

Sound Living

Hebrews

Jerry Nelson

Do you ever doubt the existence of God? Do you wish you could hear from God? The author of Hebrews tells us God exists and how we can hear from Him: through the prophets of old and through His son, Jesus Christ.

Through the book of Hebrews we can:

- Know Jesus better than ever.
- Know who He is in ways we have not thought of.
- Be so impressed with the person and character of Jesus that we are attracted to Him.
- Be so impressed with His actions on our behalf that we respond to Him.
- Persevere in discouragement because we know Him and
- Follow Jesus! Live as He lived and love what He loves until we see Him face to face.

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By Jerry Nelson, www.soundliving.org

Requests for information should be addressed to jnelson@soundliving.org

Jerry Nelson has served as the senior pastor of Southern Gables Church (EFCA) since 1978. Expository preaching is his passion and practice. He holds undergraduate degrees from Moody Bible Institute and the University of Minnesota, a master's degree from Denver Seminary and an earned doctorate (D.Min.) from the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School along with an honorary doctorate (D.D.) from Trinity College and Seminary of India. He and his wife Barbara live in Lakewood, Colorado and have four children.

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Chapter One

God Has Spoken Hebrews 1:1-2A

Many people have a favorite verse from the Bible. Maybe you have many favorite verses or passages. That's true for me. Depending on the situation, or my emotional state, I find that one or another verse on a particular occasion speaks most powerfully to me. For years there has been one verse in particular that is a very favorite verse of mine. The verse is Hebrews 1:1 and the beauty of it lies in what it says but I confess to an affection for the way it is stated in the King James Version. Yes, it is archaic language but it is stated so majestically.

"God, who at sundry times and in diverse manners spake in times past to the fathers by the prophets hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son"

That's an awesome statement—God has spoken! He is not silent. He could have said nothing—we could be on our own. We could be as ignorant of Him as is a tribal witch doctor. But the creator of the universe, of you and me, has spoken. He has said something—He is communicating with us. God is talking! We don't have to guess what He thinks, we don't have to wonder how we relate to Him, or to question what His plan is. **God** has spoken!

But not everyone knows that. Bertrand Russell, the English philosopher said, "...man is the product of (chance) causes...His origins, his growth, his hopes and fears, his loves and beliefs, are but the outcome of (the) accidental (meeting) of atoms...all the labor of the ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death

of the solar system.”¹ Russell said there is no God **to** speak, hence no word from God. But all the world’s religions, and the quest of every human heart gives evidence of how unsatisfying Russell’s philosophy truly is. The world teems with religions, each of them offering some explanation of the human search for life’s meanings.

The author of the book of Hebrews tells us how God has spoken.

Do you ever doubt the existence of God? Do you ever wonder if He is really there? Do you ever wish you could just hear from God? Have you ever been in a situation where you wondered, “Why doesn’t God say something?” How can God be so silent? Job cried out long before the Old Testament was written: *“If only I knew where to find him; if only I could go to his dwelling... I would find out what he would answer me, and consider what he would say.”* (Job 23:3-5)

Others have said God is so silent, He must not exist. Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish director, has written brilliant screenplays on the subject of God’s supposed silence. In the film, *The Seventh Seal* there is a man seeking God. He is named Antonius Block, a knight returning from the Crusades. Early in the film the Knight stops at a wayside chapel and enters the confessional booth. He is not aware that the one hearing his confession is Death. Listen to the exchange:

Knight: Why can’t I kill God within me? Why does he live on in this painful and humiliating way, even though I curse him and want to tear him out of my heart? Why, in spite of everything, is he a baffling reality that I can’t shake off? Do you hear me?

Death: Yes, I hear you.

Knight: I want knowledge, not faith, not suppositions, but knowledge. I want God to stretch out his hand toward me, reveal himself, speak to me.

Death tempts him: But he remains silent.

Knight: I call out to him in the dark, but no one seems to be there.

Death tempts him further: Perhaps no one is there.

Knight: Then life is an outrageous horror. No one can live in the face of death knowing that all is nothingness.

The Knight experienced a felt absence of God. He was always reaching out, asking if God were truly there.

What he missed is that God is there. God has revealed Himself. God is not hidden—it is we who have hidden ourselves from Him by refusing to listen.

God Has Spoken

And the author of the book of Hebrews tells us how God has spoken. There are two major ways God has spoken. Before I mention the two major ways let me remind you of two other ways that God has spoken to people - two other ways that God has communicated something of Himself to every human being.

God tells us something of Himself through creation.

"For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse." (Romans 1:20)

God tells us something of Himself through our consciences—things that we know about God innately.

"Indeed, when Gentiles, who do not have the law, do by nature things required by the law, they are a law for themselves, even though they do not have the law, since they show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them." (Romans 2:14-15)

But the author speaks here, not to those lesser ways of God's speaking to us but God's greater, more complete ways.

Look at Hebrews 1:1: *"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways..."* What is the first of the two ways the author states? God has spoken through the **prophets**. Many times in the Bible the word "prophets" is a reference not only to men like Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah but to all the authors of the Old Testament books (from Genesis to Malachi) including men like Moses, who wrote the first five books of the Bible and David who wrote the Psalms. When the Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, much of the New Testament had not yet been written. So he was referring mostly to the Old Testament, when he said, *"All Scripture is God-breathed"*: it is inspired by God—it is God speaking. God said to Jeremiah, *"I have appointed you a prophet... to whoever I send you, you shall go and whatever I command you, you will say. I have put my words in your mouth."* He told Jeremiah exactly what to say.

Throughout the Old Testament we find it written, *"thus saith the Lord"* or *"This is what God said."* And when it says, "God has spoken" that is not a metaphor for some non-verbal communication, it means literally God has

spoken; God has used words, statements, questions and commands spoken either by Him or by His appointed messengers such as angels. And the Bible is not a human editorial about God but it is God's communication, God's words to people. God has spoken.

Hebrews 1 also says, "*God spoke through the prophets at many times and in various ways.*" God spoke at many times to Adam and to Abraham and to Moses, hundreds if not thousands of years apart. Over many years He spoke to

God has spoken through the prophets, not only to men like Daniel, Jeremiah and Isaiah but to all the authors of the Old Testament books.

Abel, Enoch, Noah, Isaac, Jacob and Joseph. And He also spoke in many ways: He spoke through dreams and visions; He spoke through angels, He spoke through law, story, prophecy and poetry. He spoke to Moses in the storm and thunder on Mt. Sinai and in a gentle whisper to Elijah. The author of Hebrews along with the other authors of the Bible testifies to this central truth—this is the Word of God. God has spoken. God superintended the history as it happened and the writing of it as it was penned.

A recent cover story in TIME magazine asked a question in its title: "The Bible, Fact or Fiction?" The writers of the article recounted some of the historical and archeological findings of recent years that corroborate some of the historical statements of the Bible. What I found interesting was not that TIME gave a rather rational and even balanced review of the findings but most interesting were the letters to the editor in the following weeks. Listen to these words:

A religious leader wrote, "I find religiously irrelevant the question of whether events described in the Bible represent historical fact. If it could be proved that every event portrayed in the Bible is absolutely and unequivocally historically false, my faith would remain unaltered."

Another wrote, "As a trained theologian and pastor, I am not concerned with whether there was an Abraham, a Noah, a 40-year trek in the wilderness, or an invasion of Palestine. Those stories were created to convey theological truth..."

Yes, God spoke in the past but now God has spoken to us by His Son.

Well, maybe they aren't concerned but I am! I find the question of historicity exceedingly relevant! If the Bible is nothing more than the fanciful musings of the philosophically curious then God has not spoken and I don't know any more about Him than I can learn from the stars above and the conscience within. And what I learn by those two means leaves me very insecure indeed, for all they tell me is that God is and that I'm guilty. But God has spoken!

If you look at Hebrews 1:1 and 2 again you can see that the author is not interested only in writing that God has spoken through the Old Testament but the author's greatest interest is in getting on to the major point:

*"But in these last days he has spoken to us **by His Son.**" (Emphasis added)*

In these words the primary theme of the letter is now stated. Yes, God spoke in the past but now God has spoken in a way that is far superior—He has spoken to us by His Son. The author wants us to know that God has now

spoken to us in a way that is unlike anything before. He is no longer limiting what He wants to say to what frail sinful humans can convey. Instead He is going to come Himself in the person of His Son and say it directly by His very presence and voice. The big difference is that before, God used prophets; now, He is using His own Son.

Don't misunderstand. The author is not suggesting for a minute that the Old Testament is now unnecessary or that it is faulty. No, God's words to us in the Old Testament are still God's words, and the revelation of God in Jesus can only be understood within the context of the former revelation in the Old Testament. The Old Testament sets the stage for the new. The problem with the Old Testament is not that it is in any way faulty but that it is incomplete. The picture we get of God in the Old Testament is an awesome picture but the difference between a picture of God and having God present is even greater than the difference between having a picture of your loved one and having them with you.

What we have in the Bible is what theologians call "progressive revelation." It is not that the progress is from the less true to the more true but from the less complete to the more complete. The Old Testament writers knew they didn't have the full picture. They knew they were only seeing part of the plan. I Peter 1:10-12 says, *"The prophets who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, trying to find out the time and circumstances of the things they wrote about. It was revealed to them that they were not serving themselves but you when they spoke of those things that were to come."* (Paraphrase)

Slowly over time God revealed Himself ever more fully. Abraham had only occasional contact with God. Moses

several hundred years later had much more; he had the written Word of God, the Law. But then Jesus came and John says it best, "*The Word became flesh and we beheld his glory, glory as of the only begotten of the father - full of grace and truth.*" They saw God. Jesus is the Father's ultimate revelation of Himself. Do you want to know what God is saying? Listen to Jesus. Do you want to see God? Look at Jesus.

In Hebrews 1:1 there is one more thing I want to draw your attention to.

The author writes "in the past" God spoke through the prophets but in "*these last days He has spoken to us by his Son.*" What does he mean "in the past" in contrast to "in these last days"? In Jewish thought there were basically two ages in all of human history—this present age and the age to come. The authors of the Old Testament clearly saw themselves as part of the present age and they wrote about and looked forward to the age to come. They called that age to come "the last days." Most, if not all, of the Old Testament writers prophesied concerning the "last days" and the Messiah who would bring in that age to come. They understood that everything they prophesied about would be completed in "the last days."

They understood that all their laws and rituals were but reflections of what would come.

They knew that a time was coming and a Messiah was coming who would complete everything that they knew only in part.

Jesus came as the fulfillment of that Old Testament prophecy. The author of Hebrews is clearly stating that there is no revelation beyond Jesus—He completes it. There was a progression of revelation from Abraham to Moses to David but when Jesus came, He completed it. There is no greater revelation of the Father than Jesus. If you want to

hear God, don't listen anywhere else. If you want to see God, don't look anywhere else. If you want to know God, don't look for anyone else.

Now to make the point even clearer: Don't go looking for a further revelation of God, not in Islam or Mormonism or Jehovah's Witnesses or Christian Science or anywhere else. Jesus is the **Son; He is God in the flesh, the full and complete revelation of God.** God has spoken by His **Son! And He has spoken because He wants to** communicate with us—He wants to tell us something that is of eternal significance. He wants us to know that we can belong to Him and that we can know Him.

***Do you want to know what God is saying?
Listen to Jesus. Do you want to see God?
Look at Jesus.***

Jim Kimbriel told a story this week found by evangelist, Leighton Ford, in the *Charlotte Observer*. There's a Canadian whose nickname is "Father Goose." His actual name is Bill Ashman and he grew up in Ontario. When he was little he wished he could fly like the birds. Forty years later a friend said to him, "Bill you are always talking about flying like a bird, have you ever thought of hang-gliding?" Well Bill tried it and then he built one of those ultra-light single engine airplanes—the kind that looks like a go-cart with wings and a propeller. Still remembering that he wanted to fly not only like but with the birds an animal trainer friend asked him if he had ever heard of "imprinting." Imprinting is where young geese are taken immediately from their eggs and spend time with someone other than another goose. Bill tried it. He walked all around the yard with them. He rode his motorbike around and they followed him. Then he tried his ultra—light airplane. It took

two years but one morning they followed right into the air and right next to the wings of his plane.

The scientific community learned of what Bill was doing and they got an idea. The Trumpeter Swan, which had been bred in captivity, was becoming extinct because when they released them into the wild, they couldn't get them to migrate. Using the same method of "imprinting" that he used with the geese, Bill is going to become "one" with the Trumpeter swans and lead them to migrate South and then in the spring, migrate home again.

The author of Hebrews brings us face to face with the fact that God speaks, God does say something. God has revealed Himself.

Leighton Ford said the story reminded him of our Father-God. God in His desire to save us from extinction used a plan to show us how to get home. But He not only got close to us, He became one of us. God the Son came and He didn't pretend to be God and man, He is God and He is human. One author put it this way: "God is engaged in a stunning love affair with the human family. In the person of the Son, God exposes himself as incarnate to satisfy our need to grasp him with our senses: to see him, to listen to him, to touch him."² God has revealed Himself in His Son. Ingmar Bergman, the Swedish film producer I mentioned earlier, tells of one day having a vision of wandering around a great cathedral and coming before a picture of Christ. He demanded of the picture, "Speak to me. I will not leave this cathedral until you speak to me."

The picture did not speak and that year Bergman produced another of his films on man's despair of ever finding God.

The film was titled, "The Silence," as if God has not spoken. Bergman was looking in the wrong place. He was looking at the wrong picture. God has spoken to us by His Son. It is in looking at the character and speech and actions and above all the supreme action of His death on the cross for us that we see Jesus and **hear** God—a God who came, who spoke and who loves us. For those who wonder why God is silent, the truth is, He is not.

Some take little note of the fact that God has spoken "Because," they say, "God spoke 2000 years ago, but what has that to do with me today?" But I say God is still speaking. God, by His Spirit is still opening men's and women's minds and hearts to the truth of what He has said in the Old Testament and He is opening their hearts to the witness of the New Testament to who Jesus is and what He has done. God's word is alive and active and He will meet you and speak to you!

There are only two kinds of people in this church—those who are not yet God's children and those who are. To those who are not, I challenge you as another pastor did, "Read one of the Gospels through, sincerely praying the essence of Bergman's prayer over it as you go: 'Speak to me! Please speak to me!' "³ The author of Hebrews brings us face to face with the fact that God speaks, God does say something. God has revealed Himself. And He has repeatedly taken the initiative to make Himself known because He wants to be known. God wants us to know Him. God has come again and again into our human experience.

Yes, I would like Him to visit me as He did Abraham or Moses but He has not chosen to do so in that way. He has chosen a better way; He has revealed Himself fully in Christ. "No," the author of Hebrews says, "God is not silent!" He has spoken and he has spoken completely and

finally in His Son.

As a result of this series of sermons from Hebrews:
I want us to know Jesus better than ever.

I want us to know who He is in ways we have not thought of before or for a long time.

I want us to be so impressed with His person and character that we are attracted to Him.

I want us to be so impressed with His actions on our behalf that we will respond to Him.

I want us to be so encouraged by knowing Him that we will desire to and in fact persevere even in the face of discouragements and opposition.

I want us to want to follow Jesus: to live as He lived, to love what He loves and to long to see Him face to face.

PRAYER

Lord, I want every hearer to make it a life-long passion to know Jesus; to learn everything about Him that he/she can and to seek Him with their whole heart. To know God!

Lord Jesus, quicken our spirits, I beg! Let us see You in these words, You, revealed in these last days as the Father has revealed You. Let us see Your superiority—let us be overwhelmed with what You reveal in this book of Hebrews.

End Notes

¹ *Basic Writings of Bertrand Russell*, p. 62

² Lane CTC p. 32

³ Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, Chap 1

Chapter Two

Who do you say that I am? Matthew 6:9

To your way of thinking and living, who is Jesus? Who is He to you? Most of us have been around churches long enough to be able to give quick and correct answers to at least part of that question. The part we can answer quickly is “who is Jesus?”

- He is the Son of God
- He is the Savior/Messiah
- He is Lord

But when I ask, “Who is He to you?” that requires more thought. You see, it is one thing to give textbook answers to the question “Who is Jesus?” but it is something else to answer, “What difference does He make to me?”

For some Jesus is little more than a remote historical figure. A person who lived a long time ago, a long ways away, who spoke a different language, in a very different culture. Like Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, Napoleon Bonaparte, and Julius Caesar, they know Jesus somehow impacted Western Civilization but its relevance to them and today is difficult to imagine. They readily say His name in a service of worship but He’s light-years away from their work, and entertainment and relationships...He resides like an “insubstantial phantom on the edges of consciousness.”¹

For some, even in our churches, Jesus is simply a moral teacher—a teacher of how to live happily. He embodied in His life and teaching what it means to be a good person: how to love, forgive, and treat others as you want to be treated. He’s the Jesus some learn of in Sunday School and

in their bedtime stories. This Jesus is simply part of a Christian orientation woven into their personalities by church-going parents—simply part of their culture, their rearing. But a Jesus who is part of their lives and is important to their lives is unthought.

A.W. Tozer said it a little more sharply, “God is treated as visiting royalty in a democratic country. (Interesting but irrelevant.) Everyone takes His name upon his or her lips, and especially at certain seasons he is feted and celebrated and hymned.

“But behind all this flattery people hold firmly to their right of self-determination. As long as a person is allowed to play host he will honor God with his attention, but always God must remain a guest and never seek to be Lord.

“People will have it understood that this is their world; they will make its laws and decide how it shall be run. God is permitted to decide nothing. People bow to God and as they bow, they manage with difficulty to conceal the crown upon their own heads.”²

The temptation is always there to just live life like normal people and not get all involved in these fanatical ideas about actually following Christ.

It is sometimes difficult to perceive as relevant a Jesus we can't see, a Jesus who isn't right in our faces day after day. As we read the book of Hebrews, it seems the people to whom the author was writing were people having a difficult time living a Christian life. There's reason to believe they were being ridiculed if not persecuted for being Christians. And the tougher things got the more likely they were to question the relevance of being Christians. Apparently they

were particularly tempted to just go back to their former religion, or at least some form of it, and stop making such a big deal out of Jesus. To get along you have to go along—that seemed wise. The temptation is always there to just live life like normal people and not get all involved in these fanatical ideas about actually following Christ.

But look at Hebrews 2:1. Here the author is writing to say, "You can't just let Jesus slip out of your consciousness—you can't just push Him out to the periphery of your life."

"We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away." (2:1)

Do you see the word "therefore" in the challenge? What does the "therefore" refer to? The preceding chapter. The author is saying in essence, "based on what I have just told you about Jesus, certainly you will agree that we must pay more attention." It's as if he has asked, "Have you forgotten or don't you realize who Jesus is?"

Let's go back to chapter 1 now and see what it is the author reminds his readers. In Chapter One we looked at verses 1 and 2 we saw the author beginning the whole book, the whole sermon by an introduction of Jesus as superior to any previous ways God had used to communicate with human beings.

"In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe." (1:1-2a)

Now what he does through the remainder of this chapter is demonstrate by his own declarations and by quoting from the Old Testament just who Jesus is, thus proving His superiority over all others. You need to be looking in your

Bible at Hebrews 1 to most fully appreciate what I want you to see next. Beginning at the middle of verse 2 and through verse 3, the author makes six statements about Jesus.

1. He is the Son of God and thus an heir
2. Jesus is the one who made the universe
3. Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being.
4. He sustains all things by the power of His word.
5. He made purification for sins
6. He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

What I want you to see is that beginning at verse 5, the author picks up on and expands on four of those six statements. In verse 5 and continuing through verse 9 he writes about Jesus' relationship to the Father—He is a Son, an heir. He is deity. In verse 10, he camps again on the issue of Jesus as creator. In verses 11-12 he writes of Jesus unchanging eternal nature. And in Verse 13 he addresses again the issue of Jesus as King. Only then does he come to the issue we looked at first, at the beginning of chapter 2: how seriously do we take Jesus?

But let's go back to his description of Jesus in chapter 1. You have probably noticed the author's reference to angels several times in the context. Steven in the book of Acts and Paul in the book of Galatians tell us something about how the Law of God was given to Moses in the Old Testament that is not mentioned in the Old Testament: Angels were used by God to give the Law to Moses. God gave the law but He did so through His angels.

Most of the Old Testament descriptions of people meeting angels are so awe inspiring that it would be easy to think of angels as almost god-like. And if God chose angels, those awesome creatures, to give the Law to Moses then angels

are very special. And it was tempting to think that angels were more special than Jesus; after all, Jesus was merely a human being. It's not that these Christians were necessarily tempted to worship angels but more likely that they were exaggerating the role of angels and minimizing the role of Jesus. They were more enamored of angels than of Jesus. What the author will do is set the record straight about Jesus so that such foolishness doesn't continue.

Jesus is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's being.

And what does it say about Jesus? In verse 2 and in verses 5-9, Jesus is declared to be the Son of God and the Heir of all things. Quoting from the very Old Testament these Jewish Christians would have been reading, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the author establishes who Jesus is. If you are impressed with angels, and you have every right to be, then you ought to be even more impressed with Jesus.

Verse 5: Has any angel ever been called **the** Son of God? No.

Verse 6: In fact, what are the angels to do in relationship to Jesus? Worship Him.

Jesus' relationship to the Father/God is different than any human being's relationship to the Father, and even different than any spiritual being's relationship to the Father. Verse 2 says that the Son has been appointed heir of all things. Verse 6 calls Jesus the "firstborn." The "firstborn" in that culture was the "heir" to the father's wealth. The point is that Jesus rightly rules over every created thing. Or as He Himself put it in Matt. 28: "*All authority in heaven and earth has been give to me.*"

No one and no thing is superior to Him. Something might be a bit confusing about the language that is used in these verses. Did you notice it says Jesus "*was appointed*" heir? Or that the Father says, "*Today I have **become** your father*"? Or "*I will be your Father*"? Doesn't that sound like there may have been a time when Jesus wasn't those things? Almost as if there was a time when Jesus wasn't the Son of God, when Jesus didn't exist and then came into being?

In a few minutes you are going to see that the author establishes that Jesus is not only superior to the angels and everything else but that He is God, very God, nothing less than fully God. In fact he does that even in this context in verse 8 when God refers to the Son, Jesus, as "GOD". Now if Jesus is fully God, then these verses about being "appointed" an heir cannot be referring to Jesus' being but only to His action as Messiah. What it means is that in the eternal council of God the Trinity, it was determined that the second person of the Godhead (or the Trinity), the Son, would be the one who would come to earth to bring salvation and thus as the sovereign God/man He would be the rightful owner of every created thing.

And if Jesus supremacy as the Son of God and heir of all things wasn't enough for the readers to make them listen to Jesus and follow Him, and to take Him seriously, the author goes on to say not only is Jesus heir of all things but He created everything. Verse 2 says it is through the Son that God made the universe. Verse 10, quoting again from the Old Testament, repeats that truth:

"He also says, 'In the beginning, O Lord, you laid the foundations of the earth, and the heavens are the work of your hands.'"

Look at Genesis 1. I'm not just trying to be cute with

language when I say what I say next. But on the authority of Hebrews 1, John 1 and Colossians, I can read Genesis 1 this way: "In the beginning Jesus created the heavens and the earth."

"And Jesus said, 'Let there be light' "(1:3)

"And Jesus said, 'Let there be separation between earth and sky.' " (1:6)

"And Jesus said, 'Let there be dry land...' " (1:9)

Jesus is not only superior to the angels and everything else but He is God, very God, nothing less than fully God.

That baby born in a Bethlehem manger was the one who created our galaxy. The galaxy in which our earth resides is made up of over one hundred thousand million stars. Our galaxy is 100,000 light-years across— about 600 trillion miles. He made it all. That Jesus who sat on the ground by Lake Galilee talking to hundreds of people is the one who created not only our Galaxy but the one hundred, thousand, million other galaxies that we know about. And each galaxy is 3 million light years apart from each other. And turn the telescope around and make it into a microscope and we find that inner space is as awesome as outer space. Quarks, and leptons, and Neutrinos too small to measure. The Jesus whose name you sing and speak is the One who made it all. How can we consider doing anything other than following, obeying, and serving the One who is Creator?

But not only is He heir of all things and creator of everything but He is, according to verse 3, the "*radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being.*" All analogies are limited. Jesus is not like the moon to the sun, a reflection of the light, but He is the light itself. He is the

very radiance or glory of God's glory. And if that doesn't make the point that Jesus is God then the next phrase should: *"the exact representation of his being."* It is not that Jesus just acts like God but that God's very being exists in Jesus—He is God as much as the Father is God.

And if that doesn't make the point then verses 11 and 12 add more: Everything else perishes because it is perishable but the Son will remain—He is unchangeable. Everything else ends but the Son's years will never end. He is eternal. Who is Jesus: He is the glory of God, the being of God, the immutability of God and the eternity of God. Who then must He be? GOD.

But the author goes on to stack up yet another proof of Jesus supremacy- another reason why we can't ignore Him: *"he sustains all things by his powerful word."* (1:3) God's providence has to do with His controlling all things, not only the forces of nature, but the events of history, to His desired ends. What this text teaches me is that God the Son is the one who is doing that. Jesus is today superintending all history, all events to bring everything out exactly as He determined. Jesus is not an ignorant, powerless king, standing around wringing His hands, wondering what is going to happen. He is sustaining all things, upholding all things, guiding all things, including our lives because He loves us. Stop and think about it! It is not some far off, unknown force that is guiding your life but Jesus. He is the one who is working every detail of your life. If that is true, can you imagine ignoring Him?

In the middle of verse 3, the author points out the next thing about Jesus to show His supremacy. This is a point that the author is going to make much of in the rest of the letter so he only mentions it here. Just as the Jewish High Priest would go into the Temple and make a sacrifice for

the sins of the people so God the Son went to the cross both as the Priest who offered the sacrifice and the sacrifice itself. For only the infinite and perfect Son of God could actually fully pay the penalty of the law of God against our sins. Jesus actually met the requirements of the law and made it possible for us to be purified, cleansed, and forgiven of our sins. How could we ignore such a savior?

God's very being exists in Jesus—He is God as much as the Father is God. Who is Jesus: He is the glory of God, the being of God, the immutability of God and the eternity of God. Who then must He be? GOD.

And lastly, the author points out at the end of verse 3 that Jesus sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. In verse 13, quoting again from the Old Testament, the author reiterates that point: Jesus is in the unique position of authority. Using a word picture fitting for that and prior cultures, we have the picture of Jesus seated in honor and all His enemies bowing before Him. Or, Jesus standing victoriously with His feet on the necks of those who opposed or ignored Him.

Look at Revelation 19. This Hebrews picture is similar to the one given in Rev. 19:11-16

"I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the

Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. 'He will rule them with an iron scepter.' He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS."

If this is who Jesus is, then how can we ignore Him? And that is exactly the author's point when we come full circle to where we began:

"We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. For if the message spoken by angels was binding, and every violation and disobedience received its just punishment, how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation? This salvation, which was first announced by the Lord, was confirmed to us by those who heard him."(Hebrews 2:1-3)

Jesus is Heir of all things, the Creator and sustainer of all nature and all history, the savior who died for me, the one who will reign supreme over all and who is God Himself.

Oh, this is a timely warning. Be careful! Don't drift away! That word "drift" is like a boat drifting, imperceptibly, little by little unnoticed, but moving nonetheless, until its occupants are in danger.

I know how dangerous drift can be. 2 ½ years ago we were vacationing on a houseboat on Lake Powell. We tied up and began to dive into the deep water at the back of the boat. What we didn't notice was the boat drifting. It drifted into shallow water and I dove into a rock breaking

my skull in five places. Most people in life don't set out to deliberately dive into a rock. But they do drift until it happens. They neglect their relationship to the Son of God until it's too late.

In a little book entitled *A Church at Risk*, William Dean discusses two kinds of neglect. He writes about the neglect of complacency. This is like two guys drifting down a river in a canoe and thoughtlessly not paying attention to all the map markings and signs that warn of a falls. Thinking they have plenty of time and that the paddling is easy they decide to float on past some of those warnings. Only when the current was too strong and the paddling did no good did they realize they had to get out, but it was too late. We go through so much of life assuming our current lifestyle, attitudes and conduct won't hurt us. We don't want to get fanatical about Christianity. We live saying we believe in Jesus but live largely oblivious to Him because we are so busy with so much else.

But William Dean wrote of another neglect—the neglect of contempt. In verses 2 and 3 the author of Hebrews does an “if-then” argument to get our attention. I’m paraphrasing but watch the text:

“For **IF** the message, the law of God given to Moses by angels was binding and every violation and disobedience against God and His law received its just punishment, **THEN** how shall we escape the just punishment if we ignore such a great salvation as has come to us through the Lord Jesus, the Son of God who is fully and wholly God?”

To “ignore” here I believe means to deliberately disregard. I’m not making this up just to fit here in the sermon, but just within the last couple of weeks I again heard of another person who had the nerve to say “I’m a Christian

but I don't want to think about following Christ right now. I'll come back later to do that." Whenever I hear that, it frightens me greatly. How can someone say, I know Jesus is Heir of all things, the Creator and sustainer of all nature and all history, the savior who died for me, the one who will reign supreme over all and who is God Himself and walk away saying, "I'll come back later"? But whether it is the neglect of complacency or the neglect of contempt, it ends up in the same place.

Do we take Jesus seriously? I'm troubled by the movies and television shows we, the people of Southern Gables Church, watch. So many of them are scripted off of one or more of the seven deadly sins—greed, vengeance, lust, etc. We feed our minds and our children's minds on that which is the very antithesis of what Jesus told us to feed on. Do we take Jesus seriously?

I'm troubled by the gambling I hear goes on in little and big ways. The Lottery, Lotto, and Las Vegas only work because it feeds on our greed and worse yet, if we win, we have taken money for nothing from people who got nothing for it. It is not only a "stupid" tax, it is an evil tax.

I'm troubled by the immorality that is ruining so many marriages, so many young lives, and is laughed about in television sit-coms and in our off-color jokes. Do we take Jesus seriously?

We have scores of people who are doing nothing for the Kingdom of God and giving nothing to the Kingdom of God. I don't know who they are but over 500 families in this church gave less than \$500 to the ministries of the church last year. We have nursery and elementary classes of children that we can't get adults to love, teach and lead while scores of adults sit idly by not investing one minute in

anyone else other than themselves or their own family. Do we take Jesus seriously?

Here in this first chapter, the author emphasizes the deity of Christ. This is God we are talking about! And he says to us in 2:1, "*We must pay more careful attention to what we have heard so that we do not drift away.*"

How do we pay more careful attention? Ladies and gentlemen we have to get with Jesus. We must have times, many times, probably daily times, when we come into His presence, read and listen to His word, pray to and mediate on His presence. Are you meeting with Jesus?

Maybe you need to make a decision—you need to ask God's forgiveness for ignoring Him. You need to invite His grace to enable you to get serious about your relationship to Jesus Christ.

End Notes

¹ William Dean, *A Church at Risk*, p. 15

² *Ibid*, p. 17 no citation

Chapter Three

All We Were Meant to Be Hebrews 2:5-18

There is an old saying that goes like this: "There are some people who are so heavenly minded they're no earthly good." I think it is possible to turn that around and be just as true: "Some people are so earthly minded they're no heavenly good" And maybe it can be changed still more and yet be true: "Some people are so earthly minded they're no earthly good either."

Sometimes we get so mired down in "today" that we have no way to judge what is most valuable in life. We lose perspective. When we get so bogged down in the present we are very easily discouraged. We are very easily led to invest in the unimportant and miss the truly important. We are such creatures of the present that we lose sight of the future or if we have any vision of the future it appears as little more than personal peace and affluence, as Francis Shaeffer put it. We define a good future for ourselves in terms of the time, money and freedom to do whatever we want to do. That most often translates into being able to travel more, purchase a nicer house, get a newer car, obtain some new way to entertain ourselves, or get that promotion.

For others a good future has no definition at all—they have no vision for anything; they just exist from day to day. Watch some of the newer sit-coms on TV such as those about younger adults and notice the emptiness, the banality of the characters portrayed. The highest goals seem to be getting a job or getting into bed. We shouldn't be surprised that so many younger people envision no

future at all and can't even express what a good future would be like. The theology of prime-time television is that there is no personal sovereign God. We are the products of blind chance hence there is only "now," there is no future.

But even for many who consider themselves Christians, the idea of the future doesn't say much. "Well, when I die I will go to heaven not hell." What does that mean to you? Just avoidance of pain? Many young people will admit that going to heaven holds no excitement for them. And I suspect that going to heaven for many older people only appeals because of the desire to avoid what is happening here; they are tired and want relief. But is that all eternal life is: avoidance of hell and escape from our present trouble? What does God have in mind for us? What is His vision of our future?

Human beings don't have the apparent power and majesty of the angels but God put us in the highest position of having every created thing under our rule and authority.

Look at Hebrews, chapter 2. The author of this treatise declared importance of understanding and responding to our salvation. In the remainder of chapter 2 he gives us a clearer picture of what that salvation is and how it comes about.

Just as in Chapter 1, so here, in chapter 2, Jesus is still at the center of the author's thoughts but he begins at verse 5 by talking about God's ultimate intention for us human beings—our future.

"It is not to angels that he has subjected the world to

come, about which we are speaking.” (2:5)

According to the author, in this verse what has he been talking about? “The world to come.” “Salvation.” The future. When the author introduced the idea of “salvation” back at the end of chapter 1, he included in that word the whole idea of ultimate salvation—the world to come—that which takes place after this world and history, as we know it, end.

Again, looking at verse 5, who is it God has **not** subjected the world to come? (Angels) Now it is obviously not the author’s intention to talk about angels again because he goes right on to the answer the question that is begged: “If not to angels, who **has** God subjected the world to come?” To answer the question he goes back to such a well-known Psalm that he doesn’t even tell where it is found. All of his readers would know it was Psalm 8.

But before we read the quote from the Psalm it is important to remember that this Psalm was not written originally about Jesus. It is clearly written about human beings, mankind, us. The Psalmist had looked into the night sky and once again felt puny in comparison to the vastness and greatness of creation and he asks, *“What is man that you are mindful of him, the son of man (another way of speaking of human beings) that you care for him? You made him a little lower than the angels; You crowned him with glory and honor and put everything under his feet.”*

The Psalmist was awed. Just think about it, human beings don’t have the apparent power and majesty of the angels but God put us in the highest position of having every created thing under our rule and authority.

The first readers of this book would remember the rest of

the Psalm where the “everything” over which human beings rule is spelled out as *“all the works of God’s hands”* and *“all flocks and herds, and the beasts of the field, the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, all that swim the paths of the sea.”* The author of Hebrews makes the same point at the end of verse 8 when he adds, *“In putting everything under him (mankind) God left nothing that is not subject to humans.”* God says all creation is subject to mankind. Human beings are the rulers over everything.

Now look at Genesis 1:26. What the author of Hebrews is talking about and what the Psalmist was referring to is what God said at the very beginning:

“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.’ God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day.”

(Gen. 1:26-28, 31)

That’s God original intention—a world of order and prosperity and right relationships with humans ruling and caring for it all. Not a world of chaos, and grinding poverty, and ecological disasters, and selfishness and broken relationships.

Let’s go back to Hebrews 2. God’s design for human beings is that they be in a position of glory and honor and rule over all creation. But that also begs the question: When is

that supposed to happen? As we have seen, it was supposed to have already happened but the very end of verse 8 acknowledges reality: *"Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him."* God's intention for us human beings is not being experienced. We are living in a way and a world that is far different than what God created us to experience.

God's design for human beings is that they be in a position of glory and honor and rule over all creation.

Look at Romans 8. First I want to remind you of what God told us in Genesis. When the first man and woman rebelled against God by disobeying Him they lost the exalted position they were created to have. As a result of their sin, not only was their relationship to God broken but also their relationship to all creation was changed. Even the earth itself was changed and the world became a hostile place and living the human life became a painful experience. Work became labor, childbirth became an ordeal, and relationships tore apart. Many thousands of years later, we still live in that broken world and to the extent that humans rule at all in this world they do so by force, not in the way God originally intended. The author of Hebrews is right—*"Yet at present we do not see everything subject to mankind."*

But the "world to come" that the author refers to, that's different! Look at Romans 8:19-21:
"The creation waits in eager expectation for the sons of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the

glorious freedom of the children of God.”

There is coming a day when the whole world will be re-created, when the created world and everything in it will be liberated from the damage sin has done to everything. Jesus said in Matt. 25 that those who belong to Him would receive an inheritance – the Kingdom of God – prepared for them since the creation of the world. God tells us in 2 Peter that He will create a new heavens and a new earth that will be the home of those who belong to Christ. And in Rev. 21 we are given a glimpse of what that new earth will look like when God allowed John to see that things were very different on that new earth.

God’s ultimate intention for us, in keeping with His original intention for human beings, is that we will live radically different lives in a radically different world.

I think many Christians have a very fuzzy idea of what life after death will be like because we think of a place “out there” somewhere, where at best we can imagine clouds, harps, angels, and many people standing around a great throne singing songs. We should remember that “heaven” is more technically the place where the souls of believers who die now go into the presence of God. But those souls don’t have bodies; there is nothing physical about either those people or the place where they are. They are human spirits who are with God until Jesus comes again, at which time the spirits of those who belong to God and their new resurrected bodies will be reunited to live physically in the presence of the Lord.

And where will we live? After a period of time on this

present earth God will create a new earth and there we will live physically in the presence of the Lord forever. God's ultimate intention for us, in keeping with His original intention for human beings, is that we will live radically different lives in a radically different world. No longer this earth or we conditioned by or dominated by sin.

Imagine a world in which:

Children no longer taunt each other with unkind and cutting remarks. No tender young hearts coming home from school broken by rejection or failure.

Where no parents neglect or abuse their children; no children suffocating to death, unattended in a locked closet.

Where the relationships between men and women are not based on sexual power but on genuine love for each other: no rape, no rapists, no abuse or abusers.

Where every person matters and belongs: no loneliness, no sense of insignificance, and no self-pity.

Where work is a joy and has real significance: no drudgery, no sense of shame over less meaningful work, and no feelings of inferiority.

Where we aren't jockeying for position in relationships, not having to talk our way into significance by being sharper or wittier.

Not having to self-consciously act in certain ways just to be acceptable and not having to hide to avoid the possibility of rejection.

Imagine a world where there is no possibility of poverty, or

of losing a job, no possibility of not being able to support yourself or your family.

Imagine a world where there is no fear of sickness or even of death.

Imagine a world where there is no possibility that your parents will divorce each other. No possibility that your children will ruin their lives and shame or desert the family. No possibility that your husband or wife will reject and desert you.

No possibility that your best friends will fail you, turn away from you, or leave you.

But how can we know this will be true? How can we be certain this will come to be? At the end of chapter 2, verse 8 the author acknowledged that the world as God ultimately intends it has not yet come. We don't yet see everything subject to humans. But look at verse 9: *"But we do see Jesus."*

"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

The author traces the actions of Jesus that insure our relationship to that world to come. He reminds us of what Jesus did to make certain we could experience that true new age.

What point does the author emphasize over and over again about Jesus in chapter 1? That Jesus is who? God! Now here in chapter 2 the author is equally intent on proving something else about Jesus. Do you already see what it is from verse 9? Jesus is also fully a human being. This is not

just esoteric language for theologians to argue about. Whether Jesus is truly a human being is as important to every one of us as whether He is truly God. And the author is going to tell us why.

But first of all does the Bible say that Jesus is truly a human being? Look again at verse 9:

"But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because he suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."

In chapter 2 the author is equally intent on proving something else about Jesus, Jesus is also fully a human being.

What about human beings in verse 7 is true about Jesus in verse 9?

"He was made a little lower than the angels." Now we were created as human beings but according to chapter 1 Jesus has always existed therefore the point of verse 9 is that Jesus, at a point in time, became a human being.

Look at the end of verse 9: *"because Jesus suffered death so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone."*

The phrase "taste death" is a Jewish expression for "fully participating in something." We might say "just a taste" meaning a little but this expression means getting the whole experience. Jesus, who is God, became fully human so that He could fully experience the fallen human situation—living in a body that was going to die and facing all the temptations humans face.

Look now at verse 11: *"Both the one who makes men holy*

(Jesus) and those who are made holy (us) are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers."

We are never called "brothers" of the Father but we are called "brothers" of the Son of God. In verses 12 and 13 the author takes three Old Testament statements and puts them on the lips of Jesus thereby declaring Jesus' solidarity with us as human beings. He has become one of us. Since we are flesh and blood, human beings, so too Jesus shared in our humanity. The words "shared in" mean "fully participated in." Again the author emphasizes that Jesus became a human being. Look at verse 17: *"For this reason he (Jesus) had to be made like his brothers IN EVERY WAY..."*

The devil gained power over the human race when he seduced every man and woman into rebellion against God. That first rebellion allowed the reality of death to enter the human experience.

There was nothing about being truly human that Jesus missed; He was fully human.

Look back to verse 10: *"It was fitting that God should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering."*

"It was fitting," means that it was consistent with the way God designed it before creation, and consistent with the way, all through the Old Testament and New Testament, that God said He would bring about our salvation and He would do it by becoming a human being. And when it says that Jesus was "made perfect through suffering," it is saying that He was fully qualified to stand in for us only by becoming one of us: fully human. Now what is mystifying

to us, what is a conundrum for us, is that Jesus remained fully God even while He became fully a human being. He is nonetheless God even while He is human. And He is nonetheless human even while He is God.

But why did Jesus have to become a human being? Verses 14 and 17 specifically respond to that question.

*"Since we are flesh and blood, human beings, Jesus too shared in our humanity—He became a human being—**so that** (here's the first place where we are told why Jesus had to become human) *by his death Jesus might destroy the devil who holds the power of death—and that Jesus can free us who all our lives are held in slavery by our fear of death.*" (Emphasis added)*

The devil gained power over the human race when he seduced the first man and woman and every man and woman since into rebellion against God. That first rebellion allowed the reality of death to enter the human experience.¹ Since that time death shadows everything we do.

The novelist Somerset Maugham wrote:

"There are moments when I have so palpitating an eagerness for death that I could fly to it as to the arms of a lover...I am content to be assured that with my last breath my soul, with its aspirations and its weaknesses, will dissolve into nothingness."² He wrote that when he wasn't facing death squarely in the face. But his nephew, Robin Maugham, wrote of a far different attitude when he visited his uncle shortly before Somerset Maugham died. In the London Times, April 9, 1978 the nephew wrote:

"...I found (my uncle—we called him Willie) reclining on a sofa, peering through his spectacles at a Bible which had very large print. He looked horribly wizened, and his face was grim.

"I've been reading the Bible you gave me," he said, "and I've come across the quotation: 'What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?'"

"I must tell you, my dear Robin, that the text used to hang opposite my bed when I was a child...Of course it is all a lot of bunk..."

That evening, in the drawing room after dinner, Willie flung himself down onto the sofa. He said, "Oh Robin, I'm so tired."

He placed his head in his hands and then he looked up at me and took hold of my hand tightly. At that he looked toward the floor. His face was contorted with fear, and he was trembling violently. Then he looked up, ashen faced as he stared in horror ahead of him. Then suddenly he began to shriek, "Go away! I'm not ready...I'm not dead yet...I'm not dead yet, I tell you..."

His high-pitched terror-struck voice seemed to echo from wall to wall. I looked around but the room was empty."

Oh, the fear of death, especially for one with no vision for a future.

But when Jesus became a human being and died and rose again from the grave, He conquered the power of death. Jesus, a human being, broke the stranglehold Satan had on all human beings. Jesus proved that death is not the final victor over life. Death was defeated. Life wins—life in Jesus. And verse 17 gives us still more understanding of why Jesus had to become a human being.

"For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people". (2:17)

Since God is holy and we are sinful, it is impossible for us to come to God. There has to be a mediator, some human to stand between God and sinful people.

In the Old Testament, God made a temporary way for the people to come to Him. He ordained a special class of people, called priests, especially the High Priest, who would represent the people and come before God with sacrifices to assuage the anger of God against them because of their sin. The High Priest (Lev. 16:20-22) would bring the sacrifice before God in the Temple and confess his own sins and the sins of the people. And then he would transfer the guilt for their sins onto the sacrifice by laying his hands on the lamb that was being sacrificed. Then the lamb's life (symbolized by the blood) would be given instead of the people's. God's wrath would be turned away from the people; God would be made friendly toward the people.

When Jesus became a human being, He became that mediator, not a temporary one, but the sinless human, who would stand between God and others. He not only stood as the mediator to bring God and us together but He also became the sacrifice; not an animal whose blood could never actually take away sins but a fully human sacrifice. He shed His blood for our sins. He took the wrath of God against our sin. He made it possible for God to look on us with grace rather than anger.

That's why Jesus became a human being—to bring us salvation, to bring us into a right relationship to God. He brought us back to what God originally intended for us. To allow us to be the human beings God created us to be. To allow us to live in this world and the world to come, not enslaved to sin but free to be all God created us to be. And God not only wants us to experience that "world to come" later but He wants us to begin at least in part to experience some of that world now. In relationship to God and to each other in the church we can begin to experience the love, acceptance, forgiveness, trust, and joy that God designed us to enjoy in full in the "world to come."

How do we know we have such a future? Because “we see Jesus”! He’s been there and He is now exalted. If you are “in Christ” you have an almost unbelievable future. Believe it and begin living it. What perspective do you have on life and on the future? Do you truly see this life and live this life in the light of the world to come?

End Notes

¹ William Lane, *TCTC*, p. 50

² Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 76

Chapter Four

Warning Against Unbelief Hebrews 3:1—4:13 Presented by Dr. Don Payne

Ted Turner was raised in a Christian home and became a Christian as a young man. He took that Christian faith so seriously, that his intention as a teenager was to go for a career in foreign missions. But at the age of 20, his 17-year-old sister died of a disabling and disfiguring disease. And at the age of 20, Ted Turner walked away from his plans for missions and his Christian faith and is today, as many of you know, one of the most outspoken cynics of anything connected to Christian faith.

What do you do with a crisis of faith? What do you do when God seems very, very distant? Or when your road is winding and treacherous and foggy, and when the pain you feel is just as intense as the pain of someone who does not confess Christian faith? What do you do with a crisis of faith? What do you do when the questions outnumber the answers and when God does not fix things? That question may hit this group in a number of ways. For some of you, I imagine those kinds of situations are painfully familiar and you know exactly what I'm talking about when I say a Crisis of Faith. For others of you, I imagine, you have never seriously looked back once you put your hand to the plow. And you wonder whether, truly, a Crisis of Faith is something all that threatening to you. And yet there may be even a few here for whom there is no Christian faith to be in Crisis and you wonder whether the faith you might have could be subject, or is worth subjecting, to that kind of crisis.

What do you do with a Crisis of Faith? What exactly are we talking about when we talk about faith? Are we talking about warm sentiment? Are we talking about certain moral values? No, when we talk about a crisis of faith, a Crisis of Christian Faith, we're talking about a faith that finds its center in Jesus Christ—in the redeeming, saving, forgiving work of Jesus Christ, that has attached oneself to Jesus Christ, for time and for eternity. Whoever you are,

Crisis of Faith never leave us unchanged

wherever you are, crises of faith have a major impact on us, because they will either strengthen that faith in Jesus Christ or they will weaken it or they will numb it and keep it at a distance. But Crises of Faith, which hit every single person, never leave us the same. They never leave us the same because when faith commitment in Jesus Christ does not keep spouses from leaving, when a faith commitment in Jesus Christ does not keep children from dying, when it does not preserve jobs or preserve incomes, when faith in Jesus Christ keeps us on the social margins and when it challenges the values and habits that run most deeply in us, and when it does not always provide instant, speedy answers, we're forced at those points, to examine what life is about. We're forced to examine what faith in Jesus Christ is about. So Crises of Faith never leave us unchanged.

Our text for this morning contains some wise pastoral counsel to people who were in a Crisis of Faith. They were people who lived long ago, in a foreign land, in a foreign culture, and a people whose Crises of Faith were being triggered by very specific events. But I'd like for you to read that account with me:

"Therefore, holy brothers, who share in the heavenly calling, fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high

priest whom we confess. He was faithful to the one who appointed him, just as Moses was faithful in all God's house. Jesus has been found worthy of greater honor than Moses, just as the builder of a house has greater honor than the house itself. For every house is built by someone, but God is the builder of everything. Moses was faithful as a servant in all God's house, testifying to what would be said in the future. But Christ is faithful as a son over God's house. And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast.

So, as the Holy Spirit says:

'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion, during the time of testing in the desert, where your fathers tested and tried me and for forty years saw what I did.' That is why I was angry with that generation, and I said, "Their hearts are always going astray, and they have not known my ways." So I declared on oath in my anger, 'They shall never enter my rest.'

See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. We have come to share in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first. As has just been said:

'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion.'

Who were they who heard and rebelled? Were they not all those Moses led out of Egypt? And with whom was he angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the desert? 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."

Hebrews 4

"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it. For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did; but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. Now we who have believed enter that rest, just as God has said,

'So I declared on oath in my anger; they shall never enter my rest.'

And yet his work has been finished since the creation of the world. For somewhere he has spoken about the seventh day in these words: 'And on the seventh day God rested from all his work.' And again in the passage above he says, 'They shall never enter my rest.'

It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their disobedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David, as was said before:

'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.'

For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day. There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God; for anyone who enters God's rest also rests from his own work, just as God did from his. Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall by following their example of disobedience.

For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

These comments made to people who lived long ago in a foreign land, in a foreign culture facing specific crises are easy to view from a distance. And yet, as this wise pastor speaks these words to these people, we find that the door opens. And he looks in through the threshold of time and culture and he looks at us and he questions us. What do you do with a Crisis of Faith?

What do we know about these people the author was addressing? We don't know much but we do know that they were largely Jewish Christians—Jewish Christians living in an increasingly hostile culture. Their culture less and less tolerated their commitment to Jesus Christ so they found themselves disenfranchised not only from the surrounding

"Therefore, since the promise of entering his rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it."

culture, but also from their Jewish family and friends. What went on in their minds? As they encountered a crisis of faith, what did it feel like? What did they think as they found themselves more and more out of step, considering whether they should return to the safe, stable confines of Judaism. What went on their minds?

I can only imagine, as they sat at the kitchen table drinking coffee, they would discuss with each other, how certainly they had no right to put fences, or boundaries, around their children's future because of their own faith commitments. After all, my faith is my faith, but do I really have a right to restrict the colleges that my children can attend or the kinds of jobs that they can have, or the levels of income that my kids can make because I have made certain faith commitments? Do I really have a right to do that? And I

can imagine as they sat around drinking coffee, considering whether to abandon this Christian faith and return to the safety of Judaism, that they were thinking to themselves, you know these Christians... they really are a rather radical, ragtag bunch aren't they? You know, it felt right, it seemed like the thing to do at the time, because this was so fresh, so new, so novel, but now, it seems like these Christian are ignoring centuries of traditions. Things are not easy. Things are not clear. And when things are not clear, we have a tendency to tip the scales back toward the safety of an elaborate system—of a neat, tight, manageable, respectable way of following God.

But the author's question to these folks is the same question to us: What do you do with a Crisis of Faith? What do you do when it is easier to turn back than it is to keep going? What do you do when the answers do not come easily? What do the Ted Turners of the world, who have professed Christian faith, do when loved ones die? Well, we can't answer that question of what to do with a crisis of faith until we know what a crisis of faith really means. What really goes on in our minds during a crisis of faith? What goes on is that, when the rules we've been give have

The work of God to which we have attached ourselves, the work of God that has gripped us in our hearts through Jesus Christ is not new. It's what God has been doing all along.

become difficult, we're prone to make up our own. And when a crisis of faith hits, we tend to measure the value of our lives by our immediate comfort, by immediate relief, by our ability to predict and control the future. A crisis of faith exposes to every one of us our mastery at selling ourselves illusions. And as we question what to do with a crisis of

faith, we turn the question back to the text and we say what can we do? What can we do with a crisis of faith that is both honest and constructive?

I want to suggest to you several options—several steps if you will, for what we can and **must** do with a crisis of faith. What we can and must do that is both honest and constructive. Our author gives us our first piece of advice in the first 6 verses of chapter 3. He tells us to rediscover our roots—to go back to the very beginning. It was very tempting for these Hebrew Christians to think that somehow they had cut themselves off from centuries of credible religious tradition. And you know we are always wise to be suspicious of new, novel spiritualities. We are always wise to be suspicious of spiritual claims and spiritual systems that claim a sort of insider—a secret role—that is completely unrelated to anything else going on in the world. But the author tells these Hebrew Christians very clearly in no uncertain terms that the household that has been built on faith in Jesus Christ was the same house that Moses was working on long before them.

You see, the work of God to which we have attached ourselves, the work of God that has gripped us in our hearts through Jesus Christ is not new, is not novel. It's what God has been doing all along. And Jesus even supersedes that work of Moses, the author tells us, because Moses worked on this household of faith just as a servant, but Jesus, the author tells us, is over this house, as a Son. Jesus, the author tells us, was both apostle and high priest, and those two characteristics carry great weight with the Jewish mind. Moses was looked at as one sent from God and the one who took the people back to God. Jesus extended the work of Moses. He was the One sent from God and the One who takes us back to God.

In a crisis of faith, we have to rediscover our roots. And in doing so, we find that we already share in what God has been doing all along. In that crisis of faith we focus on the center. The author tells us to fix our thoughts on Jesus, to look again as we did at the beginning, to who He is, to be able to have claim on our hearts. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ does demand a price on our lives. Because just as Christians of 2000 years ago paid a price, they paid the price of cultural, social ostracism. They paid the price of risking being disenfranchised by the power players of their culture. Faithfulness to Jesus Christ exacts a price from us. But the author tells us that the price of faithfulness to Jesus Christ is underwritten for us, by who Jesus is, and by what He has done. The price is real. But at the same time that the price of faithfulness is real, the risk is real, as well. And that risk is that those who walk away from Jesus Christ have no assurances from Him. That's a frightening statement, isn't it?

What does a crisis of faith mean? A crisis of faith does not just put a system of belief at risk. A crisis of faith puts **me** at risk. It puts each of us personally at risk. It's not just the system of thought that hangs in the balance. I hang in the balance. Because a crisis of faith is a crisis of life itself, and that crisis is real. And though some, like Ted Turner, may walk away from it blatantly and flagrantly, there are also some who walk away quietly, subtly, respectively, without ever even showing it. And I suspect that is where the risk is most real for most of us. Because, most Christians, most who have professed Jesus Christ, do not flagrantly walk away like the Ted Turners of our world, but I fear that for many who stay with the routine and keep showing up and keep smiling and perhaps even keep reading their Bibles, somewhere inside, there is a numbness, there has been a walking away; the life and faith in Jesus Christ has been abandoned. And that crisis is real.

The first thing we can do with a crisis of faith is to rediscover our roots—to go back to where we started. Because we never really get away from those roots, do we? We go back to Who Jesus is and to What He has done and we find that the Lord to whom we have attached ourselves is the same Lord who has been working all along. It is not something new, not something novel, and not something secret.

The second thing we can do with a Crisis of Faith that is both honest and constructive is to recognize that risk—recognize what the risk is. We notice in verse 11 of chapter 3, and then again in verse 3 of chapter 4 the author says, "*so I declared on oath, in my anger, they shall never enter my rest.*" He repeats himself, chapter 4 verse 5, "*so I*

What does a crisis of faith mean? A crisis of faith puts me at risk.

declared on oath, in my anger," quoting from the Old Testament, "*they shall never enter my rest.*" What is at risk? At risk is the rest we find in life. There is no rest outside Jesus Christ. Now certainly we can all look at people we know who have no faith in Jesus Christ whatsoever, and we find many of them contented. We find people who are happy. We find people for whom life works well, people who see no need for some kind of religious rest that's promised by Christian faith. And while that is indeed true, what we also find is that in even the happiest, most content and even the most successful person in life, there is an inescapable, recurring, gnawing sense that we were made for more. And perhaps you, if you have known some measure of contentment and happiness and success in your life, perhaps can testify to that. No matter how good it gets, we never can completely put the lid on that recurring sense that *something* is missing. Somehow,

someway, somewhere, there has to be more. And it's that gnawing, recurring sense that we were made for more, that testifies to our fundamental need for what the scripture calls *God's Rest*. The scripture calls it Eternal Life, realized even partially now, but fully after death. There is no rest outside Jesus Christ and that is the risk. When a Crisis of Faith hits, and we're tempted blatantly or even very subtly, to walk away, recognize the risk. There is **no rest outside Jesus Christ**.

***What do we do with a Crisis of Faith?
The author tells us to pay close attention
to our soul. Give focused attention to our
souls.***

But thirdly, we have to recognize what our tendencies are. We rediscover our roots. We look hard at the risk. But we have to recognize our tendencies. Our tendencies are shown clearly in verse 8 of chapter 3, the author quoting from the Old Testament, says, "*Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as you did in the rebellion during the time of testing in the desert.*" What we do is to form calluses. That is our tendency. We form spiritual calluses. Now most of us do not see ourselves as having hard, calloused hearts, but this word for "hardened your hearts" was actually a medical term used in ancient days by Hypocrites, the forefather of modern medicine. It was a medical term that depicted a condition that was dry, that was rough, and that was hard like a scar, or scab, or callus. And though scars and scabs of the soul may look differently on the outside, that resistance that goes on, on the inside, is just the same.

Even if you have never seriously looked back once you put your hand to the plow, even if you've never thought of

yourself as being tempted to flagrantly walk away from the faith, that same hardness of heart, that same "callusedness" of soul can set in when the price gets too high, or the pain gets too intense or God just seems too abstract. And the scripture tells us that that 'callused-ness' of soul is incompatible with the rest that God provides. For all the risk, for every one of us, the risk is where that 'callused-ness' of soul can lead us. You see every one of us who has proclaimed faith in Jesus Christ is at risk of those calluses forming in our soul when a Crisis of Faith hits. For every one of us, we risk that callus becoming harder and harder and we risk someday our faith being nothing more than a shell that we've preserved that has nothing on the inside.

What do we do? What do **you** do with a Crisis of Faith? Thankfully, the scripture does not leave us just with the risk because it gives us some options. If you'll notice in Chapter 3, verse 12, the author tells us, *"see to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful unbelieving heart that turns away from the Living God."* Look again at chapter 4, verse 1. *"Therefore, since the promise of entering His rest still stands, let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it."*

What can we do with a Crisis of Faith? What can we do when God seems very abstract and when our faith in Jesus Christ does not keep us employed, when it does not keep those we love from leaving, when it does not make the pain in our lives hurt any less? What do we do with a Crisis of Faith? The scripture encourages us to care for our soul. He uses a word for "care" that actually is a word for *see, or look at*. The author tells us to pay close attention to our soul. Give focused attention to our souls. Caring enough means caring enough to wrestle with God and not to quit when our energy is low. Those who fear God can face anything else, but those who do not fear God are liable to

fear almost anything in the world. And when the author tells us that in a Crisis of Faith we are to take care, we're to fear God, take care that there does not develop in us a sinful and unbelieving and disobedient heart, he is telling us not to take the Crisis of Faith lightly, but to do business with God. Because God never walks away from those who care enough to keep wrestling with Him.

What happened to Ted Turner when his sister died? Was God inadequate for Ted Turner's faith? I believe He was not. What happened to Ted Turner? I can only guess that at some point, he walked away from the struggle. Caring about our souls and taking care for our souls and fearing God, lest an unbelieving heart begin to callus in our hearts, does not mean that we deny the struggle. It does not mean that we ignore it, that we pretend it's not there. It means that we care enough to keep doing business with God. Because God never walks away from those who care enough to keep wrestling with Him.

Now all that's been said so far can easily lead us to believe that the author wants to create in us a sense of spiritual paranoia; a constant, perpetual fearfulness about our souls. But that is not the case, because paranoia only paralyzes, it does not encourage. And if our author of Hebrews has any goal in mind it is to encourage us. It's to give us courage – it's the courage of soul necessary to not run away from the crisis, the crises which threaten our faith. There's an old saying that says, "Cowards die a thousand times, but the brave die only once." Now that old saying has been used to encourage soldiers to risk their lives in battle. That old saying has been used even to encourage young children to stand up to schoolyard bullies. It's also been used to give people in all kinds of circumstances the greatness of heart to face those circumstances. Cowards die a thousand times, but the brave die only once. It's that kind of greatness of

heart, that kind of largeness of soul that we're after.

Where do we find it? Where do we find the greatness of heart to stand in a crisis of faith to do business with God and wrestle with God even when He appears to be silent? We find it in chapter 3:12-13: *"See to it, brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God. But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness."* Courage, my friends, comes from the community of faith.

How do you view the regular weekly gathering of Christians at church? How do you view that? Well, if the regular weekly gathering of Christians is merely a perfunctory ritual, sooner or later, we lose motivation. If the regular weekly gathering of Christians is merely a social time, a time to connect with friends, sooner or later there will be other people we enjoy more. And we find sooner or later that not everybody in the Christian Church is enjoyable to us. If the regular weekly gathering of Christians is viewed

Caring about our souls and taking care for our souls and fearing God means that we care enough to keep doing business with God.

mostly as an information center, a place where we come and learn, sooner or later we find we can always learn more from the radio or from books or from the latest guru. But if the regular weekly gathering of Christians is a time when we come to have our vision cleared, a time when we come to have our souls cleansed and softened from the calluses that are always forming, if the regular weekly gathering of Christians is a time when we're pushed outside the tiny confines of our own experiences and our own

minds, then the Gospel becomes believable again. Because a community, a community of faith in which we are encouraged by each other, in which we encourage each other, comes to be more than just a side benefit.

Being part of the Christian community is absolutely essential to my faithfulness. I do not have the resources for faithfulness to Jesus Christ over the long haul, without the encouragement of other Christians. Without it I'm left solely to the devices of my own mind. I'm left to the narrow parameters of my own experience, and life takes on an illusory quality. But the author tells us to take care, to hold firm, to be fearful of God. And that conveys what's at stake in this crisis of faith. It conveys how deceptively easy it is

What do you do in a crisis of faith? We hold fast to Jesus Christ, we hold fast to the hope of forgiveness and redemption and live that out in our relationships and our choices right now because Jesus' redeeming work is part of what God has been doing all along.

to start down a path toward callousness and toward ruin. Now all of this is not meant to paralyze us but to encourage us, because the faithfulness God calls for, He provides for.

In 1952 when Florence Chadwick was 34 years old she attempted to be the first woman to ever swim the 21 miles from Catalina Island to the western coast of California. She had already conquered the English Channel, both directions, and on a July morning, at 34 years of age, 1952, when she got into the water, it was so numbingly cold and the fog was so thick that she could hardly see the boats in her own party. Some 15 hours later, numbed with the cold,

she asked to be taken out of the water. She couldn't go on. But her mother and her trainer in a boat along side her encouraged her that they were near the land and they encouraged her not to quit. She swam just a little bit further, but just a few moments later, she insisted on being taken out of the water. And hours later, when her body had thawed, she said to a reporter, "Look, I'm not excusing myself, but if I could have seen land, I might have made it." Later she was to reflect that she had not been licked by the fatigue, she had not been licked by the cold, but the fog alone had defeated her, because it had obscured her vision of the goal.

What do you do in a crisis of faith when the fog is so thick that nothing seems real? We can hold fast to Jesus Christ, we can hold fast to the hope of forgiveness and redemption and live that out in our relationships and our choices right now because Jesus' redeeming work is part of what God has been doing all along. And we can hold fast with courage because the goal is not trivial or just an illusion but the goal is central to life. It's God's rest. It's that which we must not miss. It's the only condition that satisfies our lives. And we can hold fast with courage and greatness of heart because God has provided every resource that we need.

But there's one final reason the author encourages us to hold fast and to take care for our souls. We can hold fast with courage because the one who calls us forward, the one who laid down His life for the forgiveness of our sins so that we could have our lives back is that same One we will have to give an account to one day. If you look at verses 12 and 13 of chapter 4, the author tells us the word of God, speaking of Jesus, *"is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and*

attitudes of the heart. Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account."

On that day, there are no more excuses, on that day there are no more games; on that day there's no more pretending that things just weren't clear, there's no more pretending that God did not come through for me. On that day we have no more excuses.

What do you do with a crisis of faith? You don't ignore it or deny it, but you engage God in it, diligently, to care for your soul. What do you do with a crisis of faith? You don't allow it to harden or to begin to form calluses or scars in your soul, but you take care. You give focused attention to learning more of His way; learning who God *is* in this crisis of faith. What do you do with a crisis of faith? You face the Lord Jesus Christ *in* the crisis, openly, honestly, and ready to be taught by Him. You don't distance yourself from the household of faith, from the community of faith, but you let the clarity of others' lives illumine your own.

All of that is easier said than done especially when you're in the middle of excruciating pain. It's easier said than done when you're in the middle of an indescribable loss, when you're in the middle of a temptation that you don't think you can resist anymore, or that you're not sure if you want to resist anymore. But we're addressed at the beginning of this passage as "holy brothers." Our author sees us through the lens of what God has called us to be. He encourages us. Holy brothers, I know better. I know more about you than you feel about yourselves. I know that this pseudo rest that can be obtained by walking away from a crisis of faith is hollow. And he tells us that Jesus Christ can be trusted to lead us to God. That, in a sentence, is the message of this text.

What do we do with a crisis of faith? We link ourselves to this one fact—that Jesus Christ can be trusted to lead us safely home to God even through the very worst that we can imagine. That *rest of God* is something in which we participate even now through faith in Jesus Christ. That *rest of God* exists partially, even in the middle of a crisis of faith, but that *rest of God* for which we have been fundamentally made, is found at the end of a road of faithfulness. Don't miss it for your life, because that alone IS life.

Chapter Five

Protestants in Need of a Priest Hebrews 4:14—5:10

As we move into the next chapter of Hebrews, we see a continuance of the theme addressed earlier by Don Payne. Have you ever had a crisis of faith? I mean have you ever had a time when you found yourself entertaining doubts about the existence of God, or the love of God or the ability of God? Have you ever been desperate and in your desperation wondered if God was truly there to meet your need? I am talking about those times when your faith was on the line. When it was decision time, would you actually trust God or would you find another way? Could you actually continue to believe what you said you believed or would your beliefs change?

- I've observed many men and women in the crises of life:
- A father whose child dies after a protracted and painful illness.
- A wife whose husband leaves her.
- A man whose business fails.
- A woman who feels herself withering from the lack of intimacy.
- A young person who fears life or another whose parents divorce.

And I have sometimes seen them at that point in life bail out. I've seen them turn their back on the God they said they knew. I've seen them at that time of decision, chose another way for their lives.

The English author and professor of literature, C.S. Lewis faced such a crisis of faith. He was 58 years of age when he married for the first time. The next four years of his life were by his own report the most exhilarating and enjoyable he had ever known. Though his wife Joy was diagnosed with cancer shortly before their marriage, the cancer was soon in remission and all seemed well. But the disease returned in full fury and four years after their marriage Joy was dead. Lewis was devastated. He later wrote "You never

"It is not (I think) that I am in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him.

know how much you really believe anything until its truth or falsehood becomes a matter of life and death to you. It's easy to say you believe a rope (is) strong as long as you are merely using it (tie) a box. But suppose you had to hang by that rope over a precipice. Wouldn't you then first discover how much you really trusted it?"¹

Lewis' faith was on the line and I want you to listen to some of the groaning of his soul as he wrestled with his faith in God:

"I find myself asking the question, 'Where is God?' This is one of the most disquieting symptoms of my grief. When you are happy, so happy that you have no sense of needing God (and) you remember (to) turn to Him with gratitude and praise, you will—or so it feels—be welcomed with open arms.

"But go to him when your need is desperate, when all other help is vain, and what do you find? A door slammed in your face, and a sound of bolting and double bolting on the

inside. After that, silence. You may as well turn away. The longer you wait, the more emphatic the silence will become. There are no lights in the window. It might be an empty house. Was it ever inhabited...Why is he so present in our time of prosperity and so very absent a help in time of trouble?"

"It is not (I think) that I am in much danger of ceasing to believe in God. The real danger is of coming to believe such dreadful things about Him. The conclusion I dread is not 'so there's no God after all,' but, 'so this is what God is really like (silent, uncaring)." Lewis was truly in a crisis of faith.

Have you ever had a crisis of faith? Are you perhaps in the midst of one now? Oh maybe it has not been brought on by something as dramatic as a death or a divorce but maybe your crisis is just a slow erosion of confidence in God's goodness or wisdom. And you find yourself wondering if following Him is worth it. You don't even know what your options are but you are in a crisis of faith.

The Israelites, we are reminded in Hebrews, chapter 3, faced a real crisis of faith when they were told by God to go into the territory called Canaan. The reconnaissance team came back and most of them said it was impossible—God or no God it would be deadly to try to go into that country. The crisis came. Could they trust God? Their answer was "no" and they turned back from following God.

The author of Hebrews knew that illustration was appropriate to his readers because apparently they too were facing some large obstacles in life. We don't know for certain what the obstacles were but from the text we see these Christians were in a crisis of faith:

2:1 – *"Don't drift away."*

2:18 – *"Because Jesus suffered when he was tempted he is able to help those who are being tempted."*

3:6b – *"And we are his house, if we hold on to our courage and the hope of which we boast."*

3:12 – *"See to it brothers, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God."*

4:1 – *"Be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of God's rest."*

4:11 – *"Let us therefore make every effort to enter that rest, so that no one will fall..."*

Do you hear what is apparently hanging in the balance? The issue is whether they will continue to trust and follow God or not. It wouldn't be a crisis of faith if that weren't the potential outcome.

When you or anyone else faces a problem in life and you feel strong to handle it and you stand in there until it's over, that may be a battle but it is no crisis.

- It's a crisis when you know you have no strength to fight any longer.
- It's a crisis when you know you are about to give up.
- It's a crisis when you don't know what you will do next.
- It's a crisis when you are afraid you will do what formerly was unthinkable—you might walk away from God or at least put Him on the back shelf.
- It's a crisis when you are out of resources; when you know it is humanly impossible to go on and you need supernatural help or you just know you will cave in.
- It's a crisis of faith when you aren't even certain that supernatural help is available.

I can only imagine the stories we would hear if we opened the microphones and let you tell of your experiences!

What do we do at those times? How do we keep from dropping out, from giving up, from just going into neutral

and coasting? I think “spiritual coasting” is the most likely for many of us. We wouldn’t go off the deep end and curse God. No, we would probably keep going to church and saying all the right words but our hearts wouldn’t be in it and because of our crisis of faith we would just begin to coast. How do we keep from doing that when we hit those times of crisis of faith?

God gives us His answer through the author of Hebrews beginning at verse 14 of chapter 4. But before we look at the answer I want you to be certain with me that the question being answered in verse 14 and following is still the same as we have been discussing.

“...let us hold firmly to the faith we profess...”(4:14b)

“...so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in our time of need.”(4:16b)

What do we do at those times? How do we keep from dropping out, from giving up, from just going into neutral and coasting?

Yes, it is the same question: “How do we keep from bailing out on God or just going into neutral when our faith is in crisis?” And the answer? **We need a priest!** That’s right, even Protestants need a Priest.

To explain what I mean by that I want you to look more closely at Chapter 4:14 - 5:10:

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.

"Every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal gently with those who are ignorant and are going astray, since he himself is subject to weakness. This is why he has to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of the people. No one takes this honor upon himself; he must be called by God, just as Aaron was. So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' And he says in another place, 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.'

"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him and was designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek."

Anyone understood that unholy human beings wouldn't stand a chance with a holy and just God unless someone stood as a mediator between God and them. And so the high priest would bring sacrifices, and thereby turn the wrath of God away from the people.

I think most of you know the chapter divisions in your Bible were not placed there by the authors but were added only a couple of hundred years ago. It is unfortunate that the break for chapter 5 was placed in what is the middle of the thought the author is developing in these verses. The

thought begins with 4:14 and continues through 5:10. And what the author does in verses 14-16 is give us a specific and succinct answer to our question and then he gives some background explanation to that answer by what he tells us in 5:1-10. I want to reverse that and have you look at 5:1-10 first and then we will conclude by looking at the specific answer itself in 4:14-16.

I have already said what we need is a Priest and the author is definitely developing that theme when in 5:1-4 he describes the high priest of the Old Testament. In verse 1 he reminds his readers of what they probably already knew: a high priest was selected from one particular family, the descendants of Levi (one of the 12 sons of Jacob) and the high priest was responsible for representing the people to God. Anyone with any awareness at all understood that unholy human beings wouldn't stand a chance with a holy and just God unless someone stood as a mediator between God and them. And so the high priest would bring sacrifices, as God had commanded, and thereby turn the wrath of God away from the people. The truth is that a holy and just God would rightly destroy the people unless the justice of God was responded to by the shedding of blood (the payment for sin).

In verse 2 of chapter 5, the author tells us something else about the high priest. The priest doesn't just go through the motions of offering sacrifices but the priest also has a heart for the people he is representing. He is able to deal gently with the people he represents because he too is subject to weakness—he too is human. He knows what the people are going through because he goes through it himself. In fact, in verse 3, the Old Testament high priest is so much like the people he represents that he is himself a sinner and so before he can offer sacrifices for the sins of the rest of the people he has to offer sacrifices for his own

sin.

And finally, in verse 4, the third characteristic of the Old Testament high priest is to be appointed by God; he couldn't just independently decide to take on the role of a priest. A high priest is selected from among humans to represent humans. He offers sacrifices to God to turn away the wrath of God against sin and he is not self-appointed but God-appointed.

The author gave that quick background of Old Testament high priests to get to his greater interest—the New Testament High Priest, Jesus Christ. In fact, what the author points out is that while the Old Testament high priests were similar in some regards to Christ, namely in that they represented the people before God by bringing sacrifices for sin, they, the Old Testament priests, were inadequate, imperfect and inferior to Christ and what He would do as a High Priest.

And so in verses 5-10 he points out the greater and far superior High Priesthood of Jesus.

1. "So Christ also did not take upon himself the glory of becoming a high priest. But God said to him, 'You are my Son; today I have become your Father.' "(5:5)

Yes, just like the Old Testament high priests, Jesus didn't independently take that role upon Himself—God called Him. But Jesus didn't become a high priest by virtue of being from the family line of Levi. Jesus is the High Priest of His people because He is the Son of God, and He is not a priest temporarily like the Old Testament priests. Rather, Jesus is priest forever, as earlier symbolized by Melchizedek. (We'll learn more about Melchizedek in chapter 7) Yes, the Old Testament high priests had a legitimate position but Jesus' position is infinitely superior; God the Son is acting as the mediator between God and us. Jesus is the Priest I need.

2. *"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverent submission. Although he was a son, he learned obedience from what he suffered."* (5:7-8)

The second thing the author wants us to know about Jesus' superior priesthood is found in verses 7 and 8. Back in verse 1 we were told that every high priest had to be selected from among men—had to be a human being. A high priest couldn't represent human beings before God unless the high priest was himself a human being.

Back at the end of chapter 2, which we looked at earlier, we learned that Jesus is fully a human being even while He is fully God. But here God wants us to get some sense of how true that is, not just theoretically but experientially. Jesus became a human being.

***Jesus is the High Priest of His people
because He is the Son of God, and He is
not a priest temporarily like the Old
Testament priests, Jesus is priest forever.***

What does verse 7 say? *"During the days of Jesus' life on earth, he offered up prayers and petitions with loud cries and tears to the one who could save him from death."*

What must Jesus have experienced when, weak from his fasting, Satan came to Him and offered Him the world and an escape from the future Jesus was facing. I think we are mistaken if we think that was easy for Jesus as if He just quoted some Old Testament Bible verses and "puff" Satan was gone. Nonsense. Jesus was human—the struggle was intense. It was a crisis.

But when you read of Jesus crying out in prayer, what

situation in Jesus' life most readily comes to mind? The Garden of Gethsemane. Three of the Gospel writers give us some idea of the emotional pain and spiritual struggle Jesus experienced as He faced the crucifixion. Jesus was crying out for help in the face of an overwhelming calamity: a crisis of faith. With loud cries and tears He prayed and sought the Father. Jesus wasn't faking it—Jesus entered fully into the human experience. The pain of your crisis of faith could not be any greater than was the Lord Jesus' pain.

But please don't misunderstand Jesus' crying. He was not crying about the physical pain He would face. Many people have faced terrible physical suffering with peace and courage. Was Jesus just a wimp? Contrary to some who try to make too much of the physical suffering of Jesus and

By His obedience, obedience even to death on the cross for our sins, Jesus completed His task—He became the sacrifice for sins. Jesus is the Priest I need.

thereby appeal to our sympathy, we focus on the wrong pain if we think primarily of thorns, beatings and nails. Jesus' pain was physical but the deepest pain, pain felt not just in His flesh but in His soul, was what He knew He would experience when hanging on that cross—He would bear the sins of all God's people and He, Jesus the infinite God/Man would be separated from the Father. Jesus faced a disintegration that was unimaginable. And when it came He cried out "*My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*"

Does Jesus know pain? He knows a pain as deep as any mother or father whose child has died. He knows a pain as sharp as any man whose wife has left him. He knows a

pain as enduring as any parents whose children are destroying their lives, their futures and their eternity. And when, in verse 8, it says that the Son of God learned obedience, it does not mean that He was formerly disobedient and had to learn how to be obedient, but that He gained experiential knowledge of obedience. Griffith Thomas wrote, "This is the difference between innocence and virtue. Innocence, like Jesus before he became a human, is life untested, while virtue is innocence tested and triumphant."² Jesus is human. He has been through it and He knows our suffering. He is able to represent us before the Father. Jesus is the Priest I need.

3. *"...and, once made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him..."* (5:9)

And in verse 9 we find again the third thing that every high priest does: he offers sacrifices for sins. When it says that Jesus was made perfect it obviously does not mean that He was previously sinful. The word "perfect" as used in many other places in the New Testament has to do with completeness. By His obedience, obedience even to death on the cross for our sins, Jesus completed His task—He became the sacrifice for sins. He perfected His high-priestly role and, as it says in verse 9, He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him. Jesus is the Priest I need.

Now please be careful – when you hear and read the words "eternal" and "salvation," don't too quickly assume that these are just other words for heaven when we die. While heaven would certainly be a part, a big part, of what Jesus, as our "source" provides, what is the context of this statement? Is the author of Hebrews here discussing only heaven? No, he is discussing lives in crisis now—people who are facing enormous challenges and who are tempted to give up.

Now let's take all of this back to the basic answer God gives to the question of what we do when our faith is in crisis. The answer is stated so powerfully in Hebrews 4:15-16:

"For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."

As the author has already told us, Jesus knows by experience what it means to suffer. Betsy Ten Boom, the sister of Corrie said to her sister one day while they were in the Ravensbruck Concentration Camp during WW II when Betsy could stand that "pit" no longer, "No pit is so deep that Jesus is not deeper still." You can enter no painful experience that He is not familiar with and that He has not endured even more.

And when verse 15 says Jesus sympathizes, it means two very specific things. Contrary to some variations in our English use of that word, in the Greek the word has to do with truly suffering with us when we suffer. When we use the word we use it psychologically—"I am sincerely sorry for what you are going through." But Jesus experiences it with you. When your heart is broken, His breaks. When the pain reaches clear into your soul with an ache that surpasses physical pain, He aches with you. What does your crisis of faith feel like? He feels it.

But not only does He experience our experience as we experience it, the word sympathy in Greek carries the idea of assistance! Chapter 5 verse 9 said that Jesus as our High Priest is now the "source" of our salvation, our assistance now as well as later. And so what does God say we are to do in the times of a crisis of faith? What are we to do when we have reached the end of our resources? What are we to

do when we don't even seem to have faith to believe?

"Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need."(5:9)

In those times of crisis we may and we must appeal to our Priest, Jesus. In our crisis, in our weakness we lie to ourselves and say Jesus wouldn't understand. In our crisis, we lie to ourselves and say there is no reason why Jesus would help us. In our weakness we lie to ourselves and we say we aren't even sure we want help—we just want to give up. But Jesus says come, just come, approach the throne of grace with confidence.

That English translation "confidence" bothers me a little. If by it, we mean, we must come with full faith and strong belief that God is and that He is the rewarder of those who diligently seek Him, I won't make it. Too often my faith is so weak, it seems non-existent. But the word translated "confidence" may also be translated "bold frankness" or "speaking everything."

- We come to Jesus telling Him everything.
- We come telling Him how fearful we are, how weak we are, how little belief we have any longer in Him or anything.
- We come spilling out our feelings and our fears, but we come.

And Jesus, who knows those feelings, who knows those fears, takes my poor halting, little-faith words and adds His strong words and meets my need. Maybe all I do is stumble into His presence, but stumbling, I come. And I find mercy—He forgives my weakness, my unbelief and I find grace to help in time of need.

And what help does Jesus in His love provide? Does He

remove the circumstances of our crisis? Not often. He enables us to endure. In the Gospel of Luke it is recorded that when Jesus cried out with tears to the Father to "*if possible remove this cup, this experience, from me*" it says that an angel came and "*strengthened him.*" He still bore the sins of God's people on that cross. He still endured separation from the Father. **But He endured and so can we!**

Jesus, my Priest, the High Priest I need.

End Notes

¹ C.S. Lewis, *A Grief Observed*, p. 25

² Thomas Hewitt, *Hebrews*, p. 98

Chapter Six

Babies, Counterfeits and Doubters Hebrews 5:11—6:8

Do you remember from your childhood ever being mocked by an older sibling or schoolmate and being called a “baby!” From their point of view you were acting immaturely and so they slandered your maturity by calling you a “baby.” I remember one of my daughters was one time taking care of an infant who was for no apparent reason crying a “mad” kind of cry. In mock-frustration my daughter at one point looked at the child and exclaimed, “You’re such a baby!” That stated description of someone who obviously isn’t chronologically a baby has the effect sometimes of making the person look at their behavior and even change it, that is if it isn’t a brother who calls you that and you hit him instead.

Kent Hughes, Pastor of College Church in Wheaton, IL, tells of his second son, William, who when two was addicted to sucking the knuckle of his index finger. Candid family pictures of those years universally show him with his knuckle in his mouth. His parents tried everything to get him to quit—they tried reason, rewards, cajoling, but nothing worked. But something happened to change that.

Now before I finish that story I must admit I’m getting ahead of myself. The author of Hebrews said, *“While we have much to say about this [Jesus as our High Priest] I can’t yet because, you are slow to learn!”(5:11)*

So he digresses to help us learn in verses 5:11 through 6:19. Look at 6:20 and 7:1:

“...where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf. He has become a high priest forever, in the order of

Melchizedek.”(6:20)

“This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him.”(7:1)

The author has returned to the theme he introduced back in chapters 4 and 5—a comparison of Jesus and Melchizedek as high priests. What I want you to see next is that this digression, this excursus that begins at 5:11, has three subjects all related to each other:

- In 5:11 - 6:3, the author talks about babies—spiritual babies.
- In 6:4-8, he writes about spiritual counterfeits.
- And in 6:9-20, he addresses the spiritually insecure—the doubter.

It is this important digression we look at now.

God’s Spirit makes us feel shame when we have sinned. How we respond to shame is quite another thing.

But first, back to Kent Hughes’ son, William, the knuckle sucker. One day Barbara Hughes overheard an older playmate of William’s say to him, “You’re a baby. Babies suck their thumbs.”

That night as she tucked him in bed the knuckle reflexively went in his mouth. But he consciously withdrew it and said, “I not a baby!”

And that was the last time we saw him with his knuckle in his mouth.”¹

A little shame added to an insatiable desire to grow-up brought about definite change.

The author of Hebrews used a little shame to motivate his readers. According to the English dictionary “shame” is a feeling of distress caused by consciousness of the guilt or

folly of oneself.”² Shame isn’t all bad, contrary to what some say today. No, we wouldn’t want a shame-based religion and “no” we wouldn’t want people to only act out of shame but shame is an excellent tool. God’s Spirit makes us feel shame when we have sinned. How we respond to shame is quite another thing. Do we move to feelings of worthlessness alone or do we admit guilt and move to change?

As we will see later this author is confident that shame coupled with instruction will have the desired results. How does he use shame and what is the subject?

"We have much to say about this, but it is hard to explain because you are slow to learn. In fact, though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness. But solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil."(5:11-14)

Spiritual Babies

Some of you are spiritual babies! Now, mind you, the author is not just “name-calling.” He is very specific about the problem. First of all, he writes, “I’d like to teach you more advanced things about the Lord Jesus but you are “slow to learn” or “dull to hear.” That phrase “slow to learn” doesn’t mean stupid or incapable. It actually reads, “you **have become** slow to learn.” There was a time when you couldn’t get enough of God’s Word—you read it, you wanted to learn everything about it, but you have grown cold toward it. Now you hardly ever read it, much less do you put yourself in the place to study it and interact with other believers about how it applies to your life. You don’t

study it on your own, you don't avail yourself of a Sunday School class, and you don't even participate in a small group that is studying together.

And what has happened as a result? You are "milk" drinkers (babies) (5:12). Now that would be fine if you hadn't been Christians for so long.

But by this time you ought to be teachers. How long have you been a Christian? Are you able to help others grow in their relationship to Jesus?

I'm not asking if you have the gifts to teach a whole class of people; I'm asking if you have the personal spiritual experience with Jesus and of His Word to teach even one other person how to grow as a Christ-follower.

Spiritually immature. Is it alarming to you how many Christians still spend and invest their money as if only they and maybe their own families mattered, but make no real investment in the kingdom of God? Jesus said, "*Seek first the kingdom of God.*" That doesn't characterize their lives.

Is it alarming to you how many Christians define success in terms of money and position just as the unbelievers do, rather than in service, obedience and holiness?

Is it alarming to you how many Christians spend dollars and hours in front of a television or motion picture screen watching powerfully told stories that violate nearly every aspect of godliness, filling their minds and their children's minds with pictures and ideas that are specifically and intentionally contrary to God's word and will?

Is it alarming to you how some Christians talk when not in church, what they find humorous in jokes and stories, and

how they rationalize dishonesty or theft in school, business, and taxes?

Is it alarming to you how many Christians find revenge to be a greater motivation than forgiveness? Murder and mayhem is more exciting to their minds than mercy and grace. Arnold Schwarzenegger, Jean Claude Van Dam, and Chuck Norris are more stimulating to their souls than

How long have you been a Christian? Are you able to help others grow in their relationship to Jesus?

stories of forgiveness, love, and sacrifice. Greed is stronger than charity. They can't or won't give testimony of their own coming to faith in Christ much less ever step out to tell someone else why Jesus is so important to them and others.

Is it startling to you to learn that premarital sex, adultery, abortion, divorce and marital and family strife are nearly as common among church-goers as among the general population? And these are the Christians. Oh, they may have started well but they "have grown slow to learn" – dull of hearing and uncaring about being a Christ-follower.

Look at verse 13: *"Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching of righteousness."*

Or as he writes in verse 12, *"you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again."*

Maybe there was a time when God's Word shaped your life even if you knew only the elementary things. But you have grown so cold that not even the most basic truths shape

your thinking and lifestyles any longer. Apparently some of the Hebrews said they were Christ-followers but they acted much like the world around them.

Why is the author so hard on these people? Because he knows that if they are not sufficiently anchored in truth, if the truth has not become part of the fabric of their thinking, they will fall flat on their faces when the crises of faith come. Years ago Jim Means used an analogy that has stuck with me—"Patch the roof **before** the rains come." I fear for many of us who call ourselves Christians. I can only imagine what would happen if our faith was on the line as it was for many in the days of the writing of this book.

We are shocked at what happened in Rwanda years ago: so-called Christians of one people group slaughtering so-called Christians of another people group. We look now with horror on what the church in Germany allowed to happen. But if a race war broke out in this country, would churchgoers join it or would there be enough spiritual

They have trained themselves through the practice, the exercise of obedience to God's word.

maturity to bring truth and peace to bear on the war? Some would like to think those people, in Germany or Rwanda acted that way because they weren't **true** Christians. I'm afraid, just as true, is that some of them were unprepared—they didn't have the spiritual muscle to do the right thing.

In verse 14 we are given a solution to this spiritual immaturity, this spiritual flabbiness:

"But solid food is for the mature who have trained themselves through practice (through exercise) to

distinguish good from evil.”

They have trained themselves through the practice, the exercise of obedience to God’s word. Application of the Word of God and the will of God to life’s situations when doing so contradicts our natural inclination is what develops maturity:

- Giving when we’d rather use the money on ourselves.
- Forgiving when it runs counter to our selfish desire to take revenge.
- Serving when we’d rather use the time on ourselves.
- Choosing the ethical way even when it costs us money.
- The author says it is the practice of godliness that brings maturity. Knowing what to do and **doing it** brings growth!

I remember hearing of a very successful businessman being asked the secret of his success. He said, “Good decisions.” They then asked, “How did you learn to make good decisions?”

“Ah,” he said, “by making bad decisions.” The moral of the story is not to make bad decisions; the moral is practice! In every decision of life, asking what scriptural truths bear on this decision and then **acting** on it, is what builds maturity. With each obedient response to God’s word the habit gets more ingrained and the response becomes second nature.

God may be shaming those first readers of this letter and also shaming us—but He is making His point, isn’t He? What will we do about it? Are there some changes necessary in our lives? The author has been fairly hard on these readers. Do you suppose he’s angry? Do you think he is speaking as one who has given up on them and is just venting his frustration before leaving them?

Look at the first part 6:1:

"Therefore let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity..."

He is not saying these teachings about Christ are unimportant, when he calls them "elementary" but that they are basic and in spite of the spanking he has just given them, he wants them to "press on" with him to deeper things about Jesus. Look at verse 3: *"And God permitting, we will do so."* The author has confidence in these Christians that this challenge will result in a desire on their part to change. He knows a spiritual truism: where there is spiritual life there is growth. Knowing what else he knows about them, he is confident they will respond so he's ready to push on with his subject.

Counterfeits

But before he does so he gives a severe warning to some others who were in the church. He's not addressing the "babies" now but he's writing to the "COUNTERFEITS." Look at verses 4-6:

"It is impossible for those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, who have shared in the Holy Spirit, who have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age, if they fall away, to be brought back to repentance, because to their loss they are crucifying the Son of God all over again and subjecting him to public disgrace."

I can't know everything that was going on in the mind of the author but given his words I get the impression he was thinking like this: many of the people in this church, to whom I'm writing, are immature Christians – they are spiritual babies. And it is not just because they are new Christians, but because they have neglected the Word of God.

I have just scolded them and I know that God's Spirit will use the admonishment to bring about some change. But I don't want that misunderstood. There are some in their midst who aren't even babies. There are some in the church who aren't even Christians. And my scolding about immaturity is not warning enough for them. I'm concerned there are some reading this who are "counterfeits." And what they need is not "training in righteousness" but conversion! They need to realize they are playing with fire and they are more than likely to get burned.

I know this is a passage over which first and second year Bible college and Seminary students argue at great length. The argument is whether the author here is describing Christians who lose their salvation or "counterfeits" who are in great danger of losing any opportunity of becoming true

Where there is spiritual life there is growth!

Christians. When you look at verses 4 and 5 and see how the author describes the spiritual experience of these particular people you are left with a decision to make: Is he describing one who actually becomes a Christian and then walks away from it or is he describing someone who has every advantage of hearing about Jesus but rejects Him?

Look at the phrases:

- They have once been enlightened
- They have tasted the heavenly gift
- They have shared in the Holy Spirit
- They have tasted the goodness of the Word of God
- And they have tasted the powers of the coming age.

All those descriptions could denote a true Christian but they may just as well be describing a person who comes close

but doesn't respond to Christ as saving-Lord. The words and phrases used here don't, in themselves, give us the answer as to which these people are: saved but in danger of becoming lost or never saved and in danger of never being able to be saved. To know which it is we must look to the larger context, which I have already been explaining and to the largest context, that is the rest of the teaching

The author says be careful, be warned; it is to your peril that you sit in the light with your eyes intentionally closed.

of the Bible. Listen to other passages from the Bible: He who has begun a good work in you...will perfect it until the day Jesus comes again. (Phil. 1 and Luke 14)
Not even life and death can separate believers from the love of God in Christ Jesus. (Rom. 8)

Those who are elected, called and justified will also be glorified. (Rom. 8)

Believers are *"kept by the power of God through faith unto final salvation..."* (I Peter, Jude, and II Timothy)

True believers are *"sealed by the Spirit unto the day of redemption."* (Eph. 4)

Those who fall away were never true believers otherwise they wouldn't have fallen away. (I John)

New life in Christ is "eternal." What would that word mean if it could end?

Jesus said, *"I know my sheep and they follow me; and I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, and no one shall snatch them out of my hand."* (John 10)

Given all the biblical instruction we have regarding the keeping power of God (what I, following others, like to call “the perseverance of God (and the perseverance saints) it is contradictory to make this passage assume genuine believers are being described here as ones who can be irretrievably lost after having once been saved.

Look at 6:9: Even here in this immediate context the author indicates that he is not talking about the true believers in the church—*“Even though we speak like this, I am confident of better things in your case—things that accompany salvation.”*

This warning is a solemn warning to those in the church who are hypocrites—“counterfeits.” Counterfeits claim something by their identifying with the church, by singing the hymns, by giving every outward impression at church that they believe what is being said, when in fact they have never yielded to the Saving-Lord Jesus Christ. They want all the benefits of feeling religious without any true commitment or life-style change.

The author is saying, “you have had all the advantages of the gospel—you have heard it, you have seen it to be real in others, you have lived in the blessing of the church, benefiting from its ministry to you and your family, but you have never responded to Jesus Christ. You have held Him off as a concept to be intellectually assented to but not a person to be related to and personally followed.

God, through this writer, says **be warned!** My Spirit will not always strive with you. I will not always leave the door open and I will not always give you such clear understanding of the truth. The author says be careful, be warned; it is to your peril that you sit in the light with your eyes intentionally closed. You can cross a line, even this side of death, where there is no turning back—where it will

be impossible for you to repent and when you will have no stirrings in your heart to respond to Christ. God can turn you over to the logical and spiritual conclusion of your stubbornness—eternal spiritual death, so be warned.

What does the Bible say? "*Impossible to be brought back to repentance.*" Impossible to be brought back to that place where you could turn to Christ or would turn to Him. Judas is a classic example of this whole sad condition: He was with the Lord Himself. He looked like the real thing; no disciple, even after three years with Him, had any idea He was counterfeit. He had all the advantages of the good news: he saw it all. He was so close he tasted it, but he never responded. And there came a day when it was too late—Satan entered him and there was no turning back. Don't play with this. Don't wait to deal with this. Don't think you can put it off and deal with it later.

The issue is not that you might physically die before doing so; the greater likelihood is that the Spirit of God will stop pursuing you! I think these verses make it clear you may cross a line, long before you die. Jesus, in Mt. 12, spoke of the unpardonable sin—the full-knowledge rejection of Jesus Christ. Some of you may be young and you live under the misguided notion that God would never do that to you. You may think you have plenty of time to turn around. I don't see anything in these verses that give comfort to the young. What I do see is that those who have had the most light are the most liable. You've been reared in a Christian home, you've heard the gospel many times in student groups, and you've seen the difference between your life and those who truly follow Jesus. How about you? How long will you sit in church, live in a Christian family, even associate with Christian friends but reject the light of the gospel, reject the person of Jesus?

Why do you think God included this warning here? Was He just announcing doom on some? No. This is a gracious warning to the counterfeit in the church, to lose no time in bowing before the Lordship of Jesus Christ and truly becoming a follower of His. Maybe God's shaming description of some as immature, a "baby," is accurate of you. Maybe God's warning to "counterfeits" is aimed right at you. This was a straight-from-the-hip, strongly-worded, but love-filled plea – Come to the Lord Jesus.

End Notes

¹ Kent Hughes, *Hebrews* Vol. 1, p. 145

² *Oxford Encyclopedic Dictionary, 1991*, p. 1332

Chapter Seven

Babies, Counterfeits and Doubters—Part Two Hebrews 6:9-20

Some time ago a man called me and asked to meet. It seems a certain passage of Scripture had pricked his conscience and caused him to begin seriously questioning the direction of his life. That passage was from 2 Cor. 13:5 where Paul writes, *"Examine yourselves to see whether you are in the faith, test yourselves."* It seems the man dared to take a look at his own life and when he did, he didn't like what he saw. And in light of that verse, it frightened him. He came, wondering if possibly he wasn't truly a Christian.

Have you ever had a time or times in your life when you wondered if you were truly a Christian? I have a Christian friend who several years ago went through a period of time when his own sinfulness was no longer secret, no longer only in his mind, but it broke out into open sin, disgraceful sin, and public sin. Always before he could admit his potential for sin, even great sin, but he never actually believed it could happen. Then, it did and he realized that his sinful conduct only reflected his sinful interior—his sinful heart. Like King David of Israel, hundreds of years before, my friend saw himself as God sees him, and me: wicked to the core. With that new awareness, he wondered like never before "Am I even a Christian?" The man, I mentioned earlier was at the same place.

Have you ever been there? Oh, maybe your sin isn't public but you know your own heart and you wonder, "Am I even a Christian?"

Hebrew 5:11-6:9, what we just studied, certainly had the potential of making people think about their true spiritual

condition. The author has said some of you are spiritual babies when you should be mature. He has written that some of you are hypocrites—counterfeits. And the clear implication, as we saw earlier, is that those to whom God is speaking should confess that and turn to Christ.

But with a pastoral sensitivity, the author apparently knew that some who shouldn't have been indicted by the warnings would nonetheless begin to feel spiritually insecure. His warnings may have produced insecurity where none was warranted. There may have been some **new** Christians listening to this letter and there may have been **some who were struggling** in their faith as a result of a recent or on-going crisis. The author now turns his attention to these.

We are confident that in your lives there are things that accompany salvation; your actions have demonstrated spiritual life. What kind of actions? Your work, love and hence ministry to God's people.

Look at Hebrews 6:9: "*Even though we speak like this, dear friends...*"

Even after this solemn warning to the spiritually immature and to the unbelievers, even after a warning that probably makes all of them investigate the true nature of their faith, the author wants the majority of the readers to know that based on his knowledge of them (in spite of their immaturity) they truly belong to Christ. Look at verse 11 where he writes: "*We want each one of you*"—the author is not only speaking to the church corporately but to each Christian individually.

"*Dear Friends*" he says. This is a warm, heart-felt,

affectionate affirmation of them.

"We are confident of better things in your case." We are confident that in your lives there are things that accompany salvation; your actions have demonstrated spiritual life. What kind of actions? Your work, love and hence ministry to God's people.

The point of the verse is that the author has seen evidence of their genuineness. Do you remember earlier I told you of a man who came in to see me because he was wondering if he were truly a Christian? When he voiced that insecurity, I asked a question: "Why are you here in my office talking to me?"

"Well," he said, "I want to make certain that I am a Christian. I want to follow Christ."

I knew the man and so I said to him, "Look at yourself! Look at where you are. It is late on a weekday afternoon in Denver, Colorado and here you are, a grown man, an intelligent man, and a man with business responsibilities, sitting in a church office with a pastor, asking about spiritual life. Why do you care? You care because God is at work in your life. You are here and not sitting in some 'happy hour' because God has invaded your life. How many men do you know at your work who even care about the things you are here talking about? Why are they where they are this afternoon and you are here? Is it because you are smarter than they are or better than they are? We both know better. It is because God is in your life. No, my friend, you are not a counterfeit. I am confident of better things in your case, things that accompany true salvation."

That is what the author to the Hebrews is saying to some of his readers. But please notice he does not say "There

that takes care of it—any insecurity you may have felt, I'm certain is now gone because I have told you that I'm confident of you." No, he tells them in the next few verses how they can know **for certain** they belong to Christ Jesus. These true believers were feeling insecure and God wanted them to live not in doubt but in confidence.

And what we have in these next verses are two major sources of confidence—two ways by which you can live with assurance, confident that you belong to Jesus. Look first at verse 11. It is important to note what we are talking about and what we are not talking about here.

"I want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to..." what? He wants them to do something for a purpose. What is that purpose? ***"In order to make your hope sure."***

The New American Standard Bible translates it a little differently getting at the same idea—*"so as to realize full assurance of hope."* The author wants these Christians to be confident of their relationship to Christ – he wants them to be "sure" to have "full assurance." So please notice what the author is NOT here talking about: He is not talking about how these people become Christians. He has already said he is confident they are. What he is concerned about is that they have confidence in that rather than living insecurely all the time.

Now what are those two ways whereby Christ's followers may have confidence, assurance, and certainty about their relationship to Jesus? Verses 10-12 give the first of the two ways and verses 13-19 give the second. Those two ways are obedience and trust. Now again, I remind you we are talking about our sense of confidence, our feelings of assurance. These people's sense of their own relationship to Christ had been shaken; a close look at themselves in

the light of some very severe warnings had reduced their level of confidence. Some of them, with tender spirits and sensitive consciences, could potentially have begun to doubt their genuineness. "Am I truly a Christian" they wondered. God says, let me show you the foundations of assurance.

Obedience

Again I remind you, he is writing that he wants them to have assurance—to do something *"in order to make their hope sure."* What are they to do?

"We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end."

Do you want to have assurance of your relationship to Jesus Christ? Then, God says, be diligent about that relationship!

What are those two ways whereby Christ's followers may have confidence, assurance, and certainty about their relationship to Jesus? Obedience and trust.

The author had already commended them for their work for the Kingdom of God, for their love for others, and for their help given to other Christians. Basically he says to keep it up. Paul wrote, *"By grace we are saved through faith...and not by works. For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do."*

Please bear in mind, that good works are not what make us Christian; we are saved by grace through faith, but good works demonstrate that we are Christians.

To the Philippians Paul wrote, *"Continue to work out your salvation...for it is God who works in you to will and to do his good purpose."*

He also wrote to the Corinthians, *"By the grace of God I am what I am—yet not I, but his grace to me was not without effect—No, I worked harder than all of them—yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me."*

Do you want to have assurance of your relationship to Christ? Then diligently follow Christ. Obedience brings confidence.

But the author to the Hebrews goes on in verse 12 to give the other side of the same idea: *"We don't want you to become lazy/sluggish."*

Laziness or sluggishness will cloud over your confidence. Earlier, of the immature, the babies, he had said they *"had become slow to learn"*—they had ceased to care about the things of God. They weren't in the Word, they weren't actively serving others: they had become lazy. The author doesn't tell them to get busy just because he wants more

***As we obey the Lord, as we, not lazily but
diligently imitate those who walk with
Jesus, our own assurance grows.***

work done. He urges, he begs them to stop being lazy because he knows what will happen to their sense of confidence, their assurance, when hard times come or when they sin. They will doubt. If you have ever truly lived with the pain of spiritual doubt you can appreciate why this pastor wants assurance for his readers. If you want assurance of your relationship to Christ, the author writes,

then be diligent about your obedience—don't be lazy. Notice also in verse 13—*"imitate those who through faith and patience inherit what has been promised."*

In the next verses the author will give an example of someone who patiently believed God—Abraham. In chapter 11 the author will give many such examples. Here, his point is "what I am asking you to do has been done by many others, by God's grace." As he will show them, the examples of faithful men and women are meant to be an encouragement.

I have probably said this before but it is appropriate here: I love Sundays. I love walking into this place and seeing men and women I know and some I am only getting to know. I love seeing these very normal people affirming their faith one more time because it's the same faith I have. I love seeing them serve one another. They are proving by their actions that not only their faith, but also my faith is real, God is who He says He is, and that the grace of God changes lives, including my life. As I watch you and imitate you in service and faith, I grow in confidence and assurance that this life of faith in Jesus is for real. So the first foundation of assurance, of confidence, regarding your relationship to Jesus is obedience. As we obey the Lord, as we, not lazily but diligently, imitate those who walk with Jesus, our own assurance grows.

Trust

But in verses 13-20, God gives the second foundation of assurance: trust in the promise and character of God. It is a simple question—will I believe God? Look at verse 13: to whom does the author refer? Abraham. Look in your Bible at Genesis 22:16. Most of you have heard of Abraham. For over 50 years God had been promising Abraham that he would be the father of many and that through him all the

world would be blessed. The older Abraham got the harder, it would seem to us, it would be for Abraham to believe that he would have a son and God's promise would come true. Finally, way past childbearing years, God again promised. Then miracle of miracles, Sarah had a son and his name was Isaac. Abraham's faith certainly would have been greatly strengthened.

But then the unthinkable was asked of him. God told Abraham to sacrifice his own son, to kill him. With what seems to be almost unbelievable faith in God, Abraham set out to obey God. When you read the story you can almost feel the struggle that would have gone on in your soul or mine if we had been called to do that. But the Bible says Abraham believed God so much that he knew God would do something, even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead.

But as Abraham was about to complete his obedience, God spoke out to him from heaven and stayed the sacrifice. And then God did something He had never done before. Several times God had promised Abraham that He would make of Abraham a great nation of people but this time:

"The angel of the Lord said, 'I swear by myself,' declares the Lord, 'I will surely bless you and do everything I have promised.'" (Gen 22:15)

It is this "swearing by himself" that the author of Hebrews picks up in our text in Hebrews 6:13:

"When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself."

In verse 16 we are told the significance of this: When men or women want someone to believe them they claim some more permanent person or object as a witness to their promise: We will "swear on a stack of Bibles" that we will do such and such. Or we will say, "so help me God." In

either case we are appealing to something or someone with more credibility than we have, to back us up. Well according to verse 17 when God wanted to express His promise to Abraham and to us in such a way as to give us absolute confidence that it would happen, God took an oath on Himself. God in essence said, "I God, so help me God" will do as I promised. Verse 18 says God did this so that on the basis of two things we could be greatly encouraged—we could have absolute confidence in God. Those two things are God's promise and God's oath, two things that are unchangeable and thus make it impossible for God to lie.

Abraham listened to God, knew God's character, and trusted God's word. He believed God. He believed God when Abraham couldn't see how the promise could possibly be fulfilled. He believed God when he couldn't see how this circumstance could possibly bring about the promise of God. He believed God when he was asked to do something that appeared, and was, absolutely contrary to the promise

The Bible says Abraham believed God so much that he knew God would do something, even if it meant raising Isaac from the dead.

of God. In the book of Genesis and quoted in Romans, we know Abraham believed God and it was counted to him as righteousness. God said, you trust Me and I will save you—you will be Mine. You trust Me and I will do what I tell you I will do.

Now what has all this to do with assurance of salvation—confidence that you belong to Christ Jesus? God says, "Not only do I promise that you belong to me but I swear to it." God said, *"As many as received Christ, to them God gives*

the right, the authority to be properly called the Children of God."

"If you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God has raised him from the dead, you will be saved."

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only son that whoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life."

- Is your faith in Christ alone for the forgiveness of your sins?
- Is your faith in Christ alone to give you His righteousness and thus make you acceptable to a holy God?

Is your faith in Christ alone for the spiritual life that places you in God's family?

Then how do you know you are truly a Christian? Because you have God's word on it.

I looked across the table at that friend in my office and said, "The **reality** of your relationship to Jesus Christ is based on one thing only: God's gracious action whereby, in Jesus Christ, He gave you spiritual life through the means

"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."

of faith. But your **sense** of that reality, your assurance, your confidence in that relationship, is based on at least two actions: Obedience and Trust.

"If you will obey God and if you will believe that God can't lie, you will have the assurance of your salvation that will enable you to overcome doubt and live positively before God and people. Do you want assurance of your relationship with God? Then obey Him. Don't be lazy, but

be diligent about imitating those who love and serve Jesus. Do you want the assurance of your relationship with God? Then trust Him—He has put His word on it.”

I love the way the author finishes the idea:

“We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure.”(6:19)

Using a metaphor we can all understand, this hope is an “anchor” for the soul, firm and secure. An anchor is something to which my soul can attach that is so secure, so firm, that I know, I have confidence, I have assurance, I belong to Jesus.

Chapter Eight

Promise—God’s Power to Guarantee Your Future Hebrews 6:13-19

Promises are powerful! The right promise, by the right person, can guarantee the future and even change the present. When I was about 10 years of age I was left home alone while my parents and siblings visited my grandparents about six miles away in the town closest to our farm home. Like the huge wind and thunderstorms that strike eastern Colorado on occasion, so that night a storm hit our area of Wisconsin. It was one of those storms when the lightening and thunder nearly coincide—you see the flash and a bone-jarring clap strikes immediately. You are certain the lightening has struck the house even as the house shakes.

I had seen such storms before and just that summer a tornado had smashed two of the smaller buildings near our house and strewn the boards and contents over our yard and nearby fields. That night as the storm raged, I was in a second-floor bedroom. I was in bed and I had the covers pulled over my head as I alternated between singing and crying. I would sing loudly, attempting to drown out the sound of the storm. But every so often the sound would penetrate and I would cry in fear. Then I would get hold of myself and begin again to sing or whistle loudly, pretending all was well.

I tell you that story as a parable of life. There are times in our lives when the future seems very uncertain. Earlier I said there are two anxieties that are common to all people—anxiety over the past and anxiety about the future. We look at our anxiety about the past. Many of us would do

almost anything to be able to change some of our past. But only one thing can alter our history and that is forgiveness. God by His grace changes our past when He forgives and forgets, when He treats us as if it never happened. We likewise alter someone else's past when we do the same for them. Forgiveness is the power to change the past.

Now I want us to think about the other anxiety that is common to all people: anxiety about the future. Uncertainty sometimes niggles away in the backs of everyone's mind. Young people are often consumed with anxiety about the future—when their parents divorce, when moving to a new city or school, when they approach

All of us long for a sense of security in our lives—some guarantee about the future.

graduation from high school or college. Some older people are overcome with it as health deteriorates, as family members die, as expenses increase but income doesn't. And the rest of us try hard to avoid anxiety and work hard to insure against it. But anxiety is pervasive and too often, severe.

Dr. Arman Nicholi Jr., professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School, notes the great increase in depression in America. There are currently eleven million people diagnosed as clinically depressed and over 250,000 people each year attempt to take their lives. He asks, "How do we explain the explosive increase in depression and hopelessness within our society as we enter the twenty-first century A.D.?"

"Historians and social scientists tell us that we have fewer spiritual resources to draw from than at any time in Western cultural history. Many young people today feel that their cultures fail to provide answers to questions of

purpose and meaning and destiny. We fail, they feel, to provide some reason for hope. The consequence is that we are now in a cultural crisis and living in what is being called 'The Age of Despair.' We hear of our 'spiritual vacuum' and our 'crisis of meaning'."¹

All of us long for a sense of security in our lives—some guarantee about the future. We take out insurance to insure. We open mutual funds and bank accounts to assure sufficient funds for the future, we seek a particular education to insure our future, and we seek out specific relationships in an attempt to guarantee against loneliness. But in the back of our mind and sometimes in the forefront we realize that all our guarantees could evaporate in a minute. We witness an auto accident, a Columbine, a friend with cancer, we see others being laid off or a business that fails and we wonder how secure the future really is.

Walt Whitman captures something of our longing for security.

*"A noiseless patient spider
I mark'd where on a little promontory it stood isolated,
Mark'd how to explore the vacant vast surround,
It launch'd forth filament, filament, filament, out of itself,
Ever unreeling them, ever tirelessly speeding them.*

*And you, O my soul where you stand,
Surrounded, detached, in measureless oceans of space,
Ceaselessly musing, venturing throwing,
Seeking the spheres to connect them,
Till the bridge you will need be form'd,
Till the ductile anchor hold,
Till the gossamer thread you fling catch somewhere, O my
soul."²*

We are forever attempting to anchor our lives, to attach

ourselves to something that is more secure, to bring some certainty into an uncertain future. Is there anything that can do that? Is there anything that can guarantee the future? The answer is yes and they are called promises.

Promises are powerful! The right promise, by the right person, can guarantee the future and even change the present. That night, as the wind howled around the house, I heard the phone ring. I don't remember if it rang during a fit of crying or a fantasy of singing but I heard it and, as frightened as I was to venture from the bed, I answered it. The first six words I heard changed my night. They were a promise and they guaranteed my future. It was my father on the phone and he said, "Jerry, I'm coming to get you." The wind still blew, the thunder cracked, and it seemed like an eternity but the outcome in my mind was never in doubt—my father had promised he was coming. That promise guaranteed my future and altered my present. Promises are powerful.

Only one thing affirms that humanity will not just simply expire. Only one thing assures us that the entire universe will not just simply fly apart. Only one thing guarantees that you and I will not soon just simply cease to exist. That one thing is a promise! Only one thing assures that human history is moving to a predictable end. Only one thing guarantees that you and I will live forever. A promise! God's promise!

Read Hebrews 6:13-19:

"When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself, saying, 'I will surely bless you and give you many descendants.' And so after waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised.

"Men swear by someone greater than themselves, and the

*oath confirms what is said and puts an end to all argument. Because **God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear** to the heirs of what was promised, he confirmed it with an oath. God did this **so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we** who have fled to take hold of the hope offered to us **may be greatly encouraged.***

"We have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus, who went before us, has entered on our behalf." (Emphasis Added)

There are two key words here: God's Promise! Forgiveness is God's power to change the past. Promise is God's power to guarantee the future. Let me show you that from this text in Hebrews 6.

The author is clearly using the example of God's promise to Abraham from Genesis 22 to illustrate the quality of God's promises to us. In that account, Abraham is commanded by

***Only one thing guarantees that you and I
will live forever. God's promise!***

God to offer his son Isaac as a sacrifice. When Abraham was willing to obey this nigh impossible, this seemingly contradictory, command of God we are told that God made a promise to Abraham. In the words of the author of Hebrews that promise was: *"I will surely bless you and give you many descendants."*

But the author wants us to see something unusual about the way God makes this promise to Abraham:

"When God made his promise to Abraham, since there was no one greater for him to swear by, he swore by himself..."

Earlier we saw the significance of this. So in two ways God guarantees that what He says will happen: One, He God, promises it and two, He God, swears to it. These two unchangeable things show how impossible it is for God to lie. Or as Moses wrote it in Numbers 23:19:

*"God is not a man, that he should lie,
Nor a son of man, that he should change his mind.
Does he speak and then not act?
Does he promise and not fulfill?"*

Back to Abraham's experience, the author of Hebrews writes what every one of his readers would have known:

"After waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised."

God promised and it absolutely happened! With that illustration cited the author then makes his point:

"God wanted to make the unchanging nature of his purpose

***"For I know the plans I have for you,"
declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you
and not to harm you, plans to give you
hope and a future."***

very clear...so that...we...may be greatly encouraged."

God's purpose in promising and swearing to it was not for Abraham alone but **also for us**. He wanted to make clear the **unchanging nature** of His purpose so that we would not be overcome with anxiety about the future. Our future is guaranteed by nothing less than God's promise and He has sworn Himself to fulfilling it.

And what has He promised as it relates to your future? Read His own words carefully as they relate to several areas of our future.

What about your life?

Jeremiah 29:11 says, *"For I know the plans I have for you," declares the LORD, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."*

Thinking he would only be with us a few weeks, Barbara and I made the decision early in our son's life that we would rock him or lie with him until he drifted off to sleep each night. It's a great time as we talk, pray and sing together. Many nights after he falls asleep, I stroke his head and just stare intently at him and think it is impossible to love someone more than we love him. And often it occurs to me in that moment to acknowledge to God, "This is how you feel about me isn't it?" And that is how He feels about you!

What about God's own presence in your life now?

God has said, *"Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."* (Hebrews 13:5) That was God's promise to Carol Kimbriel as she faced death.

What about the seemingly impossible situations you face?

I Corinthians 10:13 says, "No testing has gripped you except what is common to man. And God is faithful; he will not let you be tested beyond what you can bear. But when you are tested, he will also provide a way out so that you can stand up under it."

That was God's promise to Sharon and John Boyer when Sharon battled cancer.

What about death itself?

John 11:25 says, *"I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies."*

That's God's promise to every widow and widower in this

church.

What about a future after death?

"I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am."(John 14:3)

Do you realize what we have in these promises? No, the promises don't directly address every detail of life: we'd like to know which college, which job, will we always have sufficient income, will our health hold, will our relationships thrive. But God gives us promises that are far more foundational, significant and eternal. He promises His loving presence and His powerful superintendence in all of life and beyond life to eternity itself. By His promise God has already guaranteed our future. It is impossible for God to lie.

We can lay hold of His promises. They are ours to claim. We can come into face of God and say, "You promised!" When I'm with my son and I suggest we not do what I had said we would do, he says, "But Papa, you said!" And with those words he grabs hold of my integrity, "You said!" Yes, I did say. Can I go back on my word? Can I do less than I promised? Would I not cease to be something of what "Papa," "father" means? God would cease to be God if He failed in His promises. And if we cease to believe His promises we cease to believe in God.

Rather, the author says, *"we have this hope as an anchor for the soul, firm and secure."*

This hope we have is the certain promise of God. Playwright Jean Kerr wrote, "Hope is the feeling you have that the feeling you have isn't permanent."³ But in the Scripture hope is not that hopefulness (that "I hope so" of so many) but hope is the absolute certainty of what will come—what God has guaranteed will happen. These promises of God are an anchor for the soul. That's a

brilliant phrase!

An anchor bites into the solid-ness of the ocean floor and holds a boat securely in place. The promises of God tie us directly to the person of God; our lives are secured by the certainty of God's promises. We are moored to an immovable object, like a lighthouse anchored to a rock, the

God promises His loving presence and His powerful superintendence in all of life and beyond life to eternity itself.

promise of God anchors us to the rock.

"Let the winds blow, and billows roll,
Hope is the anchor of my soul.

But can I by so slight a tie,
An unseen hope, on God rely?

Steadfast and sure, it cannot fail,
It enters deep within the veil,

It fastens on a land unknown,
And moors me to my father's throne."⁴

God has promised and He has sworn to it. All that makes God "God" stands behind His promise. He will not, He cannot fail you. Promise is God's power to guarantee the future.

End Notes

¹ Arman Nicholi Jr., *In Finding God at Harvard: Spiritual Journeys of Thinking Christians*, p. 112-113

² www.quotation.about.com

³ Jean Kerr, *Finishing Touches*, Act III

⁴ Charles Spurgeon

Chapter Nine

Who would name their baby 'Melchizedek'? (Jesus, the High Priest, who meets our deepest needs)

Hebrews 7:1-8:1

Have you ever done something for which you were truly guilty? Not only did you feel guilty but in fact you were? Have you ever felt the guilt that King David felt when he wrote, *"I know my transgression and my sin is always before me—night and day, God your hand was heavy upon me..."*?

Susan Smith of South Carolina drowned her two young sons by strapping them into car seats and then driving her car into a lake. Assume for a minute that Susan Smith has not totally lost touch with reality. How does she deal with the guilt?

What does a father do when in a burst of anger he slaps out at his young daughter and she falls against the corner of a table permanently disabling her? How does he handle the guilt?

How does someone live each day with the knowledge that they broke a marriage vow? That they abandoned their spouse and children they swore they'd never leave?

What does someone do when they have violated the trust of their parents, their God and their future spouse by engaging in premarital sex?

What does a person do when they have failed to be the father or mother they knew they should have been and now their children are living as selfishly and as destructively as they did?

In the situations I've just described I am talking about real guilt. I'm not discussing "false guilt"—feelings of responsibility—some people have when in fact they had no responsibility. No, I'm talking about when you do bear responsibility, maybe full responsibility; you did or did not do something that resulted in great harm (physical or emotional) to another person. You are guilty! How do you live with that?

Most, if not all, religions try to deal with guilt by having people somehow atone for their sins—do something to make up for what they did wrong. Some religions have penance or some form of it, whereby the guilty person "makes up for" their sin in some way. Many religions will

In that Jewish religion, guilt was dealt with in a sacrificial system headed by the priests. Here God says, "the former sacrificial system is set aside because it was weak and useless."

have other forms of "paying" for the sin thus again, absolving the offender of guilt. But do those actions actually make the offender "not guilty" or even "less guilty"? Can people actually believe that their sin, their harmful actions against God or others are dealt with by these superficial means? Or do they go only living with a measure of guilt and just hoping that God and others will somehow not hold them as accountable as they feel?

The Jewish religion, at least the Jewish religion of New Testament times, around the time of Jesus and the Apostles, was a religion, like other religions, that attempted to deal with the issue of guilt. In that Jewish religion, guilt was dealt with in a sacrificial system headed by the priests. The priests regularly sacrificed animals to atone for the sin

of the people. And specifically, each year, the high priest, would sacrifice a bull to pay for the sins of the people.

The author of the Book of Hebrews repeatedly makes reference to Jesus as a "high priest." Look at Hebrews 4:14:

"Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess."

Here Jesus is called a "high priest." Even while the author was talking about Jesus as a high priest he introduced us to someone named "Melchizedek":

"And he says in another place, 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.' " (5:6)

Still speaking of Jesus, the author referred to Him as "designated by God to be high priest in the order of Melchizedek." (5:10) Who is this "Melchizedek" and what is his significance? Let's first look at some background to give us the author's perspective.

In this book of Hebrews, God, through a human author, is writing to Jewish people about their particular religion, but it is applicable to people of any religion or people who claim to have no religion. Look at 7:11: God says, *"If perfection--that is, completeness, what you really need and want from your religion--could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood...why was there still need for another priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek not in the order of Aaron?"*

Even if you don't understand everything about this verse yet, you get the gist of it at first reading. God is saying, *"There is something wrong with your religion--it won't do for you what you need."* Look at 7:18. Here God says, *"the former regulation (that is the former sacrificial system) is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect). "* "Your religion isn't doing for you

what you need. You Jews may have the law and you may be doing all the right sacrifices but something has changed that makes all that obsolete. Your religious system it isn't able to bring you to God and it isn't able to deal with your guilt.

Now obviously, his point is saying all this is not to "rag" on the Jewish system but rather to demonstrate that a new and infinitely better way has come—a way that will bring you to God, a way that will permanently deal with real guilt. God demonstrates in chapter 7 that Jesus is infinitely better than any religion to bring us to God and in Jesus we find the way to deal with our real guilt. To make his point, the author first shows how **Jesus is a very different high priest** than all the high priests of the Jewish religion. And to do that, he will begin by showing how different and superior this Melchizedek was to the Jewish Priests.

Why does he talk about Melchizedek if Jesus is the most important issue here? Look back at 6:20 and 5:6. What do you read?

"Jesus is a priest or high priest forever in the order of Melchizedek."

Where does that statement come from? Psalm 110. The Psalmist, probably King David, wrote about a coming King. Even though he might not have known it, he was writing prophetically. He was writing about a king who would come and who would be unique. David and his sons and grandsons who were kings were not priests. Kings and Priests had distinctly different roles and the two were not to mix. The Priests, in fact were from a different family line—from the family of Levi—while the kings were from Judah. But the Psalmist said a king was coming who would also be a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek, not Levi. Zechariah, the Prophet, also predicted a Priest-King who

would come.

And so by Jesus' day, the Jews were waiting for a Messiah who would fulfill those two offices—King and Priest. And what the author is doing is showing how Jesus is that Priest-King—the One who would deal with our needs in a way that no religion ever could. Now to show that Jesus is the Priest-King fulfilling the Old Testament prophecies and to show that this Priest-King is infinitely superior to the Old Testament Priests and their religion, the author starts out with a reminder about Melchizedek.

In Verses 1-10 we are shown how Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and greater than the Levitical priests who came out of Abraham's family and greater than the religious system of the Levites. To the Jews Abraham was

Jesus is a very different high priest than all the high priests of the Jewish religion.

the greatest. And from Abraham came Isaac and from Isaac came Jacob (later renamed Israel) and from Jacob-Israel came 12 sons who became the beginnings of the 12 tribes or families or clans of Jacob-Israel. Some of the names of those sons were Benjamin, Issachar, Dan, Judah, Joseph, and Levi.

The great, great, great, (I don't know how many "greats") grandsons of Levi were Moses and Aaron of whom we read in Exodus when the Israelites (descendants of the 12 sons of Jacob-Israel) were in slavery in Egypt. Through Moses, God gave instruction that Aaron, Moses' brother and also a descendant of Levi, and his sons after him were to be the priests of the nation of Israel. Hence it is Levi's descendants, and also Aaron's descendants who became

the priests and so we refer to the “ Levites” as the priests. And we refer to the “Levitical” priests or even the Levitical system when talking about the sacrifices of the Old Testament: “Levitical,” Levites, descendants of Levi. To the Jews, Abraham was the greatest and his descendant Levi and his descendants the Levitical Priests were the only way to God through the sacrificial system of the Temple.

We desperately needed a different kind of Priest and a different kind of religion and Jesus is that Priest bringing not a religion but Himself.

But what is God’s point in verses 1-10? Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and greater than the Levitical priests. How is that possible?

Look at verse 4:

“Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder!”

When Abraham came back from battle he gave a tenth to Melchizedek the King-Priest of the city of Salem. Not only did Abraham give a tithe to Melchizedek, but Melchizedek, also in verses 6-7, “blessed” Abraham. And verse 7 makes clear what everyone already knew—the greater blesses the lesser.

Not only that, but, in verse 8, the Levites who collect tithes from the people die. But Melchizedek, of whom the Scripture is silent about his birth and death, is a type, a pre-figuring, of a priest who never dies. Please don’t misunderstand; the text doesn’t say that Melchizedek didn’t have a mother and didn’t die but that the Genesis account of him is silent on the issue thus making it easy to use him as an illustration of someone who is truly without beginning or end—namely the Messiah, Jesus.

And lastly in verses 9-10 because in one sense Levi and his children were still in Abraham when Abraham met and honored Melchizedek, it can be said that even the Levitical Priests honored Melchizedek. Because Abraham represented the entire family that would be born to him and his descendants. So the author has established his first point: Melchizedek is greater even than Abraham and certainly greater than the Levitical Priests.

Now he comes to his second point in verses 11-19:

"If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. For it is declared: 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek.' The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God."

We desperately needed a different kind of Priest and a different kind of religion and Jesus is that Priest bringing not a religion but Himself. We are back to verse 11 that we looked at earlier. The argument is this: Why would King David and Zechariah the prophet describe a King to come who would be a Priest-King like Melchizedek if the Levitical Priests, the ones through Levi and Aaron, were all we

needed? They wouldn't have! But they did and verse 12 says that where there is a change of priesthood there is a change of law—a change in the way people are brought to God. In verses 13-14 we see that Jesus is that Priest and He descended, in one sense, not from Levi (like the Jewish Priests) but from Judah, another son of Jacob-Israel. And in verses 15-16, Jesus is like Melchizedek in that He serves as a Priest not because He is a descendant of Levi but because He lives forever, *"A priest forever in the order of Melchizedek."* (7:17)

Do you remember from verse 11 how he said the Levitical religious system was obviously flawed; otherwise we wouldn't have needed a new Priest? Well, in verse 18 we are told why a new system was needed:

"The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless for the law made nothing perfect."

In Romans 7 and 8 and Galatians 3 Paul says in essence the same thing: The Law was not designed to bring people to God, it simply showed us how sinful we really are—it was a tutor, a schoolmaster showing us our need. It was powerless to make any change in a person. The law could show you how guilty you were, but do nothing to actually cancel or relieve the guilt. But in Jesus a better hope is introduced by which we actually draw near to God.

"for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God." (7:19)

Now at verse 20 the author begins his third and culminating point: We have a new and infinitely superior High Priest in Jesus. And in these verses we will see in what ways Jesus is superior to any religious system and what that means to us.

First of all in verses 20-22 we are told that Jesus is superior

to any religious system because He is the High Priest by God's appointment **and oath!**

"And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: 'The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: You are a priest forever.' Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant."

To accommodate our tendency to lying and our suspicion of anyone else's promises, God says I not only tell you I appointed my Son to be your priest forever but I swear to you, I take an oath—Jesus is high Priest forever. God never

The Law was not designed to bring people to God. The law could show you how guilty you were, but do nothing to actually cancel the guilt. But in Jesus a better hope is introduced by which we actually draw near to God.

said the other priests would be forever but He did say, quoting from Psalm 110 again, that Jesus would be and He swears to it. And because Jesus is God's guaranteed High Priest forever, according to verse 22 He is the guarantee of a better covenant. What this High Priest does lasts forever. Trust in the religious systems of the world, even the sacrificial system of the Levites and they will fail you eventually. But Jesus' priestly actions on your behalf will never fail—He is the guarantee.

Adding to that same concept, in verses 23-25 we find that Jesus is infinitely superior to any religious system even the Jewish one because while the other priests die Jesus lives forever.

"Now there have been many of those priests, since death

prevented them from continuing in office; but because Jesus lives forever, he has a permanent priesthood. Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

And since He lives forever and serves as our permanent high priest, He is able to completely save us who come to God through Him. Those who trust in Jesus are at this very moment being saved by Jesus. Salvation is not just a point in time conversion but it is also a day-by-day "being saved"

Jesus, the High Priest not only offered the sacrifice Himself but He became the sacrifice Himself. He met the demands of justice against our sin.

by Jesus Himself. The other priests are merely human beings, subject to the same limitations as the rest of us, but Jesus, human though He is, is also God who lives forever.

Verse 25 goes on to say that He always lives to intercede for us. The picture is definitely of the Lord Jesus who as our Priest presents our case before the Father. He is this day interceding on our behalf. And it is important not to think of Jesus standing before the throne like some impoverished supplicant with His hands outstretched asking the Father for something for which He has no right to ask. No. Jesus sits enthroned as the Priest-King and His every request is consistent with the Father's desires and so the Father hears and responds. Because of who He is, He is able to save completely those who come to God through Him. He will keep us, protect us, and bring us to the Father.

But not only is He infinitely superior to other religions by virtue of God's oath declaring Him a priest forever, and by His permanence whereby He doesn't die, but also He is also infinitely superior to all religions because of His character, His virtue. Verses 26-27 spell out just some of the attributes of Jesus:

- He is holy. He perfectly fulfilled the will of God, never missing the mark, always displaying the moral character of God.
- He is blameless. In all His actions toward others He was perfectly innocent of any malice or wrongdoing.
- He is pure. He knew no sin having never sinned.
- He was separate from sinners in that while He was fully human He was in a class by Himself--He never sinned.

And what in Verse 27 does God say that means for us?

"Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices, day after day, for his own sins and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."

Chapters 9 and 10 are going to spell this out in more detail but for now the point is that when Jesus, the holy, blameless, pure, like us but unlike us, Son of God, the High Priest not only offered the sacrifice Himself but He became the sacrifice Himself—He took our sin and our guilt on Himself—He met the demands of justice against our sin. The other religious systems make us feel guilty for our sin because we are, but Jesus takes the guilt away. The other religious systems pretend we can do something about our guilt, but we can't.

- What can make up for a life taken?
- What can make up for slander?
- What can make up for a child abused?

- What can make up for a God ignored?
- What can make up for a vow not kept?

If we tried to pay for our sin we would spend eternity trying. But not even eternal punishment could atone for our sin against God and others.

When Jesus, the sinless Son of God died, not for His own sin, but ours, He satisfied justice. He removed the guilt by being guilty in our place. And since He has removed the real guilt, I can be relieved of the feeling of guilt because a Holy God forgave me. Other religious systems lead people to try to pay for their sin by offerings. Others would have you do penance to somehow make up for what you've done. Others would say you will have to spend months or years in a purgatory to suffer enough for your sins. But God says to bring your guilt to Jesus and receive His full forgiveness—not just a psychological forgiveness but a real forgiveness, your guilt removed. Your sin was paid for by Jesus—it is as if you never sinned. By faith in Jesus, God declares you “not guilty.”

Isn't that the kind of High Priest you want?

"The point of what we are saying is this: We do have such a high priest, who sat down at the right hand of the majesty in heaven." (8:1)

Is He your high priest?

Chapter Ten

A New and Better Covenant Hebrews 8:1-13

Have you ever heard the term “backslidden” or “backsliding”? In my boyhood church that phrase was used a lot. What those in my church, following the example of the Bible, were talking about was, those people who give good evidence that they have become Christ-followers—real Christians—and then sometime later seem to drift back to the old way of thinking and living. If someone is in a “backslidden” condition, living disobediently, are they still a Christian? I don’t think anyone other than God can really know. There certainly is a lot of biblical evidence that if a person stays in that “backslidden” condition, it eventually proves they did not ever truly belong to Christ. But that true believers can “backslide” for a time, seems evident from the experience of Peter, the Apostles, some of the Corinthian Christians, Solomon, and others.

The possibility of a temporary, even weeks-long or months-long, lapse into unbelief and sin, “backsliding” seems entirely possible for many true believers. How many reading this can remember well a time when your relationship to Jesus was alive, stimulating, and satisfying but you have long since slid back into a lifeless religious routine? How many are feeling such pressure from life’s circumstances that you are sorely tempted to just give up, at least for a while; to quit fighting it and just slide back into that comfortable, carelessness about God that used to characterize your life before you became a Christian?

Maybe you’ve grown weary of “living the Christian life”—it’s too hard. And so you decided, mostly by default, to slide

back into one or the other of two popular religions. Some of you are tempted to slide back into what I call "the man on the street religion." That is the religion that carelessly hopes God will overlook my failures, my sins, my imperfections because after all, I'm more good than bad. "God's fair, isn't He?" With a belief something like that, many can live blindly hoping their logic is correct and that it will all work out in the end.

Some of you are tempted to slide back into the second popular religion in what I call "evangelical wishful thinking religion." That is the religion that says, "I asked Jesus into my heart some time ago and therefore I'm a Christian and it doesn't really matter what I do from now on because

The word "Covenant" as used of God's relationship to His people means a binding together, an obligation to each other.

when I die, I'll still go to heaven." Yes, there are times in our Christian lives when we grow weary, when it seems that it would be easier and much more comfortable to just slide into something that isn't so hard.

Apparently the people to whom God is writing in the book of Hebrews were facing very difficult times being Christ-followers. And apparently they were tempted to give in to the pressures to just go back to the old ways.

"Be careful so you don't drift away."(Hebrews 2:2)

"See to it that you don't turn away from the living God."(Hebrews 3:12)

And several more times in the letter, He warns them not to go back. The ways of the old religious system tempted them to go back. They would just do the best they could, offer the proper sacrifices to the priests in the Temple and

just hope for the best while they went on living their lives. The radically different way of living that was demanded of Christ-followers was too hard.

But the pastor-author through whom God writes this letter, says, "Don't go back"! Don't go back to what is dead, to what can't possibly help you. Don't go back to the old when a new way has appeared. In Hebrews 7:22 the pastor said, "*Jesus has become the guarantee of a better **covenant.***" And in Hebrews 8, the pastor writes in verse 6 that Jesus has brought a new covenant, a new way of relating to God, that is superior to the old one.

"But the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant of which he is mediator is superior to the old one, and it is founded on better promises."

What is this word "covenant" and what does it mean? In our Bibles most of us have an Old Testament and a New Testament. That word "testament" is a Latin rendering of a Greek word meaning, "covenant." We can rightly refer to the Old Testament of the Bible as that which discusses God's dealings with His people under the Old Covenant. And the New Testament as that which discusses God's dealings with His people under the New Covenant. So "Testament" and "Covenant" are roughly equivalent and we have two "covenants"—an Old and a New.

The word "Covenant" as used of God's relationship to His people means a binding together, an obligation to each other, but specifically a "contract" of sorts where the more powerful says what the conditions are going to be and the less powerful can decide whether or not to accept those conditions and the resulting benefits or penalties. In the Old Covenant God told them how to relate to Him and what privileges and penalties accompanied obedience or disobedience. In the New Covenant God told them how to

relate to Him and that privileges and penalties accompanied obedience or disobedience. The book of Hebrews is written to demonstrate how superior Jesus and the NEW Covenant are to the old way of seeing and doing things.

Remember, I am likening the "old" covenant to the systems of belief that we are tempted to slide back into when we grow weary of following Christ. Today, most of us are not tempted to slide back into the Old Covenant-Testament sacrificial system with priests, lambs, and temples but we are tempted to slide back into other systems that we hope will make us right with God in the end. To talk them out of backsliding, this author-pastor tries to demonstrate to them how infinitely superior walking with Jesus is to going back to their old system. And he says, in verse 6 that it is superior because the NEW covenant is founded on better promises.

Look at verse 7.

"For if there had been nothing wrong with that first covenant, no place would have been sought for another."

Your old system for relating to God was flawed; if it weren't flawed there would have been no need for a New covenant but there was a problem with the Old Covenant. People didn't respond to God in faith and obedience. Under the Old Covenant, everyone who was born of Jewish parents was considered part of the Covenant. The boys were circumcised on the 8th day after birth to indicate their covenant relationship to God. What you had were people who were called "Israelites" or part of the people of "Israel" just because they were born into the family.

But at the end of verse 9 God says that the people did not remain faithful to the covenant.

"It will not be like the covenant I made with their

forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they did not remain faithful to my covenant, and I turned away from them, declares the Lord.” (8:9)

God made a covenant with the People. He said that if they would trust Him and obey Him He would be their God and they would be His people. But the covenant and commandments were disregarded as Jeremiah said, *“But they did not listen or pay attention; instead they followed the stubborn inclinations of their evil hearts.”* (Jeremiah 7:24-26)

The book of Hebrews is written to demonstrate how superior Jesus and the NEW Covenant are to the old way of seeing and doing things.

Prophet after prophet came calling the people back to covenant loyalty saying, *“Listen to the terms of the Covenant and follow them...all along I have warned you, obey me—but you did not listen or pay attention.”* (Jer. 11:6f) King Josiah (as recorded in 2 Kings 23) called the people back to God. The people said they would follow God but it was lip service, *“They did not return to me with all their heart but only in pretense.”* (Jer. 3:10).

And so the pastor to the Hebrews says in verse 7, there’s something wrong! You see, the Old Covenant couldn’t deliver! The Old Covenant couldn’t actually bring people to God

The Old system said you “ought to do better” but it gave people no power to do so.

- The “man on the street” religion says be careful to be good more than you are bad, but it can’t help you do it.
- The “evangelical wishful thinking religion” says, “I hope you’re right about this ‘eternal security’ stuff because I’m in trouble if it’s wrong and something in my heart says this isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. Calling myself a Christian while disregarding God doesn’t do well in creating peace of heart and mind.”

The Old Covenant didn’t cut it because there were thousands who were part of the Covenant who had no ability to obey the law. They were part of the Covenant not by heart, but just by birth.

And so God, in verse 8, using the prediction of Jeremiah, says a time will come when the house of Israel, the so-called “people of God,” will truly be the people of God. God will make a new covenant. And this time, people would become part of the Covenant not by birth but by re-birth!

The NEW covenant was NEW in that it imparted a new heart able to obey, to respond to God, to be God’s person.

And God is writing to remind these discouraged or careless Christians of certain facts that ought to change their minds about backsliding. Your birthright may entail obligations and even hardship but don’t, like Esau, sell it for a bowl of porridge. Don’t slide back into the old system just because following Christ is hard.

Consider what you have in Christ and the New Covenant that you could never have under the old system. In verse 6 God had called it a “better” covenant.” How is it better? Verses 10-12 show us three ways:

1. Your New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus

Christ is better because God has brought you into His family by writing His laws, His desires on your mind and heart. (8:10) Under the old system the laws of God were external to the person. A person could look it up in the Bible, read it, and even think to himself, "I ought to do that" but there was nothing corresponding to that in his heart—he had no internal compulsion or propensity to obey. If you go back to your old system, whatever it is, remember that you will be expected to live by the law (you can't escape that) but you'll have forfeited or at least dulled that inward principle enabling you to obey God.

When God talks about writing His laws on our minds and hearts He is talking about a "heart transplant." This is more than memorizing the Bible. Deut. 6:6-9 already called for that and most of the people of Israel were no better off for it. Memorizing is no guarantee of performance. What people need is a new heart—a heart on which is written the law of God.

"I will take the stony heart out...and give them a heart of flesh, that they may walk in my statutes and keep my ordinances and obey them; and they shall be my people, and I will be their God."(Ezekiel 11:19ff)

When the people in Moses' day heard the demands of the covenant they said, *"All that Jehovah has spoken we will do, and be obedient."*(Ex. 24:7) "But they did not have the internal moral power to match their good intentions."¹ They needed a new heart! The defect was not in the demands of God but in the inadequacy of the human beings who were supposed to obey. The NEW covenant was NEW in that it imparted a new heart able to obey, to respond to God, to be God's person.

Dr. Christian Barnard, the first surgeon ever to do a heart transplant asked one of his patients, "Would you like to see

your old heart?" John Blanchard writes, "the men stood in a room of the Groote Schuur Hospital in Johannesburg, South Africa. Dr. Barnard went up to a cupboard, took down a glass container and handed it to Dr. Blaiberg. Inside the container was Blaiberg's old heart. For a moment he stood there stunned into silence, the first man in history to hold his own heart in his hands. (After asking many questions) he turned to take a final look at the contents of the glass container, and said, 'So this is my old heart that caused me so much trouble.' "² The Apostle Paul wrote, *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation, the old has gone, the new has come."*

God has given us a heart transplant. We now have a heart that desires to obey our God. Yes, we still battle daily with our old habits but at least now we have a new propensity for obedience engraved on our new hearts by the Spirit of God.

Don't slide back to the old systems, the old ways of thinking, the old "pull yourself up by your own bootstraps" kinds of religions. Don't ignore the new heart God has given you. Don't stifle the promptings of that new heart by disregarding God or by carelessly ignoring Him. It may be hard to be a Christ-follower but God has given you a new heart on which He has written His laws so that you are enabled to follow Christ. Don't ignore that.

2. Not only is your New Covenant relationship with God through Jesus Christ better because God has brought you into His family by writing His laws on your mind and heart but also because in this New Covenant relationship we have an intimacy with God that others cannot know. Look at Hebrews 8:10b-11:

"I will be their God, and they will be my people. No longer will a man teach his neighbor, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the

least of them to the greatest."

The Old Covenant relationship was with a whole lot of people who frankly didn't know God. Most were part of the Covenant simply by birth not re-birth. They knew about God if a neighbor or brother told them saying, "know the Lord" but they didn't know God personally. They had no relationship with Him. God through this author-Pastor, in a sense, pleads with His readers and us, "Don't slide back to the old system where your knowledge of God was second-hand." Don't go back to where you only know God by what others tell you instead of having the experience of being His child. Don't go back to being distant from God.

What you have under the New Covenant is a Father-child relationship with Almighty God. Because God's Spirit now lives within you, you have the privilege of coming directly into the presence of God. Whether you are of the greatest or the least, if you are trusting in Jesus Christ as your

***God has given us a heart transplant.
We now have a heart that desires
to obey our God.***

saving-Lord, you belong to God and you can know Him personally. Would you forfeit that? Would you go back to a system that just knows about God when you can live daily in an awareness of His presence and the intimacy of His counsel to you? Don't slide back.

3. This New Covenant relationship with God through Christ is better because we have the full knowledge of sins forgiven and remembered no more.

"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more." (8:12)

As I have explained in previous sermons from Hebrews, sin

is the plague of the human race. Most, except the most audacious and foolish, admit that something is wrong between them and God. Most human beings know they need help because they are in trouble with God. Most of the other religious systems of the world are an attempt to deal with God's displeasure against sin. Even the Old Covenant could not actually deal with sin—it only sacrificed animals daily as a reminder that the blood of bulls and goats cannot take away sin. If you slide back to the old way of living and thinking you will have to deal all over again with the problem of sin—your sin.

The “man on the street” religions and the “evangelical wishful thinking religion” don't deal with sin; they just try to cover them, ignore them, or pay for them, none of which works. Under the New Covenant, God in Christ has paid for your sins and He promises to forgive them and “remember them no more.”

Forgiveness is tied to memory. Kent Hughes tells of the ancient Roman named Seneca of whom it is said, he could listen to 200 students each quote a line of poetry and then when they were all done, repeat back each person's poem. It is said of St. Augustine that he admired a friend who could recite from memory the entire text of Virgil, backwards. But they would lose in contest with God for God never forgets anything unless He wills to. And He willed to forget our sins because Christ paid for them.

That is the “New Covenant” forgiveness—total forgiveness—no longer remembered. Would you slide back to the insecurity and doubt of the old systems? God by His Spirit gives us the security of knowing we have been forgiven by Him and that we belong to Him. Don't lose that! The New Covenant provides what is so much better. Don't lose it.

How about you, have you slid back to the old ways and old systems?

Have you dulled the writing of God's word on your heart?

Have you lost a sense of His personal presence in your life?

Have you taken back again the guilt for your sins?

Don't forget the New Covenant!

End Notes

¹ FF Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 173

² Kent Hughes, *Hebrews*, p. 218

Chapter Eleven

Traveling Light

Hebrew 9:15-28

Presented by Dr. Don Payne

"For this reason Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, that those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance—now that he has died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant.

"In the case of a will, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it, because a will is in force only when somebody has died; it never takes effect while the one who made it is living. This is why even the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. When Moses had proclaimed every commandment of the law to all the people, he took the blood of calves, together with water, scarlet wool and branches of hyssop, and sprinkled the scroll and all the people. He said, 'This is the blood of the covenant, which God has commanded you to keep.' In the same way, he sprinkled with the blood both the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies. In fact, the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

"It was necessary, then, for the copies of the heavenly things to be purified with these sacrifices, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. For Christ did not enter a man-made sanctuary that was only a copy of the true one; he entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. Nor did he enter heaven to offer himself again and again, the way the high priest enters the Most Holy Place every year with blood that is not his own. Then Christ would have had to suffer many times since the creation of the world. But now he has appeared

once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. Just as man is destined to die once, and after that to face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Hebrews 9:15-28)

Most of us don't plan to be hypocrites. But somewhere along the line in that journey of faith the realities of God, the realities of the gospel, the realities of Jesus Christ, don't compel our hearts anymore. Somewhere along the line in that Christian journey what was once fire in our bones and wind in our sails no longer even turns our heads. You see we can keep all of the trappings in place; we certainly built a nice house, a nice respectable house of faith. Our

For the history of mankind, we have been preoccupied with guilt.

doctrinal beliefs are in place, the Sunday habits are maintained, our devotional practices are kept up, and our ethical standards are as intense as ever. But somehow along the line, we have become at least functional hypocrites and we do not even know it, but we gave up. 'Gave up' is such a harsh way to put it, because quite possibly for most of us there was no point along the line where we consciously said to ourselves, "I quit." But the law of diminishing returns begins working. And we feel that the more we invest in this Christian faith, the less LIFE we are experiencing. And fatigue sets in, despair overcomes our souls, our vision begins to fade and the risks and liabilities of faith outweigh the benefits as we slug it out day after day in a world that values only the here and now. We've maintained that nice looking, respectable house, that

structure. We pay the bills, we cut the grass, we check for burglars, and it is a nice place to visit. But we don't really "live" *there* anymore.

What is it that makes us vulnerable to this slow slide into hypocrites at least the functional hypocrites where we find our Christian faith to be more draining than life giving? But Hebrews 9 illustrates for us how a weak understanding of sin and a weak understanding of sin's solution straitjacket's our spirit and sets us up to quit.

Just over a year ago, about 5 miles away from this church, Albert Petroski brutally took the lives of three innocent people. Recently, the jury spared Albert Petroski's life, giving him life in prison. Yet, last week Petroski took his own life. Now, none of us here know what went through Albert Petroski's mind. None of us knows what it was, exactly, that burdened his soul. But we do know this: whatever it was, his imprisonment of soul went far beyond the bars that that contained his body. And whatever encumbered Albert Petroski's soul, can only differ in degree from what encumbers ours.

For the history of mankind, we have been preoccupied with guilt. It started as early as Cain and Abel, the first two brothers, where Cain destroyed the life of his brother because his brother brought to God an acceptable sacrifice and he himself did not. And out of his sense of guilt and shame for what he had done, he destroyed his brother. And then the guilt and shame of that followed Cain like a dark cloud all his life. It shows up again in secular literature. If you're familiar with William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, you've seen Macbeth trying in futility to rub out the spot of his victim's blood from his hand. You see it today even in Clint Eastwood and in bumper stickers that tell us to "forget guilt." For the history of mankind we have been preoccupied, even obsessed, with guilt even in our very

attempts to deny it and ignore it and run from it.

The case for real guilt, for universal guilt, and for individual guilt has already been made compellingly in the book of Hebrews. And this reading focuses our attention in an even more direct, more intense way, because it brings us face to face with the solution to our guilt. Not so that we can ignore it, not so that we can pretend that we are not guilty, but so that we can deal with our guilt honestly and face every obstacle to faith and life with a strong heart. That's why this seems like a fairly abstract theological discussion for a group of people who needed something very practical.

These Hebrew Christians were in the middle of a temptation to turn back because of opposition to their faith. Why would the author give such a heady theological discussion to people who needed answers—practical, specific answers? In difficult times, why do you preach heady theology to people who are in the trenches? It's because the way we respond to our guilt determines our endurance in faith when the wind blows against us. Now the link begins actually in verses 14 and 15, where our author says, *"how much more then, will the blood of Christ who, through the eternal Spirit."*

It is through Jesus' death that our consciences are cleared and we are freed to serve the Living God, because this new covenant the author talks about, this new covenant that Jesus brought about, gives us a new way of relating to God. Now with this new covenant, we're able to related to God with glad hearts, not fearful hearts. And in verse 22, the author argues that this true life the new covenant brings, is rooted in Jesus' death, because this covenant functions like a will. It functions like a will because a will is valid only when the maker of the will dies. And it's made with us because we have a fundamental need, which, left

alone would have killed us. It's as if each one of us had discovered we have a terminal disease and we have absolutely no resources to gain the treatment for this disease. And we discover that a will has been made on our behalf, and when the benefactor of that will dies, we are instantly left with the resources to get the treatment for our terminal disease.

The reason for this kind of a will, this kind of a covenant, is because this fundamental need we have strikes at the very core of what it means to be human. It strikes at the very core of life itself. Sin is not just an inconvenient appendage to our lives. Sin is not a commodity that simply cuts away our respectability, but sin literally imprisons our souls and kills. And God's promise, God's covenant, God's will was given to us so that we could LIVE, so that we could be FREE. Not just in the hereafter, but NOW. It's given to us so that we can live. I borrowed the title for this message

It is through Jesus' death that our consciences are cleared and we are freed to serve the Living God, because this new covenant gives us a new way of relating to God.

from a book by the same title, by Eugene Peterson. Peterson comments in the introduction to his book, "We live in a world awash in the fantasies of freedom. We fantasize a free life based on power, on sex, on fame, on leisure. Whole industries develop out of these fantasies, and they shape even careers, but the world we live in is conspicuously and sadly lacking in the experience of freedom. The actual lives of most people are filled with boredom and hassle. Our churches are attended regularly by the inhibited, the obsessive compulsive, the fearfully

defensive - enough of them to provide outside observers with a stereotype."

Sin's symptom is guilt and that guilt leads to an encumbered, constricted life, a life that's barely worthy of the title LIFE. But Christ's death set us free from that straitjacket. He set us free to know and enjoy God. Free to live a fully human life because now we're free to live for God. That kind of life doesn't arise out of a radical problem like ours without an equally radical solution – the death of an innocent one. And that's why all this talk among Christians about "blood." Have you ever found yourself somewhat embarrassed when you watch TV programs and saw a scene depicting antiquated Christians in a camp meeting singing old hymns like *"Nothing but the Blood of Jesus"* and *"What Can Wash Away my Sins?"* *"There is a*

***Jesus, the Great High Priest, the Sinless One, solved that problem with finality—
solved it once and for all.***

Fountain Filled with Blood"? Have you ever pondered those lyrics? Have you ever found yourselves embarrassed among your modern-minded friends that in Christianity we talk so much about "blood"? I want you to think again, perhaps for the very first time, about what we sing, when we sing, *"There is a Fountain":*

*"There is a Fountain filled with blood, drawn from Emmanuel's veins;
And sinners plunged beneath that flood, wash all their sins away."*

See, SIN steals life. And it steals our freedom. Sin is living death, but His blood has cleansed us and by cleansing us He's made us alive again.

Verses 23-28 show us that only Jesus Christ could accomplish that because God, Himself, had to be dealt with. The author speaks of the copies of heavenly things, which were symbolically cleansed by the repeated Old Testament sacrifices. But all those previous sacrifices were just “acting it out” and that’s why they were endlessly repeated. And the net effect was that our sin, our constriction, our straightjacket was kept in our faces. But Jesus, the Great High Priest, the Sinless One, solved that problem with finality—solved it once and for all.

Maybe you fully agree with all of that, but in the honesty of your heart, you find that claim immensely difficult to *feel*; to *feel cleansed*, to *feel* forgiven. We find it difficult to feel forgiven because in every heart resides a vent to take care of ourselves. Yes, we believe that Jesus Christ died for our sins but we *live* and we *feel* as if WE have to atone for our sins. Maybe we feel that way through reliving and rehearsing our sins to ourselves. Maybe that takes the shape of obsessively moralizing to others or through chronic anger and judgment on the lives of others; or maybe even through running from our sins—denying them and living it up. Either way, we feel as if WE have to atone for our sins. To live in faith leaves us with nothing to do but trust God. And when we are left with nothing to do ourselves, that’s a terrifying prospect. We feel powerless, and empty-handed, which in fact we are.

In verses 27 and 28 the author gives us God’s promise that our guilt and our sin have been taken care of **just as certainly** as each of us will encounter death and judgment. Because with the certainty of the Promise that the sin and guilt are taken care of, comes the certainty and the promise that Christ will return and give us the full entrée of salvation. Because every small piece of forgiveness, of cleansing, that we have experienced, that

we have tasted now is just an appetizer. But just as certainly as Christ did die, just as certainly as our sins have been forgiven, just as certainly as we will die and face judgment, just that certainly Christ will return and open the table without restriction for us.

Now maybe that, too, is old news for you. Maybe you can hear those things and remember a time when those facts, those statements made a mark on your heart. But perhaps that impression has been slowly rubbed out. Perhaps the guilt that you still live with is so subtle that you are only able to recognize it by its symptoms. Perhaps all you recognize is a low-grade spiritual disharmony that's hardly identifiable—hardly a label you can put on it. But it keeps you restless and it keeps you running: never resting, sapping your energy for God, setting you up to lock the house and look elsewhere for *LIFE*.

Friends, I sense that's where these early Christians were. Though their circumstances, and their specific choices were different from ours, why is the truth about Jesus dying for our sins so difficult to experience? It's so difficult to experience because we take our sins and our guilt into our own hands. And as we do that, as we chronically and perpetually try to deal with our own sins, as we allow them to stare us in the face, it eats away at the fiber of our souls; it eats away at our energy and we find in place that "law of diminishing returns" that cuts away our resistance. And what we've been told about *life* and *freedom* feels to us like a lie. And in the face of the strong crosswinds of our culture, we find ourselves hardly wanting to resist.

Chapter ten takes us into that very arena. How does this claim that Christ has forgiven my sin become wind in my sails? How does that become life giving and energizing? How can we travel light? The first key we find in chapter 10

is to reexamine the role of the law. People kept coming back to the sacrificial system because the problem was never solvable that way. Because the sacrifices that were offered repeatedly were merely a copy, they were merely a reflection of the business that had to be done with God. They were meant merely to show us our helplessness and to bring us to God with empty hands. Kent Hughes, pastor and author, gives the analogy of the picture he was given by his wife when they were engaged. He says that when his wife gave him this engagement picture he carried it around and almost worshipped it. It stood on his desk, it was in his briefcase, and it was everywhere he went,

Just as certainly as Christ did die, just as certainly as our sins have been forgiven, just that certainly Christ will return and open the table without restriction for us.

because this represented his beloved. But Kent Hughes says, "wouldn't it be odd if once we were married, and I was able to live with the real thing, I was still obsessed with kissing that picture. Or if I no longer enjoyed my wife, herself, because I still had her picture. No, that would be insane because once we had the real thing the picture fades in importance. Or it's importance changes."

And the author turns us to Psalm 40 and puts in Jesus' mouth the words of David. Look at verse 5, *"Therefore, when Christ came into the world, He said: 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.' Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the scroll—I have come to do your will, O God.'"*

Those words Christ our Lord fulfilled and yet they were originally the words of David. Because even though King

David lived under the old covenant, the old rules, David knew what really counted. David is called "a man after God's own heart" but David was not a man after God's own heart because he was a sterling, moral example. King David was anything but a moral example for us. But David was a man after God's own heart because he knew how to relate to God with his sin. David knew what really counted; he

When I come to the table, submitting myself to what God alone can do for my sin, and has done through Jesus Christ, that I find the Holy Spirit assuring me that this is not only true, but it's true for ME.

knew that what God really wanted was for him to come to the table with open hands, without pretense. He knew God wanted him to come to the table in submission to what God alone could do for his sin. What David anticipated, and what Jesus Christ our Lord fulfilled, we rehearse. We rehearse when we come together, The fact that Christ has died, and that all those sacrifices that were repeated endlessly, were merely there to confront us with our sin.

In verse 12 of chapter 10, the issue is put so decisively that it says Christ, when He was done with His work, sat down. He sat down at God's right hand because the job was done. And confidence, confidence for life, *freedom, real life* comes our way when we quit running and we quit drowning guilt's voice and we quit using our very religious methods to try to take care of our guilt on our own. Now of course we all know there is some guilt we all have that is not grounded in reality. Guilt that's been forced upon us by others whose expectations we never meet. But whether our feelings of guilt are valid or invalid, the first step is to come to God with all of our guilt feelings. And let God sort

through them, let God purge them, because I'm equally helpless to discharge my guilt feelings whether they're valid or invalid.

Chapter 10, verses 15 and 16 tell us that as this becomes our habit, as we, like David, build a habit of coming to the table with God without pretense, as we build the habit of coming with our hands open, truly and honestly trusting that our sins have been cleansed. Verses 15 and 16 tell us the second thing that happens to us:

"The Holy Spirit also testifies to us about this," the author says. "First he says: 'this is the covenant I will make with them. After that time, says the Lord, I will put my laws in their hearts and I will write them on their minds.' "

How do all these facts about Christ dying for my sins translate into me *feeling* forgiven? How do I learn to travel light? How do I learn to *live* again? It is when I come to the table, submitting myself to what God alone can do for my sin, and has done through Jesus Christ, that I find the Holy Spirit assuring me that this is not only true, but it's true for ME. It's not just true that SIN has been forgiven; it's now true that MY sin is GONE! It's not hanging over my head anymore and God's commands to me no longer are a curse because I can't keep them, but now the Holy Spirit has written God's law on my heart. It's as if my heart has a radio tuner in it. And previously every time my tuner came across God's commands, God's laws, there was nothing but static and disharmony, abrasive noise. But now that the Holy Spirit has assured me of this new covenant on MY behalf, when my tuner comes across God's law, I'm now assured by those commands that God has purpose for my life and an investment in my life; that God has love directed toward ME, and I'm traveling light.

Nothing drains our energy for faithfulness like a sense that

sin and guilt are still leveraged against us. And when we say that we believe that Jesus died for our sins, and yet we feel that our sins are always still sitting there staring at us, we make ourselves susceptible to the temptation to sit on the sideline, to find life somewhere else. This takes place among some Christians when we doubt the reality of our conversion by chronically rehearsing how we failed God. I can't tell you how many Christians I have seen and heard from who are beaten down wondering if they are truly born again. They end up reliving what they thought, what they felt, what they said, when they were converted, wondering if they truly believed strongly enough to be forgiven. That doubt seems well intentioned but it's destructive and it's insidious because it focuses faith on faith itself. And when we focus our faith on our faith itself we live as if we are responsible to atone for our own sins and we find that we never get ahead of the game. And as we never get ahead of that game our spirits are worn down, and what once captivated our souls and engaged our attention no longer is wind in our sails, but merely a vacation home, that we check up on, that we maintain, but we no longer live there because we cannot atone for our sins.

This takes place also when we are caught up in compulsive religious activity, which never satisfies us. We end the day always feeling like we should have done more. We find ourselves taken by popular Christian songs that tell us, "God, how can I repay you?" We can NEVER repay God. And we can only lavishly give of our time and our energy when we realize that we can *never* give enough and we weren't *meant* to pay it back. Then we are free to give and to serve and to live sacrificially. The only people who are free to live for God, to pursue holiness, to serve wholeheartedly, are those who are truly living in the confidence of being forgiven.

It's difficult to remember that, isn't it? But as we come, like David did, with open hands, no longer trying to atone for our own sins even in subtle religious ways, we find our souls untied. We find our straight jackets taken off. We find that we can breathe again. We find our lungs filled with fresh air to face God and say, "I love you, Lord." I sense this is where these early Christians were coming from. Maybe in different terms, different specific choices, but that is why the author felt it was so important to cover some heady theological matters with Christians who were in the

The only people who are free to live for God, to pursue holiness, to serve wholeheartedly, are those who are truly living in the confidence of being forgiven.

trenches. The way we see our sin, as pervasive and radical, and the way we see guilt, that is, that we are helpless to do anything about our feelings of guilt, determine whether we will sit down and quit or whether we will travel light and weather the storms. The Christian life that is truly trusting what Christ has done is the most engaging, breath-taking adventure you can imagine. And everything else is merely playing it safe because it's too terrifying to trust God.

But the author does not leave us just with a sense of paranoia or risk—the risk of turning back, the risk of going down that slow slide in hypocrisy—but the author leaves us with the challenge in verse 22 to draw near to God, to draw near to Him with a sincere heart, to draw near to Him in full assurance of faith that He has accepted me. And that is Faith not in our own faith in our own devices or in our own fantasies, but that is Faith in what Christ has once for all done, with my guilt. We're called not to paranoia or fear, but we're called to travel light. Doesn't that sound good?

Doesn't that sound like what life was meant to be? Now throw off the heavy backpack and let's take off.

Chapter Twelve

Logical Outcomes Hebrews 10:19-39

What we believe, that is, what we truly believe, determines the way we act. If, for example, you believe, with high probability, you will die if you fly in an airplane you probably won't fly in an airplane. If you believe you can only get a good job with a formal education, you will probably get a formal education.

That's not only true in the more mundane issues of life but it is also true in matters of faith and religion: If you don't believe any god exists you probably won't become part of a church. If you believe God is somehow pleased by some of the religious or service oriented things you do, like attending church, singing in the choir, teaching a child to read, then you will likely do those things. What we believe determines what we do.

What do you believe? And what decisions did you make based on that?

- Why did you choose the career path you chose?
- Why have you chosen to relate to certain people, as friends?
- Why do you invest your money the way you do, buying the things you buy, saving the money you save?
- Why do you spend your discretionary time the way you do, the hobbies or recreation in which you engage?

What do you believe about life and death and God and people and history and the future that causes you to spend yourself and your assets the way you do? What do you believe and what does it lead you to do?

In chapters 1 through the first half of 10, the author has been teaching; he has been setting forth the information he wants them to know and believe. What he does beginning at 10:19 is to apply that information. There is a shift in the book at 10:19 from teaching to application.

If you look at these verses you notice that twice the author says the word, "SINCE."

"Since we have confidence..." (10:19)

"Since we have a great priest..." (10:21)

Twice he refers to what he has already taught. And then he gives three applications:

- "let us" (10:22)
- "let us" (10:23)
- "let us" (10:24-25)

Look at the entire text:

"Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for

These two themes dominate the book of Hebrews: Jesus as the all-sufficient sacrifice and Jesus as the perfect mediator.

he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the

more as you see the Day approaching.”(10:19-25)

The logic of the passage goes like this: Since you believe these things to be true then certainly you will respond in these ways. What are the two things the author says are true?

1. We have access into the very presence of a Holy God because of the sacrificial death (the body and blood) of Jesus. (10:19-20)

The author already wrote about that subject at length in chapter 9:11-10:18, which we looked at earlier.

2. Jesus is the great priest of God's people. (10:21)

Remember the author has already written on this subject at length as well in chapters 7-9.

These two themes dominate the book of Hebrews: Jesus as the all-sufficient sacrifice and Jesus as the perfect mediator. Based on those two things being true the author says we must respond:

- Let us draw near to God (10:22)
- Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess (10:23)
- Let us consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds. (10:24-25)

Since the author, in verses 19-21, summarizes the two major points of his letter, I would like to do the same. I want to remind you of the Basic Theology this book teaches:

- God teaches that He is holy, so holy He can have nothing to do with sin or those who do the sin. (Heb. 3:7ff)
- The Bible also teaches that no one is righteous, not even one
- Everyone is a sinner and all sinners, sin. (Rom. 3)
- The Bible teaches that the soul that sins will die. And

that the wages of sin is death. (Heb. 10:28ff)

"Anyone who rejected the law of Moses died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much more severely do you think a man deserves to be punished who has trampled the Son of God under foot, who has treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him, and who has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know him who said, 'It is mine to avenge; I will repay,' and again, 'The Lord will judge his people.' It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God."(10:28-31)

Every human being stands separated from a holy God and headed for eternal destruction.

Two things are required for us to once again have a positive relationship with God: We **need a sacrifice** to atone, to make amends, for our sins—something has to be done about our sin. And we **need a mediator, a priest, to connect us to God. Most religions of the world have** some kind of sacrifice or offering they make to atone for sin AND they have some kind of priesthood that acts as mediator between the god or gods needing to be appeased and the human beings needing forgiveness. The questions are whether the sacrifices and offerings are sufficient to truly atone for the sins and whether the priests or religious leaders are truly capable of bringing God and humans together. We need a sufficient sacrifice and a capable mediator.

First of all we need a sacrifice to atone for our sins. Heb. 9:22 says *that God said, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins."* And so during the Old Covenant (during the time of the Old Testament) a system of sacrifices was established to shed the blood of animals to

cover the sins of the people. But from the beginning it was known that those sacrifices were insufficient or as the Bible says in Heb. 10:4, it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to actually take away sins. Those animal sacrifices were largely symbolic of a sacrifice that would come later—a sacrifice that would be sufficient. Those animal sacrifices were insufficient because there needed to be a human sacrifice for humans. Look at Heb. 2:14-15: *"Since the children of God have flesh and blood, Christ too shared in*

***Every human being stands separated from
a holy God and headed for eternal
destruction.***

their humanity so that by his death he might destroy the Devil who holds the power of death..."

But not just any human would do, for all humans are sinful and in need of sacrifice for themselves.

*"But now Christ has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself."
(Heb. 9:26)*

*"Therefore when Christ came into the world he said, 'Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased.' Then I said, 'Here I am—it is written about me in the Old Testament I have come to do your will O God'."
(Heb. 10:5-7)*

Those verses say that "Christ appeared," and "Christ came into the world" indicating His existence before He came here. He is the eternal God the Son who became a human being. God, Himself, in the person of the Son, became the

perfect and sufficient sacrifice to atone for our sins.

But we not only need a sufficient sacrifice we also need a capable mediator-priest—someone to represent us to a holy God. We have no right to come to a Holy God. Even if we are forgiven, we have nothing to commend us to God. He is the Creator and we are merely the creatures.

Heb. 5:1 says, every high priest is selected from among men and is appointed to represent them in matters related to God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. But Heb. 7:23 says generation after generation of those priests died. And even while they lived (Heb. 7:27), they were offering sacrifices not only for the sins of the people but for their

How does this cleansing, this new relationship with God based on Christ's death and Priesthood, become ours? By faith and trust—by believing God will do what He says He will do.

own sins as well. They were as inadequate at truly being a mediator as any other person. In ways, these priests were just symbolic of a priest who would come and who would be adequate.

In contrast, it says in Hebrews 7:24, Christ brought a permanent priesthood because Jesus lives forever. And not only does He live forever, but He is not sinful. (Heb. 7:26) This high priest is "*holy, blameless, pure and set apart from sinners.*" And when He offers a sacrifice, He is able to offer it only for others because He is perfect—"*He does not need to offer sacrifices day after day for his own sins.*" (7:27) And so as the **perfect sacrifice** and the **perfect mediator-priest**, Jesus is able to bring us back

into relationship with God. The **perfect sacrifice** atones for our sins: it removes the guilt and turns God's wrath away from us. The **perfect mediator-priest** brings us right into the presence of God. Now God looks on us with favor instead of anger. We stand before a holy God in the name of the perfect Son of God; His righteousness is imputed, credited to us.

Look at Heb. 10:10: *"...we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ..."* And Heb 9:14 says, *"The blood of Christ who through the eternal Spirit offered himself unblemished to God, cleanses our consciences from acts that lead to death so that we may serve the living God."* Or as God predicted it in the Old Testament and repeated in Heb. 8:10, *"This is the covenant I will make with them, after that time," declares the Lord, "I will put my laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people...I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*(8:10, 12)

And how does this cleansing, this forgiveness, this new relationship with God based on Christ's death and Priesthood, become ours? By faith and trust—by believing God will do what He says He will do. Speaking of the contrast between those who believe and those who don't we read in Heb. 4:2, *"For we also have had the gospel preached to us, just as they did, but the message they heard was of no value to them, because those who heard did not combine it with faith. But we who have believed enter that rest..."* We receive the promised forgiveness and new relationship with God.

It is by grace through faith that we are saved from the wrath of God and saved to a new life lived in God's favor.

Since we have confidence to enter into the very presence

of God through Jesus and since we have such a great priest how will we respond?

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (8:22-25)

"LET US draw near to God" What you believe about God and what you believe about how to relate to God determines how you respond. What do you believe about God? Do you believe what verses 19-21 teach or do you just believe God is love and therefore will overlook any faults of ours? We should live as best we can and when we die God will take care of it. Millions in American churches act as if this is what they believe. They give God a few moments on Sunday morning by attending a church service if nothing more important like rest, vacation, weekend outings, athletics, guests, or whatever doesn't interfere. Apparently they believe God is just love so it doesn't really matter what we do. Is that you?

Or do you believe God is powerful and picky? If that is what you believe then we must be quite careful about what we do so we don't make Him angry. "Let us" make certain we are in church as often as possible, "let us" always be doing something for religion or for other people so that God will be pleased with us. I remember a woman I worked with who sincerely believed she must go to church every day and that she must give some money to the church each week and she believed it was her obligation to God to do some good deed each week—she cleaned an elderly

woman's house for free each week. She believed her God required those things of her and so she complied. Is that you?

Or do you believe God is mean, and therefore the best thing is to have nothing to do with Him. A woman recently told me of her husband's reaction to their two-year-old son's death by accident—he would have nothing to do with God after that tragic event. Is that you?

Or do you believe God is an enigma, rather unknowable to us, and therefore you acknowledge that He exists, but you just live and let live.

Or do you believe God is kind but not all-powerful. High School students were recently interviewed on Public Radio after listening to the videotaped testimony of a Frenchman

What you believe about God and what you believe about how to relate to God determines how you respond.

who barely survived the Nazi Holocaust. When one of the students heard first-hand what that experience was like for individuals she said it made her re-think her belief about God. Her conclusion was that God is not all-powerful, for in her thinking, God obviously couldn't stop that atrocity. She was asked what that would mean to her faith and she said she didn't know but she'd have to rethink it.

Is that you?

Or do you believe, as in Hebrews, that an all-powerful God in His mercy has reached down to us sinners in the person of His Son to provide the sacrifice necessary to atone for our sins—to forgive us and bring us into a relationship with

Himself, a relationship of love and acceptance? And do you therefore long to draw near to God? Do you delight at being in His presence?

"Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water." (10:22) Using Old Testament temple language this Pastor/author reminds us that we have had our hearts cleansed by the blood of Jesus and we have been brought into the family of God as symbolized by baptism. We have access right into the very presence of Almighty God. Or as he said it in Heb. 4:16, *"let us then approach God with confidence that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need."*

This phrase "draw near to God" in 10:22 is an Old Testament reference to coming to God to worship Him. Do you believe that God, through Christ Jesus, has provided a sufficient sacrifice for your sins and has provided a perfect mediator to bring you into God's presence? Then do you draw near to God? Is it your custom to come to Him privately and to come to Him with the rest of the church

"Hold unswervingly to the hope you profess, for he who promised is faithful."

family in worship? If we believe the gospel at all, then we understand what an awesome privilege it is to come into God's presence, to be loved by Him, to be able to call Him Father, to pray to Him, to worship Him, to join with other believers in His presence. We have access to God!

Not only are we invited into the presence of God but we are also urged to *"hold unswervingly to the hope we profess for*

He who promised is faithful." (10:23) What do you truly believe about the future?

- Do you believe, as in Heb. 10:37, Jesus is literally coming again?
- Do you believe, as in Gal. 6, that in due time we will be rewarded for doing good if we don't grow weary?
- Do you believe, as in Rom. 6, that living righteously leads to eternal life?
- Do you believe, as in Heb. 10:32, that perseverance, even in hardship, will be rewarded?
- Do you believe, as in 2 Cor. 9, that investing in the Kingdom of God yields benefits far superior to the merely temporal and material?

And why do you believe those things even when sometimes it seems that God is silent and inactive? Because you have so much evidence from the past that God is faithful to do what He has promised in His timing and not necessarily ours. Chapter 11 is a listing of just such evidence.

How is your faith being tested these days? Are you tempted to wonder if God cares, if God even hears you, if He is even there? *"Hold unswervingly to the hope you profess, for he who promised is faithful."*

And now *"LET US consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds"* (10:24-25) Do you believe that God, through Christ, has brought us into the family of God? Do you believe that we are part of a New Covenant relationship with God and each other? Do you believe that Christianity is not only about faith (10:22) and hope (10:23) but also about love (10:24-25)? Do you believe as the Apostle John wrote it, *"Whoever loves God must also love his brother"*? And *"Whoever does not love does not know God"*?

If you do, if we do, then we will give thoughtful

consideration to how we may spur one another on to love and good deeds. The New English Bible translates it this way, *"We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness."* But the author doesn't just leave the subject there; he gets even more specific: *"LET US not give up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day of Christ's return approaching."*(10:25)

Spurring one another on, actively seeking ways to stimulate one another to love and good deeds will never happen if we aren't together in ways that allow for that. This "meeting together" (NIV) or "assembling together," (NASB) should be understood simply as the regular gathering together of Christian believers for worship and exhortation in a particular place. That is what we do here on Sunday mornings. The practice at first took place daily (Acts 2:46) but subsequently weekly, on the first day of the week (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:2). Philip Hughes wrote, "Unconcern for the well-being of the body of Christ, of which we are members, is symptomatic of self-concern and egocentricity. Selfishness and divisiveness go hand in hand; for self-love breeds the spirit of isolationism. He who does not love his fellow Christians fervently from the heart (I Pt. 1:22) feels no compelling need to associate himself with them. Indeed, if that is you, the genuineness of your Christian profession is suspect, for those who are one in Christ cannot help loving one another."¹

Why do you come to worship services? The emphasis is on what I may do for the others. Notice in verse 24 and 25 it says to "spur" one another on to love and good deeds and to "encourage" one another. What is the essence of Christianity? Loving God and others. What is worship? An expression of love for God and others. "Love" can only be

expressed in community. Love cannot be private. The head of the church, Jesus, doesn't function without the body and you are part of the body of Christ.

Many today see religion as so private an issue that they can come to the cross and get something and then leave, to carry on alone until the day Jesus comes. There are too many who treat Christianity like a commodity to be possessed rather than a relationship with God and each other to be nourished, but that is not Christianity.

What do you believe? The way we live reveals what we truly believe. Some of us need to change our beliefs or change our responses. Come into the presence of God, asking His forgiveness, seeking His grace to enable you to draw near to Him, to hold unswervingly to the hope you profess, and to meet together with God's people to encourage them and stimulate them to love and good deeds.

End Notes

¹ P.E. Hughes, A Commentary on Hebrews, p. 415

Chapter Thirteen

Bold Faith and Great Sacrifice **Hebrews 11**

Something has happened in our culture that it makes it very hard for us to think seriously about and give sacrificially to world evangelization. Steven Covey wrote a book entitled, *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. The book has been very popular for the past few years. The subtitle on the cover of the book is: "Powerful lessons in personal change." But inside on the title page the subtitle is "Restoring the Character Ethic." There is every appearance that marketing has forced the change in subtitle from an emphasis on "character" which evidently doesn't sell too well to "personal." It is ironic that in a book that emphasizes character the publishers had to downplay that issue and play up the individual in order to sell the book.

Covey himself notes there was a time when our culture was interested in developing "Character" (integrity, humility, fidelity, temperance, courage, patience etc.) But increasingly our culture has become obsessed with developing "personality" ("Your attitude determines your altitude" the sales trainer says. "Smiling wins more friends than frowning." "Whatever the mind of man can conceive and believe it can achieve." etc.).

Dr. Philip Cushman, Professor at the California School of Professional Psychology, recently wrote a book entitled *Constructing the Self—Constructing America*. I heard an interview with him where he argued that something changed in America at the turn of the last century; we moved from a concern with character to a concern with personality. The quest became one of finding out what others like about people and then attempting to project

that image. Advertising became the art of telling us what will make us acceptable to others. Advertising no longer centers on the product being sold but on what you will be *like* if you buy the product. The emphasis is on how good you will look, how healthy you will be, and how acceptable or even desirable you will be to others. And because life has become centered on personality (how do I project myself) rather than character (what I am truly like) we have lost ourselves. We are no longer real people but merely reflections of what we think those around us want.

Many have noted that today we don't have heroes who demonstrate vividly and boldly some character trait or some virtue; instead we have "stars" who project an image. Instead of the emphasis being on some higher good or

What is truly most important in life? Is it our personal well-being? Or are there virtues, and goals, and ideals that are worth even more than our lives?

some noble deed, the emphasis has been placed on the person. Personal fame has become the definition of success. To be well known is more important than being good. And with that change from character to personality something else changed.

BEFORE: "Give me liberty or give me death" was heroic. The emphasis on sacrifice for a cause was noble. BUT NOW: A person's life is worth more than any cause. I remember in the height of the cold war when Communism was perceived as a real threat to our country and nuclear war seemed imminent, the slogan became popular: "Better 'red' than dead." The slogan revealed that personality (the person) was more important than character (the cause).

Even in Jr. High, we reflected a changing culture. For when we wanted to justify cowardice we would say "Better a live coward than a dead hero." The self has become so important, so dominant, that everything is judged by how it will affect *my* life.

This turning inward is profoundly troubling. Our well-being has become the most important criterion of life. Theologian Francis Schaeffer called it the modern person's quest for personal peace ("just leave me alone") and personal affluence (comfort). That is why it is so difficult to sacrifice today. It is because we are so focused on self, striving to fulfill our individual needs.

Dr. Dick Swenson, in his book, *Margin*, appeals to us to create "margin" in our lives. But why? What is so appealing to us in his suggestions to create extra space in our finances as well as in every other area in life? Was the appeal "personality" driven? Do we want margin to simply make life easier for us? Was it our ego-centricity that was appealed to? Or was the appeal "character" driven? Do we want margin so we are more available for the purposes of God? What is truly most important in life? Is it our personal well-being? Or are there virtues, and goals, and ideals that are worth even more than our lives? I'm convinced that our answer to that question is based almost entirely on our vision of the future.

I think our culture moved from an emphasis on character to personality when we stopped believing in a God who matters. When we stopped truly believing that God exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. I think our culture changed when we stopped seeing the future as God sees it. I bring all of this up about our culture because when I go to the Bible, especially the 11th chapter of Hebrews, I see a people who lived very differently. In fact

the author of the book of Hebrews saw them as very different than the people around them. I see a people of bold faith and great sacrifice.

In chapter 11 the author gives his first readers and us this great list of historical characters who “saw” something that others don’t see. And that “sight,” that vision of the future, is what allowed them to keep on, to persevere, to remain faithful, to live by very different values than others around them. But before listing some of those people, the author tells us how they saw what others don’t see.

“Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see.” (11:1)

Just as our eyes are the physical organs by which we see what is around us so faith is the spiritual organ by which we see what is ahead for us. That is spiritual “vision.” They saw the future and they were so convinced it would come to pass that they lived their lives accordingly.

Now beginning in verse 4 of chapter 11, the author lists many people who lived by faith—that is people who ordered their lives not only by what they could see but more importantly by what they could *not* see but believed God for. We won’t take the time to look at all of these examples but I want you to notice the commentary that is interspersed among the examples. After mentioning the faith of Abel and Enoch, in verses 4 and 5, the author adds the following:

“And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him.” (11:6)

God says faith is imperative—absolutely necessary. But notice the faith is not just “faith in faith.” Today we hear even among Christians such things as:

“His faith will see him through.”

“She is a person of strong faith.”

“I know they’ll make it—they have great faith.”

Such phrases come terribly close to being a belief that it is “faith” that actually produces the desired results. The author makes it clear that faith has an object, but faith in what? Faith in Who?

Faith is in God: believing that He is and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him. These people had faith in God. They believed that what God said the future would be like is exactly what it would be like. Continuing then at verse 7, the author goes on to give many examples of

Just as our eyes are the physical organs by which we see what is around us so faith is the spiritual organ by which we see what is ahead for us. That is spiritual “vision.”

those who believed God and directed their lives by that belief even though they did not see the results at the time they believed or in some cases they did not *ever* see the results in their lifetime.

- By faith Noah acted on the basis of “things not yet seen.” (11:7) He had God’s eyesight into the future and he believed the picture of the future that he saw—a flood.
- By faith Abraham obeyed sight unseen, “even though he did not know where he was going.” (11:8)

What I want you to see is the commentary of verse 10: It says that Abraham was “looking forward”—he had vision. He had God’s eyesight into the future. What did he see? *“He was looking forward to a city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”* Clearly the language used here indicates that Abraham saw more than a Promised

Land where his children and grandchildren would live in peace and prosperity. He saw God ruling over the whole world.

In verse 11, again the author mentions Abraham and Sarah's faith. But beginning in verse 13 we have commentary again. The people mentioned here still believed God and acted on that faith that vision of the future, when they died and they didn't receive the thing promised. Faith is believing God and what He has promised even if in *this* life we don't see the results. That is what these examples demonstrate.

Though they could not see it with their physical eyes and even though they might not see it in their lifetime, they lived because they believed it would come.

But again, what enabled them to do that?

"All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth."(11:13) They saw the result and welcomed it from a distance. They had "vision"—they saw the future and believed it would come to be. As verses 13-14 instruct us, they were "looking" and "longing" and "thinking" about a better "country" a different "city," one God was preparing for them. The truth is, their "homeland" was not Canaan; their true homeland was the Kingdom of God, that Kingdom God was preparing to usher in. These people ordered their lives by a vision of that future, distant as it might be.

By faith Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and Moses acted in obedience because they believed God—they saw the future.

(11:17, 20, 21, 22, 23)

By faith Moses—He was looking ahead to his reward.
(11:24-26)

"By faith Moses saw him who is invisible." He had spiritual eyes to see the future—he had faith. (11:27)

Look at verse 39:

"These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised."

This verse confirms or restates the idea in verse 13—these people all "saw" the future from a distance, but none of them saw that future come to pass. You see, historically, the Kingdom of God was in the distant future. But they knew it was coming. They saw it with eyes of faith. And here's the point: Though they could not see it with their physical eyes and even though they might not see it in their lifetime, they lived—they conducted their lives, they invested in that future—because they believed it would come.

The entire book of Hebrews reflects on the fact that the Kingdom that was promised throughout the Old Testament has now been ushered in! What message did John the Baptist preach? *"Repent, for the Kingdom of heaven is near."* He preached that the Messiah, a new king would come and usher in the Kingdom of heaven, the Kingdom of God. Jesus repeated the theme of John the Baptist and preached it: *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near."* A new kingdom was about to begin. And all through the Gospels Jesus spoke of the new Kingdom he was establishing.

And then with the death and resurrection of Jesus, that Kingdom of God was ushered in. That Kingdom is God's

rightful rule over everyone and everything. Jesus Himself said that the kingdom He began would start small but spread and spread until He, Christ, returns and brings that kingdom to completion.

"Since we are surrounded by such a group of faithful people—people who trusted God even though they didn't see the final product—let us press on, persevere, run the race before us." (12:1)

Let us "fix our eyes on Jesus." Here is that idea of "seeing" again—faith-seeing! Jesus is the final and ultimate example of faith—seeing the future.

This verse says by the "joy that was set before him" He was able to endure the cross. He had an unshakable mental picture of the future.

When we consider that Jesus as well as Abraham and Moses, and Gideon, and Daniel and all the rest persevered, we will be encouraged to do the same.

- "don't lose heart" (11:3)
- "Endure hardship" (11:7)
- Make every effort to live holy lives. (11:14)

And why? Because, like all those who have gone before us, we see something in the future. (11:18-28)

What vision does God give us of the future? In verses 18-21, the author speaks of the experience of the Israelites when they came to Mt Sinai. The whole experience of the Jews in getting the Law of God and getting a land of their own was a precursor, a type, a small picture of what would happen one day when the Kingdom would come in its fullness. Yes, the Jews had a mountain and it was an awesome experience with God. (11:18) But you have come to a different mountain – You see into the future with eyes of faith to the completion of the Kingdom of God. (11:22)

Yes, here in verse 22 the author uses Jewish places and symbols ("Mount Zion," "Jerusalem") to explain it but notice that in verse 28 the author uses the more universal language, describing it as the Kingdom

"By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood, so that the destroyer of the firstborn would not touch the firstborn of Israel." (11:28)

We look forward to the fullness, the completion, the full extent of the Kingdom of God. What has begun with

"Since we are surrounded by such a group of faithful people, us press on, persevere, run the race before us."

Christ's first coming will grow and grow and finally be completed with His second coming.

But what I want you to see is what the Kingdom in its fullness will look like.

Hebrews 12 describes it well:

- "thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly" (the angels of God)
- "to the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven" (all those converted to Christ since he left the earth)
- "to the spirits of righteous men made perfect" (Old Testament believers)
- "and to Jesus..."

This is how the Apostle John saw it:

"After this I looked and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb"—the Lord Jesus. And they weren't

ignoring God, they weren't pursuing their own selfish interests, rather they were worshipping God. We look around and see people denying Christ, whole religions antithetical to the claims of Christ, People who deny that God exists. People living only for their own well-being. But the picture we are given by God is that it shall not always be so. There is coming a day when God shall reign supreme and everyone will know it and everyone will bow to it with delight or by demand.

Now the question is: Is that the future we see with eyes of faith? Do we believe that's what God is doing? That God is building His kingdom? Is that our vision of the future?

What are we willing to live for? What do we give our energy, our time, and our money to accomplish?

There is not a man or woman alive who does not live life based on their vision of the future. The only question is, what vision is it? Is it a true picture of the future or a false one?

Now because these people had a true picture of the future and they believed it, they were willing to give their lives to that vision. No sacrifice was too great because they were not focused on their own well-being but they were focused on the future.

- Noah withstood the condemnation of everyone around him. (11: 7)
- Abraham left his family and his country. (11:8)
- Abraham was willing even to give the life of his own son. (11:17)
- Moses chose to be mistreated along with God's people rather than enjoy the pleasures of sin for a short time. (11:25)

"Some faced jeers and flogging, while still others were chained and put in prison. They were stoned; they were sawed in two; they were put to death by the sword. They went about in sheepskins and goatskins, destitute, persecuted and mistreated."(11:36-37)

Is there anything we are willing to die for? For that matter what are we willing to live for? What do we give our energy, our time, and our money to accomplish? About a week ago I spend some time with a young man who proudly spoke of his goals in life. He was in pre-med because he believed medicine is how he could make the most money. He was choosing not to return to his native country after medical school because he couldn't make as much money there. He had chosen his school on the basis of the one that would most likely position him to earn more money. He said it over and over again.

It seemed that his vision of the future is similar to many Americans and sadly, even many evangelicals: Work hard, earn as much as you can, live as comfortably as you can, and retire with enough money to continue your comfortable lifestyle. And Christians add the idea of "inviting Jesus into your heart as your own personal savior" so that when you die you go to a comfortable heaven rather than hell. These Americans and that young medical student sound very much like they have adopted the "personality"-centered life that Covey and Cushman describe. Their well-being is central.

I don't mean to embarrass them but in contrast I want you to think about our staff missionaries. What future do they see, what vision do they have that would cause them to give up what they have or could have had here in the U.S. to leave family and friends, to humble themselves to ask for support and live in a foreign city, in a foreign country and

to tell people who don't want to hear that Jesus loves them? What must they see to do that? What must we see to live our lives differently than our neighbors? What do we see that causes us to invest our lives the way we do?

Great Sacrifice comes from Bold Faith. Bold Faith comes from a God-given picture of the future that is so clear in our minds that we will pay any price including life itself to be God's instrument to bring it about. What picture of the future are you living your life for? Let me ask it differently: If any one person could see how we spend all of our time, our energy, and our money, what future would they say we believe in?

Chapter Fourteen

How Clear is your Vision? Hebrews 10:32-12:3

A few years ago a friend of mine who had for many years professed to know and love the Lord Jesus, walked away from his family, his friends, and his God. For years he said he believed certain things about the future but then he said he no longer believed them. His circumstances changed and he decided that what he had believed couldn't accommodate those new circumstances, so he changed what he believed.

Earlier I mentioned a man who went to church all his life until his two year old child died. He has not darkened the door of a church since. Like my friend, this man's picture of the future changed. What he thought would happen in the future he no longer believed would happen.

What you truly believe determines what you do. How many people get a dose of Christianity, saying they believe it and then somewhere along the way they drop out? When they accept Christianity they get a certain picture in their heads of what the future will be like and then when it doesn't quite turn out that way, or they stop believing it will, they quit the whole thing.

I think there is tremendous temptation to bail out of Christianity. How many times have you prayed, even pleaded with God for something that was truly important and felt like you got no answer? In spite of your best efforts at doing things right, you lost your job and couldn't find another one, or your spouse walked out on you, or your business collapsed, or something happened to your

kids, and you looked around and saw many outrageous pagans getting along just fine. The godless and ungodly seem to prosper and frankly have a lot more fun in life than those who obey the God of the Bible.

- Christians are expected to forgive and turn the other cheek when offended and abused.
- Christians are expected to pursue life not for their own advantage but for the advantage of others.
- Christians are expected to think of all their money as belonging to God to be spent, saved, invested and given away as God determines.
- Christians are expected to invest a significant part of their time in helping others and not just recreating and vacating.
- Christians are expected to be together with other Christians in church weekly and at other times for the purpose of encouraging those other Christians and worshipping God.

Do you have any idea how all that interferes with life? Why not just forget it?

What you truly believe determines what you do. I think there is tremendous temptation to bail out of Christianity.

Look at Hebrews 10:32 and following. This letter that we call "Hebrews" was written to a church somewhere in the Roman empire, probably a church in a city near Rome or in Rome itself. Rome, you must recall, was not sympathetic to Christianity. To the contrary, Christianity was considered a threat to the Roman Empire and threats in those days were not handled in courts that respected civil rights and freedom of religion.

In A.D. 49 Emperor Claudius expelled the Christians and Jews from Rome. Seen as enemies of the people, these new Christians were subjected to insult, persecution and the confiscation of their property—they got out of the area only with what they could carry on their backs. Now at the time of the writing of this letter, it was about 15 years later. And under a new emperor a new threat had broken out against Christians. A fire broke out in Rome. It spread quickly through the city. Once nearly contained, it broke out again and when finally snuffed out it had raged through 10 of the 14 districts of the city totally destroying three of them.

The unpopular Emperor Nero had been away when the fire broke out and he returned to the city when his own palace was threatened. He provided emergency assistance, sacrifices were offered to the gods, and he embarked on an elaborate program of urban renewal. The problem was that many thought the Emperor's efforts were an attempt to cover the fact that he had deliberately started the fire. To silence such rumors, Nero commanded the imperial police to move against the Christians. A contemporary Roman historian wrote that Nero did this to suppress the rumor about him. And that he fabricated scapegoats and punished with every refinement the depraved Christians as they were known. They were paraded before the magistrates and condemned to death for arson. And on the basis of their testimonies many other Christians were discovered and likewise tortured and put to death.

In those days, what would it have been like to have been part of a church in Rome or in a town not far from Rome? The stories were too awful, the threat too close. What price were they willing to pay to be disciples, followers of Jesus? They had reason for quitting Christianity. Read the author's words to them in that dark time:

"Remember those earlier days after you had received the light, when you stood your ground in a great contest in the face of suffering. Sometimes you were publicly exposed to insult and persecution; at other times you stood side by side with those who were so treated. You sympathized with those in prison and joyfully accepted the confiscation of your property, because you knew that you yourselves had better and lasting possessions.

So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."(10:32-36)

But how do you do that? How do you persevere? What keeps Christians from "bailing out"? What keeps you from quitting when things get rough?

There is a one-word answer: FAITH.

Now wait a minute, don't jump to conclusions about what I mean by that word "faith." I always fear when I use a well-known word that everything just "fuzzes" up and definitions get cloudy. "Faith" is one of those words we hear so often we no longer put any definition to it—we just say "Oh yes—faith."

But read what the writer of Hebrews says beginning at verse 37. The author, quoting from the Old Testament, tells his readers how they can "hang in there," how they can remain faithful to God even in the midst of great persecution:

"For in just a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But my righteous one will live by faith." (10:37-38a) There's that word "faith" but what does he mean?

We've already seen the word "faith" used one way in this letter. Faith means believing that God will forgive us and

bring us into His family when we trust only in Jesus Christ and His death and resurrection for us. We speak of this faith as, "We are saved by grace through faith."—trusting in Christ and what He has done. But the faith spoken of here, in Hebrews 10, is not the faith that looks back—the faith that sees in Christ the basis of our forgiveness and new relationship to God. The faith spoken of here is a faith that looks forward. In fact the author gives his own definition of the word right here in the context: *"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."*(11:1)

Most of you know that chapter 11 is called the great "faith chapter" in the Bible. And when you look at the verses you see verse after verse that begin with "by faith" some

"So do not throw away your confidence; it will be richly rewarded. You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised."

person or another did such and such. Obviously the author is illustrating the point he wishes to make. And what's the point? How do you remain faithful to God even when everything appears to go wrong? The answer: Faith.

Before we look at his illustrations however I want us to again look at his definition of faith. From verse 1 we learn that the faith he is describing here has two components. The two lines of verse 1 say the same thing two ways. What are the two things you see in both lines? What are the two components of the faith he is describing: Line one says, "being sure" compared to line two that says, "certain." What's the component? Certainty.

Line one says, "what we hope for" compared to line two that says "what we do not see." What's the component? Vision—seeing with the mind into the future.

The two components of faith: Certainty and Vision.

Now look at verse 6 where the author gives us even more help in understanding what he means by faith:

"And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him."(11:6)

"Faith is the act of believing God and mentally seeing His vision of the future even when we can't see it with our physical eyes."

What is another synonym for "certainty" that you find here? "Believe."

What is another word or phrase for "vision" that you find here? This may not be quite as obvious until you study it for a while but look at the words *"God rewards those who earnestly seek him."* When are those rewards given? In the future. The issue is that faith looks forward to the rewards that will come. We have a synonym here for "vision"—a looking forward.

I'm ready to give a definition now:

"Faith is the act of believing God and mentally seeing His vision of the future even when we can't see it with our physical eyes." Or again as the Bible says it, *"Faith is being sure of what we hope for and being certain of what we do not see."* And *"He who comes to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him."* Because of God we are certain of Him and His vision of the future.

I want you to look at chapter 11 now and see the illustrations the author uses to drive home his point. Again, what is the point? By faith we are able to remain true to God even when circumstances would tempt us to give up and quit. When we look at the 11th chapter we see that the author gives us illustrations from one end of the Old Testament to the other. In verse 3 he starts with a reference to creation.

He goes next to Abel the son of the first man and woman. (11:4)

He refers to Enoch a descendant of Adam and Eve's (11:5)

We hear about Noah and the flood (11:7)

We read about Abraham (obviously a descendant of Noah) (11:8-19)

We see Isaac, the son of Abraham. (11:20)

We see Jacob, the son of Isaac. (11:21)

We see Joseph, the son of Jacob. (11:22)

We come to Moses who led the descendants of Jacob out of Egypt. (11:23-29)

He mentions the time of Joshua, the leader after Moses. (11:30-31)

Then at verse 32 he realizes it would take too long to mention the many others in the detail he has already mentioned some so he summarizes by mentioning the time of the Judges, the Kings and the prophets telling how some were victorious in this life and others were thoroughly defeated but all were men and women of faith. (11:39)

What do we learn from all these illustrations that help us remain faithful when the temptation is to give up, to quit or to pack it in? The first thing I want you to see about the faith of these people that instructs our faith is that "Faith sees the invisible." Look at verse 7: *"By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family."* Most of you are sufficiently familiar with the incident to remember that God told Noah what was

going to happen—a flood was coming. Noah had a choice—to believe God’s picture, God’s vision of the future or not believe it. *"When warned about things not yet seen"* Noah got the vision, the picture, in his own head and he acted on the basis of that picture. That picture of what would be, was more real to him than anything he could see with his physical eyes. In spite of the fact that he lived in a land-locked country and there had likely never even been rain, much less a flood, Noah built the Ark. By faith he saw the invisible.

Look at the last part of verse 8. God told Abraham to leave his home city of Ur and Abraham obeyed God *"even though he did not know where he was going."* God had told Abraham that He was going to make of Abraham a great nation and give him an inheritance of a great land.

Stuart Babbage, an Australian pastor has four pictures hanging in his office. Each of the pictures of the desert looks nearly identical and equally barren. When he was asked why he had those pictures he said that he took them while standing among the ruins of ancient Ur, where Abraham had lived. No matter which way you look from Ur you see much the same thing—sand!

Why would Abraham leave that cultured, comfortable, and secure city not even knowing where he was going. Because he had a picture from God in his mind of what God was going to do and he believed God. Faith sees the invisible.

Now look at verse 22. Speaking of Joseph who lived in Egypt and died 300 years before his descendants left Egypt, the text says correctly that Joseph "spoke about the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt and gave instructions about his bones"—that is that his descendants were to take Joseph’s bones with them when they left Egypt and went to

the Promised Land. What picture did Joseph have in his mind? He saw the land God was going to give them and he believed God. Faith sees the invisible.

There are at least 5 more examples among these illustrations of this same idea. What kept these people going? Their God-given picture of the future was more real to them; they believed it more than anything they could see in the present. What picture of the future do you have and what impact does that picture have on the way you live?

Why would Abraham leave that cultured, comfortable, and secure city not knowing where he was going. Because he had a picture from God in his mind of what God was going to do and he believed God. Faith sees the invisible.

The second thing I want you to see about the faith of these people that instructs our faith is that "Faith overcomes fear." Look at verse 23: *"By faith, Moses parents hid him for three months after he was born, because they saw he was no ordinary child, and they were not afraid of the king's edict."*

Most of you remember that the Egyptian leader, fearful of the population growth of the Israelite slaves in his country ordered that all male children be killed. Moses parents' didn't comply. Why? Look at the middle of the verse—they saw something. Obviously it doesn't mean the baby looked unusual to the physical eyes but that with eyes of faith, these parents saw into the future and they obeyed God.

Look at verse 27: *"By faith, Moses left Egypt not fearing the*

King's anger."

When the Israelites finally left Egypt after the night when all the first-born Egyptian children were slain, the King, the Pharaoh, changed his mind once again and sent his army to stop the people. Imagine men, women, children, and carts all being attacked by the mightiest army in the world. But Moses left anyway. Why? Look at the rest of the verse: *"He persevered because he saw him who is invisible."* Moses saw something. He saw into the future and he believed that picture more than he naturally feared the Pharaoh.

When Martin Luther was fighting for his life during the Reformation in Germany over 400 years ago, he writes that

What about you? What God-given picture do you have of the future and are you investing in it.

at night he would go to his window, look out, and ask God, "Whose world is this anyway? Yours or mine. I know it is yours, God, and so I'm going to bed, I'll see you in the morning." His confidence in God and God's picture of the future overcame his fear.

The third thing I want you to see about the faith of these people that instructs our faith is that "faith overcomes temptation." Look at verses 25-26: *"Moses chose to be mistreated along with the people of God rather than to enjoy the pleasures or sin for a short time. He regarded disgrace for the sake of Christ as of greater value than the treasures of Egypt."*

Again, I suspect most of you remember that Moses, though a Jew, was raised in the palace of the Pharaoh's daughter. But when it came time to choose between living as the grandson of the Pharaoh or living with God's people, he

chose God. Why? Oh, it's that vision thing again. Moses had a picture of the future that had been given to him by God and he believed it. And the text says that he regarded that future as having greater value than all the treasures of Egypt.

Everything in this culture vies for our attention and our investment. The temptations to invest in the here and now, the temptations to succumb to the pleasures of the moment are intense. But Moses' vision of the future was absolutely clear and it was in that future that he was going to invest. What about you? What God-given picture do you have of the future and are you investing in it. Or is your investment greater elsewhere? Faith overcomes temptation!

The fourth thing I want you to learn about faith, from the faith of these people, is that "faith overcomes delay and opposition."

Look at verse 21:

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of Joseph's sons, and worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff."

Jacob was the grandson of Abraham. To Abraham had been given the promise of becoming a nation of many people who had a land of their own. That promise had been reiterated to Isaac, Abraham's son, who in turn repeated it to Jacob. Think about it—how long do you go on believing something is going to happen when it hasn't yet? By the time referred to in verse 21, Jacob is an old man and he is not even in the land that God had promised to Abraham and his descendants. He is still in a foreign country, Egypt. Surely the vision has faded away! After that much time, they must have misunderstood God.

But what does the verse say: Jacob blessed Joseph's sons and he worshipped God. From the Genesis account we learn that Jacob spoke to Joseph and his sons about the part of the land that would be theirs when they left Egypt and went to Canaan. All these years later and Jacob didn't miss a beat; he believed that God-given picture in his head as much as if it had already happened. Faith overcomes delay and opposition.

Look at verses 36-37: the author recalls that down through the years many had met such opposition to their faith that they were killed. But they died with their vision undimmed. Even death couldn't conquer the vision.

Richard Wurmbrand is a man who has for many years worked to get the Scriptures and the Gospel to people behind what were the once communist controlled countries of the "iron curtain." Before he began that ministry Wurmbrand was imprisoned in his country because of his Christianity. For 14 years he lived in a soundless cell 30 feet below the ground. He saw no trees, no sky, no children. He was hungry all the time, fed potato peel soup and sometimes only a slice of bread a week. For those 14 years they tried every inhumane form of torture they could think of to get him to renounce his faith. Why did he not renounce it? Because his God-given picture of the future that he carried in his head was clearer and more real than even the circumstances under which he lived. Faith overcomes delay and opposition.

There is so much more in this chapter but the last thing I want you to learn about faith from the faith of these people is that "Faith has an object." Many today define faith as that silly belief that something will happen that can't possibly happen. Or faith is defined as what you fall back on when you have no reason to believe. Or faith is defined

as a kind of irrational optimism. No. Faith has an object. For faith to be biblical, faith must believe in something and someone.

I have already described faith as having two components: certainty and vision. Vision is about pictures of the future. What God-given picture did Noah have in his head? He saw a flood covering the earth and he saw a boat floating on those flood waters safely carrying him and his family. And why was he so certain the picture reflected future reality? Because he believed God. Noah's faith had an object—the object was the picture God gave him of the future and the object of his faith was the God who promised it.

What was Abraham's picture of the future? He saw a land where thousands or even millions of his descendants would live. And he believed the God who promised it. Faith has an

***Faith has an object—a God-given
vision/picture of the future and of
the God who promises it.***

object—a God-given vision/picture of the future and of the God who promises it. If you don't have a God-given picture of the future I can't imagine that you will be able to withstand the pressures of life. Without a vision, a God-given vision of the future, life will throw you. God says, I don't want you to "shrink back," fall away, "throw away your confidence," or bail out. What God-given picture of the future do you have? And do you live your life by it? Do you believe God?

Let me tell you what I see in that picture of the future given by God in His word:

1. I see a people of God grown to maturity in Christ. I see a

congregation of men and women who love the Lord Jesus, love His people, and love to do His will. You see I believe the picture the Apostle Paul paints in Philippians 1:6 and corroborated in many other places: *"I am confident of this, that he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus."*

If I cooperate with God in the coming to pass of that picture, that vision, I can't fail; God has guaranteed it will happen. I'm willing to invest my life to see that happen. How about you?

2. I see a thriving, reproducing church established in every people group of the world. The picture is one of congregations of believers worshipping God in every country, every region, every language, and every tribe. Jesus said in Matthew 28, *"Go and make disciples of all peoples."* If I cooperate with God in the coming to pass of that picture, that vision, I can't fail—God has guaranteed it will happen. I'm willing to invest my life to see that happen. How about you?

3. I see Jesus coming again. The picture is of Him coming with all the accoutrements of power. I see him breaking through the clouds and coming to this earth just as He said He would. I see Him reigning as King of kings and Lord of lords not just potentially but actually, visibly, and eternally. And I see those true believers who died before then being raised from their graves and I see those of us who did not die coming together at the throne of Jesus to worship Him and thank Him that every thing He said would happen has indeed happened.

Following Jesus was worth it! It was worth it all! Those pictures of the future are what drive the present. That vision and a certainty that God exists and that He rewards those who earnestly seek Him make it possible to overcome

fear, temptation, delay, and outright opposition.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart." (12:1-3)

Chapter Fifteen

Loving Discipline Hebrews 12:4-13

Four and one-half years ago Jerry Sittser and his family took a weekend trip. On their way home a drunk driver struck their mini-van head on killing Lynda, Jerry's wife of 20 years, his four year old daughter and Jerry's mother. In his book entitled *A Grace Disguised*, Jerry writes, "For the past few years my dominant emotion has been a nervous and doleful bewilderment. A pause at a stop sign, a last minute switch of seats before departure, a slower or faster acceleration after a turn would have spared us all unspeakable suffering..."

"One of the worst aspects of my experience of loss has been this sense of sheer randomness. The event was completely outside of my control—an accident, as we say.

"Maybe," I thought, "there really is no God and no meaning to life." I was tormented by an inability to discover any explanation that made sense of the tragedy. An answer to the "why?" question eluded me."¹ Jerry's faith, Jerry's trust in God, was tested more than any other time in his life. How can you make sense of such random tragedy? What possible good can come out of such deep hurt?

A few days ago, Tom (not his real name) called and asked to see me. He had attended our church for a couple of years, while in seminary more than 15 years ago, and said he wanted my counsel. Though I did not remember him and had not even seen or heard of him for nearly 15 years, the story I heard caused in me a deep sadness for him. Tom graduated from seminary with a heart set on

becoming a missionary. For several years he attempted to raise the necessary support but failed to so he couldn't go. He engaged in another venture and it too ended in disappointment. Finally, Tom was called to be the pastor of a church where he has served successfully for several years.

But through all those experiences what Tom has wanted, along with a way to serve God, was a wife—someone who would share life and ministry with him. Now in his early 40's Tom sat before me as an attractive, intelligent, capable servant of the Lord with a hurt that was breaking his heart and causing him to doubt his ministry. He had dated through the years but it never resulted in someone he could marry. Now in his 40's he was wondering, no, he was agonizing, over the possibility that he would never marry.

***It is faith that is needed to persevere
in this life. Faith that is needed to remain
true to God even when life seems
to go wrong.***

It crushed him when his friends either hinted or outspokenly said why they thought he wasn't married yet with all reasons laid at his feet, as if he could change something then he would be married. From Tom's perspective, it seemed God was choosing to ignore his deepest desire—God wasn't changing the situation. He had become so disheartened that he wondered if he could continue as a pastor. He wasn't ready to throw off his belief in God, but he had begun to lose heart and he had certainly grown weary. The plea of his heart was "God please release me from this misery." And the fear of his heart was that God wouldn't respond. How can he go on when the hurt is so deep.

How does a Christian respond when the problem can't be fixed or the hurt can't be healed? God answers these questions addressing the Hebrew Christians who had already encountered hardship and were about to enter even more painful situations. Earlier I outlined the historical setting of this letter to these Hebrews. Under Roman Emperor Claudius there had been an expulsion of Christians from Rome and then 15 years later under Emperor Nero, the Christians were scapegoats for a natural disaster. Throughout the Roman empire and particularly in and near Rome, Christians were being arrested, tortured and killed. It looked like only a matter of time before these Christians would be facing the loss of everything, possibly even their lives.

The pastor-author of this letter writes encouraging them (as he says in 10:23) *"to hold unswervingly to the hope we profess."* In 10:36 he tells them *"we need to persevere."* In 10:38 he reminds them that the righteous will live by faith. And then in chapter 11, which we looked at in the last 2 chapters, he parades before their mind's eyes a list of people who had, by faith, persevered through some of the hardest of times, even the loss of their lives. And he concludes the list in the beginning of chapter 12 by reminding them of Jesus who more than all the others endured hardship by faith. Finishing with these words he says, *"Consider Jesus who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart."* (12:3) It is faith that is needed to persevere in this life. Faith that is needed to remain true to God even when life seems to go wrong.

But at chapter 12 verse 4 it is as if the author anticipates a reaction from those who hear his words about faith and his examples of faithful people down through the centuries. If God is sovereign, why do His people go through such

terrible times, through such trouble, through such suffering? What is God doing that He would allow His own people to experience such pain? The temptation is to assume that life is out of control—that God has abandoned them or worse yet, that God is not in control.

What God says next, through this pastor-author, is very hard to hear—meaning I don't like it at first, but is very true, and very important that we understand. Read what He says:

"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons:

'My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son.'

Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are illegitimate children and not true sons. Moreover, we have all had human fathers who disciplined us and we respected them for it. How much more should we submit to the Father of our spirits and live! Our fathers disciplined us for a little while as they thought best; but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it.

Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. 'Make level paths for your feet,' so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed."(12:4-13)

I want you to know that it is with intellectual humility and heartfelt sympathy for those who are the living wounded that I say what I am going to say next. I have not endured

the pain that some of you have borne or are now bearing. I cannot speak from first-hand experience about every tragic possibility of life. All I can do is go to God's Word and attempt with intellectual humility to understand what God is saying to those of you who are now in the midst of the battle of faith and to the rest of us who will one day go through it.

It is startling to me that God calls the hardships these Christians are enduring, "discipline." The hardships, in their case, are persecutions for their belief in Jesus Christ. The suffering they are experiencing is called "discipline." Do you understand the implications of that? This isn't a situation where they have intentionally done something wrong and

What is God doing that He would allow His own people to experience such pain? The temptation is to assume that God has abandoned them or worse yet, that God is not in control.

God is disciplining them for it. Their situation is not in their control. Like Jerry Sittser whose family died, and like Tom whose deepest desire was unmet, these people were not suffering as a result of their own willful sin. How can this be called the "discipline" of God on them?

What God is about to teach in these next verses is about God's purposes and a Christian's response to those painful and even tragic situations in life over which we have no control. Look at verse 5 of chapter 12:

"You have forgotten that word of encouragement." You are tempted to "lose heart," to give up, because you have forgotten a God-given truth that will make all the difference in the world when you go through times of great suffering. I want to summarize the passage for you. I want you to

hear this God-given truth in two sentences and then I want you to look at it with me to see if that is indeed what God is teaching:

"For the Christian, hardship is intentionally brought on by God to bring us to maturity because He loves us. Therefore learn faith in all your hardships."

First of all, do you agree that the author is not talking about the slight inconveniences of life but is talking about real hardship? Look at verse 4:

"In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

Back in chapter 10 we were already told that these people had withstood insult, persecution and even confiscation of

"For the Christian, hardship is intentionally brought on by God to bring us to maturity because He loves us. Therefore learn faith in all your hardships."

their property as they were driven from their homes and their neighborhoods. I think the implication in 12:4 is that though they have not yet been killed, that could come next. First of all then, the suffering the author discusses is real suffering –uncontrollable tragedy and pain.

But, secondly, who is behind it? This is where this passage gets very hard for me. What does God say about their hardships? In verses 7-11 the author reiterates in different words what they already should have known from the Proverbs passage he just quoted in verses 5-6. Who is behind the hardships of these Christians? *"Endure hardship as discipline."* (12:7a)

Discipline from whom? God!

- Whose discipline is it? "The Lord's" (12:5)
- Whose rebuke of you is it? The Lord's. (12:5)

- Whose discipline is it? “The Lord’s” (12:6)
- Who is doing the punishing? “The Lord” (12:6)

What I find so difficult in this passage is that it doesn’t say that God simply allows these things to happen. I would be more comfortable with that. It seems to come dangerously close to making God responsible for the evil that befalls His people. Yet there is ample biblical evidence that God is not even capable of sinning or doing what is wrong or being maliciously hurtful to people. To make God the author of evil would contradict the very nature of God.

But the author will have none of the feeble explanations for suffering that make God a helpless bystander or at best an after-the-fact fixer of whatever has gone wrong. Some, like Rabbi Kurshner, in a book written several years ago, would make of God a kindly sympathizer with our pain but incapable to really do anything about it. This author says God is not just standing helplessly by while we suffer, nor is God just reacting to the tragedies of our lives, but that God is sovereignly superintending even the hardships.

Guido de Bresi author of the Belgic Confession of Faith was executed on May 31, 1567 in Belgium. Just before he was hung he wrote a prayer to give to his wife: “Oh, my God, now the time has come that I must leave this life and be with you. Your will be done. I cannot escape your hands. Even if I could, I would not do it, for it is my joy to conform to your will.” He saw even the gallows as God’s actions and not the actions of men only. Now that may sound malevolent or mean until we see the third thing the text teaches us on the subject.

Notice, please, the purpose for which God disciplines us through hardships: Look at the last part of verse 10:

“God disciplines us for our good that we may share in his holiness.”

Look at verse 11: *"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on however it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it."*

When we think of the concept of discipline we most often think of punishment. And when we think of punishment we think of it in terms of retribution or payment for crimes or sins. A huge debate has raged for years in our criminal justice system. Are our prisons primarily places for rehabilitating criminals or are they primarily places of justice, meting out penalty for the crimes committed? When we think of discipline or punishment as justice—as paying for what we have done wrong—then we must understand that none of God’s children will ever be so disciplined or punished. Jesus Christ has finally and fully paid for our sin. We will never be held responsible for the eternal death our sins deserve; justice has been met in Christ’s death on the cross. The wages of sin is death – eternal separation from God. For themselves, Christians cannot rightly think of discipline or punishment in the sense of justice.

But we can and must think of discipline and punishment of the Christian as education. The word “discipline” used throughout this passage is the word for teaching—similar to the word “pedagogy.” Even when the words “rebuke” (end of 12:5) and “punish” (12:6) are used, it is in the context of training, teaching, correcting. God is in the business of teaching us and He will use even painful methods to accomplish it. I have known the feeling and I have heard the cries, “What is God trying to teach me?” “I’m willing to learn, I give up, just tell me what is it?!”

The context in which this whole discussion is set is the topic of faith. Among other things that God may teach us in the midst of suffering is this large issue of faith. Paul said to

the Thessalonians, *"Your faith is growing more and more...in all your persecutions and trials you are enduring."* (2 Thess. 1:3-4) James wrote, *"Consider it pure joy whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature..."* (James 1:2-4)

Similarly Peter wrote, *"Rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith may be proved genuine."* (1 Pt. 1:6ff)

Simply put, nothing teaches dependence on God like dependence on God. Nothing teaches great faith like great hardship.

Earlier I defined faith as "the act of believing God and mentally seeing His vision of the future even when we can't see it with our physical eyes." Faith is trusting God even

***But we can and must think of discipline
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education.***

when you don't have the immediate physical evidence to support such trust. Several years ago my daughter Stephanie gave a children's book to me that I think illustrates this beautifully.

Billy and the Attic Adventure.

"There once was a little boy named Billy.

Billy loved to explore things.

One day, when Billy's dad came down from the attic, Billy got an idea. Billy climbed upstairs and found all sorts of fun things to explore. One thing was an old leather helmet too big for his head.

When Billy finally tried to come down from the attic, his foot slipped.

Billy could barely hang on by his hands and the helmet covered his eyes.

"Mom! Dad!" Billy screamed.

"I'm here, Billy," said Dad. "Just let go. I'll catch you."

"But I can't see you," Billy cried.

"You don't need to," said Dad. "I can see you."

So Billy let go, and fell, right into his dad's arms."²

Most of us have an almost insatiable need to control our situations, to trust ourselves rather than God. That propensity for self-trust must be crucified for us ever to be the holy, Christ-like people God intends to populate heaven with. David Watson, the British pastor who suffered greatly for several years with cancer wrote, "Behind much anger

***God is in the business of taking us deeper
and deeper into an understanding of
Himself.***

about suffering is our human arrogance which assumes that God must somehow justify his existence and explain his actions before we are prepared to consider the possibility of believing him."³ A friend once told Joni Erickson Tada (a quadriplegic since age 17) "you don't have to know why God let you be hurt. The fact is God knows and that's all that counts. Just trust him..."⁴ God is in the business of taking us deeper and deeper into an understanding of Himself.

The experience of Job is an awesome story. I think Phil

Yancey is right: the Book of Job is not about “where is God when it hurts?” but rather, “Where is Job when it hurts?” When absolutely no reason could be found for Job’s suffering, would Job still trust God? The book of Job is about faith in its starkest form; trusting God with no other evidence except our relationship with Him.

Michael Quoist imagines God speaking to him:

“Son I am here.

I haven’t left you,

How weak is your faith!

You are too proud.

You still rely on yourself...

You must surrender yourself to me.

You must realize that you are neither
big enough or strong enough.

You must let yourself be guided like a child.

A little child.

Come, give me your hand, and do not fear.

If there’s mud, I will carry you in my arms.

But you must be very, very little,

For the Father carries only little children.”⁵

Jerry Sittser, whose wife Lynda and daughter were killed in the head-on collision I mentioned earlier wrote three years after the tragedy:

“Despite my having been a Christian for many years before the accident, God has become a living reality to me as never before. My confidence in God is quieter but stronger. I feel little pressure to impress God or prove myself to him; yet I want to serve him with all my heart and strength. My life is bountiful, even as I continue to feel the loss. Grace is transforming me, and it is wonderful. I have slowly learned where God belongs and have allowed him to assume that place—at the center of life rather than at the periphery.”⁶
The more mature we become in our Christian faith the

more likely it is that we will suffer even greater hardships, even deeper pain because God is in the process of transforming us into men and women of **faith**, people who don't trust just in the reasons or the evidence but trust in God alone.

Lastly, I want you to see that God's motive for wanting to teach us great faith is that He loves us. In verses 6-10 God makes it clear that His reason for disciplining us, even with rebukes and painful circumstances is that He loves us.

"because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son."

The author makes much of the issue of adoption – we have become children of God. Our country and even our churches are filled with people who think discipline and love are contradictory. And they have abandoned their children in so thinking. Other than Jesus, no child has ever been born who did not need the discipline of his parents or he would ruin his life. Lack of discipline is indicative of abandonment not love.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic book *The Problem of Pain*, "If God is love, He is, by definition, something more powerful than mere kindness."⁷ We want mere kindness—sympathy without discipline. But God gives us so much more. He gives us love, love that cares enough to use whatever it takes to conform us to the image of Christ. Lewis went on to say, "We are...in very truth a Divine work of art, something which God is making, and therefore something with which He will not be satisfied until it has a certain character...It is natural for us to wish that God had designed for us a less glorious and less arduous destiny; but (when we think like that) we are wishing not for more love but less."⁸ To ask that God's love should be content with us as we are is to ask that God should cease to be God."⁹

Phil Yancey tells of visiting his mother one holiday. They reminisced and soon the picture box came down from the closet shelf. They talked their way through years of pictures until Phil noticed a picture of an infant with his name written on the back. What got his attention was the crumpled condition of the photo as if one of the childhood pets had mangled it. He asked his mother why she had hung on to such an abused photo.

When Philip was 10 months old, his father contracted spinal lumbar polio. He died three months later. He was totally paralyzed at age 24 and had to live inside an iron lung because he was so weak he could not breathe on his own. Phillip's mother, was one of few visitors allowed. And she would sit day after day with her husband. Lying in his steel cylinder, he asked for a picture of his son who was not

God's motive for wanting to teach us great faith is that He loves us. God makes it clear that His reason for disciplining us, even with rebukes and painful circumstances is that He loves us.

allowed into the room. That picture was attached to the iron lung, jammed in between some metal knobs, thus the wrinkled condition of the photo. When Phil's mother told him the story of the crumpled photo, he had a strange and powerful reaction. It seemed odd to him to imagine someone caring for him whom, in a sense, he'd never met.

Yancey writes, "During the last months of his life, my father had spent his waking hours staring at that image of me. There was nothing else in his field of view. What did he do all day? Pray for me? Yes, surely. Did he love me? Yes. But how can a paralyzed man express his love, especially when his own child is banned from the room. That photo,

Yancey went on to write, is one of the few links connecting me to the stranger who was my father. Someone I have no memory of, no sensory knowledge of, spent all day every day thinking of me, devoting himself to me, loving me as well as he could.

"I mention this story, he writes, because the emotions I felt when my mother showed me the crumpled photo were the very same emotions I felt that February night in a college dorm room when I first believed in a God of Love. Someone IS there, I realized. Someone is watching life as it unfolds on this planet. More than that, Someone is there who loves me. It was a startling feeling of wild hope, a feeling so new and overwhelming that it seemed fully worth risking my life on."¹⁰

"For the Christian, hardship is intentionally brought on by God to bring us to maturity because he loves us. Therefore learn faith in all your hardships."

End Notes

¹ *Christianity Today*, March 4, 1996

² Daryl Worley, *Billy and the Attic Adventure*, Tyke Corp.

³ David Watson, *Fear No Evil*, p. 127

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 131

⁵ Unknown, *Prayers of Life*

⁶ *Christianity Today*, Mar 4, 1996

⁷ C.S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain*, p. 41

⁸ *Ibid*, p. 43

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 48

¹⁰ Philip Yancey, *Disappointment with God*, p. 254-5

Chapter Sixteen

Perspective Heb 12:12-29

What's the goal of your life? Seriously, "What's the goal of your life?" What are you living, working, investing to accomplish?

- Get into a certain kind of a job or profession?
- Obtain a comfortable amount of money?
- Live in a particular part of the world or a certain kind of house?
- Retire early and travel?
- Experience a lot of exciting adventures?

Come on, engage me—what is your goal in life? What are you striving for ?

What would you most like to be known for? If you ever dream of being known for one particular thing, what would it be?

- A great athlete like Michael Jordan?
- Very intelligent like Bill Gates?
- A person of great compassion like Mother Theresa?
- A person with a phenomenal voice like Pavarotti or Whitney Houston?

To what do you aspire? Most of us dream, or at least have dreamed, of being extra good at something or being recognized for something in life. If you overheard others talking about you and they described you the way you most want to be described, what would they say? "Above everything else he (or she) is..." what? Or they would say, "His/her) greatest goal in life is to..." what?

I think the answers to those questions, “What is your greatest goal in life” and “What would you want to be known for” are most easily answered when we determine what we most value in life. I would suppose we most value what we think is most valuable—what will last the longest, what will give us the most pleasure, what will most likely meet our needs. If most valuable to us is the positive opinion of us by others, we will likely do whatever it takes

What we value most in life, what we are living for, and what we most want to describe us, reveals the God we believe in.

to gain their approval. If most valuable to us, is the freedom to go to the places we want to go and buy the things we want to buy then we will likely do whatever it takes to get the necessary money.

Our perspective shapes what is most valuable to us. A little child has no perspective on tomorrow and what saving and waiting can bring, so a gumball machine in front of his eyes and 25 cents in his hand look far more valuable than anything you can tell him. Our perspective shapes what we consider most valuable. So again, what is most valuable to you in life? What is your goal? What would you most want to be known for?

- Do you believe in God? What God do you believe in?
- Do you believe in the God who created everything, Who is in control of everything?
- Do you believe in the God who has given His laws by which people are to live?
- Do you believe in the God who will hold people accountable for the way they act?

Do you believe in the God who will draw history to a close and open a new age in which only some people will experience His love and grace?

If you truly believe in that God, it will have serious implications for what you say you most value in life. It will have important ramifications for what you say is your goal in life. It will affect what you want to be known for! I can say it another way, "What we value most in life, what we are living for, and what we most want to describe us, reveals the God we believe in. Again, "What is your goal in life?" and "What do you most want to describe you?"

The author of the letter to the Hebrew Christians wrote to them these words: "*Be holy for without holiness no one will see the Lord!*" In that sentence he captured what over and over again in the Bible we are told about the Christian's goal in life and the characteristic by which true Christians most want to be known: We want to know God and we want to be holy for he is holy.

Have you ever thought of it that way? More than anything else in life, I want to know God. That is more valuable to me than career, health, or possessions. Have you ever thought of it that way? When people described you the thing you most would want them to say is, "Above all else he (she) is HOLY." When I think of Michael Jordan I think awesomely athletic. When I think of Bill Gates I think brilliant and rich. And when I think of you, I think "holy."

The people to whom the letter we call "Hebrews" was written were people who professed to be Christians. In a world of pagans and Jews these people like a minority elsewhere in the known world, accepted the teachings of Jesus and called themselves Christians. But in addition to the great personal benefit they derived from experiencing the grace of forgiveness and peace with God, they also began to experience great persecution. Neither the Jews out of whose families most of these Christians had come nor the Romans with their wholly different religion wanted

anything to do with Christians except to exterminate them if possible. To become a Christian meant the loss of family in many cases but it also, at times, meant the loss of jobs, homes, and even lives.

It was one thing to be a Christ-follower when things were going well in life but when the roof began to cave in, that was another matter. Striving to be like Christ, working to live in obedience to His will, aiming at holiness in their lives was okay until the price went up. Being a Christ-follower became too hard, too costly. They were being asked to give up too much to be a Christian. To answer the question, this Author/Pastor to the Hebrews gives them **perspective!** **And in a sense after** giving that perspective, he asks them to decide for themselves. Since what I am telling you is true, do you think following Christ is worth it? He uses an example from a long time ago to illustrate a person who doesn't have the right perspective and the consequences of that.

Esau was the firstborn but twin brother of Jacob. These two sons were born to Isaac and Rebekah. Because Esau was the firstborn, centuries old cultural law said that he would get by far the largest share of his father's estate when Isaac died. But even more significantly Esau would become the leader of the family. To his grandfather Abraham and to his father Isaac God had given the promise that out of their family God would make a great nation and bless all the peoples of the world. But the Genesis account of what happened informs us that Esau "despised" those rights of the firstborn. That means he didn't think of them as valuable but as worthless!

The Hebrews text, like the Genesis one, tells us that for a single meal he sold his birthright. They were of such little value to him that he sold them for a bowl of soup. He came

in from the field hungry and consistent with his brash, devil-may-care, attitude and consistent with his think-with-his-belly logic, he agreed to give up his firstborn birthrights if Jacob would feed him. Here was the prototype of modern godlessness—the here and now is all that counts.

According to verse 16 this man’s perspective was limited to the next meal and the next female. I don’t think it helps to paint this man as an uncouth slob; the point is that even if he had been sophisticated, he lacked perspective. He made his decisions on what is most valuable in life from what he could see or feel, what he could reason out, and what was right before him. Worst of all, he didn’t believe God! A bowl

Striving to be like Christ, working to live in obedience to His will, aiming at holiness in their lives was okay until the price went up.

of soup was more valuable to him than God’s promise of the future. And when he finally woke up to the problem, it was too late. Esau was an example of what God didn’t want His people to do. He didn’t want them thinking with their bellies, their nerve endings, or their natural perceptions; He wanted them to have a much broader perspective by which to decide what is most important in life. This He sets out to do in the next verses.

Compare verses 18 and 22. In verse 18 he says, “You **have not** come to” something. And in verse 22 he says, “You **have** come to” something else. In both verses the “something” to which they “have not” or “have” come is a mountain. In verse 18 it is obvious from the description that this mountain is Mt. Sinai where God gave the Law. And in verse 22 it specifically says it is Mt. Zion, the hill on

which Jerusalem is situated. But according to this same verse (22) the earthly Mt. Zion is only a symbol of the real Mt. Zion the author has in mind. In this case Mt. Zion is a euphemism for the coming Kingdom of God. But again it is obvious that he intends to contrast these two mountains. The first one, Mt. Sinai, can be touched—it is tangible and temporal. The second one, Mt. Zion can't be touched—it is heavenly and it is eternal.

The words in verses 18-20 are clearly a reference to the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai. What the Israelites got there was an experience with God that did little more than frighten them nearly to death. And what they got there was the law of God that showed them how unholy they truly were. Mt. Sinai gave them a view of the holiness of God

The God who is sovereignly Lord over all is there. And the fact that He is the "judge" is not frightening but reassuring to the Christian because we stand no longer condemned.

and a view of their own sinful-unholiness. By those two things alone the people would be condemned, not saved. I think the point is that you Hebrews don't want to build your perspective on the basis of Mt Sinai. If you determine what is most valuable to you on what can be touched, on the here and now, only on the things you can see with your own eyes, you will miss it. Like Esau, you will lose.

But in verse 22, the author says, you **have not** come to that mountain, you have come to a different mountain. You have come into the kingdom of God. In verses 22-23 we are given a picture of the future. Do you remember that earlier I asked, "What is your goal in life?" I also said your

goal in life will be determined by what you consider most valuable. This word picture painted in verses 22 and 23 is intended to give all of us such an accurate perspective of the future that we will not build our lives around the temporal, the tangible (the Mt. Sinai) but around the eternal, the yet intangible, the real. (Mt. Zion)

What God shows us is a place where he lives. He shows us a place where thousands upon thousands of angels are gathered together and joy characterizes their attitudes and conduct. This is a grand celebration; there is an air of exuberance, of excitement—this couldn't get any better. In this place are gathered not only angels but *"the church of the firstborn whose names are written in heaven."* (12:23a) These are all the believers, you and me—we are right in the middle of all that celebration. And as we already noted but again it is stated in verse 23, we are in the presence of the living God, *"the judge of all men."* The God who is sovereignly Lord over all is there. And the fact that He is the "judge" is not frightening but reassuring to the Christian because we stand no longer condemned.

At the end of verse 23 we find that all the saints of all the ages are present in this place. Millions and millions from every tribe, tongue and race are gathered together in the presence of the living God. And most importantly there is Jesus, the one who mediated, who brought God and us together. There is Jesus who by His blood cleansed us from our sin—forgave it. And the blood of Jesus doesn't speak of vengeance like Abel's blood but it speaks of forgiveness. Carefully read Revelation 21:1-4 and see if your mind's eye doesn't capture the same picture.

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our

eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart. In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood."

Do you believe that? Let me ask you again, "Do you believe that?" Does that vision shape your life? Is that perspective so valuable that it dictates what is most important to you? Have you noticed who is at the exact center of that picture? It is God. If that picture is truly a picture of the future, what could possibly be more important or more exciting than knowing God and being holy like He is holy?

The Bible says we were made to know God. Jesus said, "*This is eternal life, that they may know God and Jesus Christ whom the Father has sent.*"

J.I. Packer wrote: "Once you become aware that the main business that you are here for is to know God, most of life's problems fall into place of their own accord."¹ He went on to say that for too many life is either a great big problem or it is a great bore. "What makes life worth while is having a big enough objective, something which catches our imagination and lays hold of our allegiance; and this the Christian has, in a way no other person has. For what higher, more exalted and more compelling goal can there be than to know God?"²

Like Esau, we spend too much of life being enamored of goals and activities that don't matter. We are wholly distracted by the immediate. We are too easily pleased with the temporary that we miss out on the eternal. We want a bowl of soup today more than we want a feast tomorrow. And we take the bowl of soup because we don't believe

God!

Look at verse 25:

"See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"

God, in these verses, not only gives us a picture of the future but He also gives a warning. I am convinced there are millions of people in the evangelical churches of America who have been snookered by a perversion of a teaching called "eternal security." There are too many who are truly convinced that once they ask Jesus into their hearts, as they put it, or they get saved, it doesn't matter

What could possibly be more important or more exciting than knowing God and being holy like He is holy?

what they do after that—they are guaranteed a place in heaven. The Bible does not teach that. The Bible teaches that those who truly belong to Christ will persevere—they will remain faithful to Jesus Christ and they will walk in obedience to His will. The warning of these verses is to those in the church who so thoroughly misunderstand what being a Christ-follower is that they miss the grace of God. Look at verses 15-16a:

"See to it that no one misses the grace of God and that no bitter root grows up to cause trouble and defile many. See that no one is sexually immoral, or is godless like Esau..."

Just as in many evangelical churches so here in Israel there were some who thought that going through the motions of saying the words of the covenant was all there was to it.

"Make sure there is no man or woman, clan or tribe among you today whose heart turns away from the LORD our God

to go and worship the gods of those nations; make sure there is no root among you that produces such bitter poison. When such a person hears the words of this oath, he invokes a blessing on himself and therefore thinks, 'I will be safe, even though I persist in going my own way.' This will bring disaster on the watered land as well as the dry." (Deuteronomy 29:18-19)

Do you desire more than anything else to be a holy person ready for the coming of the Lord? If it is then we you become a thankful person rather than a bitter, complaining person.

Those who are true Israel, those who are true Christians, will follow Christ. Now back to Heb. 12:25: "*See to it that you do not refuse him who speaks. If they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, how much less will we, if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven?"*

If we refuse the grace of God to forgive our sins and the grace to lead us into a life of holiness in following Jesus Christ, we will not escape any more than those Israelites did back in the wilderness and any more than Esau did.

The author concludes by reminding us that the God who shook Mt. Sinai as noted in verses 18-20 is the same God who (verse 26) will not only shake the mountain but everything. Everything we now see, touch, hear, taste, and smell will be removed. Peter wrote, "*The day of the Lord will come like a thief. The heavens will disappear with a roar; the elements will be destroyed by fire, the earth and everything in it will be laid bare.*

That day will bring about the destruction of the heavens by fire, and the elements will melt in the heat." If life on this

earth or anything in it is your goal than your future will go up in smoke.

"Our God is a consuming fire!" "But we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken," or as Peter said it, "But in keeping with his promise we are looking forward to a new heaven and a new earth, the home of the righteous." (2 Pt. 3:10ff)

Do you believe that? No, do you really believe that? Does that truth shape the goal of your life? Do you desire more than anything else to be a holy person ready for the coming of the Lord? Is the goal of your life to know God? If it is then as it says in verse 28 we will become thankful people rather than bitter, complaining people. *"We will worship God acceptably with reverence and awe."* And this worship clearly is a worship not just of the lips, but also of the life. It will be worth it all! Look at the future for those who are Christ-followers!

End Notes

¹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*, p. 29

² Ibid, p. 30

Chapter Seventeen

Honoring Marriage Hebrews 13:4

The news article from May, 1996 read:

“Nearly 200 homosexual couples—some in drag, others in traditional wedding garb—last Monday held hands before an only-happy-to-oblige-you Willie Brown, the new mayor of San Francisco.

“Twenty couples at a time walked the aisle to Mr. Brown and said among other things: ‘We pledge, while in this union, to be responsible to each other and to be committed to a relationship of loyalty and mutual caring.’

“Then a beaming Mayor Brown gave his city’s official endorsement to the couples, among them two men in drag, wearing full nun’s habits:(as the mayor intoned:) ‘I hereby pronounce you lawfully recognized domestic partners. You may consummate the relationship.’

The cities of New York and Madison, Wisconsin also already allow same-sex marriage ceremonies. The state of Hawaii has passed a law making same-sex marriages legal. The Hawaii Supreme Court is currently reviewing that law. If that law is upheld, the constitution of the United States could make all other states recognize those same-sex marriages. Many states, including Colorado have attempted to pass laws that would preempt that possibility, passing laws that would specifically make opposite sex marriages the only lawfully recognized marriages in their states. Colorado passed such a law but our Governor vetoed it in 1996. Should homosexuals be allowed to be legally married? On a different but related subject, is it actually

wrong for a man and a woman who are unmarried to have sex? According to some polls, by 1991 as many as 70% of 20-year-old Americans had had sex. Most of them were unmarried.¹

The arguments we hear most often are, “Well, we really love each other!” Or “We are more committed to each other and love each other more than many married couples we know.” Or, “What difference does a marriage license, a piece of paper, make? I think we’re already married in the

If you are part of God’s family, living not just for the present but truly following Christ and living with a future kingdom-perspective, then you will conduct yourselves differently than the world around you.

eyes of God.” Others don’t even use the arguments of “love” but simply state they can’t imagine there being anything wrong with something that is so natural. Is pre-marital sex actually wrong?

Let me raise a third, but also related subject: adultery. Very few people seem to want to defend adultery, but it is surprising how many will commit it and rationalize their actions at least to themselves, even while calling themselves Christians. Is adultery actually wrong or is it just socially tacky.

I have raised these issues because the biblical text we are studying addresses the larger issues of marriage and sex. With this discussion, we conclude our study of the book of Hebrews. God, through the author of this letter, has been addressing a church, giving them instructions on

maintaining their spiritual balance in the midst of the real and sometimes hard experiences of life. They identified themselves as Christians in a world that was very hostile to Christianity. The author wrote to encourage them and to challenge them to remain faithful to Jesus.

He began his encouragement of them by reminding them throughout the first several chapters of the letter that Jesus is truly superior to anything they left behind when they became Christians. He wanted them to know, beyond doubt, that Jesus is the only way to God—in no other way can their sins be forgiven, their relationship to God be restored, and their future be secured. He wanted to be reassuring that in spite of the persecution they faced, they were not foolish to trust in Christ Jesus.

And starting in the last half of chapter 10, the author uses several means to encourage them to persevere, to remain faithful because it will be worth it all. He gives them a picture of the future—of what will be—and says, “Look at that. Fix your eyes firmly on Jesus and that future and you can hang in there—you can be a Christian in a very un-Christian world. Several times in several ways, in this letter, he reminded them they are not living for the present. This life is not all there is. They are like pilgrims, living in this land, but preparing for a land to come; living this life but all the while preparing for the life to come. He said it this way in Hebrews 13:14: *“For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for a city that is to come.”*

Look at Hebrews 13. We find in this chapter of the letter, the author’s concluding remarks. If you are part of God’s family, living not just for the present but truly following Christ and living with a future kingdom-perspective, then you will conduct yourselves differently than the world around you. As we follow Christ and prepare for the coming

of the Lord Jesus there are some things the author says ought to characterize us. In verse 1, of chapter 13, he puts those issues under the heading of "loving one another." *"Keep on loving each other as brothers,"* he writes. Then, in his concluding part of the letter, he spells out six ways that love is to be expressed as we follow Christ and persevere as Christians until Jesus comes again.

1. He instructs them to be gracious, to be hospitable to those they don't know. (13:2)
2. He tells them to remember to take care of Christians who have been imprisoned for their faith. (13:3)
3. We will come back to in a minute. (13:4)
4. He calls on them to be free of the love of money. (13:5)
5. He calls on them to obey and honor their spiritual leaders. (13:7, 17)
6. He reminds them not to go back to their former religious traditions and beliefs. (13:9ff)

I introduced this message by raising the issues of homosexual marriage, premarital sex and adultery. I did that because of the third subject God raises in this conclusion to Hebrews. If you are going to be a Christ-follower, living not only for this life but living with the perspective that the Kingdom of God is more lasting and more important than anything that could happen here, then *"Marriage should be honored by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."* (13:4)

I will not attempt to speak to these issues in ways that would convince the unbeliever, the one who is not a Christian. The unbeliever essentially says, "I don't care what the Bible says on these subjects because the Bible is irrelevant." The letter of Hebrews was not written to pagans in Rome but to the church. The author was writing

to people who believed in God and believed God—who wanted to know what God thought.

I am not addressing those, even here, who judge the Bible by how they feel and what they want to do or what is currently politically or socially correct in the culture, but I **am** addressing people who judge their actions and the culture by what God says. I am concerned that even in the church, even among those who truly are Christ-followers, there is confusion about what God says on the subjects I have raised.

I want to show you again, from God’s Word, what He does say on these subjects. I want us to be very clear about what a Christ-follower believes and then how a Christ-follower acts in these matters. I know it is very difficult to

If you are going to be a Christ-follower, living not only for this life but living with the perspective that the Kingdom of God is more lasting than "Marriage should be honored by all.

know exactly how to apply these truths in a world that doesn’t believe, but it is imperative that we begin with us being clear on the truths.

God begins His instruction on marriage and sex with this exhortation: “Marriage should be honored by all.” Or stated differently, “Let marriage be precious to all of you.” The marriage relationship is so fundamental to every society that to corrupt that relationship is to do fundamental damage to that society. Even our own Supreme Court recognized this when many years ago while upholding biblical marriage as one man united to one woman they wrote: States must anchor their marriage laws in “the basis

of the idea of the family, as consisting in and springing from the union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony; (Such a marriage) is the sure foundation of all that is stable and noble in our civilization, (marriage is) the best guaranty of that reverent morality which is the source of all beneficent progress in social and political improvement."²

Why should marriage be honored? After America's fling in the 60s and 70s with every alternative imaginable, even the sociologists and psychologists have largely come back to an understanding that a stable home of a husband and a wife provides, hands down, the environment most conducive to the rearing of children. There has been and there is no setting better for children than a strong marriage.

Not only should marriage be honored and precious to all of us because it provides the best place for children but if sex outside of marriage is wrong then practically speaking,

"The marriage bed (should be) kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral."

marriage provides the only place for the propagation of the species. Without marriage there will be no people. A fairly practical benefit of marriage if sex and marriage go together.

But Christians should honor marriage also because we know God has said that marriage, the relationship between a husband and a wife illustrates the relationship of God with His people. In Ephesians 5 God says that the love of a man and a woman in marriage best illustrates God's love for us. There is no greater symbol of the relationship of

Christ to His church than the marriages of God's people. A godly marriage, in essence, communicates significant elements of the gospel. "Marriage should be honored by all." Not just by married people—but by all.

After making that resounding affirmation of marriage, God then gets very specific: "*The marriage bed (should be) kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*" The sentence is very clear, one thing that will dishonor marriage and clearly break the command of God is if the marriage bed is not kept pure. What is meant by the term "the marriage bed"? Obviously it is a euphemism for the sexual relationship. For marriage to be honored as God has commanded, the sexual relationship between people must be kept pure. In the right context, sex is right, pure, and holy—God honoring. But clearly implied is, that it is altogether too possible for the marriage bed, the sexual relationship between people to be impure—unholy, dishonoring to God, dishonoring to marriage. The verse goes on to say exactly what is dishonoring and impure: "*for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral.*"

Now we are down to the nub of it: What does God say about the issues I raised earliest in this message? What about adultery? Does any Christian misunderstand God's law and will regarding that issue? It doesn't get much clearer than, "*Thou shalt not commit adultery.*" Any married person having sexual relations with any one or any thing other than their own spouse is committing adultery.

And Jesus said, "*You have heard it said, 'Do not commit adultery' but I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.*" Immediately after which He tells us to be ruthless in guarding our hearts in this matter for as He says it, "*it is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your*

whole body to go into hell." God is serious about this matter of adultery. It violates marriage, it violates God's law, and it violates God. I could spend much more time, and I have on other occasions, giving much more evidence for the catastrophic effects of adultery but for the Christ-follower, it is enough to know what God commands even if we don't know why.

Clearly adultery is wrong but what about homosexual conduct and premarital sex. Look at verse 4 again. Who else will God judge besides the adulterer? *"The sexually immoral."* The sexually immoral dishonor marriage. Many of you know the Greek word that is here translated "sexually immoral" is a word that covers a whole range of sexual sins. So what does God prohibit, what is included in these words, "sexual immorality"?

Do you have any doubt about what God says about homosexual conduct? Leviticus 18:22 says, *"Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is repugnant to God."* As far back as the time of Abraham and Lot, men in the city of Sodom asked Lot, *"Who are the men who came to visit you—bring them out to us so that we can have sex with them."* And Lot correctly denied them calling it for what it was and said, *"No, don't do this wicked thing."*

In Romans 1 it says, *"For although they knew God, people neither glorified him as God nor gave thanks to him, but their thinking became futile and their foolish hearts were darkened. Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another. God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even women exchanged natural relations for the unnatural ones. In the same way men also abandoned natural relations with women and were inflamed with lust for one another. Men committed*

indecent acts with other men and received in themselves the due penalty for their perversion.” (1:21,24,26)

And as in the Hebrews’ passage, so in I Corinthians 6 God says, “...*The wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God—homosexual offenders will not inherit the kingdom of God.*” I know there has been a great deal of printer’s ink used in trying to get these verses to mean something else, but even most unbelievers fully admit what the Bible says about homosexual relations. They just don’t care what God thinks. But the believer, the one who is a Christ-follower,

But the believer, the one who is a Christ-follower, wants to know what God thinks. God forbids homosexual relations.

wants to know what God thinks. Three years ago, I devoted an entire sermon to this subject—the Christian’s response to homosexuality and the homosexual. But as to homosexual marriages, which is a contradiction in terms, isn’t God’s word clear enough? God forbids homosexual relations.

Throughout the Scriptures, marriage is reserved for a man and a woman—no exceptions. And it is our God-given obligation and our social-cultural responsibility to uphold that standard in every way we can with love and grace. Whether the world believes it or not, we know that homosexual relations are not only anti-God’s law but are anti-human. And we will use whatever persuasive and legal means we have to maintain the place of marriage and sex in marriage as being between a man and a woman.

I intentionally saved, for last, the issue that is most violated even by people who claim to be Christians. In Hebrews

13:4 God says He will judge the sexually immoral. Are sexual relationships between unmarried people—immoral, sin? To the non-Christian the answer to that question is irrelevant but to the Christ-follower that answer is very important! Again, I am not addressing people who don't care what God thinks; I'm addressing the people who are looking for a different city and country than the one in which we live. I'm addressing those who are following Christ to a Kingdom that He will bring with Him when He returns again. What God thinks matters to us!

Is pre-marital sex or sex outside of marriage wrong? Look with me at I Cor. 7. In verse 1, Paul wrote that in light of the circumstances surrounding the church in Corinth "*It is good for a man not to marry.*" Or literally it reads, "*it is good for a man not to touch a woman.*" "Touching a

God calls the marriage relationship a covenant! Divorce was the breaking of a covenant agreement.

woman" is a euphemism here for sex. Why do some translators say, "it is better for a man not to marry"? Because as we will see in a moment, in God's thinking, marriage is the only context in which sex is legitimate. But back to the text: given your circumstances, it is good for a person not to have sex. Paul continues, "*But since there is so much immorality, each man should have his own wife and each woman her own husband.*" (7:2) What does Paul say they are to do to avoid immorality? Get married. Now look at verse 8: "*Now to the unmarried and the widows.*" Anybody besides the married omitted here? No, this instruction is to all single people—high school students, college age, older singles, never married, formerly married, widowed – anyone not now married.

"It is good to stay unmarried as I am. But if they cannot

control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion." Of course there are a lot of other issues raised by the words of Paul here, but stick to the main point—what does he say about sex? If you can't or won't go without sex then you must get married. Why? What is the clear implication? Sex without marriage is "immorality."

Back in I Cor. 6, using the specific example of prostitution, God says that our bodies were not made for sexual immorality. (6:13) He goes on to say, "*Do you not know that he who unites himself with a prostitute is one with her in body?*" "*Flee from sexual immorality.*" (6:16, 18)

Only the most obtuse would say that verse applies to prostitution only. Honestly, in context, isn't it clear? Sexual relationships outside of marriage are called immoral; they are sin against the will and Word of God.

Now I know that begs the question "What is marriage?" Even if we agree that casual sexual encounters are immoral what about when a man and a woman truly love each other and are committed to each other? Can sex in that situation be wrong? More and more adults, even many who claim to be Christians, are living together, or otherwise engaging in sex, and want to believe there is nothing wrong with it. Some will claim God has not prohibited it. Their logic apparently goes something like this: "If we love each other and are committed to each other then we are married in God's eyes. And if we are married in the eye's of God then sex is right because sex in marriage, we have seen, can be pure and holy not impure and immoral." So again the question, "What is marriage according to the Bible?"

In Malachi 2:14, God calls the marriage relationship a covenant! Divorce was the breaking of a covenant agreement. To be a covenant relationship, and remember,

marriage is a covenant relationship, certain things were required:

1. There had to be a stated promise with specific intentions, not unstated and unspecific, but a stated, specific commitment made—those are vows, promises. It is not a covenant, not a marriage, if there is not a specific and stated vow of commitment, of promise. “Assumed” commitment doesn’t qualify as a covenant and marriage is a covenant.

2. But secondly, for it to be a covenant there had to be the intention of permanence. Yes, covenants were broken but that very word “broken” indicates the intention of covenants—they were to be permanent. When Jesus spoke to the subject of marriage he harkened back to the very beginning, to Genesis itself, in stating what marriage is intended to be by God. He said, *“A man shall leave his father and mother and shall be united to his wife and the two shall become one flesh...Therefore what God has joined together let man not separate.”* The word “united” that Jesus used (also translated “cleave”) means to be permanently bound to. Many, if not all men and women who “live together” without being married, are avoiding this very attribute of a covenant. Apparently, it is fear of permanence—fear of commitment—that makes them avoid the covenant-making ritual of marriage.

3. But thirdly, for it to be a covenant there had to be witnesses. Covenants were witnessed or attested to by others—those who could later say “yes” or “no” that was or wasn’t part of the covenant. A private covenant is an oxymoron. Without witnesses there is no covenant. The private commitment between a man and a woman doesn’t biblically qualify as a covenant of marriage. And in the Scriptures all covenants are made intentionally before God. If God is not called as both witness and Lord of the

covenant then there is no covenant. Back to Jesus' description of marriage in Mt. 19—what did He say was God's part in the marriage? *"What God has joined together let man not separate."*

It is illogical and wrong to call it a marriage if the living arrangement contradicts the clear teaching of God's own word. In a marriage, God does the joining. The authority God vests in governments sanctions even the marriages of unbelievers sanctioned by God.

4. And fourthly, with covenants there were ceremony, ritual, and symbols connected to the commitments being made. Usually a religious sacrifice was made, or a gift was

For marriage to be a covenant there had to be stated, specific intentions, an intention of permanence, witnesses and a ceremony symbolizing the commitment being made.

given, or a symbol was made or set up to remind everyone of the covenant that was made. In the Scriptures, when marriages are begun, there are dowries, parties, specific actions that symbolize the covenant made. Sexual intercourse itself is one of the signs of the covenant, the union, and the marriage. And sex outside of that marriage covenant is a dishonoring of marriage, it is a cheapening of all that the covenant of marriage stands for and it is a direct contradiction of the will of God.

The Bible is clear: marriage is not just an unstated agreement between two people. It is a covenant between a man and a woman. And covenants are stated, specific, permanent, public, and solemnized with ceremony and symbol. And the covenant of marriage is to be honored by all people. And specifically, any sex outside of that marriage

covenant is dishonoring to marriage and directly contrary to the stated will of God. Those who claim to be Christ-followers don't have to wonder what God thinks about the issues of adultery, homosexuality or premarital sex; He is quite clear.

End Notes

¹ Adolescence 26, Fall 1991: 631

² Murphy v. Ramsey cited in *World* April 6, 1996

