

Apostolic BIBLE Commentary

Hebrews: Better Things



Daniel L. Segraves, PhD

Hebrews: Better Things

A Commentary on Hebrews 1-13

by Daniel L. Segraves, PhD

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PhD Hazelwood, MO 63042-2299

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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 teachings 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.¹ 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.² 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 (p46) 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.³

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 Luke⁴, 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.”⁵

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.⁶ 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.”⁷ (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.⁸

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).

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.⁹ 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).

ny 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.¹⁰

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."

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 seven 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.¹¹ 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.¹² 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.¹³ 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,¹⁴ 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 context 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; 1 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.¹⁵ 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."¹⁶ 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.¹⁷ 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.”¹⁸

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 steadfast, 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 honour, 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.¹⁹ 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 pointed 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.”²⁰

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 (“forwhom 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 supplied 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.)

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.”²¹ 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 administers, 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."²² 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.)

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 carcases fell in the wilderness? (18) And to whom sware 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”:²³

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.²⁴

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.”²⁵ It is what stands under something (e.g., a building, a contract, or a promise²⁶). 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 12:8.²⁷ 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 giving 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 wellbeing. 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."²⁸

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, *sabbatismos*, 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:

- i 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.

ii 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.)

ii 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).

ii 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.

i 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.

i 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 hairsplitting 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.

i 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.

i 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.

i 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.

i 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).

i 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.

i 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 shebeee. 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 discernor 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,²⁹ 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 at 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 disobedience. 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.

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,”³⁰ 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 Messiach, 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 11:23-24.)

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.³¹

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).³² 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, aitos) 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.

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.³³ An ancient Jewish tradition identified him as Shem, whose life, according to Masoretic chronology, overlapped Abraham's by more than one hundred

years.³⁴ 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.³⁵ (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.³⁶ 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."³⁷ 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.³⁸ Those who hold this view further suggest that all the teachings of this and the next verse are exclusively old covenant teachings.³⁹ 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.⁴⁰ 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 12:14.⁴¹ 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.”⁴² 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.⁴³ (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).⁴⁴ 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.⁴⁵ It may be best to understand the reference to combine both elements.⁴⁶

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.”⁴⁷ 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.⁴⁸

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 non-scriptural, 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 firstborn 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”⁴⁹ 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.⁵⁰

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 grave⁵¹ (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.⁵²

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,⁵³ 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.”⁵⁴ 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.⁵⁵ 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."⁵⁶ (See Acts 1:4-5; 2:38.) They "tasted the good word of God" by being exposed to Christian preaching,⁵⁷ 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.⁵⁸ 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."⁵⁹ 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."⁶⁰ 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 firstcentury 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."⁶¹ 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 firstcentury 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) necessary 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."⁶² (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."⁶³ (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 executed 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.⁶⁴

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).

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 neither 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.⁶⁵ 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,⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷ 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.⁶⁸ 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.”⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰

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.⁷¹ (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.⁷² 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.⁷³

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.”⁷⁴

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.⁷⁵

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.⁷⁶

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.⁷⁷

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 AD 70, during which time this letter was written.⁷⁸

Although there have been various lapses into Mosaism (return to the law of Moses)⁷⁹ 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).⁸⁰

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 AD 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 participating 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.⁸¹ (See II Corinthians 3:6.)⁸²

But the Old Testament prophecies do not limit the blessings of the new covenant to spiritual blessings; they include national blessings pertaining to the reestablishment 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 AD 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.

The Heavenly Tabernacle Is Superior to the Earthly (9:1-28)

1. The Levitical Priesthood (9:1-10)

(1) *Then verily the first covenant had also ordinances of divine service, and a worldly sanctuary.*

(2) *For there was a tabernacle made; the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the shewbread; which is called the sanctuary. (3) And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all; (4) which had the golden censer, and the ark of the covenant overlaid round about with gold, wherein was the golden pot that had manna, and Aaron’s rod that budded, and the tables of the covenant; (5) and over it the cherubims of glory shadowing the mercy seat; of which*

we cannot now speak particularly. (6) Now when these things were thus ordained, the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. (7) But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: (8) the Holy Ghost this signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing: (9) which was a figure for the time then present, in which were offered both gifts and sacrifices, that could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience; (10) which stood only in meats and drinks, and divers washings, and carnal ordinances, imposed on them until the time of reformation.

Verse 1. The covenant God established with Israel at Mount Sinai featured “ordinances of divine service,” but it was characterized by an “earthly sanctuary” (NKJV). The specific directions that God gave Moses for the construction of the Tabernacle begin in Exodus 25. The Tabernacle was simply a tent that served as a place for God to dwell among the Israelites. (See Exodus 25:8.)

The word translated “ordinances” (dikaionomata) comes from the same stem as the words translated “righteous” and “just.” Because of the association of these ordinances with God, they are considered “divine” service. Romans 9:4 uses the same word translated “service” here (latreias) for “the service of God” associated with the giving of the law. This service consisted of the rituals related to the Tabernacle and Temple worship. It had to do exclusively with Israel, for it sprang from the law of Moses. The word translated “sanctuary” is hagon, forms of which are elsewhere translated “holy,” “sanctify,” and “saints.” The essence of the concept of holiness is separation, and the Tabernacle was the ultimate holy place on earth because of its separation unto God and from all that was ritually unclean. This “holiness” was reinforced by severe penalties for those who defiled the sanctuary. (See Leviticus 10:1-3; 16:1-2; II Chronicles 26:16-23.)

But for all its holiness, the sanctuary of the first covenant (the law of Moses) was nevertheless an earthly (kosmikon, from kosmos) structure. Thus it was not the “true tabernacle” (8:2) or the “heavenly thing” (8:5). As long as the covenant which focused on this earthly Tabernacle was in effect, “the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest” (9:8, NKJV). The Tabernacle itself and the rituals associated with it were symbolic of a greater reality (9:9-10). There was a “greater and more perfect tabernacle” to come, not constructed by human beings (9:11). That the sanctuary accompanying the law of Moses was earthly indicates the inferiority of the old covenant to the new covenant, which features a heavenly ministry (9:23-25).

The significance of the Tabernacle as a symbol for greater things to come is seen in that fifty chapters in the Bible deal specifically with instructions relating to its construction and rituals: thirteen chapters in Exodus, eighteen in Leviticus, thirteen in Numbers, two in Deuteronomy and four in Hebrews. The importance of the Tabernacle is evident in that the Bible devotes only two chapters to the creation of the universe.

Verse 2. The earthly Tabernacle was thirty cubits long, approximately ten cubits wide and ten cubits high.⁸³ (A cubit is approximately 18 inches.) (See Exodus 26:15- 28.) It was

divided into two compartments. The first, the Holy Place, was twenty cubits long. In this compartment was the lampstand and the table of showbread. (See Exodus 25:23-39; 27:20-21; 37:10-24.)

We typically speak of the Tabernacle as a single structure, and so it was. But it actually consisted of two tents joined by strategically placed clasps.⁸⁴ The KJV translates the Greek more literally here than the NKJV: “For there was a tabernacle made; the first, wherein was the candlestick, and the table, and the shewbread; which is called the sanctuary. And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of all” (verses 2-3, KJV). Here we see two tabernacles, the sanctuary (or the Holy Place, *hagia*), and the Holiest of All (*hagia hagion*). The NKJV and some other translations supply the word “part,” which is not found in the Greek text, in order to preserve the idea of a single sanctuary: “For a tabernacle was prepared: the first part . . . and behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle” (verses 2-3, NKJV). It seems better to accept the reading of the KJV because the Greek text does not contain the extra word, adding the word obscures the clear meaning of the text, and from the Hebrew Scriptures we can establish the concept of two tents merged so as to form one. (See Exodus 26:6, 11; 36:13, 18.)

In the original Tabernacle, there was apparently another piece of furniture in the Holy Place: the altar of incense. (See Exodus 30:1-10; 37:25-28; Leviticus 16:12, 18-20.) It is difficult to explain why the writer of Hebrews did not include the altar in his inventory of the furnishings in the Holy Place. Though there is limited manuscript evidence for including a reference to the altar of incense in this verse,⁸⁵ the overwhelming textual evidence excludes it. A further complication is that verse 4 seems to identify the “golden censer” as belonging to the Holiest of All behind the veil. Many translations render the Greek words *chrysoun thymiaterion* as “golden altar” rather than “golden censer.”⁸⁶

As we shall see in our examination of verse 4, this problem may resolve itself if we pay special attention to the writer’s precise choice of words as it pertains to the “golden altar,” which seems to be the preferred translation. In any event, the silence of verse 2 on the subject of the altar of incense is no proof it was not in the Holy Place; the writer of this letter obviously had his own reasons for not referring to this piece of furniture in conjunction with the lampstand and the table of showbread. He did not deny the presence of the altar of incense in the Holy Place; he simply did not mention it.

It is common to see the lampstand as symbolic of Jesus Christ the light of the world and the showbread as symbolic of Jesus the bread of life.⁸⁷ This symbolism may very well be true, but the Book of Hebrews develops neither theme. Indeed, after mentioning four of the main pieces of furniture in the Tabernacle, the writer remarked, “Of these things we cannot now speak in detail” (verse 5, NKJV). The purpose of this section of Hebrews is not to explore in minute detail all the symbolism inherent in the Tabernacle, but to focus on the more narrow range of symbolism found in the way the blood of animals offered once each year on the Day of Atonement represented the blood of Jesus (verses 7-14).

The practical function of the seven-branched lampstand, which stood on the south side of the sanctuary, was to illuminate perpetually the interior of the Holy Place. (See Exodus 27:20-21; Leviticus 24:2-4.) Each Sabbath, twelve freshly baked cakes of bread were placed on the table of showbread,⁸⁸ which stood on the north side of the sanctuary. (See Exodus 40:22.) The cakes were eaten by the priests and replaced. (See Exodus 25:23-30; 37:10-16; Leviticus 24:5-9.)

Some have suggested a symbolism more immediate to national Israel. In this view, the twelve cakes of showbread symbolized "God's provision for the 12 tribes of Israel" and the lampstand symbolized "the continuing witness of the covenant community (Zec 4:1-7; Rv 2:1)."⁸⁹

Verse 3. The Holy Place was separated from the Holiest of All by "the second veil." (See Exodus 26:31-35; 36:35-36.) It is called the "second veil" to differentiate it from the first veil, which screened the entrance into the Tabernacle. (See Exodus 26:36-37; 36:37-38.) The area behind the second veil was called the Holiest of All or the Most Holy Place (verse 12) because it was the one place on earth most separated unto God and from all else. Although the Holy Place was separated unto God and from the bulk of people in Israel, any qualified priest could enter it to perform the ritual service. But only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place, and then only once each year on the Day of Atonement (verse 7; Leviticus 16).

This second veil was torn apart in the Temple at Jerusalem at the time of Christ's death. (See Matthew 27:51.) This event was a dramatic and undeniable signal that the law of Moses was terminated. It was a divine signal, for the veil was torn without human intervention from top to bottom. According to Jewish tradition, the veil was four inches thick and was so strong it could not be torn by teams of oxen pulling in opposite directions.

The veil was apparently a symbol of the genuine humanity of the Messiah (10:19-20). His death on the cross dealt with the sin problem so completely and finally that it removed the barrier between God and humanity and made a way for all people to come directly into the presence of God. The translation of the KJV is preferable here: "And after the second veil, the tabernacle which is called Holiest of all." This rendering preserves the idea in the Greek text that, in a sense, there were two tents connected in such a way as to form one.⁹⁰ The NKJV offers this translation: "And behind the second veil, the part of the tabernacle which is called the Holiest of All." But there is no basis in the Greek text for the words "part of the."

Verse 4. In contrast to the discussion of the Holy Place and its contents in verse 2, the discussion now turns to the Holiest of All. The reference to the "golden censer" is problematic for the following reasons: (1) There is no evidence from the Hebrew Scriptures that a golden censer (a shallow pan for the burning of incense) was permanently housed in the Most Holy Place. The high priest was to take a censer full of burning coals into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement and burn incense there

before the Mercy Seat (Leviticus 16:12-13), but Scripture gives no indication as to where this censer was permanently kept. Nor do the Hebrew Scriptures ever refer to the censer used by the high priest as a “golden” censer.⁹¹

(2) The translation “golden altar” is probably better, in which case it refers to the altar of incense, which was overlaid with gold. But according to the Pentateuch, it was located within the Holy Place, not the Most Holy Place. It was placed just outside the veil that separated the two compartments, so that it was the item of furniture closest to the ark of the covenant, but it was not in the compartment with the ark. (See Exodus 30:1-10; 37:25-28.)

We can resolve the problem by noting that verse 4 does not say that the golden censer (altar) was in the Holiest of All, but that the Most Holy Place had the golden altar. That is, the altar of incense was associated intimately with the ark of the covenant by its use; it pertained to the ark by virtue of the rituals performed on the Day of Atonement. (See Leviticus 16:12-20; Exodus 30:10.) Incense is generally thought to symbolize worship (Malachi 1:11) and prayer (Psalm 141:2; Revelation 8:3-4), because it is “something that ascended from a sacrifice, a pleasing aroma to God.”⁹² As it pertains to the ministry of Jesus, the altar of incense is thought to symbolize His intercession for human beings.⁹³

The incense itself was made from a special recipe to be used exclusively on the altar of incense. If anyone attempted to duplicate the formula for personal use, he would be “cut off from his people” (Exodus 30:34-38, NKJV). This instruction further emphasizes the holiness of the things associated with the worship of God in the Tabernacle; they were to be kept separate from common use.

The item of furniture that was unquestionably within the Holiest of All was the ark of the covenant. (See Exodus 25:10-22; 37:1-5; Leviticus 16:2; I Kings 8:6.) The ark was a box overlaid with gold, and it originally contained three things: a golden pot in which manna was supernaturally preserved (Exodus 16:32-34), the rod of Aaron that budded supernaturally to indicate that God had chosen him and his sons to serve as priests (Numbers 16; 17:1-11), and the two tablets of stone upon which the Ten Commandments were written (Exodus 34:29; Deuteronomy 10:1-5). By the time the ark of the covenant was placed into the Most Holy Place of Solomon’s Temple, however, all that remained in it were the tables of stone. (See I Kings 8:9.) Any attempt to locate the manna or Aaron’s rod after that point is speculation.

It is significant that the tablets of the Ten Commandments were called “the tablets of the covenant” (NKJV). For all practical purposes, the law of Moses was itself the covenant. (See Deuteronomy 10:8.) Thus, it is the law of Moses that has been made obsolete (8:13) and that has been replaced by the new covenant (8:6-12).

Verse 5. On top of the ark of the covenant were two cherubim, or angels, fashioned from one solid piece of gold together with the mercy seat. (See Exodus 25:17-22; 37:6-9; Leviticus 16:2, 13-15.) The mercy seat was a flat slab toward which the cherubim faced in

a symbol of angelic protection,⁹⁴ for it was upon the mercy seat that the presence of God descended to meet with the high priest. (See Exodus 25:22; Psalm 80:1; 99:1.) On the Day of Atonement, the high priest sprinkled blood upon the mercy seat to atone for the sins of the people of Israel. (See Leviticus 16:14-34.)

The term “mercy seat,” which was first entered into English translations by William Tyndale, comes from the Hebrew verb *kapporeth*, which means “to make atonement,” in the sense of covering sin. In the Greek text of the New Testament, the word translated “mercy seat” is *hilasterion*. The same word is translated “propitiation” in Romans 3:25 in reference to the blood of Christ, and another form of the word (*hilasmos*) is found in I John 2:2; 4:10, also in reference to the way the blood of Jesus satisfies the righteous judgment of God on the sins of the human race. We can therefore safely say that the blood sprinkled upon the mercy seat by the high priest under the old covenant was a symbol of the blood of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ, who would take away the sin of the world (John 1:29, 36). Verses 7-15 reinforce this symbolism.

Regarding the golden censer (altar), it may seem problematic to say that the verb “had” (*echousa*) refers to its association with the Holiest of All rather than demanding its location within the Most Holy Place, because the same verb serves to locate the ark of the covenant. But it “would not be impossible for such a common term . . . to be used in different senses in relation to its two direct objects.”⁹⁵ Since the testimony of Scripture elsewhere is abundantly clear in describing the altar of incense as being located in the Holy Place and the ark of the covenant as residing in the Most Holy Place, that must be its meaning here. The writer of such a book as Hebrews would certainly have known the details of the Tabernacle, as would his original readers. We must seek to understand this reference in the same way as they would have understood it.

Even though the previous verses have described in some detail the contents of the Holy Place, the Most Holy Place, and the ark of the covenant, verse 5 declares, “Of these things we cannot now speak in detail” (NKJV). It was not the purpose of the author to enter into a lengthy discussion of the minutiae of the Tabernacle. As significant and great as the Tabernacle was, it had served its purpose and was now obsolete. (See 8:13.) The purpose of this letter was not to encourage the original readers in their renewed fascination with the law of Moses, but to point them to the greater reality of which the law was only a shadow. The greatest and most significant symbolism provided by the law was its foreshadowing of the way in which the blood of Jesus would gain immediate access for all people into the very presence of God. (See verses 7- 15.) That is what the Book of Hebrews discusses in detail. Verse 6. After the construction of the Tabernacle (Exodus 40), including the building of each item of furniture (Exodus 36-39), the priests “always” went into the Holy Place, the first compartment. (See comments on verse 2.) The point is that entry into the Holy Place was not as restricted as entry into the Most Holy Place (verse 7). Any qualified priest could enter the Holy Place, and priests entered it daily as they performed their duties. These duties included tending the lampstand and burning incense (Exodus 27:20-21; 30:7-8; Leviticus 24:1-4).

Weekly the showbread was set out (Leviticus 24:8-9). (On the word “service,” see comments on verse 1.)

As in verse 2, the Greek text here indicates not that the priests went into the first part of the Tabernacle, as suggested by the NKJV, but into the first Tabernacle, as accurately translated by the KJV. (See comments on verses 2-3.) Although, in the final analysis, there was only one Tabernacle formed from the joining of the two tents together by the golden clasps just above the veil that hung down to separate the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place, the linen canopy that was the first covering placed over the Tabernacle framework was actually two canopies that were not sewn together. (See Exodus 26:1-6.) In one sense, they were joined by the golden clasps, but in another sense, they were kept separate by the same clasps, because the fabric itself was not integrated. The same was true with the canopy of goats’ hair that covered the linen canopy. It was made up of two canopies joined by bronze clasps. (See Exodus 26:7-13.)

Thus, the sanctity of the Most Holy Place was preserved. Although the high priest passed directly from the Holy Place into the Most Holy Place, the Most Holy Place was separated by a veil and by the golden and bronze clasps. (See comments on verse 3.)

Verse 7. In contrast to the relatively free access that qualified priests had into the Holy Place, only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place in the Tabernacle, and he could enter it only once each year, on the Day of Atonement. (See Leviticus 16.) We should understand the high priest’s entrance into the Most Holy Place “once a year” (NKJV) as referring to one day a year, for he actually entered it at least twice on the Day of Atonement.

It was required that he bring blood with him as he entered. First, he had to sprinkle the blood of a bull upon the mercy seat to make atonement for himself and the members of his house. (See Leviticus 16:3, 6, 11, 14.) Then, after exiting the Most Holy Place, he had to kill a goat and reenter the Most Holy Place to sprinkle its blood on the mercy seat for the sins of the people. (See Leviticus 16:15-16.) He may actually have entered three times, with the first being to put in place the “censer full of burning coals” on which incense burned to obscure the mercy seat from his vision (Leviticus 16:12-13). Jewish tradition suggests there were four entries into the Most Holy Place, with the final one being to retrieve the equipment first taken in for the burning of incense at the beginning of the ceremony.⁹⁶

After the high priest concluded the ceremony in the Most Holy Place, he returned to the Holy Place and sprinkled some of the blood of the bull and goat on the Altar of Incense. (See Leviticus 16:18.) While this annual ceremony was conducted, no other priest could enter the Tabernacle. (See Leviticus 16:17.) Since the events of the Day of Atonement were symbolic of a far greater reality (verse 9) – the ultimate and final atonement provided by Christ (verses 11-15) – the restriction of both the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place to the high priest alone may represent the exclusivity of Christ’s sacrifice. No one else participated in it. True cleansing from sin does not come by the work of Christ Jesus and someone else, but by His work alone.

The reference to “sins committed in ignorance” (NKJV) indicates that human beings are responsible for all their sins, even those committed unknowingly. The proverbial saying “ignorance is bliss” is certainly not accurate theologically. Whether or not a person is fully aware of his responsibilities to God, he is accountable for his failure to adhere to those responsibilities. (See Luke 12:48.) The law of Moses prescribed specific sacrifices for sins knowingly committed (e.g., Leviticus 6:1-7), though for some intentional sins there was apparently no recourse (e.g., Numbers 15:30-31). In addition to the general cleansing on the Day of Atonement for sins committed in ignorance, the law made other provisions for cleansing from such sins, apparently if they were discovered after the fact to be sin. (See Numbers 15:22-29.) It seems the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement dealt with every infraction of the law that had not been dealt with previously throughout the year by other sacrifices.

Two aspects of the good news of the gospel are pertinent here: (1) Since He was sinless, Christ did not need to offer a sacrifice for Himself (4:15; 7:26-27). (2) The blood of Jesus atones not just for sins committed in ignorance, but for all sins, even those committed deliberately (9:26; John 1:29; I John 2:2). His sacrifice is thus immeasurably superior to even that of the Day of Atonement. There can be no limit to the efficacy of Christ’s blood, for His death was of infinite value.

Verse 8. What the Holy Spirit intended to signify by the rituals of the Day of Atonement is that the way into the true “Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first Tabernacle was still standing” (NKJV). (See verses 11-12.) As dramatic as the events of the Day of Atonement were, they were mere symbols of a greater reality. (See verses 9, 23-24.) The ceremonies served to illustrate not how simple and easy it was to gain access into the immediate presence of God, but how difficult it was. Nothing about the Day of Atonement suggested to the people of Israel that they too could enjoy intimate fellowship with God. Instead, the rituals were frightening and exclusive. The high priest entered the Most Holy Place at the risk of his own death. Jewish tradition indicates that the prayer of the high priest when he exited the Most Holy Place was intentionally short “lest he put Israel in terror.” When he survived the last ritual and the day was over, he invited his friends to a feast in celebration.⁹⁷

The phrase “while the first tabernacle was still standing” further supports the claim of the author of Hebrews that the Tabernacle associated with the law of Moses was a thing of the past. (See comments on 8:13; 9:1.) At the time this book was written, it was no longer standing. It had, of course, been replaced by the Temple, but the author was not interested in the Temple standing in Jerusalem at the moment he wrote. It would soon be destroyed. He was interested in the original intent and function of Tabernacle worship as prescribed by Moses under the first covenant and its comparison to new covenant worship as prescribed by Jesus.

Verse 9. The Tabernacle and all its rituals were “symbolic for the present time” (NKJV). (See also 10:1; Colossians 2:16-17.) With the coming of the new covenant, this covenant of symbols had served its purpose (8:13). The gifts and sacrifices offered under the law of

Moses were incapable of making him “who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience” (NKJV). (See 10:1-2.) The point is that those ritual offerings provided no assurance of right standing with God. Since the blood of bulls and goats did not take away sin but merely served to remind Israel of their sinfulness (10:3-4), the sacrifices left the people of Israel with a troubled conscience. This does not mean that no one under the law ever enjoyed a clear conscience, but that no one obtained a clear conscience simply by the sacrificial rituals. During the law, people gained a clear conscience with God by faith in Him, just as today. (See 11:1-2, 6, 39.)

Verse 10. The sacrificial rituals of the law of Moses were external; they did not deal with the needs of the inner person. They pertained to “foods and drinks, various washings, and fleshly ordinances” (NKJV). (See 13:9.) Leviticus 11 details the laws concerning clean and unclean foods. There were also regulations concerning acceptable drinks in a variety of circumstances (Leviticus 10:8-9; 11:33-38; Numbers 6:2-3). Rules governed ceremonial washings that brought ritual cleansing (Exodus 30:20; Leviticus 15:4-27; 17:15-16; Numbers 19:7-13).

All of these regulations, and others like them in the law of Moses, were “fleshly” (NKJV). (See comments on 7:16.) The author of Hebrews did not use “flesh” (sarx) here, as Paul commonly did, to mean the sin nature.⁹⁸ He meant, rather, that the rituals of the law were external, pertaining to the outer person rather than the inner person.

In a telling statement supporting his previous declarations concerning the termination of the law of Moses with the coming of Messiah, the author declared that all of the ordinances of the law were “imposed until the time of reformation” (NKJV). A more literal translation of the Greek text at this point indicates that they were in force until the time of “setting things right” or “straight.” Contextually, this time of “reformation” refers to the establishment of the new covenant (8:13; 9:11-15). This new covenant pertains to the inner person by cleansing the conscience (verse 14), giving full assurance of one’s right standing with God.

2. The Priesthood of Christ (9:11-14)

(11) But Christ being come an high priest of good things to come, by a greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this building; (12) neither by the blood of goats and calves, but by his own blood he entered in once into the holy place, having obtained eternal redemption for us. (13) For if the blood of bulls and of goats, and the ashes of an heifer sprinkling the unclean, sanctifieth to the purifying of the flesh: (14) how much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

Verse 11. In contrast to the temporary and symbolic ministry of the earthly Tabernacle and the Levitical priesthood, Jesus Christ is the great High Priest associated “with the greater and more perfect tabernacle not made with hands, that is, not of this creation” (NKJV). The Tabernacle built under Moses’ direction was not the actual or final sanctuary.

It merely represented something to come. The true Tabernacle is not built by men; it is otherworldly. (See comments on 8:2, 5; 9:1, 23.) Here again we see that the law of Moses and its rituals were never intended to be permanent; they were “imposed until the time of reformation” (9:10, NKJV), and that reformation was the termination of the old covenant and its replacement with the new covenant. (See 8:13.)

A textual variant here reads “the good things that have come” (Greek, *ton genomenon agathon*) as opposed to “the good things to come” (Greek, *ton mellonton agathon*). Both readings have substantial support from the Greek manuscripts. Metzger is of the opinion that the copyists who included the second reading may have been influenced by 10:1, where *ton mellonton agathon* appears without variant.⁹⁹ If the first reading is preferred, the idea is that with the coming of Christ and His high priestly ministry, the good things (i.e., the better covenant and promises [8:6]) have come; they are completely realized in Him. If the second reading is preferred, the point is that “Christ is High Priest . . . of the glorious future of hope.”¹⁰⁰

Verse 12. When Christ entered the true Most Holy Place, a reference to heaven itself as opposed to the inner sanctuary of the earthly Tabernacle (9:24), He went in with His own blood. (See 13:12 and Acts 20:28.) His blood stands in stark contrast to the blood of goats and calves with which the high priest entered under the law, and it demonstrates the superiority of the new covenant. All of the blood offered under the law was symbolic (9:8-9); it did not take away sin (10:4). The blood of animals was merely a pale shadow of the blood that would deal completely and finally with the sin problem: the blood of Jesus (10:1).

The entrance of Jesus into the true Most Holy Place was once for all, because by His blood He “obtained eternal redemption.” This event brought to an end the law of Moses with its annual visits of the high priest into the earthly Holy of Holies. (See verses 7-8, 25-28; 10:10, 14.) Under the law, the blood of animals was shed repeatedly, but the blood of Jesus will never be offered again. (See Romans 6:10.) Since the death of Jesus was of infinite value, it obtained eternal redemption (cf. the “eternal Spirit” [verse 14] and the “eternal inheritance” [verse 15]).

The word translated “redemption” (Greek, *lutrosin*) has to do with making a ransom. It appears also in Luke 1:68; 2:38. Another form of the word (Greek, *apolutrosis*) appears elsewhere (e.g., Luke 21:28; Romans 3:24; Hebrews 9:15; 11:35). The blood of Jesus provided the payment necessary to satisfy the righteous judgment of God against sin.

Verse 13. The blood of bulls and goats refers to the sacrifices on the Day of Atonement. (See comments on verse 7.) The high priest first offered the blood of a bull for his own sins and the sins of his family, and then he offered the blood of a goat for the sins of the people.

The “ashes of a heifer” refers to the ritual under the law in which an unblemished red heifer was slaughtered outside the camp of Israel and then burned. Its ashes, when mixed

with running water and sprinkled on an unclean person or thing, provided cleansing from ritual defilement. (See Numbers 19.)

The point is that these rituals provided sanctification merely “for the purifying of the flesh,” or the outer person. (See comments on verse 10.) This is characteristic of the entire sacrificial system of the law of Moses. The uncleanness described in Numbers 19 is not moral, but ceremonial. It included the ritual uncleanness caused by touching a dead body or entering a tent where someone has died. The sacrifices of the law did not resolve the alienation from God caused by moral imperfection; they dealt only with external ceremonial uncleanness. “Christ’s death met certain objectives and operated in a sphere different from that of the animal sacrifices of the old economy. . . . Animal sacrifices were efficacious in the sphere of ceremonial cleansing. They were not efficacious, however, in the realm of conscience and therefore in the matter of spiritual salvation. . . . Christ’s offering is superior in that it accomplished something the Levitical offerings never could, namely, soteriological benefits.”¹⁰¹

Verse 14. It would be a misstatement to say that the blood of Jesus was as effective in cleansing the conscience as the sacrifices of the law were in providing ceremonial cleansing for the outer person. We cannot equate the effect of Jesus’ blood to anything else. It is more correct to say that if the sacrifices of the law provided ceremonial cleansing, “how much more” is the effect of the blood of Christ. That is, the blood of Christ is even more effective in cleansing from sin than the sacrifices of the law were in cleansing from ceremonial uncleanness. This is not to say that the sacrifices of the law were ineffective, but that the value of the blood of Jesus is infinite, so that when we compare it to anything else, only superlatives are appropriate. (See 8:6.)

Whereas the sacrifices of the law could not “make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience” (9:9, NKJV), the blood of Jesus cleanses the conscience from “dead works.” Given the right context, we might think that “dead works” (Greek, *nekron ergon*) refers to sins. Indeed, some translations render these words as “works that lead to death.” But “dead works” is a more accurate and literal translation, and in this context the reference seems to be to the works of the law of Moses. (See comments on 6:1.) Though the blood of Jesus certainly does cleanse from sin (9:26, 28), included in that sin is defection from exclusive faith in Jesus Christ and rejection of the new covenant in favor of the old covenant. This was the temptation that the original readers of the Book of Hebrews faced. The works of the law were dead because, with their fulfillment in the person of Christ, their purpose was accomplished and they were terminated. (See Matthew 5:17-18.) Instead of focusing on rituals now dead, believers should focus on serving “the living God.” Even though God gave Israel the law, He is above and beyond it; His existence is not in any way tied to or dependent upon the law. (See Matthew 12:8.) “The writer wished his readers would give up all thoughts of returning to Old-Covenant rituals. Their consciences ought to be perfectly free from any need to engage in such things and, retaining their confidence in the perfect efficacy of the Cross, they should hold fast their profession and serve the living God within the New-Covenant arrangements.”¹⁰²

Christ offered Himself to God “through the eternal Spirit.” This statement demonstrates that God did not forsake the Messiah on the cross. We should understand His lament, “My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?” (Matthew 27:46, NKJV), in the context of Psalm 22, from which He quoted it. It is a poetic expression of the aloneness the Messiah experienced in His human existence at the point of this ultimate crisis. The following words from Psalm 22:1 illuminate the meaning: “Why are You so far from helping Me, and from the words of My groaning?” (NKJV). Though the Messiah was divine as well as human, He was not spared any of the suffering associated with His substitutionary death. In His humanity, He accepted and felt the full brunt of the consequence of the sins He bore: alienation from God.

But there was not an actual separation of deity from humanity. If the Incarnation is genuine, such a thing could not be. Jesus was not a human person and a divine person both living in one body; He was one person, at once both human and divine. The statement that Christ offered Himself to God “through the eternal Spirit” means that “in the power of the Divine Spirit . . . the Servant [Messiah] accomplishes every phase of his ministry, including the crowning phase in which he accepts death for the transgression of his people.”¹⁰³ If the Spirit of God had withdrawn from Him on the cross, the Messiah would have been incapable of accomplishing eternity’s greatest achievement, for He would have been no more than a man, though a sinless one. But Jesus did all He did in the power of the Spirit. (See Luke 4:14.) To suggest that He ever did anything apart from the Spirit of God would be to imply an untenable fracture between His humanity and deity. But at the same time, His deity did not overwhelm or eradicate His humanity to spare Him from the suffering associated with human existence, including the sense of alienation He experienced on the cross.

Jesus “offered Himself.” His was a willing sacrifice. His life was not taken from Him; He laid it down. (See John 10:17-18.) At no point in Jesus’ life, including the moment of His death, was Jesus the unwilling victim of Satan or people. Although people crucified Him, and although Satan was involved in engineering the circumstances surrounding the crucifixion (see Luke 22:3), God was completely in control, ensuring that everything that happened was according to His divine purpose. All Satan or humans could see was what was happening in the temporal realm. Had they known what the death of the Messiah would accomplish in the realm of the Spirit, they would not have carried it out. (See I Corinthians 2:7-8.)

Jesus was a sacrifice “without spot.” Sacrifices under the law of Moses had to be without blemish (e.g., Exodus 12:5; 29:1; Leviticus 1:3, 10; 3:1, 6; 4:3). Christ was spotless in that He was without sin (4:15; 7:26-27; Isaiah 53:9). In contrast to the high priest under the law of Moses, whose first sacrifice on the Day of Atonement dealt with his own uncleanness (verse 7), the sacrifice of Jesus was completely altruistic.

That Christ offered Himself to God does not suggest a multiplicity of persons within the Godhead. It is significant that throughout this passage, the writer referred to “Christ” exclusively. (See 9:11, 14, 24, 28.) The English “Christ” is transliterated from the Greek

Christos, which is the equivalent of the Hebrew *Messiah*, or *Messiah*. Both words mean “anointed one.” Thus “Christ” is always a reference to His genuine humanity, which was anointed by the Holy Spirit. (See Luke 4:18.) The Book of Hebrews uses “Christ Jesus” once (3:1), “Jesus Christ” three times (10:10; 13:8, 21), “Jesus” nine times (2:9; 4:14; 6:20; 7:22; 10:19; 12:2, 24; 13:12), and “Christ” nine times (3:6, 14; 5:5; 6:1; 9:11, 14, 24, 28; 11:26). While there may not be a specific purpose in each use, it seems that “Christ Jesus” or “Christ” focuses on the genuineness of the Messiah’s human nature, while “Jesus Christ” or “Jesus” focuses attention on the reality of His deity. (“Jesus” means “Yahweh-Savior” or “Yahweh is Salvation.”)

In this verse, the Messiah offers Himself to God. Since the title of “Messiah” has to do with a human being anointed by God, the point is that as it pertained to His human nature, Christ willingly gave Himself as a sacrifice to God. (See Luke 23:46.) To suggest that “Christ” and “God” refer to two divine persons is problematic, for it suggests a separateness within God’s identity so substantial that one intelligent person can meaningfully offer something to another intelligent person. Traditional trinitarianism defines God as “three distinct persons,” but not as “three separate and distinct persons.”¹⁰⁴ But if one divine person can offer something, including himself, to another divine person, some kind of radical separation is required. It is more contextually satisfying, and more in harmony with all the Scripture has to say concerning monotheism, to see this verse as meaning that the Messiah’s offering sprang from the fullness and genuineness of His humanity.

3. The Blood of the Covenant (9:15-28)

(15) And for this cause he is the mediator of the new testament, that by means of death, for the redemption of the transgressions that were under the first testament, they which are called might receive the promise of eternal inheritance. (16) For where a testament is, there must also of necessity be the death of the testator. (17) For a testament is of force after men are dead: otherwise it is of no strength at all while the testator liveth. (18) Whereupon neither the first testament was dedicated without blood. (19) For when Moses had spoken every precept to all the people according to the law, he took the blood of calves and of goats, with water, and scarlet wool, and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book, and all the people, (20) saying, This is the blood of the testament which God hath enjoined unto you. (21) Moreover he sprinkled with blood both the tabernacle, and all the vessels of the ministry. (22) And almost all things are by the law purged with blood; and without shedding of blood is no remission. (23) It was therefore necessary that the patterns of things in the heavens should be purified with these; but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. (24) For Christ is not entered into the holy places made with hands, which are the figures of the true; but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us: (25) nor yet that he should offer himself often, as the high priest entereth into the holy place every year with blood of others; (26) for then must he often have suffered since the foundation of the world: but now once in the end of the world hath he appeared to put away sin by the sacrifice of himself. (27) And as it is appointed unto men once to die, but after this the judgment: (28) so Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation.

Verse 15. By virtue of His death, Christ qualifies to be the mediator of the new covenant. (For a discussion of the significance of His role as mediator, see comments on 8:6.) The replacement of the old covenant with the new covenant is a major theme of Hebrews. (See 7:22; 8:6-10, 13; 9:1, 16-18, 20; 10:16, 29; 12:24; 13:20.) The chief characteristic of the new covenant is that, as opposed to the old covenant, it provides redemption from sin. (See 10:4.) Since the blood of animals could not deal with the sin problem, during the law of Moses God “passed over” the sins of the people (Romans 3:25, NKJV). He did not ignore their sins, but He reserved His judgment for the day when Jesus Christ would die on the cross for the sins of the world. Those who had faith in God were forgiven on the basis of the blood that Jesus would shed, just as people of faith in this era are forgiven on the basis of the blood Jesus has shed. (See 11:1-2, 6, 39; Revelation 13:8.)

The death of Jesus provided “redemption of the transgressions under the first covenant” (NKJV). (For a discussion of “redemption,” see comments on verse 12.) The first covenant, the law of Moses established at Mount Sinai, did not provide redemption from sin. (See comments on verse 13.) As 9:10 and 13 indicate, “the Levitical offerings were related to ‘food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body,’ and the sprinkling of blood so as to sanctify and purify the flesh. Animal sacrifices were efficacious in removing ceremonial uncleanness.”¹⁰⁵ They were not efficacious in removing moral uncleanness. For this reason they could not make anyone “perfect in regard to the conscience” (verse 9, NKJV). (See also 10:1-2.)

Redemption from sin was necessary so “that those who are called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (NKJV). This statement explains the “promise” that the people of faith prior to the new covenant “did not receive,” even though they “obtained a good testimony” (11:39, NKJV). References to eternal life under the old covenant are scarce and veiled. Only with the coming of the new covenant does the concept of eternal life spring with clear emphasis to the forefront.¹⁰⁶ The only clear reference to eternal life in the Old Testament is in Daniel 12:2. A more obscure reference is in Job 14:13-15; 19:25-26. But nowhere does the Old Testament suggest that people can gain eternal life simply by adherence to the law of Moses. The only “life” promised in return for adherence to the law was long life in the Promised Land. (See comments on 3:1.)¹⁰⁷

“Those who are called” (NKJV) does not mean a limited number of people determined by a prior choice of the sovereign God. This view, as suggested by the Calvinistic doctrines of “unconditional election,” “limited atonement,” and “irresistible grace,” cannot avoid the consequence that salvation is unavailable to some people and that the blood of Jesus is not adequate to atone for the sins of all humanity. The comprehensive teaching of the New Testament is that salvation is available to all who will trust in Jesus; His blood is of infinite value and is therefore sufficient to atone for the sins of the whole world. (See John 3:16; 7:37-39; Mark 16:15-16; I John 2:2; I Timothy 2:4; II Peter 3:9; Revelation 22:17.) All humanity is called to believe on Jesus; it is a universal appeal and obligation. But only those who partake “of the heavenly calling” (3:1) by putting their trust in Him actually receive the eternal inheritance.

The words “may receive” (NKJV) are translated from the Greek *labosin*, the aorist active subjunctive form of *labano*. The subjunctive mood indicates that receiving the inheritance is potential, pending the meeting of certain conditions. In this case, the condition is faith in Jesus Christ. If “those who are called” (NKJV) meant an elect number who are predestined to salvation as opposed to the universal call to all humanity, it is difficult to see why the writer used the subjunctive mood. The subjunctive mood implies a condition and suggests that those who are called may not receive the promise if they do not meet the condition. But the Calvinistic vision holds that those who are called – an elect number out of the entire human populace – will without question be saved. If that were the point here, it seems that the indicative mood would have been used, for the indicative expresses action that is actually taking place.

The role of Christ’s death in establishing the new covenant is addressed more fully in verses 16-28.

Verses 16-17. These verses describe the new covenant established by the death of Christ (see Matthew 26:28) as His last will and testament. (For a discussion of the word *diatheke*, here translated “testament” and elsewhere “covenant,” see comments on 7:22.) In order for a will or testament to be in effect, the death of the one making the testament is necessary. The new covenant required only the death of Jesus Christ to be established. Just as a human being draws up his last will and testament to reflect only his desires concerning the disbursement of his estate, that is, without regard for the opinions and wishes of others, and just as those wishes are carried out following his death regardless of what anyone else may think about it, so Jesus Christ took the sole initiative for the terms of the new covenant.

The new covenant was not in effect until the work of the Cross. Just as a human will or testament does not take effect until the person making the will dies, so the new covenant awaited the death of Jesus to go into effect. Prior to the death of Jesus, then, the reigning covenant was still the one established with Israel at Sinai. Jesus Christ was born “under the law” (Galatians 4:4), while the law of Moses was still in effect. Though the law was waning in its influence and was soon to meet its demise, it was the covenant current from Mount Sinai to Mount Calvary.

For this reason, we must recognize a sharp distinction between the dealings of God with humanity prior to and after the Cross. The Cross ushered in a new era, characterized by the new covenant. The Hebrew prophets foretold several characteristics of the new covenant that were radically distinct from the old covenant: (1) It is unlike the old covenant, which was established with Israel at Sinai (Jeremiah 31:32). (2) It involves an internal work in the hearts of people rather than simply making demands for external observance (Jeremiah 31:33). (3) It offers a superior knowledge of God (Jeremiah 31:34). (4) It includes forgiveness of sins (Jeremiah 31:34). (5) It involves the Holy Spirit coming upon believers (Isaiah 59:21; Ezekiel 36:26-27; Joel 2:28-29). (6) It results in an increased awe for God (Jeremiah 32:40). (7) It includes an atonement for sins (Ezekiel 16:60-63). (8) It provides justification (right standing with God) (Ezekiel 36:25). (9) It provides

regeneration (the new birth) (Ezekiel 36:26). (10) It provides sanctification (a holy life) (Ezekiel 36:27).

When John the Baptist prepared the way for the Messiah, he declared that Jesus was the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit (Mark 1:8; John 1:33). Jesus Himself declared that those who believe on Him would receive the Holy Spirit (John 7:37-39), but not until after His glorification, which, of course, followed His death. Just before His departure from this earth, following His death and resurrection, Jesus told His disciples, "For John truly baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now" (Acts 1:5, NKJV). Jesus identified the baptism with the Holy Spirit as the promise of the Father (Acts 1:4; 2:33), meaning the promise of God recorded in the Old Testament to pour out His Spirit.

All the Old Testament promises concerning the coming of the Spirit, the prophecy of John the Baptist, and the promise made by Jesus began to be fulfilled on the Day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit came upon all of the gathered disciples, filling them and speaking through them in languages they had never learned (Acts 2:1-4). According to Peter, who possessed the keys of the kingdom (Matthew 16:19), this event fulfilled Joel's prophecy concerning the pouring out of God's Holy Spirit (Acts 2:16-18).

Thus the Day of Pentecost ushered in a new era, the era of the new covenant. From that day forward, as Jesus had predicted, all those who believed on Jesus received the Holy Spirit. (See Acts 8:15-17; 9:17; 10:44-46; 11:15-17; 15:7-9; 19:1-7; Romans 8:9, 11, 14-16; I Corinthians 12:13; Galatians 3:2-5; 5:16, 22-25; Ephesians 1:13; 3:16; 5:18; Hebrews 2:3-4; 6:4; Jude 20.) The death of Jesus Christ made this new era possible.

Verses 18-19. To prefigure that the shedding of Messiah's blood would establish the new covenant, the first covenant—the law of Moses—was also dedicated with blood. As an indication of the inferiority of the old covenant, the blood by which it was established was the blood of animals.

After Moses read the law to the people of Israel, he sprinkled the blood of calves and goats on the book itself and on the people. (See Exodus 24:3-8.) The blood sprinkled upon the book apparently indicated the activation of the covenant itself, and the blood sprinkled upon the people indicated their identification as the people upon whom the covenant was binding.

The Hebrew Scriptures themselves do not inform us about the use of "water, scarlet wool, and hyssop" (NKJV) in this ceremony or of the sprinkling of blood upon the book. This information was apparently preserved in Jewish tradition. The Exodus account reveals that Moses sprinkled blood upon the altar (representing God Himself as one of the parties to the covenant) and the people (representing the other party to the covenant).

Verse 20. After Moses had read the words of the covenant and sprinkled the blood, he said to the people of Israel, "This is the blood of the covenant which God has commanded you" (NKJV). The writer of Hebrews presented Moses' statement in somewhat different

words from the Hebrew text: "This is the blood of the covenant which the Lord has made with you according to all these words" (Exodus 24:8, NKJV). The meaning in Hebrews is inherent in Moses' statement as recorded in Exodus. The phrase "which the Lord has made with you according to all these words" reflects the idea of "which God has commanded you." The old covenant was, after all, characterized by the Ten Commandments. It was a bilateral covenant that required for its performance the faithfulness of two parties: God and Israel. God could be counted on to keep His part of the covenant, and the people of Israel declared, "All that the LORD has said we will do, and be obedient" (Exodus 24:7, NKJV). They failed, of course, to live up to their commitment. (See Jeremiah 11:10.)

The statement of Moses at the inception of the old covenant bears remarkable resemblance to the statement of Jesus just prior to the inauguration of the new covenant. At the institution of the Lord's 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). This similarity would not have been lost on His disciples, all of whom were thoroughly acquainted with the words of Moses as recorded in the Torah. Though the disciples doubtless did not fully grasp the import of Jesus' words at the time, they did later as the awareness came to them that the death of Jesus was God's way of terminating one covenant and establishing another. Each celebration of the Lord's Supper brought this truth back to their attention, as Paul indicated: "In the same manner He also took the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood: this do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me'" (I Corinthians 11:25, NKJV). Just as the Jewish Passover had constantly refocused the nation's vision on God's intervention in delivering them from Egyptian slavery, so the observance of the Lord's Supper constantly refocused the vision of the early church on the termination of the old covenant and the establishment of the new covenant in Christ's blood.

Verse 21. Not only did Moses inaugurate the law by the sprinkling of blood upon the people, the book, and the altar built at the foot of Mount Sinai; he also sprinkled with blood the Tabernacle and the sacred vessels upon their completion. The Hebrew Scriptures record the sprinkling of blood upon the altar, but not the sprinkling of the Tabernacle itself and of all the vessels (Exodus 29:12). Here the writer of Hebrews no doubt drew upon Jewish tradition, which preserved this information and was common knowledge to his original readers.¹⁰⁸ The Old Testament does not record everything that happened in each event to which it alludes; some of these things were preserved by oral tradition and written down much later in sources like Josephus, Philo, and the Talmud. Where this information is included by inspiration in the New Testament, we can be certain of its accuracy. This certainty does not extend to Jewish traditions not supported by the New Testament.

The sprinkling of the blood of animals on the Tabernacle (which was the dwelling place of God, Exodus 25:8) and its vessels demonstrated their identification with the old covenant itself. The Tabernacle was essential to the covenant; one could have no meaningful existence without the other. Similarly, under the new covenant, the church is

the dwelling place of God (I Corinthians 3:16- 17; II Corinthians 6:16); the church depends upon the new covenant for its meaning and existence.

Verse 22. Under the provisions of the law of Moses, “almost all things are purified with blood” (NKJV). The word “almost” retains a provision for the poor, who could not afford a blood sacrifice, to offer a substitute. (See Leviticus 5:11-13.) Even in this case, however, the flour offered was a substitute for blood. Thus, the writer of Hebrews could declare, “Without shedding of blood there is no remission” (NKJV).

Leviticus 17:11 explains why the blood was necessary: “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul” (NKJV). This identification of “life” with “blood” indicates a mutuality of value. Since “life” and “blood” are virtually identical, they become synonyms, and the value of one is equivalent to the value of the other. From this identification we see why the blood of Christ could atone for the sins of the whole world: Since He was not only man but also God, His blood – or His life – was of infinite value. The sacrifice of His life was of more value than the entirety of creation. (See Acts 20:28.) Leviticus 17:11 also points out that under the law, the blood atoned only as it was “upon the altar,” that is, only in conjunction with the death of the sacrificial animal. To say, “Without shedding of blood there is no remission” is to say, “Without death there is no remission.”

The blood shed under the law did not take away sin (10:4); it offered purification from ceremonial or ritual uncleanness. It was but a pale shadow of the blood of Christ, which, due to His identity as God, was efficacious in remitting sin. The word “remission,” translated from the Greek *aphesis*, literally means “sending away.” Essentially, the word “remission” is synonymous with “forgiveness.”

Verse 23. Everything associated with the Tabernacle was a copy of heavenly things. (See comments on 8:2, 4- 5.) This statement does not mean that in heaven there is a physical tent identical in appearance to the Tabernacle in the wilderness. The word translated “patterns” (KJV) and “copies” (NKJV) (Greek, *hypodeigmata*) means a “sample,” “suggestion,” “outline,” “token,” or “example.”¹⁰⁹ What Moses saw in Exodus 25:9, 40 was not a physical tent in heaven, but a “pattern.” The Tabernacle constructed under the law was thus the copy of a pattern, not the reproduction of a celestial Tabernacle already in existence.

Contextually, the heavenly reality of which the Tabernacle was merely a copy is “the presence of God” (verse 24). The earthly Tabernacle provided a place where God could meet with the Israelites (Exodus 25:8) through the obscurity of clouds of incense as they were represented by one man (the high priest) in the most remote and forbidden chamber (the Holy of Holies) on only one day out of the year. How different this was from the immediate and intimate access into the very presence of God that the blood of Jesus gained for all believers!

In heaven we will not see a Tabernacle like that of the law of Moses, sectioned off into increasingly taboo chambers, the most remote of which is accessible only to the few who happen to meet the stringent qualifications. Instead, like the apostle John, we will see “no temple in it, for the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple” (Revelation 21:22, NKJV). The word here translated “are” (Greek, *estin*) is actually the third person singular form of *eimi* (“to be”), meaning “is.” Since it is singular, not plural, it draws together the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb into one entity. Subjects and verbs must agree in number; a singular verb demands a singular subject. When Revelation 22:1-4 speaks of God and the Lamb, it describes one throne, one face, and one name. It uses singular pronouns to refer to God and the Lamb (“his,” “him”). The point is that the Lamb, Jesus Christ (John 1:29), is the visible manifestation of the invisible God Himself. (See I Timothy 3:16; John 1:14; Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:15.)

The “copies of the things in the heavens” (NKJV), that is, the Tabernacle built by the ancient Israelites and all of its furnishings and equipment, were purified by the sprinkling of the blood of animals. The plural “these” is apparently a reference to the plural sprinklings, first on the book, the altar and the people at the foot of Sinai (verse 19), then on the Tabernacle and all its vessels (verse 21). The word “purified” is translated from the Greek *katharizesthai*, which has to do with cleansing. Since the blood of animals could not eradicate moral impurity (10:4), this was a ceremonial or ritual cleansing which, like all the rituals of the law, were symbolic of a greater reality. (See comments on verse 9.)

The ritual cleansing of the earthly copies represented the future genuine cleansing of the “heavenly things” with “better sacrifices” than those of the law of Moses. At least nine views have been advanced as to what these “heavenly things” are. Since there can be no sin in heaven in need of cleansing (Revelation 21:27), the most satisfactory solution seems to be that the true Tabernacle refers to the sphere of communion between God and man. As MacLeod pointed out, “The sacrifice of Christ opened up a way of access to God’s presence and keeps it open. As sinful pilgrims on their way to the heavenly city, God’s people defile all they touch, even their ‘meeting place’ with God, and they need the constant efficacy of the sacrifice of Christ their high priest to remove that defilement.”¹¹⁰ Not only does the blood of Jesus gain access for us into the presence of God; it continually holds the door of access open as it perpetually cleanses us from sin (I John 1:7).

The cleansing of the earthly Tabernacle with blood was “necessary,” because in God’s economy “without shedding of blood there is no remission” (verse 22, NKJV). If the shedding of animal blood was necessary to provide ritual cleansing under the law, it was also necessary for “the heavenly things” to be cleansed with “better sacrifices.” This is another way of saying that the sacrifices of the old covenant did not actually remit sins (10:4). They were symbols of the sacrifice that would.

That the heavenly things are cleansed with “better sacrifices” does not mean the one sacrifice of Christ is insufficient. In view of the author’s insistence that Christ’s singular sacrifice was sufficient (9:28; 10:10, 14), we should understand the word “sacrifices” as a generic plural that, still in the language of the old covenant, states the necessity of sacrifice

to deal with the sin problem.¹¹¹ The focus is not on how many sacrifices are necessary under the new covenant, but on the need for something superior to the blood of animals to cleanse the heavenly things.

Verse 24. In contrast to the high priests under the law of Moses, Christ—as the great High Priest (4:14)—did not enter the holy places of the earthly Tabernacle. This point alone indicates the inferiority of all associated with the old covenant. The Tabernacle was not the ultimate dwelling place of God, which awaited the arrival of the great High Priest to enjoy its fullest glory; the Tabernacle's greatest glory was in the service of imperfect human priests. It would never rise above that. That Christ never entered the earthly holy places shows there was no need for Him to do so. The glory of the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place paled in comparison to the true Holiest of Holies, heaven itself. The holy places “made with hands” were merely “copies” (NKJV) or “figures” (KJV) of the true. (See comments on verse 23.)

What characterizes the true Holy Place is the presence of God. In contrast to the rare annual visit of the lone high priest to the Most Holy Place of the Tabernacle, where clouds of incense shrouded the presence of God, Christ has gained access on our behalf into the immediate and unmitigated presence of God. The word translated “presence” (Greek, *prosopon*) literally means “face,” indicating the complete openness of communion, and “person,” indicating the genuineness of the encounter.

By His own blood, the Messiah entered into the immediate presence of God Himself. This statement does not mean that Christ is someone other than God, but that He has passed from the human and earthly realm into the heavenly realm. The human Messiah (“Christ”) now resides in heaven itself on behalf of all human beings whose faith is in Him. His appearance there in the presence of God demonstrates with certainty that we will all one day stand with Him in that ultimate Holy Place. Just as under the law the high priest entered the Most Holy Place on behalf of all the people, so Christ has entered heaven on our behalf. But here again we see the inferiority of the law of Moses: the Aaronic high priest could never invite the people to join him in his annual pilgrimage into the Most Holy Place. But Jesus declared, “And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself; that where I am, there you may be also” (John 14:3, NKJV).

Verses 25-26. Since the one sacrifice of Jesus was of infinite value, it alone was sufficient to resolve once and for all the sin problem. (See verses 28; 10:10, 14.) Unlike the high priest who was required annually to make another sacrifice and to sprinkle its blood on the Day of Atonement to gain entrance into the Most Holy Place, Jesus appeared “once at the end of the ages . . . to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (NKJV). Christ's sacrifice did not merely deal with sin temporarily: it “put away” sin. The word translated “put away” is a form of *aphesin*, frequently translated “remit” and “forgive.” Here we see the finality of Christ's sacrifice. It was not necessary for Him to “suffer often since the foundation of the world” (NKJV). His blood was not a partial solution or a temporary solution; it was complete and final. This message would not have been lost on the original readers of this

book who were being tempted to revert to Judaism. The inferiority of the law of Moses was evident by the necessity to offer sacrifices again and again. Obviously, no one sacrifice was sufficient. On the contrary, the death of Jesus so completely dealt with sin that no further sacrifice was necessary.

Verses 27-28. It is necessary that all human beings die once. It is not necessary for them to experience the “second death” (Revelation 20:14). Only those who have not experienced the second birth will experience the second death. As someone expressed it, “Be born once, die twice. Be born twice, die once.” Adam’s sin brought physical death on the entire human race (Genesis 3:19; Romans 5:12-14). To die physically is not to cease to exist or to lose consciousness. (See Luke 16:19-31.) It is merely the separation of the immaterial part of a person (spirit/soul) from the material part (body). (See Revelation 6:9-10.) The believer who dies is consciously and immediately in the presence of the Lord (II Corinthians 5:1-8; Philippians 1:23; Luke 23:43). The unbeliever who dies is consciously and immediately in a place of torment (Luke 16:19-24; II Peter 2:9).

Not only must all human beings die, they must—after death—face judgment. (See John 5:28; Acts 24:15.) For the believer, this is the judgment seat of Christ, which will occur after the bodies of the believers are resurrected in a glorified state and reunited with their soul/spirit. (See I Thessalonians 4:13-16; I Corinthians 15:22-23, 35-53; Philippians 3:21.) This is the first resurrection (Revelation 20:4-6). The judgment seat of Christ is not a judgment to determine salvation; only the saved will appear there. It is a judgment to determine rewards. (See Romans 14:10; I Corinthians 3:12-15; II Corinthians 5:10.)

The judgment unbelievers must face is the final judgment, sometimes called the Great White Throne Judgment. (See Revelation 20:11-15.) Although the Bible does not describe the resurrection body of unbelievers, we may be sure it will be suited to their fate, which is the lake of fire (Revelation 20:15).

The necessity of the singular death of human beings underscores that Christ was offered only once to bear the sins of many. Just as people must die only once, it was necessary for Him to be offered only once. The word “many” does not mean that by His death He bore the sins of many but not all. In this verbal allusion to Isaiah 53:12, the contrast is “between the one sacrifice and the great number of those who benefit from it.”¹¹² In Hebrew thought, “the many” was a reference to the entire human race.

Verse 25 says Christ offered Himself. Here, we find the passive participle (Christ “was offered”). This construction no doubt arises since the author has in mind the great atonement passage of Isaiah 53, which describes the Messiah as being made an offering for sin (Isaiah 53:10).

Both here and in I Peter 2:24, the Bible says Christ bore the sins of the human race. He took the penalty of sin upon Himself.¹¹³ This is also the meaning of II Corinthians 5:21. Since Jesus fully bore the penalty of sin Himself, there is no penalty left for human beings to bear, if they will put their trust in His work on their behalf.

Since Jesus dealt permanently with the sin problem on the cross, His second appearance to those who eagerly wait for Him will be “apart from sin, for salvation” (NKJV). This is not a reference to His sinlessness, which the book has well documented (4:15; 7:26-27), but it means that unlike His first appearance, His second will be without reference to sins.¹¹⁴ Christ’s second coming will be in reference to salvation, not sin. The ultimate outworking of the salvation provided by the blood of Jesus— final and utmost deliverance from sin and all its consequences— will occur at His second coming.

Christ’s second appearance will be “to those who eagerly wait for Him” (NKJV). This statement harmonizes perfectly with the teaching of Paul concerning the Rapture of the church (I Thessalonians 4:13-18). It will be an appearance only to believers, not to the world at large. Paul three times used the same Greek word (*apekdechomenois*) that is here translated “eagerly wait” (NKJV), also in reference to the second appearance of Christ to believers. (See I Corinthians 1:7; Galatians 5:5; Philippians 3:20.)

Christ’s Sacrifice Is Superior to the Old Covenant Sacrifices (10:1-39)

1. The Law Was a Shadow (10:1-4)

(1) For the law having a shadow of good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with those sacrifices which they offered year by year continually make the comers thereunto perfect. (2) For then would they not have ceased to be offered? because that the worshippers once purged should have had no more conscience of sins. (3) But in those sacrifices there is a remembrance again made of sins every year. (4) For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and of goats should take away sins.

To this point, the writer of Hebrews has alluded to the inferiority and inadequacy of the sacrifices of the law of Moses (9:12-14, 23), but here he moved to a clear emphasis on the superiority of Christ’s sacrifice. All of the sacrifices associated with the law were mere shadows in which God took no pleasure. They were unable to take away sins. What all those sacrifices from the construction of the Tabernacle in about 1400 BC to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70 could not accomplish even when added together, the death of Christ accomplished in a moment of time, once and for all.

This section of the book gives a strong warning to the original readers that there is nothing left in the old covenant—the law of Moses—to which to return. There was never any substance there anyway, and now even the shadow had been taken away. To abandon the new covenant in favor of a vanished shadow would be to sin willfully and to risk the vengeance of God. The section ends with an appeal not to “draw back to perdition,” which would be the consequence of returning to the law, but to continue to “believe to the saving of the soul,” which means continuing to have faith in Jesus Christ and His work on the cross.

Verse 1. Here, in a precise statement, we see the purpose and limitation of the law of Moses. God never intended the law to be an end in itself. In a statement similar to Paul's "the law was our tutor to bring us to Christ" (Galatians 3:24, NKJV), the writer of Hebrews declared that it had a mere "shadow of the good things to come" (NKJV), and that it was incapable of perfecting those who approached God on the basis of its sacrifices.

Contextually, the "good things to come" refer to the provisions of the new covenant in Christ Jesus. (See verses 10, 14, 16-23.) The law offered only a "shadow" (Greek, skia) of these things. Skia appears in 8:5 together with hypodeigma (see comments on verse 23) to describe the manner in which the ministry associated with the Aaronic priesthood was a "copy and shadow of the heavenly things" (NKJV). In Colossians 2:17, Paul used skia to categorize the dietary laws, the feast days, the new moons, and the sabbaths of the law as shadows "of things to come." In contrast to these shadows, the "substance is of Christ."

Since the law offered only a shadow, it did not possess "the very image of the things," or the good things to come, the provisions found only in Christ and the new covenant established in His blood. Nowhere in Scripture do we see more clearly that words are defined by their contexts. The word translated "image" (Greek, eikon) ordinarily indicates a representation of the real thing. Jesus used the word to refer to the physical likeness of Caesar on a coin (Matthew 22:20). Paul used it to describe idols shaped like human beings (Romans 1:23). John used eikon of the image of the beast, probably a physical likeness (Revelation 13:14-15). In another context, Paul used the word to describe the image of Adam in every person (I Corinthians 15:4-9). A total likeness is in view: body, soul, and spirit. In yet another context, he relied on eikon to express a likeness of quality or character, not a physical likeness. (See Romans 8:29; I Corinthians 11:7; II Corinthians 3:18; Colossians 3:10.) In I Corinthians 15:49, eikon again emphasizes quality or character, but also reaches out to embrace physical likeness.

Here, however, the word "image" refers to the reality itself in contrast to the shadow. This meaning is highly significant because some passages say Christ is the image of the invisible God (II Corinthians 4:4; Colossians 1:15). A physical likeness is not in view, because God is a Spirit and has no body, but what is in view is an exact representation of God in man. In other words, whatever God is, Jesus is. The eikon is so precise and complete that we can actually say that Jesus is God Himself.

The root word from which eikon comes is eiko, which means "like," and it is used only in James 1:6, 23, first to compare a man with wavering faith to a wave of the sea and next a person who hears the word but does not do it to someone who looks in a mirror but does nothing about what it shows him.

The basic idea is that one thing or person is like another in some way. The word eikon seems to find its ultimate expression when used to describe how Jesus is like God. The likeness is so complete that there is no distinguishing between Jesus and God. He is God in flesh. To say that one is like God is not the same as saying one is like Caesar or any other use of eikon, for God is unique. "To whom then will ye liken me, or shall I be equal?

saith the Holy One" (Isaiah 40:25). (See also Isaiah 40:18; 46:5.) For Jesus to be like Him, He must be Him, albeit in a visible manifestation. Since the image of God in Jesus is not a reference to a physical body, the likeness must be that of essence, and since the essence of deity is unique, there can be no difference between the deity that dwelt in Jesus and the nature of God before the Incarnation. Jesus as the image of God is God incarnate. The humanity itself was not God, but the deity was miraculously and mysteriously manifest in every aspect of the authentic humanness of Jesus.

Since eikon in Hebrews 10:1 refers to the reality, we can also say that the use of eikon to describe Jesus as the image of God also refers to the reality of His deity.

Since the law consisted of shadows and every sacrifice was merely a representation of something good to come, those sacrifices, though offered year after year, could never make perfect those who approached God by means of them. The word "perfect" (Greek, *teleiosai*) does not refer to sinless perfection. Verse 2 defines it as freedom from consciousness of sins. That is, since the sacrifices themselves were only shadows incapable of taking away sins (verse 4), they were not able to effect a clear conscience. Even after the high priest approached the Most Holy Place and executed the elaborate rituals of the Day of Atonement flawlessly, neither he nor the people of Israel had a sense of release from sin. Instead, they were simply reminded again that they were sinful people (verse 3).

Verse 2. We see the inability of the sacrifices of the law to deal with the sin problem in that they had to be offered again and again. If those sacrifices had been sufficient to remove sin, it would not have been necessary to repeat them. They did not purify the worshipers; those who offered the sacrifices were left with a lingering consciousness of sins.

Here, by implication, we see a marvelous consequence of the sacrifice of Christ. Since His sacrifice—in contrast to the sacrifices of the law—was efficacious, it purifies those who approach God through Christ Jesus and leaves them with no more consciousness of sins. Because His blood does remit sin, we can "draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience" (verse 22, NKJV).

Also by implication we see here that the one sacrifice of Christ was sufficient. (See verses 10, 14 and 9:25-28.) When a sacrifice can perfect those who approach God on its basis, there is no need for any further sacrifice. At that point, sacrifices can cease. (See verse 18.)

Verse 3. The sacrifices associated with the law of Moses served as annual reminders of the sinfulness of the people. Since the word translated "reminder" (NKJV) (Greek, *anamnesis*) appears in the New Testament only here and in the establishment of the Lord's Supper (Luke 22:19; I Corinthians 11:24-25), there is a strong implication of a connection between the two. Just as the sacrifices of the law continually reminded the people of Israel of their sinfulness, so the bread and cup of the Lord's Supper continually remind believers of the new covenant established in Christ's blood and of the cleansing from sin thereby provided.

Verse 4. The height of the sacrificial system under the law was the Day of Atonement, on which the high priest offered the blood of a bull for himself and his family and the blood of a goat for the people of Israel. (See comments on 9:7.) If these sacrifices were incapable of taking away sin, we may be sure all lesser sacrifices suffered the same limitation.

The word translated “take away” (Greek, *aphaireo*) is a strong one. It is used to describe the way Peter cut off the ear of the high priest’s servant (Luke 22:50) and the way the conception took away reproach of Elizabeth’s barrenness (Luke 1:25). The new covenant implication is that the offering of the body of Christ was able to do what the blood of bulls and goats could not do: The blood of Jesus took away sins as decisively as Peter’s sword sliced off a man’s ear and as Elizabeth’s conception eradicated her reproach.

2. The Messiah’s Confession (10:5-9)

(5) Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldst not, but a body hast thou prepared me: (6) in burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast had no pleasure. (7) Then said I, Lo, I come (in the volume of the book it is written of me,) to do thy will, O God. (8) Above when he said, Sacrifice and offering and burnt offerings and offering for sin thou wouldst not, neither hadst pleasure therein; which are offered by the law; (9) then said he, Lo, I come to do thy will, O God. He taketh away the first, that he may establish the second.

Verses 5-7. Here the writer of Hebrews offered a form of the Septuagint version of Psalm 40:6-8, which is itself “an interpretative paraphrase of the Hebrew text.”¹¹⁵ The Book of Hebrews frequently appeals to the Septuagint, or a form of it. (See comments on 1:6, 10-12; 2:5, 12-13, 17; 3:7-11.) There is no problem here concerning the integrity of Scripture; the writer of Hebrews was inspired of God in his use of the Septuagint or any variation of it. For this reason, the context relevant to understanding this quote is the immediate context here in Hebrews, not the context of Psalm 40:6-8. Not all of Psalm 40 in its original context is Messianic, for verse 12 says, “My iniquities have overtaken me, so that I am not able to look up” (NKJV), and the Messiah had no sin. But here, as elsewhere, God inspired the writer of Hebrews to use portions of Old Testament passages and to invest new or additional meaning in them pertaining to the Messiah.

This passage is incarnational. It has to do with what the Messiah said to God in conjunction with His entrance into the world. It is not a communication between persons in the Godhead, nor does it apply prior to the Incarnation. The word translated “cometh” in the KJV (Greek, *eisrchomenos*) is a present tense participle that functions in the active voice. The KJV translation of this word (“cometh”) is more precise than that of the NKJV (“came”). The idea in *eisrchomenos* is “coming.” The verb *legei* is translated “he saith” by the KJV, which again is more accurate than the “He said” of the NKJV. *Legei* is the third person singular present active indicative form of *lego* and means “he says” or “he is saying.” This is the idea in the old English “saith.”

When did the Messiah make this statement? The KJV reads, “When he cometh into the world, he saith . . .” In today’s English, this means, “When he is coming into the world,

he is saying . . .” The tenses suggest that the Messiah made this statement shortly after the assumption of His human nature, perhaps at His birth, since the phrase “coming into the world” is a Jewish expression for birth.¹¹⁶ But this conclusion is problematic in view of the questions concerning the development of the Messiah’s human consciousness. If He experienced human existence as do all other human beings—and that is what Scripture declares—then His human consciousness developed. (See Luke 2:52.) Thus, the Messiah did not have a fully aware human consciousness at birth to enable Him to make a statement like this.

Actually, the word “when” does not appear in the Greek text of verse 5, and this fact may help resolve the question. The verse itself does not indicate precisely when the Messiah made this statement. The present participle “coming” (Greek, *eisrchomenos*) does indicate it could not have been prior to the Incarnation, as does the present active “He says” (Greek, *legei*). But since *legei* can be a “timeless present”¹¹⁷ and the word “when” is absent, we may conclude simply that the Messiah made this statement at some point after the Incarnation. A literal translation would be, “Therefore, coming (or entering) the world, He says . . .” The statement “a body hast thou prepared me” indicates strongly that the entire quote comes after the Incarnation. The word *katertiso*, translated “hast thou prepared” by the KJV, is in the aorist tense, which means it was accomplished in the past. Since the body was already prepared, and since this statement was made in conjunction with the Incarnation, the Messiah could have said it at any time during His life on earth prior to His crucifixion.

We should understand this communication between the Messiah and God in the same sense as all the prayers of Jesus. (See comments on 5:7.) It is not a conversation between two divine persons, but a genuinely human Messiah communicating with God from His human psyche, which He possessed as surely as a human body (verse 5), and whose mission was to do the will of God (verse 7). In the mystery of the Incarnation, the Messiah was, of course, the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of God’s person. (See comments on 1:3.) But His deity did not obscure or overwhelm His humanity; the Incarnation manifested God in human existence. (See John 1:14.) The Incarnation, the greatest of miracles, is a mystery, as are all miracles. (See I Timothy 3:16.) Scripture states the truth of the Incarnation but does not tell us precisely how the Incarnation worked. We must confess all that the Scripture says to be true, both as to Christ’s deity and humanity, but we cannot offer a complete explanation without clouding or confusing either the deity or the humanity of Christ. It is enough to say that Jesus was both God and man.

The Incarnation involved God emptying Himself. (See Philippians 2:7, where the Greek *heauton ekenosen*, translated “made himself of no reputation” by the KJV, more properly means “emptied Himself.”) He did so not by giving up any of His deity, but by “taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men” (NKJV). Thus we must confess that Jesus is the “human face of God.” In the Incarnation Jesus did not consider the appearance of divine essence something to be retained (Philippians 2:6);¹¹⁸ instead, His humanity was so genuine and complete that He experienced everything common to

humans, including the need to pray and commune with God. How He could be God and yet pray is an enigma, but it is one we must accept.

To attempt to resolve this tension by suggesting that Jesus is a second person in the Godhead praying to the first person solves nothing but creates new problems. It does not explain why one divine person would need to pray to another or how such prayers could be valid. It does not explain how one divine person could honestly say to another, “Not My will, but Yours, be done” (Luke 22:42, NKJV). If the radical monotheism of Scripture (see Deuteronomy 6:4) permits the one God to exist as two or three distinct but completely equal persons, how could one confess to have a different desire or will from another? For that matter, as in our present context, how could one say to another, “I have come . . . to do Your will, O God”? (verse 7).

The best way to think about the conversations between the Messiah and God is to attribute them to the genuineness and fullness of Christ’s human existence. He was a man, so He shared fully in the experiences of man, including the need for prayer.

The word “wherefore” or “therefore” (NKJV) refers back to the immediately preceding verses, which discuss the inability of the levitical sacrifices to take away sins. The Messiah’s ministry was the divinely ordained response to the inadequacy of the law of Moses in dealing with sin.

The Messiah’s incarnational confession, as translated by the NKJV, was, “Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me. In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure. Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come—in the volume of the book it is written of Me—to do Your will, O God.’”

The sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin are those “offered according to the law” (verse 8, NKJV). That is, the reference here is not to abuses of the sacrificial system of the law of Moses, but to the sacrificial system itself as found in the law. This verse thus indicates the temporary nature of the law. From its inception, the law was not something pleasing to God; He took no pleasure in the slaughter of animals, though this was the central event around which all the law revolved and which, in a sense, represented the law in its totality.

Why would God give to ancient Israel a covenant in which He took no pleasure? Paul addressed this question directly in Galatians 3:19-25: “What purpose then does the law serve? It was added because of transgressions. . . . The Scripture [the law] has confined all under sin. . . . We were kept under guard by the law. . . . The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ. . . . But after faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (NKJV).

We should probably understand the Greek *charin*, translated “because of,” to refer to the goal, as it is in Titus 1:5, 11 and Jude 16—in this case, the goal of the law. That is, God gave the law to bring about transgressions.¹¹⁹ The law was not merely a response to transgressions, for where there is no law, there is no transgression (Romans 4:15). This interpretation agrees with Romans 7:13: “Has then what is good become death to me?

Certainly not! But sin, that it might appear sin, was producing death in me through what is good, so that sin through the commandment might become exceedingly sinful" (NKJV). Contextually, the reference to "what is good" is to the law. The point is that the law, in and of itself, does not separate people from God, but the sin nature in all human beings takes advantage of the law to produce even more sin and thus to separate people from fellowship with God. Here we see one of the major purposes of the law: it pointed out the sinfulness of humans and their inability to please God by their own strength.

God did not give Israel the law because it was His ultimate plan for redemption or because something inherent in the sacrificial system pleased Him. He gave Israel the law to demonstrate clearly to them the sinfulness of human nature, their inability to redeem themselves, and their desperate need of a Savior. This is the meaning of the statement, "The law was our tutor to bring us to Christ, that we might be justified by faith" (Galatians 3:24, NKJV). (See comments on verse 3.)

The words "sacrifice," "offering," "burnt offerings" and "sacrifices for sin" probably encompass the entire sacrificial system of the law. "Sacrifice" (Hebrew, *zebach*) could refer to the offering of any animal, but the Hebrew Scriptures use it to refer to the peace offering. "Offering" (Hebrew, *minchah*) as it pertains to the law specifically means the meal or cereal offering. The "burnt offering" (Hebrew, *'olah*) was an act of worship. The "sacrifices for sin" (Hebrew, *chatta'ah*) were for atonement.¹²⁰ The point is that what the entire scope of sacrifices under the law could not do, the one sacrifice of the body of the Messiah accomplished. (See also verse 10.)

The Hebrew text of Psalm 40:6 reads, "My ears you have opened," where the Septuagint has, "A body You have prepared for Me" (NKJV). The Septuagint is an interpretive rendering, understanding the ears to be representative of the entire body. Literally, the Hebrew reads, "My ears you have digged." This seems to refer to the creation of the human body, made from the earth (Genesis 2:7), in which the various orifices, including the ears, were "digged out." If the Messiah had a body, He would have ears. But it suits the purpose of the writer of Hebrews to quote the Septuagint, for his emphasis is on the body of the Messiah as the sacrifice that did what the sacrifices of the law could not do.

The Messiah came to do the will of God, which, in this context, was to take away the first covenant with its ineffectual sacrifices and to replace it with the new covenant by means of "the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (verses 9-10, NKJV).

The phrase "in the volume of the book it is written of Me" (NKJV) indicates the Christ-centered nature of the Pentateuch or Torah, the first five books of the Bible. The law of Moses, found in these books, existed to proclaim the good news of the coming Messiah; in direct statements and shadows, the law wrote of Him. This was Jesus' point when He said to the unbelieving Jews, "You search the Scriptures, for in them you think you have eternal life; and these are they which testify of me" (John 5:39, NKJV). The Pharisees thought they could find eternal life in the study of the Scriptures alone; they did not understand that the very Scriptures they studied spoke of Jesus. To the disciples on the

road to Emmaus, Jesus began “at Moses and all the Prophets” and “expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself” (Luke 24:27, NKJV). Later, to the larger apostolic circle, Jesus said, “These are the words which I spoke to you while I was still with you, that all things must be fulfilled which were written in the Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms concerning Me” (Luke 24:44, NKJV).

Verses 8-9. Here the writer of Hebrews reiterated a portion of the previous verses, clarifying that the sacrifices, offerings, burnt offerings and offerings for sin he had in view were those “which are offered according to the law” (NKJV). Thus the problem with the sacrifices was not the attitude of those who offered them or the spiritual condition of Israel at large. In other words, the reason God did not desire these sacrifices or take pleasure in them was not because of lack of devotion or faith on the part of those offering the sacrifices. The sacrifices were offered according to the law, but they still brought Him no pleasure. They could not, for they were incapable of taking away sins under the best of conditions. (See verses 4, 11.) God could not be satisfied with a mere shadow. (See verse 1.)

Then, in a dramatic statement that should answer forever the relationship of the old covenant to the new covenant, verse 9 declares, “He takes away the first that He may establish the second” (NKJV). The “first” is the old covenant with its inadequate sacrificial system; the “second” is the new covenant with its efficacious offering. Here we clearly see that the two covenants cannot coexist. The new covenant is not merely an updated or revised or enhanced version of the old covenant. For the new covenant to be in effect, the old covenant had to be taken away. There is no compatibility between these covenants. One is a shadow; the other is the reality. (See comments on 8:6-13.)

3. The Finality of the Cross (10:10-18)

(10) *By the which will we are sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.*

(11) *And every priest standeth daily ministering and offering oftentimes the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins: (12) but this man, after he had offered one sacrifice for sins for ever, sat down on the right hand of God; (13) from henceforth expecting till his enemies be made his footstool. (14) For by one offering he hath perfected for ever them that are sanctified. (15) Whereof the Holy Ghost also is a witness to us: for after that he had said before, (16) This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, saith the Lord, I will put my laws into their hearts, and in their minds will I write them; (17) and their sins and iniquities will I remember no more. (18) Now where remission of these is, there is no more offering for sin.*

Verse 10. The will of God, which the Messiah came to do (verse 7), was to provide sanctification once for all “through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ.” The Greek word translated “sanctified” is derived from *hagios*, commonly related to holiness, separation and saints in the New Testament. The Hebrew idea of holiness is primarily separation unto something or someone and then by extension from something or

someone. This verse describes the instantaneous positional sanctification or setting apart of believers unto God that occurs at regeneration. (See also I Corinthians 1:2; 6:11.) Verse 14 describes the progressive growth in practical sanctification that occurs as the believer daily seeks greater conformity to the character of Christ. (See also I Thessalonians 4:4.)

We should not think that the sacrifice of Jesus Christ on the cross involved only His physical body. In Hebrew thought, man is integrated so completely that to speak of one part of his existence is to speak of the whole. (See comments on 4:12.) In Isaiah 53:10, the “soul” of the Messiah is an offering for sin. As represented by His body, the entire human existence of the Messiah was involved in the Atonement. Since this is true, humans are completely redeemed. If only the body of the Messiah had been involved in redemption, presumably only the bodies of people would have been redeemed. But since the Fall in the Garden of Eden resulted in the corruption of not only the material but also the immaterial component of human existence, it was necessary that the Messiah’s material and immaterial existence be involved in the redemptive act. His suffering was not limited to His physical body; it extended to His soul and spirit. The sanctification provided by the Atonement was “once for all.” There will never be a need for another sacrifice to complement that of Jesus Christ. He finished the work of redemption. (See John 19:30.) All that remains now is for humanity to appropriate His finished work through faith.

Verse 11 reiterates that the sacrifices offered according to the law could never take away sins. (See comments on verses 1, 4.) The statements in this verse are in the present tense (i.e., the priest “stands ministering daily . . . offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins,” NKJV), indicating that these activities were occurring even as this book was written. The same indication appears in verses 1, 3, 8. The implication is that the Book of Hebrews was written before the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. The presence of the Temple and its continuing sacrificial ritual intensified the temptation of the original readers of this book to return to the old covenant.

It is significant that the priests stood to offer the repeated daily sacrifices. Under the law of Moses, the priests could not offer sacrifices from a seated position. In contrast, Jesus Christ, after offering the only efficacious sacrifice, sat down (verse 12), indicating the finality of His sacrifice.

As in verse 4, the implication here is that what the sacrifices of the law could not do (“take away sins”), the offering of the body of Jesus did. (See comments on verse 4.)

Verse 12. The sacrifice of Jesus was “for sins.” These words reveal the error of every theory of the Atonement that sees the death of Jesus as accomplishing anything less than or other than the actual removal of sins. In the blood of Jesus, sins are remitted (verse 18), so that God is justified in forgetting them (verse 17).

Throughout church history, a number of Atonement theories have been suggested, many of which seem to offer some valid insight while at the same time suffering limitations.

Unlike the case with many doctrines, no church council has ever been held on this subject, and the discussion continues to this day.¹²¹

The development of any biblical doctrine must first take into account related doctrines. In the case of the Atonement, the broadest of these is the doctrine of God, since He is the offended party and also the One who must offer forgiveness, if any is to be offered.

Scripture presents God as being absolutely holy and sinless. By virtue of His very nature, He cannot countenance sin.

The law of God is not something impersonal, as suggested by some theories of the Atonement. It is rather an expression of God Himself. When humans disobeyed it, they disobeyed God, for God is the One who gave the law. Disobedience of God's law carried the death penalty (Genesis 2:15-17; Ezekiel 18:20; Romans 6:23).

Sinful humans are unable to do anything to help themselves, for no one is righteous, no one understands, and no one seeks after God in and of himself (Romans 3:10-11). Therefore, if there was to be an atonement, someone else had to make it on behalf of humans. The only one who could make such an atonement would be one who, while human, was not merely human. Only God could offer a sufficient price, since a sacrifice of infinite value would have to be made to atone for a world of sin.

In the person of Christ, God added humanity to His deity in order to atone for the sins of humans. Since Jesus was a man who never sinned, He could die in place of people who had; since He was God His life was of infinite value.

The Hebrew word translated "atonement" (kaphar) means "to cover." In the Old Testament, sinners offered a sacrifice as a substitute for themselves, providing a covering for their sin by interposing a sacrifice between the sin and God.

The sacrificial animal had to be perfect in every way. The one who needed atonement presented the sacrificial animal to the priest and laid his hands upon it as a confession of guilt and as a symbolic transfer of that guilt to the animal (Leviticus 1:3-4).

The great atonement passage in the Old Testament is Isaiah 53. It pictures the coming Messiah, the suffering servant, as bearing the sins of the people (Isaiah 53:4-6). Jesus cited Isaiah 53:12 as applying to His personal ministry (Luke 22:37). His primary purpose for coming into this world was the death of the cross (Mark 8:31). Jesus declared His death was a ransom, without specifying to whom it was paid (Matthew 20:28). He was a substitute, taking the place of others in death (John 15:13). John the Baptist declared the substitutionary and sacrificial roles of the Messiah (John 1:29).

Even Caiaphas, the unbelieving high priest, was apparently an instrument in the hands of the sovereign God in declaring the substitutionary work of Christ (John 11:49-50; 18:14).

Under divine inspiration, the apostle Paul emphasized the wrath of God upon sin (Romans 1:18) and described the death of Christ as propitiatory. That is, it actually appeased the wrath of God against sin (Romans 3:25-26). Moreover, the Atonement was the work of God Himself in Christ (II Corinthians 5:19). It was a demonstration of the love of God (Romans 5:8). It was such a supreme price that it guaranteed all lesser gifts (Romans 8:32). Christ's death was a substitution (II Corinthians 5:14). Christ was the Passover lamb offered as a sacrifice (I Corinthians 5:7). Paul's many references to the blood of Christ clearly reveal the sacrificial nature of the Atonement (Romans 3:25; 5:9; Ephesians 1:7; 2:13; Colossians 1:20). Christ was made a curse for us (Galatians 3:13), and He died for us (I Thessalonians 5:10).

In summary, in the death of Christ God provided a sacrifice, fulfilling the Old Testament sacrificial system, to atone for the sins of humanity. This sacrifice was not merely a substitute; Christ actually bore in His body the sins of the world.

By the Atonement, God was propitiated (His just wrath against sin was satisfied) and He was thereby able to be merciful to sinful humans. Christ's death became the means of reconciliation between God and humanity, removing the barrier that hindered such a relationship.

While many of the Atonement theories that have been offered lack vital elements, there is some accuracy in many of them. It is true, for example, that the death of Christ gave us a perfect example of the dedication we should have toward God. It is true that the death of Christ demonstrated the boundless love of God for His creation. At the same time, it revealed the seriousness of sin and the certainty and severity of the judgment of a righteous God. The death of Christ was a victory over Satan and his evil forces, which liberated sinners from the grasp of the enemy. And the death of Christ rendered satisfaction to God for the sins of humanity.

But the death of Christ was much more than all of this. At the cross of Calvary, God took on Himself the sins of the human race, paying the penalty for sin, which was totally beyond the capability and reach of humanity. When Jesus Christ came forth from the tomb, He came as a conqueror over Satan and sin. Nothing remains to stand in the way of salvation for those who will have faith in the finished work of Calvary.

The Atonement includes both objective and subjective elements. Objectively, it satisfies God's righteous judgment and enables Him to turn in mercy to sinful humanity. Subjectively, it provides the basis for the grace of God to draw individuals to Christ.

Since the death of Christ was effective in removing sins, there is no need for any further offering (verse 18). That Jesus "sat down at the right hand of God" indicates that His redemptive work is finished. Priests must stand to offer their daily sacrifices, but Christ's seated position illustrates the finality of His work. (See comments on verse 11.)

For a discussion of "the right hand of God," see comments on 1:3 and 8:1.

Verse 13. From the time that Jesus finished His atoning work and sat down at the right hand of God, He has been waiting for His enemies to be subjugated to Him. (See comments on 1:3; 2:6-8.) Here we see the fulfillment of Psalm 110:1, to which the writer of Hebrews alluded earlier (1:13).

The enemies of Christ certainly include Satan and all who identify with him. Satan will be finally vanquished when he is cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:10). This is also the fate of those whose names are not written in the Book of Life (Revelation 20:12-15). Perhaps the writer intended this comment as a warning to those who contemplated turning away from faith in the one offering of the body of Christ to return to the ineffective offerings of the law. (See verses 26-39.) If some did so, they would identify themselves as the enemies of God and thus could expect to suffer the fate reserved for all who oppose Him. The only way to avoid this destiny would be to hold the beginning of their confidence steadfast to the end (3:14). Verse 14. Again Hebrews declares the finality of Christ's sacrifice. (See 9:25-28; 10:10, 12.) Since the offering of His body was efficacious, there was no need for any further offering. (See verse 18.) Christ's cross dealt with sin decisively and permanently. Nothing else needs to be done, and nothing else can be done to contribute to a resolution of the sin problem, either collectively or individually.

The context defines the perfection accomplished for people of faith by the Atonement as purification from sin, which includes the cleansing of the conscience from sins. (See verses 1-2.) It is not a reference to sinless perfection, or to the eradication of the sin nature, but to the forgiveness of sin extended to those who appropriate the provisions of the Cross. (See verse 18.) Those who are so forgiven, when they understand the completeness and finality of Christ's work, have no more consciousness of sins. (See verse 2.) That is, as opposed to the Israelites who were reminded of their sins every year on the Day of Atonement (verse 3), those who are cleansed by the blood of Christ need take no further thought of the sins so purged. Their sins are not merely covered; they are actually gone. (See comments on verses 4, 11.)

The perfection resulting from the provisions of the Atonement is permanent ("forever"). A person who has through faith appropriated the provisions of the Cross will never need to do anything further to contribute to the purging of his sins.

Permanent perfection does not mean that if a person loses faith in Christ he retains his salvation, for the letter to the Hebrews warns of the dangers of losing faith in Christ and thus losing salvation. (See comments on 2:1-3; 3:12-14; 4:1, 4-6; 10:26-38.) Rather, the condition by which we appropriate the provisions of the Atonement—namely, faith in Christ—is the condition by which we retain them. Those who have "received the knowledge of the truth," which the larger context of the letter defines as the new covenant, but who "sin willfully" by turning away from the Son of God (verse 26), discounting the value of His blood and insulting the Spirit of grace (verse 29), will surely experience the vengeance of God (verse 30). They have cast away their confidence in Christ (verse 35) by drawing back from Christ and the new covenant to perdition (verse 39). Only those who continue to believe will be saved (verse 39).

The Greek *hagiazomenous* is translated “are sanctified” by the KJV, which one could interpret to mean a once-for-all event. But the word is a present passive participle, and the NKJV translates it more precisely as “are being sanctified.” It is true that, as verse 10 states, “we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (NKJV). That verse refers to positional or forensic (legal) sanctification. We have been set apart unto God once for all by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. There is nothing we can do to enhance that sanctification; there is nothing more effective than the blood of Jesus in separating us unto God.

But verse 14 apparently refers to the ongoing outworking of this sanctification in the believer’s life. This verse has to do with progressive sanctification, the day-by-day growth in conformity to the character of Christ that every believer should experience. (See Romans 8:29; II Peter 3:18.) Believers have already been “perfected,” or purified from their sins (verse 1), but they now need to bring their experiential Christianity into conformity with their positional Christianity. In this sense, the Christian life is the process of “becoming what we are.” God does not wait until we bring every area of our lives into conformity with His character before He saves us, but He saves us to bring every area of our lives into conformity with His character. (See Ephesians 2:8-10.)

That *hagiazomenous* is in the passive voice indicates that this sanctification is not something the believer accomplishes by his own efforts. It is not merely the product of self-discipline. Rather, it is something accomplished in him by the “one offering” by which he is forever perfected. Philippians 2:12-13 describes this process well: “Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for His good pleasure” (NKJV). Though believers are to “work out” their own salvation, they do so as they respond to God’s initiative in giving them the desire (“to will”) and the ability (“to do”) to perform His pleasure. Human works that represent an effort to earn God’s favor are worthless (Romans 4:4-5; 11:6; Ephesians 2:8-9). But works that result from genuine faith responding to divine initiative contribute to the maturing of godly character in the believer. (See James 2:14-26; Hebrews 11.)

Verses 15-17 constitute an internal witness to the inspiration of Scripture. The writer of Hebrews agreed with Jesus, Peter, and Paul that the Scriptures were given by the Holy Spirit. (See Mark 12:36; Acts 1:16; 28:25; II Timothy 3:16; II Peter 1:21.) Scripture itself claims to have been given by the Holy Spirit, and we must either accept or reject that claim. If we accept it, we must acknowledge the supernatural origin of the Scriptures and thus their authority. If we reject it, only two options remain. Either the Scriptures were written by people who thought they were being moved by the Holy Spirit but who were not, in which case the Scriptures were written by deluded and thus mentally unstable people, or they were written by people who claimed to be moved by the Holy Spirit but who knew they were not. In this case, the Scriptures were written by liars.

But the nature of the Scriptures excludes the possibility that they were written by deluded or deceitful people. People who are mentally unstable do not write literature with the grand and consistent sweep of the Book that has been confessed to be the greatest

literature in the world even by those who reject its supernatural origin. If these people were deluded, their efforts would have descended into senseless gibbering. Nor could or would liars have written a book like the Bible. Liars do not lift up the high moral tone of Scripture, which itself forbids lying. If the Bible had been written by deceitful people, their deceit would at some point have turned to self-serving ambition; they would have written something to further their own carnal purposes. But nowhere in Scripture do we find evidence of such an attempt.

In the final analysis, the only reasonable decision is to agree with the witness of Scripture that it is of supernatural origin; it is given by the Holy Spirit.

Significantly, the word “witnesses” (NKJV) is in the present tense. Although the Scripture does consist of words written on paper or some other surface, it is a living witness, not a dead one. It did not merely speak in the past; it continues to speak. As Stephen testified, the Scriptures are “living oracles” (Acts 7:38, NKJV). Because they originate with the eternal God, the words are just as potent and effective today as they were the first day they were spoken. In a sense, it is just as if God is continually speaking them to every generation.

The witness of the Holy Spirit to which the writer of Hebrews referred was the promise of the new covenant found in Jeremiah 31:33-34. He previously referred to this promise in 8:8-12 (see comments). In this case he collapsed the longer promise into a shorter statement: After promising to make a new covenant characterized by an inner work as opposed to the external nature of the law of Moses, the Holy Spirit added that He would no longer remember the sins and lawless deeds of the people.

This passage identifies the Holy Spirit with God Himself. It is the Holy Spirit who speaks (verse 15), who is the Lord (verse 16), and who further adds the words of verse 17. In its original context, Jehovah spoke this prophecy. Its attribution to the Holy Spirit here is as significant as the equation of the Holy Spirit with God in Acts 5:3-4. The Holy Spirit is God.

Verse 18. The offering of the body of Jesus Christ (verse 10) resulted in the remission of sins. (See Matthew 26:28.) The word “remission” is translated from *aphesis*, which is often translated “forgiveness.” (See Mark 3:29; Acts 5:31; 13:38; 26:18; Ephesians 1:7; Colossians 1:14.) The essential meaning of *aphesis* is to “send away.”

What the blood of bulls and goats was unable to do (verses 4, 11), the blood of Jesus did. Since the blood of Jesus was efficacious in removing sin, there is “no longer an offering for sin” (NKJV). That is, since the Atonement dealt completely and permanently with sin, no further offering needs to be made. The sacrifice of Jesus has made every other sacrifice for sin obsolete (8:13). On the basis of the offering of the body of Jesus Christ, God chooses to “remember no more” the sins and lawless deeds of those who put their trust in Him (verse 17). Jesus Christ has completely satisfied the penalty for sin.

4. Don't Draw Back from Christ (10:19-39)

(19) Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, (20) by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh; (21) and having an high priest over the house of God; (22) let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water. (23) Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;); (24) and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works: (25) not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching. (26) For if we sin wilfully after that we have received the knowledge of the truth, there remaineth no more sacrifice for sins, (27) but a certain fearful looking for of judgment and fiery indignation, which shall devour the adversaries. (28) He that despised Moses' law died without mercy under two or three witnesses: (29) of how much sorer punishment, suppose ye, shall he be thought worthy, who hath trodden under foot the Son of God, and hath counted the blood of the covenant, wherewith he was sanctified, an unholy thing, and hath done despite unto the Spirit of grace? (30) For we know him that hath said, Vengeance belongeth unto me, I will recompense, saith the Lord. And again, The Lord shall judge his people. (31) It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God. (32) But call to remembrance the former days, in which, after ye were illuminated, ye endured a great fight of afflictions; (33) partly, whilst ye were made a gazingstock both by reproaches and afflictions; and partly, whilst ye became companions of them that were so used. (34) For ye had compassion of me in my bonds, and took joyfully the spoiling of your goods, knowing in yourselves that ye have in heaven a better and an enduring substance.

(35) Cast not away therefore your confidence, which hath great recompence of reward. (36) For ye have need of patience, that, after ye have done the will of God, ye might receive the promise. (37) For yet a little while, and he that shall come will come, and will not tarry. (38) Now the just shall live by faith: but if any man draw back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him. (39) But we are not of them who draw back unto perdition; but of them that believe to the saving of the soul.

Verse 19. Because we have in Christ a High Priest who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens (8:1), and because He is a High Priest who has completely satisfied the righteous judgment of God upon sin by the offering of His body (verses 10-18), we can boldly enter the true Holiest Place by His blood. The word "therefore" refers back to the discussion of the atoning work of Christ and reveals its logical effect. The death of Christ on the cross did nothing less than to cleanse people of faith from their sins (verse 22) and to qualify them to enter directly into the presence of God.

The term "high priest" appears fifteen times in the Book of Hebrews, four times referring to high priests under the law of Moses (8:3; 9:7, 25; 13:11) and eleven times referring to Jesus Christ, the great High Priest (2:17; 3:1; 4:14, 15; 5:5, 10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1; 9:11;

10:21). The teaching concerning Jesus Christ as the great high priest is the "solid food" (5:12, 14, NKJV) that is the main theme in this letter (8:1). (See discussion on 5:10- 11.) That

the final mention of Jesus Christ as High Priest appears in 10:21 indicates that this passage sums up all that Hebrews has previously said about Him in this capacity, including His atoning work. An understanding of the full effect of the blood of Jesus gives believers boldness to enter into the presence of God on the basis of that blood.

Where there is timidity in approaching God, there is a failure to appreciate fully the finality and completeness of the work of the Cross.

It is significant that the writer of Hebrews here referred to the original readers as “brethren.” His previous uses of the word indicate a purposeful attempt to remind the original readers of the intimate relationship they have with the Messiah and with one another under the terms of the new covenant. (See comments on 2:11-12, 17; 3:1, 12.) His final use of the word also suggests an appeal to intimacy (13:22). This closeness contrasts to the distance from God that the rituals of the law of Moses forced upon the people of Israel. (See 12:18-21 and comments on 7:19.) Appealing to his readers as brethren seems to be a way of reminding them of the superiority of the new covenant.

This is not the first time that the Book of Hebrews mentions the boldness with which Christ’s high priestly work enables us to enter God’s presence. (See comments on 4:16.) Here, it says we have this boldness “to enter into the Holiest.” Again, we see that the Most Holy Place under the law of Moses symbolized the very presence of God Himself. (See comments on 9:3-5, 7-9.) In 4:14-16, the high priestly work of Christ gains the believer bold entry to the “throne of grace.” Like the reference to the throne in 8:1, this phrase is simply a figure of speech for the presence of the God who is characterized by grace. When Hebrews says that Christ has not entered the holy places of the earthly Tabernacle, it points out that they are mere copies of the true holy places; the true Holy Place is heaven itself, the very presence of God (9:24).

Verse 20. In context, the “new and living way” into the presence of God that Jesus has “consecrated” for us stands in obvious contextual contrast to the “old” and “dead” way of the law of Moses. (See 8:13; 9:8-10, 14; 10:1, 4, 9, 11.) It is “new” because it is based on the new covenant. (See 8:6-12.) It is “living” because this way is actually a living person, Jesus Christ, who imparts life. (See John 14:6.) That is, this way is not based on the blood of dead animals, but on the blood of one who was slain but is now alive forevermore. (See Revelation 1:18; 2:8.) The law of Moses was the “ministry of death” (II Corinthians 3:7, NKJV), but the Spirit that accompanies the new covenant gives life (II Corinthians 3:6-11). The old covenant separated people from God by declaring them to be sinners (Romans 7:5-13; Galatians 3:19-25); the new covenant brings them into fellowship with God by providing a means for their sins to be forgiven (verses 10, 14, 17-18).

Jesus “consecrated” this new and living way for us. The word translated “consecrated” (Greek, *enekainisen*) is simply the language of inauguration.¹²² The same word is used in 9:18 of the old covenant, where the KJV translates it “dedicated.” The inauguration of this new and living way overrides and terminates the inauguration of the old way, the law of

Moses. They cannot coexist. (See comments on 8:13; 10:9.) Inauguration implies the beginning of a new administration, and that is exactly what Jesus Christ accomplished.

The statement that Christ consecrated this new and living way “through the veil, that is, His flesh” (NKJV) has been the subject of much speculation. Some have suggested the point is that His flesh (i.e., human nature) was a veil which obscured His deity. But this seems to impose a meaning on the verse. Rather, the language seems to continue the symbolism of verse 19 and may allude to the rending of the veil in the Temple at the moment of Christ’s death (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). In this sense, the veil is not a barrier to entry into the Holiest Place; the torn veil provided free passage into the Most Holy Place. Likewise, the flesh (i.e., “the body of Jesus Christ,” verse 10), pierced on the cross, provides access into the true Holiest of All. The humanity of Jesus is not a barrier to intimacy with God; it is the means by which He stands in solidarity with us as our high priest (verse 21), thus enabling us to enter into the most intimate relationship with God.

If the veil here does not allude to the rending of the Temple veil but refers simply to the function of the inner veil in the Tabernacle in guarding the way to the Most Holy Place, the verse still indicates that it is through the flesh, or human nature, of Jesus that we have a way into the presence of God. The veil still is not a barrier. On the Day of Atonement, it was no barrier. There was a legitimate provision for entry beyond the veil. Just as the veil opened a way into the Most Holy Place on the Day of Atonement, so the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ opened the way into the presence of God as He atoned for the sins of the world on the cross.

Verse 21. Here is the final reference in the Book of Hebrews to Jesus as High Priest, thus forming a literary parenthesis with 2:17, the first mention. When we compare Moses’ faithfulness in the house of God (3:2, 5) and Jesus’ faithfulness over His own house (3:3-4, 6) with the statement that Jesus is “a high priest over the house of God,” we find a strong indication of the deity of Jesus Christ. In His identity as “Son,” Jesus is “over His own house” (3:6); in His identity as “high priest,” He is “over the house of God.” Though we must not draw too sharp a distinction between “Son” and “high priest” (both terms assume His humanity), to think of Jesus as the Son of God is of necessity to think of Him as God, while to think of Him as High Priest is to focus on His solidarity with the human race.

In Hebrew thought, the concept of “son” indicates likeness. This thought underlies the identification of James and John as “sons of thunder” (Mark 3:17) and Barnabas as the “son of consolation” (Acts 4:36). When Jesus claimed that God was uniquely His Father, and by implication that He was thus the unique Son of God, the Jews understood Him to claim equality with God (John 5:18). From a Western perspective, we may think that likeness to God could mean similarity but something less than identity. Since God is unique, however, to be exactly like Him—or to be His Son in the sense Jesus claimed to be—is to be deity. If Jesus is not God, His claim is blasphemy and an encouragement to idolatry. As the Son of God (i.e., God manifest in flesh, I Timothy 3:16), Jesus is over His own house. As High Priest, He is over the house of God, the congregation of believers.

(See discussion on 3:1-6.) As the Son of God, He is identified with God; as the High Priest, He is identified with us.

As the High Priest over the house of God, Jesus represents us to God by means of His atoning work. (See comments on 2:17; 3:1; 4:14-15; 5:5, 10; 6:20; 7:26; 8:1; 9:11.)

Verse 22. The high priesthood of Jesus enables us to draw near to God “with a true heart in full assurance of faith.” To the original readers of this book, this remark was an exhortation to seek intimacy with God on the basis of Christ’s high priestly work rather than on the basis of the law of Moses. Rather than “drawing back” (verse 39) from Christ and rejecting the work of the Cross (verse 29), believers must approach God with the full assurance which springs from faith that the blood of Jesus is God’s exclusive answer to the sin problem (verse 19). A heart that has confidence in Christ alone is a “true heart” as opposed to an “evil conscience” that questions the efficacy and finality of His sacrifice.

When one’s faith is in Jesus Christ alone, his heart is “sprinkled from an evil conscience,” and his body is “washed with pure water.” Here we find new covenant language: “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). The original readers of this letter would have understood these words to say, “You have received the cleansing from sin promised by the Hebrew prophets to accompany the new covenant.” (See verse 17.)

Some may suppose that the statement “our bodies washed with pure water” is a reference to water baptism, but this view is unlikely. The significance of water baptism is not in washing the body (I Peter 3:21). Nowhere is there any suggestion that the water of baptism is “pure” water. “Having our hearts sprinkled” is obviously a symbolic way of saying, “Our sins are forgiven.” In this context, “having . . . our bodies washed” means the same thing. In light of the emphasis in Hebrews on the law as symbol for new covenant realities, there may be an allusion here to the ritual washing of the priests in the laver.

What their washing merely symbolized has been accomplished by the blood of Jesus.

In the context, an “evil conscience” is one that is not cleansed from sin and that continually reminds one of his sinfulness (verses 2-3). It is a conscience that relies on the law of Moses, or anything other than the blood of Jesus, to deal with sin and to gain access to the presence of God.

Verse 23. Here is the second of three closely related exhortations. The KJV translates this verse, “Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised).” The word translated “faith” here is *elpidos*, which means “hope.” Thus the NKJV translates the verse: “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.” This phrase gives us a strong indication of the purpose for which the letter was originally written. The first Jewish readers were in danger of abandoning their hope in Christ Jesus as they contemplated a return to the rituals of the law of Moses. Such a step would have been spiritually disastrous for them. (See verses 26-39.) Rather than turning away from Christ, they needed to firmly retain the

hope that springs from His atoning work. (See Romans 8:24-25.) They were to be unwavering in this hope; even to consider a return to the shadowy figures of the law of Moses was to betray the One who is faithful to keep His promises. Hope is the anchor of the soul (6:19). It may be that the social pressures on the first-century Jews who believed on Jesus as their Messiah (see 12:3-4), the delay in Messiah's return, and the apparent continuing prosperity of the law of Moses as evidenced in the daily rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem all combined to cause them to waver in their hope and their confession. But to turn away from Christ for these or any other reasons is to act prematurely; He will keep every promise He has made to those who believe on Him. We must not forget that the new covenant is based upon "better promises" than the law of Moses (8:6).

The reference to "hope" here follows the reference to "faith" in verse 22 and precedes the reference to "love" in verse 24, thus bringing the letter to the Hebrews into conformity with the general emphasis on these three qualities in the New Testament epistles. Together, faith, hope and love represent the highest expression of the Christian life.¹²³

Verse 24. Continuing the summary begun in verse 19, the letter exhorts its readers not to turn away from faith in Christ (verse 22) or from the hope that characterized their initial confession (verse 23), but to "consider one another in order to stir up love and good works" (NKJV). The letter to the Hebrews offers a detailed doctrinal defense of the new covenant and its superiority over the old covenant. But doctrinal truth alone will not guarantee conformity to Christian character. In addition to recognizing the superiority of Jesus over all else—including the prophets of old, the angels, Moses, Aaron, and Joshua, as discussed in the early chapters of this book—the Jewish Christians needed to reaffirm and refresh the faith, hope, and love that had characterized them when they first believed. Specifically, as it pertained to love, they needed to stop focusing on the outmoded Temple rituals with nostalgic longings, and they needed instead to focus on the needs of one another for the specific purpose of stirring up love and good works.

In this trilogy, as in many other cases (e.g., I Corinthians 13:13), faith, hope and love are mentioned in this order. Though all three qualities abide, love is the "greatest." Where there is love for God, faith and hope will follow. Where there is love for one's fellow man, the same qualities will be evident. Those who love others will tend to trust them, and trust is the essence of faith. Those who love others will tend to hope for the best for and from those they love. (See I Corinthians 13:4-7.)

This is only the second time the word "love" is found in Hebrews. In the earlier mention, as here, love is tied to the qualities of faith and hope. (See comments on 6:10-12.)

Not only were the Hebrews to encourage each other to love, they were also to encourage one another to good works. Love is not merely a feeling. Just as genuine faith issues in works (James 2:14-26), so genuine love results in loving actions. The writer of Hebrews was opposed to "dead works" (6:1; 9:14), but not to the "good works" that spring from love for God and other people. The works of the law were dead in that the purpose for those rituals had now ended. There is always a place, however, for loving deeds.

There is no idea here that faith, hope, and love are merely psychological perceptions. Genuine faith results in drawing near to God (verse 22). Genuine hope results in unwavering allegiance to God (verse 23). And genuine love results in loving deeds performed both for God and others (verse 24).

The word translated “provoke” (or “stir up” [NKJV]) is a strong one (Greek, *paroxysmos*). In Acts 15:39 it is translated “contention.” Generally, it has the idea of some kind of irritation. (See Acts 17:16; I Corinthians 13:5; Ephesians 6:4.) Its use here in a positive sense is striking and makes this exhortation all the more significant. The command is no casual one; believers are to vigorously promote love and good works in one another.

The most effective way to stir up another person to love and good works is by taking the initiative to love that person and to do good things for that person. When we are loved, we tend to love in return. When we are blessed by the good deeds of another, we tend to reciprocate by sharing the blessing of those good deeds with others. In other words, we are not so much stirred up by vocal admonition as by the example of love and good works in others.

The word translated “consider” (Greek, *katanoeo*) contains the idea “to pay attention to.” It appears in 3:1, which urges believers to focus their attention on Christ Jesus. In view of the temptation the first-century Jewish believers faced to defect to the old covenant, “there may be a suggestion of watching out for possible failures or weaknesses in the community . . . though not with [an] unfriendly motive. . . .”¹²⁴ Verse 25 makes this thought especially likely. (See also 12:15.) Believers are to be alert to the spiritual struggles of their brethren. (See James 5:19-20; Galatians 6:1.) Rescuing one who is in danger of losing his faith is as important as his initial salvation.

Verse 25. One of the first and most visible signs of the Christian faith is the frequent gathering of believers for worship and mutual encouragement. (See Acts 2:42, 44- 47.) Early in the Christian era, it was common for Jewish believers to gather for these purposes in synagogues. (See Acts 9:2, 20; 13:5, 14-15, 42; 14:1; 17:1, 10, 17; 18:4, 7-8, 19, 26; 19:18; 22:19; 26:11.) It was not until later in the first century, around A.D. 80-90, that the confession of faith required of all who frequented the synagogues was amended to include an article that amounted to blasphemy against Jesus Christ. The article was specifically intended to root out Jewish Christians from the synagogues. Even James, who wrote what is probably the oldest book in the New Testament, referred to the place of Christian worship as the synagogue (James 2:2).¹²⁵

Just as frequent gatherings are indicative of the Christian faith, so where faith wanes it is characterized by a loss of commitment to the community of worship and exhortation. As this verse notes, some Jewish Christians had already forsaken the assembling of themselves together. There is something about belief in Jesus that thrives in mutuality. It is not meant to be experienced in isolation. When people choose isolation, it is the sign of a deeper spiritual crisis.

The writer of Hebrews urged these early Christians not to fall victim to the destruction of isolation from the community of believers. There is strength in the exhortation that arises from fellowship. The importance of faithfulness to the Christian assembly increases “so much the more as you see the Day approaching” (NKJV).

Significantly, this verse demonstrates the expectation of the early church for the return of the Lord. Everywhere in the New Testament, believers anticipate the Lord’s return at any time. (See I Corinthians 15:51; I Thessalonians 4:15, 17; Titus 2:13; Hebrews 9:28.) The reference to “the Day,” like “the day of the Lord” and “the day of Christ,” is eschatological; these terms describe some aspect of the events associated with the return of Jesus. (See Acts 2:20; I Corinthians 1:8; 5:5; I Thessalonians 5:2; II Peter 3:10.)

That believers can “see the Day approaching” indicates there are discernible signs of the Lord’s return. Jesus said one of the signs of the end would be persecution. (See Matthew 24:9.) It may be that the writer of Hebrews referred to such persecution here. (See verse 32; 12:3-4.) If these early Jewish Christians were experiencing persecution for their faith, it was no time to consider giving up and returning to Judaism; the persecutions themselves were indications of the validity of their faith and of the approach of the time when their faith would receive its ultimate reward.

Verse 26. Verses 26-31 have been especially troubling to many who have not understood their meaning in the larger context of the Book of Hebrews. Some have interpreted these verses to mean that if a person sins after he is saved, there is no hope for his salvation. That is not at all the meaning of the passage.

In this entire section of exhortation, the writer of Hebrews included himself as needing to share in the reaffirmation and renewal he recommended to his readers. (See verses 22-25.) He included himself among those for whom Jesus had consecrated the new and living way (verse 20). Verses 26-31 are no exception. He did not identify with his readers in the positive expressions of Christianity only to abandon them in the warnings against apostasy. He wrote, “For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (NKJV). Here was a Hebrew Christian writing to Hebrew Christians. What was a danger for one was a danger for all. Gentiles, who were never associated with the law of Moses, could be tempted in many areas, but any temptation to identify with the dead rituals of the law would be minimal. But because of their long association with the old covenant, not only in a religious but also in a cultural sense, Jewish Christians must ever be alert to the danger of sacrificing the integrity of the new covenant on the altar of old covenant forms.

In the context, the willful sin warned against here is a defection from Jesus Christ and the new covenant to the dead works of the law. (See verses 9, 16-17, 20, 29, 32, 35, 39; 6:4-6; 8:6-13.) The “knowledge of the truth” these Hebrew Christians had received was the knowledge of the new covenant established in the blood of Jesus Christ as the fulfillment of all the prophecies of the Hebrew prophets about a coming covenant that would result in the remission of sins. (See verses 16-18.)

The phrase “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” has troubled many who suppose it means “there is no more forgiveness for sins.” But that is not the meaning of this statement. The point is that for those who reject the sacrifice of Jesus, there is no other sacrifice that can atone for their sins. (See verse 18.) The sacrifices of the old covenant were no longer meaningful (8:13; 10:5-9), and even when they were in vogue they never took away sins (verses 4, 11). There is certainly no non-Christian sacrifice that can atone for sins. Therefore, those who turn away from the provisions of the new covenant are without any resource to deal with the problem of sin.

For the early Jewish Christians to turn away from Jesus Christ would have been a willful sin; they would have been sinning against the knowledge of the truth they had received. They had been illuminated (verse 32); their eyes were opened to the truth that Jesus was the promised Messiah. To turn from Him now would have been a purposeful, intentional, and arrogant move. There was no real question in their minds as to whether Jesus was the promised One. Their problem was apparently not one of understanding but of willingness to stand fast in the face of the pressures they faced from their brothers in Israel who had rejected the Lord (verse 33).

The word translated “sin” (Greek, *hamartanonton*) is a present active participle. It does not have to do with a one-time sin, or even an occasional sin, but with continual, persistent sin. The warning here is not against the struggles with faith that all Christians experience, or even the occasional lapse of faith that may occur, but against an ongoing rejection of Jesus. Those who reject Him will find no other source of salvation.

Verse 27. All that awaits those who reject Jesus is “a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries” (NKJV). (See verses 30-31, 38-39.) This verse declares the exclusivity of Christianity. The gospel is not a way to salvation; it is the only way. At the second coming of Jesus, those who do not know God and those who do not obey the gospel of Jesus Christ will suffer the vengeance of God “in flaming fire.” They will “be punished with everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His power” (II Thessalonians 1:8-9, NKJV). In this case, His “adversaries” are apparently those who have known Him (verse 26), but who have stubbornly turned away from faith in Him.

This description of the fate of those who turn away from Christ is startling and bleak, but it is true, and its purpose here to impress upon the reader the utter devastation that awaits those outside of Christ. It also underscores that the old covenant is no longer a viable option. It is not merely an inferior covenant; there is no salvation in it. We find salvation exclusively in the blood of Jesus (verse 19), the only way to God.

Verse 28. The first readers of this letter were quite aware of the penalty for rejecting the law of Moses. If two or three witnesses testified to having personal knowledge that anyone in Israel was guilty of worshiping false gods, the idolater was to be mercilessly stoned to death. (See Deuteronomy 17:2-7.) But this fate was mild compared to what awaited those who rejected the “new and living way” Jesus had inaugurated (verse 20).

We see the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant even in the penalty for the rejection of the covenant. Those who rejected the old covenant suffered the fate of physical death at the hands of their peers. But those who reject the new covenant will suffer the vengeance of God Himself (verses 30-31).

Verse 29. If the law of Moses required the death of those who rejected it, and it was merely a shadow of things to come (verse 1), then those who reject Jesus Christ are worthy of “much worse punishment” (NKJV). To reject Jesus after having received the knowledge of the truth (verse 26) and after having been illuminated (verse 32) is to trample the Son of God underfoot, to count His blood, upon which the new covenant is based and by which we are sanctified (verse 10), to be a common thing, and to insult the Spirit of grace (NKJV).

To trample Jesus underfoot is to reject Him as the promised Messiah. It is also to deny His deity, for such a rejection involves counting His blood to be common (“unholy” KJV), or just like the blood of any human. It is a rejection of the Atonement. The blood of Jesus was the blood of God (Acts 20:28). In a very real sense, then, to reject Jesus is to reject God Himself. The “Spirit of grace” is the Holy Spirit – God’s Spirit characterized by the grace He imparts to believers. (See 4:16; 6:4; 12:15.)

Verse 30. Whereas those who rejected Moses’ law were judged by humans and experienced the temporal punishment of physical death (verse 28), those who reject Jesus Christ and the new covenant in His blood will face the judgment of God Himself. This verse quotes portions of Deuteronomy 32:35-36, but the quote from Deuteronomy 32:35 does not precisely match either the Hebrew text or the Septuagint. In this case, the writer apparently had access to a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures we no longer possess. This version of Deuteronomy 32:35 is witnessed to by the Targums, which are Aramaic paraphrases of the Hebrew Scriptures.¹²⁶ Apparently, more than one Greek translation circulated in the first century. Including himself with his readers as he did earlier in this context (verses 20, 22-26), the writer declared, “We know Him who said.” This statement would not have been appropriate to a Gentile audience who did not know the law of Moses. The Jewish author of this book, writing to a Jewish audience, shared with them a commonality of tradition. They understood each other.

In its original context in Deuteronomy, the statement “‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay,’ says the Lord” emphasizes that judgment is a divine prerogative. The words are used to make the same point in another New Testament context (Romans 12:19). Here, however, the contextual emphasis is not that judgment belongs to God, but the severity of the judgment of God as compared to human judgment under Moses’ law (verse 28). In this instance, the inspired New Testament writer used Old Testament words in a new way; the words find new emphasis in their new context. (See comments on 1:10.)

The second quotation in this verse, “The Lord will judge His people” (NKJV), is another example of Old Testament words receiving new meaning by their inspired use in a new context. In their original context, these words mean that God will vindicate His people; He will come to their defense “and have compassion on His servants” (Deuteronomy

32:36, NKJV). But in this new context, the judgment is one of condemnation of those who reject Jesus Christ. This judgment is fearful (verse 31).

The use of these quotations is significant for biblical hermeneutics (principles of interpretation). The same words can have different meanings, or at least different emphases, in different contexts. Thus context plays a crucial role in the interpretation of Scripture. Since each word of Scripture is inspired, the contexts are also inspired. Words are defined by their contexts. Given the right context, a word can take on a meaning radically different from the one it normally has.

For example, the New Testament ordinarily uses the word “image” (Greek, *eikon*) to refer to some kind of visible representation of someone or something, which can easily be distinguished from the person or thing represented. (See, for example, Mark 12:16; Romans 1:23; 11:4.) But in one context, the word refers to the reality itself. (See comments on 10:1.)

As another example, the New Testament quotes Habakkuk 2:4 three times. In one context, the emphasis is on “faith” as opposed to the works of the law (Romans 1:17). In another context, the emphasis is on the “just,” who live by faith, as opposed to the condemned, who are under the curse of the law (Galatians 3:11). And in Hebrews 10:38, the emphasis is that the just shall “live,” as opposed to the perdition that those who “draw back” will experience (verse 39).

We must not take any statement of Scripture in isolation; God did not inspire the Bible as a series of disconnected statements or even in a chapter-and-verse format. He inspired it as a flowing narrative meant to be read in large, contextually-related segments. For this reason, “proof-texting,” or the listing of widely separated verses that are thought to bear on the same subject in order to prove some point, can be dangerous. We should not cite verses in this way until we have carefully studied the context of each one to assure that they do indeed address the same subject. Some have cynically suggested that they could use the Bible to prove any point they wish, but they could do so only by ripping statements and verses from their contexts and giving them meanings that God and the human authors never intended.

Verse 31. People may have thought it a fearful thing to fall into the hands of human judges under the law of Moses (verse 28), but that judgment was mild in comparison to the judgment of those who trample the Son of God underfoot (verse 29). We see the superiority of the new covenant over the old covenant, a persistent theme in Hebrews, by the increased severity of judgment upon those who reject Jesus Christ. Just as there are degrees of reward in the eternal realm based on the quality of one’s service in the kingdom of God (I Corinthians 3:12-15), so there are degrees of punishment based upon the extent of revelation one has rejected (Luke 12:47-48; Matthew 10:15). The increased severity of judgment for the rejection of Jesus Christ and the new covenant indicates that the revelation of the new covenant is superior to that of the old covenant. (See John 1:17.)

The same word translated “fearful” (Greek, phoberos) here also appears in verse 27. The point is that the prospect of judgment for who reject Jesus Christ is literally frightening. The prospect is frightening at least in part because, since the judge is God Himself, the judgment will be precisely appropriate. Under the law of Moses with its human judges, it was possible that a guilty person might go free. It was even possible that false witnesses could condemn an innocent person to death. But, at worst, the law provided for temporal punishment: physical death. But the judgment God will render at the last day will be eternal, and it will be according to the unmitigated facts as recorded in the heavenly books, including the “Book of Life” (Revelation 20:12-15). Those who stand before the Great White Throne will be judged not according to human testimony, which may be flawed, but according to their actual deeds.

The emphasis on the “living God” here contrasts with the deadness of the law (6:1; 8:13; 9:14). The law had served its purpose and no longer functioned as far as God was concerned. But the God who had given the law still lived, and He had now given a new and better covenant, which replaced the old.

Verses 32-33. The writer encouraged his original readers to recall the days when they first were “illuminated,” or when they first came to know Jesus Christ as the promised Messiah. In order to regain the right perspective on their current temptations, it was necessary for them to refocus on the truth that first led them to turn from the rituals of the law and to place their faith in Christ alone. When they first turned to Christ, they boldly abandoned the Mosaic covenant and rejoiced in their newfound freedom. They did so even though they “endured a great struggle with sufferings” (NKJV) and even though they became a spectacle as they endured reproaches and tribulations. Not only did they endure these painful experiences themselves; they also “became companions of those who were so treated” (NKJV).

In other words, the first-century Jewish Christian community was a suffering community. Suffering was especially characteristic for Jewish believers because of the intense pressure they experienced from their families and friends who rejected Jesus and who viewed these new Christians as traitors to their faith. (See Matthew 10:32-37; Acts 4:1-22; 5:17-28, 40; 6:9-15; 7:54-60; 8:1-3.)

Though the original readers of this letter had suffered greatly for their faith, none of them had yet been martyred (12:4). This comment rules out Jewish believers in Jerusalem as the first recipients of this letter, for members of that church had begun to experience martyrdom as early as AD 33 with the stoning of Stephen. Again in AD 44, under Herod Agrippa I, James was beheaded.¹²⁷ But wherever there were Jewish communities in the first century, it was common for those who embraced Christ to experience the ridicule and disapproval of those who rejected Him.

Verses 34-35. During the earlier days of their faith in Christ, the first readers of this letter had demonstrated compassion for the writer during his imprisonment. Some Greek manuscripts at this point read “for you had compassion on the prisoners” instead of “on

me in my chains” (NKJV). Regardless of which reading is original, this comment is a continuation of the point made in the previous verse that they had become “companions of those who were so treated” (NKJV). During the time of the imperial persecution of the church, prisoners who had no means of personal support were allowed by their Roman guards to starve unless friends supplied them with food and other resources.¹²⁸

Not only did the first readers of this letter demonstrate their compassion by ministering to those in prison; they also “joyfully accepted the plundering” (NKJV) of their goods. Though we do not know exactly how or when this plundering occurred, we have an account from Philo of similar events in Alexandria in AD 38 when the Jews of that city were evicted from their homes: “Their enemies overran the houses now left empty and began to loot them, dividing up the contents like the spoils of war.”¹²⁹ The response of the Jewish Christians to such plundering was joy, because they knew they had “a better and an enduring possession . . . in heaven” (NKJV).

It seems obvious that the writer reminded his readers of their pristine faith and early experiences when their vision was clear in order to show them how far they had drifted in reaching a place where they actually considered turning away from faith in Christ to embrace the old ways all over again. There is a powerful lesson here for all believers: In order to retain our faith, we must continually refocus on Jesus Christ alone.

It is a terrible mistake for believers to cast away their confidence in Jesus Christ; there is great reward for such confidence. Although there are temporal benefits to trusting in Him, the ultimate reward is eternal. This eternal reward will cause any temporal discomfort to pale into insignificance by comparison.

Verse 36. The original readers of this letter had done the will of God when they were illuminated (verse 32) and placed their faith in Christ Jesus. When they retained their faith in the face of “great struggle with sufferings” (verse 32, NKJV), when they had compassion on imprisoned brethren, and when they accepted the plundering of their goods with joy, they had done the will of God. Now, they needed endurance so as not to forfeit the promise of God.

The larger context of the Book of Hebrews identifies “the promise” as the promise of eternal life that is included in the new covenant and that comes in conjunction with the “promise of the Father,” the baptism of the Holy Spirit. (See comments on 9:15-17.) This is the promise that the people of faith in the era prior to the coming of the Messiah did not receive, even though they were justified by faith (11:39).

As people of faith, they will, of course, enjoy eternal life, but on the basis of the new covenant rather than any prior covenant (11:40). Since faith characterizes the new covenant, the benefits of the new covenant extend to people of faith who lived in the pre-Messianic era, just as the forgiveness from sin made possible by the blood of Jesus is given to those who lived prior to the Cross (Romans 3:25). In a sense, we can say that these new covenant benefits are made retroactive.

The lack of “the promise” does not mean that people of faith prior to the coming of Jesus died severed from fellowship with God, only to be restored to fellowship with Him after the work of the Cross. Since in the mind of God the work of the Cross, upon which the new covenant rests, was “from the foundation of the world” (Revelation 13:8), God was justified in declaring in advance the final judgment that He would pronounce upon the people of faith who lived and died before the coming of Jesus. Upon this basis, upon death those people entered into “Abraham’s bosom,” a Jewish idiom representing participation in the promises God made to Abraham, the most notable of which was justification by faith. (See Luke 16:22; Genesis 15:6; Romans 4:1-5.) Their status was anticipatory rather than final, for upon His ascension, Jesus “led captivity captive” (Ephesians 4:8), apparently taking those pre-Messianic people of faith who resided in “Abraham’s bosom” and transferring them to paradise, or the “third heaven” (II Corinthians 12:1-4). The reference is not so much to spatial locations as to genuine events in the realm of the Spirit. In summary, even though people of faith in the Old Testament enjoy eternal life, they did not receive it on the basis of the law of Moses or of any covenant prior to the new covenant. They received it in a provisional sense in anticipation of the coming of Messiah.

The point of verse 36 is that to receive eternal life, one must not only begin in faith, one must endure in faith. This teaching cannot be harmonized with the idea of unconditional eternal security.

Verses 37-38. When it comes to faith in God, it is always too soon to give up. As the original readers of this letter contemplated casting away their confidence in Jesus Christ, they were looking in the wrong direction. When they looked back over their shoulders at the law of Moses, the old covenant and the Temple rituals, they fixed their gaze on an outmoded and now-ineffectual system, rather than looking into the future and the certainty of the return of Jesus. (See Acts 1:11; James 5:8.)

The writer of Hebrews here made use of the words of Habakkuk 2:3-4 in a form varying from the Hebrew but similar to the Septuagint. (See comments on 1:10; 10:5-7.) From a human perspective, it may seem that the Lord is tarrying or delaying His coming, but He has established a precise time for this event, just as He did for His first entry into the world (Galatians 4:4; Mark 13:32). When that time comes, He will come without delay.

First-century believers anticipated His coming in their day (“yet a little while”). God has always allowed believers this wonderful hope; the time of His coming is His secret. If God had informed the first believers that He would not return for thousands of years, they would have had reason for despair, especially during periods of great persecution. On the other hand, in a very real sense, His return was to occur shortly, for with God a thousand years is as a day (II Peter 3:8).

Here appears one of three quotations of Habakkuk 2:4 in the New Testament. (See Romans 1:17; Galatians 3:11.) The prophet Habakkuk, when the law was still in force, declared that “the just shall live by faith.” The point is that even under the old covenant, only people of faith were justified. It was not enough to perform the rituals of the law; the

works of the law are powerless to justify, or to gain a person right standing with God. (See Romans 3:20.)

The contextual emphasis here is that people of faith enjoy life, and specifically eternal life, in contrast to those who “draw back to perdition” (verse 39). To draw back here means to turn away from Jesus Christ and the new covenant established in His blood. God takes no pleasure in those who reject Jesus.

Verse 39. Here, as in 6:9, we find a breath of fresh air. Though his warnings are uncompromising and stern, the writer of Hebrews was confident that the believers who comprised his original audience would not, in the final analysis, abandon Jesus Christ. Still including himself with his readers (see verses 20, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 30), he declared, “We are not of those who draw back” (NKJV).

He clearly asserted, however, that those who do draw back would face “perdition,” which is translated from a Greek word (*apoleian*) that means destruction. Since those who commit this “willful sin” (verse 26) will experience the vengeance of God (verse 30) and fail to endure to the point of receiving “the promise” (verse 36), and since they are obviously not included in the “just” who enjoy “life” (verse 38), it seems evident that perdition describes the loss of their salvation and their ultimate spiritual destruction. As a further indication of this meaning, this verse contrasts drawing back to perdition with believing “to the saving of the soul” (NKJV). It is one thing to start out right (verse 32); it is another to endure to the point of receiving the promise of eternal life experientially and not just potentially. Those who ultimately receive the promise will be those whose faith endures to the Lord’s return.

II.

Faith Is Our Only Approach to God (11:1-40)

Faith Described (11:1)

(1) Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

Before plunging into a consideration of the nature of faith or specific examples of faith at work in the lives of “the elders” (verse 2), we must view this passage in the larger context of the entire letter.

The first-century Jewish Christians wrestled with the temptation to abandon a life focused on the unseen world in favor of a life focused on what was seen. Specifically, they were tempted to turn away from faith in Christ, who was no longer visibly and bodily present on earth, to return to the very visible sensory rituals of the law that emanated from the Temple in Jerusalem.

We should understand this section primarily as a call to refocus. While the law of Moses was fixed on visible and tangible things like the tables of stone and the Tabernacle (later the Temple) and its furnishings, the new covenant directs its gaze to things the natural eye cannot see. The central focus of the new covenant is the Messiah, who is present with us by means of His invisible Spirit. It also focuses on the new heart given to believers by the Holy Spirit rather than on external conformity to the Mosaic code (Jeremiah 31:33).

The elders from Abel to the close of the Hebrew Scriptures “obtained a good testimony” (verse 2), but the law itself was “not of faith” (Galatians 3:12). It offered specific temporal rewards to those who did specific things. As we shall discover in this section of Hebrews, this description of the law does not mean that no one under the law had faith, which by definition means to believe in the unseen. That is precisely the point. It would have been senseless for first-century Jewish believers to abandon faith in Jesus Christ to return to an inferior covenant that depended upon the visible and tangible for its survival; even the Jewish elders who lived during the law’s years of relevance were not justified by the works of the law but by faith in God. That included Moses, Joshua, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel and many unnamed people. And in a brilliant stroke that must have been breathtaking to the first readers of this letter, this list of Hebrew heroes is sharply punctured by the inclusion of a Gentile, female harlot—Rahab—whose faith gained her equal standing even with the most revered of the Jewish champions.

We should view Hebrews 11 as illustrating the point of 10:38: “The just shall live by faith.” To live a life that focuses on the visible world is to “draw back to perdition” (10:39). There is no place for compromise between a life of faith and a life that demands tangible

assurance of God's presence in the form of predictable patterns (the Mosaic rituals) and outcomes. (See verses 35-38.) Faith demands no sensory reinforcement or cosmic concurrence with human ambition. It believes what it cannot see and trusts when it cannot understand.

Verse 1. As opposed to the tangible rituals of the law of Moses, faith is both substance and evidence. The Temple was standing in Jerusalem at the time of this letter, gleaming like a snow-covered mountain in the early morning sun. The sights and sounds of a rich tradition spanning many centuries emanated from its sacred courts. Everything about the Temple struck the human senses with powerful impact.

But the new covenant calls people, even Jews, away from fascination with ceremony and splendor to the simple life of faith in God. This faith itself is the "substance," not of things possessed, but of things "hoped for." In addition, faith is "evidence," not of things seen, but of invisible things. By contrast, a person could participate in the rituals of the law without faith. When the focus is on what someone already possesses and sees, faith can be absent. (See Romans 8:24-25.)

Some have misunderstood this verse to mean that faith is a force by which we can bring into existence things that do not presently exist but for which we hope. In addition, some think if we have faith, it is proof that the unseen things for which we are believing will one day materialize. An examination of chapter 11 itself suffices to dispel these notions. Nowhere in the chapter does faith fit this description. Indeed, though all the people in this section had genuine faith, not one of them received faith's ultimate reward (verse 39). Instead, the faith described here is the human response to divine initiative. God speaks, whether with a specific or a general command, and men and women respond with obedient actions springing from their unquestioning trust in Him. That is faith.

Instead of teaching that by faith we can bring into existence things which do not exist, this passage teaches that there is an entire unseen realm not perceivable to the senses, but it is no less real because it is invisible. The same word translated "substance" here (Greek, *hypostasis*) is translated "confidence" in 3:14, which is the subjective, rather than objective, meaning of the word. *Hypostasis* literally means "that which stands under," in the sense of the foundation or essence of something.¹³⁰ Here it means that faith enables us to cling to the essentials of the new covenant, which, though not yet realized, already exist and will one day be clearly seen. The word translated "evidence" (Greek, *elegcho*) means "conviction," in the sense of something proven without doubt to be true.

The meaning of this verse is not mysterious. If we believe there is a God, though we have never seen Him, then we have faith. If we believe there is an unseen realm that includes angels, heaven, and hell, then we have faith. Faith does not demand sensory evidence; it is settled confidence in the unseen God.

Faith Results in Justification (11:2)

(2) *For by it the elders obtained a good report.*

Verse 2. The brief and clear statement of this verse should have convinced the original readers of this letter not to defect from the new covenant to return to the rituals of the law. If the “elders” (Greek, *presbyteroi*) “obtained a good testimony” (NKJV) through faith, their descendants should be convinced of faith’s priority over ritual. The “elders” are those, both named and nameless, whom this chapter holds up for their examples of faith. On the basis of their faith, not on the basis of the law, they were justified (or gained right standing with God). (Compare verse 8 with Romans 4:3.)

Faith Grasps the Testimony of Scripture (11:3)

(3) *Through faith we understand that the worlds were framed by the word of God, so that things which are seen were not made of things which do appear.*

Verse 3. The universe itself is visible, tangible, and perceptible to our sensory faculties. Thus, it requires no faith to accept the visible, created realm. It is there. We can touch it and see it. Only those who are deceived would deny its reality. But faith is necessary to understand that the visible realm was created by the word of God. Those who believe that “the things which are seen were not made of things which are visible” (NKJV) are people of faith. It is the absence of faith that causes some to deny the Creation accounts of Scripture. Where there is no faith, only what is tangible can be accepted as real.

This problem was precisely the one faced by the original recipients of the letter. The Temple was real; people could see it. The rituals were real; people could physically participate in them. The sights and sounds of the Temple Mount were real; people could perceive them by the senses. Their struggle was to accept as real what they could not see and what they had not yet realized. (See II Corinthians 4:18.)

This Creation account is in perfect agreement with all else Scripture has to say on this subject. The universe came into existence when God created the heaven and the earth (Genesis 1:1). The work of creation involved God speaking things into existence (Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 20, 24). Thus, all things were made by the word of God. (See John 1:1-3; Psalm 29:3-8; 33:6, 9.)

Although “word” here is translated from the Greek *rhema*, while John 1:1 uses *logos*, there is no need to see a radical distinction between the two. Although *logos* has to do with both a thought and the thought expressed, while *rhema* focuses more on the

utterance itself, there is a substantial overlap of meaning between the two words. The influence of context on words is telling. Genesis describes God as speaking at Creation. Psalm 29 identifies the voice of the Lord with the Lord Himself. Psalm 33:6, 9 equates the word of the Lord and the vocalization of that word. Although John 1:1 personifies the Word, it does not suggest a plurality of persons in the Godhead any more than speaking of the life of God makes it a distinct person (I John 1:1-2).

Although this verse offers valuable insight on how the universe came into existence, that is not the primary reason the author wrote these words. His primary purpose was to point out that if his readers could believe that creation occurred by God's word—even though they had no first-hand, tangible evidence of how it occurred—they should also be able to retain their faith in the new covenant realities that the human senses could not yet perceive.

Examples of Faith (11:4-40)

1. Abel (11:4)

(4) *By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh.*

Verse 4. Working his way chronologically through the Hebrew Scriptures, the writer of Hebrews held up many examples of faith. These examples include not only those from the Mosaic era but also from before the law. They include not only men but women. And they include not only Jews but Gentiles. After reading this chapter, no one should doubt that faith is the only means of access to God.

The first example is Abel. (See Genesis 4.) Abel's sacrifice of the firstborn of his flock and of their fat was acceptable to God because he offered in faith. That is, Abel's offering was a result of his trust in God. Many conclude that God accepted Abel's sacrifice because it was a blood offering and rejected Cain's offering because it was not a blood offering, but Scripture does not clearly make this statement. This view is quite recent in the history of Bible interpretation.¹³¹ The Genesis account does not declare that these sacrifices were sin offerings. Indeed, the offerings seemed appropriate to the profession of each. Abel was a shepherd; he brought of the firstlings of his flock. Cain was a farmer; he brought an offering of the fruit of the ground.

In any case, it seems clear that God accepted Abel's offering because of his faith and did not accept Cain's offering because of his lack of faith. Indeed, before God respected Abel's offering, He respected Abel (Genesis 4:4). (See Matthew 23:35.) Before He rejected Cain's offering, He rejected Cain (Genesis 4:5). The reason God rejected Cain is that he did not

“do well” (Genesis 4:7). (See I John 3:12.) If he had done well, God would have accepted him and, by implication, his offering also.

In this pre-Mosaic period, sacrifice was “acceptable to God not for its material content, but in so far as it [was] the outward expression of a devoted and obedient heart.”¹³² Cain’s problem was sin (Genesis 4:7). The word translated “coucheth” by the KJV in Genesis 4:7 is cognate with the Akkadian name of a demon. Thus it pictures sin as an evil power “lying in wait to pounce upon its prey, but it is powerless against a man of righteous life.”¹³³ Proverbs 15:8 sums up the situation well: “The sacrifice of the wicked is an abomination to the LORD, but the prayer of the upright is His delight” (NKJV). Regardless of the content of the sacrifice, it is an abomination to God if the person offering the sacrifice is wicked. That was Cain’s fundamental problem.

The greatest difference between Cain and Abel is that Cain did not trust God while Abel did. Cain was very wrong to refuse to put his trust in God. Even though he blatantly insisted on coming to God on his own terms – which terms were not acceptable to God – God still loved him, appealed to him to do the right thing (Genesis 4:6-7), and assured that Cain would not suffer the violent fate he brought on his brother (Genesis 4:15).

Throughout this chapter we see that faith always results in some action or behavioral change. Faith cannot exist in a vacuum. It is not mere mental assent. Abel’s faith resulted in the offering of a sacrifice to God.

We also see that faith is a person’s response to God’s initiative. It never begins with someone seeking divine endorsement. The idea to offer a sacrifice to God did not originate with Abel. He simply worshiped in a way God had already declared appropriate.

As with Abraham, who was counted righteous prior to circumcision on the basis of his faith alone (Romans 4:9-12), Abel was righteous (right with God) prior to his offering. In other words, he had genuine faith before he made his sacrifice. Indeed, it was his faith that prompted him to sacrifice. But this public demonstration of his faith by obedience gave God an opportunity to witness to Abel’s righteousness. God did this by “testifying of his gifts” (NKJV). This testimony occurred when “the Lord respected Abel and his offering” (Genesis 4:4, NKJV).

Though Abel is dead, murdered by his rebellious brother, he “still speaks” by means of his primitive and powerful example. This point was particularly relevant to the original readers of this book. In a way, Abel was speaking to them, urging them not to abandon the life of faith for the life of ritual. In truth, Cain was the first ritualist. He was the first to seek access to God and approval from God on the basis of ritual apart from faith. Since ritual can be an expression of genuine faith only if God approves the ritual, the first-century Jewish Christians who contemplated a return to the rituals of the law would be guilty of the sin of Cain if they did so, for God no longer approved the rituals of the law as an expression of faith. They would thus be seeking God on their own terms. This self-willed approach may be the “way of Cain” in Jude 11.

Some have suggested that the phrase “he being dead still speaks” refers to the way in which Abel’s blood still cries out for vengeance (Genesis 4:10). Without question, that is the point in 12:24. (See also Revelation 6:9-11.) But this verse does not mention the blood of Abel (it simply says that he speaks), and in the context the subject is not vengeance upon sin but the necessity of faith in approaching God. These points lead us to the interpretation just given.

2. Enoch (11:5-6)

(5) By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. (6) But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.

Verse 5. Enoch’s translation demonstrates the dramatic power of faith. Enoch expressed faith in his simple walk with God (Genesis 5:22-24). Scripture tells us little about Enoch, but we do know that he was a prophet of God (Jude 14-15.) Enoch pleased God “before he was taken” (NKJV). Here again we see the nature of biblical faith. To be “taken away so that he did not see death” (NKJV) was not a goal Enoch had set. He was not believing for God to translate him, so that God was obligated to respond by doing the thing—however unusual—for which Enoch had faith. It was because he had faith and thus pleased God that God took Enoch.

The statement that “Enoch walked with God” (Genesis 5:24) gives us insight into the Hebrew view of the spiritual life. With our Western mindset, we interpret this statement to mean that Enoch lived for God, and of course he did. But in the Jews’ view of life they literally, physically walked with God. In other words, instead of “walking with God” being something to do at special times or in special ways, it was simply one’s conscious awareness of living all of life—whether worship, work, or play—in God’s presence. There was no dichotomy between the sacred and the secular. All of life was sacred to God. Even the Hebrew word translated “work” (*abad*) includes the idea of worship. For those with faith in God, to plow a field was to worship God. People were to do everything for His glory and as unto Him.

Prior to the sin of Adam and Eve, God walked with them in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8). To walk with God was to be in fellowship with Him. Since Enoch was a man of faith, he walked with God. By definition, to trust God is to walk with Him. We do not know why God translated Enoch and not others; God has not chosen to reveal that to us. But we do know that it was on the basis of his faith that Enoch received this blessing, not on the basis of ritualism.

Verse 6. It is impossible to please God apart from faith. This is the essential message the writer of Hebrews wished to communicate to his original readers. A life merely of adherence to the law of Moses is not a life of faith (Galatians 3:12). If they turned away

from faith in Christ (6:6; 10:29) they would displease God, no matter how fervent or sincere their participation in Jewish ritualism. (See Galatians 1:14-16.)

To have faith is to come to God. There is no other approach to God than faith. Cain attempted to approach God through ritual alone (verse 4), but God rejected his attempt. The word translated “comes” (Greek, *prosechomenon*) has to do with worship. It conveys the idea of coming near to God in worship. Hebrews 10:1 uses the same word in the phrase “make those who approach perfect” (NKJV), where the approach to God is under the sacrificial system of the law of Moses. The original readers of this book would have understood this connection. Under the law, people of faith approached God by the sacrificial system; under the new covenant, they approach God by faith without the sacrificial system, which has been fulfilled in Christ.

In this verse we find a practical definition of faith. Biblical faith has two components: (1) belief that God is, and (2) belief that He rewards those who seek Him diligently.

To believe that “He is” is to believe in the existence of the unseen God (11:1), with, of course, the understanding that it is the true God of Scripture in whom we believe. It is not enough to believe “a god” exists. The validity of faith depends completely on the object of faith. There is no power in faith itself; there is value to faith only if its object is the all-knowing, all-powerful God of the Bible who has revealed Himself in Jesus Christ. (See John 6:19; 14:1, 6.) Faith, or trust, is only as good as the one in whom we place the trust.

The phrase translated “He is a rewarder” (Greek, *misthapodotes ginetai*) can be more precisely translated “He becomes a rewarder.” *Ginetai* is the present middle indicative of *ginomai*, which means “to become.” The suggestion is that God responds to those who have faith in Him by rewarding their diligence in seeking after Him. In this context, to “seek Him” is to come to Him in worship.

The original readers of this letter surely had no problem believing in the existence of God, although some of them may have doubted the fullness of Christ’s deity. (See 10:29.) If some of them struggled with Christ’s preeminence and deity, that would explain why the writer consumed a substantial portion of his letter declaring the supremacy of Jesus Christ over all else, including the prophets of old, the angels, Moses, Joshua, and Aaron. It would explain the description of Jesus as the brightness of God’s glory and the express image of God’s person (1:3), as the One the angels worshiped (1:6), as the One declared to be God (1:8), and as Creator (1:10).

But regardless of their view of Jesus, it seems clear that the original readers of this letter struggled with the issue of the proper approach to God. This verse challenges their desire to defect from the new covenant and to go back to the old covenant way of worshiping God. They can no longer approach Him through the rituals of the law; they must abandon the shadow (10:1) and come to God on the basis of faith alone. And this faith must include the conviction that He will respond by rewarding their faith unaided by obsolete ritual.

3. Noah (11:7)

(7) *By faith Noah, being warned of God of things not seen as yet, moved with fear, prepared an ark to the saving of his house; by the which he condemned the world, and became heir of the righteousness which is by faith.*

Verse 7. Noah is an example of how faith is convinced of the reality of “things not seen” (verse 1), for he responded to the divine warning of “things not yet seen” (NKJV). The idea to build an ark was not Noah’s. He did not conceive a plan to build a boat and then trust God for a flood. The possibility of a world-wide flood would never have occurred to Noah. Instead, God warned Noah of the coming judgment and instructed him to build an ark (Genesis 6:13-22; 7:1-4). Noah’s faith was demonstrated in his obedient response (Genesis 7:5).

The flood was not a divine response to Noah’s faith; Noah’s faith was a human response to a divine command. Noah responded with “godly fear” (NKJV); his faith was characterized by reverence for God.

The deliverance of Noah and his family from the destruction of the flood is an early example of salvation by grace through faith (Ephesians 2:8-9). Noah found grace in the eyes of the Lord (Genesis 6:8). The Hebrew word translated “grace” (chen) means “favor.” When God graciously extended the offer of deliverance to Noah, Noah responded in faith. Throughout the history of the human race, salvation has been received in this manner. When people respond in faith to the grace of God, salvation is the result.

The account of Noah indicates that salvation by grace through faith is not salvation by mental assent. That salvation is by grace does not preclude some requirement on the part of humans, and that salvation comes through faith does not preclude a specific response of faith. It was absolutely essential that Noah build a boat. This requirement does not mean that Noah was saved by works, however. Every moment of labor on the ark was an expression of his faith. Noah’s confidence was in God, not in the boat. If Noah had not found grace in the eyes of God, he could theoretically have built a boat anyway, but God is able to sink any boat built by humans. There would have been no salvation in a boat built by human initiative; that would be salvation by works. But because Noah had faith, he obeyed God’s command, and as a result of his obedient faith he received salvation according to the divine plan.

By his response of faith to God’s command, Noah “condemned” or judged the world of his day. He proved that someone of his time and culture could have faith in God in the face of widespread corruption. If there had not been a Noah, it would seem difficult for God to have a just basis to judge anyone else. If not even one person on the face of the earth had been able to trust God during that time, it would seem that God was expecting the impossible. (See Romans 3:3-6.) Noah’s faith, standing against the pervasive unbelief of his day, proved it was possible to trust God in the most difficult of times. Thus, no one could fault God for judging those who refused to believe on Him.

Noah “became heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (NKJV). In other words, he was justified by faith. (See Genesis 7:1.) He was not justified by building the boat. Noah had faith prior to building the ark, and because of his faith he found grace in the eyes of the Lord. Thus he had right standing with God before God commanded him to build the ark. Because he was right with God, God shared with Noah His plan to destroy the human population while saving Noah’s family.

4. Abraham and Sarah (11:8-19)

(8) By faith Abraham, when he was called to go out into a place which he should after receive for an inheritance, obeyed; and he went out, not knowing whither he went. (9) By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: (10) for he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God. (11) Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. (12) Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable. (13) These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth. (14) For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. (15) And truly, if they had been mindful of that country from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. (16) But now they desire a better country, that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city. (17) By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, (18) of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: (19) accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure.

Verse 8. The idea to leave Ur and to journey to Canaan did not originate with Abraham. God said to him, “Get out of your country, from your family, and from your father’s house, to a land that I will show you” (Genesis 12:1, NKJV). By faith Abraham obeyed, even though he did not know the location of the land God would give him. Thus, he too is an illustration of faith’s confidence in things “hoped for” and conviction of things “not seen” (verse 1).

With Abraham, the writer of Hebrews held up the example that would be most meaningful to his original readers. The Bible often offers Abraham as an example of faith. (See Acts 7:2-8; Romans 4:3; Galatians 3:6; James 2:23.) If Abraham could leave his home at the command of God, even without knowing his ultimate destination, surely the first-century Jewish Christians—physical and spiritual descendants of Abraham—could maintain their faith in Jesus even though they as yet had no tangible evidence of the ultimate new covenant promises. We must believe God’s promises until their performance.

Initially, Abraham did not leave his home as a result of the assurance that he would inherit the land. The promise of inheritance came later (Genesis 12:7; 13:14-15; 15:18- 21; 17:8). He obeyed God's voice purely out of his trust in God, not because of any incentive.

Like Noah, Abraham illustrates that faith is not mere mental assent. Abraham's faith resulted in his obedience. There can be no faith where there is unwillingness to obey the commands of God, whether those commands are to build a boat, leave one's home, or do anything else God directs. The commands of God may be general to all who live during a specific age, or they may be personal to an individual.

Verse 9. We see Abraham's faith not only in his initial response to God but also in his nomadic life "in the land of promise as in a foreign country" (NKJV). Even though he dwelt in the land that his heirs would eventually possess, neither he nor Isaac nor Jacob ever possessed it fully. (See Genesis 26:3; 28:13-15.) They lived in tents, moving from one place to another. (See Genesis 13:3, 18.) Abraham's trust in God was so complete that he did not demand the fulfillment of the promise in his lifetime. He was content with the confidence of hope.

The lesson for the original readers of Hebrews was that genuine faith does more than start the believer on his journey; it sustains him to the end. Just as Abraham had left Ur by faith, so the early Jewish Christians had begun their Christian life by placing their faith in the Messiah.

Now, just as Abraham had continued by faith to dwell in the promised land as a stranger, so they should sustain their profession of faith in Christ even though they suffered reproaches and tribulations (10:33). That Abraham was steadfast in his faith even though he never saw the fulfillment of all the promises God made to him should have encouraged Abraham's descendants, the Jewish people who believed on Jesus, to be unwavering in their faith, even though all their hopes had not yet been fulfilled.

Verse 10. Abraham's faith enabled him to see even beyond the promise of an earthly, temporal inheritance. Though it was still in the realm of unseen hope, he "waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God" (NKJV). This phrase is not merely a description of the earthly Promised Land. "Many Jewish texts in Paul's day reinforced the Old Testament hope of a new Jerusalem, often speaking of a heavenly Jerusalem that would come down to earth. These texts also sometimes spoke of Jerusalem . . . as 'our mother.'" ¹³⁴ Such references occur, for example, in the Dead Sea Scrolls. ¹³⁵ The city in view here is a "heavenly" city (verse 16; 12:22; 13:14).

The "builder" (Greek, *technites*) of this city is God. *Technites* means a craftsman or designer. ¹³⁶ God has designed the city. He is also the "maker" (Greek, *demiourgos*), the One who does the actual work. ¹³⁷ This city owes nothing to human effort. It "has foundations." In the Greek text, the word "foundations" (*themelious*) is preceded by the definite article, meaning "the foundations." In other words, this city is the only one that has the foundations, or the eternal foundations. ¹³⁸

Hebrews does not suggest that Abraham had a fully developed understanding of this city to come. Indeed, the prophets of old did not understand much about the eternal future. (See I Peter 1:10-12; Ephesians 3:5.) But, since Abraham was a man of faith, he put himself in the company of all those who await faith's final fulfillment: the joys of the eternal state in the presence of God. No matter how vague Abraham's understanding of the heavenly city, it was to be his ultimate reward as a man of faith. All believers will one day enjoy the things "hoped for" and "not seen" (verse 1), not based on the level of revelation they have received (Abraham's revelation was certainly less than that of New Testament believers), but based on their faith.

Since Abraham patiently trusted God while waiting for unseen things, his descendants – the first-century Jewish believers – should be able to do the same. Though Abraham died without receiving the promises (verse 13), he never wavered in his faith (Romans 4:20). His example should encourage all believers to persevere in their faith in Christ even while they wait for faith's fulfillment.

Verse 11. Hebrews now moves from Abraham as an example of faith to his wife, Sarah, who was also an example. Physically, Sarah was incapable of bearing a child. (See Romans 4:19; Genesis 18:11-14). But because she trusted God that He would faithfully perform what He promised, she "received strength to conceive seed" (NKJV). Though we may not find a clear witness in the Old Testament to Sarah's faith, we may be sure that the record here is accurate. A great deal of information about the era of the patriarchs that was not written in the Hebrew Scriptures was transmitted from one generation to another by oral tradition. In addition, the writer of Hebrews was inspired by the Holy Spirit in this account.

Again we see that faith is a human response to divine initiative. The idea of having a child in old age was not Abraham's or Sarah's. Sarah was barren before God called Abraham out of Ur (Genesis 11:30). There is no record that Abraham or Sarah had asked God for a child. Though they may well have done so, there is certainly no indication that they had asked God for a child but wished to delay conception until they were very old and physically incapable of reproducing. As far as the biblical record is concerned, the first promise of God that Abraham and Sarah would have children appears in Genesis 12:2: "I will make you a great nation" (NKJV). The promise became more specific in Genesis 12:7: "Then the LORD appeared to Abram and said, 'To your descendants I will give this land'" (NKJV). Abraham was seventy-five years old at this time (Genesis 12:4). Since Sarah was ten years younger than Abraham, she was sixty-five (Genesis 17:17). For that time, they were apparently still within child-bearing age, for the average life-span of people in that day was much longer than today. Abraham was 175 years old when he died; Sarah was 127. So the promise that Abraham would have children probably did not seem miraculous when God first gave it.

In Genesis 13:15, the Lord reaffirmed to Abraham His promise to give him children. After ten years had passed and Abraham and Sarah were still childless, the Lord came to him in a vision and said, "Do not be afraid, Abram. I am your shield, your exceedingly great

reward" (Genesis 15:1, NKJV). Abram responded, "Lord GOD, what will You give me, seeing I go childless, and the heir of my house is Eliezer of Damascus? . . . Look, You have given me no offspring; indeed one born in my house is my heir!" (Genesis 15:2-3, NKJV).

According to archaeological evidence, it was common at that time for wealthy couples who had no children to adopt a servant as their heir. God had promised to give the land to Abram and his descendants, but since he had no natural children and as far as he could see he would have none, Abram suggested that God might fulfill the promise by having him adopt Eliezer. At this time God made His promise more specific: "This one shall not be your heir, but one who will come from your own body shall be your heir" (Genesis 15:4, NKJV). Because Abraham believed this promise, right standing with God was accounted to him (Genesis 15:6).

Even after this promise, Abraham cooperated with Sarah in a scheme to father a child by Hagar (Genesis 16:1-4, 15-16). Abram was eighty-six years old at this time. At this point, then, it was Sarah who was unable to reproduce, not Abram. This error on Abram's part became the source of tension between the descendants of Ishmael and Isaac to this day.

Thirteen years later, when Abram was ninety-nine years old (Genesis 17:1), the Lord reiterated His covenant with Abram and made the promise of children even more specific: "As for Sarai your wife, you shall not call her name Sarai, but Sarah shall be her name. And I will bless her and also give you a son by her; then I will bless her, and she shall be a mother of nations; kings of peoples shall be from her" (Genesis 17:15-16, NKJV). God had already changed the name of Abram, which means "exalted father," to Abraham, which means "father of a great number" (Genesis 17:5). Sarah's name change seems less significant: Sarai means "my princess," while Sarah means "princess." The change to Sarah may indicate that she would no longer be a princess only in the eyes of Abraham, but because of her offspring, in the eyes of others as well.

Even at this point, however, Abraham responded by falling on his face, laughing, and asking in his heart, "Shall a child be born to a man who is one hundred years old? And shall Sarah, who is ninety years old, bear a child?" (Genesis 17:17, NKJV). Instead, Abraham again offered God an alternative: "Oh, that Ishmael might live before You!" (Genesis 17:18, NKJV). As with Eliezer, Abraham offered God a way to fulfill the promise of descendants without a miracle. But God responded, "No, Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac; I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant, and with his descendants after him" (Genesis 17:19, NKJV). Isaac means "he laughs." God fulfilled His promise by supernatural intervention in spite of Abraham's laughter.

Then, when both Abraham and Sarah were "well advanced in age" and Sarah past the age of childbearing, the Lord appeared again to Abraham and said, "I will certainly return to you according to the time of life, and behold, Sarah your wife shall have a son" (Genesis 18:10-11, NKJV). Sarah was listening inside the tent, and as Abraham had done earlier, she "laughed within herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, shall I have pleasure, my

lord being old also?" (Genesis 18:12, NKJV). But, as God had said, Sarah did conceive and bear Abraham a son (Genesis 21:1-8).

Throughout this account, it is difficult to see the response of Abraham and Sarah as so strong in faith that they obligated God to fulfill their wish. Instead, from beginning to end, the plan and promise came from God, and He continued to lead Abraham and Sarah until they could fully believe, comprehend, and receive His promise. How does this account fit with the description of Romans 4:18-20 that Abraham was not "weak in faith" and "did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief"? Abraham had no doubt that God would keep His promise to give him many descendants. But Abraham did not understand how it would happen, for he thought perhaps it would be through his servant Eliezer or, later, through his son with Hagar, Ishmael.

When we consider the entire account, it is clear that the faith of Sarah and Abraham to have a child in old age did not originate with them. Abraham attempted to convince God to fulfill His promise another way, and both of them expressed skepticism that the promised son would be born to them when they were past child-bearing age. Thus, their faith was a trusting response to God's initiative. Although Sarah had at first laughed, she did, in the final analysis, believe that God was able to do what He promised to do.

As with all the other "heroes of faith" in this chapter, Sarah demonstrated that faith is the confidence of things hoped for and the conviction of things not yet seen. (See verse 1). She believed God for the son she could not see, simply because God had promised the son to her.

Verse 12. Though Abraham was past the natural age of reproduction (Romans 4:19), God miraculously enabled him to father a son. This divine enablement was not temporary. After Sarah's death, Abraham took Keturah for a wife and fathered several children by her (Genesis 23:1; 25:1). Indeed, God fulfilled the promise that Abraham's descendants would be as innumerable as the stars of the sky and the sand by the seashore. (See Genesis 15:5; 22:17.) This statement does not mean that Abraham's descendants will literally equal in number the stars or the sand, but that, like the stars and the grains of sand, they will be so numerous that it will be impossible to count them precisely.

Early dispensationalists tended to say the sand represented Abraham's earthly descendants, the Jews, and that the stars represented his heavenly descendants, the church. Though there is a clear distinction between Israel and the church (I Corinthians 10:32), it is doubtful that the stars and the sand bear this significance. First, any Jewish person can enter the church on the same basis as any Gentile (Romans 11:17-24). Second, in the church ethnic distinctions are insignificant (Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11). Third, the church is a mystery not evident in the Hebrew Scriptures (Ephesians 3:1-6). The stars and sand simply illustrate the multitude of Abraham's descendants.

Verses 13-14. All of those mentioned so far in this chapter with, of course, the exception of Enoch, died in faith. At their death, they were still trusting God to keep His promises.

The only promise mentioned contextually that was not fulfilled before their death is the promise that Abraham and his descendants would inherit the land from the Euphrates to the Nile (Genesis 15:18). Hebrews may refer to promises in the plural to point out that Abraham was not the only one to see death before realizing the fulfillment of all of God's promises to him. This is a common experience for people of faith. Just because some promises are not fulfilled in this lifetime, that is no indication they will not be fulfilled. There is a world to come.

Though people of faith died without receiving all the promises of God, they saw them "afar off." This phrase underscores the nature of faith. Faith is confident of things hoped for but not yet received, and it is convinced of things not seen. (See verse 1.) These people of faith embraced the unfulfilled promises with the confession that they were "strangers and pilgrims on the earth" (NKJV). This confession reveals their understanding of the temporal nature of this present earth and the certainty of life beyond. Their faith prevented them from viewing life on this earth as final. They were not discouraged if they did not see the fulfillment of every divine promise during their earthly life. Abraham, who waited for the only city with eternal foundations, was an example of this faith. (See verse 10.)

Those who confess the temporary nature of their stay on this earth testify plainly that they are seeking something beyond this world. People of faith are identified by their lack of attachment to this present world and their eager anticipation of the next; people of unbelief are identified by their attachment to this world and their view that this present life is all there is.

Verse 15. If Abraham had focused his attention on Ur, the country he left, opportunity would have presented itself for him to return to it. Likewise, if the original readers of this letter took their focus off Jesus and the new covenant and looked with longing back to their former life under the old covenant, the opportunity would present itself for them to turn away from Jesus to embrace the law all over again. There is also warning here even to those who have never been under the law of Moses: If, after coming to Jesus, we focus longingly on the life we lived before coming to Him, we will find opportunity to turn away from our Lord. But to go back to life before the promise is to forfeit the promise through disobedience. The promise of God will come only to those who press on in its pursuit.

Verse 16. The persistent faith of the patriarchs is evidence that they were ultimately pursuing, not just an earthly inheritance, but a heavenly one. That is precisely what God has prepared. (See verse 10.) Since God has made preparation to reward their faith, He is not ashamed to be identified as the God of people of faith. Genuine faith will never go unfulfilled. God would be ashamed if He failed or refused to reward those who seek him diligently (verse 6).

Verses 17-19. Nowhere is the nature of faith better demonstrated than in the offering of Isaac by Abraham. Verse 17 declares, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up

Isaac" (NKJV). The idea to offer Isaac as a burnt offering certainly did not originate with Abraham. (See Genesis 22:1-2.) God called Abraham to make this sacrifice, and Abraham's response demonstrated the depth of his unquestioning trust in God. Someone said, "Faith begins when God speaks." Abraham's faith was the confidence of things hoped for and the conviction of things not seen, for he concluded that if he offered Isaac, God was able to raise him up (verse 19).

God's call to offer Isaac was a test of Abraham's faith. It was not a temptation to sin, for God does not tempt anyone to sin (James 1:13-14). The use of the Greek *peirazo* both in James 1:13 and here illustrates that words are defined by their contexts. The context in James defines *peirazo* as temptation to sin that arises from one's own lust, while the context here defines it as a test from God, since Genesis 22:1, to which this verse refers, specifically reports that God "tested" Abraham (NKJV).

When people consider the offering of Isaac, they commonly focus on the inner turmoil of Abraham as he set out to obey God. But not only is the Old Testament account silent about any such turmoil, that is not the focus here. The point here is the challenge that faced Abraham to reconcile God's promise with God's command. Abraham knew without question that Isaac was the promised son through whom God would fulfill His promise to make Abraham the father of many nations. (See Genesis 17:19, 21; 21:12; Romans 9:7.) Now God had commanded him to offer Isaac as a burnt offering. How could Isaac die and still be the son through whom God would fulfill His promises to Abraham?

Abraham's trust in God on this point was unquestioning. He knew that if he offered Isaac, God would raise him from the dead, for that was the only way God could fulfill his promises to Abraham through Isaac. Indeed, "in a figurative sense" (verse 19, NKJV), Abraham did receive Isaac back from the dead, because as far as Abraham was concerned, Isaac was offered. The word translated "offered up" in verse 17 (Greek, *prosenenochen*) is in the perfect tense, which indicates the action was completed in the past with the effects of the action continuing into the present. Abraham did not anticipate that an angel would interrupt the sacrifice of Isaac (Genesis 22:10-12). Had he not been interrupted, he would certainly have completed the sacrifice with the full assurance that God would raise Isaac from the dead.

But the actual performance of the sacrifice was not to be. The phrase in the latter part of verse 17 that "he who had received the promises offered up his only begotten son" (NKJV) makes use of the Greek *prosepheren*, translated "offered," which is in the imperfect tense. It indicates that Abraham was in the process of offering up his son, but it does not declare that the offering was finalized. Since Abraham received Isaac back from the dead "in a figure," it may be that this entire episode in the life of Abraham foreshadowed the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His resurrection from the dead. Verse 19 uses the Greek *parabole*, translated "figure," which may suggest that the events of Moriah were a parable. The word *parabole* refers to something thrown alongside something else for the sake of comparison. John 3:16 uses the Greek *monogene* ("only begotten") of Jesus, and this passage uses it of Isaac. Although Abraham had already fathered Ishmael, Isaac was

his “only begotten son” as pertaining to the promise of God. Ishmael, the son resulting from Sarah’s scheme and Abraham’s natural strength, had no part in the Abrahamic covenant.

If the offering of Isaac is a parable of the giving of the only begotten Son of God, this event may be what Jesus referred to in John 8:56: “Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad” (NKJV).¹³⁹

James 2:21 also appeals to the account of Abraham’s offering of Isaac as evidence of the genuineness of Abraham’s faith.

5. Isaac (11:20)

(20) By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau concerning things to come.

Verse 20. Isaac, the son of promise, was also a man of faith. Although Esau sold his birthright to his brother Jacob and later lost the primary blessing of their father through Jacob’s deceit (Genesis 25:27-34; 27), he was still the recipient of a blessing. Isaac blessed both Jacob and Esau, and he pronounced these blessings by faith. (See Genesis 27:24-40.) Esau’s subservient position was not due to any prejudice on the part of his father or God. He was a profane person who devalued his birthright (Hebrews 12:16).

Isaac’s blessing was by faith in that it concerned things to come, or things hoped for but not seen. (See verse 1.) These blessings did not spring from Isaac’s imagination; they were not a product of his wishful thinking. Since we know that the blessing he pronounced on Jacob was according to the will of God, in spite of the deceit of Rebekah and Jacob, it follows that the more limited blessing he pronounced upon Esau was also in accordance with God’s will.

In Isaac’s response to Esau, we see his recognition that Jacob was the rightful recipient of the blessing God intended: “I have blessed him – and indeed he shall be blessed” (Genesis 27:33, NKJV).

6. Jacob (11:21)

(21) By faith Jacob, when he was a dying, blessed both the sons of Joseph; and worshipped, leaning upon the top of his staff.

Verse 21. In Jacob’s final blessing upon the sons of Joseph, we continue to see the role of faith in the preservation of the promise God first made to Abraham, then extended to Isaac, and then to Jacob. The last words of the family patriarch before death had great significance. (See Genesis 48.) Jacob’s blessing of Ephraim and Manasseh was not mere tradition. Against Joseph’s wishes, Jacob placed his right hand on the younger Ephraim, conferring the greater blessing upon him. (See Genesis 48:13-20.) He did so by faith: the blessings he pronounced involved things hoped for but not yet seen. (See verse 1.) By definition, the faith that prompted Jacob to perform the unusual act of crossing his hands

when laying them on Joseph's sons was his trusting response to God's direction. The idea of making such a distinction between the two was not Jacob's.

The statement that Jacob "worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff" is a reference to Genesis 47:31, where Jacob "bowed himself on the head of the bed" (NKJV). As usual, the writer of Hebrews followed the Septuagint translation at this point. The question as to whether the translation should be "bed" or "staff" arises because the original Hebrew language was written without vowels. Only consonants were used; vowels were supplied orally when the Scriptures were read. In some cases, as here, by the insertion of different vowels, a word can mean more than one thing. The consonants of the Hebrew word translated "bed" are *mtth*. When the word is read *mittah*, as in the Massoretic text, it means "bed." When it is read *matteh*, as by the translators of the Septuagint, it means "staff." One could argue from the inspiration of the New Testament that the reading *matteh* is correct.

Not only did Jacob bless Ephraim and Manasseh by faith, he also worshiped by faith. The account in Genesis 47:31 follows immediately Joseph's promise to Jacob that he would carry his body out of Egypt to bury him with his fathers (Genesis 47:29-30). Although at the time this promise was an unseen hope, Jacob was confident that it would come to pass, and in that confidence he worshiped. The basis of Jacob's faith was the promise God had made first to Abraham, then to Isaac, and finally to Jacob himself concerning their inheritance of the land. (See Genesis 12:7; 13:14-17; 15:18-21; 17:8; 26:1-3; 28:13-15; 35:11-12.) Jacob's trust that God would keep His promise was so complete that he knew his descendants would not remain in Egypt, and he wished to be buried in the land God had promised to him.

7. Joseph (11:22)

(22) By faith Joseph, when he died, made mention of the departing of the children of Israel; and gave commandment concerning his bones.

Verse 22. Like his father Jacob before him, at his death Joseph asked the Israelites to carry his bones out of Egypt and bury them in the Promised Land. (See Genesis 50:24-25.) By faith Joseph made his dying declaration about the future departure of the Israelites from Egypt. On the basis of the promise God had made to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob that their descendants would inherit the land, Joseph knew that God would "surely visit" the Israelites to bring them out of Egypt to the Promised Land (Genesis 50:24-25). Thus, Joseph's faith illustrates his confidence of things hoped for and his conviction of things not seen. (See verse 1.) In accordance with his wishes and their oath to him, the Israelites did carry Joseph's bones out of Egypt in the Exodus. (See Exodus 13:19; Joshua 24:32.)

8. Moses' Parents (11:23)

(23) By faith Moses, when he was born, was hid three months of his parents, because they saw he was a proper child; and they were not afraid of the king's commandment.

Verse 23. After the death of Joseph a new king arose in Egypt who had not known him. (See Exodus 1.) He feared that the increasing numbers of Israelites would, in the case of war, assist the enemies of Egypt and vacate the land. This new pharaoh placed the Israelites under harsh forced labor and commanded the Hebrew midwives to kill any male children born to Hebrew women. Because of their fear of God, the midwives did not obey the command of the king. When the pharaoh inquired as to the reason for their failure to obey him, the midwives reported, "The Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women; for they are lively and give birth before the midwives come to them." Because of their refusal to obey the king, God blessed these midwives while the Israelites continued to multiply and increase in might. Since he had been unable to limit the growth of the Israelite population by infanticide, the pharaoh apparently broadened his command, commanding the Egyptians to cast every newborn Hebrew boy into the river.

At this point, Moses was born. His mother hid him for three months, and when she could hide him no longer, she "took an ark of bulrushes for him, daubed it with asphalt and pitch, put the child in it, and laid it in the reeds by the river's bank" (Exodus 2:1-3, NKJV).

From the account in Hebrews, we discover that the parents of Moses acted by faith in hiding the baby for three months. The focus at this point is not on the placement of Moses in an ark in the river, where the daughter of Pharaoh found and rescued him (Exodus 2:5-10). Though that act was also one of faith, Hebrews reveals that the trust Moses' parents had in God was greater than their concern for the king's command to murder all newborn Hebrew boys. The faith of Moses' parents caused them to preserve this "beautiful child" (NKJV).

This adjective seems to mean more than physical beauty. The word translated "beautiful" ("proper," KJV) is the Greek *asteion*, which appears only here and in Acts 7:20, in both cases referring to Moses. The Jewish historian Josephus declared that God gave a vision in the night to Moses' father, Amram, to tell him that Moses was no ordinary child but was destined by God to accomplish great things for His people.¹⁴⁰ The Talmud includes a similar account, speaking of a revelation to Miriam, Moses' sister, in her role as a prophetess.¹⁴¹ In his commentary on this verse, John Calvin wrote that the issue was not any external beauty Moses possessed, but a "mark, as it were, of future excellency imprinted on the child, which gave promise of something out of the ordinary."¹⁴²

We might dismiss these traditions as fancy except that this verse specifically asserts that Moses' parents hid him "because they saw he was a beautiful child," in keeping with Exodus 2:2. It would seem very strange if the only reason they hid him, sparing him from death, was because of his physical appearance. Would they have submitted to Pharaoh's command if the baby had been less beautiful? No doubt many Hebrew parents risked their lives to spare the lives of their newborn sons. That does not seem to be the point here. Certainly, if they were people who feared God, Moses' parents would not have obeyed the command to kill him under any circumstance. But in this case, their disobedience to the king's command is credited to something unusual. They saw something in the baby that motivated them, even beyond parental love, to spare his life.

Stephen's account makes clear that something was unusual about the baby: "At this time Moses was born, and was well pleasing to God; and he was brought up in his father's house for three months" (Acts 7:20, NKJV). The same word translated "beautiful" in Hebrews is translated "well pleasing" in Acts. But in Acts, Stephen declares that Moses was well pleasing to God.¹⁴³ Since, in a sense, all children are beautiful to God, this description must mean something more than that Moses was a beautiful baby. Moses was well pleasing to God even as a newborn infant during the first three months of his life. This status had nothing to do with Moses' own faith, which he would exhibit later. All of these descriptions strongly suggest that something alerted the parents that God had chosen this baby for a specific and significant work. In this case, as in Jude 14-15, it may be that Jewish tradition preserved a historical narrative not recorded in Scripture.

The example of Moses' parents indicates the appropriateness of civil disobedience when obeying the command of a human authority would mean disobeying God. (See Acts 4:19-20; 5:27-29.) Generally, Christians are to obey those in civil government (Romans 13:1-7). But when the civil government issues orders contrary to the commands of God, there is no choice but to obey God, disobey the human order, and accept whatever consequences may come. (See Daniel 3.) Scripture reveals that God will sometimes bless this course of action by protection from the wrath of the offended human authority. But it also indicates that God does not always do so (verses 35-37).

In the case of Moses' parents, there is no indication that they had special assurance from God that He would spare them from Pharaoh's wrath. But even without this assurance, they trusted God and did not fear the king. In this case, it was the will of God to spare their son and them as well from any human penalty.

9. Moses (11:24-29)

(24) *By faith Moses, when he was come to years, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter;*

(25) *choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God, than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season; (26) esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt: for he had respect unto the recompence of the reward. (27) By faith he forsook Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king: for he endured, as seeing him who is invisible. (28) Through faith he kept the passover, and the sprinkling of blood, lest he that destroyed the firstborn should touch them.*

(29) *By faith they passed through the Red sea as by dry land: which the Egyptians assaying to do were drowned.*

Verse 24. Not only were the parents of Moses people of faith; Moses was a man of faith as well. The phrase "when he became of age" ties this event to Exodus 2:11: "Now it came to pass in those days, when Moses was grown . . ." (NKJV). As he did throughout this book, the writer of Hebrews followed the Septuagint here. The words "became of age" are translated from the Greek *me gas genomenos* (literally, "having become great"), which

is identical to the Septuagint translation of Exodus 2:11. Stephen reported that Moses was forty years old at this time (Acts 7:23).

Moses' refusal to be identified as the son of Pharaoh's daughter relates to his rescue of a Hebrew man whom an Egyptian was beating. Moses killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The next day, Moses came upon two Hebrew men fighting and attempted to stop them. The response of the wrongdoer revealed to Moses that his actions of the previous day were public knowledge. When the news reached Pharaoh that Moses had killed an Egyptian, he sought to kill Moses. Moses fled to the land of Midian. (See Exodus 2:11-15; Acts 7:23-29.) According to Stephen, Moses "supposed that his brethren would have understood that God would deliver them by his hand" (Acts 7:25, NKJV). Apparently, then, even at this early point in his life, Moses had an awareness of his destiny to deliver the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. Because he embraced this destiny, he had to reject his identity as Pharaoh's grandson.

This act on Moses' part illustrates his faith in God. Even though he was aware of his destiny as Israel's deliverer, this hope was not yet realized. Like all people of faith, however, Moses was persuaded of things hoped for and convinced of things not seen. (See verse 1.) Although his attempt to deliver one of his brethren was premature, he trusted that God would one day use him to set his people free.

Verse 25. Moses' choice to identify with his own people rather than with the Egyptians caused him to stand with the Hebrews in their affliction instead of enjoying "the passing pleasures of sin" (NKJV), which were his as a member of the royal household. There was a direct application to the original readers of this book who faced the temptation of apostasy. If the first-century Jewish Christians defected from their allegiance to Jesus Christ and the new covenant to return to the Temple rituals and the law of Moses, they would be like Moses if he had rejected the will of God for his life to cling to his previous life of privilege and prestige. The affliction they now experienced (10:32-33) contrasted starkly to their previous place of privilege in the Jewish community as did Moses' affliction with his prior exaltation. They too, like Moses, needed to be willing to "suffer affliction with the people of God" rather "than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin." To reject Jesus as the Messiah (10:29) would be a sin even more awful than if Moses had rejected his role as the deliverer of his people.

Verse 26. Here is a fascinating example of the inspired application of an Old Testament event to a New Testament situation. Hebrews has Moses "esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt" (NKJV). It may at first glance seem strange that the affliction Moses willingly embraced could be called "the reproach of Christ." He lived, of course, long before the Messianic era; indeed, he made his choice prior to the writing of any Scripture containing Messianic prophecies. The word "Christ," transliterated from the Greek Christos, is the Greek equivalent to the Hebrew Messiah; both words mean "anointed one." They refer specifically to Jesus the Messiah, the One anointed to deliver His people from their sins, who was not only a human being but also "God with us" (Matthew 1:21-23). Since the Incarnation was far in the future, how could

Moses have had any awareness of the “reproach of Christ”? Even if he had some knowledge of a coming Messiah from revelation he personally received from God or from oral tradition harking back perhaps as far as the events of Genesis 3:15, how did he connect the events surrounding Israel’s captivity in Egypt with this promise?

At this point, we must remember that revelation need not be complete for someone to believe it, nor must faith be aware of all the details and timing of God’s plan in order to be real. The Israelites cried out to God for deliverance from the oppressive treatment they suffered at the hands of the Egyptians (Exodus 3:7-9; Acts 7:34-35). However near-sighted or limited their understanding, their cry for deliverance was a cry for a Messiah, one anointed by God to free them from bondage.

Israel’s deliverer in the most immediate sense was Moses (Acts 7:34-35; I Corinthians 10:1-2). In this limited sense, Moses was their “Messiah.” Perhaps the passage means that he esteemed the reproach of being Israel’s deliverer more valuable than Egypt’s treasures. As Israel’s deliverer, Moses subjected himself to the rejection and ridicule of both Pharaoh and his own people. The NEB says Moses esteemed “the stigma that rests on God’s Anointed” greater riches than the treasures in Egypt. He was the anointed of God for the Hebrews, a type of the ultimate Anointed One who would deliver all people not just from physical captivity, but from sin’s slavery.

Trinitarian commentators, who believe God is three persons, typically understand the “reproach of Christ” differently. Some suggest that the author of Hebrews “thought of Christ as identified in some way with the people of God in [Old Testament] times.”¹⁴⁴ According to this view, not only was the first person of the trinity involved with his people, so was the second person in some way. But from the perspective of Oneness theology, this notion is problematic. Even trinitarian theology holds that the supposed second person of the Godhead did not assume Messianic identity until the Incarnation. Therefore, to know “Christ” prior to the Incarnation, unless it was prophetically, would have been to know God in a way He had not yet revealed Himself.

The term “Christ,” as it applies to Jesus, is an incarnational term – that is, it speaks of God as He is manifest in the flesh. Thus it is difficult to see how this verse could refer to “Christ” being identified with the people of God in the Old Testament prior to the Incarnation, unless it simply means the Spirit that later became incarnate. (For similar usage, see I Corinthians 10:4; I Peter 1:11.) In other words, Moses chose the reproach of following God, whose people would later endure similar reproach with Him when He manifested Himself in flesh.

Some commentators have suggested that since “the Christ” is equivalent to “the Anointed,” the reference is to the people of God rather than to an individual.¹⁴⁵ They sometimes use Psalm 89:51 to support this view. Then this verse would mean Moses valued the reproach of being identified with the people of God, the nation of Israel. It is true that they were anointed of God, but the first explanation given above seems most satisfying.

Moses was able to maintain the right perspective when weighing reproach against Egypt's treasures because "he looked to the reward" (NKJV). The passage does not specify the nature of this reward, but it no doubt was the reward of obedient faith, the actual success of his efforts in freeing his oppressed brethren from Egyptian bondage.

Again, the message for the original readers of this book is clear. Though they had suffered (10:32-33) for their identification with the ultimate Messiah, Jesus Christ, they were to bear "His reproach" (13:13). Indeed, like Moses, they should esteem His reproach to be "greater riches" than the "treasures in Egypt," a not-too-veiled allusion to the law of Moses, which was still very appealing to the senses of first-century Jews, but which was obsolete (8:13). If this allusion is surprising, we should remember that Paul described the covenant established at Mount Sinai as a covenant of bondage and represented it by Hagar (Galatians 4:23-25) and that John made the earthly city of Jerusalem in the first century correspond to Sodom and Egypt (Revelation 11:8). John identified Jerusalem as the city "where also our Lord was crucified" (NKJV), tying the Jewish rejection of the Messiah, and thus their preference for the law of Moses, to their spiritual identification as Sodom and Egypt. The next verse, Hebrews 11:27, has Moses forsaking Egypt, and the purpose of Hebrews is to encourage its first readers to cling to Jesus and to forsake the law. These points further indicate that this verse uses Egypt to represent the law in making an application to its readers.

Believers must be willing to suffer discomfort on this earth, if need be, to identify with Jesus Christ. (See John 15:18-21.) They are best able to do this when they, like Moses, look "to the reward." Whatever suffering they endure now will be far overshadowed by the joys of the eternal realm. (See 12:2.)

Verse 27. Moses' rejection of his Egyptian heritage and privileges was an act of faith. The king had discovered Moses' premature attempt to introduce himself to his Hebrew brethren as their deliverer by killing the Egyptian who was brutalizing a Hebrew, and he sought to find and kill Moses. (See Exodus 2:11-15; Acts 7:24-25.) Moses fled to the land of Midian, where he spent the next forty years. (See Acts 7:29-30.) This act was one of faith because he went out of Egypt with no visible means of sustenance; he turned his back on a visible palace and a tangible support system and "endured as seeing Him who is invisible" (NKJV). This attitude is characteristic of faith. (See verse 1.)

Josephus emphasized that Moses "left the land taking no supply of food."¹⁴⁶ His faith in the God he could not see with the natural eye was not in vain; God arranged for Moses' path to cross that of a priest of Midian who welcomed him into his family and gave him his daughter as a wife (Exodus 2:16-22). F. F. Bruce pointed out that this verse contains a message to the original readers of this epistle, first-century Jewish Christians in danger of defection from Christ back to Judaism, "that the invisible order is the real and permanent one, and not such a visible but transient establishment as Judaism enjoyed up to A.D. 70."¹⁴⁷

Several attempts have been made to reconcile the statement here that Moses did not fear the wrath of the king with the statement in Exodus 2:14 that, when his execution of the violent Egyptian was discovered, “Moses feared and said, ‘Surely this thing is known!’” (NKJV). Some have denied that Moses’ flight from Egypt was connected with his fear upon learning that his action was public knowledge; others have seen this reference as having to do with Moses’ departure from Egypt in the Exodus rather than with his earlier departure to Midian.¹⁴⁸ Contextually, the latter seems an impossible resolution. The next verse, verse 28, speaks of the Passover, which makes it unlikely that the present verse speaks of the Exodus, which occurred after the Passover. Moreover, the king’s wrath seems irrelevant to the Exodus; indeed, at that time the king desired for the Israelites to vacate the land. (See Exodus 12:31-33.)

There is another possibility for reconciling the accounts, however. Though Exodus 2:14 records that “Moses feared and said, ‘Surely this thing is known!’” (NKJV), nowhere does Scripture assert that Moses feared Pharaoh. It is true that Exodus 2:15 reports that when “Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses” and that “Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian” (NKJV), but nothing explicitly ties Moses’ flight with fear of Pharaoh. To flee from certain death in order to fulfill the call of God on one’s life is no sign of fear.¹⁴⁹ The writer of Hebrews was certainly familiar with the Exodus account, and he did not hesitate to report that Moses did not fear the wrath of the king.

It may be that Moses’ fear, rather than being directed toward Pharaoh, was directed toward his own people, the Hebrews. That is, he did not fear for his life at their hands, but he feared that they would misinterpret his actions in killing the Egyptian in such a way as to cause them to reject him as their deliverer. Stephen’s interpretation of this event seems to make this a possibility. Rather than describing Moses’ flight to Midian as a response to the wrath of Pharaoh, Stephen described it as a response to his rejection by the Hebrew man who was abusing his neighbor. (See Acts 7:23-29.) The nature of inspiration requires us to consider both the record of Exodus 2:15 and that of Acts 7:29 in our attempt to arrive at a complete and accurate understanding of the purpose for Moses’ flight. Actually, there is no contradiction between the two. Stephen specifically declared that Moses fled at the saying of the Hebrew man; the Exodus account does not deny this. In Exodus 2:15 is a simple statement of fact: “When Pharaoh heard of this matter, he sought to kill Moses. But Moses fled from the face of Pharaoh and dwelt in the land of Midian . . .” (NKJV). If we had no other scriptural evidence, we might assume that Moses fled as a response to Pharaoh’s intention to kill him, but that would be an assumption. To say that Moses “fled from the face of Pharaoh” is a Hebraism; it means that Moses fled from Pharaoh’s presence. In the broadest sense, it has reference to Egypt itself. Pharaoh’s presence was felt throughout Egypt since all Egypt was his domain. But the grammatical construction of Exodus 2:15 does not demand that the flight of Moses was a response to Pharaoh’s wrath.

The suggestion that Moses’ fear was that his Hebrew brethren would misunderstand his intentions is further supported by Stephen’s declaration that “he who did his neighbor

wrong pushed him [Moses] away, saying, ‘Who made you a ruler and a judge over us? Do you want to kill me as you did the Egyptian yesterday?’” (Acts 7:27-28, NKJV). This Hebrew man misinterpreted Moses’ intention as a desire to become a ruler and a judge over Israel. At that point, Moses’ only desire was to be their deliverer (Acts 7:25). Though he would later function as a ruler and judge in conjunction with the law given at Sinai, those roles were not in view at this time. Moses apparently feared that if the Hebrews viewed him as one who wished merely to rule and judge them rather than as one who wished to deliver them, they would reject him and fail to experience the freedom God had in store for the nation.

It is understandable that the Hebrews would have interpreted Moses’ action in killing the Egyptian as a claim of authority to rule. Moses was the grandson of the Pharaoh, a representative of the civil government with authority to deal with those who violated civil law. Civil government had the responsibility to carry out capital punishment against those who shed the blood of other human beings (Genesis 9:6; Romans 13:4). In Egypt, that authority resided in the royal family, of which Moses was a member. The Hebrews may very well have thought that if Moses asserted his authority in taking the life of an Egyptian, he could certainly do the same to a Hebrew. Such action would constitute a claim to be a ruler and a judge.

The fear that prompted Moses to flee Egypt was not fear for his life at the hands of Pharaoh, but fear that his people would reject him and thereby ruin his ability to deliver them. Although he could not have anticipated the manner in which God would use him to deliver the Israelites, Moses no doubt reasoned that during his absence from Egypt this event would be forgotten and he would have a fresh opportunity to deliver his people, unsullied by his past impulsiveness. In short, when he took a stand to protect his people, he was not afraid of what the king might do, but he persisted in his course of action until he indeed delivered Israel.

Verse 28. We see Moses’ faith not only in his rejection of his identity as Pharaoh’s daughter and his flight from Egypt, but also in keeping the Passover. (See Exodus 12.) It was an act of faith for Moses to lead the Israelites to kill a lamb, to apply its blood to the doorposts and lintels of their houses, and to prepare and eat it in the manner the Lord commanded. It was an act of faith because it was tied to an unprecedented event—the death of the firstborn of man and beast in the houses where no blood was applied—and to the anticipation of the Exodus, which was still in the realm of hope. Moses did not demand tangible proof that the firstborn would indeed die in the houses where the Passover was not observed. His faith was the confidence of things hoped for—the Exodus— and the conviction of things not seen—the death of the firstborn. (See verse 1.)

Verse 29. The example of faith now broadens to include not only Moses but all the Israelites. By faith they passed through the Red Sea as by dry land. (See Exodus 14:13-31.) This act was one of faith because it involved explicit trust in God. The sight that greeted the eyes of the Israelites as they stood on the shore of the Red Sea observing the miraculous opening of the dry passage was unprecedented. Fear and skepticism could

easily have found root in their hearts if they pondered the possibility that the sea which had parted could as easily come together again, even as they attempted to cross to the other side. But their hopeful confidence in God for deliverance from Egypt and their conviction that He would deliver them, even though that deliverance was not yet finalized, enabled them to strike out across the floor of the Red Sea with walls of water towering on each side. The Egyptians, who were not people of faith, drowned attempting to cross the Red Sea. Here we see the necessity of works to accompany faith and the uselessness of works apart from faith. (See James 2:20.) The Israelites expressed their faith by crossing the sea; the attempt of the Egyptians to do the same apart from faith was futile.

10. Joshua and Israel (11:30)

(30) By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they were compassed about seven days.

Verse 30. The Israelite conquest of Jericho is a classic example of faith. It involved behavior that looked foolish on the surface: the men of war were to march around the city once each day for six days accompanied by seven priests bearing seven trumpets before the ark. On the seventh day, they were to march around the city seven times. The priests were to make a long blast with the trumpets, and the people were to give a great shout. Then, the Lord said, "The wall of the city will fall down flat." (See Joshua 6:1-21.) Joshua and the Israelites acted by faith because they had no tangible evidence that all this marching, trumpeting, and shouting would indeed cause the city wall to fall. There was no precedent for these actions. But, because the Lord had spoken, they were confident that the thing they hoped for—victory over Jericho—would be theirs if they were obedient. They were convinced of things not seen. (See verse 1.)

11. Rahab (11:31)

(31) By faith the harlot Rahab perished not with them that believed not, when she had received the spies with peace.

Verse 31. In the midst of the discussion of people of faith comes Rahab, an example that must have jarred Jewish believers in the first century. The first strike against Rahab was that she was not a Hebrew; she was a Gentile inhabitant of Jericho. The second strike was that she was a woman; Jewish men in the first century tended to devalue women. (See Matthew 15:23; Luke 24:10-22; John 4:27.) It is said that devout Jewish men of the time daily thanked God that he had not made them Gentiles or women. The third strike against Rahab was that she was an immoral woman, a harlot.

There could be no better way to illustrate that all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, or social status have equal access to God on the basis of faith than to include Abraham and Rahab in the same list. The Book of James treats this subject in the same manner. (See James 2:21-25.)

Rahab demonstrated faith in Israel's God by the welcome she gave the spies into her home and her protection of them from the king of Jericho. (See Joshua 2:1-21; James 2:25.) She

had heard the report of the exploits of the Lord on behalf of His people, and she confessed that Israel's God "is God in heaven above and on earth beneath." (See Joshua 2:9-11.) She was confident that the not-yet-seen thing she hoped for—the deliverance of her family from destruction when the Israelites took Jericho—would come to pass if she trusted in the God of Israel.

Rahab stands in contrast here with "those who did not believe." The lack of faith in the true God sealed the doom of most of the inhabitants of Jericho; faith in Him spared Rahab and her family. As a result of her faith, this formerly immoral Gentile woman found a place in the ancestry of the Messiah. (See Matthew 1:5-6; Luke 3:31-32.)

12. Various Heroes of Faith (11:32-40)

(32) And what shall I more say? for the time would fail me to tell of Gedeon, and of Barak, and of Samson, and of Jephthae; of David also, and Samuel, and of the prophets: (33) who through faith subdued kingdoms, wrought righteousness, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, (34) quenched the violence of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, out of weakness were made strong, waxed valiant in fight, turned to flight the armies of the aliens. (35) Women received their dead raised to life again: and others were tortured, not accepting deliverance; that they might obtain a better resurrection: (36) and others had trial of cruel mockings and scourgings, yea, moreover of bonds and imprisonment: (37) they were stoned, they were sawn asunder, were tempted, were slain with the sword: they wandered about in sheepskins and goatskins; being destitute, afflicted, tormented; (38) (of whom the world was not worthy:) they wandered in deserts, and in mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth. (39) And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: (40) God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect.

Verse 32. After discussing in some detail heroes of faith beginning with Abel and extending through Rahab, each of whom demonstrates the nature of faith in its confidence of things hoped for and conviction of things not seen (verse 1), it is as if the writer of Hebrews suddenly realized that if he continued in this vein, it would consume more time than he had available. And why should he continue? The examples he had already given demonstrated his point conclusively. To continue to trace through the Hebrew Scriptures, providing as much detail as is given on the men and women of faith already mentioned, would be a massive task. The Hebrew Scriptures are characterized by accounts of those who responded to specific commands or promises of God with trusting obedience. Therefore, the author concluded his treatment of this subject in a summary fashion, by quickly listing various additional heroes of faith—named and unnamed—and giving a synopsis of the results of their faith.

In this section, which extends through verse 38, is a discovery that should have been meaningful to the original readers of this letter: Though faith sometimes results in deliverance from unpleasant circumstances, there is no assurance that this will always be the case. Faith sometimes has painful consequences, including death. If the first-century Jewish Christians abandoned faith in Christ because of their sufferings (10:32-33; 12:3-4,

12, 15) and because of unrealized hopes (2:1; 3:12-14; 6:12; 10:23; 11:1), they would reject the example of their ancestors whose faith in God was unshaken by disappointment.

The first person of faith in this summary is Israel's sixth judge, Gideon, who – like all the heroes of faith before him – responded to God's initiative in such a way as to give Israel a miraculous victory over Midian. (See Judges 6:11-40; 7:1-25.) The idea to defeat Midian with a mere three hundred men armed with trumpets, pitchers and torches was certainly not Gideon's. No positive thinker was he! (See Judges 6:12-13, 15.) Even after the Lord promised Gideon that He would use him to defeat the Midianites, Gideon twice put out a fleece to confirm God's promise (Judges 6:36-40). But in the final analysis, Gideon did trust God and discovered that where there is faith one can be confident of things hoped for and convinced of things not seen. In the case of Gideon, this unseen, seemingly impossible hope was the defeat of the Midianites.

The next person of faith to appear in this summary is Barak, the fifth judge over the nation of Israel. (See Judges 4-5.) God used Barak, together with Deborah, the fourth judge, to defeat Sisera, the commander of the army of Jabin, king of Canaan. This defeat occurred in a most dramatic way, as God caused the River Kishon to flood by heavy rain, overflowing the plain where the battle was waged and miring Sisera's nine hundred iron chariots in the mud. (See Judges 4:13, 15; 5:21:22.) Every man in Sisera's army was killed by the sword except Sisera, who fled on foot (Judges 4:15-17). His escape was short-lived, however. Sisera met his death in the tent of Jael, the wife of Heber the Kenite, as she hammered a tent peg through his temple, nailing him to the earth as he slept. (See Judges 4:17-22; 5:24-27.) Again, we see faith as a human response to divine initiative: Barak's victory was the result of his obedience to God's command (Judges 4:6-10.)

The third person of faith mentioned in Hebrew's summary is Samson, the thirteenth judge of Israel, whose story is told in Judges 13-16. Although Samson frequently disobeyed the law of God, he also often acted in faith. By faith he killed a lion, thirty men of Ashkelon, a thousand Philistines, and, in his death, three thousand more Philistines (Judges 14:5-6, 19; 15:14-15; 16:27-30). He did these things as the Spirit of the Lord came upon him.

The fourth person in this summary of the heroes of faith is Jephthah, the ninth judge of Israel. (See Judges 11-12.) Jephthah was the son of Gilead by a harlot. Though his family had rejected him, the elders of Gilead later asked him to rule over them. God used him to deliver Israel from the Ammonites by a decisive victory. This victory occurred as the Spirit of the Lord came upon him (Judges 11:29); it was thus a result of his faith.

The fifth hero of faith listed by Hebrews in this concluding statement is David, the great king of Israel. Though David's life was characterized by faith, faith was no where more evident than in his defense of Israel against Goliath when David was still a young man. (See I Samuel 17:45-47.) We see David's faith in that he conquered Goliath "in the name of the LORD of hosts."

The last hero of faith mentioned by name is Samuel, who served as a prophet and a judge in ancient Israel. Like David, his life was characterized by faith. A shining example of Samuel's faith is the victory over the Philistines that prevailed as long as he judged Israel. (See I Samuel 7:9-17.)

At this point, Hebrews terminates its listing of people of faith by name and offers unnamed prophets as further examples of faith. Israel, of course, had many prophets. The summary that follows offers clues as to the identity of some of these prophets.

Verse 33-35a. Here, in summary fashion, we see the results of the faith of some of Israel's heroes. Some subdued kingdoms. These kingdoms included the peoples who populated the land of Canaan prior to Israel's arrival. Some people of faith worked righteousness or, as the words *ergasanto dikaiousunen* could be translated, "administered justice" (NIV). This translation seems preferred from the context with its emphasis on Israel's judges. Some obtained promises. They acted by faith to lay hold on specific promises from God. Some, like the prophet Daniel, stopped the mouths of lions. Some, like the three young Hebrew men, quenched the violence of fire. Though they were cast into the fire, it did them no violence, or harm. Some people of faith escaped the edge of the sword. This comment may refer to prophets like Elijah, upon whose life Jezebel's threat was unsuccessful. (See I Kings 19:2.) Though he perceived his own weakness, Gideon was made strong, became valiant in battle, and turned to flight the Midianite army. There is more than one account in the Hebrew Scriptures of women who received their dead raised to life again. (See I Kings 17:17-24; II Kings 4:18-37.)

A common theme runs throughout these accounts. As men and women of old believed the words of God, trusted in Him, and obeyed His commands, they received the things for which they hoped. They saw things previously invisible. (See verse 1.)

Verses 35b-38. But faith does not always result in deliverance from unpleasant circumstances. It sometimes has painful immediate consequences. No doubt this message was even more pertinent to the original readers of the book. Their experiences to this point were apparently more in harmony with those whose hopes were never realized on this earth and with those who never saw the invisible things. (See 2:1; 3:12-14; 6:12; 10:23, 32-33; 11:1; 12:3-4, 12, 15.)

Some, by faith, refused deliverance from torture in order to obtain a better resurrection. That is, they suffered for their faith rather than denying their faith in order to be spared a painful death. (See Matthew 5:10-12.) They did so in order to enjoy the resurrection to life rather than to condemnation. (See John 5:28-39; Acts 24:15; Revelation 20:13.) The Greek verb translated "tortured" (*tympanizo*) suggests the idea of being stretched on a rack and beaten to death.¹⁵⁰ This was the fate of Eleazar of the Maccabean days.¹⁵¹ The faith of others was tried by mockery, scourging, and unjust imprisonment. Still other people of faith were stoned, which was a common form of execution among the Jewish people. Jewish tradition declares that the prophet Isaiah was sawn in two with a wooden saw by the servants of King Manasseh.¹⁵² Though some people of faith escaped death by the

sword (verse 34), others were slain by the sword.¹⁵³ There were those whose faith resulted in homelessness as they wandered about, destitute, afflicted, tormented, clothed in the skins of sheep and goats.

Though these people of faith had little standing in the social community – they wandered the deserts and mountains, making their homes in caves and holes in the earth – their faith set them apart so radically from unbelievers that the world was unworthy of them. Their lives were characterized by a focus on invisible hopes rather than material possessions, but they were people of character.

The point is well made: our greatest opportunity and responsibility is to trust God, whether that trust results in joyous deliverance from painful circumstances or whether it has unpleasant results and its promises are never realized on this earth. The first readers of this letter would be more likely to identify with the latter, but the example of their ancestors should have served to encourage them to keep their faith in Jesus Christ regardless of their temporal disappointments.

Verse 39. All the heroes of faith mentioned by name or left unidentified in this chapter “obtained a good testimony through faith” (NKJV). This is true regardless of whether their faith had pleasant or unpleasant temporal consequences. (See verses 32-38.) This verse echoes the sentiments of verses 2 and 13: on the basis of faith a person obtains a good testimony, and even if death precedes the fulfillment of a promise, it is no indication that the person who died before receiving a promise lacked faith.

That these people of faith “obtained a good testimony” means we can witness, even as in this chapter, that their faith in God was genuine. But beyond that, the phrase implies that they were justified, or gained right standing with God, on the basis of their faith. (See comments on verse 2 and Romans 4:3.)

But even though the examples in this chapter were people of unquestionable faith, they “did not receive the promise” (NKJV). Verse 33 points out that some “obtained promises,” and verse 13 reveals that some died without receiving the promises, but the promises in view in those verses are distinct from the promise addressed here. God gave various individuals discussed in this chapter many promises. Some were fulfilled during the lifetimes of the people to whom they were given; others were not. (See verse 13.) But the ultimate promise, which involved the coming of the Messiah, the new covenant, and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, was not fulfilled during the lifetimes of any of the people of faith mentioned in this chapter. (See comments on 9:15; 10:36.)

Jesus specifically identified the promise of the Father as the baptism with the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:4-5). This statement ties the baptism with the Holy Spirit to the promises of the Hebrew prophets that a new era was coming which would be characterized by an unprecedented work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of God’s people. (See Isaiah 59:20-21; Jeremiah 31:31-34; Ezekiel 36:25-27; 37:14; 39:29; Joel 2:28-29; John 7:37-39.) Although this promise awaits its final fulfillment as it pertains to national Israel (Romans 11:12, 26-27),

it is enjoyed at this time in the church, where ethnic origins are of no significance. (See Acts 2:16-21, 33, 38-39; Galatians 3:28; Colossians 3:11.)

Verse 40. The “something better” that God has provided for us is “the promise” of verse 39. Regardless of the inspiring heroics of the people of faith and the rewards received by those whose faith had pleasant consequences—including translation (verse 5), miraculous preservation of life during the worldwide flood (verse 7), miraculous conception (verse 11), miraculous provision (verses 17-19), miraculous protection (verse 23, 28, 31, 33), miraculous deliverance (verse 29, 34), miraculous victory (verse 30, 34), and resurrection from the dead (verse 35)—the provisions of the new covenant are far better. The glory of the new covenant causes everything before it to pale by comparison. Indeed, all that preceded the coming of Christ was merely a shadow of Him. (See 10:1; Colossians 2:16-17; Luke 24:27, 44-45; John 5:39.) The new covenant is superior to all covenants before it because it is based on better promises. (See comments on 8:6.)

In view of the miraculous experiences of many people of faith in the pre-Messianic era, how can we say that we now have “something better”? The new covenant is better because it involves the Incarnation, wherein God Himself walks among people (John 1:1, 14; I Timothy 3:16; I John 1:1-2), the permanent forgiveness of sin based on the Atonement (8:12-13; 9:26; 10:4, 10, 17), life in the Spirit rather than by the letter of the law (Galatians 3:2-5; II Corinthians 3:6-11), and the promise of eternal life rather than merely long life in the earthly land of promise (see 9:15; I John 2:25).

As great as were the experiences of many people of faith before the coming of Christ, the inferiority of the covenants under which they lived and the incompleteness of the revelation they received means that “they should not be made perfect apart from us” (NKJV). This comment indicates the solidarity of people of faith on both sides of the Cross. The point is that God has only one basis upon which people are “made perfect” (Greek, *teleiothosin*, which has to do with being brought to the end or purpose of a thing), and that is the Cross. (See 10:14; 12:23.) Whether a person of faith lived and died before the coming of Jesus or whether he lives in the present era, it is by the Cross that he or she receives “perfection” (which, in the ultimate sense, is salvation). Though the vision of those who lived prior to the Cross could not have been as clear as we now enjoy, it is faith and not the extent of the revelation received that procures the benefits of the Cross. (See 10:36.) If people of faith before the coming of Christ had realized the ultimate fulfillment of their hopes—or had been “made perfect”—apart from those who lived in the Messianic era, it would mean that God had more than one means of providing redemption. It would mean that the Cross of Christ, rather than being the unique means of dealing with sins, would merely be a means. But God has no other basis upon which to cleanse people from sin (10:4). The blood of Jesus is His exclusive provision for redemption (10:19-20).

The message chapter 11 communicated to the original readers of Hebrews is this: Though the faith of those who lived prior to the coming of Christ was genuine, and though it often resulted in miracles—but often it simply gave faithful people the ability to endure hardship—the experience of all those mentioned was inferior to the experience of

participants in the new covenant. Those in the pre-Messianic era “did not receive the promise” (verse 39); what God has provided for us is better. This fact should have convinced the original readers to abandon any thought of defecting from Christ and His new covenant to return to a covenant always inferior and now outmoded. (See 8:6-13; 10:1-5, 8-9, 26-29, 35-39; 12:18-24.)

III.

God Disciplines His Children (12:1-29)

Follow the Example of Jesus (12:1-4)

(1) Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, (2) looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God. (3) For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds. (4) Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin.

This section of the letter provides insight as to why the first readers were tempted to turn away from Christ and the new covenant to return to the law of Moses: They had mistaken God's chastening for abandonment (verses 5-8). They interpreted the pain and discomfort accompanying divine discipline to mean they had made the wrong decision in believing on Jesus. Like the ancient Israelites who looked back to life in Egypt with nostalgic yearning (Exodus 14:11-12; 16:2-3; 17:3), these first-century Jewish believers fondly recalled their life under the law, forgetting their lack of intimacy with God (verses 18-21), the inability of the law to bring them to maturity (7:18-19), and their inability to obey the law's impossible demands (Romans 8:3). (See Acts 15:10; Galatians 3:10-12; 4:9.)

The focus of Hebrews to this point has been to assure the original readers that they did not do the wrong thing to believe on Jesus and that their suffering was not unprecedented for people of faith. Instead of responding to suffering by turning away from Jesus, they needed to respond by recognizing the loving hand of their heavenly Father in their difficulty. His chastening was for their long-term benefit (verses 11-17).

Verse 1. Believers are surrounded by a great "cloud of witnesses." These "witnesses" are those who have gone before who have stood fast in their faith regardless of the circumstances of life. Specifically, these witnesses include all those mentioned in Hebrews 11 who "obtained a good testimony through faith" (11:39). The example of these witnesses should encourage believers in this era to deal decisively with distractions by laying them aside and to endure until they receive faith's ultimate reward.

This verse draws a vivid word picture. The word translated "cloud" (Greek, *nephos*) describes a vast cloud mass, and the metaphor "refers to the great amphitheatre with the arena for the runners and the tiers upon tiers of seats rising up like a cloud."¹⁵⁴ The people of faith from the previous era are not merely spectators observing the agonizing struggles

of believers in the present era; they have been through the same struggles themselves. The picture the author had in mind may be something like that of “a relay race where those who have finished their course and handed in their baton are watching and encouraging their successors.”¹⁵⁵

In view of the example of those who ran before them, believers are to “lay aside every weight.” The word translated “lay aside” (Greek, *apothemenoi*) also appears in Colossians 3:8, which commands believers to “put off” sinful behavior. The word has to do with laying off old clothing.¹⁵⁶ The word translated “weight” (Greek, *ogkon*) describes any handicapping encumbrance. The idea is that in a race, there should be no “trailing garment to hinder or trip” the runner.¹⁵⁷ This statement is similar to the descriptions elsewhere of people “girding up their loins” to run (II Kings 4:29; 9:1) and of believers “girding up the loins of their minds” (I Peter 1:13). Since the long, flowing garments worn at that time could easily hamper and trip a runner, it was necessary to tuck the tail of the garment into the sash (“girdle”). Here, however, the believer is not simply advised to “gird up his loins,” but to lay aside every hindrance to the race of faith. In ancient Rome, runners in the stadium raced naked or nearly naked.¹⁵⁸ Since the verse goes on to urge the laying aside of sin as well, it may be that the weights are not inherently sinful. They are, however, hindrances to endurance.

For the original readers of this letter, these weights may have included a failure to engage daily in mutual encouragement (3:13; 10:24), a lack of diligence in entering into Christ’s rest by ceasing to depend upon one’s own works to gain merit with God (4:10-11), a lack of boldness in approaching the throne of grace (4:16), an immature fascination with the elementary principles of Christ and a failure to go on to the solid food (5:12-14; 6:1), a sluggishness in faith and patience (6:12), and a failure to assemble faithfully with believers for mutual exhortation (10:25). For believers at other times and places, hindrances that they need to lay aside may include these or other things which, though not necessarily inherently sinful, prevent them from doing their best in the Christian race. It is so important for us to finish the race successfully that the appeal to lay aside even non-sinful hindrances is justified. The carrying of unnecessary weights, even if they are not sinful, may make us more susceptible to sin itself.

Not only are believers to lay aside weights, they are to lay aside “the sin which so easily ensnares.” For the original readers of this letter, this sin included “an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God” (3:12), apostasy (the rejection of previously revealed truths and valid spiritual experiences) (6:6), a rejection of Jesus Christ and His atoning work (10:26-31), and a rejection of the life of faith (10:38-39). These specific sins could easily ensnare the first recipients of this letter because, as Jews, they had lived their lives under the law of Moses, a covenant given for a radically different purpose than the new covenant. Though the law was valid, it had been widely abused by the Hebrew people, who viewed it as an end in itself and who sought to gain right standing with God on the basis of the works of the law (Romans 9:31-32). This erroneous perspective was so deeply ingrained in the minds of the Jewish people that they struggled mightily with the idea that they could attain right standing with God only by faith in Jesus Christ. They had a

deep seated and time-honored belief that the law was the ultimate and final revelation of God. Jewish tradition claimed that when the Messiah came, the writings of the prophets and the poetic books would be abrogated, but not the law.¹⁵⁹ Since only a small minority of Jewish people had placed their faith in Jesus Christ, they were constantly exposed to the temptation to return to the law, which arose from the influence of unbelieving family and friends. In such an environment, it was relatively easily to defect from the new covenant back to the law.

For believers today, other sins may easily ensnare. In many cases, these kinds of sins may be those associated with our life before coming to Christ, just as the law was associated with the first readers of this letter in the days before their faith in Christ. For this reason, each person must make a careful, prayerful, and realistic assessment of himself to determine what kind of decisions he should make so as to enhance his potential for successful completion of the Christian race and to decrease his potential for defeat. It may be necessary for some to lay aside behaviors in which others can engage. Something that is a weight and could easily develop into a sin for one person may not be a hindrance to another. (See Romans 14.) The reason believers are to lay aside hindering weights and easily ensnaring sins is so we can “run with endurance the race that is set before us.” The race in view is not a short sprint but a long-distance run that requires endurance and persistence.¹⁶⁰ The word translated “race” is *agona*, from which the English “agony” is derived and a form of which is translated “striving” in verse 4. Here, the Christian life is described as a race requiring intense effort and even pain. Athletic symbolism is not uncommon in the New Testament. (See I Corinthians 9:24, 26; Galatians 2:2; 5:7; Philippians 2:16; I Timothy 6:12; II Timothy 4:7.)

Verse 2. As the believer runs the Christian race, he is to look steadfastly “unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith.” The first readers of this letter were tempted to look away from Jesus and back to the law. (See 2:1-3; 3:1, 12; 6:6; 10:29, 39.) Instead, the author urged them not to be distracted by various hindrances and sins (verse 1); they should keep their gaze fastened unswervingly on Jesus. Just as a runner keeps his eyes on the finish line – his ultimate goal – so the believer must hold Jesus as the final goal of his life.

The word translated “author” (Greek, *archegon*) appears also in 2:10, where it is translated “captain.” “Finisher” is translated from *teleiotes*, a word the writer of Hebrews apparently coined from *teleioo*, for it has not been found elsewhere.¹⁶¹ *Teleioo* has to do with completion, maturity, or consummation. The word “our” does not appear in the Greek text. The point seems to be that Jesus is the originator and completer of faith. To the first readers of Hebrews, this description meant that the same Jesus who first caused faith to arise in their hearts would, if they looked only to Him, complete what He started. (See Philippians 1:6.)

The struggles of the Jewish believers to whom this letter was first addressed were not unknown to Jesus. They were experiencing sufferings, reproaches, and tribulations (10:32-33); He had endured the shameful death of the cross. Though He despised the shame associated with death on a cross (Deuteronomy 21:23; Galatians 3:13; Matthew 26:39-42;

Philippians 2:8), He nevertheless endured it “for the joy that was set before Him.” A consideration of the reward for endurance of the pain made the suffering bearable. Likewise, if believers keep in mind the ultimate reward of faith, they can endure persecution and other uncomfortable circumstances.

The joy that was set before Jesus was the knowledge that by His suffering He would provide redemption for the world. (See Matthew 18:11.)

The word translated “has sat down” (Greek, *kekathiken*) is in the perfect tense, which indicates not only that He sat down at some point in the past but that He remains seated. (On “the right hand of the throne of God,” see the discussion on “the right hand of the Majesty on high” in 1:3.)

Verse 3. In chapter 11, the writer of Hebrews held up for the consideration of his readers the heroes of faith from Abel to unnamed sufferers and martyrs. These people lived by faith in spite of their failure to receive faith’s ultimate reward. (See 11:39.) These examples, drawn from the ranks of human beings who stood in solidarity with the first readers of this letter, should have encouraged the first Jewish audience to divest themselves of distracting hindrances, whether or not they were sinful, in order to be able to endure patiently to the end of the race. (See verse 1.) But the ultimate example is Jesus Christ Himself. (See verse 2.) No one had suffered more significantly than He, though no one deserved it less. In spite of the shame associated with death on a cross, Jesus had been able to endure it by focusing on the ultimate joy that would result from His suffering.

For this reason verse 3 urges believers to “consider Him who endured such hostility from sinners against Himself.” The first readers of this letter were not the only ones who had ever suffered for their faith. Because it is easy to “become weary and discouraged in your souls” (NKJV) when we think we are alone in our sufferings, or if we think our sufferings are unprecedented, we should remind ourselves of others whose sufferings were perhaps even greater. (See Matthew 5:10-12.) The One whose sufferings were most intense—due to His complete innocence and the vicarious nature of His sufferings—is Jesus Christ. Peter considered the example of Christ’s wrongful sufferings to be instructive for all believers. (See I Peter 2:19-23.)

The hostility that Jesus endured was “against Himself.” Strictly speaking, the persecution believers experience is not directed against them; it is due to their identification with Jesus Christ. (See I Peter 4:16.) Thus, believers do not experience personal rejection, as did Jesus. This fact helps put into perspective the persecution associated with being identified with Christ.

God created human beings to exist in a social context; it is not good that man be alone. (See Genesis 2:18.) The first social context in which a person exists is the family. Thus, it is especially devastating to be rejected by one’s family. But it is sometimes the consequence of identification with Jesus Christ. (See Matthew 10:21, 34-36.) Being rejected by one’s family can result in great mental and spiritual weariness and discouragement.

Remembering that this kind of rejection is not due to one's personal lack of worth but rather due to enmity against Jesus Christ can help a person retain his spiritual strength and courage.

The word translated "consider" (Greek, *analogisasthe*) occurs only here in the New Testament, and it "conveys the idea of comparison as well as considering."¹⁶² We are not only to consider the sufferings of Jesus; we are to compare them with our own. When we do so, our sufferings fall into perspective. Jesus is the only one ever to suffer who was completely innocent. (See Isaiah 53:4-5, 8-12.) He is also the only one whose sufferings were vicarious. (See I Peter 2:24.)

Verse 4. The comparison urged upon the original readers of this letter would reveal that they had not yet suffered to the same degree as Jesus. He had been crucified; they had "not yet resisted to bloodshed." Their suffering was real (see 10:32-33), but it was not as intense as what Jesus or other believers had experienced. (See II Corinthians 6:4-5; 11:23-27.) Jesus had "endured . . . hostility from sinners against Himself"; the first readers of this letter had been "striving against sin" itself (NKJV). Peter addressed the same issue: "Therefore, since Christ suffered for us in the flesh, arm yourselves also with the same mind, for he who has suffered in the flesh has ceased from sin" (I Peter 4:1, NKJV).

There is a certain suffering associated with denying sinful impulses. The natural tendency of the flesh is toward sin; to deny the flesh its sinful indulgence is to put it to death. (See Romans 6:11-13.) Believers are positionally identified with Jesus Christ in His death; they are to live out this identification by resisting temptation. (See Romans 6:2-6.) This process is painful because it involves the moment-by-moment, day-by-day yielding of one's members—body, soul and spirit—to the leading of the Holy Spirit rather than to the impulses of sin. (See Romans 6:13-19.) Though the Holy Spirit works within the believer to give right desires and abilities (Philippians 2:13), the sin principle is also still there, struggling against the Spirit. (See Galatians 5:16-17.) There is suffering here, but it is nothing compared to the sufferings Jesus Christ endured.

The specific sin against which the original readers of this letter struggled was apostasy. Because of their past associations, ongoing rejection by their non-Messianic Jewish brethren, and the apparent continuing prosperity of Temple worship, they were tempted to renounce their faith in Christ and to turn back to the law.

Alternatively, the struggle against sin to which this verse refers may be the enmity of those who rejected Christ. In other words, the first readers of this letter had to struggle against those who attempted to persuade them to abandon their faith in Jesus. Both the word "striving" here and "race" in verse 1 are translated from a form of the Greek *agona*, from which we derive the English "agony." The word underscores the effort and pain associated with resisting temptations to abandon the Christian life and to endure to the end.

That the first readers of this letter had “not yet resisted to bloodshed” may help narrow the range of possible recipients and dates for the writing of the letter.¹⁶³ (See comments on 10:32-33.)

Those Who Are Chastened Are God’s Sons (12:5-11)

(5) And ye have forgotten the exhortation which speaketh unto you as unto children, My son, despise not thou the chastening of the Lord, nor faint when thou art rebuked of him: (6) for whom the Lord loveth he chasteneth, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth. (7) If ye endure chastening, God dealeth with you as with sons; for what son is he whom the father chasteneth not? (8) But if ye be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers, then are ye bastards, and not sons. (9) Furthermore we have had fathers of our flesh which corrected us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection unto the Father of spirits, and live? (10) For they verily for a few days chastened us after their own pleasure; but he for our profit, that we might be partakers of his holiness. (11) Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous: nevertheless afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruit of righteousness unto them which are exercised thereby.

Verses 5-6. One of the reasons the original readers of this letter were tempted to turn away from Christ was that they had confused God’s discipline with abandonment. (See comments before 12:1.) They had “forgotten the exhortation which [spoke to them] as to sons.” The exhortation in view is in Proverbs 3:11-12. As elsewhere, Hebrews quotes the Septuagint translation.

When we forget biblical principles, we are always in danger of losing our faith. One of the first consequences of forgetfulness is misjudging God. If we do not know how or why God acts as He does, we may think He is unconcerned or unjust. We may even question His omniscience, omnipotence, omnipresence, or existence. Although we will never have the answers to all possible questions in this life, unanswered questions should drive us back to the Bible rather than cause us to lose faith in God. It may be that we have misunderstood some biblical teaching.

The exhortation of Proverbs 3:11-12 speaks to those who are sons of God, not to those who have never known Him. The painful circumstances in the lives of unbelievers may have different causes, but it is always possible that the believer’s discomfort is due to divine discipline.

Believers are not to despise the chastening of the Lord. The word “despise” (Greek, *oligorei*) means we are not to “make light of” His chastening. Children are sometimes tempted to reject the discipline of their human parents as pointless and meaningless. But discipline that is rejected bears no positive fruit. (See verse 11.) Those who despise the

chastening of the Lord may find His continuing chastening to be even more painful. (See I Corinthians 11:30-32.)

The Lord does not intend His rebuke to cause discouragement. If we remember the Lord's motive in chastening (verses 10, 14), His rebuke will be cause for rejoicing, for it is evidence that He still loves us, considers us His children, and has hope for our future. The truly frightening thought would not be the chastening of a loving heavenly Father, but to think that He has given up on us. (See Romans 1:24, 26, 28; I John 5:16.)

Verses 7-8. In his own words rather than those of Proverbs 3:11-12, the writer of Hebrews reiterated that chastening is evidence that God is dealing with us as sons. Chastening is inherent in the father-son relationship. The only people whom God does not chasten are those who are not His sons. That they are illegitimate means that they do not have God for their father. (See John 8:42-44.)

Although it may not have lessened their pain, this discussion of divine discipline should have encouraged the original readers of Hebrews. Having forgotten the message of Proverbs 3:11-12, they were in danger of misinterpreting the circumstances of life. It should have brought them hope to know that they were still the sons of God and that He was actively involved with all the events of their lives, even the painful ones.

Verse 9. It should come as no surprise that our heavenly Father disciplines us. Even in the human realm, we experience discipline. In addition to its advice on response to the chastening of the Lord, the Book of Proverbs addresses the role of chastening in rearing children. (See Proverbs 13:24; 19:18; 22:15; 23:13-14; 29:15.) If we are wise children, our response to the correction of our human fathers is to pay them respect. If we are willing to respond in this way to correction on a purely human level, "shall we not much more readily be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?" (NKJV) We should be even more willing to respond in a positive way to God's chastening than we are to acknowledge the legitimacy of the discipline given by our human fathers. The result of proper response to God's chastening is life.

The precise phrase "Father of spirits" appears nowhere else in Scripture. The phrase "God of the spirits of all flesh" appears in Numbers 16:22; 27:16. In the context of Hebrews, we should not suppose that the writer intended to communicate specific insight concerning the makeup of the immaterial part of humans. He did not mean that God is the Father of the human spirit only and is not related to any other aspect of human existence. Rather, the contrast is between human fathers and our heavenly Father. The phrase "human fathers" in the NKJV is *tes sarkos hemon pateras*, which literally translates as "fathers of our flesh." This phrase stands in obvious contrast to *toi patri ton pneumaton*, "to the Father of spirits."

The purpose of the verse, then, is not to establish an anthropology (doctrine of humanity). It does not mean that children derive only their physical body from their parents but derive their spirit from God. The anthropological view that seems most satisfying

biblically is traducianism, which teaches that a person receives all his existence, material and immaterial, from his parents.¹⁶⁴

The life that results from proper response to the chastening of the Lord is eternal life, whereas proper response to the discipline of human fathers tended to result in long life on this earth. (See Exodus 20:12; Ephesians 6:2-3.) We know the life promised as a result of subjection to the Father of spirits is eternal life because His discipline is designed to bring us to share in His holiness (verse 10), and without this holiness “no one will see the Lord” (verse 14, NKJV).

Verse 10. The discipline our human fathers gave us was “for a few days.” That is, it extended only as long as we were under their authority. We are always obliged to honor our parents (Exodus 20:12; Deuteronomy 5:16), but we are obliged to obey them only so long as we are “children” still in the process of being brought up by our parents “in the Lord” (Ephesians 6:1, 4). The possibility exists that non-Christian parents may attempt to influence their children to disobey God; Christian children cannot obey such commands. (See Matthew 10:21, 34- 36; Acts 5:29.) Even in a circumstance like this, however, a child must honor and respect his parents.

But whereas parental discipline terminates when a son or daughter leaves father and mother to establish a new family (Genesis 2:24), God’s discipline of His children extends as far as needed.¹⁶⁵ Human fathers chasten their children as seems best to them; since human beings are fallible, it is always possible they could be wrong in their application of discipline. But God makes no mistakes; His chastening is always “for our profit.” Specifically, the intent of His chastening is “that we may be partakers of His holiness” (NKJV).

Holiness, which has its origins in the Hebrew qadosh, means “separation” of some kind, with this separation being unto something or someone and consequently a separation from something or someone.¹⁶⁶ In this context, it is separation unto God and consequently from all that is unlike Him. Specifically, this passage identifies holiness as “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” (verse 11, 14) and the avoidance of bitterness (verse 15), sexual immorality, and profanity (verse 16).

People can be holy only as they are “partakers of His holiness.” God alone is inherently holy (Leviticus 11:44; 19:2; I Peter 1:16). Morality is not holiness, although those who are holy will be moral. Modesty is not holiness, although those who are holy will be modest. Honesty is not holiness, although those who are holy will be honest. It is possible to be relatively moral, modest, honest, and to have other positive character traits and yet to have no faith in the true God and no relationship with Him. Although those who are holy will be people of high character, it is possible to be of sterling character and to be unholy due to lack of faith in God. Biblical holiness comes only when we identify with the true God by faith in Him, and it is perfected in us as we respond to His chastening in obedience.

Verse 11. The chastening of the Lord is painful. It does not immediately promote a joyous response. Such chastening may include weakness, sickness, and premature death. (See I Corinthians 11:30-32; James 5:16.) But divine discipline to which we correctly respond ultimately “yields the peaceable fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” There is a clear parallel between the “holiness” of verse 10 and “the peaceable fruit of righteousness.” Both are the results of divine discipline. In other words, the holiness in view is the peaceable fruit of righteousness. There is a parallel between the holiness that is “the peaceable fruit of righteousness” and the command to “pursue peace with all people, and holiness” (verse 14, NJKV).

“Righteousness” is a theological term that for some people may obscure the meaning of the Greek *dikaiousunes*. The English word “righteousness” springs from the Old English “rightwiseness.” It simply has to do with being right.¹⁶⁷ In this case, it means doing the right thing in God’s eyes. This right thing is to pursue peace with all people (verse 14).

Chastening is seen here as training. The Greek *gegymnasmenois*, from which comes the English “gymnasium,” is translated “trained” (“exercised,” KJV). The idea, drawn from the metaphor of athletics, is that of long-term, disciplined training rather than sporadic bursts of exercise. When a believer commits himself as a way of life to responding obediently to the chastening of the Lord, permanent growth in character results. Such a result cannot come from short-term efforts.

Proper Response to God’s Chastening (12:12-17)

(12) Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees; (13) and make straight paths for your feet, lest that which is lame be turned out of the way; but let it rather be healed. (14) Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord: (15) looking diligently lest any man fail of the grace of God; lest any root of bitterness springing up trouble you, and thereby many be defiled; (16) lest there be any fornicator, or profane person, as Esau, who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. (17) For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.

Verses 12-13. Since the chastening of the Lord is a sign that those He chastens are still His children (verses 5-7) and since He intends for the chastening to profit believers, enabling them to partake of His holiness (verse 10), believers should respond by gaining new courage and repairing the paths in which they walk. “Therefore” (Greek, *dio*) refers to what has gone before.

Verse 12 closely follows the wording of Isaiah 35:3, and verse 13 seems to borrow from Proverbs 4:26. “Hands which hang down” are limp and ineffective hands. The reference

may even be to paralysis. “Feeble knees” are weak and incapable of sustained exertion in walking or standing. In the larger context of the book, the reference to the spiritual weakness of the original readers is obvious. They have become dull of hearing, and they have regressed to become babes who need milk rather than solid food (5:11-13). Hebrews 5:14 uses the Greek *gegymnasmena* to point out that only those who have their senses “exercised” to discern both good and evil are qualified for solid food. Thus the “exercise” of 5:14 is semantically related to the “training” of 12:11.

The spiritual weakness of the original readers is a consequence of walking on crooked paths. The context of the letter suggests that this crookedness results from a lack of exclusive and unswerving commitment to Jesus Christ and the new covenant. (See 6:4-6; 10:23-29, 35, 38-39.) Although they had been spiritually enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and tasted the good Word of God and the powers of the age to come (6:4-6), they were contemplating turning away from Christ and reverting to the old covenant (2:1-4). Their spiritual ambivalence caused them to be spiritually lame and in need of healing. In order to make their paths straight once again and to regain their strength, they needed to recognize the chastening hand of their loving heavenly Father in their pain, they needed to turn away decisively and permanently from the rituals of the law of Moses, and they needed to commit themselves unequivocally and exclusively to Jesus Christ.

Verse 14. To be a partaker of God’s holiness is not merely an ethereal concept. It involves purposeful conformity of one’s actions to the character of God. Here, holiness is expressed in the pursuit of peace with all people. (See verse 10.) Rather than identifying the pursuit of peace and the pursuit of holiness as two different things, the context strongly links them together. (See verses 10- 11.) The use of *kai* (“and”) here seems to be ascensive at the least,¹⁶⁸ with the idea being, “Pursue peace with all people, even holiness. . . .” It may even be emphatic, with the thought being, “Pursue peace . . . indeed, pursue holiness.” The adjective “which” (Greek, *ou*) is singular, apparently applying to the pursuit of both peace and holiness as a singular referent. That is, no one will see the Lord whose holiness is not characterized by the pursuit of peace with all people. Paul gave similar advice in Romans 12:18, and Jesus said peacemakers shall be called the sons of God (Matthew 5:9).

If the pursuit of peace and holiness are two different issues in this verse, then the statement “without which no one will see the Lord” can refer only to one of them, and it would apparently refer to that closest in the text, the pursuit of holiness. If we remember, however, that the problem this chapter addresses is the failure of the original readers to understand that their painful experiences were due to God’s chastening, we can see the connection between the pursuit of peace with all people and holiness. If they did not recognize God’s chastening hand in their pain, they would no doubt have identified those who persecuted them as their personal enemies. This attitude would have led to tensions between them and their persecutors. Thus, their recovery of holiness upon recognizing the chastening of the Lord should also have resulted in the development of peace with those they formerly perceived to be enemies. People were not their enemies; they had been instruments in the hand of God to chasten His children. Thus, the pursuit of peace

with all people and the pursuit of holiness are one and the same. Those who reject the chastening of the Lord and who thus do not partake of His holiness—and who, by implication, perceive people to be their enemies—can have no expectation of seeing the Lord.

Verse 15. In addition to pursuing peace with all people, the writer of Hebrews urged his original audience to carefully avoid falling short of the grace of God. There are eight references to the grace of God in the thirteen chapters of Hebrews. The substitutionary death of Christ was a work of God's grace (2:9). The throne of God, to which believers can boldly come on the basis of Christ's high priestly work, is a throne of grace where those who come receive mercy and grace (4:16). To turn away from Christ and the new covenant is to insult the Spirit of grace (10:29). On the basis of grace, acceptable service to God is possible (12:28). By grace the heart is established so as to avoid strange doctrines (13:9). And the author's final wish for his readers is for grace to be with them (13:25). Hebrews connects grace with the work of Christ in establishing the new covenant. To "fall short of the grace of God" is thus to turn away from Christ and the covenant He established in His blood. The original readers were in danger of doing this if they defected to the law of Moses. If they thereby failed God's grace, the result would be the springing up of a troubling bitter root that would defile many. Grammatically, the phrase "root of bitterness" refers not to bitterness itself as the troubling root, but to a root of trouble that is bitter.

The verses remaining in this chapter reveal that this bitter root would result from rejecting the new covenant like Esau rejected his birthright (verse 16). If they did this, they would discover that they had rejected their only hope to inherit God's blessing (verse 17). Just as there was no hope for Esau apart from his birthright, there is no hope for Israel apart from Jesus Christ and the new covenant. If they traded the grace of God as expressed in the new covenant for the works system of the law of Moses, an outmoded covenant (8:13), they would, like Esau, discover it to be a bitter root that would trouble and defile many. This defilement would pollute their faith and cause them to refuse the voice of God (verse 25).

Verse 16. The warning to respond correctly to the chastening of the Lord was intended to help the readers avoid the consequences of misinterpreting their circumstances. (See comments before verse 1.) These consequences would have included an inability to see the Lord (verse 14), a falling short of the grace of God, and the springing up of a troubling, bitter root that would defile the faith of many (verse 15). These would be among the consequences of those who, like Esau, undervalued their birthright. If these first-century Jewish believers turned away from Christ and the new covenant in favor of the rituals of the law of Moses, they would be guilty of the same sin as Esau, "who for one morsel of food sold his birthright" (NKJV).

There are striking parallels between Esau's failure and the potential failure of the original readers of Hebrews. Esau made the wrong decision because of his weariness and hunger (Genesis 25:29-32). He was so overwhelmed by his circumstances that he said, "I am about

to die; so what is this birthright to me?" (Genesis 25:32, NKJV). Esau traded something of eternal value for momentary gratification. The Jewish believers to whom Hebrews was first written were in danger of becoming "weary and discouraged" in their souls (verse 3). Although they had not experienced martyrdom, they had been struggling against sin with the sufferings that accompany this struggle (verse 4; see also 10:32-33). If they turned away from Jesus for whatever momentary relief this action may have brought, they would have, so to speak, sold their "birthright," their claim on the Messiah and the new covenant established in His blood, for "one morsel of food," the temporary comfort of the law of Moses. If they did so, they would, like Esau, be "fornicators" and "profane" persons.

It is doubtful in this context whether the word "fornicator" has to do with physical sexual immorality. Instead, it seems to be a reference to the spiritual fornication of unfaithfulness to God. The word is used this way in a number of contexts. (See Judges 2:17; II Chronicles 21:11; Isaiah 23:17; Ezekiel 16:26, 29; Revelation 2:20; 17:2, 4; 18:3, 9; 19:2.) To turn away from the true God is to commit spiritual fornication just as a man or woman who is unfaithful to his or her spouse commits physical fornication. Here we see the exclusive nature of the new covenant; there can be no blending of the old covenant and the new. Romans 7:1-4 expresses the same idea.

Another parallel between Esau's failure and the potential failure of the original readers of this letter is that the words translated "birthright" (Greek, *prototokia*) here in verse 16 and "firstborn" (Greek, *protokon*) in verse 23 are both from *prototokos*. Although Esau's was a natural birthright whereas theirs was a spiritual one, the first-century Jewish Christians were in danger of losing their birthright just as he had lost his. (See verse 23.)

To be "profane" (Greek, *bebelos*) is to lack spiritual values.¹⁶⁹ The Septuagint translation of Ezekiel 21:25 applies the word to Zedekiah due to his failure to keep his oath with the king of Babylon.¹⁷⁰ Zedekiah's punishment was to lose his right to the throne of David. Thus, his "profanity" had the same consequence as that of Esau: they both lost what was rightfully theirs. For Jewish believers to defect from faith in Jesus Christ would likewise be an act of profanity that would result in the loss of spiritual privileges.

Verse 17. It was impossible for Esau to recover the blessing he lost by despising his birthright. The episode in Esau's life to which this verse refers appears in Genesis 27:30-37. By deceit, Jacob obtained the blessing Isaac intended for Esau. Although Esau "cried with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, 'Bless me — me also, O my father!'" (Genesis 27:34, NKJV), he could not retrieve the blessing already given to Jacob. The warning for the first readers of this book was that if they rejected Christ and the new covenant, they would find themselves excluded from the blessing of God. No blessing remained in the rituals of the old covenant.

Although Hebrews compares the sale of Esau's birthright for food to the danger of apostasy, it is doubtful if we should understand the phrase "for he found no place for repentance" to mean it is absolutely impossible under any circumstances for those who

have turned away from faith in Christ to recognize their error and return to Him. (See comments on 6:6; 10:26-29.)

First, nowhere does this verse proclaim this point. The reference is simply to an episode in the life of Esau and its consequences.

Second, the nature of the birthright was that only one son could possess it. It had already been given to Jacob; therefore it could not be given to Esau. This is not the nature of the new covenant. Its blessings are not limited to one person only. Jesus said, "The one who comes to me I will by no means cast out" (John 6:37, NKJV). God is "not willing that any should perish but that all should come to repentance" (II Peter 3:9, NKJV). "Whoever desires [may] take the water of life freely" (Revelation 22:17, NKJV).

The requirement to receive the blessings of the new covenant is faith. If someone who has turned away from the Lord finds new faith, there is no biblical reason he could not enter anew into the blessings of the new covenant. James wrote, "Brethren, if anyone among you wanders from the truth, and someone turns him back, let him know that he who turns a sinner from the error of his way will save a soul from death and cover a multitude of sins" (James 5:19-20, NKJV).

Third, the issue for Esau at this point was not salvation but the birthright. The birthright gave the eldest son social precedence over any younger brothers (Genesis 43:33) and an inheritance twice that of any younger brother (Deuteronomy 21:27; Genesis 48:22; I Chronicles 5:1). By definition, this position was available to only one brother, but it had nothing to do with salvation. That is, the possibility of salvation was not limited to the firstborn son who was in possession of the birthright.

When Hebrews says Esau "found no place for repentance," it may simply mean that there was no possibility Isaac could have second thoughts and take the birthright blessing from Jacob and restore it to Esau. The Greek *metanoias*, translated "repentance," means to "think afterwards" or to "change one's mind." Although Esau begged his father to bless him, the nature of the blessing rendered it impossible for Isaac to do so, although he did give Esau a less significant blessing. (See Genesis 27:39- 40.) In other words, it was not Esau who could not repent – indeed, he definitely had a change of mind – it was Isaac.¹⁷¹ If, on the other hand, Esau's inability to find a place for repentance refers not to Isaac but to himself, it means that he could find no way to reverse the consequences of his actions. The verse does not say that Esau could not repent; it is evident that he did. Rather, it says, in an unusual phrase, "he found no place for repentance" (Greek, *metanoias gar topon ouch euren*). What he sought diligently with tears was not the ability to repent, but a way, or a "place" (*topon*) to undo what he had done. But that was impossible.

Likewise, if a Christian commits apostasy, it is impossible to undo the commission of this sin. But it is pressing this reference to Esau too far to say some people cannot be saved regardless of how desperately they want to be. As Leon Morris pointed out in his commentary on this verse, "it is not a question of forgiveness. God's forgiveness is always

open to the penitent. Esau could have come back to God. But he could not undo his act."¹⁷² Westcott pointed out, "The son who had sacrificed his right could not undo the past, and it is this only which is in question. No energy of sorrow or self-condemnation, however sincere, could restore to him the prerogative of the first-born. The consideration of the forgiveness of his sin against God, as distinct from the reversal of the temporal consequences of his sin, lies wholly without [out- side] the argument."¹⁷³

The word "blessing" is translated from the Greek eulogian, which has to do with some kind of "good word." In this case, the blessing upon Jacob consisted of promises of material prosperity and social prominence (Genesis 27:28-29). In terms of the new covenant, the blessing is the gospel itself.

A Contrast between the Old Covenant and the New (12:18-29)

(18) For ye are not come unto the mount that might be touched, and that burned with fire, nor unto blackness, and darkness, and tempest, (19) and the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which voice they that heard intreated that the word should not be spoken to them any more: (20) (for they could not endure that which was commanded, And if so much as a beast touch the mountain, it shall be stoned, or thrust through with a dart: (21) and so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, I exceedingly fear and quake:)

(22) but ye are come unto mount Sion, and unto the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to an innumerable company of angels, (23) to the general assembly and church of the firstborn, which are written in heaven, and to God the Judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, (24) and to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant, and to the blood of sprinkling, that speaketh better things than that of Abel. (25) See that ye refuse not him that speaketh. For if they escaped not who refused him that spake on earth, much more shall not we escape, if we turn away from him that speaketh from heaven: (26) whose voice then shook the earth: but now he hath promised, saying, Yet once more I shake not the earth only, but also heaven. (27) And this word, Yet once more, signifieth the removing of those things that are shaken, as of things that are made, that those things which cannot be shaken may remain. (28) Wherefore we receiving a kingdom which cannot be moved, let us have grace, whereby we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear: (29) for our God is a consuming fire.

Verses 18-21. Now begins a section, extending through verse 24, that compares the law of Moses to the new covenant. It clearly states the superiority of the new covenant.

The events to which these verses refer may be found in Exodus 19:12-13; 20:18-26 and Deuteronomy 4:11; 9:19. The mountain to which verse 18 refers is Mount Sinai, upon which God gave the law to Moses. The giving of the law was a dramatic event, characterized by tangible, visible, audible, earthly phenomena. These phenomena underscore that the law, which is not of faith (Galatians 3:12), had existed in an

environment radically different from that of the new covenant. Faith does not demand visible evidence; it is convinced even of things that are still in the realm of hope (Hebrews 11:1). The new covenant also involves coming to a mountain, but one that human eyes have not yet seen (verse 22).

The description of the old covenant in these verses clearly casts it in a negative light. It was a physical mountain that burned and yet was shrouded in black darkness. (Compare the references to “outer darkness” in Matthew 8:12; 22:13; 25:30, 41. In at least the last reference, there is a parallel between “outer darkness” and “everlasting fire.” It is possible for “fire” and “darkness” to exist in the same context.) God gave the law in the midst of a tempest. The trumpetlike voice they heard so frightened the people that they begged to hear it no more. They wanted Moses to relay the word of the Lord to them, rather than it coming to them directly. In other words, the law did not promote intimacy with God but distance from Him.

Although Mount Sinai could be touched, the people were forbidden to touch it. Indeed, if an animal or human being touched the mountain, the penalty was death by stoning or by being shot through with an arrow. (See Exodus 19:12-13.) The law was not given in an inviting and welcoming atmosphere. Everything about it struck fear in the hearts of the people and discouraged them from seeking intimacy with God. The sight was so terrifying that even Moses was “exceedingly afraid” and trembled.

Verses 22-24. The contrast between the two covenants is striking. Whereas God gave the law in a way that discouraged the people of Israel from hearing His voice and strictly forbade them even to touch the mountain upon which He gave the law, under the auspices of the new covenant believers are to “come boldly to the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16). They have “boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus” (Hebrews 10:19).

Those who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ have come not to Mount Sinai but to Mount Zion. This is not the earthly Mount Zion that was captured by David from the Jebusites (II Samuel 5:6-9) and that was eventually extended to include the site of Solomon’s Temple (Psalm 78:68-69),¹⁷⁴ but the heavenly Mount Zion, upon which stands the Lamb (Revelation 14:1). The earthly Mount Zion was merely a type or shadow of the heavenly reality. (See 10:1.)

If Mount Zion refers specifically to the Temple which stood upon it, it is significant that the Temple of Solomon, in spite of its variations from the Tabernacle in the wilderness, was designed “by the Spirit” (I Chronicles 28:12). Concerning the plans for the Temple, David said, “All this . . . the LORD made me understand in writing, by His hand upon me” (I Chronicles 28:19, NKJV). If the Tabernacle was built according to a heavenly pattern (see 8:5; 9:23), there is no reason to think any less of the Temple.¹⁷⁵

Believers have also come to “the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem.” John described this city in Revelation 21:2, 10-23. Paul also contrasted it with earthly Jerusalem.

(See Galatians 4:25-26.) This is the city “which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God” (11:10). It is the city Abraham sought but never found. God has prepared it, however, for all people of faith (11:16). The heavenly Jerusalem is the continuing city that is to come (13:14). Although this city has not yet descended from heaven, those who partake of the new covenant have access to its spiritual privileges. (See 4:16; 9:8; 10:19-22.)

The heavenly Jerusalem is occupied by “an innumerable company of angels.” This description reminds us that angels accompanied the giving of the law of Moses. (See 2:2.) Deuteronomy 33:2 speaks of “ten thousands of saints” that accompanied the Lord in the giving of the law, and the reference here is to angels. (See Septuagint translation.) The Hebrew *qadosh*, translated “saints” in Deuteronomy 33:2, certainly can refer to human beings, but there is nothing to prevent it from referring to angels.

The form of the word used in this verse simply means “holy ones.” Since we know the law was given by the hands of angels, this is the most reasonable understanding of the word in Deuteronomy 33:2. According to Daniel, “ten thousand times ten thousand” stand before the Lord (Daniel 7:10), an obvious reference to the vast multitude of angels. At Sinai, the angels God used in giving the law were part of the distant and unapproachable scenario; in terms of the new covenant, it is not so. Believers have come to the heavenly city populated by the angels.

Believers have come also to “the general assembly and church of the firstborn.” The words “assembly” (Greek, *panegyrei*) and “church” (Greek, *ekklesia*) in this context are virtual synonyms; by definition the church is an assembly of redeemed people. The word “firstborn” is plural (Greek, *prototokon*). (For the parallel between “firstborn” and “birthright,” see comments on verse 16.) Under the new covenant, people of faith are the firstborn by virtue of their identification with Jesus Christ, who is the ultimate firstborn. (See 1:6; 2:13; Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:15, 18; Revelation 1:5.) Those who are in the church are “registered in heaven.” Similar terminology appears elsewhere. Jesus told the seventy disciples that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:20). Paul declared that the names of his fellow workers were in the Book of Life (Philippians 4:3). John said that those who were not written in the Book of Life would be cast into the lake of fire (Revelation 20:12, 15).

Believers have come to “God the Judge of all.” At the giving of the law, the people of Israel were afraid even to hear the voice of God. Under the new covenant, people of faith have actually come to God Himself. The identification of God as “the Judge of all” no doubt reminded the first readers of this letter that they would one day answer to God for their response to the Messiah and His new covenant. (See 10:30-31.) If, after having received the knowledge of the truth, they trampled the Son of God underfoot (10:26, 29), they could expect to experience the vengeance of God. (See II Thessalonians 1:8.)

Believers have come to “the spirits of just men made perfect.” This phrase apparently refers to the people of faith mentioned in chapter 11, who were justified by faith but who were not “made perfect apart from us” (11:40). Now that the new covenant has been

established in Christ's blood, the full benefits of the Atonement have been applied to these people.

In general, when Scripture speaks of those who are dead without any reference to their material body, it identifies them as "spirits." When it refers to the dead with some awareness of their body, it tends to describe them as "souls." (See, e.g., Revelation 6:9-10.) We should make no radical distinction between "soul" and "spirit." Both terms refer to the immaterial person, except in those cases where "soul" refers to the person himself in his full human existence. (See comments on 4:12.) It may be that "soul" emphasizes the immaterial person as he relates to his body and the material world, whereas "spirit" emphasizes the immaterial person as he relates to God. But the phrase "spirits of just men" does not establish a precise anthropology. It simply points out that those who died in faith now enjoy the perfection, or completeness, unavailable until the establishment of the new covenant.

Believers have come "to Jesus the mediator of the new covenant." (On the concept of Jesus as the Mediator, see 8:6; 9:15.) The point is clear: no one can participate in the new covenant apart from faith in Jesus. The first readers of this letter were well acquainted with the concept of a new covenant from the Hebrew Scriptures. (See Jeremiah 31:31.) But they needed to know that if they turned away from Jesus, they were at the same time turning away from any hope of receiving the new covenant. (See 8:6.)

Believers have come to "the blood of sprinkling that speaks better things than that of Abel." The blood of sprinkling is the blood of Jesus, which established the new covenant. (See Matthew 26:28.) The blood of Jesus speaks of reconciliation to God, of forgiveness from sin. (See Ephesians 1:7.) The blood of Abel speaks of condemnation (Genesis 4:10). (For a discussion of "sprinkling," see comments on 10:22.)

The word "come" in verse 22 is the language of conversion. It is translated from the Greek *proseluthate*, a form of which is transliterated "proselyte." Participants in the new covenant are those who have experienced the new birth (John 3:5). By means of this experience, they enjoy the privileges described in these verses.

We should not understand the references to "God the Judge" and "Jesus the mediator" as suggesting a distinction between "persons" in the Godhead. They do not mean one "person" in the Godhead is the Judge, while another is the Mediator. Jesus declared, "For the Father judges no one, but has committed all judgment to the Son

... and has given Him authority to execute judgment also, because He is the Son of Man" (John 5:22, 27, NKJV). To the men of Athens, Paul said, "God . . . commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom he has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead" (Acts 17:30-31, NKJV). On the basis of the Incarnation, by virtue of the genuineness and fullness of His humanity, which enables Him to identify with the human condition (4:15), God will judge all people.

References to God as Father pertain to God prior to, beyond, and above the Incarnation. Theologians use the term “transcendence” to speak of God in His “otherness” or “beyondness” or in contrast to His “immanence,” which pertains to His presence among us. In relation to His immanence, God is identified as Spirit. But Jesus is God incarnate, God in human existence. We do not say, however, that God is at one point Father but not Son or Spirit, at another point Son but not Father or Spirit, and at another point Spirit but not Father or Son. All that God is, He is at all times. He does not change (Malachi 3:6). There has never been any change in God as it pertains to His essential nature or deity.

But we cannot deny that the Incarnation occurred at a specific point in time. The Incarnation did not effect any change in God as far as His divine essence was concerned, but it did result in God adding human existence to His divine nature. (See Philippians 2:5-8.) Before the Incarnation, God was eternally Father, Word, and Holy Spirit. (See John 1:1-2.) These titles do not designate three “persons” but describe one God who is at once Father of creation in a general sense and of people of faith in a specific sense, Word (Greek, *logos*) in reference to the communication of His purpose, and Spirit in reference to His activity. In the Incarnation, the Word was made flesh (John 1:14; I Timothy 3:16; I John 1:1-2; 4:1-2). This union of humanity and deity, Jesus Christ, became known as the Son of God. (See Luke 1:35; Galatians 4:4.) Thus, following the Incarnation, it is correct to speak of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit (Matthew 28:19). We can consider God as Father and as Holy Spirit apart from the Incarnation, for these are references to God in His transcendence and immanence. But when we consider the Son of God, we must always have the Incarnation in view, for He is by definition the Word made flesh.

Since the Incarnation, it is impossible to know the Father apart from knowing the Son. (See John 8:19.) To know Jesus is to know the Father; to see Jesus is to see the Father. (See John 14:6-10; I John 2:23.) There is no radical distinction of “persons” in God; the only distinction is between the humanity and deity of Christ. The “subject-object” relationship between the Father and the Son, which some trinitarian theologians use to prove a plurality of “persons” in the Godhead, actually arises from the fullness and genuineness of the humanity of the Messiah. We do not say one “nature” communicated with another, but the Incarnation required that Jesus possess a full human identity, including the human psyche. Because Jesus was fully human, He shared in all the experiences common to humans, including the need to pray. The Incarnation transcends our human experience and reasoning ability. We certainly cannot explain it by saying one “person” in the Godhead prayed to another.

Paul wrote, “For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus” (I Timothy 2:5, NKJV). Any reference to Jesus as Mediator is an acknowledgement of His humanity. Any reference to God as Judge subsequent to the Incarnation is also a reference to God as He is known in the person of Jesus Christ. Thus, both verses 23 and 24 acknowledge the Incarnation, which is specifically the point that the first readers of Hebrews were in danger of denying. (See 10:29.)

Verse 25. Here again is an allusion to the danger facing the first readers of this book. Although they had placed their faith in Jesus and embraced the new covenant, they were in danger of reverting back to the rituals of the law of Moses. There seems to be a parallel here with 2:2-4, bracketing within this letter the impossibility of escaping the consequences of neglecting the new covenant. On Sinai, God spoke through angels (2:2; Galatians 3:19; Psalm 68:17). Under the new covenant, it is God Himself who speaks directly (verse 23 and 2:3). Those who heard and refused His voice (through angels) as expressed under the law of Moses did not escape the consequences of their disobedience (2:2); neither shall those who “turn away from Him” under the terms of the new covenant (2:3).

It is significant that the giving of the law involved God speaking (through angels) “on earth,” while the new covenant involves God speaking “from heaven.” This contrast indicates the nature of the covenants. The law of Moses was a covenant regulating the life of ancient Israel on earth, specifically in the land promised to Abraham. It contained no promise of eternal life in heaven. (See comments on 9:15.) The new covenant offers profuse promises of the eternal heavenly inheritance.¹⁷⁶ Even though the Hebrew Scriptures indicate that God did speak from heaven (Exodus 20:22; Deuteronomy 4:36), the writer of Hebrews declares that it was “on earth” because God gave the covenant on a physical mountain on earth (verse 18) and it pertained to the earthly life of the people. It was “an earthly revelation in comparison with the revelation given in the gospel.”¹⁷⁷

The warning not to “turn away” is in harmony with all this letter has to say about the temptation facing its original readers. They had believed on Jesus as their Messiah, and they had come to Him on the basis of the new covenant, but they were now tempted to turn away and to revert back to the law of Moses.

There is a direct contextual and linguistic connection between the word translated “speaks” (Greek, *lalounta*) in this verse and “speaks” (Greek, *lalounti*) in verse 24. Both are from the Greek *laleo*, and their close connection here makes their meaning virtually synonymous. That is, what God speaks now in terms of the new covenant is the same as what the blood of Jesus speaks; it is a message of faith and forgiveness. There seems also to be a contextual parallel between the message spoken by the blood of Abel and that spoken by angels on God’s behalf at Sinai, especially when we consider the extended context of verses 18-21. If we remember that the law of Moses was not of faith (Galatians 3:12) and that its emphasis was not so much on what one believed but on what one did, it seems clear that the result of the law was to condemn and to cry out for judgment, just as the blood of Abel did. (See Romans 7:5, 8-14.)

The Abrahamic covenant, which was separate from the law of Moses, addressed the need for faith. (See Galatians 3:6-19.) Nothing prevented the ancient Israelites from having faith in God; indeed, faith was the nature of the Abrahamic covenant of which they were recipients. But the law of Moses itself had to do with works, not faith (Galatians 3:12). So the new covenant speaks of faith and forgiveness, while the law of Moses speaks of works and judgment. For those who turn away from the new covenant and defect to the old

covenant, only the curse of the law — the demand for perfect obedience as the only means to avoid the negative consequences of the law — remains. (See Galatians 3:10-11.) There can be no escaping it.

Verses 26-28. At the giving of the law of Moses, the voice of God (through angels) shook the earth. (See Exodus 19:18.) Since the old covenant itself was an earthly covenant, the phenomena associated with it were essentially earthly. (See verses 18-21, 25.) But the new covenant is heavenly in nature, and God has promised that He will “once more . . . shake not only the earth, but also heaven.” These words are drawn from Haggai 2:6, and as in Haggai, they indicate the termination of the law of Moses and the inauguration and permanence of the new covenant.

The “things that are being shaken” are the things pertaining to the law of Moses. They are being shaken in order to be removed. The law of Moses involves “things that are made.” These things include the Tabernacle and all its furnishings; they even include the stone tablets made by Moses. (See Exodus 25:8-40; 26; 27; 28; 30; 31; 34:1; Hebrews 8:5-13.) Although the Temple still stood in Jerusalem when this letter was written, it would soon be destroyed by the invading Roman armies. Even as this letter was written, all remaining vestiges of the law of Moses were being shaken in preparation for their final removal. But not only was the earth being shaken; so was heaven. This comment suggests that not only were the earthly expressions of the law of Moses being removed, the law was no longer bound in heaven. (See Matthew 16:19.)

The new covenant, however, could not be shaken. It is the final, ultimate covenant, made permanent by being established in the blood of Jesus (verse 24). It has been bound in heaven. This is the “kingdom which cannot be shaken.” It does not have to do with “eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Romans 14:17, NKJV). “Eating and drinking,” as well as the declaration in Hebrews that our hearts should “be established by grace, not with foods which have not profited those who have been occupied with them” (13:9, NKJV), have to do with one of the distinctives of the law of Moses: the regulations on food and drink. The kingdom we are receiving is not characterized by earthly regulations (Colossians 2:20-23) but by grace that works through faith (Ephesians 2:7-9). On the basis of grace alone can we “serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear.”

Paul ministered according to the grace given to him by God. (See Galatians 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:7-8; Romans 12:3; 15:15; I Corinthians 15:10.) The word “grace” is translated from the Greek *charis*, which means a free gift of some kind. In other words, Paul’s ministry flowed out of the exercise of the specific gift he received from God. In Paul’s case, his gift was to be an apostle to the Gentiles.

But Paul was not unique in having a gift. To the church at Rome, he wrote, “Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us, let us use them . . .”

(Romans 12:6, NKJV). In other words, God has given each believer a specific gift or gifts to define his or her function in the body of Christ. Along with this gift comes specific desires and abilities. (See Philippians 2:13; I Peter 4:10-11.)

On *eulabeias*, translated “godly fear,” see comments on 5:7, where the identical word appears. The idea communicated by “reverence” (Greek, *deous*) is “awe.” Under the new covenant, these are the only acceptable attitudes in our service to God, as opposed to the stark terror (Greek, *ekphobos*) and physical trembling that smote even Moses in conjunction with the law (verse 21).

The present participle translated “are receiving” (Greek, *paralambanontes*) implies that though we have begun to enjoy the provisions of the kingdom of God, we have not yet entered into its final and ultimate form. There is much more to come. (See I Corinthians 2:9-10.) Verse 29. This verse is drawn from Deuteronomy 4:24. There the statement “For the LORD your God is a consuming fire, a jealous God” (NKJV) immediately follows a warning not to forget the covenant God established with Israel at Sinai: “Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God which He made with you, and make for yourselves a carved image in the form of anything which the LORD your God has forbidden you” (Deuteronomy 4:23, NKJV). In its new context here in Hebrews, the essence of the warning is the same: Do not forget the covenant God has established with you. But in this new context, the reference to is the new covenant, not the law of Moses. Although Hebrews does not quote the entirety of Deuteronomy 4:24 here, saying that God is a consuming fire is equivalent to saying that He is a jealous God. We must not “turn away” from Jesus and the new covenant (verse 25), for God will not tolerate rivals. Those who refuse Him will not escape the consequences of their actions (verse 25; 2:3).

IV.

Practical Christianity (13:1-25)

To this point, the letter to the Hebrews has been heavily weighted toward doctrinal concerns. The major emphasis has been the superiority of Jesus Christ over all others, including the Hebrew prophets, the angels, Moses, Aaron, Joshua, and the Levitical priesthood. Incorporated into this theme has been the superiority of the new covenant established by Jesus Christ over the law of Moses. This emphasis served the purpose of encouraging the first readers of the letter to remain true to Christ and not to defect to the old covenant.

That theme still undergirds chapter 13 (see verses 9- 16, 20), but it occurs in the context of practical Christianity. What is the impact of the new covenant on daily Christian experience? It results in expressions of genuine love for one's brothers and sisters (verse 1), for strangers (verse 2), for imprisoned believers (verse 3), and for one's spouse (verse 4). It produces contentment and confidence in God (verse 5), respect for and submission to spiritual leaders (verses 7, 17, 24), doctrinal stability (verses 8-9), and a life characterized by thanksgiving and doing good (verses 15-16).

It may seem at first that verses 1-5 form a series of disconnected, unrelated maxims. But these introductory

verses are actually tied together by the theme of love. Verse 1 exhorts the readers to "let brotherly love continue." "Brotherly love" is translated from the Greek *philadelphia*, a compound word formed from *philos* ("love") and *adelphos* ("brother.") In verse 2, the word translated "entertain" is the Greek *philoxenias*, formed from *philos* and *xenizo* ("to receive as a guest," "to entertain"). In verse 5, the words "without covetousness" are translated from the Greek *aphilargyros*, formed from *philos* and *argyros* ("silver"). So verse 1 has to do with loving one's brothers, verse 2 has to do with the demonstration of love in showing hospitality to strangers, and verse 5 declares there is to be no love of money in the lifestyle of the believer. Although verses 3 and 4 do not contain the word *philos* in any form, it is evident that love is their theme also, first in love for imprisoned believers and second in the honorable love for one's spouse that should characterize marriage.

Love Others (13:1)

(1) *Let brotherly love continue.*

Exhortations to brotherly love occur elsewhere in Romans 12:10, I Thessalonians 4:9, I Peter 1:22 and II Peter 1:7. The biblical idea of love is not limited to, or even chiefly

characterized by, one's feelings or emotional attachments. Rather, we cannot separate love from behavior. In its active sense, *philos*, from which *philadelphia* ("brotherly love") comes, means to be "loving, kindly disposed, devoted."¹⁷⁸ Contextually, brotherly love includes hospitality to strangers (verse 2), identification with imprisoned believers (verse 3), and faithfulness to one's marriage vows (verse 4).

Ellingworth pointed out that "Hebrews does not distinguish sharply between [*philadelphia*] and [*agape*]: [*agape*], too, is a human activity directed towards fellow Christians."¹⁷⁹ References to *agape* ("love") appear in 6:10 and 10:24.

The concept of the brotherhood of believers also appears in 3:1 and 13:23. But in Hebrews, believers are not brothers with one another only; they are also Christ's brethren (2:11, 12, 17).

The admonition to "let brotherly love continue" may be a response to the possible defection of first-century Jewish believers from Christ to the law of Moses. If they turned away from Christ, they would be turning away from the brotherhood they found in Him. They should focus on their new identity as brethren in Christ rather than on their previous identity as members of the Jewish community. They should allow the love that characterized the new believing community at the first to continue.

Entertain Strangers (13:2)

(2) *Be not forgetful to entertain strangers: for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.*

The word translated "entertain" (Greek, *philoxenias*) means to show hospitality. Among the ancient Hebrews, hospitality was a great virtue. (See Isaiah 58:7.) A good example was Abraham, who showed hospitality to three "men," two of whom turned out to be angels and one of whom was the Lord (Genesis 18:1-22). The statement "some have entertained angels unawares" no doubt refers to his experience. When he first received these visitors, he did not know they were celestial beings. Because of Abraham's willingness to show hospitality to these visitors, God blessed him with the promise of a son by Sarah.

Hospitality is equally important in the New Testament, which presents it as an expression of authentic Christianity. (See Romans 12:13; I Peter 4:9.) It is a requirement for spiritual leaders. (See I Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8.) Jesus held up hospitality as evidence of love for one's neighbor (Luke 10:34).

It seems likely that the "strangers" were fellow believers in Christ who were traveling and in need of safe lodgings.¹⁸⁰ In the first century, public inns were of questionable reputation.¹⁸¹ Even though they may not be personally acquainted with such travelers, believers should always stand ready to extend loving care to their brothers in Christ.

The admonition to “be not forgetful” may imply that as the early Jewish Christians began to lose their focus on their identity with Christ and to contemplate returning to their former life in Judaism, they became unconcerned with the needs of other Christians. The more focused they were on their identity with Christ, the more concerned they would be with the needs of those whose faith was common with theirs.

Empathize with Those in Prison (13:3)

(3) *Remember them that are in bonds, as bound with them; and them which suffer adversity, as being yourselves also in the body.*

A further expression of brotherly love is to look for opportunities to minister to imprisoned believers. (See Matthew 25:34-46.) It was not uncommon in the first century for Jewish Christians to be imprisoned for their faith. (See Romans 16:7; Colossians 4:10; Philemon 23.) Paul had this experience and deeply appreciated the support of believers (Philippians 1:7, 13; 4:10-14).

The phrase “and them which suffer adversity” does not mean two groups are in view here, one in prison and the other suffering adversity. The word “and” is not in the Greek text; the translators supplied it. The phrase “them which suffer adversity” further describes “them that are in bonds.” The imprisoned believers were enduring hardship.

In the earlier days of their faith, the first recipients of this letter had shown compassion on the author of the letter in his imprisonment (10:32-34). It may be that they had lapsed in this concern due to their flagging faith. They should “call to remembrance the former days” (10:32) and remember those in prison as they had previously done.

Proper empathy would arise as they identified so completely with their imprisoned brethren as to consider themselves “bound with them.” The nature of the Christian community is that when “one member suffers, all the members suffer with it” (I Corinthians 12:26, NKJV).

We may be tempted to find in the phrase “as being yourselves also in the body” a reference to the church as the body of Christ. But that would be to read something into the text.¹⁸² Rather, the point is that since every human being exists in a human body, it is possible to envision how we would feel if we experienced the same adversity as our imprisoned brethren.

Avoid Moral Impurity (13:4)

(4) Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge.

One of the false doctrines which attacked first-century Christians was that celibacy is superior to marriage. (See I Timothy 4:1-3.) This notion ignores that marriage is God's idea; He said it is not good for man to be alone. (See Genesis 2:18, 21-24.) Solomon declared that a man who finds "a wife findeth a good thing, and obtaineth favour of the Lord" (Proverbs 18:22). Jesus demonstrated the honorableness of marriage by participating in a wedding celebration, where He worked His first miracle (John 2:1-11).

Within the covenant bonds of marriage, the sexual relationship is wholesome. To become "one flesh" is as pertinent to marriage as to leave one's father and mother and to enter into the vows of permanence. (See Genesis 2:24.) Indeed, husband and wife are not to refrain from the sexual relationship unless both consent, and then only for a brief period of time (I Corinthians 7:3-5).

In contrast to the sexual relationship in marriage, any sexual activity outside of marriage is certain to merit the judgment of God. "Whoremongers" is translated from the Greek *pornos* and refers specifically to fornication. It is a broad word that encompasses sexual immorality of all kinds, while the word "adultery" refers specifically to the unfaithfulness of those who are married to their vows wherein they promised to keep themselves exclusively to their spouse.¹⁸³ Thus, adultery is a form of fornication, but fornication includes more than adultery. Neither fornicators nor adulterers shall inherit the kingdom of God (I Corinthians 6:9; Ephesians 5:2-6; Galatians 5:19-21).

It is possible to translate this verse as "Let marriage be honorable . . . and let the bed be undefiled." This option is due to the emphatic position of *timios*, translated "honourable." In this case, the point would be that all believers are to highly prize marriage, and they are to refuse to defile the legitimate sexual relationship by being unfaithful to their vows and failing to keep themselves exclusively for one another.¹⁸⁴ (See Matthew 19:9.)

Avoid Greed (13:5-6)

(5) *Let your conversation be without covetousness; and be content with such things as ye have: for he hath said, I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee. (6) So that we may boldly say, The Lord is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me.*

The Greek word translated "conversation" in the KJV is *tropos*, which means "conduct" or "way of life." "Without covetousness" is translated from the Greek *philargyros*, which

is formed from *philos* ("love") and *argyros* ("silver"). The Christian life is to be characterized by love for one's brethren (verse 1), strangers (verse 2), prisoners (verse 3), and one's spouse (verse 4), but it is not to be characterized by a love for money. Instead, in reference to material things, believers are to be content with their present circumstances. (See Philippians 4:11.) Contentment should certainly characterize the lives of those who have food and clothing (I Timothy 6:6-8). These are the essential necessities of life; anything beyond food and clothing is a luxury.

This admonition may be connected to the temptation the original readers faced to return to the law of Moses. The law promised wealth to those who obeyed its requirements.

(See Deuteronomy 8:18; 28:4-6, 8, 11-13.) These Jewish Christians may have looked with longing back to the covenant that promised plenty of material goods. Instead, they should have recognized that knowing God is sufficient. As Jesus taught, life is not defined by material possessions (Luke 12:15). The same word translated "without covetousness" here appears in I Timothy 3:3, which declares that a bishop must not be greedy for money. Indeed, the desire for riches brings many unnecessary and destructive temptations (I Timothy 6:9). Scripture does not oppose hard work, saving, and planning for the future, but it does oppose greed and miserliness. The love of money can actually cause a person to stray from the faith (I Timothy 6:10). It may be that this was at least part of the danger facing the original readers of Hebrews.

The statement "I will never leave you nor forsake you" comes from Deuteronomy 31:8 and Joshua 1:5. In both contexts, God gave the promise in view of the challenge before Joshua to take the land promised to the fathers. As he looked to new horizons and achievements, Joshua had the promise that the Lord would not forsake Him. It is significant that the same promise is given here to Jewish Christians at an equally critical juncture in their experience: Would they press on into the fullness of new covenant faith and experience, or would they fearfully turn back to what they had known and to what was comfortable to them? (See 6:1-2.) God was with Joshua and the people of Israel as they crossed the River Jordan into the fulfillment of the promises made to the patriarchs, and He would be with these Jewish Christians as they pressed on in pursuit of the blessings of the new covenant promised through the Hebrew prophets.

In verse 6, the Septuagint translation of Psalm 118:6 appears. This quote may come in response to pressures brought against the first readers of this letter by unbelieving relatives and former companions in the "Jews' religion" (Galatians 1:13). (See 10:32-33; 12:3-4; Matthew 10:34-36.) It may be that the early Jewish Christians were intimidated by the enmity of unbelieving Jews to the point that their resolve was weakening. If this was the case, they should boldly proclaim the promise of Psalm 118:6: "The LORD is my helper, and I will not fear what man shall do unto me." When people of faith are walking in obedience to the Word of God, they have assurance of the help of the Lord. They do not have a guarantee of freedom from pain or difficulty, but God promises to help them through all trials. When God is our help, nothing anyone can do will ultimately contribute to our downfall. (See Romans 8:18, 28-39.)

Follow Your Leaders (13:7-8)

(7) *Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation.*

(8) *Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever.*

Three times this chapter refers to those who “rule.” (See also verses 17 and 24.) The word translated “rule” (Greek, *hegoumenon*) has to do with leading or guiding. The idea is not so much that of commanding but of leading by example. (See I Peter 5:1-3.) We see this idea in that those who rule are those who have “spoken . . . the word of God.” They are people whose faith should be followed as believers consider the end result of their conduct. These people have not merely told others what they should do; they have patterned the lifestyle that should be common to all believers.

The ministry of these people undoubtedly falls into the categories of Ephesians 4:11. They have spoken the Word of God, which is the responsibility of bishops (I Timothy 3:2). Bishops are also known as elders (Titus 1:5, 7). The ministry of bishops or elders fulfills at least the roles of pastors and teachers.

Apparently, the temptation to defect from Christ and His new covenant had not affected the spiritual leaders of the people to whom this letter was first written. There is no indication that their faith was in danger. Indeed, their faith was an example to follow. In the face of their temptations, the first readers of this letter were to keep in mind or think of (Greek, *mnemoneuete*, from we derive the English “mnemonics”) their spiritual leaders. The leaders were not turning away from Christ. The believers needed to examine carefully the end result of the life of faith of which their leaders were exemplars. Those who maintained their faith would enjoy all the rich, eternal blessings of the new covenant; these were too precious to trade for the temporal attraction of Judaism.

In order to grasp the significance of verse 8 within its context, it is necessary to look at the verse and its surroundings from the viewpoint of first-century Jewish Christians. The statement “Jesus Christ, the same yesterday, and to day, and for ever” would no doubt have reminded them of Malachi 3:6: “For I am the LORD, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob” (NKJV). Malachi gave the immutability of the Lord as the only reason He had not already consumed the disobedient, unbelieving Israelites. The failure of Israel to obey the law of Moses had placed them in danger of the judgment of God (Malachi 3:5), but His unchanging mercy had prevailed over judgment. God continued to spare them to give them an opportunity to repent and to keep the commandments.

Hebrews 13 addresses the practical aspects of obedience to the new covenant. In the immediate context of verse 8, there is an admonition for believers to live as their spiritual leaders (verse 7) and to resist strange doctrines (verse 8). Like the Israelites in the days of

Malachi, the first readers of this letter were tempted to abandon God's covenant. For Malachi's readers, the covenant in view was the law of Moses. For the readers of Hebrews, the covenant in view was the new covenant. But in both cases, the only reason the judgment of God had not already fallen on the disobedient was His immutability. People may change; they may become unfaithful. But God does not change; His mercy endures. (See Psalm 136.)

The immutability of Jesus Christ (or the fact that He does not change) is strong evidence of His deity. Only God does not change. That the author declared "Jesus Christ" is the same yesterday, today, and forever rather than simply asserting the Lord does not change indicates anew that believers must not trample the Son of God underfoot (10:29). To embrace the new covenant was not an option; the identity of Jesus Christ made it necessary to remain faithful to Him and the new covenant.

Avoid Judaism; Follow Jesus (13:9-14)

(9) *Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines. For it is a good thing that the heart be established with grace; not with meats, which have not profited them that have been occupied therein.*

(10) *We have an altar, whereof they have no right to eat which serve the tabernacle. (11) For the bodies of those beasts, whose blood is brought into the sanctuary by the high priest for sin, are burned without the camp. (12) Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. (13) Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach. (14) For here have we no continuing city, but we seek one to come.*

Here, in the essence of simplicity, is a summary of the warning treated in great detail elsewhere in Hebrews: Believers in Christ are not to be moved by divers ("various") and strange doctrines. (See Ephesians 4:14.) Specifically, they are not to revert to any aspect of Judaism. "Meats" refers to the commandments in the law of Moses pertaining to diet. Even these were mere shadows fulfilled in Christ. (See Colossians 2:16-17.) Commandments having to do with foods are contrasted here with grace. The law of Moses focused on human behavior, not on the grace of God. (See John 1:17; Galatians 3:12; Romans 3:21-24; 11:6.)

One of the "strange doctrines" that attacked the first-century church was the commandment to abstain from certain foods, which God "created to be received with thanksgiving by those who believe and know the truth" (I Timothy 4:3, NKJV). Contrary to the restrictions in the law of Moses, the foods God created to be received with thanksgiving include "every creature of God" (I Timothy 4:4). Prior to the law of Moses, God said to Noah, "Every moving thing that lives shall be food for you" (Genesis 9:3, NKJV).

God gave ancient Israel the laws limiting their diet not primarily for health reasons but to provide another point of separation between them and the heathen nations about them. (See Leviticus 11:44-47.) The Canaanites considered the pig the holiest creature, the choice sacrifice to offer to their idols. As part of the separation between Israel and the Canaanites, God commanded the Israelites to consider the pig to be unclean. But with the end of the law of Moses, the restrictions on diet were lifted, and the situation returned to its pre-Mosaic state in which every moving thing was as acceptable for food as vegetables were. Jesus declared this concept when He said, "Do you not perceive that whatever enters a man from outside cannot defile him, because it does not enter his heart but his stomach, and is eliminated, thus purifying all foods?" (Mark 7:18-19, NKJV). In a vision, God told Peter to eat all manner of animals. Although the purpose was to tell him to preach to the Gentiles, certainly a holy God would not have used something inherently unholy to represent something He had cleansed. (See Acts 10:10-15.)

The focus of the new covenant is on the heart, not the physical body. The only way one's heart can be established is by grace. To be occupied with regulations concerning food is of no profit. Food "does not commend us to God; for neither if we eat are we the better, nor if we do not eat are we the worse" (I Corinthians 8:8, NKJV). "The kingdom of God is not eating and drinking, but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit" (Romans 14:17, NKJV). In other words, the concerns of the kingdom of God do not involve one's diet. The heart has to do with the inner person; food has to do with the outer person. The new covenant centers on the grace of God (Ephesians 2:8-9). As believers focus on God's grace, they will be firmly established in their spiritual life. But a focus on the outer person contributes nothing to the spiritual life. (See 9:10.)

Participants in the new covenant have access to an altar that is off-limits to those who are still occupied with the rituals of the law of Moses. As in other cases throughout Hebrews, verse 10 points out the impossibility of merging the new covenant and the old covenant. Those who continue to "serve the tabernacle," which represents all aspects of the law of Moses, have no right to the blessings of the new covenant. To participate in the new covenant, one must recognize the fulfillment and termination of the law of Moses in Christ Jesus (Romans 10:4).

The word "altar" here does not refer to a literal, physical altar; it is a figure of speech that represents the sacrifice of Jesus Christ.¹⁸⁵ The cross of Christ demands exclusive allegiance. It cannot be added to the law, for it brings the law to an end and replaces it with an entirely new covenant. (See Colossians 2:14; Ephesians 2:14-15.) On the Day of Atonement, the priests did not eat the bodies of the sacrificial animals as they did on other days (Leviticus 10:16-18); they carried them outside the camp of Israel and burned them (Leviticus 16:27). The sacrifices on the Day of Atonement represented the death of Jesus on the cross; the priests were not permitted to eat the flesh of these sacrifices. There was apparently a divinely ordained shadow here. Since the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement represented the death of Jesus, which would establish the new covenant, and since the new covenant requires separation from the rituals of the law of Moses, God ordained that the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement would be treated differently than the other

sacrifices. If the priests had been permitted to eat the flesh of the bull and the goat offered on the Day of Atonement, it would suggest that the benefits of the new covenant come by the works of the law. But taking the bodies of these animals outside the camp and burning them implies the severance of the benefits of the new covenant from the rituals of the Tabernacle.

In fulfillment of this type, Jesus suffered outside the gate, or outside of the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem represented in the broadest sense the law of Moses (Galatians 4:25). If Jesus had died inside the city, it could perhaps be said that He in some way perpetuated the law of Moses by simply being the ultimate sacrifice among many. But His sacrifice was in a category alone. It was not merely the greatest sacrifice; it was the only sacrifice ever offered that could actually remove sin. In order to “sanctify the people with his own blood,” Jesus was crucified outside of the city that personified the law of Moses. (See comments on 10:10.) Therefore, those who wish to identify with Him and to partake of the benefits of the new covenant must turn from the law of Moses, depart from the earthly Jerusalem, and “go forth . . . unto him without the camp.” To go outside the “camp” implies leaving the law behind. It is something done outside or external to the old covenant under which Israel lived. It is impossible to stay within the camp—to continue to identify with the law—and to go forth to Jesus at the same time.

A reproach is associated with turning away from the law and embracing Jesus as the Messiah. This reproach was particularly painful for the Jewish people. For Jesus to be taken outside of the city of Jerusalem to be crucified indicated that He was rejected by all that the city represented, which included centuries of tradition that exalted the law of Moses as the supreme revelation of God. The reproach is seen in the cry “Crucify Him!” It is seen in that He died the death reserved for the most base and despicable criminals. To the Jewish people who rejected Him, their peers who believed on Jesus were tainted with the same reproach.

For the Jewish believers who had turned their backs on the religious system represented by the city of Jerusalem, it should have been great comfort to know that Jerusalem was not the eternal city anyway. The “continuing city” is the one to come: the New Jerusalem. (See 11:10, 16.) Those who depart from earthly Jerusalem—and by implication from the law of Moses—to identify with Jesus Christ in His reproach have assurance of their inheritance in the heavenly city to come.

Sacrifices of Praise and Doing Good (13:15-16)

(15) By him therefore let us offer the sacrifice of praise to God continually, that is, the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name. (16) But to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased.

The discussion of sacrifices in these verses served to draw the attention of the early Jewish Christians away from the sacrificial system of the old covenant and point them to the completely different sacrifices of the new covenant. Animal sacrifices were an essential feature of the law of Moses, and they were a consequence of sin. No animal sacrifice actually took away sins (10:4). Instead, they constantly reminded the Israelites of their sinfulness (10:3).

Under the new covenant, the only sacrifice related to sin is the death of Jesus on the cross (verse 12; see also 10:10, 14, 18). Participants in the new covenant do offer sacrifices, but not animal sacrifices to remind them of their sinfulness. Instead, they offer sacrifices of praise, doing good, and sharing. (The Greek *koinonias*, translated “communicate” by the KJV, means to have fellowship or to share with one another.)

We are to offer the sacrifice of praise—which we perform as we verbalize our thanksgiving to God— “continually.” That is, praise is to characterize the life of the believer. We are to offer praise to God “by him,” which contextually means by Jesus Christ. This statement is similar to Peter’s admonition to “offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ” (I Peter 2:5). Peter is in harmony with the author of Hebrews here; the sacrifices we are to offer are radically different from those of the old covenant. They do not involve animals; they are spiritual in nature; we offer them to God as we focus our adoration exclusively on Jesus Christ. (See comments on 7:25.)

The phrase “the fruit of our lips giving thanks to his name” follows the Septuagint translation of Hosea 14:2. The KJV translates the Hebrew text of this passage as “so will we render the calves of our lips,” with “calves” representing the offering of bullocks. Hosea saw this sacrifice of praise as happening in conjunction with the establishment of the new covenant with Israel. When the people return to God (Hosea 14:1) and their iniquity is taken away (this is new covenant language; see comments on Hebrews 10:16-17), their sacrifice of praise will involve vocalized praise rather than the blood of animals. By using this quotation, Hebrews asserts that those who have faith in Jesus Christ enjoy the blessing Hosea foretold. To turn away from Him would be to reject the promise Hosea gave.

Under the law of Moses, the sacrifice of thanksgiving involved the offering of an animal. (See Leviticus 7:11- 38.) Not so under the new covenant. Even the Psalms anticipated a thanksgiving offering that did not involve the flesh of animals. (See Psalm 50:12-15.)

In verse 15 we see the Hebrew identification of God with His name. To give thanks to His name is to offer the sacrifice of praise to God Himself. To the Jewish mind, it was impossible to separate a person from his name. (See 1:4; 2:12; 6:10.) In a very real sense, a person was his name, and his name was the person.

Believers are to take advantage of every opportunity to do good, especially to fellow believers (Galatians 6:10). This admonition does not mean they are to have less concern about doing good for those outside the family of God, but they are never to miss an

opportunity to do good for those who are in the household of faith. The fellowship that characterizes the believing life should include sharing with those in need. There is no room in the family of God for selfishness, greed, or hoarding. If a person sees his brother in need and has the resources to help but does nothing, the love of God is absent in his life (I John 3:17).

God is well pleased with the sacrifices these verses describe; He is not pleased with animal sacrifices offered by those who would revive or perpetuate the obsolete Mosaic covenant. (See 8:13; 10:6.)

The sacrifices just named are not the only ones associated with the new covenant. Other important sacrifices today are the believer's life (Romans 12:1; Philippians 2:17) and the results of evangelistic efforts, new converts (Romans 15:16).

Obey Your Leaders (13:17)

(17) Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.

This is one of three references in chapter 13 to those who rule. (See verses 7 and 24.) As the comments on verse 7 point out, ruling does not mean dictatorship or domination, but leading by one's example of faith and by the declaration of the Word of God. Deviation from the declaration of God's Word disqualifies one from being a spiritual leader. Leaders are to be obeyed as they speak the Word of God and as they are exemplars of a life of faith.

But there can be no escaping that believers must obey their spiritual leaders who are faithful to the Word of God. They must "submit themselves" to their spiritual leaders.

The reason is clear: spiritual leaders are responsible to God for the souls of those they lead. They will give an account to God for their work. If those for whom they were responsible were obedient to the Word of God, these leaders can give an account to God with joy. If not, their report to Him will be with grief.

There is no indication here that the spiritual leader's eternal reward hinges on the faithfulness of those who follow him. The report of grief will not be unprofitable for the spiritual leader; it will be unprofitable for those who refused to obey.

This call to obey spiritual leaders is a call to be faithful to the new covenant. The leaders were not tempted to turn away from Christ and the new covenant; thus, the believers should follow their example.

Pray (13:18-19)

- (18) *Pray for us: for we trust we have a good conscience, in all things willing to live honestly.*
(19) *But I beseech you the rather to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.*

The writer of Hebrews desired the prayers of those to whom he wrote; he especially wished them to pray that he could be restored to them quickly. This comment gives no definite information as to the identity of the author. We know nothing for certain as to why the writer was separated from his readers. It does not seem to be imprisonment, for he declared in verse 23 that Timothy has been set free from apparent imprisonment and that he would accompany Timothy if he came to see the original readers soon. If the writer were imprisoned, he would have had no assurance that he would be able to do so.

The human author of Hebrews was confident that he had a good conscience; he desired to live a completely honorable life. The Greek *peithometha*, translated "trust" by the KJV, means the writer was persuaded that this was so. The Greek word translated "honestly" by the KJV (*kalos*) means "good" in the sense of "honorable." The "good conscience" to which he testified contrasts with the "evil conscience" from which those who are cleansed by Christ's blood are delivered. (See 10:22.) In the larger context of Hebrews, the honorable life is the life of faith in Jesus Christ and adherence to the new covenant.

V.

Concluding Benedictions (13:20-25)

(20) Now the God of peace, that brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the everlasting covenant, (21) make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ; to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (22) And I beseech you, brethren, suffer the word of exhortation: for I have written a letter unto you in few words. (23) Know ye that our brother Timothy is set at liberty; with whom, if he come shortly, I will see you. (24) Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you. (25) Grace be with you all. Amen.

The final verses of Hebrews are a fitting conclusion to a letter whose chief purpose is to demonstrate the superiority of Jesus Christ over all previous revelations of God and to encourage its readers to remain true to the new covenant rather than defecting to Mosaism. This section acknowledges the resurrection of Jesus from the dead, a historical fact that demands a response and that is the evidence of the inauguration of the new covenant (verse 20). It identifies Jesus as the great Shepherd of the sheep, a description that no doubt reminded the early Jewish readers of the new covenant promises associated with the regathering of the nation (verse 20). The covenant established on the basis of Jesus' blood is the everlasting, or eternal, covenant, in obvious contrast to the temporary covenant God made with Israel at Sinai (verse 20).

The closing verses also indicate that the works associated with the new covenant are actually performed in the believer by the God of peace (verse 21). The law was weak through the flesh (Romans 8:3); it made demands upon the ancient Israelites but offered no enablements. Not so with the new covenant.

So from beginning to end, the Book of Hebrews is faithful to its central theme: Jesus Christ is better than all else, and the new covenant established in His blood is vastly superior to the law of Moses.

Verses 20-21. The concluding benediction expresses the writer's hope that God will bring his readers to completion by performing in them the things that please Him. It acknowledges that this work will take place "through Jesus Christ," who deserves eternal glory.

The sentiment of these verses is in keeping with all that we discover about the new covenant elsewhere in Scripture.

The resurrection of Jesus from the dead signaled the inauguration of the new covenant. (See Acts 2:22-33; 13:29-41; Romans 1:1-6; Isaiah 53:8-11 – even though He is "cut off from

the land of the living,” the Messiah’s days are “prolonged” so He can “see His seed”; Matthew 12:38-40; 16:1-4; Luke 11:29-32; I Corinthians 15:3-4, 14, 17-19.) It is impossible to remain passive in the face of Christ’s resurrection. If we do not accept the biblical claim that Jesus rose from the dead and acknowledge the legitimacy of the new covenant He inaugurated, the only alternative is to trample the Son of God underfoot, count the blood of the covenant a common thing, and insult the Spirit of grace. (See 10:29.)

The description of Jesus as “that great Shepherd of the sheep” is new covenant language. As opposed to Moses, who served as a shepherd to Israel from the Exodus to his death (Isaiah 63:11), and Cyrus, a Gentile king who temporarily served as Israel’s shepherd in a limited way (Isaiah 44:28), Jesus Christ is the “great,” and thus the ultimate and final, Shepherd. This role fulfills the prophecy of Ezekiel concerning the regathering of the people of Israel into their land with one shepherd over them. (See Ezekiel 34:11-31, especially verses 13 and 23.) Jesus claimed to be the Good Shepherd who gives His life for the sheep (John 10:11-18.) Even in this context, the resurrection of Jesus from the dead is central (John 10:18). Jesus, whose resurrection gives us a “living hope,” is the Chief Shepherd (I Peter 1:3, 7; 5:4.)

The phrase “the blood of the everlasting covenant” is unmistakably a reference to the new covenant. The blood of Jesus stands in contrast to the blood of bulls and goats that characterized the covenant God established with Israel at Sinai and that was temporary in nature (8:9, 13; 10:4, 16-17, 19; Exodus 24:8; Jeremiah 31:32). The prophecies of the Hebrew Scriptures identify the new covenant as an everlasting covenant (Isaiah 55:3; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 37:26). Although the Hebrew Scriptures also speak of an “everlasting covenant” when the new covenant is not in view, this use does not indicate that any other covenant will endure eternally.¹⁸⁶

The Hebrew *olam*, translated “everlasting,” can—given the right context—mean “eternal,” but it does not necessarily have reference to something without end. *Olam* inherently means “a very long time.” For example, the Aaronic priesthood was an “everlasting priesthood” (Exodus 40:15), but we discover in Hebrews 7:11-12 that it was not eternal; the termination of the law of Moses necessitated the termination of the Aaronic priesthood. The rituals associated with the Day of Atonement in ancient Israel were an “everlasting statute” (Leviticus 16:34), but they terminated with the death of Jesus Christ (Hebrews 10:4-18).

Regarding the “everlasting” covenants in the Hebrew Scriptures, only the context of these references and any related texts in the New Testament can tell us the significance of the word “everlasting.” The New Testament itself, however, identifies only one covenant as “everlasting,” and that is the new covenant. The Greek *aioniou*, translated “everlasting” in the KJV, means “eternal.” The same word describes the eternal life that will be the reward of the righteous (Matthew 25:46). Specifically, the Book of Hebrews itself defines the covenant in view here: it is the same covenant addressed in 8:6. The writer of Hebrews declared that the old covenant was not eternal (7:11-12; 8:7-13; 9:10, 15; 10:9, 16-18).

Therefore, the everlasting covenant must be the covenant that replaced it. The new covenant will never be superseded.

The phrase “make you perfect in every good work to do his will, working in you that which is wellpleasing in his sight” is in harmony with everything the New Testament says elsewhere about the grace of God under the new covenant working in believers to give them right desires and abilities. (See Philippians 2:13; I Corinthians 15:10; Galatians 2:7-9; Ephesians 3:7-8; Romans 12:3, 6; 15:15; I Peter 4:10-11.) By contrast, the law of Moses, which demanded perfect obedience (Galatians 3:10-12), was weak through the flesh (Romans 8:3). In other words, the law demanded of people what they could not do. Indeed, one of the purposes of the law was to convince the people of Israel that they were sinners in need of a Savior (Galatians 3:19-25; Romans 4:15; 5:20; 7:5-14; I Corinthians 15:56). On the other hand, the commandments of the new covenant are its enablements (Philippians 1:6; 2:13).

The word “perfect” is translated from *katartisai*, which means being “equipped.” The same word appears in 10:5, where it is translated “prepared.” The idea is that God will fully equip believers to do the things that please Him. In the new covenant are all the resources one needs to live a life pleasing to God.

All new covenant blessings come “through Jesus Christ.” If He is rejected, there is no hope for salvation (10:26-31).

The phrase “forever and ever” is translated from *aionas ton aionon*. *Aionas* and *aionon* are from the same word translated “everlasting” in the phrase “the everlasting covenant.” The covenant established in Christ’s blood will endure for as long as He receives glory, and that is for eternity.

“Amen” is the English transliteration of the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word, which means something like, “So be it!”

The identification of God as the “God of peace” reassured the troubled Hebrew Christians that in spite of their trials (12:3-4), they could find peace in God, but only under the terms of the new covenant, which the “God of peace” introduced by the resurrection of our Lord Jesus.

“The God of peace” is the One who “brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus.” Elsewhere, Scripture declares that Jesus was raised from the dead by the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God. (See Romans 1:4; 8:9, 11.) Because Jesus Christ is God, the Holy Spirit is also the Spirit of Christ. Thus there was no contradiction for Jesus to declare He would raise Himself. (See John 2:19-21.) When Scripture asserts that Jesus was raised from the dead by God, or by the Spirit of God, the emphasis is on Jesus as Messiah, a focus on the genuineness and fullness of His human nature. When Jesus declares He will raise Himself from the dead, the emphasis is on His deity.

Though God raised others from the dead and restored them to natural life, Jesus was raised to die no more (Romans 6:9-10). He was the prototype of all whom God would eventually raise from the dead to eternal life (I Corinthians 15:20). His resurrection from the dead was conclusive proof that He was who He claimed to be. (See Matthew 12:39-40.)

Verse 22. The letter to the Hebrews is a “word of exhortation.” Exhortation has to do with encouragement. The purpose of the letter was to encourage the wavering Hebrew Christians not to lose heart. Though their trials were painful (12:3), it would have been a terrible mistake for them to turn away from Jesus Christ to return to the rituals of the law.

In this verse we see the wistful appeal of the author. Having written as clearly and persuasively as possible, now all he could do was appeal to his brethren—those who shared his faith in Christ—to receive his message.

Perhaps the reference to having written in “few words” implies that he could have written much more that would have been pertinent. On the other hand, *bracheon*, translated “few words,” may suggest that the author was “outspoken,” or bold.

Verse 23. Timothy had been imprisoned but was now released. The author’s declaration that if Timothy came shortly to see the recipients of this letter he would come with Timothy, supports his appeal in the previous verse. If his readers knew he was hoping to see them soon, perhaps they would recognize his tender concern for them and be more inclined to respond to his message quickly.

Even though this verse names Timothy, it offers no definite clue as to the identity of the author. Many in the first-century church knew Timothy. (See Acts 17:14; 18:5.)

Timothy may have been arrested under Nero in Rome, then released at Nero’s death. If so, the date of the letter would be in the late 60s.¹⁸⁷

Verse 24. Here is the third reference to spiritual leaders in chapter 13. (See verses 7, 17.) The letter does not have spiritual leaders as its primary audience. They were not the ones tempted to revert to Judaism. Instead, the letter was written to the community of believers themselves. The author wished them to greet their spiritual leaders and all the saints on his behalf.

The word “saints” is translated from *hagios*, which implies “holiness.” It is important to note that this word, a form of which is translated “sanctify,” has to do primarily with separation. The Hebrew background of the word (*qadosh*) involves first the way God Himself was separate from His creation and then the way His chosen people, the Jews, were separated from the nations around them by the law of Moses. Only by association did the word begin to take on implications of morality. When we think of the word “holy,” we tend to think immediately of the moral aspects of the word. But a person could choose to be a strict, uncompromising moralist, and yet if he had no faith in God he would not be holy. Because we have faith in God, we are holy; it is our faith that separates us from

the unbelieving world around us. Genuine faith will produce results, and these results will include morality. But it is not morality that makes us holy; it is faith.

The phrase “they of Italy salute you” does not clearly reveal whether it refers to believers who formerly lived in Italy but now lived abroad, which could imply they were sending greetings back to Italy, or to believers who currently lived in Italy and were sending their greetings abroad. In the latter case, which would seem more likely if Timothy was imprisoned in Rome and now released, the letter would probably have been written from Rome.

Verse 25. The author’s final wish was in harmony with that of many other New Testament letters: he wished for the grace of God to be with the believers to whom he wrote.¹⁸⁸ (For a discussion of the perspective of Hebrews on grace, see the comments on 2:9; 4:16; 10:29; 12:15, 28; 13:9.) In the final analysis, grace characterizes the new covenant (John 1:17; Ephesians 2:8-9), so there could be no more appropriate wish than desiring the grace of God.

Notes

¹D. A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 404.

²*Ibid.*, 395.

³*Ibid.*, 404.

⁴Clement of Alexandria suggested that Paul wrote the letter originally in Hebrew and that Luke translated it into Greek.

⁵See 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.

⁶See Leon Morris, in Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981) 12:7.

⁷See *ibid.* The discussion in this paragraph follows Morris.

⁸*Ibid.*

⁹Walter 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.

¹⁰F. 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.

¹¹*Ibid.*, 11.

¹²Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 110.

¹³See Ellingworth, 113.

¹⁴Bruce, 9.

¹⁵*Ibid.*, 18.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 18-19.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, xlix.

¹⁹John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament Edition* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 783.

²⁰Bruce, 39.

²¹*Ibid.*, 57.

²²Ray Summers, *Essentials of New Testament Greek* (Nashville, TN: Broadman Press, 1950), 109.

²³Bruce, 62.

²⁴*Ibid.*

²⁵A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1932) 5:336.

²⁶*Ibid.* 5:418.

²⁷The 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.

²⁸It is interesting to note that English translations preceding the King James Version, such as Tyndale and Coverdale, also use "Joshua." See Bruce, 76.

²⁹The 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.

³⁰Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 566.

³¹Bruce, 98.

³²Bauer, 374.

³³Walvoord and Zuck, 798.

³⁴Bruce, 107, n. 78.

³⁵Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 144.

³⁶Bruce, 109.

³⁷Ellingworth, 311.

³⁸John MacArthur, Jr., *Hebrews*, in *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 137.

³⁹*Ibid.*, 138.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*, 140-41.

⁴¹*Ibid.* 42*Ibid.*, 310.

⁴³*Ibid.*, 312.

⁴⁴Morris, 53.

⁴⁵Walvoord and Zuck, 793.

⁴⁶Westcott, 145-46.

⁴⁷*Ibid.*

⁴⁸See the discussion of first-century Jewish baptism in Bruce, 115-16.

⁴⁹MacArthur, 138.

⁵⁰*Ibid.*, 140.

⁵¹In 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.

⁵²The 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).

⁵³Westcott, 146.

⁵⁴Ellingworth, 317.

⁵⁵Ibid., 318.

⁵⁶For 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.

⁵⁷Ellingworth, 321.

⁵⁸Ibid., 320.

⁵⁹Westcott, 150.

⁶⁰Ellingworth, 323.

⁶¹Morris, 57.

⁶²Walvoord and Zuck, 797.

⁶³Ibid. 64Morris, 60.

⁶⁵Ibid., 64.

⁶⁶Ibid. 67Bruce, 143.

⁶⁸See Bruce, 147-48, n. 56.

⁶⁹Bruce, 148.

⁷⁰Ibid., 151, n. 70.

⁷¹Morris, 70.

⁷²Bruce, 152.

⁷³Ibid., 153-55.

⁷⁴Morris, 71.

⁷⁵Alternatively, 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.

⁷⁶See Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1970), 100-1.

⁷⁷Bruce, 156.

⁷⁸The 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.)

⁷⁹Mosaism 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.

⁸⁰For 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.

⁸¹Although 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.

⁸²This 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.

⁸³It may be somewhat surprising to know that Scripture does not explicitly give the measurements of the Holy Place and the Most Holy Place (also called the Holy of Holies or the Holiest of All). The common consensus is that the Holy Place was twenty cubits long by ten cubits high by ten cubits wide and that the Most Holy Place was ten cubits squared. The following facts support this conclusion:

1. The boards that stood upright forming the sides of the Tabernacle were ten cubits in length, making the Tabernacle height ten cubits (Exodus 26:16).

2. Each side of the Tabernacle was made up of twenty of these boards, each of which were a cubit and a half wide (Exodus 26:16-21).

3. The width of the Tabernacle was approximately ten cubits, for the west end of the Tabernacle consisted of six boards a cubit and a half wide (Exodus 26:22). These six boards placed side by side would measure nine cubits. There is some uncertainty here because there were two additional boards, each a cubit and a half wide, forming “the two back corners of the Tabernacle” (Exodus 26:23, NKJV). They were joined together with the adjacent boards to form the corners, making a total of eight boards across the west end (Exodus 26:24-25). We do not know exactly how they were positioned to form the corners.

4. The Tabernacle covering was a linen curtain consisting of ten smaller curtains joined together. Each of these ten curtains was twenty-eight cubits long and four cubits wide. When joined together, the resulting curtain was thus twenty-eight cubits by forty cubits. The curtains were joined in such a way that precisely in the center, the fifth and sixth smaller curtains were joined with fifty “loops of blue yarn on the edge” of each curtain and “fifty clasps of gold” securing the curtains together. (See Exodus 26:1-6.) The finished product was twenty-eight cubits wide and forty cubits long. If the linen curtain was laid on the top of the Tabernacle framework beginning at the front (east) entrance, thirty cubits would be taken up to cover the top, leaving ten cubits to cover the back, or west, end behind the Most Holy Place. At precisely twenty cubits from the entrance and ten cubits from the west end, the elaborate loops of blue yarn connected by gold clasps would be visible on the ceiling. Since the linen curtain was twenty-eight cubits wide, and approximately ten cubits were needed to cover the width of the Tabernacle, approximately nine cubits would remain to hang down on both the north and south sides. This length would enclose the Tabernacle almost, but not quite, to the ground, since the height of the Tabernacle was ten cubits.

5. On top of the linen covering was a curtain of goats’ hair. (See Exodus 26:7-13.) This curtain consisted of eleven smaller curtains, each thirty cubits long and four cubits wide. Thus the final curtain was thirty cubits wide and forty-four cubits long. The fifth and sixth curtains were joined by fifty loops on the edge of each curtain; each of the matching loops were fastened together by a bronze clasp. In its final form, the goats’-hair curtain was four cubits longer than the linen curtain. Since the extra four cubits were doubled and hung over the entrance to the Tabernacle, precisely forty cubits were left to cover the Tabernacle in the same way as the linen curtain. Thus, twenty cubits from the

entrance and ten cubits from the back of the Tabernacle, the goats'-hair curtain was joined by the bronze clasps exactly over the spot where the linen curtain was joined by the gold clasps. Westward beyond the clasps, the goats'-hair curtain extended another ten cubits over the top of the Tabernacle, then hung down ten cubits to cover the back. The goats'-hair curtain was thirty cubits wide, two cubits wider than the linen curtain, so with ten cubits taken up with covering the width of the Tabernacle, twenty cubits remained — ten on each side — to cover the sides of the Tabernacle all the way to the ground. From within the Tabernacle, then, approximately one cubit of the goats'-hair curtain was visible extending down beyond the linen curtain on both sides.

6. It seems reasonable that the veil which divided the Holy Place from the Most Holy Place would have hung down directly beneath the place where the linen curtain was joined by the blue loops and gold clasps. Hanging "the veil from the clasps" (Exodus 26:33, NKJV) may refer to the gold clasps that joined the linen curtain. Otherwise, there seems little reason for the linen and goats' hair curtains to be joined in this manner at precisely this place. There may be a clue here in the statements that the linen curtains are to be joined in this way "that it may be one Tabernacle" (Exodus 26:6) and that the goats' hair is also to be joined in this manner to "couple the tent together, that it may be one" (Exodus 26:11, NKJV). There is a recognition here that, in a sense, there are two tents, one holier than the other, but that in another sense, the two are one. As support of this view, Hebrews 9:2 indicates there was a first Tabernacle, the Holy Place, while Hebrews 9:3 points out that there was another Tabernacle, "the Holiest of all" (KJV).

⁸⁴See previous note.

⁸⁵Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (Stuttgart, Germany: United Bible Societies, 1971), 667.

⁸⁶See discussion in 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), 184-85, and see discussion in Brooke Foss Westcott, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Repr., Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1980), 246-47.

⁸⁷See discussion in H. Orton Wiley, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Kansas City, MO: Beacon Hill Press, 1959), 282, and in John MacArthur, Jr., *Hebrews* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1983), 222-23.

⁸⁸The Hebrew words commonly translated "showbread" are *lechem happanim*, which literally mean "bread of the face," signifying that it was bread set out before the face of God, or bread "shown" to Him. (See Bruce, 183, n. 12.)

⁸⁹Walter A. Elwell, ed., *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 2:2016.

⁹⁰See discussion on verse 2.

⁹¹See discussion in Paul Ellingworth, *Commentary on Hebrews*, in *New International Greek Testament Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1993), 425-27, and see discussion in Bruce, 184-87.

⁹²Elwell, 2:2016.

⁹³See MacArthur, 222, and C.I. Scofield, ed., *The New Scofield Study Bible* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1989), 115, n. 2.

⁹⁴The function of cherubim is apparently to protect and guard what God reserves to Himself. (See Genesis 3:24.)

⁹⁵Ellingworth, 427.

⁹⁶See Leon Morris, in Frank E. Gaebelin, gen. ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1981), 12:83.

⁹⁷*Ibid.* 98Ellingworth, 444.

⁹⁹Metzger, 668.

¹⁰⁰A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1932) 5:398.

¹⁰¹Jerry M. Hullinger, "The Problem of Animal Sacrifices in Ezekiel 40-48," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (1995): 288.

¹⁰²Zane C. Hodges, in John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, eds., *The Bible Knowledge Commentary, New Testament edition* (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983), 802.

¹⁰³Bruce, 205.

¹⁰⁴In Dake's Annotated Reference Bible, Finis Dake declared that God is three separate persons, but traditional trinitarianism says only that God is three distinct persons.

¹⁰⁵Hullinger, 288.

¹⁰⁶See Matthew 19:16; 19:29; 24:46; Mark 10:30; John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2-3; Acts 13:46, 48; Romans 2:7; 5:21; 6:22-23; Galatians 6:8; I Timothy 1:16; 6:12, 19; Titus 1:2; 3:7; I John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20; Jude 1:21.

¹⁰⁷Some people object to this view by citing the account of the rich young ruler (Matthew 19:16-26; Mark 10:17-27; Luke 18:18-27). They suppose that when Jesus called the young ruler's attention to the commandments of the law of Moses, He was instructing him to obey the law by faith, which would result in eternal life. But a comparison of each of the three accounts indicates otherwise. First, though the young ruler said he had kept the commandments, he had no assurance of eternal life. If the law of Moses had promised eternal life on the basis of adherence to its commandments, it would seem reasonable to think that this young ruler would have been assured by his obedience.

Second, Jesus did not respond directly to his question. Instead, Jesus asked, "Why do you call Me good? No one is good but One, that is, God" (Matthew 19:17, NKJV). Jesus apparently was soliciting the young ruler's opinion as to His identity. Since only God is good, why did the young ruler call Jesus "good"? Did he recognize Jesus' claim to deity? If the young ruler recognized that Jesus was no mere man, but God manifest in flesh, he was well on his way to receiving the gift of eternal life. Apparently, however, the young ruler did not understand this. There is no record of any response to Jesus' question.

Third, Jesus responded to the young ruler's question on the basis of the law of Moses, which was still in effect. He said, "But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments" (Matthew 19:17, NKJV). We may assume here that when Jesus referred to "life," He had eternal life in view, but that is an assumption. It is significant that only Matthew records this statement. Matthew was written to a Jewish audience, and the Jewish people knew the promise of life as it was found in the law of Moses. Jesus did not ignore the young ruler's failure to grasp His identity and then commend the keeping of

the law of Moses as a way to gain eternal life. Rather, because of the young ruler's lack of perception, Jesus resorted to the law of Moses, the lesser revelation under which the young ruler still labored. Otherwise, Jesus is made to offer eternal life on the basis of the mere keeping of the law of Moses, even apart from belief on Him.

Fourth, the young ruler stated that he had kept the commandments from his youth. But he still had not attained eternal life. Jesus responded to the young ruler's claim by saying, "One thing you lack" (Mark 10:21, NKJV). In other words, in spite of the young ruler's adherence to the law of Moses, he had not attained eternal life. The one requirement for eternal life was still lacking.

Fifth, it was not by selling his goods and giving to the poor that the young ruler would attain eternal life, but by following Jesus, which, by implication, means believing on Jesus. It would have been possible for the young ruler to sell all and give to the poor without following Jesus; there would have been no eternal life in that. We know that the real issue was faith in Christ, not only because He said, "Take up the cross, and follow me" (Mark 10:21, NKJV), but also because Jesus explained to His amazed disciples, "How hard it is for those who trust in riches to enter the kingdom of God" (Mark 10:24, NKJV).

The young man trusted in his riches rather than trusting in God, and that was precisely his problem. The only way he could have received eternal life was by trusting in God, which implicitly meant believing on Jesus, not merely by the commandments of the law of Moses, which he kept anyway. As Tuck has pointed out, "The intended message is that the young man was not vindicated by his 'faithfulness' toward the Ten Commandments; rather he was indicted for his faithlessness toward the Messiah who was indicated by and superseded Moses. The regular New Testament thought is that rejection of Messiah in favor of Moses demonstrates actual unfaithfulness even toward Moses (cf. Luke 16:31; John 5:39-47; Rom. 9:31- 10:4)." Gary Earl Tuck, "The Purpose of the Law Relative to Sin in Pauline Literature," Th.D. dissertation, Dallas Theological Seminary, 1991: 96.

¹⁰⁸See discussion in Bruce, 216.

¹⁰⁹David J. MacLeod, "The Cleansing of the True Tabernacle," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 152 (January-March 1995):

61.

¹¹⁰*Ibid.*, 71.

¹¹¹See Morris, 91, and Ellingworth, 478.

¹¹²Ellingworth, 487.

¹¹³See Morris, 93.

¹¹⁴Hodges, 803.

¹¹⁵Bruce, 232.

¹¹⁶Ellingworth, 500.

¹¹⁷*Ibid.*

¹¹⁸In Philippians 2:6, the word "form" (Greek, *morphe*) has to do with an external appearance that is truly indicative of the essence of a thing. The word "being" (Greek, *hyparchon*) is a participle, which indicates continual existence. The word translated "robbery" (Greek, *harpagmon*) is somewhat of a puzzle, since it appears only here in New Testament Greek, nowhere in the Septuagint, and rarely in secular Greek. The idea of

harpagmon seems to be “a prize to be grasped,” whether already possessed or yet future, or as suggested in a marginal note in the New Scofield Study Bible, “a thing to be held on to.” In both appearances of the word “God” in this verse (Greek, *theos*), it is without the definite article, which usually indicates divine essence rather than emphasizing the person of God. Thus, the verse seems to mean that before the Incarnation, He who became incarnate existed continually in His divine essence, including the external “appearance” of that essence (which would presumably have been revealed only to the angels, who are spirit beings, since God is invisible), but He did not consider this “appearance” something to retain as He contemplated adding human existence to His existence as God. Thus, what He gave up in the Incarnation was not deity, but the appearance of deity.

¹¹⁹Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, rev. F. Wilbur Gingrich and Frederick W. Danker, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979), 877.

¹²⁰See discussion in Bruce, 233-34.

¹²¹Here is an overview of various theories of the Atonement:

The Ransom Theory. Later theologians have called this the classical theory because of its widespread acceptance in the first millennium of Christianity. Origen and Gregory of Nyssa were among those who developed this view.

This theory of the Atonement holds that Satan was in legal possession of the souls of people because of their sins. God made an agreement with Satan to trade the soul of the sinless Jesus for the souls of all those who would accept Jesus as their Savior. Since the soul of Jesus was the only one not legally belonging to Satan, this offer was attractive to Satan. He did not realize, however, that Jesus was actually the Son of God. So when Jesus died and Satan attempted to possess His soul, he discovered much to his surprise and dismay that he could not hold the soul of Jesus. Jesus was too powerful for Satan to hold, and thus Satan had neither the soul of Jesus nor the souls of those who accepted Jesus.

The ransom or devil ransom theory has also been called the fishhook theory because some of the early church writers described it in terms of a fisherman who places an attractive bait over the hook in order to attract the fish. The humanity of Jesus was the bait over the hook of deity. When Satan “bit” the humanity, he discovered too late the deity.

While this theory sounds crude and implies deception on God’s part, we should recognize that there is an element of truth in it. That is, in the Atonement God did gain a marvelous victory over Satan, a victory that Satan doubtless did not anticipate. (See I Corinthians 2:8; Colossian 2:15.)

The Satisfaction Theory. In the eleventh century Anselm, archbishop of Canterbury, suggested a view of the Atonement known as the commercial or satisfaction theory. It sees the Atonement as compensation to the Father for His honor wounded by the sins of humanity. Anselm saw sin as essentially failure to give God what is due Him. Since he also pictured God as a feudal overlord who, to maintain his honor, insists that there be adequate satisfaction for any encroachment upon it, Anselm believed that God’s violated honor could be put right again only in one of two ways. Either He must punish

or condemn those who have violated His honor, or He could accept satisfaction made in behalf of those who have violated His honor. Sinful humans could not make adequate payment, for regardless of what they did, they would only be giving God what was already due Him. Therefore, a greater compensation was required, which made the Incarnation logically necessary. Since Christ was both God and man, the value of His life was infinite, and since He was sinless and did not deserve punishment, His offering of His own life went beyond what could have been required of Him. Thus God was able to accept the death of Jesus as payment for His offended honor.

While Anselm's theory reflected the political milieu of his day and suggested that God was somewhat like a feudal lord who feared his serfs might become unruly if he did not deal with them firmly, it did emphasize the seriousness of sin and the costliness of forgiveness.

The Moral Influence Theory. Also in the eleventh century, Peter Abelard presented another view of the Atonement, largely in response to Anselm. Abelard, a scholastic philosopher, taught that forgiveness was not impossible as far as God was concerned. The only problem was that God could offer forgiveness only to those who requested it. The essential need, then, was not for some price to be paid either to Satan or God, but for humans to be influenced to repent.

In order to bring humans to see their need of repentance, God sent His Son to suffer and die for man as a manifestation of divine love. When they saw the great sacrifice God had made, they would be moved to shame and repentance, thus enabling God to forgive them.

While there is some truth in this view, in that the Cross is without question an unsurpassable demonstration of the love of God (John 3:16; I John 4:9-10; Romans 5:8), Abelard was condemned for heresy. The reason is that this view indicates Christ did not make any sort of sacrificial payment to the Father; He merely demonstrated His love for man. Thus the Cross was for man's benefit only. It was a piece of divine showmanship and nothing more.

The church did not see how a death that did not actually accomplish something could be a demonstration of love. As an illustration, let us suppose Jones and Smith are walking along a river and Jones, who is unable to swim, falls into the water. If Smith jumps in to save Jones, we can interpret his efforts as love. But if Jones does not fall into the river and Smith jumps into the water anyway, flailing about while shouting, "See how much I love you!" we would not interpret Smith's actions as a demonstration of love but of questionable sanity. Jones will not be moved to love Smith but to pity him. If the death of Jesus Christ does not actually reconcile us to God, it would seem to be merely a cosmic drama where God, like Smith, does something totally unnecessary in an attempt to impress humans with His love.

The Socinian Theory. A sixteenth-century theory explained the Atonement as merely providing an example people should follow in their total and selfless devotion to God. This teaching, developed by Faustus and Laelius Socinus, rejected any idea of vicarious satisfaction.

This view, most fully expressed by Unitarians, holds to a Pelagian view of the human condition. (Pelagius taught that people are not sinners by nature, that Adam's sin

affected only Adam, and that all people have the ability to do God's will and to fulfill His expectations by their own power.) Since people have the total power of choice over each decision, all they need is an example to follow. The death of Christ provided that example.

The Socinian theory also holds that God is not a God of retribution and that He does not demand any form of payment or satisfaction from those who have offended Him. It sees Jesus as a mere human who was able to surrender perfectly to God.

The Socinian view overlooks the many passages of Scripture that describe the death of Jesus as a ransom, a sacrifice, a case of sin bearing, and a practice of priesthood, focusing instead on I Peter 2:21: "For even hereunto were ye called: because Christ also suffered for us, leaving us an example, that ye should follow his steps." The idea is that we are called to suffer as Christ suffered. The context of this verse, however, sees the death of Christ as sin bearing: "Who his own self bare our sins in his own body on the tree, that we, being dead to sins, should live unto righteousness: by whose stripes ye were healed" (I Peter 2:24). Our suffering is limited to the willing acceptance of undeserved wrongs: "For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully. For what glory is it, if, when ye be buffeted for your faults, ye shall take it patiently? but if, when ye do well, and suffer for it, ye take it patiently, this is acceptable with God" (I Peter 2:19-20).

The Governmental Theory. This theory describes the Atonement as a demonstration of divine justice. It views sin as a serious wrong that demands justice on a scale corresponding to the magnitude of the infraction. Whereas some atonement theories are almost purely objective (viewing the Atonement as affecting God only, usually in satisfying His divine displeasure with sin) and others are almost purely subjective (viewing the Atonement as affecting humans only, usually in impressing on them the gravity of sin or the love of God), the governmental theory is a mediating view with both objective and subjective elements.

Hugo Grotius, a late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Calvinist who later embraced Arminianism, developed this view in response to the Socinian theory.

According to Grotius, God is a holy and righteous ruler who has established laws that must be obeyed. If they are disobeyed, God has the right to punish the offender. Since God is a God of love, however, He can make a sovereign choice to forgive sin and absolve humans of guilt. But since He also must keep in mind the importance of demonstrating the obligation of humans to keep His law, He chose to deal with human guilt in a way that would demonstrate both His clemency and severity.

Grotius saw God as a ruler rather than as a creditor or master. Whereas a creditor may cancel a debt if he chooses, and a master may punish or refrain from punishing his servants, a ruler cannot simply overlook the laws of his realm. Grotius described the death of Christ as an act of "penal substitution." Instead of Christ taking the penalty of death that should have been inflicted on the human race, the death of Christ was a substitution for a penalty. Grotius did not believe it was possible to transfer a penalty from one person to another, so his view differed from that of Anselm, who saw the Atonement as a penalty inflicted on Christ instead of on human beings.

According to Grotius, then, the suffering of Christ was not a vicarious bearing of the sins of others, but a demonstration of God's hatred of sin that, when viewed by the

human race, would induce them to understand the horror of sin and turn from it. As they turned in repentance, they could receive forgiveness.

Grotius' theory differed from Socinianism in that he saw the death of Christ as more than a beautiful example of how Christians should live; he saw in the Atonement an illustration of the consequences of sin. Grotius believed that people not only had to be encouraged to do good, they must be deterred from doing evil.

The governmental theory differs from the moral influence theory in that the former sees the death of Christ as a legitimate offering made to God by Christ, upon the basis of which God is able to deal mercifully with humanity. This is the objective element in the theory. But the main emphasis of Grotius' view is its subjective element: the impression made upon humans of the seriousness of sin and its consequences.

Other Views. In addition to these theories of the Atonement, other views with sometimes subtle differences from the above have surfaced in church history.

The Recapitulation Theory. While this view contains the idea that Christ was a ransom to Satan, it goes beyond the ransom theory to suggest that Christ in His life and death repeated all the stages of human life that belong to humans as sinners, including death. By doing so, Christ replaced Adam's disobedience with obedience. This obedience becomes humanity's by faith and accomplishes an ethical transformation. Irenaeus (c. 130-200) suggested this view.

The Dramatic Theory. Aulen (1930) suggested that the Atonement was actually a divine drama illustrating the struggle between evil and good and presenting Christ as the ultimate victor in the conflict.

The Mystical Theory. This view, represented by Schleiermacher (d. 1834), says Jesus took on a sinful human nature but successfully triumphed over it by the power of the Holy Spirit. Rather than salvation lying in the cross of Christ, it rests in His person. His divinehuman nature is communicable to humans, and therein lies salvation.

The Vicarious Repentance Theory. According to this view, put forth by John McLeod Campbell (d. 1872), all that humans need to obtain forgiveness is an adequate repentance. Since humans are unable to repent sufficiently, Christ acted on their behalf, meeting the conditions for forgiveness. Christ's death also stimulates humans to the life of holiness necessary for acceptance by God.

¹²²Ellingworth, 518.

¹²³See discussion in Daniel L. Segraves, *Themes from a Letter to Rome* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1995), 134-36.

¹²⁴Ellingworth, 526.

¹²⁵See Daniel L. Segraves, *James: Faith at Work* (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1995).

¹²⁶Bruce, 262.

¹²⁷See discussion in Bruce, 267.

¹²⁸*Ibid.*, 270.

¹²⁹*Ibid.*, 268.

¹³⁰See comments in volume 1 on hypostasis in 1:3. In that case, it has an objective meaning, indicating that Christ is the essence of God. But in 3:14 and 11:1, the word is

better understood in the subjective sense of assurance. (See discussion in Morris, 113, and Bruce, 278.)

¹³¹See discussion in Bruce, 283-86.

¹³²Bruce, 283.

¹³³Ibid., 284.

¹³⁴Craig S. Keener, *The Bible Background Commentary, New Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 532.

¹³⁵Ibid., 675.

¹³⁶Morris, 119.

¹³⁷Ibid.

¹³⁸Bruce, 297, n. 85.

¹³⁹See Bruce, 312.

¹⁴⁰Bruce, 317-18.

¹⁴¹Ibid., 318, n. 176.

¹⁴²Ibid., 317, n. 175.

¹⁴³The KJV translation of Acts 7:20, which has Moses being “exceeding fair,” does not completely translate the Greek *asteios toi theoi*.

¹⁴⁴Morris, 126.

¹⁴⁵Ibid.

¹⁴⁶Bruce, 322, n. 194.

¹⁴⁷Ibid., 323.

¹⁴⁸See Bruce, 321-23, both text and notes, for a discussion of these efforts to reconcile the accounts in Exodus and Hebrews. Leon Morris, in Morris, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, notes the difficulty in reconciling the accounts and gives supporting evidence for both the exit to Midian and the Exodus. Morris prefers the flight to Midian as the occasion in view, but he makes no attempt to reconcile the reference to Moses’ lack of fear in Hebrews to the record of his fear in Exodus.

¹⁴⁹See, for example, the flight of Joseph, Mary and Jesus into Egypt to escape Herod’s wrath (Matthew 2:13-

15) and Paul’s escape from Damascus in a basket by night (Acts 9:23-25; II Corinthians 11:32-33). Neither was an act of fear or cowardice.

¹⁵⁰Bruce, 337.

¹⁵¹Ibid.

¹⁵²Ibid., 340-41.

¹⁵³The critical text omits the words “were tempted.”

¹⁵⁴Robertson, 432.

¹⁵⁵Morris, 133.

¹⁵⁶Robertson, 432.

¹⁵⁷Ibid.

¹⁵⁸Ibid.; Morris, 134; Keener, 678.

¹⁵⁹William Barclay, *The Making of the Bible* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1961), 13-14.

¹⁶⁰Morris, 134.

¹⁶¹Robertson, 433.

¹⁶²Bruce, 355, n. 51.

¹⁶³See discussion in Bruce, xliiff. and 266ff.

¹⁶⁴A topic of debate in the area of biblical anthropology has been the origin of the soul or spirit in all humans after Adam and Eve. According to the creationist view, God creates each spirit and places it in the human being at conception. Under the preexistent view, God created all souls or spirits at some point in eternity, later assigning each one to a body. This view is pagan in origin. The traducian position says the immaterial nature is communicated to the child by his parents in the process of conception, along with the physical body.

The creation of the original man is distinct from the creation of all else, for the Lord God “breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul” (Genesis 2:7). Thus the immaterial part of Adam originated directly with the breath of God. But what is the origin of the soul in people descended from Adam? We must reject the idea that souls are preexistent, waiting to be assigned to bodies, as lacking biblical evidence. Eastern religions have accepted the idea of the “transmigration of the soul,” but this view – which would allow the possibility of reincarnation – is without scriptural support.

While some theologians have endorsed and continue to support the theory that God creates a new soul for each child born, it raises several problems. One has to do with the impact of this idea on the doctrine of the original sin. How would sin then be imputed to the human race? Does God create sinful souls? Or does He create innocent or holy souls but infuse them with sin at some point after they are assigned to a body? And when do the soul and the body unite? Is it ever possible for there to be a baby in the womb with no soul?

The traducian theory seems more in keeping with the biblical witness and the observable facts. Just as Adam was made in the image and likeness of God, he “begat a son in his own likeness, after his image; and called his name Seth” (Genesis 5:3). If the image of God in Adam included his immaterial nature, it would seem that the image of Adam in Seth would include the same. When God gave humans the command and ability to multiply and replenish the earth (Genesis 1:28), He did not limit that reproductive ability to the physical body. It was the ability to authentically reproduce humanity, including both the material and immaterial parts. This view eliminates the problem of God creating sinful souls, it explains the communication of the sinful nature to all humanity from our father Adam, and it fits with the observable facts of psychology.

¹⁶⁵See the discussion on sickness as divine discipline in Segraves, James: Faith at Work, 189-91.

¹⁶⁶See “Holiness: Separating unto God and from Sin” in Segraves, Themes from a Letter to Rome, 173-204.

¹⁶⁷See “Righteousness and Justification: Imputing Right Standing to the Believer’s Account” in Segraves, Themes from a Letter to Rome, 11-61.

¹⁶⁸See discussion in H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1955), 250-51.

¹⁶⁹See Bruce, 367.

¹⁷⁰Ibid., 366.

¹⁷¹See discussion in Ellingworth, 668.

¹⁷²Morris, 140.

¹⁷³Westcott, 408.

¹⁷⁴See discussion in Bruce, 373.

¹⁷⁵See discussion of the typological function of Jewish history in Bruce, 62-63.

¹⁷⁶See Matthew 19:16, 29; 24:46; Mark 10:30; John 3:15-16, 36; 4:14, 36; 5:24, 39; 6:27, 40, 47, 54, 68; 10:28; 12:25, 50; 17:2-3; Acts 13:46, 48; Romans 2:7; 5:21; 6:22-23; Galatians 6:8; I Timothy 1:16; 6:12, 19; Titus 1:2; 3:7; I John 1:2; 2:25; 3:15; 5:11, 13, 20; Jude 1:21.

¹⁷⁷Bruce, 381, n. 193.

¹⁷⁸Bauer, 861.

¹⁷⁹Ellingworth, 694.

¹⁸⁰Ibid. 181 Bruce, 390.

¹⁸²See discussion in Bruce, 392, and Ellingworth, 696.

¹⁸³See discussion in Bruce, 392. ¹⁸⁴See discussion in Ellingworth, 697. ¹⁸⁵See discussion in Bruce, 399-402.

¹⁸⁶In the Hebrew Scriptures, the phrase “an everlasting covenant” is used in connection with the Abrahamic covenant (Genesis 17:7, 13, 19; I Chronicles 16:17; Psalm 105:10), the Mosaic covenant (Leviticus 24:8), the Davidic covenant (II Samuel 23:5), and the new covenant (Isaiah 55:3; 61:8; Jeremiah 32:40; Ezekiel 16:60; 37:26). The phrase “the everlasting covenant” is used in connection with the Noahic covenant (Genesis 9:16) and the Mosaic covenant (Isaiah 24:5).

¹⁸⁷Keener, 684-85.

¹⁸⁸See I Corinthians 16:23; II Corinthians 13:14; Galatians 6:18; Ephesians 6:24; Philippians 4:23; Colossians 4:18; I Thessalonians 5:28; II Thessalonians 3:18; I Timothy 6:21; II Timothy 4:22; Titus 3:15; Philemon 25; II Peter 3:18; Revelation 22:21.