

Preachers' Gathering 2018

Preaching Hebrews

Introduction

and

Sermon Outlines

Derek Newton

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Preachers' Gathering 2018

Preaching Hebrews

Introduction,

Sermon Material and Notes

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Sermon: Hebrews 1:1 – 2:4

The perfect work of Christ (1:1-4)

The writer opens his letter with a three-fold shocker of a statement: there is a God; that God has spoken; that God has spoken to humanity supremely and finally in and through His Son, Jesus Christ. A total stunner of a claim. It's the essence of counter-cultural, politically incorrect arrogance guaranteed to turn off many Western, postmodern audiences in 2018! The writer then expands his claim through the rest of the letter, namely that the Word of God **reveals, redeems and renews** human life, ready for eternity! The world screams back at the writer, 'How dare you make such an outrageous assertion? On whose authority do you make such a shocking claim? What are the qualifications of a Son who you claim was this world's final mouthpiece of God?

Our author responds with a dense and detailed argument in a single sentence lasting 4 verses, followed by 10 more verses, giving his readers and ourselves the ultimate Christology in a nutshell and showing why the Son was *qualified* to reveal, redeem and renew life. This is central to the whole letter and even on the basis of statistics alone, this issue of the Son's qualifications demands our attention – the adjective 'better' is used 13 times in Hebrews to compare Christ and his new order with the old one!

- a) Christ has been appointed 'heir of all things' (1:2). Linked to Ps 2:7-8, this grants the nations and the ends of the earth to Christ ie. His ownership of the entire cosmos (2:5) has been inaugurated and will be consummated at the end of the age. Christ has the right to rule His cosmos with all power and authority!
- b) Christ is the appointed agent of the Father for the creation and final subjection of the whole universe (1:2). A task of mind-boggling proportions – I'm told that light travels at 300,000 kilometers per second, but to cross the universe that journey of light will take 92 billion years to complete.
- c) Christ was and is God incarnate in all His glory and He upholds, sustains and controls this vast universe by 'the word of His power' (1:3a) towards its designed end. As the cosmos was created by God's Word through the Son, so it is sustained by that same powerful Word. As we look at Christ, we see God's glory and His revealed person and presence.

d) Christ was and still is the perfect sacrifice for sin (1:3b). ‘After he had provided purification for sins...’ A short, sharp statement of enormous significance. We have words available for human communication but in a real sense, words don’t take us far in trying to grasp the enormity of this brief third of a verse, which is why our writer expands these 7 English words into a total theology! In this universe only Christ is qualified and entitled to be our great High Priest. We speak of heroes and heroines ‘paying the ultimate price’. Here was the inexplicable and incomprehensible sacrifice, the ultimate oxymoron – the human impossibility of being a ‘crucified Messiah’. A permanent sacrifice which leads us, freely forgiven, into the very presence of the living and eternal Godhead.

e) Christ ‘sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven’ (1:3c). Christ died, was raised and was exalted to occupy His place at God’s right hand. He alone was qualified to take up this position. Rooted in Ps 110, Christ is now occupying His past, present and eternal position as the one and only perfect mediator between God and humanity in His role as **Prophet, Priest and King**.

Writer’s Conclusion - Christ is superior to all others.

How superior is Jesus? (1:5-14)

The past prophetic voices show just how superior. Lest there be any doubt whatsoever about the superiority of Christ over and above the angels (1:4), our writer now repeats, reiterates and reinforces his growing mountain of OT evidence for Christ’s supreme position of authority and governance above the status of the angels. In 1:1-4, the writer of ‘Hebrews’ has laid a strong theological foundation for the entire letter – it is God-centred with 68 references to *theos*; it focuses on God’s exalted Son; it highlights the Word of God and its communication. Theology is the foundation for practice but we need to be so careful here that biblical text and context must be the foundation for our theology! Ultimately, the Word and Spirit will change lives. Those lives need to be cleansed by the risen and exalted Christ.

So the writer builds on his intro in Chapter 1 to expand the vision of Christ that is being laid before the readers. 1:5-14, with its many OT prophetic references, further throws the spotlight onto five themes:

a) in 1:5, the Son is superior because of His unique relationship to the Father. Because of this, Christ holds a rank, position and power that is over every other name or being in the universe. Resurrection, exaltation, enthronement.

- b) in 1:6-7, the angels, respected by Jews, do worship the Son and are servants for God, yet ultimately they are inferior to the divine Son who is pre-eminent in the Church and cosmos.
- c) in 1:8-12, the Son is the anointed, eternal King (1:8-9) *and* the builder and terminator of the cosmos (1:10-12). He holds the supreme and superior authority, eternality and divinity. Father, Son and Spirit are one God. A Trinity of mutually related Persons, but a unity of equal essence (Council of Constantinople). Christ rules, dealing with sin and upholding righteousness.
- d) in 1:13 comes the climactic claim that only this Son, this Christ, has the right to be seated in power and victory at God's right hand. Every enemy of the Godhead will be defeated and brought into complete subjection to the Lord Jesus Christ.
- e) in 1:14, He it is who will usher in a transformed earth and heaven, but meanwhile He will use angels to serve us, the inheritors of Christ's salvation.

Both author and readers of this letter were very conscious of the intense reality of spiritual warfare and in any disintegrating culture, nation or society, the overwhelming need is for a strong focus on authority and accountability. Our own culture in 2018 is denying this need, yet at the same time crying out for it! It is this divine and human Christ, our great High Priest, who will sustain us as we persevere in a world hostile to Christ and the living out of the Christian life. Our writer is now moving to the heart of his exhortation thus far – God has no mediator or message that is greater or higher than Christ and His gospel.

Five truths about the Son in 1:1-4, reinforced and strengthened by five truths in 1:5-14, yet all of this is sandwiched between 1:2 ‘he has spoken’ and 2:1-4 ‘we must listen’. *Why such a protracted and detailed Christology??*

The Proof of the Power of Jesus – our ability to persevere (2:1-4)

- a) Caution – (2:1) ‘Therefore we must *pay more careful attention* to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away’. Here is a major reason for the writer’s extended Christology over 14 verses! *Because* of Christ’s supremacy, our author pleads with the community to keep them on the straight and narrow. To push them towards what will move them forward in their faith in, and following of, Christ. God’s final Word is in His Son. The gospel of Christ consists of truths and teachings that are of such importance as to be a matter of life and death. The Greek word *dei* is

used here, indicating absolute necessity. They must not shift away from the word of the Son (1:2). That Word is the message of the gospel. But why is listening such a necessity?

- b) Condemnation – 2:2-3a., *Because* there will be judgment for those who ignore this salvation! The Law was mediated through angels, yet breaking of that Law carried specific and serious penalties. If so, then ignoring the salvation brought in and with Christ would carry greater condemnation. The writer feared that the community would then fail to confess Christ publicly and the impact of the gospel would be severely diffused.
- c) Confirmation – 2:3b-4. The gospel had come in and with Christ, but our author and his readers had heard gospel testimony from reliable witnesses. On top of that, though, God himself had confirmed the gospel and supremacy of Christ supernaturally through signs, wonders, miracles and Holy Spirit giftings. The great acts of God validated the truth of the Word of the gospel. Our writer reminds his readers of the power of this gospel and the majesty of Christ's Person and Work. He wants to reignite the Christian faith and life of this struggling and suffering community of believers as they face persecution.

Our writer – and therefore we as preachers – need to focus graciously but firmly on the call to authority and accountability. We must present a God who actually does have the right to rule over us and to expect our submissive accountability. Grace must be taught but so must obedience, works and lives of holiness in response to grace! 'Drifting away' refers here to Christians who drift away from the message itself, rather than necessarily from God Himself. 'Escape' is not clearly defined and we need to weigh the points at which our writer is ambiguous in his intended meaning.

It is surely the writer's aim to give his readers such a mighty vision of God that they will see Christ's sufficiency to keep them, guard them, provide for them and sustain them, even in the direst of persecution circumstances they will face. If we hold firmly to the message of salvation, we can know that we stand solidly in that continuous line of Jesus, Apostles and God. Yes, Hebrews is a theological letter, centred on the Person and Work of Christ, BUT it is also a strong letter of pastoral exhortation to live out a transformed life by and in Christ. We are to persevere to the very end in the faith and faithfulness of Christ Himself.

Summaries of Each Chapter

CHAPTER 1

God has spoken through His prophets but now supremely through Christ. This Christ is heir of all things and creator/sustainer of the universe. Christ made purification for our sins and is now glorified in heaven. Christ is superior to God's angels – see the evidence 1:5-7 rooted in Ps 2:7; 2 Sam 7:14; 1 Chron. 17:13; Deut. 32:43; Ps 104:4. The Son is set high above all God's beings – 1:8-13, rooted in Ps 45:6,7 and the unchanging God in 1:10-11, rooted in Ps 102:25-27. The Son sits at the right hand of the Father and reigns supreme over all the enemies of God – 1:13, rooted in Ps 110:1. The angels are ministering spirits sent to serve the inheritors of salvation (1:14).

CHAPTER 2

If the message spoken by angels was binding and violations received punishment, then we *must* listen to what we have heard and act according to it, so that we don't drift away! The evidence is in the Word, in the words of Christ, in signs, wonders and miracles, and in the gifts of the Spirit, given according to God's Will (2:1-4). All things in the universe are subject to Christ, even though just now, it might not seem like it. He has been exalted because of His voluntary humbling of Himself in death (2:5-9). We are His children and brothers, whether male or female, having been made so through His suffering by death on the Cross (2:10-13). Christ had to become human in order to redeem us from the fear and power of death and Satan. He made atonement for our sin and because of His suffering and temptation, He is now able to help us who are tempted (2:14-18).

CHAPTER 3

Therefore, fix your thoughts on this Jesus, apostle and high priest! He, like Moses, was faithful to God, but Jesus is faithful as a son over God's house. We *are* that house if we cling to our courage and hope! (3:1-6). This is followed immediately by a strong warning from the Holy Spirit against unbelief, based on a section of Psalm 95:7-11 and presented in Heb 3:7-11. We have a share in Christ if we persevere to the very end and don't turn away from the living God. Encourage each other not to be deceived by the sin of unbelief and learn from the lesson of Israel of old who were beset with unbelief, disobedience and a failure to enter the promised land (3:12-19).

CHAPTER 4

Therefore, because the promise of entering His rest still stands, we must ensure we don't fall short of it. The promise of 'rest' has been there since God finished His work of creation but we need to respond to God with *faith*, so as not to fail and fall short of inheriting the promised blessings of the Lord (4:1-5). Some will enter His rest but some who had the gospel preached to them formerly will be disobedient and will fail yet again to hear the Lord's voice, preferring instead to harden their hearts (Ps 95:7-8). They failed to find rest under Joshua, but God still had a further day of rest – a Sabbath-rest. If we enter God's rest we also rest from our own work, just like God did from His work. We must make *every* effort to enter that rest, rather than fall by our disobedience (4:6-13). God sees *everything*, His Word is living and active and we will be finally accountable to Him (4:12-13). *Therefore*, because we have a *Great High Priest* – Jesus the Son of God – who has gone through the heavens, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For Jesus is sympathetic with our weaknesses, He having been tempted like us, but without falling into sin. *Therefore*, we must approach the throne of grace with confidence, so we can receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need (4:14-16).

CHAPTER 5

High priests are chosen from men to represent them in issues related to God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. Because high priests are human and weak, they must offer sacrifices for their own sins as well as for the sins of the people. Because high priests are weak, they are gentle with weak and straying people (5:1-3).

High priests are not self-appointed; they must, like Aaron, be called by God Himself. Indeed, Christ was called by God into this priesthood in the order of Melchizedek. This is recorded by the writer of Hebrews in 5:4-10, but anchors this record in Ps 2:7 and Ps 110:4. Jesus offered prayers and shed tears to the Father who could save Him from death. God heard Him as Jesus submitted reverently. Though a son, he learned obedience from what He suffered and when He had been made perfect, He became the source of the eternal salvation of all who obey Him, designated by God to be high priest in that order of Melchizedek.

In 5:11-13, the writer pauses to reflect that his readers are still immature – feeding on milk rather than solid food - and therefore unable to teach, failing properly to understand righteousness and good from evil.

CHAPTER 6

Therefore, let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and move on to maturity, leaving behind certain basics about Christian faith and practice (6:1-3). The writer then lists a range of Christian experiences which a believer can have and yet still be in a position, if they fall away, of being impossible to be brought back to repentance. The reason is that they would be crucifying Christ all over again and subjecting Him to public disgrace! (6:4-6).

Well-watered land produces crops and receives the blessing of God, but thorny land is worthless and is in danger of being cursed and burned up! (6:7-8).

However, the writer is confident that in the readers' case, there will be things that accompany salvation. God is fair and will recall their works and love. Make your hope sure by persevering in deeds and love right to the very end. Don't be lazy, but rather imitate those who through faith and patience inherit that which has been promised (6:9-12).

Thus, for example, Abraham, after patient waiting, inherited God's blessing and many descendants (6:13-15).

Men swear oaths by someone greater than themselves. God was determined to make clear His unchangeable plan to bless His heirs with His promise, so He confirmed this with an oath. God cannot lie and wants to encourage us in this hope of His. This hope is an anchor. It enters the inner sanctuary behind the curtain, where Jesus entered on our behalf. He has indeed become a high priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek (6:16-20).

CHAPTER 7

In 7:1-10, the writer of Hebrews supplies more information about the previously-mentioned Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He had met Abraham on his return from the defeat of the kings and blessed him. Abraham then gave him a tenth of everything. His name means '*King of righteousness*', but also '*King of Salem*', meaning '*King of peace*'. No father or mother or genealogy or beginning of days or end of life. Like the Son of God, he remains a priest for ever. Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder. The law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people ie their brothers – even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. Melchizedek however did not trace his descent from Levi, but he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises! The lesser person is blessed by the greater – in one case, the tenth is collected by men who died;

but in the other, by him who is declared to be living! It could be said that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

The argument continues and expands in 7:11-22. If perfection could have been achieved through the Levitical priesthood – for on the basis of it the law was given to the people – why was there still need for *another* priest to come, one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? When there was a change of the priesthood, there had to be a change in the law. He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe and no one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. For Christ descended from Judah and Moses had said nothing about priests with regard to that tribe. What we have said is even clearer if another priest like Melchizedek comes along, for Melchizedek has become a priest *not* on the grounds of an ancestry regulation, but rather on the basis of the power of an indestructible life – see Ps 110:4) The former regulation is set aside as weak and useless. A better hope has come, by which we draw near to God. He became a priest with a divine oath (Ps 110:4), namely, that God will not change his mind about the eternal nature of this new priesthood. *Because* of that oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant.

Finally, in 7:23-28, the writer argues that there have been many human priests, all of whom have had their service cut short by death, BUT that Jesus priesthood is permanent *because* He lives for ever. Indeed, Christ can save *completely* because He always lives to intercede for them! This high priest meets our needs – He is holy, exalted *and* set apart from sinners. He does not need to offer daily sacrifice for His own sins and the sins of others! Christ offered sacrifice for their sins *once and for all* when he died on the cross. The law appointed high priests who were weak, but the oath, coming after the Law, appointed the Son who has been made perfect *forever*.

CHAPTER 8

We now indeed do have a high priest who sat down at the right hand of God and who serves in the sanctuary. This is the true tabernacle set up by the Lord, *not* by men (8:1-2).

Each high priest was appointed to offer gifts and sacrifices. If Christ had been on earth he would not have been a priest, for there are high priests on earth who serve at a sanctuary that is actually a prescribed, earthly copy (Mosaic) and shadow of the heavenly one. *But* the ministry Jesus has received is as superior to theirs as the covenant He mediates is superior to the old one. Jesus' ministry is founded on *better* promises (8:3-6).

If the Old Covenant had been sufficient, there would have been no need to set up a new one. God had found fault with the people over their disobedience to the old covenant when He had brought them out of Egypt and *He* then set up a new covenant, by which He would put his laws in their minds and write them on their hearts. He will be their God and they will be His people. No longer will men need to teach men to obey God; rather they will all know the Lord because He will forgive their wickedness and remember their sins no more (8:7-12) – founded on the promise of (Jeremiah 31:31-34).

The Old Covenant will soon disappear, for it is obsolete and is replaced by the new covenant (8:13).

CHAPTER 9

In 9:1-5 the writer of Hebrews describes the setting up of the tabernacle of the first covenant, with its regulations for worship and earthly sanctuary. First room had the lampstand, table and consecrated bread, called ‘the Holy Place’. Behind the second curtain was another room – the Most Holy Place – containing the golden altar of incense and the gold-covered ark of the covenant, the latter containing the gold jar of manna, Aaron’s staff that had budded and the stone tablets of the covenant. Above the ark were the cherubim of the Glory, overshadowing the atonement cover (mercy seat).

Then in 9:6-10, the priests entered the outer room and carried on their ministry regularly. *Only* the High priest entered the inner room but only once a year and with *blood* – an offering for the sins that the High Priest himself and the people had committed in ignorance. In this the Holy Spirit was showing that access to the Most Holy Place had *not yet* been revealed, as long as the first tabernacle was still standing. This is an illustration for the present time, showing that the gifts and sacrifices being offered were *not able* to clear the conscience of the worshipper (v.9). These external regulations – food, drink and ceremonial washings – applied until the time of the new order.

The rest of Chapter 9 deals with the New Tabernacle / New Covenant of the Lord Jesus Christ. The argument runs as follows:

9:11-14 Christ came as High Priest of our salvation and went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle that was not man-made ie not part of *this* creation. He did not enter by animal blood sacrifice. He went into the Most Holy Place by his own shed blood, having obtained eternal redemption (v. 12). Sprinkled animal blood gives outward cleanliness. Christ by the

eternal Spirit offered Himself unblemished to God and cleansed us from acts leading to death, so that we might serve the living God.

9:15 Because of this, Christ mediates a New Covenant so that ‘the called’ will inherit their promised eternity, through his death as a ransom that frees us from sins committed under the Old Covenant.

9:16-21 Only on the death of a person does his/her will become valid and effective. Even the Old Covenant became effective by Moses act of taking the blood of animals and sprinkling the scroll and the people with that blood. His was the blood of the Covenant that God commanded the people to keep. Moses likewise sprinkled the Tabernacle and all the items contained within it that had ceremonial use. Indeed, the law demands that almost everything be cleansed with blood and there is *no* forgiveness without the shedding of blood.

9:23-28 The copies of the heavenly things *had* to be purified with these sacrifices, *but* the heavenly things needed better sacrifices than these! For Christ did not enter a copy – a man-made sanctuary – but rather entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God’s presence. Nor did Christ enter heaven repeatedly, like the annual entry of the High Priest into the Most Holy Place, with animal blood. Then Christ would have had to suffer repeatedly since creation, rather did Christ appear at the end of the age just *once* to ‘do away with sin by the sacrifice of Himself’. Just like humans die once and then face judgment, so Christ was sacrificed once to remove the sins of many. He will appear a second time, not as sin-bearer, but to bring salvation to those awaiting Him.

CHAPTER 10

10:1-4) The law is only a shadow of the great things coming – *not* the realities themselves. Therefore, by the mere repetition of sacrifices year after year, the law can never make perfect those who draw near to worship. If it *had* been able to do this, then the sacrifices would have been stopped and the worshippers would have felt freed from the guilt of their sins! As it is, those animal blood sacrifices simply reminded people annually of their sins because those offerings simply could not take away sins!

10:5-18 *Therefore*, when Christ came.... The writer now quotes then explains Psalm 40:6-8. The law required specified sacrifices and yet the Lord was not pleased with them. Christ had then come to do the will of God. By that very will, we have been made holy by the sacrifice of the body of Jesus

Christ, once for all (10:5-10). The writer then focuses again on the fruitless labours of the priests in repeating sacrifices, but Christ sacrificed himself only once, and sat down at God's right hand. He has made perfect those being sanctified – by His one sacrifice – and He awaits the final submission of His enemies (10:11-14). The Holy Spirit bears witness to God's law being written on hearts and minds and sins being forgotten (10:15-18) – rooted in Jeremiah 31:33, 34.

10:19-25 *Therefore* because we have entered the Most Holy Place through the blood of Christ, by the new way of the curtain – His body – and with a great priest over the house of God, let us *draw near* to God with fulness of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold to this hope, for the God who promised is faithful. Let us seek ways to push each other on towards love and good deeds. Let us carry on meeting together and encouraging each other as that great Day approaches.

10:26-39 If we *continue* to sin after receiving knowledge of the truth, then there is no remaining sacrifice for sin. There remains awful judgment for those who have insulted Christ, who have despised the blood of Christ and who have offended the Spirit of grace. We are aware of the dreadful consequences, based on Deut 32:35,36; Ps 135:14; (10:26-31). Look back to the early days when you suffered pain and loss for your faith because you knew the greatness of your eternal possession. Now hold on to your confidence and *persevere* so that you receive your promises. Christ will not be slow to come, so live on in faith and don't shrink back, so God will not be displeased with you (10:32-38). In 10:39, the writer affirms his confidence that the readers of this letter *will* hold to their faith and be saved.

CHAPTER 11

Verses 1-2 introduce the dominant subject of Chapter 11 – faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. The ancients were commended for this. All the following were '*by faith*':

v.3 The universe was created at God's command, so that what is seen was not made out of what was visible.

v.4 Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain.

v.5-6 Enoch was taken by God without dying! He pleased God. We must approach God, believing that He exists. He rewards seekers.

v.7 Noah believed God and acted – heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

v.8-10 Abraham went, even though he didn't know where he was going to! He lived in a foreign land. He, plus Isaac and Jacob, inherited God's promise.

v.11-12 Old Abraham and barren Sarah conceived, as they held to the faithfulness of Him who had made the promise! They produced many descendants.

vv. 13-16 These people still had faith at the point of their deaths, aliens and strangers at their deaths. They were all looking for a heavenly city, country and home.

v.17-19 God tested Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, even though it was through Isaac's line that God had promised to produce Abraham's descendants. Abraham trusted that God could even raise the dead! Abraham received Isaac back from the dead, figuratively speaking.

v.20 Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau r/e their future.

v.21 Jacob was dying and blessing each of Joseph's sons.

v.22 Joseph, nearing death, spoke of the exodus of Israel from Egypt.

v.23 Moses' parents hid him for 3 months after birth – they saw his special nature.

v.24-28 Moses as an adult refused to be known as son of Pharaoh's daughter. He chose suffering with God's people, rather than enjoy fleeting sin. He preferred disgrace for Christ's sake rather than Egypt because he was looking for his reward. He left Egypt and kept the Passover, seeing the God who is invisible.

v.29 The people passed through the Red Sea, unlike the Egyptians!

v.30 The walls of Jericho fell.

v.31 Rahab, the prostitute, was spared because she welcomed the spies.

vv.32-38 The writer refers then to Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and the prophets gained great victories and escaped death. Some were raised back to life, whilst others were tortured and killed – to await a resurrection. Varied was the form of persecution and suffering, BUT...

vv.39-40 *All* were commended for their faith, yet *none* received what they had been promised. God had planned something better for us, so that only together with us would they be made *perfect*.

CHAPTER 12

12:1-3 Therefore, because we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us *throw off* all hindrances and sins *and run* with perseverance the race set out before us, *fixing our eyes on Jesus*, the author and perfecter of our faith - who bore the cross and sat down at God's right hand. *Consider him* who suffered so much, so that you will not grow weary and give up.

12:4-6 In struggling against sin, you have not yet shed blood. Remember the encouragement of being sons of God: His discipline of His sons proves His love of them. See the root of this in Proverbs 3:11-12.

12:7-13 This theme is taken further as the writer treats hardship and discipline – evidence of our sonship! Every human father disciplines his sons, and this persuades us to surrender to the Father's discipline, so that we might *share in his holiness*. It will seem hard and harsh at the time, but if we accept the training of it, it will yield a harvest of righteousness and peace. *Therefore*, says the writer in 12:12-13, strengthen your arms and knees and make level paths for your feet, so that the lame may not be disabled but rather healed (Prov. 4:26).

12:14-17 Try to live in peace with everyone and be holy, so that you might see the Lord. Make sure no one misses God's grace and don't allow bitterness to sprout and spread. See that all avoid sexual immorality and the sort of godlessness displayed by Esau, who sold his birthright as oldest son, for a meal.

12:18-27 You have not come to a dark and burning mountain that cannot be touched and utters only condemning words to those who approach. RATHER, you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, to the city of the living God, to thousands of angels, to the church of Christ. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous people made perfect, to Jesus, mediator of a New Covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. Make sure you do not refuse him who speaks (12:25). If they didn't escape when they refuse him who warned them on earth, how much less will we escape if we turn away from him who warns us from heaven! *Then* His voice shook the earth, *but now* He is shaking the heavens (Haggai 2:6).

12:28-29 *Therefore*, because we are receiving a kingdom that *cannot be shaken*, let us be thankful and so worship God acceptably with *reverence* and *awe* because 'our God is a consuming fire' (Deut. 4:24)

CHAPTER 13 Concluding Exhortations

13:1-3 Continue to love each other as brothers; entertain strangers - they could be angels without you knowing it; remember those in jail as if you were fellow-inmates; remember the ill-treated as if you also were suffering.

13:4-6 Keep marriage pure and don't worship wealth. The Lord will keep us content – see Deut. 31:6 and Psalm 118:6-7.

13:7-8 Remember your leaders who spoke God's word to you. Imitate their life and faith. Jesus Christ does not change.

13:9 Avoid strange teachings. It is grace that strengthens us, not ceremonial foods.

13:10-16 We have an altar from which the officials at the tabernacle must not eat. The high priest takes the animal blood into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burnt outside the camp. Jesus suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy by His blood. Go to Him outside the camp for we are looking for a city that is to come. Continually offer to God through Jesus a sacrifice of praise. Do good to others and share with them. God is pleased with such sacrifices.

13:17 Obey your leaders and submit to their authority so that their work will be a joy.

13:18-19 Pray for us. We believe we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably. Pray I will be restored to you soon.

13:20-21 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant, raised Christ the Shepherd from the dead, equip you with everything good to do His will. May He work in us what is pleasing to Him, through Jesus Christ.

13:22 I urge you brothers to bear with my word of exhortation for I have written only a short letter.

13:23 Our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you.

13:24-25 Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. Grace be with you all.

Summary of Whole Book

(based on some thoughts of FF Bruce.)

- 1 In the past God has spoken in various ways through the prophets but He has now finally spoken in His Son who is greater than any prophet or angel. Moses' law, with its severe stipulations, was communicated through angels. How much more serious then if we ignore the salvation provided by the Christ Himself! The future and eternal dominion of the world has been committed to Christ. Psalm 8 teaches that God put everything under the dominion of humanity, but Christ had to take our human nature upon Himself in order to win back this dominion. To achieve this, He conquered Satan who had usurped that dominion and put humanity into bondage. Christ invaded the realm of death that Satan had ruled and controlled. Christ is truly human and as such is qualified to serve as High Priest on our behalf. Because of His own experience of pain, He knows all our trials and therefore knows when and how to help us in our own struggles.
- 2 Be careful: those who rebelled against God in the wilderness were kept out of His rest in the promised land. However, there is a better rest than Canaan awaiting God's people. Yet we must not forfeit that rest by rebellion against God when He speaks to us through His Son, a greater One than Moses.
- 3 Jesus is our great high priest, able to sympathize with, and help, His people. He who underwent Gethsemane can be called upon for understanding and grace to help us. God Himself called Christ to this office in an irrevocable oath – 'You are a priest for ever, after the order of Melchizedek'. I would like to expand this issue, but you are still spiritually immature. Be warned that anyone who has already been baptized and tasted the blessings of the new age can never repeat the experience of repentance and conversion if they commit apostasy. I have a better hope for you than to think you want to commit apostasy. I want you to move forward to full maturity. Don't stagnate or stand still!
- 5 So, Christ is divinely appointed as a high priest of Melchizedek's order. Melchizedek was priest of God Most High who suddenly appears in the ancient, sacred records, though with no word of his previous or subsequent career. He was great, and Abraham paid him tithes and received his blessing. We can say that Levi – ancestor of the priestly families of Israel – paid tithes to Melchizedek in the person of his great-grandfather Abraham. This indicates that Melchizedek is greater than

Levi, and Melchizedek's priesthood better than Aaron's. If indeed perfect access to God had been attainable under Aaron's priesthood, then why should God have appointed the Messiah as priest of a different order?! Jesus' priesthood after Melchizedek's order is superior to Aaron's – Jesus was confirmed in office by the oath of God. Jesus is immortal and sinless cf Aaron's line of priests have to present a repeated sin-offering for their own cleansing before presenting one for the people. Jesus' sacrifice of Himself deals with our sin for ever!

- 6 The Aaronic priests minister under the old covenant of Mount Sinai but now obsolete. Jesus mediates the new covenant, foretold by Jeremiah. The old covenant provided for taking away external impurity by animal sacrifices but that could never remove SIN; under the new covenant Jesus sacrificed Himself to God and by this He purifies the conscience from guilt and breaks the barrier between His people and God. Aaronic priests minister in an earthly sanctuary of the old order but a curtain blocks access to the divine presence; Jesus ministers His spiritual and eternal high priesthood in the heavenly sanctuary where there is no barrier – the earthly sanctuary is only a temporary and inadequate copy of the heavenly one! It's the difference between shadow and substance!
- 7 Therefore, let us leave behind the old order and use the new route by faith and hope, opened up by Jesus' own death. This will bring assurance of the very real, though invisible, eternal certainty of the Coming Christ. Many former people of future-looking faith experienced this hope and gained God's approval. Such promises were to be fulfilled later and we now need to follow their example. Indeed, we need to follow Christ's example of living by faith. Through the Cross, He now rules from God's right hand. Let us not be pulled down by our trials for such trials actually prove us to be true sons and daughters of God. We have the fullness of revelation in a way that the people of old had not been fully aware. We will inherit the promise of glory in its fulfillment in Christ in this new order. Then we will fully experience sharing in His glory after His Second Coming. Why on earth would we want to slide backwards into our old ways of living when we have all this to look forward to?
- 8 Keep going forward as Christians in patience and hope. Live as Christians should live. May the God who raised His Christ from death, enable you to do *His will* in the totality of your lives.

Historical/Cultural Contexts

It needs to be acknowledged that although these contexts are crucially important in the task of biblical exegesis, yet many of our answers about these issues, with regard to Hebrews, remain uncertain and inconclusive.

William L. Lane in 1998 wrote – ‘Hebrews is a delight for the person who enjoys puzzles’. Another William – Barclay – wrote in 1957 ‘When we come to read *The Letter to the Hebrews* we come to read what is, for the person of today, the most difficult book in the whole New Testament’. FF Bruce begins his commentary ‘Since, however, neither that community nor the writer is expressly identified in the text as it has been preserved to us, the document presents us at the outset with a number of critical problems to which no agreed solution has been found.’

Hebrews was aimed at immature Christians who were tempted to give up on the church and recapture their pre-Christian lifestyles. The writer was persuading discouraged believers, who were on the drift, to draw near to Christ and persevere in their walk with Him. He wants them to ‘hold fast’, to ‘strive to enter’, to ‘go on to maturity’, to ‘seize the hope’ set before them (3:6; 4:11,14; 6:1,18). They needed to learn endurance – Abraham ‘patiently endured’ because of the divine promise (6:15); Moses endured by turning away from Pharaoh and his Hebrew contemporaries and looking into the face of God (11:27); Jesus endured by the ‘joy set before him’ when facing intense opposition (12:2-3). God is ready to speak to us effectively through Christ and we need a vision of His uniqueness.

Who were ‘the Hebrews’?

The English title of the letter suggests that the readers were Jews. Yet immediately some argue that the real title should be ‘against the Hebrews’, though with no clear evidence. In any case the title seems to have been a much later addition to the text and may indicate a later writer’s view! What is sure is that the readers were indeed Christians – (Heb. 6:9-10; 10:39). It is true that the OT is quoted very extensively in Hebrews, with 35 quotations from and 34 allusions to the Septuagint (LXX), although it is also true that much of the gentile world was familiar with the LXX, with Jewish sacrifices and with Jewish culture. Also, in Hebrews are 19 summaries of OT material and 13 references to OT names or topics: so we need to be aware that the readership of Hebrews, *might* have included Gentiles. FF Bruce sees a real

possibility that even the author might have been Gentile. The author does not describe the Jews as 'Pharisees' or 'legalists'; nor does he describe the Gentiles as 'barbarians'. It may have been a mixed audience worshipping in a house church or house churches.

Some scholars do argue that the addressees could well be Gentile Christians in danger of 'falling away from the living God' (Heb 3:12). It is implied that if Jewish Christians relapsed into Judaism, this would not involve a renunciation of 'the living God'. A relapse into Judaism would at least mean that they would carry on worshipping the God of Israel. Moreover, the repeated use of the phrase 'dead works' (6:1; 9:14) suggests that those addressed had a Gentile background. However, it seems that the audience rightly took it for granted that the Levitical priesthood was instituted by divine authority but may have wrongly taken it for granted that such provision for them was God's final step. Converts from paganism would not be so assured of the divine institution of the Levitical priesthood. Also, the phrase about going to Christ 'outside the camp' (13:13) would make more sense if written to an audience of Jews. Overall, Bruce suggests that the readers were *probably* Jewish believers in Jesus but who had been influenced by the non-conformist Judaism of the Essenes or Qumran community. Thus, for example, the reference to 'instruction about ablutions' in 6:2 *might* be addressed to such readers.

Thus, the addressees seem to Bruce to have been Jewish Christians who had never seen or heard Jesus in person but learned of Him – as did the writer himself – from others who had listened to Jesus in person. Since their conversion, they had experienced persecution – public abuse, imprisonment, stealing of their property, but not yet actual death – for their faith. However, their spiritual progress in the faith had now become *arrested/slowed down/stalled* after a great start. They may well have been reluctant to leave Judaism behind, thereby losing the protection that Judaism enjoyed under Roman law. The writer warns them not to fall back but rather to *persevere* in the faith. The readers were therefore likely to have been Hellenists schooled in the Greek OT and their knowledge of the rituals of Israel would have been based on their reading of the OT, rather than by direct contact with the Jerusalem Temple.

Some scholars feel that the writer may have been addressing a sub-group within a larger Christian community. He criticizes them (e.g. Heb 5:11-14) and exhorts them to remember their leaders (e.g. Heb 13:7, 17, 24). This likely sub-group are also urged to continue meeting with other Christians

(e.g. Heb 13:25. They *may* be former leaders and are now struggling to follow. It thus seems likely that they were a certain group within the Christian community rather than the community as a whole. Bruce thinks these readers were possibly one house-church in a wider group of citywide house-churches, from which the one house-church was tending to separate itself from/neglect the others in the city.

When was the letter written?

We have a number of definite references to Hebrews in *1 Clement* which has been dated around AD 96. So, Hebrews must have been written *before* AD 96 but how much before?! AT Robinson has argued for all NT documents to be considered pre - AD 70 and this has been neither proved nor disproved! He places only 1 and 2 Thessalonians and James before AD 50. Few scholars would date any NT document *before* about AD 45-50. Clues do exist – the material on the sacrificial system appears in the present tense and presumably prior to the AD 70 destruction of the Temple. However, Greek tenses focused on aspect rather than time. Nevertheless, if the writer had known that the Temple had been destroyed, surely, he would not have used the present tense because he was trying to say that the old (sacrifices) has passed away and the new had come.

If the ‘Timothy’ of Hebrews 13:23 – released from prison - was the co-worker of Paul, then this would have been around the AD 50’s or perhaps early 60’s. However, we do not know how long Timothy outlived Paul or when Timothy actually died. Nevertheless, if the Temple *had* been destroyed already, then surely it would have suited the writer’s argument - about the old passing away – for him to mention this! Surely therefore Hebrews was written before AD 70. The author’s concern about their lack of spiritual maturity even after some years as believers (5:12-14) suggests the lapse of time before Hebrews was written. Persecution mentioned in 10:32-34 seems to have happened somewhat earlier. Options – if the group was in Rome it might have been the persecution under Claudius in AD 49, under Nero in AD 64, or under Domitian in AD 91-95.

But, if the letter was written to Palestine, then it could have been at the time of the early persecution after Pentecost (see Acts). The believers had not yet suffered to the point of death (12:4) and this would suggest a period *before* Nero. It was nevertheless a period of real persecution under which some were falling away – (11:35-12:3; 12:7; 13:3,12-13). Thus, Hebrews might be dated *before* the AD70 fall of Jerusalem, and sometime *around* the mid 60’s. ie *after* about 30 years of the Roman church’s existence. Bruce

tentatively favours a date before, but not long before, the outbreak of persecution in Rome in AD 64. He points out that the author writes as if the ritual of the tabernacle – similar to that of the unnamed Temple – was still going on in the present ie just prior to the Fall of Jerusalem in AD 70. Others believe that the absence of any specific reference to the temple in Hebrews suggests that it was written after the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Some therefore date the epistle in the second half of the first century, possibly in the early 80's AD.

Where were the readers?

We have a clue in the text – at Heb 13:24 'those from Italy' send a greeting to the readers.' There are two theories here –

- a) Those in Italy with the author are sending the greeting. Implication – the author is in Italy together with the others who are also from that place. This indicates that the readers are *outside* Italy.....OR
- b) Those who are with the author outside Italy, but who come from Italy, are sending greetings back to the readers. Commentators tend to favour b).

By the mid first century AD, Rome – a likely destination for this letter – had a population of around one million, including between 40,000-60,000 Jews.

A readership in Rome is a strong possibility because of Heb 10:32-34; 12:4. This would fit the persecutions in Rome between AD 49 and 64 ie between Claudius and Nero. Pastors in the Hebrews Letter are uniquely called *hegumenoī*, a word used elsewhere in *1 Clement* and the *Shepherd of Hermas* – both linked to the church at Rome. Indeed *1 Clement* shows extensive use of Hebrews.

Some argue for Alexandria as a destination, but if it had first been sent there, then why would folk like Clement of Alexandria have considered it to be Pauline. Bruce argues that because Alexandria gave early acceptance of Pauline authorship to the letter, then why would Alexandria so quickly forget Pauline authorship and attribute the letter to someone else?!

Others say the readers were Jewish Christians in Palestine, but why would the readers refer to generous givers (Heb 6:10; 10:34; 13:16) when we know the material poverty of the church in Jerusalem.

There are two notable suggestions concerning the readers' identity:

- 1 A H Trotter – A small group of former leaders in the church have found it hard to submit to the current leaders of the church. These leaders had been persecuted in Rome and functioned ‘underground’ during the blitz on the church by Claudius in AD 49. These leaders emerged around AD 64 but rejected the new leaders and are now being reprimanded for their lack of commitment to the new leaders, to the community and to Christ. The old leaders may be mixed up with doctrinal error and may be reluctant to submit to authority. Therefore, they need to know a *fresh* vision of Christ
- 2 F F Bruce - the readers could have been in a church location somewhere resulting from the large exodus of Hellenistic believers that fled Jerusalem after the death of Stephen. Some still argue for Jerusalem as the letter’s destination BUT the author fails to refer specifically to the Temple itself. Moreover, the author refers to the long-term ministry ‘to the saints’ (6:10) whereas the Jerusalem Church had been very much a recipient, not a giver, of ministry.

Bruce takes his point about the nature of nonconformist Judaism among the readers of the Letter to the Hebrews and suggests that this could well fit in with Rome as a likely destination for the letter.

Authorship

Origen – ‘As to who wrote the epistle only God knows for sure’!

Any Jewish person – and indeed many Gentiles – might have been able to grasp and write about the Levitical priesthood in ‘Hebrews’. In that sense the specific identity of the author is less important than we might be tempted to think. We *do* know a certain amount about the author – he is rooted in Hellenistic Judaism. The letter calls us to *think* and *live* out of knowledge of, and obedience to, God.

Clues to the type of author

Heb 2:3-4 is key. The author says the salvation about which he writes ‘was first announced by the Lord, [and] was confirmed to us by those who heard him’. This indicates secondary knowledge of the gospel message rather than reception by direct revelation. So it seems unlikely to have been one of the 12 apostles.

Heb 11:32 uses a masculine participle, showing the author to be male.

The author refers in 13:23 to ‘our brother Timothy’. The author had personal knowledge of this Timothy. This has been used by some as evidence pointing towards authorship by Paul.

The author was living with people ‘from Italy’ (13:24). He had written a brief ‘word of exhortation’ (13:22), indicating he was a preacher of the gospel. He asks the readers to pray he’ll soon be restored to them – perhaps he is in prison.

The author was well-educated – fine grammar, vocabulary, style, rhetoric and philosophical knowledge.

An expert in his use of the OT, combining allegory with literal application. He thinks creatively and critically in theology – he presents a thesis, analyzes it to develop it, departs from it to fit his structure, returns to it and fits his digressions into his ongoing arguments in a polished and stunning fashion.

The author uses religious symbols extensively – priesthood, sacrifices, tabernacle, feasts ie. the breadth and depth of the cultic life of Israel.

He was a preacher with a pastor’s heart, tough and tender! He warns brutally but encourages those who are serious about their faith (Heb 6:1,4-6,9; 10:26-39). It is widely agreed that Hebrews starts off more like a *sermon* than a *letter*. Its contents had the feel of a typical sermon of the Greek-speaking synagogues of the era. See Heb 13:22 cf Acts 13:14-15. If so, Hebrews is in effect an *extended sermon*. The writer uses

verbal analogy – using one passage to explain another in light of a term or phrase the two have in common;

argument from lesser to greater – what applies in a lesser situation most certainly applies in a more important situation;

the Old Testament to show his readers how to remain faithful to Christ; and

a formal style of rhetoric obtained in advanced education.

Few people will understand this now. He combines such a sophisticated training with Christian tradition, lovingly to urge his readers to persevere in Christian commitment, through this ‘word of exhortation’ (13:22) inspired and revealed by the Holy Spirit through the human writer.

He knows this community well and expects to be heard as a man who carries authority. He is well aware of the issues facing this church (13:4 – honouring marriage) yet he doesn’t name names.

He is very conscious that this church has problems with obeying leaders – see 5:11-6:3; 10:25-39; 12:15,25; 13:7. Other texts also show his pastoral and personal concerns for people in the church – (3:1,12; 10:19; 6:9,11; 13:19,23). Such texts indicate that the author of this letter was not an abstract or ‘armchair’ theologian but rather a hands-on, practical minister to the people of God.

Theories of authorship

- 1 APOLLOS – First suggested by Martin Luther and widely supported since then. (Acts 18:24) shows that Apollos was a Jew from Alexandria, a learned man and strong in Scripture. This would fit him well to the clues we see in the text of Hebrews itself. He had an accurate view of Christ and taught well (Acts 18:25, 27-28). He knew how to refute Jewish interpretations of the Law. Paul referred to Apollos along similar lines to Timothy – (1 Cor 16:10-12; Heb 13:23; Acts 18:28). *However*, Apollos is never mentioned as author prior to Luther’s era! Strange that the Alexandrian Church did not record some knowledge of authorship by Apollos (an argument from silence, though). Also, there is no mention about Apollos having a formal education or being exposed to the teachings of Philo in Alexandria. Apollos has no written works to his name and yet the author of Hebrews was so good in language that he would surely have written considerably! Nevertheless, Apollos does stake a high claim to possible authorship of this letter!
- 2 BARNABAS – Tertullian suggested this around AD 200, *but* this information seems to have been secondary in source and Tertullian’s language is not always clear. He may be mixing up Hebrews with the very different Epistle of Barnabas. There are some links between Barnabas and the author of Hebrews: Acts 4:36 presents Barnabas as a Levite from Cyprus and thus a Jew of the Diaspora, likely to be familiar with the Septuagint. Heb 13:22 describes itself as ‘a word of encouragement’, linking it to the name of Barnabas. He gave property and money for the gospel (Acts 4:37 cf Heb 10:34). Barnabas’ connection with Paul favours Barnabas as author of Hebrews. The letter reflects Pauline ideas and the author seems to expect his authority to be recognized. Barnabas travelled widely with Paul and would have been exposed to Paul’s preaching. Thus, Barnabas was likely to have been an interpreter of Paul for the Hebrews. Paul and Luke count Barnabas as an apostle and this might explain the sort of authority exercised by the letter’s author.

However, there are some arguments *against* Barnabas as author of Hebrews. It is perhaps a little strange that if Barnabas was author, then why did the early church not give recognition to this fact. Perhaps because the theologically defective Epistle of Barnabas was wrongly attributed to him, then maybe there was a reluctance to attribute the genuine Hebrews to his authorship. Another factor against Barnabas (Heb 2:3-4) has the author seeing himself as a lesser authority than the primary witnesses to Jesus. This however is not a strong case because Barnabas has no known connection to Jesus prior to his relationship with Paul in Acts. Also, Barnabas could have been an authoritative apostle *and* a secondary witness! However, Barnabas has no known link with Rome, so how could he have been that close to the community in Rome to write Hebrews? This is another argument from silence!

3 PAUL – Over the course of history, although not in the 20th Century, the case for Paul has been the most commonly argued one amongst scholars and commentators. How did the early church fathers link Paul to the Letter to the Hebrews? The *Western* Fathers wrote mainly in Latin and were loyal to the Bishop of Rome, whilst the *Eastern* Fathers wrote in Greek (or Syriac, Coptic or other Eastern languages) and tended to resist the dominance of Rome. Hebrews was known early on in the West – Clement of Rome quoted it often but without reference to its authorship. Marcion, with his anti-OT bias, omits Hebrews in AD 150 from his canon, whilst the Muratorian Canon omits it too in about AD 185. Tertullian mentions Hebrews but only slightly. In the 4th Century, Augustine and Jerome began to discuss Hebrews but failed to defend its authenticity. In the East, Eusebius of Caesarea quotes Clement of Alexandria who quotes Pantaenus, bishop before him about AD 190 who defended Pauline authorship.

The claim here was that because Paul was Apostle to the Gentiles, he wanted to remain anonymous in writing to the Hebrews, especially also because Jesus was the apostle to the Hebrews. Clement views Luke as the translator of a Hebrew original written by Paul. Thus, the style is like Acts, which is why Clement feels that Paul omits his title ‘Paul, an apostle’ from Hebrews. Clement also claims that Paul omitted his name so as not to offend the Jewish readership who would react against Paul having rejected his Jewish heritage and chosen to serve the Gentiles. Origen the Alexandrian scholar (about AD 185-254) feels that Hebrews does not have the style/eloquence/direct approach of Paul himself. Origen suggests that Hebrews was written by a disciple of Paul, based on what

his master said. Thus, churches may treat Hebrews as Paul's own. Eusebius also accepts Hebrews as Pauline.

In Gal 1:11-12 Paul lays claim to direct revelation of the gospel from God Himself. In light of this text, plus 2 Cor 12:1-7, it is hard to see why the author of Hebrews would admit to 'secondary' revelation if it was Paul. Could the two authors be one and the same person?! Also, Paul never fails to 'sign' his other letters. This suggests that Paul was not the author, though it MIGHT be the case that, according to Clement of Alexandria, Paul omitted his name out of respect for Christ, the true apostle to the Hebrews. Clement of Alexandria felt that Hebrews was written by Paul for Hebrews in the Hebrew language, but that Luke translated it and published it for the Greeks. He then argued that Hebrews and the Lukan writings had similarities, but the Greek of Hebrews showed no sign of having been translated from Hebrew. At this stage of scholarship, we simply cannot know for sure.

The vocabulary of Hebrews and Paul's epistles are radically different from each other. For example, Paul uses forensic language to describe Justification in salvation, but when the author of Hebrews uses such language – like *dikaiosune* – he uses it to mean ethical righteousness ie. obedience to God's will. Or could this be explained by Paul's concern for the total picture of Salvation ie its outworking in practice as well as its initial justification? In total, 169 terms that are used in Hebrews appear nowhere else in the NT.

Paul and Hebrews differ in sentence-building and distinctive imagery. Hebrews' long sentences are smooth and sophisticated classical pieces, whereas Paul's long sentences are sometimes rough, rambling and diffuse.

Theological differences also exist. Hebrews is different from Paul but not disagreeing with Paul. There are differences of emphasis. Hebrews says 'resurrection' is an 'elementary' teaching (Heb 6:2), stressing the exaltation of Christ to the right hand of the Father as his triumph over death (Heb 9:24-27), while Paul elevates the resurrection to that status (Rom 1:4). Paul stresses the forensic and redemptive aspects of Christ's blood whereas Hebrews stresses the cultic cleansing, sanctifying and perfecting work of the sacrifice. Are these not complementary though? Paul makes little reference to the new covenant – 2 Cor 3:6 - (is this true?) and fails to speak of Christ in relation to the high priesthood, yet these issues are central in Hebrews.

Trotter feels that the overall evidence is finely balanced between Barnabas and Apollos as the more likely author of the Letter to the Hebrews. The final choice, says Trotter, is impossible to make. G.H. Guthrie leans towards Apollos as author, as did Martin Luther. Bruce concludes that Paul and the author of Hebrews held in common the apostolic teaching but when we assess detail, it becomes clear that the two authors had very different thought, language and technique of OT quotation. A number of scholars have pointed out that the title ‘apostle Paul’ does not appear on a single ancient manuscript of the Letter to the Hebrews. Calvin concludes ‘I can adduce no reason to show that Paul was its author’. Others have suggested authorship by the hand of Luke or Clement of Rome or even Silvanus (1 Peter 5:12) because of the similarities between Hebrews and 1 Peter.

Background

Dr Bruce W. Winter’s recent research at Tyndale House, Cambridge, on suffering under the Romans, generally, greatly helps our understanding of the pressures on Christians in NT times. Hebrews recounts the strong desire of many Christians to escape the double-edged sword – exile and execution – but at the same time, such escape would plunge them into real spiritual danger!

Christians reading the Hebrews Letter had suffered much because of their faith (10:32) and understandably were very tempted to find a way(s) of avoiding more agony. In their early days of persecution, the Christians had stood firm.

The perpetual divinity of Jesus was proclaimed in Heb 1:2-3. But this was the same status granted to departed Roman emperors in the period AD 14-68 (Augustus, Tiberius, Caligula, Claudius and Nero). Thereafter, all new Caesars were given the title *pontifex maximus* of the Roman Empire ie. ‘high priest’! Jesus was a *threat*! These emperors carried out ritual and sacrifice that guaranteed the divinely-superintended safety and security of the entire Roman Empire across the world. Rome – and other cities - also had its own great high priest as vital Imperial Cult mediator between gods and Empire.

In Hebrews 4:1-8:1, Christ is portrayed as great high priest, appointed by God for ever and this must have been a massive challenge and threat to the Roman Imperial authorities. Heb 10:21,23 claims that Christians no longer needed to make sacrifices but did need to be loyal and obedient to Christ! A direct threat to Roman peace and stability. So, no surprise that many Christian believers had endured suffering and public humiliation (10:32-

34), by Roman law. Another punishment lay ahead, second only to death in severity, namely exile to an isolated place, a fate greatly feared right across the Roman Empire.

The writer to the Hebrews pleads with his readers ‘Therefore now let us go forth to him outside the camp bearing his reproach’ (13:13). The readers are strongly tempted to flee to Judaism as a way to avoid persecution, but at the same time to commit apostasy from the Christian faith. (See § C iii p28 below) To explore this thesis, the evidence needs to be examined:

a) Their sufferings

Heb 10:32 indicates much *conflict* of sufferings, a highly combative term of contests and/or warfare situations. Intense struggles through which the believers had not actually given up! – Likely scenarios:

- i) Verbal public abuse in the theatre – they had been publicly exposed in the public arena. Passive voice is used to show how they had been forced, alongside criminals about to go to prison, to bear public humiliation and mockery. Read Acts 19:21-41 for a comparable situation in the Ephesian theatre. In another case, according to *I. Eph. 572 ll. 1-12*, a total of 43 people, who tried to violate the sanctity of the Artemis Cult in Ephesus, were sentenced to death.
- ii) Public floggings – Heb. 10:33 hints at them. Philo of Alexandria tells how Flaccus, Prefect of Egypt from AD 32-38, humiliated Alexandrian Jews by having them flogged naked in the theatre. Some died; some had life changing injuries. We know that early Christian converts were similarly treated.
- iii) Imprisonment of Christians – after humiliation there might follow prison as ‘fellow prisoners’ (10:33), involving loss of freedom and lack of food, unless gifts/bribes to Roman officials were offered by family or friends.
- iv) Loss of possessions – this was done by Roman officials seizing Christians’ property whilst they were in prison. Yet the believers accepted this ‘with joy’, knowing that a far greater inheritance awaited them (Heb 10:34-35). All these struggles would have tempted some Christians, facing current and future pain, to slide back into the far safer Judaism, thus committing apostasy from the Christian faith.

b) Many legal punishments

- i) Severe penalties, especially exile – Roman Magistrates during Nero's rule obtained certain biases to punish Christians with hard labour, deportation to an island and ultimately exile. Jails were intended for holding men briefly, prior to trial and sentencing, but they were increasingly used to detain Christians, foreigners, slaves and women for longer periods of time.
- ii) Christian infringement of Roman Law – in 45 BC restrictions were placed on the meetings of assemblies and gatherings. In the period of AD 14-68, this was reinforced in level of intensity, as emperors were very uneasy about hotbeds of political dissent and disloyalty to the Emperor and Empire ie treason and sedition. Jews were free to meet weekly, but not Christians. Disobedience to this ruling was punished by heavy fines, especially for Christians who tried to worship together (10:23-25, 26-30). Weekly worship for Christians was in fact banned for Christians – see Pliny the Younger, 'To the Emperor Trajan', 10.96.
- iii) Loyalty to Roman imperial gods – All subjects in the Empire except Jews were required to offer sacrifices to the emperor in their temples. The governor Pliny the Younger (AD 61-c.112) questioned Christians about this. Some gave up their faith. In the early second century, believers who held to their faith were executed or, if Roman citizens, sent to Rome for trial. Christians generally were threatened with the death penalty for failure to bow to the Caesars. It was very tempting to shift into Judaism to avoid death or exile.

c) The possibility of exile

Hebews uses metaphorical phrases for exile, namely 'outside the camp' and 'outside the gate' (13:11-14). Jesus 'suffered outside the gate' (13:12).

Key aspects:

- i) Exile as a *penalty* – insulting, lonely, an alternative to the death penalty for some, harsh, loss, desolate location, distant place, brutal climate, infertile land for crop growth, polluted water supply, potentially permanent exile, loss of citizenship, loss of all property (see Ovid 43BC-AD17 in Ibis and Ex Ponto: Ovid had offended Augustus in one of his poems and for another undisclosed reason besides, and the result was that Augustus exiled him in about AD 1 to Tomis, an isolated city on the Black Sea coast where Ovid stayed till he died in

AD 12). The writer to the Hebrews was calling the believers to share in Christ's suffering and bear His abuse (13:13).

ii) Continuing *Endurance* – the believers in any case have no enduring city here on earth (13:12-14). The Empire was claiming that Rome was the eternal city of peace and security! For Christians, *Heaven* was the eternal City of God! (10:34-35). The way ahead will be very tough for the Christians, but the ultimate reward lies at the end. To give up would be very dangerous and will incur the loss of divine blessing (10:38; Heb 2:3-4) ie destruction = apostasy, but the writer is confident of their persevering faith (10:39).

Hebrews 11 gives many examples of enduring faith! Christians must be as determined as naked athletes who wish no hindrances to their race (12:1). Looking to Jesus was vital. Jesus looked beyond His own humiliating death to His final reward (12:2). These Christians had not yet been called upon to pay the ultimate price of death.

iii) *Strengthened* to face exile (*phugas*) – their pain was a sign of divine sonship and approval for their endurance and acceptance of discipline (12:7-11). News of Timothy's release from jail would be helpful (12:12-13; 13:22-23). Exile lay ahead and that must have been utterly daunting! They had to cling utterly to Christ to face this.

Their great high priest had undergone such painful loneliness and would sustain them (2:18; 4:16; 13:12-13). They would need to know Christ's presence in a big way! The role of the Jewish high priest appointed by Rome had been superseded by the One eternal Son of God with perpetual divinity. Christ had also superseded all the divine Caesars in their high priestly office. These believers must go 'to him outside the camp and bear the abuse he endured' (13:13). He it was who suffered, endured and can give them grace for their own form of alienation and utter estrangement. Exile would be painful but temporary. Exile would yield righteousness in the sanctifying process of these believers through the experience of exile (12:7-11).

Two reasons for endurance, therefore, are that

- (i) Christ Himself suffered outside the gate to win the Christians' sanctification and
- (ii) these believers had no enduring city here on earth, as they persevered in suffering, whilst awaiting the final fulfillment of the new order of the Christ.

Structure And Argument

(based on G Guthrie's textual work)

The Letter to the Hebrew was structured as a *sermon* and this has baffled commentators for centuries (view of George H. Guthrie, in his Commentary p.27). Commentators have therefore been very divided as to just how to outline and divide up this book! Many writers have structured their work around the theme of Christ's *superiority* over the *Prophets* (1:1-3) over the *angels* (1:4-2:18) and over *Moses* (3:1-4:13) etc. The problem is that these passages also contain other material that make them hard to divide up in a simple way! All this needs to be re-thought because Hebrews consists of two main foci –

Exposition – Focuses on the Person and Work of Christ.

Exhortation – Motivation of the readers to respond appropriately.

The Author *switches back and forth* between these two foci. He does not develop his arguments chronologically, systematically or neatly. He uses a method of point-by-point *exposition* of the text, but then followed by repetition of his *exhortation* about the response/action demanded of the readers rooted in each bit of exposition. (See outline below for details.)

Explaining The *Exposition*

The writer begins with an Introduction to his sermon at 1:1-4 and then moves into his *Christ Material*, section-by-section in two main parts –

1. The Position of the Son in Relation to the *Angels* (1:5-2:18). This section divides into:
 - a) The Son Superior to the Angels (1:5-14) and then a brief transition at 2:5-9, followed by
 - b) The Son lower than the Angels (ie. among humans) to Suffer for the 'Sons' (ie. heirs) – (2:10-18).
2. The Position of the Son, Our High Priest, in Relation to the *Earthly Sacrificial System* (4:14-10.25). This section divides into:
 - a) The Appointment of the Son as a Superior High Priest (5:1-10; 7:1-28) and then a brief transition at 8:1-2, followed by
 - b) The Superior Offering of the High Priest (8:3-10:18).

Notice the development of a *Descent/Ascent* Theme here: Christ starts at the highest point universe, exalted high above all angels (1:5-14). He comes down into humanity's realm and lower than the angels to bear our sins (2:10-

18). Having lived out His solidarity with humanity, He is then separated from us and becomes High Priest (5:1-10; 7:1-28). Having fulfilled that sacrificial, sin-bearing ministry as High Priest, He is raised back into heaven (8:3-10:18).

The author makes *repeated* and *frequent* reference throughout the letter to the High-Priestly work of Christ. He comes back again and again to this theme.

Explaining The *Exhortation*

Here we find the author repeating again and again a number of key motifs – Falling Away, Sin, Punishment, Promise, Gospel, Voice Of God, Jesus/The Son, Faith, Obedience, Endurance, Entering, Examples. The author moves again and again from *Christ to congregation*, weaving together a devastating sequence of warnings, encouragements, positive and negative examples. Endurance by faith will yield the promised inheritance. Falling away and rejecting God's Word will yield serious judgment. He motivates his audience towards *action* and *transformation*.

The Main Message

The preacher of Hebrews uses a specific technique here –

He challenges these lukewarm and struggling believers to persevere in their commitment to Christ. The Exhortation consists of warnings, challenges, examples and evidence of God's faithfulness to His promises, all of which are *rooted in god's word*. *However*, he lays a strong foundation in his exposition on Christ. The triangular dynamic involves Christ – Spirit – Word. As Trotter puts it – 'The ultimate bases for endurance, therefore, are their new covenant relationship with God's superior Son and an ongoing openness to God's Word. In other words, one's endurance ultimately will depend on the health of one's relationship to Christ and faithful obedience to the Word.' (p. 30) The author was addressing a struggling community that needed to strengthen its commitment to Christ by drawing near to the Lord. Our writer does, however, at a number of points in his letter e.g. Heb 6:9; 10:32,39, express his confidence in the faith and determination of the readers.

Our Interpretation Of Hebrews

A number of factors need to be borne in mind –

1. The author urges the readers to carry on confessing the name of Christ, despite the social and physical cost of such discipleship. This would be

comparable to Christians losing their jobs because of a Christian confession or Christians suffering for their faith in China or North Korea for example. It also speaks to those guilty of the sin of unbelief or spiritual laziness (3:13; 6:12). It challenges faith in a variety of situations (11:1-40) and encourages steadfastness in those tempted to ditch their faith and decide to return to a pre-Christian lifestyle or a Jewish compromise.

2. The genre of Hebrews is a *Sermon*, probably intended to be read as one continuous message which can be done in about one hour! This sermon has a *flow*, but it also employs the art of *repetition*. Each part has a specific role in the whole. A sermon is not merely the sum of its parts. The book deals with our *motivation for persevering in discipleship*.
3. We need to focus on language, style, word meanings, terms and phrases.

Dividing the text

1 after George H. Guthrie

Key: Times New Roman font = Exposition; Comic Sans font = Exhortation; *Comic Sans italic* = overlap between exposition and exhortation. (Based on G Guthrie, pp 39-40)

Introduction: God has spoken to us in a Son (1:1-4)

1. The position of the Son in relation to the *Angels* (1:5 - 2:18)

A. The Son Superior to the Angels (1:5-14)

Warning: Do not reject the word spoken through God's Son! (2:1-4)

ab. The Superior Son for a time made positionally lower than the angels (2:5-9)

B. The Son lower than the Angels (ie. among humans) to suffer for the 'sons' (ie. heirs) (2:10-18).

Jesus, the supreme example of a Faithful Son (3:1-6)

The Negative Example of those who fell through faithlessness (3:7-19)

Transition (4:1-2)

The Promise of 'Rest' for those who are Faithful (4:3-11)

Warning: Consider the power of God's Word (4:12-13)

2. The position of the Son, our High Priest, in relation to the *earthly sacrificial system* (4:14-10:25)

Overlap: *we have a sinless High Priest who has gone into heaven (4:14-16)*

A. The Appointment of the Son as a **Superior High Priest** (5:1-10; 7:1-28)

Introduction: The Son taken from among humans and appointed according to the Order of Melchizedek (5:1-10)

The present problem with the hearers (5:11-6:3)

Warning: The Danger of falling away from the Christian Faith (6:4-8)

Mitigation: The Author's confidence in, and desire for, the Hearers (6:9-12)

God's Promise, our basis of hope (6:13-20)

The Superiority of Melchizedek (7:1-10)

The Superiority of our eternal Melchizedek and High Priest (7:11-28)

ab. We have such a High Priest who is a Minister in Heaven (8:1-2)

B. **The Superior Offering** of the Appointed High Priest (8:3 - 10:18)

Introduction: The More Excellent Ministry of the Heavenly High Priest (8:3-6)

The Superiority of the New Covenant (8:7-13)

The Superior New Covenant Offering (9:1-10:18)

Intro: Pattern of Old Covenant Worship: Place, With Blood, Effect (9:1-10)

a. Christ's Superior Blood (9:13-22)

b. A Sacrifice in Heaven (9:23-24)

c. An Eternal Sacrifice (10:1-18)

Overlap: *We have a Sinless High Priest who takes us into Heaven (10:19-25)*

Warning: The Danger of rejecting God's Truth and God's Son (10:26-31)

The Positive Example of the hearers' past, and an Admonition to Endure to receive the Promise (10:32-39)

The Positive Example of the Old Testament Faithful (11:1-40)

Reject sin & fix your eyes on Jesus, supreme example of endurance (12:1-2)

Endure discipline as Sons (12:3-17)

The Blessings of the New Covenant (12:18-24)

Warning: Do Not Reject God's Word! (12:25-29)

Practical Exhortations (13:1-19)

Benediction (13:20-21)

Conclusion (13:22-25)

2 after Raymond Brown

Brown suggests that Hebrews consists of two great themes, namely Revelation and Redemption, or to put it another way – the word of God and the work of Christ have been woven together throughout the letter. The Word Of God is central in Chapters 1-6 and 11-13, whilst The Work Of Christ takes centre stage in Chapters 7-10.

Brown offers this threefold breakdown of the letter –

1 What God has said to us – The writer of this letter has a very high place for God's Word – which requires a verdict from us (2:1-4) - and he refers to its various OT channels and contexts (1:1). This Word found form in the Person of Christ (1:2-3a), revealed in His 'divine nature, perfect life, vital teaching, unique sacrifice and victorious achievement' (Brown, p.18). This Son of God is greater than the OT prophets (1:1), the angels (1:36-2:18), Moses (3:1-6) and Joshua (4:1-10). This Word is a very serious business, for there are consequences for *Unbelief* (3:12,19) and *Disobedience* (3:18), and yet at the same time God pleads out of His huge compassion that we *must* listen to His Voice. The warnings are very clear – 'do not harden your hearts', 'take care, brethren', 'exhort one another..... that none of you may be hardened' (3:7-8, 12-13). This Word must be received by faith and accepted with obedience (4:2,6,11). It is a *Persuasive and Powerful Word* (4:12), exposing our inner life. 'It condemns us and convicts us until we acknowledge the seriousness of our sin (4:13) and the immensity of His grace (4:16)'.

2 What Christ has done for us – The writer uses *Contrast* to expound the work of Christ – (i) The priesthood of the old covenant was temporary, *but* Christ's is permanent (7:24). (ii) The OT priests tended towards weakness and sinfulness, *but* Christ was sinless (5:2; 7:26). (iii) The former priests offered the blood of goats and bulls, *but* Christ offered Himself (9:13; 7:27). (iv) Their offerings gave only a partial cleansing – merely ‘the purification of the flesh’ - *but* Christ’s sacrifice purified the person’s ‘disturbed and guilty conscience’ (9:9,13-14; 10:22) (Brown p.19). (v) The OT sacrifices reminded worshippers of the seriousness of sin (10:3) *but* by Christ’s offering of Himself, our sins can be removed (9:26; 10:11-12). (vi) The OT system of sacrifice needed continual repetition, *but* Christ’s sacrifice was ‘once for all’ (10:11-12).

3 The argument developed – Humans are ignorant and need the divine Word in Scripture to reveal their need of forgiveness through Christ’s sacrifice (9:22; 10:18-22). Cleansing and freedom prepare a person for a life of dedication to the Lord. Thus, sanctification is a key theme in the letter (2:11;10:10,14,29;13:12). We are set apart for service to God in this world, no longer following sinful desires *but* living a new life because we now belong to Christ.

In order to obtain this ‘great salvation’ (2:1) for us, Christ entered this world as the perfect revelation of God’s mind and message (1:2-3). He was determined to do His Father’s will (10:5-7). He is God (1:8) but the letter also extensively portrays His humanity. H R Mackintosh once wrote (*The Doctrine of the Person of Christ*, Edinburgh, 1937, p.79) ‘Nowhere in the New Testament is the humanity of Christ set forth so movingly’.

He came from the tribe of Judah ‘made like his brethren’ (7:14; 2:17). He knew temptation but was victorious (2:18; 4:15; 7:26). He learned obedience through suffering (2:10; 5:8). He knew agony in the garden of Gethsemane as his time of sacrifice drew near (5:7; 9:14). Arrested, mocked and crucified. Tried and humiliated by sinful men (12:3). He suffered outside the city gate (13:12) and endured the cross, scorning its shame (12:2), knowing it was God’s will for Him and the only way to bear away our sins and make us holy (10:10,11,14). The ‘God of peace’ (13:20) raised Christ from the dead. He lives for ever (7:24), now exalted at the Father’s right hand (7:26; 8:1; 10:12), where He appears for us in the presence of God (9:24). In that holy place (6:19; 9:12), He intercedes for us (7:25) and

will come a second time to bring ultimate salvation ‘to those who are waiting for him’ (9:28).

This Word of Christ is final and complete (1:2). Christ’s final work is expounded supremely in Hebrews as God’s purposes are fulfilled in and through Christ’s words and deeds. He saves completely and effectively. His work in dying and rising *effects the salvation of all who believe* (4:3; 10:39), *obey* (5:9) and *continue in faith* (3:6,14).

An alternative approach is to divide the text thematically:

3 Thematically

A preacher recently prepared a series of sermons on the book of *Leviticus* using a thematic approach that could profitably be adapted for a book such as *Hebrews*. That series of sermons consisted of 7 messages as follows –

- 1 Understanding The Old Covenant
- 2 Understanding Sacrifice
- 3 Understanding Priesthood
- 4 Understanding Food Laws
- 5 Understanding Atonement
- 6 Understanding Holiness
- 7 Understanding Sabbath

Finally, the text may be divided by a word that occurs 21 times, linking indicative with imperative. (This matches the sermon series on p 61 below)

4 at ‘Therefore’

1:1-2:4 Introduction. The Son and His superiority to angels (1:5-14). **Therefore (2:1)** Do not reject this Word from the Son (2:1-4).

2:5-3:6 The Son, superior to angels, but lower for a time (2:5-9a); The Son, lower than angels..... (2:9b-18);

Therefore (3:1)fix your thoughts on Jesus, the faithful Son of God (3:1-6).

3:7-19 **Therefore (3:7; 3:10; 3:11)** A negative challenge. Do not fall away by unbelief and unfaithfulness. (3:7-19).

4:1-13 **Therefore (4:1)** ...A positive challenge. ‘Hearing’ must be combined with faith (4:1-2); the promise of rest for the faithful (4:3-11); we are judged by God and His Word (4:12-13).

4:14-5:10 **Therefore (4:14)** let us hold firmly to the faith we profess, since our sinless High Priest has gone into the heavens (4:14-16). The Son was taken from among humans and through much suffering was appointed by God according to the order of Melchizedek (5:1-10).

5:11-6:20 The hearers’ current problem of spiritual sluggishness and immaturity. **Therefore (6:1)** ...let us leave the elementary teachings about Christ and go on to maturity (5:11-6:3); the danger of falling away (6:4-8); the writers’ confidence in, and hope for, these believers, coupled with his assurance of the certainty of the divine promise (6:9-20).

7:1-28 The superiority of Melchizedek (7:1-10), yet even this priesthood would be surpassed. The superiority of Jesus opened the way for drawing near to God by a better covenant. **Therefore (7:11)** ...if perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood, why was there still the need for another priest to come to our rescue in our approach to the living God? Many High Priests have come and gone in their mortality but Jesus lives for ever and has a permanent priesthood. **Therefore (7:25)** Christ is able to save us completely and eternally because He always lives to intercede for us.

8:1-13 The High Priest of a New Covenant (8:1-2). Every High Priest offers sacrifices and Christ is no exception. **Therefore (8:4)** if Christ were on earth, He would not be a priest, for there are others on earth who offer the law-prescribed gifts, but Christ exercises a superior ministry to all others, founded on a superior covenant and on better promises (8:3-7). Under the New Covenant, Christ will pardon and put God’s laws in our own minds and hearts (8:8-13).

9:1-10:18 **Therefore (9:1)** ...the first covenant had worship regulations and an earthly sanctuary (9:1-5). The functions and limitations of this first covenant are then outlined (9:6-10). Christ brought in a new way by His own blood (9:11-14). By contrast, Moses had sprinkled animal blood under the Old Covenant (9:15-22). **Therefore (9:23)** ... these copies of the heavenly things needed to be purified with such sacrifices, but Christ gave His own body as the perfect sacrifice (9:23-28). The Old Covenant could not transform a person’s life internally (10:1-4), **Therefore (10:5)** ...a new, different and eternal sacrifice was needed to bring in the New Covenant order (10:5-18).

10:19-39 In light of this new way of the New Covenant for a new life. Our High Priest will take us into heaven. **Therefore (10:19)** ... *Let us* draw near to God, with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith; *let us* hold to the hope we profess; *let us* consider how to spur one another on to love and good deeds; *let us* not give up meeting together; but encourage one another (10:19-25). Don't reject God's Way, His Truth or His Son (10:26-31). Remember your earlier days as Christians when you suffered but stood firm in the midst of it all.

Therefore (10:35) ...Don't throw away your confidence; persevere in God's Will and you'll be rewarded (10:32-39).

11:1-40 Defining 'faith', followed by examples of changed Christian lives. OT people who lived by faith, even though they could not see the outcomes. They had not received the fullness of what had been promised.

12:1-11 Because of the ultimate perfection that we will experience in Christ alone, **therefore (12:1)** ... Reject sin and every other hindrance and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us., fixing our eyes on Him (12:1-2). Accept God's discipline that will yield righteousness and peace (12:3-11).

12:12-29 We will grow in Christ through His discipline and share in His holiness. **Therefore (12:12)** ...strengthen feeble arms and weak knees. Live in peace; don't allow anyone to miss God's grace; avoid roots of bitterness, avoid sexual immorality (12:14-17). You have not come to a dark place but to the Mount Zion of joy and glory (12:18-24). Listen to Jesus and obey Him who warns the Church from heaven (12:25-27). Don't turn away from this unshakeable kingdom where we have come to the angels, to God and to Jesus who care for us. **Therefore (12:28)** ...Since we are receiving an unshakeable kingdom, be thankful and worship with awe and reverence (12:28-29).

13:1-25 Love each other as brothers. Entertain strangers. Care for prisoners. Respect marriage. Don't love money. Remember leaders (13:1-10). Doctrine and life are inseparable (13:11-12). **Therefore (13:13)** ...Go to Christ to seek the city to come (13:13-14). Christ is our goal – **therefore (13:15)** ...worship through Jesus; be generous; obey leaders (13:17-19); live for God (13:20-25).

Dealing With Challenges In Hebrews –

(based on G Guthrie)

Example 1 4:1-13 Entering the rest of God

This concept has caused some confusion. Our writer to the ‘Hebrews’ ends chapter 3 with the promise of sharing in Christ if we hold firmly till the end the confidence we had at first (3:14). He then warns against hardening of hearts, disobedience and unbelief, as evidenced by the wilderness generation who failed to enter Canaan (3:16-19). He moves rapidly and repeatedly between exposition on the Person and Work of Christ and the exhortation for action by disciples! In 4:1-2 our author transitions from the past failure of Israel of old (3:7-19) into the continuing promise of rest for the new people of God (4:3-11). He now deals with a ‘spiritual rest’ in which we cease from our own work (4:10) but we deliberately choose to enter that rest whilst avoiding a fall by disobedience v.11.

The writer combines exegesis of Psalm 95 and Genesis 2:2 and concludes in 4:12-13 with a very strong warning about the power of God’s great WORD. The vital connecting text is 4:1-2 with its highly significant warning that *hearing* God’s Word is not enough; it has to be combined with *faith*. The word is not just ‘be careful’ but literally ‘Let us fear’ sliding away from God’s will with its dire consequences. The focus is on ‘*today*’ and needs to be read, ‘Therefore, while the promise of entering his rest *still stands, be fearful* of falling away!’ He is *not* saying that particular persons *have* fallen away but that such a possibility exists, and caution is therefore needed. ‘Be found’ in v. 1 actually means ‘seems’ with an impersonal subject. But the perfect infinitive ‘to have fallen short’ suggests that this spiritual state describes a person who had never truly entered the rest of God. For the OT people of Israel, the ‘gospel’ was the promise of entry into Canaan, which they had forfeited by merely ‘hearing’ but not responding in faith and for the readers of ‘Hebrews’, it was the word of salvation proclaimed first through the Lord (2:3-4) but in danger of not being received with a faith that would persevere right to the end.

4:3-5 Those who ‘have believed’ are entering into God’s rest which is described as ceasing from one’s own works (4:10), yet it remains unstated whether this is a *present* spiritual state or a *future* existence in heaven? The theme of perseverance to the journey’s end suggests entry to heaven, the Most Holy Place. However, others argue that the 7th day of creation has no

evening end, so it could mean that God's 'rest' is not a location or point in time but rather a present reality, the 'Today' of present opportunity. If the 'rest' is totally future, how could some people have fallen short now? *All* of the community would still be short of entering the 'rest', if it was completely future. It remains unclear re the acceptance of the promise of 'rest' today, whether the 'rest' is actually entered a) Now through faith, OR b) At death at the point of 'rest' (12:23), OR c) At the final consummation (13:14), OR all three times! It may well be all three at the various stages of the journey of life – 11:16; 12:28; 10:22. Ps 95:11 and Gen 2:2 use the common word 'rest'. The author of 'Hebrews' links the two to stress that the 'rest' of God is not something of the past (4:6-9) and that it involves the cessation of work (4:3,10). Psalm 95:11 shows that the 'rest' of God in Gen 2 was an ongoing reality when the Psalmist wrote. This theme is then developed in 4:6-11.

4:6-11 Our writer states in verse 6 that 'It still remains that some will enter that rest'. The Greek text includes the phrase 'since therefore', indicating that the argument is moving to a consequence, namely that the question of rest was not closed off by the disobedience of the wilderness generation. Our writer believes that the Psalmist in Psalm 95 has clearly left open the door of access to God's 'rest' '*today*'. In 4:11 the term 'Sabbath-rest' is introduced, rather than just 'rest'. This is most probably rooted in Leviticus 16:29-31; 23:26-28, 32 in which the people of God were not to do any work because this was the Day of Atonement for the high-priestly offering. Thus, the Sabbath that remains for God's people is a new covenant Day of Atonement Sabbath in which they are cleansed from their sins. There is thus a very real link to the gospel of Christ. Our writer then follows this in verse 11 with a strong exhortation for his readers *actively and seriously, to seek entry* to this rest and avoid anything that would cause them to disobey and fall away from faith. Thus, there seems to be a paradox between stopping our own work and making every possible effort!. How is this paradox resolved?

1. The desert generation failed to enter Canaan (land of rest/promise) because they failed to act in obedience to God's command to enter. They followed their own wisdom and so failed to enter.
2. The readers of 'Hebrews' must obey God's call to enter the promised Sabbath rest of atonement ie they must combine hearing of the gospel with faith – trusting obedience in 4:1-2. If they fail to do this, it will result in spiritual catastrophe! They must obey the 'voice' of God that they have

heard (3:7). That is vital because the *voice of God* speaks *promise* and *encouragement*— see 4:12-13 which now follows –

4:12-13 Our author once again uses Ps 95 to speak about the ‘voice of God’ here in ‘Hebrews’. The Word is a sharp and penetrating force of discernment into human lives. It is living, and it *actively does* the work of God. After all, it was that Word which brought the cosmos into being, which sustains it now and which has the cutting edge to reach every part of our inner being, with its words of promise *and* judgment. We cannot hide anything from the Lord’s eyes. We are totally exposed and vulnerable to His gaze. We dare not be casual or trivializing where the Word of God is concerned. The consequences are catastrophic indeed.

Resting from our own work, as God did, means an obedient but active *dependence on God*. Effort to enter God’s rest is still demanded of us, whilst we are at the same time called to recognize our total dependence on His grace.

INTERPRETING Example 1:

As we already know, the big picture of Hebrews is a vital starting point, but we also need to remember the author’s interpretive processes, structures and methods. As we gather together exegetical detail from the passage, we need to consider the theme of ‘rest’ in light of the overall context. We need to move from textual details to the overall thrust of the message and then move in reverse back to the details. Likewise, we move backwards and forwards from the worlds of the text to the modern contexts, drawing out the possible implications of the ancient texts and contexts for today’s contemporary readers.

The author of the ‘Hebrews’ interprets the OT using two rabbinic approaches to interpretation –

a) Verbal analogy

This is based on the presupposition that there is a consistency and continuity in God’s revelation of truth, ie a number of passages having ‘verbal analogy’ (words in common) can be studied in light of one another because God has used specific terminology to get across specific truths to His people. Thus, regarding Hebrews 4, the author uses Genesis 2 (which refers to ‘rest’) to help our understanding of ‘rest’ in Psalm 95, in which God calls it ‘my rest’. Thus, we are to cease from our works as God did from His (Heb 4:10). Entering of the rest by God’s people thus involves

obedience (4:11) and faith (4:1-3), two issues closely linked in the author's mind (cf 3:18-19) and involving the ceasing of one's own efforts and the acceptance of God's will.

b) Stress on plain meaning of specific words –

Rabbinic interpretation of the OT held a very high respect for the text and 'literal' interpretation was generally very acceptable. Thus Heb 4:6-9 for its author meant that the 'Today' of Psalm 95 was a time of opportunity for promise or punishment well beyond the Davidic era and continues to be valid.

It is of course vital to understand what the author of Hebrews is trying to communicate about 'rest' if we are to achieve accuracy in our interpretation and application of this material on God's promised rest. Care is needed here because the actual nature of 'rest' is left somewhat unclear by our author. Because of this, it will be harder to reach a specific application of 'rest' and yet 4:1-13 is embedded in a challenging and exhorting wider section of text and does demand a response from its readers! Heb 4 is not only about physical and emotional rest. It is much wider and deeper than that. Its main focus lies in our spiritual need to draw near to God! The text should not be used to argue for a Sabbath rest one day a week or for abstinence from work on a Sunday.

APPLYING Example 1:

1. We must *fear* missing this rest. We must respect the power and judgment of God (3:7-19). Some preach such a strong focus of God as Judge that His grace is obscured or forgotten. Others focus so much on promise and blessing that they obscure our spiritual accountability. Our application needs to be balanced between grace/mercy and anger/judgment. A balance of promise and warning needs to be found. In Heb 4 the divine word of promise *must be balanced* with the issue of accountability. The gospel calls us to the grace and love of God in view of the holiness and justice of God.
2. We must not *reject* the ‘rest’ by our failure to mix faith with obedience to the Word of God. Those in Heb 4:1-3 *seem* not to have truly believed. Some seemed to be falling away from the Christian movement and have not truly stopped their own works or taken up serious faith in Christ’s sufficient sacrifice.
3. We must *cease from our own works*. In 4:10 this means turning from trusting in our own ways of being justified and casting ourselves wholly on God’s way of repentance and faith. It is a rest *but needs active obedience to God*. We must be active in response to God’s actions. Paul stresses that salvation is by faith alone and James stresses that works do not earn salvation, but they do express genuine faith. Thus, Abraham offered Isaac as an expression of faith and was justified (James 2:21-23). Hebrews believes in the idea that a lack of obedience shows a lack of true faith (Heb 3:12,18-19; 4:2,11). Hebrews also reflects Paul’s view of faith as trust in God, expressed in ceasing from one’s own works (4:10). For the Hebrews writer, faith relates to the unseen (Heb 11:1) and therefore trust is needed. Faith for Hebrews certainly does not guarantee health and wealth.
4. We can enter the rest *now*, but consummation awaits the end of the age. Salvation has an inauguration, continuation and consummation. For some in the community, their seeming *faithlessness* suggests their hearing of the gospel has not truly been joined to faith. True believers live out faith now in God’s rest, *but* the ‘rest’ will be consummation as they persevere right to the end.
5. All who lack God’s promised rest are actually spiritually stranded in the wilderness, somewhere between slavery in Egypt and the promised land of Canaan! Jesus says, ‘Come to *Me*’ (Matt 11:28-30), not to church, to rules, to a psychologist or to a holiday. It means finding and fulfilling our

place as human beings in the created order. If we are still outside this rest, then we are in a dysfunctional relationship with God. We need to humble ourselves and come to the One who has made His Day of Atonement sacrifice as our great High priest. We need rightly to relate to God by faith and obedience to His Word.

- 6 There are many people who connect with the Church by association and through activities, but who have not yet entered the ‘rest’, a real faith relationship with God in Christ. Faith is personal; it involves active trust in the promises of God; it unites us to Christ in a covenant relationship
- 7 We need to communicate the need to have real reverence for God and a commitment to God’s Word. All of us need to be aware of the great danger of trivializing God and the things of God. Real faith starts with our own encounter with God and our willingness to examine our own hearts.
- 8 Several ways can be used in order to expose ourselves more and more to the power of God’s Word. The Church needs regular Expository Preaching, plus reading, thinking through, reflecting on Scripture. Are we really listening to the Word and opening ourselves up to it in a life-changing way? Private reading/small group Bible Study? Overviews of Scripture? Personal study is a vital supplement to communal study. Memorization and meditation are great.
- 9 Spiritual growth demand time and discipline. Our lives need to give evidence of continuous transformation by God’s Word. This will impact those who are seeking to enter the ‘rest of God’.

Example 2 5:11 – 6:12 Warning against ‘falling away’

The author of ‘Hebrews’ has been discussing Christ’s designation as ‘High Priest’. As he moves into Chapter 5, he shifts his argument into His concern about his readers’ *spiritual immaturity*! There’s a definite sequence:

- A. 5:11-6:3 **Confrontation** – ‘You are spiritually immature’.
- B. 6:4-8 **Harsh Warning** – ‘You are in Danger’.
- C. 6:9-12 **Softening** – ‘I have confidence in you’.

A Confrontation **i) 5:11-14.** 5:11 refers to 5:10, indicating that the readers had developed poor spiritual hearing skills! They had neglected the very ABC of God’s teaching. It seems they *had* previously had such teaching but needed it all again! This ‘teaching about righteousness’ *may* refer to what was taught in the second century re Christian suffering under

persecution. They have failed to be ready for the huge cost and responsibilities of being disciples of Christ. The mature, by contrast, are those who know how to make right choices when faced with hard decisions (5:14). They need to be able to take on board the rest of his letter and ultimately to persevere in the face of growing persecution!

ii) 6:1-3 The author surprisingly decides not to repeat the elementary teachings, but rather to move them on to maturity. The author includes himself in the exhortations eg ‘Let us leave...’. The verb ‘go on’ is passive and suggests that the community will be moved on in maturity by *God Himself*. The writer does not want to abandon the elementary principles but to move to weightier issues of Christian discipleship. The matters listed in 6:1b-2 all have parallels in Judaism. They *may* have been trying to stick to areas held in common between Judaism and Christianity to avoid offending Jews. The six fall into 3 groups –

- a) ‘repentance from acts that lead to death, and of faith in God’
- b) ‘instruction about baptisms, the laying on of hands’
- c) ‘the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment’

If ‘instruction’ is viewed in apposition to ‘foundation’, it could be read that the foundation of repentance and faith *equals* instruction about baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection and eternal judgment. This would see the ‘repentance from dead works’ and ‘faith towards God’ summarize the initial step of Christian life. The baptisms may have been Christian or may refer to repeated washings found in first century Judaism. Laying on of hands may be linked with Holy Spirit anointing. The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment would be theological truths about the end of the age. The writer had confidence in the readers moving forward towards maturity.

Application of 5:11 – 6:3 Some texts can be approached by propositions like Point 1, Point 2, Point 3 but sometimes we need to consider the situation of the author or hearers or a third party. We need to consider examples or situations. What truths are built into the author’s example or his readers’ situation and circumstances? Thus, we need to consider that the writer in 5:11-6:3 is looking for *Rhetorical Impact*. In 5:1-10, the writer introduces us to the Son’s appointment as a high priest in the order of Melchizedek:

(5:1-4 outlines the appointment of the high priest under the old covenant; 5:5-6 proclaim that Christ has been appointed a priest by God, quoting Ps 110:4; 5:7-10 shows the ‘path of appointment’ for Christ, by which He qualified as high priest – the path of obedience to suffering death).

Then the writer breaks off from the high priestly subject, but that may not reflect the preacher's lack of ability to preach right through a topic or the lack of audience ability to understand the subject matter. Rather it shows the *skill of the preacher!* The strong language of 5:11-6:20 would have *stunned* his audience to listen more carefully to the really vital section on Melchizedek that he will resume at 7:1. Thus, in 5:11-6:12 the writer focuses on the poor spiritual state of his readers in order to get their attention ready for the key argument about Christ's High Priestly work on their behalf.

The writer at times seems to be coming across in his letter as abrasive, sharp and unfeeling. Actually, he is a minister, very concerned for his flock, concerned *and* loving. He offers encouragement *and* specific helps for their spiritual growth. The reference to 'elementary teachings' indicates that converts really were discipled systematically in the early church.

How well do we as churches today *teach* our people in ways that will move them from immaturity to maturity? Our ministries of teaching our people need to be built on our own willingness to be vulnerable and open to positive criticism of our own failings and weaknesses. *E.g.* are we willing to have members of our congregations point out *our* negative features, like lack of eye contact? Confrontation must be rooted in a position of love and encouragement from our members. We need to await the right moment, having prayed about it, to confront folk. If we rebuke someone, we must be ready to give practical advice as to how to respond.

B. Harsh Warning 6:4-8

Introductory Thought – 6:4-8 is a harsh warning and 6:9-12 softens the warning. The former is designed to shoot fear into the hearts of those adrift. The latter is aimed to express the writer's confidence that his audience do not actually fit the description of the former! The section then ends with two exhortations – 'show...diligence' and 'do not...become lazy' (6:11-12).

Structure of 6:4-8

'For'

'(It is) impossible'

'The ones' (object)

'Once'

- a) having been enlightened...and
- b) having tasted the heavenly gift... and
- c) having become partakers of the Holy Spirit... and

- d) having tasted the goodness of God's word...and....the powers of the coming age
- e) and (then) having fallen away

‘To renew to repentance again’

‘Because they are a) crucifying to themselves (the Son of God) and b) exposing to ridicule (the Son of God).

Exegesis of 6:4-8

The word ‘impossible’ is placed by the writer *first* in the sentence for emphasis. Then we have a string of participles. ‘Enlightened’ here probably means their early /initial exposure to gospel truth. The word ‘tasted’ (*geuomai*) actually means ‘to experience something. ‘The heavenly gift’ seems to be the blessings of God (Rom 5:15,17; 2 Cor 9:15; Eph. 3:7; 4:7) that surround salvation, rather than the Holy Spirit Himself. ‘Partakers’ means ‘partner in business’ but it is broad in usage and means ‘to have a close association with’ or ‘participate in’. Those who have fallen away were ‘companions of’ or ‘sharers of’ the Holy Spirit. They had also ‘tasted the goodness of the Word of God and the powers of the coming age’. The Word of God and power are closely linked (1:2-3; 2:3-4; 3:7-19; 4:12-13) cf those who had heard God’s voice and seen his acts (3:7-11) in the wilderness *and yet* fell away through lack of faith, even though they had experienced these revelations!

NIV treats ‘if they fall away’ (v 6) as *conditional*. However, it can be treated as the culminating experience in a *sequence* of experiences. The verb ‘fall away’ (*parapipto*) can mean ‘go astray’ but the seriousness of the following descriptions suggest a *serious sin of rejecting Christ*. The final bit of this long sentence means it is impossible for them ‘to be brought back to repentance’ (*anakainizo* = ‘renew’) ‘again’ (*palin*), suggesting that those who had fallen away had repented previously ie. those who have fallen away cannot be brought back again to a true repentance. This text has been *highly controversial!*

Context of 6:4-8 ‘Repentance’ in 6:1 is vital to the author of Hebrews and it is inextricably linked to Christ’s totally unique sacrifice for sins (10:18,26). Once one has rejected Christ, there is nowhere else to go for forgiveness before God. Why? V6:‘To their loss they are *crucifying* the Son of God all over again and *subjecting* him to public disgrace’. Both are *present participles*, probably showing action in progress. Up till this point, he has used the aorist. These acts of ‘crucifying’ and ‘subjecting...to disgrace’ modify the infinitive ‘to be brought back’. These participles can

be viewed as causal ('because they...') or temporal ('while they...'). The result is the same: *repentance has been, and is, ruled out because the fallen ones are rejecting Christ.*

Since the incompleteness of these participle actions is stressed, however, Heb 6:4-6 does *not* negate the chance of the fallen reversing course in the future. ie 'as long as they are crucifying the Son of God and subjecting him to public disgrace'.

The fallen ones are identifying with those who treated the cross as an expression of rejection and who insulted Christ instead of bearing the shame of identifying with him (Matt. 27:39-44). Our writer carries on with agricultural imagery that compares those who end well with God and those who don't. 6:7 = fruitfulness, leading to a harvest; 6:8 = failure leading to disappointment, devastation and the road to destruction.

C. Softening 6:9-12

In verse 9 the 'dear friends' indicates a strong change of tone. The writer is confident that his readers share in 'better things.... that accompany salvation'. Genuine disciples of Christ are on a road that will lead to the consummation of their salvation. *His reason for confidence?* Their faith has been lived out in 'work'. They have a love for God that is being worked out and expressed through ministry to his people. Works and ministry are important – Rom 2:6-7; 1 Cor 3:13-15; James 2:15-16; 1 John 3:16-20. Heb 6:11 shows how hard it is to know any person's standing before God, except for *continuing expressions of God's grace*. We must *persevere* in the love and work of God. Continuous and consistent *diligence (spoude)* is needed by the believers.

INTERPRETING Example 2

- 1 The language of Heb 6:4-12 is *ambiguous!* The text doesn't always define the author's intentions. The passage certainly describes those who have had association with the Christian community. Had they shown some signs of a new life OR had they given evidence of a real and true life-change? Those are the hotly-debated questions.
- 2 We *all* carry theological baggage into our work of interpretation! Personal and denominational experiences over the years tend to fix our positions. It makes objectivity difficult, but not impossible, to achieve.

Factors to bear in mind –

- a) This passage is *Exhortation*. He is trying primarily to motivate them into action not instruct them theologically. Obviously, the writer thinks theologically but his *main* hortatory goal may explain why he didn't define his terms in detail!
- b) Heb 6:7-8 is also a type of wisdom genre. Thus, we need to be careful of associating particular theological constructs with the images of 'rain', 'crops' etc. Thus, for example the reference to 'burning' cannot be assumed to refer to 'going to hell'. It is rather a general, but non-specific, reference to destruction.
- c) Beware of moving from a word meaning into a theological conclusion when the writer himself does not define that particular word! E.g. 6:4-5 may be saying that 'tasted' means to 'experience something' but there is no definition here. The word does *not* mean 'to sample' or 'eat without fully digesting'. We are not told by the writer just what the 'heavenly gift' was or how its blessings were received and experienced by the tasters! What was it to be a 'sharer in the Holy Spirit'? It could be a genuine indwelling OR an experience of the Spirit's convicting presence but without conversion OR something else!

Various interpretations

1. The Hypothetical View – The writer wants to shake his readers out of their complacency, but the state described cannot actually happen. It is true that our author can use rhetorical skill well, *but* the problem is that there are *repeated*, real, severe warnings throughout the whole letter.
2. The Pre-Conversion Jew View – The readers are Jews who are linked to the Christian Community but without any actual commitment to Christ. However, there are specific refs to 'holy brothers', 'Christ's companions' etc.
3. The Covenant Community View – Verlyn Verbrugge feels the Vineyard Song of Isa 5:1-7 is the background to Heb 6:4-6 and that God is rejecting a whole community rather than individuals. The vineyard is destroyed by God's judgment against Israel and Judah, but according to Verbrugge does not affect every individual in the Hebrews context. However, the Hebrews author seems to make distinctions. In 4:1 he doesn't want any to fall short; in 6:4-12 he

distinguishes between those who have fallen away (6:4-6) and the hearers in whom he is confident.

4. The True Believer Under Judgment View – Those threatened by God's judgment are true believers but cannot lose their salvation. This view is rooted in the wilderness wanderings judgment where the covenant people of God lost the earthly blessing of entry to the Land but did not lose their relationship with God. This view gives serious account of the association between the fallen and the Christian community. *However*, in 3:6,14 the author is concerned for his friends if they don't hold on to their courage and hope. They appear to have fallen short of a level of commitment that combines faith with hearing the gospel (4:1-2). 10:26-31 describes the fallen as 'enemies of God' who are set for destruction. Those in 6:4-6 have no part in salvation. Overall the warnings are too harsh to make them mean loss of reward rather than loss of salvation.
5. The Phenomenological True Believer View – The readers are true believers who have lost their relationship with Christ and cannot expect salvation in Him when He returns. This is based on the phenomena of Christian experience in 6:4-8 eg Scot McKnight holds this view.

Pro's: He spreads his exegesis across a number of texts; he stresses 'inaugurated eschatology' ie salvation as a process involving conversion, development and future consummation at Christ's coming.

Con's: McKnight feels one can have present aspects of salvation and 'lose...faith' ie one can have a true relationship with Christ but then by lack of perseverance lose that relationship. Our perseverance is the evidence of the authenticity of our saving faith. Faith in Hebrews = obedience to the will of God. True relationship with God results in a lifestyle of obedience to God. McKnight assumes that all the readers of Hebrews are true Christians, but Guthrie reckons that the author of Hebrews is never actually sure that *all* the readers were true covenant people of Christ.

6. The Phenomenological Unbeliever View (Guthrie's own view) – The 'fallen' in Hebrews may have seemed to be genuine Christians as they related to the believing community, but by their rejection of Christ, they show that they don't have real faith. This means the readers *were* in danger of falling away. *Two concerns* –

- a) In this text, esp. 6:4-6, the writer *does* use language that can be interpreted as referring to Christians. They look outwardly like Christians in the community, but they lack true faith. They may have experienced all the elements of 6:4-6 but they *have not borne fruit* (6:7-8) and do not give evidence of the ‘better things’ linked with salvation (6:9-10). Guthrie argues that Hebrews eschatology is ‘now and not yet’; likewise, its soteriology is present *and* future, but we cannot have one without the other ie if we reach the end *without* a relationship with Christ, because of lack of perseverance, then that relationship was never really there cf 1 John 2:19.
- b) Heb 10:29 the reference to ‘being sanctified’ has confused some. How can it be said that an apostate is ‘being sanctified’? The answer is that the verb can be translated as an impersonal ‘by which one is sanctified’. Ultimately the author of Hebrews *admits* his lack of knowledge of the true spiritual state of his readers. *It is known by God* but is related to *ongoing fruitfulness and perseverance*.

CONCLUSIONS on Example 2

1. Those who fall away from God, cutting links with the Christian community and rejecting Christ, are in serious trouble and stand under God’s judgment. Guthrie p.231 ‘Those who fall away from the faith must not be allowed to slip calmly into the night’.
2. Participation in the Christian community does not necessarily equal salvation. Starting well does not guarantee ending well. We must care for those in our churches.
3. True spirituality is closely tied to fruitful faithfulness in the Christian life. True relationship with God shows itself in our works and in all of our ministries to others.
4. There are negative warnings in Scripture that have rhetorical power eg’s. Matt 7:22; 1 Cor 10:6-12. What churches need to recover is a ‘fear of the Lord’. Sometimes we need to hear case studies of those who have ignored the warnings and made shipwreck of their lives.
5. Conversion is the human response to God’s offer of salvation; regeneration is the other side of the coin, the action of God Himself on a person’s spirit. J.I.Packer says that in the *past* we have been saved

from the penalty of sin; in the *present* we are being saved from the power of sin; in the *future* we will be saved from the presence of sin. *Regeneration* is the first stage of salvation. We can see the results of this invisible act of God but *only God knows the human heart perfectly*. Participation in the Church is not the same as spiritual transformation which only happens gradually over time. The writer to the Hebrews is trying to *encourage* believers on this road.

6. We cannot safely use dialogue to manipulate people into the Kingdom. Such ‘converts’ are not likely to last. We must engage in sincere dialogue with those to whom we witness, *listening* to their questions, complaints and feelings.
7. Those who come to faith in our Christian communities need systematic preaching, teaching, discipleship and training.
8. All Christians are called into Christian service for life. This is at the same time a source of hope for us, *for God applauds our work*. Let us therefore show *diligence* right ‘to the very end’.

Application of Hebrews

C H Spurgeon (*The Early Years Banner of Truth*, 1962, p. 48) read Hebrews as a teenager and concluded –

‘I have a very lively, or rather deadly, recollection of a certain series of discourses on the Hebrews, which made a deep impression on my mind of the most undesirable kind. I wished frequently that the Hebrews had kept the Epistle to themselves, for it sadly bored a poor Gentile lad’.

Many older people also feel bewildered by a world of ceremonial, priests and sacrifices, revolving around endless animal offerings and sacrificial gifts.

And yet, **vital issues** emerge from the pages of this letter –

- 1 *Biblical revelation* – strong focus on the word of God.
- 2 *Christ’s deity* is to be upheld and protected in our lives and ministries.
- 3 The *creation of humanity* (chapter 2).
- 4 The themes of *freedom and bondage* (also in chap. 2).
- 5 The issue of the ‘*scandal of particularity*’ ie the *uniqueness* of Christ in God’s saving purposes eg’s John 14:6; Acts 4:12. Almost everything in contemporary Western and non-Western thinking opposes Christ’s distinctiveness and uniqueness, especially where it involves His role in Creation and Redemption and His Supremacy over all religious systems/ ideas of salvation! Many systems either ignore Christ or give Him some sort of position in a hierarchy of mediators or channels for the procuring of blessing from the divine world. Jehovah’s Witnesses, regardless of their increasingly subtle forms of presentation of their claims, still deny the deity of Christ and the finality of His perfect work. J Hick (*The Myth of God Incarnate* editor, SCM Press, 1977, p.58) claimed that the greater the success of Martin Luther King and his willingness to suffer, so it became more likely that he risked assassination. Hick then states – ‘And so with Jesus. To live the life of love, to teach love, and to found the community of love *entailed* the likelihood of the cross’. Raymond Brown responds – “But this letter [Hebrews] asserts that Jesus did not die simply as a willing martyr for a good cause. It teaches not the mere ‘likelihood’ of the cross but its absolute necessity. He died in our place and without the shedding of His blood ‘there is no forgiveness of sins’ (8:22)”. The doctrine of Substitutionary Atonement, not surprisingly, is

under severe and sustained attack in many parts of the Church and World. Concepts such as Sin, Satan, Hell and Judgment are generally not ‘flavours of the month’ and are certainly not popular or ‘politically correct’ today.

- 6 *Purification for sins* through Christ’s death (1:3). This forms the basic plank of the whole central section of Hebrews Chapters 7-10. Humanity tries every possible escape route to run away from its accountability and responsibility for sin, but the guilt remains and needs to be dealt with! Sin traps us and makes us do things we would sometimes want to avoid doing; it makes us say things we would not want others to say to us; it makes us dwell on inner thoughts, our verbal expression of which would embarrass us no end if uttered publically! Our sense of guilt can be solved only by Christ’s forgiveness and hope.
- 7 The *purpose of life* in this world. There is widespread confusion and bewilderment, amongst many strata of society, about the meaning of life today. The writer reminds his readers from Psalm 8 that humankind is now not as God intended (Heb 2:8), but that God in His grace has sent Christ to set us free from this alienation and bondage, in a way that we ourselves could never achieve! Christ became like us (2:9,14) so that we could become like Him! He takes us from sin and selfishness into a new life and destiny, surrendered to Him for sacrifice and service in His world. We become His children and He will take us to glory (2:10-13) as/if we strive to continue and persevere in the faith.
- 8 *Death, Judgment and the Life to come*. People today, especially in the West, try to hide from the reality of death. Hebrews deals with lives that are ‘held in slavery by their fear of death’ (2:15). Hebrews teaches that Christ has won an eternal deliverance. Born as a baby (2:14; 10:5-9) but experienced death, entering our human anguish over death. He suffered and tasted death for everyone (2:9). Christ knew that Satan sought to make humans fear death and be overwhelmed by the uncertainty beyond death. Christ passed through death and overcame the powers of sin, death and the devil. He was raised by God from death and this has brought us peace and hope (13:20). Alongside these glorious truths, however, we need to deal with passages such as Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26-31 and 13:4, with their strong reminders of the *judgment of God* as an unavoidable and undeniable reality, not only in the first century AD but also in our contemporary situations.

9 *The Christian life.* Hebrews addresses the issue of those who begin the Christian life with great promise but then drift away from faith or from the fellowship of Christ's people. Some even make a point of deliberately rejecting faith. Heb 3-4 deal with this problem within the context of first-century apostasy. The writer is convinced that salvation is rooted in a personal relationship with Christ expressed in repentance and faith (5:9). Yet at the same time, salvation is ongoing. It is not purely set in the past, though the past is important. We have been made holy (10:10) but we are being made holy (10:14). The writer stresses present and future. He saves now (7:25) but will return to bring salvation to those waiting for Him (9:28). We are called to believe and to continue by faith. It is our very perseverance in faith which validates and authenticates that faith.

10 The gospel is *demanding* in its call to discipleship. Christ defines discipleship in terms of taking up a cross, with denial and self-crucifixion. This is a radically different discipleship than presenting the Christian faith as the way to happiness, fulfillment or satisfaction. The way of the Cross as the way to glory also needs to be explained. Christ submitted Himself to God's will (5:7), learned obedience through suffering (5:8) and was 'made perfect' (5:9). We live today in a society that largely rejects the very idea of costly, painful and sacrificial living.

11 The Christian life can involve *isolation and opposition*. Hebrews portrays Christ as the sympathetic High Priest who can deal with such loneliness. Because He knew such hardship, He can enter into our 'weaknesses'. He is now Lord in heaven (4:14-15) and Son of God, yet He is also loving Son of Man who has been victorious in temptation when on earth. Hebrews speaks of a *man in heaven!* The opposition He faced means that He knows our feelings. We are never alone for He is our friend, always present, loving and strong (13:8).

12 *Comfort in Hebrews.* From 10:19, we meet believers caught up in the reality of first-century AD persecution. In 10:25 the writer reminds them of their fellow believers who had suffered previously and of the OT heroes of the faith and their successors in their struggles. We all need a renewed call to courage and a reminder of the faithfulness of God (11:11). We need a reminder of the past (11:1-40) and a vision of the future (12:22-29) – the unshakeable kingdom to which we belong.

13 The challenge of *practical Christian living*. The final *six* appeals to the believing readers of the Letter to the Hebrews:

- (i) use your homes for God;
- (ii) remember the pain of fellow Christian ‘prisoners of conscience’;
- (iii) honour marriage as special and especially regarding sexual behaviour;
- (iv) hold lightly to the things of this world;
- (v) encourage church leaders;
- (vi) beware of ‘strange teachings’.

All of these injunctions have powerful relevance for today.

14 The high importance of *fellowship*. The writer of Hebrews is very aware of the central importance of believers meeting together (10:25). Such regular relating with fellow believers stimulates mutual benefit - new energy, enthusiasm, warmth and determination to persevere even under the severest pressures. Much of Western society tends towards individualism, fed today by the relentless push in society towards an accompanying focus on personal rights, choices and powers. We need to recover a sense of the community nature of the Church which means that our selfish actions as individuals really *do* affect, restrict and damage the health and welfare of the community as a whole. Even our deliberate absence from the fellowship can deny benefit to those present!

15 Hebrews is a personal ‘*word of exhortation*’ (13:22). The key to an understanding of Hebrews seems to be the writer’s continual and repeated efforts to present the sheer majesty of Christ’s person and work in such a way that will blow the minds of his readers/listeners, stir their hearts at the deepest possible level and move them to changed thinking, attitudes, actions and lifestyles, such that they will *continue in faith*, through pain and struggle, right to the very end of their lives. Alongside this focus, the writer comes across as one who is also learning humble and obedient servant-hood, evidenced by his frequent use of the phrase ‘*let us*’. He includes himself in the challenge of his own sermon! So surely must we as preachers now. Our own willingness, within God’s Sovereign purposes, for suffering, sacrifice, self-discipline and self-denial will surely always be absolutely necessary, albeit painful, ingredients in our lives and ministries as pastors and preachers today.

SERMON OUTLINES and Notes

1) 1:1 – 2:4 God has spoken. Therefore, listen (See also page 1)

1:1-4 The Word of God reveals, redeems and gives new life. This is a key theme throughout the letter, as the Word came to the fathers, through the prophets, but finally in *His Son*. Revelation came through progression until its final fulfillment in Christ. Throughout history, God's servants have been His spokesmen but now God has opted to choose His own Son to deliver His final revelation to humanity!

The writer of the letter reveals just why the Son is qualified to deliver supreme revelation – God has appointed Him 'heir of all things' (Ps 2:8 and Heb 1:5); through Christ, God created the entire cosmos of space and time (Col 1:16) – Christ was God's agent in this task; He is the radiance of God's glory and as such the light of God shines in and through the Christ into human lives and situations; Christ is the image of God's being and nature, such that seeing Christ is seeing what God the Father is; Christ upholds all things by 'the word of His power', thus being the Creator and ongoing sustainer and controller of this vast universe; Christ provided purification for our sins by His work as our great High Priest – He works globally and personally in a way that no one else in this universe could; Christ then sat down at God's right hand, showing us how this Christ applied Psalm 110:1 to Himself and indicating the sheer exaltation and supremacy of Christ to His current position as perfect mediator between God and humanity in His role as Prophet, Priest and King.

Christ is thus marked out as superior to the angels, through His exaltation to the highest place and through the title 'Son' that He had always possessed. All this was eternally appointed by the Father, for the Person and Work of His own Son. Indeed, the adjective 'better' is used 13 times in Hebrews to compare and contrast Christ and His new order with all that went before Him, including the angelic roles of law-giving (2:2f) and the administration of nations (2:5)!

1:5-14 Lest there be any doubt whatsoever that Christ is indeed better than the angels, our writer now amasses a mountain of OT evidence that argues his case! Indeed, five of his selected quotes are from the Psalms, one is from 2 Samuel 7:14/1 Chron. 17:13 and one comes from Deut. 32:43. The writer of Hebrews builds his case text by text, as he further puts the spotlight on Christ's supremacy over the angels:

Ps 2:7 – ‘*You are my Son, today I have become your Father*’. God never said this to any angel! These words were most fully realized and fulfilled in the Messiah of David’s line whom God would raise up. Christ had always been eternal Son but had entered the full exercise of that office following the suffering and exaltation that actually proved His total obedience to His Father’s Will.

2 Sam 7:14 – ‘*I will be His Father and He will be my Son*’. The prophet Nathan gives God’s response to David’s wish to build a house for the ark of God, namely that God is not wanting a house of wood but rather to confirm that He will establish the house of David for ever! This greater Son of David was no less than the expected and promised Christ celebrated in Luke 1:32f; 1:68f – the Davidic Messiah Himself.

Deut. 32:43 - ‘*Let all God’s angels worship Him*’. The focus here in verse 6 is not on the first or second coming of Christ but on the reality of this Christ being worshipped by angels! ‘*Firstborn*’ – see Ps 89:27 and Ps 97:7 – because He exists before creation and He has inherited all creation as His – it belongs to Him. Some say that this refers to the Father’s purpose to commit judgment to the Son, so that all may honour the Son (John 5:23). The timing is most probably at Christ’s exaltation and enthronement as sovereign over the universe.

Ps 104:4 – The angels in verse 7 may be carrying out God’s commands with speed (winds) and strength (fire) but ultimately angels operate in ways that are fading/ephemeral, whereas Christ works eternally and permanently!

Ps 45:6f – Here in verses 8-9 the Psalmist celebrates a royal wedding. This Messiah can be addressed not only as God’s Son but actually as ‘God’, for He is the Davidic Messiah and the radiance of God’s glory. He is perfect justice and righteousness. The ‘companions’ are those who belong to Him for they share in His joy and glory.

Ps 102:25-27 – In vv 10-12, the key point is that even though earth and heaven might pass away, God Himself is eternal and unchanging. The words are applied here by the Psalmist to the Son because it was through the Son’s agency that Creation took place – the angels were there as watching worshippers. Indeed, God here addresses this Creator as ‘*Lord*’!

Ps 110 – Finally, this reference is to the Son’s enthronement and the promise of victory for Christ over all his enemies! This is the right of the Messianic King and Great High Priest who died, rose and is now exalted! No angels ever got an invitation to sit before God, let alone at His right

hand. Verse 14 confirms that ultimately angels served God and those who would inherit salvation in Him. The nature of this salvation is *not* explained. What the readers *do* need to know is the terrible danger that faces anyone who treats this salvation *lightly*! The readers had embraced the authority of this gospel and this authority was that of Christ. God has *no* message or mediator higher than Christ's gospel.

2:1-4 *Therefore*, all this huge focus on Christ's superiority to the angels can now be understood. The Law was mediated by angelic intermediaries. God's final Word is *in his son* – the truths and teachings of the gospel are of paramount importance and are a matter of life and death. Believers *must not drift away* from them, and risk loss of their hope and security! (2:1). Even the Law, mediated by angels (Deut. 33:2; Gal 3:19; Acts 7:53), carried very severe penalties for its infringement (2:2). The great salvation came to this earth by *Christ, The Son Of God*. This gospel must therefore not be treated lightly! The writer of Hebrews thus feared that Christian believers risked sinking under pressure to the extent that they would retreat from public profession of gospel and faith. Then the gospel would cease to have any real influence on their lives! Here then is the first of a number of severe warnings from the writer (2:3). The gospel had come with and in Christ (Mark 1:14f; Luke 4:18ff) but the author of Hebrews and the letter's readers had heard this gospel testimony from reliable witnesses (Luke 1:2). In this respect, the author did not claim special personal revelation of the gospel in the way Paul did. As such, he puts himself on the same level as the readers of his letter! 2:4 stresses, though, that God Himself added abundant evidence of His own supernatural confirmation of this unique gospel. God showed His agreement with the utter superiority of Christ through many signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Holy Spirit – see Acts 2:2,43; Gal 3:5; 1 Peter 1:12. The distribution of gifts of the Spirit signed and sealed the truth, reality and power of Christ's gospel! The writer to the Hebrews would not have mentioned these manifestations had there been any chance that they would have pleaded ignorance of such events. They were well known and widespread and the writer now reminds his readers of their validating power in order to re-kindle their dwindling faith in the sheer majesty of Christ's Person and Work.

2) 2:5 – 3:6 Just who is this Incredible Christ?

2:5-9a The Humbling Of Christ – We have OT evidence that the governance and administration of this world has been allocated to angelic powers, some of which are evil and hostile, eg the angelic ‘prince of Persia’ and ‘prince of Greece’ (Dan 10:20-21; 12:1). However, in Hebrews the age and world to come has not been entrusted to angels but rather to the Son of God, whom His Father has ‘appointed heir of all things’ (1:2). That new world-order inaugurated by Christ has not yet fully appeared and for a while the hallmarks of the Christ had to be weakness and pain, rather than strength and glory. The writer to the Hebrews quotes Ps 8:4-6 in Heb 2:6 but applies this great privilege not to humanity but instead to Christ, the head of the new creation and ruler of the world to come! Yes, the Christ was like a human being (Dan 7:13) but vastly more besides! Christ is the last Adam and ultimately the entire creation will be brought into subjection to this Christ.

The Lord Jesus Christ has been appointed as Sovereign but in order to deal with His people’s mega-problem of sin, He must realize His sovereignty through the twin pathways of deep suffering and painful death. This is why the Christ had to ‘be made a little lower than the angels’ (2:9) in His person and function as High Priest in the presence of God Himself. 2:8 indicates that the surrender of creation for human oversight is not yet fully realized and not all creation yet gives allegiance to Christ, but the sovereignty extended to humanity, which has not been adequately exercised, has already been handed over to Christ, so that He will continue and complete His work for this cosmos. In verse 9 we see that by Christ’s death and resurrection, He has been exalted to the highest possible place where he reigns until all opposition to His sovereignty is eliminated and it will finally be seen that ‘all things are subjected to Him’. Because of His humiliation, suffering and death, Christ has been granted heavenly glory. The crowning followed the suffering. Christ died for us and by taking on Himself what was due to us, He redeemed us from the curse of death. This is *The Grace Of God*.

2:9b-18 The Suffering Of Christ – What God supremely did, according to 2:10, was to make Christ, through His *suffering*, perfectly qualified to be the Saviour of His people. The heart of the Godhead is revealed in his ultimate work, namely that He was ‘in Christ reconciling the world to Himself’ (2 Cor 5:19). As our ‘representative’ and ‘forerunner’, Christ entered into the presence of God to secure *our* entry there. This perfect Son of God has become His people’s perfect Saviour in order to open up the way to God Himself and to achieve this, He *must* experience and endure suffering and

death. We had to tread a pathway of perfection that Christ himself had trod in order to count as our representative and High Priest. Christ Himself opened up this way.

- a) He had to sympathize with us and He could only do that by experiencing and sharing our own pains and struggles.
- b) At the same time, Christ had to live in perfect *obedience* to God to be a qualified High Priest, fully acceptable to God.
- c) He had to present an *atonement* for humankind to God. He suffered *with us and for us!* His suffering was *voluntary* and *vicarious!* This is how, incredibly, Christ 'brought many sons and daughters to glory' (2:10). He, the Saviour, has saved those He is happy to call His brothers and sisters (2:11)

In verses 12-13 this remarkable solidarity with His people is confirmed by the writer's use of three OT quotes:

Ps 22:22 – we are the members of His Church under the New Creation;

Isa 8:17b – as Isaiah and the remnant of Israel stayed faithful to God when so many rejected the prophet, so Christ endured rejection yet refused to give up;

Isa 8:18a – Isaiah's two sons, Shearjashub ('Remnant will return) and Mahershalalhashbaz (Hasten booty, speed spoil) bore names that reminded Israel of God's saving plans for Israel, as did his own name 'Yahweh is salvation'.

Similarly, Christ's own 'sons' and 'children' – see Isaiah 53:10 and John 17:6 – were a constant reminder that *the Word of God would ultimately be fulfilled* in spite of all the opposition it faced! Verse 14 underlines the fact that Christ had to be truly human. He had to be born into this world and experience death in this world, like every other human being does. Jesus had died in apparent weakness, failure and disgrace. Death and evil *seemed* to have been victorious, but the reality was the very reverse – Jesus had been raised from death and had given His followers the power of His risen life!

The prince or angel of death is identified here with the devil or Satan, but Christ has disarmed him. The all-pervading human fear of death has been dealt with and for believers in Christ, death brings freedom, not bondage. The devil can no longer scare us with death (2:15). The sense of 2:16 is that Christ 'took hold' of us, providing help and deliverance. Who are the 'us'? None other than the many sons of Abraham whom the Son of God is bringing to glory! The reality of solidarity with humanity crops up yet again in the words of the writer. Any priest must be one with those He represents

before God and Christ had to be like His brethren as High Priest, except for sin (2:17). He suffered with them and for them and was made perfect through that suffering. He is both sympathetic *and* faithful. The perfect High Priest! Our confidence to approach God is possible, *only if our sin has been dealt with!* Because Jesus was sinless, He was entitled to enter God's presence but because He has also dealt with our sins, He has a double entitlement to enter God's presence. As High Priest He has *actually* removed the sin barrier between ourselves and our Holy God. An additional blessing comes to us in verse 18, for Jesus Himself had been frequently tempted, not only as a human being gets tempted, but also tempted to seek a less costly way to fulfill His life and ministry. The readers of Hebrews were being tempted to retreat from God and throw in the towel called 'discipleship'! In Christ they had a Victor and an Intercessor who had proved that it *was* possible to endure, persevere right to the end and still be standing firm!

3:1-6 The Faithfulness Of Christ – Therefore, brothers and sisters, in light of the totally stunning role of Christ in salvation just presented by the writer, *focus on Jesus*, having been *set apart by God for himself*, having been *made a family member* and having been *called into his eternal rest!* (3:1). God has revealed Himself totally and finally in Christ. He is God's representative among humans *and* humanity's representative in the presence of God – the ideal and perfect High Priest. In all these regards, Christ has shown Himself to be completely faithful (John 17:4). 3:2 records that Moses had been Israel's true advocate with God (Ex 32:11ff, 31f; Num. 12:7f; 14:13ff). Yet, Moses' status was actually inferior to Christ's (3:3-4). Moses was a faithful administrator under God but Christ the Son of God, was infinitely greater and higher in power. The universe was made through Him; it was given to Christ by his Father as His heritage; thus, Christ is founder and inheritor of the household of God. Moses was a servant of the divine household, but Christ is Son and heir! In the OT God had issued a warning against those who might 'speak against my servant Moses' (Num12:8). The far greater warning, implicit here, is not to challenge the claims of Christ and His gospel! In other words, *continuance in the Christian life is the acid test of reality*. The true saints of God are those who *persevere to the end*. This is why the writer to the Hebrews is desperate for believers to endure, to keep fearless confession, to foster hope, to be joyful and to uphold and build their faith, no matter what their circumstances!

3) 3:7 – 19 Warnings About Unbelief

3:7-11 OT Warning against Unbelief – Early Christian tradition of Christ's work of redemption viewed the death of Christ as a 'New Exodus' – the sacrificial lamb without blemish who is the true Passover. Like Israel in early days, these believers are 'the church in the wilderness', baptized into Christ (antitype of Israel's passage through the Red Sea), sacramentally feeding on Him by faith (antitype of Israel's feeding with manna and water). Christ the living Rock leads them through the wilderness; the heavenly rest before them is the heavenly counterpart to the Israelites goal of earthly Canaan (1 Cor 10:6ff; Jude 5). The writer warns his readers *not to abandon their faith and hope*.

Psalm 95:7b-11 cannot be separated from Psalm 95:1-7a in this Psalm that was sung in the Temple on the Sabbath. The key point was to remind believing people that it was and is vital to worship God, but deeds and words of worship are valid and acceptable only if they spring from genuinely obedient minds, hearts and wills. *Massah* = 'tempting' and *Meribah* = 'striving' (Ex 7:2,7). Israel's complaint to Moses about lack of water at Rephidim was just one of a whole string of occasions of moaning and grumbling that stretched over 40 years of wandering. They wanted to see just how long God's patience would last, faced with their unrelenting stubbornness of mind, heart and will!

Another example of unbelief in Israel was the Num. 14:20ff and Deut. 2:14 incident when most of the spies sent into Kadesh-Barnea brought back an unfavourable report about the land of Canaan. The Israelites revolted against Moses and Aaron and only by Moses' intercession did God spare the whole people. The entry of the Israelites was delayed by continued wandering for a further 38 years. Only Caleb and Joshua entered the promised rest of God in Canaan at this time. Failure to listen to, and respond in obedience to, the voice of God is taken very seriously by God. Now generations later, the writer to the Hebrews warns his readers that 'Today' is the time to listen to and obey God.

3:12-18 Shun the Sin of Unbelief – Our writer explains strongly in 3:12 along these lines - the Israelites who rejected Moses in the wilderness wanderings era were judged by God in their failure to enter their earthly Canaan. How much greater will be the loss of the new age blessings of heaven for those who fail to enter because of unbelief that involved disloyalty as well as passive failure to believe. The Israelites of old had

rejected the authority of Moses. If Christians reject the Christ who is Son of God and who is appointed by God as Apostle and High Priest, then this amounts to rebellion against the living God! This would be apostasy, a complete break with God. To turn back from gospel illumination and reject it in favour of the old order already superceded, amounts to sin against the light.

The call of the writer is therefore for the believers to maintain *the faith* and *their faith* to the end, by hearing the voice of God and living in obedience. Mutual encouragement was the order of the day – and every day/’Today’ – for there is always strength in numbers. Isolated Christians are always vulnerable. Struggling with temptations to compromise will always press in on Christians and worldly wisdom will be a threat – and ‘the deceitfulness of sin’ - that will push believers towards a watered-down conscience that will all the more easily lead them into doubt and disobedience. United encouragement reduces this. Verse 14 stresses again that the true people and partners of Christ are those who remain firm right to the very end. Perseverance is our greatest challenge. The ancient people of God worshipped God after their deliverance from the Red Sea but soon flagged and drifted. *Starting* the journey of faith is vital but is not enough. The final prize goes to those who continue and *complete* the course! Verses 15-18 underline the worrying truth that the people of Israel at the Red Sea had seen just what power God had wielded on their behalf and yet had rebelled against Him. God passed sentence, as recorded in Num. 14:27ff and Deut. 32:20. How true of all of us as believers in Christ. We experience His power and yet we so quickly start to doubt and drift all over again as we struggle to trust our God! Finally, the writer summarizes the truth that because of unbelief – faithlessness – those wandering people failed to enter God’s rest in the promised land. The message to the Hebrews of first Century AD must have been plain indeed. They had experienced the redeeming power of God in the gospel of Christ and had received the promise of an eternal rest and inheritance. The writer pleads with his readers not to risk losing these glorious promises.....*by unbelief*.

4) 4:1 – 13 Hearing, faith and God's judgment

4:1-2 Hearing and Faith – The Marriage Made For Heaven! The writer has dealt with entry to the ‘rest’, in the form of the earthly Canaan. He now turns again to the spiritual counterpart of the earthly Canaan. ‘Therefore’, writes the author, persevere and attain this goal of entering eternal rest in this new order! The followers of Jesus need to fear the possibility of missing this goal! The earlier Israelites got no value from hearing the good news because they failed to appropriate it by faith. The demands on those people were to obey God’s voice and to keep God’s covenant but they chose instead to disobey His voice and to disregard His covenant. Hearing the gospel by itself does not bring final salvation; it requires to be appropriated *by faith - a genuine faith and a persistent faith.*

4:3-11 Rest for the faithful – The reference to ‘my rest’ (Ps 95:11; Gen 2:2) relates to a sharing in the rest that God Himself enjoys after His active work of creation. The ‘rest’ of God had been available ever since the end of creation (4:3) but can be forfeited by disobedience, as the writer repeatedly injects through his quoting of Psalm 95. That ‘rest’ is ongoing and may be shared by all who respond to the gospel with faith and obedience. The divine Sabbath thus started at the point of creation’s completion and continues even now (John 5:17). This is the writer’s focus in 4:3-5. In the following two verses, he underscores his belief, based on this Psalm 95, that entry into the ‘rest’ of God is still available ‘so long a time’ after the Exodus and wilderness wanderings era. The voice of God in the Psalm and Letter is the paramount factor of gracious promise, whether in the days of Moses, David, Christ or the 21st Century AD. However, this ‘rest’ can also be forfeited by shallow response to grace, presuming on His patience, tempting the Lord or treating faith and obedience with lightness, hypocrisy or rejection.

Verse 8 summarizes the argument and sets a context to it. The ‘rest’ in Psalm 95:11 is not the earthly Canaan for that land of rest was lived in by the Israelites who entered it under Joshua’s lead. The people addressed in Ps 95 had already been living a long time in Canaan. The ‘rest’ was also different from the rest they had from all their enemies, given by God in Joshua’s day (Josh 23:1 cf 21:44). To the Greek readers, the names ‘Joshua’ and ‘Jesus’ are not two names *but one!* The former led God’s people into the earthly Canaan, but the latter led His people as heirs of the new covenant into their heavenly inheritance. The former was a temporal ‘rest’; the latter was a true ‘rest’, still prepared and reserved for disciples of Christ in the new order,

new creation and new eternal life with God. According to 4:9-10, the ‘Sabbath rest’ involves our participation in God’s own rest. As God rested after His work of creation, so believers rest after their service on earth. It means the eternal homeland that is the heritage of believers – a better ‘home’ or ‘city’ (11:10,16). People of faith are already citizens of this city of God, though not yet experiencing their full privileges as citizens of it.

Just when we enter this city is not completely clear in the Hebrews letter – it *may* be that the writer to the Hebrews believes that OT believers entered the rest on completion of Christ’s redemptive work, whilst NT people of faith enter the rest on death. It is to this eternal fellowship with God that the readers of the letter are urged to persevere, regardless of the difficulties and pain of this present evil age. Our writer reaches yet another climax to his arguments in verse 11 with another highly significant ‘*therefore*’. In view of all the prospect of glory by persevering in their faith and in view of the catastrophic results of unbelief, the believers are urged to strive with every drop of energy and endurance in order to enter their promised ‘rest’ in their eternal home. The Word of God *must* be taken seriously, *must* be accepted in faith and *must* be put into daily practice.

4:12-13 Judgment by God and His Word - This focus on ‘warning’ in verse 11 is then continued and intensified through verses 12-13. The warning about falling by disobedience is timely and there is a reason for it – *because*, unlike human words, this Word of God is living, powerful and discerning of the true condition of the human heart. The Word is ‘active’ in achieving that purpose for which the Word was given (1 Pet 1:23; Isa 55:11). It reaches all the recesses of our spiritual being and exposes our innermost motives, thoughts and driving forces (1 Cor 4:5). The Spirit and Word work together to take a human being apart. The result will be that whilst we can deceive ourselves and certainly we can deceive others about our true nature, yet nothing escapes God’s awareness and knowledge of us! (4:13). We are exposed and stripped naked in the presence of the all-knowing God. We cannot conceal *anything* from Him. Ultimately, we don’t have to satisfy other people or our own conscience, but we will stand before God Himself and ‘we must give account’.

5) 4:14 – 5:10 Jesus, our Great High Priest

4:14 – 16 Our faith and our confidence

Two more ‘*therefore’s*’ confront us within the space of just three verses! Following the strong words of warning and admonition in 4:12-13, there follow words of comfort and encouragement. Real notes of positivity pile in, one after the other. In Christ, we are promised all the strength we need to hold onto the faith and resist an array of temptations to compromise and crumble. Jesus is no ‘armchair theologian’ – He has undergone human trouble and temptation but come through and remained firm and faithful. He now reigns in glory and this is a massive incentive for us to persevere in faith and obedience. He has been exalted high above the heavens as our great High Priest, *cf* earthly high priests who at most passed once a year through the inner veil into the holy of holies in a physical but temporary sanctuary, appearing for just a few moments before God on behalf of their people. *What a vast difference, when it comes to the might and majesty of the Christ in his great high priesthood.*

Verse 15 indicates that alongside this magnificent transcendence, Christ’s humanity remains absolutely valid as a foundation for His sympathy, understanding and compassion *for us* here and now! He went through huge human temptation and trial but came through with His faith and obedience intact. He is supremely qualified to understand and help *us* in our weaknesses. Christ had been 40 days in the wilderness and only He – the sinless one – can fully appreciate the sheer power of the temptation to sin! The confidence of the writer in believing the readers *can* ‘hold firmly to the faith they profess’ is firmly rooted (‘for’) in his knowledge that this High Priest has indeed *struggled personally with various trials and temptations* and is therefore equipped to help struggling believers with their own sufferings in this life.

‘*Therefore*’ (4:16), God has given ample reason to come to the throne of God with confidence, for it is at that throne that Christ Jesus sits in exaltation as our High Priest. The earthly mercy-seat was the place where propitiation took place on the day of atonement and God offered grace to the people. That was a transaction in token, whereas Christ’s presence on the heavenly throne confirmed a propitiation in actual fact and reality. It also indicates the perpetual availability of God’s grace and help in all of our needs – on a 24/7 basis of access!

5:1 – 10 Qualifications for High Priesthood – The key issues here are:

- a) a high priest must be sympathetic to those he represents, and,
- b) he must be appointed to this office.

5:1-4 General Qualifications – Aaron and all his successors represented Israel in the presence of God and had to be Israelites themselves, familiar with their needs and struggles. These high priests had to present the people's gifts and sin-offerings to God annually on the day of atonement (5:1). The high priest needed to be knowledgeable with Temple ritual *but also needed* to show tenderness and consideration to those struggling and drifting, remembering that he himself is subject to weakness (5:2). Those dealing with the sins of the people needed to be very conscious of their own weakness and thus gentle with others. Indeed verse 3 shows us that the high priest had to make a sin-offering for himself, as well as for the people; *cf* Jesus had no need to offer such a preliminary sacrifice for Himself. Jesus had endured His people's weaknesses and temptations during His own journey on this earth, but then supremely had borne His people's sins in His own body on the tree, in His capacity as the ultimate and unique High Priest of God. This leads the writer of 'Hebrews' to point out in 4:4 that no man could take the initiative to appoint himself as high priest. There must be evidence of a divine call in every case (Lev 8:1ff; Num 20:23ff, 25:10ff).

5:5-10 Christ's Qualifications For High Priest – The author of the letter here presents Christ's qualifications to be high priest – His divine appointment and His sympathy with His people. Christ did not take the initiative in this appointment. God called Him, using the words of Ps 2:7; Heb 1:5 – 'You are my Son: today I have become your Father' – most likely at the point after which Jesus had been crucified, raised and exalted. This is followed in 5:6 by the quoting of Ps 110:4 – 'You are a priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek'. It was a double appointment by God Himself in the same person – as Davidic Messiah (Ps 2:7) and as high priest (Ps 110:4).

Melchizedek appears in Gen 14:18 as king of Salem, probably Jerusalem, and priest of God Most High. Centuries later, Jerusalem fell into David's hands and became his capital city (2 Sam 5:6ff). After that, David and his heirs became successors to Melchizedek's kingship and probably also to the priesthood of God Most High. However, in the Hebrew monarchy the 'divine kingship' of the fertile crescent – which united religious and civil leadership – was abandoned. The chief priesthood in the Jerusalem temple was practised in the period of the monarchy by the family of Zadok – a family different from the Davidic line and with no claimed links to the order

of Melchizedek. Under the Hasmonaeans, chief priesthood and chief civil power in Israel were combined in one person but had nothing to do with Melchizedek. A number of religiously pious groups in Israel were not happy with this Hasmonaean way of combining roles and they wanted to separate kingly and priestly functions. As far as we know, the writer to the Hebrews was the first to combine these two eschatological roles in one person, namely in the Christ who has become our High Priest and King in the order of Melchizedek.

Our writer now puts the spotlight in 5:7 on Christ's stunning humanity. We have been told already that Jesus was faithful and merciful as our High Priest because He was made like us in every way – He sympathizes with our every weakness because He Himself was exposed to all the struggles, trials and tests that we have to face and endure. This sympathy of Christ for us here and now continues even in His present exalted and glorified state. It seems that the writer must have heard of earthly examples of Jesus 'praying', 'pleading', 'crying out', and 'weeping' – possibly additional to the obvious one of Gethsemane (Mark 14:33b-36; John 12:27f). These acts of Jesus surely have ongoing pastoral application for us today. These acts ultimately point to Jesus' need of divine help to drink that appalling cup of suffering, yet the very cup that brought Him glory. Amazing!! Jesus' qualifications for His high-priestly service were His agony, tears, prayers, pleading and suffering throughout His earthly life and ministry. The marvel was that His trust in God had never failed. In all this, Christ 'was heard for His godly fear', because He committed Himself and submitted Himself to the will of God. He endured the pain and the cup *was not* removed. How could it have been?! Even Jesus went hungry in the wilderness testings and knew bitter loneliness in Gethsemane. Sometimes God does *not* intervene to deliver us from our pain.

Verse 8 insists that He – 'Son', rather than 'a son' – was not exempt from the general rule that learning comes by suffering. We have nasty consequences from our disobeying, and that teaches us next time to obey! Jesus however had set out from the start to obey God and learned by suffering step-by-step just what this obedience would cost Him on earth (Isa 50:5f). His sufferings were the required price of His obedience on earth *but at the same time they were a crucial part of His obedience*. Indeed, they were the very means by which He fulfilled the will of God (Matt 3:15; Mark 10:38f; Luke 12:5). Jesus was utterly at God's disposal for God's saving purposes, which meant the initial baptism for His identification with humanity, followed by His receiving and drinking of the cup of intense suffering

publicly. The Christians reading this letter to the Hebrews knew that their present trials and suffering could be averted by renouncing their confession or at least reduced by making it less visible to the public gaze. Were they to give up their faith or press on to perfection? Jesus did indeed press on to be made ‘perfect *through suffering*’. The readers must do the same – strengthened by Christ’s example and by Christ’s present available power to help. No struggle of ours is beyond or outside Christ’s sympathetic help for us.

The author completes this section of his argument in verses 9-10. By suffering, Christ was made perfect. In a real sense, death for believers means perfection, but here in the letter, the writer explains that by suffering and death, Christ was made perfect and ‘became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him’. He was also named by God as ‘high priest in the order of Melchizedek’. Humiliation and suffering lead to exaltation in glory. This happens because of the nature of Christ’s eternal sacrifice, pinpointed in 9:12 (‘eternal redemption’), 9:15 (‘eternal inheritance’) and 13:20 (‘eternal covenant’). This sacrifice was attained once only, not needing repetition and valid permanently! This required Christ’s obedience and it is obedience which is stated as the condition for this eternal salvation. In other words, the readers, and indeed ourselves, *must* persevere in their loyalty to Christ, the Saviour called ‘high priest’ for ever.

5:11 – 6:3 (*See also 'Example 2', p 49 above*)

The Hearers' Current Problem – Logically, the writer should press on with further explanation of the priestly 'order of Melchizedek', but he is aware of the mental and spiritual sluggishness of some of his readers, so he breaks off to address this serious problem of immature spiritual development (5:11). The author dives straight in by claiming that the readers have been Christians for some time and ought to be teachers by this stage. The reality is that they really need to begin with the ABC of their theological thinking and spiritual understanding of the basics. They are still at the 'milk' stage, not the 'solid food' stage! (5:12-13) These readers had settled down in their Christian lives, aware that continuation would involve a deeper, and more costly, separation from their past lives and Jewish or other religious upbringing, especially perhaps the fact that the old order of priesthood and sacrifice was no longer valid. Only those who are growing in the 'word of righteousness' will gain the knowledge and understanding to make moral judgments and exercise spiritual wisdom (5:14). Some of these readers had stagnated and got stuck in the faith! It is also true of course that the teaching on the passing away of the old order might well have been unacceptable to some of these Jewish believers and that would have been another stumbling block on their road to maturity. We all face intellectual, moral and personal blockages that stop us from going forward.

Having told his readers that they are not yet ready for solid food, the author of the letter now surprises his 'audience' and ourselves by proposing to move on from the basics(!) into the heavier stuff! Strange that he now says 'therefore' in 6:1, rather than 'nevertheless'! Like ourselves at times, these believers probably needed a jolt out of their complacency, by being given a fresh vision of the sheer extent of the glory of Christ. In short, they needed to be exposed to the love of Christ in His high priesthood and simply be blown away by it in their own lives!! In 6:1-3 our writer lists 3 pairs of issues that he does *not* want to re-visit at this point. He seems to start from a Jewish foundation and builds Christian Theology.

a) *Repentance From Dead Works/Faith Towards God.* This could well include a list of all the evil ways of death featured in the *Didache* like adultery, idolatry, hypocrisy, envy and pride, to mention just a few. Repentance from these was vital (Rom 6:21; Mk 1:15) and it was tightly linked into faith, of which these believers had a substantial knowledge from their understanding of the OT (Gen 15:6; Hab 2:4; Isa 7:9).

- b) *Teaching Of Baptisms/Laying On Of Hands.* These were probably ceremonial washings carried out by nonconformist Jewish groups, common in Rome and challenged here by our writer as invalid. Imposition of hands was probably understood here as imparting the Spirit.
- c) *Resurrection Of The Dead/Eternal Judgment.* The Pharisees held that this doctrine from OT times with regard to Israel's ancestral hope would be realised. The Jews had accepted the reality of God's judgment (Gen 18:25; Isa 33:22; Dan 7:9ff). In NT terms, Christ will be the Judge of all.

If converts from paganism gave up Christianity and returned to paganism, it would be a clearly visible break; *but* if a 'Hebrew' slid away from Christianity, he or she could slowly abandon the Christian elements of their faith but still hold on to the Jewish foundations listed in 6:1-2 and deceive themselves that they were truly growing in Christ – when in fact they weren't. The writer thus sees no point in repeatedly stressing the basic Jewish foundation points in 6:1-2. He therefore goes on to the serious material on high priesthood and looks for Christ to work!

6:4-8 The danger of falling away – The writer now explains why there is no point in laying the foundation all over again, namely because apostasy is incapable of remedy. It is impossible to cure or put right. Those who *persevere* prove themselves to be the true people of God. People who have shared the covenant privileges of God's people, then reject and renounce them, are the hardest people to reclaim for the faith. It is true that nothing is impossible for the Lord to accomplish by the power of His Spirit. This passage is not about nominal adherents to the Christian faith who have never known its power in their lives. This concerns those who know where the truth lies and over a period of time, they follow the faith but then for some reason renounce it. Thus, the seed that fell on rocky ground produced a believer who grew for a while but under testing, then fell away.

These are folk who have

- a) '*been enlightened*' – ie the light of the gospel has impacted their lives and they may well have been baptized. To reject the gospel now would be to sin against the light of God and as such, by its very definition, there would be no way back! It would be an incurable sin.
- b) '*tasted the heavenly gift*' – this could be a reference to the Lord's Supper or might be a wider compass of all the spiritual benefits and blessings signified in, and resulting from, eating the Lord's Supper.

c) '*partaken of the Holy Spirit*' – some scholars have tried to argue that the writer here means partaking of the gifts of the Spirit rather than the actual Person of the Holy Spirit, but that cannot be proved from the text. Some claim that it is impossible for a genuine 'partaker' of the Spirit to subsequently commit apostasy. The writer to the Hebrews does however believe that it is possible in this way to 'insult the spirit of grace' (10:29) eg Simon Magus was stated by Peter as being still 'full of bitterness and captive to sin' (Acts 8:23), evidenced in following decades by his continuing opposition to the gospel. This *does* raise the question of 'In what way, and to what extent, had he partaken of the Holy Spirit?'

d) '*tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the coming age*' – Simon Magus *had* realized how good the word was when spoken by Philip and saw the signs attending – see Matt 12:28 - authenticated and acknowledged by Christ Himself, but He also warned that some had claimed to prophesy and exorcise demons in His name but they never knew Him - see Matt 7:22f. Ultimately only the Lord knows who truly belongs to Him! This warning was a very real warning against a very real danger, as long as there are 'evil hearts of unbelief' around that can cause us to turn away from the living God (3:12). In 6:6, the writer recalls that those who crucified Christ also refused to accept Him as the Son of God, exposing Him to deep, public humiliation and crucifixion. There were and are Christians who in effect place themselves in the same position of the willful sin of *deliberate apostasy*. Their rejection of this salvation leaves possible no other salvation. Some will reach a point at which they can no longer repent, following their continual and causative crucifying of Jesus. No way back! 6: 7-8 stress that fruit will come by endurance, but some land has no yield at all.

6:9-20 The writer's confidence and hope – Such was the appearance of the fruits of righteousness in these readers' lives in the form of acts of service for their fellow-Christians, that the writer felt sure they were not actual, or even potential, apostates (see the evidence in 10:32-34). Only here in the letter does he confidently write to them as 'my dear friends' (6:9). God regards such acts of kindness as having been done to God Himself (6:10). Indeed, these acts need to be continued right to the end, showing that Christian works do indeed hold a place along the road of perseverance that confirms them as heirs of salvation (6:11-12).

Our writer now presses his point (6:13-15) that the heirs of Abraham are those who have responded to the gospel, rooted in Abraham's own experience, namely that 'he believed the Lord and He reckoned it to him for

righteousness' (Gen 15:6, quoted in Rom 4:3; Gal 3:6). The key point is that Abraham and his spiritual descendants *persevered to the end*, thereby confirming the reality of their faith and their hope. The writer recognizes God's faithfulness to His promise to Abraham but also to His promise regarding the high priesthood of Melchizedek. Abraham waited patiently – so must we! Abraham believed God and eventually, against all the odds, Isaac was born with the confirmation that God's ultimate but distant promise for all his descendants would indeed be fulfilled. This was even confirmed with an oath, sworn by God Himself, after the offering up of the life of Isaac (6:16-17).

God's promise to Abraham by an oath helps the readers of this letter to realize the enormity of the divine oath to use the Melchizedek high priesthood to fulfill the divine purposes (Ps 110:4). Only God knows what He will do. His word alone is sufficient, but God swears an oath to give us double assurance – this is grace upon grace. This oath was fulfilled in the glorious gospel of Christ! This great and strong encouragement is intended for *us* (6:18-20), and because it is impossible for God to lie, we have His promise and His confirming oath. The 'double glazing' of complete assurance in these twin anchors of hope. Our hope is absolutely anchored to the One who is now behind that thick curtain behind which the Christ has entered as our Great High Priest to deliver for us an eternal salvation by the shedding of His own blood. He it is who will intercede for His Church for ever and His purposes can never be thwarted, even in the midst of a passing, crumbling and dying world that yields no hope of its own.

Our writer is now ready to proceed from where he left off in 5:11. He is ready to declare the utter marvel of the Melchizedek priesthood, however tough it may be for some of his readers to understand, because it is by this route that the writer will lead his people to a maturity of their Christian faith and Christian life. This author is following a very definite agenda in his letter to take the believers to that place that he knows God wants them to be, both at that point in history and by *perseverance* to the end of their journey. Such is also God's intended purpose for us as believers living in 2018.

7) 7:1-28 The Order of Melchizedek

7:1-10 The Superiority of Melchizedek – Our writer is gradually going to reveal the costs and demands of Christian discipleship for his believing readers, so he now deepens, expands and extends his arguments about the *Centrality and Significance of this Christ, the Son of God*. In short, Melchizedek prefigures the high priesthood of Christ. He shifts from Ps 110:4 way back to the only other reference in Scripture to this Melchizedek, namely Genesis 14. Abraham had defeated the four invading kings from the east. Abraham's nephew, Lot, had been among the captives taken by these four kings, so Abraham set off with help to recover these captives. A local ruler, Melchizedek, then blessed Abraham, who handed over a tenth of the plunder to this local ruler. Melchizedek's name involved two meanings – 'king of righteousness' and king of Salem = 'king of peace'. Our writer of the Letter to the Hebrews employs these two remarkable terms to build his case – peace with God is founded on the righteousness of God – the very core and heart of the Christian gospel! This Melchizedek, says verse 3, was without father, mother, genealogy, beginning and end. He did in fact have an historical line as an actual priest-king, BUT our writer simply records his brief appearance and then disappearance in Gen 14:18-20 to present him as a suitable type of Christ, with a special focus on the eternality of Christ, rather than His humanity. Melchizedek stayed a priest whilst on earth but Christ as the antitype remains for ever the high priest. Jesus is not shown after the pattern of Melchizedek but rather Melchizedek is shown as being made like/similar to the Son of God.

In the encounter between the amazing Abraham and the mysterious Melchizedek, the latter is shown as superior to the former and so his priesthood must also be seen as greater. Why?

- a) Because Melchizedek accepted tithes from Abraham, amounting to a tenth of all the war spoils (7:5-6a). Ongoing agricultural product was tithed and allocated to the priests in Israel. By the first century AD it is likely that this administration was actually done by the priests. The key point, however, is that whereas the members of the tribe of Levi received tithes from their fellow-Israelites, who were children of Abraham like themselves, Abraham – ancestor of the Levites and of their brethren who paid them tithes – accepted the superiority of Melchizedek by paying tithes *to him!* The priesthood of Melchizedek's order was thus higher in status than the Levitical priesthood. Neither Melchizedek nor Christ have their genealogies counted among the sons of Levi. Heb 7:9-10 suggests

that in a sense Levi paid tithes to Melchizedek - thus admitting the superiority of Melchizedek – in the person of his ancestor Abraham. Levi was the great-grandson of Abraham and had not been born when Abraham met Melchizedek. An ancestor, in biblical thinking, is viewed as containing within himself all of his descendants.

b) Because Melchizedek gave his blessing to Abraham and despite Abraham having the promises of God, nevertheless Abraham realized the superiority of Melchizedek and willingly accepted his blessing (7:6b-7). Moreover, no record exists of Melchizedek losing his priestly office by death *cf* Levite losses of priests when each one died! This, therefore, is further evidence for the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood. However, Melchizedek is only recorded as a living human. Far greater still is the Christ who surpasses *all* human priests and orders! (7:8).

7:11-28 The Superiority of Jesus – The argument continues to stress that the Aaronic priesthood was *never* designed nor able to usher in the age of fulfilment – a vastly different priest and order was needed for that! (7:11). Christians from a Jewish background/context would not have even been thinking of a priesthood beyond the Levitical model. The link between Aaronic Priesthood and Mosaic Law was so intimate that a change in the priesthood required of necessity a change in the temporary law (7:12; Gal 3:24f). For Paul, the law functioned to make us aware of sin, *not* to justify us before God. Indeed, Paul and the law basically agree that the law was a temporary age, only up to the coming of Christ and the age of perfection. Melchizedek had nothing to do with Levi and Jesus belonged to the tribe of Judah anyway and Judah had no links with priestly service. The new order proclaimed by the author to the Hebrews superseded the Levitical one and was not even earthly in its exercise. It came from outside the tribe of Levi and is eternal, not earthly (7:13-14).

No priest of the Aaronic line lived for ever, but the Christians' high priest is immortal. Each of the others died! That old order was indeed earthly and material – involving the physical descent of priests, a material shrine, and animal sacrifices. By contrast, Christ died, was raised and now operates His high priestly function in the power of a life that can never be extinguished (7:15-17). All the equipment associated with the Law and Aaronic priesthood failed to produce a peaceful conscience or direct access to God Himself (7:18-19). Some men and women of faith did undoubtedly discover this, but not via the Levitical ritual or the Aaronic priesthood. The new order

opens up free access for us to draw near to the living God. The gospel has made possible perfection *ie.* what the law could never do.

A major theological factor at work here is the swearing of an oath to confirm the appointment of the Messiah as a permanent high priest. ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind: You are a priest forever’ (Ps 110:4). The Word of God was enough, but this is raised in strength by an oath (6:17). Aaron had been appointed by divine command (Ex 28:1) but not with an oath (7:20-21). Christ by contrast is affirmed as superior to all His predecessors (7:22). The emphatic word in verses 20-22 is the last word ‘Jesus’ who guarantees and mediates what our writer for the first time names as ‘a better covenant’.

The text gives two further reasons to complete the overwhelming case.

a) 7:23-25 Superior because it is permanent – many Aaronic priests served but none enjoyed his office in perpetuity! Indeed, Josephus counted 83 high priests between Aaron and the Fall of the Second Temple in AD 70. Death stopped each one from continuing! Christ, the high priestly Son of God, by contrast, is ‘perfected for evermore’ (7:28). Permanent validity is assured! (7:24). Permanent and utterly faithful intercession by Jesus was certain! (7:25) In Christ, God draws near to humankind and in Christ humankind may draw near to God. The perfect and constant mediator, giving us 24/7 open access to the Lord of the Universe! The writer has already stressed that as high priest, this Christ made satisfaction for our sins (2:17), helps us in our temptations, sympathizes with us in our weakness and gives mercy and grace to help us in time of need. What more could we possibly or reasonably desire? He also intercedes for us (Heb 7:25; Rom 8:33f; Isa 53:12; Lk 22:32; John 17). These ministries of Christ actually never end and that’s why our salvation *is* eternal.

b) 7:26-28 Superior because of the Character of Christ – Finally, the new order of priesthood is infinitely better because the new priest is Jesus, the Christ. Remember it was Jesus who supremely endured temptation, prayed, suffered, obeyed, gave His life as a sin-offering for us. He shared our humanity in daily contact with a sinful and hostile world, whilst at the same time demonstrating His divinity. He is perfectly qualified to be high priest for us (7:26). Aaron needed to make sin-offerings for himself and his people. The high priest wasn’t actually required to offer a daily sin-offering on his own account, but daily slip-ups were always liable to occur (Lev 4:3; 16:6) and needed to be provided for. Jesus by contrast needed to make no such

offerings. He was completely and personally free from the guilt and power of sin. That was the reason for His perfect suitability to deal with our intractable sin issue (1:3; 2:17; 5:1; Isa 53:10; Mk 10:45; 14:24). *he offered up himself – a voluntary sacrifice for sin in our place.* He did it without resentment or anger against God or humankind, even as the nails were driven into His flesh! By this we have *peace with God available nowhere else and in no one else* (7:27). High priests were weak (5:2f) but the new priesthood in Melchizedek's order was arranged to supersede the old priesthood set up by the law. This came about when Christ made the supreme and totally perfect sacrifice for our sin. Now set free from His own earthly weakness, the Christ, the eternal Son of God, now operates perfectly in His role as Great High Priest to meet all of our needs (7:28). His work for us, in us and through us, will be done in His Power and Way.

8) 8:1-13 Covenant, tabernacle and sanctuary

8:1-2 The High Priest of a New Covenant – The Aaronic Priesthood Superseded – Our writer now drives home the message of all his previous detail thus far recorded, and especially that packed into Chapter 7! The Aaronic priesthood gives way to the one in the order of Melchizedek; the Old Covenant gives way to the New; the earthly sanctuary gives way to the heavenly; temporary, token sacrifices give way to the one great sacrifice that is both effective and eternal (8:1-2). This is the true sanctuary at the right hand of God Himself in His glorious heaven. It operates in the realm where there is eternal rest (Chs. 3 and 4), the eternal city (11:10,16); the unshakable kingdom (12:28). It operates in the arena of divine truth and reality; it is *not* a copy, imitation, shadow or sham, in any sense of these words.

8:3-7 A More Excellent Ministry – What does this Great High Priest actually do? - The Aaronic high priests offered ‘gifts and sacrifices for sins’, which tend not to be distinguished from each other, but basically mean ‘offerings’. This is revealed in the case of Christ in His offering of *Himself* (7:27; 9:14), an offering that is not, in any sense, repeated or continual in frequency. It was *once only!* (8:3). Jesus could never have carried out the old form of making offerings on earth, for there were others appointed to do that and they were not even from Jesus’ own family or tribe. Christ’s high priesthood was totally unique and distinct – valid in heaven, by a perfect sacrifice, offered just once for all (8:4). The earthly sanctuary was a mere ‘copy’ or ‘shadow’ or ‘replica’ of the heavenly reality, based on instructions given on Mount Sinai (Exod 25:9,40; 26:30; 27:8). In short, the Levitical order *foreshadowed the spiritual order* of the new age that would dawn in the work of the Christ (8:5).

By huge contrast, says our author in 8:6, Christ ministers in the heavenly dwelling-place itself and this ministry is therefore superior to any earthly ministry. It is superior also because of the superior covenant out of which the power is ministered, Christ Himself being the Mediator. Christ does indeed rescue and reclaim sinners, but by offering Himself, through death, as our substitute. God’s holiness and justice demands that a price be paid for the penalty that *we* have incurred. God’s call for justice *must* be satisfied, but Christ makes it possible by His sacrifice of Himself ‘to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus’ (Rom 3:26). This New Covenant, foretold in Jeremiah 31:31ff and mediated by Christ, was necessary because of the

inadequacy and insufficiency of the Old Covenant. Our writer to the Hebrews will now explain this to his readers.

8:8-13 A Better and Superior Covenant – These verses came through Jeremiah in 31:31-34 but our writer's main concern here is to stress that the pronouns 'I', 'me' and 'my' all refer to the Lord God Himself. *It is from him!* Heb 8:8-9 records God's covenant with Israel when He freed them from Egypt – recorded in Exod. 24:1-8; Heb 9:18-20; Jer. 7:23. *But the people rejected this covenant* and this sad and sorry state of affairs is outlined in Jer. 7:23-26. Prophets tried to call the people back to their covenant loyalty (Jer. 11:6). The promise of blessings for obedience and the warning of curse for disobedience attended these prophetic pleas. There was an apparent revival and re-commitment to the covenant in 621 BC in Josiah's reign, rooted it seems in the 'book of the law' – probably Deuteronomy – and mentioned in 2 Kings 23:3; Deut. 29:1. The king's turning back to God and covenant seems to have been genuine enough, but the re-dedication of others much less so, as evidenced in Jer. 3:10! Shallowness and nominalism seemed to have been the order of the days, months and years that passed. Both Israel and Judah suffered very dark times and Jeremiah prophesied a *covenant that was entirely new* (Jer. 31:31ff).

This new covenant was to have certain distinctive features that marked it out –

- a) The Setting of God's Law in their Hearts (Heb 8:10) – Deut. 6:6-9 had already laid down various ways in which God's law could be remembered/ memorized. Much more than that, however, was needed to ensure an active and living obedience to that law and Ezekiel hit the nail on the head in this regard – Ezek. 11:19f.; Rom 8:1ff. The desperate need was for a new heart, indeed a new nature, plus the knowledge and power of God actually *to do his will!* Many times, in Scripture comes the promise that God will be our God and we will be His people, but it is in the *New Covenant* that a new power, and therefore a new life, become a reality at last.
- b) The Knowledge of God by Personal Experience (Heb 8:11) – There was a sense in which the Israel of old knew its God, but clearly, they very readily forgot their God and wandered away so easily to other gods – see Judges 2:10; Hosea 4:1,6; 6:6; Jer 22:15f. The writer here intends the idea of a personal knowledge of God, born of a personal and intimate

relationship, through the possession of a new heart, by God's Spirit at work. This is part of our 'perfection' as we grow into Christian maturity.

- c) The Forgiveness of our Sins (Heb 8:12) - Forgiveness of sin had always been a mark of the divine character in the eras of Moses (Exod. 34:6f), Micah (Mic. 7:18f), Isaiah (Isa 43:25; 44:22). This pardon is a vital part of the very idea of a personal relationship with God.

These are therefore the 'better promises' on which the New Covenant is built. In this Letter to the Hebrews, the New Covenant did mean the abolition of the old sacrificial order by a perfect and unrepeatable sacrifice and the ministry of a high priest rooted in, and founded on, that one great sacrifice. The promise of a transformed life under this New Covenant has been proved by many down the running centuries of time over these past two millennia – see Romans 8:3f. This is not just for the house of Israel and the house of Judah (8:8) but for all nations. Now obsolete are the old covenant of Moses, the Aaronic priesthood, the earthly sanctuary and the Levitical sacrifices (8:13) which had all been set up under that covenant. 8:13 might suggest that the Temple had not yet actually fallen and thus that the old era had not quite fully disappeared. The era of law and prophets is past; the age of the Son and the Spirit is here and will always be here in the new order inaugurated by that great High Priest, the very Christ of God Himself.

9:1-10 Tabernacle of the First Covenant - Its Function and Limitations –

The word ‘*Therefore*’ on this occasion opens up a shift backwards in the author’s argument. He describes the wilderness tent/Tabernacle, referring to the Exodus text, in Heb 9:1-5 and then describes the ritual linked to that sanctuary in Heb 9:6-10. The Mosaic tabernacle was introduced just after the announcement of the covenant in Exod. 24. In 9:1-2 the writer underlines in effect that whether tabernacle or later Temple, the key feature of these sanctuaries is that they were both *temporary*. This wilderness tent-shrine was made up of the court, outer compartment and inner compartment. The *Outer Compartment* held a ‘candlestick’ or ‘lampstand’, made of gold with branches from the main stem and situated on the south side. The table, made of acacia wood overlaid with gold, plus crockery, and the consecrated showbread consisting of 12 cakes made and then replaced every Sabbath day, were located on the north side. Only the priests could eat the cakes. The west end of this outer compartment had a linen curtain, the ‘second veil’, in contrast to the screen through which one entered the holy place from the court. The ‘second veil’ in the outer compartment was the entrance to the *Inner compartment* or ‘Holy Of Holies’ (9:3-4).

The two pieces of furniture in this Holy of Holies were the *Golden Incense-Altar* and the *Ark Of The Covenant*. The latter, also known as the ‘ark of the testimony’, was a box made from acacia wood and contained the covenant-terms engraved on two stone tablets (Exod. 25:16,21,22). It also contained the gold jar of manna and Aaron’s staff that had budded. Finally, our author mentions the lid of the ark which was a golden slab called the mercy-seat or atonement cover (place of propitiation). This mercy-seat played a key part in the sacrificial ritual on the Day of Atonement. The blood of a bullock – offered to make atonement for the high priest and his family – plus the blood of a goat killed as a sin-offering for the nation, were both sprinkled on the mercy-seat and in front of it, while the God of Israel had vowed to appear in the cloud on the mercy-seat (Lev 16:2). Meanwhile the ‘cherubim of glory’ were two gold figures of composite creatures that hovered above the mercy-seat (Exod. 25:18-22; 37:7-9) and supported the invisible presence of Israel’s God. Our writer now wants to press on to discuss the significance of this sanctuary on the annual Day of Atonement (9:5).

Heb 9:6 reminds the readers of this letter that the outer court of the tabernacle – and the later temples – was constantly in use. The priests trimmed the lamps on the lampstand (Exod. 27:20f) and burnt incense on the incense-altar (Exod. 30:7f), also replacing the bread cakes weekly on the table of showbread. However, says 9:7, only the High Priest could enter the Holy of Holies. It had to happen once a year on the Day of Atonement. On that very special day, he entered twice, wearing white vestments, once with the blood of the bullock and a second time with the blood of the goat, following which he confessed, over the head of a second goat, the nation’s sins, before driving that goat out into a solitary place. The key lesson from the Holy Spirit in 9:8 is that in the era of the old covenant, there was no direct access to God. That unrestricted route was opened up only through the sacrificial ministry of Christ, our great High Priest.

No animal, blood sacrifice or ceremonial washing could ever ‘perfect’ the worshipper by affecting the conscience. These things had been shadows and externalities, not internal ‘transformers’. It has always been the inner, human conscience that blocks and stops free access to God Himself. When Christ came, a true ‘re-formation’ and transformation could and did begin. The outward and earthly copy gave way to the inner and heavenly reality (9:9-10).

9:11-14 Christ’s New Way by His own Blood – Christ has now appeared and the shadows have passed away. The perfect and lasting reality is now here. Christ, the Priest-King is now enthroned in, and ruling from, His heavenly sanctuary, having voluntarily given His perfect self-sacrifice. He now functions as high priest of the new and eternal order (9:11). The old way had been firstly to slay the animal and secondly to take the blood into the holy of holies – a two-fold manoeuvre. Christ by contrast achieved this in a *single* manoeuvre and had the immediate right to enter God’s Presence as His people’s representative and high priest. The redemption he had secured was both perfect in nature and eternal in validity (9:12). Under the old covenant, animal blood and ceremonial washings did achieve an outward effect of removing ceremonial pollution. The ashes of a red heifer that had been killed and burnt, were mixed with water and believed to be effective when sprinkled on a person who had been polluted by contact with a dead body. Just how it worked was never explained! (9:13).

The old sacrifices *could* restore a person to a formal level of communion with God and with fellow-worshippers but could never *cleanse the conscience or deal with the guilt of sin!* (9:14) Our writer can now reach the

pinnacle of his argument in 9:14-15 as he claims that this act of redemption was achieved through the eternal Spirit. The link here may well be with the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 42:1 in which the Servant yields His life to God as a guilt-offering for many, bearing their sins and achieving their justification. The Servant carries out *every* phase of His ministry in the Spirit's power, ultimately when He is both Priest *and* Victim. Stunning sacrifice indeed! Like the sacrificial animals under the old order, the Christ was 'unblemished' (Isa 53:9), making Him an acceptable sacrifice and thus satisfying to God in dealing with the problem and dilemma of human sin. His work satisfied the divine will and the terrible human predicament (Heb 10:5-10 cf Ps 40:6-8). External pollution was never the issue; what was needed was a solution for inward and spiritual defilement (Mk 7:15,21,23). 'Acts that lead to death' in 9:14 refers to actions and attitudes that pollute people and build barriers with God. Human beings need to be set free from inner bondage to be enabled to worship God in spirit and truth.

9:15-22 Christ, the Mediator of the New Covenant, by His unique sacrificial death, Contrasted with the Old Order – At great cost to Him-self, God opened a way to forgive and redeem those who had broken the law. It required the marvel of the New Covenant by which God has promised, 'I will forgive their iniquity, and their sin will I remember no more' (Jer 31:34). Grace and glory are God's gifts to those who have been called to the 'obedience that comes from faith' (Rom 1:5). This is our heavenly calling and heritage, as sons and heirs of the living God in Christ. The necessity of Christ's death being at the heart of this New Covenant provision is explained by our writer in 9:16-17. The Greek word *diatheke* means 'settlement' ie a covenant given by the grace of God to His people to bring them into a special relationship with Himself. It can also mean a last will and testament so that the owner can leave property, money and/or land to certain people after the owner's death. The uniqueness here is that Christ provided an inheritance, died to make that inheritance valid for the inheritors to collect, but then was raised from death to live on and to administer that inheritance to those who actually did not deserve it in the first place! Christ is testator, executor, surety and mediator all at the same time! The New Covenant is indeed unilateral in orientation. It is not a worked-out agreement between people and divinity! This New Covenant is valid only because its author has died! Even the old covenant required death (9:18) by the shedding of blood, but not the death of the one who made it. To reinforce this point, our writer 'backtracks' once again into the Mosaic covenant (9:19-20) related in Exod. 24:3-8 where Moses sprinkles part of the animal blood on the altar

(representing God as Author of the covenant) and part of the blood on the people (who are thereby brought into God's covenant). By contrast in Hebrews 9:19-20, he sprinkles it – using hyssop or marjoram herb plants - on the *Book* (representing God, His commandments and covenant) and on the people. Even the tabernacle and vessels of divine service under the old order were sprinkled with animal blood (9:21-22) and anointed with oil. Some products could be exempt on rare occasions from sprinkling with blood *e.g.* flour, incense and certain gold objects taken in war, but generally, ceremonial cleansing or atonement had to be carried out by sprinkling with animal blood.

9:23-28 The perfect sacrifice of Christ – '*Therefore*', writes our author in 9:23, reverting to his crucial point from verse 15, it was indeed necessary for the copies, the sacrificial items in and around the material sanctuary, to be cleansed by animal blood. Such 'washing', however, was only external and temporary. Inward and spiritual cleansing and renewal would need something much greater, something altogether different and lasting in its effect and results. Human defilement needs *inward* cleansing so that those very humans may come to God free of defilement, and at the same time be made a suitable dwelling-place for the Holy Spirit of God (Eph 2:22; 1 Peter 1:2,19,22f; 2:5). The 'heavenly things' consist of the New Covenant rooted and anchored in the eternal gospel of Christ that was formulated in heaven; the true sanctuary is the heavenly Zion; the New Israel is the Church of Christ which includes also the redeemed believers now in the glory of heaven. That which binds them all together in common is the perfect sacrifice of Jesus in His death, resurrection, exaltation and glorification. This is seen in 9:24 for Christ achieved His goal of entering heaven by that very sacrifice and by entering heaven both on His own behalf *and* on behalf of sinners like ourselves. That is the only way that we can ever enter God's presence in heaven by having our High Priest representing and indwelling us for all eternity. The sacrifice of the Christ, unlike the repeated animal offerings carried into the holy of holies every year, consisted of the shedding of His own blood. This was the ultimate sacrifice and is continually valid (9:25), such that Christ does not need repeatedly to offer this sacrifice again and again. It has been presented and accepted once for all (9:26). He came once only, to deal conclusively and finally with sin. 9:27-28 then concludes that people die once by God's appointment, with their judgment to follow. Christ also died by God's appointment, but He bore our sins by that death, so that His death would yield all the benefits and blessings that we will enjoy in their fullness when our great High Priest returns at the end of the ages.

All of this has *huge implications* for how we should live in the here and now, but our writer wants one more opportunity to underline the utter magnificence of this new order.

10:1-18 The reality of the New Order under Christ, our enthroned High Priest – Both the apostle Paul and our writer view Christ and His new order as the *perfect reality* to which OT sacrifice and priesthood pointed, but could never, in and of itself, deliver true perfection into the image of the Son (10:1). Indeed, if the old sacrificial system had been able to cleanse the human conscience, then the believers would have had unbroken access to, and communion with, their God (10:2). This cleansing would be ongoing and unrepeatable – hence the Perfect Tense is used. For those still under law, the annual Day of Atonement was actually a regular reminder of the reality of sin (10:3)! Compare God’s promise of Heb 8:12 to His people that ‘their sins will I remember no more’. We need not enter the morbid territory of *excessive* recall of sins already confessed and forgiven (Rom 8:15). The writer then stresses what should be pretty obvious, namely that inner moral defilement cannot be removed by the blood sacrifices of animals (10:4; Ps 51:10,16f).

This ongoing inability of sacrifices to solve the sin problem produces from our writer yet another ‘*therefore*’ in 10:5! *There is a solution* to this dilemma and the writer uses Ps 40:6-8 to deliver the goods! God’s desired sacrifice from His people is complete obedience to Him, modeled on that of His only Son. Our author applies these words to Jesus in 10:5-7. The mention of ‘a body you prepared for me’ suggests incarnation that led ultimately to death and atonement, requiring the full submission of Christ to the Father’s Word and Will. 10:8-9 announce and explain the abolition of the old order of sacrifice, because Christ’s perfect submission to the will of God has established the new order. The law will now be written on the hearts of God’s people. That is what happened with the Christ Himself – he obeyed the Word and Will of God supremely and thereby, though His shed blood, inaugurated and validated the New Covenant. That is how we have been washed, justified and made holy for Christ (10:10).

Yet again, our author throws the spotlight, this time using language from Ps. 110, on the truth that Christ’s high-priestly work as sin-bearer is absolutely unrepeatable! (10:11-12). The priests under the old order never sat down after sacrifices had been presented. They had to repeat continually the procedures, for no sacrifice could actually remove sin or wash clean the conscience for ever. By contrast, Christ completed His sacrifice once-for-

all and sat down. His work had been completed and accepted by God. His work now is to intercede on our behalf at God's right hand. We now have access to all the grace and power of God!! It might be that 10:13 serves as a warning to the readers – see 10:26-31 - not to be counted among the enemies of Christ, but to make sure that they – and we – remain friends of Christ by enduring and persevering right to the very end. There is huge encouragement to continue in faith, for in 10:14 we are told that Christ, by His sacrifice of Himself, has eternally ‘perfected’ His holy people: cleansed conscience; fit to worship; related to God; new power for life (10:15-18).

10) 10:19-39 ‘Therefore’ A Call to faithful worship to the end

10:19-25. Practical consequences of our covenant in Christ – Our author is now ready to launch into a sustained, practical section of his homily to his readers, concerning their need to respond to the *greatness of Christ*. He starts with a preamble before getting down to the detail. Even the high priests of old had severe limits set on their times of access to the Holy of Holies (10:19). Now, however, under the New Covenant, there is free access to God for all who have been cleansed, consecrated and perfected by Christ’s sacrifice. We have the right of access to the place entered by our great High Priest – into the very presence of God via the veil now opened up – on the grounds of His shed blood. Verse 20 states that this new way is ‘through the curtain/veil, that is, his body’. Some interpret this as ‘through His flesh’. Some read it as ‘through his own blood’ (Heb 9:12). Others feel the author viewed the veil as symbolizing the Lord’s human life, presented to God when He ‘suffered for sins once, the righteous for the unrighteous, that he might bring us to God’ (1 Peter 3:18). Another strong incentive for believers to enter God’s presence lies in the reality that Christ is there and is actively exercising His ministry there as the great high priest! The ‘house of God’ in 10:21 is the community of God’s people. Here now are the writer’s pleas for action from his readers, by way of response to Christ –

- a) ‘Let us draw near to God’ (10:22) – this must be done with ‘sincerity of heart’ and the ‘full assurance of faith’ that come from faith in God’s Word (11:6). The ‘sprinkling of the heart’ refers to inward and spiritual cleansing, achieved by Christ’s shedding of blood. This qualifies us to be in God’s presence. The reference to ‘pure water’ is probably to baptism, both outwardly and inwardly granting spiritual cleansing and a sense of nearness to God Himself.
- b) ‘Let us hold fast to the hope we profess’ (10:23) – see also 3:6,14, showing that we are indeed the house of God and that we are partakers and friends of Christ. The added incentives are that Christ is now actively our great high priest and that this comes to us with the unfailing and faithful promise of God.

- c) ‘Let us encourage one another’ (10:24) – their witness will be strengthened if they encourage one another. Fellowship is indeed vital. The verb ‘spur on’ is very strong and indicates that practical, mutual encouragement among believers can be very positive in generating an atmosphere of love and good works.
- d) ‘Let us not give up meeting together.... but let us encourage one another (10:25) – our writer knows of some who are staying away from the fellowship. Perhaps that was due to the false idea that Christian blessings could be got and then you could withdraw and enjoy them by yourself! Or was it due to short-sightedness, laziness, weariness, sense of superiority, sense of independence, fear of the authorities, continuing prioritisation of the synagogue and a refusal to sever ties with the synagogue, rather than focus on the specifically Christian assemblies that would strengthen their faith in Christ? It might also have been fear of growing hostility from the Roman Empire or the Fall of Jerusalem or the sense of delayed *parousia* that may have reduced their sense of evangelistic urgency with time running out. They have experienced something of ‘the powers of the age to come’ (6:5) and received ‘the unshakeable kingdom (12:27f). Let them now, therefore, prepare for the final consummation by persevering in single-minded loyalty to Christ.

10:26-31 Don’t Reject God’s Way, God’s Truth, or God’s Son – Our writer feels the strong urge to issue a further warning about the seriousness of sin. The setting here seems to one of a *deliberate* turning away from truth. Something that is intentional and sustained, rather than a sudden trip or slip on an otherwise upward spiritual trajectory. He warns those who have known the way of truth but then purposefully rejected their dependence on Christ’s high priestly sacrifice. Sheer and unapologetic apostasy seems to be suggested here by verse 29. To reject the uniquely-shed blood of the New Covenant – our only divinely-appointed means of forgiveness – leaves no alternative route to pardon. To insult the Spirit of grace (10:29) closes the very means of God’s reaching out to us in forgiving grace. Severe death penalties faced the OT people of God for apostasy. How much greater the prospect of spiritual death under the new order. The real issue is that our author wanted believers to examine themselves continuously, to walk in the Spirit and to come to God continuously with a dependence on Christ’s high priestly function of intercession for His repentant and sorrowful people.

The ‘Song of Moses’ in Deut. 32:35 and 36 is quoted in Heb 10:30 – ‘It is mine to avenge; I will repay’ and ‘The Lord will judge his people’. That

‘Song’ had a strong focus on Jewish unbelief and these quotes indicate the divine readiness to bring judgment on those who forsake the covenant. Great privilege brings great responsibility, both then and now! We must never grow complacent about the grace and mercy of God that we have known and experienced, for 10:31 reminds that it is indeed ‘a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God’. Our priority must be to remain, by perseverance, on a continuous pathway of knowing God, obeying God and serving God. Whenever we then slip or fall, we can be assured that our living God will be active in mercy as we seek His pardon.

10:32-39 A Call to Persevere in the Midst of Persecution – God is so incredibly gracious in the wisdom of His Word, for here we see parallels with Heb 6:4-8. After the severe warnings from the writer, we receive comfort and encouragement to persevere. Indeed their severe, early struggles in their Christian lives had proved to be an opportunity to demonstrate their resilience in the faith in the midst of hostile opposition (10:32-34). The word ‘enlightenment’ appears in 6:4 and 10:32! We do know that none of this community, immediately addressed by this letter, had undergone martyrdom (12:4), though some did die under Nero in AD 64. If the writer is referring to pre-64 persecution, then it might be a reference to the limits set on Jews in Rome by Emperor Claudius after AD 41, or even with regard to his expulsion of Jews from the capital around AD 49. The believers, notes our writer, either suffered insult and pain themselves or supported others so persecuted (10:33), while others upheld those in prison and even joyfully accepted the forced removal of their own property (10:34), knowing that they had an eternal inheritance (Luke 6:22f).

The writer is saying that he is confident of the ongoing practical faith of these believers because they showed it under testing times soon after coming to faith and will surely continue to show such resilience and boldness (3:6; 4:16; 10:19) in the testing days ahead (10:35). They were holding fast to the divine promises! Their great need – and ours today – was for *patience*, whilst continuing to do God’s will (10:7,9f). This plea for patience is backed up by Habakkuk’s own experience and testimony of the need for patient waiting on the Lord in the 7th Century BC setting. In the midst of this, *trusting faith* was vital and here our writer begins to prepare the way for his mammoth Hebrews 11 on that very subject of *faith*. The reference here is to the Coming One – the second coming of Christ – and the call in Heb 10:37 is to Christians who wonder whether Christ ever will actually return! The call is to a faith that will prove the believer to have endured in faith, but the opposite would be to fall back from faith into an earlier lifestyle. Our

challenge in 10:37-38 is to be ready to live out a life of suffering and faith, built on the pattern of Christ Himself. Thereby will we receive the divine promise. Indeed, our writer is supremely confident that these Christians will not fade away and be eclipsed but will indeed endure in *faith and salvation* (10:39). We need never to forget that *faith is central* because

- a) it enables us to make real in ourselves the righteousness freely offered to us in Christ's grace, *and*
- b) it sustains and gives substance to hope and shows the reality of what is basically invisible to human eyes here in this world.

11) 11:1-40 Faith and faithfulness

Defined, Demonstrated and Delivered in Human Lives

This chapter 11 runs in one overwhelming direction – To Challenge its readers to engage in *bold living for God*. Ultimately God is pleased and glorified when we *live out the Life of Faith*.

Our writer opens this lengthy portion of Scripture with a definition of ‘faith’ in 11:1-2: ‘Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see’. The promises of God related to a state of affairs belonging to the future, but believers in Christ acted as if that state of affairs were already present – that’s how convinced they were that God could and would fulfill what He had promised. Indeed, so precious were these promises that they organised the whole of their lives in their light. They took God at His word and directed their lives in line with that decision. Things still in the future were present to faith, according to their experience. Things outwardly unseen were visible to their inward eye. *Hypostasis* means a ‘firm, solid confidence’ ie a calm courage in God’s promises, even though the believers had not yet received the fulfillment of those promises (11:39). The word *elenchus* means a conviction that is active in its certainty which propels us forward to lay hold of the realities on which our hope is fixed and which, although unseen, are already ours in Christ. This involves bold confidence in God’s great realities.

These OT saints bore witness to God and He bore witness to them, affirming their bold faith. 11:3 states how God made this visible, created order into being by His word, out of nothing. Faith views this creation and is confident that this bears witness to God. What therefore are the essentials of faith?

- a) It means coming to God and seeking Him seriously and intentionally. Our writer has already pleaded for this act of approaching and drawing near to God (4:16; 10:22). We must be open to God and in conversation with Him.
- b) It means believing that God exists, so that we have the inclination to come to Him in prayer. This then stimulates further steps towards Him, seeking help.
- c) It means having confidence that God will reward the exercise of such faith. God will not miss seeing such steps and He will act in response to them.

Hebrew 11, however, is not a merely theoretical approach to faith. It is saturated in the practical details of the OT heroes of the faith. We are given insights into the circumstances that triggered a demand for faith in the lives of a number of these folk, followed by the positive outcome(s) of those faith responses. The key issue is that these ‘heroes’ of faith are actually *normal* people, *not* extraordinary, moving forward in a *trust relationship* with their Lord, rather than treating faith as a mere creed, a blind jump, a string of felt blessings or an accumulation of God’s goodness experienced in their lives.

Faith in Hebrews 11 is thus *dynamic* and *challenging*:

- 1 Faith Means Bold Action – in this chapter, most of the case studies show a person acting boldly in line with, or in response to, a word(s) from God. So, for example, we see action in the lives of Abel (11:4), Noah (11:7) and various others (11:32-34). The action, however, needs to run in sync with our quality of spiritual life and this is seen in the life of Enoch (11:5-6) for he pleased God and left this world without passing through death (Gen 5:24). We ought to remember that faith needs to be accompanied by acts, actions and works that validate and confirm that faith, and our writer will illustrate this, especially in the closing chapters of this letter. Prior to that though, he uses two examples where faith and works are operating together. Thus, in James 2:25 and Heb 11:31, Rahab the harlot welcomed the spies, protected them and was spared when Jericho fell. Abraham’s offering up of Isaac is another example of faith and works (Heb 11:17).
- 2 Faith means response to the unseen God and His Promises – this is not passive belief only, but rather response to God’s truth. *Obedience is the outward evidence of our inward faith.* They move forward in faith and God moves with them. Abraham in 11:8-12, 17-19; Gen.12:1-9 is a great example of this and yet he and others did not actually receive or see the things divinely promised! (11:13-16) Abraham did not receive the promise of an inheritance at the time of his first call. That promise of the inheritance was not given until he had returned from Egypt and Lot had chosen favourable Jordan to settle in (Gen 13:14ff). It was re-affirmed to him along with the promise of an heir (Gen 15:18ff) and again after the giving of the covenant of circumcision (Gen 17:8). This is a very important lesson for us in our call to live in obedient trust. In Heb 11:11 we learn that ‘Abram believed the Lord, and he credited it to him as righteousness’ (Gen 15:6). Heb 11:12 records the fruit of this trust for a descendant, namely multiple descendants far too numerous to count!

Abraham had faced a massive challenge in Heb 11:17-19 (Gen 22:1-8) in his calling to sacrifice his only son Isaac through whom the promises of God were going to be fulfilled and the bizarre command to kill that very child whose birth had only been possible through the intervention of God Himself!

3 Faith means God doing miracles in ordinary people's lives – a careful reading of Hebrews 11 makes us aware that some of those 'heroes' listed actually had real flaws and slips in their lives! Noah got drunk and lay naked in his tent (Gen 9:20-29); Abraham lied about Sarah (Gen 20). Other examples could be brought in to help us realize that the so-called 'heroes' were still on a journey and far from 'perfection'. An Indonesian expression goes like this – '*Kita masih ada di dunia ini*' ('We are still in this world'). Often used wrongly to justify sinful attitudes and actions in this life, nevertheless it shows us that God still has a work in progress for folk like us as well! God did still use flawed people like Moses, who committed murder; David, an adulterer; Gideon, a doubter; Jacob, a deceiver; Isaac, a liar in regard to Rebekah; the people of God down the ages who so often resisted God, rebelled against Him and wandered from Him. Yet He worked on them and used them to fulfill His purposes. God also used weakness to grant His people unexpected power, strength and victory, such as David in facing Goliath.

4 Faith means God at work in diverse settings – a boat was built, a family moved, a child was conceived, obedience in a willingness to offer that child back to God, the suffering of persecution, the winning of wars. The NT has many examples of healings by faith, but interestingly, none are recorded in Hebrews 11! Our writer shows a real diversity of 'faith contexts' from the life of Moses. Faith was exercised by Moses' parents in hiding this remarkable child for three months after his birth. They had spiritual insight to want to protect this significant baby from Pharaoh's hostile threats on his life. They refused to drown the baby in the Nile (Exod 1:22). Moses himself is then praised for his faith – he identified with God's people rather than with the godless (Heb 11:24-26), thus giving the readers of 'Hebrews' a challenging model of maintaining a Christian profession and witness, even when that might mean accepting loss, discomfort and imprisonment (11:26); he left Egypt and persevered in his God-given mission, though His God was unseen (11:27); he led the Israelites to observe the Passover ordinance (11:28), linked to the smearing of blood on the Israelites' door-posts to avoid the death angel's work. This was by faith, because the event itself was not yet seen. The

lesson of the writer to the Hebrews seems to be that Moses had maintained a lifelong vision of God and this was the big clue and secret to his faith and perseverance: a huge lesson for all Christian people today.

5 Faith means God sometimes brings different Results – this is a very sobering thought indeed. Sometimes, results of the exercise of faith are rapid – the people of Israel passed through the sea; the walls of Jericho fell; widows received their dead back by resurrection (Heb 11:32-35a). Sometimes, however, the fruits of faith are delayed in their appearing or the outcomes are negative. Yes, Daniel was lifted out of the lion’s den because of his trust (Dan 6:23) but we also need to look at those who really struggled in this life – tortured, humiliated, beaten, stoned, imprisoned, mistreated (Heb 11:35b-38). By faith, one believer lived, and by faith the other believer died. The reality was, and still is, that faith in God carries with it no guarantee of comfort in this world. The reward comes in the only world that actually does matter.

6 Faith means looking forwards to God’s ultimate reward – Christian pilgrims must have a long-term vision for the outcome of their journeying. We have God’s commendation (Heb 11:2,39), His ‘*Well Done*’ – meaning that God Himself had borne witness to their faithfulness! George Guthrie puts it in a nutshell, thus: “Faith is confidence that results in action carried out in a variety of situations by ordinary people in response to the unseen God and his promises, with various earthly outcomes but always the ultimate outcome of God’s commendation and reward.” We are called to orient our lives towards God and His Way, Word and Will, rather than towards the so-called reality of the visible world. We are not to fear, but rather to live in bold confidence and trust in the unseen God, Father, Great High Priest and transforming Spirit. Unlike the OT patriarchs, we now have the fullness of the revelation of the eternal inheritance known through the new Covenant established by Christ. Along with us, these OT people of faith now know the perfecting power of Christ’s sacrifice and the eternal inheritance of the saints. They had been looking throughout their lives for the heavenly city, the city of God, their eternal rest. They *and we* have found it in the Lord Jesus Christ.

A final thought - this is perhaps supremely seen in Heb 11:13-16 with reference to Abraham’s descendants – all the ‘aliens and strangers’ in the land. The patriarchs lived for God and not for the obtaining of an earthly security. Likewise, the readers of the Hebrews letter must consider the examples of

these patriarchs' lives and choose the path of faith, or the alternative, the path of faithlessness. They died trusting God, but not having seen their descendants' reception of the land. Christ has now gained perfection for them – and for us. They and we now enjoy access to God through Christ, as fellow-citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem. Better hope, better promises, better covenant, better sacrifices, better possession and better resurrection. Their *greatest desire was for God himself and for God's city*. The result was that 'God is not ashamed to be called their God'. This was a word of enormous challenge for readers of Hebrews and for ourselves in the 21st Century!

12) 12:1-11 Persevering in Christ through God's discipline

Christ, The Pinnacle Of God's Revelation

12:1 – ‘Therefore’, reject sin and pursue holiness – God Himself bore witness to the faith of these OT people of God. Those people of old had lived out the life of faith even before the incarnation of the Christ. The letter to the Hebrews marked the period when the word ‘witness’ – *martus* – was gaining its more specialized meaning of dying for the faith. Such faith ought to encourage us to follow their example of sacrificial endurance by faith. Even though Christ has been on earth, we still await with patience His second coming. He is still in a real sense invisible to us and we must endure warfare and suffering before the End. As in an athletic contest, the spectators are watching the Church to see just how it performs and how we live out our lives. We must caste aside all hindrances in the walk of faith and especially the weight of sin that will damage our running. Sin here refers especially to the constrictions of our environment – *euperistatos* – that pull us down as Christians, in other words, not just besetting sins but things of whatever sort that distract us from our single-mindedness in running the race.

12:2-4 – Our incentive and encouragement in obeying that calling comes by Looking to Jesus, our Example, who suffered to grant us Sanctification – In order to achieve single-mindedness, we must *Continually Keep Our Focus on Jesus*. Christ is not just an example of faith along the lines of the OT saints in Heb 11, but He is the *Pioneer and Perfecter of our Faith*. The definite article in Greek appears here in front of the word ‘faith’. We now have the faith of Jesus as an *Example, Incentive, Triumph and Pioneer* in the sense that Christ has been at work invisibly delivering Israel by faith from Egypt (see Jude) and sustaining Israel in the wilderness (see Paul). He has *always* been at work in keeping our faith. He could only be the *Perfecter* of our faith through His appalling pain and suffering on earth and especially on the cross of Calvary! He can now sustain our faith in a different sort of way than in OT times.

Roman crucifixion was not carried out on Roman citizens for it was reserved for the lowest of the lows, sub-humans, slaves, criminals. Cicero wrote in

Pro Rabirio 5 ‘Let the very mention of the cross be far removed not only from a Roman citizen’s body, but from his mind, his eyes, his ears’. Jesus went through this out of His sheer determination to do God’s Will. He brought faith to perfection by His endurance through suffering and has won the place of highest honour and exaltation. Christ, the pioneer of salvation, has been made perfect through suffering and has taken His seat ‘at the right hand of the throne of God’ (Heb 1:3;8:1;10:12 – in 12:2 it is Perfect Tense – ongoing ministry on our behalf). This exaltation is the ‘joy that was set before him’ but in order to go through this, He had to endure *shame and death*. This is a message for the Hebrews and for us today – there is a cost. This joy is not only for Himself but for all for whom He died. He has gone to the throne as our forerunner, but we will follow Him there if we persevere in faith. The *pioneer* has got there first but we will share that throne and glory with Him.

In 12:3, Christ is shown as our *supreme* example that inspires faith. When they – and we today – plumb the depths of testings and trials of our faith, they and we *must consider Jesus*. He suffered innocently at the hands of evil and brutal men and plumbbed greater depths than the Hebrews had yet experienced. Christ, and many of His disciples down the ages, had died for their faith but this had not yet been inflicted by evil opponents on these Hebrews (12:4). These sufferings were actually evidence of the Father’s love for them because He was training them through pain to be more faithful and obedient ‘sons of God’.

12:5-6 – God disciplines us as his sons, out of his love and desire for our sanctification - If we reflect on the truth of Proverbs 3:11-12, we will be more able to see our own troubles in proper perspective. God uses pain and suffering to train and discipline us and to show us that we truly are His beloved sons and daughters.

12:7-11 – The divine Father disciplines his sons and daughters, based on his relationship with them – Within these verses, words related to ‘discipline’ occur 8 times, words related to ‘son’ occur 3 times and words related to ‘father’ occur 4 times.

- a) 12:7 God disciplines us as his own children – Beloved sons and daughters are intimately loved by their Father. So, it is with us as God’s very own children.

- b) 12:8-9 God calls us to submit to hardship as discipline – ALL children need to be disciplined and even Jesus ‘learned obedience by the things which He suffered’ (Heb 5:8). We will respect that loving discipline. Sometimes an earthly father or mother may get things wrong in the type or level of discipline administered but our Father in heaven does not make any errors for He is perfect love and wisdom and deals with us on that very basis. The phrase ‘the Father of spirits’ is unique and speaks of our spiritual heavenly Father, as opposed to our physical, earthly fathers (12:8-9).
- c) 12:10 God calls us to holiness through discipline – God’s ultimate objective in His exercise of discipline is that we might share in His holiness. Our writer to the Hebrews in the early part of his letter seemed to speak about the cleansing of conscience that equipped them to approach God in worship, whilst here he is writing about God’s overall goal for His people, namely their total consummation of their sanctification which opens the way for their appearing with Christ in glory. This was a long-term process – see Acts 14:22 ‘through many tribulations we must enter into the kingdom of God’.
- d) 12:11 God calls us to yield a harvest of righteousness through our submission to discipline – Discipline may well feel intensely painful at the time, but it does eventually bear much fruit, as witnessed by the Psalmist in Ps 119:67,71; Matt 5:10-12; 2 Thess. 1:4ff. Once we accept discipline from God as something well-intentioned, we will stop feeling resentful and rebellious. His soul is now peaceable and ready to function as a fertile soil that will produce a righteous life that responds to the will of God.

13) 12:12-29 Respond to God's grace by living a new life continually listening to God's voice

Express your faith by obeying the Lord with gratitude and worship

12:12-17 Perseverance in the spiritual life of believers

1. 12:12-13 We must deal with discouragement – ‘*Therefore*’, act in light of the positivity of the peace and righteousness that can be ours if we accept God’s training of us in 12:11. These thoughts in 12:12-13, reflected also in Heb 10:37, are rooted in Isaiah 35:3f, when the exiled Jews felt that the promised deliverance would never come. The thoughts are also found in Proverbs 4:26, suggesting the need for the weak and struggling to be *helped* to continue, so that the whole community would not be held back as they endure towards the goal. We need to think *communally* in the Church as well as *individually*.
2. 12:14a We must uphold harmony – We are taught here to seek peace with all people as far as that is possible; interestingly, this ties in with Jesus’ words about peacemakers in Matt 5:9 – ‘for they shall be called sons of God’. Harmony is of paramount importance within the Church.
3. 12:14b We must strive for holiness – This refers to the embracing of positive, practical holiness of life, not merely the avoidance of forbidden things in the verses that follow. Those who practice unholy living will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor 6:9f). We must be holy if we expect to share in God’s holiness. (‘You shall therefore be holy, for I am holy’ – Lev. 11:45 cf 1 Peter 1:15f.). Our ultimate goal is to see God, but holiness of heart and life is the absolute prerequisite for that experience!
4. 12:15a We must look for grace – The readers – and ourselves today – must ensure that no one fails to experience that grace of God which puts a person on the road called ‘faith’ and equips that person to continue and complete that journey. Our goal of seeing God is possible *only by grace* and that grace is always and continually available to us throughout life.
5. 12:15b-17 We must stop all defilement – If sin emerges in the community, it must be dealt with immediately and nipped in the bud, lest the community as a whole become infected by it and with it. This sin can become the ‘root of bitterness’ and this term is taken from Deut. 29:18 in the context of the sin of Israel mixing with Canaanite religious practices.

The writer also links this with the risk of falling away in Heb 3:12. Verse 16 presents a warning against sexual immorality. Esau in the OT is not actually charged with fornication, though he was married to two daughters of Heth, and a Palestinian Targum on Gen 25:29 does accuse Esau of adultery with a betrothed maiden on the day that Esau sold his birthright to Jacob.

Our writer to the Hebrews does warn against sexual immorality, both here and in Heb 13:4. Esau is presented as a man with no real sense of spiritual values who became very angry when Jacob by deceit received the blessing intended for Esau. Jacob appears weaker but did show interest in the inheritance promised by God to his family, whereas Esau had sold his birthright for the ‘price’ of a meal when he was very hungry (Gen 25:34)! Verse 17 records the regret of Esau in surrendering his birthright and his tears of sadness at his failure to reverse his loss of that birthright! The writer to the Hebrews is trying to reinforce his point that after apostasy, there is no second repentance possible! These verses warn us severely to take a serious attitude against defilement. We can be badly hindered by the poor example, low standards and corrupt teaching of others. More than that, though, is our need to protect, build up and encourage others within the Christian Community.

12:18-29 Our identity and belonging as disciples of Christ

1. 12:18-22a We belong to a spiritual Kingdom – Here our author goes back once more to the difference between the glory of the giving of the Law, but the even greater glory of the gift/privileges of the gospel which simply must not be refused. Those who fully embrace this gospel have nothing to fear, *but* those who start out on this new road, and then fall away, are in *huge danger*. 12:18-19 warn that Sinai was so charged with God’s holiness (Ex 19:16-19; 20:18-21; Deut. 4:11f) that certain death would strike down any human or animal that touched it! The people of Israel pleaded with *Moses* to speak to them, rather than having *God* speak to them with the danger of death (Exod. 20:18f). Even an animal wandering on the Mount would be so charged that it would be lethal to touch that animal. Therefore, the beast must be killed from a distance by stoning. Moses himself was petrified after the Golden Calf incident (Deut. 9:19). *But*, and this is so vital, *you have come to Zion!!*
2. 12:22-24 We belong to an eternal Kingdom – Within this particular context, this ‘coming to Zion’ may well be a reference to the readers’

conversion, as they have come – Perfect Tense and therefore ongoing – into the spiritual realm of Christ’s Kingdom. King David had located the ark of God in Jerusalem, followed by Solomon, as God’s earthly dwelling-place. The temple and city of Jerusalem were physical, material copies of the heavenly, eternal Jerusalem. Our writer to the Hebrews believes that his readers even now have access to the spiritual realm of the new Jerusalem, even though that new Jerusalem has not yet come down to humankind. This city comprises the whole family of faith. The readers, and ourselves, already have access to this ‘city’ but not yet fully (12:22a). This is not all, though! The believers have also come to multitudes of angels who are joyfully gathered together, and it is these angels who minister to the heirs of this great salvation (Heb 1:14). This is a stunning thought, even more so when we recall that Christ passed by the angels in order to be incarnate on earth with humankind (Heb 2:16). The readers, along with ourselves, are not to worship angels, but rather to glorify the God who is served by those very angels (Heb 12:22b). *But*, there is still more in verse 23!

This is probably referring to the whole communion of saints whose names are written in heaven (Luke 10:20) or, to put it slightly differently, whose names are written in ‘the Lamb’s book of life’ (Rev 21:27). They have become members of heaven and all Christ’s people are the ‘firstborn’ children of God, by their union with *the Firstborn* and having a guaranteed inheritance. These believers have also come to ‘God the Judge of all’, underlining the enormous seriousness of Christian accountability (Heb 4:13; 10:30f). The ‘spirits of just men made perfect’ must surely mean believers of pre-Christian days who have now been fully perfected in Christ (Heb 10:14,38; 11:6,35,40). Those believers’ souls don’t need to wait until the resurrection to be perfected. They are perfected already in the sense that they are with God in His heavenly Jerusalem.

The believers have also come to Jesus, the ‘mediator of a new covenant’, and this is the new way of approach to the Godhead, made possible solely by that great sacrifice of the great high priest Himself, the Lord Jesus Christ (Heb 7:25;12:24). We can now ‘enter into the holy place by the blood of Jesus’ (Heb 10:19) with which we are sprinkled. This is the covenant-blood of Christ, the antitype of the blood sprinkled at the start of the old covenant. This new covenant blood is utterly different from Abel’s blood following his murder! Christ’s blood has the power to

cleanse the evil conscience (10:22), forgive the sinner and bring peace with God, for all who cast themselves on Christ, putting faith in Him.

3. 12:25-29 We belong to an unshakeable kingdom – These believers faced huge challenges, but our writer has offered massive comfort and encouragement to persevere. BUT great certainty brings great responsibility and indebtedness to the great High Priest, Christ –
 - a) 12:25 We must live obediently – Israel of old in the wilderness consistently failed to obey God's commands and suffered by their stubborn disobedience (Heb 3:7ff). At that time, God spoke from an earthly mountain. Now, He speaks the gospel from His heavenly Zion! To disobey the gospel offer is far more serious than to disobey the OT Law (2:2f; 10:29).
 - b) 12:26-27 We must have confidence – The coming Day of the Lord is expected to be heralded by earthquake *and* shaking of the heavens (Ps 68:7f; Isa 2:19,21; 13:13; Hag. 2:6f). This indicates God rising up to put down Gentile dominion, to raise up David's throne and to put Jerusalem and its temple as the centre for all nations' loyalty and worship! The present world order will disappear – see Rev 20:11; 21:1. In fact the material universe will be shaken into pieces, records verse 27, leaving only the unshakeable order, namely the Kingdom of Christ in which believers share with their great high priest, the royal priest. All created things are only temporary and passing (Ps 102:25ff). Here is the massive contrast – the new order of Christ is an *Eternal Unshakeable Kingdom* into which the Son of God has brought His very own people by His High-Priestly work!
 - c) 12:28-29 We must be humble and worshipful – '*therefore*', *because of this amazing assurance, respond rightly* – Be grateful for this kingdom and worship God appropriately in word and deed. Worship in reverence and awe. *Why?* Because our God is a *consuming fire!* (12:29) In the white heat of God's holiness, all that is unrighteous, unholly and unworthy of God will be destroyed by Him. By all means, express thankful love and trust because of His grace and mercy, *but* at the same time serious reverence and awe must be present too.

14) 13:1-25 Doctrine and Life - practical, pastoral instructions

13:1-16 Powerful pastoral and practical pleas

All the earlier teaching of the letter about the Person and Work of Christ, our great High Priest, has *massive and vital implications for living* –

13:1-3 Our calling to love –

- a) Love must be *continual* – Brotherly love is demanding and costly; it is repeatedly emphasized throughout the NT and has a foundation in the OT as well – Ps. 133:1; 1 Thess. 4:9f; 1 John 3:16. Given the multiple challenges and pressures facing these readers in the first century AD, the love urged in verse 1 was especially important within this Christian Community.
- b) Love must be *relational* – Verse 2 refers to giving hospitality to Christian strangers. Greeks believed that Zeus, in his role as Zeus Xenios, worked as protector of strangers. Zeus sometimes disguised himself as a traveller and blessed those who gave him hospitality, unaware of just who they were sheltering. Ancient inns in the Roman Empire were often unsafe places so hospitality to Christian strangers would be very welcome. The point is that angels can be messengers who will actually bring a certain blessing/message from God Himself to those giving hospitality (Gen 18:1ff; Gen 19:1ff).
- c) Love must be *sacrificial* – Verse 3 is indeed costly. Involvement in seeking release for Christian prisoners who were being punished for their faith, as well as even getting food into prisons, were both fraught with danger. This deep and practical concern for prisoners should be extended to all who are ill-treated. We need that capacity to put ourselves into others' shoes and feel for them and with them in ways that lead to action.

13:4 Our calling to be pure –

Honouring and protecting the marriage bed is actually part of the expression of brotherly concern and love. The root reason for this is that the marriage union is ordained by God Himself. 'Adultery' means unfaithfulness by either party to the marriage vow, whereas 'fornication' covers a wide range of sexual irregularities. Our writer warns of God's judgment in this.

13:5-6 Our calling to be satisfied –

This actually includes coveting another man's wife by sexual desire *and* the love of money. Both are rooted in the longings of the human ego. Jesus warned of the impossibility of serving God and Mammon (Luke 12:15). A person's true value is not measured by their wealth. Christian leaders are particularly warned to be extremely careful in these areas (1 Tim 3:3; 6:6-8,10). Greedy people will always be anxious and unhappy, whilst the opposite of covetousness will be contentment. Our calling is to trust God's provision, accept His promises (Matt 6:31-33) and turn away from fear (Ps. 118:6).

13:7-12 Our calling to be loyal, especially to leaders –

Leaders are mentioned three times in Heb13:7,17,24. It seems to be their former leaders in 13:7 and the readers are urged to follow and imitate their example in life and lip. They were models of genuine faith yet again! They died in faith and in the faith! They had planted this community of believers (2:3) and watered it with the Word of God (Heb. 13:7). Though they had now died and were not available to help, nevertheless Jesus Christ is *always available* (Heb 1:12;13:8; Ps 102:27). Isaiah 48:12 'I am the first, I also am the last' transfers from Father to Son. *Yesterday*, Jesus cried for divine help (5:7); *today*, He can sympathize with us as High Priest for He has been tempted as we are but without sin (4:15); *for ever* He lives to make intercession for us (7:24-25). *Help, grace, power, guidance are always available to us* (Heb 13:8). Next, in verse 9, comes a warning against deviating into strange teachings of whatever sort. If Jesus is *always the same* (13:8); why would they want to leave the Christ-centred faith in any way whatsoever? It is the very grace of God that must be the source of all our spiritual strength, not the foods, rules or deviant teachings of the Colossian sort that would diminish the place of Christ and which have been made null and void by Christ.

Our writer still has the issue of food in mind when he notes in verse 10 that the sacrifice of Christ was the antitype of the sacrifice offered on the day of atonement and the animal flesh killed on that day was not eaten. Their bodies were taken 'without the camp' and totally burned there (Lev 16:27). Other sin-offerings could be different in that the blood was not presented to God in the holy of holies, the flesh was eaten by the priests in the sanctuary. Since the offerings of animal blood on the OT Day of Atonement, their bodies were burned. Those serving the tabernacle have no permission to eat

from the altar that typically foreshadows the sacrifice of Christ. The crux is that the sacrifice of Christ is a *better sacrifice because* the spiritual antitype is superior to the material type *and* because those who enter the heavenly sanctuary by Jesus' blood (10:19) know conclusively that Christ, the great High Priest, is always available as the source of their spiritual feeding on Him by faith. An altar in verse 10 means a sacrifice. Thus, the writer is not talking about a physical, material altar, but is saying 'we have such a great high priest'. The Christian 'altar' *was the sacrifice of Christ that* opened the way for direct access to the Godhead. Christ is our sacrifice and sustenance, to be fed upon by faith. As the OT atonement red heifers' bodies were burned outside the camp, so was Jesus crucified outside a city gate in Jerusalem in order to 'sanctify the people', bringing them to God, purified in conscience by the shedding of His blood as His own voluntary sacrifice of Himself. This great truth of verse 12 has massive consequences for our understanding and practice of the following verse 13f.

13:13-14 Our calling to be bold and courageous –

Our author piles in his argument with yet another '*therefore*' in verse 13! 'Let us then go to him outside the camp, bearing the *stigma* that he bore'. Jesus was led out of the city for crucifixion, having had his Messiah-ship trashed and his Mission rubbished. A double stigma against His Person and Work! Yet this very stigma ought to be viewed as great wealth, honour and privilege. Far better than gaining any earthly city *because* 'we are looking for the city that is to come'. We must yield completely to Him. Yet again this touches the heart of the message to the Hebrews. This may well be rooted in Moses' experience after the Golden Calf incident of setting up his 'Tent of Testimony' outside the camp and far from it, so that anyone seriously seeking the Lord *must go outside the camp to find him*.

Likewise, any one, under the new order, seeking God, must seek Him outside the camp by approaching Jesus outside the 'camp' of Judaism. How hard this would be for them, because formerly they had thought of everything outside Judaism as unclean! But the calling now is to 'go to Him', regardless of the shame and stigma that would mean. They would feel the sting of Jewish criticism and Imperial insult but that very journey would lead them to eternal glory! The world *outside* Judaism with all its traditions and institutions felt insecure and dangerous, but *Jesus was there, calling them to ultimate security, and Jesus was actually in control of the outside!* The Gentile Mission beckoned and not to move forward would mean falling behind Jesus Himself. The old order of Jerusalem, and all the baggage that

went with it, was ready to collapse. (Heb 11:10; 12:27) The city of God was their inheritance to come.

13:15-16 Our calling to worship –

‘*Therefore*’, pleads the writer, although animal sacrifices were no longer needed, *our* response must be to offer continual sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise *through Jesus!* This derives from Hosea 14:2 and for the writer, the key is that now, sacrificial ritual is obsolete, because of the finality and eternal efficacy of Christ’s own sacrifice. Another crucial sacrifice lies in verse 16 and that is ‘to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased’. See also James 1:27; 1 Peter 2:5; Rom 12: 1. *Our Christian faith is sacrificial, based on the one self-offering of Christ.* Christ welcomes our sacrificial living that helps others.

13:17-21 Respect your Christian leaders

These leaders are probably the successors of the leaders mentioned in 13:7. It might be that the readers of the Hebrews letter were tempted to withdraw from the authority and fellowship of a city-wide leadership. The leaders were responsible for the spiritual welfare of the flock under their care. The Greek word *agrupnew* means ‘losing sleep’ because of the leaders’ general watching of their sheep but perhaps also because of their anxiety that some members of that community were in danger of straying. Our writer wants the believers to cooperate with, and obey, their leaders so that the latter can exercise a joyful ministry among them. See similarly Phil 2:16. Disobedience and non-cooperation would actually damage both those leading and those led! Sometimes, visiting teachers might seem very attractive and unusual but it was the regular, local leaders who ultimately cared for the local Christian community. A warning!

It *may* be that our writer did/does have some role of spiritual authority/influence over these readers, for he asks prayer for himself in 13:18. He believes sincerely that he has done his duty, whatever that was, responsibly, comparably with Paul in 2 Cor 2:12; 6:3. Our writer asks prayer that he will eventually be enabled to re-unite with this community (13:19). It would be tempting to read between the lines a little here to ask whether the writer is trying to justify himself in some way or to apologise that he has been absent from them for a lengthy time. Such a temptation would be conjecture however! The mention of Timothy’s release in verse 23 suggests that the writer himself is free at that point.

The writer's mention of 'the God of peace' in 13:20 *might* hint at possible disunity/conflict within this Christian community and the need for healing if the readers were to be effective servants of God in a hostile Roman Empire. There is a further reference to the resurrection of Christ by the blood of the eternal *covenant*. Very interesting to read of Christ as 'that great Shepherd of the sheep'! Yes, He is our great High Priest *but he is also our Shepherd* and here is the first reference in the letter to the word 'Shepherd'! The root of this is Moses and Aaron leading the people out of Egypt (Ps 77:20; Isa 63:11). Jesus is intended as the second Moses who came up, not out of the sea, but out of the realm of the dead. The stress in this letter is not on Christ's resurrection but on His exaltation to high priesthood at God's right hand. There is only this *one* reference to the Lord's resurrection in the entire Hebrews letter! The resurrection of Christ confirmed the eternal validity of His own sacrifice and thereby confirms the superiority of the new covenant over the old, (cf 9:20). This is all part of a *prayer that the readers will be equipped by the powerful Christ for every form of good work in doing God's will. The result will be that glory is given to God through Christ* 13:21.

13:22-25 A Final Farewell

The whole letter is a 'word of exhortation', *ie* a homily or sermon! The writer is probably writing outside Italy, having Italians with him, to a church *in* Italy.

– Overview – The Bible Project

An Overview of Hebrews is available online from The Bible Project.

This 8 minute-movie builds up to an A4 printable page.

There is an approximate copy of that page on the last two pages below.

<https://thebibleproject.com>

In the Menu bar, select Resources, then BibleProjectGuides,
then New Testament, then Hebrews.

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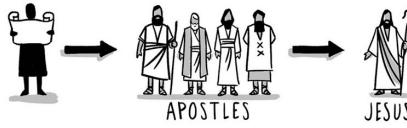
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AUTHOR: ?

- PAUL ?
- BARNABAS ?
- APOLLOS ?



AUDIENCE: ?



- SEE 10:32-34
- PERSECUTION & IMPRISONMENT

THOROUGH KNOWLEDGE
OF THE OLD TESTAMENT
SCRIPTURE



2 MAIN GOALS

#1

ELEVATE JESUS AS SUPERIOR

GOD

JESUS

"THE Radiance OF GOD'S GLORY"

"THE EXACT IMPRINT OF GOD'S NATURE"

THESE METAPHORS
MAKE THE CLOSEST POSSIBLE
IDENTIFICATION BETWEEN
JESUS AND GOD

1:

#2

CHALLENGE

THE READER TO
REMAIN FAITHFUL

TO JESUS DESPITE PERSECUTION



JESUS
EQUALS...



GOD'S WORD





1-3 IN THE PAST **GOD** SPOKE TO OUR
ANCESTORS IN MANY **DIFFERENT WAYS**, BUT IN THESE
LAST DAYS HE HAS SPOKEN TO **US** IN **HIS SON**

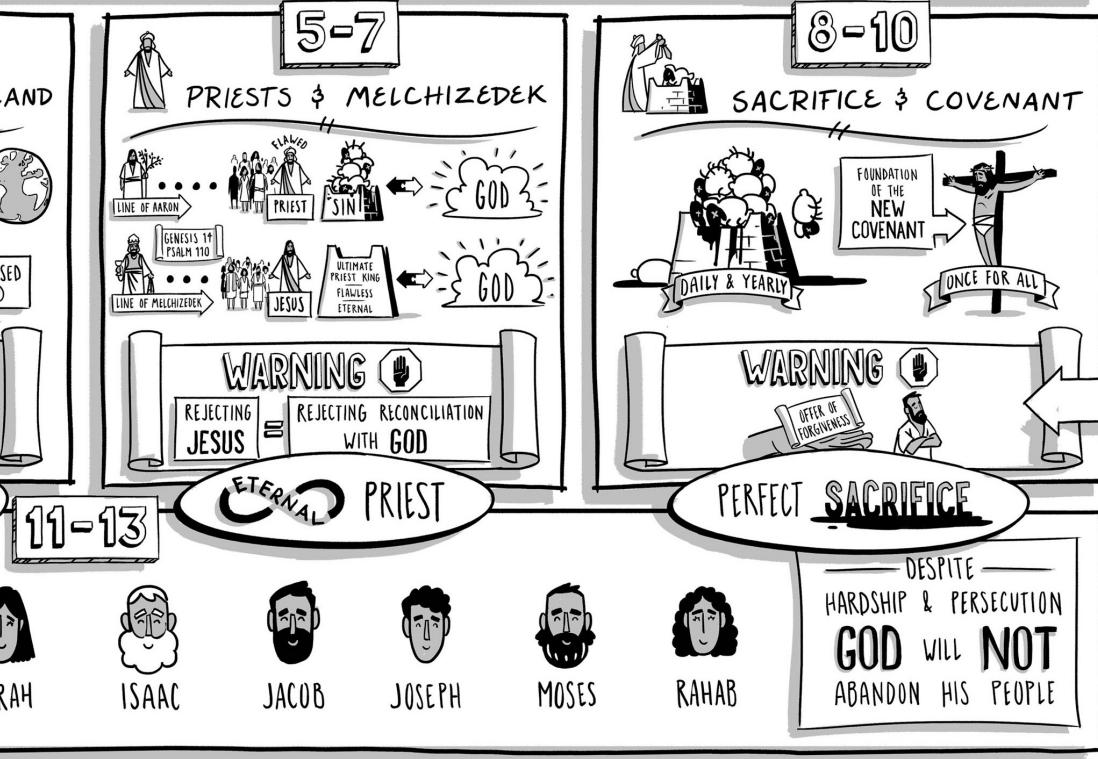
Extra tips

#1

LOOK UP OLD TESTAMENT
QUOTATIONS
(THERE ARE A LOT)

#2

THE **POINT** IS
TO FEEL A BIT
UNCOMFORTABLE,
BUT NOT
AFRAID



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