by Shadrach and Meshach and Abednego, when they walked through Nebuchadnezzar's furnace (verse 34), and the resurrection of the son of the widow of Zarephath (verse 35a). These are true miracles. God intervenes with His power and the people of God were delivered or rescued from danger or death.

Through His Providence

God also moves on behalf of His people through faith by the ordinary working of His providence. R.C. Sproul calls this the "invisible hand of God." Here God is working secretly and quietly to arrange ordinary cause and effect to send deliverance to His people. It might be evident that God is at work, but there is no miracle. It is here where we live day by day. Here is generally what we pray for and how we pray believing. We know that God is able to do miracles and that He is also sovereign over the flow of time and history. He is able to arrange our deliverance, our help in time of need.

Now what are the providences in this paragraph. Well, the author refers to Rahab not perishing because she had heard of the power of the God of Israel (Joshua 2:9-11) and cared for the Jewish spies (verse 31). He points to David conquering kingdoms and establishing righteousness (verse 33). He reminds us of Elijah escaping the sword of Jezebel (verse 34). He highlights Gideon being strengthened in weakness (verse 34); and to others putting foreign armies to flight (verse 34). These are the working of providence through the faith of those helped and delivered.

So here is one motivation to lay aside weights and sins and run with endurance. When we believe His Word, God can and will come to our aid through both His miracles of power and His moving in providence.

The Sustaining of God's People

(v.35b-38)

Next, we find that God sustains His people through faith. That is, He does not always deliver us from suffering, but rather sustains us through suffering by faith. Now this is the important other side of faith. It does not always get us out of hardship and hardness. It does not always bring a powerful or a providential intervention. But it can and does sustain us in the midst of the most horrific suffering.

So, true faith in God is no guarantee of comfort and security in this life. True faith in God sustains endurance and perseverance through all these kinds of miseries. It is by faith that "others were tortured . . . and others experienced mocking and scourging, etc." All this terrible hardship and suffering is embraced and endured by faith.

In the Midst of Death

Now I am struck by a couple of things that this kind of faith produces. Notice that in verse 35, while being tortured, God's people refuse to recant (accept release) with a faith's purpose of rising to a better life. In other words, when being burned and sawn in two and stoned and tortured and electrocuted, they leaned towards the resurrection by embracing a martyr's death. So they refused to draw back, to abandon faith in God. So they endure even to death through faith.

In the Midst of Destitution

But, there is a worse fate than death here as well. They were chained, imprisoned, destitute and degraded. Frankly, most of us, if we are not going to be delivered by the power or providence of God, would wish for death rather than living this way. But God gives them a sustaining faith so that even though they wandered about homeless living in the most desperate of life situations, they will not go back.

Now a great challenge to faith in these kinds of situations is to see the worth of the suffering. But God here in the midst of it clearly gives His divine sanction to it. He says, the world was not worthy of them. They are not going through all this because God is punishing them, but because God is demonstrating His great glory through them. And the world is not worthy to even see the greatness of God through the suffering of His people. This is a needed article of saving and sustaining faith: God makes what we are going through worth it even when the world cannot understand it.

Now all thinking people have a problem. Because it is quite frankly true that we want delivering faith. We want God's powerful or providential intervention for our help. We would rather not have to face destitution or death. So what is the point of having faith if it doesn't deliver us and only sustains?

What makes the difference?

The Sanction of God's People

(v.39-40)

This is an important question for us. We must endure by faith whether we are delivered or not. So what determines whether God moves powerfully or providentially for us or whether He sustains us through to the end?

God's Commendation

First, let's not be confused into thinking that God was displeased with them in some way. No, they are approved by God. Their faith has God's stamp of approval in both sets of circumstances. Those delivered must not think that the deliverance is the mark of God's special favor. Those not delivered but sustained must not think their lack of deliverance is the mark of God's disfavor.

Second, faith is not the determining factor. All these – the delivered and the sustained, are commended. Their faith is commended. So it is neither the quality nor the quantity of their faith that is making the difference in their situation. This is terribly important in the face of modern thinking about faith. A commended faith may receive and it may not. So what is the difference?

God's Determination

It is God's sovereign determinative will. God simply is choosing to save or sustain as is pleasing to Him and as suits His purposes. It is the decision of a sovereign, good and wise God who determines what He purposes for the sake of His people.

Further, at least in their case, that purpose involved us. God was moving in redemptive history to provide something better. That is, God is inaugurating something better than deliverance from suffering or being sustained through suffering. He is in the way to providing the wonder of no suffering so that we can all enter into it together.

So we will not say to people, "If you had enough faith or the right kind of faith, then these things will not happen to you." We say rather, "Believe that God is able, trust Him to determine what is best and endure by faith even if it means destitution and death." Whether you live or die, God is able to take care of you. Trust Him. Lean toward eternity with belief.

So as one preacher said, "Ultimately, it is God, and not we, who decides when and how we die. He has his purposes. They are hidden from us. And faith means, we believe they are good... God is better than what life can give us and what death can take from us"

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways! For who has known the mind of the Lord, or who has been his counselor? Or who has given a gift to him that he might be repaid? For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be glory for ever. Amen. (Romans 11:33-36)

God delivers by faith. God sustains by faith. God determines which is best for our good and His great glory.

Enduring Hardship While Running the Race

Hebrews 11:39-12:3

Introduction The Book of Hebrews was written to a church that was getting old and was settling into the world and losing its wartime mentality and starting to drift through life without focus, without vigilance, and without energy. Their hands were growing weak, their knees feeble. It was just easier to meander in the crowd of life than to run the marathon.

It is a dangerous place to be, as a church and as individuals. So here comes the great question this text asks. “Do you (not would you – do you) choose hardship and do you suffer hardship for Jesus?”

This text asks this question in two great analogies: a race to be run and discipline to be endured. In the light of these two great analogies, there are warnings to be heeded. So let’s remind ourselves of how we came here through the text and pick up this analogy of running the race.



Read Hebrews 10:26, 32, 36, 39; 11:39-12:3

Our Motivation

(11:39-12:1a)

Before we can set out to run hard and finish well, we have got to be motivated. There are many compelling reasons for enduringly running the race. In this text, the motivation does not come from spectators, but from prior participants. There is nothing that inspires and motivates me to play soccer well than watching an accomplished player play with superb skill. That is the motivation of this text.

Who They Are

These witnesses are the Old Testament saints whose faith is commended in chapter 11. It is not just those whose names appear, but a great mass of men and women whose faith stands firm in fulfillment and in failure.

How They Witness

The word here is never used of someone who is a mere observer. The point here is not that we ought to behave in such a way because these people are watching us. They are not observers (and neither are your Christian relatives who have died) of this world’s struggles. The word is “one who testifies.” They are people who have experienced something or seen something to which they are bearing witness. It is through the pages of Scripture that they bear witness. We read of their lives, their faith, their struggles, their accomplishments and defeats and see them prizing God and treasuring Jesus and clinging to promises. So we hear their testimony. We go back and read and reflect and ponder deeply the significance of what their lives say to us.

What They Say

They tell us that true faith endures. They tell us to keep on believing the promises of God and trusting the purposes of God.

Faith is measured, not by what it receives, but by what it endures (v.39). These Old Testament saints say to us, “Believe God in an obeying way even if you never see the promises fulfilled in your lifetime.” God approves of this kind of faith.

Faith is motivated, not by the immediate, but by the providential purposes of God (v.40). Underscore two phrases in your Bibles: *planned something better for us and together with us*. God’s purposes and plans were to bring about the complete fulfilling of His promises for all His saints together. So we also are straining forward and looking toward that day when they and we *together* will fully receive the longed for and eagerly anticipated reward.

As one author puts it:

So we are surrounded in the Scriptures by men and women whose lives tell us that real faith endures until eternity. They have gathered along the sidelines of our race and they hold out their wounds and their joys and give us the best high-fives we ever got: “Go for it! You can do it. By faith you can lay down weights and sins. By faith you can run well. By the assurance of better things hoped for, you can do it. I know it can be done, I did it. Run RUN!” [John Piper]

Our Preparation

(v.1a)

Before every race, there is preparation. Our author does not point us to the preparation of practice, as important as that may be. If you watch track stars now a days, you can easily see what this verse is saying to us. The fastest men and women in the world today run in little-bitsy shorts and tops and the lightest weight shoes they can afford. They are concerned about weights. Some of us have watched when racers got entangled while running and the disaster that followed. Some of us have experienced in our own lives and run for Christ the disheartening and sometimes disastrous effect of hindering weights and entangling sins.

If we are going to run well, there are some things we have to deal with. Running well means dealing with encumbrances and entanglements.

Hindering weights

The Hebrew Christians were carrying around hindering weights. They were trying to run the Christian race encumbered by their religious heritage. Some had been unwilling to make the break with Judaism. They were weighted down with legalism. They had not fully entered into the freedom in Christ that liberated them for sacrificial love. So there is a kind of hindering weights that come from carrying around religious legalism. We are trying to run yet we are hindered. Legalism hinders our relationship with God, turning it into a debtor instead of a grace relationship. It hinders our relationship with others, turning us into enforcers of rules. It hinders us inwardly, burdening our conscience and fettering our emotions. I tell you, loved ones, there is no greater sense of weights lifted than when God’s grace freed from the bondage of legal living and freed me for sacrificial loving.

But there is another side to this as well. There are things in the Christian life that may be allowed, but will become a hindrance to my endurance. This is an important category for us, and especially for our young people. It is an important category in our finances and our relationships. Will this, what ever it is, hinder me from running well? Instead of asking, “What’s wrong with this or that,” we ask, “Is it in the way of greater faith and greater love and greater purity and greater courage and greater humility and greater patience and greater self-control?” (Piper) We need to ask this over our music, our reading, our movies, our TV, our sports, our relationships, our money, our things.

How many more people would be here this evening if they had not been hindered by weights? So ask: Does it help me RUN the race!?

Entangling sins

Then there are the sins that entangle our legs and tie us up so that we not only do not run well, but actually fall down and fail to finish. Sin will keep us from running well. It will deftly and cleverly entwine itself around us ever tightening its deathly grip until we are no longer running the race because we are completely absorbed in battling the sin. I can tell you that if you are going to deal with entangling sins, you have got to be utterly committed to running and finishing well. Otherwise, the battle with sin, with its victories and setbacks, will become a substitute for the race itself.

Now why do I call these preparations when in our text they look like exhortations? It is quite proper to translate middle voice participles as commands, but in doing so we miss something very important. Having these motivating witnesses and having dealt with hindering weights and entangling sins, we are now ready for main exhortation.

The Exhortation

(v.1b)

“Run with endurance the course marked out for us.” I am not normally given to picking apart sentences (O, ok, a lot of times I am) but this is a powerful sentence full of grace enabling, faith building hope giving truth

Run

Christians are running a race. We are not meandering. We are not out for a nice long jog taking whatever turns will eventually bring us to our home. It is something that we set out on purpose. We hold that heavenward purpose in our hearts and run with all our grace given might for the glory of Jesus. So we need to think more about running and living on purpose.

With endurance

The Christian race is a marathon. It is not a sprint. I had friend in High School who was a phenomenal runner. When we would run laps for soccer, he often, over 3 miles could lap the whole team twice. He could run and run with amazing endurance. We need to get this right as Christians. We are running a marathon. And we need endurance. There are times we are going to “hit the wall” and we need to press through. There are times we will be running into a headwind. There are times when we will be surging along with teammates and times when we will be plodding along alone.

Sometimes there will be helpful friends with bottles of water and encouraging words. And always there will be the enemies of our souls with traps and detours and trips. Then there are the failings of sin and the weakness of the flesh. O, Christian, run with endurance!

The course marked out

This is a fascinating word here. It is the word for a contest of events. It is more than just a racetrack laid out, a marked path for running. It is the idea of a decathlon. We are running through the Christian life and it is not the long toil of an indoor mile. It is the life long run through grueling events whose tasks test our strength and demand great endurance. And it is a marked out course. Some Christians sadly are running with all their might, but they have gotten off course. So, Christian, run the course!

Our Participation

(v.2)

Verse 2 in some translations looks like a command. “Let us fix our eyes on Jesus.” Better translations pick up the Greek with its present active participle. So, we can read it this way, “Looking away from ourselves to Jesus, the leader and the finisher of the faith, who because of the joy set before Him endured the cross thinking nothing of [its] shame and at the right [hand] of the throne of God has taken His seat.”

Its Obstacle

In this verse is the key to all that has gone before. Dealing with hindering weights and entangling sins so that we run well with endurance is done by fixing our eyes on Jesus. The verb here has the idea of looking away from self in order to look on something else. So we are to look away from self and gaze on our Savior. Loved ones, in my own life, self is at the heart of all my hindering weights and entangling sins. When I stumble and struggle and don’t run well and find myself spiritually out of breath, it is normally because I have become self-centered. Looking away from self to Jesus is the skill that running the Christian life well demands.

Its Focus

Why do we look away to Jesus? Because Jesus is the origin of our faith and He is the perfecter of our faith. Believing God in an obeying way is the gift of Jesus to us – He is its author in our own lives. He creates it in us. And enduring all the way out to the end, finishing is His doing as well. Now that does not make us passive. No, we still run in faith, looking away to Jesus to keep on giving the measures of faith needed.

What is the central principle of faith running? It is the cross. Let us never ever forget this. We are looking away from self to Jesus who went to a cross kind of death in exchange for the gladness of His glorious supremacy. He thought nothing of even the shame of the kind of death He went to (in our culture, He went to an electric chair or to a hanging). He endured the cross in exchange for the crown.

The best running Christians do is when they are looking away from themselves to Christ and the cross with hearts aching for the gladness of the glorious crowning of our Sovereign and Savior.

Our Danger

(v.3)

I want to focus on the last phrase in this verse. Here is the great danger to our running with endurance. We grow weary and lose heart.

Its Description

Some of you are just beginning your run. And right now it is new and exciting and full of hope and potential. It is hard to imagine that this race can become wearisome and soul deadening. But it happens. It is a constant danger.

Some of you know that this is exactly where you are. You have been running with all your might. And now you are just exhausted. Granted, you've been lugging around a lot of hindering weights and there have been a number of entangling sins, but right now you have simply lost heart. Frankly, you are like a triathlon athlete who is on the final leg and your heart is simply not in it any more.

What is lost here is *hope*. I've been there. There have been times when I felt like it was simply not worth it. I looked away from Christ and set my gaze on me and became entangled in sin and weighted down with encumbrances and I lost heart. But, thanks be to God, His grace stirred up in my heart faith to do what the first part of the verse tells us to do.

Its Solution

“Consider Jesus who endured.” Over against the stress and struggle and strain of our trying to run well, when our hearts fail, compare our lives with Jesus'. He ran with endurance the race to the crown *through the kind of sinful opposition that nailed Him to the cross*. Is that what you are facing. Is there anyone among you here who facing the kind of opposition from sinful people that is going to end in your martyrdom? I think not. And none of you are going to die as utterly holy yet bearing someone else's sin.

Sounds a bit foreign in our ears doesn't it? There are not 12 steps of action here. There is an intense and personal struggle. I will not tell you what this struggle looks like in my life lest you think it is the best for you. But I will tell you this, you need to plan your run for Jesus this spring. You need sit down alone away from distractions and look away from self to Jesus. You need to carefully evaluate your hindering weights and entangling sins and you *must give them up*. You must realize that running with endurance is costly and demands sacrifice. Weigh that cost against the cross. Exchange present pain for heavenly gain.

So run, loved ones.

Conclusion

- **Read the Bible.** Listen to the faith and hope and love of the saints in the Scripture. Look at how they endured. Be encouraged to keep looking at Jesus because they did even when their sight would be dim and shadowy. Though they are dead, hear them cheering you on, “Run, well, Christian. The gladness and the glory are worth the hardship and pain. RUN!”
- **Prepare for running well** by setting aside time to deal with those hindering weights and entangling sins. It does not just happen. It is something that grace enables you to do.
- **Run with endurance.** What is there to say? Just go, Christian, go.
- **Be on the alert** for spiritual weariness and faintness of heart. In the moments when faith fails, then look away to Jesus. Ask Him for greater faith and finishing faith. And say to yourself all through your run this spring and summer and fall and till you hit the finish line in eternity—say to yourself over and over again, **“The present suffering is not even worthy to be compared to glory that follows. The pain is worth the gain.”**

Enduring Hardship While Receiving Discipline

Hebrews 12:1-11

Introduction Discipline is hard. Self-discipline is a struggle for many. Diets, exercise, regular routines, vigilance over sins – these all require that we impose some level of regular structure on our natural tendency towards irregular, self-pleasing chaos.

But then there is the discipline imposed on us by others. The boss who requires us to be at the office at a certain time. The spouse who expects to serve and receive a meal at a certain time. Parents who mete out consequences when expectations and demands are not met.

Both of these fit in the word, “discipline”. Then there is the carefully thought through, lovingly implemented instruction, correction and consequences that we associate with parenting and child-rearing. This is the God-ordained “how-to” that shapes hearts through teaching, commands, consequences and corporal punishment. Biblical discipline then involves a path to follow and pain when the path is not followed. There is a sense of safe rest when children stay on the path. There is also trouble and pain when children get off the path.

The Bible places a great deal of the pain and hardship that God’s people experience in this category of *discipline*. Those who received this book had to know how they were going to think about some of the hardness and hardships of their lives so that they would respond to them in a way that was pleasing to the Lord.

One writer has commented, “The book of Hebrews is a very mature and sober book when it comes to the pain and stress of Christian living and the endurance that it takes to run the race and fight the fight and finish well. It's not a book that people (especially teenagers and strong young adults) gravitate toward - unless they have suffered and struggle for some explanation of how that relates to God. In other words, the more easy and pain-free your life has been, the less you will cherish the kind of spirituality taught in this book. And the more you have suffered, the more you will cling to the precious teachings of this book - if you are willing to believe them.” (Piper)

That is a big *if*. There are many people, even many preachers, who simply do not believe what this chapter teaches. It's not a little feel-good chapter about how to make the best of your troubles - or even about how God makes the best of your troubles. It is a massive statement about the gracious sovereignty of God over the evil that befalls his people. And the big IF is: will you believe this? Will you accept the mystery of God's providence in the pain of your life, and be trained by it (as verse 11 says) for the sake of good and peace and holiness and righteousness and life? Or will you kick against this chapter and demand in the season of suffering that God give a greater account of Himself than he does in this chapter?

Our Pattern for our Enduring**(v.2-3)**

Our author begins by causing us to think deeply about Jesus. This is always the best place to begin in our hardships. Fix your eyes on Jesus and consider Him. What is it then that this does for us?

I believe that there are two kinds of hardship in view here. Our suffering hardship comes in two primary categories.

The Hardship of Sacrifice**(v.2)**

There is a kind of hardship that is related to the cross. It is the kind of hardship that comes as we take up our cross. It is the suffering that comes when we hear the call and heed the summons to come and die. We look at the gain and the glory and weigh it against the pain and hardness and the suffering and we choose the course that leads through dark valleys.

The Hardship from Sinners**(v.3)**

There is a kind of hardship that comes from sinner's opposition. In their case, it was the pressure of sinful men. They were being plundered and pressured and threatened. The hardship came because of the hostile will of sinful men. There was almost unimaginable stress. And some of you know this. You know for your faith you are sometimes ridiculed and mocked and teased. And sometimes for the sake of holiness you are openly opposed. Some of this is at work. Some of it is at home. And someday, it may come from mob violence or government.

Our Problems in Hardship**(v.3b-5a)**

Sometimes when you read the stories of suffering saints from the past, it is easy to have a rosy picture of it. We think they faced the hardships of sacrifice and sinners with amazing calm and grace. But that was not so with the saints in Hebrews and rarely is it so with us. The hardships that they were experiencing were dangerous because of how they were beginning to respond to them. Our author here points us to three real perils to Christians in difficulty.

We Become Discouraged**(v.3b)**

There is a great danger in the midst of hardship that comes by sacrifice or from sinners. That is that we grow weary and lose heart and fail in our souls. It is normal for Christians to have experiences of stress and suffering that threaten their faith and presses too hard, or lasts too long and feels almost intolerable. But, losing heart is a great spiritual danger. To be fainthearted here is literally "to become loosed-souled." We've seen how trouble is hard for small-souled people. Now we see how trouble shakes loose-souled people. And these Christians were in that danger, as are many of you. The hardship we are going through is accompanied by discouragement and depression. When experiencing these affections, we tend to quit. Discouragement and depression are like constant companions. Why is this such a danger to us?

We Lose Perspective

(v.4)

The point here is that things are bad, but not as bad as they could be. There is hostility and trouble and stress and suffering, but evidently no martyrs yet. We know from Hebrews 10:34 that some had been imprisoned and some had been plundered. But it is not yet martyrdom, though that could come. The stress level here is huge. How do you sleep at night when being a Christian may result in mob violence?

The allusion here is to boxing in the Greek games. The bare-fisted fighting of their day often drew blood. He is also using the illustration to point us back to Jesus who did resist sin even to shedding of blood. He may be pointing to the cross; it is more likely he is pointing to Gethsemane. Jesus sweated great drops of blood as He aligned his own will with the will of His Father and choose to endure the suffering and shame of the cross for the joyous reward that was laid out before Him. He did so because of the “joy set before Him.” He chose present suffering in the light of future reward.

So we will lose heart and become discouraged when we lose our sense of perspective. We allow the pain of the present to overwhelm our sense of the big picture and the long term. That is why this book is filled with magnifying Christ. That is why chapter 11 with its faithful men and women enduring hardship.

We Forget Scripture

(v.5a)

Why do we lose heart and lose perspective and become overwhelmed by the stress of our situation and the suffering of our hardships? Because we have forgotten the truths and exhortations and encouragement that come to us in the Word. We see our author telling them that they are risking losing heart and perspective because they have forgotten a very simple but profound text in Proverbs 3:11-12. This text in Proverbs is nested between trusting the Lord in all our ways (3:5-8), honoring the Lord with all our wealth (3:9-10) and finding wisdom as a chief end of life (3:13ff). So the chastening hand of God requires trust, obedience and leads to wisdom.

Listen to me loved ones; the Scriptures are more than just a theological textbook or a therapeutic sourcebook. They are the very truths of God shaping our hearts, renewing our minds, motivating our wills and directing our conduct. These people were not finding help and solace and direction from the Word. So the hardships came to them and threatened them and shook them to the foundations.

So I think it is fair to say that the believers in this passage are under tremendous stress; they are enduring some form of hostility; they are wrestling with great sorrow and are in danger of growing weary of the battle and losing heart. These chapters and this whole book is written to keep that from happening.

Now go back and notice how it is actually written. We are to give careful consideration to Christ *in order that* we do not grow weary or fainthearted. We must train our souls to pay attention to and to think much about the Lord Jesus with the aim of encouragement and endurance. I will come to the Lord, listen to Him in the Word, think on Him through meditation, commune with Him through prayer and receive grace to be strong and large souled. While this grace may come to us through the loving, encouraging, admonishing ministry of people, all of that must point us to Christ, His promises, purposes and power.

So this grace gives us endurance – it fixes the soul on Christ so that we receive power and gain perspective.

Our Perspective on Hardship

(v.5-11)

The Bible gives us an analogy and a reality on our hardships. The suffering we are experiencing is to be endured like a father's discipline.

It Is God's Discipline

In other words, what adversaries do to you out of sinful hostility, God is doing out of fatherly discipline. One preacher put it this way:

I see in this passage the precious teaching that God reigns over the hazards of our circumstances and over the health of our bodies and over the hostility of our adversaries and he designs all of life ultimately as a loving father's discipline.
(Piper)

Now this is very difficult for many. It is somewhat easy to see how God controls circumstances and nature so that He can use them as discipline. I catch a cold in the midst of basking in Bible Conference accolades to remind me that I am lowly and needy. God can control disease and car breakdowns and broken house pipes to bring those kinds of pressures to bear helping us get rid of weights and sins.

But, what about people? Does God control the hostility of sinners against us so that we will be tested over sin? That is exactly what verses 3-4 are saying. The hostility of sinners and the hardships of life are both equally under the sovereign control of God. The cold germs and the horrid server at breakfast are both under God's control, bringing testing and discipline as He sees fit and as He deems necessary.

Many people simply refuse to believe this. But, all through the Bible, and most clearly in the New Testament, evil men are controlled by God to bring both pain and good to His people. Thus, the Egyptian Pharaoh of Moses' day, the Babylonian ruler of Habakkuk, the Roman Pilate of Jesus' trial and according to Peter in Acts 2:23 "This Jesus, delivered up according to the definite plan and foreknowledge of God, you crucified and killed by the hands of lawless men." The author is here helping people to endure by teaching them to believe that God is behind everything. This corresponds with Romans 8:28 where God is working all things together for our good.

And you need to embrace this truth as well. I have drawn much strength, encouragement and hope in the midst of two very dark periods in my life. Then, God was at work to chasten and to refine me through the open hostility of people in my life. While it was painful and hard, this truth sustained so that by faith and hopefully, with all glory to Jesus, I was enabled to respond with grace and poise.

So, whether it is the hardship of suffering or the hostility of sinners, all discipline is being designed and determined by God. He is crafting it so that it is exactly suited to help you lay aside weights and sins and to enable you to run with endurance the race He has set before you. O, brothers and sisters, believe this in an obeying way!

It Reveals Relationship

(v.7-8)

Understand this: hardship and discipline reveal, not conceal relationship. The hardships that come from the loving disciplines of our heavenly Father assure us that we are truly His sons. Discipline is for all. It is how we know that we are loved. Every son and daughter the Father receives is disciplined by the skillful hand guided by the loving, holy heart of God. Every child of God receives chastening. Every one of you.

If we are without the disciplining hand of God then we are illegitimate or more frankly, bastards. We are pretending what is not so. We are not true sons of heaven, only lost sons of earth. Will you believe this? Will you look carefully in your life and trace out with joy the disciplining hardships God has brought to you and controls for you and assures you through them that you are His?

It Requires Submission

(v.9)

If you think that the hardship itself can bring discouragement and depression, what do you think would be the effect of resisting the loving chastening of our great God?

If we respect our earthly father's correction, what should be the response to our heavenly Father's chastening? There is an assumption being made here. Our author assumes that you know what it means to respect those correcting and chastening and disciplining you because you have personal and practical experience of it. It causes me to pause and wonder if so much of our lack of submission to the discipline of God and the disciplines of the faith is because we know so little of personal and practical discipline.

But there is another point here that might be easy to miss. Those who submit with reverence to the discipline of God, live. The New Testament is filled with the idea that God will make His people holy. True believers who resist the chastening hardships of the Father may well be taken on home. Witness Ananias and Sapphira in the book of Acts as well as the abusers of the Lord's Table at Corinth. So let us not treat this lightly as though the only thing at stake is a little emotional distress. It is a serious thing to fall into the hands of a living God.

So, my beloved, do not resist the chastening of God. Submit to it. Endure it with a sense of joy in the future. Bow down your heart when it wants to chafe under the hand of God. Bend your will to the holy will of God. The hardships gladly submitted to will profit us so much more.

Listen to these strange, startling and soul stirring words penned many years ago by Thomas Brooks in his *The Mute Christian under the Rod*.

Why must Christians be mute and silent under the greatest afflictions, the saddest providences, and the sharpest trials...? I answer: That they may the better hear and understand the voice of the rod. That they may distinguish themselves from the world. That they may be [like] Christ their Head, who was dumb and silent under His sorest trials: "*He was oppressed, and He was afflicted; yet He opened not His mouth; He is brought as a lamb to the slaughter...*"

And yet, Christians, it is mercy, it is rich mercy, that every affliction is not an execution, that every correction is not a condemnation. The more your afflictions are increased, the more your heart shall be raised heavenward... Afflictions are a

golden key by which the Lord opens the rich treasure of His Word to the souls of His people.

It is For Our Good

(v.10-11)

Here is the reason that we ought to submit to the Father of lights whose hand is chastening us – it is for our good, our holiness.

How does he argue for this?

First, by contrast to the discipline we received from earthly fathers. They, whom we are to respect, disciplined for a short time and as best they could. The clear intent here is to show that earthly fathers, even when correcting and chastening children, are very limited in what they do and how long they can do it. But not so with God. He not only knows perfectly what is good for us, but also what He is aiming for. The ultimate aim, that is, our holiness, shapes the “good for us”. We could possibly say here that God is perfectly designing His chastening to be good for our holiness.

Second, by comparison to the cultivating and harvesting of fruit by a skilled farmer. He starts by asserting what all of us know in our hearts but don’t like to admit. The pain of chastening is worth the gain it brings. All discipline is by design supposed to be painful. But it is also supposed to cultivate and yield righteousness. The peace that comes from becoming holy sons and daughters is what is pleasant. What it takes to produce it may not be, but what it produces is.

Third, by asserting the value of its process. Notice how he says this: “those trained by it.” We talk about discipline and call it child training. This is so very important. The wise and good discipline of a sovereign God benefits those who are submissive to it, profit from it and are therefore trained by it. It seems to me that there is an implication here that there may be true sons and daughters who are not trained by God’s chastening because they resist it and thus it does not produce what God intends.

So be the kind of son and daughter who looks up into the face of your loving Father who is affirming your relationship with you, exhibiting his wisdom to you and is training you in holiness through the hardships He directs to you. Be the kind of person who believes by faith that this pain is bringing great gain. Believe by faith that He is chastening for your good and His glory.

Be patient again with a longer quote from another writer. Listen to this good challenge to us.

In your pain, you are not being treated as a slave or as an enemy. You are being treated as a loved child of God. The issue is: will you believe this? Will you let the Word of God settle the issue for you, so that when the suffering comes, you don’t turn on God and put him in the dock and prosecute him with accusations? He probably will not tell you why it is your turn, or why it is happening now, or why there is this much pain, or why it lasts this long. But he has told you what you need to know: it is the love of an all-wise Father to a child. Will you trust him? But he is even willing to tell us more. Four words: our good, our holiness, our peace, and our righteousness. This is the design of our loving Father that comes to us painfully and mysteriously through the hostility of sinful adversaries and the natural hazards of a fallen world. [John Piper]

Conclusion

- **WHAT IS GOD WORKING ON IN YOUR LIFE NOW?** Some of you are experiencing a season of blessing. Others of you are experiencing a season of hardship. God is behind both of these for your good and His glory. Do not become weary. Do not become small souled. Do not forget what the Bible tells you. Endure as under the discipline of God.
- **HOW IS HE BRINGING CHASTENING TO YOU?** Your life will almost certainly not have the same details as in this text. But you will suffer hardship and hostility. God may bring illness or financial distress, family struggles or opposition, personal difficulties or spiritual dryness. Whatever it is in your life, you must see it, welcome it and be changed by it.
- **HOW ARE RESPONDING TO THAT DISCIPLINE?** Will we rejoice in that we are assured that we are His children? We should find real rest in knowing that His hand is showing His love even in the hardship.
- **WILL RIGHTEOUSNESS OR REBELLION BE ITS FRUIT?** Will we "be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?" Or will we rebel against the father of spirits, and die? Will we trust him? If we submit to this sovereign, loving, fatherly care, we will not "grow weary and lose heart," but we will keep the faith, fight the good fight, and finish our course, and die well, and glorify our Father in heaven.

Look to Jesus
Consider Him who endured for you.

Enduring Hardship While Heeding Warnings

Hebrews 12:12-29

Introduction I was told the following story last week.

A young man was reared on a farm. He vividly remembers a particular day in his life. He had been given the responsibility of raising a piglet. He had cared for it, feed it, groomed it. He had watched it grow from a squirmy, squealing, little pink thing into a large, snuffling porker. And he loved that pig. But the fateful day came. His father woke him up to say that this was the day that hogs were to be butchered. He looked up into the kind, but firm face of his father. No, there would be no reprieve. From the first day, he knew this day was coming. He went out to the pen with his dad. There, they stood, side-by-side. The father slowly took out the long knife he used for the task. The boy took hold of his father's pants leg. Then, he reached up and clutched his father's hand. In simple trust and childlike submission, he brought his father's hand down to his face. Then he kissed the hand that held knife. "As you see best, Dad."
[M. Scott Peck, paraphrased]

What would bring us as sons and daughters of a holy and loving Father to kiss the hand that wields his chastening rod? God's people need both the encouraging words of last week and the exhorting, warning words of this text. If we believe these things, then we will not only bend our backs, but also our hearts to the wise and good disciplines of our heavenly Father.

The word "therefore" begins our section today. These powerful exhortations and sober warnings are the consequence of the encouraging and hope-giving truths in verses 3-16.

- Your suffering assures you of the love of God, "Those whom the Lord loves He disciplines" (v.6).
- Your suffering confirms your relationship with God, "God deals with you as sons" (v.7).
- Your suffering is designed for your good, "He disciplines us for our good that we may share in His holiness" (v.10).

That's what the therefore means at the beginning of verse 12. God is ruling over the lives of His people. The persecution and sickness and hardship you endure are part of God's sovereign design for your good and your holiness. Therefore, be strengthened by this truth. Run with God in pursuing the holiness He designs, receive His grace and do not trade the hard pain of God's disciplines for the soft pleasures of the world's delights.

Now our author has packed these New Covenant church responsibilities with Old Testament texts. Seeing what he is expounding and applying will be important as we move through these paragraphs.

Our Responsibilities

(v.12-14)

Since the fatherly love of God designs your pain for your good and holiness, therefore what are our immediate responsibilities? I see these as actions that flow from attitudes.

Avoid Being Permanently Disabled

(v.12-13)

We have the responsibility to:

We must strengthen our grip.

The word here is literally, “hanging down”. It may refer to the physical posture of exhaustion. It may also refer to the spiritual problem of relaxation. Enduring hardship is not a passive thing. We don’t simply go to our easy chairs and sit back until the hardship passes. Get a grip, our author says. Don’t passively wait; actively endure.

This exhortation comes from Isaiah 35:3-6. Read what Isaiah says here. This is what the author is expounding on. We have anxious, fearful people in the midst of the disciplines of God. So we strengthen people by counsel, by speaking to them. We say things like, “Be strong. Don’t be afraid.” And then we remind them of the personal purposes and plans of God. He is coming as “our God”. When He comes He will bring both judgment and reward. Thus, all things will be put to rights. And when we say these words to ourselves and to others, we are strengthened by grace to bear pain for the sake of the gain even if it means to the glorious return of the Lord.



Also, one other use of this phrase appears in the Bible and it is a significant warning for us. In Job 4:3-6, Eliphaz confronts Job as someone who had strengthened others through words exhorting them to faith in God. But now, that hardship and suffering have touched his life, he is dismayed. Are then the words that he has used for others, not real for himself? Brothers and sisters, we need to be careful to not only strengthen others in their difficulties, but ourselves in our own trials.



We must straighten our path.

This allusion to Proverbs 4:25-27 shows that we are to walk straight on the path. God has laid out before us the way of His will in the midst of hardship. Let us keep our eyes on His will and that path. Let us walk on it, not deviating from it at all. Then in the chastening hardships our loving Father brings, we will avoid the evil that lurks just off the path of submission and obedience.

Why should we do this? Because we want to avoid being permanently disabled by our hardships. (Piper) This can happen. Some of you are in grave danger of this. You are not keeping your spiritual grip strong and you are limping around all over the road of God’s will and soon you are going to be spiritually or emotionally crippled for life. We have a responsibility, in the midst of hardship and discipline, to avoid becoming crippled by it.

Prize Being Able to See God

(v.14)

The second responsibility is to follow after peace and holiness. The word is sometimes translated “persecute” and is the word “pursue”. It is the idea of going hard after. So are we going hard after peace and holiness in hardship? Isn’t it easy when things are hard to begin picking fights and rubbing people the wrong way and being overly sensitive?

Look at it this way. God has designed your discipline so that when it has run its course it produces the peaceable fruit of righteousness. But we, in this midst of that carefully designed and orchestrated hardship must be cultivating the very harvest it is supposed to produce.

Why should we go hard after holiness? Because we value seeing God both in our present circumstances and in our future goals. Without holiness, no one sees God. We don’t talk much about holiness anymore. It simply tells us that we really do not value and treasure God as our reward. I have been asking myself this question: Do I so want to see God that I will go hard after peace and holiness?

Our Risks

(v.15-17)

In the midst of hardships, we are exposed to great risks. Our author underscores three of them for us. He warns us of their danger. Loved ones, these are nothing to be casual about as though they do not really matter. Christians being disciplined in the sanctifying design of our loving Father are at-risk in these three areas.

But first we need to look carefully at a word in the text. The word here is the verb meaning *to observe, to oversee, to give attention to, to be careful of*. We must constantly be on the alert lest these things happen in our lives. These three phrases are parallel. There are three separate but related risks. What is needed then is vigilance.

So we have got to be paying close attention, both to ourselves and to others. If we do not, the risks hidden within our hardships will lead to ruin. It begins with careful self-observation. But Hebrews has taught us that holiness is a community project. So are we paying careful attention lest the following develop?

Resisting the Grace of God

(v.15)

Our first risk is that in some way we will miss or fail or come short or actively resist the grace of God. Now on the surface, that might not appear to be such a big deal.

We think like that because we have failed to understand the role of grace. One of the central aspects of grace is that it is an enabling power. Grace is the power to desire and do God’s will. It is the spiritual electricity that energizes the human heart, will and body. It comes to us through the wires we call the *means of grace*: things like prayer, Bible study, fellowship, worship and so on.

So grace is the power of God in our salvation and in our sanctification. There would be some among the Hebrews that resisting and coming short of the grace of God means that they never actually were saved. And there were others who were coming short of the grace of God to power their sanctification.

The effect was that they cut themselves off (unplugged themselves) from the very spiritual energy that would bring good and peace and righteousness out of suffering. While being disciplined to be holy they short-circuited the process by missing or resisting the grace of God.

All of us have done this. Hardship and discipline comes and we turn away from the very things through which God sends His enabling power to endure. Are you coming short of the grace of God?

Allowing Bitterness to Grow

(v.15)

How easy it easy to become bitter! God brings hardship and difficulty and suffering all designed to refine and purify and strengthen and sanctify us and we become bitter. We harbor in our hearts anger against those through whom the hardship comes. We lay awake at night mulling over it and thinking about it. We imagine conversations and actions. Soon its tentacles grow deep into our very beings, mapping itself in our actions and attitudes and sometimes on our very faces.

But the author is using the phrase here pointing us to Deuteronomy 29:18. If we are going to really understand bitterness as the author is thinking of it, we need to look back to the text he is thinking of. Moses here challenges the Israelites with their responsibility to be vigilant over one another's lives. They were to be vigilant for a poisonous root of unbelief that bore the fruit of presumption. The people of God are ever vulnerable to hearing of the gracious kindness of God and not taking seriously their sins. That unbelief, when subjected to the chastening hand of God, turns into bitterness.



Bitterness is particularly dangerous to disciplined saints because:

- It disturbs – It causes trouble. Bitterness is often the root feeding the flower of dissension and dissatisfaction. It pollutes the spiritual atmosphere and poisons relationships.
- It defiles – Bitterness has a defiling and staining effect on saints. Bitterness is contagious. It wants to multiply its misery and spread its stain. Bitterness not rooted out will affect the whole person. You will see it in the countenance and in the conduct. It will sharpen the tongue and shorten the temper. And ongoing bitterness can defile and poison a church.

The solution to bitterness? Grace enabled forgiveness. Love driven reconciliation. Going hard after peace and holiness for the sake of seeing God. Take control of your thoughts. Stop mulling over both your real and imagined slights. Take advantage of the grace God is giving you right in the midst of your hardship to rejoice and not be bitter.

Will you give up your bitterness? Bitterness, like all sins, is pleasurable. It has a sense of “rightness” to it. You can allow it to germinate and soon it will grow into a habit. Then it will so entwine itself in your character that you hug it to yourself and refuse to let it go. Will you take the cross and cut sharply and uproot deeply any beginning sprig of bitterness? Will you seek the grace of God to become a better, not a bitter person?

Trading for the Immediate and Present (v.16-17)

Though these risks and dangers that we are warned about are parallel, they are also progressive. Resisting the grace of God may lead to bitterness and end in moral and spiritual failure. Look at how this condition is described. It is described as being sexually impure. It is described as being unhallowed or debased. It is like Esau who traded away his birthright, that is his spiritual and material inheritance for a bowl of bean soup.

Now don't make a mistake about Esau's. Esau, on the surface, looked like a good man. He worked hard, was a good hunter, led his family and loved his father. He would have seemed to be an ideal neighbor. But in his heart, he had all the potential to become immoral and godless.

Why are we liable to become immoral or godless like Esau? Because of an underlying problem that hardship tends to uncover. We do not value the eternal and too often are too willing to trade its blessings for the immediate and present. What God is doing in the design of His loving discipline is for the long term. Some of it will not yield a full harvest of righteousness whose fruit looks like peace for years to come.

Think with me for a moment. Look at what is at stake. His spiritual inheritance is at risk. Yet the choice does not feel like something that important. He is famished and here is food at a price. Yet, what happened cannot be undone and so the dire consequences. Thus we must hear and heed. Sometimes what might appear to be small trades and inconsequential compromises may lead to spiritual ruin.

So let me ask straight away: In your hardship and suffering in discipline, are you watching carefully lest you become like Esau, lest you fall into immorality and godlessness and trade the blessings of your eternal heritage for the passing pleasures of sin?

Why is this danger so great? Look at what happened to Esau. He could find no room to repent even though he sought it with tears. His early trade led to unchangeable consequences. Once his father had given the birthright to Jacob, there was no way to undo what was done. Esau was sorry about the consequences, but not about the cause. He had reached a point where the grace of God would not bring repentance.

Now these are hard words. And for many of you this will require an adjustment in your theology. But I refuse to soften the impact, even for me in my own life. Loved ones, it is possible to keep resisting the grace of God and keep allowing bitterness to grow and keep trading away the eternal blessings for present pleasures until we cross a line and we cannot find a way back. We must submit to the Father of lights and *live*. This is a very sober warning. And yes, if we confess our sins, God will forgive us. But the consequences of our failures may so pile up that God will not and does not undo them. May God in His mercy preserve us from such a fate.

Loved ones; watch over yourselves and others to see that no one keeps on resisting God's enabling grace or allows bitterness to grow or keeps on trading away eternal blessings for present pleasures. Some need to repent now lest you come to a place where tears will be shed over a life unusable for God.

Our Reasons**(v.18-24)**

We are deeply motivated to respond to discipline in God's way by our New Covenant privileges. Though we are surrounded by great dangers and grave warnings, we are supported by gracious and glorious truths. Verse 18 ought to begin with the word "for". So, the following truths will motivate us in the midst of hardship and suffering to be glad and to welcome discipline and to watch carefully over our lives. These motivations arise out of the great New Covenant theology foundation upon which this book rests.

We Do Not Come to Mt. Sinai**(v.18-21)**

As New Covenant believers we are not hearing the voice and thundering and threatening of God through the Law. Even the way the Law was given was calculated to inspire awe and fear and fright. Those who heard those words begged that they might stop because they understood that what was being commanded was beyond them. The Holiness of the Mount and its Law was so great and so distant that animals could not come near without penalty and even Moses trembled with fear.

So the disciplines of hardship and suffering are not to come to us in such a way and with such an attitude that we fearfully stop our ears at God's voice in the Word. God's disciplining hand does not come to us from Mt. Sinai and the Law. We are not to be motivated by Law in our peace and holiness.

We Do Come to Mt. Zion**(v.22-24)**

In contrast, we come to Mt. Zion. The hill of Calvary brings us to the mountain of God's heavenly dwelling and all the wonders and blessings and powerful motivations of New Covenant privileges. We endure hardship longing for heaven and home.

I can bear the discipline of my loving Father as long as I reflect and think and long for the heavenly city, the joyous assembly of a myriad of angels, the saints assembled in heaven. I can endure hardship and pursue peace and holiness and watch carefully over my life when I know that grace and glory mean coming to God the judge, and to Jesus my mediator and the blood whose word speaks forgiveness and reconciliation and hope.

So, if they do come to present New Covenant realities and not to past Old Covenant shadows, then they certainly may not return to those Old Covenant shadows. There is no refuge in those things. In the midst discipline, its pain and hardship, we need to come to the gracious speaking of the New Covenant, not to the threatening thundering of the Old.

In the midst of hardship you do not come to Mt. Sinai to hear hard and difficult and threatening words. You come to Mt. Zion to hear of the grace of God and access to God. So verses 22-24 become present, on-going realities in prayer and fellowship. You can come privately alone. But the verb is plural, so we can come *together*.

Our Responses

(v.25-28)

So how do we respond to this great truth?

Attentively Listen to God Speaking

(v.25-27)

“See to it that you do not refuse Him who speaks.” Do you see this? When we do not listen to God and hear Him and heed Him we are refusing Him. We are rejecting Him.

Now the great question then is this: if those who refused to listen to God speaking on earth had no avenue of escape, what about us who are hearing God speak from heaven? God’s voice is so immeasurably powerful that Mt. Sinai quaked when He spoke. How much more should we listen the One whose voice will shake heaven and earth. That great shaking will sift all creation so that which is eternal and lasting and of God will remain.

So when we are enduring the hardship and suffering of the loving discipline of God, we had better be listening to God.

Acceptably Worship and Serve God

(v.28)

The grand conclusion is in this marvelous verse. I am going to briefly touch on it now and then unpack it as the foundation for chapter 13.

Our first response is profound gratitude for privilege of living in the New Covenant Kingdom. The first and the old have passed away. Mt. Sinai has been satisfied. Mt. Zion is open. The Kingdom is beginning to unfold. The gospel is bringing in all God’s people and the Lord is ruling over them. This kingdom cannot and will not be shaken. So while our external circumstances are difficult and the kingdoms of this world seem to hold sway, let us be grateful for our Redeemer and Ruler whose fatherly love and awesome holiness is safely bringing every child home.

Our second response is to worship and serve this great and glad and glorious God who is giving us an eternal and unshakable kingdom. We should serve Him with reverence and awe because our God is a consuming fire. He is a hot, refining blaze whose furnace of affliction and discipline is the environment in which we worship and serve.

So when we are enduring the hardship and suffering of the loving discipline of God, we need to be worshipping and serving with gratitude.

So we come full circle in Hebrews. Chapter one opened with the variegated speaking of God in the Old Covenant now localized and finalized in His Son. So, we must pay attention (2:1). Now, God does not speak threatening words from Sinai, but gracious words from Zion where we do not come to Moses, but we come to Jesus. So we had better pay attention to this speaking from heaven One.

Let's conclude with these challenges.

Conclusion

- Enduring chastening is a community project. We must watch over one another, help one another, encourage one another and ensure that God's grace is effective in our lives. Chastening is for the individual in the midst of community.
- Are you truly living as a New Covenant Christian? Does your relationship with God based on coming to Mt Sinai or to Mt. Zion? O that our meditating and praying would consciously be a coming to the grand New Covenant privileges of a heavenly place, perfected saints, worshipping angels and to the Lord Jesus Christ, our Mediator.
- In the midst of loving discipline that feels painful *are you listening to God in His Word?* The thundering exhortation rings through all of Hebrews – pay attention to God in His Word. He is still speaking and you must be still listening. If you do not, you will be in enormous danger.
- Do all you can, through the Word, through your talking together, through engagement in worship, through holy meditation to fuel a high view of God and thus burn with awe and reverence before Him. Not the fleshly reverence of gloom, and candles and stained glass – but the Holy Spirit taught reverence of a humble, faith obedience.
- Let us rise up to worship and serve our holy and loving Father with appropriate reverence and spiritual fear. Let us be filled with gratitude for the gospel, the grace and the glorious rule and reign of Christ now in His church, His kingdom. With gratitude and serving hearts, go and proclaim the gospel of the glory of our Ruler and Redeemer.

The Motivating Power of God's Presence

Hebrews 13:1-6

Introduction We have mentioned before how the book of Hebrews has a mountain and valley landscape of powerful exhortations and God-ward motivations resting in Christ-centered truths. We are moving such a landscape once again. Chapter 12 closes with the amazing motivations of not coming to all the threatening of the Law, but to all the privileges of grace and glory. We have been given an unshakable kingdom that will forever remain. In the light of these great truths we had better listen to God and worship God with deep reverence and great awe.

And we do so because God is a consuming fire. Now is this meant to frighten or to reassure us? In reflecting recently over my own sins and weights and God designed discipline, I am certain that this is meant as an assuring and confidence building awareness.

- God is the consuming fire for my refining. The furnace may roar with white heat, but the master craftsman is refining and purifying with the greatest of skill. He is like the silver smith who keeps putting the lump he is hammering back into the flame over and over again. And then he looks closely at it. Why? Because the silver needs refining until he can see his face reflected back in it.
- God is the consuming fire of my soul's enemies. We take comfort in the fact that there will come a day when the shaking of heaven and earth will one day send Satan and evil men and women to their just punishment. We know that God will vindicate Himself. Till then, mercy marks God's ways while His wrath is carefully stoked up and stored up.

So I meet the consuming fire of God as an assuring deliverance and not impending destruction.

So now we come to these great exhortations that close this book. The issue here is not a dutiful obedience. It is a disciplined response in *how we act* when we learn and understand that *God is acting for us*. We come to this in the same way the people to whom it is written came to it. There is a great danger looming over our suffering and hardship. We learn that Jesus Christ is magnified as sufficient and supreme and that God is pleased when we believe in an obeying way. God is glorified through faith that rests in promises even through death. And since all of this is true in all that God is for us in Christ and all that God is doing in His design for us, then we are stirred with holy delight and awe struck love towards sacrificial deeds of brotherly love.

This movement of our whole lives toward sacrificial deeds of brotherly love is what this text is all about. This is the essence of acceptable worship. This is holding God in reverence and awe. Praising God pleases God as it promotes God. But worshipping God is walking with God and God's people holy fear of Him and humble love for His people.

Let us then study how to worship in our walk with God.

Our Practical Exhortations**(v.1-5a)**

I want to reflect on the first set of practical exhortations and consider some strategies for implementing them.

To Sacrificial Love**(v.1-3)**

The first paragraph is an exhortation to keep on loving as Christian brothers. It is meant to cause Christians to not falter or fail in Biblically and sacrificially loving one another in deeds. That this is so is borne out by the two examples of brotherly love.

Keeping an Open Home**(v.2)**

In Bible days when inns were dangerous and Holiday Inn was not yet available, hospitality to traveling Christians became a mark of sacrificial love. We find commended Christians all through the New Testament had homes open to people. Listen to the encouragement and extent our hospitality may carry us to: we may have entertained angels without even knowing it. There is plenty of Biblical evidence for this. Many Old Testament saints entertained angels.

Now I must offer a word of explanation. Not every bum who comes to our doors needing food or shelter is to be entertained in the hopes that he will, out of sight, sprout wings. What our author is suggesting is that those whose homes are open, even in the midst of hardship and suffering and poverty, may be trusted even with the care of heavenly messengers.

Is your home open? Do you enjoy having people in your home? Are you so image conscious that someone dropping by who might see a bit of a mess is simply made to see how uncomfortable you are? Have we become so used to using hotels that their sterile environment has become even a welcome substitute for Christian hospitality?

Cultivate an open home that gladly entertains others for the sake of Christ. Develop skill and commit yourself to sacrifice and sharing in a home, whether humble or palatial, as a place of refreshing welcome.

Having an Open Heart**(v.3)**

Keeping an open home comes from having an open heart. Our hearts are to resonate with two particular groups:

- **THOSE IMPRISONED FOR THE FAITH** – What the Author wants is that we strive to keep those who are in prison for Christ in mind. We do not forget them. In our setting, we must make serious efforts to find out about them. Most Christians imprisoned today are those in countries and cultures openly opposed to the gospel. Many missions magazines keep us abreast of men and women in prisons or held hostage in South America, China and in Moslem countries. Let us remember them in prayer just as though we were in bonds like them.
- **THOSE MISTREATED FOR THE FAITH** – This would be a much larger group. It may be Christians far away or it maybe someone sitting next to you whose boss hates righteousness and integrity or whose friends or family cut deep wounds with the knife of sarcasm and criticism.

The point here is that we must never let hardship and suffering cause us to turn inward and self-ward. We must resist at all costs a victim mentality. We must bend ourselves with all our grace to keep on loving even when it means sacrificially serving those whose faith has brought them mistreatment and imprisonment.

And we ought to do so because we are one – one in the Body of Christ. Once again we are forcibly confronted with a very different view of the church than is common today. We are a community locally as a church with responsibility to know one another well enough to be able to stir up love and holiness. We are a body universally with responsibility to be interested, inquiring, informed and interceding over the advance of the gospel through both outward demonstrations of the grace of God, whether in times and places of strength in times and places of weakness. Whether in persecution or in prison, when one part of the body hurts, the whole body suffers. How much better it is when the suffering part has the attention of rest.

To Sexual Purity

(v.4)

The second exhortation speaks to us powerfully in our culture. Like the Hebrews who lived in a Greek and Roman culture besotted with sensuality, we also are surrounded by pagan hedonism. We are being bombarded on all sides to adopt a sensual and immoral frame of reference for life. I mean, when sex sells toothpaste and kitty litter then we are utterly besotted. The culture's attack on marriage comes from all quarters.

In the midst of this, Christians must think Biblically about marriage.

Marriage is to be Honored

God has ordained marriage. It provides the context for companionship. Its covenant union, sacrificial love and loving submission all model the relationship between Christ and the church. Even those to whom God has given the gift of singleness, marriage is not to be demeaned as though it were only a necessary, but Biblical concession. Marriage is to be honored. Whatever tends to erode it is to be avoided. Whatever openly attacks it is to be opposed. Christians must clearly and publicly affirm that marriage, that is, the covenant and physical union of one man and one woman is the Biblical standard. All else is evil.

Let me be plain. Christian marriage is not for homosexuals or lesbians. The world may create other institutions which are pale imitations of the Biblical reality, but the Bible is unmistakable in its condemnation of homosexuality and lesbianism. Romans 1 is clear that a culture and its people are at the end of the cycle of depravity when those sins are generally approved of even by those who do not practice them.

The grace of God is able to deliver any sinner from the bondage of his or her sin. Praise God for His delivering grace. May we be instruments of that grace through the gospel as we offer hope and help to men and women in bondage to sexual perversions. Marriage is honored when we call for public and private repentance from approving and participating in marriage destroying, God displeasing sin. And God is honored when his people move in love and mercy with the gospel to reconcile all sinners of all kinds to God.

Sex is to be Holy

The phrase here “the marriage bed kept pure” is a euphemism. It means that sexual relations are only within marriage. Immorality and adultery pollute and defile marriage. A Christian view of sex sees it only within marriage and certainly within marriage.

But, further, there is the possibility of defiling marriage intimacy by bringing into it patterns of thought and behavior that are sinful. Marriage intimacy may be polluted by the thought and lust life of spouses. Pornography, visual or verbal, can so control ones mind that intimacy with a spouse is filled with thoughts of lust directed *at some other individual*. This clearly is wicked and defiles our intimacy.

We must constantly be on the guard against the subtle pressures to think wrongly about marriage and sex. And some of the temptations are not subtle at all. When we as Christians are together, we ought to be talking in such a way that honors marriage and places before our children a Biblical and wholesome approach to sex.

Why is this important? Because God will judge the adulterer and the immoral. Is that enough said? Illicit sex exposes us to grave health dangers now days. But a fully Christian motivation not only weighs immediate consequences, but eternal condemnation. In other words, all of you who not now married, keep yourselves pure and holy because of God, because God will respond to you. If you do not keep yourself pure and reserve sex for your marriage, then God will deal with you. Yes, purity may protect you from disease. But more importantly, purity may protect you from damnation.

I want to remind you of a connection here that is vital for a Biblical view of marital intimacy. It is an act of worship. It is an act of giving, of treasuring, of marriage joy. When shared within marriage as an expression of love in a sweet relationship, it pleases God. What a glorious thing that what we can delight in as a gracious gift from His design can also please and glorify Him. This is why when we profane and pollute our marriages and intimacy, God responds with judging wrath and severe consequence.

Brothers and sisters, honor marriage and keep your intimacy undefiled.

To Satisfied Contentment

(v.5a)

This next exhortation speaks to our materialism. But it does it in a startling way.

Our High Responsibility

Listen to how this is phrased. “Keep your life free from love of money.” That command is so plain and clear yet is so often repeated in the Bible. Is your life-style marked by not loving money? Do people look at the way you live and have no questions about whether you are serving God and money?

Money-love is a deep root of many evils. It requires vigilance and diligence. You have to work at keeping your soul from going hard after money. It requires aggressive disciplines over your life. Don't think that since you have no money that you do not love money. Brothers and sisters, having money only enables gratifica-

tion of the craving; it does not create the craving. You can long for the next, the newest, the nicer, the neatest... as things on TV, in catalogues, on show room floors, in the malls, in shop windows, in your neighbor's drive or home.

Loving money sometimes shows itself in cravings that are satisfied by spending. We love to buy and own and collect. And sometimes it shows itself in cravings that are satisfied by saving. We pinch and scrimp and count our accounts, pile up our savings, set it aside. I am not saying that either spending or saving in and of themselves are sins; but the love of money that motivates much of it is.

Money love can kill ministry – we see personal accumulation as the aim of working. Thus we function exactly the same as a thief. The solution to coveting hearts that drive thieving actions is repentance. It is a change of heart and life from a philosophy of *work to get* to a theology of *work to give* (Ephesians 4:28).

Our Humble Remedy

What is the remedy? Satisfied contentment. A Biblical Christian is marked by a deep contentment with God's provision for Him. He is grateful for it. He keeps laying up treasure in heaven so that his heart will not long for earthly riches. Whether in much or in need, Paul had learned the secret of contentment.

So then, do we go out and sell our houses and cars and stereos and give away our bank accounts? Only if you make choices to serve them and want them and provide for more and better of them rather than serving and wanting and sacrificing for Christ. Beloved, it is much easier for most to hear strong words of exhortation about purity than about money. But in both we must be pleasing to God. In both we must walk-worship acceptably with fear and awe. Do you?

Our Powerful Motivations

(v.5b-6)

How are we motivated to keep our hearts free from the love of money, to honor marriage and keep our hearts and homes open to Christians who are in need? We are motivated by the power of a promise.

God's Sure Promise

(v.5b)

We have God's sure promise. This is stated in the most emphatic way possible. "I will not ever for sure never leave you and will not and cannot forsake you ever."

I know that the sinfulness of my own heart is exposed when this really does not motivate me. This promise is supposed to stir up hearts to the hard work of sacrificial love, hospitality to strangers, keeping our marriage vows and not loving money. But does it? Frankly, are you ready now to go out to the task because God is there with you and will never leave you?

Why is this? Is it because we simply do not value and prize the presence of God with us? Does this promise excite you for love and hospitality and purity and so on? Here it is once again. Loved ones, hungering and desiring God ought to so burn in our hearts that we will be satisfied with no less. And that hunger and desire will leap up with an affirming "Yes!" when promises of the abiding presence of God are heard.

Our Spoken Purpose

(v.6)

That is what verse 6 is all about. The presence of God motivates godly living when we respond with thought out and committed confidence. We say to ourselves and others that God's promises mean that God will help us. And because He will help us, we will not fear the threats or pressure or persecution of man. What can man do? The worst is to cause pain and bring death. But they cannot do even that if God does not allow it.

Do you respond to God's sure promises with inward spoken purposes? God says He will be with us whether we are in prison or in the home of a Christian friend. He was with us when we covenanted our marriage. He will be with us when we are tempted to sin. He will be with us when we choose to treasure heaven more that we value earth.

And we will not fear what man can do to us when we care for one another. We will not tremble when we publicly stand with persecuted Christians all over the world. We will not fear the scorn of others when we stand for purity. We will not be afraid to hold up the Biblical standard for marriage against the prevailing wickedness of our culture – that is, marriage is the lifelong covenant union of a man and a woman. We will not fear for future security and safety. We will not be anxious over the stock market or our 401K's or the size of our paychecks. We will not fear for the devourer for we have God's Divine presence.

So do you fear what man can do to you? And is this fear, anxiety, worry a gauge to measure your lack of contentment with God, with all that He is and promises?

- Beware of substitute standards for spirituality. We are too often focused on substitute motivations and detailed techniques. The product is not stronger, but weaker Christians who do not think through texts for themselves and are not motivated to spiritually struggle by Biblical categories. In other words, are you more interested in hearing about Christian steps to keep clean houses than how the promises of God spur us on to godly living?
- I want to challenge you to all church involvement in our Flocks. I am convinced that flock groups are how we are going to strategize for godliness, for growth and for spiritual gain. We need to have a Flock in every community. We aim to have elders to shepherd them and qualified leaders to serve them. We should be using them to stir one another up to love and godliness. In them we should cultivate faith-building relationships, bonds of prayer and share our triumphs and tragedies with people who we know love us.
- Let us rise up with strength and confidence because of God's promises to keep on loving one another, to have open homes and hearts, to honor marriage and keep sexually pure and to free our lives from the love of money.

Conclusion

Let us do so by faith, by believing God's promises in an obeying way – all of them.

God Working in Us What is Pleasing to Him

Hebrews 13:7-25

Introduction Endings sometimes are hard things. Sometimes the endings are hard because they have been bad. There is a sense of loss and regret and unfinishedness. Sometimes endings are hard because things have been good. The separation occurring at the end of a good, enjoyed job or ministry. I have over the years come to the end of many wonderful soccer seasons. The ending of a date when Esther and I were courting. There is desire to linger and make it all last one more minute.

Coming to this last sermon through Hebrews is like that. This is a good ending. It has been a wonderful season for this preacher and I hope for this church. And I want to linger and make it last. But the last sermon on this grand sermon must sound like the text it is preaching. It must come with a sense of finality and finish. Our author does this for them and for us by highlighting how God is at work in us to bring about what is pleasing to Him.

Precepts: The Conduct that Pleases God (v.7-19)

Our author is closing the book with a series of commands that are to direct our conduct in God-pleasing ways. Generally, these are commands are addressed to the community of believers, the church. They show us how we ought to live in our lives together.

Honor those who have led you (v.7-8)

The church to whom this was written had had an exemplary leadership in the past. For whatever reason, these men were no longer with them. It is possible they were martyred, we do not know for sure. They were marked out as their teaching elders who had spoken God's Word to them and had lived godly lives whose faith sustained through to the end. That sort of faith is to be carefully evaluated, esteemed and emulated.

- Elders are commended when they live out their teaching in lives whose faith causes them to be faithful. Do we as leaders live and conduct ourselves in such a way that people see faith through us so clearly that they can imitate the faith?
- We are to make an effort to learn about the faith and faithful lives of great men and women in Christian history. To this end, we can read biographies and glean from them God-pleasing conduct flowing from faith. Do you know anything about Chrystrom, Luther, Calvin, Knox, Spurgeon, Mueller, Owen or Rutherford? What about the missionaries like the Stamms, Hudson Taylor or Jim Elliot? Who of us have not been spiritually stimulated by Elliot's, "He is not so foolish to give up what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose."

Even though leaders come and go within God's providence, Jesus never changes. Though we can find much to admire and imitate in the lives of godly men and women, we must build our lives in the foundation of Jesus Christ. Leadership must

learn and grow and cultivate grace and experience sin overcoming victory—that is to say, human leadership changes. But Jesus never does.

Don't be carried away by error (v.9-10)

These people had sat under good teaching from godly men. Now, in the hardships of the hour, they risked being captured by a variety of doctrines alien to the New Testament. The Old Testament had very detailed regulations for diet. The New Testament has done away with them. It seems, because of verse 10, that the alien doctrine taught that the special spiritual power was given in the eating of the Mosaic sacrifices. Godly Jews who brought sacrifices were sometimes given a portion of the cooked sacrifice to eat. The argument was being made that the eating of those sacrifices was required because of the spiritual sustenance given. So there was some sort of teaching about ceremonial foods giving special power to Christians for spiritual service.

The author responds with a key doctrine in Christian living. Christians are strengthened inwardly for sanctification and service by grace. Special diets may strengthen the body and have some profit like exercise. But the sustaining strength for Christians is grace. Grace is not imparted through some sort of ceremonial meal.

I want to say this with all the conviction of having chased them for a number of years. There is no “secret” or “key” to Christian living. No one can give you external steps or keys or secrets that guarantee sanctification. Spiritual power is learning and living God's Word by grace in the midst of the mess. It is a matter of the cross. It is being saved by the cross. It is taking up our cross. It is embracing the cross. The cross is our New Covenant privilege. The altar we have today is the cross of Christ.

Leave apostate religions and churches (v.11-14)

Where do I get that from this paragraph? Remember that this book is written to Jews, some of whom had professed Christ and others who were attending, but had not yet fully committed by leaving Judaism. Since the death and resurrection of Christ, Old Testament Judaism is an apostate religion. It rejected Christ and the cross and was rejected and condemned by God.

The author says that Jesus suffered a full and final sacrificial death outside the city physically and outside the camp figuratively. Those who were involved in Judaism, had to leave it (the city and the camp) and go to Jesus outside. They must be willing to bear the disgrace because they are like Abraham, looking for the heavenly city.

It is no different today. Professing believers are to be exhorted to leave false religions and apostate churches if they are to be received as true believers. Any religion, no matter how close its vocabulary may be to Biblical Christianity, that teaches a works salvation is apostate. This includes any church which teaches baptismal regeneration, including the Catholic Church.

Notice the command in this text in verse 13, “Let us go to Him outside the camp bearing the disgrace (of the cross) He bore.” If professing believers were to leave Judaism at the time of the writing of this text, then professing believers must leave apostate churches today. Why? Because it was in Judaism that they were being taught the alien

doctrine of the spiritual empowerment of ceremonial food. And today, it is apostate churches that teach various kinds of doctrines alien to the Bible.

Offer God-pleasing sacrifices to Him (v.15-16)

Since we are not to worship in the sacrifices of the Old Testament, what are the sacrifices of the New Covenant?

- Sacrifice of praise – Praise to God is commanded, it is to be continual, it is to be cultivated like fruit and is confessing the Name of Jesus. Our worship of God is to be marked by cultivating continual praise that confess the character and supremacy of Jesus. God is pleased with people whose lives are marked by a passion for Jesus that bears fruit in praise to Jesus.
- Sacrifice of sharing – Doing good and sharing with others must not be forgotten in the midst of our Godward focus. God is pleased with people who sacrificially love one another with good deeds for one another and with sharing their lives and resources with one another.

Great love for God in passionate praise to Him should lead to sacrificial love for others in selfless sharing with them.

Be willing to follow your spiritual leaders (v.17-19)

There are three commands that are given as part of following spiritual leadership. Two were given in reference to their own elders and one in reference to the author. Some of what I have to say to you here may appear to be self-serving. So I am going to carefully exposit what the Scriptures are saying and then reflect on how I have applied these to my own life.

Obey your leaders

The word is usually translated by the words *be persuaded* or *be confident*. The verb here is an imperative or a command in the passive voice. So we are being commanded “to be persuaded” by our spiritual leaders. (There is no passive use of the word *confidence*.) Look at how the author of Hebrews uses the word in 11:8 and in 5:9. It is significant that every translation I have in English and in German and Spanish translates this word by “obey.” So I am persuaded to obey my spiritual leaders.

Submit to their authority

This phrase is one word in the Greek. Most translations make it “submit” and then add “to them” for clarity. The word means “to put oneself under another.” In the battlefield, it meant to withdraw or surrender. It is an imperative or command in the active voice. So I put myself under the authority of my spiritual leaders.

Both of these words are colored by the idea of conflict and disagreement. It seems to me that what they are being commanded to do is to be persuaded by their spiritual leaders and to surrender or withdraw from conflict with them. Now we know that sinning elders are to be dealt with (1 Timothy 5:19-20). Elders are to be open to the counsel and opinions of those in the congregation. And the congregation is to not stubbornly resist the spiritual leaders.

What is to motivate us to obey and submit?

- The elders are responsible to give an account to God for you. We are like soldiers on the night watch. We carefully stay alert because we will give a report to the commander.
- This makes shepherding a joy and not a burden. There is no joy like seeing children progressing growing up in humble submission. And there is no grief like a rebellious, stubborn son who resists and will not bend his will.
- This makes the ministry profitable to you. Sometimes the usefulness of ministry fails because of failure in the elder or elders. Sometimes the ministry is without profit because of the people.

Pray for us (them)

(v.18-19)

Here is the final command. The author exhorts it in relation to himself and those ministering or shepherding with him. Because of that, he can assure them that his own conscience and conduct are pleasing to God. Since specificity is important in prayer, he requests that he be restored to them soon.

Following our spiritual leaders in submissive obedience is much easier when we are praying for them. Maybe we see needs and shortcomings in their lives. When we do, we are faced with a choice. We can criticize or gossip or we can pray, talk to them and give God time to change them. In other words, we treat them as we expect or want to be treated.

Our author makes his request for himself a part of the flow of this text. After all, if the church there is not pleasing to God in their following of their spiritual leaders, would they really pray that this absent leader be able to come to them, along with Timothy (v.23)?

Maybe whether we pray for our spiritual leaders is really the gut test of following them.

Prayer: The Ability to Please God

(v.20-21)

Now let us be frank. Most of these exhortations are not easy for us. Some will be because of our bent. But for most of us, somewhere one or more of these commands really challenges us in our sanctification. Some find imitating the faith of faithful people easy, others are too individualistic. Some find standing strong against apostasy and error easy, others struggle with wanting to be gentle and loving. Some find praise in worship easy, other struggle with emotions. Some find caring and sharing their lives natural and easy, others are more private and withdrawn. Some find obeying and submitting for the joy of their leaders easy, while others struggle with stiff wills.

For none of us is our weakness and struggle an excuse. We do not get an absence slip for being tardy in pleasing God. So how can we be pleasing to God in every aspect of His perfect will?

This prayer by our author has within it what is needed for godly obedience.

Our Divine Resources

(v.20)

The Author brings all these resources to bear on our need. He brings forward the character of God, the power of the resurrection and the shepherding aspects of the lordship of Christ.

- The God of peace – This is an oft used title by Paul in his epistles. We must remember that we are called to please by obeying the God of peace. When we do, we begin to experience the peace of God.
- The God who raised Jesus – The measure of the power of God is not in creation or in restoration. It is in the resurrection. There the power of God available to accomplish the purposes of God was most fully revealed.
- The Lord Jesus, our great shepherd – Jesus is our good and chief and great shepherd. He is our good and chief and great pastor. He is the one whom we all obey and submit to together. And He is the one whose care and chastening of us is perfect.

In other words, when the conduct that pleases God seems out of reach at certain points, here is God – the God of peace whose resurrection power is available to those whom His Son is pastoring.

His Enabling Request

(v.21a)

To see the heart of this request, it is helpful to underline the main subject and verb (and do it with a NASB). “May God equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ.”

What is requested

may God equip you

The word “equip” means to build up, shape or prepare fully. So he is praying and asking that God would do all that is necessary in every area so that we are able to do His will. He is asking this of the God whose character and power and care have just been described.

Do you think that God answers this prayer? If so, when and for whom did you pray it last?

How it is done

working in us

How is this full equipping or preparing brought about? By God working in us what pleases Him through Jesus Christ. Earlier he said that it was good that we were inwardly strengthened by grace. Well, here it is in other words. We work because God is working in us.

Now we do not passively wait until we “feel” that we are ready. No, we bend our wills and extend our efforts to begin obeying. And we do so because we believe God’s promise that He is working in us with all these divine resources to fully prepare us for the next choice of obedience. This is faith, loved ones. This is believing God in an obeying way.

Its Exalting Result**(v.21b)**

When we, believing God is working in us to shape us in every way for to please Him in doing His will, when we choose in the midst of the mess to obey, then Jesus Christ is glorified. Jesus Christ is magnified in the eyes all who see believing obedience. Magnifying Jesus is the goal of believing obedience.

Some of these are both hard and encouraging words. I close with the Author's closing appeal. **Conclusion**

Loved ones, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have only touched the surface of how saints are matured when Jesus, our sufficient Savior and our supreme Sovereign, is magnified.

For the glory of Christ and the gladness of all peoples.

The Better Christ and His Gathered People Lord's Table Message

Introduction

We are gathered this morning to celebrate together the Lord Jesus Christ, our Redeemer and Ruler. This celebration is to cause us to remember Him as we reflect on what He has done for us. In this we do fellowship with Him – He is here, not in the cup or bread, but among His gathered people.

Hebrews has been a long journey in magnifying Christ so as to mature believers. Through the Word this morning, I hope that we will fellowship with Christ as the One who is greater and better. As we worship Jesus in the Word and through our “Amen” to what it says about Him and for us, we will focus our souls on Him.

While we often become more aware of sinfulness and smallness when coming closer to such stunning greatness, let us also loose our affections to run with gladness and gratefulness on these tracks of truth. We can only be satisfied with what we have tasted and savored. We will believe and obey only what we know. We will only worship what we respect and desire. We will enter in only where there is a door. We will only see where there is light. We will celebrate where there is joy.

Let us join then with the Word and Spirit to seek Him who loves to be found.

His Supreme Person

All through the book, our author has pointed to the superiority of Christ by speaking of “better” or “more excellent”. By indicating His better and more excellent person and provisions, he magnifies Christ to us. He places the telescope of his sermon/book up to our hearts and takes what is often distant and small and makes it appear as it truly is, large and near and wonderful.

His Better Name

Hebrews 1:1-4

His place and position are as superior to the angels as His fame and reputation, His Name, is to theirs. So while angels are great and wonderful, Christ is immeasurably superior to them. They are created by Him and serve us, while He is to be worshipped by all.

Having a superior Name, worship Him.

His Better Priesthood

Hebrews 4:14-16

Because we are vulnerable and visible to God, we need a compassionate High Priest so that we can have a confident access. His priesthood is superior to all others, even the Levitical. His priesthood gains and grants an immediate and direct access. His mediation inspires confident coming. When we draw near to where grace reigns, we receive mercy and have helping grace just in time.

Having a compassionate priest, boldly come.

His Better Hope

Hebrews 7:18-19

Jesus brings us a better hope, a better confident expectation. Through His setting aside the Law and the introduction of that better hope, we draw near to God. That better hope is Jesus Himself. He is in heaven, having died and been raised, for us. Rather than a system designed to bar access while inviting nearness, we have a Person who is Himself the pioneer of the way to heaven and the one who awaits our spiritual entering by prayer now and our physical entering at death.

Having a better hope, draw near.

His Better Covenant

Hebrews 7:22

The permanence and eternalness of Christ's priesthood guarantees the superiority of His covenant and promises. What was old and incomplete and unable has been fulfilled and completed by the Lord. Thus He brings better promises for His people. And most grandly, He is able to save all who draw near.

Having a better promise, be saved.

His Better Ministry

Hebrews 8:6-7;9:11-14

Since the Lord mediates a better covenant based on better promises, He has a better ministry, a better serving. The routine work of daily sacrifice inside the courtyard of the tabernacle and the Temple is now the ministry of walking with God in love for Him and love for others every moment and every where. It is an exaltation of the “work at the church” but an exaltation of all of life as worship and ministry.

Having a better ministry, serve God**His Better Sacrifice****Hebrews 9:23-27**

We are not saved by the repetitious sacrifice of bulls and goats, but by the once for all sacrifice of the Lord Jesus Christ. It is the outpouring of His life in death that brings pardon and life. By the sacrifice of himself, He has put away sin. Soon He will appear, not to deal with sin, but deliver His people.

Having a better sacrifice, eagerly wait.**His Better Country/City****Hebrews 11:13-16**

God has provided a better country than Israel and a better city than Jerusalem for His people. Even His Old Covenant people, with eyes of faith, looked behind and beyond the earthly to long for the heavenly. When they or we are this kind of people, God is not ashamed to be called our God.

Having a better city, desire it.**His Better Provision****Hebrews 11:39-40**

Through Christ, God has planned down through redemptive history to bring about something immeasurably better for His people. A commended faith trusts God even when what is promised waits fulfillment after death. They did not receive because something better was promised and we will receive it together. This better provision is the perfection of the glorified realities, the newness of the new heavens and new earth. All this great perfection and provision is located in Christ.

Having a better provision, believe God.**His Better Speaking****Hebrews 12:24**

While Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, Christ's blood speaks of mercy and forgiveness. His speaking is better because of its place, in heaven, and its person, the Lord Jesus. Christ is the speaking of God. His Word in heaven and from heaven commands our attention and our approach.

Having a better speaking, refuse Him not.

Our Superior Privileges

The people of God, because of the superiority of Christ, have superior privileges. Through the phrase “we have” I want to press upon us that superiority, both in its privilege and in its responsibility.

The Word We Heard

Hebrews 2:1

This conclusion to chapter 1 presses home our responsibility in the light of the fullness and finality of the revelation in Jesus Christ. And we have this revelation in scripture so that it is accessible to all of us. Having now that kind of revelation, we had better pay close attention lest we drift. So here is a great privilege and a great danger. We have the Word and we tend to drift from it. So, we have to give it our attention.

Having the Word, pay attention.

A Great High Priest

Hebrews 4:14; 8:1; 10:19-25

We have confidence to enter and we have a great high priest – what grand privileges. But are they great to us? Do we sense our distance from God and our need to draw near? Do we sense our dependence upon One to be there for us? Having then these two privileges, respond like this: draw near, hold fast your profession of faith and learn how to stir up one another for God and good. And the closer we come to the end of days, we must do this all the more, not the less.

Having a High Priest, draw near, hold fast and stir up.

An Anchor for the Soul

Hebrews 6:19

In the midst the danger of drift and doubt and denial, we have an anchor cast forward and upward into heaven. That is, we have Jesus. Jesus is our anchor. When we are anchored to Him then our soul flees to Him for refuge. Our blowing about with uncertainty and instability is a sure symptom that we are not setting our hope in our heavenly anchor.

Having an Anchor, hope in Him.

A Complete Sanctification

Hebrews 10:10

While God is at work in transformation, we have been set apart to God by His Divine decision and action. We are marked out by God's will, separated from the mass of depraved humanity and set apart for the holy God to become a holy people. This once for all act of God initiates a process whereby we behave what we have become. We do what we are.

Having been sanctified, be transformed.

A Better Possession

Hebrews 10:34

While all that surrounds entices us to crave, covet and possess, God places in our gaze the delights of a better possession. We have all that God has promised us in Christ. What we have is eternal, lasting and will not corrupt, decay or fade away. Craving and clinging to what God promises, to those better and eternal possessions, loosens

our hold on earthly ones so that we are poised to give them up. It so transforms us that we can joyfully accept the loss of our earthly possessions in God's providential care.

Having a better possession, let go.

A Lasting City

Hebrews 13:14-15

What a great privilege this is. We do not have an earthly locality, but a heavenly city. We are seeking what Abraham looked for. We are not of Jerusalem here on earth but of Mt. Zion, the new Jerusalem in heaven. We have no citizenship here; our citizenship that defines us is that of heaven.

Having a lasting city, offer praise sacrifices.

A Clear Conscience

Hebrews 13:18

Finally, we may have a clear conscience. We no longer need to live under the accusing frown of God. Our Redeemer has cleansed and quieted our consciences so that we have openness before others and in the presence of God. What a grand thing it is to be so forgiven that we do not feel guilty.

Having a clear conscience, act honorably.

Conclusion

So:

Having a superior Name, worship Him.
 Having a compassionate priest, boldly come.
 Having a better hope, draw near.
 Having a better promise, be saved.
 Having a better ministry, serve God
 Having a better sacrifice, eagerly wait.
 Having a better city, desire it.
 Having a better provision, believe God.
 Having a better speaking, refuse Him not.
 Having the Word, pay attention.
 Having a High Priest, draw near, hold fast and stir up.
 Having an Anchor, hope in Him.
 Having been sanctified, be transformed.
 Having a better possession, let go.
 Having a lasting city, offer praise sacrifices.
 Having a clear conscience, act honorably.

Here then is the invitation that accompanies these excellencies and privileges: draw near.

Come on in; draw near to the throne of grace (4:16).
 Come on in; draw near through the better hope (7:19).
 Come on in; draw near to be saved (7:25).
 Come on in; draw near to be made complete (10:1).
 Come on in; draw near with a true heart (10:22).
 Come on in; draw near believing He is real and He is a rewarder (11:6).

Draw near and celebrate the Lord's Table.

End Notes