

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 climatic 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

Hebrews Introduction

By Harvey Edwards, IV

When we study a subject that was previously foreign to us and begin to understand it, one of two things happens. Either the magic disappears because we misunderstood the simplicity of what was happening behind the scenes; or we are amazed at the complexity of what has occurred, and our appreciation for what we have witnessed soars to new heights. The latter is what happens when we begin to understand the Bible.

One of the beautiful things about the Bible is that the heart of the message is simple: God has made a way for sinners to be forgiven and restored to right relationship with himself through the life, death, and resurrection of his son Jesus. If we repent of our sin and trust in Jesus, we are welcomed into relationship as a child of God. But the beauty of the Bible doesn't end there. The more we familiarize yourself with the Scriptures, the more we understand the depth and scope of God's grace. The more we read, the more we see how each moment prepares us to better understand the next. The more connections we grasp, the more we are overwhelmed by the intricacies of God's plan. Not only does he make a promise that he fulfills, he progressively fulfills it in ways that grow our ability to know him and to understand his heart. We see more clearly the depth of our sin and magnitude of his mercy so that we gladly worship him, and we look forward to the day that our hearts are fully aligned with his. And we see that this is what we were created for and what we long for—to glorify him with all of who we are as we enjoy him forever.

The Book of Hebrews is like a doorway into understanding the Bible this way. It is almost like a primer in biblical theology, teaching us to understand how the biblical authors mean for us to interpret their writings. The author of Hebrews shows how so many of the foundational stories of the Old Testament are being used by the Lord to prepare us to understand the magnitude of what he has done for us in Jesus. Each of the seemingly climactic moments of the Old Testament are anticipatory notes in the symphony of salvation, all preparing us to understand the identity of the Messiah and rightly respond to his righteous rule.

It is interesting that we don't know who the author of Hebrews is. Nor do we know exactly who he was writing to. But we do know something of the situation because of what he writes. His main point is stated clearly in these verses:

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. ³ 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, ⁴having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs (Hebrews 1:1-4).

He wants us to know that Jesus is the Son of God who is bringing about the fulfillment of all of God's purposes. The author's exhortation flows from this point—we must hold fast to Jesus, no matter the cost.

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 is set before us, ²looking 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.

³Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted (Hebrews 12:1-3).

The author of Hebrews doesn't want anyone to misunderstand. There is no way to salvation—no way to right relationship with the Father—but through the Son. This was an important message to the recipients of Hebrews because they were being persecuted for their belief in Jesus. There was a temptation to think that they could go back to relating to God through the Old Covenant—through the Law and the sacrifices—because in doing so they could avoid persecution. But the author of Hebrews wants them to understand that there is no turning back. In fact, to turn back to relating to God through the Old Covenant would be to show that they never understood the Old Testament at all. No one could keep the law. There was never a sacrifice for sins that could deal with the problem of sin. Israel was never able to live righteously. That is because the Old Covenant wasn't the path to salvation. Instead, it was always a signpost pointing us towards our need for Jesus and preparing us to recognize him as the Christ. Only he could pay the penalty for sin. Only he could earn the righteousness credited to God's people when they believed his promises. The author shows us that salvation has only ever been available because of the work of Jesus. It has always been credited by grace through faith. In the New Testament, salvation is given by grace through faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In the Old Testament, it was credited in advance to those who had faith in the promises of God that point to Jesus.

To make this clear, the author of Hebrews launches into an explanation of the Old Testament, showing that Jesus fulfills all of its promises and expectations. For example, Jesus is greater than Moses and has established a new and better covenant by which God's people can be saved. Unlike even the patriarchs of the faith, Jesus was tempted, yet he never sinned. Unlike the high priests in the Old Covenant who had to offer sacrifices yearly to atone for their sins and the sins of Israel, Jesus is the great high priest of a new and better covenant. He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, a priest to whom even

Abraham deferred, and he offered himself as a sacrifice for sin once and for all. Through his blood, he did what the blood of the sacrifices of bulls and goats could never do—he has dealt with the problem of sin. Then he demonstrated his identity as the perfect high priest through the power of an indestructible life. What we see over and over again is that everything that came before testified to the reality that Jesus is the Messiah.

There can only be one response to this knowledge—to cling to faith in Jesus. This has been and will always be the only way to the Father. God freely offers grace, but it is only to be found in Christ. This is why the author of Hebrews exhorts his readers to understand God’s revelation of himself and his purposes to redeem a people for himself through Jesus. There is no turning back to a previous way of relating to God, because all the ways that God has ever interacted with his people have been leading up to what he has done for us in Jesus. The author of Hebrews wants us to rejoice in what God has done for us in Christ, and he wants us to know what is at stake.

²⁵ See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. ²⁶ At that time his voice shook the earth, but now he has promised, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heavens.” ²⁷ This phrase, “Yet once more,” indicates the removal of things that are shaken—that is, things that have been made—in order that the things that cannot be shaken may remain. ²⁸ Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe, ²⁹ for our God is a consuming fire (Hebrews 12:25-29).

We learn from Hebrews that we aren’t free to relate to God however we want. The Hebrews can’t go back to relating to the Lord through the Law rather than Jesus to avoid persecution. We can expect to sometimes suffer if we follow Jesus, but God offers us something infinitely better than the comfort found in this life. He offers us salvation from our sin and eternal life in his kingdom. The author of Hebrews leaves us with this exhortation:

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 (Hebrews 10:19-25).

As we study Hebrews, let's be a people who ask the Lord to grow us in our knowledge of the Scriptures and what he has done for us in Jesus; to increase our love for him; and to give us confidence to remain steadfast in the faith, living our lives for his glory until he brings us home.

Study Questions

1. What does the 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 Bible passages that help you understand the interconnectedness of Scripture?
 2. The author of Hebrews is exhorting believers to remain steadfast in the true teachings of the Bible about Jesus in the face of persecution. What are ways that you are tempted to revise the teachings of Scripture to avoid discomfort in your own life?
 3. As you have grown in your knowledge of the Bible, what are new insights that you have had into the heart of God, the gospel, your need for grace, etc.?
-

The Main Point

God wants us to know him and his purposes to rescue a people for himself through his Son Jesus. As we grow in our knowledge of Scripture, we grow in our understanding of what Jesus has accomplished and what that means for us, and we are able to draw near in full assurance of the faith, knowing that he who promised is faithful.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Romans 16:25-26 – Paul discusses the mystery of salvation that is revealed in the New Testament.
- Jude 24 – Jude reminds us that God is able to keep us from stumbling and bring us before the presence of his glory with great joy.
- 1 Peter 1:10-12 – Peter discusses how the prophets prophesied about the

grace that was to be found in Jesus.

- Matthew 13:16-17 – Jesus hints that the prophets longed to see him—the long-expected Messiah.

Week 2

Hebrews 1:1-14 – Jesus As Superior To The Angels

By Nathan Kenny

Introduction

Every now and then I reflect on a drive back home to Pike Road (think east side of Montgomery if you don't know where that is) from Tuscaloosa during college. I was taking 82 because it is the most efficient and relaxing way back home, and I glanced out at the trees. I was first struck by the sheer beauty of nature and then struck by the complexity involved in keeping those trees alive. I haven't taken a biology class since freshman year of high school, but even then I remembered the concepts that trees had a transportation system to draw water and nutrients from the ground all the way up to the top and out to its branches and leaves, that the leaves had a special pigment called chlorophyll that absorbs light as a form of energy, that the trees use this energy with carbon dioxide and water to produce their food, and that trees (along with all plants I believe) have cell walls because those walls provide structure so that plants can stand upright as they don't have any skeletal structures like most animals.

God created all that. We as humans have been working for thousands of years to unravel the mysteries of nature, to understand all that is around us, but we have a God who isn't trying to understand that nature or who stumbled across plans that make life possible: he created life itself along with the blueprints, the very essence of that nature. (I figured this appreciation of God might be more palatable to some than discussing the axioms and structures of mathematics that also point to the beauty and majesty of our God of all creation...love you Michael!)

In the same way, I have also found myself wondering about the nature of angels and about how they interact with us on Earth. They clearly are powerful as depicted in Scripture and obviously quite supernatural. There are just so many things I want to know about angels that I do not think are fully answered. When you look at ancient art, and even modern art like *Doctor Who* with their depiction of the weeping angels, our world is fascinated with these beings.

However, even these angels were created. But the Son was not. He is greater. He is Creator, even of the angels, and was there with the Father from the beginning. And now, having accomplished his salvific work, he sits at the right hand of the Father.

Read Hebrews 1:1-14 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. What thoughts or questions do you have about angels in general? It is not expected that you as a group will answer all these questions right now, or ever, but it is healthy to address such questions and bring them out into the open.
 2. What quote(s) from the Old Testament about Jesus resonate the most with you, and why?
 3. What have you studied in Scripture that speaks to the truth that He is greater than angels? How have you experienced Jesus in your own life?
 4. In our contemporary Christian culture, I think that it is naturally assumed that Jesus is greater than the angels, so why do you think that the author of this letter to the Hebrews so passionately argues that Jesus is greater than the angels? How does this connect to your own lives?
-

Commentary

Hebrews 1:1-14

It is through the opening words of verse 1 “Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets” that the author informs us that he is writing to Messiah-following Jews. While God had a long record of actively teaching the Jews through His prophets, it is important to recognize that ancient Judaism could not articulate God as the Trinity like we do. This is why the author so emphatically argues for Jesus the Son’s unity and equivalence with God, displaying the “exact imprint of [the Father’s] nature” (Hebrews 1:3). The author indicates that Jesus is not just reflecting the glory of God, but is instead the actual radiance of God, that Jesus is himself God. By having Jesus bring his message, God interacted in a radically different, and unpredicted, way with the greater Jewish community, and as a result all of humanity.

After his time on Earth, Jesus “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs” (Hebrews 1:3-4). There are two ideas we ought to investigate in this statement. First, why are the angels even brought into this conversation? Clearly, the Son of God who is also God and “through whom also [God] created the world” is greater than the angels, whom God created, so why is it necessary to make this statement when writing to the Messiah-believing Jews? Second, if Jesus is the Son of God and God’s “exact imprint,” then how did he *become* better than the angels?

For the first question, it is well established throughout the scriptures that the angels are the messengers and agents of God (e.g. Genesis 19; Psalms 34, 91, 103, and 104; 1 Kings 19 and 22; Daniel 6), but there is evidence in the New

Testament that at least some prominent early believers viewed angels as integral to God's deliverance of the Torah—the law of God (see Acts 7 for Stephen's speech to the Sanhedrin and Galatians 3:19)—that was the cornerstone of their faith for so long. We even see in the New Testament that there are some believers worshipping angels (Colossians 2:18; Galatians 1:8). With verse 1 starting out by addressing how God spoke to “our fathers” and chapter 2 building on these ideas to focus on salvation, it is quite probable that the author of Hebrews is stating that not only is the Son superior to the angels (to counter angel worship) *but also* His message, the Gospel we preach to each other and to non-believers, is superior to the message the angels brought to the Jewish forefathers.¹

Now we must be careful with these ideas that Jesus and the Gospel are superior to Torah because this can lead some to believe that the Old Testament is lesser than the New Testament. Rather, we know that Jesus did not “come to abolish the Law or the Prophets” but to fulfill them (Matthew 5:17). Instead, the way that Jesus fulfills the Law perfectly, both by living according to God's Law on Earth and now having “[made] purification for sins,” demonstrates his supremacy.

In speaking about the superiority of Christ in respect to Torah, Yaakov Brown said it this way:

Messiah being supreme predates the giving of the *Torah* and does not therefore annul the purpose of *Torah*, nor does Hebrews teach such a nonsense. Messiah is the Author (John 1) and Goal (Rom. 10:4) of the *Torah* and His being greater than its covenants and priesthood regards His position over all creation, and elevates the purpose of *Torah* rather than diminishing it. Hebrews explains that the many prophecies and promises of the *Tanakh* (OT) are fully filled, or begin to be fully filled in Messiah *Yeshua* (Who has entered time and space through the womb of *Miriyam*), however, it does not nullify those prophecies and promises, rather it illuminates their purpose.²

Moving to the second consideration, it might seem insignificant that the author uses the word “become” when talking about the Christ's superiority to the angels, but one should wonder how Jesus becomes superior to the angels when He already IS superior because he is the exact imprint, the very nature and radiance, of God. It is good to note that in an Eastern culture, especially in that time, truth is not just something that is known intellectually but is something that must be experienced, or lived for completeness. It is this process of experiencing that causes Jesus to *become* better, or was *proved better*, than the angels. He

¹ “Hebrews 1: A Superior Savior,” Enduring Word, accessed August 6, 2025, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/hebrews-1/>.

² “An Introduction to the Book of Hebrew,” accessed August 7, 2025, <https://www.bethmelekh.com/yaakovs-commentary/an-introduction-to-the-book-to-the-hebrews-hebrews-1>.

existed as fully God and fully human, whereas angels have experienced neither divinity nor humanity. Therefore, by his very nature, Jesus was superior to the angels, but he also *became* superior (was *proved better*) by accomplishing a perfectly righteous life and offering himself as the only permanent atonement for our sins.³

As a final couple of notes, I have really focused on the first few verses of this chapter since the intent of verses 5-14 is much clearer, especially in light of the earlier considerations. At the same time, the numerous Old Testament quotes really speak to the eternal and powerful nature of God the Son and how the Son is superior. Sure, the angels are impressive as “winds” and “flame[s] of fire.” However, Jesus is better. Meditating on these descriptions of Christ truly leads to a rest only found in God’s peace.

The Main Point

Jesus is supreme, superior to all things of this world and even to angels, as he is eternally the very nature of God and the author of all creation. By entering this world, Jesus also became superior by completely fulfilling the Torah, by dying on the cross for our sins, and by rising from the dead to sit at the right hand of God.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Psalm 2 – “The Reign of the Lord’s Anointed” referenced in Hebrews 1:5
- John 1:1-5 – Jesus as the Word, as God
- Psalm 104:1-4 – A contrasting between God and angels and referenced in Hebrews 1:7

³ “Hebrews 1: A Superior Savior,” Enduring Word, accessed August 6, 2025, <https://enduringword.com/bible-commentary/hebrews-1/>.

Week 3

Hebrews 2:1-18 – The Founder of Salvation

By Michael Kulick

Introduction

I was born to two deaf parents. My older sister and I are what the deaf community call CODAs (Child of Deaf Adults). Having deaf parents provides a unique set of circumstances for a young kid. I found myself in situations as big as interpreting for them while they applied for a loan at the bank. I also found myself in situations as small as being stuck on the toilet with no toilet paper and no cellphone to call for help. I can look back on those random situations and find appreciation for them in helping shape who I am now, but one of the things that I didn't appreciate then as much as I do now is the sense of belonging a lot of deaf people can find being involved in the deaf community.

One of the biggest lessons I've learned from my parents over the years is understanding the pride they have in being who they are. They have no shame in being deaf. They are proud of the unique challenges they face and haven't let those challenges keep them from being able to sufficiently provide for their kids and live the life they dreamed of. That sense of pride is ingrained in deaf culture. By being a part of that culture and having that first-hand experience with my parents, I have a greater appreciation for what it means for deaf people to tackle issues that hearing people might think "impossible" for a deaf person. Tackling those issues alongside my parents gave me a greater appreciation for the things they deal with on a day-to-day basis. It gave me a better understanding of why the deaf community has that sense of unity surrounding this connecting "problem" between them. It's also through this connection that I more and more understand how important it was for Jesus to take on flesh and experience suffering with us.

Hebrews 2 provides a clear picture as to why it was so important for Jesus to join us on earth and experience suffering with us. He joined us in our humanity to conquer sin and death so that He could proudly call us His brothers and sisters in Christ, united in our one source, the Father. It also gives a warning to believers about the consequences of drifting away from Christ. The author of Hebrews is warning the church about the consequences of their disobedience while also encouraging them to cling to Christ through this unity through the Father.

Read Hebrews 2:1-18 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. What distractions can you see in your own life that cause you to drift away from Christ?
 2. What feelings do you have knowing that Jesus has experienced suffering just as we do?
 3. In what ways do you feel comforted knowing that Jesus proudly calls you His brothers and sisters in Christ?
-

Commentary

Hebrews 2:1-18

Hebrews 2 begins by warning the reader about the dangers of drifting away from Christ. Before the coming of Christ, there had been a number of ways that God communicated His law to His people, including using angels as an intermediary. The meditation on Mt. Sinai is an example of angels acting as an intermediary to bring forth a message from God (Deut. 33:2). We get confirmation of this in Acts 7:53 and Galatians 3:19. But now Christ has come, and revealed the Father. He has taken on flesh, lived a perfect life, died on the cross, and taken up his position as the right hand of God. There is forgiveness available to all who accept Jesus. But the author of Hebrews 2 is making sure that the church in this time understands that the risk of punishment has not gone away. The power of Christ has not left the earth with Him. The church has seen through the Old Testament that disobedience equals punishment, so how much greater will the punishment be when the church neglects the message of salvation from he who is at the right hand of God? The author is once again trying to place Jesus in His rightful place above the angels to show the greater message they have been given through him. This message came from the Son of God, not angels. Dennis E. Johnson summarizes it this way: "Those who taste this good word of God (Heb. 6:5) but then drift away will not escape the destruction that awaits those who commit treason against the Lord of the covenant."⁴

Drifting in our culture looks different than it did in their time. Many parts of the world still face martyrdom and loss of freedom for worshiping Christ, but drifting can feel a bit more subtle in western culture. Our internal feeling of needing Christ can begin to waver when our life circumstances aren't as challenging. Johnson puts it this way, "Their drift toward spiritual shipwreck may not start with storms of life-shaking crisis. Instead, subtle rip currents—career advancement and financial security, entertainment and recreation,

⁴ Dennis E. Johnson, "Hebrews," in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. XII, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 43.

reputation and social acceptance—loosen the line linking them to a ‘sure and steadfast anchor of the soul’ (6:19).”⁵ Allowing our life circumstances to dictate our relationship with Christ will always set us up for failure. We need to cling to the hope that is found in Jesus and trust in Him to provide instead of putting our trust in things of the flesh. It is our purpose in this life to know the truth of the Gospel, trust in Christ for strength, rehearse this truth with others, and share this knowledge with non-believers.

Verse 5 points out that the “world to come” was not created for angels to rule over. It was given to man to have dominion over. Verses 6-8 are a direct reference to Psalm 8 which points to the reality that God has given dominion over his creation not to angels, but to man. Thomas R. Schreiner puts it this way,

Psalm 8 clearly attests that rule has been given to human beings instead of angels. The psalmist reflects on the creation narrative. Human beings are lower than the angels, but they are destined for glory and honor. Everything in creation is to be subject to human beings. The author reads the creation narrative and Psalm 8 through the lens of redemptive history. All things in creation are not subjected to human beings. The world is flawed and fallen. Still one human being has fulfilled the purpose for which he was created: Jesus.⁶

Verse 9 continues the point being made in the reference to Psalm 8, saying that Jesus was also made lower than angels. He took on human form to come and experience death and suffering so that those who believe in Him would not have to experience it in the same way. There’s a double meaning here with the idea that we as humanity were made lower than angels, but also Jesus, when taking on flesh, became temporarily lower than angels to be able to truly understand and relate to our struggle, and to conquer sin by living a perfect life.

Jesus coming in the flesh to suffer is essential to the story of the Gospel and is the reason He is the founder of salvation. We see in verse 10 that all things exist for Him and through Him, so it is fitting that salvation would be brought forth through Him by living a perfect life and suffering in our place for us. Thomas R. Schreiner says,

Paul speaks similarly, saying all things are to him, through him, and for him (Rom 11:36). History is not anthropocentric but theocentric, not man centered but God centered. And one of God’s primary goals in history is to bring “many sons to glory.” The glory destined for human beings

⁵ Dennis E. Johnson, “Hebrews,” in *Hebrews–Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. XII, ESV Expository Commentary (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 44.

⁶ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 85.

includes the rule over all described in the previous verses, and it also “refers to God’s own being and presence.” We should not miss that God is the one who brings many sons to glory. The same Lord who led Israel in the exodus, freeing them from Egypt, is leading his people to glory through Jesus Christ.⁷

It is only through Christ that we can receive salvation. It is not by our own works that we can be saved from sin and death. He was fully God and fully man. This union in suffering is why He calls us His brothers and sisters and is proud to join us to His family as we can see in verse 11. “The common origin between Jesus and his brothers and sisters doesn’t mean all distinctions between Jesus and others are erased, for Jesus does the sanctifying, and the rest of the human race is sanctified.”⁸ It is through Him, for whom all things are created, that we can find salvation from our sinful nature.

Verses 12 and 13 reference Old Testament Scripture to further support the idea that Jesus is joining us to His family and is proud to call us his brothers and sisters. Verse 12 references Psalm 22:22 and verse 13 is referencing Isaiah 8:17-18. These verses are all linking the familial ties from those who have been sanctified in Christ to Him. Our “one source” is in the Father who has provided for us all. Jesus is the vessel through which we are able to have that relationship. It is through Him and for Him that all things are created and that many sons may be brought to glory. While we share humanity with Christ, it is important to understand that He is set apart from us. He is the one who lived the perfect life and did what we could never do. It is through Him that we are even offered salvation.

The author goes on to further explain why it makes sense for Jesus to be perfected through suffering in verses 14 and 15. Schreiner says, “By suffering death, he broke the power of death and reconciled to God those who feared death constantly. The significance of human nature is highlighted, for Jesus came to help Abraham’s offspring, not angels.”⁹ Verse 16 references back to the fact that the world was not created for angels. It was created for humans to have dominion over. It is for us that Jesus lived and died. Verse 17 follows this up by saying, “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people.” And in verse 18, we see that it is through suffering when being tempted on Earth that Jesus is able to help humanity who is also being tempted and suffering.

We are united with Christ through our shared suffering and through our one source of life, the Father. Verses 10-18 highlight the understanding that Jesus was fully human and shared in that suffering with us. But he lived a perfect life to provide salvation and is proud to call us his brothers and sisters. The emphasis

⁷ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 95.

⁸ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 89.

⁹ Schreiner, *Hebrews*, 94.

put on Jesus' humanity in these verses is essential to His ability to provide that salvation. The world was given to humanity to have dominion over, but God is the reason for it all. It is for Him and through Him that all things exist. With the fall of humanity, it is God who is "bringing many sons to glory" through Jesus who is the founder of our salvation. Praise be to God for sending His Son to die for us, and praise be to Jesus who suffered in our place to be able to provide that salvation.

The Main Point

Jesus is the Founder of our salvation. We are called to be obedient to His Word, and to praise Him for the great lengths He has gone to provide atonement for our sins. Jesus lowered himself to be the perfect sacrifice, and experienced life in the same way as us. He is proud to call us His brothers and sisters, so we should fix our eyes and our hearts on Him and place our hope in Him.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Psalm 8:3-9 – Humanity was made to be lower than heavenly beings but given dominion over the Earth.
- 2 Timothy 3:14-17 – God's Word about Jesus is true and trustworthy.
- Genesis 1:26 – Man was made in God's image and given dominion over the Earth.

Week 4

Hebrews 3:1-19 – Beware of Unbelief

By Aaron Barnes

Introduction

Leesa and I have two kiddos. You would think that after the years of caring for them—feeding them, clothing them, playing with them, etc.—that they would willingly obey us when we ask them to do something. Hahaha! Nope. No such luck. Sure, they are great kids. For the most part, they are very agreeable and are willing to please us as their parents. I'd say the same goes for their relationship with their teachers at school and within the church. But, there are some times—and I know the answer as to why—that they just do NOT want to do what they are asked. It is almost as if they do not trust us. It is as if we haven't been doing good things for them for the past years of their lives. Makes me scratch the ole noggin sometimes and ponder what I have ever done to make them not want to trust me. What I have come to realize is that when our kiddos realize that what we are doing for them is GREATER than their own desires to meet their needs, they will trust and obey us. Isn't that the way that we treat God, at times? He has met our needs and most of our wants. We have the breath in our lungs, the energy in our bodies, and the relationships in our circles of influence. I mean, if we stop to think about it, God has been really good to us. Why then, do we tend to doubt his goodness and his faithfulness? Why do we pray like we trust him and then act as if we don't?

In this week's text, we see the author encouraging his readers to NOT be like the Israelites in the wilderness who chose to doubt God and accuse him of not coming through for them. Even after years of caring for them and delivering them from slavery, they chose to NOT trust him and that led to them NOT going into the land he had promised to Abraham. Only after the disbelieving generation died out were they then allowed to go into and rest within the land they had been promised. Let us not be a people that has seen and experienced the faithfulness of God, only to sit back and choose to NOT trust and obey him. How can we experience all that God has to offer and act as if we haven't been sustained by his generosity and kindness? Let us choose to believe.

Read Hebrews 3:1-19 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. How have you experienced God's faithfulness to you through your

Christian brothers and sisters? Let's encourage our groups by sharing that with them.

2. Think of a time that you were tempted to doubt God's goodness and he came through? It might not have been how you would have planned it, but in the end, you can see how he worked it out. Let's encourage our groups by sharing that with them.
3. What might be holding you back from believing and trusting God that results in obedience and faith? Let our groups encourage us by praying with us

Commentary

"Holy brothers..." One of the great benefits of being united with Christ through his Holy Spirit is being united to him with one another. What a joy it is knowing that wherever we find ourselves across space and time, we are not alone in this life. By his grace and in his kindness for us, he graciously gives us brothers and sisters in the faith to walk alongside as we serve him. This designation is not one that we should take lightly. God has gone to great lengths to bring us into his family and because of that, we should seek out opportunities to exercise our sanctified sibling relationships. Paul tells us in Romans 12:10 that we should "outdo one another in showing honor." Jesus tells his disciples that their love for one another should be reflected in their actions toward one another, just as he had loved them (John 13:34). The way that we treat one another as brothers and sisters in Christ is a living testimony to a watching world. In the same line of thinking, the ways that we choose to speak to and about one another reflect the same. Jesus goes on to tell his disciples that it is through this affection for one another that "all people" will know that they (and in effect, us) love and follow him.

The term *holy* is used to refer to something as being set apart for a specific purpose. A similar term is used for all Christians as we are being renewed by God's Holy Spirit—sanctified. This means that we are set apart for the specific purpose of being used by God however he sees fit to use us. The writer of Hebrews is reminding his readers that they are siblings that have been set apart for God's specific use. He reminds us that this sibling relationship that we share as Christians is one that is different from the one that we may share with our biological siblings. Within our physical sibling relationships, we may share the same last name, hair and/or eye color, have similar hobbies and interests, and the like. None of this means that we will be just alike or that we will always get along, but it does mean that we are related in an earthly sense. When a person comes to faith, they have been united to God through his Holy Spirit and this bond supersedes blood relatives. Within the body of Christ, we may not have any of the typical characteristics that we think of with siblings, but we do share the same heavenly Father who is father over all, and we share in our eternal destination. There was a moment in Jesus' ministry (Matthew 12:46-50) when he was teaching and his mother and siblings came to him. Someone mentioned to him that they were outside the place that he was teaching. Instead

of stopping and going to them, he took that moment to make plain what was assumed.⁴⁸ But he replied to the man who told him, ‘Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?’⁴⁹ And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, ‘Here are my mother and my brothers!’⁵⁰ For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.’’¹⁰ This wasn’t to imply that we are to totally shun and forgo any and all relationships outside of our Christian family, but it is to bring awareness to the fact that our relationship to our earthly family is only temporary. In Paul’s ministry, he tells his Galatian audience that by living in service to our Christian brothers and sisters, we are actually fulfilling the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2).

Knowing that we are called to a higher purpose, the writer is pointing us to consider Jesus. This considering is much more than a mere intellectual ascent, like we might give if we were considering what to order at a local fast food chain. The word that is used here is meant to convey both a visual gaze and mental dwelling upon. One way we do this at Anchor Church is to pause the worship service every Sunday morning and read God’s word for that morning’s Call to Worship. A friend has said that we want to focus “our mind’s attention and our heart’s affection” upon the Lord.¹¹ When we are able to do that, we are then able to lift our gaze and see him for who he is and who we are in relation to him.

Here in 3:1, Jesus is referred to as “the apostle and high priest of our confession.” Later in Hebrews (4:14-16), he is referred to as the great high priest. Apostle is a term that means someone is being sent with a message. In the Old Testament, this office was held by the prophets—men and women of God who spoke the words of God to the people of God. After Jesus was crucified and resurrected, he sent out his disciples as his apostles. Today, we do not hold the office of apostle, but we are sent out into the world with the message of salvation for all. Jesus is referred to as THE apostle, meaning he is the true and greater sent one that all other apostles point toward. Jesus, the Son of God, has been sent from the Father to earth in order to accomplish salvation for mankind. He is also the high priest of our confession. The high priest was an office within the Tabernacle and Temple worship that would be responsible for the sacrifices and ensuring that the law was being passed down as was commanded by God in the Pentateuch. In the case of the sacrifices, it was the high priest’s job to make atonement for the sins of the people...including himself. On the Day of Atonement, before he could make sacrifices for the sins of the people, he had to make sacrifices for his own sins. Then, and only then, could he enter into the Holy Place to make sacrifices for the people. Unfortunately, sacrificing animals would not suffice. We needed a much better sacrifice offered by a much better high priest. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, came as the Great High Priest to offer his own life, which is a much better sacrifice than the blood of bulls and goats

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Matthew 12:48–50.

¹¹ Josh Hilliker, Worship Leader at Capstone Church in Tuscaloosa, AL.

(more on this in Hebrews 10). The writer of Hebrews is building his case for belief. He wants us to dwell upon Jesus Christ—the Son of God, THE apostle sent from the Father, the Great High Priest who came to offer a better sacrifice—and all that he has done for us, so that we might walk in a way that is a living testimony to those around us. In just a few verses, he is going to use the Wilderness Generation as a negative example that we might not be like them. He wants us to reflect upon the faithfulness and worthiness of our God so that it might lead us to believe and live a life of worship unto him.

In verse 2, we see the writer compare Moses and Jesus. To the original audience, Moses would have held a little bit more weight in the conversation of faithful saints of old. Even though Moses had moments of weakness and his own sin, the writer points out the faithfulness of Moses. He says that Moses was faithful in ALL God's house. I don't think the author is trying to cover up any of Moses' sin, but rather to highlight what Moses was able to achieve because of who God is. In Numbers 20:10-13, out of anger toward a rebellious nation, Moses strikes the rock as opposed to speaking to the rock as God had commanded him. Because of this, Moses was not able to enter into the land of Canaan. Yet, the writer of Hebrews is pointing out all that Moses did in faithful obedience to God. Back in Exodus 32, we see Moses is willing to have his name blotted out in place of the rebellious Israelite nation. And again, in Numbers 14:13-19, we see that Moses is willing to intercede once again on behalf of the people of Israel...in spite of their rebellious hearts. What the author wants for us to remember back to is how faithful Moses was to God in all that he did to bring the people out of Egypt, and to lead them through the wilderness, all the while pointing them upward to God and forward to the One that God would send one day (Deuteronomy 18:15-19). Once we have remembered how much honor Moses should receive because of his faithfulness, he draws our attention to how much more honor Jesus is to receive because of his faithfulness to the Father. Where Moses has received honor, Jesus receives more honor. Why? Because Jesus is the one that Moses was pointing toward. Jesus is both the builder of and the head over the house of God.

In verses 4-6, we see a contrast between Moses and Jesus. Whereas Moses is referred to as a faithful servant to God within his house, Jesus is a faithful son over God's house. This is a pretty big deal. The term used for Moses' servanthood here is different from other forms. This one is used to mean "an honored servant in an intimate relationship with the master, and the word carries the connotation of one who offered his service rather than being in forced servitude," (Allen, 241). We shouldn't think of Moses' service to God as a begrudging type of work that was done in order to appease the Maker of the Universe. Moses was so taken by God's love that it radically changed his heart and the work that was performed from that point onward was out of devotion to the One that had been faithful all along. Even in all of his faithfulness and devotion to God, he pales in comparison to the Son of God. The author says that the one that builds the house is worthy of more honor than the house itself. Well, in this case, because of what God was doing in Moses and his people, he was

building his house. This illustration is picked up by the New Testament writers as well, especially Paul when he writes to the church in Corinth and Ephesus. In 1 Corinthians 3, Paul refers to the collective body of Christians as God's building (v 9) and God's temple where God's Holy Spirit dwells (v 16, 17). In Ephesians 2, Paul describes the work of Christ in that believers have been brought together from far off into one household, of which Christ is the cornerstone (v 11-22). So what the writer of Hebrews wants us to see is, while Moses is worthy of honor, Christ is worthy of MORE honor because of the work that he has achieved...and the work that Moses achieved, while good, was pointing to the work that would be completed by Christ.

He ends this portion of his comparing and contrasting with a conditional phrase, "And we are his house, *if indeed we hold fast* our confidence and our boasting in our hope." A fair question to ask at this point is what is meant by the use of the word *hold*? Typically, when we use that word in our everyday vernacular, it is used to mean that we literally have something that we are grasping with our hands, or it is in our possession. But is that the best understanding of the use here? I think it best to look at what is being held before making that assumption. This verse says that we are to hold fast 1) our confidence and 2) our boasting in our hope. The things that we are to hold fast to are our confidence and our boasting. What is it that we can have confidence in? Is it in our efforts or our achievements? Paul writes to the church of Philippi that even though he has the most room to brag about his achievements, he takes no confidence in his own accolades. He says this in Philippians 3:8-11,

Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith—that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

So, we have no room for confidence in what we might be able to do for ourselves. What do we have that we can boast about? In Galatians 6:14, Paul says the only boasting he will do is not in his own self, but in the cross of Christ. So, we have no room to boast. Then what do we make of what we read in Hebrews 3:6? What is it that we are to hold onto? I think the writer intends for us to recall what was said in 3:1—*consider Jesus*. Christ is where our confidence resides. Christ is where our boasting points. The conditional *if* used here is not intended to be threat of losing one's salvation. We are not capable of losing that which was never ours to be earned. Again, Christ is both builder of and head over God's house. This means that he has achieved what was necessary for us to be born again and receive salvation. It has been credited to our account. Paul tells us in 2

Corinthians 5:21 that God placed our sin upon Christ when he was crucified on our behalf. Our sin upon his shoulders and his righteousness upon ours—the glorious exchange. Therefore, consider Jesus, who has done all of this for God’s glory and our good. Since he has done all of this, won’t he also see us through to the end? Yes! He will. So where should our confidence and our boasting be? How do we hold fast? We are able to do this as we allow God’s words to dwell in our hearts richly (Colossians 3:16) and allow God’s Holy Spirit to set our mind’s attention and our heart’s affection upon him. When we do this, we will hold fast and persevere to the end. Not because of the great strength with which we are able to hold, but because of the Great One that holds us securely.

The writer seems to switch gears a bit in verse 7, but hopefully we will see that it is a continuation of the line of thinking and not new content. Verses 7-11 are quoting from Psalm 95 and are referring back to the time when the Israelite nation rebelled against God in the wilderness—Meribah and Massah. In the book of Exodus, Moses recounts the faithfulness of God to deliver his people from the bondage of slavery to the Egyptians. The book tells of great wonders that God did in order to convince an evil Pharaoh to release God’s people, but to no avail. God turned the Nile River into blood, sent frogs and flies into Egypt, darkness covered the land, and other things like boils and sores that covered the livestock and people. Nothing seemed to turn the heart of Pharaoh. Then, with one final plague upon Egypt—the death of his firstborn—Pharaoh released them. With a mighty shout, the Israelite nation left Egypt in the middle of the night and plundered them as they went. God had not only delivered them from slavery and death, but as he did so, he gave them financial prosperity as well. They then leave Egypt and make their way through the desert and encounter the Red Sea. What would God do? Had he brought them out there to die in the desert? Of course not. God would use this as an opportunity to show his mighty hand against the world’s largest and fiercest military powers in that day. As Moses stretched his staff over the sea, God parted the sea and the Israelites crossed on dry ground and then as the Egyptians approached—beginning to cross—God brought the waters back down atop the Egyptians, burying them in the bottom of the Red Sea. God had faithfully delivered them from the hands of their oppressors! Time and again, we see the Israelites in need and God stepping in to meet their needs above and beyond their asking. He does this in Exodus 16 with the manna on the ground. In Exodus 17 he gives them water from a rock. God stopped the sun while the Israelites defeated the Amalekites in Exodus 17. And yet, look how Israel responds in Exodus 32—they worship the golden calf. On and on it goes...the same people that were delivered from Egypt through the many wonders that God worked, that walked across the dry ground of the Red Sea, that ate bread from heaven, that drank fresh water from a rock, and that defeated an army, were the same ones that continued to doubt the goodness and faithfulness of God. How long would God continue to be patient with them? How long would they grumble against the One that had cared for them at every turn? All of their grumbling and complaining came to a bitter point at Kadesh-Barnea. The Israelite nation was on the precipice of the Promised Land. As one might say today, so close they could

taste it. They send in 12 spies in teams of 2 (Numbers 13). They are in the land for 40 days. Once the spies make their way back out of the land the reports started rolling in as well. They couldn't stop talking about all the things that they saw...*a land flowing with milk and honey*. It was all that they could have ever dreamed. Yet 10 of the 12 spies thought that the people of the land were too big and they would not be able to win the battle. This was the land that God had been bringing them to the entire time. He had been preparing his people for this land and he had been preparing the people to conquer the land. The words of the 2 that attempted to persuade the people—Caleb and Joshua—fell upon deaf ears. In response, God's discipline on his people is that the generation that refused to go into the land would die and be buried in the wilderness (Numbers 14:20-38). The generation that did believe—Caleb and Joshua's generation—would be the ones to inherit the land. But it would take 40 years of wandering before they could go in and take the land.

Knowing all of this all too well, the original audience may have recalled all that they have been told about the faithfulness of the Lord and how they had seen him deliver in their own lives. In verse 12, the writer is encouraging them to "*take care*" so that they could combat the incoming temptation to doubt the faithfulness of God. He says that there might be an *unbelieving heart* that might lead them to *fall away*. We have already discussed our inability to lose our salvation. What the author is talking about now is more of an intentional turning away from God that is a result of choosing not to believe, (Allen, 253). These are people who have knowledge of God, but have not yet trusted him. The hearts of these that chose to turn away from what they had seen God do in their lives is the same spirit that lives in hearts of the people described in 2 Peter 2. Peter writes to warn of false prophets and teachers. In verse 15, he says that "Forsaking the way, they have gone astray." The writer of Hebrews has gone to great lengths to hopefully prevent his readers from turning away, in hopes of turning their hearts to God by reminding them of God's faithfulness over time.

That's where he goes in 3:13. Remember who he is writing to? Holy brothers. In verse 13, he returns to that same agenda as he is encouraging them to "exhort one another every day." Let's be honest here, there have been times in all of our lives where our faith seemed to be dwindling and we needed to borrow a brother's or a sister's faith to make it through a tough season. What a gift God has given to us in our faithful brothers and sisters! Let us seek to encourage one another to stay the course and remember that he who is faithful will continue to be faithful until the end. Before closing this chapter with a final warning, he returns to his statement we see in verse 6. There is this conditional statement that we must hold fast to our "original confidence" until the end comes. Once again, let us look "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," (Hebrews 12:2).

Verses 15-19 serve as one final reminder of what is earned from a rebellious heart that is bent toward unbelief...they are not able to enter the rest that God had for them because they chose not to believe. Before we begin to cast

our accusations upon God as if he were being unfair toward those he led out of Egypt, I want to make one thing crystal clear. This back and forth nonsense between the Israelites' heart of belief and unbelief is the result of a heart that had not been changed by God. They had seen all that God had to offer and yet they wanted more. They received all that God gave and yet felt that he was still holding out on them. It wasn't a matter of God not revealing himself to them through mighty deeds. It was that they saw all of it and yet chose not to believe. What more could God do? What else was left to prove? Soon enough though, God would do for them what they were unable to do themselves. He would give them new hearts. He would send his prophet like Moses and would make it to where they would all know him. God would circumcise their hearts and put his Holy Spirit within them and this would enable them to know and worship him—Deuteronomy 30 and Jeremiah 31.

How about us? Are we still standing on the edge of surrendering to the Lord? Have we seen all that God has done in and around us, yet we still “haven't quite figured it out?” Could it be that we might be suffering from a heart similar to what is described here? I want to encourage you with the same words that Moses encouraged his people with and the same ones that the author of Hebrews 3 uses—choose to believe in the promises of God and encourage one another to do the same as long as we have today. Choose to believe.

The Main Point

The wilderness generation did not suffer from a lack of knowledge in the faithfulness of God. They had experienced all that God had to offer and still chose to disbelieve. The author of Hebrews points his audience—and us—to consider the great lengths that God has gone to through Jesus, in order that his people might know him, trust him, and worship him. Do not rebel, choose to believe.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Exodus 7-12 — God works wonders in the sight of all of Egypt to render all of the “gods” in Egypt helpless, effectually leading to the deliverance of Israel.
- Numbers 13-14 — Moses sends 12 spies into Canaan and 10 bring back a bad report, leading to their rebellion, and them not entering Canaan until that generation dies.
- Deuteronomy 30 — Moses attempts to encourage Israel to trust in the faithfulness of God, one last time. Trusting God leads to life. Rebelling against God leads to death.
- Jeremiah 31:31-40 — God will change the hearts of his people and place his Holy Spirit within them so that they are able to obey and worship

him.

- Ephesians 2:1-8 — Salvation is a work that God does in our lives. Since it is his work in us, it is not in our power to lose what we did not earn.

Week 5

Hebrews 4:1-13 A Rest for the People of God

By Harvey Edwards, III

Introduction

What do you think of when you hear the word “rest?” To me, the concept is closely linked to its common antonym, “exertion.” Rest is what I always craved after a sleepless night on Obstetrics call; or what I look forward to following a vigorous work-out; or (speaking as a grandparent now) what I require at the conclusion of an extended family vacation. Rest is regularly needed, often deferred while necessary work is engaged, anticipated with pleasure, and what promotes recovery from striving.

But what if I asked you to define the “rest of the Lord?” Is it similar in nature, or quite different? Is it usually coupled in some way to striving, or are they not related at all? How do we enter into the rest of the Lord? Interesting and important. Let’s explore what the Bible says, beginning with a brief recap of a few salient points from the opening three chapters of Hebrews, then concentrating on biblical rest as we look at chapter four.

Background

In the beautiful passage comprising the first four verses of the book of Hebrews, the writer declares to his Jewish audience the absolute supremacy of Jesus: the one through whom the universe was created; the heir of all things; the radiance of the glory of God; the exact imprint of his nature; upholding the universe by the word of his power; the one through whom God speaks to us; and the one who, “after making purification for our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs.” Main point—**Jesus is supreme.**

As we move into chapter 2, the writer declares to the Jewish Christians that not only is Jesus superior to the angels, but also the gospel message brought by Jesus is vastly superior to the “message declared by angels,” (the Law). What Jesus brings is a “great salvation,” something the Law could never do. He “who for a little while was made lower than the angels” came himself in the flesh and declared it. Many heard it directly and have told of it. God himself proved its truth by signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. And this was all done for the benefit of—not angels—but *humans who believe*. Jesus was “made like his brothers” so that he might become “a merciful and faithful high priest” to make propitiation for the sins of the people. The message of this chapter is that God loves humanity and did not hold back anything, even his son. **Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah who brings salvation to mankind.**

In chapter 3, the writer asks his audience to compare and contrast the roles of Moses and Jesus. Moses was an imperfect but faithful man of God who fulfilled the role given him by leading the Exodus and delivering to the Jews the Law. He was “faithful in all God’s house as a *servant*.” Christ, however, being divine and existing with the Father before creation, is called “faithful over God’s

house as a *son*,” and he has promised his Father that he will forever be faithful to keep that house. Moses was great; Jesus is much, much greater. **If you listened to Moses, how much more you should listen to Jesus.**

And it is at this point in Hebrews that the concept of rest is introduced. The writer quotes David’s Psalm 95:7b-11 to recount the sad history of the Exodus generation of Israelites, who failed to enter God’s rest. You already know it. The Lord looked down upon their miserable circumstances as slaves in Egypt and he pitied them. He called Moses to lead them out of slavery, performed many wondrous signs to enable their escape, and miraculously provided food and drink as they journeyed. He invited them into a covenant relationship, gave them the Law, and privileged them to be the people through whom he would bless the entire world. He pointed them to a Promised Land “flowing with milk and honey,” and guaranteed their victory if they would just trust in his goodness and fight in dependence upon him. Had they obeyed, the temporary rest they would have enjoyed in the Promised Land was to be a foretaste of the eternal rest that would eventually be ushered in by the promised Messiah.

Yet, like all mankind since the fall, their hearts were hardened by sin. Grumbling and complaining at each difficulty along their journey, they refused to trust in God’s good intentions for them. And ultimately, in fear, they refused to go up in battle, instead hatching a lamentable plan of their own to replace Moses with a leader who could guide them back to their miserable enslavement in Egypt. But here the Lord stepped in with judgment, and in his wrath swore, “they shall not enter my rest.” And so it was—of the generation who disobeyed, only Joshua and Caleb ever entered into the rest of the Promised Land. The remainder were “loathed by the Lord” as they wandered in the desert for forty years until the very last of them had died. In the words of the author, **“we see that they were not able to enter because of their unbelief.”**

Read Hebrews 4:1-13 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. What was the mistake of the Exodus generation? Are you prone in your life to make the same mistake?
2. How do you define the “rest of the Lord?”
3. How can a Christian work and rest at the same time?
4. The Bible, also known as the Word of God, contains 66 different books, written by about 40 people, over a period of about 1,500 years. What

Commentary

Hebrews 4:1-13

And now as we turn our focus to Chapter 4, we see that it begins with the word “therefore,” which Rand would tell you is a conjunctive adverb, connecting the preceding passages (chapters 1-3) with the ideas to follow. Its meaning is roughly synonymous with “consequently.” Since “these things” (outlined for you in chapters 1-3) are true, consequently you should not do “that.” Briefly, again, what are the true things he emphasized to the Hebrews? 1) Jesus is Supreme; 2) Jesus is the Messiah, who comes to bring salvation; 3) if you revere Moses, then you should revere Jesus much, much more; and 4) unbelief precludes entering into the rest of the Lord.

And what is the “that,” he exhorts the Hebrews not to do? Disbelieve! The writer has provided ample reasons that the Hebrews should trust in Christ and Christ alone, and especially while the opportunity of entering the Lord’s rest is still open! He now earnestly urges his audience to avoid the fatal unbelief of the Exodus generation. He calls upon them to individually examine themselves “lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart,” suggesting that prospective believers have a role in opening the doors of their own hearts to the gospel. He urges them to corporately “exhort one another every day that none of you may be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin,” emphasizing the role that the community of believers has in encouraging one another in holiness. And he implores them—do not destroy your future through disbelief! How desperately we should fear the consequences of failing to accept the rest of the Lord because of unbelief!

So it is clearly a terrible thing to miss entering into the rest of the Lord. But exactly what is meant by the term “the rest of the Lord?” Our writer uses the word “rest” in several differing contexts: There is the rest that God entered into upon completion of creating the universe—not for the purpose of recovering from exhaustion, as “he does not grow faint or weary” (Isaiah 40:28), but because his work was complete—a rest of completion. There is a day of Sabbath rest from work that God required of his people, asking them to focus their hearts on him and pray expectantly for the arrival of the promised Messiah—an anticipatory rest of quietude and hope. There was a temporary rest of sorts in view for the Israelite nation in the Promised Land, denied to some because of their disbelief and disobedience—but it was to be a rest from wandering, anxiety, and eventually from conflict, the rest given under Joshua. And finally our writer references another rest mentioned by David in Psalm 95, different from that of Joshua, and still available to the people of David’s time—a rest of pure trust. In writing of it, David praises and extols the Lord as the “rock of our salvation” before condemning the disbelief of the Exodus generation. From Genesis forward, God’s goodness, mercy, and intent to bless has always been evident. But

how much more clearly, how much more fully can the trustworthiness of the Lord now be seen by the Hebrews of New Testament times! Messiah has come! Through his life, death, and resurrection he has offered himself as a propitiation for our sins and crushed the head of the serpent. His work is complete. The invitation to believe and enter into his rest has been thrown wide open! Receive it! The writer in calling the rest Jesus offers a “Sabbath rest” reinforces his central thesis **that the only way one can enter into it is to “rest from his works as God did from his.”**

As we ponder these many references to rest, we see that they are all similar in one respect: In no case is man ushered into the Lord’s rest because he has worked especially hard and deserves rest as a reward. Rather, in each case the Lord’s rest is a gift given freely to those who entrust their lives to him, who cease from their own exertions to be proven righteous, and who believe that God has done, is doing, and will do all that is necessary for their good, for his purposes, and for his glory. In Christ, we rest from trying to save ourselves, from bearing our burdens alone, and from fighting the supernatural forces that oppose us while armed with only human strength. The Lord’s work of redemption has been completed by Jesus, and we trust in his promise to carry us through all the trials and temptations of this world safely into the next. Believing that, we receive his rest as a sweet and welcome gift.

Now it might seem paradoxical that, after stressing that we enter into the Lord’s rest by ceasing our striving, our writer urges us to “strive to enter that rest, so that no one may fall by the same sort of disobedience.” But there is no paradox. Our goals are different. We are assuredly not striving to attain a state of legal righteousness before God—the mistake of the teachers of the Law. Nor are we exerting our wills in rebellion against the guidance of the Lord—the folly of the Exodus generation. Instead, we are striving to trust completely in the Lord for salvation, for growth in grace, and for all our worldly needs as we carry out the gospel work assigned to us. This striving involves honest prayers for faith, strength, integrity, and direction. It involves engaging in Christian community, to encourage and be encouraged. It involves developing a habit of immediate obedience. And it involves delving regularly and deeply into God’s Word. We strive to rest in God as he always intended for us to strive—humbly, thankfully, completely trusting in his goodness and sufficiency for all that we need. And he is faithful to grant it.

And finally, some thoughts upon the memorable description of the Word of God in Hebrews 4:12-13:

- It is living and active—it’s not just another holy book. It lives with the life of God, revealing the nature of his three persons, his love, his mercy, his holiness, and his power. It appeals to the conscience, sears the heart of the sinner, teaches the student, motivates and trains up the disciple, comforts and binds up the wounds of the sorrowful, and sustains the hope of the redeemed.
- It is sharper than any two-edged sword—it’s described elsewhere in Scripture as the Sword of the Spirit and is pictured in Revelation as

coming out of the mouth of the Christ when he comes to judge. It is sharper than any other sword, slicing like a powerful scalpel deeply into the most hidden parts of our persons, influencing us in ways that no words of man could. It performs spiritual surgery on its students, to make the proud humble, the rebellious penitent, the carnal spiritual, the harsh gentle, the discouraged hopeful, and the weak strong.

- It sees us as we are—nothing is hidden. It discerns all our thoughts and intentions that we so carefully conceal from others. It shows them to us in a true and accurate way, mercifully, in cooperation with the Spirit, in a gentle and progressive way as necessary, bringing us to faith and further growth as we approach the day when we will face the one “to whom we must give account.”
 - It is effective—“For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return there but water the earth, making it bring forth and sprout, giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater, so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not return to me empty, but it shall accomplish that which I purpose, and shall succeed in the thing for which I sent it.” (Isaiah 55:10-11)
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The Main Point

We don't work for our rest. Rest is a gift from the Lord to those who believe. We are to carefully examine ourselves and strive to trust fully in him for redemption and all our subsequent needs. The invitation remains open, issued once more by our Savior in Matthew 11:28-30. “Come to me all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Numbers 11-14 – The Exodus generation complains and rebels.
- Psalm 95 – The Lord is a great God, faithful and worthy of great praise. Do not make the mistake of the Exodus generation and fail to believe and trust him.
- Matthew 11:28-30 – Jesus calls all who are weary to come enter into his rest.
- Isaiah 55:10-11; Psalm 119:105; II Timothy 3:16 – God's Word is effective, enlightening, and indispensable.

Week 6

Hebrews 4:14-5:10 – Jesus the Great High Priest

By Wen Burnette

Introduction

We all have memories that come to mind of when we felt exposed and ashamed. Why did we feel ashamed? Were we caught doing something that we knew we were not supposed to do? Or maybe we showed a part of ourselves that we do not like and wanted to hide from our friends, coworkers, and acquaintances. A semi-funny memory of when I felt completely exposed and honestly felt like a fraud was my first college football game. We were playing Central Arkansas, and I played the incredibly important position of sideline stander. However, I had worked my way into dressing out for the game. I would be on the sideline full helmet, pads, and jersey for my first college game. My parents were driving down and I would be standing right in front of the student section. After going through pregame and all the serious Samford University fanfare, I walked into the locker room to find my official game jersey in my locker. Excited, I quickly noticed that something was different about my jersey. I discovered that I was the only player that did not have his name on the back. This may seem small, but my insides came crashing down. I felt like I did not belong. After running onto the field, I proceeded to stand in the middle of the largest group of offensive linemen I could find and kept my helmet on for the next 3.5 hours.

Looking back this story makes me laugh a little, but I think it is a small picture of something that we all think about: if someone knew who I really am deep down, would they love me? And taking this a step farther, how can God love me, does God love me? I know I struggle daily with this. I continually battle the same sins, fight the same fight, and the older I get the nastier inside I seem to notice I am.

The passage this week, however, I believe cuts right at the heart of this problem. The late Tim Keller said this “To be loved but not known is comforting but superficial. To be known and not loved is our greatest fear. But to be fully known and truly loved is, well, a lot like being loved by God. It is what we need more than anything. It liberates us from pretense, humbles us out of our self-righteousness, and fortifies us for any difficulty life can throw at us.” (Keller, p. 62).

Read Hebrews 4:14-5:10 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. What was the role of the high priest in the Old Testament? And why were they important in the Old Covenant?
 2. What is the significance that we now can draw near to the Throne of God? Why was Israel not able to in the Old Testament?
 3. What does it mean that Jesus can sympathize with our weakness and was tempted in every respect and yet is without sin?
 4. What is the confession that the author of Hebrews says we can confidently hold fast to?
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Commentary

Hebrews 4:14-5:10

Context

As we read the Bible, it is important to remember to put the passage of scripture in the correct context. We do this by asking questions such as who wrote what we are reading, when was it written, who is the audience, and what kind of writing is this (law, narrative, letter, etc.)? While we do not know the exact author of Hebrews, we do have the ancient assumption that it was written to a largely Jewish Christian audience. This means that the reader of the time would have been accustomed to many themes and references the author makes that maybe are not so plain in our everyday normal life in 2025. This by no means should make us think that we cannot understand or that the Word of God is outdated! We just need to remind ourselves of the context that the writer writes in. An important theme from this section of Hebrews is the priesthood.

Ever since Adam and Eve rebelled against God, man's largest problem has been sin. The biggest consequence of our sin is that we as fallen man can no longer be in the presence of a Holy God. Think about this—anything that gets close to the sun if not of the same pureness and intensity of the sun is destroyed. Same with God. God is the Holiest of holies. And this is why after their fall, Adam and Eve are cast out of the presence of God. “He (God) drove out the man, and at the east of the garden he placed the cherubim and a flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” (Genesis 3:24).

As Genesis continues into Exodus, even though his people have rebelled, God does not leave his people. Continuing in Genesis 15:5-6, God promises Abraham that He will make a mighty nation from Abraham “And he (God) brought him (Abraham) outside and said, ‘Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.’ Then he said to him, ‘So shall your offspring be.’ And he believed the LORD, and he counted it to him as righteousness.”

Following this promise into the book of Exodus, God has brought his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness of Mt. Sinai. Here God would meet with Moses and give Moses a set of laws that Israel was to live by to separate them from the other nations. These laws included special instructions for a tent where God would dwell in the midst of his people (Exodus 26). Now, as talked about above, humans are sinful and cannot come into the presence of the Holy God. So, God makes provision by choosing men to serve as priests. These priests would serve and take care of the tent where God dwelt among the people (Exodus 29). The main job of this priestly class was to be the mediator between God and the people. A mediator is a party that communicates and negotiates between disputing parties. Through the book of Leviticus we see the priest do this in a few ways: they carry out the sacrificial system (Leviticus 1-7), they purify the Tabernacle (Leviticus 16), and they teach the people the blessings of God (Leviticus 26). We, a broken and sinful people, need someone to go to God on our behalf. On our own, our sin prevents us from coming anywhere near a holy and perfect God. (Scrock, p. 2022).

Into this system, Jesus steps in.

Hebrews 4:14

“Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.”

The author of Hebrews identifies Jesus as the great high priest. Throughout Scripture we see the role of the high priest but there is only one great high priest (Mohler, 64). The largest role of the high priest was to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement. This was the only day when the high priest could enter the place where God dwelt. In Leviticus 16 we see very specific rules for the priest to be able to do this. First, he had to make an offering of a bull for himself (v.6) and then offer two goats, one to be killed as a sin offering and the other released after confessing all of the iniquities of the people of Israel (v.21).

While Israel has high priests, we now have the great high priest. Jesus has redefined the office. There is no yearly Day of Atonement because Jesus once and for all paid for the sins of his people. Hebrews 7 says this, “He has no need, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices daily, first for his own sins and then for those of the people, since he did this once for all when he offered up himself. For the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests, but the word of the oath, which came later than the law, appoints a Son who has been made perfect forever.” (Hebrews 7:27-28). As great high priest, Jesus does not enter the dwelling place of God once a year, but is seated on the throne at the right hand of the Father in the Throne room of God. We can confidently believe what Paul says in Romans: “because, if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (Romans 10:9).

Hebrews 4:15-16

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us then with confidence draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.”

Remember the words of the author in Hebrews 2:17-18 “Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect, so that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in the service of God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. For because he himself has suffered when tempted, he is able to help those who are being tempted.” This is what separates the God of the Bible from all other human religions. Jesus stepped out of heaven and came to sinful man. The author of Hebrews repeats his idea from the second chapter, that at this very moment, Christians have in heaven a high priest who can sympathize with us in all sorrows and trials because Jesus himself was exposed to all of these experiences (Bruce, 116). While just this is amazing, what is even more amazing is that Jesus never sinned. He intimately knows the human condition and perfectly followed the Lord.

Since Christians have a great high priest in the heavenly places, who knows the human condition and is without sin, we should confidently approach the throne of grace. Returning to The Day of Atonement, the high priest, after offering an offering for himself and then killing the goat, the high priest would enter into The Holy of Holies where God dwelled on the Mercy Seat of the Ark of the Covenant. “Then he shall kill the goat of the sin offering that is for the people and bring its blood inside the veil and do with its blood as he did with the blood of the bull, sprinkling it over the mercy seat and in front of the mercy seat. Thus he shall make atonement for the Holy Place, because of the uncleannesses of the people of Israel and because of their transgressions, all their sins. And so he shall do for the tent of meeting, which dwells with them in the midst of their uncleannesses” (Leviticus 16:15-16).

This is where we as Christians are now called to, with confidence, draw near to so that we may receive mercy and grace in our time of need. This throne is the throne where Jesus sits at the right hand of the Father (Bruce, 116). Thanks to Jesus, the throne of God is the mercy seat that we have free access to, where we receive grace and mercy from the one who can sympathize with our weaknesses (Bruce, 117).

Hebrews 5:1-4

“For every high priest chosen from among men is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He can deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is beset with weakness. Because of this he is obligated to offer sacrifice for his own sins just as he does for those of the people. And no one takes this honor for himself, but only when called by God, just as Aaron was.”

As chapter 5 starts, verse 1 identifies one of the defining marks of Israel. This mark is that Israel could trace the high priest back to Aaron the brother of Moses (Mohler, 70). From the time of Aaron, there were two general qualifications for the high priest: a high priest must sympathize with those that he represents and is divinely appointed to his office (Bruce, 118). The high priest lived among an unfaithful and sinful people who were constantly rebelling against God. In verse 2, the high priest was to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward. Ignorant probably refers to those who have a lack of knowledge in the Lord (Mohler, 71). The Lord commanded Israel to know the law and know the Lord. The high priest was to proclaim the works of the Lord and keep the festivals that the Lord had laid out (Mohler, 71).

Knowing what the Law of the Lord says does not stop people from sinning. We even see Aaron rebelling against the law at Mt. Sinai by making the golden calf that the people worshipped (Exodus 31:1-6). We are a wayward people, and the high priest needed to be able to sympathize with the people. The high priest was to deal gently and compassionately because he himself was a finite human beset with weakness.

Verse 3 continues that the high priest can understand and knows the peoples' struggle because he too is a wayward person. Returning to Leviticus 16, on the Day of Atonement, The Lord commands Aaron: "Aaron shall present the bull as a sin offering for himself, and shall make atonement for himself and for his house. He shall kill the bull as a sin offering for himself" (Leviticus 16:11). Even the high priest could not enter the presence of God without his sins being atoned for. This position then was chosen only by God. Aaron did not apply but was selected. An office that was vitally important to the people to go before the Lord.

Hebrews 5:5-6

Just like Aaron, Christ was appointed to the position of high priest. Verse 5 quotes Psalm 2:7 which highlights the point that Jesus did not pick himself for this position, but was appointed by the Father and he sought the Father's glory (Mohler, 72). To add to this, Jesus has been appointed to a priesthood that will never end. Melchizedek is a character from Genesis 14 who blessed Abraham and was given a tenth of everything that Abraham owned. While Chapter 7 of Hebrews gets deeper into this, what we need to know here is that the priesthood of Jesus will never end. While high priests of the past would die and a new priest would have to step in, Jesus lives. His priesthood will never end. He will always be at the right hand of the Father, in the throne room of God, representing and caring for his people.

Hebrews 5:7-10

Our great high priest, Jesus, went through the trials of the human condition as we do. While he went through the trials and hardship that the fallen world throws at us, Jesus was completely without sin. Think of Jesus weeping at the grave of his friend Lazarus and the temptations he went through at the hand

of the devil in the desert. Jesus knows what it means to hurt and what it means to be tempted.

Looking at verse 7, we first might recall Jesus' prayers in the garden before his crucifixion. "And he withdrew from them about a stone's throw, and knelt down and prayed, saying, "Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done. And there appeared to him an angel from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony he prayed more earnestly; and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground." (Luke 22:41-44). Knowing what was set before him, Jesus still submitted to the will of the Father and went willingly to the cross.

Knowing this, verse 8 and 9 of Hebrews 5 does not mean that Jesus needed to be made perfect or that he needed to learn obedience (Hebrews has already made clear that Jesus is the perfect Son of God), but rather it shows Jesus' humanity (Mohler, 75). The cross was terrible agony and more than that, Jesus took the wrath of God that was earned by the sins of his people. Through this obedience and suffering, Jesus became the source of our salvation. Now, all who come to him find mercy and grace. We can boldly approach the throne of grace in our time of need. We are fully known and fully loved. Jesus took on humanity and became acquainted with our grief. Through this he can sympathize with our weakness.

Finally, he has been appointed by the Father to be our priest. Our assurance and standing before the Father is secure because we have the great high priest. The great high priest who was appointed by God, able to sympathize with our weakness, and has saved us by his death and suffering on the cross.

The Main Point

We can confidently hold to our confession that Jesus is the risen Lord and Savior. He stepped out of heaven and became intimately acquainted with the human condition. Knowing our weaknesses, Jesus willingly submitted to the Father's will and became the perfect sacrifice, once and for all paying for the sins of His people. Rising from the grave and defeating death, he now sits at the right hand of the Father and is our Great High Priest forever.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Leviticus 16 – The Day of Atonement
- Luke 23:44-49 – The crucifixion of Christ and the tearing of the curtain between the Holy and Most Holy Place
- Exodus 29 – Consecration of the Priests
- Ephesians 2:1-10 – Our reality from the work of the Great High Priest
- Hebrews 7-8 – Further Explanation of Jesus as the Great High priest after the order of Melchizedek and of the better covenant

Week 7

Hebrews 5:11-6:12

By Rand Nelson

Introduction

Some family you only see at Thanksgiving. Whether it's the distance, the busyness of life, or the lack of desire, Turkey Day is the only time you share a table. For me, this meant my grandmother's wooden dining room table had been carried off somewhere only to be replaced by a series of folding tables and chairs of various sizes. The tables would line the perimeter of her living room, and we would sit together and share a meal and an awkward conversation or two.

As a younger kid, I tried to get my place at the table quickly—even if it meant sitting next to Uncle Tommy who always had a cultivated patch of hair on the bridge of his nose. There was even a Thanksgiving or two where I thought I pulled this feat off only to see my father enter the room with a plate full of fixings and gesture to me to give up my seat. My hopes dashed, I slunk to the furthest corner of the room, to the table every kid dreaded—the kiddie table.

I was the kind of kid who loathed the kiddie table. I viewed it as a humiliating and defamatory mark upon my existence. “You’re not worthy. You’re immature—a child,” the table mocked. So, I waited patiently—either for maturity to find me or for Uncle Tommy to die.

You likely know the feeling of desperate impatience—the longing to grow up and mature, to be a part of the intellectual conversations happening at the adult table, to share in the great big belly laughs that echo from its attendants. This is natural. In almost every aspect of our lives, we want to grow. We crave maturity and development. But do we equally crave this in our spiritual lives? Is there a longing to mature—to graduate from the kiddie table and explore deeper avenues of our faith? The writer of Hebrews wants this for us, and he would even go so far as to rebuke those who, for whatever reason, seem content to be lagging behind.

Read Hebrews 5:11-6:12 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 author of Hebrews warns against being “dull of hearing.” How can we guard ourselves against spiritual sluggishness in our own walk with Jesus?

2. In what ways can rebuke—when given and received in love—be a catalyst for spiritual maturity rather than a source of discouragement?
 3. The rain imagery in Hebrews 6:7–8 shows two types of crops that both receive the same blessing but produce different fruit. How might this challenge the way we assess what seem to be visible signs of faith in others (and ourselves)?
 4. Hebrews 6:11–12 calls believers to imitate those who inherit God’s promises. Who are some examples—biblical, historical, or personal—you look to for this kind of faithfulness?
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Commentary

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

When you hear the word “dull,” as here in the phrase “because you have become dull of hearing” (v.11, ESV), you may picture as I did a simple-minded person—the kind of person who would open a bag of chips from the wrong end or struggle to get the bag open altogether. But in Greek, the concept here described¹² has much more to do with effort than it does intellect. The author of Hebrews is not criticizing their lack of intelligence; he’s rebuking their sluggish pursuit of Jesus. It becomes clearer in the next verse as he stresses, “by this time, you ought to be teachers.” This communicates to us that he is not a victim of unmet, lofty expectations. No, he’s a righteously frustrated father figure who’s upset his teenagers are still asking him to tie their shoes for them.

In using the metaphor of milk and solid food, the author accomplishes two things. First, the author rightly cuts them down to size. This comment is meant to serve as a weighty rebuke. In our culture, it is increasingly difficult for people to see love in rebuke, but this entire section (as well as the entire book) is written with the good of the audience in mind. It’s not an inflammatory and condescending belittling written from a superior man of God to people for whom he couldn’t care less; it’s an affectionate and hopeful treatise whose author is confident his words will elevate those whom he loves to a place they ought to be already. Do senseless rants of ungodly and unproductive frustration from pastors to their congregation exist today? Absolutely. But not every rebuke is that, and having the maturity to discern the difference can be life giving. At the same time, not every pastor has rebuked his flock with love and patience. The apostle’s tone should never be used as license for abusive overreach but should model for us the kind of pastoral heart that should accompany a loving rebuke.

¹² James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 50. - “3576. νοθρός nōthrōs, no-thros’; from a der. of 3541; sluggish, i.e. (lit.) lazy, or (fig.) stupid:—dull, slothful.”

The second thing his rebuke accomplishes is that it paints for his larger audience (yes, even us) a fuller picture as to what the issue is. The natural course of human development is that a child's nutrition gradually matures. Infants should nurse and drink their fill of their mother's milk (the Bible even uses this positively as a metaphor in 1 Peter 2:2-3), but there comes a point when it's time for a growing child to chew and swallow something more. The Hebrews were past that point.

The author is going to use two words or phrases that are meant to be juxtaposed in verses 13 and 14. The first is the word "unskilled" and the second is the phrase "trained by constant practice." Milk is for children who are unskilled, and solid food is for the mature; the discernment of the mature has been trained by constant practice. The emphasis of the word "unskilled" should make us think something more along the lines of "ignorant" or "untested,"¹³ which I think makes clearer why these two phrases are set against one another. The spiritually mature person is not someone who is of great intellect (as we've seen above), which should be a wonderful encouragement to those of us who, well, aren't. The spiritually mature person is someone who is trained by constant practice.

As a coach, I tell my wrestlers all the time that practice is wonderful for them, but the only way they're going to really get any better is to wrestle in live competition every chance they get. And they usually start this process by routinely getting their heads better acquainted with their butts—they get beat...badly. But for those guys whose pluck and grit fuels them to keep at it, they start to see growth and they become the ones who start to pretzel their opponents. The spiritually mature person isn't necessarily spiritually mature because he has buried his nose in the writings of the Puritans, learned how to parse the NT Greek, or achieved all of the necessary degrees and certifications. These things are wonderful, but you must be careful they don't just make you a fat-headed baby. The spiritually mature person is tested and trained, and he's tested and trained by life's greatest teacher, experience. Our Lord surrounded himself with common, uneducated men who royally screwed up time and time again, trying to figure it all out. They hid themselves behind locked doors after his crucifixion and burial, fearful of the Roman Empire and Jewish authorities. And yet, over time and with the help of the Holy Spirit, they became lions as their powers of discernment were trained by constant practice. The encouragement here for the Christian today is that, by obediently taking the hand of Jesus and letting him lead you in some way into the practice of your Christian faith, you will see spiritual growth and maturity in your life.

In framing the last 3 verses of this section, it is vital to remember that the author has been writing so far about Christian maturity. So, when he tells them to "leave the elementary doctrine of Christ and go on to maturity," he's not calling them to abandon the teachings he'll detail here. He's calling them to leave the

¹³ Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words*, 13 - "552. ἄπειρος apēirōs, ap'-i-ros; from 1 (as a neg. particle) and 3984; inexperienced, i.e. ignorant:—unskillful.

safe harbor of their infancy and venture out into the depths of the ocean of the majesty of God. He uses the word “foundation” aptly. These things—repentance, faith, practices of the church, the resurrection and eternal judgment are all foundational truths of Christianity. They should be taught and revisited regularly by pastors and studied by all Christians till their depths are plumbed, but again, we’re talking about maturity. There comes a time in a Christian’s life when it is healthy and good to recognize a need for deeper study, a more active practice of the Christian faith, and to go on to maturity.

This doesn’t mean that the foundational truths of Christianity become less important. As Tim Keller once put it, “The gospel is not just the ABCs but the A to Z of the Christian life. It is inaccurate to think the gospel is what saves non-Christians, and then Christians mature by trying hard to live according to biblical principles. It is more accurate to say that we are saved by believing the gospel, and then we are transformed in every part of our minds, hearts, and lives by believing the gospel more and more deeply as life goes on.”¹⁴ To put it simply, “Jesus loves me this I know, for the Bible tells me so. Little ones to him belong, they are weak; he is strong” are some of the most profound words I have ever sung. But I didn’t learn this song in seminary when I was working towards an M.Div. I learned it as a foundational truth of my faith—as a young child—and even though I am pursuing deeper things in my walk with Jesus now, I am still encouraged by this song (and still sing it to myself and my kids) today.

Last thing here is a cautionary word from John Owen: “It is the duty of ministers of the Gospel to make sure that the doctrine they teach is not only true but also appropriate to the condition of their hearers. Some important Christian truths may, in the preaching of the Gospel, be omitted for a time, but none should be permanently neglected or forgotten.”¹⁵ Many churches around the country today pride themselves on having a low-entry for their Sunday services. Speaking critically, the idea is that they can serve diet Christianity to their people on Sundays so that unbelieving people may find it tolerable enough to maybe convert. They do this at the expense of their congregation’s spiritual health. It is important for the pastor to understand where his people are and to teach far enough in front of them that their potential growth is actualized. Starving believers in the hopes of reaching the lost is not God’s intention for how ministry is to take place. Instead, pastors should encourage their flocks to mature by practicing their Christian faith (seeking to evangelize the lost), as we saw already above.

Hebrews 6:4-8

¹⁴ Timothy Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced, Gospel-Centered Ministry in your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 64. Apple Books.

¹⁵ John Owen, *Hebrews*, Crossway Classic Commentaries (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 137–38.

The author of Hebrews next ventures into a discussion on the great sin and inevitable destruction of apostates¹⁶, those who are sometimes said to “walk away” from the Christian faith. People will disagree about this, but it is our position at Anchor Church that an authentic Christian cannot lose their salvation, nor can they by any aspect of what is sometimes referred to as “free will” choose to walk away from their faith. We believe this is the clear and certain teaching of the Bible. Now, at some point this conversation does venture into the realm of semantics (sort of), and people wind up arguing past each other—which is a large part of the entire confusion.

To start, let’s define our terms. What is an apostate? Dr. Michael Kruger defines the term in this way: “An apostate is someone who’s inside God’s covenant community, is part of the visible Church, whose[sic] professed faith in Christ, seems to be a believer, probably partakes of the Lord’s Supper and is a member of that congregation, and then later consciously and intentionally repudiates their belief in Christ and leaves the covenant community.”¹⁷ Notice in the phrase “seems to be a believer” in this definition. That is what makes this so difficult to parse out.

The main controversy occurs in verses 4 and 5. Do the blessings that are described here indicate salvation? Does “[being] enlightened, tasting the heavenly gift, having shared in the Holy Spirit, and having tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come” mean that someone is truly a Christian? If your answer to these questions is yes, then this passage teaches that you can lose your salvation.

But I don’t think that this is what the author is talking about, and I think this becomes clear when we understand verses 7-8. These verses talk about rain falling on two types of crop. The crops either produce a useful crop or they produce thorns and thistles (they’re worthless). Both crops receive good rain, and demonstrate whether or not they are healthy through what they do with the rain. When you apply that framework back into verses 4-5, the blessings the author is talking about become clearer. The author is talking about people who exist in the context of a Christian culture but have not truly followed Christ in faith. In this sense, they have tasted of the goodness of God and heard from his word, but they are able to walk away from it, because it has not taken root in their lives. There are other clues from this passage that reveal that the author is not talking about true believers, but I think the warning here is not so much that we need to worry that we can lose our salvation; it’s that we need to be certain we have salvation—which is why the verses that follow speak of assurance.

The warning—the hope-filled, loving warning—is given to the Hebrews in the hopes that they would examine their lives and determine whether or not they’re in the faith. The New Testament calls Christians to do this in both 2 Peter

¹⁶ Owen, *Hebrews*, 137.

¹⁷ Michael Kruger, “What is an Apostate?” September 12, 2018, [apostate/#:~:text=An%20apostate%20is%20someone%20who's,in%20Christ%20and%20leaves%20the.](#)

1:10 and 2 Corinthians 13:5. It is a good and healthy thing to view your life with sober judgment and ask yourself honestly whether or not you truly belong to Jesus. The connection to the previous passages lies in the idea of maturity. In the same way that you would not be able to estimate the health of a banana tree by how vibrant it may appear as a sapling, but instead by how healthily it continually produces fruit, a person who “seems to be a believer” because of their passionate display at the moment of their conversion is not for this reason a true believer. This passage (and passages like it)¹⁸ is not saying that by our sheer will and determination we are to secure our salvation, but that our salvation is truly revealed when, in the final analysis, we have not walked away.

One of the things about this topic that is so challenging is how intimately we may form bonds with people, earnestly believing them to be sincerely Christians, only to see them one day abandon the faith altogether. It is an agonizing pain to see someone you love, someone you have prayed with and for, someone who has passionately sung praises next to you in the pew, and someone who has served with you on mission trips walk away from Christ. And it presents us with an apparent contradiction in our gut. “Surely this person was truly a believer!” we say to ourselves. “How then is it that they are now turning away?” It may seem more palatable in our short term doubts to assign this all to their volition—that by their will they decided to do this; they were truly saved and then had a moment of “deconversion.” But that idea rejects the clear teaching of Scripture, too. In 1 John 2:19, John tells his readers that those who have walked away from their fellowship did so because “they were not of us, for if they had been of us, they would have continued with us” (again, the idea of perseverance in the faith is vitally important in revealing your faith’s authenticity).

Furthermore, when we make arguments like this, grasping for an answer to how this could have happened, it reveals more so that we fundamentally misunderstand some key aspects of how salvation occurs. The author of Hebrews will later refer to Jesus as the founder and perfecter of our faith (Hebrews 12:2). This truly is the heart of the matter: If you are a believer, it is because Jesus saved you. You are a believer because Christ foreknew you, predestined you for salvation, called you into salvation, justified you, and Christ will one day glorify you as well (Romans 8:29-30). It is impossible for Christ to fail in any aspect of salvation for those he has foreknown and predestined. And so believers have nothing to fear, because their salvation is not theirs to lose; it’s Christ’s, and he doesn’t lose. Will believers wander and stray into sin—perhaps even for long periods of time? Yes, that is possible. But Christ will build his church and he will call his elect into salvation. Those whom he calls, he will glorify with no exceptions. Those whom he does not call—even if they exist in the context of a Christian culture that makes it very easy to look and act the part—are not and will not be saved. They drink of the same rain but rather than healthy fruit, only produce thorns and thistles.

¹⁸ Colossians 3:21-23 – Verse 23 “if indeed you continue in the faith”

Hebrews 6:9-12

The apostle does not leave these Christians hanging. Whatever dramatic doubts his words may have introduced are immediately solved by his hopeful promise of assurance. He expresses to them whom he calls beloved that he is confident of better things in their case, things that pertain to salvation. Some translations say “confident,” some say “convinced,” and some say that “we feel sure” of the better things. The Greek tends to lean toward the word “convinced.”¹⁹ He isn’t hopeful or crossing his fingers here; he’s convinced that God has done an authentic work in their lives. Note that in the verses that follow, he states why he is so confident and convinced—because of the work they have done and the love they have shown for the Lord’s name and their service to other believers. Again the reason why Christians should have assurance of their faith is because of the evidence their faith provides in their actions. This is not about earning salvation (which is impossible, Eph 2:8–9); it’s about providing evidence of salvation.

In the final two verses of this section, the apostle is simply telling the Hebrews to keep at it. They are to “show the same earnestness to have the full assurance of hope until the end” (v.11). They are to keep pressing on toward full assurance so that they won’t become sluggish (as some have done), but instead imitate those who inherit the promises. Because of the apostle’s later referencing of the cloud of witnesses who went before us, it is certain he’s saying we should imitate those whose faith over the course of their life has certainly resulted in their salvation. These are people who have not walked away, people who have stayed in constant pursuit of Jesus so much so that they have endured until the end. These are the people we are called to be, and by God’s grace, already are.

The Main Point

The Christian life is a daily pursuit of Jesus that should result in both maturity and an assurance of faith. Believers must not be sluggish in their pursuit of Jesus, but continue on in our daily walks so that we grow up in every way into our head, Jesus Christ.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Romans 8; 2 Peter 2:10; & 2 Corinthians 13:5 - Calls from the apostles to examine the sincerity of your faith
- 1 John 2:19 - John’s explanation that those who apostatized were actually revealing their lack of true conversion
- Ephesians 4:11-16 - Believers are to grow up in maturity toward Jesus.

¹⁹ James Strong, *A Concise Dictionary of the Words in the Greek Testament and The Hebrew Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2009), 56.

Week 8

Hebrews 6:13-20 – The Certainty of the Promise of God

By John Roberson

Introduction

Growing up, I was always taught that you shouldn't swear. This went for the four letter "swear words," obviously, but I'm talking about the "I swear I didn't do it!" when your mom has you and your brothers in a line in front of that broken lamp one of you knocked over when we didn't stop running around the house like we were told only a couple minutes before. It felt good that it wasn't you that knocked it over, even though you were just as culpable. You couldn't wait to be able to truthfully blame it on your older brother who just wouldn't leave you alone. It's all his fault. And maybe he was having a hard time fessing up, so when it was your turn to talk you had to add the *swear* to it so that your mom would know someone isn't telling the truth but it surely wasn't you. Nevertheless, I'd hear "Let your yes be yes and your no be no. That's all you should need."

As unwholesome as my eagerness for truth really was, I just really wanted my mom to believe me. I didn't care what happened to my brother, bless his heart, I just wanted to be trusted. I wanted to be seen as a trustworthy person. I wanted my mom to be assured and encouraged that I was honest and did what I said and said what I meant. Then maybe, in my not so innocent, conniving mind, I thought, if I could prove myself more and more, I could really get her to buy in to how good I am. Clearly, my heart was not so pure. I'd like to think I was a pretty good kid—I managed to usually stay out of trouble—but a mother can see right through a good record to the intentions and heart of even the most well-behaved son. My character and trustworthiness, certainly at least back then, weren't good enough to stake much on. Thankfully, there is someone who is wholly good and fully trustworthy that we can stake everything on.

Read Hebrews 6:13-20 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. How does assurance and certainty lead to conviction and action? Can you think of an example in your life where certainty from deeper understanding or greater belief led you to some sort of action?
2. The persecution the Hebrews faced led to them doubting their faith in

God's promise, specifically the incarnation of the son of God, and their role in that promise. What do we experience that tempts us to waver from our conviction in the promise and purposes of God?

3. Sometimes it is difficult to see how we should relate to the Old Testament. Has the ancient promise of the Abrahamic covenant deepened the understanding of your role in God's grand plan to redeem creation?
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Commentary

Hebrews 6:13-20

The Hebrews receiving this letter would have needed no context to understand the full extent of the example of Abraham that the author begins this section with. Abraham is the beginning of their ancestral lineage, the original patriarch of the Jews. To start out, I'd like to go back to Genesis to look at the story of this promise referred to here, in order to appreciate the context and background of this passage in Hebrews. The first reference we will look at is Genesis 12. This is the original promise God made to Abram (later, seen in Genesis 17:5, God would change his name to Abraham):

Now the Lord said to Abram, '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' (Genesis 12:1-3).

This is commonly referred to as the Abrahamic covenant, and, as we will see throughout all of Hebrews, it is here that God expounds upon his grand plan for all nations. Abram did not, to any large degree, understand the mind and purposes of God, but God was faithful to remind, encourage, and assure Abram of the promise. In Genesis 15, we see God do just that—guarantee his promise made in Genesis 12 with a covenant. God says, "your very own son shall be your heir... look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them. So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:4-5). God reiterates the promise originally made. Verse 6 says that Abram "believed the Lord, and he counted it to him as righteousness." Even with this belief, in the verses that follow, God guarantees the promise and performs a covenantal ceremony where something interesting happens. In this type of ceremony, two people would participate together to demonstrate their intent to uphold their respective end of the deal. However, here, God causes a deep sleep to come upon Abram, and God acts in the ceremony by himself, signifying that it is God alone who the fulfillment of

the promise depends on. It does not require Abram for its fulfillment. This shows that God had made an *unconditional* covenant.²⁰

The last Genesis passage we will look at comes from Genesis 22. This passage is the most direct reference made in Hebrews 6:13-20. In it, we see God put Abraham to a significant test. Abraham has a son, Isaac, as had been promised. At this point in Genesis 22, God asks Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, his only son, as an offering. Scripture follows Abraham through his obedient preparations for this sacrifice. At the last second, before Abraham was about to make the sacrifice, God called out to stop him, and then provided a sacrificial lamb to take Isaac's place. God addresses Abraham:

‘By myself I have sworn, declares the Lord, because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son, I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply your offspring as the stars of heaven and as the sand that is on the seashore. And your offspring shall possess the gate of his enemies and in your offspring shall all the nations of the earth be blessed, because you have obeyed my voice’ (Genesis 22:16-18).

God makes a guaranteed oath to Abraham, swearing by himself, to fulfill the promise originally made in Genesis 12. Abraham has full assurance from God that the promise will be fulfilled. Back in Hebrews, the author is addressing Jewish Christians, the direct descendants of Abraham. They themselves are a realization of this very promise. This is their history, their ancestry that the author of Hebrews is displaying, telling them to remember their God, and be faithful themselves, just as Abraham was faithful.

In Hebrews 6:12, the author of Hebrews charges the reader to be “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” To back up and give example to that charge, the author opens our section by introducing the promise of God made to Abraham, noting that when he did so, “he had no one greater by whom to swear, [so] he swore by himself” (v 13). This is the unique aspect of the promise seen in Genesis 22 that we reviewed. Traditionally, a person making an oath would swear in the presence of some higher authority or power, so that that authority could punish that person if the oath was not kept. The person making the oath was knowingly submitting himself to punishment if he did not keep up his end of the bargain, in order to assure the other party of the seriousness of his intentions and abilities to fulfill them.²¹ God, though, has no one greater to swear by or in front of. No one holds him accountable because he is perfectly good, so he does not need accountability, and he is the supreme being and creator of all things, so no one and nothing precedes or supersedes him. So, God swears by himself, puts himself on the line, knowing he is the only one who

²⁰ Ronald Sauer, *The Moody Bible Commentary* (Chicago, IL: The Moody Bible Institute, 2014).

²¹ Sauer, *The Moody Bible Commentary*.

can deliver on his promises. The author notes this in verse 16: “For people swear by something greater than themselves, and in all their disputes an oath is final for confirmation.” God’s covenant is final. In swearing by himself, God demonstrates his power, supremacy, and holiness.

God’s intention for swearing by himself does not simply emphasize that his word can be trusted and that he will not fail. This oath God makes aims for the hearts of the recipients of the promise. God’s assurance is offered so that it can be of great encouragement to those who are in the faith. In verses 17 and 18, the author makes a connection between the ancient promise and the Hebrews now being addressed around 2,000 years later:

So when God desired to show more convincingly to the heirs of the promise the unchangeable character of his purpose, he guaranteed it with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have fled for refuge might have strong encouragement to hold fast to the hope set before us.

Who we see referenced here are “heirs of the promise” and “we who have fled for refuge.” The latter refers to the fact that these Christians were under persecution for their faith. This is one reason why the author of Hebrews states his case about the certainty of God’s promise. They needed this encouragement that worked beyond earthly circumstances to carry on this lineage of faith. As previously discussed, heirs of the promise refer to the recipients of this letter being in the lineage of Abraham. These Jewish Christians were meddling in apostasy. They wanted to return to the Old Covenant, and stick with the law presented in the Old Testament. They wanted to ignore someone very important within their own lineage (Hebrews 2:1-4).

I want to call your attention back to the verses we looked at in Genesis 22. In the second half of verse 17, notice that “offspring” and “gate of his enemies” is singular. Yes, the covenant promises many offspring—too many to number. But here, it seems that God is pointing to an individual, one that will bless the whole world.²² This is not the first reference to a future king that Scripture makes, and it is by no means the last. After Abraham demonstrated his faithfulness by a willingness to offer his only son, Isaac, whom he loved (Gen 22:2), God provided a sacrifice: “For now I know that you fear God, seeing you have not withheld your son, your only son, from me” (22:12). Abraham named the mountain “The Lord will provide.” This is a foreshadowing of the Lord providing an ultimate sacrifice. Two thousand years later, God, in fulfillment of his promise, did not withhold his son—his only son, whom he loved—providing the ultimate sacrifice to bless all the earth (John 3:16). Flip to Matthew 1, and you will see one place in Scripture where the generations from Abraham to Jesus are recorded—42 generations from Father Abraham to the Savior of the world (Matthew 1:17). Depending on your familiarity with the Bible, you may

²² Sauer, *The Moody Bible Commentary*.

recognize many of the names in this genealogy. These names are all over the pages leading up to this gospel account from Matthew, beginning where we started in Genesis 12 with Abram. God's plan and promise is well accounted for. What a blessing it is to see God's faithfulness to the heirs of the promise throughout history. What a blessing it is that God sent his son to live a perfectly righteous life—a life that no other man could live—and to die for the sins of the whole world, defeating death through his resurrection, and entering into the presence of God, to wait until the fulness of time to come again and complete the redemption of his creation.

We said that the heirs of the promise also are referred to as those who have fled for refuge, and that the Jewish Christians being addressed in Hebrews had been under persecution for their faith. The author commends them for their endurance and acceptance of suffering (10:32-34), but still finds the need to encourage them “to hold fast to the hope set before us.” In verse 18, the author of Hebrews says that this encouragement comes from two things. The first is, as we most recently see in verse 17, that God's oath, or guarantee, gives assurance and certainty to what was promised. The second is God's character. God is so purely good, that he can only be trustworthy: “In which it is impossible for God to lie.” He cannot lie, he can only be truthful. He is not like man—lying or even flippantly tossing around ideas and plans without the ability to see any of it through (Numbers 23:19, Titus 1:2). God's goodness is the result of his character. It is in his nature to give good things, it is who he is. “The unchangeable character of his purpose” means his purposes are good, from one generation to the next, worth submitting to and following after, worth putting your hope in. The author is imploring the Hebrews to not retreat to the Old Covenant, but to realize that God's intention and plan has been the very promise he made to Abraham from the beginning. That's why the author points out that God's intent was to show the “unchangeable character of his purpose” (17), which is the same now as it was in Genesis 12.

The author concludes this section talking about the “hope set before us” and the effect it should have on the believer. What exactly is this hope? This hope is the person of Christ and the salvation that he offers.²³ This salvation offers a place in the family of God, where believers become co-heirs with Christ and inherit the blessings of the Father (Romans 8:17). And this hope has a steadying effect on the soul of every follower of Christ, “a sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (19). An anchor is solid, immovable. It digs in and keeps one tethered to a firm foundation, even against wind and wave, against persecution and doubt, against the brokenness of man and his limited understanding, against lack of belief. The author also points out that this hope “enters into the inner place behind the curtain, where Jesus has gone as a forerunner on our behalf, having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (19b-20). The veil was a curtain in the tabernacle that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy (Exodus 26:31-35). In these verses in Hebrews 6, “the inner place

²³ Robert Yarbrough, *1 John, ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

behind the curtain” refers to the Most Holy Place behind the veil. Only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and only once a year on the Day of Atonement. There were strict procedural requirements that had to take place, or the priest would die because of his uncleanness. The inner place behind the curtain would be the place where the presence of God resided. An unclean man cannot be in the presence of the Holy God, so the high priest would have to follow a set of rules given by the Lord to properly enter the presence of God and atone for the sins of himself and Israel (Leviticus 16). Hebrews tells us that Jesus has become this high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek (see Hebrews 5 and 7), but needs no atonement because he is perfectly righteous. The person of Christ can fully be in the presence of a Holy God. When Christ died on the cross and yielded up his spirit, this very curtain in the temple was torn in two, signifying this separation between man and God exists no longer (Matthew 27:51). Christ’s propitiation for our sins, the death of a perfectly righteous man, was the ultimate atonement (1 John 2:2). Jesus abolishes the barrier between the Christian and the Lord. Hebrews says Jesus has gone behind the curtain, and was crucified as a forerunner *on our behalf* (20a).

The argument of Hebrews runs like this: the Jewish scriptures [the Old Testament] are continually pointing beyond themselves to a further reality which they do not themselves contain. More particularly, they are pointing to a great act of salvation, of dealing with sin, which they do not themselves offer. This great act has now been accomplished in Jesus; and we must therefore follow this Jesus... It reminds us forcibly that what God did in Jesus Christ was not an odd, isolated incident, a one-off invasion into the world. It was the climax of his long plan. Our faith, and our discipleship, do not rest upon an oddity, but upon the rock-solid plan of the Lord of history. When we grasp the cross, we are not clutching at a straw but standing on a rock.²⁴

We must follow Jesus. This is the charge the author set forth to the Hebrews. Instead of returning to the Old Covenant, you must trust in the promise of God. Trust that this was his plan all along, and that the redemption of the world will only come through Christ. When we read Scripture, it is good to remember that Scripture was written *for* us, but not *to* us directly. It was originally written to its first audience. We need to understand its context to understand how to apply it to ourselves. What we will find is that this charge does apply, and is the same for us as believers. Everyone that God justifies is justified by faith, even Abraham, and those he justifies are now sons of Abraham, becoming heirs of the same promise (Galatians 3:6-9). If you are a believer, you are a part of this lineage just like the Hebrews—heirs of the promise, blessed to be a blessing, holding fast the hope set before us. This history needs to be very real and personal to the Christian. Since the church exists to know Jesus and

²⁴ N.T. Wright, *Following Jesus* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994).

make him known, we must realize we are a part of this promise. God's story is not about us, but it does involve us. God has made his plan known to us, and invites us in to it, through faith, for his glory and our good.

In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of his grace, which he lavished upon us, in all wisdom and insight making known to us the mystery of his will, according to his purpose, which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth. (Ephesians 1:7-10)

To close, I want to revisit a verse in this section of Hebrews 6 that I skipped over. Verse 15 says, "thus Abraham, having patiently waited, obtained the promise." My initial thought was, "did he though? Is it that simple? The Lord said 'Surely I will bless you and multiply you,' then Abraham patiently waited on the Lord, and then he got what he earned? Did it happen that simply?" In between those stories in Genesis we looked at, we see that Abraham was not always patient. Immediately after the promise in Genesis 12, in fact, in the very same chapter, Abraham gave his wife Sarai over to the pharaoh and said she was his sister because he thought the Egyptians would kill him if he told the truth that she was his wife, as if God did not just promise that he would yield offspring and be blessed (Genesis 12:10-20). After God made the covenant with Abraham in Genesis 15, where God said "'This man [Eliezer of Damascus] shall not be your heir, *your very own son shall be your heir*,'" Abraham agreed with his wife that he must need to sleep with his servant in order to have any offspring, that surely what God meant was not to be taken literally (Genesis 16). We can see from these moments of sinful doubt and impatience that Abraham was imperfect. But Abraham still received the promise. The author of Hebrews is not wrong. Scripture does not contradict itself. Abraham is God's chosen, and Abraham, as God's chosen, had faith. He believed. Not that he never doubted, not that he always grasped everything that God had promised, but he believed, and it was counted to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6, Romans 4:9). Scripture is clear that God's chosen are not perfect. When we get to Hebrews 11, you will see characters whose stories are fraught with sin. God's chosen fail miserably over and over, and not only as individuals, but together as a nation (see Israel's many failures and cycles of rebellion and turning away from God throughout the whole Old Testament). However, God still uses his chosen for his purposes. The fact that God put Abraham into a deep sleep in Genesis 15 when he made the covenant tells us as much. Abraham couldn't take part in the ritual because God didn't want him to. Abraham would not be able to do what God can and would do. In this grand plan for the fullness of time, God chose Abraham to be the father of many nations, to be a blessing, to go to strange lands and leave everything he knows, but the fulfillment of such a plan? It's all up to God, not man. All Abraham needed was faith. Not his own righteousness, just belief in God's word and his plan, hoping for the promised blessings the grace of God

affords. Jesus Christ makes it possible for anyone to receive the free gift of grace and to be redeemed by his blood. Christ is the culmination of this ancient plan. May those who believe rest in the goodness of God, the assurance of his word, the hope in his promise, the fullness of his plan, and the redemptive blood of his son. May this be the anchor of the soul, as we patiently wait for Christ to come again to unite all things in heaven and on earth in himself.

The Main Point

The promise of God is certain. God is trustworthy, fully good, and worthy to be followed. This assurance should encourage us to hold fast to the hope we have in Christ, that in God's plan for the fullness of time, we surely will inherit the blessings he promised, and God will surely receive all glory.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Genesis 12 – The Call of Abram/God's Promise to Abram
- Genesis 15 – Abrahamic Covenant
- Genesis 22 – God's Provision
- Matthew 1 – The Genealogy from Abraham to Christ
- Galatians 3 – Faith Counted as Righteousness, The Law and the Promise
- Ephesians 1 – The Promised Spiritual Blessings in Christ
- Romans 8 – Heirs with Christ
- Exodus 26, 40 – The Design and Construction of the Tabernacle
- Leviticus 16 – The Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement

Week 9

Hebrews 7:1-28 – A Priest Forever After The Order Of Melchizedek

By Brandon Wingler

Introduction

Have you ever heard the term *planned obsolescence*? If not, you're surely familiar with it. Ever notice how your phone battery seems to die out after a couple of years or how design changes over time make older models gradually outdated? Planned obsolescence is a concept whereby products are designed with a built-in shelf life to be replaced in the future.

In Hebrews 7, we learn that God designed the Old Covenant Levitical priesthood with a sort of built-in shelf life. The Levitical priesthood, designed around family lineage and repeated sacrifices, could not fully reconcile sinful people to a holy God. In his divine wisdom, God planned for the Old Covenant, with its Levitical priesthood and Mosaic Law, to be replaced by a better priesthood that would make the old obsolete. This better priesthood is not temporary, but eternal. It is not built on daily sacrifices, but one sacrifice. It is not led by sinful humans, but by the perfect Son of God who is fully God and fully human.

Read Hebrews 7 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. Jesus, like Melchizedek, is both King and Priest. How does this shape your understanding of his authority and role in your life?
 2. If the Old Covenant has been replaced by a new and greater covenant, how should we now relate to the Law and the Old Testament?
 3. How can knowing that Jesus is interceding for you right now shape the way you live (such as prayer, trials, general outlook on life, etc.)?
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Commentary

Hebrews 7:1-10

The author of Hebrews has been steadily building a case for the absolute supremacy of Jesus Christ. He is greater than the angels (Hebrews 1), worthy of

more glory than Moses (Hebrews 3), and superior to the Levitical priesthood (Hebrews 4–7). Jesus is not only the Son of God, but the one through whom God created the world and is the heir of all things (Hebrews 1:2). He is the one who radiates God's glory and perfectly represents His nature (Hebrews 1:3). He sustains the universe by his powerful word and has made purification for sins. He is the eternal King whose throne is forever (Hebrews 1:8), the merciful and faithful High Priest who is able to help those who are tempted (Hebrews 2), and the sinless one who sympathizes with our weaknesses (Hebrews 4). Appointed by God, he serves not according to the order of Aaron, but as “a priest forever after the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5; Psalm 110:4).

Hebrews 7 explores the significance of this mysterious figure, Melchizedek. Melchizedek appears in Genesis 14:17–20, where he met Abraham who had just rescued Lot (Abraham’s nephew) and secured victory in battle. Melchizedek is introduced as the “king of Salem” and “priest of God Most High.” He blesses Abraham, and in response, Abraham gives him a tenth of everything he had won in battle.

The author of Hebrews unpacks this brief episode. He explains that Melchizedek’s name translates to “king of righteousness” and he is the king of “Salem,” or “king of peace.” The author also describes Melchizedek as one who is “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever” (Hebrews 7:3).

At first glance, this might sound like Melchizedek is some mysterious, eternal being. While some interpreters have suggested that Melchizedek was actually a preincarnate appearance of Christ, this is unlikely since the text in Hebrews says Melchizedek merely resembles the Son of God, not that he actually is the Son of God. Furthermore, the author of Hebrews often utilizes “typology” to illustrate how there are types of people (such as Moses the prophet, David the king, the Levitical priests) and things (such as the Passover Lamb and the exodus from Egypt) throughout Scripture which foreshadow and anticipate Christ and future events in salvation history.

What the author of Hebrews is highlighting is how Melchizedek’s history is not concerned with his ancestry, his birth, or his death. The biblical record of these events is absent. The omission of this information is striking for a people and a culture who were so focused on family lineage. But Melchizedek is a type; he is pointing forward to a greater priesthood which has no beginning and no end and is not based upon ancestry. This greater priesthood is Christ, who is eternal and perfect and is appointed to his priesthood by God.

The author of Hebrews puts forth another bold claim: Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, the father of all of Israel. Melchizedek blessed Abraham and “it is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior” (Hebrews 7:7). Because Levi descends from Abraham, it can be said that the Levitical priests also gave tithes to Melchizedek through Abraham. Therefore, Melchizedek, and by extension his priesthood, is greater than Levi and the Levitical priesthood.

Hebrews 7:1–10 introduces Melchizedek as a priest and king whose unique characteristics foreshadow Jesus’ eternal priesthood and kingship. His priesthood is not based on ancestry, law, or ritual, but in a way that points to Christ’s unending priesthood. By showing that Melchizedek is greater than Abraham, the author also proves that the priesthood Christ fulfills is greater than the Levitical system, and therefore, Jesus is the only true and lasting High Priest for God’s people.

Hebrews 7:11–28

Having established that Melchizedek’s priesthood is greater than the Levitical priesthood, the author of Hebrews further explains the significance of this as it relates to Jesus. He begins by arguing that if perfection could have come through the Levitical priesthood, then there would be no need for another priest to arise, especially one who was from a different order like the order of Melchizedek. The Levitical priesthood, while it was established by God, was not able to accomplish a complete reconciliation between God and humanity. It was imperfect.

Because the Levitical priesthood was imperfect, there needed to be a change in the priesthood. And with this change, there also came a change in the Mosaic Law: “For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well” (Hebrews 7:12). Under the Old Covenant, priests were appointed by lineage; they had to come from the tribe of Levi. But Jesus, the new High Priest, comes from the tribe of Judah which had no connection to the altar (Hebrews 7:13–14).

This break from tradition isn't an accident. In his divine wisdom and decree, God ordained for the priesthood and the Mosaic Law to be temporary until the permanent priesthood and covenantal relationship was established through Christ. Jesus’s priesthood doesn’t rely on genealogical descent but on the “power of an indestructible life” (v. 16). The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 110:4: “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek.” This verse shows how God ordained for Jesus’ eternal priesthood to replace the Levitical priesthood before it ever existed. The law made nothing perfect and did not offer hope. A sinful people could never fulfill the law, and there was no hope of salvation in one’s own works since to break the law in one point is to break the law completely. The law was never meant to save, and the old priesthood was never meant to reconcile people back to God in a perfect way.

But Jesus established a new covenant and a new priesthood. This new covenant is established by an oath, and not just any oath, but by God himself (Psalm 110:4). Because the promise of this new covenant rests upon God, it does not depend upon sinful humans who are prone to failure and eventually pass away. Jesus is the guarantor of a better covenant because he is sinless and he continues forever. He is “holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26). This leads to one of the most comforting and life-altering truths in all of Scripture: “He is able to save to the

uttermost those who draw near to God through him, since he always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25).

Take time to really absorb that truth. Christ saves to the uttermost. Not just a part of us. He doesn’t merely make salvation possible. He secures it completely. Jesus isn’t a distant figure who offered his life as a sacrifice and that was it. He is our High Priest and King who is alive and continually intercedes for us. The Son of God stands before the Father in the throne room, bearing your name and your needs, and intercedes for you. He knows your struggles, your sins, your fears, your needs, your hopes, your disappointments, and he brings them all before the Father to intercede for you. Even when we feel like our prayers fall silent or insufficient before the Father, we have an advocate who perfectly intercedes for us. His prayers are stronger than our failures. And because Christ saves to the uttermost, we can draw near to God through him and approach God with confidence (Hebrews 4:16).

So draw near to him today, with confidence, resting not upon your own performance but on the finished and perfect work of Christ for you.

The Main Point

Jesus is our High Priest. His eternal priesthood brings about a new and perfect covenant. Through his once-for-all sacrifice and his unceasing intercession for us, we are made right with God and able to approach God with confidence through Christ’s finished work.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Genesis 14:17-20 – Melchizedek blesses Abraham; Abraham gives him a tenth of everything.
- Psalm 110 – A prophetic psalm declaring Jesus’ eternal priesthood and victorious reign at God’s right hand.
- Isaiah 9:6-7 – Isaiah prophecies the birth of the Messiah, titles he will be called by, and that his eternal reign will bring justice, righteousness, and peace.
- Matthew 22:41-46 – Jesus challenges the Pharisees by citing Psalm 110 and asking how the Messiah can be both David’s son and Lord, revealing the Messiah’s divine nature as a king and a priest.
- Luke 22:31-32 – Jesus tells Peter that he has prayed that his faith would not fail and he would not be taken by Satan.
- John 17 – Jesus prays to the Father for his people to have unity and be sanctified in truth.
- Romans 8:34 – “Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died—more than that, who was raised—who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.”

- Hebrews 9:24 – “For Christ has entered, not into holy places made with hands, which are copies of the true things, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.”
- 1 John 2:1-6 – Christ is our advocate with the Father and the propitiation for our sins.

Week 10

Hebrews 8:1-13 – The High Priest Of A Better Covenant

By Bruce Mullins

Introduction

One thing I struggle with is change. It does not matter if it's a good change or bad one. Anytime there is big change in my life, I tend to get anxious, stressed, and in an overall bad mood. Even the changes that I know are positive in my life, such as getting married, having kids, buying a nicer home, getting a new pet, or making larger purchases have all at one point or another put me in this mood. The good news is after a few days of processing everything I am back to normal, realizing the change is for the better. While reading Hebrews 8, I kept thinking how small these changes in my life truly are compared to the glorious change that came about because of Jesus' sacrifice.

Hebrews 8 deals with a huge change in the lives of the Hebrew people, as well as the rest of the world. With Jesus' death on the cross, he paid the price for our sins, and a new covenant was formed between God and believers. This covenant is a better covenant with God, giving believers a closer relationship with the Lord and a permanent remedy for sin. The New Covenant was also a radical change for the Hebrews because it made the old Mosaic Covenant and the Law obsolete. When thinking about how I process big changes in my life, I can see where even though the New Covenant is so much better, the Hebrews likely struggled with such a monumental change. Hebrews 8 goes into detail about Jesus' role as heavenly high priest and how replacing the Old Covenant was part of God's ultimate plan for the redemption of His people.

Read Hebrews 8:1-13 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. How was Jesus' role as heavenly high priest different from the role of the Levitical priest under the Old Covenant? How was it similar?
2. The Mosaic Covenant and the Law were such a large part of the Hebrews' life. How do you think the Hebrews felt about the New Covenant replacing the Old Covenant?
3. How does the New Covenant through Jesus change the relationship believers are able to have with God?

Commentary

Hebrews 8:1-6

The first half of chapter 8 (verses 1-6) of Hebrews focuses on Jesus' role as the heavenly high priest. The author is pointing out how Jesus is a superior high priest than the earthly Levitical priests under the Law. Jesus is an eternal high priest whose perfect sacrifice on the cross has allowed for a new and better covenant between God and His people.

Jesus' priestly ministry takes place not on earth but in God's presence in His Holy Place. Jesus' place is at the right hand of God (v.1) and his tabernacle is the true tent that was set up by God (v. 2). Jesus is both fully human and fully God, and because of this, he reigns from Heaven in the presence of God. The earthly tabernacle and later the temple served as a way for God to dwell with his people on earth. They were always meant to be temporary until the appointed time that Jesus was to come. Jesus, as our heavenly high priest, is permanent and eternal, accomplishing a solution for sin so that His people can one day also dwell eternally in the presence of God.

High priests were required to make sacrifices to God, and it was necessary for the priest to have something to offer (v. 3). For the earthly priests, these offerings came in the form of blood sacrifices as an atonement for the sins of the people. Animal sacrifices were messy, requiring the slaughter of an animal, its blood to be thrown on the altar, and the body to be burned on the altar. Daily sacrifices were continually necessary as part of the atonement for the sins of the people of Israel. "The 'something' Christ offered was infinitely more costly and effective than the gifts and sacrifices presented by the Aaronic priests. Their offerings consisted of animals' blood; our High Priest sacrificed his own body and has brought his own blood into the heavenly Most Holy Place."²⁵ Where the earthly priests' sacrifices were only a temporary atonement for sin, Jesus provided a perfect sacrifice that allows us permanent forgiveness of sins.

In verse 5, the author explains that the earthly priests and the tabernacle were only a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things." In Exodus 25:40, Moses was instructed to make the tabernacle just as it was shown to him on the mountain. No matter how well the tabernacle (and later the temple) were built and how closely God's instructions were followed, it would always be just an earthly copy of the heavenly Holy Place. Christ resides in the true and perfect heavenly Holy Place, and as the heavenly high priest, he is far superior to anything on earth.

The first half of Hebrews 8 ends with verse 6 explaining that Jesus, the heavenly high priest, through his offering, brought the New Covenant that was

²⁵ Dennis E. Johnson, "Hebrews," in *Hebrews-Revelation*, ed. Iain M. Duguid, James M. Hamilton Jr., and Jay Sklar, vol. XII, *ESV Expository Commentary* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 112.

better than the Old Covenant under the Law. At the Last Supper, Jesus said the shedding of his blood would create a new covenant (see Matt 26:28, Mark 14:24, and Luke 22:20). Paul beautifully explains how the New Covenant is better in Romans 8:2-3 when he says: “For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do.”

Hebrews 8:7-13

The second half of Hebrews 8 (verses 7-13) moves from Jesus’ role as heavenly high priest to focusing on the new and better covenant that believers have through Jesus. The author starts by pointing out that the Old Covenant was not faultless (v. 7). This is not saying that the Old Covenant was wrong or a mistake, but rather that the Old Covenant was a temporary atonement for sin, pointing to the solution that is found in Jesus. The Old Covenant is part of the redemptive history the Bible tells, starting all the way back in Genesis 3:15, and points toward the future salvation that ultimately found in Christ. “God’s purposes in the old covenant [was] to inform his people of the moral law, to convict them of sin, and to establish the pattern of sacrifice, priesthood, and the promise of salvation that is fulfilled in Christ.”²⁶

The author then quotes Jeremiah 31:31-34 a passage prophesying the coming of a new covenant that God would have with his people. This is the New Covenant through Jesus’ sacrifice on the cross and explains how the New Covenant is different from the old. There are several promises made with the New Covenant. These include the following: God will write His laws on our hearts, His people will know Him, and He will provide eternal forgiveness of sins.

God promises that He “will put my laws into their minds, and write them on their hearts[.]” (v. 10) The Old Covenant laws were written statutes that are external to the people of Israel. The New Covenant writes God’s law on a believer’s heart and mind. “God circumcises the hearts of his people in accordance with the promises of Deut 30:6 [...] God’s commands are not an onerous burden but reflect the desires of their hearts since God has imprinted the law upon their hearts.”²⁷ In 2 Corinthians 3:3, Paul explains it this way: “And you show that you are a letter from Christ delivered by us, written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts.” Through a person’s faith in Christ, God changes the heart of a believer, internally allowing the work of sanctification to begin in a believer’s life.

The New Covenant also promises that God’s people will know him from the least to the greatest (v. 11). Under the Old Covenant, access to God’s holy presence was extremely limited. The Holy of Holies was the innermost part of

²⁶ ESV Study Bible 2373.

²⁷ Thomas R. Schreiner, *Hebrews*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander, Thomas R. Schreiner, and Andreas J. Köstenberger, *Evangelical Biblical Theology Commentary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2021), 251–52.

the temple and was where God's presence dwelled on earth. Only Levitical priests were able to access this area by going through the veil and only for very specific and limited reasons. The New Covenant has changed this access and can be seen in Mark 15:38. When Jesus breathed his last breath, the veil in the temple tore from top to bottom. With Jesus' sacrifice, the veil tore, and there is no longer separation from God's presence.

The final part of the New Covenant promises that God will be merciful toward our sins and will remember them no more (v.12). Under the Old Covenant, atonement was made for sins through sacrifices, but this was only temporary. Sacrifices had to be continually made as the people continued to sin. In contrast, Jesus' perfect sacrifice allows for a genuine and lasting forgiveness for believers.

Finally, Hebrews 8 ends with the author explaining that because we have the New Covenant the Old Covenant is now obsolete (v.13). We are no longer bound by the Law in the way the people of Israel were in the Old Testament. Under the Law, we were slaves to sin, but through Jesus we have freedom from sin. Paul again explains this better than I can in Romans 3:

For by works of the law no human being will be justified in his sight, since through the law comes knowledge of sin. But now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the law, although the Law and the Prophets bear witness to it—the righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all who believe. For there is no distinction: for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood, to be received by faith. This was to show God's righteousness, because in his divine forbearance he had passed over former sins. It was to show his righteousness at the present time, so that he might be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus (Romans 3:20-26).

The Main Point

Jesus is our Heavenly High Priest who was able to do what the Levitical priest under the Old Covenant could not do. Through Jesus' perfect sacrifice he created a New Covenant with God that allows believers back to God's Holy presence.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Jeremiah 31:31-34 – Old Testament promise of the New Covenant
- Deuteronomy 30:6 – Circumcision of the heart
- Ezekiel 36:26 – Promise of a new heart of flesh
- Luke 22:20 – Jesus and the New Covenant
- Romans 7:12 – The Law is holy and good

- Romans 10:4 – Christ is the end of the Law

Week 11

Hebrews 9 – Purification by Means of His Own Blood

By Michael Green

Introduction

I recently attended the summer graduation ceremony at Shelton State Community College. That's a pretty regular occurrence given my professional role at that institution. However, every once in a while, despite familiarity, poignant reminders present themselves. At the very outset of this ceremony as graduates proceeded into the gymnasium, someone yelled out to one of the graduates. That isn't particularly unusual when diplomas are being awarded, but at this portion of the ceremony it was rather jarring. In curiosity, I looked around to see if I could find out where it came from, and I saw that it came from an older gentleman, who I perceived to be a grandfather old enough to have a granddaughter participating in the ceremony.

But, immediately following his shouting out, I noticed that he put his face into his hands and hunched over a bit. It quickly became apparent that he was crying, weeping even. He appeared to be overcome with a pride that couldn't be contained and projected a profound thankfulness that his grandchild was getting to participate in a ceremony like this, having accomplished a tremendous achievement in his view. I don't know this, but it screamed of a grandparent of a first-generation college student, a grandparent who possibly didn't have that opportunity and couldn't have envisioned such an opportunity being available to his grandchildren. I am certainly assuming now, but it felt like maybe he had not been able to envision his progeny *belonging* in an environment designated for celebrating academic achievement in a collegiate setting.

I am probably projecting that sentiment due to his visceral reaction and the fact that I have run into that sentiment many, many times, especially when teaching developmental mathematics in a college setting. On many occasions, I sensed a student's discomfort in a higher education learning environment, their timidity in asking questions, especially to an authority figure in a content area in which they feel inadequate. Students wrestling with those feelings often feel like they don't *belong*. In their mind, there are glaring inadequacies in their knowledge and background that prevent them from *belonging* in that setting. Research has shown that what is often most helpful in addressing this is for them to have an advocate in that setting that encourages them, provides helpful resources, and helps them stay the course.

In the temple in Jerusalem, as prescribed in the Law, there was an innermost sanctum, a special place where the presence of God dwelt uniquely with his people. To enter in unwarranted was certain death. As a matter of fact, only one man on Earth could enter, and not based on his own merit but on a very specific set of rules that assigned him that duty and provided ritualistic cleansing procedures to be performed before and after entering the Most Holy Place once a year. A huge curtain separated it from an outer area, the Holy Place, that was also set apart with access granted only to priests performing their duties for the Lord.

The picture painted to the ordinary person would have been clear: we don't *belong* in there. God's presence is dangerous to us due to our sin, and we don't *belong* in the presence of God. But the good news detailed in Hebrews 9 is that Christ has entered into the unabated presence of God in his true heavenly temple and offered himself for the sins of mankind. If you trust in Him, you are now a temple of the Holy Spirit, the very Spirit of God living in you. There is no longer a divide between you and God. You *belong* in his presence; you *belong* to him.

Read Hebrews 9 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. If you were asked to explain to a lost person what it means that believers are temples of the Holy Spirit, what would you communicate?
 2. Share a praise of the Lord that has welled up in you as Hebrews has shown us how gracious the Lord is to have provided such strikingly clear pictures in the Law that were always meant to point to Christ and have now found their ultimate fulfillment in Christ. Doesn't this help to greatly illuminate what all Christ has accomplished on our behalf?!?
 3. Describe the comfort found in knowing that believers have a Great High Priest, Jesus, who is at the right hand of the Father and continually intercedes for us.
 4. In the cross, Christ dealt with our sin in totality. What obstacles do you face in living in that truth continually? What steps do you take to remind yourself of it?
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Commentary

Before digging into Chapter 9 of Hebrews, I want to point out that the last verse of Chapter 8 and the first verse of Chapter 10 serve as really great bookends to what the author is expressing in Chapter 9. Hebrews 8 ends with the verse below.

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 (Hebrew 8:13).

The idea that the Old Covenant has been fulfilled and the New Covenant has been issued in by the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus is a central theme of Hebrews 9. Much of this is accomplished by contrasting the specific acts and aspects of Christ as our Great High Priest to the ritualistic sacrificial system found in the Law.

The first verse of Chapter 10, provided below, contrasts the ideas of *shadow* versus *true form*.

For since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities, it can never, by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year, make perfect those who draw near (Hebrews 10:1).

The Law and, for the purposes of our discussion on Chapter 9, specifically the rituals contained therein, was a *shadow* of the *true form of these realities* that are found in Christ alone. He fulfilled every jot and every tittle of the Law (Matthew 5:17-18). The sacrificial system prescribed in the Law is a *shadow*; Christ is the *substance*.

9:1-14

Delving into this concept, the author begins by discussing various regulations, ceremonies, and elements found within proper worship as prescribed in the Law—the *shadow*. God is holy, and he alone dictates what constitutes worship that is pleasing to him. At this stage of redemptive history when Israel was under the Law, this involved setting up first a mobile tabernacle, and later a permanent temple in Jerusalem, built to very concrete, detailed specifications with varying important artifacts that are “set apart,” the primary meaning of the word “holy” in scripture (e.g. the ark of the covenant, Aaron’s staff that budded, etc.). The temple was segmented to reflect ever increasing restrictions as you moved closer to where God’s special presence dwelt with his people within the “Holy of Holies” or “Most Holy Place,” a locale different from any other place on Planet Earth, completely unique to Israel. Entrance to the Holy of Holies was guarded by a very large veil (curtain) that was approximately 60 feet high, 30 feet wide, and 4 inches thick, handmade with embroidery. Let’s just say it wasn’t a shower curtain from Lowe’s. It would have been a dramatic indicator of God’s otherness. Only one person, the designated high priest, goes in there. And he only does that one day a year on the Day of Atonement. The curtain then stands as a poignant symbol of the separation of God from man due to man’s sin and the holiness of God.

To further illustrate this point and harken back to the idea of *shadow* versus the *true form of the realities*, in the Holy of Holies there are replicas of

cherubim (angelic creatures) hovering over the mercy seat. Isaiah tells us that, in reality, there are seraphim designated to worship God continually in a very specific way: in the true heavenly temple of the Lord, as he is seated on this throne, they call out to one another saying, “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory!” (Isaiah 6:3b). R.C. Sproul explores Isaiah’s vision as he does a deep dive into the concept of God’s holiness in his book *The Holiness of God*. Below are some of his thoughts.

The Old Testament Jew also had different techniques to indicate emphasis. One such device was the method of repetition.

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To mention something three times in succession is to elevate it to the superlative degree, to attach to it emphasis of superimportance.

⋮

Only once in sacred Scripture is an attribute of God elevated to the third degree. Only once is a characteristic of God mentioned three times in succession. The Bible says that God is holy, holy, holy. Not that He is merely holy or even holy, holy. He is holy, holy, holy. The Bible never says that God is love, love, love; or mercy, mercy, mercy; or wrath, wrath, wrath; or justice, justice, justice. It does say that He is holy, holy, holy, that the whole earth is full of his glory (pp. 24-25).

Sproul goes on to say that when God is referred to as “holy,” Scripture is communicating that he is “transcendently separate” (p. 36). The holiness of God is a “transcendent purity” (p. 37) and “the holy fills us with a kind of dread” (p. 41).

All of this would have been communicated by that massive physical and metaphorical veil, separating God from man. “By this the Holy Spirit indicates that the way into the holy places is not yet opened as long as the first section is still standing” (Hebrews 9:8). But, remember, the earthly temple, the elements, the rituals, the design, and the veil are *shadows*, with the true *substance* being realized in Christ. The ceremonies never had the power to cleanse; they were meant to point us to the true “time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:10) accomplished by the life, death, and resurrection of Christ whose body is spoken of metaphorically as the veil. His body, sacrificed for our sins is the perfect sacrifice that allows us to enter into God’s presence and be welcomed as a child of God. This is spoken of beautifully in Hebrews 10.

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 (Hebrews 10:19-22).

This obliteration of the divide between man and God, available only through Christ, was divinely, demonstrably depicted at the death of Christ, when the veil was miraculously ripped in two from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51). Those who put their faith in Christ are no longer separated from God; they are in union with him.

Christ, the Son of God, has gone as our human representative into the true heavenly temple, into the unabated presence of the One True God, and offered himself as the perfect, sinless sacrifice necessary to redeem mankind (vv. 11-12). Jesus is an infinitely better priest and sacrifice (the *true form of these realities*) than the priests and sacrifices offered under the Law (the *shadow*). As such, his priestly duty of living a sinless life and offering himself as a sinless substitute that absorbed the penalty for our sin has an infinitely greater impact than the sacrificial system under the Law. Repeatedly under the law, the blood of animals had to be offered by regular men, polluted by their own sin, and served the purpose of ritualistic cleansing but was powerless in actually cleansing the soul of a man. It pointed to the need for a true cleansing that would only come through Jesus, whose one-time sacrifice can “purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God” (v. 14b). The *true form of the realities* is the fulfillment of the *shadow* of those realities. The *substance* is infinitely superior to the *shadow*. This is why in Revelation 5, among many other exclamations of the glory of Christ, the “living creatures and the elders” and “myriads of myriads and thousands of thousands” of angels (Revelation 5:11b) can join in “saying with a loud voice

‘Worthy is the Lamb who was slain,
to receive power and wealth and wisdom and might
and honor and glory and blessing!’” (Revelation 5:12)

9:15-28

Therefore, Jesus’s sacrifice of himself on our behalf issued in a New Covenant that is superior to the Mosaic Covenant in every way. Scripture clearly and repeatedly teaches that the penalty for our sin is death. Sacrifices have been required since the fall when Adam and Eve were covered by the skins of animals because of their new shame in their nakedness as a result of their sin (Genesis 3:21). Even at that time, it should be noted that was a provision provided by the Lord to cover them in their sin and shame, an approach that would continue throughout the atoning sacrifices prescribed in the Law. In other words, it is the Lord who has always graciously provided the appropriate means for atoning for mankind’s sin, culminating in the sacrifice of his son.

The writer of Hebrews points out that the Mosaic Covenant itself was “inaugurated” (v. 18) by blood (see Exodus 24:3-8). The sacrificial system was baked into the Law from the outset. However, the ritualistic purification procedures carried out with regularity were just that: ritualistic. Just as the animal skins provided to Adam and Eve by the Lord had a “covering” effect but no “cleansing” effect, the sacrifices provided by the law had a temporary “covering”

effect but no true “cleansing” effect. They were meant to point to the need for a truly atoning sacrifice that could cleanse us to the uttermost and put us back in a right union with the Lord, which is realized in Jesus’ offering of himself as a sinless sacrifice offered by a sinless Great High Priest.

As our Great High Priest, the perfection of Christ has enabled him to enter not into a man-made temple to offer repetitive sacrifices of animals on our behalf “but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf” (v. 24b). In doing so, “[Jesus] has appeared once and for all at the end of the ages to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself” (v. 26). For those of us that have trusted in Christ, there is no longer an annual reminder of the ongoing presence of our sin and our inability to remedy the situation as found in the Day of Atonement. Evening sacrifices conducted by fallen men on behalf of fallen men are no longer needed. Ritualistic cleansing procedures have no place now. Christ has come, and the Mosaic Covenant is no longer valid. It has served its purpose and found its fulfillment in Christ who has issued in the New Covenant. In turning to Jesus, repenting of our sin and putting our faith in him, he graciously puts away our sin. We are saved by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone (Ephesians 2:8-9). As beautifully and symbolically represented in the Day of Atonement where one of the two goats is sent away to ritualistically carry the sins of Israel to a deserted, arid place never to return (the *shadow*), Christ has now taken on the sins of the believer, never to return (the *substance*). His one-time sacrifice has put away our sin, past, present, and future, once and for all, based on his merit and not our own. And, when we see him again, he won’t be coming back “to deal with sin but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him” (v. 28b). Praise be to God who so graciously provided the Mosaic Covenant as a teacher, full of rituals and symbols that pointed to his ultimate provision of his own son, Jesus. Christ fulfilled every jot and tittle of the Law, making it obsolete due to his superior divine nature, his superior sacrifice of himself, and his superior office as our Great High Priest.

The Main Point

Christ is our Great High Priest, who entered the true heavenly temple of God to offer the one-time sacrifice of himself as the perfect, unblemished Lamb of God to pay for the sins of his people. In doing so, he has reconciled to God those of us who put our faith in him, obliterating the separation between God and man caused by sin, making us true children of God in union with the Lord. As such, his name is the name above all names, and he is worthy of honor and glory and praise.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Isaiah 6 – Isaiah has a vision of the Lord.

- Matthew 5:17-20 – Christ came not to abolish the Law but to fulfill it.
- Matthew 27:45-56 – The veil is torn in two from top to bottom at the death of Jesus.
- Revelation 12 – The Lamb of God who was slain is worshiped.
- Exodus 24:1-8 – The Law is given to Israel, and the covenant is inaugurated by blood.
- Ephesians 2:1-10 – We are saved by grace through faith in Jesus, and this is a gift of God.
- Leviticus 16 – The Day of Atonement is prescribed.

Week 12

Hebrews 10:1-18 – A Sacrifice One Time, Once And For All

By Spencer Knight

Introduction

Growing up I loved watching the Atlanta Braves on TBS. One of my favorite Braves of all-time is Jeff Blauser. Six year old Spencer thought that Blauser had the coolest flip up glasses and that was enough. As much as I loved watching Blauser, ultimately Blauser was a decent hitter for a middle infielder and a defensive liability. In 1996 a young Larry “Chipper” Jones was introduced and Jeff Blauser faded into obscurity. In sports, we often hear about athletes who are “good enough for now” but are ultimately replaceable. Temporary fixes and stopgaps are part of every season, every roster. It’s a constant reminder that nothing lasts forever in this world—success, solutions, or even the people we count on. The writer of Hebrews presents the Old Testament sacrificial system in much the same way: as a temporary, incomplete provision pointing toward something or someone greater.

Hebrews 10 invites us to reflect on the futility of repeated sacrifices that could never truly deal with sin, and to rejoice in the once-for-all, perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Just as an MVP replaces a placeholder player for good, Jesus’ sacrifice forever replaced the old system, offering not only forgiveness but transformation and direct access to God.

Read Hebrews 10:1-18 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. What does the repeated nature of the Old Testament sacrifices (v.1-4) teach us about the seriousness of sin and humanity’s inability to deal with it on our own?
2. In verses 5-10, how does Jesus fulfill what the Old Testament sacrifices could not accomplish? Why is it significant that His sacrifice was both voluntary and final?
3. Verses 11-14 contrast the standing posture of earthly priests with Jesus sitting at the right hand of God. What does this reveal about the completeness of Jesus’ work?
4. The New Covenant promise in verses 15-18 speaks of God’s Law written

on hearts and our sins remembered no more. How does this give you confidence in your standing before God today?

5. Do you ever find yourself trying to “earn” forgiveness or favor with God through actions or rituals? How does this passage invite you to rest in what Christ has already done?
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Commentary

Hebrews 10:1-18 serves as both a conclusion to the argument of Hebrews 7–9 and a transition into the final application chapters. The central theme is the inadequacy of the old sacrificial system and the sufficiency of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice.

The author begins by describing the Law as “a shadow of the good things to come” (v.1). The repetition of sacrifices year after year could never fully cleanse sin or perfect the worshiper. As verse 4 plainly states, “it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.” These sacrifices were temporary, pointing to the true, ultimate sacrifice of Jesus.

As Peter O’Brien notes in his book *Letter to the Hebrews*, “The ineffectiveness of the Levitical sacrifices is shown by the fact that they needed to be offered ‘continually year by year.’ If they had been effective in providing final cleansing from sin, they would have ceased to be offered” (O’Brien, 2010, p. 344). Their repetition testified not to their sufficiency but to their incompleteness.

Verses 5-10 quote Psalm 40:6-8, placing these words in the mouth of Christ. The passage highlights that God ultimately desired obedience and wholehearted devotion rather than external ritual. Jesus fulfills this in both His perfect life and His willingness to offer Himself as the final sacrifice, accomplishing what no animal sacrifice ever could: true, lasting atonement. George Guthrie reflects, “In offering himself in obedience to the will of God, Christ did away with the old sacrificial system and established a new way of access to God. His sacrifice is presented as both voluntary and final, fully sufficient for sanctification” (Guthrie, 1998, p. 332).

The imagery in verses 11-14 is especially vivid. Earthly priests remained standing, offering sacrifices repeatedly because their work was never finished. In contrast, after offering Himself, Jesus “sat down at the right hand of God”—a posture of completion and authority. O’Brien highlights this beautifully: “Whereas the Levitical priesthood was marked by the constant activity of standing, Christ’s sitting at God’s right hand signals the finality of his work of atonement and his enthronement as messianic king and priest” (O’Brien, 2010, p. 349).

Finally, verses 15-18 revisit the promises of the New Covenant first quoted in Hebrews 8 (from Jeremiah 31:31-34). Through the Holy Spirit, God writes His law on our hearts and remembers our sins no more. No further sacrifice is needed.

Theological Takeaway: This passage proclaims that salvation is entirely the work of God through Christ. It exposes any lingering belief that we might earn or maintain God's favor through religious activity. The good news is that forgiveness is full, final, and freely given through Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice.

The Main Point

The old sacrificial system was never able to fully deal with sin—it pointed ahead to Christ's once-for-all offering. Through Jesus, God has fully forgiven His people, written His law on their hearts, and made them perfect in His sight. Nothing more is needed.

A Few Relevant Scriptures

- Leviticus 16 – The Day of Atonement, which foreshadowed the perfect sacrifice of Christ.
- Psalm 40:6-8 – The quoted psalm demonstrating that God desires obedience over sacrifices.
- Jeremiah 31:31-34 – The promise of the new covenant, which is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus.
- Romans 3:21-26 – Righteousness comes through faith in Jesus' atoning work.
- Hebrews 7:23-28 – Jesus as the eternal High Priest offering a once-for-all sacrifice.
- Romans 8:1-4 – There is no condemnation for those in Christ because God did what the law could not.

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