

The New Testament, Book 19

Hebrews

The letter to the Hebrews is one of the richest and most important books in the Bible. As the Book of Romans was the Christian message to the capital of the Gentile world (Rome) in the 1st Century, so, Hebrews might be thought of as its counterpart, the Christian message to the capital of the Jewish world (Jerusalem) in the 1st Century.

This book stands alone in its eloquent summary of the great issues and themes of the New Covenant, with Jesus the Christ as our divine High Priest. Merrill Unger saw Hebrews as being “of unparalleled importance in expounding the transition from the old Levitical economy to Christianity.” He calls it “magnificent” in terms of both doctrinal contribution and literary excellence.

The great 17th-18th Century commentator Matthew Henry, speaking of the divine inspiration of Hebrews, wrote, “...this has been questioned by some, whose distempered eyes could not bear the light of it.” Concerning its purpose he wrote, “It is very evident that it was clearly to inform the minds, and strongly to confirm the judgment, of the Hebrews in the transcendent excellence of the gospel above the law, and so to take them off from the ceremonies of the law, to which they were so wedded, of which they were so fond...and those of them who were Christians retained too much of the old leaven and needed to be purged from it.”

Church historian Philip Schaff said of Hebrews, “It unfolds far more fully than any other book the great idea of the eternal priesthood and sacrifice of Christ, offered once and forever for the redemption of the world.”

Even skeptics, who reject its divine inspiration, praise Hebrews as a literary masterpiece.

Hebrews is generally classified as one of the six “general epistles” because it is not addressed to an individual or a specific church¹. Although its focus is definitely upon the Jewish Church, its lessons and revelations definitely apply to us all.

¹ Many commentators exclude I John, as a “general” epistle making the total five. For more on this see Introduction to the Epistles. It is worth repeating that the category to which scholars assign them is not important; what is important is what they say.

Our journey through Hebrews will be slow and careful, with many cross-references, footnotes and explanatory *NOTES*, for it is extremely rich in content.

A. Author. Who wrote this magnificent epistle? Ah, this is indeed the question; and it has been a matter of lively controversy since the time of the Ante-Nicene Fathers.

The Eastern Church (Greek Orthodox, Russian Orthodox, etc) has attributed the epistle to Paul from the very beginning, and does so today. In the Western Church, from the 4th Century (397 AD) onward, for 1,400 years, Paul was accepted as the author². The title of the book in the Authorized Version, since 1611 AD, is “The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews.”

Since the 18th Century, however, with the rise of theological skepticism and the “higher critical” approach to interpreting Scripture, the Pauline authorship has been questioned by many, and rejected by most.

The prevailing position among scholars in these latter centuries is that the author is unknown. Yet the specter of Paul, his eyes burning with holy passion, dictating this book (or with pen in hand), cannot be fully driven from their thoughts. The great Church historian Philip Schaff declares the author to be unknown; yet, in his treatment of the matter of authorship, Paul’s name appears **42 times**, in Latin, Greek, German and English.

The Argument Against Pauline Authorship Includes the Following:

1. It does not contain the typical Pauline salutation at the beginning--the writer is anonymous;
2. It is written in a classical form of Greek, rather than the koine Greek of the common man; the 13 epistles which do bear Paul’s name are written in koine Greek.
3. At least one existing manuscript is written on expensive vellum (made from treated animal skin), rather than the cheap papyrus of the manuscripts of the 13 epistles bearing Paul’s name.
4. Old Testament quotations, with one possible exception (10:30), are from the Greek Septuagint Old Testament, while Old Testament quotations in the epistles that bear Paul’s name are from both the Greek Septuagint Old Testament and the Hebrew Masoretic Old Testament.

The Argument to Defend Pauline Authorship Includes the Following:

² During this 1,400-year period the only exception in the Western Church consisted of Luther, Calvin and most of the other Reformers. I do not know why this disparate group of reformers was largely in harmony in this matter; they contended bitterly over other points of doctrine.

1. The writer was not one of the original believers. Thus he is classified as a second-generation (albeit early 1st Century) Christian (2:3);
2. The epistle contains a typical Pauline closing salutation (13:18-25);
3. The writer is in prison (10:34);
4. He wrote from Italy (13:24);
5. The author refers to Timothy as a partner in ministry, whom he expects to see soon (13:23). No other author of the epistles refers to Timothy;
6. The writer asks for prayer, that he might be allowed to visit the epistle's recipients (13:18-19); Paul is the only New Testament author who requested prayer for himself;
7. More than 100 ancient writers, from 70 AD-730 AD, ascribe the book to Paul;
8. Origen (ca 184-253 AD), considered Paul to be the author and quoted from Chapter 1, verse 3³;
9. Eusebius (263-339 AD) wrote: "The epistles of Paul are fourteen, all well-known and beyond doubt. It should not, however, be concealed, that some have set aside the Epistle to the Hebrews, saying that it was disputed as not being one of St. Paul's epistles...⁴."
10. And, finally, Eusebius, paraphrasing 2nd Century-early 3rd Century Church Father, Clement of Alexandria (ca 150-215 AD), wrote that Hebrews was written by Paul in Hebrew and translated into Greek by Luke, with the same elegant Greek and style of writing with which Luke had written Acts. Paul's name was left out of the letter, according to Clement, to give it a fair hearing by the unredeemed Jews, who hated Paul with a passion. With Paul's name on the epistle as author, he said, most Jews would reject this final word to them from God without reading it.

Conclusion. Concerning the identity of the author of Hebrews, the only honest conclusion that we can reach with certainty is that we don't know. I believe that the man who put pen to paper and wrote it (or dictated it while someone else wrote), under the inspiration of the Spirit of God, is Paul, the great apostle. But there is room for doubt--not much room--but there is room for doubt. The author's proper title must remain, for this present age, "the unknown author of Hebrews"; however, to avoid being tiresome--for your sake and for mine--I will, from this point onward, call him Paul. And, if you like, you may put a mental asterisk by his name each time I use it thusly.

³ ANF, Vol 7, Origen, De Principiis II, 5, p 247.

⁴ Eusebius, "Ecclesiastical History," Book 3, Chapter 3.

NOTE: For a more complete discussion of the authorship of this Epistle, see “Who Wrote that Book? Authorship of the Epistle to the Hebrews,” in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

B. Place and Date. Hebrews was written from Italy, where the writer was a prisoner (10:34). The letter was written before the Temple was destroyed by Titus in 70 AD, for the present tense is used repeatedly in connection with the Temple and the sacrificial system. The date of writing was probably about 68 AD.

There is one possibility about the place of writing that I have never seen proposed by anyone else. Because all that we can know with certainty is that he was a prisoner, and that it was written from Italy, it may have been written after his arrest in Macedonia or Asia, and during his travel back to Rome, some place between the southeast coast of Italy and Rome. It might have been finished (or fully written) in Rome, in the early days, between his final arrival there as a prisoner, and his consignment to the miserable Mamertine prison with Peter, awaiting execution. This epistle gives the sense of Paul’s being, although a prisoner, free to think, have company, and write. It lacks the dark mood of II Timothy; rather it reads as if it were written by a man content in his present state, and hopeful about the future.

Critical scholars, of course, argue for a much later date; however, they are refuted by Clement of Rome, 1st Century Apostolic Father and historian (ca 30-100 AD). In his famous letter to the Corinthian church (ca AD 96) he takes many of the thoughts from Hebrews and, in places, quotes directly from the epistle. In so doing, as Eusebius put it, “he [Clement] most surely showed that this work [Hebrews] was by no means a late production⁵.”

C. Occasion. Paul’s day of execution may be drawing near. The Hebrew Christians in Jerusalem have accepted Jesus as their Messiah and they expect Him soon to return, drive the Romans out, and establish his Kingdom on Earth. They are continuing to follow the sacrificial system of Temple worship, dear to their hearts and seen by them as essential, happily mixing it with their newly found Christian faith.

However, instead of the joy of Christ’s return, what lies ahead of them--and very soon--is the conquering of Jerusalem by the Roman general Titus, the utter destruction of the Temple by his 10th Legion, ending all possibility of Temple worship, and bringing about the banishment of all Jews from Jerusalem, by Roman law, “forever.” This letter, it seems, was intended by

⁵ Eusebius, “Ecclesiastical History,” Book 3, Chapter 38; ANF, Vol I, First Epistle of Clement to the Corinthians, pp 5-21.

the Spirit of God to prepare the Hebrew Christians for this unexpected disaster.

Instead of the sacrificial rites and the Aaronic priesthood to which they were so attached, the epistle was to show them that the ultimate, perfect, and final sacrifice had already been made by the Lamb of God, and that Jesus the Christ is our Great High Priest, eternal in the heavens. There was no longer any need for the Temple, its priesthood and rituals; they have been rendered null and replaced by a better covenant, sealed by the sacrificial blood of their sinless Lamb of God.

NOTES.

a. The Temple, built by Solomon, had been plundered and burned by Nebuchadnezzar, but was not completely destroyed; much of what remained had been scavenged for other building projects. Even the foundation was gone⁶. Under Ezra, after the return from captivity, it had been rebuilt as the Second Temple. Herod had subsequently enlarged the Temple Mount and made additions to the buildings⁷. The Romans, however, as Jesus had prophesied, would very soon completely obliterate it, leaving not even “one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down⁸.” They would remove the stones, and plow the site, as if the Temple had never been there. The Temple and all things associated with it would soon be nothing but rubble at the base of the Temple Mount, and fading memories. In time, even the rubble at the base of the mount would be deeply covered with soil and forgotten.

b. In the mid-to-late 1960s, the late Israeli archeologist, Benjamin Mazar, excavated the 1st Century Roman street below the south side of the Temple Mount. Beneath the accumulated soil cover, there were many large building stones, and broken pieces of stones, from the Second Temple. As the Temple was systematically destroyed by the Roman soldiers, they had shoved many of the massive building stones off the mount, to fall to the paved street below, doing much damage to the street, and accumulating there,. When the street and the stones were uncovered, there was found, among the building stones, a large fragment of a broken one, about seven feet long and three feet high. On the stone is a Hebrew inscription reading,

⁶ See in this regard Ezra 3:12, and Keller, *The Bible as History*, p 314.

⁷ The Second Temple was not a single building with a courtyard. Under Herod additions were made, and it became more like a complex, a campus, with small buildings added for the priests, Levites and for other purposes, and large, open, roofed “porches” for public gathering. For this reason, it is sometimes referred to as “Herod’s Temple.”

⁸ Matthew 24:2.

“To the Trumpeting Place.” This was carved into a Temple wall, apparently directing the Levites to the place where they blew their trumpets to announce feast days, festivals and sabbaths.

This broken stone, with its symbolic inscription, lying ignominiously in the rubble at the foot of the Temple Mount, is--it seems to me--an eloquent expression of the absolute and final end of the old Levitical era and its sacrificial system. It, along with subsequent discoveries among the rubble, also unquestionably refute the Arab (Palestinian) lie that there was never a Jewish presence on the Temple Mount.

D. Theme. The letter to the Hebrews is God’s final message to the Jewish Church. Its theme is the supremacy of Jesus as the Christ, our Messiah, the divine, eternal King and Great High Priest, and His fulfillment of all the Old Covenant law. As He had said, He had not come to abolish the Law, but to fulfill it, and replace it with a better Covenant. There are more than 20 names and titles used in Hebrews in referring to Jesus, the Christ of God.

In Hebrews, we will find ourselves frequently referring back to Old Testament passages. This should not surprise us, because the author was writing to Hebrew Christians who loved the Old Covenant, to show them how the New Covenant and the gospel of Christ Jesus are its fulfillment.

Hebrews must have been a difficult book for Archbishop Stephen Langton to separate into chapters, for its message is like a seamless garment⁹. Topics dealt with in one chapter continue to appear in the following ones, because these great themes are both interrelated, and worthy of repetition.

E. Highlights. Hebrews is so rich that it is difficult to leave any of it out; however, let us consider the following:

1. Jesus Christ Is God. (Chapter 1)

Paul, without the usual opening salutation and courtesies, opens the encounter with a knockout punch. Quoting the OT prophecies, he slam dunks the thought process with the indispensable, foundational fact of the divinity of Christ, citing the most important passages of scripture, including the one with which Jesus himself had confounded and silenced the Pharisees in their last attempt to discredit Him. In fact, their descendants today are still struggling with it¹⁰. In the process, he makes it crystal clear that angels, with all of their power, are decidedly inferior and subordinate to the Messiah

⁹ Separation of the books of the Bible into chapters is generally attributed to Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury (ca 1155- 1228). Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, begun AD 382, was the first complete Bible (containing both Old and New Testaments). Editions from the 13th Century, onward, have followed Langton’s lead in the Chapt divisions.

¹⁰ Psalm 110:1; Matt 22:41-46.

in the cosmic scheme of things, for they were created, not begotten; and they were created to serve as ministering spirits, not created to rule and reign in God's Kingdom.

NOTE: It is impossible, I think, to overemphasize the significance and importance of the word "begotten" here, and in similar passages, such as John 3:16. The fact that Jesus, the prophesied Messiah, was begotten of God by the Holy Spirit, and born to the Blessed Virgin, is fundamental to the entire work of redemption. This vital fact is included in the Apostles' Creed, that ancient summary of essential doctrinal truth¹¹.

*This matter of being begotten is so fundamentally vital that a conference of Church leaders from the entire World was convened to settle it (and other matters) at Nicea, beginning in 325 AD. And, in the Creed that was adopted at that council, the Nicene Creed, the matter is taken a step farther, in a more emphatic declaration than in the Apostles' Creed, proclaiming that Christ was "begotten of the Father...begotten, **not made**" (emphasis mine).*

*And yet, today, most of the modern Bible versions omit "begotten" in John 3:16, leaving the verse to say, "his only son," or "his one and only son." This not only renders the Messiah as less than divine, it is an absurdly untrue statement; for God has countless millions of sons (and daughters), born spiritually into the family of God through the new birth. For only one small bit of the scriptural evidence for God's many sons, see Rom 8:14. Yes, God has many sons (and daughters); but He has only One **begotten** son. As I have already said, I believe that this cannot be over-emphasized, and I don't feel at all wrong to repeat it.*

Of course, a great many theologians, including many who contribute to modern translations of the Bible, do not believe in the virgin birth and the divinity of Jesus, (or any other miracle); therefore, to them, the omission of "begotten" is an improvement on God's Word. I would not want to be among that group when it faces the judgment throne of Christ.

2. How Shall We Escape If We Neglect So Great A Salvation? (2:1-4)

Chapter 2 begins with the word, "Therefore"; this tells us that it is a continuation of what has been established in Chapter 1, i.e. that Jesus, our Messiah, is God. Because He is divine, we should hold fast to the things He taught, so that we do not let them slip away and forget them, or that we

¹¹ I believe that the Apostles' Creed is something that we all should memorize, and repeat regularly, just to maintain our spiritual equilibrium and keep other matters in perspective.

should not slip away and desert Him¹². We are to hold fast that which is good. If the words of Angels are trustworthy and important enough to be remembered always and, to disobey them in the past brought just punishment (upon the Israelite people under Moses and the Law), how shall we escape appropriate and terrible retribution if we neglect so wonderful a salvation as that which is now offered to us by the Lord Jesus, and confirmed to us in miracles and gifts of the Holy Ghost by those who heard Him proclaim this salvation?

NOTE: The reference to “those who heard Him” in vv 3-4 is interpreted by some to mean that Paul could not be the author of Hebrews, because the author here refers to those who had heard the Lord speak, excluding himself. But Paul had, indeed, heard the Lord speak¹³. However, the context here strongly suggests that the author speaks of those who heard the Lord teach, day after day, in an ongoing way, laying out the plan of salvation, and that they had later seen his teaching confirmed in their own ministries with miracles and manifestations of the Holy Ghost¹⁴.

Considering all of the other evidence pointing to Paul as author of Hebrews, it seems to me that it is reasonable to interpret vv 3-4 as a reference to the original (1st generation) disciples of Jesus, those who lived and traveled with Him. Paul, although a 1st Century contemporary of Jesus, and one of the greatest of apostles, is classified by most scholars as a 2nd Generation Christian, one who knew and listened to the ones who had known and traveled with Jesus in his earthly ministry, but became a convert after Pentecost.

3. A Little Lower Than the Angels (Temporarily). (2:5-18)

In rich expression, Paul goes on to make the point that the Messiah was, temporarily, made a little lower than the angels, in the same position as that of mankind¹⁵. He assumed this position in order to experience being fully human, to face, and overcome, all of the temptations and trials common to man--as a man--and to experience, as a man, his sacrificial death for the redemption of all of humanity (“for every man”)¹⁶. Although He had

¹² The Greek here is literally “lest at any time we should slip away [or drift past]” the truth that we have heard. The Old Testament equivalent of this is “backsliding,” which term occurs 12 times in the OT prophets Jeremiah and Hosea, concerning the unfaithful children of Israel.

¹³ Paul heard the Lord speak on the road to Damascus, and again at Corinth, reassuring Paul that he was safe there to continue preaching and teaching. He later came and stood by Paul, telling him that he must go to Rome. And, at some point, it seems that the Lord also spoke to Paul about proper taking of communion (Acts 9:4-6; Acts 18:9-10; Acts 23:11; and I Cor 11:23).

¹⁴ Mark 16:20.

¹⁵ Psalm 8:4-6.

¹⁶ In Jn 3:16, the universality of the opportunity to be redeemed is expressed as “whosoever.”

created all things, it was necessary and proper that he became a man, a little below the position of angels, for 33 years, in order that He (the Captain of our salvation), could fully experience being human. This was necessary in order that, through his sacrificial death and resurrection, He might conquer the god of this world, Satan, who had previously possessed the power of death. It was also necessary that Jesus experience being fully human in order to comfort us in our temptations and trials, as a merciful High Priest who understands our weakness and imperfection; we shall see more of this wonderful fact in Chapter 4.

4. Harden Not Your Hearts. (Chapter 3)

Continuing to quote passages from the Old Testament, Paul reminds us that not everyone who came out of Egypt with Moses entered the Promised Land. In fact, only a few survived to enter the land of promise. The majority of the former Hebrew slaves did not enter the rest that was eventually enjoyed by the faithful few, in being finally established in a land of their own. Those who failed in reaching this goal, he says, failed because of their unbelief, and because they hardened their hearts. There is a rest, provided by God, in our redeemed position as part of his household, if we hold fast to our confidence and hope in Him, trusting and believing Him to the end¹⁷. We must not harden our hearts with unbelief; for, if we do, we will not hear his voice, we will not learn of his true nature (his ways), and we will not enter into his rest¹⁸.

***NOTE:** A key concept in this message to the Hebrew Christians is that Jesus, the Christ of God, is now our great High Priest, eternal in the Heavens, and there is no longer any need for a human high priest, performing religious rites on Earth. We shall see this wonderful fact beautifully expanded upon in Chapt 4; but it is introduced in the first verse of Chapt 3.*

5. Entering into the Rest of God. (4:1-10)

There is a precious promise of God that, if we believe Him, take Him at his Word and trust Him, we can be liberated from the worry, anxiety and mental turmoil that is common to man. Knowing then, that He is offering us this rest, this peace of mind, let us not fail to enter into it--to make it ours. Continuing to pour on the OT quotations, Paul uses the illustration of the seven days of Creation. God created the Universe, he reminds us, in six days, and on the seventh day he rested. And here is the key to

¹⁷ Numbers 14:11.

¹⁸ Psalm 95:8-11, 103:7; Is 28:9-12; I Cor 14:21.

understanding this: God did not rest on the seventh day because He was tired; He rested because he was **finished**. And we, when we are finished, i.e. when we have done all that is in our power to do, if we trust God with the outcome, there is a peace, a rest for our weary souls that can be had in no other way. The key is trust; and we cannot trust Him if we do not believe him, i.e. believe that what He has promised, He will perform. And it is difficult--nay, probably impossible--to believe Him, if we do not know him, i.e., if we are not his children by faith in Christ Jesus.

NOTES:

a. In v 8 "Jesus" is, in Greek, "Iesous" (ee-a-soos). It can be rendered "Joshua" or "Jesus," and most modern versions render it here as "Joshua." At first glance, "Jesus" may seem out of place here, in Paul's reference to the OT; but remember that, in this epistle, Paul is mightily making the point to the Hebrew Christians that Jesus is the divine Messiah, the Eternal One who was present in the Exodus and the Wilderness Wanderings. It wasn't Joshua, son of Nun, who offered the Israelites the rest in trusting God; it was God, and He did it through Moses. Considering this, it seems to me that, in v 8, "Jesus" is the better rendering.

b. This blessed rest of God applies to any of the countless situations in our lives when what we need is beyond our own resources, or when what is required of us is more than we can do. It also applies, I believe, to our redemption; for in it we are trusting God with our eternal destiny, and believing Him for our salvation, something that we lay hold on by faith, but which we cannot see, except in retrospect.

I cannot think of this principle without remembering a moment between hospitals, on Interstate 5 in San Diego County when, at age 40, out of strength, out of alternatives, and completely out of hope, I cried out in complete helplessness, saying to God, "If you are really there, and if you can do anything with what is left of me and what is left of my life, it is all yours, because I can't." I had no knowledge of the principle we are studying here; in fact, I wasn't even sure of God's reality; but, if He was real, and if He was there, I was sincerely placing my future in his hands.

He immediately took it. I heard no voice, I saw no vision; all I remember about that moment is that peace descended upon me. I didn't understand it then, but the future was out of my hands, and I had entered into God's seventh day.

6. The Word of God is Alive and Powerful. (4:11-13)

Because this rest, this peaceful trusting in God, is available to us, says Paul, we should strive to do whatever it takes to enter into it. It is a

wonderful way to live, and the key to it is God's Word, with its many promises. And his Word is not just an interesting book; it is a living, supernatural, powerful thing; and it is the engine that underlies and energizes all that He has for us. His words are not just ink on paper, some remarkable ideas of which we can read and be enlightened; rather, as Jesus put it, they are Spirit and Life¹⁹. And they can shine the light of truth into the hidden recesses and darkest corners of our hearts and minds, not allowing us to be comfortable with harboring wrong thoughts and attitudes. The Word is sharper than a two-edged sword (or the sharpest scalpel), able to divide, and separate for examination, our innermost parts, even the difference between the soul and the human spirit.

NOTE: In thinking of the triune nature of man, with body, soul and spirit, it is easy to understand the body; we all have one and we can see it. The soul, our thoughts, attitudes and personalities are, for all practical purposes, the mind. It resides between our ears. The Greek for soul is "psyche," the word from which we derive such English words as psychology, psychosomatic and psychiatrist.

The human spirit, however, is not so easy to visualize and understand. It is our very essence, residing somewhere in the very center of us. It is what gives life to the body and soul; when the spirit leaves the body and soul, the result is death; the body no longer functions, the mind no longer thinks or is aware, the personality no longer exists. That is why we call the dead body "remains"; it is all that is left once death has occurred²⁰. In speaking of the spirit we sometimes call it the heart. And, if it is difficult to know and describe the location of the human spirit, it is even more difficult to separate it in our understanding from the soul. Only the Word of God can separate and clarify the difference between soul and spirit. This is the reason for the word, "even" in v 12.

For more on the three parts of each of us, see "The Trinity of Man" in Part IV (Selected Topical Summaries).

7. Our High Priest Understands. (4:14-16)

In the following three verses Paul returns to the foundational fact that Jesus the Christ is our great High Priest, divine and eternal in the Heavens. In light of this fact, he says, we should hold fast to our profession of faith in Him, not wavering or returning to place faith in the annual intercession of a fallible, human, high priest²¹. And then he reveals and makes plain what is,

¹⁹ John 6:63.

²⁰ James 2:26.

²¹ I Timothy 2:5.

to me, one of the most wonderful truths concerning our relationship with God. Jesus, our High Priest, makes intercession for us before the Father when we fail and come short of the mark. This we know²². He is at the right hand of the Father, pleading our cases, and He does it perfectly; but it is even better than that. Our eternal High Priest, says Paul, in his 33 years of humanity, was tempted in every way that we are tempted, but He never sinned. As the result of this, two very precious things are revealed:

a. **He understands.** He is touched with the feeling of our weaknesses and failures; He knows how we feel in our sinful imperfection, because He has felt that way; and,

b. **It is not a sin to be tempted.** He was tempted, in every way that any of us is tempted; He experienced it all. He was even tempted by some things that are so disgusting that they would not tempt most of us; yet, He was without sin. It is not a sin to want a wrong thing; it is a sin only if we do it.

NOTE: It can be risky to speak of God in human terms as if He had human limitations, for we know that He has none. Yet, I think it helps us humans to understand this intercession ministry of Jesus the Christ if we think of it in this way, because we definitely do have human limitations:

a. *God the Father cannot be tempted with evil; we will see this stated plainly in the first chapter of James²³.*

b. *God the Son, our Great High Priest and Advocate, has been tempted in every possible way, from the most trivial shortcoming to the darkest perversions from the pit of Hell; and He understands. He even understands the feeling of our weakness; and, in this way, He can better plead the case of sinful man before the Father. Am I saying that God, in any of the Three Persons has limitations? Definitely not! But there is a difference between intellectual understanding of a concept, and experiential understanding of an event--even the feeling of it. This is completely valid in a human sense, and it helps me to understand what takes place in the intercession of Jesus, our precious Redeemer and Advocate, when He mediates for us before the Father.*

8. A High Priest After the Order of Melchisedec. (5:1-6)

Continuing to use references to the Old Testament precedents, Paul reminds us that in the Levitical priesthood a man could not just decide to be a priest; rather, he had to be a lineal descendant of Aaron, the original human high priest. The genealogical records were carefully kept, so as to

²² Romans 8:34; Hebr 7:25.

²³ James 1:13.

know which men were eligible to be priests and Levites, serving in the Tabernacle (and, later, in the Temple). Every human high priest was, himself, imperfect; and he offered gifts and sacrifices for sins, not only the sins of the people, but also for his own sins. The human high priest did not appoint himself; he was appointed, usually by the king. Likewise Jesus, our great High Priest, did not appoint Himself High Priest; He was appointed to this position by the Father, saying (through David the Psalmist), “Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee”; and also saying (through David the Psalmist), “Thou art a priest forever, after the order of [in the manner of] Melchisedec²⁴.” The human high priesthood was limited by the death of the high priest, after which he was replaced by another; the High Priesthood of Christ is perpetual, until the end of all things as we know them.

***NOTE:** Melchisedec is what is called a “type” of Christ. In theology a “type” is a person or thing in the OT who/which is a symbol or foreshadow of a person or thing in the NT. The person or thing foreshadowed by the “type” is called the “antitype.” Aaron in the OT was a type of Christ because he was chosen by God to be the first high priest, one who represented God to the people and offered sacrifices for the sins of the people. Here, Melchisedec is the type, and Christ is the antitype. You probably won’t want to know this; but, in case you do, theologians call the study of types and antitypes “typology.”*

* * * * *

The Mysterious Melchisedec

At this point we must stop to enquire about this mysterious man, Melchisedec (the Greek form of his Old Testament name, “Melchizedek”).

He first appears in Genesis 14 where, after Abram’s rescue of Lot and the kings of Sodom and Gomorrah, he brings bread and wine to the exhausted warriors of Abram²⁵. Here, he is identified as King of Salem²⁶. Because “salem” means peace, he is thus King of Peace. He is also identified as “priest of the Most High God.” He blesses Abram, and Abram gives him a tenth of the spoils gained in the battle. He is a type of Christ, in that:

1. he has no recorded beginning or ending;
2. he is both king and priest;

²⁴ Psalm 2:7; 110:4.

²⁵ At this point, God had not yet changed Abram’s name to Abraham.

²⁶ Salem (the Hebrew word for “peace”) is believed to be the most ancient name of Jerusalem. By the 14th Century BC the name seems to have evolved to what we call it today; on the Tel el-Amarna Tablets, dated to the 14th Century BC, the city is called “Uru-salim.”

3. he is “King of Salem (Peace),” as Christ is “Prince of Peace”²⁷;
4. he is superior to Abram, in that he blessed Abram and Abram presented to him the tithe of the spoils;
5. there is Eucharistic symbolism here, in that he gave bread and wine, the symbolic elements of Holy Communion, to refresh and renew the warriors; and,
6. neither Jesus nor Melchisedec was of the tribe of Levi. Jesus was born into the tribe of Judah; and Melchisedec has no beginning or ending, and does not appear at all in the Levitical genealogy.

He next appears in Psalm 110 as a type of the prophesied, divine Messiah, “after the order of Melchizedec.”

Finally, here in the epistle to the Hebrews, he becomes a relentlessly recurring symbol of Christ, the eternal High Priest. In the rest of **the entire Bible**, he is mentioned **only twice** (Gen 14:18-20, and Ps 110:4); yet, in this one book of Hebrews, Paul mentions Melchisedec nine times! He wants there to be no lingering doubts concerning the eternal High Priesthood of Christ, foreshadowed by this “priest of the most high God,” an obvious messianic figure, and one who is well known to the Hebrew Christians.

This setting forth of the mysterious Melchisedec as a type of Christ is found only in the Book of Hebrews.

* * * * *

9. He Learned Obedience by the Things He Suffered. (5:7-10)

In his life in the flesh as a man, Jesus learned perfected obedience by his suffering. Although He was (and is) the Son of God, He experienced being human to the fullest extent. He offered up prayers and supplications to his Father, at times with tears, and the Father always heard his prayers. In the Garden of Gethsemane He shrank from the horror of becoming sin, and being separated from his Father; and yet He fully experienced and learned obedience in accepting and submitting to this horrible, physical, emotional, and spiritual suffering²⁸. In this completion of his human experience, He was perfected as the Author of eternal salvation for all who will obey Him, and not rebel. In this way he fulfilled his qualifications as our eternal High Priest.

10. Strong Meat Is for the Mature. (5:11-6:3)

²⁷ Isaiah 9:6.

²⁸ We should always remember that He did not have to go through that spiritual, mental and physical agony; He chose to do it. (John 10:17-18).

Concerning this matter of the Divine High Priesthood of Christ, Paul says that there are many things to be taught, and they are not simple; i.e. they are not appropriate matters for spiritual babes. Using the analogy of appropriate food for human nourishment at different stages of development, he says that babies need to be fed on milk--not meat--because they cannot chew and digest meat. He says that there are many things, facts and concepts, that the Hebrew Christians need to learn; but they are not yet mature enough in their knowledge and understanding. And, he says, knowledge and understanding alone are not enough; it is necessary to do these things, to become doers of the Word and not hearers only, exercising our discerning to be able to recognize both good and evil. "Strong meat," he says, meaning more advanced learning, is for the spiritually mature. He challenges us to move on, beyond the first principles of repentance, faith, baptisms, laying on of hands, judgment and the resurrection of the dead to eternal judgment. And, if God permits it, he says, we will proceed to more advanced teaching.

***NOTE:** The Greek word rendered "exercised" in 5:14 is a form of "gumnazo." This word literally means to exercise naked (from "gumnos," naked) for, in ancient Greece, athletes trained and competed naked. Here, of course, the word simply means to exercise and gain strength as an athlete does. In context, it tells us that our senses, even spiritually, grow more able as we actually do the things we learn. We are not just to know and understand; we are to grow through experience in the spiritual arenas and battlefields of life. As James would express it, we need to be "doers of the Word and not hearers only"²⁹.*

11. There Is a Point of No Return. (6:4-8)

In the following five verses there is perhaps the most sobering warning in the entire New Testament. Beginning with the words, "It is impossible," Paul speaks of sin and repentance in an ultimate sense. He speaks of those of us who were once enlightened, heard and understood the gospel, tasted "the heavenly gift" of forgiveness, the new birth and empowerment, were granted the gift of the Holy Ghost, have tasted and experienced how good the Word of God can be for us, and have experienced the mighty powers of the world to come. Speaking of such as these he says, if they fall away, i.e. turn away from their commitment to the Lord and reject his gift of righteousness, it is impossible for them to be brought back to repentance,

²⁹ James 1:22.

because they nail the Son of God upon the cross again, and hold Him up to public shame and disgrace. They are, it seems clear, doomed.

In the final two verses of this most sobering of passages he uses the analogy of the soil, the rain which nourishes it, and what the soil produces. If it brings forth good things to eat, for the farmer or gardener, it is blessed of God. But, if it persistently produces thorns and thistles, it is rejected, is near to being cursed, and will ultimately be burned up.

If words have meaning, and they do, we must deal with these words; and these are the words of God. This warning should give us all great pause.

NOTES:

a. We must deal with the words “impossible” and “rejected”; first, impossible. The underlying Greek is “adunatos,” and it means just that: impossible. Second, rejected; the underlying Greek is “adokimos,” and it means literally “not passing the test.” In other words, we must accept this passage to mean exactly what it says; we cannot dismiss it as being only figurative or a questionable rendering of the Greek.

b. This passage does not stand alone, in isolation; the matter of first following Jesus, and then becoming a castaway, will be found again in Hebr 10:26-31, and elsewhere in the New Testament. For a few examples, see Rom 1:25-32; I Cor 9:27; Jas 5:19-20; II Pet 2:20-22.

*I can see no way to avoid the fact that some will go a long way in following and serving the Lord, and yet turn back in such a way that they are **rejected**; and it is then **impossible** for them to be restored to repentance and a right relationship with God. And yet Jesus said, very plainly, that all things are **possible** with God; i.e. He can do anything.*

How do we reconcile this apparent contradiction? The answer, it seems to me, lies not in any inability of God, for that would be impossible; rather, the answer lies in the heart and will of man. It seems that, although we have experienced all that is stated in vv 4 and 5, we can then choose to sin in such a way, and for such a prolonged time, that our hearts become so hardened that, even though we know the truth, we will refuse to repent and return to it.

No matter how one may wish to interpret these passages, they should give all of us pause, and clarify our spiritual vision when we are tempted with sin and rejection of the plain truth of Scripture.

12. Hope Is the Anchor of the Soul. (6:13-20)

Paul urges the Hebrew Christians to have faith and patience, to the end, in order to obtain the promises. He reminds them of Abraham, who patiently endured a long period of waiting before he obtained the promised son, Isaac.

When God made the promise, He confirmed it with an oath; since there is no one, or thing, greater than God, He swore by Himself. These two things, which cannot be changed, i.e. his promise and his oath, were the guarantee of the blessing. In like manner, to guarantee the better covenant to Abraham's spiritual descendants, the heirs of salvation, God confirmed the promise by an oath³⁰.

Two unchangeable things, then, are the guarantee of our redemption: his promise; and his oath, sworn by himself. Knowing this, we are able to be faithful to the end, as was Abraham when in human terms it made no sense to hope. This hope that we have is the anchor of our souls, making us able to believe and hold fast to the promise, because Jesus has become our eternal High Priest, after the manner of Melchisedec.

13. More on Melchisedec, Abraham, Christ, and the Covenant. (Chapter 7)

Chapter 7 defies being separated into highlights; in fact, it defies being separated at all. At any rate, try as I might, I can find no place to interrupt it. It is a reiteration of almost everything that has gone before it in the epistle, apparently because the content is worthy of repetition, because of its importance and its difficulty of understanding³¹. Paul repeats the introduction of Melchisedec, out of nowhere, as King of Salem (Peace) and priest of the most high God, bringing bread and wine to Abram's small army, blessing Abram, and receiving tithes from him.

Verse 3 is worthy of our stopping to examine it, for it refers to Melchisedec's having no mother, father or "descent" (genealogical history). This can appear to be a problem, for if he is a type of Christ, we know that Jesus has a Heavenly Father, had an earthly human stepfather, a mother and two genealogical lines (his mother's and Joseph's). The apparent answer to the problem is that, because Jesus is of the tribe of Judah, there is no record of his ancestry in the genealogical line of Levi, from which all earthly priests and high priests came. It seems to me that Paul might have made this more clear; nevertheless, this seems to explain his choice of words. And verses 4-17 seem to support this conclusion.

Continuing to speak of the old, temporary priesthood, which is replaced by the eternal priesthood of Christ, there is yet another reference to that mysterious oath mentioned in 6:17. Under the old system, he says, priests were consecrated and set in their priesthood without an oath; the priesthood

³⁰ The identity and nature of the oath referred to here is unclear; it probably refers to God's declaration that Christ is our eternal High Priest, after the order of Melchisedec, for this is the guarantee that we have an eternal mediator and intercessor in the Heavens. We shall see more about this oath.

³¹ It may be comforting to refer again to II Pet 3:13-16.

of Christ, however, was established with an oath by God (“Thou art a priest forever...”), and his priesthood is eternal³².

Jesus, because of the unique nature of his eternal priesthood, is the guarantee of a better covenant. And, because of his eternal priesthood, the power of his endless life, He is able to save “to the uttermost,” (completely, perfectly and for all eternity) those who come to God through Him, for He lives forever, making intercession for them (and for us).

Again reminding the Hebrew Christians (and us) that it was necessary for human high priests to offer sacrifices for their own sins, as well as for the sins of the people, he points to another way in which our eternal High Priest, Christ Jesus, is superior. He was/is sinless, and He offered up the perfect sacrifice for the people, i.e. He offered up Himself; and He needs no sacrifice for his own sin, for He is/was/shall ever be, sinless.

And, in the closing verses of Chapter 7 (vv 20, 21 (twice), and 28), that oath, which we first saw in Chapter 6, re-appears. Because of that oath by God, declaring the priesthood of Christ to be forever and divine, and because its fulfillment in Jesus occurred after the establishment of the old covenant, the new covenant is superior to, and annuls, the old covenant.

14. A Better Covenant with Better Promises. (Chapter 8)

In Chapter 8, Paul summarizes the matter of the two covenants, i.e. the two ways of God’s dealing with his people (us). To begin with, he says, we have a high priest who is established at the right hand of God’s throne of majesty in the Heavens. And He ministers in the heavenly tabernacle, pitched by the Lord, and not one pitched by man. By clear implication he is asking, “What could be better than that?”

Referring again to the old covenant, established on Mount Sinai, he says that Christ has obtained a more excellent ministry (than that of the earthly high priests), and that He is the mediator of a better covenant with better promises. The first covenant was not perfect, he says; for, if the first covenant had been perfect, there would have been no need for the second one. And then, quoting the prophet Jeremiah, he says that the old system of laws was written on tablets of stone; but, under the new system, the laws are written on the fleshy tablets of the hearts of God’s people³³. And, he says, under this new covenant, with its better promises, each one who embraces the promises, and enters into the covenant, will have a personal, experiential, knowledge of God; he will no longer need someone to urge him to accept

³² This oath is first recorded in Ps 110:4).

³³ Psalm 40:8; Jer 31:31-34; II Cor 3:3.

redemption and explain it to him. And God, under this new relationship, will remember our unrighteous deeds no more.

And, finally, he points out that the very existence of the new covenant makes the old one obsolete, null and void.

15. A Greater and More Perfect Tabernacle. (9:1-11)

Continuing to compare the Old Covenant with the New, Paul describes the original Tabernacle and its furnishings, with its Holy Place where the priests offered sacrifices all year, and its Holy of Holies, containing the Ark of the Covenant, which only the high priest entered, and that only once a year, to offer blood for himself and for the people. Then he speaks of a different Tabernacle, a greater and more perfect Tabernacle, one not made with hands. He doesn't explain at this point, but he is speaking of the Heavenly Tabernacle.

16. Not by the Blood of Goats and Calves. (9:12-17)

Then he compares the cleansing effect of the blood of goats and calves, and the ashes of a burnt heifer, with that of the perfect blood of Christ. Taking the metaphor a step beyond this, he compares the blood and ashes of sacrificed animals, which could sanctify and purify the body, with the blood of Christ, who offered Himself without spot or blemish to God, which can sanctify and purify our consciences--our inner man--so that we, as a kingdom of priests, may serve the living God³⁴. Therefore, Christ is the mediator of the new covenant, so that by his death He provided redemption for all of the transgressions under the old covenant. And it was necessary for Him to die, because no testament (will) is of any effect until the one who makes the testament, or will, dies.

NOTE: We have covered a lot of ground since the study of Num 19, so we may need a reminder here that the ashes referred to in v 13 are the ashes of the red heifer which, mixed with running water, were necessary for ceremonial cleansing after coming into contact with the dead (or even a tomb containing the dead).

17. Without the Shedding of Blood There Is No Remission of Sin. (9:18-22)

In ratification of the old covenant Moses took the blood of calves and goats, water, scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll of the Law and all the people. He also took blood and sprinkled the Tabernacle and the instruments and furnishings of the Tabernacle. In fact, under the old covenant almost all things are purified by blood, and without the shedding of

³⁴ I Peter 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6, 5:10.

blood there was no remission of sin and its guilt. This is the way that it was.

18. The Ultimate Application of Blood: the Heavenly Sanctuary. (9:23-28)

Again comparing the ministry of human priests in the wilderness Tabernacle and, later, in the Temple at Jerusalem, with the ministry of Jesus as our heavenly High Priest, we are again told that the former, which is passing away was only a type or shadow of the latter, which is eternal in the Heavens. And, whereas the earthly high priests entered the Holy of Holies in the Temple, our great High Priest entered into Heaven itself, and presented his own blood to pay our sin debt and wash away our unrighteousness³⁵. If the blood sacrifice of Christ was of no more effect than that of the earthly high priests, He would have to go through his atoning sufferings, die for mankind and be resurrected over and over, thousands of times; but this is not so, because his suffering to pay our sin debt was perfect, and sufficient to be effective for all time.

NOTE: The principle of reincarnation, the belief that we die and then are re-born into another life, and eventually become perfected (after perhaps hundreds, or thousands, of incarnations) is a common feature in pagan religions. It usually involves also the principle of karma: that if in this life we are good, we will live the next life in an improved situation; and, if we live badly, we will enter the next life in a worse condition or situation than in our present life. In some forms even the uniqueness of man is denied; for, if you are not good, you may come back as a cockroach, an earthworm or a rattlesnake.

If this were true, there would have been at least one imperfect human perfected by the process; yet human history records only one perfect human, and He was God in human flesh. Worse, if reincarnation were true, then the sinless life and horrible, atoning, death of Jesus, followed by his resurrection, was unnecessary--a tragedy rather than the ultimate triumph that it was. And, in case we have missed this point, in one brief verse of 15 words, v 27, the concept of reincarnation is declared to be a lie.

19. Having Completed the Work of Atonement, Christ Sat Down. (10:1-18)

Chapter 10 opens with a debate-ending rhetorical question: if the old covenant system of sacrifices could perfect us, why aren't we already perfect? Then, for added impact, Paul looses another barrage of OT quotations to back up his point, showing that, from centuries past, the prophets had written of a time when spiritual sacrifices would replace animal

³⁵ I John 1:7-9.

and plant sacrifices. And, he says, Jesus Christ, our Messiah, after making his one perfect sacrifice, sat down in the heavenly throne room at the right hand of the Father. As was the case with God's resting on the 7th day after the Creation, Christ sat down, not because He was tired, but because He was finished; nothing more was required, nor could anything be added to that which is perfect.

20. The Ultimate Veil of the Temple. (10:19-23)

Having just peppered the reader (from those Hebrew Christians to this present day) with OT quotations, Paul makes a vital point. The sin-bearing moment of Jesus on the cross, when the veil of the Temple had been supernaturally ripped apart, opening the way into the Holy of Holies was a shadow or type of a heavenly, more perfect, counterpart. By the sacrificial tearing of his flesh, Jesus opened the way for us to enter into the heavenly Holy of Holies, with direct access, through his sacrifice and intercession, to the presence of God, the YHWH of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Thus the Veil of the Temple was the type, and the torn body of Jesus is the antitype, i.e. the fulfilling reality.

21. We Need Each Other. (10:24-25)

In the next two verses Paul expresses concisely a vital principle: that it is dangerous, if not deadly, to attempt to live the Christian life alone, i.e. without close, strong, Christian fellowship. In all of the New Testament, there is not a single example or illustration to present a Christian, living alone, relating to the Lord in isolation from all other believers, and doing well--not a single one. In fact, the very opposite is the picture drawn throughout the New Testament, with congregations of believers, living, working and worshiping together, bearing one another's burdens, encouraging one another, exhorting one another to a healthy, godly life and growing in the Lord, all under mature, wise leadership.

Living life alone is exactly what Satan wants us to do, for then we become extremely vulnerable to his lies, deceptions and temptations. I sometimes express it this way: it is the banana, separated from the bunch, that gets peeled.

22. A Sobering Thought Concerning Deliberate Sin. (10:26-31)

Following the brief passage about the importance of staying in fellowship, or need of one another, there is one of the two most frightening passages in the New Testament concerning sin, backsliding and the possibility of restoration; both are in Hebrews³⁶. The first passage, in Chapter 6,

³⁶ The other is a similar passage, 6:4-8.

describes the sin and the circumstances which make the sin fatal, apparently without remedy. This passage explains **why** the sin referred to in Chapter 6 is so serious--apparently without remedy. If we sin willfully, deliberately, in full knowledge of the truth of God's Word and will for us, and having received this truth into our lives, we have rejected God's gracious forgiveness and the sacrifice of his only begotten Son to buy our freedom; and, having rejected God's perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins, there remains nothing that can cleanse us and bring us into a righteous relationship with God. A crude analogy would be that my airplane is going down, to a certain crash; I have been given a parachute, the only one in the aircraft, and I refuse and reject it, casting it aside. The result is my certain death, for there is no other way to be saved from the crash. The point is not that I prefer another parachute rather than the one provided; it is that there is no other. Remembering that the epistle is written primarily for the Hebrew Christians, Paul returns to the Old Testament precedents, reminding them (and us) that, under the old covenant, one who despised and disobeyed the Law was put to death with the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more serious an affront to God Almighty, he asks, is it to despise the perfect, gracious sacrifice of the Son of God, trampling on all that He represents, treating the priceless, sinless blood of God's covenant as if it were an unholy, nasty thing, and insulting the Holy Spirit of God?

The unavoidable result will be a fearful, terrifying, irreversible judgment which will consume the haters of the living God on the Day of Judgment, as if they had never existed.

***NOTE:** It is impossible to consider this passage, and its related passage (6:4-8), without (at least) brushing against the controversial doctrine of eternal security, i.e. is it possible, once born again, to turn away from God so as to forfeit one's salvation?*

In this study, except for the foundational Christian doctrines, such as the divinity and uniqueness of Jesus the Christ, his virgin birth, sinless life, atoning death and bodily resurrection, we do not contend for certain doctrinal positions. In fact, as I have stated several times, we avoid the divisive doctrinal issues that have divided us into so many separated denominations.

On the other hand, neither do we ignore certain controversial passages in order to avoid them, as if they weren't there. Concerning the matter of being saved, and then turning from God to sin, deliberately forfeiting salvation, the debate usually resolves into irreconcilable questions of the

will of man versus the power of God. But this only leaves us where we were 400 years ago, in the days of Calvin and Arminius--at impasse.

It seems to me that perhaps the answer is to be found in the mind, heart, and the capacity for rebellion, in man. Is his heart still tender toward God, regardless of his own weakness and sin? Or is his heart so hardened toward God, impervious to conviction, that he is determined to have the pleasures of sin for a season, regardless of the consequences? Death and life are indeed in the power of the tongue; but they have their origins, it seems to me, in the heart--that place deep within our being where God looks to find approval or disapproval, love of Him or rejection. It is, indeed, a point to ponder.

23. Words of Encouragement: Press on to Receive the Prize. (10:32-39)

Having set forth again the sobering thought about falling away, the remainder of Chapter 10 reminds the Hebrew Christians that they have come a long way and endured persecution, and encourages them not to give up. He remembers their kindness to him in his imprisonment³⁷. Quoting Habakkuk he reminds them that, if they don't give up and turn back, there is great reward for them in the end. The just, he says, shall live by faith³⁸.

24. What Is Faith? (11:1)

Faith, a necessary component of our salvation, and the underlying principle by which we must live in order to please God and live in his will, is defined in the 15 words of the very first verse of Chapter 11. And, the definition of this word--a thing of such transcendent importance--is to be found nowhere else in the Bible³⁹.

So, what is this all-important thing that is a necessary ingredient for entering into the Kingdom of God, and in living our lives before Him? It consists of two things; the first component is "the substance of things hoped for." It is what gives form and reality to things for which we hope, but have not yet received. This, it seems to me, simply amounts to believing God, and trusting that He will do what He has promised. We shall return to this aspect in verse 6.

The other component of faith is "the evidence of things not seen." This is a little more difficult to express (at least it is for me), other than in the simple words of the verse. It is that inner assurance, the conviction that, although we cannot perceive it with our natural senses, a thing promised by God is nonetheless real.

³⁷ This suggests Pauline authorship of Hebrews.

³⁸ Habakkuk 2:1-4.

³⁹ Habakkuk 2:1-4; Rom 1:17; Gal 2:20; Eph 2:8.

In the New Testament, faith (in Greek, *pistis*) is always used in the sense of relating to the triune Godhead. It is never used in relation to anyone, or anything, else.

NOTE: Chapter 11 is often called “the faith chapter” because faith is its subject. It will be useful to remember a classic verse in Romans, Rom 10:17, which tells us that faith comes by hearing the Word of God. One may wonder why the verse doesn’t also say “reading” the Word of God; it is probably because the vast majority of Christians, at the time when this epistle was written, could not read. When we get to the Book of Jude, we will find that faith can be built up and strengthened by praying in the Holy Ghost⁴⁰. In anything we do, when we act with our trust in God alone, and not ourselves, other people, things or our senses, we build up and strengthen our faith.

25. Without Faith It Is Impossible to Please God. (11:2-6)

In the following passage we are told that by faith the saints of the OT pleased God and set positive examples for us. He mentions God’s creation of the Universe, out of nothing (in Latin, *ex nihilo*), saying that, by faith, we understand that God did this—that He spoke it all into existence. He cites the example of Abel (admittedly, his wording here is a bit obtuse), saying that it was by faith that he offered a better sacrifice than did Cain. Moving on, he cites Enoch, of whom we are told that he pleased God, and that he walked with God and God took him. Since it is impossible to please God without faith, it is apparent that Enoch walked in faith. And, he must have done this to an exemplary degree, for he was taken directly to Heaven without dying; and this was experienced by only one other man: Elijah, a great man of faith⁴¹.

And then there is a proclamation that without faith it is impossible to please God. After all, the failure to walk in faith is to walk in doubt, or by placing our confidence in someone, or something, else; and that definitely does not please God. In fact, at one point in the exodus from Egypt, He wanted to obliterate the Israelites in the desert because they doubted Him⁴². If we are even to come to God and be his children, we must do two essential things: (1) we must believe that He is, i.e. believe in his existence; and (2)

⁴⁰ Jude 20.

⁴¹ Because these two great men of God are the only people who did not experience death, and Hebr 9:27 seems to say that all will experience physical death, many Bible scholars believe that they will be the two witnesses of Rev 11:3-14, who are murdered, but after three days are raised from death.

⁴² Numbers 14:11-12.

we must believe that He rewards those who diligently, sincerely, seek to know, trust, and walk with Him.

26. Heroes and Heroines of the Faith. (11:7-40)

After this brief essay on the foundational necessity for faith, there follows a succession of examples of heroes and heroines of the faith in the Old Testament, including Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, Joshua, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, the prophets, and un-named women, some of whom had their dead raised to life again.

And then he speaks of some who were tortured, suffered cruel mocking and scourging, chains and imprisonment, some who were stoned, sawn asunder, tested, and slain with the sword. There were some who wandered about in animal skins because they had no clothing, destitute, afflicted and tormented, living in deserts, high mountains, and caves.

All of these, who did not live to see and receive the promise of the coming Messiah, nevertheless died in faith; and they received honor from God for their faith. They would not receive the fulfillment of what was promised until the coming of the Messiah.

NOTES:

a. This is a very long passage of Scripture, following a highlight. The 34 verses in this very long passage should be studied a few at a time. I suggest the following divisions: vv 7-16; 17-22; 23-29; 30-35; 36-38; and 39-40.

b. Verses 39 and 40 are not easily understood. The unfulfilled promise, spoken of here, seems to be the coming of the Messiah, which would be the fulfillment of all OT promises. The ultimate victory for the OT saints would be the Messiah's victory over death on the cross, followed by the Resurrection, following which He freed them from Sheol, liberating them from the power of death. He then, it seems, led those who accepted Him as Messiah to Heaven, in a triumphant procession, and presented them, without spot or blemish, to the Father.

This sequence of events, when Christ Jesus descended into Sheol, the resting place of the OT dead, and then led those who received Him to Heaven, in a triumphant procession, is nowhere specifically stated in the Scriptures. It may be inferred from Ephesians 4:8-10 and related Scripture passages. We can know that the risen and glorified Christ, in Rev 1:18, declares that He has "the keys to hell (in Greek, 'hades'), and of death," which, it would appear, He had seized from defeated Satan in the Lower Regions. I cannot present this series of events as fact; but it is an appealing, fulfilling, and reasonable possibility. For a clear presentation of

this line of thinking, see the Dake Annotated Reference Bible, Eph 4:8-10, with explanatory notes.

27. Running the Race of Life.

Chapter 12 opens with four of the richest verses in the Bible; they speak of the Christian life, with its difficulties and problems. In these verses Paul uses the metaphor of an athletic event, a race that we run, from the moment when we enter the Kingdom of God, until we leave this life and step into the next. The richness of the content here calls for individual attention to the components of the passage.

The spacing here MUST be freed from some kind of auto formatting!

a. So Great a Cloud of Witnesses. (12:1a)

As we make our way through life as children of God we must remember that we are not pioneers. So many others have gone before us that Paul describes them as “a cloud” of those who have made their way through life, faithfully bearing witness to the truth. We have them as examples to encourage us; beyond this, the meaning is uncertain⁴³.

b. Get Rid of Unnecessary Weights. (12:1b)

We are to get rid of things in our lives that hinder us in living for the Lord. These are things that do not stop us, or make the race impossible; rather, they are often small things that distract us, slow us down and use energy that would otherwise help us to make steady progress. They aren't sins (we will get to that next); they may be good things, but things that play a larger role in our lives than they should--things to which we give our time and energy, that would be better spent in actively serving the Lord.

c. The Sin(s) that Easily Beset Us. (12:1c)

Like unnecessary weights, there are often also sins to which we are particularly susceptible. There may be sins that are a problem for me, but sins that may not be a problem area for you. We all seem to have thin spots in our spiritual armor, and as we make our way through life we become aware of them. These will be areas where we do not dare to dabble; we should flee from them. We must carefully avoid these problem areas and, eventually, perhaps we can leave them behind, in the trash bin of life.

(Consider using here the cover art [Sally] of “Live Free.”)

d. Life Is a Distance Event. (12:1d)

⁴³ There are differences of opinion concerning the identity of the “cloud of witnesses.” Some believe they are guardian angels; others believe that they are all the people who come into contact with us in this life. Still others believe the witnesses are the believers who have died before us, looking down on us from Heaven.

Victorious Christian living is not achieved the first day, or the first year, or even the first decade; it is a lifetime accomplishment. Life is a distance event--not a sprint. We will need patience, because there will definitely be difficult times, including times of failure. We can expect the enemy of our souls to continue to attack us throughout the race, ambushing us with temptations and deceptions. In addition, we may pick up again one or more weights of which we must, again, rid ourselves. Besetting sins may cause us to stumble; when they do we must repent, be forgiven, and get back on the track. The Christian life requires patience--with others, and with ourselves; and the good news is that, if we don't give up, the trials and tribulations will make us stronger, and will develop our patience⁴⁴.

e. Looking Unto Jesus. (12:2a)

As we go through life we have the examples of the faithful who have gone before us to encourage us; but our ultimate example is Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our faith. His is the example that we should constantly keep before us, to encourage us; and it is He whom we should emulate. We cannot ever achieve perfection, for we will be Christians under construction, a work in progress, until we die and step into his presence; but, by trying to follow his example, we will make steady progress. He endured pain and horrors that we can only imagine; and he suffered, including the rejection and mockery of those for whom He suffered. We need to look unto our Leader as we run.

f. For the Joy that Was Set Before Him. (12:2b)

Jesus endured the suffering of scourging and crucifixion, and He endured the shame of hanging, naked and mutilated, on the cross, the form of execution designed for the vilest of criminals. And He despised it. But, we are told here, He endured it in order to achieve the joy that was set before Him. Opinions differ as to the identity of the joyful reward that made him able to endure it all. I like the idea that, as He hung there, the Father gave him visions of each of us that He was rescuing from the power of sin and death--a panorama--or a slide show, if you will, of each and every one of us who would receive the redemption that He was making possible by his suffering⁴⁵.

g. The battle Is in the Mind. (12:3-4)

By looking unto Jesus, by keeping his example before us, we can keep going. When we stumble and would like to quit, with his example before us

⁴⁴ Romans 5:3-5.

⁴⁵ See in this regard Is 53:10.

we can get up, get back on the track and continue the race. And the factor that determines the outcome, whether we get back in the race or give up and quit, is our decision--what we decide to do. The battle is won or lost in the mind⁴⁶. And, he reminds the Hebrew believers, they may be experiencing some persecution and hardship; but, compared with the suffering of some, it is not so bad, for they have not yet suffered grievous injury and the spilling of their blood.

28. Despise Not the Chastening. (12:5-13)

Again quoting from the Old Testament, Paul speaks of hardships as chastening, or correction, by the Lord⁴⁷. And, he says, we are not to scorn or despise the correction that we experience, for it is used by the Lord for our benefit. He chastens and corrects us, when we need it, because He loves us. Using the example of our earthly fathers, who correct and discipline their children because they love them; in fact, he says, a child who is not corrected and disciplined by his father is not a true son, and his father does not care about him. In such a situation, he says, the child is in the position of an illegitimate child, abandoned and ignored by his father and left to find his own way through the dangers and pitfalls of life. And, he points out, although chastening and correction are not pleasant at the time, the result is living in the peace of a right relationship with the Lord, without a burden of sin and guilt. Then, quoting Isaiah and Proverbs, he makes an important point: in these times of correction, as in all difficult times, we should encourage and support one another, and we must stay “on the straight and narrow path⁴⁸.”

***NOTE:** For many years I was involved in New Life for Girls, an excellent ministry of last resort to women of all ages whose lives have been wrecked by destructive lifestyles. I served as a board member, and in personal ministry to the women. One thing that they consistently needed was to forgive and be freed from resentment of their parents--not because they had been too strict, but for the opposite reason. They resented their parents for not being strict enough--for allowing them to grow up without rules or boundaries, making a mess of their lives. I dealt with this problem, not once or twice, but in almost every case.*

29. A Reminder that We Need Each Other. (12:14-17)

Prompted by the Holy Spirit to warn the Hebrew Christians that hard times are ahead for them, Paul reminds them of the deadly effects of sin, and he

⁴⁶ II Corinthians 10:5; I Pet 1:13, 2:11.

⁴⁷ Proverbs 3:11-12.

⁴⁸ Isaiah 35:3-4; Prov 4:23-27.

urges them to pursue peace with those about them, and to live holy, consecrated lives⁴⁹. Reminding them of the example of Esau, who traded away something precious, i.e. his birthright, for a bowl of pottage, he re-emphasizes the importance of looking out for one another, lest any be tempted to turn back and spoil their relationships with the Lord. It is essential, he reminds them, to stay in close fellowship with one another, encouraging one another and, when necessary, confronting one another when we believe that a brother or sister is in error.

30. Mount Sinai Compared with Mount Zion. (12:18-29)

In a passage whose meaning might be overlooked, in the last 12 verses of Chapter 12, Paul compares the old covenant with the new. He uses symbolism heavily, and nails his points with still more references to the old covenant. In rich prose he takes the Hebrew believers back to the beginning of the exodus from Egypt. He paints a terrifying word picture of the awesome display of the power and majesty of God when Moses was called up onto the mountain to receive the beginning of the Law. He doesn't name the mountain (Sinai) because they don't need to be told--they know exactly what he means. He tells them that, in receiving Jesus as the Messiah, everything is different. They have not come, he says, to a physical mountain that can be touched, one blackened and shaken by the fiery presence of God. Watching, at the base of that mountain, the Israelites were commanded not to touch even the base of the mount, for if they did, they would die. This so terrified them that they could not stand the sound of the words. The fiery tempest on the mount and the sound of the heavenly trumpet were so terrible that even Moses trembled. This is the revelation of God that the Hebrew Christians had known before.

However, he tells them, they have now come to the spiritual Mount Zion, a very different thing, the heavenly Jerusalem, which is the Church of the Firstborn. They have come to God, the Judge of all, and to the presence of angels too numerous to count. The Church of the Firstborn includes the spirits of those justified, the righteous dead, in Heaven. And, he reminds them, they have come to Jesus, our Mediator of the new and better covenant, and to his blood sacrifice, which provides forgiveness, a thing so much better than the blood of Abel, which cried out for vengeance. He warns them not to reject Jesus, nor to refuse to hear Him. For, he says, if those who refused to hear Him on earth did not escape judgment, how much less shall we escape if we close our ears to the words He speaks from Heaven?

⁴⁹ Psalm 34:14.

He reminds them that the voice of God caused the earth to shake at Mount Sinai and, quoting the prophet Haggai, he warns them that God will once more cause his voice to shake, not just the earth, but also the heavens⁵⁰. In closing the chapter, Paul exhorts the Hebrew believers to live lives acceptable to God, with reverence and fear, for, in case they have forgotten, one aspect of God is that He is a consuming, purifying fire.

***NOTE:** Although the Book of Hebrews was written about 30 years before the Book of Revelation, and Paul never saw John's amazing book of End-Time prophecy, vv 22-27 here read as if they had come from Revelation. It appears that the Holy Spirit was showing Paul things that did not come from his human knowledge and understanding.*

31. “And, In Closing...”

Chapter 13 opens with a rapid-fire string of significant, memorable, often-quoted statements. It is as if Paul is closing with a list of important reminders for the Hebrew Christians:

a. Entertaining Angels. (13:1-2)

Let brotherly love continue, and don't refuse shelter or food to those who need it. Some who have fed and sheltered strangers, he says, didn't realize it, but they were entertaining angels. With a fascinating suggestion he seems to be implying, “if you don't entertain strangers, you might miss a great blessing.”

b. Do What You Can to Help Prisoners and Others Who Are Suffering Hardship. (13:3)

Don't neglect to help those (fellow-believers) who are in prison, care about them as if you were a prisoner with them. And do what you can for others going through difficult times, as if you were experiencing the same hardship as they.

***NOTE:** When speaking of “them that are in bonds” (those in prison), he is almost exclusively referring to those suffering under Nero's persecution, as he, himself, was. Except for Nero's campaign to stamp out the Church, there would be little reason for a believer to be in prison.*

c. Marriage Is Honorable and the Bed (Must Be Kept) undefiled. (13:4)

Hold marriage in honor and esteem it highly, protecting the marriage bed (the intimacy of husband and wife) from being violated or defiled. And this

⁵⁰ Haggai 2:6.

is no small matter, for God will judge and punish whore mongers and adulterers⁵¹.

d. Don't Be Covetous; Be Content with What You Have. (13:5a)

We must avoid coveting those things that we do not have, and which belong to others. We should be content with what we have; otherwise we will keep ourselves miserable, thinking of those things we wish were ours, rather than being thankful for, and enjoying, what we have⁵².

e. God Will Never Leave Us Nor Forsake Us. (13:5b-6)

This great fact, that God will never leave nor forsake us, is the source of comfort in all difficult times. We will go through painful and difficult times in life; but through them all, He will be with us. He is our helper, so why fear man⁵³?

f. Be Thoughtful of Your Leaders. (13:7)

Be thoughtful and appreciative of those who lead and teach you in the Church, for it is they who brought you to the knowledge of the gospel and your relationship with Christ. Watch their behavior and (if it is godly and good), let them be examples for your life.

g. Jesus Doesn't Change. (13:8)

The 10 words of v 8 express an underlying principle, a foundational fact of the Kingdom of God that is worthy of pondering, and which could be the subject of volumes. It isn't even a complete sentence, because there is no verb (the verb "is" is clearly implied, between "Jesus Christ" and "the same"). It is simply a statement of fact concerning our wonderful, divine, Redeemer: He doesn't change; and He is eternal. What He was, in what we may call eternity past, He is today. And what He is today, He will continue to be the same in what we may call eternity future⁵⁴.

h. Resist Doctrinal Add-Ons. (13:9)

We are to become doctrinally well-established, stable and steady. Our hearts must be established in the grace, goodness, and love of God, and not confused or cluttered with legalistic requirements or "new truth" (there is no such thing as "new truth"--truth is eternal). We are to be especially wary of food restrictions ("touch not, taste not, handle not..."). Trying to keep up with new doctrinal ideas, deciding what to believe and then having that

⁵¹ Here the Greek rendered (marriage) "bed" is *koite*, referring to sexual love between a husband and wife; from this Greek word we derive the English word "coitus." In Romans 13:13 the same word is rendered "chambering" (i.e., visiting many different bed chambers in a promiscuous way).

⁵² Philippians 4:10-14.

⁵³ Joshua 1:5.

⁵⁴ Malachi 3:6.

belief dashed and replaced with another, can keep us in a confusing spin⁵⁵; and God is not the author of confusion⁵⁶.

32. Now, Sacrifices Are to Be Spiritual. (13:10-17)

At this point Paul becomes somewhat mysterious and theological again, comparing the old covenant with the new. Even for brilliant Paul, and even for his book of Hebrews, verses 10-17 are unusually rich, and super-saturated with meaning⁵⁷. Referring to the fact that under the old covenant the priests and Levites were fed with meat and other things which were sacrificed on the altar, he points out that now, under the new covenant, the altar cannot be used in this way. In fact, the new altar is nothing like that old one. He seems to make reference to the altar in the Heavenly Sanctuary, where mortal priests and Levites cannot go; and, simultaneously, he seems to be referring to the altar of our hearts, that private place within us, where we spiritually meet with the Lord.

He then speaks of the way the old covenant priests sacrificed animals outside the camp, and then carried the sacrificial blood into the Tabernacle (and, later, the Temple), for specific applications. He contrasts the old way with the fact that Jesus, our Passover Lamb, was led outside Jerusalem as if he were a vile criminal, where He was put to death, shedding his atoning blood for all mankind. Because of his perfect sacrifice, allowing Himself to be publicly humiliated, we should be willing to go forth in life, bearing the persecution that comes to us, simply because we follow Him.

Reminding us that we have no permanent home on this Earth, but that we do have an eternal home awaiting us in Heaven, we should offer sacrifices, as did the priests under the old covenant. However, there is a significant difference: now, under the new covenant; our sacrifices are to be spiritual. We are to offer up praises, continually, the fruit of our lips, giving thanks to Him⁵⁸. We must also remember the needs of others, and help them when we can; this also is a spiritual sacrifice that is pleasing to God. We are also to obey our leaders in the Church, who are responsible for our spiritual

⁵⁵ The Greek word rendered “carried about” in v 9 is *periphero*, meaning carried from place to place, or to spin about.

⁵⁶ I Corinthians 14:33.

⁵⁷ I would never afflict you unnecessarily with such a word in the text of this study guide; but, theologically, vv 10-14 are an exercise in “typology.” In this, what the Hebrew Christians are doing, in their legalistic religious exercises, is the type; and the New Covenant, with Christ Jesus, as our eternal High Priest, receiving spiritual sacrifices, is the antitype. See the explanatory **NOTE** following Highlight 8.

⁵⁸ Psalm 51:14-17, 141:2; Hos 14:2; Rev 5:8.

health and welfare; they will have to answer to God for the way they perform these duties⁵⁹.

***NOTE:** Verses 15 and 16 are still another reminder of the essential balance between our spiritual lives and our practical lives. This is the need for both faith and good works, i.e. the need to please our Great High Priest with spiritual sacrifices, and our responsibility for helping those who are in need. This balance of the spiritual and the practical is the theme of the book of James, which we will study next.*

33. Pauline Closing Instructions and Benediction. (13:18-25)

The final verses of Hebrews sound like Paul's typical final instructions and requests. He is in prison and asks for prayer--for himself and those with him--so that he may be able to visit Jerusalem⁶⁰. And, with a beautiful benediction, the news of Timothy's release from prison, and greetings from the believers in Italy, he closes the epistle.

⁵⁹ The assumption here is that those in authority over us in the Church do not require us to do wrong or sinful things. This is a parallel to the principle that we are not required to obey our earthly secular leaders if they require something sinful or otherwise wrong.

⁶⁰ In v 23 Paul says that Timothy has been "set at liberty." This may mean that Timothy has been briefly imprisoned--perhaps with Paul in his rented home; or it may mean that Timothy has finished, or has been released from an assigned task or mission. The fact is that the meaning of this statement is unknown.