

# Hebrews: Better Things

VOLUME ONE

**A Commentary on Hebrews 1-8**

By Daniel L. Segraves

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## Volume One

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by Daniel L. Segraves

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## Preface

Every New Testament epistle was written to address a specific issue or issues that arose in the first-century church. Some appear to be written to audiences almost exclusively Gentile (e.g., I and II Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, I and II Thessalonians), others to both Gentile and Jewish readers (e.g., Romans, Philippians, I and II Peter), and still others to audiences almost exclusively Jewish (e.g., Hebrews, James).

The Book of Hebrews, as the name implies, was apparently written to deal with a tendency among some first-century Jewish Christians to defect to Judaism. We should not think, however, that this makes the book any less relevant to Gentile Christians living two millennia later. Throughout the Christian era, misunderstanding of the law of Moses (i.e., the old or Sinaitic covenant) and its relationship to the new covenant has been persistent, even among Gentiles. In some cases, this has led to Gentile believers embracing part or all of the law as normative for Christians. But the Book of Hebrews joins the Pauline epistles (e.g., Romans, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians) in declaring the termination of all the Sinaitic covenant in favor of the new covenant established in Christ's blood. (See Hebrews 7:12, 18; 8:6, 7, 13; 10:9.)

The Book of Hebrews is Scripture inspired of God, and it is thus profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness. (See II Timothy 3:16.) Its message harmonizes with and strengthens the

teaching of the other books of Scripture on every subject it touches.

Many commentaries have been written on the Book of Hebrews throughout the history of Christianity. Little has been written, however, from the perspective of Oneness Pentecostal theology. This work is intended to be an analysis and exegesis of the text, not simply an attempt to defend a denominational view. The exaltation of Christ so apparent in the book does, however, take on rich new significance when seen through the theology harmonious with all Scripture has to say on this subject: Jesus Christ is nothing less than God Himself revealed in a complete and authentic human being.

This commentary is based on the King James Version (KJV) of the Holy Bible. Where the wording of the KJV may tend to obscure the meaning for some modern readers, the reading of the New King James Version (NKJV) will be consulted. Where the critical Greek text (as seen in Nestle-Aland's 26th edition and the 3rd edition of the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament) has a significantly different reading from the text upon which the NKJV and KJV are based, it will be discussed.

For fourteen years, I have taught a course in systematic theology that focuses on the termination of the old covenant and the establishment of a radically new covenant by Jesus Christ in His blood. This new covenant is superior in every way to the law given to Moses at Sinai. And this is the central message of the Book of Hebrews.



## Introduction

The Book of Hebrews makes a rich contribution to New Testament theology. The superiority of Jesus Christ over all else is the central theme of the book. It is well known that the book can be summarized in one word: *better*. This word, which occurs fifteen times in the book, refers to the way in which Jesus is better than the prophets, the angels, Moses, Aaron, and the sacrifices of the old covenant.

A summary statement provides a brief overview of the contents of the book:

Jesus Christ, whose superiority over all others is demonstrated by the Incarnation, has established a new covenant, which is better than the old covenant in its rest, its priesthood, its tabernacle, and the sacrifice by which it is established, and which is apprehended by faith, provides for the discipline of disobedient children, and results in practical expressions of Christianity.

Believers of every generation must be reminded of this vital message, for the negative influence of sin constantly entices even the most sincere Christians to turn away from complete and total reliance on the provisions of the new covenant to return to the futile effort of self-justification so common under the law of Moses. (See Romans 9:31-32; 10:3-4.)

## **Inspiration and Place in the Canon**

The Book of Hebrews has been accepted as an integral part of inspired Scripture from the earliest days of the Christian era. There is no evidence its place in the canon was ever questioned in Alexandria, in the Eastern church, or by the Syrian writers.<sup>1</sup> Though it was not immediately accepted by the Western church due largely to uncertainty as to its author, the influence of Jerome and Augustine resulted in its eventual acceptance there as well.<sup>2</sup> Clement of Rome, who wrote *I Clement* in about A.D. 96, quoted from the book as Scripture (*I Clement* 36:1-6).

The earliest manuscript evidence currently extant for Hebrews dates from the early third century and includes the book with the Pauline Epistles, immediately after Romans. This manuscript copy (p<sup>46</sup>) probably reflects the second-century belief in Alexandria of the canonicity of the book. Eusebius's church history includes Hebrews with the books acknowledged to be authoritative.<sup>3</sup>

## **Author**

Although some have attributed the book to Paul, we are not certain of the identity of the author. Paul readily identified himself as the author of many books, but Hebrews bears no such claim. It is suggested that the acquaintance of the author with Timothy (13:23) is a clue to Pauline authorship, but Timothy was well known among many Christian leaders of the time. The letter certainly adheres to Paul's theology, but there are subtle differences in the Greek expressions when compared with books known to be written by him.

Even though our earliest manuscript copy of the book places it with the Pauline letters (see comments under “Inspiration and Place in the Canon”), its place reflects only the opinion of the Eastern church that the letter was written by Paul. Since the letter itself does not identify its author, all attempts to do so are speculation. Clement of Alexandria (A.D. 150-215) and Origen (A.D. 185-253) both asserted the Pauline authorship of Hebrews, but Tertullian (b. 160) held that the author was Barnabas.

Other suggested authors include Luke<sup>4</sup>, Silas, and even Apollos. But Jerome’s point is well taken when he wrote that since the letter was “honored daily by being read in the churches,” it really did not matter who the author was. In the final analysis we will have to say with Origen, “But who wrote the epistle, in truth God knows.”<sup>5</sup>

### **Date of Composition**

The Book of Hebrews was apparently written in the late 60s, for Timothy was still alive (13:23) and the Temple was still standing (7:5; 8:4, 13; 10:1-3, 11; note the use of the present tense). Since the Temple was destroyed in A.D. 70, an earlier date for the writing of the letter is required.

The implication that the author and his audience were second-generation Christians (2:3) may refer not to a chronological but a geographical second generation. That is, they may have been contemporaneous with the first generation of believers in Israel, but since they had not personally heard Jesus, they received the gospel from those who had.

## **Original Audience**

It seems the book was written to a specific, primarily Jewish local church. There are references to the solidarity of the recipients in spiritual weaknesses (5:11-6:12; 13:17), in giving monetary assistance to others (6:10), in suffering (10:32-34), and in their relationship with the author and Timothy (13:18-24). These shared experiences suggest a local assembly. That they were primarily Jewish is evident from the theme and language of the book, which focus on the Old Testament and the Jewish religious system.

We are, however, unable to identify the location of this church. The only reference to a specific location occurs in 13:24: "Those from Italy greet you." It is not clear whether this means the author was in Italy when he wrote the letter and that he was thus sending greetings to those outside Italy, or whether he was elsewhere sending greetings back to believers in Italy from Italian believers who had migrated.

Many locations have been suggested as the destination of the letter, with Rome being perhaps the most common, but as with the question of authorship, we must finally admit uncertainty. For the purpose of interpreting the book, however, its destination is not nearly as significant as the issues addressed in the letter.

## **Purpose**

Though the Jewish believers addressed in this book had experienced persecution for their faith (10:32-34), they had failed to mature (5:12). It seems they were

tempted to abandon their faith in Christ and to return to Judaism (10:19-39; 13:9-15). The writer urged them to recognize that there is no sacrifice for sins other than the blood of Jesus (10:26-29). The readers needed to be reminded that the old covenant predicted its own demise (8:6-13). There was nothing left in it to which to return.

It is not certain why the letter's recipients were in danger of reverting to Judaism. It may be that they were wearied by the continuing reproach of the Cross (13:12-13). When they embraced Jesus as the Jewish Messiah, they put themselves outside the mainstream of Jewish tradition and of the continuing and powerful cultural influence of the Temple and of the Jewish sects, including the Pharisees and Sadducees. The strong pressure to return to Jewish orthodoxy may have seemed too much for them to resist. The readers apparently were in danger of abandoning meetings of Messianic Jews (10:25), of rejecting their Christian teachers (13:7), and of embracing strange teachings including elements of the old covenant dietary law (13:9).

## **Style and Structure**

Hebrews is unique among the books of the New Testament. Although it has the conclusion of an epistle, or letter (13:20-25), it does not have an epistle's opening. Since it was addressed to a specific group of believers it may be considered a letter, but it has more the ambience of a written sermon. Perhaps it was based on a sermon previously given and then put in writing for a specific audience. The writer's characterization of his work as a "word of exhortation" (13:22) seems to identify it with

messages ordinarily delivered orally. (See Acts 13:15.)

One of the most striking things about the book is its nearly exclusive use of the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures made in the third century B.C. But even so, the author apparently had access to more than one version of the Septuagint or supplied his own translation in some places.

The sections of the Hebrew Scriptures most commonly quoted are the Pentateuch and the Psalms. The author quoted from the Pentateuch twelve times and alluded to it another thirty-nine times. He quoted from the historical books only once, with no allusions except mention of historical figures in chapter 11; from the prophets four times, with eleven allusions; from the Psalms eleven times, with two allusions; and from Proverbs once, with one allusion. All told, twenty-three of twenty-nine quotations come from the Pentateuch and Psalms.<sup>6</sup> This emphasis is appropriate in view of the major point of the book: the old covenant has been fulfilled by Jesus Christ and superseded by the new covenant.

The author of Hebrews viewed the words of the Old Testament as having been spoken by God Himself. He typically did not mention the human author of the Hebrew Scriptures (though he did in 4:7 and 9:19-20). He twice credited to Christ words in the Old Testament (2:12-13; 10:5-7) and twice to the Holy Spirit (3:7; 10:15). The overall effect is to emphasize that Scripture is "God-breathed."<sup>7</sup> (See II Timothy 3:16.)

Hebrews sees all of the Old Testament as pointing to Jesus Christ. It is not just that isolated and specific prophecies are fulfilled in Jesus, but

the thrust of the whole OT is such that it leads inescapably to him. . . . Christianity [is] the final religion, not because . . . the faith of the OT [is] mistaken, but because it [is] God's way of pointing men to Jesus. . . . The fuller meaning of the OT is to be seen in the person and work of Jesus.<sup>8</sup>

### **Summary of Content**

Hebrews identifies itself as a "word of exhortation" (13:22). It encourages its readers to "hold fast" (3:6) and to "go on unto perfection" (6:1). The chief means of encouragement employed by the author is to demonstrate the superiority of Christ over the prophets, the angels, Moses, and Aaron and the superiority of the new covenant to the old covenant. The sacrifice of Christ is better than the sacrifices of the Mosaic code. Faith is the only valid means of a relationship with God. The author indicated that the painful experiences of the readers could be explained as the corrective discipline of a loving God, and he offered practical guidelines for Christian living.

The author of Hebrews rapidly moved into a declaration of the deity of Christ. Ultimately, it is His deity that gives Him preeminence over all others. Jesus is "the brightness of His glory and the express image of His [God's] person" (1:3, NKJV). Inherent in this claim is the undeniable identification of Jesus Christ as God made visible, or as God manifest in the flesh (I Timothy 3:16).





# I.

## **The Better Things of the New Covenant (1:1-10:39)**

The intended recipients of this letter were well versed in the teaching of the Hebrew Scriptures—apparently by means of the Septuagint (a Greek translation rendered in approximately 250 B.C.)—that a new covenant would one day replace the covenant Israel had with God from the time of Moses’ venture up Mt. Sinai. God never intended the old covenant to be permanent; one of its chief purposes was to bring Israel to the Messiah. After it had served this purpose, it retained no active function. (See Galatians 3:19-25; Romans 10:4; Colossians 2:14-17.)

The need to replace the old covenant with a new covenant was made obvious by the people of Israel’s breach of the former covenant. (See Jeremiah 11:1-10.) The author of Hebrews quoted Jeremiah 31:31-34 to prove the termination of the old covenant and its replacement (8:8-12). The new covenant, as described in Ezekiel 36:25-27, would be superior to the old covenant in at least three ways:

1. It offers *a new record*. “Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols” (Ezekiel 36:25, NKJV). In new covenant terms, this is justification by faith. By means of this wonderful provision of the new

covenant, the righteousness of Jesus Christ is credited to the account of the believer, so that the believer stands before God completely free from any record of sin. (See II Corinthians 5:21; Romans 3:24-29; 4:5, 25; 5:1, 6-11, 18-19).

2. It offers *a new heart*. "I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh" (Ezekiel 36:26, NKJV). In terms of the new covenant, this is regeneration. The use of the word "heart" is a common Hebrew idiom referring not to the physical organ but to the inner person (the immaterial or spirit person) as opposed to the outer person (the physical body). By means of regeneration, a believer is actually "born again." In a very real way, he becomes a new person. A person who is regenerated by the Holy Spirit has overcome the spiritual death that passed upon everyone as a result of Adam's sin. (See John 1:33; 3:5; 7:37-39; Acts 1:5; 2:1-4; 2:38; Romans 5:12; Ephesians 2:1-5).

3. It offers *a new life*. "I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them" (Ezekiel 36:27, NKJV). This is the sanctification of the new covenant. Sanctification is the natural and necessary outworking of regeneration and justification. It is the process of believers "becoming what they are" as they daily mature into greater conformity to the character of Christ. (See I Corinthians 6:11; Hebrews 10:10, 14; II Timothy 2:21-22; I Thessalonians 4:3-5.)

In the first major section of his letter, the writer of Hebrews discussed numerous additional ways in which the new covenant is better than the old covenant. Chiefly, the new covenant is better because it was established uni-

laterally by Jesus, who is better than the prophets through whom God spoke during the days of the old covenant (1:1-3). He is also superior to the angels, through whom the old covenant was given to Moses (1:4-2:4). The new covenant offers an infinitely superior revelation of God; Jesus is actually God Himself in human existence (2:5-18). Thus Jesus is better than Moses, who was highly esteemed by the readers of this letter (3:1-19). He is better than Joshua; the rest Jesus offers is vastly superior to the rest Israel found under Joshua in the Promised Land (4:1-13). Jesus is a greater high priest than Aaron; He is a priest after the order of Melchizedek, to whom even Levi paid tithes through Abraham (4:14-8:13). The inferiority of the old covenant is demonstrated by the inferiority of its tabernacle when compared to the heavenly tabernacle after which it was patterned (9:1-28). And finally, the sacrifice offered by Jesus Christ to establish the new covenant was incomparably superior to the sacrifices of the old covenant (10:1-39).



# A.

## Jesus Is Better Than the Prophets (1:1-3)

*(1) God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake in time past unto the fathers by the prophets, (2) hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds; (3) who being the brightness of his glory, and the express image of his person, and upholding all things by the word of his power, when he had by himself purged our sins, sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high.*

*Verse 1.* The writer of Hebrews begins his letter by immediately contrasting the revelation of God in previous times, and thus under the old covenant, with the revelation of God in current times, and thus under the new covenant (verse 2). This sets the tone for the entire letter: the things characterizing the old covenant, as wonderful as they were, are inferior to the things characterizing the new covenant.

The reference to “sundry times” and “divers manners” involves a play on words in the Greek language (*polymeros*, “at many times,” and *polytropos*, “in many ways”). This is not uncommon in New Testament literature. *Polymeros* could be translated “in many parts” or

“in many portions.” *Poly* means “many,” and *meros* has to do with a “part,” as contrasted to the whole.<sup>9</sup> The idea is that God’s revelation in days prior to speaking through His Son (verse 2) and thus prior to the new covenant was incomplete. Though He gave “many portions” of His revelation, and though He spoke in “various ways,” His ultimate revelation awaited the coming of Jesus Christ.

We can identify eight covenants in Scripture: the Edenic covenant (Genesis 1:28-31; 2:8-17), the Adamic covenant (Genesis 3:14-19), the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9:1-27), the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 12:1-4; 13:14-17; 15:1-18; 17:1-8), the Mosaic covenant (Exodus 20), the Palestinian covenant (Deuteronomy 27-30), the Davidic covenant (II Samuel 7:8-17), and the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Matthew 26:27-28; Hebrews 8:7-13). Each covenant represents a portion of the revelation of God. (See Romans 9:4.) Some of the covenants are conditional (bilateral), requiring the faithfulness of two parties (God and one or more persons) for their fulfillment; some are unconditional (unilateral), requiring only the faithfulness of God. Although the word “covenant” is not used in the context of each of the eight, we use the term if the characteristics of a covenant are present.

The new covenant, presented in Hebrews as superior to all previous revelations of God, is by definition another “portion” of the overall revelation and is itself predicted in the Hebrew Scriptures. (See discussion under “I. The Better Things of the New Covenant.”) But it so far surpasses all other covenants, and thus all other portions of the revelation of God, that an entire section of inspired Scripture, the New Testament, is given to its presentation and development.

In days prior to the revelation of God through His Son, He spoke to the fathers (the patriarchs) by the prophets in a variety of ways. These included, but were not limited to, straightforward human speech, dramatic symbolic enactments (e.g., Jeremiah and Ezekiel), parables (e.g., Nathan and David), and written communication in a variety of literary forms (e.g., history, poetry, apocalyptic).

A prophet is by definition a spokesman for God. (See Exodus 7:1.) Thus those who delivered the messages of God to the fathers were prophets, regardless of the method of delivery. In addition to the prophets delivering the messages of God in a variety of ways, God spoke to the prophets themselves in a wide variety of ways. These included dreams, visions, and an audible voice.

This verse declares the authenticity of the message proclaimed by the Old Testament prophets. Though the manner of God's revelation to them was varied, and though no revelation given to the Hebrew prophets was the complete and final revelation, when they spoke, they were speaking on behalf of God. This certifies the Old Testament as inspired of God. (See also II Peter 1:20-21; II Timothy 3:16; Acts 1:16.)

*Verse 2.* A first-century Jewish reader would have understood the reference to the "last days" as meaning the "final" days. If God has spoken by His Son in these "last days," it means there is no further or more advanced revelation to come. God has saved His ultimate revelation for that given through and by the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus Himself said, "The words that I speak to you I do not speak on My own authority; but the Father who dwells in Me does the works" (John 14:10, NKJV).

The translators supplied the pronoun "his"; the Greek

text contains no pronoun, nor does it contain the definite article. The words *en huioi* mean literally “in son,” or “in a son.” The translators are justified contextually in supplying the pronoun “his,” for it is obvious that the Son referred to is the Son of God. But a literal reading of the Greek text of verses 1-2 provides a jarring contrast: The same God who in former days spoke *by the prophets* (many were involved in the former revelations) has now ultimately spoken *by a Son* (only one is involved; the Son has exclusive claim to the highest and finest revelation).

The same preposition (*en*) describes both the prophets and the Son as spokesmen for God, but the superiority of the message delivered through the Son, as well as the identity of the Son Himself, dramatically sets the final revelation apart from the former.

Verses 2-3 list seven characteristics of Jesus Christ. Verse 2 lists two of the seven: (1) He is the heir of all things; (2) He is the One through whom the worlds were made.

### **Heir of All Things**

The Incarnation was necessary to provide a qualified heir for all God originally intended human beings to possess. Adam’s failure in the Garden of Eden disqualified him and all his offspring from receiving the eternal blessings of God. The banning of humanity from the tree of life illustrates the blocked access that resulted from Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:22-24). Jesus Christ, the last Adam, succeeded in reversing the damaging effects of the sin of Adam (I Corinthians 15:45-50).

The good news for believers is that they are “joint



heirs with Christ.” All that belongs to Christ rightfully belongs to those who are “in Christ,” those who by virtue of Christ’s atoning work have become the children of God. “The Spirit Himself bears witness with our spirit that we are children of God, and if children, then heirs—heirs of God and joint heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer with Him, that we may also be glorified together” (Romans 8:16-17, NKJV).

The “all things” of which Christ is heir apparently include all God intended for human enjoyment from the beginning. This seems to involve some kind of dominion over all creation (Genesis 1:28). We do know that the present, sin-cursed creation will one day be purged, and there will be new heavens and a new earth where righteousness dwells (II Peter 3:10-13). Those who are included in the first resurrection, which seems to involve not only tribulation martyrs but also the raptured church, are privileged to reign with Christ (Revelation 20:4-6).

### **He through Whom the Worlds Were Made**

Jesus is the One “through whom also He made the worlds” (Hebrews 1:2, NKJV). The Greek preposition translated “through” (“by,” KJV) is *dia*, which, in the genitive case, as here, carries the idea “by means of.” Since the emphasis in Hebrews 1:1-3 is on the Incarnation, and the Incarnation did not preexist the conception in Mary’s womb, the point cannot be that Jesus—as God manifest in the flesh—created all things. The creation predated the Incarnation.

The idea of an agent being involved in creation brings to mind John 1:1-3, where John declared of the

Word, “All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made” (NKJV). But there is no suggestion here that the Word is separate from God. And though *logos* (“word”) was used in Greek philosophy during the first century to describe reason as the impersonal, controlling principle of the universe, we may be sure John was not using it in that sense, for he attributed deity to the Word (John 1:1). Doubtless, John, a Hebrew, used *logos* as the Greek equivalent of the Hebrew *dabar* (“word”), for God created by His spoken word. (See Genesis 1.) There is no hint in Genesis 1 that the words God spoke in creation are to be identified separately from Him, for they are the utterance or expression of His very person.

In John’s terms, God’s Word was eternal, His Word was with Him from eternity, and His Word was divine. (In the phrase *theos en ho logos* [“the Word was God”], *theos* is an anarthrous predicate nominative that attributes essence or quality to the subject, *logos*. John’s point was to declare the deity of the *logos*.) John personified the Word and reiterated His eternity (John 1:2). He declared the role of the Word in creation (John 1:3): God created by His Word. Then John reported that “the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14, NKJV).

The subject here is the same as in Hebrews 1: the Incarnation. Just as the writer of Hebrews used “begotten” in the context of the Incarnation (Hebrews 1:5), so did John. John is his own best interpreter of what he meant by “Word.” In his first letter, addressing the same subject in his attack on incipient Gnosticism (a denial of

the genuineness of Jesus' humanity), John further defined the Word as the "Word of life . . . that eternal life, which was with the Father, and was manifested unto us" (I John 1:1-2). This phrase is in perfect harmony with John's previous statement, "In him [the Word] was life; and the life was the light of men" (John 1:4). (See also John 1:5, 7-9.)

In simplest terms, the Word is the very life of God. In the Incarnation, God's life is manifest in the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the living God made known in genuine, complete, and authentic human existence. (See John 1:18.) John did not suggest that prior to the Incarnation the Word had such radical individuality as to be separate from God. In Hebrew thought, since there is only one God (Deuteronomy 6:4), and since the Word is essential deity, the only identification that we can give to the Word is that He is God. That the Word was "with God" does not imply that He was separate from God, any more than God's life being with Him implies that His life has identity separate from Him. But in the Incarnation, when the Word was made flesh, humanity was added to deity with the resultant identification as the Son of God. The term "Son" is exclusively incarnational.

Thus the point made by the writer of Hebrews is the same as that made by John (and by Paul in Colossians 1:16): God created all things by His Word, and the Son is the Word made flesh (John 1:3, 14). There is no suggestion that prior to the Incarnation the Word was known as the Son. Though it may seem at first that the word "Son" here is a preincarnational reference since He is the One "through whom also He [God] made the worlds," the statement that God has "in these *last* days spoken to us

by His Son,” which contrasts with God’s prior communication through the prophets, indicates grammatically that God has *not* spoken by His Son prior to “these last days.” If we could use “Son” in a preincarnational sense, it would be incredible to think that God never spoke by the Son from all eternity and throughout the entire era of the Hebrew Scriptures until the Incarnation.

The attempt by some to identify the Son with Old Testament theophanies or with the wisdom of Proverbs 8 fails on the ground that God reserved His revelation by His Son exclusively for “these last days.” Thus when the writer of Hebrews asserted that the Son is the One “through whom also He [God] made the worlds,” he meant that the One who is now incarnate is the Creator. But in His preincarnate state He was not known as the Son; He was the Word of God by which God created. As the Word of God, He was as closely identified with God as any human’s word is identified with him. As the Word of life, He was as closely identified with God as any human’s life is identified with him. Just as no one’s word or life has any identity or existence apart from the person himself, so we can make no attempt to identify the Word apart from God or to proclaim His existence separately from God. The personification of God’s Word is a figure of speech, just like the personification of His wisdom in Proverbs 8.

*Verse 3* lists another five characteristics of Jesus Christ. He is (1) the brightness of God’s glory, (2) the express image of God’s person, (3) the One who upholds all things by His powerful word, (4) the One who purged sins, and (5) the One who is now reigning with all authority.

All these attributes depend upon and demand the

Incarnation, the manifestation of God in authentic and complete, although sinless, humanity. That is, Jesus qualifies for these descriptions because He not only is God, He is also man.

### **Brightness of His Glory**

The descriptive terms used of Christ in this passage indicate strongly the impossibility of separating Him from God. He *is* God made visible in an authentic human existence. The word “brightness” refers to effulgence, flood of resplendent light, or radiance. Jesus Christ is actually God shining brilliantly into the world. The word translated “brightness” has to do not with a mere reflection, but with a shining out.

Since God will not give His glory to another, Jesus is the radiant glory of God Himself. “I am the LORD, that is My name; and My glory I will not give to another, nor My praise to carved images” (Isaiah 42:8, NKJV). (See also Isaiah 48:11.)

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the word “glory” has to do with the visible glory of God that appeared to Israel on various occasions. (See Exodus 16:10; 24:17; 40:34; I Kings 8:11; Romans 9:4.) Since this was the glory of God, it came to represent God Himself to the Jewish people. Thus when Paul wrote in Romans 3:23 that all humans fall short of the “glory of God,” his Jewish readers would have understood him to mean that all fall short of measuring up to the standard of perfection exemplified by God Himself. When James wrote that Jesus Christ is the “Lord of glory” (James 2:1), he meant that Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God.

### **Express Image of His Person**

Jesus is the express image of God's person. The Greek word *charakter* (from which we get our English transliteration "character"), translated "express image," reveals that Jesus Christ is the exact representation of God. The word "person" is translated from the Greek *hypostasis*, which has to do with the substratum, or that which underlies something. Here, it is a reference to the essence or essential nature of God. Thus Jesus is the exact representation of God's essence. As Paul put it, "He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation" (Colossians 1:15, NKJV).

### **Upholds All Things**

In addition to being God made visible, Jesus Christ upholds all things by the word of His power. The phrase "by the word of his power" may be a Hebraism meaning "by His powerful word." Since the fullness of the Godhead (i.e., every aspect of God's essence) continually dwells bodily in Jesus (Colossians 2:9), it is by Him that "all things consist" (Colossians 1:17), or hold together in unity. Jesus is not only the cause and purpose of all creation; He is also the One who gives continued coherence to all things. Not only would there have been no creation apart from Him; creation could not continue without Christ as its sustainer.

### **Purged Our Sins**

The ultimate purpose for the Incarnation was "to seek and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). The Cross

was God's final answer to the sin problem, the means of demolishing the barrier between God and humanity. "But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God. . . . For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified" (Hebrews 10:12, 14, NKJV).

This offering has been called "the great exchange." Paul succinctly described the manner in which God dealt with our sins through Christ: "For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him" (II Corinthians 5:21, NJKV).

Any suggestion that God requires something in addition to the blood of Jesus to deal with human sin is heresy of the worst sort. The atoning virtue of Jesus' blood is limitless precisely because His death was of infinite value. This is so because in His death He was not just a man, but God manifest in the flesh. Had He been just a sinless man, His death could perhaps have atoned for one other person. But since He was truly God, His death was "the propitiation for our sins, and not for ours only but also for the whole world" (I John 2:2, NKJV).

### **Reigning with All Authority**

After Jesus purged our sins, thus accomplishing the highest purpose of the Incarnation, He "sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3, NKJV). The term "right hand" in Scripture is often a metaphor for power and authority. When the Bible speaks of "the right hand of God" (e.g., Acts 2:33), it refers to the place of ultimate power and authority. The point is that

He who suffered the ultimate humiliation of assuming solidarity with His creation now occupies the supreme position of exaltation (Philippians 2:5-9). In that position, He is due the homage of all creation (Philippians 2:10-11).

The word “Majesty” is a metaphor for God Himself, but we must not think that the “the right hand” has to do with a geographical position. God is an omnipresent Spirit. Anthropomorphisms (references to God in human form or with human characteristics) do not attribute human limitations to God; they accommodate revelatory language to human comprehension. That is, when the Bible speaks of God’s “right hand” or “nostrils” or “footstool,” we must not understand it to mean that God is a giant human being. These terms communicate something about God to us in language we can understand. If Scripture did not accommodate information about God in human terms, we could understand nothing about Him. As the infinite, uncreated cause of all creation, God exists in a realm entirely separate from and beyond human knowledge or comprehension. But in the language of Scripture and ultimately in the person of Jesus Christ, God has made Himself known to us insofar as that is possible with the limitation of our present capacities for knowledge.

Concerning the phrase “the right hand of the Majesty on high,” F. F. Bruce commented:

That no literal location is intended was as well understood by Christians in the apostolic age as it is by us: they knew that God has no physical right hand or material throne where the ascended Christ



sits beside Him; to them the language denoted the exaltation and supremacy of Christ as it does to us.<sup>10</sup>

The statement that Jesus “sat down” was significant to the original readers of this letter, for they were acquainted with priests who never sat. There was no end to the sacrifices they offered. (See 10:11-12.)

By His present reign, Jesus is accomplishing the complete subjection of all God’s enemies. “For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet. The last enemy that will be destroyed is death” (I Corinthians 15:25-26, NKJV).

This statement does not imply that one day Christ will no longer reign, but that His reign will not terminate before He has subdued all His enemies. Paul described His ultimate victory in a fascinating way: “Now when all things are made subject to Him, then the Son Himself will also be subject to Him who put all things under Him, that God may be all in all” (I Corinthians 15:28, NKJV). When Jesus has finalized the purpose of the Incarnation, the terminal subjection of all the effects of sin, He will no longer be known simply as the Son (God manifest in the flesh) but as God Himself. Throughout eternity, we will not think of Jesus as the Son of God, but as God, for the purpose of the Incarnation will be complete. This does not imply a termination of the Incarnation, but a submerging of the Incarnation into God’s greater and preincarnate identity as “all in all.”



# B.

## Jesus Is Better Than the Angels (1:4-2:18)

### 1. His Superiority Is Shown by His Identity (1:4-14)

*(4) Being made so much better than the angels, as he hath by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they. (5) For unto which of the angels said he at any time, Thou art my Son, this day have I begotten thee? And again, I will be to him a Father, and he shall be to me a Son? (6) And again, when he bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, he saith, And let all the angels of God worship him. (7) And of the angels he saith, Who maketh his angels spirits, and his ministers a flame of fire. (8) But unto the Son he saith, Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever: a sceptre of righteousness is the sceptre of thy kingdom. (9) Thou hast loved righteousness, and hated iniquity; therefore God, even thy God, hath anointed thee with the oil of gladness above thy fellows. (10) And, Thou, Lord, in the beginning hast laid the foundation of the earth; and the heavens are the works of thine hands: (11) they shall perish; but thou remainest; and they all shall wax old as doth a garment; (12) and as a vesture shalt thou fold them up, and they shall be*

*changed: but thou art the same, and thy years shall not fail. (13) But to which of the angels said he at any time, Sit on my right hand, until I make thine enemies thy footstool? (14) Are they not all ministering spirits, sent forth to minister for them who shall be heirs of salvation?*

Angels are mighty spirit beings whose strength and wisdom make them worthy of respect. (See II Samuel 14:20; Psalm 103:20; 104:4.) But the writer of Hebrews appealed to six Old Testament passages to demonstrate conclusively the superiority of the Son of God over the angels.

*Verse 4.* In view of the “theology of the name” so apparent in the Hebrew Scriptures, it is significant that the first evidence of Christ’s superiority over the angels is His name. In Hebrew thought, one’s name is not just an appellation by which he is known. Instead, a name signifies a person’s character, reputation, works, and worth. To the Hebrews, it was impossible to separate a person from his name. In a real sense, a person *was* his name.

Although written in Greek, the New Testament uses “name” in the same sense: “You have a few names even in Sardis who have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with Me in white, for they are worthy” (Revelation 3:4, NKJV). Here, the name and the person are identical.

“A good name is to be chosen rather than great riches,” said the wise man (Proverbs 22:1, NKJV). The idea is not, of course, that one combination of letters of the alphabet is better than another, but that a good reputation earned by being of good character is better than riches. The identification of one’s name with his character and person

was not just a human idea, for God renamed Abram “Abraham” and Jacob “Israel” to signify their new identities and destinies.

The writer of Hebrews defended the superiority of Jesus over the angels since He “by inheritance obtained a more excellent name than they” (Hebrews 1:4, NKJV). The context identifies the “name” here as “Son” (verse 5). The Messiah’s proper name, Jesus, is not used until 2:9; “Christ” does not appear until 3:1. The letter uses the full descriptive name “Jesus Christ” or “Christ Jesus” only four times (3:1; 10:10; 13:8, 21).

The point is that it is better to be known as a “Son” than as an “angel.” The word “angel” (*angelos*) means “messenger.” True to the meaning of their name, angels are God’s messengers; they act only on His order and do only what He commands. (See Psalm 103:20.) The Son of God is much more than a mere messenger, as verses 2-3 have already demonstrated. In terms of His relationship to God, “Son” implies a far greater degree of intimacy than “messenger.” Specifically, to be the “Son of God” in this sense requires that the Messiah actually receive deity from His Father. He receives His “more excellent name” by inheritance; He is the “Son of God” because God is His Father in a unique way, unparalleled by the fatherhood of God in relationship to any others, whether angels or people.

It is evident that this verse continues to discuss the Incarnation, as opposed to the preexistent state of the One now known as the Son of God. The words “*having become* [“being made,” KJV] so much better than the angels” (NKJV) imply the Incarnation. So does the word “obtained.” In the strictest sense, apart from the

Incarnation, God cannot be spoken of as “becoming” or “obtaining.” God is immutable; He does not change. (See Malachi 3:6.) The only “change” God has ever experienced is in the Incarnation, and this did not change His deity. He added genuine human existence to His changeless deity.

*Verse 5.* To demonstrate the superiority of the Son over the angels, the writer of Hebrews quoted two verses from the Old Testament. The first is Psalm 2:7; the second is II Samuel 7:14. Psalm 2 is a royal enthronement psalm that was apparently used in a liturgical way at the ascension of various kings in the Davidic lineage to the throne of Israel.<sup>11</sup> But as with other passages speaking of people or events near at hand, Psalm 2 also looked far beyond the merely human kings occupying Israel’s throne to the final and ultimate Son of David, the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

As it applies to the Messiah, the declaration “You are My Son, today I have begotten You” (NKJV) joins other New Testament passages in identifying Jesus Christ as the “only begotten Son.” (See John 1:14, 18; 3:16, 18; I John 4:9.) The Greek *monogenes*, translated “only begotten,” implies the uniqueness of the Son of God. Even angels are called the “sons of God” collectively, but none of them is a Son of God in the way the Messiah is. (See Job 1:6; 2:1; 38:7.) Regenerate human beings are also identified as “sons of God,” but not in the same sense as Jesus Christ. (See John 1:12; Romans 8:14, 19; Galatians 4:6; Philippians 2:15.) Jesus is the Son of God by birth and by nature (Luke 1:31-35; Galatians 4:4); He had no human father. We have human fathers; we are the sons of God by adoption (Romans 8:15-16). When the term “Son of God” is used of Jesus, it has reference both to His deity and humanity,

to who He really is, at once fully God and fully man.

The question this verse poses is rhetorical; a strong negative response is expected.<sup>12</sup> The Lord (Hebrew, *Yahweh*) has never identified any angel as His Son in this sense. Angels are created, not begotten (verse 7).

Commentators have made a wide variety of suggestions as to the time of the begetting of the Son.<sup>13</sup> Some of them, such as the idea that this refers to the “eternal generation” of the Son, seem influenced primarily by theological considerations, and others, such as the suggestion that it refers to Christ’s resurrection, are influenced by the use of similar terminology in other contexts. It is true that other uses of similar language refer to specific events other than the Incarnation (e.g., Christ’s resurrection, ascension to heaven, or even ascension to the throne of David during the Millennium). But we must first find the meaning of words in their immediate context, not in possible parallels elsewhere.

The immediate context of this verse identifies the day of the begetting of the Son as the Incarnation. Verse 2 introduces the Incarnation, and verse 4 reaffirms it. The best translation of verse 6 seems to be: “But when He *again* brings the firstborn into the world” (NKJV), which suggests strongly in retrospect that the first bringing of the firstborn into the world is the birth of Christ. (See comments on verse 6.)

In no context, immediate or distant, is there any indisputable reference to the idea of “eternal generation.” When Psalm 2 was used during the enthronement rituals of the kings of Israel, the phrase, “You are My Son, today I have begotten you,” referred to various human kings, but it did refer to a specific day: the day of enthronement.

There is no reason why, when Hebrews uses the psalm to refer to David's greatest Son, the phrase "Today I have begotten You" should suddenly refer to the vague idea of "eternal generation" rather than to a specific point in time. Indeed, the idea of an "eternally begotten" Son springs from the preconceived notion that Jesus is eternally the "second person" in the Godhead. The term is self-contradictory, and the idea it suggests is impossible to grasp. When two words so inherently opposed to one another in meaning as "eternal" and "begotten" are placed together in this way, both lose their significance.

The simplest and most contextually agreeable way to understand the phrase "Today I have begotten you" is that it refers to the Incarnation, the moment that the Holy Spirit came upon Mary to cause her to conceive. (See Luke 1:26-35.) Since angels did not come to be in this way, they were never the recipients of this kind of declaration.

The second rhetorical question comes from II Samuel 7:14, which, like Psalm 2, had immediate reference to a human being—Solomon—but long-term reference to the greatest Son of David. This quotation reinforces the idea that the time in view here is the Incarnation, for II Samuel 7:14 as applied to the Messiah definitely refers to his entry into the world via the seed of David. (See Romans 1:3.) The Incarnation fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies that the Messiah would be the Son of David. (See Psalm 132:11; Luke 1:32.) In this way Jesus shared completely in everything inherently involved in human existence.

The word "flesh" (Greek, *sarx*) does not mean "skin," it means "human nature." Thus Jesus, like any human



being, had a human body, soul, spirit, mind, heart, and everything else required to be a real human being. Only by becoming fully human could He redeem us. Jesus received his human nature from Mary; otherwise He could not truly be called the “seed of David.” Mary was no mere surrogate mother, no incubator into whose womb God placed a new human nature that never existed anywhere before. Jesus stands in solidarity with the human race because He was made of a woman (Galatians 4:4).

The only way Jesus differed from us is that He did not possess the sin nature. By the miracle of the virgin birth and by being begotten by the Holy Spirit, He was spared the sin nature. But this does not make Him any less human than us, for sin is not inherent to human nature. Both Adam and Eve were complete human beings before they sinned and thus before they possessed a sin nature. Jesus is the last Adam (I Corinthians 15:45). Like the first Adam, He had no sin. But unlike the first Adam, Jesus never did sin, and thus He avoided being contaminated by the sin nature. (See Hebrews 2:17; 4:15; II Corinthians 5:21.)

The second question is no reference to “eternal generation” as we see from the future tense: “I will be” and “He shall be.” When God established the Davidic covenant in II Samuel 7:8-17, He looked past the line of human kings who would ascend to David’s throne to the ultimate King of kings who, though descended from David as to His humanity, would be the Son of God because the Holy Spirit brought about conception in the virgin Mary. No angel could claim this kind of origin; it was reserved exclusively for the Messiah, Jesus.

*Verse 6.* Before we can accurately interpret verses

6-12, we must determine who the writer of Hebrews had in mind when he wrote, "He says." Is this a reference to God? Is it a reference to the human author of the various Hebrew Scriptures quoted? Is it a reference to the Scripture itself, with "he" being a personification? Many believe that the pronoun "he" in these verses refers to God Himself on the basis that in verses 5 and 13 this masculine singular pronoun does indeed refer to God. This is a strong argument, for context is of great importance in interpreting Scripture.

But context alone is not the final determiner of meaning; it is also essential to consider grammar. In verses 5a and 13, the verses quoted from the Hebrew Scriptures have God speaking in the first person singular *to* the Messiah in the second person singular. In verse 5b, God speaks in the first person singular *of* the Messiah in the third person singular. There can be no question, then, that in these verses the first person singular pronoun "He" refers to God.

Verses 6-12 do not follow this pattern, however. The Septuagint version of Psalm 97:7, quoted in verse 6, does not have God speaking at all. The statement is that of the inspired psalmist. Throughout the Psalm, the writer refers repeatedly to God in the third person singular. Thus, the person referred to in the statement "he says" of verse 6 is the psalmist, not God. That translations which capitalize the first letter of a pronoun referring to deity capitalize "He" here carries no weight in this matter. The original Greek had no system of capitalization; this decision is made solely by translators to reflect their understanding of the passage. As we shall see, each of the verses quoted from the Old Testament in verses 6-12 has as its

spokesman, not God, but the inspired human writer.

The only exception would be if the writer of Hebrews used the literary device of personification, in which case the meaning of verse 6 would be, “And again, when he [God] bringeth in the firstbegotten into the world, it [Scripture] saith, And let all the angels of God worship him.” This is grammatically possible. The Greek *legei*, translated “he saith,” is the third person singular present active indicative form of *lego* (“I say”). Depending on the context, it could be translated either “he saith,” “she saith,” or “it saith.”

It would seem strange for God to borrow the words of a human author in Psalm 97:7 and say to His angels, “Let all the angels of God worship Him.” This is not the kind of statement God would make; this statement would be made by another, someone other than God. Even if, as F. F. Bruce suggested,<sup>14</sup> the writer of Hebrews here quoted from the Septuagint version of Deuteronomy 32:43, the individual speaking is still a human being, Moses.

It is important to establish who is speaking in verses 6-12, for the identity of the speaker has implications for Christology. It would be one thing for God to say to the Son, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (verse 8); it is quite another for the human author of the Psalm quoted in verse 8 to make the same statement.

The translation of this verse offered by the KJV may obscure the time frame the writer of Hebrews had in mind as to precisely when the saying “Let all the angels of God worship Him” (NKJV) refers. As translated in the KJV, the statement “And again” seems to flow with the same statement in verse 5, thus making verse 6 another quote in a series of three from the Old Testament. If this were true,

it would argue strongly that the masculine singular pronoun “he” in the statement “he says” refers to God, for it does refer to God in verses 5 and 6.

But it seems better, with the NKJV, to translate verse 6, “But when He again brings the firstborn into the world, He says.” The structure of the Greek at this point certainly allows for this translation, and if the writer of Hebrews intended this verse to be the third in a series of quotes pertaining to the same event, it seems he would have used the same structure in verse 6 as in verse 5. In verse 5, *kai palin* is translated “and again.” The writer could have begun verse 6 with *kai palin*, but he instead wrote, *hotan de palin* (“and” or “but whenever again”).

It is not certain *when* the command is given to the angels to worship the Messiah. Many suggestions have been made. Some, with the view that verse 6 is the third in a series of quotations from the Old Testament pertaining to the Incarnation, believe this command refers to the announcement of the birth of Jesus by the angels. (See Luke 2:8-14.) But there is no evidence of the angels actually worshiping Jesus at that time; their mission was rather to announce His birth. Others, also understanding verse 6 to be the third in a series of quotations but with the view that the time frame to which all three refer is not the Incarnation, suggest the time to be Christ’s baptism, resurrection, ascension, elevation to high priesthood, second coming, or ascension to the throne of David. In other contexts, Psalm 2:7 is used in reference to the baptism of Christ and to His resurrection. (See Mark 1:11; Acts 13:33.) It is also used of His elevation to being our High Priest (Hebrews 5:5). That the same words are used in such a wide variety of contexts indicates that the con-

text alone can determine specific meaning.

In Revelation 5:11-12, the angels worship the Lamb after He takes the scroll from the right hand of God. But there is no indication that the angels are doing so in response to a direct command from God.

If the two quotations of verse 5 have the Incarnation in view, and if verse 6 addresses a subsequent bringing of the Messiah into the world, then the command for the angels to worship the Messiah could be at any one of the previously suggested points, except the birth of Jesus. The important thing is not to identify the time of the command, but to note that the angel's worship, whenever it was, indicates their inferiority to the Messiah.

It also indicates His deity, for biblical theology forbids the worship of any but the true God. "Then Jesus said to him, 'Away with you, Satan! For it is written, "You shall worship the LORD your God, and Him only you shall serve"'" (Matthew 4:10, NKJV). Angels are forbidden to receive worship (Revelation 19:10; 22:9). Jesus is far better than they, for He is God Himself, worthy of worship (verse 8).

The word "firstborn," translated from the Greek *prototokon*, is—like all other words—defined by its context. It need not, as some suggest, have to do with order of birth. In this case, as in Colossians 1:15, the word signifies the preeminence of Christ. Contextually, the preeminence in view here is His preeminence over the angels. This does not mean, as Arius suggested, that Jesus was merely the first and greatest of the created angels, for angels cannot receive worship. That the angels were commanded to worship Him indicates that Jesus was above, beyond, and prior to them.

*Verse 7.* The same need to identify the person speaking applies here as in verse 6. The writer of Hebrews quoted Psalm 104:4. In that psalm, God is not the speaker; the human author is. The statement recorded in this verse would sound strange coming from God, who made the angels Himself. Rather, the psalmist made a series of observations about God, one of which is that He “makes His angels spirits and His ministers a flame of fire” (NKJV).

The first thing to note here is that the angels are created beings. The Son is not created, but begotten, and He is therefore superior to the angels. (See comments on verse 5.) Since the Son is begotten of God, He cannot be other than God, for God is unique.

Second, angels are spirit beings. (See also verse 14.) Though spirits are by definition invisible (Colossians 1:16), angels have been given the ability to assume visible form similar in appearance to a human being. (See Genesis 19:1; Exodus 3:2; Numbers 22:22-31; Judges 2:1; 6:11, 22; 13:3, 6; I Chronicles 21:16, 20; Matthew 1:20; Luke 1:26; John 20:12; Acts 7:30; 12:7-8.)

Third, angels are God’s ministers or servants. Their only purpose is to obey His word. (See Psalm 103:20.)

Fourth, angels are “a flame of fire.” Some references to angelic activity in the Old Testament connect it with the appearance of fire. (See Exodus 3:2; 13:21 with 14:19-20; 24:17 with Galatians 3:19 and Hebrews 2:2.) Fire may in these instances symbolize strength.<sup>15</sup> With the birthday of the church on the Day of Pentecost, tongues “as of fire” (NKJV) sat upon each person who was filled with the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 2:3-4.) This occurred in fulfillment of Jesus’ promise that His disciples would

receive power upon the reception of the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 1:8.)

*Verse 8.* In contrast to the angels as servants of God, the Son is God Himself. In this case, the words “he says” are not in the Greek text; they are supplied by the translators. An examination of Psalm 45:6, from which this verse is quoted, reveals immediately that the speaker is the human author of the psalm. He declares, by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the Messiah’s deity.

Those who hold a trinitarian view of God appeal to this verse to support their idea that the Son is eternally the second person in the Godhead. They suggest that the speaker is God the Father, whom they consider to be the first person in the Godhead. Thus they have the first person in the Godhead declaring to the second person, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever” (NKJV). This is as close as they can come to finding biblical authorization for the term “God the Son.” But this conclusion imposes on the verse something that is simply not there. It also suggests a separation within God so pronounced that persons within the Godhead can speak to each other in the same way human beings speak to one another. Such a view comes dangerously close to tritheism, belief in three gods. Moreover, we cannot equate the prayers of Jesus with the idea that one person in the Godhead addresses another as God; His prayers sprang out of His genuine and complete humanity. (See Hebrews 5:7.)

The point of the writer of Hebrews is that the Son is God manifest in genuine humanity. (See John 1:1, 14; I Timothy 3:16.) In reference to His being God, He permanently occupies heaven’s throne. (See Revelation 4:2-6, 9-10; 5:1, 6-7, 11, 13; 6:16; 7:9-11, 15, 17; 8:3;

12:5; 14:3; 16:17; 19:4; 20:11; 21:5; 22:1, 3.) The scepter is a symbol of His royal authority, and it is a scepter of righteousness.

The word “righteousness” comes from the Old English “rightwiseness,” which simply refers to something that is “right.” The Son’s scepter is “right” in that He conducts the affairs of His kingdom in a way that is precise in its justice. (See Romans 3:4, 19.) None will ever be able to accuse Him of a lack of justice; He is not tainted by self-serving ambition or partiality. He does exactly what is right in every situation.

*Verse 9.* If God is the speaker in the series of quotations from verses 6 through 12, this verse—quoted from Psalm 45:7—is strange indeed. How would we interpret the meaning if God says to the Son, “Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness more than Your companions”? (NKJV). Would this mean that although the Son is Himself God (verse 8), He has a God? From a trinitarian perspective, does this mean that the first person in the Godhead is the God of the second person in the Godhead? And who are the Son’s “companions” or peers? And if the Son is God, how can it be said that He has been anointed? Who would anoint God?

But there is no need to wrestle with these problems, for God is not the speaker in this verse. The speaker is the human writer of the psalm. In verse 8, the psalmist declared the Son to be God and described aspects of His deity. In this verse, the psalmist addressed the humanity of the Son; he had the Incarnation in view. In reference to His humanity, the Messiah loved righteousness and hated lawlessness. As a result, God anointed Him with the oil of gladness (the Holy Spirit) beyond the anointing given to



any other human being. (See Luke 3:22; 4:1-21; John 3:34; Acts 10:38.)

Some may suggest that the Son's "companions" or peers are angels and that verse 9 speaks of His superior anointing beyond that of the angels. But for this to be true, the angels would have to be, in some way, the Son's peers, or equals. They are not; He is superior to them in every way. The only way the Son can have peers is in the Incarnation; He took on genuine humanity, thus declaring His solidarity with the human race. (See Hebrews 2:17.) Hebrews 3:14 uses the same Greek word translated "companions" (NKJV) here (*metochous*) to describe the way in which believers are identified with Christ.

F. F. Bruce, while acknowledging that the Son's "companions" are human beings and not angels, suggested that the anointing here is not the anointing of the Messiah with the Holy Spirit, but "the joy with which God has blessed Him in acknowledgement of His vindication of divine justice, 'the joy that was set before him' mentioned in Ch. 12:3."<sup>16</sup> He based this interpretation largely on the view that Psalm 45 celebrates a royal wedding, with the psalmist addressing first the bridegroom and then the bride.<sup>17</sup> But regardless of the possible use of Psalm 45 in a royal wedding with its fuller significance relating to the coming Messiah, the writer of Hebrews used Psalm 45:6-7 to refer exclusively to the Son. It seems reasonable, then, to understand the Son's anointing as His anointing with the Holy Spirit, which He Himself described (Luke 4:18).

So the superiority of the Son over the angels is sustained. They are to worship Him (verse 6). They are God's servants (verse 7); He is Himself God (verse 8).

*Verse 10.* In verses 10-12, the writer of Hebrews continued his use of the Septuagint to demonstrate the superiority of the Son over the angels. In these verses, he quoted Psalm 102:25-27. In the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 102 is a prayer of distress, with the psalmist being the speaker throughout the entire psalm. But interpretation of the passage in Hebrews is complicated by the Septuagint, in which the psalmist is the speaker only through verse 22. From verse 23 through the end of the psalm, God is the speaker. Since the writer of Hebrews used verses 25-27 to refer to the Son, does this mean the writer intended his readers to understand that God is the spokesman in Hebrews 1:10-12 and that He is speaking to the Son?

If God were the spokesman in the immediately preceding verses (Hebrews 1:6-9), it would argue strongly that He is still the spokesman in verses 10-12. This would mean God refers to the Son as Lord (Hebrew *Yahweh*, or Jehovah) and that He uses the perspective and words of the human psalmist to talk with the Son. For the following reasons, however, this is doubtful, even though the writer of Hebrews used the Septuagint and even though in the Septuagint the speaker at this point is God.

First, the immediately preceding context in which Hebrews quotes Psalm 102:25-27 does not have God as the spokesman. (See comments on verses 6-9.) If God is to be the spokesman in verses 10-12, there should be some clear textual indication of it.

Second, verse 10 does not introduce a spokesman at all but flows immediately from the quotation of Psalm 45:6-7 in verses 8-9. Verse 8 does not identify a spokesman; the translators supplied "he says," but the

spokesman in the quoted text is the psalmist. The last spokesman identified is in verse 7, where it is the psalmist. Immediately before that, verse 6 identifies the spokesman, where it is also the psalmist. Within the passage quoted in verses 10-12, there is no hint that the spokesman is God.

Third, though the writer of Hebrews made inspired use of the Septuagint, he limited his use to a specific, clearly identifiable purpose. As F. F. Bruce pointed out, Hebrews uses two different forms of the Septuagint, corresponding by and large to two early variants. Though we could speculate that the author used a form of the Septuagint earlier than either, and from which the two are derived, he sometimes deviated from both forms and “appears to have selected his variants for interpretational purposes.”<sup>18</sup>

In other words, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, the writer of Hebrews sometimes used one version of the Septuagint, sometimes another, and sometimes apparently neither. He may in some cases have supplied his own translation. His chief purpose, then, was not necessarily to endorse a specific contextual meaning as found in the Septuagint, but to make use of old covenant terminology to demonstrate that even the covenant now superseded declared the Son of God to be superior to the angels. In other words, it was not a radically new idea that the angels were inferior to the Son.

This discussion raises the question of the reliability of the Septuagint as a translation. In some cases, New Testament writers quoted the Septuagint; in others, they apparently provided their own translation from the Hebrew. The quality of translation in the Septuagint is not even;

some books are more carefully translated than others.

If we keep in mind that the writers of the New Testament were inspired of God equally with the original writers of the Old Testament, it will help us understand their use of Old Testament passages. The Holy Spirit directed their use of the Hebrew Scriptures. If the Holy Spirit wished to invest new meaning into the words of Old Testament prophecies, or if He wished to use the essence of an Old Testament prophecy and add additional significance to it by adopting the reading of the Septuagint or any other translation (including that of the human authors of the New Testament), He was certainly free to do so. The words were His. There may be an analogy here to the way a human author can revisit words he has previously written and revise them to take on new or additional meaning. In the case of Scripture, of course, the words of the New Testament are inspired of God and are thus without error, just as the words of the Old Testament.

When the New Testament quotes the Old Testament in any form, we must interpret the New Testament statement in its New Testament context. If the New Testament quotes the Hebrew Scriptures and claims they are fulfilled in a specific New Testament event, we may gain additional insight from the Old Testament context as well. But in this case the interpreter must be certain the New Testament actually claims the Hebrew Scripture is *fulfilled* in the New Testament event.

We must remember that the inspiration of Scripture ended with the writing of the last book of the New Testament by the apostle John. (See Revelation 22:18-19.) For that reason, we do not have the authority today to invest

new meaning into the Old Testament Scriptures. No one in our day is inspired equally with the writers of the New Testament to expand on the meaning of any inspired writing. The task before today's interpreter is to seek to understand all of Scripture in its original context.

Since the immediate context of the quote from Psalm 102:25-27 here in Hebrews does not suggest God is the speaker, and since the actual Hebrew text of Psalm 102 has the psalmist as the speaker throughout, it seems best to view the speaker in verses 10-12 as the psalmist. If the writer of Hebrews intended to suggest that God was the speaker, it seems he would have begun his quote from the Septuagint at Psalm 102:23 so as to remove any question.

The point of verse 10, then, is that the Son is better than the angels because He laid the foundation of the earth and the heavens are the work of His hands. It is interesting, though, that when the writer of Hebrews addressed the Creator, he identified Him—from the Septuagint—as Lord. The Jewish readers of Hebrews would have understood this word as a reference to Yahweh (“Jehovah,” KJV). Why did the author not address Him as “Son,” as in verses 5 and 8?

It seems significant that, in speaking directly of creation, the writer of Hebrews did not use the term “Son,” but “Lord.” (See comments on 1:2.) Although the Son, as God manifest in flesh, is the Creator, when discussing the creation of all things, the author identified Him as “Lord” (Yahweh). Creation preexisted the Incarnation, and the term “Son” can be used only in conjunction with the Incarnation. Every reference to the Son in Hebrews has to do with the Incarnation, whether as occurring at the moment viewed in the writer's mind or as already having

occurred. (See verses 2, 5, 8.) The word “Son” is not used of preincarnate deity. If the writer of Hebrews had used “Son” in verse 10 to refer to the Creator, it would have been his first use of “Son” to refer to an event prior to the Incarnation.

The Son is better than the angels because He is Yahweh who created all things, including the angels.

*Verses 11-12.* Though creation itself will age and perish, Yahweh will not. As the Creator, He has the ability, in a figure of speech, to “fold up” creation and to change it. (See II Peter 3:10-11.) Yahweh, however, is immutable, or unchangeable. (See Malachi 3:6; James 1:17.)

*Verse 13.* Here the writer of Hebrews returned to an Old Testament passage in which God is the spokesman, as in verses 5-6. In this case, the quotation is from Psalm 110:1: “The LORD [Yahweh] said to my Lord [Adonai], Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool” (NKJV). Psalm 110 is a Messianic psalm of great significance, for the New Testament quotes it several times. (See Matthew 22:41-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44; Acts 2:34-35; Hebrews 10:12-13.) Psalm 110:1 does not imply a preincarnational conversation between two persons; it is prophecy fulfilled in the exaltation of Christ as a result of His willing humiliation. (See Philippians 2:5-11.)

It is significant that the psalmist wrote that Yahweh spoke to Adonai, rather than Yahweh spoke to Yahweh. Although God incarnate certainly is Yahweh in human existence, the psalmist distinguished between the preincarnational and incarnational states of God’s existence by the use of Yahweh and Adonai. Though the psalmist reported what Yahweh would say to the Messiah upon His exaltation, the psalmist did not indicate that Yahweh Him-

self called the Messiah “Adonai.” The psalmist reported the conversation from *his* perspective: “Yahweh said to *my* Adonai. . . .” Just as the prayers of Jesus were genuine prayers arising out of His authentic humanity (Hebrews 5:7), so Yahweh’s statement to the exalted Messiah reflects the genuine humanity of the latter. It in no way suggests a radical separation between the Messiah’s divine nature and Yahweh; the Messiah *is* Yahweh in human existence. (See comments on verse 10.) Deity cannot be compartmentalized or fragmented.

As mysterious as the great miracle of the Incarnation is (I Timothy 3:16), however, the prayers of Jesus and the prophetic conversations between Yahweh and the Messiah give powerful evidence that Jesus’ humanity was not merely an appearance or a charade. No human analogy will serve to illustrate adequately the workings of this mystery. Nevertheless, humans are created in the image of God, and a person can consult with himself without positing a radical division within his being. If this is so, surely God can do the same, especially considering that He added a complete human nature to His existence as God. (See Philippians 2:5-11.)

The Son is better than the angels, for He alone has the privilege of sitting at the right hand of God and anticipating the complete subjugation of all His enemies. (See comments on 1:3.) Angels do not sit in God’s presence; they stand (Luke 1:19).

*Verse 14.* The writer again pointed out that angels are ministering spirits. (See comments on verse 7.) Their sole purpose for existence is to serve. They serve God by serving those who will inherit salvation. (See Psalm 34:7; Acts 5:19; 8:26; 12:7, 11; I Corinthians 4:9; 11:10.) Their

inferiority to the Son is thus evident, for they are required even to serve His brethren. (See 2:10-11.)

By a series of quotations from the Old Testament, the writer of Hebrews proved conclusively that the Son is superior to the angels. This fact was particularly significant to his Jewish readership, for they had great respect for angels in view of their role in giving the law of Moses. (See 2:2-3.) The writer diligently prepared his readers to consider that the immeasurable superiority of the Son over the angels translates directly into the equivalent superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant.

## **2. His Superiority is Shown by His Message (2:1-4)**

*(1) Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. (2) For if the word spoken by angels was stedfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompence of reward; (3) how shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; (4) God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?*

If the Son is superior to the angels, it logically follows that the covenant given through angels is inferior to the covenant established by the Son. The letter to the Hebrews was written to Jewish Christians in danger of



reverting to the law of Moses, and the writer urged them to consider that there will be no escaping the consequences of abandoning the ultimate covenant, the new covenant, in favor of a covenant that was merely a shadow. (See Hebrews 10:1; Colossians 2:16-17.)

*Verse 1.* The writer used the first person plural pronoun “we,” identifying himself with his readers. Although this use may not be conclusive, it seems from this, and from his use of “us” in 1:2, that the writer was Jewish. We find further support by his reference to the “fathers” and the “prophets” (1:1). Certainly the writer himself was in no danger of defecting from the new covenant, so his identification with his readers could not be due to the possibility of shared apostasy. It must, then, be due to a shared heritage. The general tenor of his discussion of the law of Moses indicates that he was one of those to whom the law was given.

If the Jewish people were earnest in their identification with the old covenant, they should be even more earnest in their complete and exclusive adherence to the new covenant. The obvious reason is that the new covenant is superior to the old covenant, as demonstrated by the old covenant’s being given by the mediatorship of angels (verse 2), whereas the new covenant was established by the Son of God Himself without the aid of angels.

The writer’s reference to “the things we have heard” (NKJV) has to do with the gospel itself, which those who personally heard the Lord Jesus confirmed to the writer and his readers (verse 3). A failure to earnestly heed the message of the new covenant would result in the first-century Jewish Christians drifting away and, by implication,

drifting back to the old covenant. Since there can be no mixing of the covenants (Hebrews 10:9; Romans 7:4), the writer encouraged his readers to avoid any drift; their loyalties belonged exclusively to Jesus Christ and the covenant He established in His blood. (See Matthew 26:28.)

*Verse 2.* On Mount Sinai, God gave the law to Moses through angels. (See Galatians 3:19-20.) The Hebrew Scriptures do not record the angels' role, but the Jewish people knew this fact and preserved it through their oral history. That God used angels as messengers and servants in giving the law to Moses uniquely suited the purpose of the writer of Hebrews. Since God used angels in giving the old covenant but gave the new covenant by His Son, the superiority of the new covenant is established. Though we can see the preeminence of the new covenant by comparing its contents and provisions to those of the old covenant, it is not necessary to compare the covenants themselves to see that the new covenant is better. It is enough to compare the spokesmen who delivered the covenants.

The old covenant was steadfast, for the angels spoke only what God told them. (See Psalm 103:20.) The covenant was in no way diminished or weakened from its intended purpose by God's delivering it to Moses by the agency of angels.

The law of Moses specified penalties for each infraction of its commands. No violation was overlooked. Failure to adhere to any one of its 613 commandments resulted in some specific penalty. These penalties were "just" in that they were uniquely suited to the nature of the infraction. Some sins were worthy of physical death,

others of lesser punishment. To the limits of its intended purpose, the law was not too harsh or too lenient. Those who received punishment deserved their reward.

This truth may be difficult to grasp in a society where the perpetrators of the most violent crimes are somehow cast in the role of victims. But the fact is that the just reward for all sin is death, or spiritual separation from God. (See Romans 6:23.)

*Verse 3.* If those who transgressed the law of Moses did not escape their just punishment, and if the new covenant is superior to the law, how much less shall anyone escape the consequences of neglecting “so great a salvation” (NKJV), or such a peerless covenant? The neglect the writer had in mind is the drifting away he mentioned in verse 1. His readers were apparently not in danger of simple backsliding; they were in danger of turning away from reliance upon Jesus Christ for salvation and returning to self-reliance under the works-oriented system of the law of Moses. (See Hebrews 10:28-32.)

The “great salvation” of the new covenant was first offered by the Lord Jesus (cf. 1:2-3); it was later confirmed to the readers of the letter to the Hebrews by those who had heard Jesus themselves. This statement indicates that neither the writer of the letter nor his readers were first-generation believers in the sense that they heard Jesus themselves. They had believed on Jesus through the words of others. (See John 17:20.) This fact suggests that neither the writer nor the readers of this letter lived in Judea.

The writer did not specify the penalty for neglect of the salvation proclaimed by Jesus Christ, but it must be in keeping with the nature of the new covenant itself.

The old covenant was a temporal covenant having to do exclusively with the life of the Jewish people in the land promised to Abraham. It made no promise of eternal life. Its penalties were thus temporal, or earthly. (See Deuteronomy 28.) But the new covenant promises eternal life in heaven in the presence of God for those who believe and obey. (See John 3:16.) The penalty for neglect of this new covenant must, then, be the loss of its greatest promise: eternal life. In order to retain the salvation offered by the new covenant, the believer must keep his faith in and reliance upon Jesus Christ exclusively. Any drifting away from Jesus Christ will have devastating consequences. (See Hebrew 6:4-6; 10:26-31.)

*Verse 4.* The message of great salvation, first declared by Jesus Christ, then by those who heard Him, was confirmed (cf. verse 3) by means of signs and wonders, various miracles, and a variety of gifts of the Holy Spirit. This confirmation is in keeping with Jesus' promise in Mark 16:17-18 and with Mark's further declaration that the disciples "went out and preached everywhere, the Lord working with them and confirming the word through the accompanying signs" (Mark 16:20, NKJV). Nowhere does the New Testament ridicule the value of signs and wonders; God intends for these marvelous works of His to draw the attention of people to the claims of Christ and to confirm that those claims are true. References to signs and wonders are common from the Day of Pentecost forward. (See Acts 2:22, 43; 4:29-30; 5:12; 14:3; Romans 15:19; II Corinthians 12:12).

When the nobleman whose son was at the point of death in Capernaum asked Jesus to heal his son, Jesus

answered, "Except ye see signs and wonders, ye will not believe" (John 4:48). Some have thought these words to be a rebuke, but it seems better to understand them as a simple statement of fact. Jesus did, after all, proceed to heal the boy. Jesus recognized that, in addition to the very real help they give to hurting people, signs and wonders are a great aid to faith.

Indeed, John, explaining the purpose behind his book, said: "And many other signs truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: but these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God; and that believing ye might have life through his name" (John 20:30-31).

Satan has a counterfeit to the miracle-working power of God, and there will as a result be false signs and wonders. (See Matthew 24:24; Mark 13:22; II Thessalonians 2:9.) But the sincere Christian who allows the Bible to be his final authority, who confesses the absolute deity of Jesus Christ, and whose interest in signs and wonders is to bring glory to the true God and to minister to those in need does not have to fear the spurious. He will remember that Jesus said, "If ye then, being evil, know how to give good gifts unto your children: how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to them that ask him?" (Luke 11:13). Those who, in sincere faith, ask God for the Holy Spirit, or, as Matthew put it, "good things" (Matthew 7:11), need not fear that they will receive a counterfeit.

Since the writer of Hebrews used the plural form for "gifts" of the Holy Spirit, he must have had in mind something beyond the initial gift of the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 2:38.) In the context of signs and wonders and miracles,

it seems reasonable that he had in mind the spiritual gifts given to believers to enable them to minister with unusual effectiveness to others. (See I Corinthians 12-14.)

We must remember that God performs all His works according to His will. God is sovereign; He knows what is best in every situation. For that matter, believers must always pray for the will of God to be done. (See Matthew 6:10; 26:42; Romans 1:10; James 4:15; I John 5:14.) To assume to know what is best in a given situation, and to attempt to order God to act according to one's own opinion, is the height of presumption. God is immutable (unchanging), and He will not be deterred from doing His will by the whim of anyone. Any apparent change in God is due to His own immutable character, or to the way He has predetermined to do certain things or to respond in certain situations. Even Nineveh's famed repentance did not change God's mind; it is His unchanging nature to refrain from punishing those who repent. (See Jeremiah 18:7-11.) References to God repenting are examples of anthropomorphic language; His actions are described in human terms or as they appear to human beings.

### **3. His Superiority Is Shown by the Incarnation (2:5-18)**

*(5) For unto the angels hath he not put in subjection the world to come, whereof we speak. (6) But one in a certain place testified, saying, What is man, that thou art mindful of him? or the son of man, that thou visitest him? (7) Thou madest him a little lower than the angels; thou crownedst him with glory and hon-*

*our, and didst set him over the works of thy hands: (8) thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet. For in that he put all in subjection under him, he left nothing that is not put under him. But now we see not yet all things put under him. (9) But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honour; that he by the grace of God should taste death for every man. (10) For it became him, for whom are all things, and by whom are all things, in bringing many sons unto glory, to make the captain of their salvation perfect through sufferings. (11) For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren, (12) saying, I will declare thy name unto my brethren, in the midst of the church will I sing praise unto thee. (13) And again, I will put my trust in him. And again, Behold I and the children which God hath given me. (14) Forasmuch then as the children are partakers of flesh and blood, he also himself likewise took part of the same; that through death he might destroy him that had the power of death, that is, the devil; (15) and deliver them who through fear of death were all their lifetime subject to bondage. (16) For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham. (17) Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people. (18) For in that he himself hath suffered being tempted, he is able to succour them that are tempted.*

The final example the writer of Hebrews gave as to the superiority of the Son of God over angels concerns the Incarnation. Although the Son of God is God manifest in genuine, authentic, and complete humanity (I Timothy 3:16), and although human beings are “a little lower than the angels” (2:7, 9), Jesus is “crowned with glory and honour” (verse 9.)

*Verse 5.* The Septuagint translation of Deuteronomy 32:8 indicates that God has subjected this present world to angels: “When the Most High divided the nations, when he separated the sons of Adam, he set the bounds of the nations according to the number of the angels of God.” Since the writer of Hebrews frequently appealed to the Septuagint, it may be that he had this reference in mind when he declared that God “has not put the world to come . . . in subjection to angels.” Angelic administration over specific nations of the world is further suggested by references to “the prince of the kingdom of Persia” and “the prince of Grecia” (Daniel 10:13, 20). The archangel Michael is “one of the chief princes” and the prince of Israel (Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1). This latter reference, in conjunction with Deuteronomy 32:9, suggests that while God has given other angels some kind of administrative responsibility over the various nations of the world, He has given Michael this responsibility over Israel.

Colossians 1:16 reinforces the idea of angelic administration over the nations of the world: “For by Him all things were created that are in heaven and that are on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or principalities or powers. All things were created through Him and for Him” (NKJV). This verse indicates that there are both visible (human) and invisible (angelic)



realms of government. The many facets of God's wisdom are "made known by the church to the principalities and powers in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 3:10, NKJV), an apparent reference to these angelic authorities.

A number of these angelic rulers must have joined Lucifer in his rebellion against God's authority (Isaiah 14:12-16; Ezekiel 28:11-17; Revelation 12:4, 7-9), for they are described as the enemies of God and of His people. (See Roman 8:38; Ephesians 6:12; Colossians 2:15.) This explains the difficulty the angel dispatched to Daniel had with the "prince of the kingdom of Persia" and the difficulty he expected with the "prince of Grecia." Even though God, for His own sovereign purposes, has to this point allowed these fallen angelic rulers to retain an influence over specific nations of the world, those angels faithful to God are able to gain victory over them when on a mission for God. (See Daniel 10:13, 21; 12:1.) It may be that the kingdoms shaken by Lucifer in his fall are those nations ruled by the angels who joined him in his rebellion (Isaiah 14:16). Even in Ezekiel 28, in the detailed description of Lucifer's fall, he is identified as the "king of Tyre" (verse 12). Therefore, the "kings" before whom this fallen angel was laid in disgrace may be the other angelic rulers (Ezekiel 28:17). The angels sent by God to "gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other" (Matthew 24:31, NKJV), may be those angelic rulers who remained faithful to Him. They will search, among the nations of the world for which they are responsible, for those who believe in the Messiah Jesus.

We see the superiority of the Son of God over the angels in that the "world to come," or the ultimate and

final age, will be under subjection to Him, not to angels. (See 1:2-3 and Revelation 11:15.) The Dead Sea Scrolls may indicate a belief that the world to come will be subject to Michael and those angels subordinate to him.<sup>19</sup> If so, the writer of Hebrews disproved this view.

The writer's theme to this point is "the world to come" ("of which we speak"). He began to address this theme in 1:2 and, although in an interlude he discussed in great detail the superiority of the Son of God over the angels, he continued to address the future age. (See also 6:5.)

*Verses 6-8.* The writer of Hebrews quoted a portion of Psalm 8 to demonstrate that though human beings are made "a little lower than the angels," they are destined to rule over all God has made. In its context in the Hebrew Scriptures, Psalm 8 seems to refer to the dominion God originally intended for humans to have over creation. (See Genesis 1:26-28; Psalm 8:6-8.) Although Adam's sin marred this dominion (Genesis 3:17-19; Romans 5:12), and thus it is not currently operative (Romans 8:20; Hebrews 2:8b), it will be restored through the Atonement and the exaltation of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 2:9-10).

It seems that in this case the writer of Hebrews used this portion of Psalm 8 as a Messianic reference. Although the Messiah is the Son of God, He is also the Son of Man—a genuine human being—and He is thus one who has been made "a little lower than the angels" and yet "crowned . . . with glory and honour" (verses 7, 9). It is His destiny to be set over the works of God's hands and to have all things put in subjection under His feet. Although "we do not yet see all things put under him" (I Corinthians 15:24-26; Hebrews 10:13), it is clear that this dominion is His ultimate destiny. As Paul point-

ed out, “Christ . . . is over all, the eternally blessed God” (Romans 9:5, NKJV). We see the superiority of the Son of God over the angels in that, although in the Incarnation He assumed “a little lower” status as a human being, ultimately He will rule over all creation, including the angels themselves.

*Verse 9.* The chief purpose of the Incarnation was to provide a substitutionary sacrifice for the sins of humanity. Here is the first time the name “Jesus” appears in the letter to the Hebrews. Jesus is the Son of God of whom the writer spoke to this point. Since Psalm 8 identifies human existence as being “a little lower than the angels” (verse 7), this verse reinforces the genuineness of Jesus’ humanity. To be made “a little lower than the angels” is to be made a human being. As a result of the Messiah’s willing surrender to “the suffering of death” (Philippians 2:8), He is “crowned with glory and honour.”

Some suppose this verse suggests that Jesus tasted death for everyone after He was crowned with glory and honor. In this view, His crowning preceded His death. But it is clear elsewhere that the exaltation of Jesus followed His humiliation. (See Philippians 2:8-9; Acts 2:23, 32-33.) It seems better to understand this verse as follows: the purpose of the Incarnation, the suffering, and the crowning of Jesus Christ was to make His death, by the grace of God, efficacious for every human being. As F. F. Bruce put it, “Because the Son of Man suffered, because His suffering has been crowned by His exaltation, therefore His death avails for all.”<sup>20</sup>

The glory with which Jesus is crowned is apparently the Shekinah glory that was from time to time visibly manifest to the nation of Israel. (See Exodus 16:10;

24:17; 40:34; I Kings 8:11.) Since the Shekinah was the glory of God, it came to represent God Himself to the Jewish people. When James wrote that Jesus Christ is the “Lord of glory” (James 2:1), he meant that Jesus is the visible manifestation of the invisible God. (See Hebrews 1:3.) The “honour” with which Jesus is crowned is His exaltation to “the right hand of the Majesty on high.” (See comments on 1:3.)

The “grace of God” is God’s free gift of salvation that comes upon all who place their faith in the atoning work of Christ Jesus. (See Titus 2:11.)

The blood of Jesus did not provide merely a “limited atonement” for some. Rather, He tasted death “for every man.” Jesus’ death was of infinite value, for He was God as well as man. Therefore, His death satisfies God’s righteous judgment against the sins of the whole world. (See I John 2:2; John 1:29.)

*Verse 10.* In His infinite wisdom, God knew that the only fitting or appropriate solution to the sin problem that plagued the human race and that a human being had introduced (Romans 5:12), was the Incarnation. Since, in its origin and effect, sin is essentially a human problem, only a human being could solve it. But the difficulty was that all human beings were marred by sin (Romans 3:23), and thus no one was qualified to reverse the effects of sin inaugurated by the prototypical man, Adam. God’s plan was to bring “many sons to glory,” and He determined that the only fitting way to do so was to lead these human sons to glory by a “captain” who was like them in every way except by participation in the sin nature. (See verses 14, 17-18 and Romans 8:3.)

God is the *reason* for the existence of all things (“for

whom are all things”) and the *author* of the existence of all things (“by whom are all things”). (See Romans 11:36.) This description removes any idea that the universe came into being by a cosmic and purposeless accident and also any Gnostic idea that God Himself was distant and removed from actual creation. The writer of Hebrews had already pointed out, by the exact grammatical expression translated “by whom” (*di’ hou*) here, that God made the worlds through the Son. (See comments on 1:2.) In other words, the Son is the Creator in 1:2, while God is the Creator in 2:10. Thus the writer of Hebrews asserted not only the humanity of the Son, but also His deity.

The purpose of God that made the Incarnation necessary was His goal of “bringing many sons to glory” (NKJV). This phrase refers to the ultimate glorification of the sons of God that will occur in conjunction with the appearing of Jesus Christ. (See Romans 8:18, 21, 23; I Corinthians 15:20, 43; Philippians 3:21; Colossians 1:27; 3:4; I John 3:2.) In order to bring human beings to this state of glory, they must be led by one of their own. (See verses 14, 17-18.) Since no sinful human being can lead others to this state of glorification, it was necessary for God Himself to assume genuine and complete humanity in order to accomplish His purpose. (See I Timothy 3:16; John 1:1, 14.) Thus Jesus (verse 9) is the Captain of salvation for all human beings.

The word “captain” is translated from the Greek *archegon*, which has the idea of “one who leads off.” In Acts 3:15, the same word is translated “prince,” describing Jesus as the “Prince of life.” Inherent in this idea of Jesus being the “captain” of salvation for human beings is

that He Himself shares completely in human nature. It would be quite impossible for human beings to follow the lead of One who had nothing in common with them. In other words, if Jesus had only a divine nature, it would be hopeless to ask human beings to identify with Him in any way. There is a great ontological chasm between God and man. God is the infinite, uncaused, uncreated origin of all things. Man is finite and created. This may be described as the Creator-creature distinction, and it is established in Genesis 1:1. There is no possibility of humans crossing this chasm to become divine; only God, for whom all things are possible, could cross the chasm to become man.

It may seem strange to think of Jesus as genuinely and completely human since He did not share in the sin nature. But this problem assumes that it is inherent in the human nature to be sinful. That is not so. Adam and Eve were both genuine, complete human beings, but they did not possess the sin nature until they rebelled against God. Actually, the humanity of us all is now marred by sin. In that sense, it is less than what God originally intended it to be. But the humanity of Jesus, like that of Adam before the Fall, was not marred by sin. This is one reason Jesus is identified as the “last Adam” (I Corinthians 15:45).

In view of Jesus’ sinlessness (Romans 8:3; Hebrews 4:15), the idea that He was made “perfect through sufferings” is jarring. Jesus was morally perfect from His conception in Mary’s womb onward. The word “perfect” is translated from a form of the Greek *teleios*, which has to do with maturity or completeness. The idea here is the same as in Luke 2:52, which records that the boy Jesus “increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God

and men” (NKJV). Moral perfection is not in view, but the genuineness of the Messiah’s humanity is. Jesus shared in the full range of human experiences, including temptation. (See verse 18; 4:15.) He was made “perfect,” or complete, in relation to His humanity by participating fully in the human condition, including suffering. (See 5:8-9.)

*Verse 11.* It is Jesus who sanctifies (9:13-14; 10:14; 13:12), or who sets people apart unto God and from sin. By the Incarnation, Jesus identifies so completely with human beings that He and they “are all of one.” Thus there can be no difference between Jesus’ humanity and that of the human race at large, except His exemption from the sin nature. (See comments on verse 10.) Because He stands in absolute solidarity with the human race, “He is not ashamed to call them brethren” (NKJV). The marvel of the redemptive plan is that in order to bring many sons to glory (verse 10), God was willing to stoop to become one of us. (See Philippians 2:5-8.) Since we could not come to Him, He came to us.

*Verse 12.* The writer of Hebrews quoted the Septuagint translation of Psalm 22:22. This Messianic psalm (poetic prophecy about the coming Messiah), which by definition addresses the Messiah’s humanity rather than His deity, shows Him declaring His solidarity with the human race even to the point of lifting up His voice in praise to God “in the midst of the assembly” (NKJV), or in the same way that human beings lift up their voices as they assemble to praise God.

It is essential to note here that the Messiah’s conversation with God arises from His human nature, not from His deity. A reading of Psalm 22 demands this understanding.

(See, for example, Psalm 22:9-10.) It is not a picture of one divine person speaking to another, but of a genuinely human Messiah speaking to God just as surely as any human being would.

The writer's point in quoting Psalm 22:22 is to reinforce and demonstrate the identification of the Messiah with His human peers ("My brethren"), a theme that has continued since verse 9. (See comments on 1:9.) The phrase "in the midst of the assembly" underscores His identification with those who assemble to praise God; He is one of them so completely that He joins them in praising God. This description offers insight regarding the prayers of Jesus. (See 5:7.) They were not conversations between persons in the Godhead, nor were they a mere charade. They demonstrate Messiah's full participation in human existence; if He had no need for prayer, He would not have been human.

We must understand the Messiah's declaration of God's name to His brethren (human beings) in the context of the Hebrew idea of "name," sometimes called "name theology." (See comments on 1:4.) The Jewish readers of this letter understood the statement that the Messiah declared God's "name" to His brethren to mean that the Messiah declared God Himself. There is no idea in Hebrew thought of a name being a mere appellation or label by which one is known. A person *is* his name. This idea lingers somewhat in statements like "He has a good name." In prayer, Jesus said, "I have manifested Your name to the men whom You have given Me out of the world" (John 17:6, NKJV). This was another way of saying Jesus manifested God Himself. (See John 1:18; I Timothy 3:16; Hebrews 1:3.) It is certainly true that the



name “Jesus” incorporates the name “Yahweh,” the name of God revealed in the Hebrew Scriptures, but the idea here is that Jesus was God made known in human existence.

*Verse 13.* Again, the writer quoted from the Septuagint, this time Isaiah 8:17-18. Both references reinforce the theme begun in verse 9: the Messiah is a genuine human being who, like other human beings, puts His trust in God. He credits God with having given Him “the children” (those human beings who have believed on Him, verse 14) He has. (See John 17:6.) Though it remains a great mystery, Jesus Christ was at once both God and man, with His deity uncompromised by His human nature and with His human nature uncompromised by His deity.

Throughout the centuries, many have attempted to explain this miracle, but no explanation has been completely satisfactory. Many of the attempts have erred by compromising either the completeness of Christ’s deity or the genuineness of His humanity. The Christologies that are most satisfactory are those which limit their expressions to what was *not* the case rather than to how the Incarnation functioned. Since God has not chosen in Scripture to explain the relationship of the deity and humanity in the Messiah, we can only speculate. But our speculations must never violate scriptural teaching; they must confess that Jesus was both God and man.

*Verse 14.* Since human beings partake of “flesh and blood,” the Messiah “shared in the same” (NKJV). His was not some unique flesh and blood, some new or different flesh and blood created by God outside of Mary’s womb and deposited within her. No surrogate mother was she, no mere incubator who contributed nothing to the birth

of the Messiah. (See comments on 1:5.) Jesus shared “in the *same*” flesh and blood, although He was spared the sin nature. Romans 8:3 says He came “in the likeness of sinful flesh.” If Paul had said Jesus was made *in sinful flesh*, he would have compromised the sinlessness of Christ. If he had said Jesus was made *in the likeness of flesh*, he would have compromised His humanity. So he said Jesus was made *in the likeness of sinful flesh*, thus preserving both His humanity and His sinlessness.

The reason for the Incarnation was to provide a legitimate basis for the destruction of Satan. Adam, who could have resisted Satan’s temptation, abdicated his ability to conquer Satan by his rebellion against God. Jesus, the last Adam, suffered the ultimate penalty of sin—death—and by His resurrection from the dead wrested Satan’s most powerful weapon out of his hand. (See I John 3:8.) Jesus rendered Satan defenseless. (See Colossians 2:15.)

*Verse 15.* Jesus’ victory over death, which is Satan’s ultimate weapon, brings release to all those who suffered under bondage through fear of death. Since Christ is the “firstfruits” from the dead (I Corinthians 15:20) and the “captain” who will lead “many sons to glory” (verse 10), He has removed death’s sting. (See I Corinthians 15:54-57.) The writer of Hebrews thus asserted his belief in the resurrection of the dead.

*Verse 16.* Most translations since the King James Version render this verse something like “For indeed He does not give aid to angels, but He does give aid to the seed of Abraham” (NKJV) rather than the incarnational translation of the KJV: “For verily he took not on *him the nature of angels*; but he took on *him* the seed of Abraham.” The italicized words are not in the Greek text; they are sup-

plied by the KJV translators. Apparently the KJV translators were influenced by the contextual emphasis on the Incarnation. But the writer used the same Greek word here translated “give aid” (NKJV) to describe the way God took Israel by the hand to lead them out of Egypt (8:9). Since the focus in the context is on the way the Messiah ministers to His fellow human beings (see especially verse 18) as their High Priest (verse 17), the current translations are grammatically and contextually accurate. The Messiah’s mission is not to aid angels, but to aid “the seed of Abraham,” an obvious reference to all who believe, whether Jew or Gentile. (See Galatians 3:7, 29; Romans 4:9-12.)

*Verse 17.* The Messiah’s identification with human beings is complete. He was made like us “in all things.” The Incarnation was necessary so Jesus could function as “a merciful and faithful high priest.” Being a high priest requires complete identification of the priest with those he represents. A priest could represent only those with whom he stood in solidarity. Here the writer introduced a major theme in his letter: the Messiah as High Priest. (See 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:1, 5, 10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1, 3; 9:7, 11, 25; 10:21; 13:11.) He thus pointed the attention of his readers away from the priesthood of the Mosaic system to a far superior High Priest. Like the high priest under the Levitical system, the Messiah was like his brethren as to His humanity (see comments on verse 12), but unlike the Levitical high priest, the Messiah brought God and humanity together in a miraculous union. It was completely unreasonable, therefore, for the readers of Hebrews to contemplate returning to a system with a merely human priest. The new covenant offers a High

Priest who unites God and man in One.

As the High Priest of a better covenant (8:6), Jesus is both merciful and faithful. He is merciful because He identified completely with the sufferings of those He represented (verses 10, 18). He is faithful because, unlike the priests of the Mosaic code, He submitted perfectly to God. (See 5:8.)

The priestly ministry of the Messiah was “in things pertaining to God.” The chief responsibility of the high priest in the Old Testament was to make “propitiation for the sins of the people.” Propitiation is something that satisfies the righteous demands of a holy God against sin. (See Romans 3:25; I John 2:2; 4:10.) The Greek word translated “propitiation” (*hilasterion*) is also translated “mercy seat” (Hebrews 9:5). Here, the writer of Hebrews followed the Septuagint in describing the mercy seat as the “propitiatory” in Exodus 25:18-22.

The mercy seat was the lid to the ark of the covenant upon which the high priest sprinkled blood on the Day of Atonement. (See Leviticus 16:14.) The sprinkling of this blood, which was a type of the blood of Jesus (Hebrews 9:12), atoned for the sins of Israel. (See Leviticus 16:15-17.) The word “atone,” as used in the English translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, means “to cover.” The blood of bulls and goats did not actually take away sin (Hebrews 10:4), but because this blood represented the blood of Jesus, it provided a temporary covering for sin until the Messiah came. On the basis of the “shadows” of the Messiah in the sacrificial system (Hebrews 8:5; 10:1; Colossians 2:17), God “passed over the sins that were previously committed” (Romans 3:25, NKJV), that is, those that were committed prior to the shedding of

Christ's blood. Perhaps we could say God held the sins of people of faith who lived during the era of the Mosaic covenant in abeyance until the Messiah came; then, upon the basis of the blood of Jesus, He forgave those sins, just as He does the sins of people of faith today. (See Hebrews 11:6, 39-40.)

Jesus is a better High Priest than any under the old covenant, for His blood did not merely cover sins temporarily. By His death, Jesus dealt with the sin problem once and for all. (See 10:10, 14.) Sin demanded death (Romans 3:23), and Jesus paid that penalty. Thus He completely satisfied the righteous judgment of God against sin and made it possible for God to show mercy on sinners.

*Verse 18.* Since Jesus has identified completely with the human race in suffering and experiencing temptation, "He is able to aid those who are tempted" (NKJV). (See Matthew 4:1-11; Hebrews 4:15; Isaiah 7:14-16; and comments on verse 16.) The Levitical high priest could empathize with those he represented, for he was one of them, but he was unable to aid them. Indeed, the Levitical high priest found it necessary to offer sacrifices for his own sins before he could offer sacrifices for the sins of the people he represented. (See 7:27.) The aid the Messiah gives is the release from the penalty of sin and bondage to sin, which He extends to those who place their faith exclusively in Him for salvation. (See Romans 6.)



# C.

## **Jesus Is Better Than Moses (3:1-6)**

*(1) Wherefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and High Priest of our profession, Christ Jesus; (2) who was faithful to him that appointed him, as also Moses was faithful in all his house. (3) For this man was counted worthy of more glory than Moses, inasmuch as he who hath builded the house hath more honour than the house. (4) For every house is builded by some man; but he that built all things is God. (5) And Moses verily was faithful in all his house, as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken after; (6) but Christ as a son over his own house; whose house are we, if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm unto the end.*

The writer of Hebrews here moved from his discussion of the superiority of Jesus over angels to another theme: the superiority of Jesus over Moses. He intended his readers to understand the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant, and he approached the subject from a variety of perspectives. We see the inferiority of the old covenant in that angels delivered it (2:2), whereas Jesus Christ delivered the new covenant (2:3). Now we

see the inferiority of the old covenant in that Jesus is better than he to whom God gave the old covenant, namely, Moses.

*Verse 1.* The writer focused the attention of his readers on the person of Christ Jesus. He called on them to “consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (NKJV). To say that Jesus is the “Apostle” signifies that God sent Him to represent God to humanity; to say that He is the “High Priest” indicates that He represents humans to God. (See Romans 8:34; I Timothy 2:5.)

Jesus is the Apostle and High Priest “of our confession” (NKJV). “Confession” is translated from *homologias*, which in this context seems to mean “that which is confessed,” or the content of new covenant faith, rather than “the act of confessing,” which the word could mean in other contexts. The essence of the new covenant faith is that we find salvation exclusively in the atoning work of Jesus Christ, who was both God and man.

The readers of this letter are called “holy brethren” and “partakers of the heavenly calling.” The first of these terms apparently refers back to the Messiah’s willingness to call believers His brethren. (See 2:11-12.) Here is an unspoken appeal to those who considered turning back to the provisions of the old covenant. If the Messiah, who is so much better than the angels, considers them to be His “holy brethren,” why would they want to return to a system that originated by the mediation of angels (2:2)?

Second, the readers of this letter were “partakers of the heavenly calling.” This description implies, in complete harmony with all the Scriptures have to say on the subject, that the old covenant gave an “earthly calling.” Although Old Testament saints had the hope of eternal



life, in itself the law of Moses made no promise of eternal life. The “life” it promised was long life in the land given to Abraham, upon the condition of obedience to the law’s demands. (See Exodus 20:12; Psalm 91:16; Proverbs 3:2.) Indeed, the commandment to honor one’s parents was the first commandment to contain a promise, and that promise was simply long life on the earth. (See Ephesians 6:2-3.) It was not reasonable to consider turning from a heavenly calling to a mere earthly one. The “heavenly calling” involves the ultimate glorification of the sons of God. (See comments on 2:10.)

The word translated “partakers” (*metochoi*), is translated “companions” (NKJV) in 1:9. Contextually, it indicates that believers become partakers by their identification with Jesus Christ. (See comments on 1:9.) They are “holy” (*hagioi*) because of the sanctification (*hagiazon*) Jesus has provided. (See comments on 2:11.)

The word “therefore” reflects upon all that has gone before. In view of the superiority of Jesus Christ over the prophets and the angels, the only reasonable response is to focus one’s attention exclusively upon Him. To return to the old covenant is to act irrationally; it would mean rejecting God’s ultimate revelation for one that was merely a shadow.

*Verse 2.* In a sense, the Messiah is the new Moses. Moses delivered ancient Israel from Egyptian slavery, and Moses gave the newly delivered nation the law. Thus the Hebrew people, including the recipients of this letter, had enormous respect for Moses. But Moses anticipated his own demise and declared that from among the people would come a prophet like him; Israel was to heed this prophet. (See Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19.) Although this

statement had immediate application to Joshua, the prophecy was ultimately fulfilled in Jesus Christ. (See Acts 3:22-23.) The first-century Jewish community anticipated the coming of this specific prophet. (See John 1:21, 25; 6:14; 7:40.) John apparently had this idea in mind when he wrote, “For the law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17).

The comparison between Moses and Jesus is especially significant given the Jewish nature of the original readership. Some of them contemplated turning away from the new covenant established in Christ’s blood and returning to the old covenant given by Moses at Sinai. (See discussion under “Purpose.”) But since Jesus was superior to Moses, this move would be unreasonable and spiritually fatal. The writer recognized the validity of Moses’ ministry, but he declared the ministry of Jesus to be superior to that of Moses.

Like Moses, Jesus Christ was faithful to the One who appointed Him. The writer of Hebrews did not denigrate Moses’ faithfulness in order to show his inferiority to Jesus, but he showed that Moses was in no way better than the Messiah. Why, then, return to Moses?

Moses was faithful “in all His house” (NKJV). The idea of stewardship over the house of God is the central theme of the passage. (See verses 3-6.) The statement concerning Moses’ faithfulness “in all His house” is drawn from Numbers 12:7. The Greek *oikos*, a form of which is translated “house,” can refer either to the dwelling place itself or to a “household” or family. It seems that “house” in Numbers 12:7 and here refers to the people of Israel themselves rather than to a literal

dwelling place like the Tabernacle.

It is interesting that Moses' disobedience to God in the matter of smiting the rock the second time, rather than speaking to it as God commanded, is not mentioned here. (See Numbers 20:7-13.) Mercy overwhelms judgment (James 2:13). In spite of the temporal consequence of Moses' sin (he was unable to enter the Promised Land), God counted him faithful.

*Verse 3.* The superiority of Jesus over Moses is now demonstrated. Jesus "has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses." Again, the writer's purpose is not to belittle Moses, but to exalt Jesus. Moses was worthy of glory, but the worthiness of Jesus surpassed that of Moses. In this context, Jesus is worthy of more honor than Moses for the same reason the builder of a house has more honor than the house itself. Thus Jesus is seen as the builder of the house (the nation of Israel) in which Moses was faithful.

In this verse, as in 2:7 and 9, "glory" (*doxa*) and "honor" (*time*) are virtual synonyms.

*Verse 4.* Every house has a builder, but the ultimate Builder is God. Apart from Him, nothing would exist. When we consider this verse with the previous verse, it seems clear that the writer of Hebrews declared the deity of Jesus Christ at this point. Jesus is worthy of more glory than Moses because the builder of the house has more honor than the house, and it is God who has built all things. In verse 3, the builder of the house (of Israel) is Jesus; in verse 4, God is the One who has built all things.

This statement harmonizes with the Son's role in creation as described in 1:2, 10. F. F. Bruce commented, "No

distinction can be made between the Father and the Son in this regard.”<sup>21</sup> If the Father is the Creator of all things (Malachi 2:10), and if the Son created all things (see comments on 1:2, 10), we can make no meaningful distinction between them pertaining to deity.

The only basis upon which we can make a distinction of any sort is the Incarnation. The identification of God as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ (e.g., Romans 15:6) underscores that in the Incarnation God added human existence to His unmitigated deity. Since this humanity was complete in every way, it incorporated all immaterial aspects of human existence, including the human spirit, mind, will, and emotions.

For this reason, the Bible often speaks of the Lord Jesus Christ in terms that seem to suggest a distinct identity from God the Father. The explanation for this language is not to posit a Godhead in which two distinct persons share equality. This approach solves nothing; it still does not explain how the Father can be the God of Jesus. However strongly it is denied, that approach implies some kind of inferiority or permanent subordination of Jesus to the Father.

The solution lies in another direction: the genuine humanity of Jesus. The humanity of Jesus was not a mere shell of a body lacking human integrity as it pertains to the inner man. There was no pretense in His human nature. Since this is true, He possessed a human consciousness and identity that did not exist prior to the Incarnation. We see this consciousness from His assumption of human nature onward. Without it, many biblical statements about Jesus are meaningless, such as Luke’s assertion that the boy “Jesus increased in wisdom and

stature, and in favor with God and men” (Luke 2:52, NKJV). Other examples are His prayers, such as, “O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39, NKJV); His statements of inferiority to the Father, such as, “I am going to the Father, for My Father is greater than I” (John 14:28, NKJV); His statements of dependence on the Father, such as, “The Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner” (John 5:19, NKJV); and the limitation of Jesus’ knowledge: “But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father” (Mark 13:32, NKJV).

If Jesus did not possess a complete human psyche, statements like the above would be empty, or they would imply permanent inferiority of one person in the Godhead to another. The only other alternative is to say that Jesus is merely human. Since none of these options are scripturally tenable, we must understand all biblical statements about the relationship of the Father to the Son in terms of the complete and authentic humanity of Jesus.

We must not suppose, however, that under any circumstance could His humanity exist apart from His deity: He was one fully integrated person, at once both God and man. But He had a human psyche not overwhelmed or consumed or eradicated by His deity. In the kenosis (self-emptying of the Incarnation, Philippians 2:7), God determined to limit His human nature to the experience of any human being. Only by so doing could He identify fully with us in our weaknesses and temptations. (See Hebrews 4:15.) The exercise of His human nature in such a way demands that, in the Incarnation, Christ be spoken of as

possessing a human identity distinct from God the Father. Doing so does not in any way compromise the deity of Christ or the radical monotheism of biblical theology, but it does give credit to the completeness and genuineness of His human nature. Any other explanation compromises the completeness of His deity or His humanity.

*Verse 5.* Moses was faithful in his responsibilities relating to the nation of Israel. His role was that of a servant, however, not that of the builder of the house. Both this verse and verse 2 say that Moses was faithful *in* all God's house. Even though Moses had a place of great honor and glory, he himself was nevertheless *in* the house together with all other Israelites. Christ is not merely *in* the house; He is the *Builder* of the house (verses 3-4), and He is *over* His own house (verse 6).

Moses' ministry was "for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward" (NKJV). This phrase indicates, as does 10:1, that the Mosaic system was a shadow of the realities found in the Messiah. (See also Colossians 2:16-17; Galatians 3:24.) After His resurrection, Jesus explained to His disciples the things pertaining to Him in the law. (See Luke 24:44-45.) The original readers of this letter should have seen that there was nothing in the Mosaic system to which to return; it was a system of shadows now replaced by substance.

*Verse 6.* Whereas Moses was faithful *in* all God's house (the nation of Israel) as a servant, Jesus Christ is "a Son *over* his own house" (NKJV). This idea continues the theme of the superiority of Jesus over Moses. A Son is greater than a servant. One who is *over* His own house is better than one who is *in* another's house. Indeed, as seen in the previous verse, the house in which Moses was

faithful was a mere shadow of the house of the Son.

Here it is clear that “house” refers not to a building but to people. The writer of Hebrews assured his Jewish readers, who considered defecting back to the inferior house of Moses, that they were the house of Christ. Why would they want to abandon the ultimate house, which the Son of God Himself administrates, for an inferior house they shared with Moses, who—although worthy of glory and honor—was nevertheless nothing more than one of them? The Son of God stands in solidarity with the human race, but by the miracle of the Incarnation He is God as well. (See comments on 1:3, 8, 10-12.)

The readers’ identity as the house of the Son is conditioned upon holding “fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end” (NKJV). In Greek, this phrase is a third-class condition, which introduces some question as to whether the condition will be met. (By contrast, a first-class condition assumes the reality of the condition.) The third-class condition “expresses that which is not really taking place but which probably will take place in the future.”<sup>22</sup> In view of the possible defection of the readers of this letter away from the new covenant and back to the law of Moses, this use of the third-class condition is especially significant. If the readers failed to meet the conditions, they would no longer be the Son’s house. Just as the old covenant and the new covenant cannot coexist (10:9), so it is impossible for one to be in the same house as Moses and to be in the Son’s house at the same time.

The conditions required to remain in the Son’s house are as follows: (1) one must “hold fast the confidence”; (2) one must not abandon “the rejoicing of the hope” (NKJV). First, one must keep his confidence in Christ

alone. Confidence placed in anyone or anything other than Christ for salvation is misplaced. Second, one must maintain his hope for salvation in the provisions of the new covenant. Those who base their hope upon the work of Christ on the cross have cause for rejoicing, for this hope will be fulfilled. Those who place their hope in an outmoded system like the law of Moses will be disappointed.

In keeping with the conditional nature of this statement, the writer declared that the conditions must be met “to the end.” Grammatically, this verse indicates that it is possible for one to be a part of the Son’s house but to lose that identification by casting away one’s confidence and hope. This interpretation agrees with the overall theme of the letter: Those who abandon Jesus Christ in favor of the Mosaic system cannot escape the consequences of their actions (2:3). (See also 6:4-6; 10:26-31.)



# D.

## **The Superiority of Jesus As the Ultimate Object of Faith (3:7-4:14)**

### **1. Tragedy of Unbelief (3:7-19)**

*(7) Wherefore (as the Holy Ghost saith, To day if ye will hear his voice, (8) harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: (9) when your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. (10) Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do alway err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. (11) So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) (12) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. (13) But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. (14) For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end; (15) while it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. (16) For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. (17) But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the*

*wilderness? (18) And to whom swear he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? (19) So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief.*

*Verses 7-11.* By a lengthy quote from the Septuagint translation of Psalm 95:7-11, the writer of Hebrews warned his Jewish readers against turning away from Jesus Christ and the new covenant established in His blood to return to the inferior covenant established at Sinai. (See also verses 12-14.)

Here is an example of a portion of the Hebrew Scriptures being given new meaning and significance in a New Testament context. (See comments on 1:10.) In their original context, the verses quoted here from Psalm 95 did not have to do with the danger of rejecting the new covenant for the old covenant. They had to do with the unbelief of the Israelites who accepted the evil report of ten of the twelve spies sent by Moses to investigate the Promised Land. (See Numbers 13-14.) Because the Israelites believed the report of the spies who claimed they could not successfully occupy the land instead of believing the promise of God, the entire nation—with the exception of Joshua and Caleb, the two spies who urged Israel to go ahead and possess the Promised Land—was sentenced to forty years of wandering in the wilderness between Egypt and Canaan.

Although the passage in Psalm 95 deals with the unbelief of ancient Israel and their subsequent inability to take possession of the land God had promised them, that scenario closely resembled the looming crisis among the Jewish readers of this New Testament letter.

The letter to the Hebrews was addressed to those who had been given the promise of the new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34), just as the ancient Israelites had been given the promise of the land. The readers of this letter were, however, considering turning away from this promised new covenant to return to what was inferior, just as the ancient Israelites turned away from the Promised Land and desired to return to Egypt. (See Numbers 14:2-4.) The comparison should not be lost on the first-century Jews; if they were wise, they would learn from the negative example of their ancestors. When God leads His children to new vistas of promise, it is fatal to resist.

F. F. Bruce pointed out that the exodus of Israel from Egypt parallels in some ways the redemption from sin made possible by Jesus. In this sense, we may speak of “the redemptive work of Christ . . . in terms of a new Exodus”:<sup>23</sup>

The death of Christ is itself called an “exodus” [Luke 9:31, where the Greek *exodos* is translated “decease”]; he is the true passover, sacrificed for His people [I Corinthians 5:7b], “a lamb without blemish and without spot” [I Peter 1:19]. They, like Israel in early days, are “the church in the wilderness” [Acts 7:38]; their baptism into Christ is the antitype of Israel’s passage through the Red Sea [I Corinthians 10:1]; their sacramental feeding on Him by faith is the antitype of Israel’s nourishment with manna and the water from the rock [I Corinthians 10:3]. Christ, the living Rock, is their guide through the wilderness [I Corinthians 10:4]; the

heavenly rest which lies before them is the counterpart to the earthly Canaan which was the goal of the Israelites.<sup>24</sup>

Such remarkable parallels as these are anticipated in the writer's earlier assertion that Moses' faithfulness was "for a testimony of those things which would be spoken afterward." (See comments on verse 5.) As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, "Now these things became our examples . . . and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come" (I Corinthians 10:6, 11, NKJV).

It is significant that the writer of Hebrews prefaced his quote from Psalm 95 with the words "as the Holy Spirit says" (verse 7). This phrase expresses his belief in the inspiration of the Hebrew Scriptures, and it squares perfectly with the statements of David himself, Jesus, and Peter as to the origin of the Psalms (the Septuagint identifies David as the author of Psalm 95). (See II Samuel 23:1-2; Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16.)

The appeal "Today, if you will hear His voice" (verse 7, NKJV) stresses that to hear is to understand and obey. The Hebrew *shema*, translated "hear" in Psalm 95:7, and the Greek *akouo*, in this verse, signify a hearing that results in obedience. (*Shema* appears in the great commandment of Deuteronomy 6:4.)

We see freedom of choice in the appeal not to "harden your hearts as in the rebellion" (verse 8, NKJV). In a similar passage, Paul discussed the hardening of Pharaoh's heart. It is true that God hardened Pharaoh's heart. (See Exodus 9:12; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:8.) It is also true that God told Moses and Aaron that He would harden

Pharaoh's heart (Exodus 7:3). But before Scripture ever records that God actually hardened Pharaoh's heart, it records that Pharaoh hardened his own heart. (See Exodus 8:15, 32.) Twice before it says that God hardened Pharaoh's heart it states simply that Pharaoh's heart was hardened. (See Exodus 7:14; 9:7.) Although the KJV translates Exodus 7:13, "And he hardened Pharaoh's heart," the NKJV translates it, "And Pharaoh's heart grew hard. . . ." When we examine the entire context, it seems that Pharaoh first hardened his heart against God and that God subsequently further hardened Pharaoh's heart.

I Samuel 6:6 records that both the Egyptians and Pharaoh hardened their own hearts. Though God at first extended mercy to Pharaoh by inviting him to release the people of Israel upon the basis of a request alone, Pharaoh rejected the appeal and hardened his heart. Shortly thereafter, God determined the time for mercy was past and He further hardened Pharaoh's heart.

Likewise here, the hardening of the hearts of ancient Israel was not initially an act of God; it was their choice. If the readers of this letter hardened their hearts, they would exercise their freedom of choice to abandon the new covenant.

"Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years" (verse 9, NKJV) apparently refers in part to Exodus 17:2, 7, which record the complaining people of Israel contending with Moses for water. Moses asked, "Why do you contend with me? Why do you tempt the LORD?" (Exodus 17:2, NKJV). The name of the place where God responded to Moses' plea by providing water from the rock was called Massah ("tempted") and Meribah ("contention") (Exodus 17:7). The readers of Hebrews

were well advised to avoid testing and trying God similarly, by rejecting His generous provision of the new covenant. Such resistance of God inevitably results in God's anger (verse 10) and in His refusal to allow those who reject His provisions to enjoy their benefits (verse 11). Just as those who rejected the Promised Land for fear of their inability to dislodge its inhabitants were forever barred from its bounty, so those in the first century who turned away from the new covenant would be bereft of its benefits, chief of which was forgiveness of sin. (See 10:1-4, 10-18.)

*Verse 12.* As they considered the negative example of ancient Israel, the readers of the letter should beware lest "an evil heart of unbelief" (NKJV) caused them to depart "from the living God" (NKJV). The evil, unbelieving heart parallels the "evil conscience" of 10:22. If any abandoned the new covenant because they no longer believed in the validity of the blood of Jesus, or the uniqueness of His person, or the power of God's grace (10:29), they would sever themselves from the *living* God. The point is that the old covenant is extinct; there is no life in it. (See II Corinthians 3:6.)

The writer called his readers "brethren," no doubt in a sincere attempt to cement their identification with him as kindred partakers of the new covenant.

*Verse 13.* So they would not depart from the living God through unbelief, the writer urged his readers to "exhort [encourage] one another daily" (NKJV). "Today" refers to the current opportunity that exists so long as God extends mercy. The purpose for daily exhortation is to prevent any of the believers from being "hardened through the deceitfulness of sin" (NKJV). The hardening

here parallels that of verse 8; it is the frame of mind that rejects the promises and provisions of God in favor of inferior revelation. Sin is deceitful in that it always seeks to draw people away from current revelation. The law of Moses was a valid revelation in its time and for its purpose, but to return to it after the new covenant has replaced it is to be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin.

The needed daily exhortation would take place, at least in part, as the readers assembled together for mutual edification. (See 10:24-25.) As Jewish believers who had been deeply steeped in Hebrew culture, lifestyle and tradition, there was a special temptation for these early Christians to defect back to a comfortable and familiar faith. But the time for that was gone forever; though it required a radical reorientation of thinking and living, their only hope was to forsake the old covenant approach to God and to embrace unreservedly the provisions of the new covenant. Because of the constant temptation to defect, they needed to commit themselves to the discipline of giving and receiving encouragement daily.

*Verse 14.* Believers have become “partakers of Christ,” but retaining that identification with Him depends upon holding “the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end” (NKJV). In language strikingly similar to that of verse 6, the letter here reminds its readers that there is a condition to salvation. One’s ultimate salvation is conditioned upon continuing to believe what one believed at the beginning of salvation. Christians must continue to trust exclusively in Christ and in the provisions of the new covenant. If they turn back and embrace again the old covenant, their confidence will no longer be

in what it was at the beginning of their Christian experience, and they will suffer the loss of salvation. (See 6:4-6; 10:29.)

The word “confidence” is translated from *hypostaseos*, the same word translated “person” in 1:3 and “substance” in 11:1. The etymology of *hypostaseos* has to do with “the sediment or foundation under a building.”<sup>25</sup> It is what stands under something (e.g., a building, a contract, or a promise<sup>26</sup>). As used in this verse, *hypostaseos* refers to the *basis* or the *foundation* of salvation in the person of Christ. Not only do we find salvation in Christ; we find it exclusively and without mixture in Him. Not only must a person place his trust in Christ to be saved; he must place his trust in Christ alone. Any attempt to find salvation in Christ plus something or someone else—including the old covenant—will fail. Jesus Christ will not submit to becoming a part of one’s salvation experience. It is impossible to be a partaker of Christ—and thus of the new covenant—and at the same time a partaker of someone or something else.

The text declares, “We have *become* partakers of Christ,” not “we *are* partakers.” The emphasis is on becoming. The original readers of the letter, as Jews, had previously related to God on the basis of the old covenant, but they were not thereby “partakers of Christ.” They had *become* partakers of Him only when they embraced the new covenant. The new covenant is not merely a *better* way of becoming a partaker of Christ; it is the *only* way. The old covenant offered no means by which a person could become a partaker of Christ; it was given for entirely different reasons than the new covenant.



What does it mean to be a partaker of Christ? The word translated “partaker” is *metochoi*, a form of which also appears in 1:9; 3:1; 6:4 and 12:8.<sup>27</sup> In 1:9, it deals with the way Jesus identifies with human beings in the Incarnation as “companions” (NKJV). In 3:1, the idea is that believers participate in “the heavenly calling,” in apparent contrast to the merely earthly calling of the Sinaitic covenant. In 6:4, it refers to the way believers partake of the Holy Spirit by the new birth. In 12:8, the point is that no genuine child of God is exempt from chastening. Here, the writer meant that believers actually share in the life of Christ, and they will continue to do that if they steadfastly keep Him as the exclusive basis and foundation of their salvation. (See Galatians 2:20; Colossians 1:27.) The necessity of enduring to the end reappears in 12:1.

*Verse 15.* For the second of three times, the writer quoted from Psalm 95:7-8. (See comments on verses 7-11.) His purpose here was to encourage his readers not to harden their hearts, which is another way of encouraging them to maintain the steadfastness of their confidence, as the previous verse shows. If a person has placed his faith in Christ and turns from it or in any way mitigates it, we can only describe his actions as hardening the heart. Just as ancient Israel left Egypt full of hope and faith that God would honor His promise to give them the land of Canaan, only to harden their hearts upon hearing the bad report of the ten spies, so the original readers of this letter had embarked on their Christian life with their faith and confidence fully in Christ. When they first believed on Him, they had no question that He alone could and would fully provide salvation. Now they were tempted to return

to the old covenant. But they could never go back. Even though, when the old covenant was in vogue, those who embraced it did so in active and genuine faith, such was no longer possible. To return to inferior revelation is to harden one's heart.

*Verses 16-19.* Continuing to use ancient Israel as an example to warn of the dangers of turning back from current revelation, the writer stated, "Who, having heard, rebelled" (NKJV). The rebels were the specific generation (verse 10) that Moses had delivered from Egypt. The irony is that the generation with whom God was angry was not a later generation, far removed from the miracles and from the giving of the covenant at Mount Sinai. Such a generation could perhaps have pleaded ignorance. They could have claimed that the promise faded in their minds or that their ancestors had not adequately informed them. But such was not the case. The generation that incurred the anger of God was the original generation, the very people to whom He promised the land and to whom He showed many miracles to confirm His promise. (For the original promise of the land to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, see Genesis 15:7-21; 17:6-8; 26:1-3; 28:1-4, 12-15. For the renewal of this promise to Moses and the generation he delivered, see Exodus 3:6-8, 16-17; 4:27-31.) It was these "who sinned, and whose corpses fell in the wilderness" (NKJV). And this is the generation, not a later one, to whom God swore "that they would not enter His rest" (the Promised Land) (NKJV). The reason they were banned from the promise was their disobedience, brought about by their "evil heart of unbelief" (verse 12).

This lesson applied directly to the original readers of this letter. They too were in the first generation of the giv-

ing of God's covenant—the new covenant. God had confirmed the validity of this covenant to them “with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit” (2:4, NKJV). (See also comments on 2:2-3.) If they, like their ancestors, hardened their hearts against what they had heard and seen to be true, they would be banned from the provisions of the new covenant, just as their forebears were banned from the Promised Land.

## **2. The Consequence of Unbelief (4:1-6)**

*(1) Let us therefore fear, lest, a promise being left us of entering into his rest, any of you should seem to come short of it. (2) For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it. (3) For we which have believed do enter into rest, as he said, As I have sworn in my wrath, if they shall enter into my rest: although the works were finished from the foundation of the world. (4) For he spake in a certain place of the seventh day on this wise, And God did rest the seventh day from all his works. (5) And in this place again, If they shall enter into my rest. (6) Seeing therefore it remaineth that some must enter therein, and they to whom it was first preached entered not in because of unbelief.*

It is appropriate for a letter written to Jewish Christians to offer the experiences of ancient Israel as examples. Although Israel's experiences can serve as examples even for Gentile believers (I Corinthians 10:11), believing

Jews should have been especially sensitive to the mistakes of their ancestors. If the ancient Jews failed to enter fully into the rest God promised them because of their unbelief and disobedience, Jewish believers in the first century needed to be careful not to make the same mistakes.

In this section of his letter, the writer compared Israel's situation under Joshua's leadership with that of the first-century believers under the ministry of the Messiah. Though God promised a rest to ancient Israel, the rest He promised under the new covenant is far superior.

*Verse 1.* The statement "a promise remains of entering His rest" (NKJV) indicates that the rest God promised to ancient Israel was not the ultimate rest. That rest had to do specifically with possessing the land promised to Abraham. (See Deuteronomy 3:18-20; 12:9-11.) An obvious comparison exists here between the first, old covenant rest, and the ultimate, new covenant rest. (See verses 9-10.) There is the possibility, however, that—just as the ancient Jews failed to enter into their rest because of their unbelief and disobedience—so believers in this era may fail to enter into the rest of the new covenant for the same reasons.

The encouragement to "fear" the consequences of unbelief and disobedience is a recurring theme in the letter. (See 10:27, 31; 12:28.) The devastating results of these sins for ancient Israel serve as a stern warning for all who would later contemplate anything less than full faith and obedience. The alternative to the rest promised by God is not simply inferior rest; it is unending restlessness. We see this truth in the forty years of ceaseless wandering endured by the generation of ancient Israelites

who refused to enter into their promised rest. (See also Isaiah 57:20.)

The way the original readers of this letter would “seem to come short of” the promised rest of the new covenant would be if—like ancient Israel—they withdrew from the current revelation of God to an inferior revelation. Though, without question, God was with ancient Israel while they were in Egyptian slavery, that option no longer remained open to them when He called them out of bondage under Moses’ leadership. There was no possibility individual Israelites could choose to remain in Egypt and retain God’s favor once God was ready to do a new thing with them. Likewise, once God established the new covenant, there was no longer any possibility of opting to relate to God on the basis of the old covenant. The only choice available now is to turn away from the old covenant established at Sinai and to fully embrace the covenant established on Calvary.

*Verse 2.* Here, the word “gospel” is used in its most generic sense of “good news.” The writer did not mean that the content of the New Testament gospel as defined in I Corinthians 15:1-4 was communicated to the generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt. He meant that both the Israelites who were brought out of Egypt and those to whom he wrote were recipients of good news. The good news for ancient Israel was that God would give them the land promised to their fathers and they would enjoy prosperity and long life in the land; the good news for believers under the new covenant is that they inherit eternal life when they cease from their own labors and rest completely and exclusively in Jesus Christ.

The promise of rest in the land was of no value to the

generation of Israelites who came out of Egypt, for they did not receive the word with faith. This demonstrates the conditional or bilateral nature of that promise: God promised the land, but Israel had to believe and act on the promise in order to receive it.

*Verse 3.* Just as there was a requirement for ancient Israel to enter into the rest promised them, so there is a requirement for those who would enter into the rest of the new covenant. That requirement is faith. But faith is not mere mental assent; since faith must be in Jesus Christ, it will result in adherence to His commands. The nature of Christ's claims as to His identity are such that it is impossible to believe what He claimed about Himself without also seeking to conform to His words. If Jesus is who He claimed to be—the very Son of God—His words ring with divine authority and demand to be obeyed. (See John 6:63; 14:10; 12:48-50.)

The writer again referred to a statement from Psalm 95:7-11 to demonstrate that God prevented the ancient Israelites from entering into their promised rest because of their unbelief. (See comments on 3:7-11.) This was true even though—as far as God was concerned—He had already done everything necessary for them to inherit the promise. He had even made arrangements for His angel to go before the Israelites and to deal with the inhabitants of the land. (See Exodus 23:20-23.) The reference to “the works” being “finished from the foundation of the world” wonderfully illustrates that from the beginning God has taken the initiative to do all that needed to be done to provide rest for His people.

Although it is true that in order to appropriate His rest, people must believe and obey, neither faith nor the

obedience that springs from faith can properly be classified as “works” intended to earn favor with God. The “works” Scripture condemns are those done to impress God or to obligate Him to reward people with His favor. Such an approach to God is demeaning to Him; it puts Him on the level of a harsh, disapproving, miserly taskmaster who selfishly withholds good things from all but those who somehow contribute to His sense of well-being. Such action misrepresents God by humanizing Him. (See Matthew 5:45; Acts 14:17.) On the other hand, the obedience resulting from faith is simply the natural consequence of genuinely held belief. It is no attempt to earn favor with God or to obligate Him.

In every age, the promises God makes concerning the people in that age are readily available on the basis of faith. The reason is that, from the foundation of the world, He already did all that needed to be done for people to appropriate the promises. Even before the moment in history when Jesus was nailed to Calvary’s cross, salvation was available to people of faith because He was “the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8, NKJV).

*Verse 4.* To illustrate the completion of God’s works from the foundation of the world, the writer of Hebrews quoted Genesis 2:2. After the six days of creation, God rested “from all His works” (NKJV). This statement does not mean that God never again worked; His rest was specifically on the seventh day. In His defense of healing a man on a sabbath day, Jesus declared, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (John 5:17, NKJV). But, from the foundation of the world, God needed to do nothing more to enable people to appropriate the

specific promises He made to them.

*Verses 5-6.* Again, the writer of Hebrews appealed to a portion of Psalm 95:7-11 to underscore that—even though God had done everything needed to give the Promised Land to the ancient Hebrews—they were prevented from obtaining that promise because of their unbelief and disobedience.

### **3. The Reward of Belief (4:7-10)**

*(7) Again, he limiteth a certain day, saying in David, To day, after so long a time; as it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts. (8) For if Jesus had given them rest, then would he not afterward have spoken of another day. (9) There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. (10) For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his.*

*Verses 7-8.* Although the disobedience of the ancient Israelites prevented them from entering into the rest offered in the Promised Land, a rest is still available under the provisions of the new covenant. We know this is true because, long after Israel finally did enter the land, God spoke through David, “Today, if you will hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (NKJV). (See Psalm 95:7-11 and comments on 3:7-11.) This promise did not refer to the Promised Land; they already possessed that rest. Instead, these words looked ahead to a greater rest yet available. This was not the rest they found under Joshua, for the warning David gave came long after Joshua and referred to another day.



In verse 8, the King James Version translates *Iesous* as “Jesus.” Although this translation is not technically in error (*Iesous* is simply the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew *Yeshua*’, or “Joshua”), the context refers to Joshua, not Jesus Christ. For this reason, the NKJV and all other modern English translations render *Iesous* here as “Joshua.”<sup>28</sup>

The writer of Hebrews did not suggest that Joshua did not give ancient Israel any rest at all; indeed, Joshua 21:44 and 23:1 declare specifically that he did. But the Promised Land was not the ultimate rest, as Psalm 95:7-11 shows. Joshua gave Israel temporal rest, but a greater and more permanent rest remained for people of faith.

*Verse 9.* Since ancient Israel did not experience the ultimate rest prophesied in Psalm 95:7-11, it must remain for people of faith in this era to experience. (See verse 11.) The rest Israel enjoyed under Joshua in the Promised Land was not the final rest the psalmist had in view.

The writer of Hebrews coined a word here, *sabbatizmos*, which is translated “rest.” It obviously comes from the Hebrew *shabbath*, frequently transliterated “sabbath” and the essential meaning of which is “to cease.” By extension, it means “to rest,” for it signifies ceasing from one’s labor.

The fourth of the Ten Commandments given to Israel at Sinai was the commandment to rest on the seventh day of the week. God said, “Remember the Sabbath day, to keep it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is the Sabbath of the LORD your God. In it you shall do no work: you, nor your son, nor your daughter, nor your manservant, nor your maidservant,

nor your cattle, nor your stranger who is within your gates" (Exodus 20:8-10, NKJV).

The Sabbath commandment was not originally a command to worship on the seventh day of the week, but to rest. The use of the Sabbath as a day of worship arose during the Jewish exile, in conjunction with the building of synagogues. When they were driven from the land and thus cut off from the Temple, the Jewish people instituted the synagogue as a substitute center for worship and social interaction. Because they were captives and in slavery, the only day available to them to gather for public worship and to perpetuate their faith was the one day of the week they simply refused to work: the Sabbath.

But to find God's original intent for the Sabbath, we must go to the commandment to cease completely from labor. As with other commandments in the law of Moses, God did not intend the fourth commandment to be an end in itself. He intended it to point toward the ultimate rest found in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote, "Therefore let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ" (Colossians 2:16-17, NKJV). Since the law of Moses concluded with the coming of Christ (Romans 10:4; Galatians 3:19, 22-25; Hebrews 10:9), the commandments concerning permissible foods, drinks, feast days, monthly holy days, and weekly sabbaths were not binding under the new covenant. God's original intent for these commandments was not that they would survive the demise of the Sinaitic covenant, but that they would foreshadow in some way the coming Messiah. Specifically, the Sabbath was a shadow of Christ in that it was a day of complete and absolute

rest. Likewise, in Christ, the believer finds salvation as he ceases completely from his own efforts to earn salvation and rests in the work of Christ on his behalf. (See verse 10.)

Some have suggested that the use of *sabbatismos* in this verse indicates that believers under the new covenant must continue to keep the Sabbath day as commanded to ancient Israel. But this conclusion flies in the face of the entire purpose for the letter to the Hebrews, which is to persuade Jewish believers not to return to an inferior covenant that has been replaced. (See 10:9.) *Sabbatismos* here cannot refer to the Sabbath day, for Israel in the Promised Land did *not* experience the rest in view here (see verse 8), yet Israel did keep the Sabbath day during the times the nation was faithful to God.

The New Testament uses the term “the people of God” only here and in 11:25. A similar phrase, but without the definite article in the Greek, appears in I Peter 2:10. References to the church as God’s people occur in Romans 9:25 and II Corinthians 6:14-16. Although in the context of the law of Moses the term refers to Israel, the writers of the New Testament appropriated it for the church. Those who are in covenant relationship with God enjoy the intimacy of being termed His “people.” They are His “elect.” (See Romans 8:33; Colossians 3:12; II Timothy 2:10; I Peter 1:2.)

*Verse 10.* The evidence that a believer has entered into the rest of God is that he has ceased from his works just as God ceased from His on the seventh day of creation. (See Genesis 2:1-3.) In the larger context of the entire letter to the Hebrews, the works from which the believer ceases are those the law of Moses required. The works

required under the law were conditions for receiving the temporal blessings promised by the Sinaitic covenant. Failure to accomplish these works resulted in temporal curses. (See Deuteronomy 28.) By extension, the believer enters into the rest of God by ceasing from any work intended to earn favor with God or to merit salvation.

This statement does not mean the believer gives no external evidence of his faith. If his faith is genuine, he will demonstrate it by works. (See James 2:14-26.) But it means that the believer does not rely on his works to earn salvation. He realizes that salvation is a free gift of God purchased for him by Jesus Christ. (See Matthew 11:28; Ephesians 2:8-9.)

Some are of the opinion that the believer will not enjoy the rest in view here until after his death. But the aorist (simple past tense) verbs (“entered” and “ceased”) indicate that at least in some sense this rest is already complete in the believer’s life. The believer “has entered” (NKJV) into God’s rest because he “has . . . ceased” (NKJV) from his works in the same way God ceased from His after six days of creation.

Those who hold that the commandment to rest on the seventh day of the week is still binding in the church age typically teach that God established the Sabbath day in Genesis 2:1-3 when He rested from His creative work. But the command to keep the Sabbath day was for Israel only, as the following points demonstrate:

- *The first mention of the Sabbath in the Bible is Exodus 16:23.*

There is no biblical record before this time of anyone keeping the Sabbath or even being aware of it. The word “remember” in Exodus 20:8 (“Remember the sabbath day,

to keep it holy”) refers back to the command in Exodus 16:23, not to something Israel had previously known, for no verse of Scripture suggests Israel was aware of the Sabbath before leaving Egypt.

- *No one before Israel in the wilderness knew of the Sabbath.*

“The LORD made not this covenant with our fathers, but with us, even us, who are all of us here alive this day” (Deuteronomy 5:3). The elements of the covenant God made with Israel—including the requirement to keep the Sabbath—had not been given to any previous generation. The covenant in all its aspects, including the Sabbath, originated at Sinai. (See Nehemiah 9:13-14.)

- *The Sabbath was a sign between God and Israel only.*

God gave Israel the Sabbath to be a sign between Him and Israel alone. They were never a part of a covenant between God and any other people. “Moreover also I gave them my sabbaths, to be a sign between me and them, that they might know that I am the LORD that sanctify them” (Ezekiel 20:12). The statutes and judgments of the law given to Israel were unique to them; God did not deal in that way with any other nation. Those things unique to the law of Moses, therefore, were not binding on other peoples at other places and times. “He sheweth his word unto Jacob, his statutes and his judgments unto Israel. He hath not dealt so with any nation: and as for his judgments, they have not known them. Praise ye the LORD” (Psalm 147:19-20). (See Exodus 31:12-17.)

The only way the Sabbath could be a sign between God and Israel would be if it were unique to that relationship. If God required all people to keep the Sabbath, what kind

of a special sign would it have been between Him and Israel? Something is a sign only because it is unique, special. If it is common, it is no sign.

The Sabbath was a visible sign that allowed God immediately to test Israel's obedience to Him. "Then said the LORD unto Moses, Behold, I will rain bread from heaven for you; and the people shall go out and gather a certain rate every day, that I may prove them, whether they will walk in my law, or no. And it shall come to pass, that on the sixth day they shall prepare that which they bring in; and it shall be twice as much as they gather daily" (Exodus 16:4-5).

- *God promised to make a new covenant with Israel.*

The new covenant God would make with Israel would be unlike the covenant He made with them at Sinai (Jeremiah 31:31-34). The feature of this covenant is a knowledge of God superior to what the law of Moses offered. Instead of having to do with days, festivals, offerings, and so forth, this new covenant features a deeply personal relationship with God, indicated by His writing laws in their hearts. In promising the new covenant God said nothing at all about the Sabbath.

- *The reference to God's rest on the seventh day in Genesis 2:1-3 indicates that God blessed that specific day only.*

"Thus the heavens and the earth were finished, and all the host of them. And on the seventh day God ended his work which he had made; and he rested on the seventh day from all his work which he had made. And God blessed the seventh day, and sanctified it: because that in it he had rested from all his work which God created and

made.” A careful examination of this passage reveals nothing about God blessing *every* seventh day. He blessed the specific seventh day, the day following the creation of humanity. This seventh day is not called the Sabbath, nor is it ever referred to as the Sabbath. It was simply the seventh day, and God sanctified that day—or set it apart—for His rest.

John 5:17 shows that God does not rest every seventh day or on the Jewish Sabbath. Jesus had just healed a man on the Sabbath, for which the Jews condemned Him. Jesus said, “My Father has been working until now, and I have been working” (NKJV). The clear implication is that the Father accomplished His divine works on the Sabbath and so did Jesus. John 5:19 confirms: “Then answered Jesus and said unto them, Verily, verily, I say unto you, The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he seeth the Father do: for what things soever he doeth, these also doeth the Son likewise.” Since Jesus healed the man on the Sabbath, it was clear the Father was at work also.

- *Jesus superseded the Sabbath.*

Those who believe keeping the law of Moses is essential to New Testament salvation dispute this claim. But it is the clear teaching of the New Testament.

As Jesus visited the pool of Bethesda on the Sabbath, He healed an impotent man, commanding him, “Rise, take up thy bed, and walk” (John 5:8). The man obeyed, totally healed.

The Jews bitterly condemned this action of Jesus on the Sabbath. In fact, they sought to kill Him, “because he not only had broken the sabbath, but said also that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). The Jews were concerned because Jesus spoke

with the authority of the One who had given the Sabbath law and instructed the man to carry his bed, even though Jeremiah 17:21 says, “Bear no burden on the sabbath day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem.”

On another occasion the Pharisees accused Jesus and His disciples because they plucked ears of corn to eat as they walked through a field on the Sabbath. In reply Jesus asked, “Have ye not read in the law, how that on the sabbath days the priests in the temple profane the sabbath, and are blameless?” (Matthew 12:5). (See Numbers 28:9-10; 18-19.) Jesus did not suggest that the priests were exempt from the Sabbath obligations and that therefore their strenuous labor on that day was not a violation of the commandment. Instead He said, “The priests . . . *profane* the sabbath.” And yet, He said, they “are *blameless*.” In other words, even to the nation of Israel under the law of Moses, there were times and circumstances when the law was not binding, being superseded by higher law.

Jesus also cited David’s clear violation of the law, a violation for which he received no condemnation: “Have ye not read what David did, when he was an hungred, and they that were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and did eat the shewbread, which was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them which were with him, but only for the priests?” (Matthew 12:3-4). The showbread belonged only to Aaron and his sons. They alone were to eat it and only in the holy place. It was *most holy* unto the Aaronic priesthood. (See Leviticus 24:9.) Clearly it was unlawful for David, who was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi, to eat this holy bread. Jesus said it was unlawful. Yet he was not held guilty.

Jesus explained His refusal to condemn the disciples



this way: “But I say unto you, That in this place is one greater than the temple. But if ye had known what this meaneth, I will have mercy, and not sacrifice, ye would not have condemned the guiltless. For the Son of man is Lord even of the sabbath day” (Matthew 12:6-8).

The one greater than the Temple is, of course, Jesus Himself. The implication is that anything done under the lordship of Jesus Christ and which does not receive condemnation from Him cannot be sinful. Even under the law of Moses, the supreme desire of God was not the hair-splitting observance of legal technicalities, but the showing of mercy and meeting of human needs. (See Hosea 6:6.) Jesus Christ is Lord even of the Sabbath.

- *God warned of vain Sabbath keeping.*

In Isaiah 1:10-17, God referred to the disobedient Israelites as spiritual Sodom and Gomorrah. (See Revelation 11:8.) They went through the motions of the law, including the keeping of the Sabbath, but it was repulsive to God. God never meant for the law of Moses to be an end in itself. The law was a schoolmaster to bring Israel to Christ (Galatians 3:24). He did not accept those who kept the law without a heart in right relationship with God.

- *God caused the Sabbaths to cease.*

“I will also cause all her mirth to cease, her feast days, her new moons, and her sabbaths, and all her solemn feasts” (Hosea 2:11). The reason for this action was the spiritual adultery of Israel. But had the Sabbath been an end in itself—if the point of the Sabbath was the keeping of the Sabbath—it would seem strange that the same God who commanded it would now stop it.

- *God caused the Sabbaths to be forgotten.*

“And he hath violently taken away his tabernacle, as if

it were of a garden: he hath destroyed his places of the assembly: the LORD hath caused the solemn feasts and sabbaths to be forgotten in Zion, and hath despised in the indignation of his anger the king and the priest” (Lamentations 2:6). Again, if the Sabbath was an end in itself, it would seem very strange for the Lord, who commanded the observance of the day, to cause it to now be forgotten. It would seem rather that He would cause it to be remembered.

- *Early Judaizers wanted the Christians to keep the law of Moses, but the church would not command such a thing.*

“But there rose up certain of the sect of the Pharisees which believed, saying, That it was needful to circumcise them, and to command them to keep the law of Moses. . . . Forasmuch as we have heard, that certain which went out from us have troubled you with words, subverting your souls, saying, Ye must be circumcised, and keep the law: to whom we gave no such commandment” (Acts 15:5, 24).

A careful reading of Galatians 3, 4, 5 will put the law of Moses in its proper perspective. It was for the nation of Israel only; it began at Mount Sinai and had no impact whatsoever on any previous covenant God had made with people; it ended with the coming of Christ. The danger of going back under the law is clear. Paul declared: “Ye observe days, and months, and times, and years. I am afraid of you, lest I have bestowed upon you labour in vain” (Galatians 4:10-11).

- *Christ fulfilled the Sabbath.*

“Let no man therefore judge you in meat, or in drink, or in respect of an holyday, or of the new moon, or of the sabbath days: which are a shadow of things to come; but

the body is of Christ” (Colossians 2:16-17). The Sabbath, a day of rest, predicted the coming Messiah and the spiritual rest believers would find in Him. The Sabbath was merely a *shadow*; it was no substance in and of itself. (See also Hebrews 10:1.) Now that the substance has come in the person of Jesus Christ, there is no longer any need for the shadow. Indeed, it would be an insult to Jesus and spiritually dangerous to maintain a fascination with any law whose purpose has been served. It would be just as distasteful to God for New Testament Christians to require observance of the Sabbath as it would be for them to offer the blood of bulls and goats.

- *Exodus 20:11 does not suggest that God established the Sabbath at Creation.*

“For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that in them is, and rested the seventh day: wherefore the LORD blessed the sabbath day, and hallowed it” (Exodus 20:11). The words “seventh” and “Sabbath” are not synonymous. The Hebrew word for “seventh” is *she-beee*. The word for “sabbath” is *shabbath*. The word *shabbath* literally means “intermission” or “to cease.” Never in Scripture is *shebeee* translated “sabbath,” and never is *shabbath* translated “seventh.” They are different words.

We know of the *seventh* day from Creation, but not the *Sabbath*. God is not said to have rested on the *Sabbath*; He is said to have rested on the *seventh* day.

While the Hebrew word translated “rested” is from the same root as the word transliterated “sabbath,” this does not indicate that the seventh day was formally instituted as the Sabbath in Genesis 2. The word simply means “rest” and is used in the Old Testament of rests occurring other than on the Sabbath day.

The word “wherefore” is translated from two Hebrew words that carry the meaning “for this reason.” In other words, God’s rest on the seventh day was the pattern for Israel’s rest on the Sabbath day.

The Sabbath is *in* the seventh. “Six days may work be done; but in the seventh is the sabbath of rest” (Exodus 31:15). In the beginning it was the *seventh* day; under the law it became the *Sabbath* day. The seventh day became the Sabbath for Israel only. There is no indication that the Sabbath was on the same day as the original seventh. Time for Israel began in Exodus 12:1-2: “And the LORD spake unto Moses and Aaron in the land of Egypt, saying, This month shall be unto you the beginning of months: it shall be the first month of the year to you.” Exodus 20:11 does not say God blessed the *Sabbath* in the beginning. He blessed the *seventh* (Genesis 2:1-3). He blessed the Sabbath in giving the manna. (See Exodus 16.)

#### **4. Holding Fast to Belief (4:11-14)**

*(11) Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief. (12) For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart. (13) Neither is there any creature that is not manifest in his sight: but all things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do. (14) Seeing then that we have a great high priest, that is passed into the*

*heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our profession.*

*Verse 11.* Since under the old covenant, the law of Moses, Israel did not experience the rest David prophesied about in Psalm 95:7-11, and since this rest is a unique provision of the new covenant, which offers salvation to those who cease from their own works and rely completely on the work of Christ on the Cross, believers must “be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience” (NKJV). The translation of the Greek *spoudasomen* as “let us labour,” as in the KJV, may mislead some to think that, after all, they obtain the rest of the new covenant only by working. The word does mean “to take pains” or to “make every effort,” but the focus is on diligence, not on an attempt to merit a reward. The NKJV translates *spoudasomen* as “let us . . . be diligent.”

In other words, it is worth doing whatever God requires for us to enter the rest of the new covenant. But the requirement is not works; it is faith (11:6), specifically faith in Jesus Christ exclusively and completely for one’s salvation. (See 2:3, 9-18; 10:26-29.) Thus we can understand the first half of verse 11 to mean, “Let us therefore be diligent [to exercise the faith necessary] to enter that rest.”

We must be diligent “lest anyone fall according to the same example of disobedience” (NKJV). The disobedience in view here is still that of ancient Israel when they heeded the bad report of the ten spies and refused to advance and to take the land promised them. (See comments on 3:7-11.) Their disobedience sprang from their

lack of faith in the promise of God. Had they believed He would keep His promise to give them the land, they would have obeyed His command to take the land. Thus Israel's negative example is appropriate for believers under the new covenant. The first-century Jewish believers to whom this letter was originally written were in danger of abandoning their faith in Jesus Christ and of returning to the old covenant. If they did so, they—like ancient Israel—would turn away from the promise of God to give them rest,<sup>29</sup> and they would be guilty of disobedience. To refuse to enter the Promised Land was disobedience for ancient Israel; to refuse to appropriate by faith the provisions of the gospel is disobedience under the new covenant. (See II Thessalonians 1:8.)

*Verse 12.* People often consider this verse with no regard for its context, but—as with any other verse of Scripture—we can fully understand it only when we see it as an integral part of the flowing narrative. As it pertains to ancient Israel, the reference to “the word of God” contextually has to do with God’s promise to Abraham, which He renewed to Moses and to the nation of Israel in Egyptian captivity, to give them the land. (See comments on 3:16.) As it pertains to the new covenant, the “word of God” is the promise of salvation rest to all who trust exclusively and completely in Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews declared that “God . . . has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” (1:1-2, NKJV). A major theme of the letter is the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant. In this specific reference, the failure of ancient Israel to inherit the Promised Land is a warning to first-century Jewish believers not to abandon the new covenant. Thus the “word of God” (Greek,

*logos tou theou*) has significance for both covenants. Just as the word of God discerned the thoughts and intents of the hearts of the ancient Israelites, so it would discern the thoughts and intents of first-century believers who were entertaining the possibility of turning away from Jesus Christ.

Some have suggested that the “word of God” here refers to Jesus, as in John 1:1. But the context here indicates the actual words spoken by God first of all to Abraham and finally through Jesus Christ.

This description reveals a great deal about the nature of God’s words as opposed to mere human words. Because of His nature and integrity, the words of God are not mere vocalizations; they are living, spiritual expressions of His person and character. (See John 6:63; Acts 7:38; I Peter 1:23.) Thus the Word of God is “living” (NKJV). Since it is impossible to sever God’s words from God Himself, to disobey His words is to disobey Him. The Israelites who disobeyed the Word of God by refusing to enter the Promised Land actually disobeyed God who promised the land to Abraham. Those who contemplate turning away from Jesus Christ and the new covenant likewise actually entertain the thought of disobeying God, who has spoken His ultimate and final word through Jesus Christ. (See 1:2.)

The Word of God is also “powerful,” translated from the Greek *energes*, from which the English “energy” comes. The idea is that the Word of God is operative, effective, or active. It is in no sense devoid of life, and it contains within itself the “energy” to accomplish its stated purpose. That is, the very word God speaks contains within itself all the resources necessary to guarantee its

fulfillment. Israel needed nothing more than God's promise to take the land; the circumstances were irrelevant. Likewise, under the new covenant, believers need nothing more than God's promise of salvation through Jesus Christ; they must not be moved by currents of emotion, by doubts, by fears, or by any attack—satanic or otherwise—on the divine promise of salvation by grace through faith apart from works. (See Ephesians 2:8-9.)

Just as the ancient Israelites turned away from the Promised Land by the prospect of giants, so first-century believers were in danger of turning away from salvation rest in Christ Jesus by the fear that God's promise was insufficient. Just as it seemed to the Israelites that God's promise needed the supplement of human strength before they could enter the land, so it seemed to the first-century Jewish believers that the work of Christ was insufficient to provide their salvation.

Not only is the Word of God alive and able to produce the desired result, it is also "sharper than any two-edged sword" (NKJV). The idea is that it is capable of piercing to the ultimate depths of a thing; nothing can escape God's sight. (See verse 13.) The Word of God pierces "even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow" (NKJV).

Some use this statement to support the idea that human beings are a trichotomy of body, soul, and spirit, with each entity being separate and distinct from the others. But the Hebrews viewed a human as an integrated whole, not as fragmented into separate parts. Though God formed Adam's body of the dust of the ground, as God breathed the breath of life into his nostrils, he became "a living soul" (Genesis 2:7). When the God of



Israel declared, “All souls are mine” (Ezekiel 18:4), He did not mean just the immaterial part of a person belongs to Him, but that humans in their totality—all that makes humans human—belong to Him. Eight souls were saved in Noah’s ark; this means, of course, eight people (I Peter 3:20).

Though there certainly are material and immaterial components to human existence, this verse suggests that, from the Hebrew perspective, to speak of any component is to address the whole person. (See also I Thessalonians 5:23.) This does not mean the Hebrews were unaware of the distinction between the material and immaterial components of human existence, but that they thought of human existence in a holistic way.

When Abraham asked Sarah to say she was his sister, he explained he wished her to do this so his “soul” could live (Genesis 12:13). The NKJV rightly translates, “That I may live.” Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, “soul” is a metaphor for “person.” (See, for example, Exodus 12:15, 19; 31:14; Leviticus 4:2; 5:1, 2, 4.)

The point of this verse is not to give technical insight into the nature of the immaterial person any more than of the physical anatomy (“joints and marrow”) or mental faculties (“thoughts and intents”), but to use these various references to the material and immaterial to demonstrate the ability of the living Word of God to assess completely and accurately the innermost thoughts and motives of humans. God was not deceived by Israel’s reluctance to enter the Promised Land; their problem was unbelief. Neither would He be deceived by first-century Jewish believers who turned away from Christ to embrace the old covenant; their problem was the same: unbelief.

Grammatically, the verse does not say that the Word of God divides the soul and spirit from one another or the joints and marrow from one another. Instead, the Word of God is sharper than any two-edged sword, able to pierce the soul to the point of dividing it, able to pierce the spirit to the point of dividing it, and likewise with the joints and marrow. Likewise, the Word of God is able to discern, not *between* the thoughts and intents, but *both* the thoughts *and* the intents of the heart.

The terms “soul” and “spirit” focus attention on the immaterial part of humans; “joints” and “marrow” focus on the material part; “thoughts” and “intents” focus on the mental processes. Some have suggested that “soul” has to do with the immaterial part of a person as it relates to the created world and “spirit” has to do with the immaterial part of a person as it relates to God. Whatever the individual words of the verse may mean, the point is that the Word of God is able to probe into the most remote recesses of a person’s being to ferret out the truth. The following verse underscores this truth.

*Verse 13.* Here we see the universal responsibility of humanity to act on the Word of God. Whether the discussion has to do with ancient Israel’s failure to obey God’s command to possess the land or with the defection of Christians from the new covenant, “there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are naked and open to the eyes of Him to whom we must give account” (NKJV). No one can avoid his ultimate responsibility to give account to God for the deeds done in the body. (See 9:27; Romans 2:6; II Corinthians 5:10; Revelation 20:12-13.) The Israelites who refused to enter the Promised Land were responsible to God for their unbelief and dis-

obedience. The first-century Jewish Christians who contemplated abandoning the new covenant would answer to God for their actions. Every human being who has ever lived, whether he is saved or unsaved, will one day give an account to God. For those who are saved, this accounting, which will occur at the judgment seat of Christ, will not endanger their salvation, but it will determine rewards. (See I Corinthians 3:12-15; II Corinthians 5:10; Romans 2:6.)

The description of God's omniscience (complete knowledge) in this verse reiterates the point of verse 12. Verse 12 is not concerned with distinguishing *between* the soul and spirit, the joints and marrow, and the thoughts and intents. All of these terms describe hidden, remote, and virtually inaccessible components of human existence. In agreement with verse 12, verse 13 indicates that however secret any aspect of a person's existence may be, nothing is hidden from the Word of God and thus from God Himself. God's omniscience gives us a powerful motivation not to turn away from Jesus and His Cross, but to be diligent to enter His rest. (See verse 11.)

*Verse 14.* The new covenant is administered by Jesus, the "great high priest." Using the word "great" (Greek, *mega*) with "high priest" emphasizes His superiority to the high priests of the Mosaic covenant. None of them, including the first, Aaron, could be called a *great* high priest. The priesthood of all of those in the Aaronic lineage terminated at their deaths (7:23), but the priesthood of Jesus did not (7:24). Though He died, He rose from the dead and "passed through the heavens" (NKJV), a reference to His ascension. (See Luke 24:51; Acts 1:9; Ephesians 4:8-10.)

The great High Priest is Jesus the Son of God. The term “Son of God” requires the Incarnation. (See Luke 1:35.) Only by virtue of His genuine and complete humanity can Jesus function as High Priest, for an integral part of what it means to be a high priest is to stand in solidarity with those the priest represents. (See 2:14-18; 4:15; 5:7-10.)

The phrase “let us hold fast our confession” (NKJV) underscores the primary purpose of the letter to the Hebrews, which is to persuade the readers to remain steadfast in their faith in Christ and in their commitment to the new covenant despite the temptation to turn from Christ and to revert to the old covenant.

# E.

## **Jesus Is a Better High Priest Than Aaron (4:15-5:10)**

*(15) For we have not an high priest which cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities; but was in all points tempted like as we are, yet without sin. (16) Let us therefore come boldly unto the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy, and find grace to help in time of need. (5:1) For every high priest taken from among men is ordained for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins: (2) who can have compassion on the ignorant, and on them that are out of the way; for that he himself also is compassed with infirmity. (3) And by reason hereof he ought, as for the people, so also for himself, to offer for sins. (4) And no man taketh this honour unto himself, but he that is called of God, as was Aaron. (5) So also Christ glorified not himself to be made an high priest; but he that said unto him, Thou art my Son, to day have I begotten thee. (6) As he saith also in another place, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec. (7) Who in the days of his flesh, when he had offered up prayers and supplications with strong crying and tears unto him that was able to save him from death, and was heard in that he feared; (8) though he were a Son, yet learned*

*he obedience by the things which he suffered; (9) and being made perfect, he became the author of eternal salvation unto all them that obey him; (10) called of God an high priest after the order of Melchisedec.*

The Levitical priesthood was central to the covenant God established at Sinai with the nation of Israel. Nine chapters of the Pentateuch are taken up with laws concerning the priesthood. (See Exodus 28-29; 39; Leviticus 8-10; 21-22; Numbers 18.) The Mosaic covenant could not have survived without it, for the priests were responsible to administer all affairs relating to the Tabernacle and the sacrificial system. The office of priest was not open to any Israelite who might aspire to it; it was limited to those who descended from Levi, one of Jacob's twelve sons, through Aaron. (See Exodus 27:21; 28:1; Numbers 17:3, 8; 18:2, 21; Deuteronomy 10:8-9; 18:1; 21:5; 31:9.)

But the writer of Hebrews demonstrated the superiority of Jesus as High Priest over Aaron. Jesus stood completely apart from the Aaronic priesthood, for He was of the tribe of Judah, not Levi. (See 7:14.) Jesus' priesthood was patterned after that of Melchizedek, not Aaron. Melchizedek was contemporary with Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20) and predated the giving of the law of Moses by some four hundred years. Thus Jesus did not merely continue or enhance the law of Moses; He stood prior to it, apart from it, and superior to it. The type of priesthood He represented predated the law. Since Melchizedek was greater than Abraham (7:7), so is Jesus. It would be folly to forsake Jesus, the *great* High Priest, to return to an outdated and inferior covenant administered by inferior priests.

*Verse 15.* In the Incarnation, the deity of Jesus did not override, obscure, or overwhelm His humanity. It did not prevent Him from sympathizing “with our weaknesses” or from being “tempted as we are” (NKJV). Though Jesus did not sin, He was genuinely tempted and thus can identify with us in our temptations. (See comments on 2:18.) The high priests under the Mosaic covenant were also tempted, of course, but they succumbed to temptation just as all human beings do. (See 5:1-3.) Since Jesus experienced temptation but successfully resisted it, He is superior to the high priests in the Aaronic lineage.

*Verse 16.* Jesus’ identification with the human race in temptation enables Him to be so thoroughly sympathetic to our plight that we can approach the throne of grace boldly. We do not timidly approach a God who is distant and unaware of the real struggles we face. In Jesus, we have a God who willingly became so completely one of us that He recognizes the legitimacy of our weaknesses and gladly extends mercy and grace to us in our time of need. (See Philippians 2:5-8.)

The term “throne of grace” indicates that God, who sits on the throne, is characterized by grace in His relationship with His children. “Grace” is translated from the Greek *charitos*, from *charis*, which essentially indicates that the favor given is free. This meaning is the origin of the common definition of grace as the unmerited favor of God.

“The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (John 1:17, NKJV). God extended grace to people prior to the coming of Jesus (Genesis 6:8; Exodus 33:12-13, 16-17), but grace is the fundamental characteristic of the new covenant, not of

law. Thus we can say under the present covenant that grace reigns (Romans 5:21). God's throne is a throne of grace, and He does not impute to sinners their trespasses (II Corinthians 5:19).

Whereas, in simplest terms, grace is the unmerited favor of God, mercy involves the actual forgiveness of sins. When believers boldly approach the throne of grace, they find what they need most: a God who refuses to give them the condemnation they so richly deserve. He does not, however, merely overlook or ignore sin, but He extends His free favor and forgiveness on the basis of the Atonement. The blood of Jesus has satisfied His righteous judgment; now He relates to people of faith as those whose sins have been dealt with once and for all "through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ" (10:10, NKJV). He stands ever ready, at any "time of need," to offer this grace and mercy.

The boldness with which believers can approach the throne of God stands in stark contrast with the hesitancy and reluctance traditionally associated with the high priest's approach to the holiest place on the annual Day of Atonement. This is made possible by the fact that, under the new covenant, believers approach on the basis of the blood of Jesus (10:19), which has completely and permanently satisfied the righteous judgment of God against sin.

*Chapter 5, verse 1.* Before discussing further the high priesthood of Jesus, the writer of Hebrews explained the qualifications and responsibilities of the purely human priests who served in Aaron's lineage. He addressed their ministry (5:1), their empathy with the people (5:2), their sinfulness (5:3), and their appointment (5:4).



By definition, the high priest was “taken from among men.” In order to represent the people of Israel, the priest had to be one of them in every way. (See comments on 2:17.) The priest could represent only those with whom he stood in complete solidarity. The Greek preposition *huper*, translated “for” in the phrase “is appointed for men” (NKJV), indicates the priest is appointed to serve *on behalf of* the people from among whom he is taken.

The Greek phrase *ta pros ton theon*, translated “in things pertaining to God,” appears also in 2:17, where the “things” in view are the high priest’s responsibility to God to make “propitiation for the sins of the people.” The phrase “that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins” reinforces the identification of the “things pertaining to God” as the sacrifices offered for the sins of the people. All the elaborate symbolism and ritual of the Tabernacle and the Levitical priesthood would have been pointless without the heart of the matter: the sacrifices for sins.

Some have thought that the reference to “both gifts and sacrifices” identifies different kinds of offerings made by the priest. It has been suggested that the word “gifts” has to do with cereal or meal offerings and that the word “sacrifices” has to do with animal offerings. Grammatically, however, both words seem simply to refer to the same thing: offerings made for sin. The words “for sins” seem to qualify both “gifts” and “sacrifices.”

*Verse 2.* The translation given by the NKJV is helpful here: “He can have compassion on those who are ignorant and going astray, since he himself is also subject to weakness.” Since the high priest was in every way one of

those whom he represented, he could empathize with them. (See also 7:28.)

Scripture uses three specific terms to emphasize the causes of human sin: ignorance (Greek, *agnoia*), error (Greek, *planomai*), and inattention (Greek, *parakoe*). The first two appear in this verse. The first, translated “ignorant,” often refers to innocent ignorance. (See II Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 1:22.) In other cases there is an ignorance for which people are responsible (Ephesians 4:18; Acts 3:17). The meaning of the word in this verse is strongly influenced by the theme of the high priesthood’s responsibilities to offer sacrifices for sins and the reference in Hebrews 9:7 to the annual visit of the high priest into the Holy of Holies to offer a sacrifice both for himself and the *agnoema* (from *agnoia*) of the people. It is apparent that these ignorances (*agnoema*) were such that the people were responsible for them, even though they were unintentional. (See Numbers 15:22-29.)

A form of the second of the three terms, *planomai*, also appears in this verse. It “emphasizes the cause of one’s going astray, namely, being deceived,”<sup>30</sup> and is translated by the NKJV “going astray.” At least in some cases *planomai* is used, this deception could have been avoided. (See Mark 13:5-6; I Corinthians 6:9; Galatians 6:7; II Thessalonians 2:9-12; I John 3:7; II John 7.) One can be led astray by evil spirits (I Timothy 4:1), others (Ephesians 4:14), or oneself (I John 1:8).

The context of verse 2 indicates that the “weakness” (NKJV) to which the high priest is subject is the propensity to commit the same sins as the people. Because the priest recognizes in himself the same sins experienced by those he represents, he can have compassion on the people.

*Verse 3.* Since the Levitical high priest was himself a sinner, he was required to offer sacrifices for his own sins, as well as for the sins of those he represented. (See 9:7.) Leviticus 16:6 and 11 explain that before Aaron could offer a sacrifice for the sins of the people, he first had to offer a sacrifice for himself and for his family. In this, Jesus was unlike the Levitical priesthood. Since He was without sin, he had no need to offer a sacrifice for Himself. (See 7:26-27.)

*Verse 4.* Under the law of Moses, the office of the priesthood was not open to anyone who might aspire to it. It was limited to male descendants of Levi through Aaron. (See Exodus 27:21; 28:1; Numbers 17:3, 8; 18:2, 21; Deuteronomy 10:8-9; 18:1; 21:5; 31:9.) The high priest was divinely chosen specifically from among those who qualified for the priesthood. Aaron was the first high priest (Exodus 28:1-38; Leviticus 8:1-12; Psalm 105:26); his son Eleazar replaced him (Numbers 20:23-29). Because Phinehas, Eleazar's son, was so zealous against sin, God apparently promised that the high priesthood would always be limited to his descendants (Numbers 25:7-8, 11-13).

*Verse 5.* To demonstrate that Jesus Christ was the divinely appointed High Priest, just as Aaron had been, the letter to the Hebrews for the second time quotes Psalm 2:7. (See comments on 1:5.) The word "Christ" (Greek, *Christos*) is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew *Messiah*, or Messiah, and it requires the Incarnation. The discussion in this verse does not pertain to the Messiah's deity, but to His humanity. Indeed, the entire discussion of His high priesthood has to do with His humanity. The only way Jesus Christ could function as the great

High Priest was to identify completely with humanity. (See comments on 2:14-18.)

Thus, as in all other contexts containing conversations between God and Christ, the writer's purpose is not to describe conversations between two divine persons, but to underscore the genuineness of the Messiah's humanity. If the point of this verse is to emphasize the Messiah's deity, it would seem strange to assert that He "did not glorify Himself" (NKJV). The point is the exaltation of the Messiah into the role of the High Priest. Since the Messiah is God manifest in genuine humanity, His humiliation (the Incarnation, Philippians 2:5-11) was required before He could be glorified to become the great High Priest. The statement "You are My Son, today I have begotten You" (NKJV) is a Messianic prophecy that the New Testament uses in a variety of contexts. It is not a conversation in eternity between two divine persons, but the prophetic address of God to the genuine man in whom He was manifest.

This prophecy does not suggest that the deity and humanity in Christ were divisible to the point that the humanity existed or could have existed apart from the deity, but the Incarnation required the addition of genuine and complete human existence—including human consciousness—to the deity. If the Messiah possessed a genuine human consciousness that the divine consciousness did not overwhelm or replace, there had to be communication of knowledge between the humanity and deity in Jesus. (See comments on 3:4.)

*Verse 6.* To demonstrate further that Christ did not glorify Himself to become High Priest but that God called Him to this ministry (see verse 5), Hebrews quotes Psalm

110:4. This Messianic psalm is clearly of great significance, for the New Testament quotes it frequently. (See Matthew 22:41-45; Mark 12:35-37; Luke 20:41-44; Acts 2:34-35; Hebrews 1:13; 7:17, 21; 10:12-13.) By identifying the high priesthood of the Messiah as according to the order of Melchizedek rather than the order of Aaron, Hebrews demonstrates that His priesthood is prior to and superior to that of the priests under the old covenant.

Under the law of Moses, the office of king and priest were separate. The king was of the tribe of Judah through David (Genesis 49:10; II Samuel 7:16); the priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi through Aaron (Exodus 27:21; 28:1; Numbers 17:3, 8; 18:2, 21; Deuteronomy 10:8-9; 18:1; 21:5; 31:9). No king dared intrude into the priesthood. (See I Samuel 13:8-14; II Chronicles 26:16-21.) Perhaps one reason for the separation of the offices was to protect the people; the resulting checks and balances prevented one man from concentrating all power into his hands.

Melchizedek, however, was both a priest and a king (Genesis 14:18). This fact demonstrates his superiority over the more limited Levitical priesthood. Jesus Christ, after the order of Melchizedek (whose name meant "king of righteousness," Hebrews 7:2), is also both King and Priest. (See Luke 1:32-33; Revelation 19:16; Hebrews 4:14.)

Melchizedek brought out bread and wine when he met Abraham (Genesis 14:18). His action was a prophetic foreshadowing of the memorials of the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper. (See Matthew 26:26-28; Mark 14:22-25; Luke 22:17-20; I Corinthians 11:23-34.)

Since His priesthood is according to the order of

Melchizedek, Jesus is “a priest for ever.” (See also 7:3.) In His role as High Priest Jesus “always lives to make intercession” for us (7:25, NKJV; see also Romans 8:34). This role requires the permanence of the Incarnation; the only way Jesus can continue as High Priest is if He retains the genuine and complete humanity He had on this earth.

*Verse 7.* This verse demonstrates the genuineness of Christ’s prayers. Some, who deny the complete solidarity of Jesus with humanity, have suggested that His prayers did not arise out of any real need to pray but were merely examples for us to follow. They reduce the humanity of the Messiah from any meaningful identification with human beings to a mere moral influence (in contradiction to 2:14, 17). His prayers, according to this view, were simply a charade, a well-intentioned drama in which Jesus *acted* as if He needed divine assistance even though He did not.

But the prayers of Jesus were genuine, springing out of the fullness of His humanity. “He . . . offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and was heard because of His godly fear” (NKJV). He did so “in the days of His flesh” (NKJV). The phrase “in the days of His flesh”

emphasizes the conditions of human weakness of which He partook during His earthly life and . . . does not imply that His incarnate state was terminated with His exaltation to the right hand of God. If the expression did have this meaning, it would seriously weaken [the] argument that Christians have right now a high priest who feels for them and with them in all their temptations and sorrows.<sup>31</sup>

It would also indicate that the Incarnation was not genuine, for genuine humanity cannot be discarded and cease to exist. The NEB translates the phrase, "In the days of his earthly life."

Jesus "offered up" (5:1 uses the same root word for the gifts and sacrifices the high priest offered under the law) both prayers (Greek, *deeseis*) and supplications (Greek, *hiketerias*). The New Testament uses *deesis* (from which *deeseis* comes) exclusively of entreaties addressed to God.

*Hiketerias* is derived from *hikesia* and is used only here in the New Testament. When a word appears only once in Scripture (called by Greek grammarians a hapax legomenon), it is sometimes difficult to determine its exact meaning because there is so little contextual evidence. But an early Christian writer used the word to refer to eager supplication (*I Clement* 59:2).<sup>32</sup> An examination of the prayers of Jesus indicates that they occurred in a variety of contexts. Some were simply entreaties addressed to God for various purposes. (See Matthew 11:25-27; Mark 1:35; 6:46; Luke 3:21; 5:16; 6:12; 9:18; John 11:41-42; 17.) But at times the prayers of Jesus went beyond simple requests and could be classified as "eager" or even desperate supplications. (See Luke 22:41-44; Matthew 27:46.) The writer of Hebrews apparently had this stronger meaning in mind, for he identified these prayers and supplications as being made "with vehement cries and tears" (NKJV).

The genuineness of Christ's prayers is further underscored by their being "offered up . . . to Him who was able to save Him from death." In His prayers, which arose out of His genuine humanity, Jesus prayed to God. It was not,

as some suggest, a case of one divine person praying to another divine person. Such an idea violates the radical monotheism of Scripture and would be difficult to distinguish from ditheism (belief in two gods). It would also indicate a subordination of one divine person to another, making the one praying inferior to the other.

But neither, as others suggest, were the prayers of Jesus a case of our Lord praying to Himself. Jesus possessed a complete human psyche by means of which He communicated with other people and with God just as any human being does. (See comments on verse 5.) Since He is unique in that He is both God and man, there is no satisfactory way to explain His experience in terms completely understandable to finite human minds. There may, however, be a vague parallel in the way human beings can consult with themselves from different points of view.

The prayers of Christ include those in the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prayed, "O My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me" (Matthew 26:39, NKJV). Though God was able to save Him from death and though Jesus "was heard because of His godly fear," Jesus experienced the death of the cross. This happened because Jesus' cry to be saved from death did not terminate His prayer. He concluded, "Nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will" (Matthew 26:39, NKJV). The Atonement that issued from Christ's death was the will of God; there was no escaping the cross.

That Jesus would actually pray these words further indicates the completeness of His human nature: He subordinated His human will to the will of God. If it had been the case of one divine person praying to another, His words would have meant the will of one was opposed to



the will of the other. There is, however, no bifurcation in the will of God. (See Ephesians 1:5, 11.) Not even those who believe God exists as three persons would suggest that He exists as a divine committee where there is the possibility of one person having a will different from the others. When Jesus prayed, “Nevertheless, not as I will,” He spoke from His human nature, indicating that, as a man, He abhorred what was to come. It was not so much the physical pain He dreaded, but the shameful experience of dying a death deserved by a sinner (12:3). Jesus had never sinned, but He would die just as if He had, so that we, who had done no righteousness, could live just as if we had. (See II Corinthians 5:21; Romans 5:12-21.)

The word translated “godly fear” is *eulabeias*, from *eulabeia*, which is a compound word formed from *eu* and *lambano*. *Lambano* means to take in the sense of receiving. When coupled with *eu*, the idea is to take hold well, carefully, surely, cautiously. *Eulabeia* also appears in Hebrews 12:28: “Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear” (NKJV). As it pertains to one’s relationship with God, *eulabeia* means to be careful and cautious in reverencing Him. The life of Jesus perfectly exemplified this attitude. God hears the prayers of those who sincerely reverence Him.

*Verse 8.* Still focusing on the humanity of Jesus, the letter points out that even though Jesus was the Son of God, and thus superior to the Aaronic priests, to Joshua, to Moses, to the angels, and to the prophets of old, He nevertheless “learned obedience by the things which He suffered” (NKJV). (See comments on 2:10.) It would be

incredible to think this statement pertains in any way to His deity. God is omniscient; there is nothing for Him to learn. God is sovereign; there is no one for Him to obey. But as it pertains to His humanity, Jesus experienced all that any human being experiences, including the painful experiences by which one matures in life. (See 2:18.)

*Verse 9.* The word “perfect” is translated from a form of *teleios*, which has to do with maturity. (See comments on 2:10.) Jesus was in every way obedient to His call; He successfully resisted all temptation. (See 2:18; 4:15.) Satan failed completely in his effort to distract Jesus from His purpose. (See Matthew 4:1-11.) Thus, Jesus “became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him” (NKJV). The word translated “author” (Greek, *aitios*) means “cause.” The cause of eternal salvation is the Atonement provided by Jesus. But in order to appropriate this eternal salvation, it is necessary to obey Him. This statement does not suggest that salvation is, after all, by works, but that a person will, without fail, express genuine faith by what he does. (See II Thessalonians 1:8; James 2:14.) The commands of Jesus that everyone must obey certainly include those of John 3:5 and Mark 16:16.

*Verse 10.* Here, the author reiterated the truth, from Psalm 110:4, that God appointed the Messiah to fill the role of High Priest according to Melchizedek’s order, not that of Aaron. (See comments on verse 6.) He returned to this theme later in the letter (6:20; 7; 8:1-5). The continual reinforcement of the superiority of Christ’s high priesthood demonstrates the inferiority of the Aaronic priesthood and the old covenant upon which it was based.

# F.

## **It Is Fatal to Forsake a Superior Covenant for an Inferior One (5:11-6:20)**

*(11) Of whom we have many things to say, and hard to be uttered, seeing ye are dull of hearing. (12) For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat. (13) For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. (14) But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil. (6:1) Therefore leaving the principles of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection; not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God, (2) of the doctrine of baptisms, and of laying on of hands, and of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. (3) And this will we do, if God permit. (4) For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, (5) and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, (6) if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves*

*the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame. (7) For the earth which drinketh in the rain that cometh oft upon it, and bringeth forth herbs meet for them by whom it is dressed, receiveth blessing from God: (8) but that which beareth thorns and briers is rejected, and is nigh unto cursing; whose end is to be burned. (9) But, beloved, we are persuaded better things of you, and things that accompany salvation, though we thus speak. (10) For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister. (11) And we desire that every one of you do shew the same diligence to the full assurance of hope unto the end: (12) that ye be not slothful, but followers of them who through faith and patience inherit the promises. (13) For when God made promise to Abraham, because he could swear by no greater; he swore by himself, (14) saying, Surely blessing I will bless thee, and multiplying I will multiply thee. (15) And so, after he had patiently endured, he obtained the promise. (16) For men verily swear by the greater: and an oath for confirmation is to them an end of all strife. (17) Wherein God, willing more abundantly to shew unto the heirs of promise the immutability of his counsel, confirmed it by an oath: (18) that by two immutable things, in which it was impossible for God to lie, we might have a strong consolation, who have fled for refuge to lay hold upon the hope set before us: (19) which hope we have as an anchor of the soul, both sure and stedfast, and which entereth into that within the veil; (20) whither the forerunner is for us*

*entered, even Jesus, made an high priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.*

People have advanced a variety of theories as to the identification of the intended readers of this portion of the letter. The soteriology of the interpreter tends to influence the hermeneutics of the interpreter. Those who hold that believers are unconditionally eternally secure (i.e., that they cannot lose their salvation) identify the warnings of this section as directed toward Jews who may have professed faith in Christ but who somehow stopped short of genuine faith and thus were not saved. Another option for those who endorse the idea of unconditional eternal security is to suggest that the warnings are merely hypothetical. Still another suggestion is that the passage is a warning to genuine believers who have fallen into sin and will experience loss of reward, though not the loss of salvation. Interpreters who do not hold the teaching of unconditional eternal security typically interpret this section as warning genuine Christians about the possibility of falling away from Christ and losing their salvation. A consideration of the actual words of the passage and the larger context of the entire letter indicates strongly that the last view is correct.

*Verse 11.* Melchizedek has long been an enigmatic figure. He appears on the scene briefly in Genesis 14:18-20, seemingly out of nowhere, then disappears, never to be seen again. But his appearance, though brief, is extremely significant because of his superiority to Abraham (7:4-7), the chief patriarch of people of faith. As a result, there has been a great deal of speculation about Melchizedek's identity. Some have suggested he was an angel who ruled

in Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> An ancient Jewish tradition identified him as Shem, whose life, according to Masoretic chronology, overlapped Abraham's by more than one hundred years.<sup>34</sup> Others have suggested that he was the preincarnate Christ. As the comments on 7:1-8 will reveal, none of these views is accurate.

The writer of Hebrews had much to say about Melchizedek, and he addressed this subject in 7:1-10:18. Essentially, the significance of Melchizedek is the way in which he was a type of Jesus in His high priesthood. (See 8:1.) But the spiritual dullness of the original recipients of this letter made it difficult to explain this significance to them. The reason was apparently their fascination with the law of Moses and its Aaronic priesthood.

The first readers to whom this letter was written were without question Christian believers. They are called "holy brethren" in 3:1. They had been inducted into the church. (See 12:23.) The final chapter of the letter offers the same kind of encouragement found in many of Paul's letters to other first-century believers. But because they were on the verge of succumbing to the temptation to turn away from Christ and back to the shadowy figures of the old covenant (10:1), they had regressed in their spiritual understanding. The writer did not declare, "You *are* dull of hearing," but, "You *have become* dull of hearing" (NKJV). That is, they had not always been dull; this trait developed from their failure to grow spiritually. (See I Corinthians 3:1-4; II Peter 3:18; Ephesians 4:12-16.)

The teaching about the Melchizedekian high priesthood of Christ is not inherently hard to explain or to understand; it is hard only for those who are "dull of hearing." But for those who are not clinging to the shadows of the law of

Moses, the superiority of Christ's priesthood over that of Aaron is evident. (See comments on 4:14-16; 5:5-6.)

*Verse 12.* The original readers of this letter had been Christian believers long enough that they should have matured to the point of being able to teach others. Although their spiritual regression had rendered them incapable of teaching Christian doctrine, the statement "by this time you ought to be teachers" strongly indicates that God expects all Christians to be instructors, not just those who have the positional gift of teaching (Ephesians 4:11; I Corinthians 12:28). All should be involved some way in teaching or discipling their brothers and sisters who are newer in the Lord than they. (See II Timothy 2:2; Titus 2:1-5; Galatians 6:1; James 5:19-20.)

The original readers of this letter had regressed to the point that they needed someone to teach them again "the first principles of the oracles of God" (NKJV). The word translated "principles" (Greek, *stoicheia*) is equivalent to the "ABC's" of something. It represents going back to the very basics and starting all over again. That these early Christians were tempted to revert to the law of Moses indicates they had forgotten even the primary things about the oracles of God.

The oracles (Greek, *logion*) of God are the words of God. (See Acts 7:38; Romans 3:2; I Peter 4:11.) The general teaching of the Word of God regarding the relationship of the old covenant and the new is that God never intended the old covenant to be permanent and final; its purpose was to prepare Israel for the coming of the Messiah and His institution of the new covenant. Thus, God designed the old covenant with built-in obsolescence. (See Jeremiah 31:31-33; 32:37-40; Isaiah 59:20-21;

Ezekiel 16:60-63; 36:24-28; 37:21-28; Galatians 3:19-25; Hebrews 8:6-13.)

The spiritual regression of the first-century Jewish Christians addressed in this letter was so significant that they had forgotten even the elementary distinction between the old covenant and the new covenant. The “milk” of which they had need is described further in 6:1 as “the foundation of repentance from dead works, and of faith toward God” (NKJV). The most elementary principle of Christ is that one must repent, or turn from, dead works as a basis for one’s relationship with God and turn to faith as the only means of access to God. (See 11:6.)

The “dead works” are the rituals of the law of Moses.<sup>35</sup> (See 9:12-14.) The fascination of the original readers with the law of Moses and the Temple rituals, which were still practiced in the Temple in Jerusalem at the time of the writing of this letter, indicates that they had forgotten that under the new covenant people relate to God by faith and not by ritual. (See chapter 11.)

The “solid food” of which they had need refers to the content of the new covenant, as characterized by the superiority of Christ over all else, including the prophets (1:1-3), the angels (1:4-2:16), the Aaronic priesthood (2:17-3:1; 4:15-5:10), Moses (3:2-6), and Joshua (4:8). Specifically, in this verse, the solid food is the teaching concerning the high priesthood of Jesus after the order of Melchizedek.

*Verse 13.* The NKJV supplies the word “only,” so that this verse reads, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe” (NKJV). There is nothing disgraceful about partaking of milk. (See I Peter 2:2.) But believers should not limit



themselves to milk; they should mature to the point of eating solid food. As in the previous verse, milk refers to the foundational teaching of the new covenant, which is that believers must turn from the “dead works” or rituals of the old covenant and relate to God on the basis of faith. (See 6:1.) This is an essential teaching, but it is merely the milk of the new covenant. Believers should grow beyond it to embrace the full-orbed sufficiency of Jesus Christ. (See Colossians 2:10.)

The “word of righteousness” is defined by the previous verse; it is a reference to the “oracles of God.” “Word” and “oracles” are translated from the same Greek root word. In this case, however, the “word” is described as “the word of righteousness” rather than as the “oracles of God.” Doing so emphasizes the new covenant teaching of justification by faith, or the imputation of righteousness to those who believe. (See Romans 4:1-8.) The essence of the new covenant is the imputation of the righteousness of Christ to those who embrace the covenant. (See II Corinthians 5:21.)

Thus, those who limit their spiritual diet only to the milk of no longer relying on dead works and of relating to God on the basis of faith are not yet skilled in the strong meat (“solid food,” NKJV) of the vastly significant teaching concerning the imputation of Christ’s righteousness to those who believe. They are spiritual “babes.”

*Verse 14.* Those who occupy themselves with the “solid food” (NKJV) of new covenant righteousness indicate by so doing that they are “of full age,” that is, they have grown spiritually and are no longer “babes,” occupied only with the “milk,” or foundational teachings, of the new covenant. (See comments on verses 12-13.)

These believers have arrived at the state of spiritual maturity by exercising their spiritual senses to discern between what is good, an apparent reference to the new covenant, and what is evil, which seems to refer to any idea of returning to the now-outmoded old covenant. This contrast does not mean the law itself was evil; it was given by God and was appropriate for the time and people for which He intended it. But it would be evil to try to resurrect it after it has served its purpose of leading Israel to the Messiah. (See Galatians 3:19-25.) Returning to the law would mean turning from Jesus, and there could be no greater evil than that. (See 6:4-6; 10:26-29.)

The phrase “by reason of use” is translated from the Greek *dia ten hexin*, which has to do with the experience or skill acquired through practice, or by habitual application.<sup>36</sup> The suggestion is that, especially for first-century Jewish believers, it was necessary for them to habitually or repeatedly compare the provisions and requirements of the old covenant with those of the new covenant. By so doing, they would discern the radical distinctions between the two, and they would thus choose the solid food of the new covenant. The need to do so may seem strange to believers of today who have never related to God on the basis of the old covenant, but for those whose heritage for centuries focused on Mount Sinai, it was a continuing challenge to focus on Mount Calvary. (See 12:18-24.)

*Chapter 6, verse 1.* The call here is not to abandon the principles of the doctrine of Christ, but to refuse to limit one’s Christian experience to those principles. The Greek *aphentes*, translated “leaving,” does not in this context mean “abandon,” but to “go on to something

else.”<sup>37</sup> Because in some contexts a form of the word means abandonment (e.g., I Corinthians 7:12; Revelation 2:4), some think it carries the same meaning here.<sup>38</sup> Those who hold this view further suggest that all the teachings of this and the next verse are exclusively old covenant teachings.<sup>39</sup> They interpret the “doctrine of baptisms” to refer only to the various ritual washings of the old covenant, and they restrict the “laying on of hands” to the practice of laying one’s hands upon the sacrificial animals.

Even those who hold this view must, however, confess that the Old Testament has little to say about the resurrection of the dead or eternal judgment.<sup>40</sup> If the word “foundation” refers exclusively to old covenant teachings, it seems strange that the only explicit reference to eternal judgment in the Hebrew Scriptures is Ecclesiastes 12:14.<sup>41</sup> By definition, a foundation must be solid and complete. Even though there is much development to do beyond the foundation, foundational teachings should be complete enough to provide a clear outline of the structure that will follow. In addition, just because the word here translated “leaving” elsewhere refers to abandonment, that does not mean it is so used here. Words are defined by their contexts, and the immediate context of this verse does not suggest abandonment of any of the teachings mentioned, but rather building upon them.

Even if we were to understand “leaving” to mean “abandoning,” what is in view is still not the abandoning of the principles themselves. The translation of the NKJV is helpful here: “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection.” The departure in view is not from the elementary

principles themselves, but from the discussion of those principles. The Hebrew Christians were not to allow their entire Christian experience to be consumed with discussions of the rituals of the law of Moses (see comments on 5:12) and of the relationship of those rituals to faith. They were to work through those issues, recognize the shadowy function of the rituals of the law (10:1), turn away from them to faith directly in God, and then go on to perfection (Greek, *telioteta*, from *telios*, meaning “maturity”).

The word “therefore” (Greek, *dio*) refers, as it ordinarily does, to what has immediately preceded. The spiritual regression of the original readers of this letter made it necessary for the author to call them away from their limited spiritual diet of “milk” to the “solid food.” Though he recognized their immaturity, he did not intend to leave them in that state. Unlike new believers who genuinely do need “milk,” these believers had been in Christ long enough that they should have been teachers (5:12).

In a sense, they needed someone to teach them again the first principles of the oracles of God, but the writer of this letter did not intend to do that. They had, after all, already been well instructed in those things. What they needed to do was to mature quickly by recognizing and accepting the elementary truths they had already been taught; then they should go on beyond those things to the “solid food.”

In addition to the idea that “the elementary principles of Christ” (NKJV) refers to old covenant teachings, some have suggested that the phrase refers to the “foundational principles in the Old Testament” or “the teaching of the historical Jesus” or “to words spoken by Christ, not only

during his earthly life, but also in Christian preaching.”<sup>42</sup> But as we have already observed, it seems unlikely that what is in view is Old Testament teaching, due to the minimal treatment given to some of these teachings in the Old Testament. For example, the Hebrew Scriptures say almost nothing about the resurrection of the dead or eternal judgment. And if the “dead works” are the rituals of the law, as suggested in the comments on 5:12, it would be difficult to find substantial teaching in the Old Testament that clearly indicates the need to turn from these rituals. There are, of course, passages in the Old Testament where God rebukes Israel for faithlessness in observing the rituals, but the problem is always with the people, not with the rituals. New covenant believers are, however, called to turn from the rituals themselves.

Contextually, it seems better to understand the “elementary principles of Christ” to refer not to any of the above suggestions, but to elementary Christian teaching. The discussion to be put behind the readers is not merely a discussion of old covenant teachings or of the teachings of Christ Himself, but of the elementary doctrines, the “milk,” of Christianity. These new covenant teachings include the necessity of turning from the law (“repentance from dead works”), of relating to God on the basis of faith and not ritual, of the historical and prophetic significance of the ceremonial washings of the old covenant, of the baptism of John, of Christian baptism, of the laying on of hands (probably the practice under both the old covenant and the new covenant), and the eschatological events of the resurrection from the dead and eternal judgment. Jesus Christ is the personification of the new covenant, just as Moses was of the old covenant. (See

comments on 3:1-6.) The elementary principles of Christ are, therefore, the principles of the new covenant itself.

The call issued in this verse is not merely to leave something, but to go on to something else: perfection. This word is translated from a form of *teleios*, which carries the idea of maturity or, as 5:14 suggests, “full age.” It has to do, not with perfection in contrast with sin, but with spiritual maturity in contrast with spiritual infancy.<sup>43</sup> (See comments on 5:13, where *nepios* is translated “babe.”) The maturity in view is the spiritual growth arising from exposure to and acceptance of the “solid food” of more advanced new covenant teaching, illustrated in this case by the teaching concerning the Melchizedekian high priesthood of Jesus Christ as opposed to the Aaronic high priesthood of the law of Moses.

The writer of this letter, deeply concerned about the spiritual infancy of the original readers, had no intention of “laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.” This foundation had already been laid for them (Romans 15:20; I Corinthians 3:10-12; Ephesians 2:20), and it was time that they progressed beyond that necessary, but elementary, level.

Apparently, the “dead works” are not simply sinful activities in general; the larger context indicates they are the rituals of the law that the coming of the Messiah and the institution of the new covenant made “dead.” (See comments on 5:12.) They are not, as the NIV’s translation suggests, works that *lead* to death. The Greek words *nekron ergon* mean, simply, “dead works.”

Thus, we should not understand the “foundation of repentance from dead works” as strictly equivalent to the necessity of repentance from sin (e.g., Acts 2:38). God

certainly requires repentance from sin (e.g., Acts 17:30), but that kind of repentance does not precede faith; it follows the beginning of faith. (See John 3:16-18.) If this verse had to do with the Christian repentance that springs from faith in Jesus, seemingly it should mention faith first, then repentance. But the repentance that is foundational, especially when the Christian faith is presented to Hebrews, is repentance from the lifeless rituals of the law of Moses. Essentially, repentance means a change of mind and a turn from something.

The writer of Hebrews had no desire to go again over the ground he had obviously covered before. The Hebrews demonstrated their spiritual regression by their continued fascination with the rituals of the law, a fascination fueled by the continuing presence of the Temple in Jerusalem and its full complement of priests and sacrifices and the sights and sounds so appealing to the senses. The writer apparently could not endure the tedium of explaining again the deadness of the rituals that, to the human senses, gave every appearance of life. He simply called his readers away from their seemingly endless discussions of the value of those rituals in contrast with the claims of the new covenant. The very foundation of Christianity, the very first of the first principles, so to speak, was the necessity of turning away from the old covenant, represented by the rituals of the law, and of turning in faith toward God. We find a more thorough treatment of this theme in 10:38-39; 11; 12:1-2.

Faith, from the Greek *pisteuo*, is essentially trust. The new covenant calls those who have formerly trusted in other things, even in the law of Moses, to turn from that trust and to place their confidence exclusively and

directly in God. There can be no genuine faith in God where there is also reliance upon someone or something else for salvation.

*Verse 2.* By a series of genitives (the Greek case of description), the writer of Hebrews linked together six matters, identifying all of them as “elementary principles of Christ” (NKJV) and thus as forming the “foundation” of Christian teaching. In the immediate context, these elementary principles are also “milk” in opposition to the “solid food” of the Melchizedekian high priesthood of Jesus Christ. (See comments on 5:11-14.) These six matters are repentance from dead works, faith toward God, and the teaching concerning baptisms, laying on of hands, the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. (See comments on verse 1 for a discussion of repentance from dead works and faith toward God.)

Some think the “doctrine of baptisms” refers to the various washings under the law of Moses (Numbers 8:7; Hebrews 9:10).<sup>44</sup> Others see it as referring exclusively to baptisms associated with the new covenant, including the baptism of John, Christian baptism, and the baptism of the Holy Spirit.<sup>45</sup> It may be best to understand the reference to combine both elements.<sup>46</sup>

The specific Greek word translated “baptisms” occurs only here, in 9:10, and in Mark 7:4, 8. In 9:10, it definitely has to do with the “various washings” (NKJV) associated with the old covenant. In Mark, it describes the washing of cups and pots as it developed in Jewish tradition. (See also Matthew 15:1-9.) The use of the identical rare word (Greek, *baptismos*) in 6:2 and 9:10 argues strongly for the same meaning in both cases. Mark’s use of the word for ceremonial washings supports the idea



that whenever it is used, such washings must be in view.

But it is also possible that, though the reference in 6:2 includes old covenant washings, it also reaches out to embrace the doctrine of new covenant baptism. The following reasons support this position:

*1. If the reference to repentance from “dead works” and faith toward God has to do with turning from the rituals of the old covenant (see comments on 5:12) in favor of approaching God on the basis of faith alone, it suggests that the “doctrine of baptisms” could include a continuing reference to the tension between the baptisms or washings of the old and new covenants.*

The writer of Hebrews may see, as part of the “foundation” or “elementary principles,” the Christian teaching distinguishing between the ritual washings of the Jews and water baptism in the new covenant.

If we knew more about the spiritual regression of the original readers of this letter and the possibility of defection from the new covenant back to the old covenant that loomed before them (verses 4-6; 10:29), we might discover that rather than growing in grace to the point of being able to digest “solid food,” they had reverted to a spiritual infancy characterized by, among other things, endless discussions of the relative merits of the washings commended in the law of Moses as opposed to the merits of Christian baptism. In truth, the washings of the old covenant were merely symbols of a greater reality fulfilled in Christ. (See 9:9-10.) If their prophetic significance was removed, there would be no value in them at all.

Westcott pointed out, “The plural [baptisms, as opposed to baptism] and peculiar form [the rare *baptismos*

as opposed to the common *baptisma*] seem to be used to include Christian Baptism with other lustral rites. The ‘teaching’ would naturally be directed to shew their essential difference.”<sup>47</sup> He offered, as a reference to illuminate the passage, John 3:25. In the latter context, Jesus and His disciples baptized in the land of Judea while John was also baptizing in Aenon near Salim. (See John 3:22-23.) The disciples of John fell into a dispute with the Jews “about purification” (John 3:25, NKJV). This purification had to do with water baptism, for “they came to John and said to him, ‘Rabbi, He who was with you beyond the Jordan, to whom you have testified—behold, He is baptizing, and all are coming to Him!’” (John 3:26, NKJV). John 4:1-2 speaks of baptism by Jesus’ authority, thereby enclosing the context with references to baptism.

Water baptism was not a strange or uncommon practice in first-century Israel, even apart from Christian baptism or the baptism of John. Many influential rabbis baptized their students. Excavations have uncovered many first-century Jewish homes that included the *mikvah*, or ritual bath wherein devout Jews immersed themselves daily for religious cleansing.<sup>48</sup>

Thus the “doctrine of baptisms,” as an elementary principle, could have to do with Christian teaching concerning the entire scope of washings or baptisms, from those incorporated into the old covenant to the baptism of John and to Christian baptism, and it may even allude to the washings associated with Jewish tradition. The Christian teaching concerning all of these baptisms is as follows: (1) The washings of the old covenant were symbolic of the ultimate cleansing that would come with the arrival of the Messiah (9:9-15). (2) The baptism of John

was a divinely ordained practice to identify those who embraced his message of the coming of the Messiah and responded in repentance (Mark 1:2-5; Acts 19:1-4). (3) Christian baptism is a command of Christ (Matthew 28:19; Mark 16:16) linked to repentance and remission of sins (Acts 2:38; 8:16; 10:47-48; 19:5; 22:16) and resulting in identification with Jesus Christ in His death, burial, and resurrection (Romans 6:3-5; I Corinthians 1:13; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:11-12; I Peter 3:21). (4) The nonscriptural, traditional Jewish washings were simply human commandments with no spiritual value (Matthew 15:1-9; 23:25-26; Mark 7:1-8; Colossians 2:8, 16-23).

*2. The reference to "the doctrine of baptisms" follows the reference to "faith toward God," and Christian water baptism is faith's response to the commands of Christ.*

If the writer of Hebrews had referred to the doctrine of baptisms before or immediately after his reference to repentance from dead works, it would strongly suggest that the baptisms or washings in view were exclusively those of the old covenant. But the position of the doctrine of baptisms in the list of the six elementary principles allows it to retain a reference to the washings preceding the new covenant (it is still closely tied to repentance from dead works and faith toward God) while also incorporating baptism in the new covenant.

*3. The fourth of the elementary principles, "the laying on of hands," may also have a dual significance, namely, laying hands on sacrificial animals under the old covenant (Numbers 8:12) and the laying on of hands practiced in the new covenant. (See Matthew 9:18; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23; 16:18; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 6:6;*

8:17; 13:3; 19:6; 28:8; I Timothy 4:14; 5:22; II Timothy 1:6.)

The elementary Christian teaching on this subject would explain the significance of laying on of hands under the old covenant as opposed to the new covenant. If this reference is plural, the context would strongly indicate that the reference to the doctrine of baptisms is also plural.

If the “doctrine of baptisms” refers exclusively to baptisms (plural) under the new covenant, it could mean both water baptism and Spirit baptism. (See Mark 1:8; Acts 1:5.) This suggestion may be somewhat problematic since Ephesians 4:5 declares there is “one baptism.” The latter verse apparently describes water baptism, since the previous one (Ephesians 4:4) mentions the Spirit in a context that suggests Spirit baptism. The statement that there is “one body and one Spirit” is similar to Paul’s assertion in I Corinthians 12:13: “For by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free—and have all been made to drink into one Spirit” (NKJV). If Paul saw Spirit baptism as the means of placing believers in the body of Christ—the church (Ephesians 1:22-23)—and water baptism as the means by which believers put on Christ Himself (Romans 6:3-5; Galatians 3:27; Colossians 2:11-12), his statement in Ephesians 4:4 that there “is one body and one Spirit” seems to refer to the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and his statement in Ephesians 4:5 that there is “one Lord, one faith, one baptism” seems to refer to there being only one Lord in whom we have faith and with whom we are united in water baptism.

When we consider all factors from the near and more distant contexts, it appears that “the doctrine of baptisms” speaks in general of the elementary Christian teaching concerning the various washings of the old covenant, the baptism of John, Christian baptism, and even the traditional Jewish cleansings in the first century.

Like the doctrine of baptisms, the doctrine or teaching concerning the laying on of hands has a place in both the old and new covenants. Under the old covenant, the laying on of hands was practiced for the consecration of the Levites to Tabernacle service, for animal sacrifices, and even for the identification of those sentenced to capital punishment. (See Exodus 29:15, 19; Leviticus 4:15, 24; 8:14, 18, 22; 16:21; 24:14; Numbers 8:10, 12; 27:23; Deuteronomy 17:7.) Under the new covenant, the laying on of hands is practiced in connection with personal ministry to others, including prayer for the sick, prayer for the baptism with the Holy Spirit, and confirmation of individuals into positions of spiritual leadership. (See Matthew 9:18; 19:13, 15; Mark 5:23; 6:5; 7:32; 8:23, 25; 10:16; 16:18; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 6:6; 8:17-19; 9:17; 13:3; 19:6; 28:8; I Timothy 4:14; 5:22; II Timothy 1:6.)

The elementary teaching concerning the laying on of hands apparently focuses on the overriding purpose of the practice in each of the two covenants; the distinction in purposes is dramatic. Under the old covenant, the laying on of hands was used almost exclusively in a symbolic imputing of sins to sacrificial animals (Exodus 29:15, 19; Leviticus 4:15, 24; 8:14, 18, 22; 16:21) and in the identification of those worthy of death by those who witnessed the guilty person’s sin (Leviticus 24:14; Deuteronomy 17:7).

The only other use of the practice was in the ritual cleansing of the Levites for purification (Numbers 8). Here, the Israelites laid their hands on the Levites, apparently to symbolize the imputation of their sins to the priestly class (who represented the people to God). The Levites (who were a sacrifice to God in place of the first-born of each family) in turn laid their hands upon two young bulls, which symbolized the imputation of their sins to the sacrificial animals. The purpose was atonement for the Levites (Numbers 8:12). Moses laid his hands upon Joshua to appoint him as his successor, but this action was not strictly part of the 613 commandments in the law of Moses (Numbers 27:23).

Thus, under the old covenant, the laying on of hands was essentially a negative act of condemnation. Because of the positive associations we have with the laying on of hands under the new covenant, we may tend to see the laying of hands on the Levites as representing some kind of blessing, but this view is anachronistic. It reads new covenant practices back into the old covenant. It was no doubt clear to the Israelites, whose law called for the laying of hands on animals offered as sin offerings and for the final condemnation of lawbreakers prior to stoning, that the laying of hands on the Levites was not an act of joyous blessing, but an occasion of somber reflection on the sacred role of the Levites as they represented all the people, including their sins, to God.

On the other hand, the laying on of hands under the new covenant is exclusively positive, involving the impartation of some kind of blessing (Matthew 9:18; 19:13, 15; Mark 6:5; 7:32; 8:23, 25; 16:18; Luke 4:40; 13:13; Acts 8:17-19; 19:6) or the confirmation of ministry (Acts 6:6;

13:3; I Timothy 4:14; II Timothy 1:6). To the first-century Jews, this change of emphasis should have been a clear signal of the termination of the old covenant.

The laying on of hands is so significant in the new covenant as a positive blessing or confirmation that Paul warned Timothy, “Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people’s sins; keep yourself pure” (I Timothy 5:22, NKJV). In an environment where the laying on of hands signified blessing or approval, it was important not to debase the symbolic significance of this practice by carelessly and quickly laying hands on those whose lives did not merit such blessing or approval. Under the old covenant, it was appropriate to lay hands on lawbreakers who deserved death; under the new covenant, it is inappropriate to lay hands on a sinner who does not seek after God. There can be no clearer indication of the radical difference between the two covenants.

The elementary Christian teaching concerning the laying on of hands demonstrates how unlike the two covenants are. Under the old covenant, this practice was essentially negative; under the new covenant, it is essentially positive. Here is yet another indication that the two covenants are mutually exclusive. And this point should have reminded the original readers of this letter that to go back to the old covenant was to abandon the covenant that was vastly superior.

Even those who suggest that the elementary principles in view in 6:1-2 are “Old Testament concepts” rather than “elementary Christian truths”<sup>49</sup> are hard pressed to locate detailed teaching in the Old Testament on the subject of the resurrection of the dead. MacArthur, for example, admitted that the

Old Testament doctrine of resurrection is not clear or complete. We learn of life after death and of rewards for the good and punishment for the wicked—and not much more about resurrection than this. From Job, for instance, we learn that resurrection will be bodily, and not just spiritual (Job 19:26). There is little else that we can learn of it from the Old Testament.<sup>50</sup>

But if we understand the distinction between old and new covenant teaching on these elementary principles, we have no problem. We are not surprised that the Old Testament contains so little concerning the resurrection of the dead, for the old covenant, which is the most comprehensive subject in the Old Testament, is inferior to the new covenant. We would expect to find clearer and more detailed teaching on this subject in the New Testament, and we do.

Jesus taught that the resurrection of the dead is universal; those who have done good will enjoy the resurrection of life, and those who have done evil will suffer the resurrection of condemnation (John 5:28-29; see also Luke 14:14). Paul agreed (Acts 24:15). But the New Testament takes this doctrine beyond these insights, which do not in themselves advance beyond the information in the Old Testament. (See Daniel 12:2.)

We gain additional insight from the New Testament as follows: (1) The final judgment will be done by the Messiah, whose resurrection from the dead is a harbinger of things to come (Acts 17:31-32; see also Acts 4:2; I Corinthians 15:20-23; Colossians 1:18). (2) Without the resurrection from the dead, the Old Testament promises



of a Messiah to come are stripped of their significance (I Corinthians 15:12-19). (3) In the resurrection, the redeemed will bear the image of the resurrected Messiah (I Corinthians 15:35-50); (4) Although the resurrection will be a bodily resurrection, as Job anticipated (Job 19:26), the resurrection body will be incorruptible and immortal (I Corinthians 15:51-54). In this way we have final victory over death and the grave<sup>51</sup> (I Corinthians 15:54-57).

The rapture of the church, which may occur at any moment and which involves only those who are in Christ (I Thessalonians 4:13-18), is distinct from the resurrection of Old Testament saints, which will occur after the Great Tribulation (Daniel 9:24-27; 12:13), and from the final resurrection in conjunction with the Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15).

In the most general terms, the resurrection of the just—although including distinct groups and occurring at different times—is the first resurrection. (See Luke 14:14; John 5:28-29; I Thessalonians 4:16; Revelation 20:4; Daniel 12:2.) The resurrection of the unjust refers to the unsaved who will stand before the Great White Throne. It is the second resurrection, resulting in the second death. (See Revelation 20:11-15.)

As with the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead, the doctrine of eternal judgment is found in the old covenant, but it is much more clearly detailed in the new covenant. Abraham recognized God as the Judge of all the earth (Genesis 18:25). Solomon concluded Ecclesiastes with the warning that “God will bring every work into judgment, including every secret thing, whether good or evil” (12:14, NKJV). In Daniel’s dramatic vision of the

Ancient of Days, he reported that a “fiery stream issued and came forth from before Him. A thousand thousands ministered to Him; ten thousand times ten thousand stood before Him. The court was seated, and the books were opened” (Daniel 7:10, NKJV). But the New Testament takes the theme of eternal judgment beyond these general concepts and reveals that there are five eschatological (end-time) judgments.<sup>52</sup>

First, there is the judgment seat of Christ (Romans 14:10; I Corinthians 3:11-15; II Corinthians 5:10). It occurs in heaven after the rapture of the church and before the second coming of Christ to this earth at the end of the Great Tribulation. (See I Corinthians 4:5; II Timothy 4:8; Revelation 19:7-8; 22:12.) Only those who are redeemed members of the church will be present at this judgment. It is not a judgment to determine salvation, but rewards for deeds done subsequent to salvation. Works categorized as gold, silver, or precious stone will be rewarded; those categorized as wood, hay, or stubble will not. (See Ephesians 6:8; Colossians 3:24-25.) Under the symbol of fire, each believer’s work will be tested to determine “what sort it is” (I Corinthians 3:13), which indicates a test to ascertain the quality of the work.

It may be that the determining factor is the motivation behind one’s deeds. In describing the religious ostentation of the first century, Jesus said some people’s giving, praying, and fasting were motivated by their desire to be seen of others. (See Matthew 6:1-18.) Thus the commendation of men was all they would ever receive. But those who engaged in these good works with pure motives, doing them secretly as unto the Lord, would be rewarded openly.

The second eschatological judgment is the judgment of the Gentiles. Also known as the judgment of the nations, it will occur at the end of the Great Tribulation at the second coming of Christ. (See Matthew 25:31-46; Joel 3:2.) This judgment, which will take place in the Valley of Jehoshaphat, will determine the fate of the Gentiles then living on the basis of their treatment of Christ's brethren, the Jewish people, during the preceding Tribulation. Those Gentiles whose faith in Christ has prompted them to minister to the persecuted Jews during the Great Tribulation are described as sheep; their reward will be to enter into the kingdom, which is also known as the Millennium. (See Revelation 20:4-6.) Those Gentiles whose lack of faith in Christ caused them to fail to minister to the persecuted Jews during the Great Tribulation are described as goats; their fate is to be cast into the lake of fire. This judgment will dramatically demonstrate the blessing and cursing of the Abrahamic covenant described in Genesis 12:3.

The third eschatological judgment is the judgment of Israel. (See Ezekiel 20:37-38.) This judgment will occur on the earth at the second coming of Jesus at the end of the Great Tribulation. It will involve the Jewish people who are living on the earth at that time and will be based upon their acceptance or rejection of Jesus as the Messiah. (See Psalm 50:1-7; Ezekiel 20:33-44; Malachi 3:2-5; 4:1-2.) Those who have believed on Jesus will enter into the kingdom blessing of the Millennium; those who have rejected Him will not.

The fourth eschatological judgment is the judgment of the fallen angels. (See Jude 6.) Since the final judgment of Satan occurs at the end of the Millennium and before the

Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:10), it is reasonable to conclude that this judgment will occur at the same time, since Satan himself is a fallen angel. (See II Peter 2:4.) Christians will be involved with Christ in this judgment (I Corinthians 6:3), which will result in the fallen angels being cast into the lake of fire (Jude 7).

The last of the eschatological judgments is the Great White Throne Judgment. (See Revelation 20:11-15.) This judgment, which occurs after the Millennium, involves all who have not previously been resurrected. It is based upon each individual's works. Those whose names are not found written in the Book of Life are cast into the lake of fire.

Although the judgment (Greek, *krima*) of Hebrews 6:2 has to do with the eternal sentence pronounced rather than the process of judgment,<sup>53</sup> the new covenant does reveal far more detail about the various eternal judgments than does the old covenant. The last of the elementary principles of Christian teaching is appropriately concerned with the last great eschatological events to transpire before the introduction of the eternal realm.

*Verse 3.* The author intended, with the permission of God, to leave the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ (verse 1) and to advance to teaching befitting mature believers. This teaching had to do specifically with the high priesthood of Christ after the order of Melchizedek. (See comments on 5:11-14.) The plural "we" is not merely a plural of authorship, but a real plural, meaning "you and I together."<sup>54</sup> The author wanted to take his readers along with him on his journey to maturity. He had no desire to abandon them in their spiritual infancy.

The author recognized that his ability to proceed to mature teaching depended upon the permission of God; his acknowledgment strongly indicates his reliance upon the Holy Spirit in writing the letter. By definition, Scripture is given by inspiration of God. (See II Timothy 3:16.) If the human writer had insisted on taking the letter in the direction he thought best, regardless of divine direction, his writing would not be trustworthy.

Before he offered the more mature teaching, the author first needed to give a somber warning of the dangers of apostasy.

*Verses 4-6.* These verses have struck fear in the hearts of many; some have even succumbed to hopelessness after they turned from Christ back to a life of sin. But the point of verses 4-6 cannot be that it is impossible for people to be saved if they once knew Christ and then fell away from Him. Such an interpretation would fly in the face of the Atonement itself, for the blood of Christ was shed for the sin of the whole world. (See I John 2:2; John 1:29; Hebrews 10:12; Isaiah 53:4-12; Matthew 26:28; II Peter 3:9.) If some people—for whatever reason—cannot be saved, the power of the Atonement is limited, and the blood of Jesus Christ is insufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world.

Since Jesus was not only a man but also God, however, the value of His death on the cross is infinite. It is impossible for the weight of the sins of the world, no matter how despicable they are, to surpass the value of Christ's blood. The Hebrew word translated "offering" in Isaiah 53:10, in the phrase "when You make His soul an offering for sin" (NKJV), describes an offering that is more than enough to satisfy the penalty.

Whatever these verses mean, then, they cannot contradict the pervasive biblical teaching concerning the efficacy of Christ's blood. Indeed, as we shall see, they do not challenge this blessed truth.

Verses 4-6 describe the impossibility of renewing again to repentance those who fall away after having experienced the Christian life. To understand this passage, we must keep in mind the general context of the entire letter: it is written to Hebrew Christians in danger of defecting from the new covenant back to the old covenant. The grammar of the passage reveals why it is impossible to renew these Jewish believers.

Nothing in this passage suggests that it speaks merely of a hypothetical situation which could not actually occur.<sup>55</sup> Those who so interpret the passage apparently try to conform it to their prior belief that it is impossible for the genuinely converted to apostatize.

Verses 4-6 address the problem of Christian believers, and particularly Jewish Christian believers, turning from the new covenant after they "were once enlightened," "tasted the heavenly gift," became "partakers of the Holy Spirit," and "tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come" (NKJV). If believers who have had these new covenant experiences turn from them back to the old covenant with its animal sacrifices and shadows of what is already fulfilled (10:1), "it is impossible . . . to renew them again to repentance" (NKJV). The reason is that they "crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame" (verse 6, NKJV).

To be "enlightened" refers to the initial realization necessary for salvation: that one is a sinner in need of a Savior and that the Savior is Jesus Christ. The Greek *photizo*,

translated “enlightened,” has to do with instruction. Thus, the enlightenment comes by means of Christian teaching.

There may be some parallel between these initial Christian experiences and the elementary principles of Christ listed in verses 1-2. That is, for these Hebrew Christians, the enlightenment revealed the deadness of the works of the law as a result of the death of Christ on the cross. Once they were enlightened to the purpose of the law in bringing Israel to Christ (Galatians 3:19-24) and realized that, this purpose being served, they were no longer under the law (Galatians 3:25), they responded with “faith toward God” (verse 1). This response included Christian baptism (verse 2). As a result of their faith, they “tasted the heavenly gift,” the gift of salvation, by becoming “partakers of the Holy Spirit.”<sup>56</sup> (See Acts 1:4-5; 2:38.) They “tasted the good word of God” by being exposed to Christian preaching,<sup>57</sup> which was confirmed with signs, wonders, miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit. (See 2:3-4.)

By these supernatural confirmations of the “good word of God” they tasted “the powers of the age to come.” Tasting the Word of God and the powers of the age to come may parallel the elementary principles of “laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment” (verse 2). By the preaching of the Word of God, they had come to (1) understand and experience the laying on of hands, with the miraculous signs that often follow (i.e., the “powers of the age to come”), (2) believe in the resurrection of the dead, and even to experience a glimpse of that future blessing in the present (Acts 9:36-42; 20:7-12) by the demonstration of the supernatural power of God, and (3) comprehend more fully matters pertaining to eternal judgment. Thus, by tasting the “good

word of God,” they also tasted “the powers of the age to come.”

The word “tasted” in verses 4 and 5 does not imply a mere sampling; it means to eat or drink and thus to experience to the full.<sup>58</sup> The people discussed in these verses had not merely come to the threshold of salvation; they were saved. The warning against falling away would be meaningless unless they had arrived at a position of true faith from which to fall.

In the Greek text, there is no question about the possibility of falling in the phrase “if they fall away.” The word translated “if they fall away” (Greek, *parapesontas*) is an aorist active participle, indicating completed action. Those so described have fallen “aside from the right path.”<sup>59</sup> Specifically, the larger context of the entire letter suggests they have abandoned the Messiah and His new covenant in favor of the old covenant, much as their forefathers yearned to return to Egypt after their deliverance. (See comments on 3:7-19.)

It is specifically these people who have been exposed to the elementary principles of Christian teaching and who have experienced genuine salvation, but who have rejected all they knew—by teaching and experience—to be true, who cannot be renewed to repentance. But this fact does not mean that, from God’s perspective, their salvation is completely outside the realm of possibility.

The phrase “since they crucify again for themselves the Son of God, and put Him to an open shame” (NKJV) revolves around two present active participles (Greek *anastaurountas* and *paradeigmatizontas*) that mean “while they go on crucifying . . . and putting to shame.”<sup>60</sup> In other words, as long as these apostates go on in their



apostasy, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance. Though it is unspoken, the implication is that if they turn from their apostasy, their repentance would no longer be impossible. The repentance in view must be defined by the context: it is repentance from dead works, or from the rituals of the law. So long as a person discounts the value of the Cross of Christ, he cannot be released from his allegiance to ritual.

The underlying thought here, as well as in 10:26-29, is that if we reject the Cross of Christ, there is no other provision for salvation. Those who fall away from the new covenant can find no place of repentance, for there is no provision for repentance outside of the new covenant. If anyone rejects the Son of God, thus crucifying him again and openly shaming Him, that person cannot be saved. But nothing in this passage suggests that salvation is impossible for apostates who see the error of their way and turn from it. Repentance is impossible only for those who continue to reject the provisions of the Cross.

*Verses 7-8.* These verses offer a metaphor that compares Christian believers to land and its produce. In verse 7, the earth “bears herbs useful for those by whom it is cultivated” because it “drinks in the rain that often comes upon it” (NKJV). The identification of earth, rain, herbs, and cultivation with blessing from God would have been familiar to the original Hebrew readers of this letter, as would the identification of bearing thorns and briars with rejection and cursing. First, there was the original curse on the ground as a result of Adam’s sin (Genesis 3:17-19). Then, there was the old covenant promise of rain on the condition of perfect obedience to all the commandments of the law of Moses (Deuteronomy 28:1, 12) as

well as the assurance of a curse in the form of rain withheld if the commandments were not kept (Deuteronomy 28:15, 24).

Since the old covenant revolved around the quality of life in the land, the Israelites had a high awareness of the relationship between spiritual blessing and agricultural prosperity. For example, the prophet Malachi tied Israel's economic poverty to their failure to obey the Mosaic commandments on tithe and offering (Malachi 3:8-9). As a result of their disobedience, the "windows of heaven," a reference to rain (Genesis 7:11-12), had been closed to them, resulting in the destruction of their crops. But if they would obey, God would open the "windows of heaven," blessing them with abundant rain that would result in fruitful crops (Malachi 3:10-11). Even in the New Testament, Paul identified rain and fruitful seasons with the blessing of God (Acts 14:17). The metaphor is thus uniquely suited to the letter's original audience.

The "earth" in these verses represents people and their response to the rain that often comes. Since there was never a question under the old covenant as to whether the earth, a specific reference to the land promised to Abraham, belonged to God, the question here is not whether the people under discussion belong to Him. Verses 4-5 indicate that even those who bear "thorns and briers" have at one time received salvific "blessing from God." Grammatically, the "earth" of verses 7 and 8 is the same; the difference is the response to the rain. Those believers whose response to the frequent rains (the experiences of verses 4-5) is to bear useful herbs are blessed of God. (Compare Jesus' teaching on the vine and branches in John 15:5, 8.) But those who, in spite of the gracious gift

of rain, bear thorns and briers (the apostasy of verse 6) are rejected. (See John 15:2, 6.)

We must note, however, that the rejection of verse 8 is not ultimate and final. Even though their lives have produced “thorns and briers” rather than “herbs,” there is still the possibility that these unfruitful believers can return to a place of fruitfulness. They are not “cursed”: they are “*near*” to being cursed. Though the phrase “whose end is to be burned” may cause some to think of the ultimate penalty of the lake of fire for those whose names are not written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:11-15), that view does not fit the agricultural imagery here. It was common in Israel to burn fields producing only weeds. The point was not to destroy the earth itself, but to rid it of the undesirable plants and seeds and prepare it to bring forth a desirable harvest.

Although it is not fully developed here, the idea seems to be that those Hebrew Christians who, in spite of their salvific experiences, were producing fruit not compatible with Christianity could expect fiery discipline to purge them and prepare them to bear good fruit once again. Such discipline is undeniably the subject of Hebrews 12:5-11. (See also I Peter 1:6-7; 4:12; II Peter 1:8-11.)

Another theme not fully developed here, but indicated in the phrase “near to being cursed” is that if those whose lives produced “thorns and briers” persisted in doing so, even after all attempts by God to restore them, they would ultimately experience the curse, which at the moment of this writing was near. This curse is no doubt separation from the gracious blessing of God which, in this metaphor, had continued to result in rain even upon the unfruitful ground. When the curse was realized, the

rain would cease, in keeping with the old covenant context of the metaphor. Israel's disobedience resulted in God withholding the rain, which was considered a curse (Deuteronomy 28:15, 24).

The somber warning of these verses, following closely that of verses 4-6, was not lost on the original Hebrew readers. They clearly understood that the blessings of God which He had continued to pour out upon them would one day cease if they did not produce the fruit of the Christian faith. If they turned away from the Messiah and the provisions of the new covenant, no source of blessing remained. Even the temporal blessings of the old covenant could not be revived, for the coming of the new covenant had terminated the old. (See Hebrews 7:11-12, 18-19; 8:6-7, 13; 10:9.) There was no possibility of choosing between the old covenant or the new covenant. It was the new covenant or nothing at all.

*Verse 9.* After the essentially negative message of verses 4-6 and 8, the section beginning with verse 9 offers fresh assurance of the writer's confidence that the grace of God would win out over the temptation to fall away from faith in Messiah.

This passage is the only one in the letter to use the word "beloved." It is obviously a term of endearment and assurance. Though the message of the letter is strong and uncompromising, the author still regarded the recipients as his brothers in Christ. He warned them of the dangers of falling away, but he was confident they would not do so.

The word "better," an underlying theme of the book, appears here. Not only is Jesus in every way better than all who have gone before—including the prophets,

angels, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua—and not only is the new covenant better than the old covenant, but the first-century Jewish Christians were capable of better things than apostasy.

The phrase “things that accompany salvation” (Greek, *echomena soterias*) could be translated “things that lead to salvation” or “things that follow from salvation.”<sup>61</sup> In view of the context, we must understand it in the latter sense, for the “beloved” to whom this letter was written were already saved. There are certain fruits that naturally follow salvation (verse 7). Even though the Spirit of God led him to issue stern warnings, the author was confident that his readers would ultimately do the right thing.

*Verse 10.* The genuineness of the Christian experience of the first readers of this letter is evident by their “work and labor of love . . . shown toward His name” (NKJV). They may have become “dull of hearing” (5:11), failed to mature as rapidly as they should have (5:12), remained in a state of spiritual infancy (5:13) and even—in a moment of severe temptation—contemplated reversion to their life under the old covenant (3:12; 4:11; 6:6), but they had on the other hand given evidence of the sincerity of their faith.

This evidence took the practical form of ministering to the saints. Such service was apparently a strength of first-century Jewish believers; they had been so diligent in ministering to others that some had unknowingly ministered to angels. (See Hebrews 13:2.) Throughout the New Testament, ministry to those in need, and especially to believers, is a mark of genuine Christianity. (See Galatians 6:10; I Timothy 5:10; James 1:27.) Not only had the first readers of this letter ministered to saints in the past,

they were continuing that ministry at the moment this letter was written (“and do minister” [NKJV]). Here was evidence not only that they had once been saved, but that they still were.

Believers can have assurance that “God is not unjust to forget [their] work and labor of love” (NKJV). Although salvation is by grace through faith, not of works, it results in good works (Ephesians 2:8-10), which will be rewarded at the judgment seat of Christ (I Corinthians 3:14). (See comments on 6:2.) These works are the result of salvation, not the cause of it, for they are the “labor of love.” They are works that result from the genuineness of one’s love for God and others.

This labor of love was “shown toward His name” (NKJV). In Hebrew thought, “name” was synonymous with “person.” (See Revelation 3:4 and comments on 1:4; 2:12; 13:15.) The idea here is that the love demonstrated in ministry to the saints is the love for God that first results in salvation (verse 9) and then leads to a concern for others. (See Mark 12:29-31.)

*Verses 11-12.* The strong warnings of verses 4-6 and 8 were not intended to strike hopelessness in the hearts of the readers. They were intended to prevent them from falling prey to discouragement resulting from the resistance of unbelievers (12:3-4), many of whom were no doubt family and close friends who had not embraced Jesus as the Messiah. (See Matthew 10:32-37.) The writer’s desire was that each of his readers would continue to show the same kind of diligence demonstrated in their faithful ministry to the saints “to the full assurance of hope until the end” (NKJV).

Not only are love (verse 10) and faith (verse 12) nec-

essary for ultimate salvation, so is hope. (See Romans 5:2-5; I Corinthians 13:13; Galatians 5:5-6; Colossians 1:4-5; I Thessalonians 1:3; 5:8; Hebrews 10:22-24; I Peter 1:21-22.) Believers must not be discouraged by painful experiences in this life, even by the ultimate pain of rejection by one's family. Each one must maintain his hope to the end, because biblical hope gives "full assurance" that its object will be realized. In contrast with mere wishful thinking or human hope that things will one day be better, biblical hope is based on the solid bedrock of the promises of God. It cannot be disappointed. (See Romans 5:5.)

The word translated "sluggish" (NKJV) is the same as that translated "dull" (Greek, *nothroi*) in 5:11. Although the recipients had become dull of hearing, the writer expressed his desire that they not become sluggish in their hope. To give up hope is to despair, and to despair is to turn one's back on God. Instead of succumbing to hopelessness, believers must "imitate those who through faith and patience inherit the promises" (NKJV).

Here we see two qualities necessary to receive the promises of God: faith and patience. Faith, at its deepest level, is trust in God. In the face of the most painful circumstances, faith continues to trust in God's person and character. Faith embraces the biblical claim that God is a good God and that He gives only good and perfect gifts to His children. (See Matthew 7:11; Romans 8:28; James 1:17.) Therefore, faith never succumbs to the temptation to believe that evil is from God or that He is unable or unwilling to make even our deepest pain result ultimately in good.

Patience, coupled with faith, refuses to give up before

the promise of God is realized. This theme is repeated in 10:35-39. The antidote to sluggish hope is active imitation of those who have trusted God regardless of the circumstances and who have refused to abandon their trust in Him until, in His time, the promise was fulfilled.

*Verses 13-14.* As an example of those who through faith and patience have inherited promises, and thus whom we are to imitate (verse 12), the writer of Hebrews offered Abraham. There are possibly three reasons why he held up Abraham as the example to emulate: (1) The example of Abraham was uniquely suited to the original Jewish audience of this letter, for they considered Abraham to be their father (John 8:39). (2) Abraham was closely connected to Melchizedek (7:1-2) and the writer emphasized the high priesthood of Jesus according to the order of Melchizedek. (3) The promise made to Abraham culminated in Jesus the Messiah, Abraham's ultimate seed. The author of Hebrews repeatedly endeavored to refocus the faith of his readers on Jesus Christ rather than on the law of Moses.

The promise alluded to here is the one God gave to Abraham in Genesis 22:16-18, in a reconfirmation of the Abrahamic covenant after the offering of Isaac: "By Myself I have sworn, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son; blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice" (NKJV).

That God swore to affirm the truthfulness of His



promise, and that verse 16 points out that people swear oaths to end disputes, may indicate that the ban on swearing by Jesus and James does not prohibit oaths properly executed for legal purposes. (See Matthew 5:34-37; James 5:12.) The point both Jesus and James emphasized was that believers must be people of their word. It had become common for Pharisees to rely on an abundance of oaths to try to establish credibility. These legalists were skilled at avoiding commitments by making grand-sounding statements that were voided by technicalities in the precise words they chose (Matthew 15:3-9). To avoid swearing by God Himself, they would swear by "heaven" or by the "earth," but as Jesus pointed out, heaven is God's throne and the earth is His footstool (Matthew 5:33-35). Honest believers ordinarily have no reason to swear to confirm the truthfulness of their words.

Here we find, however, that God Himself took an oath. (See also Deuteronomy 4:31; 7:8; Psalm 110:4; Hebrews 3:11; 4:3; 7:21.) We should also note that at His trial Jesus answered the high priest when the latter sought to put Him under oath (Matthew 26:63-64).

The fact that God could swear by no one greater indicates His ultimate supremacy. It also indicates the absolute monotheism of Scripture. There is no idea here of one person in the Godhead swearing by another; God swore *by Himself*. If three persons constituted the Godhead, surely one of the three could swear by another, or by the other two, since each person would be theoretically as great as the other two.

The promise God gave to Abraham related to the offspring Abraham would have through Sarah. His ultimate

offspring was Jesus, the Messiah. (See Galatians 3:16.)

*Verse 15.* Abraham's response to the promise of God was faith (Romans 4:3, 19-21) and patience. Thus, Abraham is an appropriate example of the faith and patience that Christians should imitate (verse 12). Prior to the reference to faith and patience, the writer of Hebrews expressed his desire for believers to "show the same diligence [as they had in ministering to the saints] to the full assurance of hope until the end" (verse 11), considering that Abraham's faith and patience were coupled with hope (Romans 4:18). Faith (trust in God) and hope (assurance that God will keep His promises) should always be companions in the heart of the believer.

The words "patiently endured" are translated from the Greek *makrothymesas*, a participle related to the noun *makrothymias* translated "patience" in verse 12. A common word in the New Testament, it refers to "the ability to hold one's feelings in restraint without retaliation against others."<sup>62</sup> (See Colossians 1:11; 3:12; James 5:7-8, 10.) Another word, *hypomone*, also has to do with endurance and perseverance but means "the ability to remain steadfast in the face of undesirable circumstances."<sup>63</sup> (See Colossians 1:11; Hebrews 12:1-3, 7; James 5:11.) The use of *makrothymesas* here rather than *hypomone* suggests that the challenge the Hebrews faced was not to retaliate against their persecutors (12:3-4). Perhaps their temptation to defect from Christ was due to ridicule and rejection from Jewish friends and relatives who did not believe on Jesus. (See comments on verses 11-12.)

*Verse 16.* The "greater" by whom people swear is God. (See comments on verse 13.) In the realm of human affirmation, there is no stronger statement than a legally exe-

cuted oath. An oath confirms the truthfulness of what is claimed and serves to end further dispute. The words translated “for confirmation” (Greek, *eis bebaiosin*) form an ancient, enduring, and widely used Egyptian legal formula that was a technical expression for a legal guarantee. Apparently the writer of Hebrews made use of a well-known expression to support his claim that a properly executed and legal oath settles disputes.<sup>64</sup>

*Verse 17.* The reason God confirmed His promise to Abraham by an oath was “to show more abundantly to the heirs of promise the immutability of His counsel” (NKJV). Since ultimately the promise to Abraham was that the Messiah would come as his descendant (Galatians 3:16), and the “heirs of promise” include Abraham’s descendants through Sarah prior to the Messiah, the point here is that God confirmed His promise by an oath so as to assure Abraham’s descendants of the coming of the Messiah. To be “immutable” is to be unchanging. God determined to demonstrate abundantly to Abraham’s descendants that He would not change the promise He had given. Thus the writer of Hebrews again focused the attention of his readers on Jesus the Messiah. They should not be distracted from their allegiance to Him; the truthfulness of God is at stake in the coming of the Messiah to end the law and establish the new covenant.

*Verses 18-20.* The two immutable, or unchangeable, things are (1) the promise God made to Abraham and (2) the oath by which God confirmed His promise. It is impossible for God to lie. (See Romans 3:4.) The purpose for bringing to the readers’ attention God’s promise to Abraham was to remind them that they shared in “strong consolation.”

They had “fled for refuge to lay hold of the hope set before” them (NKJV). The author did not identify what they had fled from, but he perhaps referred to the persecutions experienced by first-century believers, especially in view of the martyrdom of Stephen. Although they had fled from Jerusalem to other parts of the Roman Empire (Acts 8:1), flight to another geographical location could not offer stability of hope. But a flight from fear to hope gave them “an anchor of the soul, both sure and steadfast” (NKJV).

This hope “enters the Presence behind the veil” because it is anchored in Jesus, who prepared the way for our entry into the very presence of God by becoming “High Priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (NKJV). The flight of hope takes us into the presence of God symbolized by the Holy of Holies (Most Holy Place) in the Jewish Tabernacle and Temple. Jesus entered the true Most Holy Place with His own blood as opposed to the blood of goats and calves of the old covenant. (See 9:12.) Since, as High Priest, He represented us upon His entry, we can boldly “enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus” (10:19, NKJV).

The tearing of the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place in the Temple at the moment of Jesus’ death (Matthew 27:51) demonstrated the termination of the old covenant and the establishment of the reality of which it was merely a shadow. (See 9:1-8; 10:19-22.)

How unwise it would have been for the original readers of this letter to turn from the “strong consolation” of hope they had in Jesus Christ and to abandon the “refuge” they found in Him, the very presence of God, to return to

the shadowy images of the law. It is always too soon to give up on the promise of God; since He cannot lie, and since He is immutable, we can have absolute confidence that He will, in His time, fulfill His Word.

That Jesus is High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek, not of Aaron (7:11-22), is a jarring reminder that the law of Moses has come to an end. The ripping of the curtain separating the Most Holy Place from the Holy Place in the Temple and the invasion of the Most Holy by a priest not arising from Levi signifies in the most dramatic way the conclusion of an era. The law of Moses and the Aaronic priesthood, which was intimately connected with it, were wondrous for their time, but they have been superseded by One better than Moses (3:1-6), who brought a covenant better than the law (8:6-13), and whose priesthood is superior to that springing from Abraham (7:7-10).



# G.

## **The Melchizedekian Priesthood Is Better Than the Aaronic (7:1-8:13)**

### **1. Melchizedek (7:1-3)**

*(1) For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; (2) to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace; (3) without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually.*

The letter to the Hebrews moves now to the “solid food” (5:12, 14, NKJV), the teaching concerning the high priesthood of Christ according to the order of Melchizedek. (See comments on 5:10-11.) This teaching shows Christ to be superior to both the law of Moses, with its Levitical priesthood, and to Abraham, who demonstrated his inferiority to Melchizedek by giving him tithes. From our perspective, we may wonder what qualifies this teaching as solid food. It will help us to look at the issues from the perspective of the original readership of this

letter. To the Jewish people, none was greater than Abraham, and no covenant could be superior to the law of Moses. But by comparison, any teaching concerning the supremacy of Jesus made all that went before seem as milk.

*Verse 1.* Genesis 14:18-20 records Abraham's encounter with Melchizedek. Since the entire episode is recounted in three verses, and we know nothing else of Melchizedek, it may seem strange that this event has such a high profile in the New Testament. But Melchizedek's significance is in the way he represents the Messiah, Jesus Christ.

There has been a great deal of speculation concerning Melchizedek's identity, especially because of the statements about him in 7:3, 8. Some have suggested that he was a theophany (visible manifestation of God) or the preincarnate Christ. But, when we examine the question from all perspectives, it seems better to understand him as simply a human being of unknown genealogy. There is no hint in Genesis that he was anything other than a man.

Melchizedek was the king of Salem. Salem was the ancient name of the city now known as Jerusalem. (See Psalm 76:2.) The city definitely existed during the time of Abraham. It became the capital city of Israel during David's reign. Melchizedek was a "king" in the sense that the word is used of other "kings" of the time; he was something like a tribal chieftain. (See Genesis 14:1-2, 5, 8-9, 17.) Abraham was able to defeat these kings with 318 trained servants (Genesis 14:14).

Melchizedek was also a priest of the Most High God. It may seem strange to think of a priesthood existing prior to the Levitical priesthood under the law of Moses, but



that is precisely the point: there was a priesthood prior to the law. Scripture may not record as much detail as we would like to know about the pre-Mosaic priesthood, but it gives evidence of its existence. Jethro, Moses' father-in-law, was a priest. (See Exodus 3:1; 18:1, 12.) Though Scripture does not identify Job as a priest, he did offer sacrifices for his children (Job 1:5), and Job was probably contemporaneous with Abraham.

Inherent in being a priest and representing people to God is that the priest must be in all respects like those he represents. (See 4:15; 5:1-2.) This point indicates the genuineness of Melchizedek's humanity; to represent human beings to God, he had to be a human being.

Melchizedek blessed Abraham, indicating his superiority to Abraham. (See verse 7.) The blessing consisted of the words, "Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand" (Genesis 14:19-20, NKJV).

*Verse 2.* Abraham gave to Melchizedek a tithe, or a tenth, of the spoils taken in battle. This was obviously an act of worship to the Most High God Melchizedek represented. (See verses 6, 8-10.) It is significant that Abraham gave this tithe four centuries before the law of Moses provided detailed regulations for tithing in ancient Israel. (See verses 5, 8.) Clearly, people of faith in God knew and practiced the concept of tithing prior to the law.

It is also significant that Abraham gave this tithe to Melchizedek, a priest. Under the law, the tithe was also given to the priesthood. The indication is that tithes were given as worship to God and to finance the work of God. I Corinthians 9:13-14 strongly suggests that, just as the

tithe was used to finance the priesthood under the law, so under the new covenant the tithe is intended to finance the efforts of those in full-time ministry.

The name “Melchizedek,” from the Hebrew *malak* (king) and *tsedeq* (righteousness), means “king of righteousness.” “Salem” is transliterated from the Hebrew *shalom* (“peace”), thus making Melchizedek also “king of peace.” These names make Melchizedek uniquely suited to be a type of Jesus Christ. (See Isaiah 32:17; Psalm 85:10.)

*Verse 3.* Upon the basis of this verse some have suggested Melchizedek was an angel, a theophany, or the preincarnate Christ. It seems best, however, to understand the phrase “without father, without mother” not as meaning Melchizedek had no human parents, but as explained by the further statement “without genealogy.” To the Levitical priesthood, one’s genealogy was of utmost importance, for it determined whether one was qualified to serve as a priest. (See Nehemiah 7:64.) In contrast to the detailed and accurate genealogies maintained by the Jewish people to assure the purity of lineage for the Levitical priesthood, there is no record of Melchizedek’s genealogy. This point shows the radical difference between the priesthood of Melchizedek and of Aaron.

That Melchizedek did indeed have human ancestors is indicated by the phrase “he whose genealogy is not derived from them [Levi]” (verse 6). It suggests that Melchizedek did indeed have a genealogy, but it was not Levitical, and there was no need to record it since his priesthood did not depend upon it.

We should also understand the statement “having nei-

ther beginning of days nor end of life” in view of the previous statement that he was “without genealogy.” That is, there is no record of the beginning of his days or of the end of his life. The only testimony of Scripture concerning Melchizedek is to his life, not to his death (verse 8). This must be the meaning of the statement, for only God Himself has no beginning of days or end of life, yet Melchizedek included the statement “Blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand” (Genesis 14:20, NKJV) in his blessing of Abraham, obviously indicating that he was someone other than God.

If Melchizedek were literally without a human mother, he could not represent the Messiah in that regard, for Jesus had a human mother. (See Galatians 4:4.) For that matter, Jesus had a genealogy. (See Luke 3:23-38.) It was Jesus’ humanity that qualified Him to serve as High Priest (2:14, 17-18); in order for Melchizedek to be priest, he too had to be a human being.

The assertion that Melchizedek was “made like the Son of God” indicates that he was not indeed the actual Son of God but *like* the Son of God. His similarity to the Son of God was that he “remains a priest continually” (NKJV). This description does not mean that he is a priest eternally, but that—unlike the Aaronic priesthood—there was no termination to his priesthood. Under the law of Moses, the priests ceased serving at the age of fifty years. (See Numbers 4:3, 23, 30, 35, 39, 43, 47; 8:25.) The priesthood of Melchizedek endured for his lifetime.

The point of this discussion is to show that the high priesthood of Jesus is not dependent upon the law of Moses. It is completely separate from and superior to the priesthood as it functioned under the law.

## 2. The Superiority of the Melchizedekian Priesthood (7:4-7)

*(4) Now consider how great this man was, unto whom even the patriarch Abraham gave the tenth of the spoils. (5) And verily they that are of the sons of Levi, who receive the office of the priesthood, have a commandment to take tithes of the people according to the law, that is, of their brethren, though they come out of the loins of Abraham: (6) but he whose descent is not counted from them received tithes of Abraham, and blessed him that had the promises. (7) And without all contradiction the less is blessed of the better.*

Verse 4. Here Scripture identifies Melchizedek as a *man* who was greater than the patriarch Abraham, as indicated by Abraham's giving him a tenth of the spoils taken in battle. (See comments on verse 2.) The word translated "spoils" means literally "the top of the heap," implying the very best, or the most choice spoils of war.<sup>65</sup>

The writer of this letter appealed to his readers to "consider" the greatness of Melchizedek; they were not to let the significance of Abraham's act escape them. A careful consideration of the greatness of Melchizedek helps one recognize the superiority of the Messiah and His new covenant over the covenant characterized by the Levitical priesthood. If Melchizedek was greater than Abraham, there can be no question that Jesus—of whom Melchizedek was merely a type—is far greater than everything associated with the old covenant.

Verse 5. The priests descended from Levi were commanded to accept tithes from the Jewish people, even

though they all shared in descending from Abraham. (See Numbers 18:24, 26, 28; Deuteronomy 26:12; Nehemiah 10:37-38; 13:5; Malachi 3:8-10.) Since all the people of Israel, including the Levites, descended from Abraham, there was no inherent superiority of the Levites over their brethren from whom they received tithes. The receipt of tithes was based, not on the superiority of the Levites, but upon the demand of the law of Moses.

*Verses 6-7.* The situation of Melchizedek was quite different from that of the Levitical priesthood. Melchizedek stood prior to and apart from the lineage of Levi, and his superiority over Abraham is seen in that he received tithes from Abraham—who was the greatest among the ancestors of the Jewish people—and in that he blessed Abraham, even though God had already given promises to Abraham. (See Genesis 12:1-3; 13:14-18.) A blessing is an official pronouncement by an authorized person,<sup>66</sup> and Melchizedek's blessing of Abraham even subsequent to Abraham's receiving promises from God indicates Melchizedek's superiority. Even the promises Abraham received could not make him superior to Melchizedek.

### **3. Levi Paid Tithes to Melchizedek (7:8-10)**

*(8) And here men that die receive tithes; but there he receiveth them, of whom it is witnessed that he liveth. (9) And as I may so say, Levi also, who receiveth tithes, payed tithes in Abraham. (10) For he was yet in the loins of his father, when Melchisedec met him.*

*Verse 8.* Under the Levitical priesthood, the men

who received tithes from the people were “mortal” (NKJV). (See comments on verse 5.) The word “mortal” has to do with death; all those who received tithes under the law eventually experienced death. Careful records were kept of their deaths, just as of their births. But in the case of Melchizedek, there is no biblical witness to his death; the only witness is to his life. This does not mean Melchizedek never died, but only that there is no record of his death. (See comments on verse 3.) If Melchizedek did not experience death, he would not be a suitable type of the Messiah, Jesus Christ, for Jesus did indeed die.

*Verses 9-10.* The superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood is proved conclusively in that, in a sense, Levi—whose descendants receive tithes under the law—paid his tithe to Melchizedek. Abraham, in paying tithe to Melchizedek, represented all of his descendants, including Levi, in recognizing the superiority of Melchizedek. If Abraham was inferior to Melchizedek, certainly all of Abraham’s offspring share in that inferiority.

#### **4. If the Priesthood Is Changed, So Is the Law (7:11-12)**

*(11) If therefore perfection were by the Levitical priesthood, (for under it the people received the law,) what further need was there that another priest should rise after the order of Melchisedec, and not be called after the order of Aaron? (12) For the priesthood being changed, there is made of necessity a change also of the law.*

*Verse 11.* The argument in this section depends closely on the inseparability of the law of Moses from the Levitical priesthood. Whatever we can say of one we can say of the other. Neither can exist without the other. Israel received the law under the Levitical priesthood.

God never intended for the Levitical priesthood to be an end in itself, and it was incapable of bringing Israel to a state of perfection (Greek, *teleiosis*, "maturity"). These facts are evident in that Jesus Christ, the great High Priest (4:14), was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, not Aaron, a Levite (Exodus 4:14). (Compare with Galatians 3:23-24; 4:1-5.)

The word translated "another" is from the Greek *heteros*, which means "another of a *different* kind," rather than *allos*, which means "another of the *same* kind." The priesthood of Jesus was radically different from that of the Levitical priesthood. Thus Jesus' ministry was in no way a continuation of the law of Moses. Though He fulfilled the symbolism in the law that pointed to the coming Messiah (10:1; Colossians 2:16-17), He patterned His ministry after that of Melchizedek, who predated the law and who was superior to Abraham, the patriarch of Israel. (See comments on verses 1-10.)

The Jewish people would naturally have assumed that the priesthood of Aaron was superior to that of Melchizedek, because it came after that of Melchizedek. But the prophecy that the Messiah's priesthood would be Melchizedekian appears in Psalm 110:4 (see comments on verse 17), which was written after the Levitical priesthood was established and during its tenure. This prophecy therefore assumed the termination of the Levitical priesthood and with it the law of Moses.

*Verse 12.* That Jesus was a priest according to the order of Melchizedek and not of Aaron does not represent a mere temporary aberration from the law of Moses and the Levitical priesthood. It represents instead a change in the priesthood, which of necessity requires “a change of the law” (NKJV). This phrase does not mean the law was merely updated or revised. The word translated “change” (Greek, *metathesis*) means that the law was abrogated.<sup>67</sup> To abrogate means to abolish by formal means. (See Ephesians 2:15.) This wording again underscores that it is impossible to have the law of Moses without having the Levitical priesthood to sustain it. The termination of the Levitical priesthood equals the termination of the law of Moses.

## **5. Jesus Is Not from the Priestly Tribe (7:13-17)**

*(13) For he of whom these things are spoken pertaineth to another tribe, of which no man gave attendance at the altar. (14) For it is evident that our Lord sprang out of Juda; of which tribe Moses spake nothing concerning priesthood. (15) And it is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest, (16) who is made, not after the law of a carnal commandment, but after the power of an endless life. (17) For he testifieth, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec.*

*Verses 13-14.* The subject of these verses is Jesus, who was from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. The law of Moses excluded from the priesthood everyone from the tribe of Judah. Thus Christ’s priestly role demonstrates



again the termination of the law of Moses with the coming of Christ. (See Romans 10:4.) It also demonstrates the genuineness of the humanity of the Messiah; we can trace His human lineage back through David to Judah (Luke 3:33; Acts 2:29; 13:23; Romans 1:3; II Timothy 2:8; Revelation 22:16).

The tribe of Judah was the royal tribe in Israel. Whereas the priests came from the tribe of Levi, the kings came from the tribe of Judah. (See Genesis 49:10.) The significance of this is that whereas the priesthood and throne were kept separate under the law of Moses, they are united in the person of Jesus Christ. Just as Melchizedek was both priest and king (see comments on verses 1-2), so is Jesus. (See Luke 1:31-33.) The union of the priestly and royal functions in one person again requires the cancellation of the covenant established at Sinai (see comments on verse 12) and indicates the superiority of the new covenant.

The assertion that no one from the tribe of Judah “officiated at the altar” (NKJV) may be questioned on the basis that both David and Solomon, who were from the tribe of Judah, offered sacrifices. (See II Samuel 6:12-13, 17-18; 24:25; I Kings 3:4; 8:62-64.) But it may be that these kings did not physically participate in the actual offering of the sacrifices. To say that they offered the sacrifices may simply mean that they provided them but that the priests performed the sacrificial rituals. Even if David and Solomon were actually physically involved in offering these sacrifices, however, it was a rare and unusual occurrence that cannot be described as giving “attendance” (KJV) or officiating at the altar. The Greek word translated “has officiated” (NKJV) or “gave attendance” (KJV) is

*proscheken*, which suggests regular devotion to the altar in the sense of giving oneself to that alone, as did the priests.

This verse identifies Jesus as “Lord” (Greek, *kyrios*), a word widely used in the New Testament as the equivalent of the Hebrew name Yahweh (“Jehovah,” KJV). To identify Jesus as Lord is to declare His deity. (See John 20:28; Acts 9:5.) To identify Him as arising from Judah indicates His humanity.

*Verses 15-16.* The abrogation of the law of Moses is even more evident since the priesthood of Jesus Christ was “not according to the law of a fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an endless life” (NKJV). Verse 15 strongly indicates that Melchizedek was not a theophany or the preincarnate Christ, for Christ is in the *likeness* of Melchizedek; He is not Melchizedek. (See comments on verses 1, 3-4, 6, 8.) The word translated “likeness” (NKJV) is *homoioteta*, which means that Jesus is *similar to*, but not the *same as*, Melchizedek. The similarities between Melchizedek and Jesus include the following: neither is identified with the Levitical priesthood, the priesthood of both is permanent, and both are superior to Abraham. Again in verse 15, the Greek *heteros* is translated “another,” reiterating that Jesus is a priest of a different kind from the Levitical priesthood.

Jesus Christ did not come “according to the law of a fleshly commandment” (NKJV). The word translated “fleshly” (“carnal,” KJV) is from the Greek *sarx*, which Paul used widely in a variety of contexts. Here, the law of Moses is “fleshly,” a somewhat common theme in Paul’s letters. In Galatians, there is a virtual equivalence of “flesh” with the law of Moses and “Spirit” with the new

covenant. (See Galatians 3:3-5; 4:23-31; 5:16-25; 6:8.)

It may seem strange at first to think of the law as represented by the flesh struggling against the Spirit, but that is precisely the message of Romans 7:5. When Israel was under the law ("in the flesh"), "the sinful passions which were aroused by the law were at work . . . to bear fruit to death" (NKJV). The law of Moses was not sinful (Romans 7:7), but it was fleshly in that it was a temporal, earth-bound covenant which sought to govern the lives of the people of Israel on this earth without the benefit of regeneration. (See Deuteronomy 29:4.)

The "fleshly commandment," the law of Moses, required that one's genealogy be traced to Levi in order to qualify for priesthood. That commandment does not apply to the priesthood of Jesus; He qualifies for priesthood by "the power of an endless life" (NKJV).

*Verse 17.* Here appears a quote from Psalm 110:4. In this Messianic psalm, Yahweh addressed Adonai ("The LORD said to my Lord" [NKJV]). It does not describe one "member" of the Godhead speaking to another. Jesus Christ Himself is elsewhere identified as Yahweh. (See Isaiah 40:3; Matthew 3:3.) Rather, this psalm describes God's prophecy to the Messiah, a human being who was also divine, prior to the Incarnation. It does not have to do with the one God existing as more than one person, but with the genuine and complete human existence of the Messiah.

How can we say that God speaks to Jesus, or that Jesus speaks to God, if they are not two persons? How can Jesus truly be God and yet speak to and about His Father as God? The mystery of the Incarnation is in view here (I Timothy 3:16). Jesus Christ Himself is fully God

(Colossians 2:9; John 5:18), but He is God manifest in an authentic and complete human existence. God, who is an omnipresent Spirit, existed before the Incarnation without any of the limitations inherent to human existence. But when He humbled Himself to permanently add full humanity to His existence as God, He voluntarily embraced the limitations that accompany human existence. (See Philippians 2:5-8.)

For example, although God is omnipresent (everywhere present), the physical body of Jesus cannot be omnipresent, even though it is now glorified. In the Incarnation, God humbled Himself to spatial limitations. Although God is omniscient (He knows everything), there are things Jesus confessed He did not know (e.g., Mark 13:32). In the Incarnation, God humbled Himself to limitations of knowledge. How these things, and everything else involving the Incarnation, could be is simply beyond our full comprehension, because it is the greatest miracle ever to occur. By definition, a miracle defies human understanding or explanation. Regardless of the system of theology (the doctrine of God) one embraces, there is ultimately no satisfactory answer that people can fully comprehend as to how God is manifest in the flesh. We must accept the doctrine of the Incarnation by faith; no human intellect can comprehend it.

There are, however, certain ideas we must believe and confess to be true, even if we do not fully comprehend how they could be, simply because the Scriptures declare them to be true. We human beings must realize, after all, that God is infinite and we are finite. There is simply no way that finite people can understand everything the infinite God knows. For this reason, faith plays an integral

role in salvation. Faith does not ask us to believe things that are irrational, but it does ask us to believe things that are suprarational. For example, it would be irrational to say that Jesus is God but He is not God. But to say that Jesus is fully God and He is also fully man, is suprarational. The former statement contradicts itself; the second makes two positive assertions, neither of which contradicts the other. Though, from our perspective, we cannot comprehend how Jesus could be both God and man at once, this is the teaching of Scripture, and with God all things are possible. (See comments on 3:4.)

The Christian church has struggled to formulate theological statements for centuries, but always without complete success due to the limitations of human comprehension and vocabulary. In some cases, theological statements have been limited largely to negative declarations; because of the difficulty in formulating precise statements about what and how God *is*, the focus is on what He is *not*.

At the time Psalm 110 was written, the Messiah had not yet come, and He was thus not yet a priest. But Yahweh swore to the Messiah, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Psalm 110:4, NKJV). Hebrew grammarians describe this usage as the “prophetic perfect,” that is, God speaks of things that have not yet happened as if they already have, because of the absolute certainty that they will. That Messiah’s priesthood would be forever contrasts it with the Levitical priesthood. The Levites ceased serving in the priesthood at the age of fifty years (see comments on verse 3); in addition, death prevented them from continuing forever (verse 23).

The permanence of the high priesthood of Jesus Christ indicates the permanence of the Incarnation. He will never give up the human existence He received from Mary. The continuance of His priesthood depends upon the continuance of His human nature. (See 2:14, 17; 4:15; 5:1-2.)

## 6. The Abrogation of the Law (7:18-19)

*(18) For there is verily a disannulling of the commandment going before for the weakness and unprofitableness thereof. (19) For the law made nothing perfect, but the bringing in of a better hope did; by the which we draw nigh unto God.*

*Verse 18.* Here is a clear statement of the termination of the law of Moses. The “former commandment” (NKJV), the law, is annulled “because of its weakness and unprofitableness” (NKJV). The word translated “annulled” (NKJV) is the Greek *aphetesis*, an even stronger word than *metathesis*. (See comments on verse 12.) The word carries the idea of cancellation, setting something aside, expunging, and discarding.<sup>68</sup> The law of Moses was “weak through the flesh” (Romans 8:3), because it made demands for which it provided no enablements, and it was unprofitable because it “made nothing perfect” (verse 19; see also verse 11). For these reasons, God has cancelled the covenant made at Sinai. Words from the same root as *aphetesis* are translated “remission” and “forgiveness” frequently in the New Testament, to indicate the cancellation of sin from a believer’s record. (See Matthew 26:28; Mark 1:4; Luke 1:77; 5:24; 24:47; Acts

2:38; 10:43; Romans 4:7; Hebrews 9:22; 10:18; James 5:15; I John 1:9.) Just as surely as one's sins are cancelled by the blood of Jesus, so is the law of Moses.

*Verse 19.* Though the law of Moses did not produce maturity (see comments on verse 11), "the bringing in of a better hope" did. This "better hope" is bound up in Jesus, who is the "Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises" (8:6, NKJV). The word translated as "bringing in" (Greek, *epeisagoge*) was used by Josephus to mean "replacement."<sup>69</sup> Verses 18-19 make use of the Greek "*men . . . de*" formation, which is somewhat weakened in the KJV translation. The idea is "on the one hand . . . on the other hand." The NKJV preserves this thought in its translation: "For on the one hand there is an annulling of the former commandment because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect; on the other hand, there is the bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God." These verses contrast the two covenants. The law is cancelled; the "better hope," the new covenant, replaces it.

We see the superiority of the new covenant in that by it "we draw near to God." The old covenant tended to keep people at a distance from God. (See 12:18-21.) The new covenant invites people into the presence of God on the basis of the blood of Jesus. (See comments on 4:16; 6:19.)

This is not to imply that no one under the old covenant could enjoy an intimate relationship with God. They could, but only on the basis of faith, not on the basis of the works of the law. (See 11:6; Romans 3:20; Galatians 3:21.)

## 7. God's Oath and Jesus' Priesthood (7:20-28)

*(20) And inasmuch as not without an oath he was made priest: (21) (for those priests were made without an oath; but this with an oath by him that said unto him, The Lord sware and will not repent, Thou art a priest for ever after the order of Melchisedec:) (22) by so much was Jesus made a surety of a better testament. (23) And they truly were many priests, because they were not suffered to continue by reason of death: (24) but this man, because he continueth ever, hath an unchangeable priesthood. (25) Wherefore he is able also to save them to the uttermost that come unto God by him, seeing he ever liveth to make intercession for them. (26) For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; (27) Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. (28) for the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore.*

**Verses 20-22.** All that the law of Moses required for a person to qualify for priesthood was that he demonstrate without question his descent from Levi. (See comments on 7:3, 5-6.) No oath was required; the qualification was purely physical. But God declared the priesthood of the Messiah with an oath from which He will not relent. (See comments on 6:13-18.) The point is that Jesus did not



qualify to be High Priest simply because of His human lineage; He was not one priest among many. He qualified because God declared His special priesthood with an unswerving oath. This fact sets the priesthood of Jesus apart from the Levitical priesthood of the law as superior. He “has become a surety of a better covenant” (NKJV). In the Greek of the lengthy sentence reaching from verse 20 through verse 22, the name “Jesus” is the final word. Thus, by intentional design, the writer focused the reader’s attention on Jesus.

The word “surety” means “guarantor.” Jesus Himself is the One who guarantees that the promises of the new covenant will be kept. F. F. Bruce pointed out:

The old covenant had a mediator (*cf.* Gal. 3:19) but no surety; there was no one to guarantee the fulfilment of the people’s undertaking: “All that Jehovah hath spoken will we do, and be obedient” (Ex. 24:7). But Jesus guarantees the perpetual fulfilment of the covenant which He mediates, on the manward side as well as on the Godward side. As the Son of God, He confirms God’s eternal covenant with His people; as His people’s representative, He satisfies its terms with perfect acceptance in God’s sight.<sup>70</sup>

The covenant Jesus established is “a better covenant” than the one established at Sinai. This is the underlying theme of the entire letter. (See 8:6.) It is better because it promises eternal life, not merely long life in the promised land, because it offers regeneration (Ezekiel 36:25-27), and because it offers a superior knowledge of God (8:11).

In verse 22 is the first use of the word “covenant” (Greek, *diatheke*) in the letter to the Hebrews. The word appears in Hebrews seventeen times, but it does not appear in any other New Testament book more than three times. Although in nonbiblical Greek *diatheke* refers to a person’s last will and testament, it is the word normally used in the Septuagint as the equivalent of the Hebrew *berith*, which means “covenant.” As with any other word, *diatheke* must be defined by its context, and it does on occasion refer to the last will and testament of a human being rather than a covenant in biblical sense. (See 9:16.) But the author may use *diatheke* rather than *syntheke*, the common word for “covenant,” because *syntheke* could suggest an agreement between two parties on equal terms. In contrast, a will does not require the consent of two parties; once the testator makes it, there can be no amendments to it.<sup>71</sup> (See Galatians 3:15.) The new covenant established by the blood of Jesus (Matthew 26:28) is unilateral. It does not depend upon the performance of humans, and God did not consult with humans concerning its provisions or requirements.

For a discussion of Psalm 110:4, quoted here, see comments on verse 17.

*Verses 23-24.* Under the Levitical priesthood of the law of Moses, many men served as priests. They were mortal (7:8); their priesthood terminated with their death and passed to their successors. (See Numbers 20:28; Joshua 24:33.) By the fall of the Second Temple in A.D. 70, Josephus reckoned that there had been eighty-three high priests since Aaron.<sup>72</sup> But since Jesus Christ lives forever (7:16), His priesthood is permanent. The word translated “unchangeable” (Greek, *aparabaton*) means that the

priesthood of Jesus Christ cannot be transmitted to another. Here is another contrast between the Aaronic priesthood of the law and the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus. Under the law, the office of the high priest was always in a state of transmission; under the new covenant, we have the ultimate and final High Priest, Jesus Christ.

*Verse 25.* The phrase “to the uttermost” means “completely” or “absolutely.” Since there is no mutation in the high priestly ministry of Jesus Christ, there is no limitation on His ability to intercede for those who come to God through Him. This verse offers assurance that any person who will come to God through Jesus Christ can be saved. Nothing can exhaust or equal the ability of Jesus to save. No one who comes will be turned away. The only condition is that people approach God through Jesus Christ. Any denial of Jesus Christ is of necessity a rejection of salvation. Jesus is not *a* way to God; He is *the* way. (See John 6:37; 14:6.) Salvation is not found in Christ plus anything. He alone is able to save, and He is able to save completely and absolutely, without recourse to any other resources.

To come to God through Jesus Christ does not imply approaching one person in the Godhead through another person in the Godhead. It means that the only way to know the true God is through Jesus Christ. To know God, we must acknowledge and confess that Jesus Christ is God incarnate. To reject the Incarnation is to reject God. (See John 8:19; 14:6-11; I John 2:22-23; 4:1-3.) The idea in this verse is not that someone other than God introduces us to God, but that through Jesus—who is God Himself manifest in flesh (I Timothy 3:16)—we come to know God.

What form does the intercession of Jesus take? Bruce pointed out:

The character of our Lord's intercession has at times been grotesquely misrepresented in popular Christian thought. . . . [But Christ] is no mediator in the ordinary sense, a go-between who places his good offices at the disposal of two parties in the hope of bringing them to agreement. He is the unique Mediator between God and man because He combines Godhead and manhood perfectly in His own person; in Him God draws near to men and in Him men may draw near to God, with the assurance of constant and immediate access.<sup>73</sup>

I Timothy 2:5 explains, "For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus" (NKJV). The mediatorship, or the basis of intercession, is the Incarnation, the fact that He who is God is also genuinely and fully human. (See 2:17-18; 4:15; Romans 8:33-34.) Christ's intercession does not mean that Jesus must eternally pray for humanity; it means that the permanence of the Incarnation assures the eternal empathy of God for human beings. Leon Morris noted that "there is no thought of Christ as a humble suppliant. Rather, he is supreme and his very presence in heaven in his character as the one who died for mankind and rose again is itself an intercession."<sup>74</sup>

*Verse 26.* The Incarnation uniquely suited Jesus to represent us as High Priest. (See 2:14, 17-18; 4:15-16; 5:7-9.) Because He stands in complete solidarity with the human race, no one can complain that God does not understand our plight.

Jesus Christ is holy. The word "holy" is commonly translated from the Greek *hagios*, which has to do with

separation, but in this case the word is *hosios*. The Septuagint frequently uses *hosios* to translate the Hebrew *hasid*, which is related to *hesed*. *Hesed* means “loyal love” and often indicates loyalty to covenant obligations. The significance here seems to be that Jesus loves us with a loyalty expressed in His faithful performance of all the conditions and promises of the new covenant. He demonstrated the loyalty of His love upon Calvary’s cross, to which He was willing to go even though it was distasteful to our sinless Savior to be made sin for us. (See 12:2; Matthew 26:39; II Corinthians 5:21.)

Jesus Christ is harmless. The word translated “harmless” (Greek, *akakos*) is the negative form of *kakos*, which means “evil.” *Akakos* means Jesus is not evil in any way. To translate the word as “harmless” implies that He is incapable of doing harm, and that is certainly true. Some translations render the word as “guileless,” which means that Jesus is without cunning. He is innocent not only of any inherent evil or wrongdoing, but also of any intent to do evil.

Jesus Christ is undefiled. Though He shared fully in human nature and lived on earth as a man among men for more than three decades, and though He never shirked contact with sinners, He successfully resisted all defilement. (See 4:15; Matthew 4:1-11.) Even though He was despised and rejected of men (Isaiah 53:3), no deceit was found in His mouth. Though He had committed no sin and was thus innocent, He did not revile those who reviled Him; He did not threaten those who caused His suffering. (See I Peter 2:22-23.) Ritual defilements disqualified men for service under the Levitical priesthood (Leviticus 21:17-21). But there was nothing to disqualify

Jesus from serving as the great High Priest (4:14).

Jesus Christ is separate from sinners. His human nature is genuine and complete. He was even made in the *likeness* of sinful flesh (Romans 8:3). He associated with sinners. (See Mark 2:16-17.) But He never once yielded to the temptation to sin. (See 4:15; I Peter 2:22; Matthew 4:1-11.) Thus, though He identifies completely with the human condition, He is separated from those who sin by His refusal to do so. To say Jesus was made in the “likeness” of sinful flesh preserves the genuineness of His humanity while rejecting any idea that He possessed the sin nature (Romans 8:3). If Paul had written that Jesus was made “in sinful flesh,” it would have made Jesus a sinner. If he had written that Jesus was made in the “likeness of flesh,” it would have made Him something other than human. The description Paul used under inspiration is precise: Jesus was human, but He was no sinner.<sup>75</sup>

Jesus Christ has become higher than the heavens. This statement is reminiscent of the declaration in 1:3 that Jesus has “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” (See comments at 1:3.) Similar descriptions of the exaltation of Jesus appear elsewhere. (See Mark 16:19; Luke 22:69; Acts 2:33; 5:31; 7:55-56; Romans 8:34; Ephesians 1:20-22; Philippians 2:9; Colossians 3:1; Hebrews 10:12; 12:2; I Peter 3:22.) None of these references carry the idea of spatial location. They use an anthropomorphism, an expression that describes God in human terms, e.g., the right “hand” of God. In doing so, they do not mean that Jesus is sitting at a specific location, but that He possesses all power, majesty and authority.<sup>76</sup>

*Verse 27.* Unlike the high priests under the Levitical priesthood, Jesus does not need to offer daily sacrifices.

The Levitical priests had to offer sacrifices continually because of the purpose of those sacrifices. They did not deal permanently with the sin problem. (See 10:1-4, 11.) They reminded the Israelites of their sins (10:3) and pointed ahead to the ultimate and final sacrifice, the Lamb of God who would die for the sin of the world. (See Revelation 13:8; John 1:29; I Corinthians 5:7; Hebrews 9:12; 10:10-12; I Peter 1:18-19.)

Jesus needed to offer only one sacrifice forever. (See 9:12; 10:10, 12, 14.) The reason is that His death was of infinite value, since He was both God and man. (See Acts 20:28; I John 2:1-2.) Since He was a human, He could die on behalf of humanity. Since He was sinless, He could die on behalf of sinners. And since He was God, the value of His death surpassed the value of the whole world.

Jesus “offered up Himself.” His death was not unwilling; His life was not taken from Him. He laid it down, and He took it up again. (See John 10:17-18.) Those involved in His crucifixion could have had no authority over Him at all had it not been the will of God for Jesus to die. (See John 19:11.)

The Levitical priests first had to offer sacrifices for their own sins (Leviticus 16:6; Hebrews 5:3), then for the sins of the people. Since Jesus had no sin, there was no need for Him to offer a sacrifice for His own sins. (See Isaiah 53:5.) The phrase “this He did” refers only to His sacrifice for the sins of the people.

*Verse 28.* Under the law of Moses, the men who served as high priests were ordinary human beings with the inherent weakness of the sin nature. For this reason they had to offer sacrifices first for themselves. (See verse 27.) But God’s oath in Psalm 110:4 appointed the Son of God,

the Messiah, as High Priest, and He “has been perfected forever” (NKJV). The phrase “who has been perfected forever” no doubt refers to the perfection of 5:7-10. (See comments.) Even though Jesus lived on earth as any other human being, growing in favor with God and people, as well as in wisdom and stature (Luke 2:52), He was always perfectly led by the Spirit of God. Indeed, He is the only person who experienced the full force of temptation without yielding.<sup>77</sup>

God’s oath making the Messiah a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek was given after the law. The timing demonstrates the eventual termination of the law and the superiority of the Melchizedekian priesthood over the Levitical priesthood. Inferior things are superseded by greater things, not vice versa.

### **8. The Main Point: Jesus Is the High Priest of the True Tabernacle (8:1-5)**

*(1) Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; (2) a minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man. (3) For every high priest is ordained to offer gifts and sacrifices: wherefore it is of necessity that this man have somewhat also to offer. (4) For if he were on earth, he should not be a priest, seeing that there are priests that offer gifts according to the law: (5) who serve unto the example and shadow of heavenly things, as Moses was admonished of God when he was about to make the tabernacle: for, See, saith he, that*



*thou make all things according to the pattern shewed to thee in the mount.*

Here we come to the central teaching of the letter to the Hebrews. The author of the letter carefully built his case for the superiority of Jesus Christ and the new covenant over all else, including Moses and the old covenant. In summary, the purpose of Hebrews is to convince its readers that defection from exclusive reliance on Jesus Christ and the covenant established in His blood is to return to inferior revelation. The first covenant was not without fault (verse 7); it was merely a copy and shadow of heavenly realities (verse 5); the new covenant makes the old covenant obsolete (verse 13).

*Verse 1.* The NKJV is helpful in identifying this verse as the pivotal point of the letter: "Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." The Book of Hebrews has taken great pains to this point to establish the supremacy of Jesus Christ over everything and everyone associated with the pre-Messianic era. Jesus, the great High Priest (4:14), is so far superior that He now enjoys the highest exaltation. (See 10:12; 12:2, and comments on 1:3.)

It may be difficult for us to grasp the significance of this emphasis on the high priesthood of Jesus Christ, since we do not live in the first-century Jewish-Christian environment taut with tension over the remaining relevance, if any, of the centuries-old Mosaic rituals. This tension was especially problematic before the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70, during which time this letter was written.<sup>78</sup>

Although there have been various lapses into Mosaism (return to the law of Moses)<sup>79</sup> during the two millennia of the Christian era, there has nevertheless been the widely accepted understanding of Jesus Christ as our High Priest, due in large part to the influence of the Book of Hebrews. This conception of Jesus as High Priest, which we tend to take for granted, was a novel idea in the first century. Its novelty was evident in that the Holy Spirit saw fit to inspire a complete New Testament book centered on the concept.

Although today's believers may not struggle with the tension between the Levitical priesthood and the Melchizedekian priesthood of Jesus Christ, we must still retain the strong emphasis on Jesus Christ as the only Mediator between God and humanity (I Timothy 2:5). In a sense, the main point of the Book of Hebrews, as set against the ritualistic Mosaism of the day, is that we find salvation exclusively in Jesus Christ. We must never compromise that perspective.

*Verse 2.* The Tabernacle, which God instructed Moses to build, was merely a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (verse 5, NKJV). Although it was holy because of its association with the service of God during the law (Romans 9:4), it was not the true or actual tabernacle. The true tabernacle (or "tent," from the Greek *skenes*) is the one the Lord Himself erected, not the one Israel constructed under the law of Moses. This statement does not mean there is an actual structure of some kind in heaven after which the Tabernacle was patterned, but the physical construction of the Tabernacle symbolized spiritual realities associated with the atonement in Christ's blood. (See chapter 9, and especially

verses 9, 23-24. See also 10:1, 19-21.) In other words, everything symbolic about the Tabernacle pointed in some way to Jesus Christ and the redemption He would provide.

Because of this typology, Jesus is “a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle” (NKJV). The word translated “minister” (Greek, *leitourgos*) also describes angels in 1:7. The Septuagint uses the verb form of the word to describe the Tabernacle service of the priests and Levites. (See Exodus 28:35, 43; 29:30; Numbers 18:2.) It also appears in 10:11 to describe the priest’s daily service of offering sacrifices. Just as the Levitical priesthood functioned under a covenant that was inherently terminal, faithfully fulfilling its temporal requirements, so Jesus functions in the ultimate and final covenant. (See 8:6; 9:11-15, 24-28; 10:5-14.) Similarly, the angels function in their role as the messengers of God.

*Verse 3.* Inherent to being a high priest under the law of Moses was the requirement to offer gifts and sacrifices. (See comments on 5:1.) Since Jesus is the great High Priest (4:14), it was also necessary that He offer a sacrifice. This He did when He offered Himself on the cross to atone for the sins of the world. (See 9:25-26, 28; 10:10, 12, 14.)

*Verses 4-5.* If the priesthood of Jesus were limited to the earthly realm, He would not qualify to serve in the Tabernacle or Temple because of His descent from the tribe of Judah. (See 7:11-14.) The law of Moses was well served by the priests descending from Levi, but they served the mere “copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” On Mount Sinai, God showed Moses a pattern that he was required to follow strictly in building the

Tabernacle. (See Exodus 25:40.) The reason is that God ordained the Tabernacle as a symbol of greater things to come. (See comments on verse 2.)

## **9. The New Covenant Established by Jesus Is Better Than the Old (8:6-13)**

*(6) But now hath he obtained a more excellent ministry, by how much also he is the mediator of a better covenant, which was established upon better promises. (7) For if that first covenant had been faultless, then should no place have been sought for the second. (8) For finding fault with them, he saith, Behold, the days come, saith the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah: (9) not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they continued not in my covenant, and I regarded them not, saith the Lord. (10) For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, saith the Lord; I will put my laws into their mind, and write them in their hearts: and I will be to them a God, and they shall be to me a people: (11) and they shall not teach every man his neighbour, and every man his brother, saying, Know the Lord: for all shall know me, from the least to the greatest. (12) For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their iniquities will I remember no more. (13) In that he saith, A new covenant, he hath made the first old. Now that which decayeth and waxeth old is ready to vanish away.*

*Verse 6.* The ministry (or “service,” see comments on verse 2) of Jesus is superior to that of the Levitical priesthood, because the covenant under which He functions is superior to the Mosaic covenant. One aspect of its superiority is that it is established on better promises than were available under the law of Moses.

This is a significant point of comparison between the two covenants. The old covenant itself did not offer eternal life; its promises were temporal, earthly, material. It had to do with the quality of Israel’s life in the promised land, not with eternal life in heaven. (See comments on 2:3; 4:10; 6:7-8; 7:15-16.) If the old covenant did offer the promise of eternal life, it is difficult to see how the new covenant could be built on “better promises.” But the consistent testimony of the Hebrew Scriptures and of the New Testament references to the law of Moses is that it served a narrowly defined purpose, which did not include any provision for eternal life. Rather than providing a means of salvation, the law of Moses was given to—among other reasons—define sin to Israel. (See Romans 7:7.) The law did not create sin; people were sinners already. But the law did define the sins already in the hearts of people.

The sacrificial system of the law of Moses did not provide redemption; it simply pointed national Israel to the ultimate sacrifice that would take away the sin of the world. (See John 1:29.) The blood of the sacrificial animals never resulted in the removal of any sins. (See Hebrews 10:1-4; Galatians 2:16.) All that the sacrifice of animals accomplished, and all God intended it to accomplish, was to function as a “shadow” of the sacrifice that would deal with the sin problem. (See Hebrews 10:1;

Colossians 2:16-17; John 1:29; I Corinthians 5:7; Revelation 13:8.)

The only Israelites for whom the sacrificial system was of any value were those who offered the sacrifices with faith toward God in anticipation of the ultimate Sacrifice, however vague their understanding of that ultimate Sacrifice may have been. (See Hebrews 11:6, 39-40; Isaiah 52:13-15; 53:1-12.) Even then, it was not the blood of the sacrificial animal that atoned for sin, but the blood of Jesus Christ, which the blood shed under the law of Moses represented.

It may seem strange to think that the blood of Jesus Christ could atone for sins before the Messiah actually came into the world and thus before He died on the cross, but it was possible because He was the “Lamb slain from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8). Since God, who “calls those things which do not exist as though they did” (Romans 4:17, NKJV), knew even before He created humans that they would fall into sin, He determined in advance to provide for their redemption by the Incarnation and Atonement. Since this plan was a settled fact in the mind of God, He was able to deal with the sin problem on the basis of the blood of Jesus prior to the Cross just as surely as He is able to deal with it now after the Cross. (See Romans 3:25.) This plan applied not only to those under the law, but to those before the law.

In every age, God has made salvation available only through faith in Him on the basis of the provision He made (or would make, if one lived prior to the Cross) by the blood of Jesus. The only difference between the ages is in the content of faith (the level of revelation) and the expression of faith (for Noah, it was building a boat; for

Abraham, it was leaving Ur; for Israel after Sinai, it was the law of Moses; for the church, it is the new birth).<sup>80</sup>

The immediate context of the reference to “better promises” here in Hebrews reveals that exclusive reliance upon the old covenant did not result in regeneration or complete forgiveness of sins. In contrast to the old covenant, the new covenant results in an inner work that transforms the heart and mind (verse 10) and eradicates sins (verse 12). God provisionally forgave the sins of people of faith under the law (Romans 4:7-8), but the permanent eradication, or the forgetting of sins, is a unique feature of the new covenant. Before the Cross sins were forgiven in anticipation of the Atonement, but the record of sins was not permanently eliminated until the Cross.

Jesus is the Mediator of a better covenant. The Book of Hebrews describes Jesus as a Mediator twice more. (See 9:15; 12:24.) I Timothy 2:5 uses the same Greek word (*mesites*) to say that Jesus is the only Mediator between God and humanity by virtue of the Incarnation (i.e., the emphasis is upon His humanity).

Moses was the mediator of the old covenant (Galatians 3:19-20). For this reason the old covenant is called “Moses’ law” (Hebrews 10:28). If a covenant is unconditional, there is no need for a mediator, for the performance of the covenant depends on only one party. (See Galatians 3:20.) The mediation of Moses demonstrates the conditional nature of the law of Moses; the receipt of God’s promises depended upon the obedience of the people. (See, e.g., Exodus 15:26.) Moses served as a mediator between God and Israel in that he brought God’s law to the nation and secured their promise of obedience. (See Exodus 19:8; 24:3, 7; Deuteronomy 5:27.)

Since only conditional covenants require a mediator, and since Jesus is the Mediator of the new covenant, it may at first seem that the new covenant is conditional. But the miracle of the Incarnation overcomes this problem. He who, in respect to His genuine and complete humanity, is the Mediator between God and humanity, is at the same moment God Himself. (See I Timothy 2:5.)

There is no separation between His divine and human natures. Jesus is God manifest in the flesh (I Timothy 3:16), the Word made flesh (John 1:14). He is at once both God and man. He does not slip back and forth between divine and human “roles”; He functions in both realms simultaneously. By definition, the Incarnation is a mystery; all miracles are mysteries. But our inability to explain this miracle to our satisfaction in no way detracts from its reality.

Even though the new covenant requires a Mediator, it is not conditional, for the Mediator is one with God. In respect to His humanity, Jesus represents humankind; in respect to His deity, He represents God. Jesus Himself fulfilled the requirements of the new covenant on behalf of humankind by His death on the cross. Thus the better promises of the new covenant do not await human performance; they are freely given to all who believe on Jesus. (See John 6:28-29.)

Jesus’ ministry as the Mediator of the new covenant does not spring from any identity as the second “person” of the Godhead mediating between the human race and the first “person” of the Godhead. Such a description fragments God. In reference to the law of Moses Paul wrote, “Now a mediator does not mediate for one only, but God is one” (Galatians 3:20, NKJV). If a Mediator is



required under the new covenant, that Mediator cannot be found in any plurality within God. God is one. The Mediator is found in the Incarnation, when God added humanity to His existence as deity. Jesus Christ did not mediate between another divine “person” and the human race. He is the Mediator of a better covenant because, in His human nature, He is a man. In His divine nature, He is God.

*Verse 7.* The first covenant here is the covenant God established with Israel at Mount Sinai. It is, for all practical purposes, synonymous with the law of Moses. (See Deuteronomy 4:13, 23; 5:2-3; 9:9, 11, 15; 29:21; 31:26.) This covenant was “holy and just and good” (Romans 7:12), for God gave it, and it served its intended purpose to define sin for ancient Israel (Romans 7:7) and to point them to the Messiah (Galatians 3:19, 24). It was not faultless, however. Specifically, it was “weak through the flesh” (Romans 8:3) because it demanded of human beings a perfect standard they could not meet. Since the law of Moses could not solve the human dilemma, there was a need for a “second covenant” to replace it. This “second covenant” is the new covenant that God promised to Israel and Jesus Christ instituted. (See Jeremiah 31:31-33; 32:37-40; 50:4-5; Isaiah 59:20-21; Ezekiel 16:60-63; 34:25-30; 36:24-28; 37:21-28; Matthew 26:28; Galatians 3:19-25.) Inherent in this concept of replacement is that, in contrast to the first covenant, the second covenant would be faultless.

*Verses 8-12.* Here the Book of Hebrews quotes the entirety of Jeremiah 31:31-34, which is one of the most detailed statements in the Hebrew Scriptures concerning the new covenant. Not only was there a fault inherent in

the old covenant, but God also found fault with “them,” the people of Israel with whom He made the covenant. Their fault was their failure to keep the commandments of the covenant (verse 9).

From the human perspective, it may seem unjust that God would demand of Israel something they could not do and then declare that they had a fault. But here we see the nature and purpose of the old covenant. God gave it to demonstrate the sinfulness of humanity and the inability of human beings to redeem themselves. He intended it to bring them to the place of crying out to God for redemption and embracing the Messiah, who would do for them what they could never do for themselves. (See Romans 7:14-25; 8:1-4.) God did not intend to leave them under the hopelessness of their inability to measure up to the law of Moses; He intended to replace the old covenant with a new covenant that would remedy the problem by regeneration (verse 10) and justification (verse 12).

Jeremiah prophesied that God would make the new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah (verse 8), a reference to both the northern and southern kingdoms following the division of the nation after Solomon’s death. (See I Kings 12.) He would establish the covenant with the same people with whom He made the first covenant, the people He led by the hand “out of the land of Egypt” (verse 9).

According to Ezekiel, God would make this covenant in conjunction with the regathering of the people of Israel from all nations to the land He promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. (See Ezekiel 36:24-28.) This specific regathering was not completely fulfilled by the return of the remnant from Babylon as recorded in the books of

Ezra and Nehemiah, and this regathering had not yet occurred even when the writer of Hebrews penned these words, for Jeremiah declared that after God established the new covenant with Israel and Judah, the nation of Israel would never cease to exist (Jeremiah 31:36). The reestablishment of the city of Jerusalem in conjunction with the new covenant would be permanent (Jeremiah 31:38-40). These promises have not yet been ultimately fulfilled, for in A.D. 70 the armies of Rome conquered the city of Jerusalem, the Temple was destroyed, and the nation of Israel ceased to exist.

Since the Hebrew Scriptures promised that God would make the new covenant with Israel and Judah, and all the conditions associated with the new covenant have not yet been fulfilled, it is legitimate to ask what relationship, if any, the church has to the new covenant. Some have suggested that there is more than one new covenant. They say the covenant now enjoyed by the church is called the new covenant simply because it is a new thing God has done, not the fulfillment of the new covenant promised in the Hebrew Scriptures. Those who hold this view suggest that the new covenant God will make with Israel and Judah is completely different covenant from the one now experienced by the church.

It is difficult, however, to find clear New Testament evidence for the existence of more than one new covenant. It is significant that at the Last Supper, Jesus said, "For this is My blood of *the* new covenant, which is shed for many for the remission of sins" (Matthew 26:28, NKJV, emphasis added). The definite article "the" serves to identify this covenant; it is not "a" new covenant. In the larger context of what the Hebrew Scriptures have to say about a future

day when God will pour out of His Spirit upon Israel, Joel 2:28-29 is a new covenant reference. (See Ezekiel 36:26-27; Isaiah 59:20-21.) Peter's quotation of Joel's prophecy on the Day of Pentecost affirms that the coming of the Holy Spirit on the waiting Jewish believers in some sense fulfills the new covenant. (See Acts 2:16-18.) And there is no difference between the coming of the Spirit on the Jews on the Day of Pentecost and the Spirit's descent on the Gentiles at the house of Cornelius. (See Acts 11:15-18.) That some elements of Joel's prophecy were not fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost simply points out that there is more of the new covenant to come as it pertains to national Israel. (See Acts 2:19-20.)

If the promised new covenant was specifically to national Israel, how could Gentile believers enter into any of the covenant's provisions? This question has caused some to suggest that the church replaces Israel in God's economy, becoming, in some way, the "true" Israel or "spiritual" Israel. But this view would mean replacing the literal, historical-grammatical approach to the interpreting of Scripture with a spiritualizing or allegorizing approach. In other words, the passages of Scripture pertaining to Israel prior to the coming of the Messiah would be interpreted literally, but those having to do with Israel after the Messiah's appearance would be interpreted figuratively, with believing Gentiles replacing the Jewish people. Since all Scripture is given by inspiration of God (II Timothy 3:16) and there is no clue that the references to Israel are in some cases literal and in some cases nonliteral, this approach is unsatisfying.

For the following reasons, it seems better to see the church as distinct from national Israel and yet as partici-

pating in the new covenant that God promised to national Israel.

1. *It should not be surprising that the Old Testament says nothing about the participation of the church in the new covenant, for the Hebrew Scriptures do not explicitly describe the church.* (See Ephesians 3:2-12.)

2. *The prophets who wrote and spoke during the Old Testament era were called specifically to declare the Word of God to Israel, not to reveal how God might deal with other nations in the future.* Thus they declared how Israel would relate to the new covenant, but not the implications of the new covenant for Gentiles.

3. *In at least four ways, the New Testament reveals that the church participates in the new covenant.* First, as already noted, Peter declared that the work of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost fulfilled the prophecy of Joel. (See Acts 2:16-18.) Second, Jesus commanded the church to memorialize the Lord's Supper at which He established the new covenant. (See I Corinthians 10:16-22; 11:23-34.) Third, the blessings of the new covenant include justification, regeneration, and sanctification. (See Ezekiel 36:25-27.) The church enjoys all of these blessings. (See Titus 3:5; Ephesians 1:7; 4:32; Colossians 1:14; I John 2:12; I Corinthians 6:19; Romans 7:22; II Corinthians 3:3; II Peter 1:4.) Fourth, Paul declared that he and the other apostles were ministers of the new covenant.<sup>81</sup> (See II Corinthians 3:6.)<sup>82</sup>

But the Old Testament prophecies do not limit the blessings of the new covenant to spiritual blessings; they include national blessings pertaining to the re-establishment of the nation in the land God promised to

the patriarchs. (See Jeremiah 31:31-40; Ezekiel 36:24-28; 37:11-14; 39:27-29.) These national blessings have not yet been completely fulfilled, but they will be just as surely as the spiritual blessings.

Acts 2:19-20 provides a clue as to when this will happen. There, Peter concluded his quote from Joel: "I will show wonders in heaven above and signs in the earth beneath: blood and fire and vapor of smoke. The sun shall be turned into darkness, and the moon into blood, before the coming of the great and awesome day of the LORD" (NKJV). Although Peter quoted this passage of Scripture on the Day of Pentecost, this portion of Joel's prophecy has not yet come to pass. There is no reason to take the first portion of the prophecy of Joel, quoted by Peter in Acts 2:17-18, literally and to deny the literal fulfillment of the remainder. The point is that the ultimate and final fulfillment of Joel's prophecy, and thus of all Old Testament prophecies concerning the pouring out of the Spirit on Israel, awaits the celestial phenomena described as "wonders in heaven above" and "signs in the earth beneath," which include "blood and fire and vapor of smoke," and the turning of the sun into darkness and the moon into blood. All of this must occur *before* the "great and awesome day of the Lord," (Acts 2:20), which refers to the events surrounding and including the reestablishment of the nation of Israel and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit upon the Jewish people. Specifically, the ultimate fulfillment of the new covenant with national Israel will apparently begin to occur in conjunction with the sealing of the 144,000 Israelites during the Great Tribulation. (See Revelation 7:4-17.)

We know there is a future fulfillment of the new

covenant with national Israel, for when that covenant is ultimately fulfilled, Israel “shall be safe in their land” and God will break “the bands of their yoke” and deliver “them from the hand of those who enslaved them. . . . They shall no longer be a prey for the nations . . . but they shall dwell safely, and no one shall make them afraid” (Ezekiel 34:27-28, NKJV). Also, after the establishment of the church, consisting of believing Jews and Gentiles, Paul declared that there was still a future fulfillment of the new covenant for national Israel. (See Romans 11:25-27.)

The spiritual blessings associated with the new covenant began to be fulfilled with the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Jewish believers on the Day of Pentecost and extended to the Gentile believers as the gospel was preached to them. But the salvation of individual Jews in the church, in which there is no spiritual distinction between Jews and Gentiles (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11; Ephesians 2:11-22) is not the same thing as the ultimate and final fulfillment of all of the provisions of the new covenant—both spiritual and material—upon the nation of Israel.

The writer of Hebrews pointed out that the new covenant is radically different from the law of Moses (verse 9). Specifically, it consists of an internal change in the minds and hearts of people (verse 10). In theological terms, this is regeneration, or the new birth. Rather than being a merely external covenant with commandments written on stone (II Corinthians 3:6-8), the new covenant is internal. The “heart” and “mind” refer to the inner person as opposed to the outer person.

Regeneration does not mean the new covenant has no written revelation. Obviously, we learn of the new

covenant from the written Scriptures. The idea is that the new covenant will not be written *only* in the Scriptures; it will *also* be written within the believer.

The statement “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (verse 10, NKJV) speaks of the close personal relationship with God that new covenant believers enjoy. Moreover, with the giving of the new covenant, national Israel, now disregarded because of their failure to continue in the old covenant (verse 9), will be restored to full fellowship with God. Although a remnant of Israel is presently in fellowship with God by virtue of embracing Jesus Christ as the Messiah (Romans 9:27), the day is coming when “all Israel will be saved” (Romans 11:26).

The new covenant will give Israel a knowledge of God superior to what they had under the old covenant (verse 11). The knowledge of the Lord will be universal (Isaiah 11:9), negating the need for one person to appeal to another to know the Lord. Here we see that the new covenant is not yet fulfilled with the nation of Israel. When the covenant is in effect, all will know the Lord, from the least of them to the greatest. This is not the situation currently with the Jewish people.

Another feature of the new covenant is that it involves not simply the forgiveness of sins, but their complete removal (verse 12). The statement “their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more” implies more than the provisional forgiveness available under the old covenant. (See Romans 4:6-8.) Prior to the Cross, God forgave the sins of people of faith but did not forget them in that He still needed to deal with them at Calvary. To say God forgets sins indicates their complete eradication, for God is omniscient, knowing all there is to know. In other



words, the blood of Jesus does more than provide for the forgiveness of sins as under the old covenant; it also provides for their complete purging from God's records. The blood of Jesus does not just cover sins; it completely washes them away.

This obliteration of sin is implied by the imagery of casting sin into "the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19, NKJV) Under the new covenant, mercy precedes righteousness. There is no demand for a person to merit forgiveness. God mercifully extends forgiveness to those who are not in right standing with Him in order to bring them into that standing. This work is called justification.

*Verse 13.* The writer of Hebrews pointed out that the prophecy concerning a new covenant of necessity meant that the first covenant would become obsolete (NKJV). Here is clear evidence that the two covenants cannot coexist. The new covenant is not merely a further development of the old covenant; it is a completely different covenant that replaces the old covenant.

The present tense of the statement "Now what is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to vanish away" (NKJV) implies that the Temple in Jerusalem was still standing as these words were written. It does not mean there was a time when the two covenants operated side by side in God's economy. As far as God was concerned, the old covenant terminated when it had served its divinely ordained purpose, as dramatically illustrated by the ripping of the veil in the Temple at the death of Jesus. But the external rituals of the Temple continued until the destruction of Jerusalem in A.D. 70.

Even as the Book of Hebrews was being written, the first covenant was on the verge of completely vanishing.

As far as God was concerned, the old covenant was already finished, as the past tense statement of the next verse shows: “Then indeed, even the first covenant *had* ordinances of divine service and the earthly sanctuary” (9:1, NKJV, emphasis added).

Alternatively, verse 13 may contain a simple statement of principle, not limited to the old covenant: Anything that is becoming obsolete and growing old will soon vanish. This thought is supported by the statement “He has made the first obsolete.” In reality, the first covenant was not merely *becoming* obsolete, it *was* obsolete. Like anything else that becomes obsolete and grows old, it has vanished away.

The old covenant served its purpose of giving us an awareness of sin and bringing us to the Savior, Jesus Christ. Now we are to participate in the new covenant by faith in Him and enjoy its blessings, including the permanent washing away of sin, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the promise of eternal life.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 404.

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 395.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 404.

<sup>4</sup>Clement of Alexandria suggested that Paul wrote the letter originally in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek.

<sup>5</sup>See Carson, Moo, and Morris, 394-397, for a more complete treatment of the question of authorship. To a large degree, the present discussion summarizes their views.

<sup>6</sup>See Leon Morris, in Frank E. Gaebelein, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) 12:7.

<sup>7</sup>See *ibid.* The discussion in this paragraph follows Morris.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup>Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, revised and augmented by F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 505, 687-8.

<sup>10</sup>F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Hebrews*, in *The New International Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), 7.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>12</sup>Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, in *New*

*International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 110.

<sup>13</sup>See Ellingworth, 113.

<sup>14</sup>Bruce, 9.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 18-19.

<sup>18</sup>*Ibid.*, xlix.

<sup>19</sup>John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament Edition (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 783.

<sup>20</sup>Bruce, 39.

<sup>21</sup>*Ibid.*, 57.

<sup>22</sup>Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1950), 109.

<sup>23</sup>Bruce, 62.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup>A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1932) 5:336.

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.* 5:418.

<sup>27</sup>The only other use of *metochoi* in the New Testament is in Luke 5:7, where it is a synonym for *koinonoi*. Both words are translated “partners” in the NKJV.

<sup>28</sup>It is interesting to note that English translations preceding the King James Version, such as Tyndale and Coverdale, also use “Joshua.” See Bruce, 76.

<sup>29</sup>The rest promised under the old covenant was the Promised Land and freedom from harassment by the heathen nations around them; the rest promised under the new covenant is salvation by complete and exclusive

reliance upon Jesus Christ.

<sup>30</sup>Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 566.

<sup>31</sup>Bruce, 98.

<sup>32</sup>Bauer, 374.

<sup>33</sup>Walvoord and Zuck, 798.

<sup>34</sup>Bruce, 107, n. 78.

<sup>35</sup>Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 144.

<sup>36</sup>Bruce, 109.

<sup>37</sup>Ellingworth, 311.

<sup>38</sup>John MacArthur, Jr., *Hebrews*, in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 137.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 138.

<sup>40</sup>*Ibid.*, 140-41.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup>*Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>43</sup>*Ibid.*, 312.

<sup>44</sup>Morris, 53.

<sup>45</sup>Walvoord and Zuck, 793.

<sup>46</sup>Westcott, 145-46.

<sup>47</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>48</sup>See the discussion of first-century Jewish baptism in Bruce, 115-16.

<sup>49</sup>MacArthur, 138.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>51</sup>In some contexts, the Greek *hades*, translated “hell” in the King James Version and left untranslated in many other versions, including the New King James Version, refers to death or, as a symbol of death, the grave. The

latter is the case here, where Paul quoted from Hosea 13:14 a poetic passage in which, as is the case with Hebrew poetry, the rhyme is not one of sound but of thought. In this sense, *hades* “rhymes” with death; it is a restatement of the same point by a different word. In other contexts, the word *hades* may refer to the place of literal and conscious torment to which the unredeemed go after death. (See Luke 16:23.) There is a great deal of confusion over this matter since some teach that the word *hades* or “hell” must always have the same meaning. Typically, those who teach this insist that hell is simply the grave and that there is no conscious place of suffering for the wicked after death. This is not true. Like other words, *hades* is defined by its context.

<sup>52</sup>The term “eschatological judgment” refers to judgment that will occur in the future, in conjunction with the last days, as opposed to any judgment that may occur prior to the coming of the Lord, such as the judgment of sins on the Cross (John 12:31), the believer’s responsibility to judge himself (I Corinthians 11:31), or the chastening that may come upon believers in this era due to their failure to judge themselves (I Corinthians 11:32).

<sup>53</sup>Westcott, 146.

<sup>54</sup>Ellingworth, 317.

<sup>55</sup>Ibid., 318.

<sup>56</sup>For justification from the Greek text for seeing the phrases “tasted the heavenly gift” and “have become partakers of the Holy Spirit” as parallel, see Westcott, 147-48.

<sup>57</sup>Ellingworth, 321.

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., 320.

<sup>59</sup>Westcott, 150.

<sup>60</sup>Ellingworth, 323.

<sup>61</sup>Morris, 57.

<sup>62</sup>Walvoord and Zuck, 797.

<sup>63</sup>Ibid.

<sup>64</sup>Morris, 60.

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 64.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid.

<sup>67</sup>Bruce, 143.

<sup>68</sup>See Bruce, 147-48, n. 56.

<sup>69</sup>Bruce, 148.

<sup>70</sup>Ibid., 151, n. 70.

<sup>71</sup>Morris, 70.

<sup>72</sup>Bruce, 152.

<sup>73</sup>Ibid., 153-55.

<sup>74</sup>Morris, 71.

<sup>75</sup>Alternatively, the phrase “separate from sinners” may refer to Christ’s exaltation “higher than the heavens.” The Greek phrase translated “separate” is a perfect passive participle, which indicates that the separation was not so much something done *by* Jesus as something done *to* Him and that it occurred at some specific point in the past with results continuing into the present.

<sup>76</sup>See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 100-1.

<sup>77</sup>Bruce, 156.

<sup>78</sup>The references to the Temple rituals in Hebrews are all in the present tense, indicating that they continued as the book was written, but also, in some cases, suggesting their imminent demise. (See 5:1, 3-4; 7:5, 8, 28; 8:4, 13.)

<sup>79</sup>Mosaism means a return to various aspects of the law of Moses as normative for Christianity, as opposed to

legalism, which may or may not be associated with the law of Moses.

<sup>80</sup>For a discussion of the nonsalvific nature of the law of Moses, see Daniel Segraves, *Themes from a Letter to Rome* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1995), 16-19, 50-53, 71, 159-62.

<sup>81</sup>Although the definite article “the” is missing in the critical Greek text in II Corinthians 3:6, this may not be significant. See Charles C. Ryrie, *Dispensationalism* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1995), 174. Although Ryrie seems to favor the view that there are two new covenants, and perhaps even that each covenant of all the covenants found in Scripture could be called “new” upon its inauguration, he agrees that the missing definite article in this verse is not conclusive.

<sup>82</sup>This section follows and further develops the view of Renald E. Showers, *There Really Is a Difference: A Comparison of Covenant and Dispensational Theology* (Bellmawr, NJ: The Friends of Israel Gospel Ministry, Inc., 1990), 103-4.









