

Hebrews

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The Story of Scripture: An Overview

Creation

In Genesis, God shows himself to be the Creator. He has always existed, and as we study Scripture, we will find he has always existed as the Trinity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—one God in three persons. Everything else was created by him from nothing, a fact that shows us he is wholly different from us. As we are introduced to his creation in Genesis 1, we see that everything he has made is good, and we feel a tension because we recognize that the world as we know it misses the mark. It is not good that people get old, that loved ones get sick and die, that the world is filled with violence and corruption.

This tension in the story is intentional. Things are not how God created them or wanted them to be. He created a good world, and at its heart is a garden called Eden that represents the best of it. Here he places a man and woman (Adam and Eve), both created in the image of God, to rule over creation and to fill the earth with the glory of God. This is a world with no sin, no sickness, no violence and no death. They have everything that they need. They have fellowship with God, they have a purpose, and they have the use of all of creation. God gives them life freely with only one condition: they can eat of the fruit of every tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. If they eat from it, they will die.

The Fall

In the next scene, a serpent enters the garden. This creature suggests that God does not have humanity's best interest in mind, that maybe they know more about what they want than God does. He suggests that God denies them the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil because he does not want them to be like him. And instead of trusting in the goodness of God as displayed throughout his creation and provision for them, they disobey God. This is known as the Fall. At this point, sin and its consequences enter into the world, and it is corrupted. From here, the Bible shows how the choice of Adam and Eve to disobey God leads to increasing destruction and death. It corrupts everything it touches, and humanity can do nothing to rid itself of the problem. Evil is in our world because we invited it in, and there is nothing we can do to shut it out again. This is the tension we are meant to feel as we read Scripture: one that echoes our experience in what is often a cruel world.

But God is gracious. Instead of letting death be the last word, he makes a promise in Genesis 3:15 even as he doles out the consequences of disobedience. When talking to the serpent, God says, “I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel.” God promises that there will one day be an offspring (or seed or child) of the woman that will defeat the serpent. He will be hurt by the serpent, but in so doing, he will crush its head. This promise will become clearer as the story unfolds.

The Good Seed and Righteousness by Faith

After this, we see the effects of sin driving the world into chaos. Just as God promised, sin has led to death. People are choosing immorality, violence, abuse, destruction, and death. A few faithful hold to the promise of a seed of the woman: a serpent slayer who will set things right, but even these show themselves to be thoroughly infected by sin. The story of Noah illustrates this. Things have gone horribly wrong up to this point: “The Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth, and that every intention of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). But Genesis 5:28–29 says, “When Lamech had lived 182 years, he fathered a son and called his name Noah, saying, ‘Out of the ground that the Lord has cursed, this one shall bring us relief from our work and from the painful toil of our hands.’” Lamech, Noah’s father, understands the promise of Genesis 3:15 that God will send a serpent slayer to set things right. He hopes that his son is this man. And as Noah grows, it looks like he might be; God recognizes that he is the one righteous man on earth.

Because the world is so evil, God floods the earth, saving only Noah and his family. This story teaches us something about the heart of man. Although God has brought judgment upon the earth and is restarting with one righteous man and his family, sin has so permeated the human heart that even Noah, a righteous man who has just been spared judgment, shows his brokenness. The next time we hear about Noah, he is drunk and naked, shaming himself before his children. Even the most righteous man on earth falls far short of God’s standard for humanity. Noah looked like he may be the promised seed of the woman to slay the serpent, but he is as broken as all the rest. Though his faith is to be emulated, he cannot save even himself, much less the world. And by Genesis 11, we see the world openly rebelling against the rule of God again. This shows there is a heart problem with humanity. We choose to cut ourselves off from God, the source of life, and in doing so, we choose destruction. That is the clear trajectory for humanity established in Genesis.

But just as things are looking hopeless, God steps in and chooses a man who will later be renamed Abraham to receive a great promise. In Genesis 12:1–2, God says to Abraham, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed.” Of particular importance here is the idea that all the families of the earth will be blessed through Abraham (more on that in a minute). Of immediate concern to Abraham is how God can make him a great nation even though he has no children and has a barren wife. But in Genesis 15, God reaffirms his promise, and Abraham believes God and in so doing clues us into how a sinful and broken people might be able to be made right with our creator. Genesis 15:6 says, “And he believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Abraham believes that God will come through on his promise, and God counts Abraham’s

faith as righteousness. This clues us into why people like Noah are considered righteous even though we see that man's heart is broken. They believe the promise of the seed of the woman who will slay the serpent. And God is narrowing his promise when he covenants with Abraham to bless the nations through his offspring or seed. The serpent slayer will be a child of Abraham, and he will be a blessing to the nations.

The OT's definition of righteousness can be surprising to many. Many see the OT way to salvation as observance to the law of Moses, but this is not the case. It is by faith in the promises of God. Romans 4:1–3 assures us that this interpretation is correct, "What then shall we say was gained by Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh? For if Abraham was justified by works, he has something to boast about, but not before God. For what does the Scripture say? 'Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness.'" Faith, not works, is and has always been the basis of justification. However, it is important to note that belief and obedience are closely related throughout Scripture. Belief is counted as righteousness, but that belief is always accompanied by a heart that is motivated towards obedience by the grace and mercy received. Thus obedience is the fruit (or result) of a life of faith. Faith, not works, is counted as righteousness. Obedience flows out of this faith. Obedience can be thought of as living out the identity God gives us because of our faith. We will look at this more in our discussion of the New Testament.

Just as we would expect from our knowledge of humanity, Abraham and his descendants continue to exhibit evidence of heart problems. Throughout the rest of the OT, they lie, they cheat, they sleep around, they murder. They are thoroughly broken. They will never make themselves pure. Even the best choose themselves over God. It is important that we see salvation as something completely out of the reach of humanity. But more importantly, God steps in and provides salvation to those who are willing to repent. God is faithful despite failures. He continues to pursue his people. He continues to offer forgiveness and mercy to those who will respond in belief to his promises.

The Exodus and The Law

A few generations down the road from Abraham, we find that his family (the Hebrews or the people of Israel) has grown large, but they are enslaved to the Egyptians. It is important to note that this is predicted in Genesis 15:13, a fact that should only further confirm the sovereignty of God in our minds. Things are not good. Not only are they oppressed, but their numbers intimidate Pharaoh, and he decrees that every Hebrew male child born be killed by being cast into the Nile (Exodus 1:22). But one woman, in an effort to save her baby son, places him in a basket and floats him down the same river. The daughter of Pharaoh finds the child and raises him as her own. This man is Moses. He will lead Israel in the exodus, a climactic moment in history where God delivers Israel from Egypt and establishes them as a nation. This will be the moment by which OT believers remember the faithfulness of God and becomes the bedrock for their hope of future deliverance.

The story of Exodus shows the power of God. He uses the deliverance of Israel to tell a story that will be repeated over and over again. A man will bring a broken people out of the bonds of slavery and into a Promised Land. The story of Moses will set the trajectory for the greater redemption story where Christ comes to save his people from sin and death and restore them and the world to their intended place. Moses, through the power of God, pleads with Pharaoh to let his people go. God sends ten plagues, each proving his power over the gods of Egypt and the last of which costs the Egyptians that which they took from the Israelites: their firstborn sons. Israel is spared this fate through what becomes known as the Passover. God calls each house to sacrifice a lamb and paint its blood on the door posts. They are to then eat a special meal that becomes known as the Passover meal. That night as the angel of the Lord is putting the firstborn to death, he passes over the houses that believe God and act on his commandment to sacrifice the lamb, resulting in the sparing of their firstborn sons. This final plague convinces Pharaoh to release Israel.

Despite the miraculous ways God delivers them from Egypt, including the crossing of the Red Sea, they again choose fear rather than trust him. God leads them on the way to Promised Land in a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. He feeds them manna that miraculously appears on the ground. He gives them water from a rock when they have nothing to drink, and still they grumble against him.

Finally, they come to a place called Mount Sinai and something amazing happens. God makes a covenant (probably the best way to understand a covenant is a promise that is marked by loyal relationship) with Israel that they will be his people if they will obey what he calls them to do. That sounds good to them and so they say they will. Moses then goes up the mountain to meet with God and before he can come back down, they have already failed. They make an idol and begin worshiping it. The only thing that keeps God from destroying them is his promise to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

Eventually, they move on. God leads them on towards the Promised Land (Canaan), and he continues to provide for them on the way. As they near the land, they send out twelve spies to investigate. It is a rich land but also one filled with powerful people. Ten of the twelve spies report that they do not believe they can take the land. Two of the spies, Joshua and Caleb, disagree and urge the people to trust God. Instead, they doubt his promise and try to stone Joshua and Caleb, rebelling against God. God intervenes and is again on the verge of destroying Israel. Only his promise stays his hand. The consequence for their actions? None of this unbelieving generation will get to enter the Promised Land. All but Joshua and Caleb will die in the wilderness as Israel is made to wander in it for the next 40 years.

This includes Moses. He is like Noah in that he appears to be the one who will bring about the promises of God, but despite his great faithfulness, he too sins in ways that show us he too is broken and in need of God's intervention. This is never more evident than when he strikes the rock at Meribah in disbelief and frustration, and God says to him, "Because you did not

believe in me, to uphold me as holy in the eyes of the people of Israel, therefore you shall not bring this assembly into the land that I have given them" (Numbers 20:12). Even the great prophet Moses falls short of God's perfect standard and is lost apart from God's intervention.

It is amazing that God continues to provide for Israel even as they wander through the desert. But the message is clear – disobedience displays a lack of belief in the promises of God, resulting in wandering through the desert rather than entering into the Promised Land (an image that will later represent entering into the rest of God). As the 40 years come to a close, Moses gives some last instructions to the Israelites before he dies, and they enter into the land without him.

In Deuteronomy 28–29, Moses reminds them of the covenant they have made with God. If they believe in him and his promises as demonstrated by their obedience, he will bless them in all kinds of ways. If they disobey, they will experience curses, most notably they will face exile at the hands of their enemies. Deuteronomy 30:15 sums it up this way, "See, I have set before you today life and good, death and evil." But Deuteronomy 30 also lets us know what is going to happen. They are going to disobey and go into exile. They are going to do exactly what everyone before them has done. They are going to choose to disobey God and die, and here we are clued in as to why: they have uncircumcised hearts. They can't love God how they are supposed to because their hearts are infected with sin and must be made new. This is also called a "heart of stone" (Ezekiel 36:26). But there is hope. There will be a day that God intervenes. Deuteronomy 30:6 says, "And the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring, so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live." God is doing something on the behalf of his people that they cannot do for themselves: change their very hearts.

This echoes what we see in Genesis 3:15 and Genesis 12:1–2. God is at work to bring about salvation for his people, and we are seeing his plan slowly unfold. It is something he must do on our behalf. God will send a seed of the woman who will crush the head of the serpent. He will be from the line of Abraham, and he will be a blessing to the nations. Genesis 15:6 assures us that those who are considered righteous are those who believe the promises of God. These believers will be the ones whose hearts have been circumcised so they will love God with all their hearts and souls that they may live (Deuteronomy 30:6).

Despite the warning, the prediction of Deuteronomy 30 comes true. Upon entering the Promised Land, Israel's obedience quickly wavers. Numerous accounts like Joshua 7 show the Israelites disobeying God thinking they know better than him about what will make them happy. At times, they keep things for themselves they were told not to; other times, they are fearful. They do not completely conquer the land. Judges records in great detail a people who are quick to forget God. He intervenes to save them over and over again, sending judges to help, but they continue to fall into unbelief and disobedience. Judges is summed up with its last verse, "In those days there was no king in Israel. Everyone did what was right in his own eyes" (Judges 21:25).

Kingdoms, Prophets, and Exile

At this point, God allows Israel an earthly king. A man of kingly stature named Saul receives the crown. However, despite his appearance, it quickly becomes apparent that his life does not match up. He becomes murderously jealous of a young man named David that God chooses to replace him as king (remember disobedience illustrates a lack of belief). David is a man specifically chosen by God. He is from the tribe of Judah. We didn't talk about this, but in Genesis 49:10, Jacob, a descendant of Abraham, declares that Judah, or more literally an offspring of Judah, will rule forever. All peoples will obey him, and the kingdom will be so wealthy he can tie his foal to the choice vine and wash his garments in wine. These are Messianic descriptors, meaning that these things describe the Messiah, the one God is sending to set things right, and the Messianic Kingdom he will usher in. This is important now because it hints to the meaning of the promises of God given here.

The serpent slayer will be a seed of the woman (a human), a seed of Abraham, from the tribe of Judah, and as we will see, a son of David (meaning in the lineage of David). David seems to be the next contender for the position of serpent slayer. God handpicks him. As a boy, he slays the giant Goliath when all of Israel trembles before him. He is patient and merciful to Saul despite Saul's murderous intentions towards him. He is even called a man after God's own heart (1 Samuel 13:14). But we will see that he too is broken, most notably in his sin with Bathsheba. He will sleep with her, a married woman, and then have her husband killed to cover his sin. Again, the Bible clearly illustrates even the best of men have hearts that are deeply flawed. David is not the Messiah. But he does receive a promise from God that focuses the expectations of deliverance. God promises David, "And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Samuel 7:16). One from the line of David will rule forever as the Messianic King. This Kingdom will be described in further detail in the prophets, but the gist is that it will be an everlasting kingdom marked by righteousness and justice: the two major concerns of God's law.

After David dies, his son Solomon begins his rule. His rule, like his father's, starts out promising. He asks God for wisdom and receives it. He writes much of the wisdom literature in Scripture (Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon, and much of Proverbs). He is successful in his reign. The nations come to meet him and pay tribute. In some ways, he is a picture of what the Messianic King might look like, but he is as fallen as the rest. He lets his numerous wives lead his heart after idols rather than stay true to God.

The rest of the accounts of the kings of Israel are much like this. Most are outright rebellious. Some make a call for renewed faithfulness, but the trend is towards disobedience. As a result, God does just what he said he was going to do. The people choose disobedience and in doing so, they choose the curse (Deuteronomy 30:15–20).

This leads to disaster for Israel. Under Solomon's son, the kingdom of Israel is split into two kingdoms: Israel in the North, and Judah in the South. The kingdom of Israel is conquered by the Assyrians and carried off into exile. The same happens to the kingdom of Judah by the Babylonians. At this point, the question is how one in the line of David will sit on the throne forever and set things right if there is no throne in Israel? But we must remember that during the periods of the kings and now in the exile, prophets are sent to tell the Jewish people they are about to be punished and then while in exile why they are being punished. They have disobeyed God and are experiencing the curse Moses discussed in Deuteronomy 29. But that is not the end of the story. They are also reminded of who God is, how he is faithful to his promises, how he is merciful, how he has redeemed them in the past, and how they can expect him to do so again. And he will do so in a way that will address the problem they have been unable to address themselves. He will give them new hearts.

There are many clarifications of the promises of God in the prophets. In our brief overview it is important to see that there will be a Messianic (anointed one, promised deliverer) King from the line of David (Isaiah 9:6-7; Jeremiah 23:5-5) and yet greater than David (Psalm 110:1), who in some way is like a son of man and yet who seems to share in the divinity and authority of God (Daniel 7:13-14), who will suffer for the sins of others (Isaiah 52:13-53:12) and yet will rule forever in righteousness and justice over a world that has been freed from sin and its curse (Isaiah 11:1-9). This king will not only save Israel but will bring salvation to the nations (Isaiah 49:6). We see that the members of this new kingdom will have a new covenant with God in which he will write his law on their hearts and mind (Jeremiah 31:31-34), meaning he will make them into the kind of people with hearts that are able to love follow him. There is more than we can discuss in this short overview, but it is important to see the expectation of redemption and salvation that exists because of the promises of God revolving around the seed of the woman as declared by the prophets throughout the exile.

This is where the OT ends, with the expectation of a Messiah, a serpent-slayer from the line of David who will be a blessing to the nations, who will provide forgiveness of sins, conquer death, and rule eternally with righteousness and justice. However, as they trickle back from exile and are allowed to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, no one thinks that this new kingdom has come. Israel languishes, waiting for its promised deliverer, and they will do so for 400 years. The question for Israel is, "When will this Messiah come?"

The Messiah

This is the context for the coming of Jesus—a once perfect world broken by an act of rebellion by the very ones created to be caretakers of it. This rebellion has led to broken fellowship with the creator, humanity's enslavement to sin, suffering caused by evil, and ultimately death. Hope seems distant, but deliverance is coming in a most unexpected way.

It is important to note that the NT writers see the coming of Jesus and his preaching of the dawning kingdom of God as the fulfillment of the OT Scripture and its promises. This is why Matthew begins with a genealogy of Jesus connecting him to Abraham (Matthew 1:1-17), Luke records a genealogy connecting him all the way back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38), and all of the Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) make frequent use of OT quotes and allusions to confirm Jesus as the promised Messianic King. They believe God's promises in the OT and see them fulfilled in Jesus' life, death, and resurrection.

Although there are plenty of examples of God choosing people of low station to fulfill his purposes, the typical Jewish expectation for the Messiah was one who would come in political power. That is not how Jesus comes. He comes from humble beginnings. When he starts his ministry he chooses twelve men to invest in. He doesn't choose the best and brightest; he chooses fishermen and a tax collector. But as he begins to minister, it becomes clear that Jesus is different. He heals people; he casts out demons; he shows his authority over nature; and he miraculously provides sustenance. He amazes the crowds as he teaches as one with more authority than they have never seen. He forgives sins; he overturns the temple; he explains how they have misunderstood the teachings of the OT. He claims to be the fulfillment of OT, the way to the Father, the living water, the light of the world. But most amazing of all, he claims to be the Son of God: one with God the Father. That is what all his teachings and miracles are pointing towards. The Messiah (or Christ as he is called in the NT) has come and his miracles are showing the dawning of the new kingdom promised in the OT. But the Jewish leaders are skeptical, which is unsurprising as it threatens their positions of power, and they begin to plot to kill Jesus.

Jesus' teachings are surprising. He teaches an upside-down economy for the new kingdom he is ushering in. The meek will inherit the earth (Matt. 5:5). You must love your enemies (Matt. 5:43-48). You must store up your treasure in heaven, not on earth (Matt. 6:19-21). Those who want to follow him must expect to be hated and persecuted (Matt. 10:16-25). Those who are like children will be the greatest in the kingdom (Matt. 18:3-4). Those who desire to be great must serve (Matt. 23:11-12). Earthly riches make entering into the kingdom difficult (Matt. 19:23-24). Those who wish to keep their lives must lose it (Matt. 16:24-27). Then Jesus shows what he means by all of this by serving us in a way that we could never repay. He does something for us that we could never do for ourselves. He pays the penalty for our sins. The greatest among us, the very Son of God, serves a world that has been rebelling against him since the beginning of time and takes our sins upon his shoulders. He takes our penalty for our sins—death. The God of the universe becomes the suffering servant of Isaiah 53:5, "...he was pierced for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his wounds we are healed." And because he is perfect, because he is sinless, because he is the Son of God, he rises again from the grave (Matt. 28:1-10). Jesus—the seed of the woman, the blessing to the nations, the Davidic king, the suffering servant, the Son of God—has fulfilled the promise of God. He crushes the head of the serpent. He defeats sin and death and inaugurates the new kingdom.

Our Place in the Story

This is where you and I find ourselves in the story. Sin and death have been defeated, and we are offered a choice. Will we trust Jesus and his work on the cross for the forgiveness of our sins or will we trust in ourselves and our works? At first the answer seems easy. But Jesus calls us to count the cost of following him. He is coming back to set all things right, but until he does, we are to be sharing his story so that others might be saved. And what the Bible tells us is that many will reject him and in so doing reject and persecute us. Belief in him will mean hatred by the world. The call to follow Jesus is the call to forget about temporary, earthly gain and to pursue Jesus and his coming kingdom. It is the call to be willing, like Jesus, to suffer injustice. It is the call to share the gospel with those who are still dead in their sin so that they too can know God. We will find that we are exiles in this world, that we don't really belong, but we will also find that the temporary cost will be eternally worth it (Matt. 13:44-46). Luke 9:23-25 says, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will save it. For what does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses or forfeits himself?" We will all die. But Jesus tells us that a temporary life surrendered to him will result in salvation and eternal life with him in his new kingdom.

Revelation 21:1-4 says, "Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, 'Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain anymore, for the former things have passed away.'" This is just a small glimpse into what God has in store for those who accept what Jesus has done on their behalf, who believe that he is the Christ, the Son of God. While we await his return, we are called to live in such a way that we demonstrate our belief, particularly in our proclamation of the gospel of Jesus to those who do not know him.

In short, we respond to the story of Scripture by knowing Jesus and making him known.

Questions to ask when reading Scripture:

1. What is the author's main point in this section of Scripture?
2. Where does what I'm reading fit in the overall story of the Bible? (i.e. before or after the Exodus from Egypt; before or after Jesus; before or after the resurrection, etc.)
3. What does it mean for those who were the original audience?
4. What does it mean for me today?
5. How should I change in response to this Scripture?

A Few Resources for Understanding the Story of Scripture

For Small Children:

The Biggest Story by Kevin DeYoung

The Jesus Storybook Bible: Every Story Whispers His Name by Sally Lloyd-Jones

The Big Picture Story Bible by David Helm

The Garden, the Curtain, and the Cross by Carl Laferton

thebibleproject.com

New City Catechism (Available as a book or for free as an app on both iOS and Android)

For Youth and Adults

thebibleproject.com

The Whole Story of the Bible in 16 Verses by Chris Bruno

Multiply by Francis Chan

For a More In-depth Look

The Servant King: The Bible's Portrait of the Messiah by T.D. Alexander

Old Testament Survey by Paul House and Eric Mitchell

God's Glory in Salvation Through Judgment: A Biblical Theology by James M. Hamilton, Jr.

Week 1

The Argument So Far

By Harvey Edwards, IV

Introduction

When we started the book of Hebrews, we said that this book is like a primer for understanding how to read the Old Testament in light of Jesus. Its instructive nature is the result of the occasion of the book. We don't know all of the specific circumstances of the recipients of the book of Hebrews, but we do know that they were experiencing persecution for their faith in Jesus. Because of this persecution, they were tempted to go back to relating to God through the Old Covenant. The author wants them to understand that this isn't possible. And not only is it not possible, it will lead to eternal judgment and separation from God. To abandon Jesus for the Old Covenant is to misunderstand the purpose of the Old Covenant and everything else that is recorded in the Old Testament. Its purpose was to demonstrate our need for Jesus. All of what is recorded in the Old Testament, everything that God does during that point in salvation history, is preparation for what he has now done for his people through Jesus.

Discussion

The author begins his argument with God's revelation of himself and his purposes. "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,² but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things, through whom also he created the world" (Hebrews 1:1-2). God has always spoken to his people through his prophets, but in Jesus, God has sent his Son in the flesh to reveal himself and his purposes. The idea is that God has been progressively revealing his plans and purposes in such a way that his people can comprehend his glory. His words and actions recorded by the prophets in the Old Testament have progressively demonstrated God's holiness, his grace, and his mercy. They have laid the groundwork for understanding the sinfulness of man and the attributes of God. And now that the context for understanding these things has been given in the history of Israel, God has revealed himself fully in his son, Jesus. So that there is no confusion regarding Jesus' identity, the author tells us, "He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,⁴ having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs" (Hebrews 1:3-4).

This statement about the identity of Jesus is really the backbone of Hebrews. Jesus is the Son of God and is one with the Father. His superiority to everything else is why we should trust in him alone. There is no other hope for salvation. When we understand this, the call of Hebrews is the only one that makes sense—cling to Jesus. There is no going back to the Old Covenant because the Old Covenant was laying the groundwork for understanding the identity of Jesus and significance of the incarnation. In fact, if you really understand the Old Covenant, you will see that part of the way it was pointing to Jesus was that it came up short in regards to restoring relationship with God. It was never meant to. It was meant to point to the one who could—the promised Messiah who we now know is Jesus.

Look at all the ways the author makes his point. Jesus is greater than Moses. Moses led God's people out of Egypt, but could not bring them into the Promised Land. Jesus rescues God's people from sin and death and leads them to what the Promised Land points to—the sabbath rest of God.

Jesus is greater than Joshua. Joshua brought God's people into the Promised Land, but the rest of God still eluded them as demonstrated later by the exile. This rest of God is a rest that only Jesus can bring by renewing the hearts of God's people and ultimately restoring all of creation.

Jesus is greater than the high priest of the Levitical Priesthood. After making a sin sacrifice for himself, the high priest could go into the special sense of God's presence within the Holy of Holies in the temple once a year to make sacrifices for Israel. But he had to do it every year. And even though these sacrifices could atone for sin, they couldn't deal with the problem of sin. He had to make a sin sacrifice again the next year. He would continue this way until eventually, he would die and would have to be replaced. This happened over and over again. The deaths of these priests are the ultimate proof of the inadequacies of their sacrifices to deal with the problem of sin. The author says that the inability of these sacrifices to deal with sin points to something beyond the sacrifices themselves. "Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron?" (Hebrews 7:11). We needed a better priest who could make a better sacrifice. This priest is Jesus. He lived a righteous life and then laid it down as a sacrifice for sin. He didn't need to offer a sacrifice over and over again because his sacrifice covered our sin once and for all. This sacrifice dealt with the problem of sin. This was proved when he took his life back up again. Jesus didn't need to be replaced because he lives forever, and because he lives forever, he lives to intercede on our behalf to the Father. He didn't do this at the earthly temple that housed a special sense of the presence of God. Jesus went into the heavenly temple, into the fullness of the presence of God to make a one-time sacrifice for sin. And if we know him, we now have access to the Father through him.

Through his priesthood, Jesus has established the New Covenant. This New Covenant is better in every way than the Old Covenant. This isn't a surprise to the Old Testament saints. It was expected by those under the Old Covenant. The author of

Hebrews quotes Jeremiah 31 to show the Old Testament expectations of something better than the Old Covenant. Look at Hebrews 8:6-13:

“⁶ But as it is, Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant he mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises. ⁷ For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion to look for a second.

⁸ For he finds fault with them when he says:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord,
when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel
and with the house of Judah,

⁹ not like the covenant that I made with their fathers

on the day when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt.
For they did not continue in my covenant,
and so I showed no concern for them, declares the Lord.

¹⁰ For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel

after those days, declares the Lord:
I will put my laws into their minds,
and write them on their hearts,
and I will be their God,
and they shall be my people.

¹¹ And they shall not teach, each one his neighbor

and each one his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’
for they shall all know me,
from the least of them to the greatest.

¹² For I will be merciful toward their iniquities,
and I will remember their sins no more.”

¹³ In speaking of a new covenant, he makes the first one obsolete. And what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away.

If you understand the Old Testament, you see the expectations of a Messiah who will set all things right. The author of Hebrews wants his readers to see that Jesus is the fulfillment of all of God’s plans and purposes. There is no hope for salvation and restoration to right relationship with God apart from Jesus. The Old Testament has been revealing to humanity a progressive understanding of the holiness of God, the sinfulness of man, and the incredible grace of God that he would still love us despite our rebellion. It has all been leading up to Jesus. God loves us so much that he would send his son Jesus to enter into our mess and to suffer and die in our place so that we might be forgiven. How could we ever think that we are honoring the Lord if we reject the salvation that is offered to us in Jesus?

As we continue this semester, we will see that the author of Hebrews not only continues to build his argument for faith in Jesus, but he encourages his readers to consider how Jesus changes everything about the way we live our lives. Our perspectives and actions should be totally changed by the good news of Jesus.

Read Hebrews 1:1-4, 7:23-28, 10:12-18

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I’ve read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. What are common mistakes that you see in the way that people approach reading the Old Testament?
2. How has our study of Hebrews grown your understanding of how to read the Old Testament?
3. Name some ways that the Old Testament testifies to what God has now done for us in Jesus.
4. As a group, discuss how Old Testament believers were made right with God. What did they understand about God’s promises for a Messiah?

The Main Point

God has been progressively revealing his intent to rescue a people for himself from sin and death through the Messiah, Jesus. The author of Hebrews wants us to understand that all of God's past interactions highlight what he has now done for us in Jesus.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Genesis 3:15 – The promise of a serpent slayer who will set things right.
- Genesis 12:1-3 – The promise of one from the line of Abraham who will bless the nations.
- Genesis 14:17-20 – The foreshadowing of a greater high priest than Aaron.
- 2 Samuel 7:16 – One from the line of David who will sit on the throne forever.
- Jeremiah 31:31-34 – The promised New Covenant.

Week 2

Hebrews 10:19-39 – The Full Assurance of Faith

By Harvey Edwards, III

Introduction

In late December, 1776, the outlook for the Continental Army commanded by General George Washington was bleak. To even name the ragged, little collection of colonial volunteer militia an army was quite a stretch. It was made up entirely of civilian farmers, merchants, and tradesmen, who could ill afford to even temporarily suspend the work upon which their families' sustenance depended. The controversial rebellion recently undertaken against King George the III seemed already to be in its death throes, as the formidable British forces had chased the colonial army all the way out of New York, into the rural countryside of New Jersey, and were now augmenting their numbers with thousands of fearsome German mercenaries known as "Hessians." The weather was bitterly cold. The payment promised to the colonial soldiers was in arrears. Desertions were on the rise. With military commissions set to expire at the end of the year, and with the prospects for victory vanishingly small, almost all had plans to abandon the fight, lay down their arms, and trudge back home to their families and their work. Until, that is, they were called to assemble and hear the passionate appeal of their beloved and trusted leader, General Washington, to remain and fight on:

My brave fellows, you have done all I asked you to do, and more than can be reasonably expected; but your country is at stake, your wives, your houses and all that you hold dear. You have worn yourselves out with fatigues and hardships, but we know not how to spare you. If you will consent to stay one month longer, you will render that service to the cause of liberty, and to your country, which you probably can never do under any other circumstances.¹

At first, no one moved. Then a single soldier, perhaps moved by the love and faithfulness of his leader, stepped forward. Then a few more, then more and more, eventually enough to compose a rudimentary attack force. Realizing that he must quickly make use of the men or lose them, Washington conceived a daring plan for the small force to steal across the ice-packed Delaware River and surprise the superior British and Hessian forces camped at Trenton. And despite the blizzard that raged in on the Christmas night chosen for the attack, it was brilliantly carried out, with great success. The colonists' victory stunned the British, fortified the morale of the patriots, and the fight for American independence and liberty continued.

The Hebrews to whom this letter is addressed are themselves in similarly difficult straits. They have been under prolonged attack from multiple opponents, political and religious, Roman and Jewish. Many have been imprisoned. Their property has been plundered, leaving many severely impoverished. False teachers move among them, urging them to seek the favor of Jewish authorities by resuming the obsolete, sacrificial practices of the Mosaic Covenant. They are buffeted.

God sees their distress and God knows what they need. They need reminding of the great truths about Jesus, especially about his status in the hierarchy of the universe—greater than angels, greater than Moses, greater than all the Old Testament prophets (all of whom foretold his entry into history). They need to hear again about his love and the great things he has done and what it means for them. Some need to review the authenticity of their faith and to consider the stakes involved. They all need to maintain the habit of meeting together. The ones who have suffered and remained true need a kind word of approval, along with encouragement to endure. And they all need to reflect upon the absolute faithfulness of their Lord and the certainty of his return and final victory. Fortification—that's what our writer is appointed to, and that is the focus of the passage we study today.

Read Hebrews 10:19-39 together.

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. The Hebrews found it difficult to abandon the Mosaic sacrificial system. Are there ways in which we fail to trust the adequacy of the sacrifice Jesus made?
2. How is the counsel to "draw near to God" put into practice in your life?
3. What threatens your holding fast the confession of your hope? How will you overcome those threats?
4. In what ways do you participate in "stirring up" others to love and good ~~work~~^{work}? (Try not to let modesty inhibit your response to this question. Your group will appreciate hearing, and in answering, you might actually be doing some stirring).

¹ Mount Vernon, accessed December 15, 2025, <https://www.mountvernon.org/library/digitalhistory/past-projects/quotes/article>.

5. What are some ways we can support Christians, near and far, who might be enduring hardship or persecution?

Commentary

Hebrews 10:19-25

The writer of Hebrews begins this passage with the words, “Therefore, brothers,” having previously established these doctrinal truths: That the Law of Moses was merely a foreshadowing of what would be necessary for man to enter safely into the presence of God; that the repeated sacrifices of bulls and goats portrayed the cost of sin, but were powerless to erase the condemnation it brings; that Jesus, full of love, accomplished that task, once and for all, by offering his own body and blood as the perfect sacrifice; that having done so, his work is finished and he has taken his seat at the right hand of God until he comes again in power; that the Mosaic Covenant is now obsolete and the New Covenant promised in Jeremiah is now in effect; that under this New Covenant, he has written his law on the hearts and minds of those who trust him, instilling in them a desire and growing ability to live righteously; that his Spirit is continually at work in them to help them, teach them, and strengthen them in the process called sanctification; and that as believers washed by the blood of the Lamb, they have no need to offer any further sacrifices.

Reminding them of their complete security in Jesus, the writer entreats the Hebrews to three specific actions: Draw near to God; hold fast the confession of our hope; and stir up one another to love and good works.

“Draw near to God.” While that might sound like a warm and peaceable suggestion to us, we should not project those feelings onto the Hebrews. Going all the way back to the Fall, the Lord has demonstrated that sinful man dare not draw near to his holy presence. When the Lord drove Adam and Eve out of the Garden, he placed the cherubim with a flaming sword to guard the path back into his presence. As he came down to Mount Sinai at the establishment of the Mosaic Covenant, the Israelites were forbidden to touch even the edge of it, under threat of death. And for centuries since, only the High Priest dared to pass through the veil of the Holy of Holies into the direct presence of the Lord, only once per year, and only after ceremonial washings and personal sin offerings. This thought of drawing near to God was surely terrifying!

But now, all is changed! The writer assures us, by the blood of Jesus, “we have confidence to enter the holy places.” The flesh of Christ, torn at his death, has opened “a new and living way” into the direct presence of the Father, as signified by the miraculous top to bottom rending of the temple veil when Jesus died on the cross. Jesus himself, now alive and serving as our High Priest, has sprinkled clean our hearts and deleted our guilty consciences. He has washed our bodies with pure water (signified by believer’s baptism). We are clean, arrayed in his holiness, and now completely safe to enter into the Father’s presence. We are invited in; his arms are open to receive us! What great, good news, for the Hebrews and for us! “Draw near”—in boldness, in faith, seeking always, with all our power, to get nearer still.

“Hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering.” We were “buried with Christ in baptism and raised to walk in newness of life,” as we recite at the ordinance of baptism. His faithfulness is the source of all our hope, not only for our fortunes during this life, but our hope to be raised at the last day to be with him forever. He has promised, and he cannot lie. A firm grasp of this hope is what emboldens any Christian to live life as Jesus did—as we are called to live—self-sacrificially, with single-minded purpose, embracing risks, small and great, even when the way is hard.

“Stir up one another to love and good works.” Many commentators remark upon the first word used in this command, “stir,” as conveying in the original language a sense of energy and excitement by the way we encourage. We are meant to motivate one another, by our words and our actions. And for this positive energy to be contagious, we of course must gather. Though Anchor members were still able to hear good and sound Bible teaching during Covid-era virtual church, how much we all missed meeting together! No smiles or hugs, no joining all our voices together in praise, no small-group sharing of challenges and victories—no good! The church is a body of believers, and each member of the body contributes something unique. To willfully distance oneself from the community of believers is to deprive the body of one of its functioning parts and is also a sure way to distance oneself from God. By his design, we will always be tremendously more effective as a mutually supportive community of faith than when operating solo. And our writer adds a final thought, that as the Day draws near for the return of the Lord, a time that we know will be characterized by increasing turmoil and conflict, the necessity of that mutual support will become ever more essential.

Hebrews 10:26-31

Having encouraged the Hebrews to embrace and appropriate all the blessings available to us as believers, the writer now feels it necessary to issue to some of the community a warning, a challenge really, to examine themselves to be sure that they have truly trusted Jesus as Lord. One does not automatically become a trusting disciple of Christ by merely associating with a loving community of believers. To illustrate his meaning, the writer describes a hypothetical cohort of people who “go on sinning.” They have heard and received the knowledge of the truth. They comprehend it, recognize its validity, even consider committing to it. But evaluating the costs of discipleship, they refuse repentance and submission. They go on as before, preferring to assert

themselves as masters of their own lives, living as though they were born with an absolute right to self-determination. Their continuation in sin is not by mistake, not by temporary lapses, but by what commentator Matthew Henry describes as “a full and fixed will.”²

What a stupendous mistake! For any who take this stance, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.” The writer reminds the Hebrews that even under the inferior Mosaic Covenant, one who willfully and intentionally violated the Law could be executed upon the testimony of two or three witnesses. Now that the New Covenant has been established—at an immeasurable price, the torturous sacrifice of the Son of God, who willingly, intentionally submitted to it—“how much worse punishment, do you think,” will be deserved by one who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has profaned the blood of the covenant? To receive the truth and turn away from it? That is the sin of apostasy! It’s as evil as intentionally trampling on a person, a horrific and inhumane thing to do, but this is even worse—to trample on not just a person, but the one and only perfect Son of God? To dishonor the spilled blood of Christ, the precious and essential cleansing agent needed to shield us from the vengeance of the holy Father? Such thoughts are beyond dreadful! This was exactly the path the radical Pharisee Saul was walking until he was confronted by Jesus on the road to Damascus and converted. Persistence upon this evil path is inconsistent with salvation. In sending Jesus into the world on mission, God has done the extraordinary, the ultimate, the only thing that could possibly reconcile his infinite mercy and his perfect justice in order to save us, and there is no other plan. He is not an easygoing grandfather. He is holy. To reject his amazing and miraculous offer of salvation is to invite his vengeance, and in the words of the writer, “It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”

Hebrews 10:32-39

Having completed his warnings to those who may not be fully committed, our writer now issues kind and encouraging words to those who have already demonstrated their full commitment to the Lord. He recounts the hard times they have endured since their enlightenment, their struggles and sufferings, their public reproach. He compliments their alignment with and support for their brothers and sisters in the faith who have been ill-treated, imprisoned, and plundered. He points out their rational joy despite these sufferings, based on their strong faith that as believers, they are already in possession of a bright future, one not threatened by temporal and material setbacks. He points out that there is a great reward waiting for those who maintain their confidence in the Lord and endure.

Ending this section with a quote from the prophet Habakkuk, the writer avows that the Lord will not delay but will return at the exactly correct moment. Those who shrink back will not be found pleasing to the Lord, and they will be destroyed. “But we,” he says, with great warmth, rhetorically embracing these brave believers into fellowship with himself, “are not of those who shrink back, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls.”

The Main Point

The long-awaited Messiah has come and has offered himself as the perfect sacrifice to take away our sins. He has opened the way for loving fellowship with the Father, and the Spirit has taken up residence in our hearts, showing us the way we should go. There is no other way by which men can be saved but by trusting in Jesus. Knowing that he will return in power to make all things right, we are enabled to “hold fast the confession of our hope” and endure until that day.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Jeremiah 31:31-34 - The promise of the New Covenant.
- Deuteronomy 32:35-36 - A reminder that vengeance is a righteous prerogative belonging to the Lord.
- II Timothy 1:8-12 - Paul shares with Timothy his confidence that the Lord will see him through any earthly trial and give him strength to endure.
- Habakkuk 2:3-44 - Encouragement to endure. The wait will require faith, but in relative terms, will be short.

² Matthew Henry, “Hebrews 10,” Matthew Henry Commentary on the Whole Bible, accessed January 25, 2026, <https://www.biblestudytools.com/commentaries/matthew-henry-complete>.

Week 3

Hebrews 11:1-16 – Desiring a Better Country

By John Roberson

Introduction

Faith can look a lot of different ways in life. Take a GPS, for example. If you need to go somewhere, but you don't know where you are going, you put your faith in your GPS. You have faith that it will get you to your destination, and even trust that it accurately estimates the ETA so that you can procrastinate as long as possible without being late. Failure of the GPS to do what you trust it to do can lead to some negative consequences. What is it about GPS that makes it worthy of my faith? Well, it has proven before that it can consistently and accurately do what it is supposed to do to help me arrive at my destination on time (in the early days of GPS navigation, this was not always the case—a Rand McNally or printed MapQuest instructions were sometimes necessary backups to have). I have come to know and understand that, for example, Google Maps, as an entity, is trustworthy to fulfill its purpose. This is not a blind faith. Blind faith would look like Michael Scott in "The Office" driving himself and Dwight into a lake because he believes, despite said lake being in plain view right in front of him, that "maybe it's a shortcut" and "the machine knows." Michael, in his blindness, fails to understand the ways of the GPS. As a result. When he is confused about where it is taking him, he blindly steers himself into danger. Faith, specifically in a biblical sense, requires knowledge of the character of the one who is the object of our faith. By this our faith is useful and purposeful, producing steadfastness and perseverance to remain on the path of obedience.

Read Hebrews 11:1-16 together

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. Are "assurance" and "conviction" words that you, or someone who knows you well, would use to describe your faith? Why or why not?
2. Despite having faith in the promise God gave them, Abraham and Sarah initially did not understand how God's promise would be fulfilled or what it would look like. Are there promises we see in Scripture that you initially misunderstood but have since come to understand what was actually being promised? Additionally, are there promises that Christian culture advertises that are not Biblical, causing disappointment and hurt for those expecting these promises to be fulfilled?
3. Does your faith persevere through suffering, leading to obedience? When it has, what role have other believers had in your faith? When it hasn't, what are ways you can lean on and include others to help you in your faith?

Commentary

Hebrews 11:1-16

"Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (11:1). Many may have heard this definition of faith before—it is the most direct definition of faith that we find in Scripture. Though simple in word and direct in address, this definition requires more thought and examination to understand the full picture of faith it paints for the reader. Many examples will follow in Chapter 11, which has been dubbed the "hall of faith" for the list of biblical figures featured for their faith. Before we get to these figures, it is helpful to return to the last verse in chapter 10 to properly understand this definition of faith. Verse 39 says, "But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and preserve their souls." Faith is contrasted with shrinking and, ultimately, destruction. So, it is those who do not shrink back that have faith. The previous few verses from here talk about endurance, keeping confidence, getting what was promised, and the hope of a great reward (10:35-36). Keeping the ending of chapter 10 in mind, it is clear the author of Hebrews sets up the following exposition of faith in light of perseverance. Now, faith described in 11:1 begins to take shape as the author implores the reader.

Assurance and conviction are the two characteristic descriptions of faith seen in verse 1. Assurance can be translated *confidence*, and conviction can be translated *proof*.³ So, faith is not an abstract theological idea, or "a vague hope grounded in

³ *The Christian Standard Bible: Everyday Study Bible* (Brentwood, TN: Holman Bible, 2018).

imaginary, wishful thinking.”⁴ Faith is the result of an inner resolve, a persuasion grounded in strong belief. The second component of this definition indicates that faith deals with something to come: “things hoped for” and “things not seen.” “Assurance” and “conviction” are words that describe someone who knows what they have seen or heard. They experienced a certain reality. But faith is that same conviction and confidence, but for things that have not come to pass, cannot be proven, or have not been seen or experienced. This does not mean that faith is belief that contradicts evidence, cannot be reasoned with, or is blind. It means that one who has faith trusts. And who is worthy of such trust? One whose character is unchangeable, who guarantees his promises with oaths, who cannot lie (Hebrews 6:17-18), he “who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think” (Ephesians 3:20), with whom nothing is impossible (Luke 1:37). “God is not man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind. Has he said, and will he not do it? Or has he spoken, and will he not fulfill it?” (Numbers 23:19). Faith is belief in the Lord, that he is everything he said he would be, and that he will do everything he said he would do. God is the object of the believer’s faith. Faith is not unfounded or blind because God proves himself faithful and fulfills his promises. He delivers. “For all the promises of God find their Yes in him” (2 Corinthians 1:20a). Who is the “yes” that God’s promises are found in? The answer is Jesus. God fulfills his promises in various ways, but Jesus is the ultimate fulfillment of God’s promises, alluded to even from the beginning of time (Genesis 3:15). When the author of Hebrews says “things hoped for” and “things not seen,” these things are found in and made possible by the life and righteousness of Jesus Christ.

In verse 2, the author notes that it is by faith “the people of old received their commendation.” Commendation can be referred to as divine approval⁵ or “good testimony from God.”⁶ To visit 10:39 again, we see that the faith the author of Hebrews is describing is one that preserves the soul, a faith that obtains salvation and eternal life. He uses the example of “the people of old” to prove that even they had this full faith, and this faith is what gave them divine approval, what ultimately saved them. This verse also tells us that because of their faith, God did not focus on their failures. This does not mean he ignored their failures, but he commended their lives because this faith produced perseverance to trust in the Lord and obey his commands. The author of Hebrews follows this example as he portrays the audience’s ancestors as exemplars of faith despite the reality that they were broken and sinful people. He also uses the audience’s ancestors to make the connection that even though they did not experience the first coming, death, and resurrection of Jesus like they themselves did, it is still their faith that saved them. The author implores the audience to realize that what their ancestors had, they should also have, and for more reason, because of the life of Jesus Christ that has since taken place.

So begins the “by faith” series of examples as a source of encouragement to perseverance and obedience. No human was there to know and see or record that creation (“what is seen”) “was not made out of things that are visible” (11:3). It is by faith that the believer understands and believes God’s inspired word which tells us that God spoke creation into existence and did not need or use existing matter to accomplish this. By explaining this, this verse counters a common Greco-Roman notion that there was eternally existing matter present.⁷ “In the beginning, God created...” (Genesis 1:1). Nothing existed, nothing was in the beginning, except God.

The first faithful person the author of Hebrews introduces is Abel. It is said that “by faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain” (11:4a). There is always a lot of discussion as to why Abel’s sacrifice was more acceptable than Cain’s, but 1 John 3:12 homes in on the answer. This verse says that Cain was of the evil one and his deeds were evil, while his brother Abel’s deeds were righteous. Later on in this third chapter of 1 John, we read that “if our heart does not condemn us, we have confidence before God” (1 John 3:21). By this we can know that it is not God’s preference for animal sacrifice over an offering of produce; it is the heart of the person offering. Abel’s faith meant God commanded him as righteous. That is why God accepted his offering, because his offering was an offering of faith, while Cain’s offering was absent of faith. “Through his faith, though he died, he still speaks” (Hebrews 11:4b) refers to the message and example of Abel’s faith that lives on and ministers to others, such as the Hebrews, long after his death.

The author then introduces Enoch. The first mention of “Enoch” in Scripture is Cain’s son in Genesis 4:17, though this is not the Enoch the author is referencing. The Enoch Hebrews is referencing is the son of Jared (Genesis 5:18). Enoch was a man who “walked with God” (Genesis 5:22, 24) and “pleased God” (Hebrews 11:5b). Jude 14 tells us that Enoch was also a prophet for the Lord. These things show us that Enoch had a special relationship with God, and because of his faith, he “was taken up, so that he should not see death” (Hebrews 11:5a). Enoch was commended or accepted because he pleased God. Verse 6 tells us that it is only by faith that you can please God. Why is it only by faith? Because by faith only would one “believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him” (11:6). In other words, faith is conviction of things not seen (belief that he exists), and assurance of things hoped for (belief that he rewards those who seek him).

Next is Noah. Noah’s faith led him to obey God, even though the warning he received from God was “concerning events as yet unseen” (11:7). Not only this, but obedience for Noah involved the time and resources to construct a massive boat of biblical proportions (pun intended) because torrential rain was coming, so much so that it was going to cover the whole earth and everyone in the world would die except for Noah and his household. These were definitely unprecedented events and instructions,

⁴ David W. Chapman, *Hebrews*. *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁵ Ronald Sauer, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: Moody Bible Institute, 2014).

⁶ David W. Chapman, *Hebrews*, *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

⁷ Chapman, *Hebrews*.

but the strength of Noah's faith led to a "reverent fear" to obey because he believed God would do what he said he would do. Noah's faith and obedience are contrasted with the world's wickedness, continual evil (Genesis 6:5), and ultimate rejection of God. Hebrews notes that the world was condemned by lack of faith, but Noah "became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith" (11:7).

The last character introduced in the first half of chapter 11, and one who garners a lot of attention from the author of Hebrews, is Abraham. We again see that by faith, someone acts in obedience despite, at the time, yet unrealized promises. Abraham obeyed even though he "was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance," while "not knowing where he was going" (11:8). By faith, Abraham left and "went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise" (11:9). Abraham (and his descendants Isaac and Jacob) is an heir of a promise, but he has not yet received the contents of the promised inheritance. It is his faith from the beginning that leads to his obedience, not the possession of what is promised. The next verse gives a little more insight into the beauty of the hope Abraham's faith assures him of: "for he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (11:10). This tells us that Abraham hoped for not an earthly city, but a heavenly one, one that is founded upon holy mountains (Psalm 87:1), one not designed or built by human hands, but directly by God himself. Abraham is not obeying in hopes of enjoying the spoils of the Promised Land, he is obeying with eternity in mind, his ultimate dwelling place, in the perfect presence of the fullness of his God. Because of his faith, and the salvation offered by Jesus, this hoped-for eternal reality is proof to Abraham of the worthiness of obedience.

It should be noted that these figures in Hebrews 11 do not live their lives faithfully all the time. There is doubt, sin, selfishness, and failure in their stories (see the scriptures in "A few relevant Scriptures" below). But they are both commended/accepted by God and empowered to obey through faith. This is seen well in the example of Sarah, who is the object of verse 11. It says that "by faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised." Genesis 18:12-13, however, says that when the Lord said that Sarah will have a son, "Sarah laughed to herself, saying 'After I am worn out, and my lord is old... shall I indeed bear a child?'" It seems here that Sarah laughs in disbelief and doubts how she could birth a son, as "the way of women had ceased to be with Sarah" (Genesis 18:11). The Lord questions her disbelief and says, "Is anything too hard for the Lord?" (Genesis 18:14). It does not seem here like Sarah has earned her spot in this "hall of faith." Yet, since it is said in Hebrews that Sarah is one that obeys by faith, and if we apply the same understanding from Abel's acceptance versus Cain's, we see that Sarah is not defined by this momentary disbelief. Hebrews tells us that Sarah believed in the faithfulness of him who promised, and therefore by faith she received power to conceive. Sarah's life is not defined by her failures, but through the redemptive grace of God she is defined by her faith, which empowers her to be an heir of the promise. So, God's redemptive story continues, and "from one man, and him as good as dead, were born descendants as many as the stars of heaven and as many as the innumerable grains of sand by the seashore" (Hebrews 11:12).

The next four verses speak to an important fact about the people of faith. Verse 13 says, "these all died in faith, not having received the things promised." Wait a minute... you're telling me that despite all of their confidence and conviction in these promised things affecting their whole lives, they do not receive what is promised? They were faithful till the end, but died before it could happen? The rest of verse 13 explains: "but having seen them and greeted them (the promises) from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth." Let us take Abraham and Sarah for example to understand this section of chapter 11. At the time of Abraham and Sarah's death, they had only one son even though they were promised many. Abraham and Sarah did make it to and live in the land that was promised, but only a small portion of it, and it was never fully his. These figures did not receive the full earthly reality of God's promise, but they did see it and "greeted them from afar" (11:13). Their faith allowed them to believe that the fulfillment of God's promises to them may extend beyond their earthly reality, helping them to acknowledge "that they were strangers and exiles on the earth" (11:13), that complete fulfillment of God's promises are found in a better, heavenly promised land. The people that believe "thus make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been thinking of that land from which they had gone out, they would have had opportunity to return" (11:14-15). A homeland is indeed what they are seeking, but if they wanted an earthly homeland, Abraham, for example, would have just returned to where he came from, Haran. We can see here and throughout God's story that there is a spiritual application to the often physical reality of life in exile for Abraham and his descendants, and we can extend this application to all children of God: the "spiritual application of exile terminology to this whole mortal life indicates the expectation of a life to come."⁸ "But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (11:16). Because of their faith, which led to persistent obedience, and perseverance to death, "God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared for them a city" (11:16). This is what those of faith, in confidence, hope for: the approval of their father who is not ashamed to be called their God. And this is their conviction of the things not seen: their God has prepared a holy city for them to dwell in forever with him.

The perseverance of our faith is grounded in the finality and permanency of who Jesus is and what he did displayed in Hebrews 1-10. Perseverance through faith is a non-negotiable for the believer because of Christ's earthly example, and the author of Hebrews tells us such: Christ suffered during temptation (Hebrews 2:18), learned obedience through suffering (Hebrews 5:8), and, ultimately, suffered through death (Hebrews 2:9). Therefore, why should we give anything less? God is worthy of our lives.

⁸ Chapman, *Hebrews*.

He is faithful and trustworthy, completely deserving of our faith. This faith does not go unrewarded. God is proud of the believer, as a father is of his own children, for we are his through faith. He provides for them a home and a new life with him forever. Those who endure, who have faith, who do not shrink back, can expect to be welcomed home with the words “well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21, 23).

The Main Point

Those who have faith obtain the Lord’s commendation (salvation) and preserve their souls. Through figures in Scripture, we see that faith, bridled with a confidence and conviction in God and his promises, produces perseverance to live lives of faithful obedience, longing for the reward of the heavenly city to come.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Hebrews 6:13-20 –The certainty of God’s promises.
- Genesis 1-2 – God speaking all of creation into existence from nothing.
- Genesis 4:1-16 – The story of Abel’s more acceptable sacrifice to God.
- 1 John 3:11-24 – The heart of the righteous, using Cain and Abel as an example.
- Genesis 5:18-24 – Enoch.
- Jude 14-16 – Enoch’s prophecy.
- Genesis 6:1-13 – The corruption of the world leading to its condemnation through Noah and the flood.
- Genesis 6-9 – The story of Noah.
- Genesis 12-25 – The life of Abraham

Week 4

Hebrews 11:17-40 – By Faith

By Michael Green

Introduction

Before launching into the latter half of Chapter 11 of Hebrews, let's take a look at some key concepts that inform this chapter. First, the writer to the Hebrews has been proclaiming the excellencies of Christ and his superiority in every way to the Law and the sacrificial system it contained. His writing has predominantly been in an effort to persuade his audience, Jewish Christians, not to return to Judaism as Christ is the fulfillment of the Law. Fresh off one such strong exhortation, the author turns his attention toward the underlying essential aspect of following the Lord that runs throughout the entirety of the Old and New Testaments: faith.

Chapter 11 is all about faith. In verse 1 we learn that “faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” And this faith is not a new thing. It has been the key ingredient in a right relationship with the Lord since the beginning. In fact, verse 6 tells us that “without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”

In this week's chapter of Hebrews, the author paints vivid portraits of faith as he has defined it through recounting the actions of heroes of the Old Testament, expected and surprising. Verses 1 and 6 listed above together with the specific portraits of faith that are provided as exemplars throughout the chapter, make me think of apps like Apple Maps. In an app like that, we enter the address of our destination, and the destination determines the heading. A few different routes are provided, but they are all dictated by the destination. The end destination, which is unseen and distant, an intangible idea in our minds, determines our steps now, steps that are seen, immediate, and tangible.

In the depictions of faith in this chapter, their focus on God who is unseen determines their path that is seen in ways that make no sense unless the destination is taken into account. If their destination is self-comfort, happiness in the here and now, glorification of self, accumulation of stuff, pride, etc., then the examples provided make no sense. If this world is all there is and we are just the sum total of our cells, our tissue, our neurons firing and our synapses receiving, then the paths chosen in Chapter 11 are idiocy at best and lunacy at worst. This is exactly what Paul is getting at in Romans when he says, “if Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile and you are still in your sins” (15:17) and “If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied” (15:19). But Paul knows that is not the case. Paul has faith. And, to put it in the language of Hebrews 11:6, if “[God] exists and rewards those who pursue him,” then the actions of these folks make complete sense. Their destination determines their direction, and their heading is bringing glory to the one true unseen God.

Read Hebrews 11:17-40 together.

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. Share with the group how you came to faith in Christ.
2. Let's pretend that you are writing a chapter in a book about moments that you have witnessed that exemplify faith in your own life or the life of another believer. Share one of those impactful moments to encourage your group.
3. Would you be willing to share a situation or area of your life where the group can come alongside you and pray for your faith to be strengthened?

Commentary

11:17-31

Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (vv. 17-22)

God pursued Abram, made a covenant with him, and subsequently changed his name to Abraham. The Lord called Abraham to leave his homeland and go to a land that the Lord would show him. The Lord tells him that he will “make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and him who dishonors you I will curse, and in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:2-3). At seventy-five years old, Abraham responded by setting out from his homeland, following the Lord.

In Genesis 15:1, God tells Abraham, “Fear not, Abram, I am your shield; your reward shall be very great.” Abraham pushed back a bit by reminding the Lord of his childless status, meaning that the Lord had not provided him with an heir through the natural means of Abraham’s union with his wife, Sarah. Further complicating things, Abraham and Sarah were very old, well past their childbearing years with Sarah having previously been described as “barren” (Genesis 12:30). However, the Lord responded by bringing Abraham outside, directing his eyes toward the stars, pointing out their uncountable nature, and telling him, “So shall your offspring be” (Genesis 15:5). As it relates to Hebrews 11, the next verse is of critical importance. Genesis 15:6 states that “[Abraham] believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness.” Abraham was credited with righteousness because of his faith in the Lord. Throughout Scripture, righteousness has always been a free gift from the Lord given to those who have faith in him.

The above details provide the context that makes the events of Hebrews 11:17-19 so special. Abraham and Sarah did end up miraculously having a child named Isaac. God did fulfill his promise to provide an heir, as he always does. However, God tested the faith of Abraham when he asked him to offer his one and only son from his union with Sarah as a sacrifice to the Lord (Genesis 22:2). The promises of God revolve around Abraham’s descendants coming through the child of the promise, Isaac. As John Calvin puts, “the death of Isaac … would have been as it were the collapse of all the promises; since Isaac was no ordinary man, but one who included Christ” (*Commentaries*, 413). Christ is “included” in that Christ is the ultimate realization of God’s promise to bless the nations through Abraham’s lineage. How can the Messiah ultimately come through Abraham’s lineage if Isaac is sacrificed?

And yet, Abraham was asked to offer the child of the promise to God as a sacrifice. The faith of Abraham in the Lord was on full display when in response to his son’s question regarding the location of the lamb for the burnt offering he responded that, “God will provide for himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son” (Genesis 22:8). As he walked up that mountain, wood in tow, Abraham’s steps were being directing by his “assurance of things hoped for” and his “conviction of things not seen.” He knew God, and he had faith that God would provide one way or another, keeping his promises. And this kind of faith is a pleasing aroma to the Lord, who, as a precursor to the atonement found in the sacrifice of his one and only son, Jesus Christ, provided a ram caught in the thicket as a substitutionary sacrifice in Isaac’s place.

Faith in the Lord and his promises to Abraham continued to be on display in his lineage. As the author of Hebrews points out, it is seen in Isaac’s blessings of his children, Jacob and Esau (Hebrews 11:20). Through a remarkable display of God’s sovereignty, even Jacob’s sin is used to accomplish the preordained plans of the Lord to continue the promised lineage through Jacob rather than Esau (Genesis 27:1-29). The sin is fully Jacob’s and yet, even his sin is subsumed under the sovereign plans of the Lord. Isaac unknowingly gave his blessing to Jacob, a blessing encompassed by the promises of God to Abraham, where nations will bow down to Jacob, and those who curse him will be cursed while those who bless him will be blessed (Genesis 27:29). It will be through Jacob’s lineage that the ultimate fulfillment of God’s covenant with Abraham will be realized: Jesus will come through his line.

The author of Hebrews points out that faith continued to be displayed in the next generation when Jacob “blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff” (Hebrews 11:21). In the blessing found in Genesis 48, Jacob specifically referenced “The God before whom [his] fathers Abraham and Isaac walked, the God who has been [his] shepherd all [his] life long to this day” (v. 15). Harkening back to God’s blessing of Abraham, he blessed Ephraim and Manasseh to “grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth” (v. 16), with the younger Ephraim being blessed to be greater with his offspring becoming a “multitude of nations” (v. 19). Jacob exhibited trust in the Lord and his promises as he was dying. He told Joseph that “God will be with you and will bring you again to the land of your fathers” (v. 21). Years later, as Joseph faced his own death, he displayed the faith of his fathers, trusting in the Lord and his promises to return the Israelites to the land that was promised to Abraham, telling his brothers that “God will visit you and bring you up out of this land to the land that he swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob” (Genesis 50:24). He believed it so much that he made his brothers swear to bring his bones to bury him in the promised land when the future exodus takes place.

Moses’ Parents, Moses, the Israelites, and Rahab (vv. 23-31)

Exodus 12:40-41 tells us that the Israelites stayed in Egypt for a total of 430 years. The respect and honor acquired by Joseph under the sovereign hand of the Lord were quickly forgotten by a new king over Egypt who began to perceive the Israelites as a threat and started treating them harshly. He ruthlessly enslaved the people, making their lives bitter with hard labor and began to kill the newborn sons of the Hebrews, casting them into the Nile River (Exodus 1). One of those newborns was hidden by his mother. Then, once she could no longer hide him, she put him in a basket and rested it among the reeds along the river bank, the first act of faith in this story referenced in Hebrews 11:23. According to God’s preordained plan, that baby was found by the daughter of Pharaoh who took pity on him, actually unknowingly gave him back to his mother to nurse him, and later took him into her own household as her son, naming him “Moses” (Genesis 2:1-10).

Moses was strategically positioned by the Lord to play the role of intermediary between the Israelites and the Lord, having been chosen by God to go before Pharaoh and lead God’s people out of the bondage of Egypt toward the land promised to Abraham. And Moses responded to God in faith. Hebrews 11:24-26 tells us that faith in the Lord led Moses to refuse the comforts of Pharaoh’s house and opt instead to be persecuted alongside his people, the Israelites. He would then be used by God to

negotiate with Pharaoh the exodus of his people from Egypt, making demands supported by divine plagues of increasing severity. The last plague involved the death of the firstborn of every household, “man and beast” (Exodus 11:12), that did not follow the specific instructions of the Lord to rub the blood of an innocent sacrificed lamb on the posts and lintel of the doorway of their home. In faith, Moses followed the Lord’s instructions. “[T]here was a great cry in Egypt” (Exodus 11:30) that night as the plague came to terrifying fruition. Then, Pharaoh “summoned Moses and Aaron by night and said, ‘Up, go out from among my people, both you and the people of Israel; and go, serve the Lord, as you have said. Take your flocks and your herds, as you have said, and be gone, and bless me also!’” (Exodus 11:31-32).

Moses and the Israelites then hastily departed from Egypt. But fickle Pharaoh quickly changed his mind (as decreed by the will of the Lord in order to bring God glory in his decisive victory over Pharaoh and his army) and began a hostile pursuit in his own chariot with his army in tow (Exodus 14:1-9). This all came to a critical head when the Israelites got stuck between the proverbial rock and a hard place of the Red Sea in front and the army of a world power behind. But God—faithful in his promises to his people—parted the sea, provided a way for them to cross on dry land, and then completely drowned Pharaoh’s army when they tried to do the same. Hebrews 11:29 says that the Israelites crossed the sea by faith. As a result, “Israel saw the great power that the Lord used against the Egyptians, so the people feared the Lord, and they believed in the Lord and in his servant Moses” (Genesis 14:31).

Later, as the Israelites crossed the Jordan River to enter the land promised to Abraham, the faith of the Israelites and that of Rahab (Joshua 2:8-13) were made sight when they acted in obedience and witnessed a miraculous victory of the Lord over the city of Jericho. That mighty fortified city stood between the people of God and the promises of God. And God again brought about a victory in a miraculous way that made no logical sense and rightly gave him all the glory (Joshua 6).

11:32-38

Following the author’s lead, the scope of this guide prevents us from exploring in depth the stories of Gideon, Barak, Samson, and the many others listed. However, I did find that my ESV Study Bible (2382) has an excellent little reference chart that I thought would be beneficial to include here in case you want to follow up and study each of the examples of faith found in Chapter 11.

OT Person of Faith	Reference in Hebrews 11	Reference in OT
Abel	11:4	Genesis 4
Enoch	11:5	Genesis 5:18-24
Noah	11:7	Genesis 5:29-10:32
Abraham	11:8-19	Genesis 12-25, etc.
Sarah	11:11	Genesis 12-23; Isaiah 51:2
Isaac	11:17-20	Genesis 17-35, etc.
Jacob	11:21	Genesis 25-50, etc.
Joseph	11:21-22	Genesis 37-50, etc.
Moses	11:23-28	Exodus 2:10 and throughout the Pentateuch, etc.
Rahab	11:31	Joshua 2:1, 3, 6:17-25
Gideon	11:32	Judges 6-8
Barak	11:32	Judges 4-5
Samson	11:32	Judges 13-16
Jephthah	11:32	Judges 11-12; 1 Samuel 12:11
David	11:32	Ruth 4; 1-2 Samuel, etc.
Samuel	11:32	1 Samuel; 1 Chronicles 6; 9; 11; 26; 2 Chronicles

11:39-40

The fulfillment of the promises of Abraham and the entirety of the Old Testament is found in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which did not happen in the lifetime of the people discussed in Chapter 11. They had their eyes fixed on the Lord and that determined their trajectory, their heading, their direction. Their destination determined their direction. For many, that direction involved enduring so much pain in this world. This “world was not worthy” of them (Hebrews 11:38), but in these moments of faith, their eyes weren’t fixed on this world. They realized that there is a heavenly kingdom not of this world that is ruled by a gracious, loving, powerful, perfect King of Kings. If the people of this chapter thought that this world was all there is, then their actions would make no sense. They acted instead in faith, with their hearts directed toward the God that is unseen, and that determined their steps in the here and now. They walked in “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Hebrews 11:1).

One last overall point about faith that I will make is that the pictures of faith provided by the author are all described in terms of the actions that the people took, which may conflict with how we think about the notion of “faith” if we see it solely as a

“cerebral” or “mental” or “spiritually internal” exercise. Godly obedience is always preceded by faith, because faith necessarily breeds obedience. Like birds of a feather, they flock together. When speaking to this point regarding the faith of Noah, Calvin says, “he would not have had the courage to meet willingly so many troubles, or to overcome so many obstacles, or to stand firm at his task so long, if he had not already trusted in God. Faith alone therefore is the teacher of obedience, while unbelief keeps us from obeying God” (*Commentaries*, 410).

It should be noted here that these folks weren’t perfect by any means. As a matter of fact, all sinned and certainly had lapses of faith, with many sinning grievously in their lives. Chapter 11 is providing us examples of when their faith was on display in their actions as an encouragement to press on. Calvin goes on to share some overarching thoughts on faith that are too beautiful not to include here.

The Spirit of God demonstrates to us the things hidden to us and quite beyond the kind of knowledge which depends upon the senses. We are promised eternal life, but we are dead; we are told of a blessed resurrection, but we are in a state of corruption; we are pronounced righteous, and yet we are dwelling places of sin; we hear that we are happy, and yet we are buried under countless miseries; we are promised riches of every kind of good, but are exceedingly hungry and full of thirst; God cries that he will come to us quickly, and yet to our own cry he seems to be deaf. What would become of us if we were not upheld by hope and if our minds did not escape the darkness of this world through the bright light of God’s Word and his Spirit? Faith, therefore, is said rightly to be the reality (*subsistentia*) of the things we affirm in hope, and the evidence of the things we do not see (*Commentaries*, 427).

The Main Point

After proclaiming the superiority of Christ in all things and exhorting his hearers not to turn back to the Law, the author of Hebrews shares exemplars of faith in the Lord. The Lord is after our hearts. He wants us to trust him. He wants us to put our faith in him. Focusing our hearts on the Lord will determine our steps in the here and now.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- (See the table above.)

Week 5

Hebrews 12:1-17 – Looking to the Author and Perfecter of Our Faith

By Wen Burnette

Introduction

What is the point of a sports team? Well, the answer is easy: to win championships. Yes, sports are fun and please don't think I am saying that winning championships is the only aim of sports. I am pretty adamant that youth sports should be about fun and learning the game, rather than just winning. But at some point, the aim of sports is to win a state championship, a national title, or a World Championship of some sort.

The job of a coach is to get individuals to work together, pointing the same direction to achieve the goal of winning a championship. While many have undertaken this task, one stands above the rest. Nick Saban famously preached to his players to "trust the process." By focusing on one task: the current rep, play, and game, he believed it would lead to championships. Who could argue he was wrong?

Early this past fall, Aaron Barnes and I coached Alex's 8U flag football team to a PARA championship. At our first practice, Aaron was hopeful that we would be a middle of the road team. We had kids from all over Tuscaloosa, of many different skills and abilities, but Aaron and I expected three things of each kid no matter the skill level. The first was that they would work hard, next they would be respectful, and finally they would have fun. Each practice we would end with, "What are the three rules?" and the kids would answer, "Work hard, be respectful, and have fun."

We took our lumps. We had to discipline players who didn't work hard or were not respectful. We lost games. But as the season continued, we got better. Our players cheered for each other. Our players knew what we expected of them: to play hard; to respect the coaches, other team, and each other; and then finally, to go have fun. It was my first time formally coaching and I really enjoyed it. Winning a championship was fun (my heart rate in the semi-final never got below 100). But honestly what I still like to talk about is how well the kids played the game. Each kid on our team was going to play hard, and by the end of the season each kid was saying "yes-sir" and helping another kid on the field up if they fell. I truly believe they each had a fun time. Are Aaron and I amazing coaches? I would like to think so, but probably not. I do, however, believe that we did a good job setting an expectation for our team and pushing them toward a common goal.

Likewise, as Christians, we do not aimlessly walk through life. Heaven is our goal, and we have not reached our eternal rest yet. What does this mean? We fight the fight of faith; we run the race; we finish the race! In reading for writing this, there is a quote that struck me from William Barclay,

In the Christian life we have a goal. The Christian is not an unconcerned stroller along the byways of life; he is a wayfarer on the high road. He is not a tourist, who returns each night to the place from which he starts; he is a pilgrim who is forever on the way. The goal is nothing less than the likeness of Christ. The Christian life is going somewhere, and it would be well if, at each day's ending, we were to ask ourselves: "Am I any farther on?" (Barclay 171).

Read Hebrews 12:1-17 together

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. Why do you believe that the author of Hebrews used the analogy of running a race for the Christian life? How do you see this working currently in your life?
2. How does sin affect our ability to run the race? How do we lay aside this weight?
3. Why does God discipline? What does the discipline of God show about a person?
4. How do we as a church "lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed"?
5. Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, who are some men and/or women in your life that have encouraged your faith and helped you along the race to heaven?

Commentary

Hebrews 12:1-3

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that us set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted.”

The writers of the New Testament used metaphors to convey meaning. In 2 Timothy, Paul used the picture of a soldier, athlete, and farmer to convey how a Christian minister should live out their faith. Jesus used parables to teach the crowds what the Kingdom is like. The author of Hebrews is no different and clearly uses an athletic metaphor to convey meaning to the reader (Mohler 194). As the reader starts chapter 12, we read the word, “therefore,” which should make us stop and consider what we as the reader have been reading. For the past four chapters, the author has been exhorting Christian’s to endure and now hinges from the example of Old Testament saints to applications for the life of the believer (Mohler, 195).

Going with the athletic metaphor, no runner carries weights in their hands as they run a race. Instead, the goal is to get as light as possible. In the same way, we should throw every sin that acts as a weight to our spiritual life. This is an active part of our spiritual life. Unfortunately, sin does not completely go away when we come to faith. We must continue to make war against our sinful flesh so that we can run without hindrance.

This race is not an easy one and God has not left us alone in it. First, “we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses.” While I do not believe that the saints of old are watching us from heaven as we perform (MacArthur, 375), we do look to the lives of the saints of old as an example. MacArthur, in his commentary, says: “They (the saints who have gone before us) have proved by their testimony, their witness, that the life of faith is the only life to live” (MacArthur, 375) and “Seeing how God was with them encourages us to trust that He will also be with us” (MacArthur, 375).

While the stories of the saints are incredibly helpful to our run, Jesus is our goal and aim. On this marathon, when the Christian starts to really struggle and stumble is when we start to look inwardly at ourselves and therefore take our eyes off Christ. While the great cloud of witnesses encourages us and we can be inspired by their lives, the reason we are in the race and kept in the race is Christ (Mohler, 196).

Verse 2 describes Jesus as “the founder and perfecter of our faith.” As the founder, Jesus is the cornerstone and the capstone. (Mohler, 196). The “unshakable ground on which our hope and salvation rest” (Mohler, 196). If Jesus is not who says he is, then we run our race of faith in vain. Not only the founder but also the perfecter, Jesus lived the perfect life for us, he continues to live perfectly with the Father as our mediator. As the author of Hebrews wrote in chapter 4, Jesus is our great high priest making intercession for us and carrying us to the end. Look to Christ who went to the cross for you and me and is now seated in glory at the right hand of the throne of God!

Hebrews 12:4-11

In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, do not be weary when reproved by him. For the Lord disciplines the one he loves and chastises every son whom he receives.” It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who discipline us, and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.

The race that the Christian runs is by no means easy. We struggle against sin and persecution. In John 15:18-19, Jesus tells those following him: “If the world hates you, know that it has hated me before you. If you were of the world, the world would love you as its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you.” As stated in verses 2 and 3, Christ endured the cross for our salvation and endured hostility from sinners. While the debt of sin has been covered by the blood of Christ, we can expect hostility and hatred from the world. Christ endured temptation and persecution, so we can expect it too. In verse 4, the “not yet” is a sober warning that persecution is a realistic possibility for all of us.

Considering this reality, God is molding us more into the image of Christ. The author calls the reader back to Proverbs 2:11-12, where Solomon warns his son to not take the discipline of the Lord lightly because it is a sign of sonship (Mohler, 198).

A good father disciplines his son. Discipline is unpleasant and painful, but for the son's ultimate good. A son may not always understand, but some lessons can only be learned through discipline. Romans 8:28 tells us: "And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." Things do not happen to us by random chance but rather the truth is that things come into our life by "the sovereign intentions and purposes of the Lord" (Mohler, 199). This does not mean that things in life are easy, but we can hold to the truth that our Good Father is working for our good, to mature our faith, protect us on our run toward Heaven and make us more into the image of Christ.

There are still people who regard God as vindictive. When something happens to them or to those they love their question is, "What did I do to deserve this?" And the question is asked in such a tone as to make it clear that they regard the whole matter as an unjust punishment from God. It never dawns upon them to ask: "What is God trying to teach me and to do with me through this experience?" (Barclay, 178).

Hebrews 12:12-13

"Therefore, lift your drooping hands and strengthen your weak knees, and make straight paths for your feet, so that what is lame may not be put out of joint but rather be healed."

This life is hard. There is no other way to say it. Remember Christ and keep in the race. The author of Hebrews knows that the Lord disciplines those he loves and encourages them to persevere (Mohler, 201). Since this is true, we must stay in the race when we feel tired and scared. "Even when he disciplines us, we must trust his goodness, knowing that it makes us more like Christ" (Mohler, 202). God has set life before us. We can cling to the promise that one day we will be with Him. The victory has been won by Christ who endured the shame of the cross and intercedes for us at the right hand of the throne of God. Get up and run!

Hebrews 12:14-17

Strive for peace with everyone, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble, and by it many become defiled; that no one is sexually immoral or unholy like Esau, who sold his birthright for a single meal. For you know that afterward, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no chance to repent, though he sought it with tears.

In this paragraph, the author gives the Christian reader a picture of how we should run the race of faith, as well as the warning of Esau. To start, the Christian should "strive for peace with everyone." While peace may not be obtainable with all, we should be known as believers for striving and attempting to make peace with everyone, not just those in our social circles (Mohler, 203). To add to peace, we are also to be holy. God is holy (think of the vision that Isaiah had in Isaiah 6), and we are called to be holy. We should look different than the world around us. A mind and life that is set on the things that are holy is a life that is set on the interest of God, William Barclay adds in his commentary, "An unhallowed life is a life without any awareness of or interest in God. In its thoughts, aims, pleasures, it is completely earthbound" (Barclay, 183).

The author continues the exhortation to believers to be on guard for the believers around us. We as believers have been saved, we are being saved, and one day we will be saved. As we have already stated, this race of faith is hard, and we cannot do it on our own. We as a church are called to watch over each other. There will be times when faith seems to come easy, and we need to encourage those in a time of trouble. There will be other times when faith is a challenge, when we question the goodness of God, and we depend on the faith of those around us.

A specific example given that the church must be on guard against is that "no root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble. Mohler adds: "Believers must be on guard against the poison of bitterness. Bitterness is a deadly contagion and a sign of serious spiritual trouble" (Mohler, 203). When we see bitterness start to rear its ugly head, we must be ready to dig it out from the root. Adding to this, the author tells us to flee sexual immorality and unholiness, citing the example from Genesis 25-28 of Esau. We the readers are encouraged not to imitate the example of Esau who, firstborn of Isaac, sold his birthright for a single meal to alleviate the discomfort of hunger. "A single meal was more important to Esau than the birthright that belonged to him as Isaac's firstborn son. Trading it away to Jacob demonstrated his disinterest not just for his birthright, but for the holy things of God. In fact, Moses says that Esau's actions show that he 'despised his birthright' (Genesis 25:34). Thus, the author of Hebrews appropriately identifies Esau as irreverent, unfaithful, and unworthy of our emulation" (Mohler, 204).

In light of the story of Esau, we must heed the warning to not be like him. In Genesis 27, Esau longs to receive the blessing from Isaac after Jacob receives it by tricking Isaac. Esau learns of Jacob's deception and begs his father Isaac to bless him, but Isaac has already given the blessing to Jacob. Esau is an example of someone who regrets their actions but does not truly repent. God does not reject true repentance, but he does not accept worldly regret (Mohler, 205). 2 Corinthians 7:10 says, "For godly grief produces a repentance that leads to salvation without regret, whereas worldly grief produces death." True repentance

produces a hatred of sin and a love for God. Our sin should open our eyes for our need for Christ. Look to him, the founder and perfecter of our faith!

The Main Point

Run the race of faith, looking to Christ to save us and carry us through life. Consider the examples of the saints that have gone before us and cling to faith, shedding the weight and burden of sin, so that we may run the race freely and steadfastly.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- 2 Timothy 2:1-10 – A Good Soldier of Christ Jesus
- Genesis 25-28 – The Story of Esau and Jacob
- Romans 9 – Life in the Spirit
- 2 Timothy 4:7-8 – Fought the Good Fight

Week 6

Hebrews 12:18-29 – A Kingdom that Cannot be Shaken

By Nathan Kenny

Introduction

Over the last few years, I have really been drawn in by the concept of language and how individual words come together to create something deeper. I know that may sound quite bizarre for someone so mathematically focused, but what is the point of mathematics without a way to communicate the ideas discovered? In fact, mathematics becomes more accessible when the language is understood. For example, factors in mathematics are numbers or variables that are multiplied to get a product (e.g. factors 2 and 3 multiply to get 6), and when something stays the same mathematically, we call that a constant. When you put those simple concepts together, you get a constant factor—a number that is constantly and repeatedly multiplied—creating a rich concept called an exponential function that models such important ideas as population growth, compound interest, radioactive decay, elimination of medicinal active ingredients, and cooling/heating processes. Two very simple words combine into a much deeper concept.

The Hebrew language works much the same way to convey deep and powerful meanings. Take “Immanuel” for instance. “Immanu” is Hebrew for “with us,” and “El” was a Hebrew word for God (i.e. El Shaddai is “The All-Sufficient God” or El Roi is “The God who sees me”). That is how we arrive at “Immanuel” meaning “God with us.” And within the last year I came across an offhand note about why “Jerusalem” means “City of Peace.” The prefix “Jeru” comes from roots that can mean “to found” or “foundation,” and the suffix “salem” comes from the same root as shalom, meaning peace. Therefore, we have “City of Peace.”

Hebrews 12:18-29 is titled “A Kingdom That Cannot Be Shaken” in my ESV translation, and in verse 22 the author talks about the Hebrews (many who lived in Jerusalem) approaching “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem”, or a heavenly “City of Peace”. In Hebrew, “shalom” means more than just the simple absence of conflict. “Shalom” means a peace found from wholeness and completeness. For the Hebrews receiving this letter, the earthly Jerusalem was not a place of peace at all. While the first Jewish-Roman War (66-73 CE) and the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 CE likely had not happened yet, the constant tension with the Romans was already brewing and had been since before Jesus’ day.. his heavenly “City of Peace” that the believers approached was unshakeable since it was and is founded in the new covenant that is not just a shadowy copy of the kingdom of heaven. This “city” is the kingdom of heaven itself. This “city” is a place of wholeness and completeness in Christ.

Read Hebrews 12:18-29 together

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I’ve read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. In verse 28, the author challenges us to be grateful for God’s provision in Jesus. How does it make you feel to know that as a believer you can be counted among the “assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven”?
2. At the end of Hebrews 12, the author challenges believers to offer to God acceptable worship. What does acceptable worship look like? How does it manifest in your life?
3. In James 1:27 we learn that “religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world.” What can you do personally, as a family, or as a community group (or already do) to obey God as we are called in Hebrews 12:25?

Commentary

Hebrews 12:18-29 (All from the ESV)

Before jumping into these verses, let’s briefly recap several earlier chapters in Hebrews. In chapters 7-8, the author argues that the earthly Levitical priesthood—the world of the Mosaic covenant—was not and will never be enough to eternally save God’s people, for this covenant was “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things” (Hebrews 8:5). Instead, the author explains how Jesus was of a better priesthood, after the order of Melchizedek. Not bound by this temporal world, Jesus was not “prevented by death from continuing in office” (Hebrews 7:23) but rather is able to eternally atone for our sins. This perpetual mediation and

atonement allows him “to save to the uttermost those who draw near to God” (Hebrews 7:25) and not to simply “deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (Hebrews 9:28). Jesus, as the mediator of the new covenant and the Christ/Messiah, revealed the true and heavenly form of the law that was merely a “shadow of the good things to come” in the old covenant (Hebrews 10:1).

Due to these truths, the author of Hebrews challenges Jewish believers to draw near to God through faith, holding to their/our hope and living in “love and good works” (Hebrews 10:24), without fear of evil or sin. It was this faith that all the Hebrew heroes of old demonstrated throughout the Old Testament and that God credited to them as righteousness (Hebrews 11).

As a final lead-up to Hebrews 12:18-29, the author encourages the believers to not grow weary, to endure, and to gladly embrace the discipline of God as legitimate children and inheritors of his holiness, for it is this discipline that “yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” The author finishes with a note detailing some characteristics of this holiness.

We now arrive at Hebrews 12:18-29. It may be easy to just read through this section without dwelling on the author’s words. The seemingly odd references to a beast touching a mountain and being stoned, to the storms, to the shaking, and to Moses trembling with fear and the repeated and generic “they” make the passage a little unwieldy. However, I encourage you to dive deep into these verses because the author is really driving home the importance of why the Christ-following Hebrews, and us as well, need to hold fast to the faith. We no longer are dealing with “earthly manifestations of heavenly things, but the heavenly things themselves” (Brown 2021). As a final note here, I highly encourage reading Rabbi Yaakov (Jacob) Brown’s commentary found at bethmelekh.com (see bibliography), for he (a Messianic Jewish Rabbi) has some beautiful insights that I could not include here.

Hebrews 12:18-24

This section opens with vivid imagery describing “what may be touched, a blazing fire and darkness and gloom and a tempest and the sound of a trumpet and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them” and to Moses actually trembling with fear (Hebrews 12:18-19,21). As Whittaker (2022) and Rabbi Brown (2021) both note, this is referring to Mount Sinai as seen in Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 4, specifically when the Hebrews received the 10 commandments and the old covenant.

It was in Exodus 19:6 that God first calls the Hebrews to be a “kingdom of priests and a holy nation” if they “obey [his] voice and keep [his] covenant.” We can infer the author of Hebrews is referencing this covenant since we see the command to stone or shoot any beast or man who touches Mount Sinai, the trumpet and “God [answering Moses] in thunder,” and thunders and lightnings and fire upon a mountain all in Exodus 19. However, this covenant is the shadowy copy referred to in Hebrews 10. While God wanted Israel to be his holy nation and a kingdom of priests, the Israelites could not obey his voice and keep the covenant. We see time and again God’s enduring love throughout the Old Testament when the Israelites fail at keeping the covenant.

The author’s entire point, though, is that Mount Sinai (and the old covenant) IS NOT what the Christ-following Hebrews have come to. They are no longer approaching the old covenant, the shadow, but are approaching the reality. This continues one of the author’s themes throughout the entire letter of contrasting the old covenant as a shadowy copy of the real, heavenly things to come with the fulfillment found in Jesus the Messiah and the new covenant created through his blood. Believers now approach “Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22-24). The Jews believed God personally chose Jerusalem as his dwelling place, the one promised in Deuteronomy 12. Then in Psalms and the Prophets, Mount Zion came to represent the temple, the dwelling place of God in Jerusalem (Whittaker 2022), and according to Rabbi Brown (2021) many of the Hebrews were still regularly going to Mount Zion to worship since they still lived in Jerusalem. Now believing Hebrews get to approach the new, heavenly Jerusalem and Mount Zion, “a convergent place of heaven and earth made possible by the Goal of the *Torah, Yeshua the King Messiah*” (Brown 2021). These believers get to approach the true kingdom of God, not just the shadowy version found here on earth.

These Hebrew believers also get to joyfully gather with an uncountable number of angels and with an assembly (church) of the firstborn. Up to this point, I have very intentionally focused on Christ-following Hebrews because that is who this letter was primarily written to. We always want to be careful to read Scripture how it was intended, but thankfully we also know that this joyful gathering includes Gentile believers based on Paul’s words to the Ephesians that “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel” (Ephesians 3:6). Gentile believers have been grafted into the family of God (Romans 11:11-24), and we, Hebrew and Gentile believers, have the beautiful privilege of approaching the true kingdom of God in the new covenant, through the new priesthood of Jesus the Messiah, our mediator. This message extends beyond the original audience, and the message speaks directly to you and me.

Hebrews 12:25-29

From this encouraging message of God's salvation, the author issues a solemn warning in verses 25-29. Building on the contrast between the old and new covenants, the author presents a classic lesser-to-greater argument. Since we get to approach the real kingdom of God, the author challenges us to make sure that we do not refuse "[God] who is speaking" (Hebrews 12:25). Remember in verse 19 how the sound of a trumpet and a voice that "shook the earth" made the "hearers beg that no further messages be spoken to them." If the Hebrews who rejected God's voice under the lesser, shadowy covenant did not escape judgment, how much more serious is it for those who reject the greater revelation given through God's Son?

So, how specifically did the people at Sinai refuse to follow God, and how do we learn from them? Rabbi Brown (2021) notes that the people who refused God's voice at the giving of the old covenant (Sinai) wanted to return to slavery in Egypt rather than live in freedom as a kingdom of priests for God. In the same way, those today who refuse God's voice revealed through Christ choose to return to slavery in their sin and eventual eternal death. This is a sobering reality for us believers. God is offering us freedom and the ability to approach his heavenly throne through his son, but we must listen and obey. Otherwise, we are choosing slavery and death, for God is good and just, and he will rightly judge the world at the end of days.

At the time of Mount Sinai, God's voice shook the earth, but Whittaker (2022) notes the author of Hebrews quotes Haggai chapter 2 in Hebrews 12:26 to reference a promise "that God will shake all the nations," a promise that was to be ultimately fulfilled in the future when the new Jerusalem comes. At that time God indicates he will not only shake, or judge, the earth but also the heavens, both of which are created by God in the beginning. However, we have received a kingdom that cannot be shaken, which may be interpreted as cannot be judged, for Christ's kingdom we have inherited as heirs was not created: Immanuel "was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not anything made that was made" (John 1:1-3). This is not only our future reward but also our present reward. In response to this, the author encourages us to be grateful for assurance in such a kingdom and to bring acceptable worship to God, keeping in mind that God is a consuming fire "that warms the righteous and torments the wicked" (Brown 2021).

The Main Point

Through his sacrifice, atoning work, and eternal priesthood, Jesus ushered in a new kingdom that is not simply an earthly shadow of heavenly things as with the old covenant but actually the heavenly things themselves. True believers have been blessed with the opportunity to draw near to those heavenly things, to God himself, not just in the future but in the present time. Moreover, we need to draw near to God, to listen and to obey, for he will judge this world in the end, and everything created will pass away. Only the immutable, the kingdom of God, will be left.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Exodus 19 – Israel at Mount Sinai
- Deuteronomy 4:1-14 – Moses Commands Obedience
- John 1:1-5 – In the beginning, Jesus is the Word
- Haggai 2 – The Promised Glory of the Temple

Week 7

Hebrews 13:1-25 – Continually Offer Up A Sacrifice Of Praise To God

By Will Bomar

Introduction

Years ago, I was sharing the gospel with a friend of mine who'd come from a closed country, meaning in his country it is illegal for anyone to follow Jesus and doing so leads to imprisonment or death. We studied the Bible and processed the gospel together for over a year and a half, but when being charged to count the cost of Christ, he denied him. It was something that I struggled to empathize with, as I'd never lived in such a dangerous context where my faith could lead to imminent death at the hands of my friends, family, and government. At times, I felt myself growing impatient and longing for my friend to see the glory of Christ and say that he is worth it.

One morning, my friend called me. He asked where I was and said he'd be coming straight to me. I was actually very busy at the time and told him I couldn't meet him, but he told me that it didn't matter because we needed to talk. He sounded angry in his tone which was alarming. A few minutes later, he was at the front door. I let him inside and he quietly sat down. He was clearly upset about something, but seemed to not have the words to speak. Eventually, after what felt like hours of silence, he said, "I just woke up and I had a dream last night." My interest was piqued, obviously, but I was struggling to connect the apparent anger in his tone and body language.

My friend then proceeds to tell me this dream, and in his dream, Jesus tells my friend to follow him. It was astounding, and even after telling me of the dream, my friend's anger was even more present. I responded and told him this was amazing and incredible but finally asked him why he was so angry. His response was, "I have no choice. Jesus has come to me and I must follow him." These were words that I'd longed to hear for so very long, yet I never thought they'd be spoken from a disgruntled face or through gritted teeth. He then proceeded to explain to me that this meant he would be imprisoned, or that he would be killed. He told me that even his mother and sister could be imprisoned if his government found out. We sat and processed these fears for hours, and in the end, despite all of the future suffering he might endure, he followed Jesus. This was such a glorious moment that I'll never forget. The Lord saved my friend from the eternal death that he deserves and my friend counted the cost of an earthly death and declared the Lord was worthy.

This was especially encouraging to me, and this testimony of my friend's faith reminds me of the challenge found in Hebrews 13. Christ suffered, even unto death, and he now calls us to live a sacrificial life, declaring Jesus is better even unto death.

Read Hebrews 13:1-25 together.

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. Who are the leaders that have spoken the word of God to you? How do you imitate their faith?
2. What are ways Christians today may rely on performance, ritual, or reputation instead of grace?
3. What does it mean to "go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured" (v.13)? How does this challenge the desire to be respected or approved by the world?
4. How does living for the "city that is to come" (v. 14) reshape the way we think about success, suffering, and sacrifice in the present?

Commentary

Hebrews 13:1-4

The book of Hebrews has spent twelve chapters essentially answering one central question: *Why should we hold fast to Christ?* The answer has been relentlessly clear, and it's because Jesus is better. He is better than angels. He is better than Moses. Jesus is better than priests, and he's better than sacrifices. Jesus is better than anything we might be tempted to return to when faith becomes costly. He's glorious.

The author of Hebrews pivots in chapter 13 and asks a second question: *What does a life look like when a follower of Jesus truly believes Christ is better?* The author uses chapter 13 to ground theology in everyday Christian life, and he provides

practical instruction for how to persevere in the faith. While chapter 13 might seem like a randomized list of commands, it is more so a culmination of a God-centered life revealing what happens when the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ move from doctrine into daily obedience.

Verse 1 reinforces Christ's commandment to "let brotherly love continue" (13:1). In John 13, Jesus says "a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13:34-35). The author of Hebrews is referring to a love that reflects that of Christ—a love that speaks truth, shows grace, exudes compassion, and practices patience. It's so great a love that one would lay down one's life for a friend (John 15:13). All people should recognize this distinct love as an indication of being his disciples, Christ says (John 13:35).

Verse 2 expounds on how the love of a Christ follower can be extended. Yes, a believer should continue in loving their brother and sister in Christ, but that love should not only be extended to those they know well. Rather, the love of Christ should be extended to even strangers. "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers," the author writes. The practice of hospitality is shaped by the gospel as it is something that reflects Christ's love and provision. Why should believers show hospitality for strangers? He explains, "for thereby some have entertained angels unawares" (13:2). The idea that one could extend hospitality to a stranger while also being ignorant to the fact that the one they're caring for is an eternal divine creature is astonishing, to say the least. The author's reference to angels in verse 2, though, emphasizes that obedience often bears unseen, yet eternal significance. Verse 2 is reminiscent of Genesis 18 when Abraham cares for three men who are later revealed to be the Lord and two angels. It can also be found in Judges 13 when Samson's parents care for a divine messenger.

The author of Hebrews then charges the church to remember those in prison. It's likely that the author is referencing believers who have been imprisoned for their faith, however, the church can and should love all of those who have been imprisoned. Believers are given a responsibility to love, and those in need of love are not always the most convenient to love. Remembering those imprisoned for their faith is something that believers should be diligent to do, as even today, many brothers and sisters in Christ around the world are being persecuted and imprisoned for their faith in Christ.

Marriage is addressed next and instructed as something to be "honored by all" in verse 4. Marriage, being a representation of the relationship that God has with his church, should never be treated flippantly but instead it is to be held in high regard. He warns that marriage shouldn't be defiled, specifically with things such as sexual immorality and adultery. Those who commit such acts will be judged by God. Sexual sin is not merely rule-breaking, but it is a distortion of joy as it's seeking pleasure apart from God's design.

Verses 1-4 share a common thread that is affirmed by Christ's words found in Matthew 7:12 which states, "so whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets." While this is expounded upon by practical examples toward friendship, strangers, prisoners, and spouses, the charge to love and care for others is certainly not limited to these four examples. Jesus' life reveals to the believer that he or she should love and care for the sick, the lame, the widows, the children, the religious, and the nonreligious. We should love and care for those with money, and we should love and care for those without. We should love and care for those from all nations. We should love and care for the oppressed. We should love and care for the hungry. We should love and care for all.

Hebrews 13:5-6

Contentment can sometimes seem daunting. While the author of Hebrews charges the believer to abstain from the love of money in verse 5, he reminds them, too, of what they already have. He writes, "be content with what you have, for he has said, 'I will never leave you nor forsake you.'" This reference to Christ's words illuminates the necessity of our faith so that we might be content. Contentment is possible only when God himself is our greatest treasure. Christ is greater than gold and silver. He's more precious than diamonds. Therefore, as a believer falls deeper in love with the Lord, he or she ought also to find less satisfaction in worldly pleasures and securities like money.

Naturally, as the Christian recognizes Christ as his or her treasure, they can boldly and fearlessly proclaim the Lord as their helper (v. 6). Nothing stands against the Lord, and the writer seems to be threading this truth that is found throughout the Old Testament:

- "The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1)
- "The Lord is on my side; 'I will not fear. What can man do to me?'" (Psalm 118:6)
- "I, I am he who comforts you; who are you that you are afraid of man who dies, of the son of man who is made like grass," (Isaiah 51:12)

The Lord is the believer's light, salvation, and stronghold. He is on his children's side and he comforts them. Fear fades in light of the gospel.

Hebrews 13:7-9

Next, the author points us to the topics of leadership and doctrine. In verse 7 he says, “remember your leaders,” specifically those who spoke the word of God. He implores Christians to not only remember them, but to “imitate their faith”. It’s important to note that the writer desires for believers to imitate their faith and not their personalities. There is a great beauty found in a diverse body that shares the commonality of their faith in Christ. This is critical for effective, Christ-centered disciplenaking—especially disciplenaking under pressure.

Verse 8 is essentially the theological epicenter of chapter 13: “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.” Because Jesus does not change, the gospel does not expire. His blood does not lose power. His promises do not weaken. As eternal God, Jesus Christ was involved with creation, with Abraham, with Moses, and throughout all of Israel’s history. The unchanging Christ is the reason obedience is possible and hope is secure. The Layman’s Bible Commentary expounds on verse 8. The authors write,

Any correct understanding of the theology of Hebrews – and scripture as a whole – must acknowledge the Christ did not begin to be his people’s savior or object of their faith when he came into the world as the son of Mary. What he accomplished by his incarnation, suffering, obedience, death, and resurrection was the basis for the relationship he had held with his people since the days of Adam and Eve. Otherwise, it could not be said that Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.⁹

Believers find joy in the unchanging Christ, and verse 9 warns against being led away by diverse teachings that could mislead a believer into finding joy in rituals or performance. The church was young, and there were misconceptions about how to walk in obedience to God. Confusion over the necessity of Jewish law and custom following the resurrection of Christ had potential to rapidly spread into the Christian church. Because of this, Hebrews’ author makes clear Christ’s sufficient sacrifice on the cross, and he does so by explaining it through Hebraic imagery to reveal what the Lord desires from his Church.

Hebrews 13:10-16

The question in this text is not whether Jesus is valuable. The question is whether he is valuable enough. Is Christ valuable enough to leave the camp? Is he valuable enough to bear reproach? Is he valuable enough to lose what feels safe now because we believe what God has promised later? The answer to all of these is emphatically yes.

Verse 10 clarifies for the believer that Christians do have an altar. This altar is not wood or stone. The altar is not a ritual, rather, it is a person. Christ himself is the altar for a Christian. The author establishes clear exclusivity for who is permitted to eat. If a person clings to the old way—if they cling to self-justifying religion, ceremonial confidence, or moral performance then they cannot eat here. They cannot feed on Christ while trusting in themselves. There is no sharing this altar with human merit, nor supplementing this sacrifice with religious works. Either Christ is a person’s righteousness, or they have no right to eat.

Verses 11 and 12 draws Christians into deep redemptive history by connecting the Old Testament sacrificial system with the suffering of Jesus. The author is not merely making an analogy; he is showing us that the old covenant rituals were divinely designed to prepare us for a kind of salvation that could only be accomplished through rejection, suffering, and blood.

Hebrews reminds us in verse 11 that, under the Mosaic law, the bodies of certain animals whose blood was brought into the Most Holy Place for sin were burned outside the camp. This can be found in Leviticus 4:11-12 when Moses writes about the sin offering of the priest, “But the skin of the bull and all its flesh, with its head, its legs, its entrails, and its dung—all the rest of the bull—he shall carry outside the camp to a clean place, to the ash heap, and shall burn it up on a fire of wood. On the ash heap it shall be burned up.” Then, in Leviticus 16:27, when Moses writes the instruction for the Day of Atonement, he explains, “And the bull for the sin offering and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the Holy Place, shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned up with fire.”

This was not a logistical detail: it was theological. God made it so that the sincerest sin offerings, the ones associated with atonement in the presence of God would be removed from the camp, treated as unclean, and destroyed in a place of exclusion. The camp represented covenant belonging, safety, and purity. Outside the camp was the place of curse, shame, and removal.

Then, in verse 12 the author explains the overwhelming fulfillment: “So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood.” The word “so” is crucial. It signals intention. Jesus did not suffer outside Jerusalem by accident, nor merely by political necessity. He suffered there because God was writing the final chapter of a story he himself had begun in Leviticus. The geography of Jesus’ crucifixion was not incidental; it was obedient.

By suffering outside the gate, Jesus identified himself with what the old covenant sacrifices symbolized: sin-bearing, exclusion, and curse. He was treated as unclean so that his people could be made holy. Christ does not merely sympathize with sinners; he stands in their place.

⁹ Mark Strauss, Stephen Leston, Robert Rayburn, Jeffrey Miller, Robert Deffinbaugh, and Hall Harris, *Layman’s Bible Commentary: Hebrews Thru Revelation* (Uhrichsville, OH: Barbour, 2008), 12:57.

The purpose of this suffering is explicitly stated: “to sanctify the people through his own blood.” This sanctification is about consecration. It’s the act by which a people are set apart for God and is only accomplished through Christ’s blood. This means that our inclusion in the holy presence of God rests on Christ’s exclusion and willingness to be cast out. God is not glorified by minimizing sin or bypassing justice. He is glorified by satisfying justice through the sacrifice of his Son, so that mercy reigns without compromising God’s perfect judgment.

This sets the stage for the call that follows: to go to Jesus outside the camp. This charge is commanding believers to turn away from the old covenant structures that once marked identity and security. The author is saying, wherever Christ is rejected, so also his people must go. There is hope, though, that helps the believer cope with their suffering. Verse 14 explains that “here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come.” The church is given an encouraging promise that the Kingdom of God is their home. The reason believers can endure loss, shame, and instability is not because suffering is small, but because the promised future is great.

Verses 15 and 16 then charge the believer to live a life full of worship and love. The church is called to worship because praise replaces animal sacrifices due to Christ’s sacrifice being sufficient and final. Praise is still called a sacrifice though because it costs Christians to worship, especially when offered in weakness, loss, or pain. Believers are called to worship even when it leads to their death. True praise can declare that God is worthy not only when he gives, but when he takes away.

Alongside praise stands love: “Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have” (13:16). Doing such things are sacrifices because they demonstrate that Christ is our treasure. Generosity, good works, hospitality, compassion and kindness—these are the things that function as visible proof that we are not clinging to this world as our lasting city. God is pleased with such sacrifices because they magnify the worth of Christ. Similarly, Paul charges believers in the book of Romans, “I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship” (Romans 12:1).

In verse 17, the author directs the focus of the chapter towards life within the church. Believers are encouraged to obey and submit to their leaders who have a high calling of caring for and watching over souls. These leaders have such a high calling that the author says they will one day give an account. The Layman’s Bible Commentary explains, “it seems safe to assume the near-schism within the church had already created some tension between those members and the leaders. So the author issues a clear call for obedience to those who were watching over the spiritual integrity of the church. Their work was demanding enough without a lot of opposition from within.”¹⁰

The author then asks for prayer for himself in verses 18 and 19 as he is also a leader within the Church. This reveals the hope and reality that leaders are given. Leaders within the church are sustained by the help of God and not their own efforts.

Hebrews 13:20-25

Hebrews concludes with a benediction that offers incredible encouragement, especially following the ample number of exhortations priorly given. Instead of the author’s final word being “go and do”, he says, “may God.” He says, “May the God of peace... equip you with everything good that you may do his will.” (13:20, 21) It’s deeply encouraging because the God who commands obedience is the God who creates it. He’s the one who both calls us outside the camp and also equips us to go. He’s the God who demands sacrifices, yet he supplies what he requires. Hebrews ends by reminding believers of the aim in their suffering, obedience, praise, love, leadership, and perseverance. Their aim is the glory of God displayed in a people so satisfied in Christ that they are willing to leave the camp, endure reproach, and trust God completely—now and forever.

In verse 22 the author continues with a plea for the brothers and sisters to bear with his words of exhortation. The author clearly knows the weight of what he’s charged them with, and he’s asking them to receive, not resist. He calls the entire letter a “word of exhortation,” and then testifies of a brother, Timothy, who has lived the experience of one who’s remained faithful despite suffering (13:22, 23). Leaders, saints, and believers across the world are mentioned, bonding them in fellowship (13:24). It serves as a wonderful reminder that perseverance is not a solitary endeavor. The book of Hebrews finally closes with the word, “grace” (13:25). Every warning, command, and call rests on the power of God’s grace.

The Main Point

The Christian life is sustained not by rituals, but by grace grounded in the finished work of Christ. Because Jesus is the same yesterday, today, and forever, believers can endure suffering, love sacrificially, and hold fast to the truth without drifting. Our hope is that God will faithfully work in us what pleases him through Christ, and he will provide everything needed to do his will.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Genesis 18 – Abraham cares for the Lord and two angels.
- Leviticus 4:11-12 – Instructions on sin offerings.

¹⁰ Strauss et al., *Hebrews*, 12:58.

- Leviticus 16:27 – The Day of Atonement.
- Judges 13 – Samson’s parents offer hospitality to a divine messenger.
- Matthew 7:12 – Do to others what you wish others would do to you.
- John 13:34-35 – Jesus tells his disciples to love one another.
- John 15:13 – the greatest love is the love that leads one to lay down one’s life for a friend.
- Romans 12:1 – Believers should present their lives as a living sacrifice.

Week 8

Hebrews Overview

By Harvey Edwards, IV

Introduction

There is an old story with numerous variations that expresses something of what the author of Hebrews is communicating in regards to the Old Testament. It goes something like this. There was a little girl who began to take an interest in cooking. She asked her mom if she could help make dinner. That night, her mother was cooking a pot roast. She placed the roast on a cutting board, pulled out a knife, and trimmed a half inch off of each side of the roast before placing it in her pot. Wanting to understand the whole process, the little girl asked her mom why she trimmed the roast. The mother told her, "I'm not totally sure, maybe it has to do with the way the ends cook. It is how my mother taught me." Anyone answering the questions of a curious child knows that an answer like this is rarely satisfactory to the child. She pestered her mother until she agreed to ask the grandmother. They called the grandmother and the little girl asked her why they were supposed to trim the ends of the pot roast. The grandmother laughed. "You don't have to trim the ends off of a pot roast." The mother, confused, asked her, "Then why did you teach me to do that?" The grandmother laughed. "I didn't teach you to do that, I just did it because the roast was too big to fit in my pot. I guess you just assumed that was what you were supposed to do."

Discussion

Similarly to the mother's understanding of the pot roast in this story, the recipients of the book of Hebrews didn't grasp the totality of the meaning of the Old Testament. Although we don't know all of the specifics of their circumstances, we know from the author's argument that his readers were tempted to abandon their trust in Jesus and to try to go back to relating to God through the Old Covenant in order to avoid persecution for their faith in Jesus. But this shows a lack of understanding of the Old Testament in a number of ways that the author of Hebrews takes great pains to explain because he wants his readers to know the salvation that is available in Jesus and he wants the name of Jesus to be glorified.

The mistake that many of the original readers were making was to assume that God's interaction with Israel through the Old Covenant was an end in and of itself. As they looked back at God's interactions with his people, they understood something of what God called Israel to do through the prophets: They were to obey the law and the sacrifices so that they, a sinful and imperfect people, might dwell in the Promised Land in the vicinity of a Holy God. On a surface level, this was true. God did call his people to do these things. The law and the sacrifices were a provision of God's grace to his people for that specific time. But they didn't understand the reason that God called them to do this. The Old Covenant was never meant to make them right with God. Instead, it was meant to usher God's people into an understanding of the grace and mercy that are available in his son Jesus. All of God's dealings with his people have been preparation for his revelation of himself and his purposes to redeem a people for himself through Jesus. The author of Hebrews wants his readers to understand the Old Testament's purpose so that they might not neglect the salvation of God.

This is why the author of Hebrews argues what he does—that Jesus is superior to everything that has come before. Previously, God spoke to his people through his prophets. Now, he has spoken to his people through his Son (Hebrews 1:1-2). Although Jesus took on flesh, this in no way diminishes his identity. He is the Son of God. Although he humbled himself for a while in order that he might die for the sins of his people, he is the promised Messiah who will reign forever. He is the fulfillment of all of God's promises to his people. By definition as the Son of God and the Messiah, he is greater even than the angels.

If he is greater than the angels, then the message he has brought from the Lord is necessarily greater than the message that the angels brought from the Lord to his prophets, including even the message to Moses—the Old Covenant. Moses was faithful as a servant of God to deliver the Old Covenant and the Law and sacrifices entailed within, but Jesus is faithful as a son to accomplish all of God's purposes. The readers of Hebrews must take care. If those who failed to heed the warnings of Moses and the prophets failed to enter into God's rest, how much more so can people expect to experience the judgment of God for rejecting the message of his Son?

This is really the crux of the argument of Hebrews—it's all about Jesus. All of God's dealings with Israel are to be understood as preparation for the arrival of Jesus. All of the Old Covenant and its pictures fall short of the hope that God promised if they are meant to stand on their own. If Joshua had brought the fulfillment of God's salvation when he brought Israel into the Promised Land, then why did the sabbath rest of God seem elusive to them? Because the Promised Land is pointing to something beyond itself—it is pointing to the ultimate rest that will come at the return of Jesus and the fullness of his kingdom and the setting right of all of creation. If the Levitical priesthood were able to make a sacrifice that could deal with the problem of sin, why did they need to continue to offer sacrifices? If the blood of bulls and goats could deal with sin, why did the priests continually die and need to be replaced? The answer is that the Old Covenant is self-evidently insufficient in order that it might be readily seen to point to something beyond itself. It pointed to the need for a greater priesthood that could offer a greater sacrifice. And this priest is Jesus—a priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus is a better priest. He isn't a priest according to descent from Levi, but rather one who is a priest by an oath of God and by the power of an indestructible life. Jesus took on flesh and lived a perfectly righteous life, then died on the cross for his

people. He laid down his life as the perfect sacrifice—one time, once, and for all. Jesus didn't serve in the earthly temple. He went into the fullness of the presence of God to make his sacrifice, then he took his life back up again and now lives forever to make intercession for his people before the Father as the perfect High Priest.

This was always the plan because the Old Covenant was never meant to save. The author of Hebrews shows us that the Old Testament expected God to deliver his people according to something better than the Old Covenant—a New Covenant administered through his Son. He quotes Jeremiah as receiving a message from the Lord regarding his intent to replace the Old Covenant. God told Jeremiah that though his people broke the Old Covenant, he would forgive their sins and make a New Covenant with them through which he would give them new hearts so that they might follow him and that they might be able to live forever in his presence. This is what Jesus has accomplished through his perfect sacrifice.

The culmination of God's interactions with his people and his intent to save is what Jesus has accomplished in his life, death, and resurrection. When you actually understand the Old Testament, how could you abandon Jesus? Look at how the author of Hebrews puts this in Hebrews 10:19-25:

¹⁹ Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, ²⁰ by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, ²¹ and since we have a great priest over the house of God, ²² let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. ²³ Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. ²⁴ And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.

The author of Hebrews wants his readers to hold fast in faith to Jesus regardless of their circumstances. They are to consider the salvation that he has made available and cling to him. To help them do so, the author of Hebrews asks them to consider the faithful who have come before. They all acted in faith in the promises of God that were yet to be fulfilled in Jesus. His readers are to consider what Jesus endured on the cross, how he despised the shame of the cross, how he sits at the right hand of God, so that they do not grow weary or fainthearted. Whatever they are enduring, it is momentary. Soon Jesus will return, and only those who have trusted in him will escape the judgment and receive salvation. His encouragement is to continue in the faith so that they may not neglect the great salvation offered in Christ.

All through Hebrews, the author warns his readers not to neglect Jesus. While we aren't the original audience, the words of Hebrews are meant for us, too. The warning is real, and it should be heeded. We must cling to Jesus in faith. But at the end of his letter, the author reminds us where the power to remain faithful lies—it lies in the grace of God to his people. Look at Hebrews 13:20-21, "Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen."

The author of Hebrews makes it plain that God's plan for salvation is that his people might be forgiven and restored through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In fulfillment of the plans and purposes of God set forth in the Old Testament, Jesus has lived the perfectly righteous life that we couldn't and offered himself as the perfect sacrifice for sin so that all those who believe in him might be forgiven and restored to a right relationship with the Father. As readers today, we are to see the truth of Jesus and cling to him regardless of what it might cost us here, knowing that he will bring us safely to an eternity in the New Kingdom and the fullness of the presence of God.

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. How has seeing the Old Testament as preparation for Jesus bolstered your faith?
2. Although you probably aren't tempted to try to live according to the Old Covenant, are there ways that you are tempted to try to accomplish a righteousness of your own, apart from Jesus?
3. What circumstances in your life make it hard to cling to Jesus? What are ways that you can work to cling in faith to Jesus despite those things that cause difficulties? What are some of those things that the author of Hebrews lists?

The Main Point

The author of Hebrews wants us to understand that salvation is found only in Jesus. He wants us to cling in faith to him so that we might be saved and that the name of Jesus might be glorified through our lives.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Hebrews 1:1-4 – The identity and mission of Jesus.
- Hebrews 2:1-3 – The author lays out the stakes for our belief in Jesus.
- Hebrews 4:14-16 – The privilege of having Jesus as our Great High Priest.
- Hebrews 10:19-25 – The charge to hold fast in light of the salvation that we have been given in Jesus.
- Hebrews 13:20-21 – A benediction that reminds us of the source of our endurance, the God of peace.

Week 9

Assurance of Salvation

By Aaron Barnes

Introduction

This topic—assurance of salvation—is near and dear to my heart. For a long time (maybe until my late teens or early twenties), I struggled to know that I knew that I knew it...ya know? I wanted to make absolutely sure that if I died that night, I would wake up in the arms of my Savior. That's how we used to say it back then in that old country church where I grew up.

I can remember growing up in rural Alabama, going to Cedrum Grove Free Will Baptist Church every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. The small, white cinderblock church was tucked away in a small coal mining community of Walker County. We sang from the OLD old hymnal that many of today's church members would never have seen or have known about. The pastor—John Edmund Warren, or Brother Warren or Brother John as he was known to many in the community—would preach from his 1960s Scofield KJV Red-Letter Bible with thumb index. His wife—alongside my mom and a couple other ladies in the church—would play the piano while my Aunt Valerie—standing beside the piano that was always slightly out of tune—would lead our congregational singing. Each Sunday, the songs sung were as much of a surprise to us as they were to the ones that were leading them. I can still remember my aunt and my mom talking about which song they preferred over the others and why they couldn't play or sing the other ones because it would have too many flats or sharps.

The pastor would start his sermons the same way—with the passage of the day or an illustration he had heard (or read) from a J. Vernon McGee sermon. Sure, there were times that he would use personal examples from his own life, but more often than not, he would quote McGee like they were old friends. However the sermons began, they would always seem to find their way to a logical (though sometimes cumbersome?) end with a call to repent from sin and turn to Christ for salvation. This would be every Sunday morning, Sunday night, and Wednesday night. This call for repentance would typically spur some congregants, or even the whole church at times, to find their way to the altar for prayer. It was in these moments that we would pray for God to cleanse our sinful hearts and help us follow him in our daily lives. Again, we wanted to make SURE that we knew that we knew it. This was the weekly routine I found myself in for most of my childhood. That is, until I heard someone say that Christians could know that they are secure in their relationship with God because of who God is, what he has done through Jesus, and what he continues to do through the power of his Holy Spirit. This idea—having assurance of salvation—was new to me.

In 1 John 5:13, John says that he writes his letter so that his readers can know they have eternal life. In this week's guide, I hope to communicate what I have learned about and from God through the Bible, his Holy Spirit, and other faithful Christ followers. Also, I hope that this can be a way that I communicate these truths to my kiddos as we pray for them to repent and believe in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Before gathering with your Community Group, read 1 John.

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. Besides death and taxes, what are a few other things that you are certain of in your life? What brings you confidence in knowing these things?
2. When you consider your own walk with the Lord, what are areas in your life (if any) that tend to or may cause you to doubt your salvation?
3. In 2 Corinthians 13:5, Paul tells us to examine ourselves to see whether we are in the faith. What is the difference between examining your heart to see if you are in the faith and unhealthy doubt? How can your community group help clarify things for you?

Commentary

First things first, why is it important for us to discuss our assurance of salvation? I think one of the main points that the author of Hebrews would want us to know is that faith is the unseen work that he does to regenerate our hearts, which then brings

about our response of living out that faith each and every day. Now, before someone can be secure in their relationship with God, they must first have a relationship with God. That relationship is only through Christ, and it is empowered by his Spirit. The Bible tells us that humanity has inherited a sinful nature from Adam (Rom. 5:17) and because of that, we are sinners in need of salvation. Because of our sin, we are separated from God, and the only way we can be set right with God is to confess our sin, believe that Christ's perfect sacrifice was on our behalf, that God truly raised his physical body from the grave, and trust that Christ has accomplished everything necessary for us to be redeemed (Rom. 10:9-11). The Bible also says that if we confess our sins to God, he is faithful and just to forgive us of all of our sins—past, present, and future—because of Jesus (1 John 1:9). Being forgiven, we are then able to live a life that is pleasing to God, and that life can only be lived by faith (Heb. 11:6). And what is faith? It is “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen” (Heb 11:1). Assurance, then, is something that cannot be physically grasped or truly known through mental assent. At some point in our journey to understand and apply biblical doctrine, we have to come to the realization that our relationship with God is something that must be built on trust in the Lord. Trust, as defined by GotQuestions.org, is “a bold, confident, sure security or action based on that security.” This trust is our active participation that comes from the gift of faith that God grants to those who have repented. By this point in our Community Group Study Guide, we have already covered Hebrews 11. John Roberson and Michael Green have done a great job covering that material in Hebrews 11, so I won't go into great detail here, but you should go back and reread weeks 3 and 4 of this semester's guide. Faith is what God grants to those who will repent, and it leads to a new heart. This new heart leads to a new way of living. This new way of living can be described as trust in God. In Galatians 2:20, Paul describes this way of living as having “been crucified” and living “by faith in the Son of God.” Paul tells us that he is no longer the one calling the shots. He told the Corinthian church that we are merely vessels for the Lord to fill with his Holy Spirit, to show his glory to a lost and dying world (2 Cor. 4:7). This assurance—faith that produces active trust—is what I want to unpack by looking at a few passages in 1 John. In his letter, John wants his readers to know that they can have joy in Christ, knowing that we are secure in him (1 John 5:13).

I think that God graciously gives us this assurance in three ways: through the written word of God, through the local church community, and through his Holy Spirit. First, God gives us assurance through the written word of God. John 15 is one of those chapters in the Bible that many Christ-followers have read and many preachers have used as the text for their sermons. Before we move on, can you call to mind the theme? The word that describes that chapter? ABIDE. To abide means that there is an active participation on our part that proves that we belong to God. Lest you think that I believe that we can earn or contribute to our salvation, I would like to quote ESPN Gameday's Lee Corso, “NOT SO FAST MY FRIEND!” Using some context clues AND the actual words of Jesus, we read that Jesus is talking to his disciples. John 15:1-5 says that God is the gardener and he is in charge of the pruning and the cultivating. Jesus declares that the current group of disciples—which excludes Judas the betrayer who had already left the group in Chapter 13—are already clean because of the word that he has spoken to them (15:3). Jesus—the vine—is the source of life for his disciples—the branches. As any good gardener does, God cares for the life of the vine by removing the parts of it that do not bear fruit so that it might bear more fruit. This is the work of God in the life of the believer. There will be parts of us that he will remove so that we will reflect his glory by bearing spiritual fruit. This removal is our active participation in the work of God. We refer to this as God sanctifying us. The branches are not bearing fruit in order to connect themselves to the vine and gain the attention of the gardener. Instead, the branches that are bearing fruit are those that are connected to the vine. Then, the gardener prunes the branches so that they bear more fruit. This is the process. The fruit is a natural outworking of a branch that is connected to the vine and is alive. In John 15:6-7, Jesus shifts his metaphor into application. The branches that are not connected to the vine (15:4) are proven to not be part of the actual plant. Those are gathered and thrown away because they “can do nothing” (John 15:5). This shows us that there will be people within the church that look like they belong to the Father, but are not actually fruit-bearing branches. How do we know? There is no lasting fruit in their lives. Harsh? Yes, but a necessary truth that needs to be stated.

Just going through the motion of the things that we think Christians do does not make us actual Christians. What (Who?) makes us fruit-bearing Christ followers? God, in Christ, by his Holy Spirit's power. Then our active obedience to his commands will prove our connection to him and will keep us connected to him (Jude 20-21). 1 John 3:4-10 makes this point plainly. John would tell us that since Christ followers are connected to the vine (John 15), they do not make a practice of sinning. Simple illustration? If you are a musician, you will play music. By definition, it is what you do. However, if you are not musically inclined, but you attempt to appear that way, it does not take long before the truth is evident. Even though you might accidentally play something that sounds right to others, you have no idea what you are doing and, sooner or later, the charade will end. The truth will come out and everyone will know you are not a musician. The same is true for true Christ followers. If a person is a Christian, they will be marked by an increased obedience to God's commands. They must. Obedience to God's commands is one of the assurances that God graciously gives to his children.

Secondly, God gives us assurance of salvation through the local church community. We see this all throughout the New Testament. After Jesus ascends to heaven and gives his final reminders and commands to his disciples, we pick up the narrative fifty days after Jesus' crucifixion in Acts 2—the final day of the feast of Pentecost. We read that the disciples were praying together and they were given the miraculous ability to speak in other known languages—yet the disciples did not possess the

knowledge or ability to speak in those languages. They begin preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ. Near the end of their proclamation, Peter steps in to interpret what just took place. After Peter shares the gospel and points to Jesus for salvation, many of those in the city came to Christ. They were then gathered into this new people group that we refer to as the Church. From there, we move into the New Testament Church era in which we currently live. Together, we gather weekly to worship God through preaching and teaching the Bible, praying with and for one another, and singing hymns and other spiritual songs. This togetherness can be seen throughout the New Testament. According to Mason Andrew in his article on [ChurchLeaders.com](https://churchleaders.com), the term and the teaching that we should “one another” each other, appears fifty-nine times in the New Testament and five times in John’s gospel between chapters 13-15.¹¹ This “one anothering” is a living testament to a lost and dying world, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another. By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” I think this takes place within two contexts.

First, if we read the New Testament within its context, it is a collection of letters that are written to the Church and primarily written to the gathered Christians within local contexts—churches. As they are changed by the gospel, they share it with other people groups (Acts 8). Through the way that they actively love and serve one another, the world takes notice. In John 13, Jesus is talking specifically about how the disciples would relate to the disciples—not how they would relate to the outside world. Not only would it be for others to see and take notice, but it would also be for those within the church. This idea carries over into his next letter here in 1 John 3. Through loving one another within the body of believers, John says that it reassures our hearts that we truly know him (1 John 3:19-24).

Secondly, at times, loving and serving one another will necessitate us rebuking and confronting one another in love. In Galatians 2:11-14, Paul retells his confrontation with Peter. He rebuked him publicly because Peter was in a season of hypocrisy. His life did not match his message. So, Paul rebuked him publicly so that Peter would repent and, once again, prove that he was born again by the way he lived. To say it once more, we cannot save ourselves by our actions. However, God’s word tells us that we prove our salvation through the way we live with and among one another. Since we are born not knowing the Lord—and the natural fruit of a heart that does not know God is sin—no amount of good works can ever change a sinful heart, only God can do that for us (Eph. 2:1-10). As God regenerates hearts and grants faith that leads to repentance, he adds those to his Church and they are to continue his ministry of loving and serving one another (Acts 2:42-47) in a way that shows a watching world that his ways are better and that true life can only be found within him (John 14:6). God graciously grants us assurance through the ministry of belonging—both to the larger Church and to the local church.

Finally, God gives us assurance through the indwelling of his Holy Spirit. The motivation and ability to grasp the first two assurances mentioned above can only be true through the indwelling presence of God himself within the life of the believer. In John 10, Jesus tells his disciples that he is the Good Shepherd and that his sheep will know his voice, they will listen to his voice, and they will follow him. How does this happen? How do sheep know the voice of their shepherd? They know his voice because it is the one that they have become most familiar with. This happens because they are in his fold. They are not in his fold because they necessarily chose to be, but because of the good and gracious acts of the shepherd. This is similar to the way I can call my kiddos’ attention simply by the way I whistle. They immediately turn in my direction because they recognize my call. In the same way, Jesus wants his disciples to know that they follow him because of his grace in their lives. They hear his voice and obey him because God grants them understanding. They are to obey his voice which then proves their belonging.

In John 14:26 and 15:26, Jesus tells his disciples that his Holy Spirit’s role in their lives would be to point them back to him and remind them of Jesus’ teachings. In John 16:7, Jesus tells his disciples that it is to their advantage that Jesus goes away because the Holy Spirit would be with them wherever they go. As Christ-followers, this truth should bring us comfort. Even though we might not always acknowledge it, the truth remains—God’s Holy Spirit goes with us wherever we go, always guides our hearts to God through Jesus, and will remind us of Jesus’ teachings. In 1 John 4:13-21, because God has given us his Spirit, we can abide in him and obey him. Since this truth exists, his love is perfected within us. This doesn’t mean that we love perfectly, for we know that this isn’t always true. Even the best of us fail daily to display the unwavering love for others that is given to us from God. However, verse 17 means that we can have confidence instead of living in fear. Why? Because we are now “sons of God!” (Rom. 8:15-17). Since we are his children, his Holy Spirit indwells our lives and intercedes with the Father on our behalf (Rom. 8:26). We can know that we are his! What a grace in our lives! We can have assurance through God’s indwelling Holy Spirit in our lives that grants our obedience to his teachings and belonging to his family.

Let us be a people who strive to live within this reality. Let us take every opportunity to persuade others to join God’s family of faith. Let us be diligent in our obedience to the teachings of Jesus. Let us seek out moments to affirm one another in our belonging to the Father. Let us be confident in our salvation that is made possible by God’s gracious gift in our lives, and let us seek to be a people who know Jesus and make him known to others.

¹¹ Andrew Mason, “59 Times ‘One Another’ is Used in the New Testament,” September 4, 2025, accessed December 26, 2025, <https://churchleaders.com/smallgroups/176356-the-59-one-another-statements-in-the-bible.html/2>.

The Main Point

Because of who God is, what he has done through Jesus, and continues to do through his Holy Spirit, true believers can be safe and secure in their relationship with God, resulting in a confident and active trust in their daily lives.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- John 10 – Jesus is the Good Shepherd, and true believers hear his voice and follow him.
- John 13-15 – As a benefit to true believers, God's Holy Spirit lives within them and his ministry affirms and reminds the believer of Jesus' teachings.
- Acts 2 – God uses Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost to add thousands to the current group of disciples through repentance and faith.
- 1 John – This letter is written to believers so they can know they are true believers.

Week 10

How to Read the Old Testament

By Brandon Wingler

Introduction

Imagine trying to read *The Return of the King*, the final book in the Lord of the Rings trilogy, without having read the first two books. The battles, the triumphs, and the sacrifices may still be exciting, but their full significance would be lost without experiencing the long struggle, the growth and loss endured by the characters, and the weight of the journey it took for them to reach their destination. Envision attending a symphony and walking in halfway through the finale. You arrive just in time to hear the triumphant chords as the orchestra reaches the climax, but all the moments that built up to it are missing. And consider the difference in watching a highlight reel after an Alabama football game and missing out on all the tension and drama that you would experience had you watched it live (especially here lately).

The experience of skipping ahead and getting quick summaries can be frustrating because doing so limits us from seeing the big picture and experiencing all the richness that comes with each and every part of the whole. Skipping past the Old Testament produces the same unfulfilling results. While we can read just the New Testament and come to recognize something of who Christ is and what he did, neglecting to read the Old Testament will cause us to miss the depth, beauty, and significance of his life, death, and resurrection. Furthermore, we will find ourselves unfamiliar with certain characters and concepts we find in the New Testament that would deepen our understanding and appreciation of the gospel. Skipping past the Old Testament would be like ordering biscuits and gravy and saying, “hold the gravy.” It just ain’t right.

Read the entire Old Testament together

Passage Specific Questions

1. How does seeing the Old Testament as a unified story, rather than disconnected parts, change the way you approach it?
2. Why is it important to see Christ as fulfilling the Old Testament rather than replacing the Old Testament?
3. How has studying Hebrews shaped or challenged the way you think about the Old Testament?
4. How might regular reading of the Old Testament strengthen your faith and encourage you to persevere with confidence and hope?

Commentary

For many Christians, the Old Testament can feel confusing, distant, and overwhelming. Its stories are ancient, its laws and customs often seem strange, and the culture of the ancient world seems so far removed from our modern life. Yet, as we have seen in Hebrews, the Old Testament is not just history or a set of laws and lessons but a living testimony to God’s faithfulness which finds its fulfillment in Christ.

Hebrews begins by reminding us that God spoke in the past through the prophets, but now he has spoken definitively through his son (Hebrews 1:1-2). When we read the Old Testament, we are listening to God speak across time. The challenge is learning how to listen well. By studying what the text meant in its original setting and learning how it fits within the larger story that is further expounded in the New Testament, we can come to a greater understanding and appreciation of God’s plan to redeem a people for himself.

“Unhitching” from the Old Testament?

Throughout the history of the church, some teachers and preachers have suggested that the church needs to “unhitch” itself from the Old Testament. The impulse behind this idea is that many people struggle with difficult Old Testament passages, feel confused about the role of the Mosaic Law and the sacrificial system, or worry that certain texts create obstacles for sharing their faith. These people want to rightly emphasize that Christianity is centered on faith in Christ and his resurrection, not on keeping the old Mosaic Law and sacrifices.

But the language of “unhitching” creates far more problems than it solves. While it is true that Christians are not under the Mosaic Law, it is not true that the Old Testament is therefore optional, disposable, outdated, or irrelevant. In fact, the New Testament presents the Old Testament as essential and necessary for understanding who Jesus is, what he has accomplished, and how God continues to speak to his people today.

The most serious problem with the idea of unhitching is that it undermines the authority and unity of Scripture. To unhitch implies that part of Scripture can be detached without loss. But Scripture does not present itself as a collection of independent texts. It presents itself as one unfolding revelation, breathed out by God using his Spirit through human writers, moving toward fulfillment in the promised Messiah, Jesus Christ.

This Messiah consistently treated the Old Testament scriptures as the authoritative word of God. When tempted in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), Jesus quoted from Deuteronomy 6 and 8. When teaching about marriage (Matthew 19:4-6), he appealed to God's design illustrated in Genesis 1 and 2. When challenged by the Pharisees, he reasoned from the Psalms and the Prophets. Following his resurrection, Jesus appeared to two men and "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures" (Luke 24:27). Jesus clearly understood the Old Testament scriptures as God's self-revelation of his plans and purposes which find their fulfillment in Christ.

The apostles also treated the Old Testament as the authoritative word of God. On the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), Peter explained the outpouring of the Spirit by quoting the prophet Joel, insisting that the events surrounding Jesus were the fulfillment of God's long-awaited promises (Joel 2:28-32). When Paul taught in the synagogues from the Old Testament that Christ had to suffer and rise from the dead, Luke repeatedly notes that he reasoned "from the Scriptures," referring to the Old Testament scriptures (Acts 17:2-3). To the church in Corinth, Paul affirmed that Christ fulfilled the promises and prophecies written in the Old Testament: "Now I would remind you, brothers, of the gospel I preached to you, which you received, in which you stand, and by which you are being saved, if you hold fast to the word I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. For I delivered to you as of first importance what I also received: that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the Scriptures..." (1 Corinthians 15:1-4).

Hebrews opens by quoting multiple Old Testament passages to show that the Son is superior to angels (Psalms 2:7; 2 Samuel 7:14; Psalms 97:7; Psalms 110:1). The author warns believers against unbelief using Scripture (Psalms 95:7-11; Hebrews 3:7-15). Throughout Hebrews, the law, the priesthood, the sacrificial system, and the covenant promises are not dismissed as obsolete relics of an old era but interpreted as God's purposeful preparation for the person and work of Christ. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 states, "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work." All Scripture includes the Old Testament.

Jesus, the apostles, and the New Testament scriptures do not treat the Old Testament as a problem to manage or a burden to avoid. They do not invite us to unhitch from the Old Testament. Instead, they recognize the Old Testament as God's authoritative and living Word which still speaks today to instruct his people and to call them to faith, obedience, perseverance, and hope. Rather than unhitching from the Old Testament, we need to understand how it fits into the unified story of God's plan to redeem a people for himself.

Reading the Old Testament as One Unified Story

One of the common reasons people struggle to read the Old Testament is that people approach it as a scattered collection of disconnected stories, laws, poetry, and prophecies rather than as a unified narrative with a clear direction. But the New Testament, especially in Hebrews, helps show that the Old Testament is one unified story moving toward Christ. From creation and the fall, through the Exodus to the Exile, in the promises and the prophecies, Scripture tells one unfolding story of redemption. However, as the Old Testament comes to a close, many promises remain unfulfilled. Hebrews emphasizes this when it points out that Joshua did not bring Israel into true rest (Hebrews 4:8), the Levitical priesthood could not perfect the conscience (Hebrews 7:11, 19), and the sacrifices could not fully cleanse sin (Hebrews 10:1-4). The Old Testament promises remained unfulfilled until Christ came to fulfill them.

Hebrews also demonstrates that the Old Testament can be read typologically by showing how several people, events, and institutions foreshadow Christ who fulfills the promises in the Old Testament. Throughout the Old Testament, there are types of people (such as Moses the prophet, David the king, the Levitical priests), events (such as the Exodus), and institutions (such as Passover and the Levitical priesthood) which foreshadow and anticipate Christ and future events in salvation history. In Hebrews, the author says that Moses was faithful in God's house while Jesus is faithful over God's house (Hebrews 3:5-6), that Joshua led Israel into the promised land while Jesus leads God's people into true rest (Hebrews 4:1-10), and that the priests offered repeated sacrifices, but Jesus offered himself once for all (Hebrews 10:11-14).

The author of Hebrews also emphasizes faith and perseverance. Many Old Testament figures "did not receive what was promised" in their lifetime, yet they remained faithful to God's word (Hebrews 11:13-16). Their example teaches us to trust in the Lord and to persevere through doubt and difficulties. They also show us that God's promises often have layers of fulfillment. Many of God's promises were only partially realized in Israel's history until they were fully realized in Christ. While the Old Testament believers looked forward with hope and trust in God to fulfill his promises, we look back to Christ as the fulfillment of God's promises. Yet we also look forward with hope and trust in God to ultimately bring about the new creation when all things will be made right. Israel's failures all throughout the Old Testament, like their unbelief in the wilderness (Psalm 95:7-11; Hebrews 3:7-15), serve as warnings, while the faith of those who believed in the promises of God provides encouragement for us to do the same as we trust in Christ who is the fulfillment of God's promises.

Reading the Old Testament in light of Christ allows us to see God's plan for redemption and to better understand the meaning behind all the laws, promises, sacrifices, and prophecies. Seeing the failures and the faithfulness of those in the Old Testament both warns us and serves as examples of how to trust the Lord and to place our faith in Christ and not in our circumstances. Rather than "unhitching" from the Old Testament, we are called to return to it with confidence, humility, and hope, trusting that God's story is continuing to unfold, and that Christ is the fulfillment of all that was promised.

Practical Steps to Assist Your Scripture Reading

Before you begin reading Scripture, ask the Holy Spirit to open your eyes and ears to hear God's word clearly. Ask for humility. Ask for understanding. Remember that you aren't just reading and studying Scripture; you are reading the word of God which is "living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12). Don't read simply for knowledge. Read for transformation. Read to encounter the living God through his living word so that you may be encouraged, challenged, humbled, fortified, and ultimately be conformed more to the image of Christ.

Next, simply start reading, ideally from the beginning. Some of our difficulties stem from simply not doing that which we know is helpful because it is not easy. Much like working out our body requires steadfast effort and commitment, reading Scripture does as well. Much like working out is disciplining the body, we need to exercise spiritual disciplines by incorporating regular Scripture reading into our daily lives. If having a Scripture reading plan works best for you, go for it. There are several good ones out there. However, don't approach your reading as a thing to check off the list. Reading Scripture is not a contest, homework assignment, or a task to earn more of God's favor, love, or approval. We read Scripture to learn more about God and his plan and to be transformed to become more like Christ.

Read slowly and try to understand the context of the passage through careful study and rereading. The Old Testament was written over a long period of time and features a very different cultural setting than our context. Take time to think through what came before and after the passage you are reading. Resist the urge to jump straight to some sort of application of the passage. Get a study Bible and read through the study notes after reading a passage. Use helpful resources such as the "Read Scripture" video series from the BibleProject¹², an Old Testament survey such as *A Survey of the Old Testament* by Andrew Hill and Bill Walton, and the Anchor Church study guides¹³ and sermons¹⁴ for the Old Testament books we've studied so far. For a detailed and step-by-step guide that walks you through different biblical genres and ways to further deepen your study of Scripture, consider going through a book like *Grasping God's Word* by J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays. We live in an era with a wealth of wonderful resources that can help further your understanding of Scripture. A word of caution, though. Not all resources are that helpful, and some contain significant errors and views very much opposed to what we believe is true and biblical. Exercise discernment and do your research before picking up any resource. Don't be afraid to ask an elder for help or to consult a trusted and mature church member. Reading and discussing Scripture in community can also help us to sharpen each other and ensure we do not stray far from the truth. Attend the church services, join a discipleship group, and get plugged into a community group, "not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near" (Hebrews 10:25).

Finally, read with hope and perseverance. God's people have always lived between promise and fulfillment. Like the faithful described in Hebrews 11, we may not see everything fulfilled in our lifetime, but we trust the God who keeps his promises. While the Old Testament believers awaited the Messiah and clung to God's promises, we look back on Christ and see how God fulfilled his promises. As we await Christ's return to fully consummate his eternal kingdom in the new heavens and new earth, we can read Scripture with hope and perseverance, seeing how God always fulfills his promises and looking to the examples of faithfulness of those believers who persevered before us. As we read Scripture, may the Holy Spirit transform us into people who listen to God, cling to Christ, and live with hope as we wait for the day when all things will be made new.

The Main Point

The Old Testament is not something Christians need to leave behind, but something we must learn to read rightly in light of who Christ is and what he has done. Hebrews shows us that the laws, promises, sacrifices, and prophecies of the Old Testament form one unified story which finds its fulfillment in Christ.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- **Hebrews 1:1-2** – "Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son..."
- **2 Timothy 3:16-17** – "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."
- **Hebrews 4:12** – "For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."
- **Psalm 119:105** – "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path."

¹² Bible Project, "Old Testament," accessed January 25, 2026, <https://bibleproject.com/videos/collections/old-testament/>.

¹³ Anchor Church, "Study Guides," accessed January 25, 2026, <https://anchorchurch.us/resources/study-guides>.

¹⁴ Anchor Church, "Sermons," accessed January 25, 2026 <https://anchorchurch.us/sundays/sermons>.

- **Romans 15:4** – “For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, that through endurance and through the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.”
- **Luke 24:44** – Jesus tells his disciples that everything written about him in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms must be fulfilled.

Week 11

A Word on Persecution

By Rand Nelson

Introduction

He was a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, but he wasn't a pastor. In fact, he was chosen to serve to meet practical needs for the church so that the pastors could devote themselves fully to the ministry of the word. He flourished in his role, and—God be praised—the church flourished because of how God used him. It's easy to imagine that he could have spent decades serving the body in practical ways, performing signs and wonders among them, and physically being the hands and feet of Christ, but his ministry upset the wrong people.

A local synagogue tried disputing his claims, but his wisdom and the presence of the Holy Spirit in his words left them stunned. Their hardened hearts left them with little other option but to attack him. So, they stirred up the people—spreading lies about the man, that he had spoken blasphemies against the Lord and against Moses. When given an opportunity to speak to his defense, the man did not hold back but proceeded to take the opportunity to detail the hardness of heart and stiffness of neck of the Jewish people throughout their storied history—their hypocrisy and rejection of the Lord and his prophets. For that, they killed him.

Stephen was not an apostle. He was not an elder, nor was he a missionary or the CEO of some massive parachurch ministry. He was a humble deacon, selected to serve the church alongside six people whose names you don't remember. When the Bible records his story, it's taking the abstract warnings of Jesus in John 16:2-3 and showing the concrete reality in real time. Throughout church history (including church history still actively being written) persecution has been an ever-present tool of the enemy to intimidate, harm and, yes, even to kill God's people.

Study Questions

1. What does this passage say about God, who He is, and what He does? (Father, Son, and Spirit)
2. What does this passage teach me about me?
3. What comfort/promise/challenge can I take away from this passage?
4. How will I respond or live differently because of what I've read?

Passage Specific Questions

1. How would you define persecution? What would you emphasize?
2. Can you think of a time when following Jesus clearly cost you something—socially, professionally, or relationally?
3. How does remembering persecuted believers around the world and throughout church history shape the way we view our own struggles?
4. Jesus calls us to love and pray for those who oppose us. Why is this so difficult—and what makes it possible?

Commentary

At the opening of *The Screwtape Letters*, C. S. Lewis says:

There are two equal and opposite errors into which our race can fall about the devils. One is to disbelieve in their existence. The other is to believe, and to feel an excessive and unhealthy interest in them. They themselves are equally pleased by both errors and hail a materialist or a magician with the same delight.

I remind you of this quote because I think a similar bifurcation takes place in the minds of modern Christians when we consider persecution. In my experience speaking with Christians about persecution, two similar extremes dot the landscape. Some people are very aware of the presence of persecution in the world—so much so that they may even live in fear of it whether or not it is likely to happen to them in their context. Others act as if persecution does not exist at all, dismissing claims that ongoing persecution is happening or qualifying certain hostilities against Christians as not “real” persecution. A better approach is to recognize that opposition to the gospel is present throughout Christian history, and yes, is alive and well today for God's people—even if it may look contextually different.

What is persecution?

Taking many different things into account, I'm defining persecution in this way. Persecution is hostility, opposition, harm, exclusion, and/or coercion directed at individuals or groups of people because of their faith in Christ. When we think about persecution, we need to recognize that it typically comes from one of two places (sometimes both). First, persecution can be from

secular rulers such as local, national, or international governments or armies. Second, persecution can come from within the church or from within your adjacent religious culture. We refer to the first category as magisterial persecution, and the second category we call ecclesiastical persecution. Thirdly, as is often the case in the Bible, is a magisterial persecution that is the direct result of the ecclesiastical body stirring them up. Think the Jewish leaders stirring up the crowds to pressure Pontius Pilate into crucifying Jesus.

Even if it is where our minds first go, persecution does not always involve martyrdom or physical pain being inflicted upon a person because of their faith in Christ. There are many ways to suffer for Christ without shedding blood or losing your life. But we can faithfully say that the 12-year-old American Christian girl being excluded from the slumber party because she proudly professes Jesus, and the Nigerian Christian being beheaded for their faith in Christ are both experiencing persecution, even though the difference in the severity of their circumstances is obvious.

Additionally we should expect to see persecution look differently in 21st century America (where Christianity is a large part of the established culture, not likely to be stamped out overnight) than it did in the 2nd century Roman Empire or in a modern country where it is first breaking ground (where it could potentially be quickly eradicated by persecution). Losing a job or being passed over for a promotion, being excluded from a social gathering among friends, and intentional, organized opposition to our attempts at making Christ known may all be examples of persecution—provided these things occur because of our faith in Jesus.

Persecution in the Bible

There are many instances of persecution in the Bible—in both the Old and New Testament. As we look at these passages, we can draw conclusions from the Lord that will shape our understanding of persecution and equip us for how to live in light of its reality.

Daniel 3:8-30 & Acts 4:1-22 - In both of these stories, believers are faced with a difficult choice. Do they honor their authorities and submit to their demands or do they remain obedient to God's commands? In the chapter from Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego have been instructed to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar's golden image or face the punishment of being thrown in the fiery furnace. In the story from Acts, Peter and John are called before the council and charged to stop preaching the name of Jesus.

As a brief aside, these two passages are wonderful examples in dealing with the issue of how Christians should think about civil disobedience. Generally speaking, Christians are permitted to disobey authorities when they either A) command them to do something God forbids (such as in Daniel 3) or B) when they forbid them from doing something God commands (as in Acts 4). In each of these passages, the people of God refuse to obey their authorities and Scripture clearly shows them to be in the right as they do so.

We learn from these stories that sometimes we're expected to walk right into the path of persecution in obedience to God for his glory. Sometimes God delivers his people from their persecutors; sometimes he does not. In these circumstances, we should respectfully and honorably do as they did—speak the truth clearly, and leave the outcomes to the Lord who is sovereign over them. "If this be so, our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the burning fiery furnace, and he will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But if not, be it known to you, O king, that we will not serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up" (Daniel 3:17-18). And "But Peter and John answered them, 'Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge, for we cannot but speak of what we have seen and heard'" (Acts 4:19-20).

1 Peter 4:12-19 - Peter encourages us to entrust our souls to a faithful creator (v.19) and, if we are to suffer, we should suffer for doing good rather than for doing evil. Suffering and persecution should never surprise us, and we should even rejoice in our persecutions, as we are sharing in the sufferings of our Lord. Suffering for the Lord is, in fact, a small evidence that God's Spirit rests on us.

John 15:18-20 - Jesus informs his disciples in some of the very last moments he has with them prior to his own death that the world is going to hate them. The world will hate them (and us), because the world hates Him and we are not of the world—for we have been called out of it. Again, persecution is to be expected, and the reward that comes from compromising (the love of the world) is temporary and shallow.

2 Timothy 3:12-13 - Paul informs us that all who desire to live a godly life will be persecuted. There is something about living the life of a disciple of Christ that offends and disgusts the world in which we live. We are called to endure this persecution, not at all wavering from what we have been taught.

Matthew 5:10-12, 44; Romans 12:14 - Those who are persecuted are blessed by God. Theirs is the kingdom of heaven, and it is there that they will receive their due reward. Having this heavenly mindset, we should pray for our persecutors and love them rather than returning evil for evil. We should bless them rather than curse them.

Romans 8:35-39 & John 16:31-33 - What must be at the front of Christians' minds as they endure persecution are these twin realities: First, that Jesus has overcome the world and second, that there is nothing at all in the universe that can separate us from his great love. 2 Corinthians tells us that God, in Christ, always leads us in triumphal procession. We are the everlasting victors in Christ, and nothing will ever change that.

How should we then live?

The Bible plainly shows us that persecution is a reality we must endure if we long to live faithfully as Christians. While persecution may differ from age to age (or from continent to continent), we are called to endure it as we seek to make Christ known and to trust that he is faithful even if he should call on us to lay down our lives in pursuit of his glory—as untold thousands of believers before us have done.

Lastly - What persecution is NOT.

There are many things the Bible talks about that involve suffering that are not persecution. For example, normal grief and loss are not persecution; they are just the result of the fall, a part of the human experience. Temptation is not normally persecution and neither is demonic oppression. Additionally, the discipline of the Lord often comes to us through means that are not persecution. Yet that doesn't stop us from thinking our situations are unique or from assuming that any perceived threat to our Christian happiness comes to us because we are Christians and not for some other reason.

For example, if you live in a country where preaching the gospel violates blasphemy law and you preach the gospel, the legal penalty that results from your evangelism is most certainly persecution. But if you are fired from your job for using company time to evangelize your coworker (especially if it is interfering with your or their work), the write-up or termination that follows may just be the consequences of your time theft. It is sometimes a difficult balance to remain faithful to our calling as Christians to make Jesus known while striving to submit to and obey our authorities. In some instances, we have no choice but to disobey (Acts 4:17-20); in other situations, tact, discernment, and timing may permit us to avoid these consequences altogether.

The Main Point

Persecution is a very real part of living faithfully as a Christian and exists in a variety of forms. Christians should faithfully endure persecution and trust in God's faithfulness as they endure.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- See list above

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