

Outline of Lessons

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These lessons were designed to be used by Bible classes at Woodmont Hills during the Fall of 2002. Rubel Shelly and John York preached through Hebrews while I prepared resource material for the Bible classes. Some small groups also used this material.

Transcripts of the sermons are available at Rubel's website (<http://www.rubelshelly.com/content.asp?lShow=20&ListSG=316&Start=121&SortAlpha=>) and at John York's website (<http://www.johnyork.org/content.asp?lShow=20&ListSG=260&Start=161>).

AN OUTLINE OF HEBREWS

I. The Sonship of Jesus (1:1-4:13).

Thesis: The Son stands as God's final Prophet (1:1-4).

A. The Person of the Son (1:5-2:18).

1. The Son is divine (1:5-14).
 - a. The Son's name is unique (1:5-6).
 - b. The Son's excellence is demonstrated (1:7-12).
 - c. The Son is compared with angels (1:13-14).
2. The Son's word is authoritative (2:1-4).
3. The Son became human (2:5-18).
 - a. Jesus takes on a creaturely status (2:5-9).
 - b. Jesus becomes the author of salvation (2:10-18).
 - (1) He is the brother of humanity (2:10-15).
 - (2) He is the redeemer of humanity (2:16-18).

B. The Prophetic Character of the Son (3:1-4:13).

1. Jesus is compared to Moses (3:1-6).
 - a. Jesus is faithful in his appointments (3:1-2).
 - b. Jesus is superior to Moses (3:3-6).
2. Israel is a warning to the Church (3:7-19).
 - a. Psalm 95 offers an admonishment (3:7-11).
 - b. The church is warned (3:12-15).
 - c. Israel is an example (3:16-19).
3. God's people still anticipate a rest (4:1-13).

- a. The promise of rest calls us to faithfulness (4:1-5).
- b. There is yet a rest for the people of God (4:6-10).
- c. They are exhorted to enter the rest (4:11-13).

II. The Priesthood of Jesus (4:14-10:19).

Thesis: Jesus, the Son of God, is our High Priest (4:14-16).

A. The Priestly Office (5:1-7:28).

- 1. There are qualifications for priesthood (5:1-10).
 - a. The qualifications are identified (5:1-4).
 - b. Jesus fills these qualifications (5:5-10).
- 2. Warning: Christians are expected to mature (5:11-6:20).
 - a. The problem is spiritual immaturity (5:11-6:8).
 - (1) The problem is described (5:11-14).
 - (2) Progress is expected (6:1-3).
 - (3) Without progress, there is danger (6:4-8).
 - b. They are exhorted to pursue growth (6:9-12).
 - c. Hope enables confidence and perseverance (6:13-20).
- 3. Jesus is a priest in the order of Melchizedek (7:1-28).
 - a. Melchizedek is identified (7:1-10).
 - b. Levitical and Melchizedekian orders are compared (7:11-25).
 - (1) The Levitical order is inferior (7:11-19).
 - (a) It is mutable (7:11-14).
 - (b) It is temporary (7:15-19).

(2) The Melchizedekian order is superior (7:20-25).

(a) It is immutable (7:20-22).

(b) It is eternal (7:23-25).

c. Jesus is our Melchizedekian High Priest (7:26-28).

B. The Priestly Function (8:1-10:18).

1. Jesus inaugurates a new covenant (8:1-13).

a. Jesus is our heavenly priest (8:1-6).

b. The new covenant offers better promises (8:7-13).

2. Sacrifice is the primary priestly function (9:1-22).

a. Atonement under the first covenant is described (9:1-10).

b. Jesus' work of atonement is described (9:11-14).

c. The new covenant required the blood of its mediator (9:15-22).

3. The sacrifice of Jesus is superior to Levitical sacrifices (9:23-10:18).

a. Jesus' sacrifice is compared to Levitical sacrifices (9:23-10:4).

(1) The reality of Jesus' sacrifice is effectual (9:23-28).

(2) The Levitical sacrifices are shadows of the real (10:1-4).

b. Jesus' sacrifice was the will of God (10:5-10).

c. Jesus' sacrifice was effectual (10:11-18).

III. The Call to Faithfulness to Jesus (10:19-12:29).

Thesis: Through Jesus we enter the holy place (10:19-25).

A. Exhorted to Faith (10:26-11:40).

1. God's people are called to faith (10:26-39).

a. They are warned about apostasy (10:26-31).

- b. They are reminded about faith (10:32-39).
- 2. God's people have exemplified faith (11:1-40).
 - a. Faith brings certainty (11:1-3).
 - b. The Antediluvians exhibited faith (11:4-7).
 - c. The Patriarchs exhibited faith (11:8-22).
 - (1) Abraham exhibited faith (11:8-12).
 - (2) Faith and promise are related (11:13-16).
 - (3) Other Patriarchs exhibited faith (11:17-12).
 - d. Moses exhibited faith (11:23-28).
 - e. The nation of Israel often exhibited faith (11:29-38).
 - f. Faith receives a good report (11:39-40).

B. Exhorted to Endurance (12:1-29).

- 1. The Lord disciplines his children (12:1-13).
 - a. They are exhorted to run the race with endurance (12:1-3).
 - b. Trials must be kept in perspective (12:4-11).
 - c. They are exhorted to persevere (12:12-13).
- 2. The Lord warns his children (12:14-29).
 - a. They are warned about apostasy (12:14-17).
 - b. God is a consuming fire (12:18-29).

IV. Epistolary Epilogue (13:1-25).

A. Practical Communal Exhortations (13:1-6).

- 1. Three commands are given (13:1-3).

2. Two observations are offered (13:4-5a).

3. The faithfulness of God is noted (13:5b-6).

B. Final Appeal for Faithfulness (13:7-17).

1. The community needs stability (13:7-8).

2. Exhortation: Remain in the Christian Community (13:9-14).

3. Community responsibilities are highlighted (13:15-17).

C. Concluding Personal Reflections (13:18-25).

1. Author requests prayer (13:18-19).

2. Author offers benediction (13:20-21).

3. Author makes his final appeal (13:22).

4. Author offers his greetings (13:23-25).

Introducing Hebrews

There are so many “unknowns” about the “Letter to the Hebrews” that the best we can do is surmise its context and audience from the actual document itself. The document is anonymous and its intended audience is unidentified. For so many questions, we must honestly answer, “We don’t know.”

But this does not render the “letter” meaningless or irrelevant. In fact, its major purpose serves a perpetual need. When faced with the hardships of life (whatever their origin), we all need encouragement. We all need to be challenged to persevere and hang on to our confession of faith.

This “letter” points us to the finality of Jesus Christ as the revelation and work of God. It offers Jesus as the anchor of hope, which is rooted in the faithfulness of God and God’s gracious intent in the world. Whether one is wearied by the trials of life or excited by a recent experience of divine redemption, this letter grounds faith, encourages hope and testifies to God’s faithfulness.

Background Materials

Author.

As Origen (died from wounds as a confessor in 254 C.E.) commented, only God knows who wrote Hebrews. We should respect the document’s anonymity, though surely the original readers knew the author.

While we do not know who the author is, we do know some particulars about him (the author uses the masculine gender to refer to himself in 11:32). He is well acquainted with his audience. He plans to visit them again in the near future (13:19) and they have mutual friends (including Timothy; cf. 13:23). We may assume that he lived and ministered among them for a period of time. He speaks to this community with passion and urgency.

He is well versed in the Old Testament and apparently highly educated. His Greek is perhaps the finest in the New Testament and his use of rhetoric (specific oratory forms and structures) reflects a classical education.

He was not one of the original “hearers” of Jesus, but learned the message himself from others (Hebrews 2:3-4). His language, style and theological conceptions indicate that he was familiar with Judaism in its Hellenistic expressions. It seems likely that he was not a Palestinian, but one who was at home in the Jewish world of the synagogues scattered across the Mediterranean basin.

Ultimately, we do not know who wrote Hebrews. Most probably believe that the best educated guess is Apollos, but others have been suggested as well (from Paul to Priscilla, including Luke, Barnabas, and Silas).

Date and Geographical Setting of the Audience

While traditionally it was believed that Hebrews was addressed to Palestinian Jews in Jerusalem, most now believe it was intended for the Christian community in Rome. There are several reasons for this.

The author sends greetings to his audience from a group who was lately from Italy (Hebrews 13:24; cf. Acts 18:2 for the same Greek expression). Presumably, then, he is addressing a group in Italy. Further, Hebrews was first known and used (as far as surviving documents go) in Rome. Indeed, it is quoted extensively in a letter the Roman leader Clement wrote to Corinth in 96 A.D. (*1 Clement*). Also, the visions and the theology of the Shepherd of Hermas, a prophet in Rome in the early second century, is dependent upon Hebrews. In addition, the term that Hebrews uses for its “leaders” (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24) is what both Clement and the Shepherd of Hermas use to describe leaders in the Roman church.

The “letter” is not dated, of course. The mention of Timothy locates the document in the second half of the first century, and most would date it between 60-90 A.D. It could not be later than *1 Clement* (ca. 96 A.D.) since that letter depends on Hebrews. If this is a Roman audience, then 60-64 seems the most likely date since it was written at a time when the Roman church had not yet experienced “blood” (martyrdom; cf. Hebrews 12:4).

Social Setting of the Audience

The social setting of the audience is probably the most important point to appreciate as we read Hebrews. The document is anonymous and undated, but it addresses a particular community of believers whose social context has endangered their faith. If we assume a Roman context for the letter, then several significant hermeneutical factors emerge.

The Roman church had experienced an earlier persecution in 49 A.D. In that year, the Emperor Claudius expelled the Jews from Rome due to riots that were instigated by one named “Chrestus” (as Suetonius, a Roman historian, tells us). Acts 18:1-4 refers to this expulsion. “Chrestus” probably means “Christus” (a common misspelling), and Suetonius probably refers to Jewish-Christian riots in Rome. This would not be surprising since the introduction of Christianity in Asia Minor had similar effects (e.g., Ephesus in Acts 19). Hebrews 10:32-34 probably refers to this time of persecution or expulsion.

Some fifteen years later the Roman Christian community is about to experience another persecution. However, this one will be more severe and result in martyrdom for many believers. This is the renowned persecution instigated by Nero (64-65 A.D.).

The Roman church, as Romans 16 indicates, consisted of many “house” churches scattered throughout the city. Archeological evidence points us to areas of town where merchants lived in tenement housing. The ground floor was their shop and the upper two

or three floors were living quarters. We might imagine groups of 30-50 Christians gathering in these upper floors in various places throughout the city, just as they did in the home of Aquila and Priscilla (Romans 16:3-5).

The Roman church was originally Jewish in character, but the expulsion of the Jews in 49 A.D. and the emergence of a Gentile leadership in the intervening years before the return of the Jews meant that it was a mixed group in Roman. Consequently, one of the major issues in Paul's letter to the Romans was how Jews and Gentiles might worship together as one people of God (Romans 14-15).

No doubt some of that tension still remained, but the primary tension reflected in the "letter" to the Hebrews is the external pressure the church felt. While they weathered the expulsion in A.D. 49 well, the constant social hostility and antagonism—which was no doubt reaching a crescendo—was creating apathy, neglect and discouragement in the church.

It is unlikely that the Christians in Rome were considering a return to Judaism (though this is possible for some). It is more likely that they were quitting the God of Israel altogether as the result of pressure from their pagan Roman neighbors. Many perhaps feared the coming persecution. Perhaps many were simply fed up with the persistent haranguing of their neighbors. Perhaps many were fearful of occasional mob action against them (as we see perhaps in 1 Peter).

If the problem is not a return to Judaism, how do we understand all the references to the tabernacle (note—the temple is never mentioned, only the tabernacle) and the priestly ministry in Hebrews? These are used to point us to Christ, the final revelation of God. The point is not, "Don't go back to Judaism" (though that is certainly implied), but rather "The reality has come in Christ; he is the heir—if you lose him, you have nothing."

Genre of the Document

This "letter" was probably intended to speak to the whole Roman church as the house churches shared it with each other. Consequently, the letter was originally intended to be heard. It was designed as a sermon or homily. Indeed, the writer identifies his document as a "word of exhortation" (Hebrews 13:22). The only other time that expression is used in the New Testament it refers to a synagogue sermon (Acts 13:15).

The language of the document reflects this homiletical or sermonic form. The writer never refers to what he is writing, but only to what he is saying (2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5) or what they are hearing (2:1). He does not refer to his lack of space, but his lack of time (11:32).

Consequently, the form is oral, though it is written. It was intended to be heard. It was an exhortation to encourage and provoke a response, not a theological treatise to be debated. It is exhortation, not systematic, rigorous theological debate.

It is an exhortation to persevere; to keep the faith; to hang on despite the trials and tribulations.

Structure of the Sermon

I have attached a separate document, which contains an outline of Hebrews. Your books also contain some help along this line, especially Guthrie (pp. 39-40) who has earned some respect among scholars for his work on the structure of Hebrews. My outline differs from his in that I think Hebrews 10:19-12:29 is Part III rather than an overlap of Part II. Hopefully, both will be helpful to you in some way.

In general, I think Hebrews has three major “thesis” statements: Hebrews 1:1-4; 4:14-16; and 10:19-25. This breaks Hebrews into a three-point sermon, which is a unique idea! The material following each thesis is support for the thesis and an exhortation to action based upon the thesis. I also tend to think that chapter 13 is the epistolary addition to the sermon, that is, something added to the original sermon as it was sent as a letter to the Roman Christians. Consequently, the sermon is basically 1:1-12:29.

I think the argument of the sermon proceeds something like this. Part I grounds confidence and boldness in the finality of God's act of revelation through his Son. The Son is God's final "prophet"; he is the climatic revelation. He is the revelation of God in the last days. This is ultimately expressed in the incarnational presence of God through the Son. Part II grounds confidence and boldness in the reality of God's act of redemption through his Son. He is God's final "high priest;" he is the climatic act of atonement and redemption. This is ultimately expressed by our entrance into the presence of God through the curtain of the Son's flesh (the cross). Part III is the preacher's exhortation based upon our privilege of entrance into the throne room of God. Since we have fellowship with God, we should not give up. He encourages them by their own past experience, past witnesses of faith, the model of Jesus himself and the fact that they have come to the city of God itself by the blood of Jesus.

Teaching Options for the First Week

You may feel the need to give some defense of studying Hebrews. It seems obscure with its references to ancient ceremonies and structures. It makes obscure arguments about Melchizedek and the Levitical priesthood.

I think the best defense is that it addresses a discouraged group of believers and reminds them of how God worked in Jesus for their redemption and eternal inheritance. I think we can learn something from that.

If you need another piece of information, you might suggest that this was probably the most important book of the New Testament for the early years of the Stone-Campbell Movement (the beginnings of the Churches of Christ). Hebrews was Alexander Campbell's “canon-within-the-canon,” that is, he read the New Testament through the

lens of this particular book (Eugene Boring argues this in his *Disciples and the Bible*, pp. 75-77). The most obvious expression of this is how we have historically thought about the Mosaic covenant and divided the history of God's people into three dispensations (Patriarchs, Mosaic and Christian).

Everyone should give his or her class some idea about the context in which this sermon is delivered. As readers, we need to enter the experience of the first readers as best we can. We need to hear this sermon against the background of past persecution, persistent social antagonism, and an anticipated renewal of persecution. Some of the original readers were on the verge of giving up. They were not necessarily returning to Judaism, but they were tired of the constant social friction. It was easier to give up than to persevere. Life within a pagan world is simplified when faith in Jesus is no longer our lifestyle. Consequently, try to set the tone of the letter and seek to convey to your class the urgency of its message. One of the most convenient texts for providing this setting is to mull over Hebrews 10:32-34 and 12:1-4.

Given that context, several options are available to you. There may be many more, of course, but I will offer some suggestions. You are not, of course, limited to these. Rather, do what you think is best for your class while remaining connected to the text we are studying this fall.

Option One.

Given the need for encouragement, you can acquaint your class with several exhortation sections of the sermon. You can read these and discuss them generally. No need to go into great detail, but rather simply introduce them.

1. Hebrews 2:1-4
2. Hebrews 3:12-15
3. Hebrews 4:14-16.
4. Hebrews 6:9-12.
5. Hebrews 10:19-25.
6. Hebrews 12:12-13.
7. Hebrews 12:24-28.

What is encouraging about these sections? What is the warning? How do the exhortations and warnings reflect the situation of these Christians? What can you learn from these exhortations about their problems and how the writer calls them to regain their perspective?

Option Two.

You can introduce the book to your class by concentrating on Hebrews 13:18-25. What do we learn about the author from this text? What do we learn about the readers? What key theological ideas are present in this text that ground the faith and hope of believers in Rome? How is the "pastoral" passion of the writer evidenced in this section? How is the

power of prayer reflected in this text? Why does prayer emerge so strongly here and what does it tell us about the author and his relationship with his readers?

Option Three.

You can also extend the discussion of Hebrews 10:32-34 into verses 35-39. You can concentrate your whole class on this text, though we will come back to it later in coming weeks. But your discussion can turn more personal here. For example, after appreciating the circumstance of the original readers, you could ask your class to appreciate their own circumstance. What are the sources of discouragement in our setting? What hinders our faith today? Just as this preacher addressed the source of discouragement by pointing to Jesus, how do we point to Jesus today? The coming weeks will unveil how Hebrews helps us do just that, even in our own setting today.

In particular, suppose you were to write a letter or to deliver a lesson to a discouraged group of believers today? What could you say? How would you approach it? While it would depend upon the source and nature of their discouragement, what themes would generally emerge? What themes might we always use to encourage other believers?

How has God brought encouragement to you in your personal struggles and in times of discouragement? What themes, people or events encouraged you so that you kept the faith?

God Must Really Love Us

Hebrews 1:1-4

Sermon Summary from Ministers: Hebrews is introduced in terms of the Jesus-focus that will characterize all that is to follow. The theme of this initial sermon is that God’s loving activity for his human offspring has come into focus in the work Christ has done and is doing for his people.

Teaching Material

The sermon, which our New Testament calls “Hebrews,” begins with a powerful single sentence. While English translations tend to divide it into several sentences, Hebrews 1:1-4 is actually one long, beautifully constructed sentence.

It has rhetorical flare. Verse one, for example, use alliteration as five key words begin with the Greek letter “pi” (or, p—in English, they are the words “many times,” “many ways,” “past,” “fathers,” and “prophets”). But it also has tremendous theological substance. It is fundamentally the announcement that God has spoken completely and finally through his Son.

The basic sentence in the text is that “God has spoken through his Son whose name is superior to the angels.” Everything else in the sentence serves this theological affirmation.

Exegetical Notes

1. Hebrews 1:1-2a.

The opening language is a powerful conceptual parallelism. Guthrie (p. 46) calls attention to this, but I would add one further contrast.

Topic	Past	Present
Era	In the past	In these last days
Recipients	To our forefathers	To us
Agents	Through the prophets	By his Son
Ways	In various ways	In one way (implied)
Times	In various times	At one time (implied)

The preacher does not have in mind one particular Old Testament revelation or a particular form of revelation. Rather, he is thinking of the whole continuity of God’s revelation of himself from creation up to the present. In many ways (theopanies, dreams, visions, miracles, etc.), at many times (through the whole history of the world and Israel) and through many people [prophets] (Noah, Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, Jeremiah, etc.), God spoke to those who preceded us. However, now—in these last days—God has spoken through his Son.

The “last days” is another way of saying “the final age.” Jesus appeared at the “consummation of the ages” (9:26), and a new age has dawned. The future has broken into the present and human experience has shifted. We now experience the “age to come” through the Spirit (6:4-5). Jesus is the spokesperson for this new age as he is the inaugurator of the new age. He has pioneered it for us and is leading us to the city of God where we will experience the fullness of divine presence. We look to Jesus because God has spoken through him.

Consequently, there is an implied finality and completeness of this revelation through the Son. It is final because it is God’s climatic revelation in the “last days.” It is complete because of who the Son is (which is the topic of Hebrews 1:2b-3)

2. Hebrews 1:2b-3a.

When the preacher names the “Son” in verse 2, he follows it with four descriptive phrases that reflect language that was common among Hellenistic Jews. The language described Divine Wisdom, but here the preacher applies this language to the Son.

First, the Son was appointed the heir of all things (cf. Psalm 2:8 as a background). The linkage between “name” and “inheritance” is important. The Son’s name means that he is heir. Because he is Son, he is heir. The importance of “heir” in Hebrew theology cannot be overestimated. Abram was renamed Abraham because he was appointed the father of many nations (Genesis 17:5). Son is the heir of the cosmos, of “all things”—not just “many nations.” Thus, the text articulates the cosmic status of the Son. He is no mere human inheritor, or human king, or even angel. He is the royal heir of the cosmos.

Second, the Son was the agent of creation. This language reflects the wisdom tradition of Proverbs 8:22-31. Jesus is the divine Son (wisdom) through whom God created the world (cf. John 1:1-3; 1 Corinthians 8:6; Colossians 1:16). This affirms the pre-existence of the Son. He is before creation and the agent of God’s creative work. The Son is unlike any human prophet.

Third, the Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his nature. This language identifies the Son with God. “Glory” and “nature” refer to the same point—divine glory is divine nature. To radiate the divine glory (as light radiates from the sun) is to share the divine nature (cf. 2 Corinthians 4:6), or at least to express (reveal) the divine nature. It is a declaration that the Son is the image of God (which is also something we find in Colossians 1:15; 2 Corinthians 4:4). The term “exact representation” is a lofty claim for the Son. The Greek term character. One Hellenistic Jewish writer (Philo, *The Unchangeableness of God*, 55) said that no one could exhibit the character of God. But this is exactly what our preacher claims here. Jesus is the visible representation—the stamped image of God. The term character was often used to refer to an impressed seal, and thus an “exact representation.” As such, the Son is the revelation of God himself and thus the ultimate vehicle through whom God speaks.

Fourth, the Son sustains the cosmos by his powerful word. The Son is God's providential agent in the world. He maintains the universe by his power. The Son is not only the agent of creation, but is also at work within the cosmos to sustain it. The cosmic work of the Son is ongoing. It is not merely a past act, but a present activity.

3. Hebrews 1:3b-4

The exaltation of the Son, however, is not simply in light of his pre-existent status. As William Lane in his commentary points out, while the Son was described in the categories of Jewish Hellenism's perception of Divine Wisdom, the preacher breaks with that tradition to also identify the exaltation of the Son with his high priestly function. The Son is exalted because he is humiliated, that is, the Son is exalted because through his incarnation as a human being he became a high priest who was both priest and victim. He is exalted because he shared the human experience even though he was a participant in the divine reality.

The language of "purification" anticipates a major theme in Hebrews. It anticipates the priestly and sacrificial themes of chapters 7-10. The Son atoned for sin. Consequently, his exaltation to the "right hand" of God was not simply in light of his agency in creation or cosmic status, but was also the result of his human act of priestly self-sacrifice for the sake of cleansing his fellow-humans from sin. The reference to purification, therefore, is inclusive of his incarnation, death and priestly work.

The enthronement of the Son, indeed, is the most extensively elaborated theme in Hebrews 1:1-4. The preacher will link almost everything to this exaltation to the right hand of God. The reference to the "right hand" is inclusive of his resurrection, ascension, and enthronement where he continues as priest to intercede for his people (cf. Hebrews 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). In this capacity, the Son receives his inheritance—a name that is above every name. It is a "better" (a term used 13 times in Hebrews) name than the angels.

Theologically, though the Son was the agent of creation itself and the exact image of the Father, he humbled himself to serve as a high priest among humans for the sake of their salvation. Out of this humble service, God exalted him and enthroned him as a royal priest to secure eternal redemption for his people. This is why the Son is God's final, climactic and complete spokesperson. This is the picture Paul gives in Philippians 2:5-11, though for different purposes and in different language.

Theological Substance

Essentially this text portrays the Son in three specific ways.

First, the Son is God's final and climactic revelation of himself. The Son is God's "final" prophet in that the Son is now the reference point for all revelation of God. While the revelation of God in the past was partial and scattered, the revelation of God through the

Son is complete, focused and final. This revelation is final in way that the law mediated by angels was not. It is complete in a way that could not be said of the prophet Moses.

Second, the Son is described as Divine Wisdom. While “wisdom” does not appear in these verses, the descriptors in verses 2-3 are drawn from the language of Jewish Hellenism. They are common descriptions of divine wisdom based on Proverbs 8:22-31 (as, for example, in the Wisdom of Solomon 7:21-27). This language exalts the Son above the angels and connects the Son directly with God as one who shares the reality of God’s own wisdom. This language testifies that the Son shares the divine reality and experience. The Son participates in the divine reality and thus is superior to the angels.

Third, Son’s incarnation and high priestly participation in human experience is assumed. The Son is exalted to the right hand because he made purification for sin. The Son is the high priest who made atonement for his people. Consequently, the incarnation is assumed here. The Son’s incarnational act also testifies to his superiority over the angels because he was made lower than them to identify with humanity in order to bring others to glory. The Son became a brother of humanity in order to make them “sons” of glory. This is the point of Hebrews 2:5-18.

Three theological points, therefore, emerge out the fundamental declaration that God has spoken through his Son: (1) The finality of God’s revelation through the Son; (2) the shared reality of the Son with God; and (3) the shared reality of the Son with humanity. Or, the Son, who is both divine and human, is God’s final and complete revelation of himself.

This theological beginning has a tremendous pastoral point. These discouraged Roman Christians need stability and boldness. They need the kind of theological grounding that can anchor their faith. If Jesus is the final and complete revelation of God, then there is no other hope or ground for faith beyond Jesus or exclusive of Jesus. To give up Jesus is to give up God. God has spoken through Jesus, and his promises are secure in him. The hope of discouraged believers is that God has spoken.

The theological substance is important for us. A theologically mature understanding of who Jesus is grounds our faith and gives substance to our faith. It stabilizes faith. It anchors our hope and encourages our perseverance.

Suggested Teaching Approach

I think we always want to keep in mind the purpose of the writer in relation to his audience. Consequently, the question we want to always keep before us is “how does this section contribute to the encouragement of his readers?” What is the theology here that encourages struggling and potentially hopeless believers? The answer in this context is that God has spoken through his Son, whose identity certifies the revelation.

You might spend the time thinking deeply about the identity of Jesus as the Son of God and what this means pastorally.

Who is Jesus? How is the Son described in this text? What do these descriptors mean and how are they significant? I would proceed phrase by phrase through this brief text and seek to draw the group into a discussion of the significance of these descriptors.

How does this identity ground the faith of believers? How does it give significance to the spoken word of God through him? Why is the identity of the Son important in relation to the God's word to his people?

What are the implications for our life with God? How does God speak today? How does his speaking today relate to what he has spoken in his Son?

Why is this a word of encouragement for discouraged believers?

Use your resource material for other questions and ideas (both theological and pastoral) for teaching and applying this text.

Fascinated by Angels

Hebrews 1:5-2:18

Sermon Summary from Ministers: At no time more than in recent memory, we seem to be fascinated by angels and dream of perhaps being touched by an angel presence. Some situations are so frustrating that such a dream is understandable. But the one working on our behalf is so much greater!

Teaching Material

This is a huge block of material, but it proceeds with a central thought. The central thought is the comparison of the Son with the angels. It is obvious that the theological point is that the Son is greater (superior) to the angels, but the rationale is a bit surprising in the second half of the material. He is greater because he is incarnate and thus able to help in ways that angels cannot help.

This one of the larger blocks of material that we will be asked to teach as we proceed through the seventeen weeks of classroom studies. This is packed full of theologically meaningful and significant points. There are just too many to cover. The only thing more difficult than teaching it in one hour would be to preach it in 20-30 minutes. Nevertheless, the central point lends itself to many applications and a focused theological point.

In general, I would see this block in three sections: (1) The Son is greater than the angels because he shares the reality of God [1:5-14]; (2) Therefore, do not neglect the word of God that comes through the Son [2:1-4]; and (3) The Son was made lower than the angels for our sake [2:5-18]. Indeed, part of the greatness of the Son is not simply his divine nature, but that he was willing to share our humanity and suffering in order to atone for sin and deliver us from Satan's death hold on us. The Son is greater than the angels because he was willing to be one of us at his own expense and for our sake. The selfless humiliation of the Son is a dimension of his greatness.

Yet, it might puzzle us why the preacher spends so much time on the relationship of the Son to angels. Some have thought it was because his audience was predisposed to worship angels, or that they were consumed with speculation about angels, or that they believed Jesus was some kind of angel. There may be some truth in all of these points, but it seems Hebrews 2:1-4 gives us the focus for understanding why this discussion about angels is so important. It is the comparison between the word that comes through the Son and the word that came through angels. If the word that came through angels was weighty and authoritative, then the word that comes through the Son is even more so!

The speculation about, worship of and a low Christology might linger in the background, but it is background. In the foreground is the comparison of the word spoken. If those

who neglected the word through angels were punished for disobedience, it is precarious—to say the least—to neglect the word of God that comes from his Son.

Exegetical Notes

I will offer some brief notes on the three major sections of this block of material.

1. Hebrews 1:5-14

William Lane offers a brief summary of the argument of this section that is quite helpful. I adapted and extended some of his language from his book *Call to Commitment* (p. 35) in the chart below.

The Son is Greater than the Angels

<i>Category</i>	<i>Theological Point</i>	<i>Hebrews</i>	<i>OT Quote</i>
Name	His name is “Son”	1:5	Ps. 2:7; 2 Sam. 7:14
Dignity	Even the angles worship the Son	1:6	Ps. 97:7
Nature	The Son is eternal	1:7-9	Ps. 45:6-7
Nature	The Son is unchanging	1:10-12	Ps. 102:25-27
Function	The Son reigns as angels serve	1:13-14	Ps. 110:1

The chart summarizes the point of each section and how the preacher uses an Old Testament citation to support his theological point.

The preacher uses Scripture, which is his Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. Today we refer to this as the Septuagint. This was the Bible of the early church, and the preacher assumes its authority and place in the Christian community.

His use of Scripture is Christological, that is, he reads the Old Testament through the lens of Jesus, the lens of God’s word through the Son. He assumes the messianic character of each of these texts, which he quotes. He does not think of “messianic” in the sense of predictive prophecy, but of the relationship of the Father, Son and angels. It is a theological use of the Old Testament rather than a predictive. These texts do not predict the Messiah but they do speak about the Son or to the Son.

a. Hebrews 1:5. The preacher is interested in the “name”—Son. Both Ps. 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14 were regarded as messianic in early Judaism (Qumran documents [Dead Sea Scrolls material] indicate this. But the preacher’s point is that “Son” belongs to Jesus, not to angels. They are not sons, but Jesus has been named Son. The preacher uses “Son” to refer to the pre-existent one (e.g., “though he were a Son...” in Hebrews 5:8), but uses “Son” to refer to the exalted one. “Today” may be an allusion to the exaltation of Jesus. The Son is son both by virtue of his divine nature and his obedient submission.

b. Hebrews 1:6. While quoting Psalm 97:7 to support the worship of the Son by the angels, the preacher also alludes to Psalm 89:27 in reference to the Son as “firstborn.”

This is term of rank and honor. It is a covenantal term and refers to the enthronement of the Son at the right hand of God as God's royal representative (just as David was in Psalm 89). The reference to the "world" is probably not connected to his incarnation (coming into the human world), but his entrance into the heavenly world at his exaltation. When the preacher refers to the human world, he uses a different word (cosmos). But here he uses a term which we could translation "inhabited world" and is the term used to describe the "world to come" in Hebrews 2:5. His entrance into the heavenly world is his exaltation above the angels so that they respond with worship (as we see in Revelation 5, for example).

c. Hebrews 1:7-12. The angels are servants whose form is dependent upon the will of God. They are transformed in various ways to serve God's purposes—sometimes wind, sometimes fire, etc. However, the Son is unchanging because his throne is eternal. His throne is an eternal throne, and his nature remains the same (it never grows old). The creation is subject to change, but the Son is not. Thus, the Son is addressed as "God" in this text. This is one of the few texts in the New Testament where the Greek term *theos* (God) is applied to Jesus (e.g., John 1:1; John 20:28). The point, however, is to ground the faithfulness and reign of Jesus in his eternal nature. We should not read "unchanging" as "unresponsive," but rather as faithful, stable and unswerving in his righteousness and covenantal commitments.

d. Hebrews 1:13-14. Notice that the rhetoric of 1:13 is the same as 1:5, that is, "to which of the angels did God say...." The preacher rounds out his point. The Son is the reigning king who sits at the right hand of God, but angels are servants who, at God's bidding, minister to the saints.

2. Hebrews 2:1-4.

The point of this paragraph is quite focused and difficult to miss. It is an exhortation and warning. Notice the connectedness to the previous section: "therefore...." On the one hand, we have the word delivered through angels. On the other hand, we have the word delivered through the Son and confirmed by divine miracles. If one was punished for disobeying the former, then surely those who neglect the latter will be punished as well.

We learn something about the audience in this section. The preacher uses two words that seem to reflect the gradual movement of believers away from the faith. They are "drifting" (like an unmoored ship) and they are "neglecting" the salvation provided by the Son. Their movement away from faith was not a single defiant act of rebellion, but arose out of apathy and neglect. But the result is yet an act of rebellion as they reject the Son and God's work in him.

The punishment envisioned here is not a punishment for weaknesses of faith, but for the rejection of the faith (as we will see later; e.g., in chapter 3).

3. Hebrews 2:5-18

In this section the Son takes up the cosmic task of setting the world aright by sharing the humanity of his people. That the angels are still under consideration in this section is indicated by 2:5 and 2:16. The contrast continues, and verse 18 identifies Jesus as the real helper of humanity, not the angels. Jesus is qualified to help humanity because he took up humanity in his own person and life. Since he shared our humanity, he is able to help humans in ways that angels cannot. Consequently, Jesus is superior to the angels in his function of “helping” because he became incarnate (e.g., he was enfleshed).

In addition, “death” is a primary theme in this section. It dominates humanity; it rules humanity. Humanity is enslaved to it, and fears it. No doubt the prospect of martyrdom might have enhanced this anxiety in the Roman church. Yet, the Son comes to deal with death—he tastes death and redeems us from death. He sets the world back right, as it was in the beginning. He paths a path for us through suffering so that we might again have the glory that is after suffering.

This block of material may be divided into two sections: (a) The Cosmic Task [Hebrews 2:5-9] and (b) Solidarity with Humanity [Hebrews 2:10-18].

a. Hebrews 2:5-9. The preacher quotes Psalm 8:4-6 in Hebrews 2:6b-8a. The Psalm envisions the original creation of humanity. God created them as co-regents with him. He crowned them with glory and honor as his royal representatives, his images on the earth. He gave them benevolent authority over the earth.

However, something happened; something changed. The original intent was frustrated by the loss of authority, dominion and power. What was originally subjected to humanity is now no longer subject to it. Death now reigns over humanity whereas it did not previously.

The solution to this cosmic problem is that Jesus became incarnate (made lower than the angels) and took up the task God had given to humanity. He is now at work to subject everything (including death) to himself. For this reason, he tasted death so that he might conquer it. As a result of his obedience, he is crowned with the glory and honor that was God’s original intent in creation itself. The glory and honor that humanity lost when they sinned, Jesus has regained by his obedient suffering for us. In an allusion to Psalm 110:1, the Son will reign until every enemy (including death) is put under his feet.

b. Hebrews 2:10-18. Death is a primary point in this section. The Son has come to bring other sons to glory as he redeems us from death and the fear of it. Yet, the Son does this through suffering. He does not escape suffering, but endures it for the sake of the greater goal. Thus, the Son is our champion, our pioneer, who goes before us and conquers for us. He does this as our brother—one who shares our humanity with us.

While the Son is unique, yet he brings us into relationship with God as “sons” too. The Son enables us to be sons (children) of God. He does this as our *archegon*! This is a difficult Greek word to translate because it has a broad range of meaning in Hellenistic Judaism. Suggested possibilities are leader, pioneer, author, pathfinder, trailblazer and

guide. Lane, in his commentary (and Guthrie agrees) suggests the background is the “divine hero” of Hellenism, such as Hercules who is called both an archegon and “savior” in the literature. He suggests the translation “champion,” just as Hercules wrestled with Death. Jesus faced death and conquered it; he cleared a path for us so that death would not ultimately claim us. This assurance is important in the light of the prospects of martyrdom the Roman church faced.

Yet, Jesus faced death through suffering. He was “perfected” in his suffering. This does not mean something in him erroneous or faulty was corrected through his suffering, but that he was completed or “made whole” by his suffering. He finished the race and carried out his task. This will be an important theme in Hebrews, to which we will return in later lessons when we have more time to discuss it.

The “shared brotherhood” of Jesus with humanity is important to the preacher. If he is to be a “champion,” he must share their reality in some sense. He joins humanity in order to win their place, to return humanity to its original glory in creation. The quotations in Hebrews 2:12-13 are intended to support the “shared” condition of Jesus and humanity as children (brothers) of God. The quotes are from Psalm 22:22; Isaiah 8:17-18. The first quotation locates Jesus among his brothers as a redeemed community in which he testifies about the greatness of God. The second quotation expresses the trust that Jesus had in God and shares with his brothers. Jesus, too, depended upon the greatness and faithfulness of God so that in his suffering he cried to him and trusted him. The third quotation shifts the metaphor. Now Jesus is the head of a family--he has children. God has given Jesus children through his suffering and exaltation. Whether Jesus is regarded as leader of the family or as brother to the family, it suggests a shared relationship, a familial relationship. Intimacy is the point.

Verses 14-15 speak directly to the point about death. This was the object of the Son’s work—to destroy death by breaking the power of Satan and to destroy the fear of death that lurked in the hearts of believers. The reference to Satan and the fear of death suits the situation of a persecuted community, but it also suits the condition of humanity at large. Satan held the power of death until it was wrested away from him by Jesus’ own suffering, and the fear of death is the common plight of humanity. Jesus, however, inaugurates a new death. We do not fear death because an angel will rescue us, but we do not fear death because Jesus has conquered the one who holds death. Jesus now has the keys of Hades.

Verse 17, in a summary way, identifies why the suffering of the Son dealt with death. The Son became human so that he might share humanity and act as high priest. But he became a high priest in order to make atonement. His act, as a faithful high priest, made “propitiation” for the sins of his people. This is a much-debated word, and it has been variously translated (e.g., “to make atonement,” “to make an atoning sacrifice”). “Propitiation” means to avert wrath or anger. In the best sense of the word, the suffering of the Son offered himself as the object of divine punishment for sin. In this way, God propitiated himself through the Son instead of punishing us with the punishment we

deserved. On the atonement of Christ, you might want to read my article on the atonement at <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=7015>.

The final point of the text in verse 18 is, I think, climactic. Who will help believers in their struggles, trials and temptations? Will angels help? Well, yes, but only the Son can provide the kind of empathetic help that overcomes the struggle against sin, temptation and death. Ultimately, the Son is our helper; not the angels. This is connected to his “faithfulness” (he persevered in his obedience to the Father, even to the point of death) and “compassion” (perhaps a reference to his empathy as a human being). He models and is able to help those who are suffering because he has experienced suffering. He is a champion of endurance because he endured.

Theological Substance

1. The text affirms the reality and ministry of angels. We do not want to undermine the significance of angelic ministry. They do minister to God’s saints. However, angels are not the focus of the text. Angels are discussed only to point to the dignity and exaltation of the Son. Angels always have a secondary focus in Scripture. They are messengers. They are protectors. They carry out the will of God. They are never the main point. They are never the main characters in the story. When we focus on angels to the distraction of the main point, or we focus on angels so that they supplant God or detract from the dignity of the Son, then we undermine the very function of angels. For all the concern that people have for “guardian angels” and seeking the touch of an angel, the people of God should be more focused on the “guardian God” and the touch of God. God may use angels, but it is God who is at work through his Son by his Spirit. We should never lose sight of the Son when we think about angels. It is the Son who is the real “helper” of humanity—he atoned and even now helps his people (Heb. 2:18).

2. The text affirms the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the Son of God. It appears the preacher uses “Son” to describe the divinity (chapter 1) and when he turns his attention to his humanity, he utilizes the name “Jesus” (chapter 2). However, the unity between Son and Jesus is clear. Jesus is the Son of God through whom God created the world but also through whom God made atonement through the suffering of Jesus. Hebrews 1-2 is a confession of the divinity and humanity of the one we call “Savior.” As divine, he is eternal and unchanging in his righteousness and covenantal commitment. As human, he is the one who shared our humanity in order to redeem us from death by tasting death for us. As the pre-existent one who became human, he has been exalted to the right hand of God because his work for our sake. The same one through whom God created the world is the same one who was made a little lower than the angels—Jesus, the Son of God.

3. The hearers gain confidence from the dignity and obedience of the Son. Discouraged believers are reassured of the faithfulness of the Son and they are moved by the Son’s voluntary humiliation. They gain strength from the work of the Son to destroy death and atone for sin, and they are encouraged by the Son’s role as helper in our times of testing and trial. The Son is the unchanging, committed one who seeks to bring other sons to glory, redeem them from death and help them through their trials.

Teaching Options

There are many options for teaching this text. It is so full of important points and theological reflections that it is difficult to know where to begin and what to do.

At the center of the text is the contrast between angels and the Son. There is the contrast in chapter one between angelic nature and function and the divine nature and function of the Son. In chapter two the contrast continues as the Son is willing to be incarnate and help humanity in ways that angels cannot. The Son is the heir of the world to come; he is the firstborn. He redeemed humanity. Consequently, I think if we are to teach this text we should pay close attention to the dignity of the Son in contrast to the angels.

One option is to begin by letting the class talk about angels. Guthrie has some interesting points about the current climate surrounding angels. Speculation about angels and the felt need for angels is rampant in our culture. Why is this the case? What does this reflect about our cultural needs? And when Christians are caught up into this, what does this reflect about our theology?

Some attention in class should be given to why the Son is superior to the angels, and why this is significant. Why was it significant for the preacher, and why is it a significant point for us?

Your Navigator study series book has some good questions if you want to pursue some of those paths. It has more questions than you could possibly cover in a class period. So, you will need to select a thread to follow through the text. I will probably follow a thread like this:

Starter Point: angels and our culture; are we more enamored with Jesus or angels? Our culture is fascinated with angels, but the Son is the one whom God has appointed heir. He is superior to the angels in name, dignity, nature and function. But it is not simply his divinity that exalts him above the angels. Rather, it is his incarnation. Through the incarnation, the Son empathizes with humanity, shares their painful condition and tastes death. As a result, he is exalted above the angels even though he was made lower than them incarnationally. He is greater than the angels because he redeemed us from death and made atonement for our sins...and, more, he is able to help us with our temptations and trials in ways that angels cannot.

If the word that came through angels was great, how much more important is the word that came through the Son who worked our redemption from death! Therefore, hang on to your faith.

Applications abound here. There are many theological applications regarding angels, incarnation and atonement. For example, what do we learn about angels? How should we regard angels?

But I think I will concentrate on the nature of the incarnation. Here the preacher lays the theological ground for the empathy of our high priest. He knows us because he has experienced suffering with us and for us. There are some good questions in the Navipress book to help you here, as well as on other sections.

In Awe of Moses

Hebrews 3:1-19

Minister's Summary: We dream of time machines and being in the presence of the great saints and martyrs of the past. No life is more intriguing and no ministry had more impact than Moses'. But he merely set the stage for the one whose life and ministry are for us.

Teaching Material

This text draws an analogy between the present experience of the preacher's audience and the past experience of the children of Israel in the wilderness under the leadership of Moses. The preacher brings the events of Numbers 14 (as reflected in Psalm 95) into analogy with the present experience of discouraged believers in his day.

Israel followed Moses into the wilderness. While Moses was faithful, Israel was not. The church follows Jesus into the wilderness. Jesus was faithful, but the question remains whether the church will be faithful. Will the church follow Jesus or will they follow the example of Israel in the wilderness?

The wilderness experience of Israel resulted in faithlessness and unbelief. They did not enter the land of promise because they were unfaithful and disobedient. Their hearts were hardened, though Moses was their faithful leader. The wilderness experience of the church in Rome is an open question. Will persecution, discouragement and apathy yield unbelief or will they remain faithful just as their high priest and apostle Jesus was faithful despite his own wilderness experience.

This section, then, is primarily exhortation. It calls the church to faithfulness based on the past experience of the people of God. We should learn from the negative example of Israel and follow the positive example of Jesus. We can succeed where Israel failed because Jesus is our champion and he will provide strength for the journey if we do not harden our hearts in the wilderness.

Exegetical Notes

1. Hebrews 3:1-6.

This section is fundamentally exhortation. It begins with the most basic exhortation and most foundational exhortation of the sermon: "fix your thoughts on Jesus." It is an exhortation based upon the previous section ("therefore"). Because Jesus is the exalted Son who is greater than the angels but made himself lower than the angels, focus your attention on him. He is God's faithful Son. He is further identified as an "apostle" as well as a "high priest." The idea of "one who was sent" (apostle) is closely connected to the "champion" or "leader" (2:10) where those who are sent are leaders in Numbers 13:2. The Son was sent as a leader, a champion among God's people, among his brothers.

Despite their discouraged, drifting and fruitless condition (cf. Hebrews 6), the preacher addresses them as “brothers” (connecting with the previous section as well—Jesus is our brother and we are “brothers” together) who share a “heavenly calling.” I think “heavenly” identifies the destination of the call—we are called to the heavenly city (11:16; 12:22) and the heavenly sanctuary (8:5; 9:3).

The idea of “confession” is important in Hebrews. We are exhorted to hold on to our confession (4:14; 10:23), and it seems to be a definitive expression of faith in the role of the Son as our high priest and redeemer.

In 3:2-6, the faithfulness of Jesus and Moses is compared. They were both “faithful” through their time of testing. Moses was tested, and by faith, chose to cast his lot with the Hebrews and lead the people of God (cf. Numbers 12:7). Jesus was tested (2:18; 5:8) in the wilderness as well and chose the way of suffering as the high priest of God’s people. This is a contrast, however, with the people of Israel in the wilderness who, when they were tested, hardened their hearts. The idea of a faithful leader is important in the OT (see the statements about a royal heir in 1 Chron. 17:14 and a priest in 1 Sam. 2:35). The below chart is taken from William Lane, *Call to Commitment*, 60.

Comparison of Moses and Jesus

Conclusion: We are his house if we prove faithful (Hebrews 3:6b).

<i>Moses</i>	<i>Jesus</i>
Faithful to God (v. 2b)	Faithful to God (v. 2a)
Faithful as Servant (v. 5)	Faithful as Son (v. 6a)
Servant in God’s House (v. 5a)	Son over God’s house (v. 6b)

The “house” of God, of course, is a reference to the people of God. Moses, for example, was a leader “among my whole people” (Num. 12:7). “House” often refers to the people of God in the OT (Ex. 16:31; Lev. 10:6; Hos. 8:1; Jeremiah 12:7; cf. Hebrews 8:8).

We must be careful to remember that the point is not to “put down” Moses, or denigrate Moses. Rather, Moses is highly regarded as a faithful servant. But the point is to exalt the Son. The contrast is between Son and servant (just as the angels were servants while Jesus was Son). Moses bore witness to the Son; he is not the ground of salvation but a witness to the work of God in Jesus Christ. Just as the disciples bore witness to Jesus after the fact, Moses bore witness before the fact.

The encouragement here is that as members of God’s house, we have boldness to speak openly and bear witness to our faith in Christ. Moses is a positive example of that kind of witness. Despite their pilgrim status (they are exiles, seeking a country, having nothing of their own) and despite the hostility from the surrounding culture, Christians have a ground for boldness in the confession that the Son is our champion.

2. Hebrew 3:7-19.

This section is an exhortation based upon Psalm 95:7b-11. The text is quoted in Hebrews 3:7b-11 and Hebrews 3:15. After each citation, the preacher exhorts his readers in Hebrews 3:12-14 and Hebrews 3:16-19. Thus, we have the pattern of Scripture followed by exhortation.

The preacher sees that the potential problem among his hearers is “unbelief.” The first exhortation begins with “See...that no one among you has an evil heart of unbelief” (3:12) and ends with “We see that they were unable to enter because of unbelief” (3:19). The issue is faith or the lack thereof. Will the discouraged believers of these Roman house churches continue to believe or have the seeds of unbelief already been sown in their hearts? The question of Numbers 14:11 rings in the background: “How long will they refuse to believe me?” The “unbelief” here is a refusal to believe God’s promises and trust that he will accomplish them. It is not a weakness of faith, but a rebellious rejection.

a. Psalm 95 as Basic Text.

Psalm 95 is the preacher’s text for this exhortation. It would be helpful to rehearse it a bit here.

Psalm 95:1-7a is an invitation to worship God, “Come, let us...” (95:1, 2, 6). It is an exhortation to worship, and so it fits the hortatory style of the preacher in Hebrews. Worship is manifested in singing, shouting, music, bowing and kneeling. The substance of the worship is the proclamation that the Lord is, as sovereign King, the creator of all (v. 3-5) and he is the God of Israel, who are the people of God (v. 7). God is worshipped because he is Creator of the Cosmos and because he is the Shepherd of Israel.

These two ideas of worship connect with Hebrews as well. Jesus is worshipped by the angels because he is the Son through whom God created the world and because he was the “champion” who led other sons to glory. However, the preacher of Hebrews does not make this explicit connection with Psalm 95.

Rather, the preacher focuses on the last half of Psalm 95. If we envision Hebrews as a sermon read to some Roman house churches, then the exhortation of Psalm 95:7b is contextualized by the invitation to worship in Psalm 95:1-7a. As the church gathered to sing, eat and pray in the presence of God—to come before God with worship—the preacher knew they needed to hear a word of encouragement and a word of warning, just as Psalm 95 contains that word of warning.

Psalm 95:7b-11 invites the assembled people of God to hear the voice of God. They should listen and obey rather than test God by rejecting his word and hardening their hearts against it. The two place names in the text (v. 8)—Meribah (which means quarrelling) and Massah (which means testing)—refer to places of rebellion during the wilderness experience of Israel after the Exodus (cf. Exodus 17:7; cf. Deut. 33:8). The

quotation in verse 10 is from Numbers 14:11. So, the Psalm remembers two occasions of rebellion. One is the questioning of whether God is among them or not as they were on their way to Sinai in Exodus 17, and the other is the failure of the people to trust God's promises and possess the land in Numbers 14. As a result, the rebellious did not enter God's rest, that is, they did not possess the land of promise.

The action in Numbers 14 was no mere weakness of faith. Rather, it was an active rejection of God's promises. In Numbers 14:9, Joshua and Caleb plead with Israel, "Do not turn away from the Lord" (cf. Deuteronomy 1:28).

b. First Citation of Psalm 95 and Exhortation (Hebrews 3:7-14).

The preacher applies Psalm 95 to his hearers with a pointed exhortation in Hebrews 3:12-14. The message of Psalm 95 ("Today") is still alive for this preacher's hearers, just as it is still alive for us today. The experience of Israel is the experience of this Roman church, and it is our experience today. "Today" is an epochal day. It is "today" as long as the promise lasts; as long as the invitation is still open. It is always "today" as long as God invites and before the judgment arrives.

The problem is an evil heart of unbelief—a rebellious rejection of God's promises. Sin is subtle as well as overt; it is deceitful. The heart of unbelief is a deliberate turning away from God. The response of the community is to encourage each other as they continue their communal journey. Communal encouragement will hinder/prevent the hardening of the heart.

The danger in the Roman community is that outside pressures will discourage and plant seeds of unbelief in the hearts of the church. Through the deceitful attractiveness of sin, believers will harden their hearts and turn away from God. They will refuse to believe that God will keep his promises. It is the danger of apostasy; the willful rejection of God's Son.

To counteract this, the preacher encourages them to "daily" encourage each other, and to recognize that they are partners with Christ. They partake of Christ's glory, and share his journey. If they will remain faithful, just as Christ was faithful, they too will receive the promise and inherit the salvation that Christ won for them.

c. Second Citation of Psalm 95 and Exhortation (Hebrews 3:15-19).

This exhortation is negative in character. It looks back to the rebellion ("the sin") of Numbers 14. They heard the word of promise, but refused to believe it. They "sinned." This sin is no mere act of weakness, but is rather a resolute rejection and opposition to the promise of God. The rebellious will not enter into God's rest. They refused to obey and embrace "unbelief" as a way of life.

The rebellion to which Hebrews 3:16-19 alludes is found in Numbers 14. It was a rebellion against Moses and Aaron, but ultimately against God as well. The connection

here with Hebrews 3:1-6 is obvious. If they refused to believe God's promise through Moses and thus could not enter the rest, how much will they fail to enter the rest if they reject God's promise through Jesus who is God's faithful son.

It is important to understand the nature of this "unbelief" in Hebrews 3. This is not a temporary lack of faith, or trust. It is not a moment of weakness. It is, rather, a willful rejection of God's promise. It is rebellion. The rebellious cannot enter God's rest.

Theological Substance

The contrast in this text is between the persevering faithfulness of Jesus (and Moses) and Israel's rebellion in the wilderness. Jesus persevered to the end and was faithful through his wilderness experience (suffering in human form). Israel, however, rebelled in their wilderness experience and rejected the promises of God. Faith persevered in Jesus, but unbelief reigned in Israel.

The believing community that the preacher addresses in Hebrews is in a weakened, immature state. They are drifting and in danger of neglecting the salvation that Jesus has won for them. The community has people within it that have already rejected Jesus and forsaken him. The exhortation in Hebrews 3 is intended to prevent further defections due to unbelief.

Theologically, I think we must distinguish between weakness and rebellion. All of us sin—which is no excuse for sin, but the origin of our sin is also significant. A person with a heart of faith still sins and due to weaknesses of one kind or another fails to be all that God intends them to be. We are weak, and therefore we sin. However, rebellion is a different matter. Rebellion is the deliberate rejection of God. It is an assertion of unbelief by action or confession. It is a heart of unbelief.

Believers who sin out of weakness are still believers. But the rebellious act out of unbelief. Believers, despite their sinful weakness, are assured of God's grace because their faith is directed toward God's promises in his Son. But the rebellious have no faith and thus no assurance.

What the preacher condemns and warns about is a persistent heart of rebellion; a heart of unbelief that rejects God's promises. That kind of heart will not enter God's rest.

However, he encourages believers who are struggling with their weaknesses to continue their journey. They are "partners" with Christ, and he will provide strength for the journey. They should not be discouraged by their weaknesses, but turn toward each other—encourage each other and persevere in their faith. Jesus is their "champion" and he will lead them into the promised rest.

Every community of faith lives with the reality that some in their midst give up their faith, reject God's promises and refuse to obey. The community shrinks by attrition. We

see people come and go. The preacher encourages us not to be one of those people, but to claim the work of Christ for ourselves and embrace the promise of God's rest. He encourages us to persevere in faith.

In particular, don't let the wilderness destroy your confidence in God. Persevere through the wilderness; continue to believe. Don't give up, and encourage others in their journey. It is a communal undertaking—a communal experience. We are on the journey together, so let us help each other along.

Teaching Options

There are, of course, many ways to teach this material. The following suggestion is only one.

I think I will begin with Psalm 95. Let the class sink into the mood of worship/praise that begins the text and reflect on the nature of worship a bit. Then, the text will also press the exhortation upon us—don't harden your heart. We are invited to worship, but we are also warned against apostasy. Numbers 14 will help illuminate the text in this setting.

Then, I will move to the exhortations of Hebrews 3:12-19 and talk about their application in the context of the original hearers of this sermon. The preacher encourages them to persevere in the face of opposition.

Then, I will move the application to our context. We have our own wilderness experiences. We move through tragedy, death, temptation, persecution, etc. Will the wilderness create a heart of unbelief, or will we persevere by faith through the wilderness? How does this text encourage us to persevere? What perspectives emerge from the text that enables perseverance? How does Hebrews 3:1-6 provide the ground of perseverance?

What is a "hard" heart? How does it harden? What does it mean to encourage each other daily? How is sin so deceitfully attractive? What does it mean to partner with Christ? How does this encourage us?

In the final section (Hebrews 3:16-19), I will reflect on the rebellious character of Israel in contrast to the weakness that we so often experience. Can we feel assured if we sense weakness? Does this text apply to the weak or only to the rebellious?

It seems to me that when we sense weakness, this means that we are still alive. We sense the contrast between Christ and ourselves, and yet we yearn to be like Christ and want to be like him. Rebellion, however, reflects no desire to be like Christ.

Your discussion in class, then, can focus on any number of things. You can discuss this distinction between weakness/rebellion and the nature of assurance. You can discuss ways that we can encourage each other as a community (practical things we can do).

You can discuss the ground/basis of the perseverance of faith and what sorts of things/actions do we need to consider as we seek to persevere. Part of that discussion could focus on what makes a heart “hard” and how does a heart become “hard.” What does that mean?

The Navipress material has some good questions and applications for incorporation into your lesson plan.

Awed by Joshua?

Hebrews 4:1-13

Minister's Summary: God raises up the right person for the right time. When all seemed lost for Israel because that nation's great lawgiver and leader could not complete his task, Yahweh selected Joshua to carry through. Jesus has been raised up at just the right time in history (cf. Gal.4:4) and in your personal crises. He is superior to Joshua!

Teaching Material

The preacher is still in exhortation mode. He warned them about unbelief with the example of Israel in the wilderness. The disobedient and faithless cannot enter God's promised rest (Hebrews 3:16-19). But he hopes that his hearers are more predisposed to faith than the Israelites in the wilderness. Indeed, as we will see in chapter six, he is confident they are.

The basic exhortation of this section is for believers to enter the promised rest through faith. Twice, once in Hebrews 4:1 ("let us be careful that none of you be found to have fallen short of it") and a second time in Hebrews 4:11 ("Let us, therefore, make every effort to enter that rest"), the preacher urges his hearers to persevere and continue their journey toward God's promised rest.

"Rest" is the dominant idea in this exhortation. The noun or verb is used eleven times in eleven verses. The idea is occasioned by the use of the term in Psalm 95:11, which is quoted in Hebrews 3:11 (and in this section at Hebrews 4:3, 5). The "rest" which Israel in the wilderness failed to enjoy was the land of promise because they refused to trust God's work for them in conquering the land. The hearers of this sermon also have the prospect of a "rest," and the question remains whether they will be like Israel and fail to enter that rest or whether they will persevere in faith so as to enter that rest.

This section naturally divides into three parts. Hebrews 4:1-5 begins and ends with the notion of "entering God's rest," while Hebrews 4:6-11 begins and ends with the idea of "failure to enter because of disobedience." Hebrews 4:12-13 offers the ground of God's penetrating perception of human hearts—the Word of God pierces through the heart and judges its faith or faithlessness. The first section, then, explains the idea of rest, and the section applies the negative example of Israel to the situation of the hearers of this sermon. The third section reminds the readers that they cannot escape God's judgment, which penetrates the heart.

Exegetical Notes

1. Hebrews 4:1-5.

Psalm 95 exhorts worshippers to persevere in faith so that they might enter God's rest. Consequently, the preacher concludes that there is yet a rest that remains for the people of God. It is a rest into which we can still enter. The promise has not disappeared, but rather it is constantly renewed as each generation seeks God. The Word of God promises a rest. It is good news (gospel). The gospel is the promise of sharing God's rest.

Yet, the gospel must be heard (embraced) with faith. We must trust God's promise of rest and persevere in that faith through the wilderness in order to enter God's rest. Without faith, the promise is of no avail. Without faith, we fall short and cannot enter the rest.

The preacher elaborates the idea of "rest" by combining Psalm 95:11 with Genesis 2:2. The "rest" is "God's rest," and God's rest is his creation rest. He rested on the seventh day after creating the cosmos. When God rested on the seventh day and ceased his work, this does not mean that God ceased all activity and became a spectator of the human drama. Rather, the idea of "rest" here is the experience of peace and shalom. It is the delight of relationship with the created cosmos and the human community. It is a settled enjoyment of community. It is the absence of conflict, pain and sorrow. God invites us into this rest, to share life with him in community, and to experience shalom.

However, I think Guthrie is correct to see that this "rest" is a present experience, which anticipates an eternal future. We who have believed have already entered this rest, though there is yet a fuller experience of that rest in the future when the new heaven and new earth appear.

2. Hebrews 4:6-11.

This "rest" is available to the people of God, but it is available through faith. The disobedient cannot experience or enjoy that "rest". No doubt the believers whom the preacher addressed were experiencing a state of "restlessness." They lived in a hostile environment. They were discouraged. The preacher challenges them to persevere in faith despite the wilderness. There is a rest, the preacher announces; even "Today."

"Today" rings loudly here. The "rest" is not simply a moment in past history when Israel entered the land under Joshua. "Rest" is a much larger and more pregnant notion. It is not simply rest in the land of Canaan. Rather, it is an eternal "Sabbath-rest" for the people of God. It has cosmic proportions. The "rest" is ultimately the restoration of creation—it is the renewal of all things. It is a new heaven and a new earth where the old has passed away and everything has become new. It is that heavenly city toward which we journey.

We experience this rest today as we enjoy communion with God among the people of God. This is our "Sabbath." However, the day of rest so prominent in Israel is rooted in creation (Genesis 2:2) and is part of the 10 commandments (the fourth commandment). It bears witness to a principle of "rest"—rest within a workweek that is given to enjoying God's communion and peace. It is a principle that will find its ultimate fulfillment in the

new heaven and new earth where God's people will enjoy God's own rest.

The preacher's exhortation is to "make every effort to enter that rest." Do not follow the negative example of Israel in the wilderness, but rather follow Jesus (our Joshua!). Remember that Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew name Joshua. We have a Joshua who will lead us into the promised land. He is our high priest, Jesus. He is our champion who has paved the way for us. Consequently, the exhortation is "follow Jesus" and enter the rest.

3. Hebrews 4:12-13.

The relationship between this section and the previous exhortation is found in the word "for" that begins Hebrews 4:12. Don't follow the negative example of disobedience and make every effort to enter the rest, because the Word of God is alive. It is no dead word. It is active and at work. It is not a dead letter.

On the contrary, the Word of God (the word of promise; the good news; the judgment of disobedience) is a judging sword that discerns the heart. It opens up the heart as in surgery, or it cuts through the heart like a sword that penetrates the body. It unveils the heart. The heart language is important in this section, as the quotation from Psalm 95 in Hebrews 3:7 reminds us.

The Word of God, therefore, as it comes to us as a word of promise about the rest, will judge the heart's faith or faithlessness. It will uncover what lies at the bottom of the heart. When the Word of God confronts us, it will discern whether we harbor a heart of unbelief or whether our heart believes the gospel (good news). The heart will give an account of itself before the light of God's Word.

Theological Substance

"Rest" and the perseverance of faith that is necessary for entering that "rest" are the key theological themes in this section of the homily. The familiarity of our preacher with the Old Testament is especially evident in this section because "rest" is a theological theme that runs throughout the whole biblical story. And this is the story to which the original hearers of the sermon belong, and to which we also belong. "Rest" is God's restoration of relationship with his people and their enjoyment of God's peace and community.

Significantly, the "rest" is God's rest. It his experience; his enjoyment of peace and harmony. It is "shalom." It was what God created, and the preacher takes us back to creation to understand this shalom. After God had created, God rested (Hebrews 4:4; Genesis 2:2). "Rest" does not mean that God ceased all activity. Rather, it reflects the harmony and peace of creation and God's relationship with it. God lived in community with his people, walked among them and enjoyed the mutual love they shared. This is rest. It is life without conflict, without pain, and without suffering.

But the entrance of sin into the world disturbed this “rest”. Wilderness invaded the Garden. Sin transformed the Garden into a Wilderness. But God still sought to give his people “rest.” God called Israel into being as a holy community in which he would dwell with his people. He would “rest” among them, and they would “rest” every seventh day (Sabbath; cf. Exodus 20:11; 31:17). The preacher remembers the “sabbath” as part of the rest into which God had called his people (Hebrews 4:9 uses “sabbath” terminology though it is transformed into something more than a seventh day).

He called them to a land where he would give them “rest;” where they would have peace from their enemies and live together in harmony as God dwelled in their midst (cf. Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 12:10; Joshua 1:13-15). This was the “rest” that wilderness Israel was called to enter, but they could not because of their unbelief and disobedience, that is, because of their rebellion. It is also the “rest” that Israel would experience in its history at time when peace reigned (cf. 1 Chronicles 22:9, 18; 23:25; 28:2; 2 Chronicles 14:7; 15:15; 20:30). God himself “rested” in Israel as he reigned with joy and delight among his people (2 Chronicles 6:41; 1 Chronicles 28:2).

Psalm 95 evidences a belief that there was yet a “rest” that the original worshippers who heard Psalm 95 could embrace and enter. Even though they possessed the land, there was a “rest” they were to embrace rather than hardening their hearts as Israel did in the wilderness. There is the yearning in the heart to “find rest” in God as we experience the wildernesses of life (cf. Psalm 62:1,5).

The preacher of Hebrews envisions a “rest” which believers can embrace and toward which they journey. I think Guthrie is correct that the preacher believes that the “rest” of God is both present and future. It is primarily future in the sense that believers are on a journey toward the heavenly city, but it is also genuinely present in the sense that by faith we participate in the city already. It is future in the sense that we wait for fullness of God’s glory and shalom upon the earth, but it is present in the sense that we enjoy God’s presence now and experience the peace of God through the reconciliation achieved by the suffering and exaltation of our high priest. It was experienced in Israel through Sabbath rest as well as inner peace. The preacher speaks to his hearers in the wilderness and exhorts them to persevere so as to enter God’s rest. It is a rest that they can experience now by faith, but it is also a hope in the promise of God for the restoration of shalom to the cosmos on that final day when Jesus comes again.

Christians have a “sabbath rest.” Though it is not a seventh day as in Israel, we may experience through a day of rest that is focused on enjoying God’s communal life and community (his people). It is the experience of living in relationship (community) with God. We can have peace as we trek through the wilderness because God is with us and our champion leads us toward the joy of eternal rest. We live in hope of an eternal “sabbath rest” because of the eternal redemption that Christ has won for us. We can endure the wilderness because Jesus leads us and because the wilderness is not eternal. One day the wilderness will pass away and the Garden of God will once again appear and we will enter God’s eternal rest.

Jesus invites us to come to him and he will give us “rest” (Matthew 11:28-30). When we come to Jesus, we experience “rest,” but when we are rebellious and disobedient—when we have a heart of unbelief—there is no “rest.”

Teaching Options

There are several ways to teach this text. One option is to begin back in chapter 3 with a review, and carry the argument forward in chapter 4. You could then move through the text step by step as the preacher unfolds the argument in his three sections. The Navipress book has questions appropriate for each section.

Another option is to treat the chapter theologically. Let your class see the “big picture” by telling the story of “rest” through the eyes of the biblical history of redemption (as in the theological section above). You could begin with creation and the intention of “rest” God had in mind, remind your class of the fall and how sin destroys shalom, and then carry the class through a kind of history of redemption as God seeks to bring “rest” to his people in Israel. This would lead you up to Psalm 95, and from Psalm 95 you could bring the class to Hebrews 4 and the situation of preacher and his audience. At each step, engage the class in a discussion of what “rest” means in each of those texts in anticipation of what “rest” means for us today in our journey of faith.

Ultimately, we need to bring the “today” to our audience. “Today” God still promises “rest.” “Today” God still calls us to trust his promises and experience his redemption. “Today” God still empowers our perseverance. It is a message for us—now.

In terms of application, we can offer “rest” to people in the midst of their “restlessness.” The wilderness disturbs our peace and we are often restless on the journey. We yearn for tranquility, peace, and harmony. The journey of faith, though it goes through the wilderness, offers “rest.” It offers an experience of rest in the midst of the journey, but also the hope of rest at the end of the journey. There is a present rest and a future rest—both enable perseverance. Both strengthen faith for the journey.

The exhortations are: don’t fall short of this rest and make every effort to enter the rest. It is an exhortation to persevere. Discussion can center on some practical concerns about how to keep that “rest” ever before us. How do we encourage each other about the rest? How do we bear witness to the “rest” in the lives of God’s people? How have you experienced “rest” in the present, and how does the hope of future “rest” empower your journey? How does the idea of “rest” enable perseverance?

Our Compassionate High Priest

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Minister's Summary: Gravitating toward his theme of holding on when you feel like giving up, the writer/speaker affirms the sympathetic interest of Jesus in the human plight – a plight he knows from personal experience. His example of obedience through suffering should challenge us to seek his intercession through our own times of crisis.

Teaching Material

While Hebrews 1:1-4:13 has focused on the sonship of Jesus as our faithful champion who leads us through the wilderness by his own suffering, Hebrews 4:14-10:18 focuses on the high priesthood of the Son who redeems us from our sins through his suffering. Hebrews 4:14-16 is a transitional text that looks back to themes already introduced (priesthood, sonship, suffering, temptation) but also forward to the major theme of the next section (empathetic high priest who provides grace and mercy).

Hebrews 2:17-18 heralded the Jesus as a “faithful and merciful high priest.” Hebrews 3:1-4:13 emphasized the faithfulness of the Son. Hebrews 4:14-5:10 emphasizes the compassionate (merciful) character of the Son. Our high priest is both faithful and compassionate. He faithfully carried out his task as high priest as he suffered death for everyone, but he compassionately fulfilled his task as an empathetic priest who shared the experience of our suffering (death).

The theme that holds Hebrews 4:14-5:10 together is the compassion of Jesus as our high priest. This compassion enables perseverance as we boldly go before the throne of grace and mercy to receive help in our times of need. Just as the original hearers of this sermon needed grace and mercy in their wilderness and compassion for their weaknesses, so contemporary believers need that same grace and compassion from Jesus. This vision of Jesus as a compassionate high priest encourages us to “hold firmly to the faith we profess” (Hebrew 4:16) and “approach the throne of grace with confidence.” It encourages perseverance and prayer. It emboldens faith with the knowledge that Jesus both cares about and is able to deal with our weaknesses because he himself has experienced those weaknesses.

Exegetical Notes

I have divided our text into three sections. The first contains the exhortation to perseverance and prayer on the basis of the high priestly function of the Son (Hebrews 4:14-16). The second describes the nature of the high priestly status (Hebrews 5:1-6). The third applies this high priestly status to Jesus (Hebrews 5:7-10), though his high priesthood is Melchizedekian rather than Levitical (Aaronic).

1. Hebrews 4:14-16.

This is one of the most powerful texts in Hebrews, and one of the better-known ones. Its striking character is often lost on us because of its familiarity. The shocking nature of the assertion of the Son's high priesthood is lost on us because it is so common for us to think in these terms. In particular, the Son of God shares our weaknesses! That is an incredible theological statement. If it were not so familiar to us, it would knock us off our feet. But despite its familiarity it has not sunk deeply into our hearts because we still tend to think of Jesus as the "Teflon" human—nothing sticks to him...he did not really hurt...he was not really tempted...he could not have sinned. Unfortunately, Jesus still remains somewhat distant and we seek substitutes for genuine empathy. Medieval Europe found more empathy in Mary than they did Jesus!

This revolutionary theological truth is surrounded in the text by two exhortations. Hebrews 4:14 exhorts hearers to hold on to their confession of faith because we have a "great" (exalted—ascended into the heavens, sitting at the right hand of God) high priest. Hebrews 4:16 exhorts hearers to pray for help in their times of need. Thus, the preacher calls us to perseverance and prayer (boldness in prayer—"frank speech" or to speak openly). The centerpiece between the exhortations is the empathy of the Son of God with humanity as their high priest. Since we have a faithful and merciful high priest—a fellow human who was obedient through his suffering (and thus faithful) and experienced our weaknesses (and thus merciful)—who has been exalted to the right hand of God believers should persevere and pray!

The central assertion is the Son of God is able to "sympathize" (NIV) with our weaknesses. Scholars have debated the exact nuance of the term "sympathize" here. Some have tended to think of it merely in terms of sympathy (to feel for others even though you may not have experienced it yourself), but others have preferred something more along the lines of empathy (to share the same experience with another). The word has this range of meaning. Context must determine its meaning. I prefer empathy because it fits the context better and the word is more experiential than cognitive. It is not simply that Jesus knows about our weaknesses, but that he has experienced our weaknesses. He is empathetic because he, too, has been tempted in every way just as we have. He has shared the experience of temptation.

Jesus has shared our weaknesses in that he has been tempted in every way like we have. He has the shared experience of temptation, though without sin. Some have watered down this point by underestimating Jesus' own experience of temptation. "After all," it is thought, "he could not have experienced temptation as I have because he did not sin. If only he had truly been tempted, or experienced the exact same temptation I have, then he would have sinned...if he was really human." But this misses the point. It is better to say that Jesus experienced temptation more deeply than we ever have. When we face temptation, we never feel its full power or pull because we give in too quickly. We say "uncle" and the temptation is over. But Jesus, who never said "uncle," experienced the full force of temptation as Satan pulled out all the stops. It is more correct to say that Jesus experienced temptation more deeply and more acutely than we ever have, and yet without sin. Jesus understands. He knows temptation. He knows weakness.

Nevertheless, he was faithful. But with the experience, Jesus is more than “faithful.” He is also compassionate; our “merciful” high priest who dispenses mercy and grace to those who cry out for help in times of need.

2. Hebrews 5:1-6.

In order to appreciate this assertion that Jesus, the Son of God, is our faithful and merciful high priest, the preacher reminds his hearers about the Levitical high priesthood. In particular, he notes two aspects.

First, high priests are human beings. They share the human experience, including weaknesses. They are humans representing humans before God and to God. They represent humans authentically because they share the experience of humanity. They are humans. Consequently, they “deal gently” with sins of ignorance and weakness because they know the frailty of fallen humanity. Implied, of course, is the reality under the Mosaic covenant (and in the wilderness experience of Hebrews 3:16-19) that rebellion is not coddled but punished (cf. Numbers 15:30-31).

Second, God calls high priests. They are not self-appointed, but rather divinely appointed. Aaron was called as priest and began the Levitical order. The Son was also called to be a priest, just as Aaron was. Notice the preacher refers to him as “Christ” in Hebrews 5:5 rather than “Jesus” or “Son” (which are his normal terms up to this point). No doubt “Christ” emphasizes the “anointed” status of the Son. He is the “anointed one”—even anointed to be priest as God’s Messiah.

The introduction of Aaron at this point means that the preacher has now reminded his hearers of all the major figures at the beginning of the Mosaic covenant (angels, Moses and Aaron). And, at every point, the Son is superior because he is Son.

Hebrews 5:5 recalls the language of Hebrews 1:5 (quotation of Psalm 2:7). Jesus is no mere high priest from among humanity. Rather, he is the Son of God. He is “Jesus, the Son of God” (Hebrews 4:14).

Moreover, he is not a Levitical priest. He is a priest “in the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:6; quoting Psalm 110:4—the preacher had earlier quoted Psalm 110:1 in Hebrews 1:13). Thus, while the preacher introduces Aaron, he quickly notes how Jesus’ priesthood supersedes the Aaronic priesthood. The priesthood of Jesus is “forever” and it is from a different “order.”

However, at this point, the preacher does belabor the superiority, as he will in Hebrews 7. Instead, he seeks to emphasize the “compassionate” or merciful character of Jesus as high priest through the shared experience of obedient suffering, even though he was a Son. He does, however, reiterate the Melchizedekian dignity of his priesthood in Hebrews 5:10—and is ready to explain it except that his audience is not ready to hear it (Hebrews 5:11).

3. Hebrews 5:7-10.

The empathetic Jesus offered prayers and petitions during his wilderness experience, during his days of suffering. These prayers and petitions were accompanied with loud cries and tears. This is the preacher's description of Gethsemane when the Son beseeched God to save him from death. The agony of Gethsemane was existential and subjective. It was inward. The inner person of Jesus agonized over the decision to obey the will of God.

Yet, though he was a Son, he obeyed. The text says he "learned obedience." He learned from what he suffered and learned through his suffering. This was a fairly common expression in Greek since "suffering" and "learning" invited a play on words due to their similar sounds. Particularly, for Jesus, the suffering under consideration here is his death. Consequently, the main point appears to be that Jesus, aided through the struggle by prayer, decided to obey the Father's will through suffering death on the cross. He decided to obey, and thus learned obedience. Obedience was not automatic; it was a decision.

But that decision perfected his obedience—his obedience went all the way. He completed his task and as a result he was exalted to the right hand of God as high priest. There he became our champion and the source of our salvation. He became our high priest who made atonement for sin and is now able to help those who are being tempted (Hebrews 2:17-18).

Theological Substance

Several theological themes emerge in this section, which are important for shaping our lives as the people of God.

First, the incarnate Son is an empathetic priest. Certainly he sympathizes with his people (he hurts when they hurt, just as we hurt when we see someone hurting), but more than that he empathizes. Empathy is about shared experience, as, for example, when two people share the experience of losing a child or a spouse. Empathy means that you have walked in another's moccasins. You have "been there, done that."

God did not look upon our suffering at a distance. Rather, God came near in Jesus. The Son learned obedience through suffering and through his humanity shared our experience and our suffering. God learned what it was like to hunger, thirst, be tempted and died. God experienced new realities through the incarnation. Of course, God sympathized with humanity's suffering before the incarnation, and God even suffered empathetically before the incarnation as he grieved over his fallen world and experienced wounded love (his spouse left him, and his children rebelled). But in the incarnation God entered new experiences—temptation, hunger, thirst and death.

Jesus is an insider when it comes to our suffering. He was no mere sympathetic spectator. He suffered. He was tempted. He entered and shared the human experience

with all its weaknesses and frailties. He knows the sting of death and the pull of temptation. He knows the hurts and pains of life in a fallen world.

This reality means that Jesus is able to help us in our temptations/trials because he himself was tempted/tried (Hebrews 2:18). Our compassionate high priest understands us as an insider, not an outsider. Our high priest has shared our weaknesses. Thus, we approach him with boldness because we know he is compassionate. We approach with the assurance of grace and mercy because he understands us.

Second, in the wilderness, prayer becomes our means of involving God in our situation. We cry out to God in the midst of our trials and hurts. We approach God in the wilderness with boldness, and we approach to receive grace and mercy. Our model is the Son himself.

The Son, who understands our weaknesses because he himself has experienced those weaknesses, knows lament within his own experience. The preacher's description of Gethsemane is vivid and striking. It reflects the agony of the experience of weakness. It involves "loud cries" and "tears" as we struggle to do the will of God and hope to be heard by the God who seems sometimes so distant. The Son models lament and the struggle to obey. Though he was Son, yet he learned to obey through suffering.

Just as the Son struggle through prayer, so the preacher exhorts us to go boldly to the throne of grace to receive the help we need in our own struggles. God heard his Son and answered his prayer. God's answer did not involve the avoidance of suffering and death, but the strength to endure it. In the same way, God hears our prayers and provides strength for the struggle. We receive help, though it may not be the help we had desired (since we desire to avoid suffering). Rather, it is the help we need that empowers our endurance and perseverance. Jesus was heard, and so we will be heard as well.

I would not want to limit the "approach" to the throne of Grace to prayer. It certainly has liturgical and priestly overtones as well. It is the entrance into the "Holy of Holies" as we approach God liturgically as priests. It is to "draw near" (cf. Hebrews 10:22). The idea of "throne" also engenders a vision of a royal throne room that we approach to receive aide. The meshing of these images deepens the significance of this moment—priestly, royal, liturgical, and prayerful. It lifts us up to the sublime experience of divine presence.

Third, another key theme is submissive obedience. The Son was heard because he prayed out of a disposition of submissive obedience. The Son was perfected as the champion of our salvation because he was obedient. And the Son saves those who obey.

It is significant, particularly in the light of the theme of "faithfulness" in Hebrews 3-4, which the high priest is compassionate and deals gently with those who sin ignorantly and go astray out of weakness. The high priest does not deal gently with the rebellious—they cannot enter the rest (Hebrews 3:16-19), and they are subject to severe punishment (Hebrews 2:1-4). There is a difference between sins of weakness and the sin of rebellion.

Faithfulness involves a disposition of obedience; it is submissive faith. It is a trust in God's promises that seeks to follow Jesus as the champion of our faith. It is an obedient lifestyle. Yet, we recognize that weaknesses engender sin in our lives. Our high priest is compassion with regarding weakness and deals gently with it. An obedient lifestyle does not exclude weaknesses, but it does exclude rebellion.

The Son saves those who obey. We must not water down this term. It is about faithfulness. It is about following Jesus. Those who seek to enter the rest of God must hear the word of promise with faith, obey God and follow Jesus into the wilderness.

Our hope, however, is that just as Jesus obeyed in his wilderness experience (he was faithful), and was consequently exalted as God's heir, so through our obedience (faithfulness) God will exalt us as fellow-heir with his Son because the Son has pioneered a way for us.

In summary, our empathetic high priest was also a faithful priest who calls his people to faithful obedience as well. His empathy means that he compassionately deals with our weaknesses and is ready mercifully help us when we turn to his throne of grace. We are called to perseverance and prayer because the Son himself persevered through prayer as he decided to remain God's faithful Son in Gethsemane.

Teaching Options

Perseverance and Prayer—these are the two exhortations in this section. The key, it seems to me, is to devise a pedagogical way of settling those two themes into the hearts of our people. The way the preacher of Hebrews does it is by pointing to the empathetic character of our high priest who himself persevered through prayer. He endured his suffering and remained God's faithful Son through prayer.

This suggests a couple of options to me. One option might be to concentrate on the idea of prayer as a means of perseverance and how Jesus models that path for us. This option might even begin with Matthew 26:36-46 where we see Jesus struggle through three stages of resolve as he is overcome with grief at the prospect that lies before him: (1) if it is possible, please take it away—an aversion to the prospect [Matt. 26:39]; (2) if it is not possible, I will submit—still a hesitation [Matt. 26:42]; and (3) here comes my betrayer—let me do what I have come to do [Matt. 26:46].

This option would open up possibilities of talking about how prayer enables perseverance, and the nature of prayer in the midst of struggle. Can we pray with “loud cries” and “tears”? Can we petition God to change his mind about our suffering and struggles? How does God “hear” us and “answer” us in the midst of these kinds of prayers? How do such prayers reflect a “boldness”? What is our expectation in prayer—an expectation for “mercy” and “grace” at the throne? What kind of “help” do we expect in our time of need?

Ultimately, with this option, we still want to ground the boldness of prayer in the high priesthood of Jesus and his compassion. But we can get to that point through talking about prayer, the practice of prayer and our life of prayer in the context of Jesus as a model.

A second option for teaching this material is to concentrate squarely on the empathetic character of Jesus. In this option, prayer would be one application of the theology of Jesus' high priesthood.

This option would tend to discuss the nature of Jesus "empathy" with us and his experience as human being. You might address such questions as the nature of temptation for Jesus, and how is this a help for us? How does the temptation of Jesus encourage us? Do we really connect with Jesus, or do we have some "Teflon" notion of Jesus' resistance to sin? Is he really an example for us in this situation? In other words, how much of an incarnation was the incarnation? Did he really become like us?

Can we really draw strength from the fact that Jesus resisted temptation? After all, he was the Son of God...do we have the same ability that he had? Are we called to the same kind of faithfulness that Jesus was? In this context, what does it mean for Jesus to "learn obedience"?

This option, then, would turn more on the help this text offers us theologically for understanding and resisting temptation based on the model of Jesus. Thus, it would concentrate more on the theme of perseverance (Hebrews 4:13) and resisting the temptation to "give up."

There might be some combination of these two themes that you might pursue. Many options are open to you. Be sure to check out your Navipress book for further ideas.

We Are At Risk!

Hebrews 5:11-6:20

Minister's Summary: The original recipients/hearers of this message were in a situation of challenge that put them at risk for their faithfulness to Jesus. The danger of falling away from him is made clear – against a background of confidence in the readers/hearers of this exhortation.

Teaching Material

Every parent must decide when to move his or her child from milk to solid food. Infants who have no teeth are not able to digest solid food, and therefore they draw their strength from milk alone. However, there comes a point in the life of newborns when they must be fed with solid food in order to remain healthy. An adult cannot live on milk alone, and the child who receives only milk will never become an adult.

The preacher takes up this imagery in Hebrews 5:11-14. New converts are infants in Christ, and they need milk since they are incapable of digesting meat. However, there comes a time when each child of God is expected to become an adult. As adults they are expected to digest the meat of the word. This does not mean that they no longer need the milk, but rather that they must build on the foundation of the milk with meat. Apparently, these believers had failed to grow as is expected, and this is what the preacher rebukes. They are Christians who had embraced the faith, but who had remained immature in their understanding of it. Consequently, they were on the verge of losing what faith they already had.

Exegetical Notes

I have divided this section into four parts. The preacher identifies the problem (5:11-14), and then exhorts his hearers to move beyond the milk of the Word as he calls them to maturity (6:1-3). He follows this exhortation with a warning and an encouraging word about how he expects that they will grow (6:4-12). Lastly, the preacher recalls the ground of this confidence and the foundation for growth—it is the faithfulness of God (6:13-20).

1. Hebrews 5:11-14.

The preacher's audience was spiritually immature. They were still babes who needed milk rather than adults who consumed solid food (5:12). The roots of this problem are two-fold. First, he complains that these Christians had "become dull of hearing" (5:11). Instead of progressing in their faith, they had regressed. They had declined in health rather than growing into maturity. Their "dullness" reflects a mental or intellectual obtuseness that renders them slow, lazy or sluggish. They had become hard of hearing due to spiritual laziness. The preacher's inability to explain the ground of their faith

adequately was not due to the difficulty of the material or the ineptitude of the instructor. Rather, it is the result of their spiritual laziness that prefers milk to meat.

The second problem is the improper use of time. The preacher thinks that sufficient time has passed that they "ought" to have become teachers (5:12). This "oughtness" here implies normality, that is, this is what should have been expected of everyone who grows in Christ. Yet, because of their regression, not only are they not teachers, but they have a need to be re-taught themselves. They had regressed. They had so misused their time that they needed to be re-taught the elementary principles. The word "principle" is literally the "beginning," and the term "elementary" refers to the rudiments or basics of a thing. The rudiment of any language is the alphabet. These disciples needed to relearn their Christian ABCs.

It is important to note the contrast between teachers and those who are need teaching. This is the preacher's "theory of education": milk belongs to babes, but solid food belongs to the mature (cf. 1 Corinthians 3:2). Milk is the only food for an infant without teeth. The point is clear: those who still need milk have not grown into maturity. The result of this condition means that they are unskilled to or "not accustomed to" the word of righteousness (5:13). The Greek term can have the sense of "inexperienced in" or "unacquainted with." The "word of righteousness" is unknown to them. It is unfamiliar territory. This is the heartbeat of the reader's problem because, in the context of Hebrews (note the "concerning him" in verse 11), the content of this "word of righteousness" refers to Christ's priestly work. This word (or doctrine) belongs or pertains to righteousness, that is, the means of our being accounted righteous in the sight of God (justification; cf. 10:38; 11:7). This is the basis of our boldness before God. Without this boldness there is no capacity to endure since it is the understanding of this "word of righteousness" that provides steadfastness and assurance. It is this "word of righteousness" which the preacher cannot explain effectively because they are "dull of hearing" (5:11).

The apprehension of this "word" belongs to the mature, or those of full age (5:14). It is solid food. This is the goal of the Christian believer: maturation in the faith. The term for "mature" is a common Greek term, which refers to perfection, completion or maturity. It is not ethical perfectionism. Rather, the mature Christian is the disciplined and instructed believer. The mature are those "who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil." This is athletic terminology. But constant practice and training athletes are able to accomplish their goals. The believer, however, does not emphasize the training of the body, but of the "senses." This Greek noun is a technical philosophical term for the faculty of perception, that is, the ability or capacity to make moral decisions. A well-trained moral sense, then, is able "to discern good and evil" (5:14). We derive our English term diacritical from the verb "discern" (as in "diacritical markings). It means to judge through, discriminate, and differentiate or to divide between. The practice of moral discrimination is a sign of maturity.

The preacher's theory of Christian development is clear. Infants need to be taught the elementary principles of the gospel (milk), and the mature need to be taught the word of righteousness (the priestly work of Christ). The following chart illustrates this "theory":

The text contains a series of contrasts. "First Principles" in contrast with "Word of Righteousness." Infants in contrast with Adults (mature). Milk in contrast with Solid Food. Those to Be Taught in contrast with those who Teach. These contrasts are important. The preacher will not rebuild the foundation they should already have (i.e., the first principles, 6:1-3). Rather, he is going to proceed with his topic (i.e., the word of righteousness, 7:1-10:18). This will push the disciples on to maturity or perfection (6:1).

2. Hebrews 6:1-3.

The preacher exhorts them to grow into the maturity of Christ ("let us press on to maturity..."). The term "maturity" in 6:1 is from the same root as the word "mature" in 5:14. These Christians are not yet mature, but the preacher encourages them to pursue that goal. Literally, the text reads, "let us be carried forward to maturity." The passivity of the verb indicates that it is God who will ultimately grant maturity if we will yield ourselves to his influence and teaching. Maturity is only reached as God carries us there. Of course this does not mean that we lack responsibility for failure. If we fail to grow it is our fault because God is willing to carry us. We are able, by the misuse of time and dullness of hearing, to thwart God's gracious aid and help.

While maturity is the goal, the "elementary teaching about Christ" is the foundation. The preacher encourages them to "leave it behind" only in the sense of placing it under themselves. He is not encouraging them to forsake it. On the contrary, the "elementary" or "beginning" (same word as in 5:12) teaching of Christ is the foundation for growth in Christ. This beginning word (the Greek noun is literally "word" in 6:1) is contrasted with the meaty word of righteousness in 5:13. The former is the mode of initial conversion (milk), and the other is the means of progressive sanctification and growth in Christ. This fundamental teaching is not a reference to the Mosaic system, as some would argue, but a reference to that beginning word which forms the basis or foundation of Christianity. They are teachings "about" or "of" Christ. Consequently, they are Christian teachings, not Jewish.

The "beginning word which belongs to Christ" consists in six particulars, which are listed in 6:1b-2. Before discussing each of these, it is significant that the preacher considers these six as the foundation of Christian experience. The preacher is not going to take the time to re-teach them about the first, beginning or basic principles of their conversion. On the contrary, he wants to build on that foundation instead of re-laying it. These six items, then, belong to the context of Christian initiation or the initial conversion experience. As support for this view, it is striking that the list of six items lacks any reference to sanctification and growth.

The structure of the six is indicated by the use of the conjunction "and." Literally, the text reads: repentance from dead works and faith toward God, teachings about baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment. Repentance and faith are the broad, comprehensive descriptions of conversion, but the preacher particularizes the specific teachings (doctrines) that are important for understanding

conversion: baptism, laying on of hands, resurrection from the dead, and eternal judgment.

We may structure the list in this fashion:

Comprehensively: repentance and faith.

Specific Comprehension these doctrines:

- (1) Baptisms
- (2) Laying on of hands.
- (3) Resurrection.
- (4) Judgment.

"Repentance from dead works" is not a reference to the dead works of the Old Testament (i.e. sacrifices), but to sin (cf. 9:14 where dead works stands in contrast to serving God). "Faith towards God" refers to that saving, obedient faith illustrated in Hebrews 11. "Baptisms" ("washings," NASV) is a specific reference to the act of immersion itself without any implication concerning its meaning. The reference is to the necessity of understanding the difference between Jewish (cf. Hebrew 9:10 for the use of "baptism" in the Jewish context), Pagan and Christian immersions. "Laying on of hands" is closely joined to "baptisms" in the Greek text by a small grammatical particle. This means that the two should be understood together (the same is true of resurrection and judgment). In the OT and Judaism the "laying on of hands" was a sign of blessing (cf. Gen. 48:14ff). Consequently, it is used variously in the New Testament as a symbol of the blessing of miraculous healing (Matthew 9:18), the bestowal of a miraculous gift (Acts 8:18), the bestowal of the blessing of ministry (Acts 13:3; I Tim. 4:14). Blessing or the Holy Spirit is associated with the baptismal moment. Through baptism we became partakers of the heavenly calling and shared in the reality of the Spirit. "Resurrection" does not refer to Christ's resurrection, but to our future resurrection. "Eternal judgment" is again a future reference.

These six items, then, form the foundation of the Christian conversion experience. Faith and repentance involve an understanding of baptism, the blessing of salvation, resurrection from the dead and the eternal judgment. These points are the foundation for maturity. They are the starting-point of the Christian life. From this basis, Paul encourages his readers to growth (6:3): "and this we shall do, if God permits." The antecedent of the verb "do" is "go on to maturity" in 6:1. If God wills or permits (cf. I Corinthians 16:7), the preacher expects his readers to grow into mature disciples. There are, however, some who cannot progress because they have fallen away (6:4-8). But the preacher encourages his readers to progress in the faith rather than continue their regression and backsliding which leads to apostasy (6:9-12).

3. Hebrews 6:4-12.

Though the preacher is disappointed with their present state of spiritual immaturity, he has not given up on them. He retains the hope and expectation that they will press forward in their maturing process. Hebrews 6:4-8 suggests that if they do not reverse their downward spiral, they will fall into an apostate condition. It is possible, the preacher testifies, that as infants in Christ you could fall away from the one who redeemed you from your sins. It is possible that you could crucify the Son of God again. If your Christian life yields thorns and thistles rather than fruitful vegetation, it is a worthless and cursed life. However, though this is a possibility, the preacher does not expect it concerning these Christians. Tactfully, the preacher does not leave his readers with a negative exhortation. On the contrary, he reassures them of his positive attitude toward them and their possibilities of faith.

[For more on Hebrews 6:4-6, read the “excursus on Hebrews 6:4-6” below.]

First, he expresses his confidence in their future spiritual life. In contrast to what he has previously warned, he is convinced that the things which accompany salvation will manifest themselves in their lives (6:9). He uses a term of endearment in addressing his audience: "beloved" (the only place where it occurs in Hebrews). The preacher softens his criticism by reassuring his hearers of his genuine affection for them. He does not yet classify his readers among the apostates even though they have regressed to the point that they need to be re-taught the fundamentals of the faith.

The word the preacher uses to express his confidence is a common one. It has several meanings, including "to be persuaded, be sure, certain, convinced and confident." He uses the word again in 13:18 in reference to his certainty that he has a good conscience. The preacher is firmly persuaded that these Christians will pursue "better things" than the possible apostasy, which he presented in 6:4-8. He expects them to grow up in Christ rather than be disinherited by falling away, and as they grow up they will come to possess those things, which "accompany salvation." Literally, the text reads: "having the things of salvation." There are certain things that belong to or accompany salvation. The meaning is that the things that “belong to” salvation will also enrich one who progresses in Christ and possess salvation. As we grow in Christ and are able to receive instruction about the "word of righteousness," we will be persuaded and confident about our salvation. Assurance is not some fleeting goal that no one can obtain. On the contrary, it is one of those things which belong to salvation itself. A by-product of salvation is boldness, and a confident expectation of receiving the fulfillment of our hope (6:11).

Second, the preacher's confidence is based upon his knowledge of their past and present service to God (6:10). There is joy in the knowledge that God does not forget our work and love. This does not, as some have argued, mean that God gives rewards for good works as if our good deeds place God under obligation to us. Our works are never meritorious. They do not make a claim on God. The preacher is not addressing the cause or merit of our salvation, but its fruit. The fruit of salvation is the rendering of service to God. God does not forget our work and love in the sense that he counts us as faithful that serve and love him. These Christians, as is clear from the last part of verse 10, not only

in the past, but even in the present continue to serve God by ministering to the saints. God does not regard these Christians as apostates, but as servants in his vineyard.

Third, the preacher encourages them to press on to full assurance (6:12). The term "desire" indicates his personal, passionate concern that these believers grow. The word implies an intense yearning. It literally means "to lust." And this desire is for each individual. Each one is expected to show the "same diligence" toward assurance, that is, to show the kind of diligence that they showed in the beginning before they became sluggish (5:11). This is a constant process of growth. As our hope, faith and understanding growth, so does our assurance and certainty about our salvation. Yet, it requires a diligence "until the end." The "end" is probably the inheritance of the blessing of eternal redemption (6:12).

The reason for this diligence is so that these Christians might escape the sluggishness in which they are now embroiled (5:11). Dullness of hearing leads to a dullness of life. If they are only fed milk, they cannot make the progress that only comes through eating meat. Instead of being sluggish or lazy, the preacher encourages them to be imitators of those faithful forefathers who have gone before. "Imitators" translates a Greek verb from which we derive the English verb "mimic" (to act as another). The confidence that comes from the examples of others is unimaginable (cf. Hebrews 11). Since they reached their goal and inherited the promises through faith and patience (endurance), then let us imitate them. The preacher underscores this confidence and assurance by picturing our inheritance in the present tense. As sons of God, we are even now in the process of receiving our inheritance. The reception of that inheritance is so certain that he speaks of it in the present. It is as if we already possess it. That is how certain we ought to be concerning the promises of God.

4. Hebrews 6:13-20.

Growth and assurance have an interestingly reciprocal relationship. The more we grow in Christ, the more assured we are. The more assured we are, the more we grow. It is because of this reciprocal relationship that the preacher now explains the nature of hope as the basis upon which he encourages his readers to be diligent in their growth. Confident in hope, they will be diligent in their service for the Lord.

The nature of hope is illustrated by the example of Abraham. God had sworn to Abraham that he would multiply his seed beyond the number of the stars in the sky and the sands on the seashore. Abraham never saw the fulfillment of that promise, but he did obtain the promise (6:15). In what sense did Abraham receive the fulfillment of the promise? In one sense, he received it in the person of Isaac. He had patiently waited for the birth of this promised son, and it was through him that God would multiply Abraham's seed. In effect, then, when Isaac was born, he had received the promise because the presence of Isaac assured him of the future fulfillment of the promise itself. The future blessings were so sure that it was as if he already possessed them in Isaac.

The certainty of this promise rested upon two immutable factors. First, God had sworn by his own nature. As the preacher acknowledges in 6:17, when people make a promise they guarantee it by swearing their faithfulness by something greater than themselves. But when God wants to show his reliability, he cannot swear by anything greater than himself, and consequently he swears by his own nature. God has "interposed with an oath" his promises (6:17). God has sworn to a thing, and he cannot change that oath.

Second, God has an immutable counsel. The Greek term for "counsel" refers to a legal contract that is incapable of reversal or annulment. As if the word itself were enough to convey the certainty of his promise, the preacher adds the word "immutable" (unchangeable). It is part of God's nature that when he decides to make a promise, or to make a covenant, he cannot reverse himself. God will keep his promises. Since it is impossible for God to lie, the believer can be certain of his hope as if he already possessed the thing for which he hopes.

The knowledge of God's oath and counsel is a strong confirmation of our hope. Hope, in the context of trial and persecution, has become a refuge for these early Christians. They "fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us" (6:18). Hope is our aide and comfort that we seize. The phrase "laying hold of" translates a word that means to take into one's own possession, to seize or, in legal contexts, to arrest. This hope is set before us as the finish line is set before the participants in a race. It is the prize of victory. While we may not now actually possess that for which we hope, we have the certain expectation of receiving it. Hope, therefore, is not wishful thinking. It is an anchor for the soul. This confidence, however, is based upon understanding that Jesus, as our High Priest, has already entered into heaven for us. As surely as Jesus continues his priestly work for us in heaven, so we are certain that one day we will join him there. Our hope, then, presupposes that we understand Christ's work for us. He has preceded us only to insure our ultimate entrance into the presence of God with him.

Theological Substance

All Christians are at different stages of growth and development. There are newborn babes who need milk. There are others who have reached different levels of maturity who need meat. In either case, all believers need to pursue the goal of maturity (6:1), and bear with others who have not yet reached their own level of maturity. It is only within this maturing process that a Christian becomes confident and assured about his hope and salvation. It is not a matter of becoming more saved now than one was before, but it is a growth in one's faith, hope and understanding. One is no more saved today than they were yesterday. Yet, there is a process of maturation which is able to grasp the assurance of faith better today than it did yesterday. It is this assurance and boldness that grounds the faith of believers against the social and theological pressures which often engulf them. This maturing process can only occur, however, in the context of eating meat. Thus, the preacher is about to offer some meat to his audience (7:1-10:19).

The substance of this text is about spiritual growth and maturity. The mature Christian eats solid food, is able to discern between good and evil, and bears fruit in service to the

Lord. The immature Christian only drinks milk, is unable to discern between good and evil, and is fruitless in their ministry before the Lord. The mature Christian grows in confidence and assurance, but the immature Christian—especially one with a long history in the Christian community—is weak and uncertain.

The call to move on toward maturity is grounded in the faithfulness of God. It is grounded in God's own oath, and this oath has been sworn in his Son as our high priest. The word the preacher's audience needs to hear—the priestly work of Christ—is what will ground their assurance and future growth. Unfortunately, they are not ready to hear it because of their immaturity. Nevertheless, it is this “meat” or “solid food” which will bear the fruit of maturity if they will hear it.

God will move his community forward if that community will hear his Word and trust his grace. The community will bear the fruit of the “things that accompany salvation” as the redeemed community perseveres in faith and lives out that faith.

Excursus on Hebrews 6:4-6

The chart in Guthrie on p. 217 lays out the structure of this text quite well. It visualizes it for us.

Before discussing details, it is important to understand the function of this text. Its function is to warn that regression may be permanent. If we do not progress and mature in our faith, then we will stagnate and ultimately regress. Regression can lead to apostasy and to a condition where it is “impossible” to be renewed. Consequently, the text functions as a warning to idle and immature Christians. If they do not mature and build on the foundation of their faith, then they are in danger of losing everything.

I think Guthrie is correct to see this “impossibility” as linked with the rejection of Christ. It is parallel to what we will see in Hebrews 10:26ff. If we reject Christ, there is no other sacrifice for sin. If we reject Christ, it is “impossible” to find repentance because there is no one else to whom we can turn. Along with Guthrie (p. 220), I take the participle in Hebrews 6:6 as a temporal one, that is, it is impossible to renew an apostate to repentance as long as (or, while) they are rejecting Christ (crucifying the Son of God afresh). A casual sense is the majority view, that is, it is impossible to renew them because they have openly rejected Christ. And one way of understanding this is to say that the social pressure of an abandonment of Christianity made it impossible to win them back. It was a practical impossibility. Both would understand that renewal was possible for one who sought the Lord, but it was impossible for one who had rejected and continues to reject the Lord.

The more thorny issue is whether the descriptors in Hebrews 6:4-5 describe genuine, authentic Christians or whether they describe people who were loosely attached to the Christian walk and later fell away. Some would even say that the whole situation described in Hebrews 6:4-6 is hypothetical. It is a warning about something that could never really happen. My opinion squares with Guthrie's summary of McKnight's view

on pages 228-29. I find Guthrie's criticism of it quite shallow and fails to take the language for what it says.

I find Guthrie's own position problematic because it means that the descriptors in Hebrews 6:4-5 do not describe authentic Christians. Yet, the very language is used to describe authentic Christians elsewhere in Hebrews (e.g., "enlightened" is used in Hebrews 6:4 and 10:32; "partakers" in 3:1 and 6:5).

However, I would suggest that our classes not get bogged down in this discussion. Rather, the point of the preacher is significant without deciding which "theory" lies behind the point. The point is that the Christian community has some within it who may leave it and we are warned against being one of them. The "theory" behind why they left (e.g., a Calvinist would say they left because they never were genuine believers, but others might say they left because they "lost their faith") is unimportant and incidental to the point of the preacher.

The preacher encourages perseverance in faith, and the alternative is apostasy where there is no salvation. Some in the community have already left, and some others are in danger of leaving. The preacher is not concerned to develop a theory of apostasy, but to encourage the remaining believers to hang on to their confidence. Calvinists and Arminians (those who oppose Calvinism out of an evangelical, Protestant mode) can agree on this: only those who persevere in faith will be saved. Perseverance is the key, and on this Calvinist and Arminians can agree. And this is the point in our text.

Teaching Options

When we teach this section, it will be very easy to get bogged down into a discussion of Hebrews 6:4-6, especially issues ranging from "possibility of apostasy" to "is it impossible for an apostate to come back to Christ." I prefer to keep the larger point in mind and not enter into a detailed discussion of the range of possible interpretations of Hebrews 6:4-6. Otherwise, we will probably lose the point, as we get lost among the trees. It is better to see the whole forest rather than a few limbs on a particular tree.

I prefer to emphasize the contrast between maturity and immaturity and how this relates to assurance, confidence and perseverance. Growth means we are persevering, but immaturity is always in danger of apostasy. Consequently, I would prefer to concentrate on Hebrews 5:11-6:3 and 6:7-12. Hebrews 6:13-20 plays into this discussion as the ground of our hope, which is the faithfulness of God.

My lesson would probably look something like this. (1) Discussion of milk/meat; mature/immature. What does that look like? What is "milk" and "meat"? Can we give content to those ideas? The preacher gave us some of the content of milk in Hebrews 6:2-3. Does that look like milk to us? (2) Discussion of the Warning/Exhortation. Hebrews 6:4-8 is the warning, but Hebrews 6:9-12 is the exhortation. What is the content of both? How do each function? In particular, what specifics does the preacher bring to bear in his encouraging word (e.g., past examples, their past ministry, their present

ministry, etc.)? (3) The Ground of Hope/Confidence. This is the faithfulness of God in Hebrews 6:13-20. What does it mean to say that hope is an “anchor”? How does it anchor our perseverance? How does the faithfulness of God (his oaths) make hope an anchor for us? In particular, what is the faithfulness of God to us now (e.g., is God action in his high priestly Son)?

Overall, we need to remember that the function of this text is to warn and encourage. It warns us about the danger of immaturity and apostasy. And yet it encourages us through the certainty of hope and our own experience of faith in ministry and among past leaders. It encourages the immature to hear the word of righteousness about the priesthood of Christ. It encourages the immature to hear the word and take confidence in the faithfulness of God expressed in the priesthood of Christ. The immature must grow or they will lose their way as they fail to persevere.

Jesus: Eternal High Priest of the Melchizedekan Order

Hebrews 7:1-28

Minister's Summary: Jesus has a unique high priestly role in the present scheme of things. How shall we make sense of that against the Aaronic priesthood? How can Jesus be a high priest at all? Our writer/exhorter makes a clever argument for the superiority of the high priesthood of Jesus over all others by tracing it to “mysterious” Melchizedek.

Teaching Moments

While this section has some exegetical pitfalls and some difficult hermeneutical moves (Guthrie does as good a job as one can with these moves from an evangelical standpoint), the substantive point of the text is essential to the preacher's Christology (understanding of Jesus). Essentially, the emphasis is on both the legitimacy and the permanence of the priesthood of Jesus. Both of these points are rooted in the typological relationship between Jesus and Melchizedek.

Jesus is a legitimate priest because he was not appointed as a Levitical, but Melchizedekan priest. God called him in the same way that Melchizedek was—outside of the Levitical genealogy and order. Indeed, this priesthood is superior to the Levitical because it is a priesthood that is independent of genealogy or ancestry. It is a priesthood that is rooted only in the call of God. The superiority of the Melchizedekan order is demonstrated by the tithe that Abraham paid to Melchizedek as a priest of God.

The permanence of the Jesus' priesthood is eternal. He is a priest “forever.” There is no end to his priesthood because his priesthood is like that of the Melchizedekan order. There is no successor to Jesus, just as there was no successor to Melchizedek. In addition, the “forever” character of the priesthood of Jesus is rooted in his eternal nature as the Son of God. He is priest forever because he himself is “forever”—his eternal relationship with the Father means eternal redemption for us since he is our eternal priest.

Consequently, the two central points we should gain from this text (at least exegetically) is the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over the Levitical priesthood and the eternal character of that priesthood. These two points serve a greater purpose, which will unfold in the argument contained in Hebrews 8:1-10:18. But they serve even at this juncture to point us to the eternal character of our redemption obtained by a uniquely appointed priest who transcends genealogies, ancestry and human families. The eternal Son of God is our eternal high priest.

Exegetical Notes

1. Hebrews 7:1-10

Melchizedek is a rather obscure figure in the Old Testament. He is only mentioned twice, and our preacher quotes both texts (Genesis 14 and Psalm 110). This section is an exposition of Genesis 14 in terms of the implications of the relationship of Melchizedek to Abraham and his descendants, but it is also a typological analogy between Melchizedek and Jesus, the Son of God.

The typology is present in Hebrews 7:3 when the preacher asserts that Melchizedek is like the Son of God in that he is “without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life.” While some have taken this to mean that Melchizedek descended out of heaven or that he was a divine theophany or even the appearance of the Son in a different form in the Old Testament, this is not the point. He is like the Son, but he is not the Son. We should not press this language beyond its intended point, and the point is the legitimacy of priesthood.

The preacher affirms the priesthood of Jesus, the Son of God but he has no lineage that legitimates that belief. The preacher uses Melchizedek as an example of a priest who is priest without lineage. Genesis 14 does not legitimize his priesthood by a lineage. Melchizedek appears in the narrative without a genealogical heritage. He appears in the text without father or mother. He is priest, not because of his lineage, but because he is called by God as priest. In this sense, he is like the priesthood of the Son. However, there is a further analogy since Melchizedek is also a king. He is a royal figure—he is a royal priest. This is also true of Jesus, though the preacher does not emphasize this point.

The language, then, of “without father or mother, etc.” is not about the eternal nature of Melchizedek as if he is a divine figure, but is about how he appears (and then disappears) in Scripture. He jumps into biblical history and then jumps back out—he appears without beginning or end. In this sense, his priesthood is permanent and forever because as far as the biblical record is concerned he appears as a priest and his priesthood remains unending because the text does not speak of its end.

However, Melchizedek also serves another significant point for the preacher. Hebrews 7:4-10 draws out the impact of his encounter with Abraham for the Levitical priesthood. Since Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek as a priest of God, so did Levi and the Aaronic priesthood.

The greater blessed the lesser and the lesser paid tithes to the greater! Melchizedek is greater than Abraham and the Levitical priesthood. This is an astounding statement, not simply because it reflects the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical order, but that it also affirms the greatness of Melchizedek over Abraham. That affirmation has “shock” value—how can anyone say that another person was greater than Abraham, the father of Israel and the exemplar of faith? Since Melchizedek points us to the Son of God and the Son is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, it means that the Son is greater than Abraham. He is not simply greater than Moses or Joshua, or the angels, but even Abraham!

Nevertheless, the point of application for the preacher is that the Melchizedek is greater than Levi and his descendants. Thus, the priesthood of Melchizedek is greater than the priesthood of Levi. The next section will explain why the one priesthood is greater than the other.

2. Hebrews 7:11-25

Two key words explain why Melchizedek's priesthood is greater than Levi's: (1) perfection and (2) eternity ("forever"). In this section, the preacher applies Psalm 110 to the situation.

The preacher introduces the notion of "perfection" in 7:11 and rounds out his argument in 7:19. The law could make nothing "perfect" and the priests themselves were not perfect (they were "weak;" cf. 7:28). But the priesthood of Melchizedek in the person of Jesus can perfect us (cf. 10:14) because Jesus himself was perfected through his suffering and work for us (7:28). The Levitical priesthood was weak and imperfect (and thus so was the law, cf. 7:18), and thus a change was needed. We needed the services of a perfect and eternal priest who could secure eternal redemption.

The perfection of the Son of God was won through his suffering. Suffering perfected him, as we have seen earlier in Hebrews. His priesthood was not easily won, but was tried and perfected through suffering. Rather than demonstrating weakness through sin, he was perfected in strength through suffering.

Hebrews 7:16 is a critical point. The priesthood of Jesus is not rooted in genealogy or human ancestry, but is rooted in the "power of an indestructible life." It is the eternal life of the Son of God, or the resurrection life of the Son of God (which is an expression of that eternal life), which secures the eternity of the priesthood. He is a priest forever because he himself is forever (7:24)

The eternal character of his priesthood is also rooted in a divine oath. The oath is found in Psalm 110:4. God appointed him priest, and swore his permanence. God is faithful and he will keep his promise. He will not change his mind. The Son of God is a priest forever!

The consequence of this perfection and permanence is that we something "better" now than was true of earlier generations in history. We have a "better hope" (7:19) and a "better covenant" (7:22). Our hope is better because it is an eternal, permanent one, and the covenant is better because the redemption is eternal because an eternal priest secures it.

3. Hebrews 7:26-28.

This is the preacher's summary of his argument. It is a climactic statement of the point and contains the fundamental contrasts between the Levitical priesthood and the priesthood of Jesus. Our high priest is different from the Levitical high priests. The

contrast is strong. While the Levitical priests die, our high priest lives “exalted above the heaven.” While the Levitical high priest is sinful, our high priest is holy and sinless. While the Levitical high priest sacrifices not only for the sins of others but also for his own sins, our high priest sacrifices for the sins of others. While the Levitical high priest sacrifices day after day, our high priest sacrifices only once. While the Levitical high priest is weak, our high priest has been perfected. While the law appointed the Levitical high priest, our high priest was appointed by an oath that came after the law was given.

Theological Substance

The central theological teaching of this text, which we must bring to bear in our own experience of Christianity, is the eternal priesthood of Jesus. His eternal priesthood means our eternal redemption. Somehow we need to translate this essential insight into something meaningful for our contemporary hearers.

The emphasis on “eternal” (or “forever”) is important in this section. The term *aiwna* (eon) occurs four times in Hebrews 7 (at verses 17, 21, 24, 28). Associated with that idea is the notion of permanence in Hebrews 7:24. Jesus has a permanent priesthood because he lives forever. This life means he continually lives to intercede—he is a permanent presence at the right hand of God for our sakes! Thus, he is able to save “completely.”

We have a high priest who continues to live, whose life is forever and whose priesthood is eternal. He is always present at the right hand of God as our priest. He is merciful and faithful as he intercedes for us. We do not have to remake or reappoint our priest every generation, but rather our high priest lives throughout all generations. We can be confident that he is always there. The eternal nature of our high priest as Son of God and his consequent eternal priesthood by the appointment of the Father means that our redemption is eternal and secure.

The Son is able to save—he saves completely because he lives forever. His life is indestructible and it is guaranteed by God’s own sworn oath. This kind of high priest “meets our need” (7:26).

Theologically, the application is the idea of a “better hope” for those who draw near to God. It is the hope of complete, eternal redemption (7:19, 25). God saves through Jesus, and he saves completely. There is no need for another priest, or another sacrifice. This is God’s covenantal relationship with humanity—it is found in Jesus. There is no other redemption and there is no other security. We can “draw near” to God through Jesus (7:19, 25).

Essentially, the “foreverness” of our salvation depends on the “foreverness” of the priesthood of Jesus that is, in turn, dependent upon the oath/faithfulness of God and the power of Jesus’ indestructible life (that is, the “foreverness” of God and Jesus).

Teaching Options

This is a huge amount of material (28 verses), but the central point is clear: Jesus is a priest forever unlike those of the Levitical priesthood. Our teaching, I think, would want to draw out that point and understand its implications for the original audience and for our contemporary audience.

Contemporary readers are probably lost in the details of “priesthood” and its rituals. (We will have occasion to think more specifically about these rituals in Hebrews 9.) They seem too distant to us, especially those of us in a “free church” or non-liturgical tradition.

However, ritual shaped identity and grounded confidence as it pointed Israel to God and gave them access to God. [Thus, this is one of the reasons the preacher emphasizes the superiority of the priesthood of Jesus over the Levitical one.] This is the theological issue at stake for our application of this material—soteriology (salvation) and how the priesthood of Christ grounds our salvation and secures it. How do we access God? How do we draw near to God? With what assurance and confidence can we draw near to God?

Each teacher will have to decide how much emphasis to give Melchizedek, but let us be sure that we do not make him the focus. Melchizedek is only introduced to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus’ priesthood over the Levitical one and to testify to the “foreverness” (eternal) nature of Jesus’ priesthood. We can get easily sidetracked in discussions that might be interminable if we seek to figure out every hermeneutical or interpretative move the preacher makes here. Let’s focus on his point and reason for introducing Melchizedek in the first place.

I think the overriding concern is security and confidence in following Jesus. The security of Levitical ritual (or any ritual) is consoling. It is familiar. It is tradition. But the approach to God of a house church does not have the elaborate liturgical and priestly rituals that yield confidence and security. The preacher, then, calls us to dig deeper—he calls us to a level of maturity that recognizes our security in the priesthood of Christ rather than in formalized rituals.

Do we trust in our pedigree? Our rituals? Our traditions? Or, do we trust in the work of Christ for us. What is eternal? Our rituals? Our pedigree? Our traditions? What is eternal is the work of Christ because of his eternal life and the eternal oath God swore concerning him. Our eternal redemption is grounded in his eternal priesthood. This is our confidence and security. It is what enables perseverance in the face of trials. Maturity enables perseverance because maturity understands the proper ground of confidence and security.

With this point, I will follow a teaching outline something like this. First, I will talk about Melchizedek. I will introduce Genesis 14 and the story the preacher relates. But I will tell the story from the standpoint of how this “bursts” the bubble of an unhealthy confidence in Levitical ritual. Second, I will focus on the argument in the middle section of this text. I will stress the theological substance of the text and point the class to those

texts that reflect that substance. Third, I will focus on the application of the theology to our context. Jesus is our focus, not our rituals. Rituals can offer identity, shape our life and give confidence, but only if our faith is rooted first in Jesus as God's priest and those rituals do not undermine the work of Christ as priest.

Another approach would be to major on the topic of "Who is Jesus?" in this text? This would be more of a topical approach. You could ask the class to point out various descriptions. What identifiers are noted in Hebrews 7? What descriptions do we have of Jesus here? What is the significance of those identifiers and descriptions? Then, aware of the descriptions and where they are located in the text, the class can discuss the meaning and application of each of those descriptions for our context.

Ultimately, we want to bring our class to a faith in both the finished work of Christ (he was offered once for all for sin) and the ongoing work of Christ (he continues to intercede for us). It is this work which gives security and confidence. It is by this work that we "draw near" to God. It is this work which enables the perseverance of faith.

Essentially, Jesus has won salvation for us and continues to pray for us. He is an ever-present help in our struggles. He is the eternal one who has won eternal redemption for us and is eternally present before the Father interceding for us.

Looking to Jesus: A Better Covenant

Hebrews 8:1-13

Minister's Summary: As our high priest, there are several features of his ministry that would make thoughtful believers confident of Jesus' ability to get us through discouraging times. The first is his initiation of a new, superior covenant under which he functions and by whose provisions we receive his grace.

Teaching Moments

The preacher now comes to the "point" (NIV). Or, as Lane puts it, it is the "crowning affirmation," that is the chief idea or main point (the Greek term literally means "at the head"). The argument of the sermon has led to this point and the rest of the sermon will assume it and build on it. Thus, this text is a transitional text, particularly 8:1-2.

We move from establishing the high priesthood of Jesus (Melchizedek) to the work of that high priesthood (sacrifice). We move from the eternal character of that priesthood to the eternal redemption that his sacrifice brings through the shedding of blood (atonement).

Consequently, the church is called to persevere because redemption has been secured. There is no one else who stands at the right hand of God to redeem us and intercede for us. We draw near to God through the one who lives eternally in the presence of God for our sakes. The church perseveres because it experiences the presence of God through reconciliation (particularly, the forgiveness of sins).

Exegetical Notes

1. Hebrews 8:1-2

The "crowning affirmation" is that Jesus is a high priest who ministers in the heavenly sanctuary. The "high priestly" character of Jesus ministry has been established in Hebrews 7 and his ministry in the sanctuary is the topic of Hebrews 9:1-10:18. The preacher, then, succinctly states the critical point, which builds upon what he has previously said and what he will shortly elaborate.

We have "such" a high priest (as described in Hebrews 7:26-28). He is a living reality, a perpetual priest who lives forever and ministers on behalf of his people before God in the heavenly sanctuary. He ministers in the presence of God (at God's right hand and in the heavenly sanctuary). He is perpetually in the presence of God, and not simply on one day out of every year on the Day of Atonement.

The term "ministry" in Greek is not the "deacon" work (*diakonia*), but is a liturgical word. It is the Greek term from which we get the English word "liturgy" (worship ritual).

Our high priest performs his worship/liturgical ritual—his priestly duties and services—in the presence of God himself, that is, in the “true tabernacle” or “true tent.” The point of “true” is not in terms of true vs. false, but in terms of reality vs. symbol, or type and antitype. The earthly tabernacle pointed to the heavenly tabernacle. It was not a false tabernacle, but rather a copy, a reflection or a manifestation of the heavenly one. However, our high priest serves in the true or real tabernacle, not in the copy.

2. Hebrews 8:3-6

The function of this text is to contrast the high priestly ministry of Jesus in 8:1-2 with the old covenant’s priestly ministry. The old covenant regulated the Levitical priesthood and specified its rituals and sacrifices. Jesus could not be a priest in the Levitical system because he was from Judah, not Levi (Hebrews 7:12-13). But his priesthood does not depend on the Levitical system since he is a priest in the order of Melchizedek.

The Levitical system was not legalistic, ritualistic, formalistic or contrary to God’s own life/spirit/character. Sometimes we read this text as if those old covenant rituals were bad, evil or part of a primitivism that we moderns have judged backwards. But those rituals formed the identity of God’s people and brought them into the presence of God. They functioned to shape their identity and remind them of God’s grace. Those rituals were the experience of God’s grace.

The problem with the Levitical ritual was not that it was ritual or that it was legalistic. The problem was that it was not eternal and that it ministered in an earthly tabernacle that was a mere shadow or copy of the heavenly one. It was provisional rather than permanent. Their priesthood was generational, but the priesthood of Jesus is eternal.

The “pattern” Moses was shown was the heavenly tabernacle. The earthly tabernacle was built to correspond with the heavenly tabernacle. It was a copy of it. “Pattern” here is not about patternism but about the inferior status of the earthly tabernacle. It is a copy; it is not the real (“true”) thing. Rather, Jesus entered the true tabernacle, and there ministers on behalf of his people.

A new covenant was needed because Jesus could not be priest under the old covenant, and because the old covenant is inherently a copy (shadow) of the real (true). The reality came in Jesus. Reality means it is a better covenant; it is superior to the old covenant because it is real (the antitype) rather than the shadow (type).

3. Hebrews 8:7-13.

The preacher grounds his understanding of a better or new covenant in Jeremiah 31:31-34. Part of the text is quoted again in Hebrews 10:16-17. His point is to emphasize the contrast between the old and new covenant. But before we emphasize that point, I would also like to point out the continuity between the old and new covenant that is embedded in this same text.

The two covenants have the same God (Yahweh), the same people (Israel), the same ethic (“the law” is not changed in terms of its ethics—the same law that is written on stone is placed in the heart; cf. Matthew 5:17-20), and the same promise (that God would dwell among his people). The “newness” of the covenant is not about content, but about the manner of presentation.

The discontinuity is that God dwelt among his people in a provisional way through an earthly tabernacle in the old covenant, but now God dwells among his people by the Spirit in the hearts of his people. We are now the temple of the living God in whom God dwells by his Spirit (1 Corinthians 3:16-17; 6:19-20; 2 Corinthians 6:16). This indwelling is the sanctification of the human heart through forgiveness, reconciliation and atonement. It is the indwelling presence of God for the sake of transformation, that is, so that we can be the kind of people God has called us to be. Thus, the “better” promise is the eternal character of our forgiveness in Christ rather than the provisional relationship that the shadowy Levitical order provided. Because it was provisional and temporary, it has become obsolete with the fullness of the Christ’s ministry.

The preacher expounds the forgiveness dimension of this text and does not concentrate on the “law in the heart” concept. This is evident in his application in Hebrews 10:18.

Theological Substance

What was the problem with the old covenant? Why did it become obsolete in the light of Jesus, our high priest?

For some the problem with the old covenant is its antiquated rituals or legalistic leanings. But this misreads the function and intent of the Mosaic covenant. It was never intended to be legalistic, any more than Christianity has that intent (though, of course, it did not prevent some from treating both as legalisms). The rituals were intended to shape the identity of the people and give concrete expressions to their faith, just as Christian rituals do (baptism and the Lord’s Supper, for example).

The problem with the old covenant was not its goal, intent and heart. Rather, the problem with the old covenant was that it could not absolutely secure forgiveness through the blood of animals. The problem was the nature of forgiveness and atonement. The preacher sees the point of contrast between old and new as centered in the issue of sin, atonement and forgiveness.

It is not that the rituals were legalistic or formalistic. Rather, the rituals were inferior because the sacrifices were inferior and insufficient, but nevertheless the rituals pointed Israel to the one who would provide the ground of forgiveness. The rituals were not bad or evil, just incomplete. They pointed to something beyond themselves—they pointed to Jesus who would secure our forgiveness through a new covenant.

The “better promises” which made necessary a “better covenant” is the forgiveness of sins. Forgiveness was available and genuinely experienced in Israel (Psalm 32; 51), but it

was provisional and unsecured in terms of God’s heavenly sanctuary. The ministry of Jesus provides the ground for the forgiveness of sins both under the old covenant and in the present (cf. Romans 3:25-26; Hebrews 9:15). Old covenant sins were not forgiven (in an absolute sense) on the basis of Levitical sacrifices, but were forgiven on the basis of the sacrifice of Jesus. His blood alone atones. God forgave sin under the old covenant because in his eyes those sacrifices were types or shadows of the sacrifice of Jesus.

“Better” relates to the Levitical order in contrast to the Messianic (Melchizedekian) order. Below is a chart that offers the contrasts that appear in Hebrews regarding a “better hope” (Hebrews 7:19), covenant (Hebrews 7:22), promises (Hebrews 8:6), priestly ministry (Hebrews 8:6), and sacrifices (Hebrews 9:23). This chart will help us visualize the argument of Hebrews 8:1-10:18.

Topic	Mosaic Covenant	Messianic Covenant
Priesthood	Weak	Powerful
	Temporal	Eternal
	Levitical	Melchizedek
	Sinful	Holy
Sanctuary	Copy, Shadow	Reality
	Earthly	Heavenly
	Infrequent Entrance	Frequent Entrance
	Only a Few	Universal
Sacrifices	Blood of Abel	Blood of Jesus
	Animal Life	Human Life
	External Cleansing	Full Cleansing
	Annual	Once for All

Theologically, Christians are encouraged by the finality and reality of Christ’s priestly ministry. There is no other ministry beyond his. He is the fulfillment of the Levitical priesthood, and he is the mediator of a genuine, authentic and real relationship with God that is no longer in the shadows.

Teaching Options

In teaching this material, I think three points are paramount as a theological base for application. First, we need to explain the contrast between true/real and copy/shadow in the preacher’s comparison. He points us to the majestic idea that Jesus ministers in the presence of God and not in an earthly copy. He is in the real sanctuary, not in the copy on earth.

Second, we need to emphasize how forgiveness (atonement, reconciliation) is at the center of the preacher’s concern. Our experience and reality of our forgiveness is tied to the ministry of Jesus in the true tabernacle. Here God finally and fully acted to secure forgiveness in an absolute manner. This was God’s act of redemption—he acted through Jesus to forgive, reconcile and atone.

Third, we need to emphasize a heightened sense of the presence of God. God writes his laws in our hearts and he dwells among his people. God has always intended to dwell among his people so that he could not only commune with them but also transform them. Leviticus 26:11-12 promises the dwelling of God, and Jeremiah 31 emphasizes that promise and articulates the “newness” as partly rooted in the fact that God will write his laws on their hearts. The church is the place where God dwells, and we are his temple—the fulfillment of Leviticus 26:11-12 to another level (as 2 Corinthians 6:15-16 indicates by quoting Leviticus 26). Ultimately, we long for the day when we too will dwell with Jesus in the presence of God (and experience the fullness of that heavenly tabernacle), and Revelation 21:1-4 anticipates that day.

In terms of application, we have to ask how does this encourage the original hearers in their perseverance and confidence, and we have to ask how this encourages us on our journey. What we have in Christ is real—it is a direct connect with God. It is reconciliation and forgiveness—God has dealt with guilt. It is transformation—God has put his law in our hearts. We are on the journey to a reality (not a farce or fairy tale), and we walk guilt-free (confident of God’s reconciling work) and empowered by the Spirit who dwells in us. This is confidence for the journey.

Rituals are important part of the journey. They were for Israel. The preacher does not deny their importance, but he points us beyond the old covenant rituals to experience the reality of Jesus. Christian rituals are also important as they are means of experiencing that reality (baptism, Lord’s Supper). We should not underemphasize them, but enjoy those gifts as means by which we experience God’s gracious presence among his people.

Looking to Jesus: Ministry in the Heavenly Tabernacle

Hebrews 9:1-10

Minister's Summary: Our high priest who is on duty both continuously and forever is ministering in the heavenly sanctuary. The earthly things of Aaron's ministry in a perishable structure fade by comparison to the realities of Christ's intercessory role for his people now.

Teaching Moments

This is a rather short text where the preacher reminds his hearers about God's work in the Mosaic tabernacle. He reminds of the articles within the tabernacle and the priestly functions within that tabernacle.

The text sets up the contrasts that the preacher will draw in the next section (Hebrews 9:11-10:18). It is the beginning of that argument. But before he can make the argument that the work of Christ in the heavenly tabernacle is superior (better), he must lay the conceptual ground of revived memories of God's work through the Mosaic tabernacle.

The function of this text in the argument, then, is memory. But it is exalted memory. It is not the memory of something bad, false or legalistic. It is the memory of the exalted ministry of Old Testament priests. It is the memory of God's dwelling place among his people. The text must not be approached as if it were a "put down," but as an appreciative memory of God's work in the tabernacle.

Exegetical Notes

1. Hebrews 9:1-5.

This section describes the tabernacle itself. It was a tent with specific regulations and articles of furniture. As the preacher almost clinically describes the furniture, it is important to remember the theological significance that is assumed for each.

The tabernacle was the dwelling place of God for Israel (Leviticus 26:11-12). Indeed, it was a "holy place" (a rectangle) followed by the "holiest place" or "Most Holy Place" (a square). It was holy because of the presence of God. The preacher reminds us that it was a place of special significance with the descriptions of "holy" and the detailed enumeration of the furniture (see the Navipress book for some specifics on this furniture).

The lamp stand was the light of God in the tabernacle, just as God was light in the darkness for Israel (cf. Exodus 25:31-40). The Bread is the bread of table and presence (Exodus 25:23-30). Eating the bread was eating in God's presence and a matter of fellowship with God. It was a thank offering for God's provision.

The Golden Altar of incense symbolized the prayers of God's people, and also filled the Most Holy Place with smoke as a symbol of God's presence (Exodus 30:1-10). The location of the altar is problematic. Exodus 30:6; 40:26 indicate that it stood in the Holy Place in front of the curtain. However, it appears that at other times it was placed within the Most Holy Place (1 Kings 6:20, 22) and it appears that it was understood to stand there in early Judaism by some.

The Ark of the Covenant is especially significant (Exodus 25:10-16). It is the presence God among his people; it was no mere symbol of God's presence. It was the place where God chose to center his presence among his people (Exodus 25:22). The ark was God's resting place (1 Chronicles 28:2; 2 Chronicles 6:40-42). The articles in the ark represented God's faithfulness and covenant with his people (Exodus 16:32-34; Numbers 17:10-11; Deuteronomy 10:1-2). The cherubim, angelic figures, surrounded God's throne. They testify to his holy presence. Indeed, the Ark of the Covenant is God's footstool. His feet sit on the ark as his presence fills the Most Holy Place and from there the whole earth.

The preacher specifics the atonement cover, which suites his ultimate purpose of discussing atonement in Hebrews 9-10 (Exodus 25:17-22). It is the traditional "mercy seat." The lid of the ark was sprinkled with blood on the day of atonement (Leviticus 16:14-15).

2. Hebrews 9:6-10

This second section focuses on the priestly ministry in the tabernacle. The priests daily entered the Holy Place to minister in the morning and evening (Exodus 27:20-21; 30:7-8; and once a week to replace the bread; cf. Leviticus 24:8-9), but the only the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place to minister and that only once a year (Leviticus 16). The High Priest entered on the Day of Atonement to make a sacrifice for sin, including his own sins. Thus, the High Priest entered only through blood—only by the cleansing and atoning element of blood could the High Priest enter the presence of God.

But this cleansing was external, according to the preacher. The blood of animals was only sufficient for an external cleansing. It did not cleanse the conscience. The preacher is not against external rituals, nor is he depreciating them. Rather, he is only recognizing that the tabernacle system was a copy of the original pattern (the heavenly tabernacle). He recognizes that animal sacrifices are not sufficient to cleanse people from their sins. Thus, the tabernacle ministry and regulations (including food, drink and regular immersions in water [the term "washing" is the term baptism, which refer to Levitical washings for ritual cleansing in the Mosaic system, cf. Leviticus 14:8-9; 15:5-11,13,16,18,21-22,27; 16:4,24,26,28; 17:15; 22:6]) served external functions. Literally, they could not "perfect" the human conscience.

Theological Substance

The preacher reminds his hearers of the earthly tabernacle in order to point them to something better. But we must approach this point with care.

The preacher does not rehearse this point as a “put down” of the tabernacle. He does not denigrate the tabernacle ministry or treat it with contempt. Instead, he honors it. He reminds us that it was a “Holy Place” with a “Most Holy Place.” It was the presence of God among his people. It was God’s gracious presence through atonement (“atonement cover”). Instead of lowering the meaning of the tabernacle, the preacher reminds them of its meaning and place. He gives it a high meaning in order to point to something higher!

God placed his presence among his people at the tabernacle (Leviticus 26:11-12). He dwelt among them, and the tabernacle was his dwelling place. As a holy place, it was approached with reverence and holiness. Consequently, it had worship regulations or liturgical rituals. These rituals conveyed the holiness of God and guided the approach of humans into God’s presence.

Americans do not understand the holiness of rituals. Our sitcoms constantly use the name of God as a synonym for “Wow!” as in “Oh, my God!” We do not understand holiness. Instead, we have made the holy mundane instead of making all of life holy.

However, by rehearsing these details for his audience, the preacher appeals to their sense of awe, reverence and holiness. The tabernacle was a mighty work of God among his people. It was his gracious presence.

But it was a copy, a shadow. It was patterned after the heavenly tabernacle. It pointed to something beyond itself. It was temporary because it was a copy. The original has now been unveiled and made accessible.

Theologically, I would emphasize several points. First, the dwelling of God is now in the hearts of human beings (cf. “law in the heart” of Jeremiah 31 in last week’s lesson). God now dwells in his people; we are the temple of God (2 Corinthians 6:14-16 which quotes Leviticus 26:11-12). The function of the Mosaic tabernacle has now found fulfillment by God’s indwelling of us by his Spirit.

Second, the ritual regulations in the Mosaic tabernacle presented a barrier between God and his people. Only priests could enter the Holy Place. Only the High Priest could enter the Most Holy Place. God, though dwelling among his people, was still separated from them. There was a distance between God and his people. However, in Christ this distance has been overcome as we enter into the Most Holy Place by the blood of Christ (Hebrews 10:19-25). We enter the throne room of God through prayer (Hebrews 4:16). The distance has been broken down. Nevertheless, we still wait to see God face to face when we will see him in the new heaven and new earth when God will fully dwell with his people (Revelation 21:1-4; 22:1-6).

Third, though the Mosaic tabernacle was the presence of God among his people, the regulations (including animal sacrifices) were only copies and thus could not fully

cleanse and perfect the people of God. However, the blood of Christ can, and this is the subject of the rest of chapter nine.

The preacher provides strength for the journey by pointing his hearers to something better. What Israel had was good—God was present in his Holy Place, but what God has now provided is better. If we let go of this, there is nothing left. If we forsake Christ, there is no other sacrifice for sin. Jesus has brought us into the heavenly tabernacle, and if we forsake the journey there is nowhere else to go.

Teaching Options

It would be good to detail some of the history of the tabernacle and go over the theological function of the furniture. The class could read Exodus 25 and other appropriate texts. There is a value here because we need to appreciate how important the tabernacle was to the people of Israel. We especially need to emphasize the holiness and presence of God in the tabernacle. If we can inculcate into our classes an understanding of that holiness and presence, perhaps we will be able to see this text in a clearer light as the preacher reminds his audience of what we perhaps do not see clearly.

Consequently, the history is important as we give ourselves a sense of the exalted status of the tabernacle. It is not a negative in the history of God with his people, but the reality of his presence among them and a pointer to God's fuller presence among his people in Christ by the indwelling of the Spirit. We can then call ourselves to holiness in the light of the fact of God's indwelling presence among us.

In teaching this text, then, I would move from history to theology. On the theological point I would move to application in the context of our holiness. Whereas we tend to turn the holy into the mundane, the presence of God in our lives should transform the mundane into the holy. The tabernacle reminds us of that and points us to the fuller presence of God among us today. We are God's tabernacle, and we are God's light in the world. We are his presence.

Looking to Jesus: The Perfect Sacrifice, Part I

Hebrews 9:11-28

Minister's Summary: The ministry of a high priest is to officiate in sacrifices on behalf of the people. The beautiful truth of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice of himself on our behalf is affirmed here. Jesus is both the one offering the sacrifice and the sacrifice that was offered.

Teaching Moments

In Hebrews 9:11-10:18, the preacher reaches the climax of his argument concerning the high priesthood of Jesus. The argument intends to ground the faith and hope of the people of God as a means of providing strength for their journey toward the city of God. He grounds the faith of his people in the high priestly sacrifice of Jesus and his presentation of that sacrifice in the heavenly sanctuary.

Exegetical Notes

The Mosaic Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16) is the immediate backdrop for the preacher's words. He intentionally describes the work of Christ as the work of the high priest on the Day of Atonement. Some familiarity with Leviticus 16 would be helpful.

The day was dedicated to fasting and rest (Leviticus 23:32) and apparently announced with trumpets throughout the land (Leviticus 25:9), which reflected the people's sorrow and mourning over their sin. The high priest would immerse himself (wash his whole body) before he put on the sacred garments when on other days of ritual he would only wash his hands/feet (Lev. 16:4 with Exodus 30:19-21). The special garments symbolized holiness.

The day involved two sets of sacrifices. For his own house (the Aaronic priesthood), he offered a young bull as a sin offering and a ram as a burnt offering (Lev. 16:3, 5). He offered these first. Two goats were prepared for the sins of the people. However, the priesthood had to be sanctified before it could offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people.

With a censer full of burning coals, the High Priest entered the Most Holy Place. He placed some incense on the coals, which created a smoke that filled the Most Holy Place. This smoke would prevent him from seeing the mercy seat (cf. Lev. 16:13) for there was the presence of God himself (Lev. 16:2). Once the smoke filled the room, he would bring the blood of the bull into the room and sprinkle it on the mercy seat (Lev. 16:14). He would then go outside the tent to perform the "goat ritual."

One of the goats (chosen by lot) was sacrificed as a sin offering, but other goat was released into the wilderness. The blood of the first goat was taken into the Most Holy Place. The high priest thus entered twice into the Most Holy Place to sprinkle blood, but on the same day. This purified the Tent of Meeting (Lev. 16:16). The goat released into the wilderness was sent with the sins of the people away from the dwelling-place of God and the people. The sins were laid on the goat through the laying on of hands (Lev. 16:21-22). After this ritual, the high priest again immersed himself and put on a new set of robes—his elaborate, ceremonial robes (Lev. 16:24). Immersion rituals were important on this day, as you can see from Leviticus 16:26 and 28.

Once sin and defilement had been dealt with through the sin offerings and the scapegoat, the high priest offered burnt offerings to dedicate the priesthood and the people to God once again (Leviticus 16:27).

Jewish sources tell us that though the day began with solemnity and penitence (fasting), it ended with joy and celebration in the recognition that God had atoned their sins. Israel rejoiced at the re-emergence of the High Priest from the Most Holy Place—it was a dangerous journey into the presence of God that was concluded with great joy when he reappeared.

1. Hebrews 9:11-14

William Lane calls this text the “heart of the preacher’s argument” (*Call to Commitment*, 120). Against the backdrop of the Mosaic tabernacle (described in 9:1-10), the preacher focuses his attention on Christ’s “Day of Atonement” when the high priest enters the Most Holy Place with the blood of bulls and goats. These verses succinctly state the exalted view of the cross and his subsequent entrance into heaven (ascension) that the preacher wants to impress on his hearers.

Lane calls attention to the central continuity between the Mosaic ritual and Christ and then outlines four points of discontinuity. The point of continuity is that Christ entered the Most Holy Place by means of blood to make atonement for the people. The points of discontinuity are: (1) Jesus entered a heavenly sanctuary rather than an earthly one; (2) Jesus approached God with his own blood rather than the blood of animals; (3) Jesus entered once for all rather than once a year; and (4) Jesus secured eternal redemption rather than annual cleansing. I would add one further discontinuity: Jesus cleanses the conscience rather than simply a function of external cleansing.

I think the purpose clause of verse 14 is particularly significant. We need cleansed consciences so that we might worship/serve the Living God. This is in contrast with Hebrews 9:9 where the worshipper is hindered by such. God effects atonement so that we might fully and intimately serve/worship him without restriction and restricted access. The “acts that lead to death” are the acts of sin (not Mosaic ritual; cf. Hebrews 6:2).

The reference to the “eternal Spirit” is a bit elusive. Some think it refers to Jesus’ own eternal spirit by which, by his eternal life, he offered his own death to the Father.

However, since the word “Spirit” is used in Hebrews of the Holy Spirit and never in reference to Jesus’ own spirit, it probably best to think of this in terms of the qualifying and empowering work of the Holy Spirit. By the power of the eternal Spirit of God, Jesus lives to offer himself to the Father and sit at his right hand. Eternal redemption is rooted in the eternal life of God whose Spirit is the power and agent of the work of the Son.

2. Hebrews 9:15-22

Eternal redemption secures an eternal inheritance. As the redemption and inheritance fulfill the Mosaic covenant and are the reality to which they point, there is a need for a new covenant. Jesus is the mediator of this new covenant—the real covenant, not the shadow.

The reality even is the reality that forgave the sins under the shadow. The preacher claims that the sins, which were forgiven in the Mosaic rituals, were actually forgiven on the basis on the reality, not the shadow. The people of Israel experienced real forgiveness (Psalm 32, 51), but their forgiveness was based on the reality of the work of Christ. The blood of Jesus also forgave sins under the old covenant (cf. Romans 3:25-26). Israel experienced that forgiveness through the shadow (through the rituals), but the reality of their forgiveness was not based on the shadow (blood of animals). Nevertheless, the reality of forgiveness is through a blood ritual, the blood of Jesus as our high priestly victim. The new covenant is the reality to which the old covenant pointed.

The preacher digresses in verses 16-22 to explain why the death of Christ was necessary. It was necessary not only because of the need for a blood ritual, but also because a covenant (will—same word in Greek in this section) is placed into effect through death. The preacher uses the ambiguity of the Greek word for “covenant” to connect the death of Christ with both covenant-making by blood ritual and also “testament” (wills) enactment after the death of the testator (the one who made the will). The new covenant is effected by a sacrificial death that makes a new covenant and which is put into effect (the reality is manifested and secured) after the death of the testator.

3. Hebrews 9:23-28

Just as the Mosaic covenant was enacted with blood, so the new covenant was enacted with blood precisely because the Mosaic action was a copy (shadow) of the true (real). Moses patterned his actions after the real, and the reality is the death of Christ.

The preacher returns to his Day of Atonement analogy in terms of shadow and reality. Jesus entered the heavenly tabernacle—this is the reality. This is what secures redemption. The preacher focuses on the discontinuities of the old and new in order to exalt the new—he does not intend to denigrate the old. Rather, salvation history has come to completion with the revelation and actualization of what is decisively redemptive—the work of Christ on the cross and in the presence of God.

That work is viewed in terms of past, present and future—cross, now in the presence of God interceding for us, and coming again. The fullness of our redemption will only be revealed in the end—that will be the ultimate reality (salvation). The certainty of Christ’s work and ultimate victory in the second coming is as certain as death itself!

Consequently, don’t give up the journey. Continue to persevere in faith. Your redemption is an eternal one; your inheritance is an eternal one. When Christ comes a second time, your salvation will be fully revealed and the kingdom of God (the fullness of reality) will be yours.

Theological Substance

Theologically, it is important to remember that the preacher does not think of the cross of Christ in isolation from his entrance into heaven. The cross, ascension (assumed resurrection), and presentation in the presence of God is one movement with three parts. We should think of this as a unified whole. The living Christ presents his own blood in the presence of God for our redemption. Too often evangelicals emphasize the death of Christ to the undervaluing of the redemptive significance of the resurrection and ascension.

But the preacher believes that the altar (sacrifice of the blood in the death of Christ) is useless without the presentation of that blood by the living priest in the heavenly sanctuary. The two must go together. It is one movement—it must be conceived holistically. Death and Resurrection are the gospel, and the preacher conceives the resurrection, at least in part, as the means for the living Christ to present his sacrifice to the Father through entrance into the Most Holy Place, the dwelling-place of God.

That living Christ presented his blood to the Father and remained at the side of the Father (at his right hand), and will remain there until he appears again at his second coming. The preacher reflects a grand vision of redemptive history: the Son comes, offers himself as a sacrificial victim, through resurrection life presents his own blood to the Father, remains at the right hand of the Father to intercede for his people, and then comes again to bring the fullness of salvation. This is the preacher’s understanding of salvation history.

The Mosaic covenant prefigured it. It was a shadow, a pointer to that reality. It led the people to that reality. But the reality is the work of the Son through incarnation, death, resurrection, ascension, intercession and second coming. Christology is his soteriology; it is the fulfillment of Mosaic yearnings, pointings and anticipations. It is the reality of salvation; the eternal Son brings eternal redemption through his eternal priesthood. The Son appeared at the “end of the ages” and his return will be the consummation of the age as we experience the fullness of salvation. We are in the “last days” anticipating the “last day”—the day of eternal salvation.

The theological significance is that this is a thorough cleansing—it cleanses the heart of guilty stains. Our defiled consciences hinder worship. They hinder relationship with God. Our guilt burdens us and prevents a full intimacy with God. However, the blood of Jesus cleanses those guilty stains as the hymn of William Cowper states:

There is a fountain filled with blood/
Drawn from Immanuel's veins / And sinners
plunged beneath that flood/
Loose all their guilty stains. The dying thief rejoiced to see/
That fountain in his day;/ And there may I, though vile as he,/ Wash all my sins away.

Teaching Options

The application of this text is directly related; it seems to me, to the function of the blood of Christ cleansing our guilty consciences. What the blood of bulls and goats could not accomplish, the blood of Jesus could. It is the definitive and decisive offering which washes away all sin. It provides “eternal redemption”—it takes away sin.

Some acquaintance with the Day of Atonement would be helpful since the preacher's argument depends on an analogy with that day. As in discussing the tabernacle, it is important to give a sense of how deeply holy and significant that day was. It began with fasting, penance and mourning for sin, it progressed with anticipation as the people watched the sacrificial killings and waited for the re-emergence of the High Priest from the Most Holy Place, and then culminated in washings, burnt offerings and joyous celebration (gratitude) for the atonement secured. Indeed, we might think about our own sense of excitement when we hear conversion narratives, witness baptisms, see restorations, etc.

Our discussions can turn on how guilt obstructs our approach to God, and how the blood of Christ is God's final resolution to that guilt. The focus could then shift to our gratitude for that redemption and the hope of eternal inheritance, which that redemption secures.

Our discussions could also turn on how this encourages our journey of faith. How does this theological substance empower us for the journey? How does it ground perseverance?

Looking to Jesus: The Perfect Sacrifice, Part II

Hebrews 10:1-18

Minister's Summary: The ministry of a high priest is to officiate in sacrifices on behalf of the people. The beautiful truth of Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice of himself on our behalf is affirmed here. Jesus is both the one offering the sacrifice and the sacrifice that was offered.

Teaching Moments

The fundamental point of this text is the contrast between the inadequacy of the provisions of the law in terms of both priests and sacrifices and the adequacy of the work of Christ as both priest and sacrifice. The many priests and sacrifices of the old covenant are inadequate in comparison to the one priest and sacrifice of the new covenant. This contrast is focused on the obedience of Jesus to the Father in carrying out his work. The atoning work of Christ is adequate and fully sufficient because Jesus is the obedient one who inaugurated a new covenant of forgiveness and life ("written on the heart").

This, of course, continues the themes introduced from chapter 7 forward. The priesthood of Jesus (ch 7) inaugurates a new covenant (ch 8), which secures eternal redemption through his presence before God for us (ch 9). Hebrews 10:1-18 is the climactic underscoring of the significance of these themes. It focuses the point in the light Christ's obedience and its significance for us.

Exegetical Notes

William Lane, *Call to Commitment*, p. 130, divides this section into four parts—the last part responds to the first part, and the third part responds to the second part in a chiasmic fashion. He sees the following chiasmic relationship:

- A The inadequacy of the provisions of the Law for repeated sacrifices for sin (10:1-4).
- B The repeated sacrifices have been set aside by the one sacrifice of Christ who did the will of God (10:5-10).
- B' The Levitical priests have been set aside by the one priest enthroned at God's right hand (10:11-14).
- A' The adequacy of the provisions of the new covenant: a sacrifice for sins is no longer necessary (10:15-18).

This arrangement enables the reader to see the climactic point and how the preacher brings his argument about covenant, sacrifice and priesthood to final conclusion. The next section in Hebrews (10:19ff) is an exhortation or an encouragement based upon this extended argument (7:1-10:18).

1. Hebrews 10:1-4.

The word that the preacher uses to describe how “continuously” or “endlessly” the sacrifices are offered to purify worshippers is the same word that is used to describe the work the intercession of Christ in Hebrews 10:12 and 10:14. The phrase “for all time” in 10:12 and the word “forever” in 10:14 are the same word in Greek. The theology of this connection is powerful. What the Law did continually in reminding us of sin, Jesus did “for all time” by one sacrifice so that we are “forever” perfected by that sacrifice. In contrast to an annual reminder of sin, we have, by virtue of Christ’s “for all time” sacrifice, the status of eternal (“forever”) perfection!

This perfection is the reality that Jesus accomplishes—it was what the Law foreshadowed but could not accomplish. The blood of bulls and goats (Day of Atonement) was not sufficient to dispel the memory of sin and guilt.

The preacher uses two words to describe the effect that he wants to underscore—perfection (10:1) and memory (reminder; or “feelings of guilt” in 10:2). This is equivalent to the cleansed conscience of 9:14. But “perfection” is the word that the preacher emphasizes in this section. The term “perfect” occurs again in 10:12 and 10:14. Thus, the term “perfect” and “endlessly” are connected in the same verses three times.

2. Hebrews 10:5-10.

The preacher brings another Psalm into his argument. He quotes Psalm 40:6-8 in Hebrews 10:5-7, and then quotes parts of it again in Hebrews 10:8-9.

The context of Psalm 40 is important. It is a prayer for deliverance (Ps. 40:11, 14). In the prayer, the Psalmist recognizes that God’s interest is primarily on a transformed life, a heart of obedience. God is not interested in sacrifices, even though he commands them. God’s interest in ritual is how it mediates his presence through the heart of a person who seeks him. To obey is better than sacrifice (cf. 1 Samuel 15:22).

The preacher, however, picks up a phrase that is not in the Hebrew Old Testament, but is in the Greek translation of the Hebrew OT. The word “body” in Hebrews 10:5 does not appear in Hebrew (the Hebrew reads: “you have pierced my ears” which refers to belonging to God as a servant). The preacher uses the word “body” to connect the Psalm to the theology of the incarnation. When Christ came into the world, he was given a body—a body through which to sacrifice himself, but—more importantly—a body through which to do the will of God as obedient Son. It is through the “body” of the Son that we have been “made holy.”

The body of Christ means our sanctification (holiness). We have been sanctified (made holy) by the sacrifice of the body, which is Christ's obedience to the will of God. The term "holy" will appear again in 10:14.

3. Hebrews 10:11-14.

The contrast between the Levitical priests and Jesus is strong in this text. While they continually sacrifice, Jesus has made an eternal sacrifice once for all and is now seated at the right hand of God. The priestly image is also shaped by a royal image—Jesus is seated as a royal figure who conquers enemies. He will sit there till all the enemies of God are destroyed.

In this context, the enemy is sin and guilt. The perfected one now sits at the right hand of God as he reigns over and intercedes for those who are being made holy. The word "holy" is a present passive—it indicates a process of transformation. The people of God have been made holy (10:10), but are also in the process of being made holy (10:14). It is both/and, not either/or. We are saints, but yet in the process of being sanctified. We are cleansed, but in the process of transformation. We are forgiven, but yet in the process of learning obedience just as the Son learned obedience. I see this as an allusion to the process of sanctification (contra Guthrie, p.329).

4. Hebrews 10:15-18.

This section reintroduces the quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34 which the preacher introduced in Hebrews 8:8-12. He does not quote the full text again, but emphasizes two aspects of the text.

The first emphasis is on the nature of the new life in the new covenant—it is a transformed life by virtue of the presence of God in our hearts. God has written his law on our hearts so that we might understand him and obey him. The second emphasis is on the nature of forgiveness—it is a decisive cleansing of the conscience so that even God no longer remembers our sin. If God no longer remembers it, then we need not remember it either. Sin is gone and life is transformed by the work of Christ.

Theological Substance

God's goal for his fallen creatures is to provide a "perfect cleansing" for their consciences. His goal is the perfection of his people, which involves both (1) a conscience cleansed of guilty stains—where there is no remembrance of sin, and (2) a heart upon which God has written his law so that life reflects God's holiness.

Theologically, Christ offered himself through the eternal Spirit to secure eternal redemption so that worshippers could enter God's presence with cleansed consciences (9:14). This once for all action meant that Christ is seated at the right hand of God in God's presence for us (9:24) so that we can approach God without guiltiness and without

the hindrance of guilty memories. Annual sacrifices reminded worshippers of their guilt (10:4), but the work of Christ means that guilt is no longer a factor. It has been decisively eradicated and the consciences of worshippers has been cleansed (forgiveness) and renewed (law written on the heart).

The theological center of this text is the obedience of Jesus. Twice the “I have come to do your will” text of Psalm 40 is quoted in reference to Jesus. This emphasis should not be overlooked. Jesus became the author of eternal salvation through obedience (Hebrews 5:8). This salvation, however, is for those who obey God, that is, who persevere in faith and follow their champion on his path of an obedient life (Hebrew 5:9).

The work of Christ makes us holy—he has perfected us through his sacrifice (10:14). This sacrifice means that we are forgiven (no more memory of sin; no more guilty stains, 10:17) and that God’s law is engraved on our hearts so that we may obey (so we can persevere through the suffering; 10:16).

The obedience of Christ (who does the will of God) is followed by our own obedience because of the work Christ has done and continues to do for us. Our obedience is rooted in his obedience. He has done the will of God so we can do the will of God. He obeyed so we can obey. He inaugurated a new covenant where the law of God is written on our hearts and our hearts are fully cleansed of guiltiness.

Our obedience (perseverance in faith) does not arise out of a motive of guilt or fear. Rather, it arises out of a cleansed heart as God has worked in Christ renew our hearts by his Spirit. He has written the law on our hearts, and our obedience arises out of that heart.

Because of renewed and forgiven hearts, we can persevere in faith. We can progress, grow and mature. Because of God’s work in Christ, we can enter the presence of God with confidence and without fear or guilt. The work of Christ prepares, emboldens and reshapes our hearts for the journey. It strengthens us for the journey.

Perseverance requires two things, at least in this text: (1) it requires a cleansed conscience along with an understanding of what that means and how it is rooted in the work of Christ alone; and (2) it requires the resolve to do the will of God despite the suffering and problems of life, yet with an understanding that the desire and obedience arises from God’s work in our hearts. Perseverance is by obedient faith, but obedient faith is rooted in God’s gracious work in Christ.

Teaching Options

The connection between this lesson and last week’s is the issue of guilt and a cleansed conscience (heart). I think I will begin with that connection and remind the class of the theological argument of 9:11-28. Christ has offered a sacrifice that cleanses our consciences so that we may enter God’s presence without guilty stains. God has removed guilt as a barrier, whether it is the guiltiness of sin that barred our entrance into God’s

presence or the memory of guilty that hinders our approach to God within our own psyche.

However, I will place the emphasis this week on the idea of obedience, and the quotation of Psalm 40 as a model for both Christ and contemporary believers. By focusing on Psalm 40 and the use the preacher makes of this text, we can call believers to obedience in their lives. But this obedience is rooted not in our own self-resolve, but in a renewed heart by the power of the Spirit.

We, too, just as Christ, come to do the will of God. It is not the rituals upon which God focuses, but the life and obedient heart that seeks him. God is more interested in transformation than he is ritual. Consequently, an application to work out in this setting is the contrast between sacrifices and an obedient life that is embedded in Psalm 40 upon which the preacher here draws.

After reminding the class of the argument about consciences and the work of Christ that removes the memory of sin—even from God’s own memory!—I will take them back to Psalm 40. Looking at that Psalm in its own context, and then moving to the context of Christ’s work, and then bringing it home to our context as we take up the words of the Psalm and Christ into our own lives, “Look, I have come to do your will.”

So?

Hebrews 10:19-39

Minister's Summary: In Pauline style, this section begins with a “therefore” of spiritual implication from the great doctrinal foundation that has been laid through 10:18. For one who embraces the superiority of Jesus over all that has gone before, the writer/preacher begins driving home the practical implications of this great truth for the life that is lived by faith.

Teaching Moments

The argument is now complete. Jesus is a better priest, a better sacrifice, a better mediator of a better covenant who secures for us eternal redemption and an eternal inheritance by virtue of his eternal priesthood. Our postmodern minds respond with the question, “so what?”

In this section the preacher brings the point home and applies the significance of Jesus to the lives of his original hearers. In particular, he articulates the theological significance of the priesthood of Jesus for the life of the Christian community. Specifically, he encourages his hearers to persevere in their faith as a community because of the significance of what Jesus has done for us.

Our section begins with the confidence of entering the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus and ends with an appeal for perseverance in faith. This confidence enables perseverance. Faith draws strength for the journey through recognition of what Jesus has done and from the communal experience of faith in the past and present.

Exegetical Notes

This section consists of four paragraphs. It moves the reader from the present situation of the community (10:19-25) with a warning about potential apostasy (10:26-31) to their past experience of faith (10:32-34) with an encouragement concerning their future (10:35-39).

1. Hebrews 10:19-25.

This is perhaps one of the theologically richest (which is quite a claim considering how many there are in Hebrews) and also most well known texts in Hebrews. It is well known because it contains a favorite proof-text about assembling, but it is rich because it calls for communal worship in the divine presence in the context of a life dedicated to God.

We have confidence (boldness; cf. 3:6; 4:16; 10:35) to enter the Most Holy Place. It is not only the high priest who now enters the Most Holy Place (divine presence), but believers enter it as well. The body of Christ (10:14) has opened a new way for us—it

has opened the curtain that separated God from his people. Now, the people of God have immediate access to the Father through Jesus. We all enter the Most Holy Place.

Given this opening, this access, the preacher encourages his hearers to “draw near” to God. The term “draw near” is important (cf. Hebrews 4:16; 7:25; 10:1; 11:6; 12:18, 22). It is an OT liturgical term that refers to the coming of a worshipper. It means to come before God (cf. Lev. 9:5,7,8; 10:4,5; 21:17,18,21,23). We come into the presence of God through Jesus (Hebrews 7:25). To draw near is to experience divine presence as a worshipper.

This access is characterized by several phrases. Worshipers enter the presence of God with assured and sincere hearts as our hearts have been sprinkled with the blood of Christ and our bodies have been washed in baptism.

- A sincere (true; cf. Isaiah 38:3) heart, that is, no divided allegiance; we approach God with our hearts.
- In full assurance of faith, that is, without doubt but with confidence; it is an assurance that flows from faith.
- Hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience; a purged conscience (Hebrews 9:14; 10:2) through the sprinkled blood of Jesus (blood is sprinkled, not water; cf. 9:19-22; 12:24).
- Bodies washed with pure water; the term “washed” is used of OT priestly water immersions (cf. Lev. 8:6; 11:40; 14:8,9; 15:5-8, etc.) as on the Day of Atonement (Lev. 16:4,24,26,28). It “pure water” in that it is water that is cleansing—it cleanses the body just as the blood cleanses the soul. This is a reference to Christian baptism.

The preacher also encourages two other actions. Not only to draw “draw near,” but also to “hold unwaveringly to our hope” and to “consider how we may spur one another to love and good works.” The encouragement is to remain a community—to hold together around the hope and love of the community in the light of the confidence we have in Jesus. These encouragements must be read in the light of the community’s apathy, neglect and discouragement. The preacher’s encouragement is rooted in what Jesus has done, and this is the demonstration of God’s faithfulness. Because God is faithful and because God has acted in Jesus, we hold onto our hope without wavering.

The preacher encourages his hearers to pay attention to each other—to consider each other, or fix our eyes on each other. We are to provoke—stir the pot—each other to love and good works. Thus, the community is a source of encouragement rather than discouragement. And encouragement comes in the context of assembling together.

Hebrews 10:25 is one of those favorite proof-texts for assembling, as if to miss any assembly of the saints is to violate the point here. However, what concerns the preacher

is the “habit” of some—the continual rejection and neglect of those who no longer assemble with the saints. To “forsake” the assembly is to give up meeting with the church altogether. The term is a word for “apostasy” in Chronicles (cf. 2 Chr. 7:19,22; 12:1,5; 13:10,11; 15:2; 21:10; 24:18,20, 24,25; 29:6; 32:31; 34:25). The term is used in Hebrews 13:5 as a promise that God will not forsake (abandon) his people. The preacher is referring to apostates here, not those who occasionally miss an assembly or simply never come on Wednesday evening.

What the preacher is concerned about is that assembling is something saints should do more often because of the benefit of assembling together in the presence of God (as we draw near) is encouragement. I imagine the preacher would like daily assemblies (cf. Hebrews 3:13).

Interestingly, 10:22-24 contains the triad of faith, hope and love. We draw near with faith, persevere with hope and encourage each other with love. Thus, the community hangs together and gains strength for the journey.

2. Hebrews 10:26-31.

The warning against apostasy should be heard in the context of the whole sermon. It is occasioned by the habit of some to forsake the assembly, that is, their willful rejection of the assembly of God’s people. The “sin” that the preacher has in mind is not one act of missing an assembly, or a single act of sin, but the persistent habit of sin that arises out of a willful rejection of God’s appointed one. This is the sin of one who has rejected the Christian faith as a whole. If one persists in this sin, then there is no other sacrifice; there is no hope.

The preacher uses the argument from lesser to greater to emphasize this point. If willful sinners did not escape punishment under the Mosaic law, then they will certainly not escape punishment if they have rejected God’s Son and Spirit. The words used here are quite vivid. They “trample” (cf. Isaiah 63:6,18) the Son of God, that is, they treat him with contempt (which is in contrast with how the Father has exalted him) and regard his blood as “unclean” (NIV reads “unholy”). They “insult” the Spirit of grace, that is, their rebellion constitutes an affront, an offence. They insult the graciousness of God by rejected the work of God in Christ.

The same context where God promises that he will not forsake his people in Deuteronomy 31:6 (quoted in Hebrews 13:5) is also the same context in which God says he will judge and punish his people in Deuteronomy 32:35-36 (quoted in Hebrews 10:30-31). Those who forsake God, God will forsake. If we abandon the Christian faith and sin deliberately, then God will judge his people for their sins. Judgment is certain, and thus the text constitutes a warning against apostasy.

3. Hebrews 10:32-34.

Strength for the journey not only arises from present confidence, but also from past experience. Consequently, the preacher reminds his hearers of their past perseverance. They have previously endured suffering (for the context of this suffering, see the first lesson in this series).

Indeed, their struggle began during the first days of their conversion (enlightenment). They were exposed to derision and they lost property. Some were imprisoned.

It was a time when the church endured this suffering joyfully. They were secure in their faith and hope. They persevered. However, times have changed. Now the church is weak and apathetic. Some have fallen away and no longer assemble with the saints. Some have hardened their hearts. Consequently, the preacher recalls the past in order to encourage the believers who remain.

4. Hebrews 10:35-39.

The preacher encourages endurance and perseverance on the basis of the future, that is, on the ground of what God has promised. Given the confidence we have in Christ (10:19), we should not give up what we have because the future will bring “reward”—it will bring the “Sabbath” (Hebrews 4) or the “city of God” (Hebrews 11). God has yet to fully work his will and we anticipate the future.

God has a work yet to do. The preacher quotes Habakkuk 2:3-4. Habakkuk experienced a time of tribulation, much like the preacher’s audience here. Habakkuk was told to wait for the destruction that would come upon evil (cf. Hab. 3:16-19). The preacher calls for the same patience in his hearers. They will have to wait for God’s full revelation of himself when Jesus returns. They must wait through faith.

The preacher calls for faith—a continued, persistent trust in the work of God. This is faith is not only in God’s past work in Jesus (cross, exaltation), but also God’s future work through Jesus (the second coming).

Theological Substance

The basic exhortation is to continue to believe. Through faith, draw near to God and enter his presence with confidence. Through faith, wait for God to work his final work as he judges the wicked and redeems the righteous. Through faith, patiently endure the suffering of the present time in light of the hope that sustains us.

This faith, however, has a communal context (“let us”). It is faith within a faith community. The preacher—speaking to a group of assembled believers—urges them to approach God as a community with faith, hope and love. They should remember their past, claim their confidence in the present, and hope for the future work of God as a community. In the chapters to follow, the preacher will point to past examples of faith (11:1-40), understanding of the present experience of tribulation as discipline (12:1-14), and the presence of the future in kingdom of God (12:15-29). All of this, of course, is to

give strength for the journey; to continue the journey of faith despite the hardships which community presently endures.

Their confidence, of course, is the very thing that preacher has sought to unfold up to this point in Hebrews. Their confidence is Jesus who, as high priest, pioneered their way into the presence of God. This is the ground of perseverance in the present and ground of their future hope.

The exhortations to draw near (approach God liturgically), hold fast and stir each other up are grounded in the work of Christ, both past (cross/resurrection), present (intercession; presence at the right hand of God) and future (his second coming).

Teaching Options

The NaviPress book has some good suggestions as to how to discuss this text. Some good questions are part of the outline there.

The text moves in a nice progression: (1) the “let us” series based upon our confidence; (2) the warning; and (3) the exhortation to persevere. Each section is worth some considerable discussion.

In the first section, notice how the triad of faith, hope and love function. How do each relate to aspects of the Christian life, and Christian community? In the second section, discuss the severity of the warning. Is this disturbing? What “sin” is described in this section? How does this warning fit with the general encouragement of God’s grace throughout Hebrews? In the third section, past and future converge to strength us in the present journey. What past experiences continue to encourage us in the present? How does the future encourage us in the present?

Ultimately, the text is an encouragement to continue and a warning about apostasy. If we do not continue, there is no other alternative. If we continue, God is faithful and he will do what he promised.

Take Heart From Others' Stories

Hebrews 11:1-40

Minister's Summary: As we have learned from Robert Coles and others, the power of stories to teach, inspire, and improve their hearers was already known to this teacher. A litany of OT stories underscores the meaning of faith/faithfulness to those who are discouraged, threatened, and beginning to weaken under the strain.

Teaching Moments

For those who have experienced hardship and tragedy in life, the call to perseverance in faith can often sound shallow. Those of us who have experienced deep hurt (death of a child, death of a spouse, divorce, etc.) hear those simple pithy though well-intended sayings ("Hang in there, it will get better," or "trust God, he will deliver you," or "have faith") with a bit of skepticism and cynicism. What we are thinking usually, but what we won't say is, "you don't know what you are talking about; you have not been there."

Our preacher understands the future hostility that his community will face. They will experience martyrdom on an unprecedented scale, presumably Nero's persecution in Rome (if that is the right setting for this sermon; you can search the internet for the ancient reports of his persecution by Suetonius and Tacitus). They have not yet resisted to blood (Hebrews 12:4), but they will. Consequently, he knows the need more than a few theological ideas. They need something concrete; something real.

In Hebrews 10:19-39, the preacher has brought them to a theological understanding of their confidence before God. He has reminded them of their own communal history when years ago they stood the test of persecution. He has affirmed their future reward and assured them that God is coming (the Day will come). But this does not seem enough. He wants to encourage, motivate and strengthen the faith of his hearers. Consequently, he reminds them that they are not the only ones who have endured through faith nor are they first to suffer because of faith.

Hebrews 11 provides models for and witnesses to the endurance of faith. What sufferers and strugglers need most is to know that there are others who have gone before them. Others have suffered and endured. Others have struggled and won. Faith needs models in order to endure. Faith needs fellow travelers on the journey. It needs pioneers and champions.

Our greatest pioneer and champion, of course, is Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-3). But there are others who have gone before as well throughout Scripture. Their stories are scattered throughout the Bible. The preacher draws on these stories to provide models for faith. We have examples of people who have "been there, done that." They have experienced hardship, suffering and persecution, but they have endured! They remained faithful. These are the "witnesses" of Hebrews 11 (cf. Hebrews 12:1).

Exegetical Notes

Usually, in this section I divide the text into various sections with a few notes. However, the enormity of this text persuades me to use a different tactic. Rather, I will treat the text more thematically and this will then segway into the theological section below.

However, the text does fall into a nice historical picture of the biblical narrative—it is structured by history: Antediluvian (11:3-7); Patriarchs (11:8-22); Moses and Conquest (11:23-31); and Varied Stories from Israel's History (11:32-38). These stories are bracketed by a description of faith (11:1-2) and the importance of faith (11:39-40).

1. The Description of Faith (Hebrews 11:1-2)

This is probably the most famous description of faith in the New Testament. It is not a definition of faith, but rather a description that relates to the context of the preacher's intent. He describes faith in a way that connects with the situation of his hearers and the narratives to which he is about to point them. Faith in Hebrews 10:39 is a steadfast trust in God's promise.

Lane (Word Biblical Commentary, 2:325) offers this translation: "Now faith celebrates the objective reality [of the blessings] for which we hope, the demonstration of events as yet unseen." I think this catches the heart of the point. Faith relies on the reality of hope—it banks on the future. Faith, thus, gives present reality to something that is yet future. Faith is the experience of the future. When faith acts—when it endures, obeys, and lives out its way of life—it demonstrates the reality of what we do not yet see. It is the proof of that reality.

Faith is directed toward the future, but it is a present experience that gives that future reality in the present. Faith grasps the future as if it is already here. Thus, faith endures because it is future-oriented and experiences that future in the present through that faith. The future has not yet come, but its reality is demonstrated in the experience of faith. We see that demonstration in the lives of those who have endured hardship through faith. They claimed the promise even though it was yet future. They believed even though they had not yet received. They endured despite the hardships.

2. The Value of Faith (Hebrews 11:6).

Through faith people received divine approval. God witnessed in their favor—he bore witness to their faith (Hebrews 11:2). God commended people for their faith, that is, God is pleased with faith.

Hebrews 11:6 is a critical summary text. It is a well-known text in Hebrews. But it states in a summary way the fundamental orientation with which God is pleased. God is pleased as people seek him through faith. Seeking God is important OT language. We might summarize the theology of Chronicles as "God seeks seekers" (cf. 1 Chronicles 28:8-10; 29:17; 2 Chronicles 7:14; 15:2). God yearns for his people to seek him just as

he seeks them. God seeks us (Psalm 119:174; John 4:24) and want us to seek him (Psalm 119:2,10; Hebrews 11:6).

God rewards those who seek him, which is the point of Hebrews 10:35. Don't throw away your confidence; don't throw away your faith because it will be rewarded. Again, the emphasis is future-oriented. God will reward those who seek him; God will reward those who endure through faith. The preacher again points his hearers toward the future and their hope.

3. The Endurance of Faith.

The narrative stories, it seems to me, all have the point of endurance. Perhaps some are a bit more difficult to construe in this light (such as Abel), but the whole contributes to this point. Enoch may represent endurance since he is found in the context of Genesis 5 where the most common words are "and he died." Death surrounded Enoch, but through faith he was delivered from death. There is hope in the midst of death. I wonder if Enoch is mentioned specifically because his was a victory over death—a hope that Roman hearers need.

Noah built an ark because of what he believed about the future. He persisted despite the hostility of his culture because he trusted in what God promised about the future. Abraham followed God's call even though he did not know his destination, but he knew the promises of God. He lived oriented to the future (Hebrews 11:10)—a future city, but also a future son/descendants.

The preacher even interprets Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son in terms of his orientation to the future—he believed God would raise Isaac from the dead. Isaac gave a blessing about the future through faith. Jacob blessed Joseph's sons concerning the future. Joseph's faith was demonstrated by instructions about the future. Moses endured his identification with slaves and their experience because of what he believed about the future. He kept the Passover because he believed God's promises about the future. The Red Sea and Conquest (Jericho and Rahab) experiences were based upon what Israel believed about the future.

The summary experiences are rooted in how faith gains what is promised—it succeeds, it wins, it endures because it receives what is promised. More particularly, they believed and endured through hostile opposition, through persecution and martyrdom (11:35b-38). This is the encouragement Roman Christians need. They need to hear that faith success not when it wins by cultural or worldly or Roman standards, but when it endures, trusts the promises of God and receives the promises in the end. Faith wins when it endures.

4. The Promise of Faith.

Hebrews 11:13-16 is descriptive of the people of God in every generation. It is particularly a comment on the Patriarchs, but it applies the every generation of God's people in the history of redemption. It applies to Israel in the land of Palestine under a

victorious Davidic king (cf. 1 Chronicles 29:15), and to Christians (1 Peter 1:1; 2:11). We are pilgrims, or refugees, in this world. This world is not our home, because we hope for something better.

We are the people of God and we wait for the “heavenly city”—the one which God has prepared for us. Thus, the people of God are oriented toward the future, and the road for that journey to the future is faith. It follows the path of many who have traveled it before us. They died in faith, yet hoping for the future. So, too, these Roman Christians will die in faith—just as we will, hoping for the future. But the future is demonstrated by the faith exercised in the present. The future is present through faith though it is not yet fully realized.

Theological Substance

The point of these stories is not to provide models of obedient faith, though these believers did obey. Rather, they provide models for the endurance of faith. They continued the journey despite the hardships and problems. These are not proof-texts for obedient faith, but models of enduring faith.

They continued their journey because they sought God and trusted in his promises. They endured through faith and their faith submitted to God’s call to the journey and as they journeyed. Theologically, faith is oriented to both past and future. Because of God’s work in the past (both in terms of his “word” to us and his actions), we trust God in the present. Consequently, our faith is oriented to the future beyond the present distress. We trust God’s promises because we have reason to trust him—God has a track record.

Hebrews 11 teaches us that faith also has a track record. When faith trusts God’s word to us and looks toward the future, it can endure the present. We have models of faith that confirm this. Faith, then, means embracing the hope; trusting that what we hope for is real. It is trusting that the journey has a goal and therefore the journey is worth the effort. Hebrews 11, then, can be seen as an illustration of the exhortation of Hebrews 10:35—don’t throw away your confidence because you know the promise is secure.

The future is the key, but faith is the present experience of that future. Nevertheless, the future is the hope that enables endurance. “This World Is Not My Home”—a song that reflects our pilgrim journey. We are not at home here, though we often feel at home because we are too shaped and tuned into our culture. We are too comfortable here. Perhaps a little persecution would be helpful as faith must take center stage and orient us toward the future rather than settling into our present comforts.

Those who have experienced the tragic circumstances of this present world understand the yearning for the future. They live oriented to the future. Their joy is found in hope because the tragedies sap them of their strength. As one song title by New Song reads, “Hope Changes Everything.” But hope is only real by faith and faith celebrates the reality of hope. Thus, faith endures.

Teaching Options

How do we teach such a vast amount of material? It is impossible to go verse by verse. Consequently, I think we need to choose illustrative material.

There are two kinds of material in this text. First, one is narrative re-telling, that is, short summaries of biblical narratives. These short summaries recall the fuller stories in the biblical narratives themselves—the stories of Abel, Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc. Second, there is narrative reflection or didactic material, that is, short theological summaries of the point of the narrative in the light of the present situation of the hearers.

You could teach this material by focusing on a few of the narrative stories (11:2-5, 7-12, 17-31, and the pithy summary of stories in 11:32-38) so as to illustrate the narrative reflection (11:1-, 6, 13-16, 39-40). For example, you could focus on Abraham (Hebrews 11:9-12, 17-19) and then make the point of the chapter by concentrating on the narrative reflection the preacher offers based on that story (Hebrews 9:13-16). Teaching, then, could be focus on Abraham and how he models the endurance of faith for the hearers of this original sermon, and then also how he models it for us.

You could teach this material by focusing on the narrative reflections, or, the theological points of Hebrews 11:1, 6, 13-16, 39-40. This would mean that you only illustrate very briefly with the stories and concentrate on the theological/pastoral point the preacher seeks to apply to his hearers.

I like story + reflection. I think I will probably set up the stories with the theological points of 11:1, 6. Then, illustrate those points with a few of the stories, maybe mostly recalling the list of 11:32-38 in the light of the expected experience of persecution by the believers in Rome—only briefly. And focus primarily on the theological function of 11:13-16 as the source of encouragement for the original hearers and for us.

My teaching outline will look something like this:

1. The setting of Roman Christians anticipating persecution and the need for faithful endurance.
2. The nature of faith in Hebrews 11:1-2 & 6.
3. The stories that illustrate the nature of faith, particularly 11:32-38 in the light of the expectation of persecution in Rome.
4. The hope that gives faith endurance and strength for the journey, Hebrews 11:13-16.
5. The concluding exhortation in Hebrews 11:39-40.

Eyes on Jesus!

Hebrews 12:1-13

Minister's Summary: Yes, we learn from the examples of those who have journeyed the faith-path before us. But ultimately we look to Jesus himself. By keep his eye on the goal (i.e., joy set before him), he endured and triumphed. He has become the focal point for our own faith.

Teaching Moments

We might say that the preacher really does get to the point now. He brings the witnesses of faith to the climactic example of Jesus, our priest. He points them to Jesus as the ultimate example of faith.

But he also gets to the point by interpreting their present and anticipated suffering. He interprets the hardship, which they are about to endure as one in which God is active. God is involved. He is not disconnected from this suffering or an outsider to it. He is using it for his purposes.

This material raises some important questions and perspectives for how Christians deal with suffering, even persecution (which is the context of our text). God uses suffering to discipline train and educate his people. He uses it to refine us, mature us and prepare us for holiness and the fuller experience of his own reality.

Consequently, this text creates some tension; and our classes may reflect some of this same tension. How involved is God in the suffering of his people? Clearly, he involved himself in their suffering through the empathetic incarnation of Jesus who experienced temptation, testing and weaknesses alongside of his people. However, is God an agent in our suffering, in this Roman persecution? Does God have a goal, intent? Is God active in our suffering? Hebrews 12 addresses some of these questions and points to one matrix for interpreting suffering in the fallen world.

Exegetical Notes

The “witnesses” are not spectators in an arena, but rather those who have borne witness to the endurance of faith. They testify about faith. Their stories encourage present believers. They ran the race through perseverance and completed their journey. Now they are witness to the power of faith for the journey.

These witnesses call us to follow them. Consequently, the preacher appeals to his hearers to cast off “the sin” (notice how definite that is; it is not “sins,” but “the sin”) that hinders them from running. I think the “sin” is probably the sin of apostasy, which is the danger for the preacher’s audience. Rather than quitting and hanging back, continue the race and finish the journey.

However, the primary witness to faith is Jesus himself. He joined us in the race. He himself suffered and joined us in our suffering. He ran the race and he persevered through faith. He is our champion; our pioneer. Consequently, fix your eyes on him. Keep his example ever before you.

We must not undermine the example of Jesus by appealing to his divine character. When he joined the race and entered the journey of faith, he became one of us and shared our reality. His temptations were real. The danger of apostasy was real for him. He could have been hindered by “the sin” as well. His humanity was full and real, and his hurt and shame was real and tempting. His suffering was like our suffering. Thus, he is a model for us. If we affirm anything that detracts or undermines the reality of the model for us, then we reflect a shallow understanding of the incarnation (that he became flesh and blood alongside of us).

His endurance is directly related to the “joy” that was set before him. It is related to the goal or promise; that is, it was his faith. He knew joy was ahead of him; he knew the promise of God’s exaltation. Consequently, he was willing to endure the suffering and shame for the sake of the joy.

The situation of the preacher’s audience is clarified a bit in Hebrews 12:3-4 when Jesus suffering is placed in the context of opposition from sinful men and when the preacher notes that they had not yet resisted evil unto blood. In other words, they can expect martyrdom. They will experience hostility and death from evil people, just as Jesus did. The open question is whether they will run the race to the end just as Jesus did.

But how are we to understand the coming persecution? Why does God permit this persecution? Why did he permit the crucifixion and death of his own Son? What purpose does God have in this permission of suffering? What purpose does God see in suffering at all?

The classic text for God's pedagogical purposes in discipline is Hebrews 12 (the Greek verbs and nouns for discipline are used eight times in verses 5-11). The writer of Hebrews draws upon an Old Testament understanding of discipline as he applies those principles to the situation in which his readers find themselves. The Old Testament principles of discipline are applicable to New Testament saints. The writer anticipates that his readers will face another period of persecution as in the earlier days of their faith. He calls them to remember those early days when they "stood [their] ground in a great contest in the face of suffering" (Hebrews 10:32). They were publicly insulted and persecuted. Some were thrown in prison and others had their property confiscated (Hebrews 10:33-34). The believers persevered then, and now they must expect another contest of suffering. The writer anticipates that there will be a renewal of this persecution or some kind of struggle that may involve the death of some in their community. They have not yet had any martyrs, but there may be some in the future (Hebrews 12:4).

Whatever the nature of this coming struggle, the writer offers an interpretation of it. It does not come as some punishment for sin, nor does it come because God is angry with

his people. Rather, it is a discipline that arises out of God's love. It is the kind of discipline that a father offers his child (Hebrews 12: 7-10). The writer of Hebrews quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 as a "word of encouragement that address [them] as sons" (Hebrews 12:5b-6):

The term translated "punish" is actually a verb, which means to "flog," just as Jesus was flogged and his disciples were told that they would be flogged (Matthew 10:17; 20:19; 23:34; Mark 10:34; Luke 18:33; John 19:1). Indeed, some of the previous witnesses mentioned in chapter eleven had suffered flogging (Hebrews 11:36). The original readers of Hebrews could, perhaps, expect some of that themselves. The context here does not mean "punishment" as when God expresses his righteous judgment against a sinner, but rather refers to the infliction of pain which discipline involves. God chastises his people; he afflicts them with pain for the sake of a higher goal. The notion of "rebuke" is a similar idea. This rebuke does not arise out of anger, but out of a desire for God's people to reach a higher level of maturity. God has a goal in mind, and he disciplines his people in view of that goal. He disciplines them according to the dictates of his love in the light of his goal for them—the future they cannot yet see.

The readers, therefore, should not misinterpret this new wave of persecution as a sign of God's anger. They must understand it as a sign of his love. It is God's fatherly attention just as earthly fathers give attention to their children. They should be encouraged rather than discouraged by this new struggle. God seeks to train his people through this pain. God seeks to educate his people so that they are equipped to share God's holiness and communion. In order to persevere through the struggle, believers need to keep their eye on the goal to which God has called them. This is the example of Jesus. He is the model of endurance, just as the heroes of faith are models in Hebrews 11. Jesus endured the cross with all its shame in order to experience the joy that was set before him, and even now he sits at the right hand of God (Hebrews 11:2). Likewise, all the faithful who have gone before witness to the power of faith. Though their faith did not receive what it hoped for in this life, nevertheless it persevered because they sought a city whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:13-16; 39-40; 12:1). God used struggle in their life to strengthen their faith so that it might persevere.

It is important to see God's intent here. God disciplines and he chastises (causes pain, even flogs) for a reason. It is a reason that is more significant than the pain of the discipline. The pain has a purpose. The author writes (Hebrews 12:10b-11): What does God intend in discipline? He intends something that is for our own good. The good he intends is that we might share in his holiness. The discipline trains us in such a way that it produces righteousness and peace, and the effect of this discipline is that we share God's holiness. God uses suffering and pain to produce a fruit whose purpose is that we might share his holiness.

What does it mean to share God's holiness? It certainly includes the cultivation of fruit in our lives so that when the harvest of righteousness and peace is produced, we reflect God's holiness. But there is more since "without holiness no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). There is an eschatological meaning here as well as the promise of God's current presence as we approach his throne (Hebrews 12:22ff). In order to enter

into the eschatological presence of God, we must be holy. To be holy we must be sanctified by the work of Christ (Hebrews 10:14). To be sanctified by the blood of Christ we must persevere in faith. If perseverance means to endure suffering for the sake of the joy set before us, that is, the joy of God's presence, then suffering is worth the goal. God uses suffering and pain--he disciplines us--in order to bring us closer to that goal. If Jesus suffered for the sake of the joy set before him, and the faithful of chapter eleven struggled for the sake of the promise, then the present people of God must expect to suffer as well. It is the goal of faith that makes suffering worthwhile. If discipline is a means to the joy, then discipline should be endured for the sake of the joy. The joy, however, is no earthly paradise. It is communion with God in the city of God, the heavenly Jerusalem.

In this context, James makes sense. Just as the writer of Hebrews encouraged his readers to endure trials for the sake of discipline, so James encouraged his readers to "consider it pure joy...whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance" (James 1:2). And the one who "perseveres under the trial, because he has stood the test, he will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him" (James 1:12). We do not rejoice because of the discipline, but we rejoice in the intent of the discipline. We rejoice in the light of its goal. The crown of life is worth the trials, and God disciplines us with that goal in mind. God acts, sometimes by inflicting pain, even floggings, so that we might be trained and prepared to share his holiness. God intends good even when it seems painful and senseless to us.

Theological Substance

As a sufferer who has experienced tragedy in many forms (loss of child, loss of spouse, loss of parent, divorce), this is probably one of the more difficult texts in Hebrews to integrate experientially.

In one sense it is not difficult for sufferers. We live with suffering and we connect with fellow-sufferers. So, we feel with and understand as insiders to suffering what these Roman Christians were probably feeling. But it is difficult in another sense. What the text says is "hard" emotionally. We don't want to believe that God is involved in our suffering. We don't want to think of our suffering as pedagogical, refining, or maturing. We don't think it is fair that God would teach us through the suffering of another, which, in turn, causes our own suffering.

But the "hard" lesson of this text is that God has intentions in his discipline. He has a goal. He is at work shaping his people, refining them, educating them and preparing them for the experience of holiness. He refines his people through the crucible of suffering in order to bear the fruit of righteousness in a world that needs to see righteousness. Through discipline, he produces for witness for faith and more righteousness in his world.

Too often we want to distant God from the suffering as if we are trying to protect him. The preacher does not point to Satan as the main figure in this discipline (persecution). He points to God as the one who is at work to shape his people.

As a sufferer I don't like hearing that. But as a believer I take great comfort from knowing that God is at work through my suffering for his purposes and his purposes include shaping me into his image—to bear his righteousness and share his holiness.

This is no different from what God has done all through redemptive history, as even the preacher quotes Proverbs 3:11-12. Indeed, it is exactly what God did in Jesus. He perfected his Son through suffering, and even now, through suffering, he is perfecting us.

Ultimately, this text provides an interpretative matrix for our enduring of suffering. We should interpret our suffering in the light of God's educational program. We interpret suffering as divine discipline (training) to shape us into his image. We look through the suffering to see the divine goal of sharing his holiness and bearing witness to his righteousness by the fruit in our lives. We bear witness to the power of faith. We follow Jesus who testifies to faith, and we follow the witnesses the surround us, and we become part of the group of witnesses who testify to the joy that faithful endurance brings.

Teaching Options

Depending on your class situation, be careful with this text in the light of who is attending your class. If there are raw edges of recent, tragic suffering, this text may seem too emotionally difficult. There are times in our suffering when we are ready to hear things and times when we are not ready to hear them. Consequently, be sensitive to who is in your class and how recent their wounds are.

In the case of recent words, it might be best to avoid discussion of any divine causation in our suffering (e.g., "God flogs us"). Rather, concentrate on God's intent for us in the midst of suffering. Even if he does not cause it, he uses it. To what use does God put the de facto reality of suffering? What "good" can God work through suffering and despite suffering? We can talk about this question without ever discussion whether God "caused" any particular suffering.

In talking about this text, also keep your discussion close to the text. Bring your class back to the text over and over. Let the text speak for itself; engage the text. Rather than chasing rabbits about theodicy (justifying God in the face of suffering) or about divine causation of particular events, focus on the pastoral intent of this text and its exact wording. Bring the class back to a discussion of the text in the light the circumstances of its first readers and how its principles might shape us.

Why Even Think of Turning Back?

Hebrews 12:14-29

Minister's Summary: For those who are disheartened, there is a negative prospect to consider for anyone who turns back from the journey. The stakes are too high. We must not turn back.

Teaching Moments

I think Hebrews 13 is an epistolary addendum. In other words, Hebrews 12:14-29 is the conclusion of the sermon proper, but Hebrews 13 is the preacher's additions as it is sent off as a letter. He adds some epistolary features as he sends the sermon to his audience.

Consequently, I believe Hebrews 12:14-29 is the conclusion of the sermon. It is the final word; the final appeal. It is the preacher's final attempt to persuade his people that they should not turn back from the path they have chosen. They should continue in faith and persevere in the race. They should follow Jesus to the end.

There is joy at the end. There is joy in the present. Consequently, his final appeal contains a grand picture of that "eschatological joy." Eschatological is one of those big words theologians like to use. But it is very useful. The term eschaton refers to the time when Jesus returns and gathers his people home. It refers to the goal. God is at work to redeem a people for himself and gather them home with him so he might dwell with them forever. This is "eschatological joy." It is the joy of dwelling with God—being in God's presence forever.

The preacher uses this joy to persuade his people to hang on. They have not come to Sinai, but to the eschatological assembly of God's people in the presence of God. They have come to eschatological joy. They have come to the city of God. Even now, as they assemble together, they experience the joy of God's eschatological presence. They experience the future in the present by faith. Therefore, worship God and be grateful!

Exegetical Notes

This section divides nicely as a theological exposition (Hebrews 12:18-24) sandwiched between two strong exhortations with warnings of judgment (Hebrews 12:14-17 and 12:25-29). The warnings are the preacher's last attempt to stave off apostasy in the community. His exposition is his last major attempt to encourage perseverance in faith by pointing the church to the reality that Christ has won for them.

1. Exhortation (Hebrews 12:14-17).

Though the community will experience persecution, the preacher appeals to them to live in peace with everyone as much as they can. This is not simply peace within the community of believers, but also to seek peace with the hostile environment in which

they live. Peace is the way of holiness, and the church must seek holiness, as it is the way it shares God's life that is holy.

But more specifically, the preacher is concerned that some will turn away and apostatize. They will trade their inheritance for the comfort of "peace" with their neighbors. We are always in danger of trading our future with God for the comfort of the present (whether it is the comfort of materialism, or the comfort of "getting along" with those who oppose our values). The people of God have a tendency to compromise their values for the sake of comfort. We don't want to seek peace with those around us in the wrong way—in a way that compromises our values or that creates bitterness within the community of God. Seek peace, but don't compromise holiness. Seek peace, but don't give up your eternal inheritance for temporary comforts here.

Esau is the preacher's example of this thing. He compromised his birthright for the comfort of some food. He traded something of great value for something that was essentially nothing. He traded the eternal for the temporary. In the aftermath—with the recognition that there was no changing what he had done—he sought the blessing with tears. I don't think this is a reference to someone who wants to repent but cannot. Rather, it is an eternal perspective, an eschatological perspective. That is, the preacher appeals to his hearers not to reject their inheritance because when the blessing is bestowed and the inheritance is received, we will repent of our rejection and seek it with tears. But it will be too late, just as it was too late for Esau.

2. Exposition of the Spiritual Reality (Hebrews 12:18-24)

The exhortation is rooted in the nature of Christian experience—Christians experience the reality of God's presence. They experience the future in the present. Hebrews 12:18-24 is a contrast between the experience of God's presence at Sinai and the experience of God's presence now. The description is "eschatological" in character, that is, it describes the experience of the saints through the eyes of the end. It is the presence of the future. Christians experience God as gathered in his throne room, and this foretaste of the future is experienced in the communal gathering of God's people.

The description of the Sinaitic experience recalls Exodus 19 (which is quoted in Hebrews 12:20, citing Exodus 19:12-13). Deuteronomy 9:19 is quoted in Exodus 19:21 in relation to Moses' experience of God on the mountain. It was a terrifying, holy and transcendent experience. God's holiness excluded sin and sent fearful trembling throughout Israel—so much so that they did not want God to speak directly to them.

This was the "day of assembly" in Israel when the people gathered in the presence of God at the foot of Sinai (Deuteronomy 10:4; 18:16). It is an assembly context. The presence of God is reflected in the thundering, shakings and lightning of the mountain. It is a holy mountain because God's holy presence is there. But that holiness distances people from the mountain. They have limited access to the mountain. They could not touch the mountain.

A key word in the text is “approach” or “draw near” or “come to” (Hebrews 12:18, 22). It is the same term used in Hebrews 4:16; 7:25; 10:1, 22; 11:6. It is “worship” term; a liturgical term. It means to enter God’s presence. Israel entered God’s presence in a terrifying way at Sinai, but now the church has come to God with eschatological joy, a joy that experiences the fullness of God’s redemptive presence, that is, we experience the future of God’s promise to us in his presence. We come, as an assembly and in the assembly, to God, that is, we enter his presence with boldness and joy.

The new covenant through Jesus brings us to the God himself. We enter the Most Holy Place, God’s own sanctuary. We come to where God lives (Mt. Zion or heavenly Jerusalem). This dwelling-place of God is described by its surroundings.

- Thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly—angels surround the throne of God and live in his holy city. They worship God and the Son as they celebrate the redemption God has accomplished through Jesus. Angels in the assembly surround us.

- To the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven—to the assembly of God’s people that is the company of the redeemed. They have their names written in the book of life. This language is used in OT and Jewish literature for God’s redeemed people. I think this refers to those saints who still live upon the earth. Literally, it reads: “assembly of the firstborn ones.” They are God’s firstborn, the elect ones of God. This is God’s people who are still running the race but are part of God’s election.

- To the spirits of righteous men made perfect—to saints who have received the perfection. They have been perfected by the blood of Jesus and through the suffering of life. The “spirits of righteous persons” was a well-known idiom for dead saints in Jewish intertestamental literature (cf. Jubilees 23:30-31; 1 Enoch 22:9; 102:4; 103:3-4; 2 Apoc. Baruch 30:2). They are righteous in the sense of having received divine approval and by faith (Hebrews 11:4, 7). They are “perfected” in their heavenly glory.

This describes the reality of heavenly glory, and the text affirms that believers on the earth are participants in that reality. We come (approach, draw near) and participate in the assembly of God’s people in his presence. We come to God by the blood of Jesus and we experience the fellowship of angels, dead saints and the church throughout the world.

3. Exhortation (Hebrews 12:25-29).

God has spoken! He spoken at Sinai (Hebrews 12:19), but he also spoke through his Son (cf. Hebrews 1:1-2). God has spoken through the blood of Christ (Hebrews 12:24). If we refuse this divine speaking, there is nothing but judgment left. If Israel refused the Sinaitic divine speaking and did not escape judgment, how much less will the church escape God’s judgment if we refuse his speaking through his Son?

The preacher quotes Haggai 2:6 as a warning about judgment. God shook the earth, which is a metaphor for divine wrath and judgment. The preacher heightens the

judgment by God's promise to shake the heavens. Just as God brought the fullness of redemption through Christ, so also he will bring the fullness of judgment to those who reject Christ. He will shake everything—all of created reality, and by that shaking reveal what is unshakeable. The unshakeable reality is the kingdom of God—the redeemed community in the presence of God that Christ has established through his blood.

The recognition that God is a “consuming fire” is a reflection of the reality of God's righteous judgment. The preacher quotes Deuteronomy 4:24. We approach God with boldness, but with respect and awe. We approach him in full recognition of his holiness and in full recognition that if we reject him judgment awaits us. Nevertheless, we approach him in worship with boldness and gratitude. We do not fear his presence, but rejoice in it. Consequently, we experience his kingdom presence with the confidence that God receives us graciously through the work of Christ.

Theological Substance

The exhortations are fundamentally calls to perseverance. Don't give up; don't miss the grace of God; don't refuse God's gracious offer. When the offer is rejected, there is nothing else left but judgment. God is a consuming fire and when we lose our inheritance rights, we will experience God's fire.

At Cordova Community Church, we had a refrain that we used on occasion in our corporate assemblies: “We are not here; we are there.” The point was that as we assembled to worship together we envisioned our entrance into the throne room of God. We were no longer here (on the earth, in this assembly room), but we were now there (in the heavenly throne room).

This is the reality that the preacher of Hebrews calls us to picture. He projects us into the throne room of God. We are in the Most Holy Place. We come—in our daily lives, but also in our assemblies—to Mt. Zion, the heavenly Jerusalem. We come to God who is surrounded by his angels and the saints who previously died and now enjoy God's presence (as in Revelation 7:9-17). Furthermore, as we gather in God's presence, all the saints around the world are present there as well. We are not alone! We gather with thousands of angels, millions of saints—both on earth and in heaven.

This is what God has accomplished for us through Jesus Christ. He has invited into his presence and given us access to the Most Holy Place. Even now we enjoy his eschatological presence with eschatological joy while we wait for Jesus to appear a second time. This encourages us to persevere. We don't give up because we enjoy the presence of God even now.

I wish I had known this perspective when I was working with a struggling, small church in Northeast Philadelphia. Sometimes we felt so alone. We felt so small. We felt so useless at times. Perhaps that is how Roman Christians felt and they had the added prospective persecution in the near future that would make martyrs out of many of them! But we are not alone, and neither are we small. Moreover, we are not useless—we are

God's witnesses. We bear witness to the faith, hope and love in a fallen world. We worship and we serve. We gather with saints, both dead and alive, in God's presence and in the presence of his angels. We, even in the midst of this great contest and struggle, experience the future through faith. We know eschatological joy through faith.

Have you ever seen "Places in the Heart" which stars Danny Glover and Sally Fields? During the movie several of the stars died, but at the end of the movie they reappear. They reappear in the final scene of the movie that is a communion service. In that final scene the camera pans the rows as each participant partakes and some of those who have already died are again on those pews drinking the communion cup. The scene portrays the eschatological reality that we now experience. As we eat and drink in the presence of God, we eat and drink with saints who have gone on before us. We eat and drink together in the throne room of God with all of God's saints. As we gather around the table, the Spirit of God lifts up into the throne room of God and we experience a foretaste of eschatological fellowship at the messianic table in the kingdom of God.

Given this vision of eschatological joy in festive assembly, the preacher exhorts his people to continue in their faith because they already possess the goal, that is, they already experience eschatological joy through faith. That is our hope and that is why we continue the journey. And because God has given us this gift through Jesus, that is why we praise him. So, "let us worship and be grateful."

Teaching Options

The exhortations are further elaborations of previous exhortations and warnings. The heart of this section is the portrayal of the eschatological experience of divine presence through faith. Consequently, I would concentrate my teaching on the center section (the exposition) and use the exhortation sections as the context for that exposition.

I would suggest showing the final scene out of the film in "Places in the Heart" as a concrete illustration of the meaning of this text. You could use it as an opening or a closing for the class.

Call attention to the contrast between Sinai and Mt. Zion. We should play Mt. Sinai as a negative experience, but a holy experience. It was a real experience. It was a testimony to the presence of a holy God. However, that experience has been transformed and fulfilled in the experience of Christians who assemble on Mt. Zion. We still approach a holy God (that is why we cannot simply reject him with impunity), but we approach him with boldness and joy as we enter into His Most Holy Place. We can touch the presence of God whereas at Sinai they could not touch the mountain.

Call attention to the theology of worship that is here. When we assemble, we come into God's presence. His angels surround us. We gather with saints across the world and with those who are now in God's throne room. We experience joy. Worship can engender perseverance if we understand its fullness. Worship gives strength for the journey. It can transform lament into joy. We must permit people to bring their lament

into the presence of God, and when we bring it into his presence by faith, he can transform it into an enjoyment of his presence.

One caution, however, is that sometimes we need repeated experiences of worship for that lament to be transformed by God's presence. It is not an easy fix or a one-time experience. Rather, it is a process of faith, a journey of faith. But faith will eventually discover the eschatological joy in the assembly of God's people as God is present among them.

Ultimately, this is the only joy that will transform lament. There is no joy in the present that will transform the hurt of a lost child into comfort because the present is always absent the child. But eschatological joy involves the presence of the child and transforms our lament in the present into hope for the future and the experience of anticipated and even present joy.

Draw the class into a discussion of how this eschatological joy and the picture of this eschatological assembly can give strength for the journey. There we will find the faith to go on and faith will persevere because of what God has done for us and because God works in us.

A Final “Word of Exhortation”

Hebrews 13:1-25

Minister’s Summary: A series of practical guidelines is given here for those who intend to take this teacher’s message seriously. Faith is not separate from the real world of everyday experience.

Teaching Moments

There is some debate about the relationship between Hebrews 12 and Hebrews 13. Some think it is an epistolary addendum to the sermon, but others think it is the conclusion to the sermon. Whatever its literary function, the theological point is relatively simple to discern.

Hebrews 10:19-12:29 has emphasized perseverance. As a motive and ground for that perseverance, the preacher called his hearers to experience the present with a view toward the future. Indeed, the present experience of faith is the experience of the future. Nevertheless, the future has not yet arrived. We are pilgrims on a journey of faith. Even though we even now enter the throne room of God and experience the kingdom of God through faith, we have not yet fully reached the goal of the journey or enjoyed the “better possession” that yet awaits us.

Hebrews 13 is probably best construed as “instructions to pilgrims on the journey.” The particular instructions are occasioned by the situation in which these specific pilgrims find themselves. If the occasion of the letter described in lesson one is correct, then these are instructions for pilgrims in the hostile environment of the city of Rome as they are about to experience severe persecution. His instructions for these pilgrims are connected to their particular situation.

What do you tell a group of people about life and community when their life is under hostile inspection and their community will soon encounter a brutal persecution? What do pilgrims in that situation need to hear? How can the preacher encourage them and call them to faithful perseverance?

Exegetical Notes

I have divided Hebrews 13 into three sections. The first section is advice for practical living (Hebrews 13:1-6). The second section encourages the communal life of the church (Hebrews 13:7-17). The third section is a collection of exhortations, prayers and requests. This final section makes the whole document look like a letter though it had proceeded as a sermon.

1. Instructions for Pilgrim Living (Hebrews 13:1-6).

More than likely, Hebrews 13:1 is a heading for this section. “Keep on loving each other as brothers” (as family). The term here is *philadelphia*, brotherly or familial love. The word points toward a family bonding more than simply a congenial attitude toward each other. That bonding is the root idea for the specific instructions that follow.

The ground or basis for the practical instructions is found in Hebrews 13:5b-6. Ethical living—living out our pilgrim faith—is grounded in God’s presence. We are assured that he will never leave or forsake us (13:5b, quoting Deuteronomy 31:6 which is part of Moses’ exhortation to Israel as they enter the land of promise), and we are assured that God will help us on our journey (13:6, quoting Psalm 118:6-7 which is something the Psalmist realized after he had been through a distressing time where he even despaired of his life in Psalm 118:10-18). Pilgrims need confidence and our confidence is rooted in God’s presence and help.

The preacher offers four specific practical instructions for living as pilgrims in the hostile environment in which they find themselves. First, they should show hospitality (13:2), that is, they should “love strangers” (philoxenia from two Greek words meaning “love” [*philo*] and “strangers” [*xeno*]). Part of the motive is that sometimes God sends angels among his people to experience that hospitality, as Abraham (Genesis 18), Gideon (Judges 6) and Manoah (Judges 13) did. Does God sometimes test our love of strangers? Or, are these occasions simply moments of revelation and encounter that the preacher uses to link his exhortation with redemptive history? In either case, whether angel or human, God’s people are called to “love strangers.” Given the context of persecution and traveling Christians in the first century (there were few “inns” on the roads and usually people depended on strangers for lodging), there would have been ample opportunity to show this virtue.

Second, “remembering” prisoners means, of course, to take of them. And the principle that the preacher applies is that they should treat them as if they were the prisoners. In other words, “love your neighbor as yourself.” Prison was a reality for these believers and many would endure it for their faith.

Third, sexual morality was important in the context of living in the ancient pagan world. It was a constant problem and temptation as they lived in a culture that was overtly sexual through art, statutes, temples, etc. Loving the family (brothers) means faithfulness to family, particularly one’s spouse.

Fourth, wealth and greed were a problem in the ancient world as well. The faithful will probably lose some of that wealth through persecution as they had earlier (Hebrews 10:32-34). Will they love “money” or will they love the brothers (family of God)? Will they remember the reward at the end of the journey (the “better possession” in Hebrews 10:34) through faithfulness or will they hang on to their present wealth through faithlessness?

The beginning sentence of this section calls for family bonding (13:1; brotherly love), and then the preacher articulates four practical applications of that call (13:2-5a). But the

call is meaningless and the prospect of endurance is hopeless without the presence and help of God (13:5b-6).

2. Instructions for Communal Living (Hebrews 13:7-17).

This section begins and ends by talking about “leaders” (13:7, 17; also in 13:24). Jesus is the great shepherd (13:20) who will lead us, but he also leads us through “leaders” within the community of faith. They should “remember” their past leaders (13:7) and “obey” their present leaders (13:17). The former are witnesses to the endurance of faith and models for the present community. They function as a stabilizing influence in the community, just as Jesus himself is a stabilizing influence since he is always the same (Hebrews 13:8). The latter are present for the good of the community and accountable for the community. No doubt the hostile environment and loss of faith that some exhibited in the community created some tension between the leaders and the community. The preacher reminds them (and perhaps includes himself among the leaders; cf. Hebrews 13:18) that leaders are present for the advantage of the community. For a discussion of these leaders in more detail, see my leadership material on Hebrews 13 at <http://johnmarkhicks.faithsite.com/content.asp?CID=4969>.

Hebrews 13:9-16 is sandwiched between the two appeals to leaders. This material probably reflects some problem within the community itself, though it may be a general appeal that is based on the argument in the sermon.

The text may indicate that there was some problem surrounding “foods” or ceremonial meals. Some think that part of the community or perhaps even outsiders have attached too much significance to Jewish meals. We know that Jews even outside the Palestine attached sacrificial/theological significance to their meals. More than likely, the preacher is simply reminding his hearers that old covenant meals—with their links to old covenant sacrifices—have been surpassed by the “altar” of the Christian faith, that is, the altar is the cross of Jesus or his sacrificial work. “We have an altar” is a confessional statement much like “we have a great high priest” (4:14). Those who participate in tabernacle meals based on tabernacle sacrifices do not benefit from the altar of Jesus. They are at the wrong altar; we now have a better high priest with better sacrifices.

Hebrews 13:11-14 encourages pilgrims to continue their journey to the “city that is to come” (13:14; cf. 11:10,14,16), even though it means bearing disgrace, humiliation and persecution. Jesus bore the same disgrace through his altar as he was sacrificed. He bore the shame of the cross (cf. 12:2) and so now Christian pilgrims who follow Jesus must bear the disgrace their faith brings in a hostile environment.

But because Jesus has made us holy through his blood, we are priests who offer sacrifices. The sacrifices we offer to God through Jesus include the confession of our lips and the sharing of our lives (“share” is the Greek word *koinonia* which often described financial and material sharing among believers; cf. Romans 15:26-27; 2 Corinthians 8:4; 9:13; Acts 2:42-45) through benevolence toward others (“to do good” is a Jewish expression for benevolence; cf. Galatians 6:10; James 4:17; Acts 10:38). Here is a

succinct description of worship or our priestly service. This is the Christian liturgy—to confess/praise the name of God with our lips and to share our lives with others. Worship is more than Sunday morning; it is a sacrifice of our life just as Jesus sacrificed his life for us. We worship God through Jesus with our whole being—lips and ministry. The coming persecution, of course, would test whether these believers will “confess” and “share” in the midst of that hostility. Will they endure and continue their priestly ministry before God?

3. Closing Prayers and Requests (Hebrews 13:18-25).

This final section connects the community that received this “letter” with the larger Christian community throughout the Mediterranean basin. It requests prayers for the author and his companions (“us” in 13:18), gives them news about Timothy who is a mutual acquaintance (13:23), and exchanges greetings between friends (13:24). The latter two appear rather incidental (a piece of information about Timothy and the hope that he too would visit the community) and expected (greetings). But the appeal for prayers is more intriguing.

There is some discussion about who are the “us” and “we” of 13:18 because the preacher returns to the first person (“I”) in 13:19. Some believe that it is a further comment about the “leaders” in 13:17, while others think it refers to the preacher’s companions wherever he is. It depends on how close a connection one places between 13:17 and 13:18, that is, is the preacher continuing his topic of leaders or moving to another topic? I tend to think the latter, but the apparent “apologetic” or defensive comment in 13:18 (“we have a clear conscience and desire to live honorably in every way”) may indeed that there were some problematic rumors surrounding the preacher (including the leaders if we take the “we” in that fashion). Whatever the situation, the preacher wants them to keep praying for him and specifically to pray that he might return to their community soon.

The preacher characterizes his document as a “word of exhortation” which was common language for a sermon in the first century (Acts 13:15; but also 1 Timothy 4:13 where Timothy is to devote himself to reading Scripture, teaching and “exhortation”). But exhortation is an extremely appropriate word as his letter has contained many exhortations (Hebrews 4:1,14; 6:1; 10:22-24; 12:1 are just a few).

The nature of the exhortation and the whole theology of the sermon is summarized wonderfully in the doxology of Hebrews 13:20-21. It is a “wish-prayer” or blessing. The wish is that God would “equip” (furnish, complete) his hearers with “everything good for doing” God’s “will.” This is the fundamental request. It acknowledges a dependence upon God as the equipper, supplier or power for holiness, maturation and growth. We “do” God’s will through the equipping ministry of God’s grace in our lives. It is God’s work in our lives that generates what is pleasing to him (e.g., “pleasing sacrifices” in Hebrews 13:15-16). This is the grace-centered focus of sanctification. Our holiness depends upon God’s work in us.

The wish is surrounded by theological allusions to the exhortation in Hebrews. The God of peace made peace through the blood of Jesus by an eternal covenant that is grounded in the eternal life of the Son. The reference to the resurrection connects us with the eternal life of our high priest who is exalted at the right hand of God. Even though he shed blood, yet he is no longer dead. God “led out” (literal meaning) Jesus from the dead, so he could lead us as Shepherd. God “leads out”—this is the language of Exodus, of redemption. God through Jesus leads his people to the promised land (cf. the allusion to Isaiah 63:11-14). Jesus is a “great” shepherd just as he is a “great high priest” (Hebrews 4:14; cf. 10:21).

Theological Substance

This is the most practical section in the whole of the letter, but the theological context of the sermon is not far from the preacher’s mind. Theologically, Jesus is still at the heart of what the preacher does in Hebrews 13.

Jesus is the eternal constant (Hebrews 13:8). Jesus bore disgrace for his people (Hebrews 13:11-14). Through Jesus we approach God as holy priests (Hebrews 13:15-16). Jesus is our great shepherd who redeemed us through his blood (Hebrews 13:22-23). We worship the Father through Jesus and God equips us and works in us through Jesus. God in Jesus will never leave/forsake us and he is always present to help. Jesus will always be there for us at the right hand of God because he has been led out of (redeemed from) death.

In the context of this strong theological content, the preacher offers some practical applications for pilgrim journey: love strangers, love each other through ministry to each other in prison, love your family, don’t love money and remember your leaders, both past and present. It is important to relate all of these practical admonitions to both the circumstance of the sermon (persecution and external hostility) and the theological ground of the sermon’s argument. This practical theology in the context of external pressure and theological grounding will give stability to the community of faith as it pilgrims through the wilderness of suffering. It draws the community together; the family bonds through the suffering in the light of what God has done in Jesus.

The preacher also wants to build on the bond he already has with them. He wants to return to them and bring Timothy along with him. He requests their prayers and exchanges greetings from friends. He subtly conveys to his hearers that they are part of a larger community—the community that surrounds the throne of God in worship as part of an eschatological assembly (Hebrews 12:22-24). They are not alone—they have a community beyond the borders of their own house churches that is spread across the Mediterranean basin.

Most of all, however, they are not alone because through Jesus—the great Shepherd—they approach God himself in his throne room. And Jesus is there, ever alive and ever the same. After modeling faith through suffering, he eternally sits at the right hand of God interceding for them and helping them through their difficult pilgrimage. That same theological truth is for us as well. It is our confidence too!

Teaching Options

The text outlines its own approach, it appears to me. We move from practical living strategies (Hebrews 13:1-6) to communal life (Hebrews 13:7-17) and conclude the letter on a personal note between the author and his readers (Hebrews 13:19-25).

In teaching Hebrews 13:1-6, I would concentrate on the correlation between 13:1-5a and 13:5b-6. The latter grounds the former. We can pursue the former because of the latter. That is, we pursue love (ethical living) because God is ever present and our helper. Draw out the meaning and significance of each of the ethical injunctions. Why does he say this to them, and how is it significant for us? What would the author say to us in our circumstances? Would it be couched differently because of our different situation? How does this same ethic apply to us?

Hebrews 13:7-17 is too much material for any detailed discussion, especially if you spend much time on the first six verses. You might want to concentrate on the nature and function of leadership (Hebrews 13:7, 17), or you might want to concentrate on the call for pilgrim sacrifice (bearing the disgrace) as a life of worship (praise through lips and life) in Hebrews 13:11-16. It would be difficult to do both, though we should not totally ignore either. You might assess the needs of your class as to which emphasis is needed.

With so much material you might not have time for any real discussion of Hebrews 13:19ff. However, I would call attention to the significance of prayer—both in the request for prayer and in the “wish-prayer” that is offered. Indeed, the “wish-prayer” is a fitting summary of the point of Hebrews. You might reflect on that text as an ending-point to the whole Hebrews series. It is a prayer you might pray together—ask the class to read it in unison as a prayer for each other and for our community of faith.

Grace to all of you!