

The Epistle to the Hebrews

Introduction

This letter, like those of James, 1 & 2 Peter, and Jude, are often referred to as the Jewish epistles. They were written to Jewish Christians about questions and problems they faced early in the history of the church. The following notes of introduction have been adapted from the writings of Dr. Warren Wiersbe and Dr. J. Vernon McGee.

The Author

The question of authorship has plagued this epistle throughout church history. However, it is a debate in search of a cause. The epistle was accepted into the canon on the basis of Paul's authorship. Many like to quote the statement by Origen, "who wrote the Epistle is known only to God". However, they leave out the important part of his quote.

"The thoughts are Paul's, but the phraseology and composition are by someone else. **Not without reason have the ancient men handed down the Epistle as Paul's**, but who wrote the Epistle is known only to God."

This puts the quote in an entirely different light. Clement of Alexandria (150-215AD) said that Paul wrote the epistle in Hebrew, and that it was translated into Greek by Luke. Actually, the argument for Paul's authorship is stronger than for some of his other epistles, in spite of the lack of his name in the epistle.

Following is a list, far from complete, of thoughts and phrases in Hebrews used by Paul in other epistles, but never by other authors. Compare the following...

1. Heb.1:1, 3 with 2Co.4:4; Col.1:15-16.
2. Heb.1:4, 2:9 with Phi.2:8-9.
3. Heb.2:14 with 1Co.15:54, 57.
4. Heb.7:16, 18-19 with Rom.2:29; Gal.3:3, 24.
5. Heb.7:26 with Eph.4:10.
6. Heb.8:5; 10:1; with Col.2:17.
7. Heb.10:12-13 with 1Co.15:25.

Some claim that Heb.2:3 excludes Paul as the author, since he says in Gal.1:11-12 that he received the Gospel not from men but from God. But in Heb.2:3 he identifies himself with other early Christians, using “we” to separate them from the early disciples.

Two reasons may explain why Paul did not sign his name to the book. First, he did not begin with “Paul, an apostle...” because he intended to present the Lord Jesus Christ as the ultimate apostle from God (Heb.3:1). Second, we know that Paul was hated by the Jews, and the addition of his name would only hinder the acceptance of the truth contained in it. Consider seven things the author reveals about himself that would fit the apostle Paul.

1. He was a Jew acquainted with the details of Mosaic ritualism (Heb. Ch.7-10; 13:13).
2. He was highly acquainted with Greek philosophy.
3. He had been in prison and was supported by the recipients (Heb.10:34).
4. At the time of writing he was a prisoner in Italy (Heb.13:19, 24).
5. Timothy had been imprisoned with him, but now was free (Heb.13:23, compare Phi.2:19).
6. The author hoped to be liberated soon (Heb.13:19, compare Phi. v.22).
7. The scholar Lightfoot wrote in favor of Paul’s authorship, saying, “The very style of it may argue the scholar of Gamaliel” (see Act.22:1-3).

The final argument, and to me quite convincing, for Paul’s authorship, comes from the apostle Peter. We know that Peter wrote to believing Jews who had been scattered by persecution (compare Act.8:1-4 with 1Pe.1:1). In 2Pe.3:15-16 Peter speaks of an epistle written to these same Jewish believers by the apostle Paul. He specifically separated this epistle from Paul’s other epistles, “*as also in all his epistles*” (2Pe.3:16). Peter identifies this epistle of Paul, sent to Jews, as Scripture. If Hebrews is not that epistle, then we have a portion of the inspired word of God missing!

The Recipients

This reference by Peter also helps us know specifically where the letter was sent. It would have been “*to the pilgrims of the Dispersion in Pontus,*

Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia..." (1Pe.1:1). This letter, then, is a counterpart to the Epistle to the Galatians. Where Galatians deals with the Gentile side of the problem of law versus grace, Hebrews deals with the question from a Jewish perspective. No doubt it was also to be carried to Jews especially in Jerusalem and Judea, where the judgment of God was soon to fall in the coming of Titus and the Roman legions, and the fall of Jerusalem and destruction of the nation of Israel. The recipients are called "*holy brethren*" (Heb.3:1), and "*brethren*" (2:11, 12, 17; 3:12; 10:19; 13:22). In addition to this, in every exhortation in the epistle, the author includes himself with them, using the words "*we*" and "*us*" (Heb.2:1-3; 4:1-3, 11, 14; 6:1-3; 8:1; 10:19-24; 12:28).

The Theme

The theme of Hebrews is twofold: first doctrinal and then practical. The main theme is that we have a perfect high priest who has offered a perfect and final sacrifice for sins (Heb.8:1-6). This is the main focus of chapters 7 through 10. Then the subtheme is that we ought to carefully and diligently "*consider Jesus*" (Heb.3:1; 12:3) so that we might go on to maturity (Heb.6:1). Paul's point here is that although the Lord Jesus is God's final word to man, our comprehension of that message will never be final. Throughout all eternity we will be learning what the coming of Christ and His sacrifice for us has accomplished (Eph.2:7).

The Outline

The outline of the Epistle is quite simple, but the concepts contained in these sections can be difficult to comprehend, especially for Gentile readers.

1. The Superior Person of Christ – Chapters 1- 4:13 (Doctrinal).
The Superiority of the Lord Jesus Christ is seen in seven ways.
 - A. Christ is superior to the prophets (Heb.1:1-3).
 - B. Christ is superior to Angels (Heb.1:4-2:18).
 - C. Christ is superior to Moses (Heb.3:1-19).
 - D. Christ is superior to Joshua (Heb.4:1-13).

2. The Superior Priesthood of Christ – Chapters 4:14- Ch.10 (Dispensational).
 - A. Christ is superior to Melchizedek (Heb.7:1-28).
 - B. Christ serves in a superior, heavenly sanctuary, ministers a superior covenant, based on a superior sacrifice (Ch.8-

- 10).
3. The Superior Promises of Christ – Chapters 11-13 (Practical).
These fall into a familiar category of three.
 - A. The blessings of Faith (Heb.11:1-40).
 - B. The blessings of Hope (Heb.12:1-29).
 - C. The blessings of Love (Heb.13:1-25).

Along with this outline, there are five warning sections embedded within the book.

1. The danger of drifting from God's word (Heb.2:1-4).
2. The danger of doubting God's word (Heb.3:7-4:13).
3. The danger of dullness toward God's word (Heb.5:11-6:8).
4. The danger of disobeying God's word (Heb.10:26-39).
5. The danger of despising God's word (Heb.12:12-29).

Key Words

The main idea of the book is expressed in the repetition of key words like "perfect" (Heb.2:10; 5:9, 14; 6:1; 7:11, 19, 28; 9:9, 11; 10:1, 14; 11:40; 12:2, 23), and "better" (Heb.1:4; 6:9; 7:7, 19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35, 40; 12:24). The word "better" suggests infinite superiority of Christ and His work, and the word "perfect" speaks of that which is whole, complete, without lack. We also find the words "heavenly" and "eternal" often.

The Date

It is clear that this epistle was written prior to the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD, probably around 68AD, before Paul was martyred. He speaks of the temple still standing, and of priests who continue to serve there (Heb.8:4-5; 9:9-10; 10:1-3, 11). The torn veil on the day of Christ's crucifixion (Mat.27:51) showed that God had rejected the nation, and put an end to the Levitical system of worship. The book of Hebrews serves as a warning of the coming day of fiery judgment (Heb.10:25, 27; 12:28) that would fall on Israel. See Peter's warning in Act.2:40. This was the result of the nations rejection of her Messiah, the unforgivable sin of Mat.12:24, 31-32, which resulted in the kingdom being taken from Israel, for a time (Rom.11:24-25), and given to the Gentiles (Mat.21:40-44). This judgment Paul compares to the failure of Israel to enter into Canaan due to their unbelief (Num.13-14; Heb.3:1-19). Hebrews may actually have been Paul's last epistle.

The Infinite Superiority of Jesus Christ

This is the theme of the book of Hebrews. It is most interesting that in Col.1:15-19 Paul presents seven unique superiorities of Christ. Here in Hebrews, there are several sets of seven superiorities.

1. The seven superiorities of the book: Jesus is superior...
 - A. To prophets (Heb.1:1-3).
 - B. To angels (Heb.1:4-14).
 - C. To Moses (Heb.3:1-19).
 - D. To Joshua (Heb.4:1-13).
 - E. To Melchizedek (Heb.4:13-7:28).
 - F. To the Old Covenant (Heb.8:1-10:39).
 - G. To all other heroes of the faith, as He is the Author and Finisher of faith (Heb.11:1-13:25).
2. His seven superiorities over the prophets (Heb.1:1-3).
3. His seven superiorities over the angels (Heb.1:4-14).

I am sure we could “impose” our system of “seven superiorities” in every category in the book. However, it is evident that Paul is here in the first chapter, and throughout the book, following the formula he used in Colossians 1:15-19.

1. The Superior Person of Jesus Christ – Ch.1- 4

The Superiority of Christ to the Prophets (Heb.1:1-3)

The book of Hebrews begins with two assumptions (Dr. McGee). The first is that God exists. No attempt is made to prove this assertion. The second is that God has spoken. God has revealed Himself to man. He has done this through His creation (Psa.19:1-6; Rom.1:18-20), through conscience (Eccl. 3:11; Rom.2:14-16), and especially through His word, both written and living, in the Person of Jesus Christ (Joh.1:1-18). In separating the “*time past*” from “*these last days*”, Paul divides between the Old and the New testament revelation. Note here seven superiorities of Christ to the prophets. We might say, the seven glories of Jesus Christ.

1. Jesus Christ is God’s complete and final word to mankind. God’s message through the prophets was partial, but in Christ we have His full and final message to man. The phrase “by His Son” is literally, “In Son”. The emphasis is on the unique nature of His only begotten as opposed to the prophets, who were mere men.

2. Jesus Christ is the heir of all things. Because He is the “firstborn” of all creation, and “firstborn from the dead” (Col.1:18), He is the rightful heir of both the old, and the new, creation. Bear in mind that “firstborn” designates Him not as one who was created, which is heresy, but as the One who inherits all things (Joh.1:1-3; Col.1:15-18).
3. Jesus Christ is the creator of all things, including “the worlds”, literally, the ages (Joh.1:3; Col.1:16-17). Jesus Christ is the designer and director of human history. He is guiding history to its intended end.
4. He is the glory and the image of God. The word “brightness” speaks of “*radiance*” and suggests the visible Shekinah glory of God. The phrase “*express image*” is from the word we get “character” from. It was used in the ancient world of a stamp left by a die, indicating the exact reproduction of the invisible God in the visible person of Jesus (Joh.1:14, 18; 14:9-11; 1Jo.1:1-3).
5. He is the sustainer of the universe. Scientists cannot tell us how the atom, possessing both proton and neutron, holds together. It is Jesus Christ who is “*upholding all things by the word of His power*”. The word here is *phero*, which means to bear or to carry. The Lord is carrying all things forward to fulfill His eternal plan. He does this by His word, which is *rhema*, His spoken word.
6. He alone could purge, or wash away, the sins of the world. Paul uses the word *katharismos* here, from the same root word meaning to cleanse or purify, and is used in Joh.3:25; 13:10-11 and 1Jo.1:9, as well as Heb.9:14, 22 and 10:22.
7. He now is seated in power and glory at the Father’s right hand. This was prophesied in Psa.110:1, and will be developed in Heb.10:11-18. After His resurrection Jesus took His seat at the Father’s right hand, the place of power and authority. We refer to this time, until His second coming, as the present session of Christ.

Conclusion

In these few verses Paul has set forth the Lord Jesus Christ as the final and supreme message from God to men. All of the New Testament books are simply expounding the meaning of the revelation of the Living Word, the Lord Jesus Christ. We who live in these final days of the Church age need more than ever to “consider Jesus” (Heb.3:1). For

unless we fix our eyes on Him we will not be enabled to finish the race set before us (Heb.12:1-3).

The Superiority of Jesus Christ to Angels (Heb.1:4-2:18).

This section presents the superiority of the Lord Jesus to angels. Angels played an important role in Jewish theology at the time Hebrews was written. This was because angels acted as mediators between God and Moses in the giving of the Law (Deu.33:2; Act.7:53; Gal.3:19). We are also told that Michael and his angels were guardians of the nation of Israel (Dan.10:13, 21; 12:1; Rev.12:7). Since the readers had such reverence for the Law of Moses, how much more they ought to value the message brought to us personally by the Son of God.

There are three main divisions of this section. First, the author quotes seven O.T. passages, showing that Christ is superior to angels because of His deity (1:4-14). Then, he includes a parenthetical warning, the first of five in the book (2:1-4). Finally, he presents Jesus in His humanity, and shows that He is exalted above angels because of His finished work of redemption (2:5-18).

Christ Superior to Angels due to His Deity (1:4-14)

1. V.5, He is the Son, the Heir of God (Psa.2:7; 2Sa.7:14). Jesus is called the “firstborn” (Rom.8:29; Col.1:15, 18; Heb.1:6; 12:23; Rev.1:5) not because He was a created being, but because He is the heir of the Father over all things. In Scripture “firstborn” always has to do with the right of inheritance. Jesus Christ is “Son” both in His role in the Trinity, and in His humanity, as the “only begotten” of God. The second quote from 2Sam.7:14 also shows Him to be the fulfillment of the Davidic covenant.
2. V.6, He is the object of angelic worship (Psa.97:7). The “*again*” in this verse speaks of the second coming of Christ. When He returns in all His glory, to claim authority over all creation, the Father will command the angels to worship Him. This is the “until” of Psa.110:1.
3. V.7, He is ruler of the angels (Psa.104:4). “*His angels...His ministers*” refers to the subservient role of angels to God. They are compared to wind (spirits) and fire. These were common Jewish ideas of the essence of angels. This may also relate their ministry to God’s mercy and judgment, as illustrated in Mat.3:11, *He will*

baptize you with the Holy Spirit (mercy on those who believe) and fire (judgment on those who do not believe)". The word "*ministers*" (v.7) and "*ministering*" (v.14) come from a word that speaks of divine service that is dedicated to God's purpose.

4. V.8, He is God enthroned over His kingdom (Psa.45:6). Here God the Father speaks to Lord Jesus, calling Him God (Mat.1:23; Joh.1:1; 5:18; 10:30-33; Tit.2:13) declaring that His throne is eternal and His rule is righteous.
5. V.9, He was anointed by the Father over the angels (Psa.45:7). God the Father anointed Jesus Christ above all the angelic realm. This is the eternal reality of which the anointing of Aaron was only a shadow (Exo.30:22-33).
6. V.10-12, He is the immutable creator (Psa.102:25-27). The words "*You, Lord*" address Jesus, and in the Hebrew "LORD" is "YHWH" or "Jehovah". Not only is Jesus the creator (Joh.1:1-4; Col.1:16), He is immutable/eternal (Heb.13:8), whereas creation will grow old and pass away. "*They will be changed*" anticipates the new creation, the new heavens and new earth (2Pe.3:13; Rev.21:1).
7. V.13-14, He is seated in power, while angels continue to serve (Psa.110:1). In the ancient world, as pointed out by Dr. Fruchtenbaum in his commentary on Hebrews, to sit at the right hand is the place of equality (Ariels Commentary on the Jewish Epistles, pg.26). The seated position speaks of His finished work, the outcome of which will result in His enemies being put under His feet. Verse 14 suggests the idea of guardian angels.
 - A. Guardian angels are given to all children (Mat.18:10).
 - B. They guard believers through their lives (Psa.91:1). The implication is that when one rejects Christ, they forfeit the care of angels.
 - C. Angels are keenly interested in our response to God's word and our life of faith (1Co.4:9; 11:10; 1Pe.1:12).
 - D. At death the believers soul is escorted into heaven by angels (Luk.16:22).
 - E. If a believer continues to sin to the point of death (1Jo.5:16) his guardian angel is withdrawn, and he is delivered over to the power of Satan (1Co.5:5; 1Ti.1:20). Though this results in physical death, the believer does not lose his or her salvation (1Co.5:5). More on this when we get to Heb.2:14-15.

First Warning: The Danger of Drifting (2:1-4)

1. The necessity, v.1a. The *“therefore”* ties this warning to the truths presented in chapter one. Since Jesus Christ is superior in every way, it is essential that we heed what He has said. As the Father said to the disciples on the Mount of Transfiguration, *“This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Hear Him!”* (Mat.17:5). The phrase *“more earnest heed”* comes from two words that were used for the extreme care necessary to bring a ship into safe harbor. *“Things we have heard”* refers to Jesus’ teachings (v.3).
2. The peril, v.1b. Failure to be attentive to the word of God results in a gradual drifting away spiritually. The word pictures a ship that has slipped its moorings and is drifting away with the tide. Only the Lord Jesus Christ, through His word and by His Spirit, is able to keep us anchored in the protective will of God (Heb.6:19).
3. The accountability, v.2. If God’s word communicated by angels was sure, and every disobedience brought just judgment, how much greater is the word spoken through Jesus Christ, who is infinitely greater than angels?
4. The impossibility, v.3a. The phrase *“how shall we escape”* indicates the impossibility of escaping Divine retribution for spiritual apathy. This is the impossibility mentioned again in Heb.6:4. The reason it is impossible to escape temporal judgment, if we are apathetic/disobedient to Gods word, is found in three other *“impossibilities”* in the book.
 - A. Because it is impossible for God to lie (Heb.6:18). Both His promises of blessing for obedience, and His warnings of judgment for disobedience, will be fulfilled.
 - B. Because it is impossible for animal sacrifices to accomplish what only the cross of Christ could achieve (Heb.10:4-10). To turn away from the provisions of the new covenant (Heb.2:1-4), which were purchased at the cost of the cross, and to return to the rituals of Judaism, is to reject the reality for the shadow (Heb.9:11-15; 10:1-10).

- C. Because without faith it is impossible to please God (Heb.11:6). It is an axiom of Scripture that *“The just shall live by faith”* (Hab.2:4; Rom.1:17; Heb.10:38). Failure to do so results in God’s displeasure and judgment (Heb.10:26-31, 38, 11:6; 12:25-29).

The phrase *“so great a salvation”* has the same qualifying *“so”* as in Joh.3:16, which suggests infinite quality. The use of *“salvation”* in Hebrews looks at Divine deliverance in all three stages: past redemption, present deliverance, future glorification. Thus it includes deliverance from the soon coming destruction of Jerusalem, which is *“the day”* referred to in Heb.10:25. Believers who drifted away from sound doctrine in the first century would find it *“impossible”* to escape the horrors of 70A.D.

5. The authority, v.3b-4. All that is written in the epistles is but the exposition of the words of Jesus Christ we read in the gospels. This is especially true of the teaching of Jesus in the upper room (Joh.13:17) which contains the seed-thoughts of all Church age truth. In the Jewish world, every truth must be attested by two or three witnesses (Deu.17:6; 19:5; Mat.18:16; Joh.5:31-40; 2Co.13:1; 1Ti.5:17). Here, we have 1) the witness of Jesus Himself, 2) the witness of those who heard Him, 3) the witness of signs, wonders and miracles from God, 4) the gifts given by the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost.

Five works of the Holy Spirit in relation to Scripture

1. Revelation – This is the work by which the word of God is made known to the prophets and apostles (1Co.2:10; 1Pe.1:10-12).
2. Inspiration – This is the work of directing and guiding the writing down of that which has been revealed (2Ti.3:16; 2Pe.1:19-21).
3. Preservation – This work assures us that no Scripture can ever be destroyed (Isa.40:6-8; 1Pe.1:24-25; Mat.24:35).
4. Illumination – This work opens the eyes of understanding to the student who studies God’s word in faith (Psa.19:8; Eph.1:17-20; Heb.6:4).
5. Application – Here the Spirit enables the believer to apply God’s word to daily life (1Co.2:4-5; Eph.3:16-20; 1Th.1:5-6).

Summary

These five warning sections (see page 4) in Hebrews progress from bad to worse. They show the progressive spiritual decline of the believer who is apathetic and indifferent to God's word, who drifts to his or her own spiritual destruction. This warning is resumed in Heb.3:7-19.

Jesus is Superior to Angels in His Humanity (2:5-18)

In this section we see the necessity of the incarnation, Jesus becoming man, and how in His humanity and by His finished work He is exalted above the angels. Four great reasons are given for the necessity of the incarnation.

1. To be the last Adam, v.5-9. Here Psa.8:4-6 to show that God's plan for mankind from the beginning was to be created lower than the angels for a time, but to ultimately be exalted above the angels in "*glory and honor*". It was God's plan that all things were to be in subjection to man. God put Adam in dominion over the earth as a starting point (Gen.1:26-31). The "*but now*" in v.8 speaks of the present condition of mankind because of the entrance of sin and death. Yet, even in this fallen world, "*We see Jesus...crowned with glory and honor*". This may refer to the transfiguration (Mat.17:1-5; 2Pe.1:17). He became a man, lower than the angels for a time, "*that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone*", v.9b. Jesus stepped down from glory to become man, to die on the cross, and now in resurrection claims His rightful glory (Phil2:5-11; 2Pe.1:17). He is the "last Adam", who has rescued mankind from sin and made possible eternal glory, to those who believe in Him (Rom.5:12-21; 1Co.15:20-28, 50-58). **Note:** The word "*taste*", both here and in Heb.6:4-5 and 1Pe.2:3, means to "fully experience". This can only mean that Jesus Christ died for every member of the human race.
2. To become the captain of our salvation, v.10-13. Though Jesus died for all mankind, He will bring "*many sons to glory*", because only they will believe in Him as Savior. He is the "*captain*", meaning the pioneer, the prince-leader, and the trail-blazer, of our salvation. It was fitting and suitable, in the plan of God, that if we are to share His glory, He must also share in our sufferings. When the work of sanctification is related to the Holy Spirit (2Th.2:13;

- 1Pe.1:2) the idea is of practical purification in our lives. However, in Hebrews, the sanctification of Jesus refers to our position in relation to God (Heb.10:10). Because we are united with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection, and imputed with His righteousness (Rom.4:3, 23-25; 2Co.5:19-21), He is not ashamed to call us His brethren. This is confirmed by a quote from Psa.22:22 and Isa.8:18.
3. To win the victory over the devil, v.14-16. Since the curse of sin was the fear of death (Gen.2:17; 3:10; Rom.5:12; 1Co.15:55-57), Jesus became a man that He might break the curse and destroy the power of the devil. By his sin, Adam forfeited dominion over the earth, and Satan became the god of this world (2Co.4:4). By His cross Jesus conquered Satan's kingdom, broke the power of death, and delivered his captives (Luk.4:18; Col.1:12-13). The phrase "*destroy him*" literally means "to render powerless" not annihilation. The cross broke the power of the devil, which is fear of death (1Jo.3:8). This help was not given to angels. Fallen angels have no chance of salvation. But remember that they fell in the full knowledge of God, having been in His presence. The "*seed of Abraham*" refers first of all to the Jewish believers to whom this letter was sent. But also includes us as the spiritual offspring of Abraham (Gal.3:29).
 4. To become our faithful high priest, v.17-18. The phrase "*He had to be made like His brethren*" relates back to v.10, "*It was fitting for Him*". In the wisdom and justice of God, there could be no Savior, and no salvation, apart from the incarnation and crucifixion of Jesus. By His life as "*A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief*" (Isa.53:3), and through the dark valley of His crucifixion, He is able to be "*a merciful and faithful High Priest*". He is merciful to us in our sinfulness, and He is faithful to God in His righteousness. "*He is able to aid those who are tempted*", literally means, "He is able to run to the aid" of those being tempted.

The High Priesthood of Jesus is the main theme of the book, and will be fully developed in Ch.5-8. For now the topic has been introduced in advance so as to emphasize the grave spiritual consequences of turning

away from Him who is our High Priest, the only way of salvation and our One and only mediator between men and God (Joh.14:6; 1Ti.2:3-6).

Hebrews Chapter 3

This chapter is crucial to the accurate interpretation of the whole book. This is because all of the five warnings sections in the book are based on what happened to the Exodus generation when they failed to trust God and enter into the land of Canaan.

“But with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness.” (1Co.10:5)

Later the author will declare that –

“But without faith it is impossible to please Him...” (Heb.11:6)

The recipients of this letter were facing a trial much greater than that faced by the Exodus generation. For at the end of the forty years wandering, after the deaths of all those over twenty years old (Num.14:29), All the younger generation, including Joshua and Caleb, entered into the land. What these first century Jewish believers were facing was the destruction of the entire nation, which began in 70A.D. Since they failed by refusing to believe God’s word through Moses, the author will show that Jesus Christ is infinitely superior to Moses.

Jesus is Superior to Moses (Heb.3:1-19)

The Jews held Moses in the highest possible regard as one of God’s great prophets and leaders. In Jewish theology he stood second only to Abraham (Joh.8:4-5, 39). In this chapter the Lord Jesus is shown to be infinitely superior to Moses, and the New Covenant household of the church is demonstrated to be superior to the Old Covenant household of Israel. The rest that was offered Israel was that of victory and blessing in the land of Canaan. The rest that Jesus offers is that of victory and blessing in this life, and of great and rich rewards in His eternal kingdom.

The Tale of Two Households (Heb.3:1-11)

The author's use of the word "*therefore*" in v.1 is typical of Paul, as it is used to mark the major developments of his arguments (Heb.2:1, 17; 3:1, 7; 4:1; 6:1; 7:11, 25; 9:23; 10:19, 35; 12:1, 12, 28; 13:12, 13, 15). It would be profitable to go through Hebrews and make a list of each of these occurrences and list the point that is being stressed.

It is critical to accurate interpretation (2Ti.2:15) to note that the recipients of this letter are called "*holy brethren*" and that they are "*partakers of the heavenly calling*". In 6:4 they are called "*partakers of the Holy Spirit*". The author is not dealing with mere professors of faith, but with genuine children of God.

The necessity of determining to whom Scripture is speaking is illustrated by Jesus' words in Mat.11:28-30. The invitation of v.28 is addressed to unsaved people, and offers grace (salvation rest) to those who come by faith alone. But in v.29-30 the command to take up the yoke of learning is addressed to those who respond to the invitation in v.28, those who have believed. Eternal life is a free gift received apart from works (Rom.4:3, 5). However, discipleship is a process of growth to those who work in faith (Eph.2:8-10). In v.29 Jesus is offering the moment-by-moment rest, the faith-rest life, to those who believe. If we apply v.29-30 to the unbeliever, we have introduced a works-salvation concept, contrary to the truth of Rom.4:3 and Eph.2:8.

Jesus is Superior to Moses in His Person (Heb.3:1-6)

Then, they are urged to "*consider the Apostle and High priest of our confession, Christ Jesus*". The word "consider" means to bear down with the mind, to concentrate. We might say to be preoccupied with the Person of Jesus. This command is given again in Heb.12:3. In His coming into the world as a man, He was sent by the Father as "*the Apostle*" (the ambassador) from God to men. In His resurrection He is now "*High Priest*", the One and only mediator between God and men (1Tim.2:5). As God's Apostle He came down to live among men (Psa.68:18; Eph.4:8-10). As our faithful High Priest He ascended into the presence of God to represent us before God (Heb.9:24). The key to victory in the Christian life is to keep our spiritual eyes focused on Jesus Christ, by being diligent in the study and application of His word (2Tim.2:15; Heb.12:1-3).

Both Moses and Jesus were “*faithful*”, but Moses acted as a servant, while Jesus Christ is the Son over the house (v.6). Moses was faithful in giving the law, but Jesus was faithful in bringing us the grace and truth of God (Joh.1:17). Moses was of course a sinner who needed grace. Jesus was the Savior who brought the grace of God to men (Joh.1:14). The ministry of Moses was one of slavery and death, that of Jesus was a ministry of redemption and life (2Co.3:4-18; Gal.4:21-31). The ministry of Moses brought fear and trembling, but that of Jesus brought joy and peace (Rom.5:1; Heb.12:18-24).

A key word in this section is the word “house”. It would more clearly be called a “household”. It speaks of all those who live in the household, whether children or servants. The word “house” occurs seven times in v.1-6, and is commonly used in the N.T. for the church (1Ti.3:15; 1Pe.2:5; 4:17). Moses was a faithful servant in God’s Old Testament house (Israel), but Jesus Christ is both builder and ruler of the household, both of O.T. and N.T. saints. The word “built” literally means, not only to construct but also to thoroughly furnish and supply, to provide every necessity.

Moses was a “*servant*”, the word used here means one who is a free will slave, serving out of love. This is the “pierced ear slave” of Deu.15:16-17. Moses was unique among all the prophets in that God spoke directly to him, as one speaks to a friend (Num.12:6-8; Exo.33:11).

Jesus “*has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses*”. The phrase means to permanently hold a position of greater honor and praise. Three reasons for this superiority are given in the following verses.

1. He who builds the house is greater than the house, v.3. There is an old saying that the artist is always greater than any of his works.
2. He is also the architect and builder of all things (Joh.1:1-4; Col.1:15-18; Heb.1:10-12), v.4. Remember from 1:2 that He is also the designer and director of the stages of world history. Jesus Christ is the Creator, Moses is part of His creation.
3. He is the Son who rules over the household, v.6. Both the Old Covenant household of Israel, and the New Covenant household of the church are under the authority and rule of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The authors point is that Moses was a faithful servant **in** the house of God, but the Lord Jesus is the Son **over** that household. Moses wrote of *“things which would be spoken afterward”*, but Jesus came to fulfill all that Moses wrote (Deu.18:15, 18; Mat.5:17).

Many are troubled by what is said in v.6. *“Whose house we are, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end”*. Two false conclusions have been based on this statement.

1. That those who fail to “hold fast” to the hope of eternal life were never truly saved.
2. That those who fail to “hold fast” to the hope of eternal life have forfeited their salvation.

However, by tying together the three “if” statements in the context we can determine the true meaning.

1. Christ is ruling over His household, and we are acting under His rulership, *“If we hold fast”* our confidence and joy to the end, v.6.
2. The determining factor will be “if” we hear His voice (His word) *“today”*, and do not harden our hearts to it, v.7-8, 15. If we fail to heed God’s word daily, we will fail to hold fast our victory and joy.
3. We are active partners and participants, *“partakers”*, that is in active fellowship with, the Lord Jesus Christ “if” we hold to *“the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end”*, v.14. When believers fail to stay strong from the beginning, they leave their first love, and stand in need of repentance and restoration (Rev.2:4-5).

Jesus is Superior in the Rest that He Gives (Heb.3:7-4:13)

The author uses Canaan as a picture of rest and victory through faith and obedience. Had Israel believed God’s promises, they would have claimed these promises and enjoyed rich blessings (Deu.6:10-11; Jos.24:13). How much greater the promises we have in Christ (Heb.6:13-20; 8:6; 2Pe.1:2-4).

Second Warning: The Historical Example of Failure (Heb.3:7-11)

Again, this section is critical to rightly interpret the entire book. The Exodus generation is used as an example of those who were redeemed out of slavery, but who failed to enter into the full blessings intended by God for them. While their redemption out of slavery

required only faith in the blood of the lamb (Exo.12), entrance into the promised land required both believing in the promise of God, but also in claiming the land through victorious conquest.

In the very same way the Lord Jesus offers to all who come to Him two kinds of rest (Mat.11:28-30). The first is the rest of salvation (v.28), which is freely given to all who come to Him in faith. However, the second rest (v.29-30) is discovered only by those believers who will take up the “yoke” of discipleship, who study and grow in His word, and become fellow-laborers with Him in obedient service (Rom.12:1-2). We do not want to follow the negative example of the Exodus generation of doubt, unbelief, and failure!

The quote from Psa.95:7-11 takes us back to the story in Numbers 13 and 14. Moses sent the twelve spies into the land of Canaan to prepare for the Israelite invasion. When the spies returned, ten of them declared that it was a suicide mission to go into the land (Num.13:17-33). Only Joshua and Caleb remained faithful to the plan of God to give the land to Israel (Num.13:1-2).

Because Israel believed the ten unfaithful spies, and rejected the two who were faithful (Num.14:1-10), God declared that He would destroy the nation, and build a new nation from Moses. Moses interceded on behalf of Israel, and God forgave them (Num.14:11-21). However, God declared that as discipline for their unbelief, none of the adults of that generation would enter into the land, except Joshua and Caleb (Num.14:22-38).

When this message was relayed to the people, they wanted to “repent”, and sought to go in and claim the land, but were defeated (Num.14:39-45). From this story we can conclude several doctrinal points.

1. The issue here is not salvation. These people had all believed in the Lord (Exo.4:31; 14:31), and had been redeemed by the blood of the Passover lamb (Exo. 12). It is worth noting that Moses also was not allowed to enter the land, and this was also due to his unbelief (Num.20:7-12; Deu.1:37; Deu.3:23-27).
2. The land of Canaan represented victory through faith, along with all its blessings. By their refusal to continue in faith, the Exodus generation forfeited the victorious life and the resulting blessings.

3. Israel's failure resulted from turning away from the promise of God, and believing instead in what they saw and heard concerning their circumstances. They followed appearances instead of faith.
4. The author of Hebrews is warning these first century Jewish believers that they, like their ancestors, were in danger of failing to enter into a life of victory and blessing, by rejecting the word of God and instead living in fear of their enemies' persecution.
5. In Heb.2:3 the question, "*How shall we escape?*", leads us, by the example of the Exodus generation, to the conclusion that, "*It is impossible...to renew them again to repentance*" (Heb.6:4-6).
6. There are times in history, and indeed in the Christian life, where failure to heed God's word and be guided by His Spirit will result in blessings, and eternal rewards, that will be lost forever (Heb.12:15-17; 25-29). Some opportunities once lost cannot be reclaimed. These first century Jewish believers were facing one of the greatest historical upheavals of the ancient world, the destruction of the temple in 70A.D., and the destruction of the nation of Israel.
7. Again, the issue throughout Hebrews is not a question of whether the recipients of this letter were saved. That is beyond doubt (Heb.3:1). The question is whether they will continue to grow up to spiritual maturity (Heb.5:11-6:3) and trust in the faithful promises of God (Heb.6:13-20).

In this quote from Psalm 95 should be read in the context of the whole Psalm. In the first seven verses we see the joy, thanksgiving, and worship of those who chose to live by faith and claim victory through obedience to God.

Then in v.7b-11 comes the warning to those who have hardened their hearts to God's word and promises at Kadesh Barnea (Num.13). It is worthwhile to identify the conditions that led to their spiritual failure.

1. First, they hardened their hearts to the word of God (Psa.95:8; Heb.3:8).
2. Second, they wanted to test God, instead of trusting Him (Psa.95:9a; Heb.3:9a).
3. Third, while they had seen the mighty works of God, they had not learned His ways (Psa.95:9b, 10b; Psa.103:7; Heb.3:9b, 10b). Note

- that in Psa.95:9-10 and 103:7 God distinguishes between seeing His works and knowing His ways.
4. Fourth, they “*went astray in their hearts*” (Psa.95:10; Heb.3:10).
 5. Finally, as a result of their spiritual retreat and decline, they were not allowed to enter into His rest, the land of Canaan (Num.14:39-45; Psa.95:11; Heb.3:11).
 6. These stages are similar to the same warnings Paul gives to believers in Gal.3:1-5; 5:1-9; Eph.4:17-24, and those of John in Rev.2:4-7; 14-16; 20-24; 3:1-3; 16-19.

The Meaning of Rest

In this context, the word “rest” refers to victory and blessing in the land of Canaan. However, within the wider context including chapter four, the word is used in several different ways, that are all closely related.

1. It is used of God’s rest after creation (Gen.2:1-2; Heb.4:4).
2. It is used of Canaan, the promised land, whose rich blessings had to be claimed by victory through faith (Deu.6:10-11; Jos.24:13; Psa.95:11; Jos.1:13-15; Heb.3:11).
3. It is used of spiritual rest for our souls by receiving eternal salvation (Mat.11:28; Heb.4:3).
4. It is used of the victorious life of faith (Mat.11:29-30; Heb.4:9-11).
5. Finally, it is used of our eternal rest of inheritance/reward in Christ’s kingdom (Rev.14:13).

The main burden of the book of Hebrews is to bring those who have entered into salvation rest all the way to the rest of spirituality, maturity and victorious living by faith.

The Warning Applied (Heb.3:12-19)

These believing “*brethren*” (Heb.3:1) are identified as the first century equivalent of those mentioned in Heb.2:11, 12, 17. That is, they are members of the family of God, which includes both Old and New Testament saints.

They are warned to “*beware*”, or “*watch out*”, lest they fail as the saints of the Exodus generation did. Paul makes this very same argument in 1Co.10:1-13. It is important to take note of the seven exhortations which show the sure path of escaping spiritual defeat.

1. “*Consider*”, 3:1. We must keep our eyes on Jesus Christ.
2. “*Hear His voice*”, 3:7. We must be attentive to His word.

3. "Do not harden your hearts", 3:8. We must recognize the danger.
4. "Beware", 3:12. We must examine ourselves daily.
5. "Exhort one another", 3:13. We must care for one another.
6. "Hold fast", 3:14. We must get a grip on our faith, and never quit.
7. "Let us fear", 4:1. We must recognize Satan's strategy.

Speaking of the very same Exodus generation in 1Co.10, Paul says,

"Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were recorded for our admonition, upon the ends of the ages have come."
1Co.10:11.

This spiritual defeat is attributed to *"an evil heart of unbelief"*. Those who think that "evil" and "unbelief" cannot refer to true believers I would recommend comparing Scripture with Scripture (Luk.11:13; 1Co.5:13; Jam.2:4). Jesus often rebuked the original apostles for their hardness of heart and unbelief (Mar.6:52; 8:17; 16:11, 13, 14). There is a five-fold progression here.

1. First comes the evil of unbelief in the heart, v.12a.
2. This results in a spiritual departure from the living God, v.12b.
3. This begins a process of hardening in the heart, v.13, 15.
4. Then life becomes a series of divine discipline, v.16-17.
5. The sad end is failure to enter and enjoy the rest of God, v.17-19.

When we get in the habit of failing to trust God, in each and every situation, we end up *"departing from the living God"*. This refers to loss of fellowship, fruitfulness, and service, not the loss of salvation. In Gal.5:4 Paul calls it being *"estranged from Christ"*. To avoid this ever present danger, we are to exhort one another daily, and hold fast to the local church (Heb.10:24-25). It is certain that if we unaware of the danger of drifting (Heb.2:1), and fail to "hold fast" to the word of God, we will fall prey to the deceitfulness of sin and become hardened of heart.

Over my 50 years of ministry I can count many who, when faced with a great test of faith (illness, loss of a loved one, death of a child, etc.) have followed this very pattern! All of us are in peril of following this path, if we do not "hold fast" to God's word "today".

God has a plan for every believer. That plan includes spiritual gifts and ministry (Rom.12:1-8; Rom.11:29; 1Co.12:7). We are called to a life of fellowship and joint-participation with the Lord in His plan (2Co.5:14-21). However, we can only remain active partners in this plan if we *“hold fast the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end.”* This is essentially a repetition of the truth stated in v.6. To be in fellowship and partnership with God is the sure path to victory and blessing.

In v.15 he repeats the warning from v.7 to emphasize the word *“Today”*. Because our enemy the devil, never sleeps, he keeps stressing the need for daily vigilance and spiritual progress (v.13). To live *“today”* in the fellowship and power of the Holy Spirit is what it means to *“redeem the time”* (Eph.5:16; Col.4:5). We have no time to waste in fulfilling the plan of God for our lives. How can we *“redeem”* each day, moment-by-moment? These five things we do every day for our bodies. Let us also do them for our souls.

1. Wash (1Jo.1:9; 1Co.11:28, 31).
We need to daily examine our lives and confess our sins.
2. Eat (Mat.4:4; 5:6; Joh.6:27; 35; 1Pe.2:1-3).
Every day we need to feed on the word of God.
3. Walk (2Co.5:7; Gal.5:16; Eph.4:1; 5:2, 8).
We need to walk in fellowship and communion with our Lord.
4. Work (Gal.5:6; Eph.2:10; Phi.2:12-13; 1Th.1:3; Tit.2:14; Jam.2:22).
God has gifted and empowered each of us for His special work.
5. Rest (Mat.11:28-30; Heb.4:1, 11).
By faith we rest in His faithfulness and promises, even in trials.

Verses 16-19 are especially valuable for they stress that these were believers who rebelled and ended up dying in the wilderness (1Co.10:1-13). The three *“Who”* questions emphasize that the Exodus generation had been blessed with great and mighty signs and wonders (As had these first century believers) and yet they still failed. Read Psalm 78 in its entirety. The other sins of Israel, including their complaining (Exo.15;24; 16:2; Num.14:2), their idolatry (Exo.32; 1Co.10:7), and their sexual immorality (Num.25:1-9; 1Co.10:8), all these sins are traced back to the same cause, *“They could not enter in because of unbelief”* (v.19).

Jesus made it clear that all the sins that men commit originate in the heart (Mar.7:21-23). Solomon warns us to *“Keep your heart with all*

diligence, for out of it spring the issues of life" (Pro.4:23). Two things determine the condition of the heart: first, the presence or absence of faith. Second, consistent spiritual growth, or the lack of it (Heb.5:11-14).

As an example of believers failing to *"hold fast...to the end"* (v.6), and of *"departing from the living God"* (v.12), consider the sad account of Demas. In Phi. v.24 he is named by Paul among his fellow-laborers. In Col.4:14 he is serving with Paul and Luke. Then, in 2Tim.4:10 we read, *"for Demas has forsaken me, having loved this present world..."*. This is not loss of salvation, but of fruitfulness, blessing, and eternal reward.

Summary

Spiritual growth, like physical growth, requires daily nourishment, exercise, and rest. If we are daily learning more and more of the word of God, and by faith applying it in our lives, and trusting in the promises and the plan of God, we will naturally grow up to maturity in our faith.

Peter gives us a very good picture of the stages of spiritual growth, as well as the blessings and eternal benefits we will receive by growing to maturity in our faith (2Pe.1:5-11). Five steps can summarize the plan of God for every believer.

1. Salvation by faith in Jesus Christ (Joh.3:16, 36; 6:29, 40; 10:27-29).
2. Growing to maturity by the Spirit and the word (Tit.2:11-14; 2Pe.2:5-7).
3. Service in effective prayer to God (priesthood – 1Pe.2:5-9), witness to the lost (ambassadorship – 2Co.5:14-21), and ministry to fellow believers (exercise of spiritual gifts – Rom.12:3-8; 1Pe.4:10-11). Every believer has this three-fold calling on their life (1Th.1:2-10; Heb.10:19-25).
4. Increasing conformity to the character of the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom.8:29; 12:1-2; 1Co.11:1; 2Co.3:18).
5. Holding fast the faith to the end (Col.1:23; 2Ti.4:7-8; Heb.3:6, 14).

The Rest of Jesus is Superior to the Canaan rest (Heb.4:1- 16)

Joshua did finally lead Israel into Canaan to claim the land that had been promised to Abraham. Some, like Caleb, heroically claimed their inheritance and defeated their enemies (Jos.14-15; 22:1-6). However, most failed to drive out the idolatrous inhabitants of the land, and therefore never had true rest. Let us not follow their example! The author urges us to “*go on to perfection (maturity)*” (6:1) by a series of four exhortations.

Let us fear, v.1-10

By combining Psa.95:7b-11 with Jesus’ invitation in Mat.11:28-30 we can see that “*a promise remains of entering His rest*”. There are several things listed in this section that every believer should rightly fear.

1. We should fear falling short of entering that rest (v.1b, Heb.12:15). The rest he is referring to here is what we call the faith-rest life. It is the rest of active discipleship and obedient service (Mat.11:29-30; Rom.12:1-8).
2. We ought to have a genuine fear of failing to mix the word of God with faith (v.2). It is not enough to be a hearer only (Jam.1:21-22), we must hear with faith, and let faith work through love (Gal.5:6; Jam.2:14-26).
3. We should fear being identified among those who fail to enter into the rest of God (v.3-6). All who believe in Jesus Christ have entered into the “rest” of eternal salvation, just as all who were under the blood of the Passover lamb came out of Egypt. The question was not their deliverance from slavery, but their obedience in going on to claim victory and inheritance. The rest the author has in mind is likened to God’s creation rest (v.4). God rested when His work was finished. Since the work of God was “*finished from the foundation of the world*” (v.3b), this includes all that He intends to do for us. When Jesus cried out on the cross, “*It is finished*” (Joh.19:30), He was confirming the Father’s Sabbath (Rev.13:8), and declaring that the work of the new creation was also accomplished. Therefore, our life of surrender, obedience, and victory is assured if only we will walk by faith (Rom.8:31-39; 2Co.5:7).
4. We should fear the danger of letting “*Today*” be a day that we fail to redeem (v.7-10; Eph.5:16; Col.4:5). We need to learn to live one day at a time. How do we accomplish this? First, we avoid living in

disobedience (v.6). The word “*disobedience*” literally means to fail to be persuaded by the word of God. Second, we need to hear the word as “*His voice*” (1Th.2:13). God speaks to us through His word. Third, we must not harden our hearts, when the word of God convicts and corrects us (2Ti.3:16-17). Fourth, we need to keep in mind that “*there remains a rest for the people of God*” (v.9). The word for rest here is *sabbatismos*, speaking of a moment-by-moment rest in the soul from trusting and obeying the word of God. Finally, we must “*cease from (our) own works as God did from His*” (v.10). The works of the flesh, of human intellect and energy, will never bring us rest. This means that we must be filled by His Spirit and walk in the Spirit (Eph.5:18; Gal.5:16). We must be cleansed not only of sin, but of self-sufficiency (2Co.3:4-6; 1Jo.1:9; 2Ti.2:20-21). Our obedience and service must come, not by effort, but by surrender and faith (Rom.12:1-2; 2Pe.1:3-7).

Let us be diligent, v.11-13

The word “*diligent*” is the same one used in 2Ti.2:15. It is sometimes translated “study”, and refers to an eagerness and concentration on a goal that is set before one. In 2Pe.1:5 it is the essential ingredient which we must add, if we are to grow to maturity. Our diligence or labor is not of human effort, but rather it is the battle to keep from relying on human wisdom or strength (1Co.1:18-31), and to rely on the Spirit.

This diligence is aimed at receiving God’s word as the instrument of Divine scrutiny of our souls (v.12). The piercing light of the word of God reveals to us our true self; whether we are acting out of soulish (carnal) or spiritual motives (Psa.139:23-24; Jer.17:9-10; Rev.2:23).

It is crucial for us to live “*Today*” under the searching scrutiny of God’s word, because one day we will give an account to God for every day of our lives (v.13). There is nothing of our inner life, our thoughts, words, or actions, that is hidden from Him. Therefore, how important it is for us to expose ourselves to the searchlight of His word, so that our true inner condition is revealed to us, for correction and cleansing?

Let us hold fast, v.14-15

Here, the author picks up the thread from 2:17-18, concerning the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ. This is the main theme of Hebrews (Heb.8:1-2), and is also the unique contribution of this book to Christian theology. He reminds us here of the need we have for such a High Priest as the Lord Jesus. Not only is He a High Priest, but He is *“a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens”*. He came to us as the ultimate “apostle” sent from God, and He rose from the dead and returned to heaven to be our faithful and merciful High Priest (Heb.2:17-18; 3:1; 7:25-26).

It is only due to His faithful intercession on our behalf (Rom.8:34; 1Ti.2:5), and His sustaining ministry of grace and truth, that we are enabled to *“hold fast our confession”*. He is always willing to come to our aid when we stumble (Heb.2:18), because He has also been tempted like us, yet without ever giving in to sin. That He was *“in all points tempted as we are”* simply points to the three-fold appeal of sin (1Jo.2:16), which is illustrated by His temptations in the wilderness (Mat.4:1-10). It has often been pointed out that no one but He who never gave in to temptation could actually know the full force and power of temptation. Christ our Savior has endured it all, and therefore has not only compassion for us, but the power to deliver us.

Let us draw near, v.16

These exhortations follow a logical and spiritual progression. If we fear failing to rest in His power, we will then be moved to the diligent study and application of His word. Consistency of obedience will produce in us the ability to hold fast to the confession of our faith in Christ Jesus, our High Priest. This confident assurance will lead us into a life of increasing intimacy of prayer.

The phrase *“draw near”* is used again in Heb.10:22, and is a picture of a priest approaching the altar to make an offering. Every believer in Christ is also a priest, and an active member of a spiritual temple (1Co.6:19-20; 2Co.6:16; 1Pe.2:5-10). Because our High Priest is compassionate and merciful, we can *“come boldly to the throne of grace”*. This is true even when we need mercy for forgiveness and cleansing, and also when we need grace and help for spiritual success. This is because, by His death for our sins, He has forever removed the barrier between God and men.

The phrase “*in time of need*” could be translated “well timed, at just the right time”. God will always provide for us a way of escape from temptations (1Co.10:13), as well as strength to do His will (Eph.3:14-21; 1Th.1:2-10).

Summary

In the fourth chapter the author has introduced us to the way of escaping from the spiritual perils contained in the five warning sections. These spiritual solutions will be amplified throughout the book. The believer who is aware of spiritual pitfalls, and who is driven to God’s word as a refuge, will find increasing confidence and assurance in the promises of God, and will therefore develop an increasingly dependent and effective prayer life – all resulting in a life of spiritual rest and blessing, from which will flow the “*rivers of living water*” (Joh.7:38-39) that find their source in humble dependence on the indwelling Spirit of God.

2. The Superior Priesthood of Christ – Hebrews Ch.5-10:18.

The priesthood of Jesus Christ has already been briefly mentioned (Heb.2:17-18; 4:14-16), and, again, is the central theme of the book (Heb.8:1).

Now, the author will enter into an extended discussion of Christ’s superior High Priesthood, which continues through chapter ten. In this section we also have the third warning section (Heb.5:12-6:12).

The Divine Qualifications of a High Priest (5:1-4)

The qualifications for becoming a high priest are five in number. It is important to note that these qualifications are set by God and not by men.

1. He must be appointed by God and not by men, v.1, 4.
The high priest must be called and appointed by God, “*just as Aaron was*” (v.4; Exo.28:1; 29:1-46). Only God Himself can choose the one who is to be a mediator between God and men (1Tim.2:5).
2. He must come from among men, v.1a.
This may seem to be obvious, but it needs to be stated for two reasons. The first is that no angel could be a mediator between God and men (Heb.1:5-7). Second, and most important, this fact requires that the Son of God must enter into the world as a man.

Not only was His incarnation into human flesh essential, but His earthly life, by which He was fully equipped to be our mediator (Heb.2:9-10; 4:15; 5:9). Pilate said, "*Behold the Man*" (Joh.19:5), seeing in Him nothing more than that. But Paul declares, that in all of history only One could bridge the gap between men and God, and that is, "*the Man, Christ Jesus*" (1Ti.2:5).

3. He is the mediator between God and men, v.1b.
The high priest is "*appointed for men in things pertaining to God*". He is the bridge, the point of contact, between a holy God and sinful men. He alone is able to remove the barrier caused by sin and death. He must represent God in His holiness to men, and at the same time represent men in their sinfulness to God. The word "*mediator*" in 1Ti.2:5 literally means, "One who is equal to both parties". It was for such a mediator that Job in his sufferings cried out for (Job.9:32-33).
4. He must be able to have compassion on the ignorant and erring, v.2. The word used here for "*compassion*" means neither too harsh nor too lenient. On the one hand he cannot disregard sin altogether, nor will he deal with the offender too strictly. Among men, this fellow-feeling came from the fact that "*he himself is also subject to weakness*". Apart from the Lord Jesus Christ all previous high priests were also sinful. But in the Lord Jesus, we have one who is "*without sin*" (4:15), and yet is a "*merciful and faithful High Priest in things pertaining to God*" (2:17-18).
5. He must offer acceptable sacrifice for sins, v.1b, 3.
The Levitical priests offered sacrifices which could never take away sins (Heb.9:25-28; 10:1-4, 11). But all these animal sacrifices were object lessons to point to the once-for-all sacrifice of "*the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" (Joh.1:29). Only the cross of Christ could remove the stain and penalty of sin once and forever (Heb.10:10, 12, 14, 17)

Jesus' Unique Calling and Preparation (Heb.5:5-11)

The point of the author in this section is to confirm that in all of the above qualifications the Lord Jesus Christ reigns supreme above all earthly priests. As we will see in chapter seven, this includes even

Melchizedek, who was only a priest, but Jesus is the High Priest of that order. He starts with the last qualification first.

1. Jesus was not a self-appointed priest, but was appointed by God, v.5-6. In these verses he quotes Psa.2:7 and 110:4 to show that God the Father had ordained Jesus Christ as High Priest. Both of these passages record that this ordination occurred following the resurrection of Jesus (Act.13:33).
2. In v.7 the phrase *“who, in the days of His flesh”*, shows that Jesus in His humanity was also *“taken from among men”* (v.1a). Therefore He meets, in His humanity, the second qualification. Through all His life as *“a man of sorrows...acquainted with grief”* (Isa.53:3), our Lord was under intensive training to become One who is *“able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him”* because He alone is *“holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners”* (Heb.7:25-26). How glorious is our great High Priest!
3. Then, in v.7b and 8, we see that Jesus is able to have compassion on men because of the extreme and bitter sufferings He endured during His earthly life. These verses encompass the entire earthly life of our Lord, but may especially point to His intense sufferings in the Garden of Gethsemane (Mat.26:36-46; Mar.14:32-42; Luk.22:39-46; Joh.18:1). His prayer was heard by the Father, not in saving Him from dying on the cross, but in His being resurrected from the grave. His *“godly fear”* refers to His reverence and obedience to the Father’s plan.
4. The sacrifice Jesus offered was not like the Levitical offerings, which were only a shadow (Heb.10:1-4). Rather, He offered Himself as our substitute, His life for our life, His death for our death. The phrase *“having been perfected”* indicates that His earthly life and fully prepared Him to take our place. By His substitutionary sacrifice *“He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him”* (v.9). The obedience here refers to faith in Him as Savior (Rom.1:5; 16:26).
5. Thus in all ways the Lord Jesus has become the perfect and eternal High Priest and mediator between God and men. In fact, He is the High Priest of the order of Melchizedek (v.10). We learn

later, in Heb.7:2, that “*Melchizedek*” translates into “*king of righteousness*”, as well as “*king of peace*”. In the Lord Jesus Christ the righteousness of God and the peace of men come together (Rom.5:1; Psa.85:10). See Gen.14:17-20 for the appearance of the king/priest of ancient Jerusalem.

The doctrine of the High Priesthood of Jesus Christ is a great and magnificent body of truth, which the author dearly wants to expound to his readers. However, he finds the task difficult, because they have become “*dull of hearing*” (v.11). This is the spiritual condition of those who fail to pay close attention to the truths they have been taught (Heb.2:1), with the result that they “*drift away*” from the safe harbor of sound doctrinal understanding. The absence of spiritual hunger will in time lead to the hardening of the heart (Heb.3:8, 15; 4:7) in those who are without a proper fear of failing to enter into the victory and blessing of the faith-rest life (Heb.4:1). That deep spiritual instruction is “*hard to explain*” is something every teacher of God’s word understands. Because it is also difficult to learn, many become “*dull of hearing*” and fail to mature as a result. The next section will comprise the third warning section.

Third Warning: Growth or Retreat the only options (5:12-6:12)

In these warning sections it is important to remember that the author is moving through a series of stages in the experience of believers who stray from the Word and the plan of God. These include drifting from God’s word (2:1-3), doubting God’s word (3:12-19), dull (sluggish) of hearing God’s word (5:11-14), disobeying God’s word (10:26-39), and finally, of despising God’s word (12:12-29). This process is often referred to as the backsliding or reversion of a Christian.

This section is a rebuke to all who fail to grow in grace and truth (2Pe.3:18) to the point of spiritual maturity. The path of stunted growth in Christians is always the same. Those who drift from God’s word (Heb.2:1) will inevitably come to doubt God’s word (Ch.3), because they do not mix the word with faith (Heb.4:2). As a result, Bible study does not benefit them, since their faith has no practical application or exercise (Heb.5:14; Jam.2:17, 26). They start out as hearers of the word, but they never become “*doers of the word*” (Jam.1:22-23).

In v.12 we see that the recipients of this letter had been believers for long enough that they should have now been able to instruct others in the faith. The work of making disciples (Mat.28:19) belongs to every believer. How tragic, then, to have those who, after years of instruction, *“need someone to teach...again the first principles of the oracles of God”*. They could not *“endure sound doctrine”* (2Ti.4:3), but love to have their ears tickled and their egos gratified.

Basic Biblical instruction is likened to milk (v.13). Milk is good for those who are babes in Christ (1Pe.2:2). However, spiritual growth demands a willingness to *“go on to perfection (maturity)”* (Heb.6:1), and to *“grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ”* (2Pe.3:18). While the gift of eternal salvation is free to all who will believe, the life of discipleship and service is costly indeed (Luk.9:23-26; 14:26-33).

Verse 14 sets before each and every believer the goal for every child of God. The *“solid food”* speaks of *“the deep things of God”* (1Co.2:10), what we might call advanced doctrinal instruction. Those who are growing into ever greater maturity are faithful to get their spiritual workout in learning and applying the word of God to life. As a result, their spiritual senses are *“exercised”* in daily life to distinguish between good and evil. The word used for exercise in Greek is the basis for our word *“gymnasium”*. It refers to the place we go for training, and this is what every local church should be.

It is worth ending this section with the reminder that we will all one day stand before the Lord Jesus to give an account of our lives (Rom.14:10-11; 1Co.3:11-15; 2Co.5:9-10). It was this knowledge that drove the apostle Paul, both in his personal life, and in his ministry (1Co.9:24-27; Phi.3:7-14; 2Co.5:11; Col.1:28-29). It is God’s will, expressed often in His word, that we live lives worthy of eternal reward, which will be our expression of our gratitude for all that Jesus Christ has done for us (2Ti.4:6-8; Rev.3:11; 22:12).

The goal of the faith-rest life is spiritual maturity (Heb.6:1-3)

In keeping with the negative example of the Exodus generation in chapter 3, and the exhortations in chapter 4 to enter into the life of faith and rest, the author now challenges his readers to *“go on to perfection”*.

A more literal translation would be “Let us be borne/carried on to maturity”. He is urging them to rest in faith and submit to the working of the power of God by the indwelling Holy Spirit. It is important to note that, like all the exhortations in Hebrews, the author includes himself with the readers in saying, “*Let us...*”. We are never beyond the need for spiritual exhortation. Even Paul, the great Apostle, toward the end of his earthly life, was focused on “pressing on” to higher spiritual ground (Phi.3:14).

To achieve this goal they need to leave behind what we might call “the basics” of elementary teaching. The ABC’s of the faith, or the “milk” he mentioned in 5:12. Milk is fine for babies, but “solid food”, or advanced doctrinal instruction was essential for the mature (5:14).

Six basic doctrines are mentioned to define “*elementary principles*”. While many commentators see in these the basic elements of Judaism and the Mosaic law, I cannot agree. The reason is that the “*dead works*” they had repented of were all of the Jewish rituals and rites that pointed to Jesus Christ (Heb.9:14). With the rending of the veil at the death of Christ (Mat.27:50-51), all temple rituals were made invalid. What they foretold in shadow form, Christ had now fulfilled (Heb.10:1-4). Thus they had all become “*dead works*”.

The message of the Apostles to the Jewish people was their need to repent from the sin of unbelief. By restoring the veil and continuing to engage in the sacrificial system, they proved their rejection of the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ (Act.2:36-39; 3:17-21). They needed to repent from the dead works of the law, which could never save them (Heb.9:14). This repentance would result in a true faith in God, through Jesus Christ. In the case of Gentiles, the repentance was from idols (1Th.1:9-10).

The various baptisms would specifically recognize the difference between the baptism of John, which was a sign of repentance (Mat.3:11; Mar.1:4), the baptism of Jesus, which revealed Him as the Messiah (Joh.1:25-34), and Christian baptism, which is a public profession of faith in Jesus Christ (Mat.28:19-20; Act.8:35-38; 16:31-33). These three water baptisms are outward rituals, signifying inward spiritual truth. In all, the New Testament identifies seven baptisms, four real or literal, and

three ritual. The concept behind all baptisms is identification with some thing or someone.

The Seven Baptisms

Four literal baptisms

1. The baptism of Moses – 1Co.10:1-2.
Here the nation of Israel is identified with Moses, their physical deliverer.
2. The baptism of the cross – Mat.20:22; Luk.12:50.
On the cross Jesus was identified with sinners, and bore all our sins.
3. The baptism of the Holy Spirit – 1Co.12:13.
In the Church age, every believer is eternally united with Jesus Christ by the baptism of the Spirit.
4. The baptism of fire – Mat.3:11-12.
This refers to the judgment of all who reject Jesus Christ as Savior.

Three ritual baptisms

1. John's baptism – Mar.1:1-8.
This was a baptism before Christ came, in preparation to receive Him as Messiah. Repentant Jews were identified as sinners in need of the coming Messiah/Savior, and His kingdom.
2. The baptism of Jesus – Joh.1:29-34.
This unique baptism identified Jesus as Israel's promised Messiah.
3. Christian baptism – Mat.28:18-20; Act.8:36-37; 16:31-34.
Here the new believer in Jesus Christ is identified as united with Him in His death, burial, and resurrection. Water baptism is an outward confession of the inward baptism of the Holy Spirit. Again note that John's baptism was received before believing in Christ, as a preparation, while Christian baptism is received after believing in Him, as a witness.

The laying on of hands was a sign of fellowship and commitment to service (Act.13:1-3). The doctrine of the resurrection from the dead speaks of the resurrection of believers, and the doctrine of eternal judgment relates to all who reject Jesus Christ as Savior (Joh.5:19-30).

The goal of attaining spiritual maturity was stated as a possibility.

“This we will do if God permits” (v.3). To grow to maturity takes time, and as this letter was written around 67A.D., the author knew that time was short. Already, the shadow of the destruction of the Temple and the dispersion of the nation of Israel was at hand. The time was short, and there was no time to waste.

When repentance is no longer possible (Heb.6:4-8)

This passage has troubled many believers through the ages. Many good Bible expositors do not even attempt to deal with it. As we approach this text we must remember the most crucial law of Biblical interpretation: the context determines interpretation. Let us review a few points of the preceding context.

1. The negative example is the Exodus generation (Ch.3), who failed to enter into the blessings of the Promised Land due to their lack of trust in the promises of God.
2. The authors’ challenge to his readers to be diligent to enter, not into the land of Canaan, but to enter into a life of faith leading to victory and spiritual rest (Ch.4).
3. The problem of the readers is not lack of salvation, but a failure to grow up into spiritual maturity (Ch.5:12-14).
4. The challenge in Ch.6 then, is to become mature and fruitful. Failure to do so would result in Divine discipline in life and loss of reward in eternity.

Before we deal with the phrase *“For it is impossible...to renew them to repentance”* (v.4, 6), let’s confirm that these readers are truly saved men and women. There are five qualifications listed as to their spiritual condition (v.4-5). These show that they were indeed believers.

1. They *“were once enlightened”*. The word used means “once for all”. It is the same word translated in Heb.10:10 *“once for all”*. The word *“enlightened”* is the same one translated *“illuminated”* in Heb.10:32 (NKJV). This word refers to the illumination of the heart at the moment of salvation (2Co.4:6).
2. They had *“tasted the heavenly gift”*. The word *“tasted”* is the same one used for Jesus’ substitutionary death on our behalf (Heb.2:9). The gift refers to the gift of eternal life, which they are in full possession of.

3. They became "*partakers of the Holy Spirit*". The word used here is also translated "*partakers*" in Heb.3:1 and 14, which speak of union with Christ.
4. They had "*tasted the good word of God*", the idea being to taste to the full. Just as Jesus had "*tasted*" death for all mankind (Heb.2:9).
5. And with the word of God they had also tasted "*the powers of the age to come*". The signs that Jesus and the apostles had performed in the presence of these people were a preview of the Kingdom age, when Christ will rule on the earth.

There is no way that the five things listed above could be experienced by any unbeliever. These are truly saved individuals, who are in danger of committing an offense even greater than that of the Exodus generation recorded in Numbers 13-14.

There is no "if" in the original of v.6. Literally it reads, "having fallen away". The idea is to fall by the wayside. Now we can bring in the statement, "*It is impossible...to renew them again to repentance*". He is not talking about salvation, but repentance and restoration. Why would it be impossible for a Christian who falls away to repent and be restored? There are two good answers to this question, one is textual, the other is historical.

Let's take the historical first. Remember the Old Testament incident that the author is building his arguments on? Those in Hebrews 3 and Numbers 13-14 who failed to enter into the Promised Land. Go back and read Numbers 14 again, Pay close attention to v.39-45. Do you see that they tried to "repent" and go into the land, but were defeated? Once the opportunity to trust and obey passed, it was too late to "repent".

Remember that the recipients of the book of Hebrews were on the brink of a far greater calamity. In 70 A.D. the Roman legions would destroy the city of Jerusalem and the temple. By 73 A.D. the nation of Israel had ceased to exist. The window of opportunity for these first century Jewish believers to grow to maturity and fruitfulness was fast closing. Once closed, it would be "impossible" for them to reclaim the opportunity.

The textual explanation helps here as well. The phrase *“since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame”*, uses two present participles, and should be translated, “while they are crucifying...while they are putting to shame”. In other words, repentance is not impossible should they cease these actions. However, the act of denouncing the effective work of Christ, and going back into Judaism, so as to escape persecution, would likely harden the heart beyond the point of no return. Again, the issue is not eternal salvation, but growth to maturity, fruitfulness, and eternal rewards.

At a time of great historical crisis, and intense persecution of believers, to publicly deny Christ, and to identify with those who cried out for His crucifixion, would likely exhaust what little time remained, and make restoration and growth to maturity impossible.

The Evidence that Some Believers do Fall Away

1. The Corinthian Carnality – 1Cor.3:1
2. Walking as unsaved Gentiles walk – Eph.4:17-19
3. Alienated from Christ – Gal.5:1-7
4. Loss of Inheritance – 1Co.6:9-10 (see “unrighteous”, v.1 and “so qrong”, v.8, and “unrighteous”, v.8. Then, Gal.5:19-21, and finally Rom.14:17. **Point:** The “kingdom of God” is both here and now and in the eternal future.
5. Proof believers can sin “unto death” (Joh.5:16, “a brother”).
 - A. Saul – idolatry, witchcraft, 1Sam.28:3ff; 1Ch.10:13; cf. Exo.22:18; Deu.18:10; 1Sa.15:23.
 - B. David – adultery, murder, 2Sam.12:1-13.
 - C. Samson – repeated fornication, Jud.16 (with repentance).
 - D. Solomon – idolatry, 1Ki.11:1-13.
 - E. Ananias and Saphira – sin unto death, Act.5:1-11.
 - F. Demas – forsaking Christ for the world, 2Tim.4:10.
 - G. Corinthian fornicator – 1Cor.5:1-5.
 - H. Hebrews – Heb.6:4, 7-8; 10:26-31; 12:25-29.

The examples in v.7-8 verify that the issue is fruit-bearing and blessing, and not eternal life. The “earth” represents the believer. To each and every child of God is given the “rain” of God’s word and Spirit. The provisions of grace are available to all. One believer drinks in the rain and bears fruit, resulting in blessing to others, as well as blessing to that

believer. His or her life is fruitful, beneficial, and “*receives blessing from God*”. This blessing in time is a foretaste of eternal reward at the judgment seat of Christ (1Co.3:11-15; 2Co.5:9-10). Like a fruitful field, this land is blessed (Psa.65:9-13).

Another believer is represented in v.8, as an unfruitful field. On it the same rain falls, but it bears thorns and briars. Remember that these are emblems of the curse that came through Adam’s disobedience (Gen.3:17-19). This “fruit” is “*rejected and near to being cursed*”. The word “rejected” is the same one used by Paul in 1Cor.9:27, translated either “castaway” or “disqualified”. It speaks of that which is rejected by God for usefulness in time and from eternal reward. Note that it is the crop of thorns and briars that are burned. This could refer to Divine discipline in this life (Heb.12:3-11), and also fits perfectly with Paul’s depiction of the judgment seat of Christ (1Co.3:11-15). The issue here for these believers is loss of blessing in time and reward in eternity, should they turn back to Judaism. Interestingly, Jesus used this very contrast between fruitful and unfruitful branches (Joh.15:1-8). Fruitful branches, believers who abide in Christ, are blessed with increasing fruit. Branches that bear no fruit are burned. This could refer to ultimate Divine discipline which the apostle John calls “*the sin leading to death*” (1Jo.5:16).

In the parable of the soils (Mat.13:3-9), there is an issue of believer versus unbeliever, but even in this many commentators are confused. In the first case, the wayside soil, the seed never took root. Here we are dealing with an unbeliever. In the three following soils, the seed takes root (ie. the gospel is received), but with varying degrees of response. Some who receive Christ by faith, in time of trial wither away. Others are choked out, in time, by the thorns of this life. Then there are those who bear fruit to varying degrees. The idea that “true believers” cannot fall away is refuted by the eight examples above (under number 5), and by John’s very clear warning to believers of the sin unto death, that is, a continuance in sin to the point that God removes the sinning believer from this life prematurely (Ecc.7:16-17; 1Co.11:29-31; Jam.5:19-20).

An assurance and a challenge (Heb.6:9-12)

The author follows the severe warning with a word of comfort. He is *confident of better things...things that accompany salvation.*” That he

calls them “*beloved*” again assures us that they are children of God by faith in Christ. The issue here is not salvation, but the fruits that ought to accompany a healthy and strong spiritual life.

That they had engaged in faithful ministry in the past was certain (v.10, 10:32-34). They needed the encouragement of v.10, that God is faithful, and will never forget our “*work and labor of love*” (1Th.1:3-10). When we minister to the needs of fellow believers, we are in fact ministering to Jesus Christ (Mat.25:31-40). And all works done by faith, in the power of the Spirit, will receive eternal reward (1Co.3:11-15; 2Co.5:9-11).

The option of every believer each and every day is to be either diligent, or sluggish (v.11-12). The word translated “*sluggish*” is the same one translated “*dull*” of hearing in Heb.5:11. Those who choose the path of diligence (Heb.4:11) will hold fast in the assurance of God’s word and the blessed hope that is before us (Tit.2:13), to the very end. This is the firm conviction of our eternal security in Christ, and the commitment to live lives worthy of such undeserved grace. Such faith and endurance will “*imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises*”. That is, like the great one’s of the faith that have gone before us (Heb.11), we will ultimately receive eternal rewards in abundance (2Pe.1:10-11).

The oath of God and example of Abraham (Heb.6:13-20)

Abraham is an example of a believer who, though he often failed, never quit! The promise of God did not depend on Abraham’s performance, it depended on the faithfulness of God.

The promise in v.14 comes from Gen.22:16-17. It was on Mount Moriah where Abraham was prepared to offer up Isaac on the altar. What a beautiful picture of the Father offering up His own Son for us. And the provision of the Ram caught in the thicket brought into the picture the idea of substitutionary sacrifice. It was then that God reaffirmed His original call to Abraham (Gen.12:1-3), and confirmed it by saying, “*By Myself I have sworn, says the Lord...blessing I will bless you.*” (Gen.22:16-17). It is worth noting that God gave this assurance to Abraham “*because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son*” (Gen.22:16b). However, God’s promise did not depend on Abraham, it depended on the faithfulness of God. The promise had been given years

before, but now, new assurance and confirmation was given. When we are willing to act on the promises of God, He will provide us assurance of His presence and blessing.

It was only *“after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise.”* (v.15). Not only had God fulfilled His promise to give Abraham a son by Sarah, in this incident, he gave Isaac back to Abraham! Though Abraham had often failed, he had never given up. And God was faithful to His promises.

The reason God made this statement to Abraham, according to the author of Hebrews, was not only for his benefit. It was to confirm all His promises to *“the heirs of promise”*, that is, to all believers (Gal.3:29). We who follow in the path of the heroes of the faith (Heb.11), have double assurance that God will fulfill His word: His oath upon Himself, and the promise of a God who cannot lie.

A Refuge and an Anchor of the Soul

What a beautiful phrase we find here! *“(that) we might have strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before us”* (v.18). The idea pictured here is that of one fleeing from the avenger to one of the cities of refuge (Num.35:6-32; Deu.4:42; 19:5-6; Jos.20:9). The idea of the Lord as our refuge is also common in the Psalms (Psa.9:9; 14:6; 46:1; 57:1; 59:16; 62:7-8; 71:7; 91:2, 9). We are so often troubled and tempted, fearful and in anguish – yet we find supernatural comfort and refuge in the word and promises of God.

This *“hope”* which is for us *“an anchor of the soul”* is the assurance that in Christ we possess eternal life and a place in His kingdom. In ancient Greek thought the idea of an anchor, and of a sure hope, were almost synonymous. An anchor is only of value when you can't see it. It is hooked on the bottom of the sea. But ours is secure, because it is fastened to Christ, *“the presence behind the veil...even Jesus”* (v.19-20). He is both our *“forerunner”* (trailblazer) and our *“High Priest...according to the order of Melchizedek”*. With these closing words of chapter 6 he brings us back to his main topic, our gracious and glorious High Priest. The High Priestly ministry of the Lord Jesus Christ will now be fully developed in Chapters 7 through 10.

A Better (Superior) Priesthood – Hebrews 7

This chapter picks up the main theme from 5:1-10, the High Priesthood of the Lord Jesus Christ. This theme is now fully developed through chapter 10.

In the last few verses of chapter 5 the author urged his readers to move on from the milk of the word to the strong meat. This is the only way a believer can “*go on to perfection*” (Heb.6:1), meaning spiritual maturity. Beginning with chapter 7, the author begins to set forth the strong meat of advanced doctrinal instruction. It is critical to understand that this strong meat relates to the present ministry of Jesus Christ at the right hand of God. This is why the book of Ephesians is so powerful, because it is all about the “*mystery*” of our Lord’s present session and ministry to the Church, and what it provides for us spiritually.

Melchizedek greater than Abraham (v.1-10)

In this section the author sets forth three great reasons why Melchizedek is greater than Abraham. In this extended argument, the

greatness of Jesus Christ as our High Priest is set forth. His inauguration of the New Covenant provides all the spiritual resources needed by believers who are tested and tried, persecuted and harassed. He alone is *“able to save to the uttermost those who come to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.”* (Heb.7:25).

In blessing Abraham, Melchizedek shows that he is greater, v.1, 6-7

In Genesis 14:18-20, in three short verses, we find the only historical record we have about Melchizedek. From this information the author, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, will draw a number of conclusions.

After Abraham had defeated the kings, and delivered Lot, he was met by the king/priest Melchizedek. He was blessed as having been favored by *“God Most High”* (Gen.14:19-20). This is the first occurrence of this title (*“El Elyon”*) for God in the Old Testament. It speaks of the God who is above all and over all. Melchizedek blessed Abraham as one belonging to *“the Most High God”*, and therefore as a man such as described later by David who *“dwells in the secret place of the Most High”* and who would *“abide under the shadow of the Almighty (El Shaddai)”* (Psa.91:1).

The author makes the point (v.6-7) that Abraham was the recipient of the Messianic promises. Yet, as great as he was, *“beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better.”* Melchizedek is shown to be far greater a personage, as he is able to confer blessing on the Father of the nation of Israel.

His office and ministry proves him to be greater, v.2-3

Melchizedek stands unique among all the characters of the Old Testament. He is the first priest to appear, and the only king/priest ever mentioned, before Jesus Christ. His name translates “king of righteousness”, and as Salem (later Jerusalem) means “peace”, he is *“king of peace”*. He is a type of the Lord Jesus. That he is recorded *“without genealogy”* in the book of Genesis, a book of genealogies, is significant.

With no record of his beginning or end, he is *“made like the Son of God”*. The word *aphomoiao* means “to produce a facsimile or copy”. Not only does it show that Melchizedek was not Christ preincarnate, but the

perfect tense of the verb indicates that Melchizedek, as he is recorded, remains a permanent type of Christ. In other words, the record of his life is left in mystery, so as to be a picture of Christ. The Lord Jesus is High Priest of the order of which Melchizedek was only a priest.

It is worth remembering that included in his blessing was the provision of bread and wine, an obvious preview of the Lord's table (Mat.26:26-30; 1Co.11:23-26). This may be the first incident, of which his offering of Isaac was the second, wherein Abraham "saw" Jesus' day (Joh.8:56).

Jesus Christ is declared to be the High Priest of an eternal priestly order, of which Melchizedek was but one priest. We should also note that every believer in Jesus Christ is a priest of this eternal order (1Pe.2:4-10). As such, we are obligated to intercede on behalf of men, and to offer up sacrifices of praise (Heb.13:10-16).

Abraham's tithe proves that Melchizedek is greater, v.4-5

Melchizedek appeared on the scene just as the king of Sodom was about to offer Abraham the spoils of the victory. His intervention helped to keep Abraham's focus on the promises he had received, so that he rejected any spoils at all, other than what he offered as tithes to Melchizedek. This was a great spiritual victory, and he was later rewarded with a confirmation from God that He would be Abraham's "*shield, and exceedingly great reward*" (Gen.15:1).

By virtue of Abraham's tithe, the Levitical tribe which came through Abraham, were also included as those who were inferior to Melchizedek. The authors point is that Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, his priesthood was greater than the Levitical priesthood, and the Lord Jesus Christ is greater by far than all. This is especially true since He is "*the Most High God*" by which Melchizedek blessed Abraham.

Jesus Christ a greater priest than Melchizedek (v.11-19)

The priesthood of Melchizedek was greater than that of the Levites. But Jesus is the High Priest of that order. Since the Mosaic Law was committed to the Levites, the change of priesthood means a change of law. Five things distinguish the priesthood of the Lord Jesus from the Levites.

1. He is of a superior order, that of Melchizedek (v.11).

2. He is of a different tribe, in fact, the kingly tribe (v.13).
3. His priesthood is not based on physical lineage, but on a Divine oath (v.16-17).
4. His priesthood annuls both the Levitical order, and the Mosaic law that it served (v.18). The word “*annulling*” (*athetesis*) used here comes from a common legal term for the cancellation of a treaty.
5. This change of priesthood and law brings to us a perfect and better hope, “*through which we draw near to God*” (v.19). The torn veil in the temple (Mat.27:51), speaks of free access for every believer into the very presence of God (Heb.4:14-16; 10:19-25).

It is worth taking note of the contrasts mentioned in v.18-19. The Old Covenant, the Mosaic Law, was weak and unprofitable. Paul makes the same point in Rom.8:1-4. While the law served its purpose, in pointing us to Christ (Gal.3:19-25), it was temporary in nature. The very fact that the prophets spoke of another priesthood (Psa.110:4) and another covenant (Jer.31:31-34), proves that the Old Covenant and the Levitical priesthood, were to pass away. These were intended to pass away in the light of a far greater and more perfect provision, in the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ. The Law offered, at best, only “*a shadow of the good things to come*” (Heb.10:1). That it was designed to pass away was shown by the fading glory on the face of Moses (2Co.3:7-18). But now in Christ we have a perfect covenant, that brings us into the very presence of God (Heb.4:14-16). For any Christian to turn back from the perfect and finished work of Jesus Christ, to the “*weak and beggarly elements*” of the old covenant (Gal.4:9) is an act that puts the Lord to an open shame (Heb.6:6).

The greater Priest offers a greater covenant (v.20-28)

The oath of the Father (v.20-21; Psa.110:4) by which the Lord Jesus was ordained our High Priest is crucial to the author’s argument (Heb.5:5-6, 10; 7:17, 20-21). The reason for this is that a new superior spiritual priesthood demands a new and superior covenant between God and men.

This covenant is now introduced in v.22 where Jesus, who was ordained High Priest by an oath from the Father, is now “*Surety of a better covenant*”. This surety or guarantee is secured by the oath from the Father. Remember the argument in Ch.6:13-20 about God’s oath to

Abraham? How much greater security do we have in His oath to His beloved Son?

And so the New Covenant is greater because it is based on the oath of God, an eternal and suitable High Priest, and a once-for-all perfect sacrifice. This New Covenant, promised long ago by God (Jer.31:31-34; Eze.36:22-28) is far superior to the Mosaic Covenant in six ways.

1. Because it is secured by the victory of Jesus Christ, our High Priest, v.22.
2. Because whereas Levitical priests lived and died and were replaced, the Lord Jesus continues forever as our High Priest, v.23-24.
3. Since Jesus is eternal, He will never cease to intercede for those who come to God by faith in Him, v.24-25. Our eternal security rests on His perfect, once-for-all, sacrifice and His eternal Priesthood. He is able to save "*to the uttermost*", meaning not only for eternal life, but also for abundant and fruitful life now (Joh.10:10; 15:4-5). The doctrine contained in this word "*uttermost*" includes the idea of past salvation (justification), present salvation (sanctification), and future salvation (glorification), all received "*by grace through faith*" (Eph.2:8-9; Rom.8:28-30).
4. Also, Jesus is a more suitable High Priest, because He is unique from mere human priests. Note that He is "*fitting (suitable) for us*" because He accomplished what was "*fitting for Him*" (Heb.2:10). He is a fitting High Priest for us in five ways, v.26.
 - A. Because of His nature - He is holy. We who are sinners need a sinless mediator (1Ti.2:3-6).
 - B. Because of His compassion - He is harmless. He has compassion, because He is able to sympathize with our weakness (Heb.4:15a).
 - C. Because of His life - He is undefiled. Unlike the Levitical priests, who were sinners, He had no need to offer sacrifice for Himself, but only for us (v.27). He has been "*in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin*" (Heb.4:15b).
 - D. Because of His uniqueness - He is separate from sinners. The word "*separate*" is in the perfect tense, suggesting His eternal uniqueness as the God-Man. He is separate, but not without compassion.

- E. Because of His exaltation – By His resurrection He has become higher than the heavens. This is the point of the Father’s oath (Psa.110:1-4; Heb.7:17, 21).

What a wonderful contrast that, though Jesus is like us in many ways (Heb.2:17; 4:15; 5:7-8), yet in the above things He is separate from us.

5. Jesus’ superiority as High Priest rests on His perfect, once for all, sacrifice of himself for our sins, v.27. In that *“He offered up Himself”*, we have the perfect *“Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world”* (Joh.1:29), making *“one sacrifice for sins forever”* (Heb.10:12). Our salvation is secure because of *“the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all”* (Heb.10:10).
6. Finally, He who had no sin or human weakness, and who was appointed by the Father’s oath, has been *“perfected forever”* to be our High Priest, v.28. Remember that the idea of being *“perfected”* means to attain to a set goal. Having finished His work of redemption, He now remains our King and Priest forever (Heb.5:7-10).

The finished redemptive work of Christ is seen in the phrase *“once for all”* (v.27, 10:10). But as our High Priest, He remains *“forever”* (v.28).

Summary

Our goal: spiritual maturity

All through this marvelous book, the author is urging his readers, and us, to *“go on to perfection”* (literally: be carried on to perfection) by trusting in and drawing near to our heavenly High Priest (Heb.4:16; 6:18-20; 7:25; 10:22-24; 12:1-2). The book of Hebrews is written to lead believers who are downcast, discouraged, beaten down, despairing, and weary, to look up to our faithful and merciful High Priest, seated at the right hand of the Father, and to trust in His ability to carry us to the end of our race.

Our focus: Christ risen and glorified

The key to endurance and ultimate victory is summarized in the phrase, *“Looking unto Jesus”* in Heb.12:2. In other words, the key to victorious living is the faith-rest life of surrender and *“looking away unto Jesus, the*

author and finisher of our faith" (Heb.12:2, literal translation). We must get our eyes off of self, others, and problems, and be wholly absorbed with mental preoccupation on Jesus (Heb.3:1; 12:3 "*consider Him*").

Our confidence: blessings through victory

It is important to point out, in concluding this first full chapter on the ministry of Jesus as a "*priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*" (v.17, 21), the purpose of His ministry. Going back to Genesis 14:18-24, we find Melchizedek suddenly appearing to Abraham, to minister blessing, associated with bread and wine. It is as if he cut in front of the king of Sodom, who was preparing to offer Abraham all the spoils of victory. But, through the ministry of Melchizedek, Abraham was delivered from falling to the temptation to receive either spoils or praise from the worldly source. Instead, he took an oath to the Most High God (El Elyon) that he would not take even "*a sandal strap*", so that both history and Scripture would testify that his greatness and wealth came, not from a worldly source, but from the Most High God alone.

Our Assurance: God's grace is sufficient

The Lord Jesus, in His ministry to us, calls us to look away from this world as a source of supply, and to rest in His provision alone for both our physical and spiritual sustenance. The reminder of His faithful supply (Phi.4:19), is found in the bread and wine of the Lord's table. This is a continual reminder of the faithfulness of our Melchizedek, "*who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens*" (Heb.8:1).

A Better (Superior) Covenant - Hebrews 8

The better covenant, introduced in 7:22, is now developed in full. The finished work of Jesus on the cross has made the old covenant obsolete (Heb.7:18; 8:13; 10:9). Paul tells us in 2Cor.3:11-13 that from the very beginning of the Old Covenant it was shown to be temporary and, like Moses' fading glory, designed to pass away. In effect, the author is urging them to lay aside the old wine and wineskins, and receive the new wine of abundant life in Jesus Christ (Mat.9:14-17; Mar.2:21-22; Luk.5:33-39).

In this chapter we find **three great provisions** that far surpass anything provided by the old covenant. Remember that the word “*better*” is used 13 times in this epistle. The Greek word *kreitton* comes from *kratos* which means strong, superior in dignity, worth, and advantage. In this chapter it is used twice in v.6.

1. The New Covenant has a better (superior) High Priest, v.1

The “*main point*” here refers to the central focus of the book of Hebrews. (Rom.8:33-35; Heb.2:17-18; 4:14-16; 7:24-28). This refers to the current ministry of Jesus on our behalf from heaven, which we refer to theologically as the present session of Christ. It is this doctrine that is the key to living effectively as a believer-priest in the Church age. We must learn to live in the light, not only of His finished work on the cross for our redemption, but also in the light of His present ministry of intercession on our behalf. We must never forget that we are seated with Him spiritually in victory (Eph.2:5-6; Col.3:1-4).

That “*we have such a High Priest*” reminds us that Jesus Christ is the present possession of all who come to Him in faith (see Heb.10:19-21). His High Priestly prayer (Joh.17) shows the complete spiritual unity of Christ and His people.

That our High Priest is “*seated*” shows that His sacrificial work is “*finished*” (Joh.19:30; Heb.9:28; 10:12, 14). His present session at the Father’s right hand (between His ascension and the rapture of the Church) is a work of both “*Majesty*” (authority – Mat.28:18) and of a “*Minister*” (v.2) to the needs of His people. Thus the work of both King and Priest are combined.

2. The New Covenant has a better (superior) Tabernacle, v.2-5

This topic will be dealt with in more detail in chapter 9. The tabernacle of Moses was a copy of the heavenly tabernacle (v.5, 9:24). Again, like the sacrifices, it is a shadow of a greater reality (Heb.10:1).

Since Jesus serves in a greater tabernacle, He must also have a greater sacrifice to offer (Heb.9:14, 23, 28; 10:5-10, 12, 14), one that sanctifies forever, and need never be repeated.

It is helpful to compare the seven articles in the tabernacle to the Person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Tabernacle Type

1. The brazen altar – a picture of the sacrifice of Christ on the cross (Joh.1:29, 36; 10:11).
2. The laver of cleansing – a picture of sanctification by faith in Him (Heb.9:14; 10:10, 14), and daily cleansing by confession (Joh.13:10; 1Jo.1:9).
3. The lampstand – a picture of Christ as the light of the world (Joh.1:9; 8:12; 9:5).
4. The showbread – a picture of Christ the bread of life (Joh.6:33, 35, 41, 48, 51, 53-58).
5. The altar of incense – a picture of Christ our propitiation (Rom.3:25; Eph.5:2; 1Jo.2:2).
6. The veil – a picture of the body of Jesus Christ (Heb.10:20).
7. The ark and mercy seat – a picture of Christ in present session (Heb.4:16).

3. The New Covenant is founded on better (superior) promises, v.6-13

The new covenant is superior to the covenant of the law, because it is enacted on better promises. This is because the covenant of the law is **conditional**, while the new covenant is **unconditional**. The difference is found in the words, *“If you will...”* (Exo.19:5), which indicates that the fulfillment of the promise depends on human faithfulness, as opposed to the words *“I will...”* (Jer.31:31, 33, 34), which bases the covenant on God’s faithfulness alone. In Heb.8:8-13 we read the words *“I will”* six times. These are the better promises of a better covenant. These promises fall under five main categories.

1. The promise of a covenant based on grace alone, v.6-9.
2. The promise of new birth, v.10 (cf. Jer.31:31, Rom.8:4; 2Co.3).
3. The promise of personal knowledge of the Lord, v.11.
4. The promise of complete cleansing from sin, v.12.
5. The promise of liberation from Moses’ Law, v.13 (Gal.3:23-29).

Had the Mosaic covenant accomplished what God wanted and met the needs of sinful men, there would have been no need for another

covenant. In fact, the Mosaic covenant was inferior to even the Abrahamic covenant (Gal.3:16-18). However, the covenant of the law had a role to play in pointing the Jewish nation, and all the world, to faith in Jesus Christ (Gal.3:19-25)

The introduction of the new covenant (Jer.31:31-34; Eze.36:23-27; Rom.11:27) indicates the old covenant will become obsolete. The word used here in Heb.8:13 indicates something that is gradually disappearing (Again, see 2Co.3:13-18; Heb.7:18; 10:9).

Doctrine of the New Covenant

It is impossible to assimilate the full knowledge of any doctrine without examining it categorically. This means the gathering of all major texts on the topic, and organizing the information into a logical sequence. There are three major components that make up the concept of Biblical context: 1) Historical/cultural, 2) Language/grammar, 3) doctrines/categories. Here is a categorical review of the doctrine of the New Covenant.

The New Covenant

1. The new covenant was anticipated by the fading glory reflected on the face of Moses (2Cor.3:7; Exo.34:29-35).
2. The old covenant was temporary from the start, but the new covenant is eternal in nature (Heb.7:16-17, 21, 24-28; 10:10-14).
3. The new covenant is specifically prophesied in Jeremiah and Ezekiel. Though the new covenant was originally offered to Israel and Judah, it was entered into by the church (see point 7).
4. Whereas the Old covenant was conditional, dependent on human obedience (and therefore “weak through the flesh”), the new covenant is unconditional, dependent on the faithfulness of God, and the finished work of Christ (Heb.10:12-14). Note the conditional “If...then” in Exo.19:4-5, as opposed to the several “I will” statements in Jer.31:31-34 and Ezek.36:23-30.
5. The old covenant operated under a barrier between God and man, illustrated by the veil. The new covenant opens the way into the very presence of God, pictured by the rent veil (Mat.27:51; Heb.4:14-16; 10:19-21; Heb.8:8-14).

6. The old covenant operated under an external law, that had no power to transform the inner life. The new covenant works under the power of an inner law, by a renewed heart and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit (Jer.31:33; Ezek.36:26-27; Heb.8:8-12).
7. In the upper room, Jesus indicated that His crucifixion would inaugurate the new covenant, and that those who trust in Him as Savior could only enter it into (Mat.26:26-28; Mar.14:22-24; Luk.22:19-20; 1Cor.11:23-26).
8. The specific provisions of the new covenant are as follows (Jer.31:31-34; Ezek.36:24-27; Heb.8; Heb.10:19-25).
 - A. Personal knowledge of and relationship with God.
 - B. Indwelling of the Holy Spirit in every believer.
 - C. Once for all cleansing from the debt of sins.
 - D. Every believer in Jesus Christ becomes a king-priest (1Pe.2:5, 9; Rev.1:6; 5:10).
 - E. Every believer has a three-fold ministry to fulfill, as priests interceding with God, as ambassadors to the lost, and as ministers to the saints (2Cor.5:14-21; Heb.10:22-24).