

**Heavenward
Through
Hebrews**

Final Revelation

Jesus prophesied the destruction of Jerusalem. “But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies,” He averred, “then recognize that her desolation is at hand” (Luke 21:20). As for the Temple and its buildings, center of worship under the Old Covenant, the Lord also spoke of their destruction: “As for these things which you are looking at,” He instructed His followers, “the days will come in which there will not be one stone left upon another which will not be thrown down” (Luke 21:6). All things connected with the system of worship and sacrifice under the Old Testament — the Temple, the sacrifices, the priesthood, the records, the nation — were going to be cast down; the new wine of the New Covenant was not going to be poured into the wineskin of the Old.

But Israel according to the flesh was attached to her physical accoutrements. Understandable; physical things for a physical people. The concern of God, however, was for the Hebrew Christians who would have to witness the destruction of the physical trappings of Judaism. Many of them were still zealous for the things of the Law, keeping its rituals and observing Jewish customs. The danger was that when the physical was violently torn down, these believers would not have enough faith and understanding to maintain their fellowship with the Lord Jesus, and to be able to move forward with a better understanding of the gospel. Hence, sometime before the 67 AD invasion of Jerusalem began by the Roman legions, and before the Temple burnt in August of 70 AD, the letter of Hebrews was written. Its purpose was to prepare the Hebrew Christians for the destruction of those physical remnants of the system of Moses, and for moving their focus upward, where necessary, to the spiritual elements of Christ in glory and His reign in a spiritual tabernacle.

- **Old Covenant revelation** - Of God it was written, “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him” (Psalm 97:2). One of the purposes of this covering is to prevent the material universe from vaporizing in the presence of His glory. Therefore the great God has to communicate with man across that barrier, and man has to believe in God through that which God is able to reveal to man. “God,” was the introductory word of the Hebrew epistle, “spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways” (Hebrews 1:1). Sometimes the Lord appeared in human form and spoke. Moses would hear the voice of the Lord speaking from between the wings of the cherubim above the mercy seat in the Holy of Holies. Often the Almighty would appear in a vision or a dream. Sometimes He would deliver His message through minstrels, giving His words while the seer would play his instrument. The types and the shadows were also created to communicate the plan of God.
- **Last days revelation** - All other messages and messengers were preliminary to the coming of the Son of God. The Father, then, after having delivered through the Old Testament prophets, “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Hebrews 1:2). What is spoken through the Son is final; there is no other revelation once His message is preached.

“The last days” is the final segment of earth’s existence. The words delivered through the Son are what govern God’s people during this final segment, and nothing is to added to or taken away from that “faith which was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). Through the “voice” of Jesus — that which is now written in the pages of the New Testament — “He has made known to us the mystery of His will” (Ephesians 1:9). That “which in other generations was not made known to the sons of men” has been revealed, as the Son has given the information “revealed to His holy apostles and prophets in the Spirit” (Ephesians 3:5). What a blessing to live in “these last days”!

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Creator and Inheritor

The epistles often open in sweeping statements about the Lordship of Jesus and His nature in relation to the overall communication of who God is. The apostle John, in his documentary on Jesus' life on earth, used the same technique in painting the huge picture about the Lord, stating that "the Word" was God and was the Creator. These sweeping concepts are spiritual in nature, and require that man's thought processes be upgraded to be able to begin to apprehend them. To prepare man, God had to work carefully, destroying the earth once because of man's rebellion, molding the special line of Abraham's descendants in Egypt, and finally bringing them into the Promised Land. Hence the revelation began slowly, with God's walking with Adam in the Garden, and upward through His appearances and speaking with Abraham, in His giving of the Law to Moses, to His various modes of speaking through the prophets such as Isaiah. The final revelation, then, would come through the Son of God. Those who came before were preliminary messengers; the Son would be universally recognized as the One who would be authorized to speak in behalf of the Father, and pronouncements given through Him would be final.

- **Authority as Creator** - That which is created is under the authority of that which created it. "The potter," affirmed the apostle Paul, has the "right over the clay, to make from the same lump one vessel for honorable use, and another for common use" (Romans 9:21). God's Son, according to Hebrews' author, then, is the One "through whom He made the world" (Hebrews 1:2). The supremacy of Jesus in all things is thus established.
- **Authority as Upholder** - That which is fragile and delicate must be maintained by that which is sturdy and self-sustained. The Lord Jesus Christ, then, is not only the Creator of the universe, but "upholds all things by the word of His power" (Hebrews 1:3). "And He is before all things," the apostle Paul affirmed, "and in Him all things hold together" (Colossians 1:17). It is the word of Jesus' power — and that power is considerable — that holds each atom in the universe together. It is that word which causes gravity to have its attractive force, for magnetism to work, for electrical charges to function, and for all the laws of science to operate. His authority, as that which holds all things together, should be unquestioned, since one word of His will cause it all to come apart!
- **Authority as Inheritor** - Slaves are property. As property, they pass from one owner to the next; they pass from being possessions of the master to being possessions of the master's progeny. The perceptive slave thus will recognize the upcoming power of the master's son, and will therefore at least acquiesce to his authority. The writer of Hebrews then points out the authority of Jesus: "God," he wrote, "has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things" (Hebrews 1:2).

The temple and the physical trappings of the Law were replaced with the spiritual temple and the spiritual trappings of Jesus the Christ. The Hebrew Christian was to recognize that this transition had taken place, and turn his attention to that which was given through Moses to that which was given through Christ. "New wine," said Jesus, cannot be put "into old wineskins" (Luke 5:37). The authority of Jesus therefore had to be so firmly established that the Law of Moses would not be considered as competition to the pronouncements of the Son of God. Moses was not the Creator, Moses was not the Sustainer, and Moses was not the Inheritor. Jesus, the Son, was and is. When Moses — representing the Law — and Elijah — representing the Prophets — appeared with Jesus in glorified form at the Mount of Transfiguration, the voice from heaven spoke in regard to Jesus in juxtaposition to the other two: "This is My beloved Son, with whom I am well-pleased; listen to Him" (Matthew 17:5). The Son has spoken; who will listen?

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The Express Image

“I am the Lord,” stated the Almighty through His prophet, “that is My name; I will not give My glory to another” (Isaiah 42:8). Zealous is He, and strong, destroying His enemies, and triumphing over every lofty thing raised up against the knowledge of Him. “I will not,” said He, “give My praise to graven images.” He protects His glory, and He receives the praise due Him.

But how shall this glory be revealed to mankind, that they might offer Him the worship and praise He deserves? “The time is coming,” was the oracle, “to gather all nations [Gentiles] and tongues. And they shall come and see My glory” (Isaiah 66:18). “Then the glory of the Lord will be revealed,” were words of Isaiah, prophesied to be part of the message of John the Immerser in preparation for the coming of the Messiah, “and all flesh will see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken” (Isaiah 40:5). Jew and Gentile alike would be able to perceive the glory of God in connection with the coming Christ!

- **The coming of Christ to earth** - In God’s communication with man, it was necessary that Jesus leave heaven and come to earth. As the apostle John put it, “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). This was so that God’s character could be progressively revealed to man; God in human form became the catalyst for the ability of man to assimilate information about who God really is. As the writer of Hebrews will stress a little later in his epistle, one of the things that comes out of Jesus’ taking flesh and dying on the cross is that God understands the suffering of man and can sympathize with his weaknesses.
- **Christ’s ascension** - Following His bodily resurrection, Jesus ascended to heaven. While still on earth, He had prayed, “Glorify Me . . . with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5), and this prayer was answered. Leaving any vestiges of earthly bodily form behind, He became brilliantly shining. “And He,” stated the writer of Jesus, “is the radiance of His [the Father’s] glory” (Hebrews 1:3). This radiance defines the meaning of the word “glory” as it applies to the nature of God, and is pictured inside the human mind as something more brilliant than the sun shining in its strength.
- **Exact representation** - When Christ ascended, the revelation of God to man was complete. In glory He is “the exact representation of His nature” (Hebrews 1:3). While Jesus always made it plain that He and the Father were one during the years of His time on earth, the revelation of God to man through Jesus in the flesh was incomplete. It took the ascension of Christ, where His glorification was accomplished, to communicate the full nature of God to man. Herein Christ is the exact impress of everything about the Father; the glory which shines through the Son is the same glory that shines from the Father.

God loves man, and God wants fellowship with Him. The rules of the spiritual universe require, however, that God can only be seen by the eye of faith in those who dwell in physical bodies. Hence the revelation found in the Bible is the means by which this picture of God is communicated, and communicated ultimately only to the inner person of those who have properly been immersed into Christ. This revelation is so that the redeemed of mankind might come to know God, and to be known by Him. “The world,” said Paul, “through its wisdom did not come to know God”; it requires the preaching of the gospel of glory to accomplish that (I Corinthians 1:21). And the heart of God is illustrated in the prayer of the Son: “And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent” (John 17:3). Jesus in glory is the exact impress of the Father; do what you have to do in order to see that glory!

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The Exalted Jesus

The exaltation of Jesus to the heavenly throne was preached from the beginning of the church. His crucifixion was proclaimed also, but the gospel did not stop at His crucifixion or even His bodily resurrection. “The God of our Fathers raised up Jesus, whom you had put to death by hanging Him on a cross,” was the proclamation of Peter to the Jewish high council. “He is the one whom God exalted to His right hand,” was the emphasis of the message, “as a Prince and a Savior” (Acts 5:29,30). There are many aspects of Jesus accomplished at His exaltation to heaven:

- 1) He was established as the High Priest of the New Order
- 2) He was anointed as King and took the heavenly throne
- 3) He was declared to be Jehovah (Yahweh) God by His ascension
- 4) He was recognized as the great Prophet who speaks from heaven
- 5) He was raised to the power position at right hand of the Father where He is the Savior
- 6) He was not only the testator of the New Will, but He was raised to eternal life to be the Mediator of the New Covenant, the Executor of the will
- 7) He was put in place as the Chief Cornerstone, resurrected from the dead to be positioned as the key stone in a spiritual temple

The writer of Hebrews was conscious of these aspects connected with the risen Christ, and perhaps more than any other writer of the New Testament, brings these things to the attention of the saints, upon whom the ends of the ages has come. “God,” he said, “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” – the Prophet who speaks from heaven. This Son is “the radiance of the Father’s glory and the exact representation of His nature” — He is Jehovah God, a point which will be established in more detail. The writer’s introduction is brief, but sweeping. He also includes:

- **Jesus as High Priest** - In his opening, the writer does not use the term “High Priest.” The concept is introduced, however, in these words: “When He had made purification of sins . . .” (Hebrews 1:3). The purification for sins did not occur on the cross; without a priest to offer the blood of the sacrifice there could be no purification, either of heaven or of those who were to be saints.
- **Jesus as Christ** - The writer of Hebrews will attach the High Priesthood of Jesus very closely to His being the King, the anointed Christ of God. After pointing out that purgation of sins had taken place, he then writes, “He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). His sitting down has to do with His being declared to be the Christ, the Prince. The exhortation of the Lord to the church at Laodicea helps us: “He who overcomes, I will grant to him to sit down with Me on My throne, as I also overcame and sat down with My Father on His throne” (Revelation 3:21).

The conjoining of the offices of High Priest and Christ in one man enthusiastically was prophesied by Zechariah. Aware that the kings were of the line of Judah and that the priests were descended from Levi, and that these two lines could not cross in the physical realm, the prophet wrote of the Coming One, “He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices” (Zechariah 6:13). The fulfillment of this was the exaltation of Jesus, “when He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Jesus above Angels

Both Stephen and Paul maintained that the Law of Moses was “ordained by angels” (Acts 7:53; Galatians 3:19). This would indicate that the voice which thundered from Sinai was that of God speaking through an angel, perhaps an archangel. It would also indicate that the continuing revelations from Sinai on were given through angels. This Law, then, had governed Israel for nearly 1500 years, and its dictates and customs had been ingrained in the Jewish people, both those in Jerusalem and those scattered throughout the Roman Empire and beyond. Those dictates and customs would not be given up easily; in fact, it would require the destruction of any semblance of the nation or people in order for the old ways to make way for the new. God would have to, in the words of Jesus, expressed in a thinly veiled parable, destroy “those murderers, and set their city on fire” (Matthew 22:7). The Hebrew Christians were to be prepared for that destruction, and the superiority of Christianity over Judaism would have to be established in their minds. Hence the superiority of Jesus over the angels would be the first point in the exposition, delineating the superiority of that which came through Jesus — the church and new covenant — over that which came through angels — the Law.

- **A better name** - In societies where there are societal distinctions (which is most societies, whether officially noted or not), the “high-born” have advantages over those who are “low-born.” There is, in fact, a good old English word for what the lower-born are to call those of higher-born castes: “betters.” The Lord allows such casting to occur on earth, that Christians might understand the concept of “a better name.” Christ, said Hebrews’ author, “sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much better than the angels as He has inherited a more excellent name than they” (Hebrews 1:4). Jesus has the same surname as the Father, as it is written, “I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me” (Hebrews 1:5). No angel could make such a claim; Jesus is superior to the angels.
- **Worthy of worship** - No angel is worthy of worship. When the apostle John tried to worship the angel who gave him Revelation, the angel informed John that he as an angel was just a fellow servant and should not be worshiped. “Worship God,” was his instruction (Revelation 22:9). By contrast, Jesus accepted worship from men, both before His resurrection and afterward. And not from men only, but as is quoted by Hebrews’ author, “And let all the angels of God worship Him” (Hebrews 1:6).
- **The Son sits on the throne** - Of the Son, it was written, “Your throne, O God, is forever” (Hebrews 1:8). The angels, of course, do not possess the throne, as the writer puts it in a rhetorical question: “But to which of the angels has He ever said, ‘Sit at My right hand.’?” (Hebrews 1:13).
- **Angels do not rule over the world to come** - “For He did not subject to angels the world to come,” was the annotation (Hebrews 2:5). By contrast again, it was written of Jesus, the Son of Man, “You have put all things in subjection under His feet” (Hebrews 2:8).

Angels could not possibly make claims to that which Jesus possessed. The angels who tried were banished to the realms of darkness, and will burn in the fires of hell forever. The good angels recognize their role and position, being “ministering spirits sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation” (Hebrews 1:14). Jesus, then, is clearly superior to angels, and that which was delivered through Him is therefore far superior to that which was delivered through angels. It is then “to the testament of Jesus” that we turn for instruction and salvation!

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What's in a Name?

The argumentation in the book of Hebrews is pretty complex. When a point is being made in this epistle, several logical sub-points and reasonings from Old Testament scriptures are usually involved. In this way the case for the point is complete, buttressed with several legs of syllogism, convincing the Jewish mind that the spiritual covenant of Christ is far superior to the physical covenant of Moses. The Law of Moses came through the agency of angels; the objective of the writer is to establish that a new type of law came through Jesus. "For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable," was one of his points, "how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" (Hebrews 2:2,3). The One who was seated with the Majesty on His throne is the One who has "become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they" (Hebrews 1:4). What's in this name?

- **Sonship** - The angels, God's messengers, occasionally are called "holy ones" or "saints," or even "sons of God." But the distinction is being made between those appellations and the reserved title "The Son of God." The writer brings his point in this fashion: "For to which of the angels did He ever say, 'You are My Son, today I have begotten You'?" (Hebrews 1:5). Begotten is a reference to Jesus' resurrection from the dead; the apostle Paul quoted this same second Psalm in his address to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia to prove that the Lord was raised from the dead and was positioned on the heavenly throne of David (Acts 13:32,33). No angel was ever resurrected from the dead, and no human received the permanent resurrection that Christ experienced. He, and He alone, possesses the keys of death and Hades! And the Sonship of Jesus was tied to His Messiahship. The first Messianic prophecy is quoted by Hebrews' author, under the query "Did He ever say this to angels?": "I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me" (Hebrews 1:5). Jesus is the Son, and as such is the One who inherits the name.
- **First-born** - Jesus possessed the title of the only begotten Son of God and the first-born from all eternity. "For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world," was Peter's inspired assessment, "but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you" (I Peter 1:20). Although He claimed that entitlement as the Creator and Sustainer — "all things have been created by Him and for Him" (Colossians 1:16) — it took the processes culminating in His resurrection from the dead to make the proclamation known and believed among men. Thus the apostle Paul reasons: He "was declared the Son of God with power by His resurrection from the dead" (Romans 1:4). The writer of Hebrews, conscious of the pre-existence of Christ prior to His appearing to men in human form, making His entrance by being born of Mary, notes: "And again, when He brings the first-born into the world" (Hebrews 1:6). The first-born possesses the name. Thence the conclusion: "When He brings the first-born into the world, He says, 'Let all the angels of God worship Him.'" (Hebrews 1:6).

Christ possessed the name before the foundation of the world. Of the Rock, the angel of the Lord who delivered Israel from the Egyptians, and who followed them in the wilderness, it was written: "...obey His voice ... since My name is in Him" (Exodus 23:21). For purposes of revelation it was necessary that He take human form, die, be buried, and be raised from the dead. In the process He was to be worshiped by angels, and declared to be God's Son. He is clearly far superior to the angels, and that which is now spoken by the Son is to be heeded!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Begotten Son

The book of Hebrews moves its readers from an earthly, physical focus to being able to see the importance of the spiritual, heavenly realm. The centerpiece of this revelation is, of course, Jesus — crucified, but risen and glorified. “God,” was the initial attention-getter, “has spoken to us in His Son.” As the exact image of the immortal, invisible God, Jesus is the one whose voice and whose countenance beckons man upward. The trials and temptations of earth are placed in their proper perspective while the redeemed fixes his spiritual gaze on the wonders of the enthroned Christ. While angels, described as “majestic” beings, are “greater in power and might” than the most potent of men, none can compare with the magnificence of the glorified Christ. “For to which of the angels did He ever say, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You?’”

- **The begotten Son** - Many consider the references to Jesus’ being the “uniquely born” Son of God as pointing to his virgin birth. The word of God, however, directs attention away from the physical birth of Christ to His spiritual birth, His birth from the dead. The apostle Paul, in his address to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia, gave the directive as to the meaning of “begotten” as applied to the Son. Quoting also from Psalm 2, the former Pharisee of Pharisees expounded on its meaning. “God,” he also said, “raised up Jesus, as it is also written in the second Psalm, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’ ” (Acts 13:33). This is plain teaching, from an inspired source, that “begotten” is a reference to Jesus’ rising from the dead rather than His physical birth. He was born a descendant of David in the physical sense; it is His resurrection which declared Him “begotten” of God in the spiritual sense.
- **Today** - A question has arisen in regard to the meaning of “today”; some have maintained it is an “eternal today” based on the idea that Jesus possessed the title “Son of God” from all eternity. While it is indisputable that the Lord possessed that title, the word “today” was chosen by the Holy Spirit to communicate a specific point. When the psalmist used the word “today” in a different psalm, the scripture used this phrase: “He again fixes a certain day, ‘Today.’ ” (Hebrews 4:7). The word today, it is clear, points to a specific day. The next question would be, then, in reference to Jesus’ being begotten: what would “today” point to? In Antioch of Pisidia, after Paul quoted from Psalm chapter two, he went on to quote out of Isaiah chapter fifty-five: “I will give You the holy and sure blessings of David,” a reference to the Messiah’s inheriting the throne. But he quoted Isaiah as proving that Jesus was “raised up.” Restating the case, the expression “raised up” as used by Paul in his address to the synagogue means Jesus’ resurrection all the way to the heavenly throne. Thus the word “today” specifically refers to the day when Jesus took His seat at the right hand of the Majesty on high!

The expressions resurrection and raised up typically mean “only bodily resurrected” to the modern mind. Scripturally, however, that terminology generally means “the accession of Jesus to the heavenly throne,” and definitely so as the apostle Paul so used it in connection with Jesus’ being “begotten.” It is therefore clear that “begotten” is a reference to Jesus’ being brought forth from the dead and becoming the living Savior from the power position at the right hand on the heavenly throne of David. Jesus Christ, then, is “the first-born from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth” (Revelation 1:5). Thus, the scripture, “I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me” was fulfilled when Jesus acceded to the throne, and as possessing that position “all the angels of God worship Him.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Anointed One

The writer of Hebrews wants to make His case for the superiority of Jesus over the angels indisputable, and in the process teach more about the Christ of glory. The Sonship of Jesus was established in His ascension to glory; thus He was defined as “the only begotten from the Father” (John 1:14). His coming to earth in human form was anticipated by the Old Testament scriptures, but even in this lowly state the angels were not to forget who was encased in flesh. “Clouds and thick darkness surround Him,” was the psalmist’s description of the Lord’s habitation (Psalm 97:2). This impenetrable canopy is there to prevent the glory of the Lord from vaporizing the material universe. But the psalmist predicts the Lord’s passing through this covering to have His presence manifested on the earth, describing this appearing of the Lord in such glowing terms as “the mountains melted like wax at the presence of the Lord” (Psalm 97:5). “The Word became flesh,” and in this fashion the earth maintained its physical form while the great God made His presence known. The writer of Hebrews picks up on this, noting these events in this terminology: “And again, when He brings the first-born into the world, He says, ‘And let all the angels of God worship Him.’” (Hebrews 1:6). The writer quotes from the Greek version of the Old Testament, referencing Psalm 97:7. Jesus on earth was worthy of worship by the angels, and they were to minister to Him. The angels knew it; it was revealed to man through the process culminating in the Lord’s ascension.

- **More on angels** - Angels are created beings. By definition, that which is created is subservient to that which is the creator. As the writer first contrasted the angels as having a less important name than the Son, he now contrasts the creation/Creator relationship. “And of the angels He [God] says, ‘Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.’” (Hebrews 1:7). The thrust of the usage of the quote is that God made the angels, and that He made them literally spirits (alternate translation in place of winds). Those spirits are His angelic messengers, and He can make flames of fire His servants also.
- **The Son is God** - The Son, then, is going to be established as the Creator, Jehovah God. The writer had already made this point in his opening comments, stating of the Son, “through whom also He made the world” (Hebrews 1:2). But now he buttresses his point by quoting from the Psalms: ‘But of the Son He says, ‘Your throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom. You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your companions.’” (Hebrews 1:8,9). At first the reader might object to the writer blithely saying of the Son, “Your throne, O God.” How could he just say that Jesus is the Creator God? But further lines in the quote establish the truthfulness of the point, wherein the psalmist, speaking under inspiration, states, “God, Your God, has anointed You.” Jesus is the anointed King to whom Psalm forty-five is addressed, and is therefore the God whose throne is forever and ever. Thus He is God, and as such the Creator of the angels.

The writer of Hebrews is a deep thinker, inspired, of course, by the Holy Spirit. It is important that the reader follow his logic through carefully, paying attention as to how the writer plays off of certain key words. In this way the hidden truths of Jesus, carefully placed in the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, are brought to light. The spotlight of the spiritual is thus focused on Jesus the Anointed One, seated on the heavenly throne, at the right hand of the Majesty on high!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Scepter of Righteousness

The scepter is the symbol of kingly authority. In general, it is a highly ornamented stick, maybe two and one-half feet long, and the one who held it was recognized as the sovereign. Hence, at court functions or at times of diplomatic importance, the king was certain to be in possession of his scepter (the root of scepter meaning “to lean on”). In a wealthy kingdom, the scepter would be bejeweled and ornately carved as that which befitted a king of such an outstanding earthly kingdom.

So what about King Jesus? What sort of throne and scepter would the Christ, the Anointed One of God, have?

- **The throne** - The throne of Solomon was described as a “great throne of ivory,” and it was overlaid with pure gold (II Chronicles 9:17). Obviously, a large throne whose inner base is ivory would be very costly, to say nothing of its being overlaid by gold. The throne of God, then, is going to be immensely more magnificent. “Heaven is My throne,” stated the Lord through His prophet (Isaiah 66:1). This Great King, then, is spoken of as “enthroned upon the praises of Israel” (Psalm 22:3). Those praises are manifestly of great worth, since they ascend to Him who is enthroned above the cherubim! Thus the writer of Hebrews quotes the psalmist, “Your throne, O God, is forever and ever.” No other throne comes close to matching that of the eternal King.
- **The scepter** - The scepter of the King of the ages would also be of the most precious and appropriate material. “The righteous scepter,” is the statement from the Psalms, “is the scepter of His kingdom.” Nothing can corrupt the court where this scepter presides. There are no bribes, no special deals on the side, no miscarriages of justice. It is also a court where mercy triumphs over judgment, where those of faith are granted opportunity for justification through the righteous sacrifice of the Lamb of God.
- **Love of righteousness** - He who wields the scepter of righteousness upholds righteousness. Indeed, it is written of Him, “You have loved righteousness and hated lawlessness.” While the court of righteousness possesses mercy, the purpose of such grace and mercy is to produce a practicing righteousness among those who claim the name of Christ. “The one who practices righteousness,” said the apostle John, “is righteous, just as He is righteous” (I John 3:7). The Christ who loves righteousness also hates lawlessness; those whose motives are not pure have defiled consciences, and all their deeds are therefore lawless, for which they will receive just recompense in the fires of eternal hell.
- **The anointing** - The kings of Israel, by God’s design, were anointed rather than crowned. Thus the Christ could be manifested to Israel by being anointed with the Spirit in the waters of the Jordan, and His disciples could be marked as kings and priests by being anointed with an invisible anointing of the Spirit also. But there is no setting aside of righteousness in order for this anointing to take place. It was because the Lord Jesus loved righteousness that these words were written: “Therefore God, Your God, has anointed You with the oil of gladness above Your companions.” The “oil of gladness” is a prophetic or symbolic reference to Jesus’ receiving the promise of the Spirit at His exaltation to the Father’s right hand.

The continued spiritual manifestation that Jesus is King is His scepter. That His scepter is one of righteousness establishes that His kingdom is a kingdom of righteousness. The saints, then, are cautioned to maintain their faith regardless of their circumstances, and to press on in righteousness. The apostle Peter, in fact, calls Christianity “the way of righteousness” (II Peter 2:21). “Let us,” then, in the words of the apostle Paul, “lay aside the deeds of darkness,” and “let us behave properly as in the day” (Romans 13:12,13).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Eternal God

Angels are created beings, but the great God always was. “I am who I am,” is the name. Where did He come from? The answer is: “I am.” He is, He was, and He is to come. Nothing can be added to that, and nothing can be subtracted. The eternal God exists outside of time, and the time-dependant logic of man cannot really comprehend that concept.

Angels, by contrast, have been created by the Almighty, timeless God. He “makes His angels,” stated the word of God. The angels, created by Jesus, are lesser beings than Jesus, and that which came through them is inferior to that which was spoken by the Son.

Of the eternal Son, the writer Hebrews adverts, quoting the Old Testament psalm: “You, Lord, in the beginning laid the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Your hands; they will perish, but You remain; and they will all become old as a garment, and as a mantle You will roll them up; as a garment they will all be changed. But You are the same, and Your years will not come to an end” (Hebrews 1:9-12).

- **The Son as Creator** - The writer is really working on this theme. He takes the idea that the Son is the God who is seated on the throne and parlays that into concept that the God addressed in the prayer of the psalmist is also the Son. “O my God,” wrote said psalmist, “do not take me away in the midst of my days, Your years are throughout all generations. Of old You founded the earth; and the heavens are the works of Your hands” (Psalm 102:24,25). The prayer is addressed to the Creator God, and since it is addressed to the Son, the Son is therefore the Creator God!
- **The creation is temporary** - From man’s perspective, the creation looks permanent and only being slowly changed by erosive and decaying forces. The word of God, however, communicated from the Creator, lets us know that this permanency is only an illusion. The heavens and the earth “will perish,” he notes from the quote. “They become old as a garment,” is the picture of a creation that is rapidly wearing out. But the creation will not last so long as to become a threadbare rag, used ’til the last moment. “As a mantle You will roll them up,” is the description, calling to mind the idea that as a split scroll would suddenly roll itself up, just so the creation will snap out of existence at the coming the Lord. “As a garment they will also be changed,” the writer affirmed, setting the stage for the idea that the present physical universe — the heavens and the earth — will be exchanged for a spiritual universe — the new heavens and new earth.
- **The Son is eternal** - “They will perish,” says the writer of the present heavens and earth, “but You remain.” “You are the same,” he adds, “and Your years will not come to an end.” Since the Son was there to found the universe, and since He will preside over its destruction, the Son is eternal.

No angel, including Satan and those who fell with him, can make the claim of being eternal and of being the Creator and eternal King. “To which of the angels has He ever said,” is the rhetorical question, “‘Sit at My right hand, until I make Your enemies a footstool for Your feet?’” (Hebrews 1:13). No angel can successfully challenge the authority and power of King Jesus. Another rhetorical question: “Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?” (Hebrews 1:13). Yes, He made His angels these spirits; He made them ministers, like “flames of fire,” for the service of those sons of glory who will need their assistance in the spiritual warfare connected with the name of the First-born.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Pay Attention!

“In these last days,” God “has spoken to us in His Son.” Of the various Biblical ages the earth has passed through, the Christian era is the last. The apostle Paul thus referred to Christians as those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come” (I Corinthians 10:11). The Old Testament prophets, as they looked to the cessation of the Mosaic covenant, the end of physical Israel as the people of God, and the destruction of the temple, saw that collection of happenings as “the end,” and the coming Christian age as “the last days.” The apostle Peter, therefore, quoting Joel, is noted as referring to the events connected with the beginning of the church on the Day of Pentecost, 30 AD, as “the last days” (Acts 2:17). All the message of God for the church, not surprisingly, is therefore funneled through the Son. The Lord Jesus Himself, during the days of the time on earth, affirmed of the days of the New Covenant, “Truly, truly, I say to you, and hour is coming and now is, when the dead shall hear the voice of the Son of God, and those who hear shall live” (John 5:25). Those who are “dead in their sins and transgressions” who heed the gospel of salvation are those who hear the voice of the Son of God.

- **Warning to Christians** - The Hebrew epistle is addressed to those who are already Christians, and the writer notes the brethren as those who have “heard.” “For this reason,” is the statement, referring to Jesus’ exalted position, “we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it” (Hebrews 2:1). The writer spent the first chapter of the book of Hebrews, as we moderns have broken it down, in establishing the superiority of Jesus to the angels, emphasizing that He has a greater name, that He created the angels, and that He is the God who sits on the throne receiving worship from the angels while they are ministering spirits. The warning to Christians is to pay attention to what has been spoken by Him who sits on the throne; the concern is about drifting away from the first principles. Such drifting occurs because it is effortless. Christianity, then, requires continuous input on the part of each disciple, continuous conscious effort to heed the voice of the King.
- **No escape for the neglectful** - God was pretty straight-forward in His admonition to Israel: “You shall not add to the word which I am commanding you, nor take away from it” (Deuteronomy 4:2). But Israel’s history was one of ignoring, neglecting, and outrightly disobeying that which had been given to them. The result was that they were laid low in the wilderness, that ten of the twelve tribes were lost due to idolatry, and that only a remnant survived at any time to further the plan of God. The example is clear. “For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Hebrews 2:2,3). The answer to that question is obvious: NO!

A theme constant in scripture is the general tendency of man — even of those of God’s special favor — to get comfortable in God’s blessings and let his spiritual priorities slide. The record of Israel in the Old Testament demonstrates this truth clearly, and the messages to the churches of the New Testament are also exhibitions of the same point. The writer Hebrews made a major effort to exalt Jesus to the proper high position in the minds of his readers in order to drive his points home: 1) Pay attention to what we have heard! 2) Do not neglect the word spoken through Jesus!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

So Great a Salvation

What a great salvation it was in the night in which Israel was delivered from Egypt! The people had groaned under the weight of their slavery in what God Himself called “the iron furnace,” and Pharaoh was looking for ways to destroy the males and integrate the females into the nation along the Nile. But, after nine plagues which reduced most of Egypt to a little more than rubble, with a mighty outstretched arm God brought the children of Jacob out during the night of the Passover. Over a succession of days, the Israelites were able to cross the Red Sea, watch the destruction of their overlords as they drowned in the Sea, and receive the Ten Commandments and a Covenant under Moses. Their freedom was so great that they couldn’t handle it at first, and needed a generation to be trained up for the responsibilities of citizenship in this new freedom. It was a great salvation!

- **Unalterable word** - When the voice of the Almighty [through an angel] thundered the Commandments, the children of Israel were in fear. As Moses later described it, they cried out in one accord, “Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God, let me not see this great fire anymore, lest I die” (Deuteronomy 18:16). The Commandments and the word given to Moses were unchangeable, as the writer of Hebrews comments, “The word spoken through angels proved unalterable” (Hebrews 2:2). Anyone in Israel who tried to alter in any way the statutes and ordinances was cut off from the people, and multitudes along the way died graphically that Israel might know that no one could “mess with” the immutable word of God.
- **Just recompense** - “Every transgression” of the commandments, stated Hebrews’ writer, “and disobedience received a just recompense.” A man who gathered wood on the Sabbath was stoned outside the camp (Numbers 15:32). When the people were sucked into worshipping the god of the Moabites through Balaam, 24,000 in Israel died before Phinehas, grandson of Aaron, checked the plague that came because they violated the second commandment. The judgments of God were harsh because they needed to be, and they were recorded that Christians might learn the appropriate lessons.
- **So great a salvation** - Israel’s salvation was from physical and political enslavement. As debilitating and degrading as that slavery might be, it is nothing in comparison to the spiritual bondage in which people find themselves after committing their first sin. The challenge is for mankind to comprehend the horrific nature of such slavery, and therefore also to comprehend the greatness of the release from that bondage. If Israel suffered severe punishments for her wanton disregard of physical salvation, “how shall we escape,” queried the author, “if we neglect so great a salvation?” (Hebrews 2:3). The land of Canaan, the “land of milk and honey,” is nothing in comparison to release from sins, the possession of a clean conscience, the gift of the indwelling Spirit, or the peace that surpasses all comprehension. Saints have indeed been blessed “with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus” (Ephesians 1:3)!

What kind of gratitude is exhibited by a family who inherits a wonderful mansion but trashes it because they don’t really care? What kind of character is demonstrated by an individual who takes possession of a beautiful estate but allows its fences to fall into disrepair, whose animals are not fed, whose grounds are not kept, and whose crops are not harvested? These are exhibitions of neglect in the physical realm. “How shall we escape,” was the pondering of the writer, “if we neglect so great a salvation?” The warning came to the Hebrew Christians to encourage them to maintain and strengthen their faith in Christ in the face of the upcoming destruction of the Jewish system. The message is clear to Christians of all time: no matter what the circumstances, do not neglect your salvation!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Confirmation

The Lord prepares His people ahead of time. The Lord put Israel through the “iron furnace” of slavery to the Egyptians in anticipation of the hardships of the desert. In addition, He sent ten plagues upon the land of the Nile to show His superiority over the gods worshiped by the Egyptians and to ready Israel for worshiping and serving the true God under the terms of the Law of Moses. Not all Israel took advantage of God’s initiatory steps, but His providences were perfect preparation, and any Israelite who failed to be in readiness for the giving of the Law on Sinai failed by his own choice and/or inaction.

Thus the Jews were prepared for the coming of the New Covenant as well. God had worked on a broad scale — scattering Israel, developing the reading of the Law in the synagogues, and driving the worship of graven images out of His people. But the All Wise had also worked on Israel on a personal basis; He had sent Jesus into their midst, establishing that He was the Son of God and that He was bringing the message of salvation.

- **The great salvation** - A succession of deliverers paraded through Israel’s history. Moses delivered the people from the oppression of the Egyptians, followed by such as Joshua, the judges, Samuel the prophet, and David the king. All such physical salvation was designed to prepare the Israelites (and those who would later read the scriptures) for the coming of the great Deliverer from Zion, Jesus the Son of God. But the Lord, the Redeemer of Israel, would do much more than release people from their physical bondage; He would free those who would obey Him from their captivity to Satan, and grant liberty to those who were slaves to sin.
- **First spoken through the Lord** - This salvation, affirmed Hebrews’ author, “was at the first spoken through the Lord” (Hebrews 2:3). “Everyone who commits sin,” Jesus had noted, “is the slave of sin.” “Therefore,” He added, “if the Son shall make you free, you shall be free indeed” (John 8:34,36). Thus He laid the groundwork for a spiritual salvation, moving His disciples’ understanding from the directly physical to that which is unseen. His meaning, then, in discussing the deliverance of Zaccheus with the murmuring crowd, is clear: “For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost” (Luke 19:10).
- **From the Lord to the apostles** - In His prayer to the Father, when He was still west of the Kidron, Jesus made it clear that all who would become Christians would come to saving faith through the word of the apostles (John 17:20). The terms of pardon under the New Covenant were first announced by Peter and the others on the Day of Pentecost as recorded in Acts chapter two, and the forward movement of the gospel throughout the world was spearheaded by those specially chosen men. So the great salvation, first spoken through Christ, “was confirmed to us by those who heard [the apostles]” (Hebrews 2:3).
- **Confirmation** - How was this confirmation accomplished? “God,” noted the author, was “bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will” (Hebrews 2:4).

The apostles were placed in the position of being the only ones initially who could bear witness to not only Jesus’ resurrection from the dead but also to His exalted position as King and High Priest. Both of these teachings, and the doctrines derived from them, would be challenged by the skeptics and those who were just plain opposed. Hence the apostles of Christ needed to have the backing of God — being able to perform the confirming signs and wonders, as Paul commented in his second letter to the Corinthian brethren: “The signs of a true apostle were performed among you with all perseverance, by signs and wonders and miracles” (II Corinthians 12:12).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Signs and Wonders

Fakes and false teachers have always abounded as the god of confusion has tried to distract people from the word of God's truth. Over the millennia, the great God has had to use miracles, signs, and wonders to convince men of His successively developing revelation, and the false teachers immediately show up to obfuscate the issues. When God spoke to the patriarchs, even though He implemented some signs, their use was limited because there were not many people to convince concerning His revelation at that point. But when Israel has to be persuaded to follow Moses, and the Egyptians have to be shown that their gods are not gods at all, then the mighty wonders of God had to take place in the land of Ham. But the false magicians were on the scene: "Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses," was Paul's inspired input (II Timothy 3:8). The truth-seekers would be able to tell the difference; the shallow masses would be confused but would not think much about it. The verification of Jesus' resurrection would require signs and wonders also; the performers of lying wonders would hit the scene almost immediately.

- **Jesus' miracles** - Jesus, said Peter, "went about doing good, and healing all who were oppressed by the devil" (Acts 10:38). Thus He was "a man attested" to Israel "by God with miracles and wonders and signs" (Acts 2:22).
- **The apostles** - The apostles performed miracles to affirm the resurrection and ascension of Jesus. But, in addition to their ability to bring about the obedience of the peoples to the gospel, "in the power of signs and wonders, in the power of the Spirit" (Romans 15:19), they could pass on certain gifts by the laying on of their hands. Thus the testimony concerning Jesus would be able to spread faster.
- **The early disciples** - The apostles could choose those upon whom they would lay their hands, but the Spirit would determine what gift (manifestation) of the Spirit would be granted, if any: the Spirit "works all these things," affirmed Paul, "distributing to each one individually just as He wills" (I Corinthians 12:11). "And they went out and preached everywhere," was Mark's record, "while the Lord worked with them, and confirmed the word by the signs that followed" (Mark 16:20).
- **Clarifying new venues** - The gospel initially went only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel, with powerful signs performed in Jerusalem by the apostles to bring the church off the ground among the Jews. When the first of the Samaritans — half breed Israelites, a mixture of Israel and ancient pagan stock — were immersed, Peter and John had to come down from Jerusalem, lay their hands on these who were previously regarded as unacceptable to the Lord, and have the signs confirm their immersions and acceptance. To open the venue for the conversion of the Gentiles, God had to pour out the immersion of the Holy Spirit upon the household of Cornelius. Furthermore Jesus had signs and wonders performed by Paul and Barnabas among the Gentile converts in order for the Jewish Christians to believe in these Gentiles' acceptability. And prophesying and speaking in unstudied foreign languages confirmed Paul's re-immersion of twelve men immersed into John's immersion, this time in Jesus' name so that they would receive the indwelling Spirit.

God has been (and definitely continues to be) in charge of the forward movement of the gospel. Thus the message of the great salvation found in Jesus Christ spread throughout the world in the first century AD. "After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Hebrews 2:3,4).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Son of Man

The Law was given through the agency of angels; the great salvation came through Jesus Christ. Hence, for the Hebrew readers of this epistle, it was necessary that the underlying theme of Christ's superiority over the angels be re-emphasized, that it be clear that the new covenant system which came through Christ is much superior to the law system which came through angels via Moses. But what did Jesus have to go through in order to be the exalted One by which the new covenant would come? "He humbled Himself," adverted the apostle Paul, "by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God highly exalted Him" (Philippians 2:8,9). The writer of Hebrews concurred.

- **The world to come** - "The word spoken through angels," the author affirmed, "proved unalterable." The following logical point is that the word spoken through Christ would be, if possible, even more unalterable. "For He did not subject to angels," is one of the author's points of reference for his logical presentation, "the world to come, concerning which we are speaking" (Hebrews 2:5). The world to come is the spiritual universe — "the new heavens and the new earth" — over which Jesus will preside, and the angels shall be willing subjects.
- **Quotation from Psalm eight** - The writer here quotes Psalm eight to buttress his point, and shows in his interpretation that it refers to Jesus, the Son of Man. "But one has testified somewhere, saying, 'What is man, that You remember him, or the Son of Man, that You are concerned about Him?' " (Hebrews 2:6). A surface reading of this, as well as the Old Testament psalm, would lead to the shallow conclusion that the quotation here refers to man and his offspring and mankind's dominion over the earth. In view of how the writer handles this quotation, we have taken the liberty to capitalize the expression "Son of Man," as well as various "Him's" when the pronoun refers back to the Son of Man.
- **A little lower than the angels** - The quotation continues: "You have made Him for a little while lower than the angels; You have crowned Him with glory and honor, and have appointed Him over the works of Your hands; You have put all things in subjection under His feet" (Hebrews 2:7,8). While it is true that man in general was made lesser than the angels, the direct reference is to the Son of Man. The writer of the epistle gives us the inspired interpretation: "But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus ..." (Hebrews 2:9).
- **The works of Your hands** - The concern of the prophetic psalmist, then, is not the temporal creation, but that which is eternal in the heavens. The Son of Man, the writer affirmed, has been appointed over the works of the Father's hands, and has had all things put in subjection under His feet. "For in subjecting all things to Him," is the commentary, "He left nothing that is not subject to Him. But we do not yet see all things subjected to Him" (Hebrews 2:8). The temporal creation was put under the dominion of man and was subjected to him; the Son of Man is exalted to the Father's right hand, "waiting ... until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet" (Hebrews 10:13). The "works," therefore, that are to be placed in subjection under Jesus feet are the works of the Father in the spiritual realm!

The writer of Hebrews uses quotes from the Old Testament to convince to those of Jewish background in his audience that the things connected with Jesus are the important and eternal topics to note. The quotation from Psalm eight centers about the Son of Man, and is used by the New Testament writer to show that Jesus took human form, but was then exalted to glory where all things are to be subjected to Him. Follow the logic!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Tasting Death

How human was Jesus? While the incarnation is recognized as a fundamental cornerstone of Christianity, the questions concerning Jesus' humanity are more fundamental and far-reaching than most of the "theologians" and commentators recognize. The writer of Hebrews weaves many of the significant aspects of Christ's taking human form into the early portion of his epistle, and each of these is worthy of consideration as they are paraded before the eyes of the reader.

The discussion of Christ's humanity arises from the statement, "For He did not subject to angels the world to come." What did Christ do or what did Christ experience that demonstrated His superiority over the angels, and that would therefore warrant subjecting to Christ the world to come? The writer, careful to buttress his points with Old Testament quotations for the benefit of his intended Hebrew Christian audience, noted from the Psalms that "the Son of Man" was made "for a little while lower than the angels." "He emptied Himself," in the words of Paul, "taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). Because of what Jesus went through in taking human form, He was "highly exalted" and will eventually have all things subjected to Him.

- **We see Him** - Although Christ is Lord of all, "we do not yet see all things subjected to Him." There is a process that must be completed in the realm of time for the entire plan of God to unfold. "But," says the writer, "we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus..." (Hebrews 2:9). This is interesting because the writer has already mentioned that he got his information "from those who heard" the Lord; the writer did not get the gospel directly from Jesus, and therefore was not a witness to Jesus in His resurrected, glorified state. But he says that we see Him; those who have their spiritual eyes opened through their immersions into Christ see Him! And the writer will draw on this point later in his epistle.
- **Suffering of death** - How human was Jesus? So human that He had to experience dying. The Lord, in becoming flesh and blood, endured "the suffering of death," and because He did so, was "crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone." Not only did He do the most human thing of all in dying, but He in His death went through the most extreme of any death that a person could die; He was bearing the guilt of all mankind's sins as well as experiencing the suffering of beatings and crucifixion.
- **Tasting death for everyone** - "By the grace of God," the writer noted, Jesus tasted death "for everyone." It was not just that Jesus died on the cross for the sins of all men, but that in passing successfully through death to His resurrection, He would bring others to a resurrection of life. "For it was fitting for Him," animadverted the author, "for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10).

"By the grace of God," he had stated. It was from the goodness of God that the eternal plan was set in motion for Jesus to become a man — the Son of Man — and pass through the agony of death to deliver the captive sons of men. He had to taste death; He had to experience it to find out what it was like, so that the spiritually attuned would know that the compassionate Savior understands their condition. And because Jesus tasted death, the brethren comprehend that He got nothing earthly out of His time on earth, that His purpose in coming was to demonstrate the love of God for the lost of men, and provide a means by which they might be delivered from the consequences of their sin and folly.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Crowned with Glory and Honor

The book of Hebrews is a tight weave, and the threads of thought must be followed all the way through the book. While talking about the necessity of Christ's passing through death for men, the writer also talks about Christ's ascension to the throne. Once again, the writer is beginning from Psalm eight, first keying in on "You have made Him for a little while lower than the angels," then going on to comment on "You have crowned Him with glory and honor." "But we do see Him," is his annotation, "who has been made for a little while lower than the angels [that is, Jesus took human form], namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for everyone" (Hebrews 2:9).

- **Progressive revelation** - Jesus possessed the glory and honor from all eternity. In His prayer on the west side of the Kidron, in the night in which He was betrayed, He petitioned, "And now, glorify Me together with Yourself, Father, with the glory which I had with You before the world was" (John 17:5). The events in the history of the Christ, then, are carried out for the benefit of mankind, that they might know that Jesus is indeed worthy, a worthiness expressed to them in ways they can understand. It is interesting that this communication required that Jesus pass through a horrible, mind-boggling death before men would consider that He be worthy of worship!
- **Perfecting the Author of salvation** - It is also interesting that the writer of Hebrews does not directly mention the cross until near the end of the epistle, although he refers to the death of Christ often. The readers were expected to know of the cross, and understand the wording, "For it was fitting for Him ... to perfect the Author of their salvation through sufferings" (Hebrews 2:10). In passing through suffering and death, Jesus would be perfected as He entered into glory. It is significant to note that the word is "through." Jesus was not perfected "in" suffering; He was perfected "through" suffering! He became the Author — the Origin or Source — of the brethren's salvation by not only dying on the cross, but by entering into glory where, as the writer will clearly establish later, He sprinkled His blood for the transgressions of men. "When He had made purification of sins," the writer had opened this epistle, hinting at what was to come, "He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high" (Hebrews 1:3).
- **Bringing many sons to glory** - The writer subtly shifts from Christ's being the subject of the sentences to the Father's taking that position. Keying in on the phrase, "by the grace of God," the inspired penman make the thrust, "For it was fitting for Him [God] ... to perfect the Author [Jesus] of their salvation." In this context, then, it is the Father "for whom are all things, and through whom are all things." It is the Father, therefore, who brings "many sons to glory."

The goal of bringing many sons to glory could only be accomplished through Jesus. He "tasted death for everyone." He suffered that He might be an encouragement to the brethren who suffer. He was glorified, that He might offer the purifying blood for the sons of glory, and that He might open the way for those who would follow Him. "Therefore we have been buried with Him through immersion into death," concurred the apostle Paul, "in order that as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life" (Romans 6:4). Jesus was indeed crowned with glory and honor from the Father, and He awaits the time when the sons of glory share that with Him. He will, said Paul, "transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory" (Philippians 3:21). Come, Lord Jesus!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Jesus and His Brethren

Man is indeed a fallen creature. And the honest souls among the sons of men recognize how fallen they are, and how unworthy they are to be in the presence of the glory of God. As members of the fallen race obey the gospel, they are raised from the waters to walk in newness of life and through the indwelling Spirit have fellowship with the Father. Now increasingly conscious of the glory and majesty of the Almighty, they can also become increasingly conscious of their own unworthiness, and their confidence to be in the presence of the great God can wane. In the wisdom of God, then, Jesus is established as living amongst the brethren unashamedly. “The Word became flesh,” observed John, “and dwelt among us” (John 1:14). The writer of Hebrews will establish that He continues to dwell among His brethren after He laid His fleshly garment aside and adorned the robes of glory!

- **From one Father** - The writer of the book of Hebrews laid down a foundational principle in his opening: Jesus, he stated, “made purification of sins.” This purification opened the way for what the apostle Peter called “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession” (I Peter 2:9). Every Christian, therefore, is a holy one of God, a saint, one who has been sanctified or set aside for God’s purposes only. “For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father,” was the next thrust of the Hebrews’ text (Hebrews 2:11). Jesus is not only the Source of salvation for many “sons,” but He is also the Spring of their sanctification. In the process of being sanctified and regenerated, they are “born of God,” and therefore have the great Jehovah [Yahweh] as their Father. Thus Jesus, as the Son of God, and the brethren, the “many sons,” are all “from one Father.”
- **No shame** - Jesus “derives” His name from the Father, and those who are born from above likewise acquire their sonship from Him. “For which reason,” asserts the author, “He [Jesus] is not ashamed to call them brethren.” It is exciting to think that Jesus is not ashamed to be seen with His “younger” brothers and sisters, that in fact He likes to associate with them, and be seen as mingling with them!
- **Old Testament quotations** - The writer once again will bring forth quotations from the Old Testament to establish the truthfulness of his statement. “I will proclaim Your name to My brethren,” is the writer’s quotation from Psalm 22:22, referencing Jesus’ addressing the Father, “in the midst of the congregation I will sing Your praise” (Hebrews 2:12). The Lord Christ is pictured as being unashamedly in the midst of the congregation, associating with His brethren, singing praises to the great God over all. “And again,” the writer states, “I will put My trust in Him” (Hebrews 2:13). As the brethren must trust in God, so Jesus, as this quotation from Psalm 18:2 establishes, as a demonstration of brotherly equality in this sense, must trust in God [this also sustains the proposition that Psalm 18 is more about Jesus than about David]. “And again,” he says, quoting from Isaiah 8:18, “Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me.” The Lord is proudly asking others to look at His family portrait, with Him and His children all together.

The saint who struggles can lift up his head and be encouraged. No matter what his family background, or what sin situation he has come out from, he can know assuredly that Jesus is not ashamed of him. The great Lord of all has raised him from the spiritually dead and seated him with Him in the heavenly places, and has no qualms about having His name associated with the said saint. Those who are sanctified are indeed from the same Father as Jesus, and are to see themselves as Jesus sees them. May each saint heed the scriptures in this matter, and govern himself accordingly!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Rendering Death Powerless

How willing is Jesus to associate publicly with His brethren, those of the church? As the writer of Hebrews analyzes the issues related to that question, he illustrates the great care that God has for each Christian, and how much He desires the rescue of the lost from the race of fallen men. God Himself is awesome in every respect, and far above man the creature. “It is He who sits above the vault of the earth,” commented Isaiah, “and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers” (Isaiah 40:22). The absolute humility of God is exhibited in Jesus’ laying aside His glory, dropping to man’s level, “made for a little while lower than the angels.” But this was only for “a little while.” He was indeed crowned with glory and honor at His ascension, and appointed over the works of the Father’s hands — specifically over those who have been created in Christ Jesus. But He had to suffer and die to make this possible.

- **Flesh and blood** - Man is of the material creation as well as having the qualities of a spiritual being. Man has to have a machine — an earthly body — to house his spirit and soul during the time of his sojourn on this planet while he is in the process of deciding his eternal destiny. Thus the redeemed of all the earth are described as those who “share in flesh and blood” (Hebrews 2:14).
- **Jesus’ willingness** - According to the prophet Micah, Jesus had appeared numerous times on earth before being born in Bethlehem. But, beginning at Bethlehem, He appeared in a way that He never had before; the Christ took on flesh and blood, growing from an infant to a man, and eventually dying the death that befalls all those who are of the material creation. “Since then the children share in flesh and blood,” the author noted, “He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil ...” (Hebrews 2:14).
- **Overthrowing the devil** - The devil is real, although he tries to get the majority of people to think that he is, at most, a cartoon character. A fallen angel, he is not “of flesh and blood”; rather he is “the spirit that is now working in the sons of disobedience” (Ephesians 2:2). Directly undetectable because he functions in the spiritual realm, Satan is incredibly evil and destructive, working every angle he can to shackle the thought processes of man and enslave them to do his will. He, “with the power of death,” struck fear into the hearts of men, and has manipulated and herded the human race into his corral. But the Lord Jesus Christ, in taking on flesh and blood, met the devil on his own battleground, and “through death” He rendered the prince of darkness powerless. It wasn’t “in death” that Jesus accomplished His victory; it was “through death.” In other words, Jesus went “through” the agonies of suffering and dying on the cross, but “in” His resurrection and ascension He destroyed death and him who possessed its power over men. Thus our Lord delivered “those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives” (Hebrews 2:15).

The Lord Christ is truly awesome in might and love, and worthy of the saints’ highest praise and deepest gratitude! He stepped in to wage war against Satan and won. But in winning the war for mankind against the devil and death, He Himself had to participate in death and dying; and that participation should cause everyone that has been born again to pause and reflect about the greatness of Christ’s love for him. His earnest desire to bring every possible son to glory is manifest, and every saint should willingly lay down his life in service to the great Savior.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Freedom from Slavery

Fear of death paralyzes mankind. It causes them to compromise, to give up, to give in, and to run in directions counter to what inwardly they would like to do. And fear of death is the root of the other fears, so that from that one basic dread emanate the phobias that haunt men and women in general. With the passing of the carefree days of childhood, the adult population gets slowly crushed by their fears, and the fear-mongers of the world play on those, orchestrate them through the media, and thus stampeding the public into giving up their earthly freedoms and crushing the populace into the hopelessness of serfdom.

But their spiritual slavery is even worse. Having committed sin by choice, each individual has allowed corruption to enter his heart, has therefore become a slave to sin, and is held captive by Satan. And the devil is a ruthless taskmaster, driving his prisoners deeper into the darkness, fanning the flames of their fears, and binding them tighter under his cruel oppression. "Through fear of death," wrote Hebrews' author, the sons of men "were subject to slavery all their lives."

- **Jesus' mission** - Early in Jesus' ministry, He announced His mission. Speaking to His home synagogue in Nazareth, He quoted from Isaiah, stating, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor" (Luke 4:18). The good news that was to be brought through the Anointed One had to do with the deliverance of those who recognized their oppression by Satan and their resultant spiritual poverty. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," was the first of the Lord's beatitudes, "for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 5:3). And the message coming through the Christ really is good news; the term "gospel" is not mere advertising hype! Jesus has good news to preach to the poor about their condition.
- **Release for the captives** - "He sent Me," affirmed the Christ, "to proclaim release to the captives ...". Jesus was not sent to try to negotiate the release of the prisoners from a bunch of kidnappers; He accomplished their redemption and has sent His message into the world proclaiming that the rescue has been accomplished and available to anyone who so wishes to participate.
- **Sight for the blind** - "The god of this world," emphasized the apostle Paul, "has blinded the minds of the unbelieving" (II Corinthians 4:4). Part of the deliverance that Christ would accomplish in rescuing people from the clutches of the devil would be to give them the ability to see with the eye of faith. "He has sent Me," Jesus affirmed, to proclaim "recovery of sight to the blind."
- **Freedom for the downtrodden** - Oppressed by the devil and crushed by the weight of their own guilt, a small percentage of people at least look for someone who can help them in their helplessness. The Lord has obliged, announcing that He is able "to set free those who are downtrodden."
- **Year of Jubilee** - The Old Testament Year of Jubilee, which was supposed to occur every 50 years, was a foreshadow of the freedom that can come through Christ. The gospel trumpet has sounded; through His messengers Jesus has been fulfilling His prophesied purpose "to proclaim the favorable year of the Lord" (Luke 4:19).

Jesus has accomplished His initial part of His mission. Passing through death, He was resurrected from the dead and has entered into glory as the High Priest of our confession, where He at the right hand of the Majesty is in the power position to save. Satan and death truly have been rendered powerless. Those who become Christians have had a "part in the first resurrection; over these the second death has no power" (Revelation 20:6). They are no longer slaves; they are free!

The Descendant of Abraham

Christ was made for a little while lower than the angels. He took human form, and indeed, “He made Him who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf” (II Corinthians 5:21). In the process of sharing in flesh and blood, the plan was for Him — even though He had never personally sinned — to share in the sins of mankind by taking them on Himself. But even though He descended to the lower parts of the earth, the gates of Hades could not withstand the thrust of His resurrection. In rising from the dead He conquered death, and those who were held captive by its power were set free! “It was for freedom that Christ set us free,” said the apostle Paul, “therefore keep standing firm and do not be subject again to a yoke of slavery” (Galatians 5:1). Fear of death no longer holds Christians in its sway, nor do any of the lesser fears. Those who are truly born from above are specially blessed.

- **No help for angels** - “Angels,” said the apostle Peter, “are greater in power and might” than men (II Peter 2:11). Because angels are spirits only, and not spirits housed in a carcass of flesh and blood, and are greater in power and might than man, there is no redemption for fallen angels as there is for fallen men. “God did not spare angels when they sinned,” stated Peter also, and “cast them into Tartarus and committed them to pits of darkness, reserved for judgment” (II Peter 2:4). The one who held the power of death was the prince of the fallen angels, and man, when he sinned, fell into his power. Jesus, then, took on the form of a bond-servant, and through death paid the penalty for man, but paid no penalty for the outcast angels. “For assuredly,” says Hebrews’ writer, “He does not give help to angels” (Hebrews 2:16).
- **Help for man** - If Christ won’t help the angels, whom will He assist? “He gives help to the descendant of Abraham,” is the answer. The death of Christ was a universal death; that is, it was a death that took place in order for all things to be reconciled to God. Thus “the man Christ Jesus . . . gave Himself as a ransom for all,” stepping in for God our Savior, “who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (I Timothy 2:6,4).
- **For the descendant of Abraham** - The writer of Hebrews, however, does not use the term “descendant of Adam” in describing those who are the recipients of Jesus’ help; he uses the expression “descendant of Abraham.” Those who are “immersed into Christ,” stated Paul the apostle, and thus those who belong to Christ, “are Abraham’s offspring [descendants], heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:26,29). “Assuredly,” therefore, the thrust of the letter is that the help from Christ is for those who are Christians.

God looks with favor upon the descendant of Abraham, those who “of the faith of our father Abraham” (Romans 4:12). These are also described, in even stronger terms, as the children of Christ, “the children whom God has given Me.” Those who are outside Christ have no such relationship, and therefore no such blessing. “We have,” said Paul again, “obtained our introduction by faith into this grace [favor] in which we stand” (Romans 5:2). There is no grace for those who are lost; this grace is only for those who are in Christ. They are the ones for whom God will “cut some slack,” who will have opportunity to make mistakes while they grow, who will have the second chances while they are learning the responsibilities of freedom in Christ. The Father smiles with favor upon His special children, who are being led by their older brother, Jesus. “Assuredly, He gives help to the descendant of Abraham.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Like His Brethren

One of the great questions — indeed, one of the great debate topics of all time — is this: How human was Jesus? Most who claim in any way at all to be followers of Christ give lip service to the idea that in the incarnation Jesus was one hundred per cent human. But when the implications of the incarnation start creeping into their minds, then they start to shy away from saying that Jesus was one hundred per cent human in the way that the rest of us are one hundred per cent human. At the base of Catholicism, for example, all are sinners, inheriting Adam's sin from conception, and "Mary, the mother of God," is supposed to pray for "us sinners" at the hour of death. But Mary and Jesus are exceptions, Mary having supposedly been conceived in the "immaculate conception," wherein she did not inherit Adam's sin, and therefore Jesus did not inherit Adam's sin. They are different. In the Calvinistic base of Protestantism, all are born "totally depraved." They have a "sinful nature" from conception, and have to have a "born again" experience apart from their choice to be able to understand one word of the Bible or to be able to perform any good work. In this system of thought, Jesus again is an exception, not being "totally depraved" but being the Son of God. But what says the scripture?

- **Made like His brethren** - Jesus "gives help," as the New American Standard Version translates the passage, "to the descendant of Abraham." What sort of help would such a descendant need? Jesus, according to the angel who appeared Joseph when Mary was found to be with child, said that the Christ would have the name Jesus because it would be He who would "save His people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). Implicit in the wording is that Christ's people would not be saved in their sins, but rather that they would turn away from sin and serve God in righteousness. To accomplish this, the saints would need some help. "Therefore," is the connection the writer of Hebrews makes, "He had to be made like His brethren in all things..." (Hebrews 2:17).
- **In all things** - "In all things," the scripture states. Was Jesus ever hungry or thirsty, like the rest of us? Was He ever physically tired? Did He bleed when He was cut? Was His patience tried by the people around Him? Was He ever tempted, and was He successful in facing His temptation? Was His Spirit willing, but His flesh weak? Was He in anguish over the prospects of His death while praying in the Garden of Gethsemane? Was He hurt in being forsaken by the Father while bearing the sins of mankind on the tree? When the scripture states that "He had to be made like His brethren in all things," it means what it says. Jesus was one hundred per cent human, and He did not have an "edge" in any respect over the descendant of Abraham!

The implications of Jesus' incarnation are indeed huge. First, the members of the human race have no excuse for sinning in the first place, and are justly condemned to an eternity in the lake of fire for the commission of sin. Secondly, disciples of Jesus are expected to lay aside the old self that was being corrupted in the lusts of deceit, and to put on the new self, which has been created in the likeness of the risen Christ. They are expected to walk in the steps of Him who committed no sin and who kept entrusting Himself to God. To accomplish this, they indeed need some help. Thus God has provided through Christ the Helper, the indwelling Holy Spirit, the same Spirit who lived in Christ's fleshly body. And they also receive help from a merciful and faithful High Priest. More to come on this subject!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Propitiation for Sins

Overcoming weakness and sin is a process. “If by the Spirit,” asseverated Paul, “you are putting to death the deeds of the body, you will live” (Romans 8:13). When he used the verb form “putting,” he made it clear that the laying aside of the old self and putting on the new self is a process wherein the individual must be actively involved in renewing his mind while at the same time the Holy Spirit assists him in winning victories! But, before an individual can be indwelt by the Spirit, he must first be cleansed to be a fit habitation for the Spirit of God. “You have been bought with a price,” noted Paul. “Your body,” then, is the flow of logic, “is a temple of the Holy Spirit, who is in you” (I Corinthians 6:20,19). And that price was the blood of Jesus.

- **The sacrifice** - In order to offer His blood as a sacrifice, Jesus had to take human form. Without being “flesh and blood,” He would have no blood to offer. The eyewitness of John the apostle is significant here: “One of the soldiers pierced his side with a spear, and immediately there came out blood and water” (John 19:34). In this way “He Himself bore our sins in His body on the tree” (I Peter 2:24). Hence, in keeping with the pattern set by the Old Testament sacrifices, Jesus was offered as a guilt offering and as the true Passover Lamb.
- **The high priesthood** - After discussing the humanness of Jesus, the writer then introduces the next thread in his garment of instruction: “Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things,” was the “human” part of the quote, followed with, “that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people” (Hebrews 2:17). Jesus, up to and including His death on the cross, was the sacrifice. But the blood of the sacrifice is not effective until a priest offers the blood. Since no mere man was anywhere near able to be a priest to offer up Jesus’ blood, He had to become His own priest in His ascension. The book of Hebrews brings out that not only was He a priest — interceding for one person — but He specifically became a high priest, one who offered blood and interceded for all the people! (And no other letter in the New Testament directly states that Jesus is a priest or the high priest of the new covenant.)
- **Propitiation** - The writer of the Hebrew epistle introduces sweeping concepts early on in his letter, setting up spools of his threads on bobbins so that they can be sown together to make one tight garment. After breaking the news that Jesus is the high priest, then he throws the topic of propitiation into the verbal mix. Propitiation in a general sense has to do with securing favor, and in the specific context of the Bible it has to do with the mercies of God. In the Old Testament, the high priest of Israel, once a year, offered blood on the top of the mercy seat of the ark of the covenant [the top being the propitiatory] for the sins of the people. Thus Jesus is pictured as the high priest of the new covenant, offering His blood on a spiritual mercy seat for the sins of the children of faith, the descendants of Abraham.

In this way the blood of Jesus was offered to purchase a possession for God. As the individual desires to be a part of this purchase, He is buried with Christ in immersion, wherein he participates in the death of Christ, and therefore he participates in the sacrifice. In coming up out of the water, the individual shares in the resurrection and ascension of Christ; here he partaker of the benefits of Christ’s being his high priest and the propitiation for his sins. He now is a purchased possession of God, and a fit dwelling place for God’s Holy Spirit.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Aid for the Tempted

Once corruption has entered the human heart, no amount of human goodness can root it out. Only in being forgiven by God through the sacrifice of Christ, and in being given a new heart, can the individual be set free from that spiritual rot in the center of his soul. But God is to be praised greatly for His love of lost man. He set in motion a system of sacrifices in the Old Testament so that when Christ died on the cross for the sins of the world, it would make sense to the inquiring mind. He also set in motion a priesthood in Israel so that when Christ is pictured as a high priest making propitiation for the sins of all mankind, there is also a logical progression that the thinker can follow. He can therefore believe that Christ, having “made purification of sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” In this way, faith is generated in the good and honest heart by the word of God.

- **Merciful high priest** - Every individual on the face of the earth who has ever “been old enough to know better” has sinned and separated himself from fellowship with God. Jesus could have had the attitude that since they chose darkness, they could suffer the eternal consequences of that choice. But He exhibited His compassion in coming in the likeness of sinful flesh and paying the price for their sins. But not only did He sacrifice Himself, He continues to be the “merciful” high priest “in things pertaining to God.” Jesus, instead of having “finished” His work totally on the cross, actually continues to intercede as a high priest for the descendant of Abraham, providing mercy for the striving saint wherever he needs it and petitions for it.
- **Faithful high priest** - Jesus is not only described as merciful, but He is described as faithful. Christ is dependable, keeping His promises to the saints as stated in His word. “If we confess our sins,” the apostle John emphasized to the brethren, “He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (I John 1:9). And He will not desert the saints when they are pressured from earth or from the realms haunted by the forces of darkness. “God is the one who justifies,” were words Paul flung into the teeth of opposition, “who is the one who condemns? Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Romans 8:33,34). Christ, praise God, is faithful, and will not in any way be derelict in His intercession for His children.
- **Aid in temptation** - Christ not only intercedes for the brethren in the area of forgiving sins that have been committed, He actually assists in overcoming temptation before the sin is accomplished! “For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered,” was the annotation of the author of Hebrews, “He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted” (Hebrews 2:18). Part of His intercessory work is strengthening the saints so that they overcome temptation and don’t fall into sin.

Jesus not only came as “an offering for sin,” as the apostle Paul phrased it, He also came “in the likeness of sinful flesh” (Romans 8:3). Jesus won the battles with temptation, and He won those battles by deliberate decision and an iron will. “The flesh,” is another observation by Paul, “sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh” (Galatians 5:17). Jesus’ Spirit won every contest, and Jesus is therefore qualified to provide leadership to His brethren in overcoming temptation. The saints now know this, and through the intercessory aid of their high priest, are “to follow in His steps, who committed no sin, nor was any deceit found in His mouth.” The brethren therefore “die to sin and live to righteousness”! (I Peter 2:21-24).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Consider Jesus

The world has produced its philosophers and statesmen, its generals and its athletes. But these are dust, blown away and scattered in comparison to the great men of faith of the Bible. What, really, is a Julius Caesar compared to Daniel? A William the Conqueror compared to Moses the deliverer? Or Alexander of Macedonia to David the king? Those highly regarded by earth are meager, gaunted, specters of men in contrast to the giants of the faith who strode God's pathways and marched triumphantly into the hall of God's approval. But all of these stand aside and bow in reverence before the Great One, Jesus Christ Himself. Christ is the One who died for the sins of the world; Christ is the One who permanently rose again from the dead; Christ is the One who made propitiation for the sins of the people; and Christ, "since He Himself was tempted in that which He suffered, is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted."

- **Holy brethren** - The writer of letter to the Hebrew Christians appeals to them based on the awesomeness of Jesus' actions on their behalf. "Therefore," he says, "holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession" (Hebrews 3:1). The brethren, then — holy, sanctified, set apart — should be able to see with spiritual eyes the greatness of the spiritual giants of the Old Testament writings in contrast to those honored by men. As "partakers of a heavenly calling," they should be able to comprehend the greatness of the accomplishments of the Lord Jesus, recognizing the significance of His sacrifice on their behalf and properly evaluating His service in making propitiation for their sins.
- **Consider Jesus** - Every Christian should stop and take time to consider Jesus on a periodic basis. As important as His sacrifice was, it is secondary to His ongoing work as intercessor for the brethren, and the brilliance of His radiance should fill the thoughts and minds of the saints. The Lord, recognizing the frailties of His brethren, instituted the Lord's Supper as a perpetual institution for this consideration. "Do this," He said, "in remembrance of Me" (I Corinthians 11:24).
- **Our confession** - The word confession as it is used in this portion of the epistle, is not limited to the statement that "Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God." It is the broader use of the word, meaning an entire doctrinal belief system based on Jesus. Elsewhere, it would be referred to as "the faith."
- **The Apostle** - The word apostle means "one sent out on a special mission, an ambassador or envoy." While most commonly attached to the twelve special disciples of Jesus, who indeed were sent out on a mission to get the gospel out and congregations established throughout the world in the first century, it is significant that Jesus is "the Apostle" of our confession. In fact, He is the greatest missionary of all time, having left heaven to come to earth. As the Ambassador, He delivers the message from heaven to earth, serving as Envoy to the heavenly Father.
- **The High Priest** - Not only is Jesus the Apostle of our confession, He is the High Priest of our belief system as well. An examination of the letter to the Hebrew brethren shows that the writer would love to dive right into an exposition of the high priesthood of Jesus, but feels like he must lay a lot of groundwork first. So at the close of chapter two and at the beginning of chapter three, he lays the terminology concerning Christ's high priesthood in place, waiting to come back later.

There are a lot of things to consider concerning Jesus. The writer of Hebrews would like us to think about His Apostleship, the One who would speak for the Father — exalted far above the angels by whom came the Law to Moses. And the writer would like us to contemplate His being the High Priest of our confession. We, as holy brethren, are ready and willing to charge into such a positive challenge!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Superior to Moses and Joshua

Christ is superior to the angels, by whom the Law came to Israel. But the writer to these brethren of Judea, desiring to show the greatness of the covenant which came through Christ, must also show the superiority of Jesus to the combination of Moses and Joshua, these two worthies by whom Israel left Egypt and entered the promised land. Those of Israelite background were especially used to the idea that Moses was the earthly originator of their system, and the originator of the new system would have to be favorably compared to him. "We are disciples of Moses," stated the Pharisees before whom the man who was healed of his blindness by Jesus was tried. "We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man [Jesus], we do not know where He is from" (John 9:28,29). Thus the writer of the Hebrew epistle opens this section with the words, "Consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession."

- **Faithfulness** - "It is required of stewards," pointed out the apostle Paul, "that one be found trustworthy" (I Corinthians 4:2). If a servant does not do his job, then all kinds of deleterious effects begin to stack up. To be, then, "the Apostle and High Priest of our confession," Jesus would have to be the most reliable of servants. "He was faithful to Him who appointed Him," the writer comments, "as Moses also was in all His house" (Hebrews 3:2). Jesus was indeed a faithful and willing servant, experiencing the challenge of being "made like His brethren in all things," experiencing "the suffering of death," in order "that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest." Thus Jesus faithfully carried out the will of Him who appointed Him to serve in God's house as Moses had on a lesser scale some fifteen centuries earlier.
- **More glory** - The writer is reasoning with his audience, establishing that Jesus is more elevated than Moses. "For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses," is his point, "by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house" (Hebrews 3:3). Moses therefore is subtly being regarded as part of the house, whereas Christ is being regarded as the builder of the house. Then the writer throws this point into the mix: "For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God" (Hebrews 3:4). The subtle point here is that Christ is being regarded as equal with God. Moses surely could not make such a claim!
- **Servant vs. Son** - The son, in a situation where there is a house, servants, and a significant inheritance, is rightfully regarded as the heir-apparent, and therefore his word carries equal weight as the word of his father. "Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant," notes the author, parenthetically stating, "for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later," then emphasized, "But Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are" (Hebrews 3:5,6). Just as the angels could not make the same claim to sonship as Christ, even so Moses could not make that claim either. Christ is therefore superior to Moses, and that covenant which proceeds from Christ is superior to the covenant proceeding from Moses.

Jesus, demonstrated to be the faithful Son of God, has been appointed as the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. Moses demonstrated himself to be a faithful servant in God's house, but even he was not able to enter the promised land because he failed to treat God as holy before the people at one point. Christ, on the other hand, was faithful in all respects, and through death He was able to render the devil powerless, and therefore able to deliver the descendant of Abraham from fear of death. Clearly we should follow Him!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The House of God

The house of God is one of the major themes of the Bible. Part of the tension in the drama of the Old Testament is connected with the development of a house for God. First we see the tabernacle of Moses' time — built, dedicated, and carried through the wilderness. We see it as the temporary house of God, housing the ark of the covenant at Shiloh until the slackness of Eli the high priest allowed the ark to be captured by the Philistines. After the Philistines sent the ark back to Israel, it was parked at the edge of the country until David made a special tent for it and brought in into Jerusalem; in the meantime the rest of the tabernacle lay incomplete in Shiloh. Finally the temple of Solomon was built in Jerusalem, but it too was laid waste by the Babylonians because of Judah's idolatry, and a much more modest construction was accomplished by the returnees from the Babylonian captivity. "However," stated Stephen in the speech leading to his martyrdom, "the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands; as the prophet says: 'Heaven is My throne, and earth the footstool of My feet; what kind of house will you build for Me?' " (Acts 7:48,49). The house for God is going to have to be built by God, using spiritual construction materials.

- **Old Testament foreshadow** - "Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant," asseverated Hebrews' author, "for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later." This is a huge statement; its thrust is that the things Moses spoke were to set the stage for that which would be spoken through Christ! The house of God, the sacrifices, the offering of the sacrifices, and the high priesthood were foreshadows of the "good things to come." A reflection on the general teaching of the Old Testament would point to the idea that the physical tabernacle and temple of Israel were not truly the house of God. The earlier referenced quotation from Isaiah shows that God could not really live in a physical building; hence that which was pitched by man or made by hands could not be His true dwelling place, and must be pointing to something to come. Thus the writer uses the expression, "a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later"!
- **Christ as the Son** - Moses was a faithful servant in the "house," "but Christ," he says, "was faithful as a Son over His house, whose house we are" (Hebrews 3:6). Moses was a faithful, trusted, old servant in the house in this spiritual metaphor; Christ is pictured as the Son who is taking over the house, and therefore is accorded much more honor than Moses.
- **Whose house we are** - "We," then, are the house! Jesus is the builder of this house, a house which will indeed be a fit eternal dwelling for the eternal God. Jesus the Son is therefore God, "for the builder of all things is God." And the house itself is obviously magnificent. The temple of Solomon's day, beautiful and costly, was barely a weak shadow in comparison to the eternal house.

"What kind of house will you build for Me?" God had asked. Man can't build one, so God has taken it upon Himself to fashion His dwelling place. For the elements of construction, He has used the most the most valuable materials in the universe — Christians! The great and costly stones of Solomon's day: nothing by comparison. The cedars of Lebanon, floated in great log rafts in the sea, and drug up the mountainside to Jerusalem's summit: worthless when contrasted with those rescued by Jesus' taking on flesh, dying for their sins, and His rising from the dead and interceding for them as high priest. The massive quantities of gold, silver, and bronze used in the temple: zero in value when paralleled with the saints. We are the house, and Christ is the Son over the house!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Faithful in the House

Biblically defined faith in the heart of those who are called is what God is looking for. When the centurion, for example, explained that he knew that Jesus did not have to be physically present to heal his servant, the Lord responded, “I say to you, not even in Israel have I found such great faith” (Luke 7:9). Later, wondering out loud about the events to come upon this planet, He asked this question, “However, when the Son of Man comes, will He find the faith on the earth?” (Luke 18:8). According to James, it is faith that is tested by life’s circumstances (James 1:2,3), and Peter similarly notes that faith, like gold, has to stand the test of fire. This faith, he said, is “more precious than gold which is perishable” (I Peter 1:7). Be certain, then, that this faith is what God is looking for.

- **Conditional house** - “We are,” stated Hebrews’ author, Christ’s house, “if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end” (Hebrews 3:6). Before the start of any project or at the beginning of any campaign, there are those who engage in great swelling talk and describe in varying detail how the victories will be won and the challenges will be overcome. When the dust has settled and a silence now hangs over the battlefield, it is always amazing how few of the big talkers remained through to the finish. Saints of God, then, are to “hold fast” to their initial boldness, to hold fast to “the boast” of their hope of their resurrection until the very end. If a person accomplishes what he says he will do, then his talk was not just talk! The holy ones of God are thus challenged to press on in the faith, to cross the finish lines of their lives victoriously trusting God.
- **The lesson of Israel** - Israel should have followed the leadership of God through Moses and marched triumphantly over to take the promised land. Instead, their carcasses littered the landscape from Pihahiroth to Pisgah, discounted because of their disbelief. The writer of Hebrews uses the psalmist’s inspired commentary on that time frame to warn the Hebrew Christians: “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw My works for forty years. Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know My ways’; as I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’ ” (Hebrews 3:7-11; quoted from Psalm 95:7-11). The problem with Israel was their bad heart; they hardened their hearts, and went astray in their collective heart. Therefore the judgment of God was that they had an “evil, unbelieving heart,” and “the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard” (Hebrews 4:2).

Those “many sons” who are to be brought to glory are therefore sons of faith. This faith, however, is to be a tested faith, and faith that endures through trials and tribulations of all kinds. “We are,” stated the author, Jesus’ “house, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.” Israel did not succeed in passing through the forty years of testing in the wilderness; the hope is that the Christian will endure his trials, maintaining his faith through whatever difficulties and temptations which come his way. “The word of God,” it is said, is “able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). When this seed — the word of God — is sown in what Jesus called an honest and good heart, then it brings forth, some a hundredfold, some sixty, and some thirty (Luke 8:15). So let us bring forth the proof of our faith!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Just as the Holy Spirit Says

“All Scripture,” stated the apostle Paul, “is inspired by God” (II Timothy 3:16). The apostle was talking directly about the Old Testament writings, but since Peter called Paul’s writings “scripture,” it is pretty clear that the principle applies to the New Testament writings as well. “But know this first of all,” stated Peter, “that no prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one’s own interpretation, for no prophecy was ever made by an act of human will, but men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God” (II Peter 1:20,21). This proposition was universally accepted by those of New Testament times. When the early church was facing its first opposition in the arrest of Peter and John, their prayer referenced Psalm two in these words: “O Lord ... You ... by the Holy Spirit, through the mouth of our father David, said ...” (Acts 4:24,25). When the writer of Hebrews quotes, then, from the Old Testament in one of his many quotes, it is not surprising if he introduces his point with these words, “Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says...” (Hebrews 3:7).

- **Hearing His voice** - When the children of Israel crossed the Red Sea and received the Commandments, the next thing they were to do was to go up and take the Promised Land. But because they lacked faith in God’s ability to go with them, they rebelled and did not up at once and take it. The writer of Hebrews quotes from Psalm 95, and is making the application to the Hebrew Christians who were about to get caught in the events connected with Rome’s destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. “Today,” said the psalmist, “if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts.” In the days of the psalmist, the people were not to harden their hearts but to listen to the words of the Holy Spirit. In the days of the writing of the book of Hebrews, the people were to listen to the words of the Holy Spirit. It is apparent that in the days in which we are now living, we are to listen to the words of the Holy Spirit, and those words are those which are written!
- **Hardened hearts** - The individual has the choice of hardening his heart by refusing to listen to the words of God. “Do not harden your hearts,” is the exhortation, “as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness.” A Christian can have a “soft heart,” wherein he is open to the instructions of God, or he can harden his heart, bow his neck, and refuse to walk any further in the ways of God.
- **God’s anger** - “Your fathers,” said the psalmist to Israel, and these words would also apply directly to the Hebrew Christians, “tried Me by testing Me, and saw My works for forty years.” The Hebrew Christians were in danger of turning back into Judaism or of abandoning faith in God altogether in the face of the upcoming Roman invasion and destructive practices of the Jews in Jerusalem. This turning away would be like Israel’s refusal to go forward and take the Land; it would show a lack of faith in God’s ability to go with them. “Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know My ways.’ ” God’s anger was apparent in fires’ burning people in the camp, the earth’s swallowing people alive, and poisonous snakes’ biting thousands of people. “As I swore in My wrath,” affirmed the Almighty, “they shall not enter My rest.”

The message is clear; Christians today need to heed the voice of the Holy Spirit as revealed in the scriptures. They need to press forward in their faith regardless of the things that are coming on the earth, to have faith that the same Almighty God is working in their behalf and opening the way for them to rescue others from the fires of eternal damnation.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Encouraging One Another

The destruction of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians in 586 BC was paralleled by the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. And the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD because of the Jews' rejection of the Messiah will be paralleled by the destruction the world at Jesus' second coming because of the world's rejection of the Messiah. "Wherever the corpse is," stated the Lord Jesus Christ in reference to the rotting remains of 70 AD Judaism, "there the vultures will gather" (Matthew 24:28). The Lord also spoke in regard to "the day that the Son of Man is revealed." As He described the cessation of earth, He likewise stated, "Where the body is, there also will the vultures gather" (Luke 17:30,37). The writings and warnings, then, of the Hebrews epistle are up-to-date and relevant for the saints of God today. "Men," said Jesus, will be "fainting from fear and the expectation of the things which are coming upon the world" (Luke 21:26).

- **Take care** - The Father has always made it plain that nothing in this world is happening that surprises Him. The rulers of this world only hold their positions because the Almighty allows it, even if they refuse to recognize that point. When Pontius Pilate tried to pull rank on Jesus, huffing and puffing that he had authority to release the Lord or to crucify Him, Christ responded, "You would have no authority over Me, unless it had been given you from above" (John 19:11). Christ knew, and Christ therefore pressed forward in His own faith. The saints of the first century, then, and in particular the Hebrew brethren, were exhorted, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God" (Hebrews 3:12). The saint who would back away from his faith because of pressure was regarded as falling away, and having an evil heart!
- **Encourage one another** - "Today," the psalmist had said. The time will come, interestingly enough, when time will be no more. The writer, conscious of this, couches his exordium accordingly: "But encourage one another day after day," is how he styled it, "as long as it is still called 'Today,' lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin" (Hebrews 3:13). A Christian's continued participation in sin will actually harden his heart, and make it impossible for him to follow the will of God. Some types of sin are those of yielding to the sundry temptations of caving in under the weight of impending persecution. The brethren are therefore exhorted to encourage one another to keep pressing forward in the face of these threats.
- **Deceitfulness of sin** - Sin works on the basis of deception. "Sin," said Paul, "deceived me, and through [the Law] killed me" (Romans 7:11). Because sin offers a hollow appeal to the flesh, but leaves black emptiness behind, it is deceiving; the initial appeal looks good and happy, but the prospects offered in the sale do not materialize in reality. But sin does have its appeals, and those appeals are addictive. The warning is therefore serious: do not participate in sin, because of the hardening process in which such repeated participation results.

The Christians of the first century were being warned. Through them the saints of the twenty-first century are being warned, inasmuch as the parallels of the times are obvious to the discerning mind. During the time of "the green tree," the brethren need to encourage one another to ingest the scriptures, to develop the habit of praying diligently, to have the word memorized, to be involved in seeking and saving the lost. There needs to be a lot of applause for progress made, for small victories won, for overcoming of bad habits and their replacement by new ones which are productive and spiritual. The words are good: Encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "Today"!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Firm to the End

A strong start must be completed by a ferocious finish. “Well begun” may be “half done,” but half-way is still really no way! A person’s immersion into Christ is his commencement, but not his graduation. The New Testament writings are loaded with exhortations to the brethren to continue in their faith, steadfast until the end of earthly sojourns. The warnings about the wiles of Satan are there, as well as information on the encouragements of Christ, the strengthening of the saint by the Holy Spirit, and the upward call of God. The battle for the soul is evidently a fierce one, and the saints are exhorted daily to make their decisions to serve God. “Be faithful until death,” is the recorded exhortation of Jesus Himself from the courts of glory, “and I will give you the crown of life” (Revelation 2:10).

- **Hardening of the heart** - All sin is decision-based. Even so-called spur-of-the-moment sins are the result of a pre-disposition to sin in that fashion; the mind has already practiced the sin, and the situation in which the sin is committed is simply a close enough parallel to what was already practiced for the spur-of-the-moment sin to be accomplished. The problem with these repetitious sins is that they progressively harden the heart. And this progressively hardened heart is less and less open to hearing the message of God. The warning from Psalms is therefore repeated: “Do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me” (Hebrews 3:15).
- **Partakers of Christ** - All the blessings of God are found “in Christ.” God, said the apostle Paul — first to the Jews, and by extension to the Gentiles — “has blessed us with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ” (Ephesians 1:3). By virtue of his immersion into Christ, the newly born-again is now a partaker of Christ; he is a sharer and associate with Christ in His afflictions and His glory. “For we have become partakers of Christ,” was the writer of Hebrews’ statement (Hebrews 2:15).
- **Conditional participants** - The teaching of the Bible clearly is not “once saved, always saved.” The saint must maintain and indeed strengthen his faith throughout the years of his walk upon the earth. The whole quote from Hebrews 2:15: “For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end” (Hebrews 2:14). It is interesting that the writer, instead of talking about the beginning of our faith, uses the beginning of our assurance as the modicum of his expression. What is being communicated is that our relationship with God is not a shaky relationship which God can dispose of at some arbitrary whim; rather, our fellowship with Him is very solid, and our assurance can only be abolished by deliberate and repeated rejection of His principles on our parts. But the warning is still there, and the saint is told to heed the injunctions concerning how deceitful sin is.

God is very interested in the spiritual success of His children of faith. But the rules of the game require that each person’s faith be tested, and that testing can be quite challenging. If any of the brethren desire to “give up” rather than persevere through the testing, this weakening of the mind results in a plunge into sin. And the repeated plunge into sin hardens the heart, and each plunge is deeper and harder to recover from. Hebrews’ writer presses his point with urgency: “While it is still called ‘Today,’ ” he states poignantly. As long as it is still called “Today,” Jesus has not come in judgment, and the hearer has opportunity to straighten things out. “Hold fast,” he exhorts, “while it is said, ‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.’ ” (Hebrews 3:15). None of us wants to give the Almighty any cause for provocation!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Disobedience and Disbelief

The pressure that would be coming upon the Hebrew Christians would be severe. Their individual faiths would be challenged in the times that were coming upon the region around Judea in what Jesus called “a great tribulation,” the worst that ever was or ever would be (Matthew 24:21). Even under the face of such pressure, the Father did not want the brethren to lose their faith; rather it was His desire that their lamps burn brighter under the testing that was going on. He therefore inspired the writer of the letter to the Hebrew Christians with its exhortations and warnings, pushing and pulling the brethren to higher spiritual ground, focusing upward on Christ in glory and seeing with spiritual eyes the true tabernacle of God.

Hence it is that the writer draws from the effects of Israel’s disobedience in refusing to go up at once and take the promised land. Their lack of faith in the wilderness is a continuing theme throughout the Old Testament writings, and Hebrews’ author uses one of those out of Psalm 95 to set the foundation for his exhortation. “Today,” was the quotation, “if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as when they provoked Me.”

- **Some questions** - The writer uses a literary technique of asking a series of questions, to which the answers are pretty obvious. But it allows him to make his emphases to drive his points home. “For who provoked Him when they had heard?” was the first question. The response with the appropriate articulation comes: “Indeed, did not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?” (Hebrews 3:16). When the 603,548 rebellious men are compared to the two who had faith in God’s ability to lead them triumphant is considered, basically all who came out of Egypt were providing provocation. “And with whom was He angry for forty years?” Again the obvious answer comes: “Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness?” (Hebrews 3:17). God’s wrath was not a quick burning anger that rapidly changed to forgiveness; His was a highly offended, persistent anger which tracked down and destroyed every one of those who did not trust Him. “And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest,” is his query, with the answer this time contained in the same sentence, “but to those who were disobedient?” (Hebrews 3:18). For God to be so angry that He would make an oath that the disobedient would absolutely not enter what He called His “rest,” the provocation must have been extremely severe!
- **Reason for wrath** - When Moses led Israel out of Egypt, God had spent four hundred years in preparing the people for that exodus. His anger and frustration are understandable when it is considered that He brought them to the point where the only thing left in that four hundred year plan was to take the promised land, and at that juncture, they balked and refused to go. They “sinned,” He said, and they were “disobedient.” “And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief” (Hebrews 3:19).

The scripture ties “unbelief” and “disobedience” together; in fact, the root meaning of the word translated disobedient means a flat refusal to believe to the point of rebellious disobedience. The Almighty was justly angry because He had given them more than enough reasons to believe that He was capable of bringing them into the land of Canaan. How much more, then, has He given to us who are to believe in Jesus Christ; the exodus from Egypt was very small in comparison to Jesus’ exodus from Hades. And just as “unbelief” and “disobedience” are coupled together, so also “belief” and “obedience” are inextricably joined. The Christian therefore believes that Jesus is raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of power, he believes that God is able to accomplish what He has promised, and the Christian thusly hastens to obey!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Word and Faith

What God did in having Jesus die on the cross and in having Him raised from the dead was far more significant than what God did in delivering Israel from Egypt. The Father was justly angry when, after spending four hundred years in preparing the people to remove the Canaanites from the land and to settle in a land “flowing with milk and honey,” that those people would refuse to go and take it for a possession. How much more angry would He justly be with a people who had recognized the power of Jesus’ deliverance, initially obeyed the gospel, and then who refused to go forward in faith simply because they encountered persecution or other challenges! The Hebrew Christians are therefore being exhorted to maintain their faith through the coming changes as the Romans would begin to put an end to the major portion of the Jewish population and destroy the trappings of Israel’s system of worship.

- **Let us fear** - It is good to be confident, but not overconfident. Overconfidence results in underestimating the size of the challenge facing the individual, and therefore produces under-preparation. With the severity of Roman tribulation looming and the armies “of desolation” making their way to Judea, the writer was justifiably concerned about the brethren’s not being spiritually prepared to weather the onslaught. “Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest,” is the admonition, “any one of you should seem to have come short of it” (Hebrews 4:1). The use of the words, “let us fear,” indicates just how concerned the writer is about the brethren’s ability to maintain their faith through the upcoming crisis. They would have to work on being spiritually prepared with a sense of urgency, so that they would not “come short” of God’s rest.
- **United by faith** - Faith is what motivates and encourages the saint to move forward, to charge hopefully into challenges with the anticipation that God will grant success. Without Biblically defined faith, there is not sufficient reason for the individual to face peer pressure, persecution, and suffering without compromise. The writer of Hebrews continues to parallel Israel’s experience in the wilderness to the church of his day: “For we indeed have had good news preached to us, just as they also.” The good news of Moses’ time was that God would assist them in taking the promised land; the good news for Christians is obviously the gospel of Christ and its attendant blessings and promises. “But they word they heard did not profit them,” is the writer’s pointed remark, “because it was not united by faith in those who heard” (Hebrews 4:2). The instruction of God was not received by Israel in such a way that they would have a forward focus, so it was of no value to them. The Hebrew Christians were therefore to make certain that they united their personal faith with the instructions of the gospel, in order that they might profitably move successfully through their upcoming trials.

Spiritual preparation is not something that can be done three days before the moment of testing arrives; it is ongoing, every day, “while it is still called ‘Today.’ ” Today’s Christian therefore needs to learn from the exhortation given to the first century brethren. He must begin his preparation for trials and challenges by uniting his faith and the word of God. Scriptures must be memorized, Biblically based prayers must be prayed, the word of God must be read and studied, and the gospel must be repeatedly taken to the lost. These mental and spiritual habits prepare the saint for the most challenging of times, and make it possible for him to maintain his faith and continue to move forward with God’s help. A promise still remains of entering His rest, and the desire is that no one come short of it!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

God's Rest

God said, as recorded by the psalmist, “As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest.” This rest of God must be important to Him, since His emphasis was that this rest was particularly what those who provoked His anger were not entering into. “And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient?” The children of Israel, the writer noted, “were not able to enter [that rest] because of unbelief.” The concern of the Holy Spirit, as expressed by the writer, is that “any one” of the Christians might come short of that rest; the concern is so strong it couched in terms of “let us fear.” A saint would come short of that rest if he lacked persevering faith, if he somehow did not persist through the trials and testings of his faith. “For we who have believed [had faith] enter that rest,” was the encouragement, “just as He has said, ‘As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest,’ although His works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Hebrews 4:3). What, then, is that rest? The writer brings forth a series of scriptural syllogisms for the reader to understand.

- **From the foundation of the world** - There was a rest of God in connection with Creation. “His works,” noted the writer, “were finished from the foundation of the world.” To buttress his point, he brings forth the appropriate quotation: “For He thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works’” (Hebrews 4:4). God therefore required the Jew to have a day of rest every week on the Sabbath, a physical rest pointing to God’s spiritual rest.
- **A future rest** - The writer is establishing for the Hebrew Christian audience that God indeed has a place of rest, but he is also wanting them to look forward to a future day of rest rather than looking backward to the day of rest connected with Creation. So at this point he returns to his working point out of Psalm 95: “And again in this passage, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’” (Hebrews 4:5). Both the reference out of Genesis and the reference out of Psalms make it clear that there is a rest, but the writer reasons from Psalm 95 to show there is this rest in the future. “Since therefore it remains for some to enter it,” he reasons from the tense of the verb in the expression “they shall not enter,” he goes on to add, “and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:6). Had they had faith to take the promised land, they would have entered that rest, but it would have been a rest following Creation.
- **“Today”** - But every generation has to look to that future rest. The writer makes his appeal in this fashion: “He again fixes a certain day, ‘Today,’ saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, ‘Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.’” (Hebrews 4:7). God swore that those who lacked faith in the time of Moses and Joshua would not enter His rest, but David the psalmist is using that quote to exhort his brethren, using the word “Today,” to establish that they of his time still had to move forward to enter that rest. “For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that” (Hebrews 4:8). The rest was not the physical promised land!

The writer is trying impress upon his audience — and the Holy Spirit is trying to impress on us — the importance of passing through all obstacles to enter the rest of God. For every generation of Christian that rest is future, and must be the forward focus of every faithful follower of Christ. “There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God” (Hebrews 4:9).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Due Diligence

To enter the “rest” of God is an eminently desirable goal. The alternative, of course, is the lake of fire where there is no rest, just weeping and gnashing of teeth. Hebrews’ author took his readers on a syllogistic tour, beginning with God’s resting from His works on the seventh day of Creation, but step-by-step establishing that there is a future day of rest that each must strive to enter into. The pleading continues right up to this present moment: “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” A hardened, callous heart is one in which faith cannot dwell. “The word of faith which we are preaching,” said Paul, is the word which is “in your heart” (Romans 10:8). That’s why the warning is so serious. “Take care,” was the admonition, “lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.” That hardening will drive word of faith out of the heart, and cause the individual to fall away from the living God!

- **The Sabbath rest** - There is a spiritual “rest” for those who are in Christ. “Learn from Me,” said Jesus, “and you shall find rest for your souls” (Matthew 11:29). The mature Christian has found that rest for his soul, and possesses the peace that passes understanding. But the “rest” the writer of Hebrews is talking about is a rest that each is to strive to enter into. He built his case beginning from the rest of God after He finished the Creation, working through the point that the Hebrews might think that there was a rest after Joshua conquered the promised land, to establishing that “there remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God.”
- **Resting from works** - There are works of the Law, and there are works of faith, and it is a bit of challenge to the mind to understand the difference (Romans 3:20; James 2:22). Works of the Law are what an individual would present to God in an attempt to show himself worthy of heaven; works of faith are presented by a Christian to God as those which would further the interests of His kingdom. “For we are His workmanship,” affirmed Paul, “created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them” (Ephesians 2:10). The saints that engage in such good works, faithful to the end, victoriously enter into God’s rest. “And I heard a voice from heaven,” recorded the apostle John, “saying, ‘Write, ‘Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord from now on!’ ” ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘that they may rest from their labors, for their deeds follow with them.’ ” (Revelation 14:13). “For the one who has entered that rest has himself also rested from his works,” Hebrews’ writer adds, “as God did from His” (Hebrews 4:10).
- **Diligent** - Faith that is not tested really is not faith. “The testing of your faith,” said James, “produces endurance” (James 1:3). The Christian therefore joyfully welcomes the testing, knowing that it is necessary in separating the sheep from the goats. He knows he must listen to the admonition from the Hebrew epistle: “Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience” (Hebrews 4:11).

The scripture lists the examples of faith in the both the Old and New Testaments, and notes the spiritual success and rewards attendant with those victories. But the word of God also records examples of those who failed in their faith, and also attests to the consequences of such disbelief. The writer of this epistle records the loss of those in the wilderness, and three times references the quote: “Do not harden your hearts!” The exhortation instead is exercising “due diligence,” daily maintaining the faith and moving forward to accomplish the will of God, victoriously entering the rest of God!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Word of God

There are those who hang around the church of the living God who show false fronts and possess a fake faith. Those who are true Christians, however, are recognized as such by the Omniscient One, as is noted on the seal of the firm foundation of God: “The Lord knows those who are His” (II Timothy 2:19). But the loving Father is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). Hence those who are fakes and playing the false faith game are given the opportunity to change, to acquire the obedient faith which will justify them before Jesus the Judge. The repeated appeal is, “Today — hear His voice!” That which thundered from Sinai was written in stone, recorded on scrolls, and finally distributed through the printed page. The voice of the Lord today is “heard” by reading that which has been written in the Bible. That it now consists of black or red letters on white pages does not in any way destroy its significance or content. Jesus said, “The words I have spoken to you are spirit and are life” (John 6:63).

- **Living and active word** - All books other than the Bible are dead. There are books which point effectively to the Bible, expound upon the Bible, and help people understand the Bible. But because they are of human origin, they are still dead. “For the word of God,” stated Hebrews’ penman, “is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Hebrews 4:12). Not only is the word living, it is also active. It is on the move, piercing hearts and able to get right to the spiritual core of the difference between soul and spirit. Those of the “false front” and “fake faith” need to beware: the picture painted is that the Lord’s word can penetrate those shells and determine the true heart condition.
- **All things laid bare** - After Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden, they hid from God; at least, they convinced themselves that they were hiding from God. But He who walked in the Garden knew exactly where they were, and what they had done. Modern man is no different; he convinces himself that God isn’t there, or doesn’t know what is really going. “And there is no creature hidden from His sight,” the writer reminds us, “but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13).

The Hebrews’ writer is concerned that the Jewish Christians’ motives were questionable. The times that were coming would give them the maximum test, and he did not want anyone to “come short” of a successful finish. Hence it was necessary that each of the brethren get the thoughts and intentions of his heart in line with the word and will of God.

When a saint preaches or teaches the way of salvation as it is delineated in the holy writ, he is often accused of judging others. If he has accurately handled the word of truth, he is not judging at all. It is the word of God which is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart; it is perfectly designed to expose those who do not love the truth but who actually take pleasure in wickedness. Deluding influences come down the pike all the time, and those whose heart condition is flawed will eventually follow one of those rather than holding fast to the way of righteousness. Because the word is living and active, and all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we all will have our final dealings, when the word is accurately presented, the one who makes the presentation is not judging; he is simply watching to see which way the judgment of God will fall!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Hold Fast to Our Confession

It would be eternally fatal for a follower of Christ to falter before the finish. The differences between heaven and hell are so great it is really impossible for the mind to fathom; hence the claimant to the grace of Christ must consider carefully the warnings from the word of God. But there is a natural tendency to underrate the severity of an upcoming challenge and thus be somewhat unprepared for the rigors of the onslaught. Since the physical trappings of Israelite worship and service were about ready to disappear in the midst of a Roman-originated holocaust, the writer of this epistle therefore keeps striking the chord of warning about being spiritually prepared.

- **Consider Jesus** - This section of discussion began with this statement from the author: “Consider Jesus,” he said, “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1). Specifically, the faithfulness of Jesus is the quality to be considered, how He was unwaveringly faithful in executing the Father’s will and thus became the “builder of the house.” In passing successfully through death, He was exalted to the position of High Priest by the power of His resurrection, and thus is the core of our “confession,” our belief system.
- **A great High Priest** - The apostle Paul expounded concerning Jesus: “Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore also God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name” (Philippians 2:8,9). In being offered on the cross, He was the sacrifice, but in ascending to glory, He became the priest to offer the blood of the sacrifice. “Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God,” the author of Hebrews states, “let us hold fast our confession” (Hebrews 4:14). Here the writer tenders an increased offer to discuss the high priesthood of Jesus, beginning to establish the superiority of Jesus’ high priesthood over that of Aaron. (He will, however, let that offer lay on the table after an initial foray into the discussion, excoriating the Hebrew Christians for a while concerning their dullness of hearing.) This High Priest, instead of laboring on earth in the front of an earthly tabernacle, has passed through the heavens!
- **Holding fast** - The Jews always put tremendous pressure on Christians to abandon the confession of Christ and embrace circumcision and the customs of the Law. As the time of the 70 AD destruction approached, the Jews became more and more rabid in enforcing the extremities of their various beliefs and conclusions. The pressure would thus mount on saints caught in this maw to back away from their firm stand concerning Jesus. “Let us hold fast our confession,” the author encourages. And as the Roman legions began their methodical surrounding of Jerusalem and their hostility toward anyone of Jewish extraction became more open, the pressure on the Christians to withdraw into inactivity would also increase. “Let us hold fast our confession,” was the word.

The exordium is still valid today. As attacks on the Bible as the word of God increase, and as God more and more is regarded as a delusion, saints are going to have to look more deeply at the hole card of their belief system. Do believers really have “a great high priest who has passed through the heavens”? Is He really “the Son of God”? Seeing how the foreshadows of these things were deliberately set in motion in the Old Testament, and seeing how the physical transitions to the spiritual lets the saint know there is a transcendent Mind at work, operating at a scope and scale far beyond human capability. Yes, the Bible is true, Jesus is on the throne, and the brethren can “hold fast our confession!”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

One Who Sympathizes

Jesus, according to Hebrews' author, "was made for a little while lower than the angels." The writer went to quite some length, by scriptural standards, to establish that Jesus was indeed made "like His brethren in all things." One of the reasons for this emphasis was to establish just how human Jesus was during the days of His earthly sojourn. One of God's challenges is communicating to man just how much He really loves him, and a key ingredient in that communication was for Jesus to take human form. The Lord "emptied Himself," averred the apostle Paul, "taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men" (Philippians 2:7). This absolute humility and selflessness on Jesus' part was the only way the Almighty could break down the barriers of suspicion that exist in the heart of man, and set the stage for the acceptance of Jesus' intercession on behalf of the fallen creature. "But God demonstrates His own love toward us," was Paul's affirmation, "in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

- **Double negative** - Two negatives make a positive, and writers often use a double negative to give the positive an emphasis it would not otherwise have. "For we do not have a high priest," was the first statement in the minus column, followed by "who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses" (Hebrews 4:15). The positive is thusly heavily punctuated: "we" do have a high priest as our intercessor, and "we" do have One who is willing and able to intercede for us.
- **Sympathize with our weaknesses** - As previously referenced, Jesus was one hundred percent human, and as such gave Himself no advantage over the rest of Adam's descendants. All the "fightings and fears," the "vagaries and vicissitudes" of life were experienced by our Lord as He endured the fickleness of the mobs, the betrayal by a close friend, and the misunderstandings of His most trusted associates. He was hungry, He was tired, He overcame gravity and friction, He was tested, and He was tempted. He can sympathize with our weaknesses!
- **Tempted** - We have a High Priest, noted the author, "who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin." That was an awesome accomplishment by our Lord! Sometimes we just need to sit back and contemplate what Jesus was able to do; every thought was taken captive to obedience to the Father, every word and every action were disciplined so as to be in consonance with the will and agenda of the only wise God. And all this in the face of the most extreme temptations that Satan "in person" could throw at the humble Jesus.
- **The High Priest** - Jesus, in order to be the sacrifice, had to be without sin personally; He had to have kept the Law perfectly in order to be fitted to be the offering for the sins of others. But the wisdom and efficiency of God's plan are also exhibited. In being subjected to the temptations which befall mankind as part of the sacrificial side, Christ also met the requirements of the high priestly side so that we know that we have a sympathetic intercessor!

How exciting it is to have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, yet One who has been subjected to the weaknesses of living in a fleshly body, One who therefore understands the challenges of those whom He calls "His brethren"! In this way not only has the Almighty made provision for the maximum exhibition of compassion for the still stumbling child of God, but He has also provided the maximum motivation in sending Christ as a positive example. The saint knows he has an sympathetic intercessor when he needs One, and also knows that following in the footsteps of the sinless Christ is likewise "doable."

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Grace and Mercy

God is not the “mean ogre in the sky.” He is kindly and compassionate, earnestly desiring fellowship with those who have become interested in God’s spiritual things. In fact, He is so interested in fellowshiping with the redeemed that He made significant efforts to take man — downward looking, earthly focused — and produce in him, through the gospel, a desire for fellowship with the Father. To accomplish this fellowship, God “spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,” but really to bring the message of His love and compassion, “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son” (Hebrews 1:1,2). What an honor! Actually to have God’s exalted Son leave heaven and come to earth to speak with us! And how awesome a plan it was to have the stage of earth’s history set and the development of the Jews and their synagogues accomplished so that when Jesus did arrive on earth, it was believable that He was the Son of God. “We have,” then, “a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God” (Hebrews 4:14).

- **Confidence** - Jesus “is not ashamed,” the scripture affirms, to call saints “brethren.” The Lord Himself partook of flesh and blood that He “might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives.” “When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). All these are designed to strengthen the trembling soul of him who knows he has offended the Almighty with his past misdeeds; we have a High Priest who sympathizes with our weaknesses, and intercedes on our behalf. “Let us therefore draw near with confidence,” encourages the writer, “to the throne of grace” (Hebrews 4:16). Not only is the saint to draw near the throne of God, but he is encouraged to make his approach in confidence! The brethren of Jesus, then, are boldly to stride through the courts of heaven, and in full assurance of faith to step through the ring of angels surrounding the throne into the presence of the Almighty, welcomed as sons coming home.
- **Mercy** - When the child of God looks backward in his life, he sees a trail of sin. Things were done that were not pleasing to the courts of heaven, and things that should have been placed first on the priority list were not done. This trail puts the believer in a position where he recognizes his need for mercy — a willingness on the part of the heavenly Father to overlook the transgressions, to forgive the trespasses, and let the one who is born again stand innocent before the throne. Granted! “Let us draw near the throne,” exhorts Hebrews’ author, “that we may receive mercy.”
- **Grace** - The throne is called “the throne of grace.” Grace embodies the concept of God’s giving; “Praise God from whom all blessings flow,” are words from the old doxology. Specifically, grace in this portion of Hebrews refers to the strengthening for the saint that God is willing to provide — a strength to assist him in winning the battles against temptation and to remain steadfast through the imminent trials. Not only is the brother of Christ going to receive mercy at the throne, but he will also “find grace to help in time of need.”

The Father is not the “mean ogre in the sky.” He really is interested in each individual created in Christ Jesus, and earnestly desires the successful completion of each one’s faith journey. In His benevolence and desire for spiritual fellowship, He has provided the twin blessings of mercy and grace at His throne. The person who has been immersed into Christ, and who is willing to begin to walk faithfully before his God is magnificently welcomed at that throne, and then encouraged to bring others into that heavenly fellowship.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Humble High Priest

“We have,” said Hebrews’ author, “a High Priest who can sympathize with our weaknesses.” It is impossible to over-emphasize the significance of that statement! The demonstration of Jesus’ humanity before the eyes of man is a linchpin in communicating to the saints that they may confidently approach the everlasting and holy God. In preparation for this demonstration, the Father set in motion the priests of the Old Testament tabernacle, the priests of the order of Aaron. Because these priests stood as intercessors between the Israelites and God, their humanity was exhibited to the congregation of Israel so that the Hebrews would feel comfortable in bringing their sin offerings to the altar of the Almighty, then presented by those intercessors.

- **On behalf of men** - God is high and holy, separated from sinful men. Therefore it was necessary to consecrate a set of intercessors for sinners in Israel. Priests, then, descended from Aaron — Moses’ brother — were set aside for this purpose; and the high priest himself was the ultimate earthly representative of this priesthood. “For every high priest,” noted the author, “taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Hebrews 5:1). God was not trying to distance himself from distasteful sinners in Israel; rather He took the initiative in setting up the selection process for an intercessor, and outlined a system of gifts and sacrifices which would be acceptable to Him and soothe His righteous wrath. Thus the high priest stood between Israel and the righteous God, serving “on behalf of men.”
- **Deal gently** - This descendant of Aaron, the writer notes, is “taken from among men.” The Israelite, then, who approached the altar, was greeted by another human being, someone in the same needy condition as the trembling sinner. The high priest therefore could “deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself is beset with weakness” (Hebrews 5:2). Struggling begets compassion toward those who have similar struggles. The high priest would therefore be fitted to administer their sacrifices and plead with God earnestly on their behalf.
- **Weakness** - The high priest was beset with human weakness, and “because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself” (Hebrews 5:3). On the Day of Atonement, for example, the high priest in Israel would first offer a bull for himself, then a goat for the sins of the people. The offering first for himself would make him conscious of his weakness, and provide the proper humility for such an exalted position — a position where one individual stood as mediator before the Almighty God.
- **No one takes the honor** - For as long as the high priesthood in Israel was properly structured, no one could designate himself as high priest, and no one could receive that position by political maneuvering. “And no one takes the honor to himself,” is the inspired annotation, “but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was” (Hebrews 5:4). The high priest could not claim that his calling was his own doing, and likewise no one else could set aside the God-ordained priesthood, as Korah tried to do in his rebellion.

Beset by weakness, constricted to offer only sacrifices ordained by God, and called into the priesthood by the choice of God, the high priest entered an office of designed humility. This designed humility made him approachable by the average Israelite, and trained him to be gentle in his dealings with the commonly ignorant and misguided. But more than these, the humble high priesthood of the order of Aaron was designed to set the stage for the humble and approachable high priesthood of Jesus Christ, sacrifice and intercessor for all men.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

No Self-glorification

Aaron was called into the high priesthood of Israel because of his association with Moses, not because of his personal strengths. If there ever was a high priest beset by weakness, it was Aaron. While Moses was up on Sinai receiving the Commandments on stone, Aaron caved in to the pressure of the people and let them worship a golden calf. He lacked leadership ability; of the situation it was written: “Aaron had let them get out of control” (Exodus 32:25). Clearly, then, Aaron did not maneuver himself into a position of leadership and grab the high priesthood. “And no one takes the honor to himself,” was the plan set in motion by the hand and wisdom of God, “but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was” (Hebrews 5:4). From that point on the high priests were of the lineage of Aaron through Eleazar as designated by God, and when Eli’s household went bad in the days of Samuel, the Almighty was able to arrange for the priesthood to switch over to the sons of Zadok. The individual had to be “called” to be the legitimate high priest in Israel.

- **Christ called** - The book of Hebrews establishes that God built the Bible backwards; that is, He in His mind created the spectacle of Christ’s crucifixion, the witnesses of His bodily resurrection, and the high priesthood accomplished in His ascension. After creating the substance of the new covenant, He then created the history, prophecy, and typology of that covenant in the law so that the Old Testament would foreshadow “the good things to come” (Hebrews 10:1). Thus the high priesthood of Christ was carefully prepared for in both the priesthoods of Aaron and Melchizedek. “So Christ did not glorify Himself to become a high priest,” comments the author; God was the One who elevated and glorified Jesus to that position (Hebrews 5:5). He was “designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:10).
- **Linked to Sonship** - The book of Hebrews is the only book of the New Testament which calls Jesus the “high priest.” Other writings make that inference, but only Hebrews states the point directly. And the high priesthood of Christ is linked repeatedly to His Sonship. The idea is that Christians need to be assured that they have a high priestly intercessor that they can count on; so the picture is drawn of a Son who has been trained to follow His Father’s leading and can be depended upon for that intercessory work. “Christ was faithful as a Son over His house,” was a foundational point (Hebrews 3:6). “For the Law appoints men who are weak,” says the writer in another place, “but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever” (Hebrews 7:28). Christ therefore did not glorify Himself to become High Priest, “but He who said to Him, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’” That same One also spoke of the high priesthood in connection with that Sonship, as indicated by Hebrews’ author, “just as He also says in another place, ‘You are a priest forever of the order of Melchizedek.’” (Hebrews 5:6).

“Christ did not glorify Himself,” is the perspective of the writer in this context. The Father is the One who said to the Son, “Today I have begotten You.” In the same way, the Father is the One who issued the command: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.” Christ earned this designation by being faithful as a Son, carrying out the will of the Father in coming to earth and suffering for mankind. He demonstrated His capacity to be a merciful intercessor on behalf of the struggling saints by being the sacrifice before becoming High Priest. Those who would charge Jesus with self-glorification are not objectively considering the up-front price He paid before receiving the honors at the Father’s right hand!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Although He Was a Son

Sons of the influential often are spoiled. They often have special privileges allowing them to escape from the challenging or dirty work into which their “lessers” have to plunge. But it was not so with the Son of God. Leaving the glories of heaven, the Greatest of the Great descended to the meet the lowest of the low. He “emptied Himself,” averred the apostle Paul, and was “made like His brethren in all things.” Jesus’ coming to earth was not a plush “cake walk”; instead it was a thorn-encrusted, boulder-strewn path, walked by the “Man of sorrows.” “Surely,” said the prophet, “our griefs He Himself bore, and our sorrows He carried; yet we ourselves esteemed Him stricken, smitten of God and afflicted” (Isaiah 53:4,5). This great King was not only coming to call the noble and wealthy of the earth to repentance in a face-to-face meeting, but He was also descending to show compassion to the raped and beaten slave girl on her turf and lift her to the status of “royal priesthood.”

- **His anguish** - The greatest challenge Jesus faced was His death on the cross, including His separation from the Father in bearing the sins of mankind. The writer of Hebrews amplifies the descriptions of this suffering in one terse verse: “In the days of His flesh,” is the comment, “He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to the One able to save Him from death, and He was heard because of His piety” (Hebrews 5:7). How descriptively human are these words: “loud crying and tears”!
- **His hope** - The writer of Hebrews is emphasizing Jesus’ human side in order to establish that He was and is a sympathetic high priest to the spiritual descendants of Abraham. In reference, then, to His resurrection from the dead, the apostle John noted the Lord’s comment from His divine side: “No one has taken [My life] away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again” (John 10:18). From the divine perspective, Jesus could raise Himself from the dead. But His human side is brought to the fore in His appeal “to the One able to save Him from death”; that is, He was appealing to the Father to accomplish a successful resurrection — to bring Him forth safely out from death. The loud crying and tears are understandable: Jesus’ personal faith was put to the test in His hope that His resurrection would take place; if it didn’t, His death was wasted and He would disappear into Hades!
- **His piety** - “Piety” is a word that has almost disappeared from modern English, but it means holy behavior resulting from the respect for the Almighty’s power and splendor. Jesus, tempted in all points as we, yet did not sin. Therefore when appealed to be brought forth following His crucifixion, He was able to be heard when He made this most awesome of prayers — a prayer that was answered, and through which the rest of us have our only hope of a beneficial resurrection from the dead!

Jesus’ status as the Son of God did not give Him an easy pass through earthly existence. Rather, the opposite was true. Experiencing the most extreme of physical, mental, and spiritual anguish, our Lord was fitted to be the sacrifice for the sins of the world, but was subsequently resurrected out of Hades and seated at the right hand of the Majesty on high because of His personal holiness. “Although He was a Son,” the writer commented, “He learned obedience from the things which He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). What an awesome elder brother Christians have! He was willing to forego His rank and privilege to show His lesser brothers the way to live and love, to suffer and sacrifice, and thus to be regenerated, resurrected, and rewarded. Magnificent!!!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Source of Salvation

Hallelujah! Jesus is risen indeed! It was tense for Jesus as He approached the time of His crucifixion. With sweat like drops of blood falling on the ground, He cried out in prayer, “Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from Me”(Luke 22:42). Since this petition was not granted, His next earnest desire was that He be brought safely forth out of death, that He be resurrected from the dead. This supplication was granted; and on the first day of the week, the tomb was empty, and the resurrected Christ began to be seen by designated witnesses. Hallelujah! Jesus is risen indeed! Having completed His suffering for mankind and having identified with those who are beset by the weaknesses of the flesh, Christ arose, ascended to heaven, and began His greatest work for the descendants of Abraham.

- **Made perfect** - After Jesus rose from the dead, He is described as “having been made perfect” (Hebrews 5:9). The writer of Hebrews uses that expression to identify those who have passed successfully from this life. Others to whom this applies are waiting for their resurrection bodies which they will receive at Jesus’ second coming. Jesus is the exception, because not only did He descend to the Paradise portion of Hades, but when He ascended, “He led captive a host of captives”; that is, He took Paradise up to be in His presence. The Lord Jesus is the “first fruits,” as the apostle Paul described it: “For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ all shall be made alive. But each in his own order: Christ the first fruits, after that those who are Christ’s at His coming” (I Corinthians 15:22,23). Christ is the only One “made perfect” who has received His body of glory.
- **Source of salvation** - If Jesus merely died on the cross, He would have had no power to save. “If Christ has not been raised,” noted Paul, “your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (I Corinthians 15:17). Christ had to be resurrected to the throne of glory to have the power to save, as He described to the high priest of Israel prior to His crucifixion: “Hereafter you shall see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of power, and coming on the clouds of glory” (Matthew 26:64). Thus the writer of Hebrews comments, “And having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation” (Hebrews 5:9). It is significant that He saves only those who obey Him; the Bible does not put up with the “saved by faith alone” nonsense perpetrated by Luther, Calvin, and moderns.
- **Designated as High Priest** - The writer of this epistle had mentioned the high priesthood of Jesus the Christ in a couple of earlier chapters. But particularly in chapter five, the writer begins to lay down his groundwork for a long discussion on the high priestly ministry of the Son of God. Here he stressed the humanity of our Lord, especially his crying, tears, and learning obedience through suffering — the groundwork of His being able to identify with fallen man was established. Now, “having been made perfect,” in His glory He is “designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:10).

The great works of Christ are accomplished in His ministry on the throne, including His intercessory work as high priest of our confession. “Concerning Him we have much to say,” affirmed the author, “and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing” (Hebrews 5:11). A fleshly-minded people is going to have trouble comprehending a spiritual high priest, the sprinkling of spiritual blood, and a spiritual temple. But that is one of the purposes of this book, to raise Christian’s thinking from the earthly and physical to the lofty and spiritual. Christ in glory is the source of eternal salvation!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Ought to be Teachers

Jesus expects His disciples to experience spiritual growth. “Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ,” was Peter’s exhortation (II Peter 3:18). “Grow up in all aspects into Him,” was one of Paul’s contributions (Ephesians 4:15). It is apparent that spiritual growth is not automatic, but that each follower of Christ has to be a willing participant in his own progress.

One of the areas of spiritual growth that is absolutely essential is in the realm of increasing knowledge. Christians are “disciples”; that is, they are learners from the beginning. And they continue to learn, even as their great example, the Son of God, “learned obedience” right up through His death on the cross. The Bible, then, as God’s instruction manual and teaching tool for man, is designed for all levels of comprehension. To those interested in getting relief from the crushing weight of sin, the scripture presents the basic gospel of Christ, offering redemption through the blood shed on the cross and operative through the individual’s immersion into Christ. But the word of God is designed to move those disciples upward in their comprehension, painting not only the picture of Christ’s sacrifice but also His intercessory offering as high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

- **“We have much to say”** - The writer has successively introduced the concept of Christ’s high priesthood from the beginning of the letter. Without using the terminology “high priest,” he stated, “When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). That purification did not take place on the cross; it took place through the high priestly offering in the courts of heaven. The writer had mentioned Jesus as a “merciful and faithful high priest” in chapter two, instructed the disciples to “consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” in chapter three, referenced Him as a sympathetic high priest in chapter four, and introduced his deeper discussion in chapter five, noting that Christ was “designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:10). “Concerning Him we have much to say,” he interjected, “and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing” (Hebrews 5:11). These words are reminiscent of Jesus’ words to the apostles in the night in which He was betrayed: “I have many more things to say to you, but you cannot bear them now” (John 16:12). The writer of Hebrews is not going to be able to wait, as did Jesus with the apostles; his hearers need to be brought up to speed so that they can comprehend the things he is about to communicate to them.
- **“Ought to be teachers”** - “For though by this time you ought to be teachers,” is the writer’s exhortation, “you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God” (Hebrews 5:12). These saints, some of whom have probably been Christians for twenty years or more, should be able to teach the foundations. The Old Testament precursors of Christianity are necessary, and these brethren should have been able to expound on these things from “the oracles of God,” the messages of God in written form.

Every saint needs to keep learning. The wonders of God’s character, the rewards of serving Him, and the things that cause our hearts to burn within us are revealed on the pages of His written word. But they have to be brought out by teachers. The Ethiopian eunuch, when asked by Philip whether he understood the scriptures he was reading, answered with the words of countless truth-seekers around the world: “How could I, unless someone guides me?” (Acts 8:31). They needed teachers in the first century capable of communicating the oracles of God so that the hearers could understand about Jesus’ high priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek; the situation remains the same today!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Moving from Milk to Meat

In the physical realm, there would be great concern in a family if a child could not develop sufficiently to move from milk to more solid substance. Doctors would be called, reference materials would be scoured, and petitions would be raised to the Most High for His assistance. But how much concern is there in the spiritual realm for a child of God who refuses to move off the milk of the word? While it is apparent that the child in the physical realm will die if his condition does not improve, and that would be rightly regarded as a time of sadness for the family, at least the child would go to be in the presence of God for all eternity, and that would be a blessing. But in the spiritual realm, if the newly born-again child does not begin to grow, that child will die a spiritual death, endure the second death in the lake of fire, and be eternally separated from the Father. This, of course, would be a great tragedy.

- **Partakers of milk** - The long-time Christians of Hebrew origin were excoriated by the author: “You have come,” he said, “to need milk and not solid food.” The rebuke here is pretty severe. For the writer to say in the first place that they should be teachers, and then come back with the comment that they had to begin at the basics of the basics should have been a wake-up call for the Hebrew brethren.
- **Babes in joy-land** - The understanding and using of the scriptures is not something a person steps into overnight. The “sharp, two-edged sword” requires some training and skill to be wielded effectively. The writer therefore notes, “For everyone who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe” (Hebrews 5:13). Interesting expression: “accustomed to the word of righteousness.” It takes time and study to become skilled in the concepts and details of God’s powerful word; no short-cuts! So “babes” have to begin to chew on more solids to become accustomed to the word.
- **Word of righteousness** - In the word of God the righteousness of God is revealed. All the aspects of the Father’s righteous character are exhibited in Jesus Christ. Furthermore that righteousness of God is granted by faith to the disciple of Christ at the point of his immersion. In addition, the righteous Father expects that the disciples will begin to produce the righteous characteristics of God as the word of righteousness and the Holy Spirit work within. “The one who practices righteousness,” said the apostle John, “is righteous, just as He is righteous” (I John 3:7).
- **Meaty stuff** - The saints of God are to move forward from the milk to the meat. “But solid food,” is the way the New American Standard translates the concept, “is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil” (Hebrews 5:14). There is a perfection of character to be obtained as a result of the spiritual growth process, and those who are thusly described as “mature” are to be challenged by the deeper parts of God’s word.

The word of God teaches men about God, revealing His character, His love, His sacrifices, and His rewards. The word of God also teaches men about Satan and the forces of darkness, exposing his character, his hatred, his agenda, and his end. But the word of God also teaches men about men, illustrating their characters, their choices, their workings, and their judgments. The mature in the word can use these lessons to discern what is going on in the world around them, sizing up the situations in front of them as to whether they are good or evil. It is critical that those who are still on milk honestly recognize their level of growth, and pay close attention to those who have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Move, move, move — from the milk to the meat!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Press on to Perfection

The Hebrew Christians, noted the writer, had become “dull of hearing.” He wanted to discuss the great things about the high priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek, but he was conscious that their interest level and spiritual maturity was not sufficient. He wanted not only to bring out the sufferings of Christ, but also the glories to follow. And because that discussion requires a shift from the physical realm to the spiritual realm, the writer was willing to spend some time to move his readers from a focus on milk to a focus on meat. Thus the points of distinction between the Aaronic priesthood and that of the order of Melchizedek were put on hold until a shift in thinking could be accomplished.

- **Elementary teaching** - A teacher in any discipline knows that certain foundational points have to be put in place before the student can begin to grasp his subject material. How much more, then, are foundations to be put in place in comprehending the Christ of God! The writer of the Hebrew epistle references that concept: “Therefore,” he says, “leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity” (Hebrews 6:1). The rudiments of Christianity are found in the Old Testament law and shadows. The elementary teaching about the Christ is going to include those rudiments as well as the basic information found in the gospel accounts and the basic doctrines found in Acts and the epistles.
- **Moving on** - The writer does not want to use valuable scroll space to go back over the elemental teachings concerning Christ. “Let’s leave those behind,” he says. It is not that those basic doctrines are not important; the writer will mention those within a few verses. But he wants to “proceed on to perfection,” that his readers might be able to rise above the upcoming upheavals in Judea, and be able to exhibit the character of Christ in the midst of tough times.
- **Perfection** - “Let us press on to maturity,” is the New American Standard translation. As the saint learns obedience — suffering in following the footsteps of Christ — the dross of his character is removed in the refining process, and the sterling qualities left behind are indeed those of his Savior. In his maturation, the saint becomes a partaker “of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust” (II Peter 1:4). This maturity —this perfection of character, this imitation of the character of Christ — is possible; otherwise the scripture would not keep emphasizing in different words and different ways its desirability.
- **Foundation** - The writer had emphasized that he wanted to leave “the elementary teaching about the Christ ... not laying again a foundation ...” (Hebrews 6:1). Then he lists six points of this foundation:

 - Repentance from dead works
 - Faith Toward God
 - Instruction about washings [immersions]
 - Laying on off hands
 - The resurrection of the dead
 - Eternal Judgment

The writer wants to move from the basics to a discussion of the high priesthood of Christ according to the order of Melchizedek. But he has to mention the “elementary teaching about the Christ” as a foundation for his discussion. Having mentioned them, however, he wants to “press on to maturity.” “And this we shall do,” he says, “if God permits” (Hebrews 6:3). Permission must have been granted, because we have been given this letter as one of the 66 books of the inspired writ!

Repentance from Dead Works

“Leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ,” said Hebrews’ writer, “let us press on to perfection.” That pressing on needs to be done in order for there to be a proper discussion about the high priesthood of the order of Melchizedek and its attendant covenant relationships. But some brakes have to be put on the train of this pilgrimage to give us time to go back over each of the elementary teachings. All the writer has to do is to mention them to his readers, knowing that they have been taught these things in their pasts. But the modern reader may need to be brought up to speed on these, so we begin with some comments on the first listed: repentance from dead works.

- **Dead works** - “Dead works” is an interesting expression only used in the book of Hebrews. It is therefore one of those expressions whose meaning is going to have to be determined by context, the setting in which it is used. The overall thrust of this scroll is to move the Hebrew Christians from a trust in the physical trappings of the Law of Moses — the sacrifices, the temple, the priesthood of the order of Aaron, etc. — to a trust in and appreciation of the spiritual trappings of the “new and living way” offered through Christ. “Dead works,” in this overall context, is going to refer to the general attempt by those of Jewish background to present their doing the external things of law-keeping as reason for God’s accepting them. Buttressing this position is the way the writer of Hebrews ties his first two elementary teachings together (as is brought out by the punctuation marking generally agreed upon): “repentance from dead works and of faith toward God.” Those of Hebrew background are thus being encouraged to leave behind an attempt at justification by works of the law, and turn to a system of salvation through faith in Christ; essentially the discussion of the book of Galatians and much of Romans rolled into one small phrase. The question of the apostle Paul succinctly brings the issue to its clarifying point: “Did you receive the Spirit by the works of the Law or by hearing with faith?” (Galatians 3:2).
- **Repentance** - “Repentance” in the modern mind, if the modern mind thinks about it at all, is focused on a change of behavior. While change in behavior is part of the desired end of repentance, the word itself centers more on a “change in thinking.” Though the Jew’s outward behavior might be exemplary, for example, he was still in need of repentance; he needed to change his whole viewpoint in regard to what God is looking for. Those of Israelite background struggled with that mental shift, as illustrated by the first major discussion concerning the salvation of the Gentiles. Those who had come down from Judea to Antioch of Syria and encountered their first major block of Gentiles who had become Christians were pretty insistent: “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved,” they said (Acts 15:1). “It is necessary to circumcise them and direct them to observe the law of Moses,” their spiritual brothers affirmed in Jerusalem (Acts 15:5). Such men were in great need of repentance; they really needed to change their thinking and bring it in line with the revealed perspective of God.

The Jew needed to understand (and every modern needs to make his own application of the principle) that his attempt to be pleasing to God was not based on his participation in the outer rituals prescribed by law. Just because he assembled in the synagogue on the Sabbath, just because he was there in Jerusalem on feast days, just because he ritually washed his hands, just because he looked outwardly righteous ... none of these guaranteed he had a lick of faith. His thinking under these conditions would be: I’m holy because I do all the holy things that this holy people does, and we as a group are God’s. Those are the “dead works” of the Law, and that thinking is what the Jew needed to repent of. Draw your own conclusions about today!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Faith toward God

“What shall we say,” Paul asked his Jewish/Christian brethren in Rome, “that Abraham, our forefather according to the flesh, has found?” (Romans 4:1). Since Abraham was in existence more than 500 years before the Law of Moses, it couldn’t have been law-keeping that he found! What Abraham discovered was that by having the faith that God required, God considered him righteous. The Law “was added,” in the words of the apostle Paul, for the physical descendants of Abraham, to provide a framework for the faith of Christ that was to come. “The Law,” averred Paul, “has become our tutor to lead us to Christ, that we may be justified by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a tutor” (Galatians 3:24,25). That the writer of Hebrews is conscious of these points, and is moving his Hebrew hearers from the physical system of Law to the spiritual system of faith, is therefore evident in his terminology: in regard to the elementary teachings about Christ he says that he is not “laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God” (Hebrews 6:1). By tying the two — repentance from dead works, and faith toward God — together, the writer is connecting the turning from the Law of Moses to the faith of Christ.

- **Law of Moses** - Used numerous times in what are called the New Testament writings, the expression “Law of Moses” refers to the writings of the Old Testament, the application of its laws to Israel, and the customs which sprang from it. In other words, the Law of Moses (or simply “the Law”) is a system of thought focusing primarily on the external actions of man. It’s intent, as pointed out earlier, was to make man recognize his shortcomings and therefore turn to Christ for his justification. The Jew, however, tended to point out his apparent external performance of the duties of the Law in the sight of men as a demonstration of his righteousness, and thus was blinded to his need for the intercession on his behalf provided through the terms of the new covenant.
- **Faith of Christ** - Used numerous times in what are called the New Testament writings, the expression “faith of Christ” refers to the doctrines taught in the book of Acts and other letters, the application of those principles to each Christian, and the acceptable customs which spring from that base. In other words, the faith of Christ (or simply “the faith”) is a system of thought focusing initially on the picture of Christ in glory as revealed in the written word. This picture, intently looked upon by the mind of the believer, transforms his inner man and results in what the apostle Paul would call “the obedience of faith.” The saint, then, is spoken of as living by faith, walking by faith, saved by faith, and justified by faith. It is his faith which is tested, which is refined by fire, and which is precious in the sight of God.

The person of Jewish background, therefore, was to turn from the Law of Moses to the faith of Christ; that is, he was to “repent from dead works,” and to learn what it meant to have “faith toward God.” The works of the Law were called dead works because they were the individual’s attempt to justify himself before God. The works of faith are alive because they flow from the disciple’s riveted attention on pleasing the Christ of glory. We have received, in the words of Paul, “the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Christ” (II Corinthians 4:6). Because also, in the words of Paul, “not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself” (Romans 14:7), those of us of like precious faith are bound together in one body, and therefore have a set of instructions as to how we are to function and flow together. All this forms the elemental teaching about the Christ, as the writer of Hebrews phrased it, in the realm of “faith toward God.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Instructions about Washings

No housewife would think that she could dip her clothes in blood and they would come out clean. Blood stains, in fact, are some of the more difficult to get out of clothing, and blood is not regarded as a cleansing agent. Thus God, the perfect communicator, has gone to great lengths to have the cleansing properties normally associated with water also associated with blood. Moses, when he inaugurated the first covenant with Israel, “took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and the people” (Hebrews 9:19). By interconnecting the blood and water, the people could comprehend that as water was for cleansing, so was the blood. For Israel, then, “according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood” (Hebrews 9:22).

- **Purification rituals** - The Jews, by Law, had many purification rituals. Nearly all of these had some sort of ritualistic washing connected with the total ceremony, as the writer of Hebrews noted: “Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make [him who did the service] perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:9,10). The Jews also added other washings to their tradition, as exemplified by the purification vats at the wedding feast where Jesus turned the water into wine. “For the Pharisees and all the Jews,” commented Mark in his gospel account, “do not eat unless they carefully wash their hands, thus observing the traditions of the elders, and when they come from the market place, they do not eat unless they cleanse themselves; and there are many other things which they have received in order to observe, such as the washing of cups and pitchers and copper pots” (Mark 7:3,4).
- **John’s immersion** - The Hebrew people were thus prepared for John’s immersion. The sundry purification rituals and customs set the stage for a cleansing announced by this forerunner. “John the Immerser appeared in the wilderness,” recorded Mark, “preaching an immersion of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” (Mark 1:4). The Jews accepted this cleansing from past sins as coming from God, and thousands flocked to the wilderness to be immersed by John. So pervasive in Israel was this immersion that Luke reported, “And when all the people and the tax-gatherers heard [that no one born of woman was greater than John the Immerser], they acknowledged God’s justice, having been immersed in the immersion of John” (Luke 7:29).
- **Immersion into Christ** - When the Day of Pentecost, 30 AD, arrived, the people were prepared for immersion into Christ. “Repent,” Peter had stated, “and be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Not only was remission of sins connected with immersion in Jesus’ name, but the added purpose was that those immersed might receive the indwelling Spirit. “You were washed,” stated Paul, “you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God” (I Corinthians 6:11).

One of the sectors of “the elementary teaching about the Christ” is “instruction about washings.” These baptismoi included not only the ceremonial washings of the Jews but also their carry over into the immersions of John and into the name of Jesus Christ. The Hebrew Christians were expected to know about these basic doctrines, and to be able to teach them to others. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews therefore does not want to get stuck at this basic level, but wants to move on into the teaching concerning the high priesthood of Jesus Christ, priest according to the order of Melchizedek. May we likewise be able to expound on the doctrines of washing, but may we also be able to move on to maturity in the deeper doctrines of the Christ!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Laying-on of Hands

The laying-on-of-hands as an ordination or conferring of office or authority began with Moses and Joshua. “Now Joshua the son of Nun was filled with the spirit of wisdom,” notes the Deuteronomic account, “for Moses had laid his hands on him” (Deuteronomy 34:9). The Lord is the One who started the process, saying to Moses, “Take Joshua the son of Nun, a man in whom is the Spirit, and lay your hand on him; and have him stand before Eleazar the priest and before all the congregation; and commission him in their sight. And you shall put some of your authority on him, in order that all the congregation of the sons of Israel may obey him” (Numbers 27:18-20). While there was a laying-on-of-hands in Israel for the setting aside of the tribe of Levi as a wave offering, and similarly for certain sacrifices, the use of this ceremony as a means of conferring recognition and authority lay dormant until the time of the church of the first century AD.

- **By church leadership to appoint a preacher** - In both of his letters to Timothy, Paul stated that he had been appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher (I Timothy 2:7; II Timothy 1:11). In the early part of Paul’s Christian life he was a teacher, and with Barnabas “taught considerable numbers” in Antioch of Syria. In the absence of elders in Antioch, the leadership (the “prophets and teachers”) there set Paul and Barnabas aside to go on their first missionary journey. Because of the phraseology of the letters to Timothy, the indication is that his appointment as a preacher came at this laying-on-of-hands as recorded in Acts 13 (later, the full apostleship came upon him, as indicated in the name change from Saul to Paul in Acts 13:9). Timothy, likewise, who was to “do the work of an evangelist [equivalent of preacher],” and had this gift bestowed upon him “through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the presbytery [eldership]” (II Timothy 4:5; I Timothy 4:14).
- **By preachers to appoint elders** - On their first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas, serving as preachers (also apostles of the church at Antioch), “appointed [selected by the stretching forth of hands] elders in every church” (Acts 14:23). Titus, whose directives were similar to Timothy the evangelist, was instructed to “appoint elders in every city” on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5). And Paul told Timothy, in a section dealing with elders, not to “lay hands on anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others” (I Timothy 5:22). It seems pretty conclusive that elders were appointed through the laying on of hands of those who served as evangelists.
- **By apostles to confer manifestations of the Spirit** - In Acts chapter six, the apostles laid hands on seven men to set them aside to take care of the widows of Jerusalem’s congregation. Stephen and Philip, two of the six, also received gifts or manifestations of the Spirit, having the ability to perform great signs among the peoples. In Acts 19, Paul laid hands on twelve men who then received the gifts of speaking in tongues and prophesying. In Acts eight, it was necessary for the apostles Peter and John to come to Samaria from Jerusalem and lay hands on the new saints there that they might receive manifestations of the Spirit. And Paul said that he laid hands on Timothy so that he might receive a gift of God. Without exception, these gifts were given only by the laying on of the apostles’ hands in the New Testament.

The teaching about the laying-on-of-hands was one of the elementary teachings about the Christ. The early Christians understood the laying-on-of-hands — even though there is a lot of confusion floating around in modern times — and the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews did not have to go into detail. Let’s make sure we understand, be able to teach this doctrine, and then move onward!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Resurrection of the Dead

“How do some among you,” the apostle Paul queried, “say that there is no resurrection of the dead?” (I Corinthians 15:12). People, then as now, often have gaps in their reasoning processes that need to be corrected or clarified. Those who were stating that there is no resurrection from the dead had overlooked something of major significance. “But if there is no resurrection from the dead,” the apostle pointed out to his readers, “not even Christ has been raised” (I Corinthians 15:13). Oops! They hadn’t thought of that. “If Christ has not been raised,” he superadded, “your faith is worthless; you are still in your sins” (I Corinthians 15:17). It is not surprising, therefore, that one of the elementary teachings about the Christ that would be included by the author of Hebrews would be “the resurrection of the dead” (Hebrews 6:2).

- **Preparatory resurrections** - The greatest miracle of all time was Jesus’ permanent resurrection from the dead. All the miracles of the Old Testament, all the miracles of the apostles and others during the Lord’s earthly sojourn, and the miracles of the Christ Himself were all to bring the people “up to speed” in readiness for the resurrection of Jesus out of Hades and to His rightful position on the throne of God. It was thus necessary that, in the midst of these miracles, some resurrections should occur. Hence Elijah raised from the dead the son of the widow of Zarephath, and the bones of Elisha contained enough power to raise a man hastily cast into the prophet’s grave. Jesus Himself resurrected three during His earthly ministry: the son of the widow of Nain, Jairus’ daughter, and Lazarus. “A great prophet has arisen among us,” they said (Luke 7:16).
- **Jesus’ own resurrection** - The earlier resurrections were startling and amazed their witnesses. But they were not earth-changing; they were noted, and people’s lives rolled on. Jesus’ resurrection, however, underwent much more scrutiny because of His claim to be the Son of God. The witnesses, then, of His bodily resurrection were questioned closely about the truthfulness of what they saw. And those who were witnesses of His ascension to glory and accession to the throne of heaven were given special powers to verify their testimony. Both Peter and Paul, for example, raised individuals from the dead as part of the confirming signs of Jesus’ resurrection. “He is the One whom God exalted to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior,” affirmed Peter and the apostles. “And we are witnesses of these things, and so is the Holy Spirit” (Acts 5:31,32).
- **Resurrection on the last day** - “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood,” said the Lord Jesus, “has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54). There is a resurrection of the righteous, and the day when the saints rise to meet Jesus in the air is called “the last day,” not “the last day but still with 1007 years to go.” Furthermore, when the righteous rise, so also shall the unrighteous. “An hour is coming,” stated this same Jesus, “in which all who are in the tombs shall hear [My] voice and shall come forth; those who did the good deeds to a resurrection of life, those who committed the evil deeds to a resurrection of judgment” (John 5:28,29). Even those who never die, but who are still alive at Jesus’ return will receive a resurrection body. “We shall not all sleep,” affirmed Paul, “but we shall all be changed” (I Corinthians 15:51).

“The resurrection of the dead” is one of the elementary doctrines of the Christ. It is the “one hope” to which each true saint of God presses. Thus the apostle Paul reasons that if the resurrection of Christ did not take place, neither will ours in the future. “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied,” because our efforts in order to attain to the resurrection were all wasted. But — praise God! — “Christ has been raised from the dead, the first fruits of those who are asleep” (I Corinthians 15:20).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Eternal Judgment

Sooner or later, each man must meet his Maker. “We shall all stand before the judgment seat of God,” affirmed the apostle Paul, adding, “So then each one of us shall give account of himself to God” (Romans 14:10,12). Mankind as a whole is not interested in such an accounting, having run the calculation that they shall fall short in meeting the standards of God. Their record, therefore, is one of shutting their ears to any recounting of such accountability, or of shutting the mouths of the messengers who are sent to remind them that one day they will answer. “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem,” cried out Jesus Himself, “who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her” (Matthew 23:37). “Yet they did not obey or incline their ear,” was the statement of one of those prophets, “but walked in their own counsels and in the stubbornness of their evil heart, and went backward and not forward” (Jeremiah 7:24). But the message of eternal judgment must be delivered anyway!

- **Elementary teaching** - The writer of Hebrews lists six “elementary” teachings about the Christ, including as last on the list “eternal judgment.” The fact that there is a judgment at the end of time forces the thinking man to face himself and face his need of redemption. Honest people have also run the calculation on themselves and have come to the conclusion that if weighed on the scales of God’s judgment balance, they are wanting. Therefore they rightly ask if God has made some provision for mercy and redemption that they might pass into the glories of eternity. And that answer focuses directly on Christ, “who became to us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption” (I Corinthians 1:30).
- **Jesus as Judge** - “For not even the Father judges anyone,” annotated Jesus as recorded by the apostle John, “but He has given all judgment to the Son, in order that all may honor the Son, even as they honor the Father” (John 5:22). Any picture of the judgment bar of God, then, actually has Jesus on that throne. “But when the Son of Man comes in His glory,” affirmed the Christ, “and all the angels with Him, then He will sit on His glorious throne. And all the nations will be gathered before Him” (Matthew 25:31,32).
- **Judgment of all** - No one shall escape that judgment. “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ,” was the way Paul phrased it for the Corinthian brethren, “that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, good or bad” (II Corinthians 5:10). While Paul has the Christian facing judgment primarily in view in his comment, it is clear that the non-Christian shall face the Christ as well. “And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened,” is the picture from John the Revelator, “and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds” (Revelation 20:12).
- **Consequences of judgment** - The results of this judgment are eternal. For the disobedient, “if anyone’s name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown into the lake of fire” (Revelation 20:15). This is the “outer darkness,” the place of “weeping and gnashing of teeth.” By ultimate contrast, those declared righteous enter into the eternal kingdom of glory. “Come, you who are blessed of My Father,” will be the words of Jesus, “inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world” (Matthew 25:34).

Yes, Virginia, there is eternal judgment. “God is now declaring to men that all everywhere should repent, because He has fixed a day in which He will judge the world in righteousness through a Man whom He has appointed, having furnished proof to all men by raising Him from the dead” (Acts 17:30,31).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Falling from Foundations

The writer of Hebrews wants to move his hearers from milk to meat; he wants to talk about the high priesthood of Jesus according to the order of Melchizedek. But he is restrained from doing so because of some other comments he has to make first. The writer knows that the destruction of Jerusalem is imminent and he knows that the physical trappings of worship under the terms of the Old Covenant are about to be torn down. But he is concerned about the ability of these first century Christians to maintain their faith in Christ in the face of the loss of their Jewish heritage. So he references the elementary foundations about the Christ as a touchstone for his next comments, concerned that the brethren press forward instead of falling away.

- **Definitely Christians** - A major tenet of Calvinism (the underlying belief system of all Protestantism, although a chunk of that belief system has broken away and does not claim any serious belief in the Bible at all) is that once a person is “saved,” he cannot fall away. When confronted with warnings such as the writer of Hebrews has about falling away, their contention is that those who drifted away really weren’t Christians in the first place. See if that makes sense: “For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them to repentance” (Hebrews 6:4-6). The only way a person could be described as a partaker of the Holy Spirit is if he in fact were at one point a Christian.
- **Falling away** - People fall away from the faith of Christ because they lose their focus. In the parable of the sower, the Lord Himself warns all disciples of the reality of trying to maintain the Christian faith in the face of adversity and subtlety. Those who are “shallow soil” fall away when unexpected persecution, temptation, or affliction arises, and they are “outa there.” Those who are sown in the midst of the thorns fall away because worry gets in their way, or desire for riches, or earthly pleasure, and those who once sat with the faithful in the assembly are gone, gone, gone. Too bad, but they were big boys and big girls and made their own decisions.
- **No more repentance** - God is the One who grants opportunity for repentance. God, said Peter and the other apostles, exalted Jesus “to His right hand as a Prince and a Savior, to grant repentance to Israel, and forgiveness of sins” (Acts 5:31). When God was ready, He opened the same opportunity to the Gentiles. The church in Jerusalem, after hearing Peter’s testimony regarding the immersion of the Spirit upon the Cornelius, marveled, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life” (Acts 11:18). God who opens is also the God who closes. If the saints “have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame” (Hebrews 6:6). If the one who once was a partaker insists in going contrary to the direction of God, he becomes hardened, and God closes the door for the possibility of repentance.

Falling away is not something we recommend, but it can be done. The eternal consequences are so intensely serious that anyone who would so choose has been blinded by the combination of his own desires and Satan’s wiles. That is why the foundations of the elementary teaching about the Christ are so important; they help the follower of Jesus keep his focus so that he doesn’t drift into destruction or be hustled into Hades.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Great Blessings for Saints

Saints have tremendous spiritual blessings in the heavenly places. However, because those blessings are not directly physical, many lose sight of them and plunge into oblivion. In order for a person to keep doing those things which are beneficial to him, he continually has to stress to himself the benefits of what it is he is doing. If he fails to stress those benefits, he will quit those positive habits and drift back into a slothful or destructive lifestyle. Thus the writer of Hebrews, in warning the brethren against falling away in chapter six, lists some of the great blessings for the saints, describing them in terms of past possessions of those who once were participants.

- **Once been enlightened** - Sons of the Most High have been photizo-ed, that is, they have truly been enlightened. And this enlightenment is in the most broad of terms. The saints are to “walk as children of light,” knowing that in their inner man they are shining with the light of the glory of God. But believers are also “enlightened” in the sense that they are the ones in possession of the knowledge about reality. If those under the Law of Moses, for example, were described as “having in the Law the embodiment of knowledge and of the truth,” how much more those who possess an understanding of the completed New Testament! Those who truly call upon the name of God have access to “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (II Peter 1:3). While the world’s religions and university systems claim “enlightenment,” they are in fact plunging their adherents into further darkness. “And no wonder, for even Satan disguises himself as an angel of light” (II Corinthians 11:14). What a blessing it is, “that the light is come into the world” (John 3:19).
- **“Tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit”** - The brethren of the first century knew that when a person was immersed into Christ, he not only received forgiveness of sins, but that he was also indwelt by the Holy Spirit. Through the Spirit, then, the individual had access to eternal life; indeed, by faith he already possessed it. The Christian is a partaker of the Holy Spirit from the time of his immersion; he is immersed for the forgiveness of his sins, and he receives “the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). Fellowship with God has been re-established, and the saint has had his first taste of what that fellowship is to be in the age to come.
- **“Tasted the good word of God”** - “Heaven and earth will pass away,” stated our Lord, “but My words shall not pass away” (Matthew 24:34). When the Christian therefore has his heart burn within him as the meanings of the prophecies become clear and as the great principles are understood, it is but a taste of the full comprehension of what is to come.
- **Tasted of “the powers of the age to come”** - The material realm is weak and temporary; the spiritual realm is powerful and eternal. While on the surface it seems that the material realm wins by brute force, it is the spiritual power — exhibited to the utmost in Jesus Christ — which ultimately triumphs. “He who is slow to anger is better than the mighty,” affirmed Solomon, “and he who rules his spirit than he who captures a city” (Proverbs 16:32). Strengthened as he is “with power through His Spirit in the inner man,” the saint in this age is still only having a taste of the full course of the age to come (Ephesians 3:16).

The age to come is awesome beyond comprehension, and for a saint to turn his back on that reward is the utmost in folly. But the powers, principles, bounty, and blessings for the saint in the spiritual realm in this age are tremendous. If this “taste” does not satisfy, then that individual is not spiritually minded, and will fall into the setting where he can no longer repent.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Fruit for God

Jesus Christ has accomplished great things for His people. Not only has He rescued them from the cauldron of a fiery eternity, but He also has sent His Spirit into their hearts and established eternal fellowship for them with the Father. To accomplish this, of course, He had to undergo crucifixion, separation, and finally achieve exaltation. The result: the brethren “have been enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come” (Hebrews 6:4,5). Upon receipt of such pristine heavenly blessings, who could possibly turn their backs and return to the slime of the world? But some do.

- **Fallen away** - When a saint drifts away from the first principles of Christianity and allows his heart to be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin, then he falls away. Because of the hardening of the heart in this process, “it is impossible to renew them to repentance” (Hebrews 6:6). God is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance” (II Peter 3:9). The problem is that there is a point of no return, that the journey for the once enlightened back into the darkness has such pull that they will not repent.
- **Crucifying the Son of God** - The unenlightened sinner is not aware of the love of Jesus for his soul; he is not conscious that Jesus died to bear his sins in His body on that tree. But those who have tasted the good word of God cannot make such a claim; they know that their sins were what nailed the Lord to the cross in the first place. But now, having decided to plunge again into the darkness, loving this present world, “they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame.” One who wears the name of Christ but does the devil’s work is doubly destructive; not only is he personally crucifying Christ — in one matter of speaking — again, but he is publicly shaming Christ, and thus having the name of Christ “trashed” on earth, and hindering the cause of evangelism.
- **Expected harvest** - If someone were to plant a garden, he would expect to be able to eat the produce. In some situations, if the garden didn’t yield a harvest, starvation would be facing the planter. “For the ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is tilled, receives a blessing from God” (Hebrews 6:7). The point of the author here is that when someone becomes a Christian, God expects him to be productive in the kingdom. God will both bless the individual and the effort.
- **Thorns and thistles** - It costs the farmer to till the ground and to plant it. The field of wheat, then, “drilled” in the tilled ground, fertilized, and “drinking in the rain” sent from God, should yield a bountiful harvest. “But if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned” (Hebrews 6:8). If it can’t be harvested, it has to be torched! The point here is that if God has invested so much in planting his word in the saint, and the saint refuses to yield an appropriate harvest, he will end up being burned for all eternity.

The warning is so severe because the cost is so dear. Hebrews’ writer is conscious of the persecution coming upon the brethren, and is pleading with them to develop and maintain the proper spiritual attitudes and habits so that they will successfully pass the test rather than falling away. He then writes these hopeful words: “But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and the things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way” (Hebrews 6:9). May each of us decide to place ourselves on the blessing side of God’s harvest rather than on the cursed side. No thistles and thorns here; only the waves of wind sweeping through golden fields, showing the bounty of God’s spiritual harvest!

Things That Accompany Salvation

The Almighty pictures Himself as a pretty exacting Master. When He, in parabolic form, entrusted His coinage to His servants, He expected them to “do business until I come back” (Luke 19:13). Where the Lord entrusts, He anticipates a return; where He plants, He looks for a harvest. But He requires even more than that. “You know that I am an exacting man,” is His picture, “taking up what I did not lay down, and reaping what I did not sow” (Luke 19:21). The brethren in Christ, then, should be creatively looking for ways that they can be fruitful, sowing and bringing in a harvest of righteousness.

- **Better things** - The vast bulk of the Jewish people rejected the message that Jesus was the Messiah, declared to be such by His resurrection from the dead. “He came to His own,” recorded the apostle John, “and His own did not receive Him” (John 1:11). But even of those Hebrews who had become Christians, the writer was concerned that they might fall away. And for good reason; the scripture indicates that there would be a massive falling away or apostasy following the establishment of the church in the first century. But the writer of this epistle is optimistic, saying that “we are convinced of better things concerning you.” He anticipates that these brethren will once again become teachers of the word and duplicate themselves in producing more Christians, to the glory of God.
- **Things that accompany salvation** - In addition to seeking and saving the lost, the saints also are to care for each other. “Be devoted to one another in brotherly love,” was Paul’s encouragement, “give preference to one another in honor ...” (Romans 12:10). The writer was convinced that most of the brethren would put into practice all the things that have now been incorporated in the writings of what we call the New Testament.
- **God’s fairness** - While the challenges of the imminent tribulation coming upon these Hebrew brethren would be great, the writer is subtly implying that God will help them. But he wants to lay the stress on their continuing efforts. Recalling what they had gone through in the earlier history of the church in Jerusalem, the author gives this encouraging note: “For God is not so unjust as to forget your work and the love which have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints” (Hebrews 6:10). It is interesting that God regards the ministrations the saints perform for each other as “toward His name.” In His being fair, and His remembering those ministrations, God is indicated as willing to work with these brethren.
- **Diligence, faith, and patience** - God will do His part; no one has to check on Him or supervise Him. So any problems which arise will develop on the saints’ side of the teamwork. “And we desire,” thusly stated the author, “that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (Hebrews 6:11,12). Diligence, not sluggishness, was required. (It stands out that, across the board, followers of Christ are to have a diligent, disciplined lifestyle, and not operating like a bunch of slugs!) By recalling the faith of the examples of faithful men and women listed in the Old Testament scriptures, these Christians would be strengthened and would be able to believe that God was working, and that, if they were patient, things would work out for them.

Salvation is not “once saved, always saved.” The things that accompany salvation are the works of love and discipline of faith and the strength that comes through patience. These are exhibited in the continuing ministering that the saints do for one another and for the lost. Minister on, then, brethren, minister on!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Patience of Abraham

It is encouraging for pilgrims to know that someone has successfully made the trek ahead of them. The deepening grooves of the Oregon Trail across the dry American West were assurance to later emigrants that the way was known and that Oregon City was a real destination. But it was up to trail-blazers like Jedediah Smith to figure out a watered route across the wastes of what is now Wyoming, to know where to cross the Snake River in Idaho, and to find the best overland passage over the dry hills to the refreshing waters of the Boise River. Such it is in the realm of faith, and such a trail-blazer was Abraham, father of the faithful in Christ Jesus.

- **Imitators** - The fastest way to learn anything is by imitation. Working with the master craftsman is the most efficient way for the apprentice to learn the skills, far superior to trying to pick up the slights and slants by looking at pictures in a manual. The great men of faith from the times of the Old Covenant were paraded before the eyes of the Hebrew Christians in the reading of the scrolls, and the positive results of their strong finishes were recorded favorably. The New Testament brethren were to “realize the full assurance of the hope until the end.” They were to use the favorable examples as role models, “imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.” That patience was a necessary quality for those men and women who had to wait for God to execute His plan on His timetable.
- **Promise to Abraham** - When Abraham successfully passed the test of his faith by offering Isaac on Moriah’s altar, God reaffirmed His earlier promise to him, but this time with more emphasis. “For when God made the promise to Abraham,” noted Hebrews’ author, “since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, saying, ‘I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you.’” (Hebrews 6:13,14). The word surely in the English translation is the rendering of the doubling of the words in Hebrew (“Blessing, I will bless you ...”), and is the way of showing that God swore by Himself. Abraham had been blessed by the priest of the Most High, Melchizedek, had been promised a son, had been promised that he would be a father of a multitude through that son, had been the participant in the establishing of a covenant, had been promised that his seed would possess the land, and that through his seed all the nations of the earth would be blessed. “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed,” affirmed Paul (Galatians 3:16). These, when combined, produce a package called the promise; the Law, stated Paul, “does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise” (Galatians 3:17). The writer of Hebrews uses, then, the same terminology: “For when God made the promise to Abraham ...” “I will establish the oath,” said God to Isaac, “which I swore to your father Abraham” (Genesis 26:3).
- **Patient wait** - For Abraham, the physical touchstone of those distant and spiritual promises was the birth and presence of his son Isaac. When he was 69, no son; when he was 79, no son; when he was 89, no son. Finally, when he was 99, the Lord appeared and promised him a son within the year. “And thus,” the writer remarks concerning Abraham, “having patiently waited, he obtained the promise” (Hebrews 6:15).

“Abraham believed God, and it was reckoned to him as righteousness.” Through his faith and patience, Abraham continued to walk forward, being “fully assured,” affirmed the apostle Paul, “that what God had promised, God was able to perform” (Romans 4:21). That same “full assurance of hope” stands as a beckoning promise to each saint today, and God’s goal is that each one continue to press forward in joy, bringing good news to a hostile world!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Interposing with an Oath

The custom of giving an oath or swearing had a good beginning, but, like all things touched by human hands, it deteriorated. God Himself started the process with Abraham's family, as He emphasized in His reiteration of the covenant with Isaac, "I will establish the oath which I swore to your father Abraham" (Genesis 26:3). To Israel under the Law the Almighty had given specific instructions about oaths, but it had become so perverted by people that Jesus finally had to say, "Make no oath at all" (Matthew 5:34). But with God there is no perversion, and His backing His statements with an oath is very significant. In giving the promise to Abraham, "He swore by Himself, saying, 'Blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.'"

- **Positive intent of oaths** - The purpose of an oath is to guarantee the truthfulness or positive intent of the person swearing. In American court of law, for example, testifying "under oath" is supposed to guarantee the veracity of the witness, and that if he lies under oath, he can be convicted of perjury. "For men swear by one greater than themselves," noted Hebrews' author, "and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end to every dispute" (Hebrews 6:16). When a person calls God as his witness, he is basically telling everyone he expects discipline from heaven if he is lying, and thus it is accepted among God-fearing people as the end of the discussion.
- **God's oaths** - If men of honor make an oath, and it is accepted as final, how much more if the great and righteous God were to swear. "In the same way," comments the author, "God, desiring even more to show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath" (Hebrews 6:17). The "heirs of the promise" are the aforementioned "descendants of Abraham" (Hebrews 2:16), a reference to Christians. This is an awesome passage of scripture! To show people of the Christian era that He was not going to alter His purpose, that He was moving forward with His preordained plan through the midst of the tremendous persecution that the saints were to suffer, He is described as "interposing with an oath." Thus there are two oaths: one given to Abraham at the time of the offering of Isaac, and the prophetic utterance of His oath in regard to the Priest of the order of Melchizedek.
- **Two unchangeable things** - The tribulation that was about to come upon the brethren in Judea at the hands of the Romans was prophesied by Jesus as being "such as has not occurred since the beginning of the world until now, nor ever shall" (Matthew 24:21). The saints would need to know that the Father was with them. Hence God stepped in with His two oaths, "in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement" (Hebrews 6:18). The two unchangeable things are "the promise to Abraham," and the prophecy of the coming high priesthood of the order of Melchizedek.

"The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'" (Psalm 110:4). God has had an unchanging purpose: to bring together a people and a Priest, under the terms of an eternal or unchanging covenant. The people are the spiritual descendants of Abraham, the ones who receive the strong encouragement from the oaths connected with the promises of God. The Priest is one Jesus of Nazareth, risen from the dead, ascended to the position of power and intercession on the throne. Because of this, we can believe in "the full assurance of hope until the end." Thus the saint moves forward, truly knowing that "God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose" (Romans 8:28).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Anchor of the Soul

There is such a thing as a “vain hope.” There was a news clip recently about a university co-ed who was missing. Her mother said that she knew in her heart that her daughter was still alive; two weeks later the body was found. The mother was buoying herself up with a “vain hope,” that is, her hopes were empty or without substance.

How do we as Christians know that our spiritual hopes are not “vain?” We know in our hearts that Jesus is going to give us the resurrection of the righteous at His second coming? Or is this our trying to buoy ourselves up with an empty promise? “God, desiring even more to show the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement.” God gave two oaths — one making a promise to produce a people, and one producing a priest for those people — that those people might have certainty about their resurrections from the dead.

- **Strong encouragement** - God not only offers His children encouragement, He offers them strong encouragement! Coming from God, this should produce a positive, upbeat people indeed. The Almighty issued one oath 2000 years before the promised people came into existence, and He issued the other 1000 years before the promised priest rose from the dead. The scope and scale of these two “unchangeable things” is such that the honest individual recognizes that only God could have accomplished them, and he has seen that it is “impossible for God to lie.” Thus “we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us” (Hebrews 6:18). The promised and encouraged people are those who have come under the intercession of the promised High Priest.
- **Hope set before us** - Jesus said, “He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day” (John 6:54). The offer was tendered; those who hear His voice follow Him, desiring earnestly their resurrection from the dead. “I press on,” said Paul, using language similar to that of Hebrews, “in order that I may lay hold of that for which I was laid hold of by Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:12). “This hope,” affirmed Hebrews’ author, “we have as an anchor for the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil” (Hebrews 6:19). All other hopes can be stripped from a person — his health, his family, his finances, his freedom — but his resurrection, if he keeps his faith intact, is certain because it is guaranteed by the oaths of God. This then, is the “anchor of the soul,” which would keep the Hebrew Christians secure in the shaky storm of the upcoming tribulation.
- **Within the veil** - The Old Testament tabernacle had two rooms: the outer room was where the priests ministered on a daily basis, and the inner room where only the high priest could enter on the day of atonement. Between those two rooms was the veil. Jesus is pictured as entering the realms of heaven, foreshadowed by the inner room, passing through the veil, that is, His physical death, for us. We have this “hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 6:19,20).

“Christ Jesus is He who died,” was Paul’s commentary, “yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Romans 8:34). God earnestly desired to have “us” as a people and interceded with an oath. God knew that such a people would need an intercessor, and promised such a high priest with an oath. Then He guaranteed such a people’s resurrection by raising the high priest from the dead! Are you one of those people?

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Who Is Melchizedek?

The plans of the Almighty are tremendous in scope and awesome to contemplate. Because of the hard-headedness of mankind, God had to introduce the Law of Moses to Israel. “Why the Law then?” the apostle Paul had asked the Galatians. Answer: “It was added because of transgressions” (Galatians 3:19). Except for the fleshly-mindedness of man, God could have sent Jesus into the world in Genesis three; as it was, in accordance with what God had anticipated, the Father had to work for four thousand years to prepare the world for the coming of the Son. And to do even that, the Lord God had to bring into existence a special people — Israel — and give them their own covenant with their own priesthood. The challenge would be to convince that people that their priesthood and their covenant was only temporary; that is, it would be replaced by a superior system through Christ. Hence, centuries before the giving of the Law through Moses, the All Wise had instituted a priesthood of the order of Melchizedek and had made a special covenant involving Abraham.

The writer of the Hebrew epistle had wanted to write about Melchizedek in what we moderns have broken down into chapter five; he had, however taken two chapters to excoriate the Hebrew Christians about their lack of spirituality before he could dive into the depths of his topic. After referencing the promises to Abraham interspersed with exhortation for the brethren to be steadfast because of the hope of the resurrection, the writer is able to tie things together and get back to Melchizedek: “This hope,” says he, “we have as an anchor for the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 6:19,20).

- **The setting** - The children of Israel, when discussing their heritage, traced themselves back to Abraham. It was of interest, then, that Abraham had come into the land of promise with his nephew Lot, but after separating their herds Lot had settled near Sodom and Gomorrah. When enemies came in from the east and captured those cities, and had also captured Lot, Abraham arranged for a commando strike force to rescue Lot. The raid was successful, and Lot was returned, as well as the king of Sodom, the people, and the spoil. “For this Melchizedek,” recalled Hebrews’ author, “king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, ... met Abraham as he returned from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him...” (Hebrews 7:1).
- **The names** - Melchizedek brought bread and wine to share with Abraham in a precursor of the Lord’s Supper and blessed him, “to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of the spoils.” This Melchizedek, then, “was first of all, by the translation of his name [Melchizedek], king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace” (Hebrews 7:2).
- **The ancestry** - Melchizedek, concludes Hebrews’ author, was “without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither the beginning of days nor the end of life, but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually” (Hebrews 7:3). Interesting!

Who could this Melchizedek be? No father, no mother, no genealogy (some have tried to say that he had parents, a day of birth and a day of death, but these were just not recorded): he appeared for a time, and was gone. He was the king (or prince, prince being equivalent of the king since a replacement process will soon be under way) of righteousness, and also prince of peace. The conclusion is that this is a Christophany, that is, one of the pre-appearances of Christ prior to His being born in Bethlehem. Who else could have those names and abide “a priest perpetually”?

Heavenward Through Hebrews

He Lives On

What a spectacle it must have been! Abraham returning as the triumphant possessor of the spoils of Sodom and Gomorrah was regarded as a “mighty prince” or king. To meet him in the vale was the king of Sodom, and making his surprise appearance was the king of Salem (a small village that apparently became Jerusalem). Three kings met in what came to be known as the Valley of Shaveh, the Kings’ Valley. The lesser of these was the king of Sodom, begging Abraham for the people to come back under his control. There was Abraham, the victor in the swift and strategic skirmish. And there was Melchizedek, priest of God Most High.

- **Receiving a tenth** - By strictly human terms, Melchizedek should have been the lesser of the three, a small time village chieftain, whose services as a priest were perfunctory and ceremonial. But so insignificant was the king of Sodom that he did not even appear in Hebrews’ record. And in comparing Melchizedek and Abraham, the writer notes, “Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils” (Hebrews 7:4). Notice the wording: Abraham, the patriarch. And: a tenth of the choicest spoils. Melchizedek is being established as the superior of the man who was the father of the Israelites, and regarded as the father of the faithful from the ranks of both Jew and Gentile. The thread for this thought had been laid earlier in the epistle when Jesus is described as giving “help to the descendant of Abraham” (Hebrews 2:16).
- **The Levitical tenth** - In introducing his teaching on Melchizedek, the writer of Hebrews had quoted from the Psalms, “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:6). Since the priests of the Old Covenant were of the order of Aaron, a change in priesthood is being contemplated. The writer of the epistle, then, is using the issue of collecting tithes to show that the Levitical priesthood (Moses and Aaron being descended from Levi, one of the twelve sons of Jacob) was second in line — that there was another order of priesthood in motion before the Moses’ priesthood and that of the order of Aaron. “And those indeed,” the writer emphasizes, “of the sons of Levi who receive the priest’s office have a commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham” (Hebrews 7:5). The priests in Israel, as evidenced by the collection of tithes, were elevated above the people, although all were descendants of Abraham.
- **Superior priesthood** - The Levites, descendants of Abraham, would not have been able to collect a tithe from their ancestor. “But one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham,” is the observation, “and blessed the one who had the promises” (Hebrews 7:6). The Hebrew Christian would have to stop and think about that; if Melchizedek could collect tithes from Abraham, then the priesthood of Melchizedek was superior to the priesthood of Aaron, descendant of Abraham. Not only did Melchizedek collect the tenth, he also blessed Abraham. “But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater” (Hebrews 7:7).

“Now observe how great this man was,” stated the writer in regard to Melchizedek. Abraham is held forth as the great example of faith and the one chosen out of all the earth of his day to bear the standard for God. Yet Melchizedek was greater; greater than Abraham, and greater than his descendants, the Levitical priests. “And in this case [Levitical priests] mortal men receive tithes, but in that case [Melchizedek’s receiving a tenth from Abraham] one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on” (Hebrews 7:8). Melchizedek was not a mortal man! He really was without father, without mother, having neither beginning of days nor end of life. His priesthood could only be established by Jesus’ taking the form of Melchizedek, and setting in motion a priesthood based on immortality. The Aaronic priests died; He lives on!

Change of Priesthood

Melchizedek appeared for a little while, blessed Abraham, and was gone. Melchizedek occupied only three verses of scripture in Genesis, and one verse in Psalms. The Jew therefore overlooked the role of Melchizedek and focused in on the priesthood of the order of Aaron, that order occupying such a large portion of Old Testament scriptures. The Hebrew Christian, imbued also with the Old Testament scriptures, would need instruction on the significance of the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek. Since the trappings of the Law, including the Aaronic priesthood, were about to be destroyed, the writer of Hebrews, under inspiration of the Spirit, sets forth the superiority of the system in place under Christ as contrasted to that which came through Moses. The Law was ordained through angels; Jesus is superior to angels. Moses and Joshua delivered Israel from bondage in Egypt and brought them into the promised land; Jesus is superior to Moses and Joshua. Now the priesthood of Christ is to be established as superior to the priesthood of the descendants of Levi.

- **More on tithing** - The one who collects tithes is set above the one who pays tithes, and “without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater.” Through his discussion on tithing, the writer is painting the picture that the order of Melchizedek is a superior order of priesthood to that of Aaron and Moses, both of whom were descendants of Levi. “And, so to speak, through Abraham, even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes,” comments the writer, “for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him” (Hebrews 7:9,10). Thus the conclusion that Melchizedek was greater than Levi.
- **Another priesthood** - Often the reasoning processes of the men who wrote the scriptures are deep, and the threads of thought have interspersed points and perspectives. Having established the superiority of Melchizedek to Levi, the writer goes back a couple of chapters to his quotation from the Psalms: “You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 5:6). The Old Testament prophetically contemplated the coming of an order of priesthood different from that of Aaron. Drawing on that point, he writes, “Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?” (Hebrews 7:11). The Levitical priesthood clearly was a stopgap priesthood until God could get the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek on track!
- **Basis for law** - The parenthetical statement, “on the basis of the Levitical priesthood the people received the Law,” is highly significant. The Law of Moses created the priesthood of the order of Aaron, so the Law could not be based on Aaron. Who was the priest who formed the basis for the Law? “Moses” is the logical answer, but Moses is not generally thought of as a priest. But he was! “Moses and Aaron were among His priests,” stated the psalmist (Psalm 99:6). That’s why the first sacrifices were offered under the direction of Moses, and why Moses ordained Aaron and his sons.

Law is based on the priesthood. The next conclusion: “For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also” (Hebrews 7:12). What a bombshell tossed into the middle of Hebrew thinking! The writer makes the unarguable point that there is coming a change in the priesthood. He follows that with a similarly unarguable point that there is therefore a change of law. These points are based upon and buttressed with the Old Testament scriptures of the Jews; what real objection could anyone of that background have? The system, then, of “the Law of Moses” was indeed to be replaced by the system of “the Faith of Christ.”

An Indestructible Life

“The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind,” are the opening words of Psalm 110:4. This statement has divine determination written all over it! And divine determination cannot be stopped by any physical or spiritual force or obstacle. What was contemplated by this oath, of course, was that Jesus would be high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek. But how did the writer draw the conclusion that the person contemplated by the prophecy concerning the priest of the order of Melchizedek would be Jesus? He drew on the parallel construction between two prophecies, as indicated in the connection he made in chapter five: “You are My Son, today I have begotten You,” was the quotation from Psalm two, and “You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek,” was his second quotation. And the two quotes were connected by the words, “just as He also says.” Thus the Son was also the priest forever.

- **Changing priesthood** - Hebrews’ author continues to present a series of arguments concerning the change of priesthood from that based on Aaron and Moses to that based on Melchizedek. Because of the fact that a change in priesthood necessitated a change in covenants also, the writer has to present this series of convincing points to establish that change in priesthood. Referring to the fact that the Son is also the Priest, the writer notes: “For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests” (Hebrews 7:13,14). The priests of the Old Covenant had to be descended from Levi; since Jesus according to the flesh was of the tribe of Judah, He could not be one of those Old Covenant priests. But because it was He of whom it was prophesied — “You are a priest forever” — there obviously had to be a change in priesthood.
- **New priest arising** - Jesus is risen from the dead. The truth of that resurrection is the basis for the confession that “Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God.” And since “You are My Son,” is addressed to the same One of whom it was said, “You are a priest forever,” the same resurrection that announced Him as Son also announced Him as Priest. Because the Lord could not be a priest on earth, there had to be a change in priesthood in order for Him to be a priest. “And this is clearer still,” comments Hebrews’ writer, “if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek” (Hebrews 7:15). Jesus did arise from the dead; there has been a change of priesthood!
- **New basis** - The priests of the Law of Moses were priests based on physical descent. During the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, for example, if a man could not prove his ancestry dating back to Aaron, he could not be a priest. Jesus, however, is High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek; that is, a priesthood based on immortality. Christ, then, “has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life” (Hebrews 7:16).

“When He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high,” was an introductory statement in this epistle. Jesus’ arising was all the way to heaven itself, and the indestructible life is the life He lives in glory. His priesthood is a priesthood forever in heaven, and that is where He ascended to make the purification of sins. Therefore the writer notes: “For it is witnessed of Him, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’ ” (Hebrews 7:17).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Change in Law

“On the basis of the priesthood the people received the Law,” the scribe of this epistle had noted. Moses, descendant of Levi, was the priest through whom the Law was given to Israel. While the high priest, Aaron, only had access to the back room of the tabernacle once a year on the Day of Atonement, Moses had access any time he was called. In regard to the top of the ark of the covenant, which sat in the inner room, God gave these instructions to him who had been rescued from the Nile: “And there will I meet with you; and from above the mercy seat, from between the two cherubim which are upon the ark of the testimony, I will speak to you about all that I will give you in commandment for the sons of Israel” (Exodus 25:22).

Jesus, then, is the priest on whom the new covenant is based. As God spoke to Moses, just so the Father spoke to the Son. “For I did not speak on My own initiative,” said Jesus during the days of His flesh, “but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me commandment, what to say, and what to speak” (John 12:49). After Jesus ascended, the Holy Spirit disclosed to the apostles and New Testament prophets the words of Jesus. “He shall glorify Me,” affirmed the Lord concerning the Spirit, “for He shall take of Mine, and shall disclose it to you” (John 16:14). And to clarify that all things were coming from the Father, Jesus added, “All things that the Father has are Mine; therefore I said, that He takes of Mine, and will disclose it to you” (John 16:15).

- **Fading glory, fading covenant** - “When Moses had finished speaking with them,” it is recorded of Moses’ delivering God’s words of the covenant to Israel, “he put a veil over his face” (Exodus 34:33). When Moses went into the tabernacle to meet with the Lord, he would uncover his face, and after meeting with the Lord, his face would shine; and with this shining face, he would deliver the words of the covenant. This glory, in the inspired words of the apostle Paul, was a “fading” glory (II Corinthians 3:7). The covenant, therefore, which came with the fading glory of Moses’ face, was temporary, and described as that “which fades away” (II Corinthians 3:11).
- **Unfading glory, unfading covenant** - The “glory of God” which shines “in the face of Christ” is an unfading glory! (II Corinthians 4:6). He is, He was, and He is to come. The covenant which came with that unfading glory is therefore unfading also, and is the permanent covenant — described as “that which remains” (II Corinthians 3:11). To establish the permanency of that covenant, the Lord had it established in the days of Abraham when the flaming torch and smoking oven passed between the pieces of the animals Abraham had set up. Centuries later, the temporary covenant through Moses was established with Israel.
- **Setting aside** - Jesus is the priest “forever” according to the order of Melchizedek, and His covenant, when instituted is likewise “forever.” The covenant of Moses was temporary. “For, on the one hand,” explained Hebrews’ author, “there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand “there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God” (Hebrews 7:18,19).

How comforting it is to know that the covenant of Moses was designed to “fade away” and to be replaced by a better covenant, with a better hope and better promises! How exciting it is to know that Christ on the throne has the unfading glory of God shining in His face, and has established an unfading covenant! How much security is offered through Him who thusly entered “within the veil,” giving us “an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast!”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A Better Hope

“So then,” stated the apostle Paul, “the Law is holy, and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). If the Law is holy and the commandment is good, why does it need to be “set aside” as the writer of the letter to the Hebrews is affirming? The answer lies in the relationship of man to his sin rather than in the holiness of the Law. The intention of God from the beginning was to declare a man righteous on the basis of his faith, as Paul quoted Habakkuk: “The righteous shall live by faith” (Romans 1:17). The challenge is to get man to understand what God-ordained faith is, and for him to learn to live by that faith. Hence it was necessary to bring man along in stages, from Abel to Abraham to Moses, and from “the Law of Moses” to “the faith of Christ.”

- **Law’s weakness** - The Law of Moses, stated the author, was to be set aside “because of its weakness and uselessness.” The person of Jewish background might have a little trouble accepting that statement, so the writer of the epistle is going to have quite a long series of arguments to buttress that point. He has already laid the groundwork for the statement, introducing the idea that the Old Testament prophecies and types established the coming of a priesthood superior to that based on Moses and Aaron. Contemplating that assertion, he asked the question, “Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood, what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek?” The answer was obvious: that perfection could not be attained through the Levitical priesthood. And since the law sat on the base of the priesthood, “when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” Thus the Law of Moses was to be set aside, and the author can make the statement that it was weak and useless. “The Law,” he said, “made nothing perfect” (Hebrews 7:19).
- **Bringing in a better hope** - The priests of the order of Aaron could only enter a physical tabernacle. Jesus, however, high priest of the order of Melchizedek, entered “within the veil”; that is, He passed through death and ascended to the courts of heaven, foreshadowed by the Old Testament tabernacle. Because of the Lord’s resurrection to glory, we have an intercessory High Priest in the presence of the Majesty on high, described as “bringing in a better hope.” The intercessory high priest of the order of Aaron was “obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself” (Hebrews 5:3). But Jesus offers us “refuge”; without sin, He offered Himself as a superior intercessor, and His resurrection offers us the same opportunity. A much “better hope” indeed!
- **Draw near** - The specter of approaching Him who dwells in unapproachable light can be terrifying. A man, conscious of his own sin and weakness, would be rightly hesitant about approaching the great King without someone to intercede on his behalf. With Jesus — high priest of the order of Melchizedek by the power of an indestructible life — as intercessor, the saint can have confidence and “draw near to God.”

The Law was incomplete in terms of its ability to provide sacrifices for forgiveness of sins and an intercessory priesthood. While the Law was “righteous and holy and good,” it did not have the capacity to rescue the lost sinner and transform him into the character of Christ. Jesus, however, came in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin to provide the necessary sacrifice on behalf of the fallen race. Having “tasted death for everyone,” He rose to the position of power at the right hand, “delivering those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives,” and becoming “a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God” (Hebrews 2:15,17).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A Better Covenant

God can do anything He wants at any time. He has, however, placed certain limits on Himself because of character issues; for example, He is patient, and therefore is not going to do anything rash or froward. He is also the great Teacher, laying careful foundations for the points and principles He wants to inculcate. Hence the system of the Law of Moses was instituted in Israel prior to bringing in the system of the faith of Christ, because the foreshadows and teachings of the Law were necessary in understanding the faith. But, to ensure that there be no confusion among the thoughtful, the elements of the faith were positioned hundreds of years before the Law in the promises to Abraham and prophecies of Christ and His priesthood. At the right time, then, the Law was set aside in order that the “better hope” might be brought in.

- **Law based on priesthood** - The writer is willing to lay down a thread of logic and then leave it hanging for a while before he gets back to it. His proposition mentioned earlier in the chapter: it was on the basis of the priesthood that “the people received the Law.” “When the priesthood is changed,” he clarified, “of necessity there takes place a change of law also.” Another way of stating the point would be that a change in priesthood requires a change in covenants.
- **With an oath** - The mind trained in the Jewish system would struggle with the idea that the Law of Moses was to be set aside. Anticipating that development, the Lord swore by Himself in regard to the change in priesthood. “And inasmuch as it was not without an oath,” noted the writer in reference to Christ’s priesthood, “(for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, ‘The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, ‘You are a priest forever.’” (Hebrews 7:20,21). The change in priesthood from the order of Aaron to the superior priesthood of Christ is reiterated, and the stage is set for the next emphasis.
- **Guarantee** - The Law of Moses was based on the priesthood of Moses; Moses was the priest who delivered the Law to the children of Israel with the fading glory still shining in his face. But the faith of Christ is based on the priesthood of Jesus, who delivered the terms of His covenant with the unfading glory shining in His face. Because His priesthood was backed by the oath of the Father, “so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant” (Hebrews 7:22). By virtue of His ascension — the power of an indestructible life — Jesus became the basis of the new covenant; the writer used the word “guarantee.” The new covenant is therefore permanent, and has the most solid foundation any covenant could possibly have!

Having carefully laid the foundation, the writer is now able to use the words “better covenant” to describe what has come through the high priesthood of Jesus Christ. The Jewish mind would be somewhat shell-shocked by this statement, considering the history of what God had to do with Israel to get them to implement their side of the covenant that came through Moses. But the word of the oath declared Jesus to be high priest of the order of Melchizedek forever whereas there was no oath in the case of Moses or any of the priests descended from Aaron. From the Jews’ own scriptures the case for the better covenant was being presented. These Jewish Christians, therefore, could begin to fix their attention on the spiritual high priesthood of Jesus Christ, intercessor at the right hand of the Majesty on high, and not be concerned about the upcoming destruction of the temple, priesthood, and sacrifices implemented through Moses. And the rest of us can be uplifted spiritually as we profit by the instruction, seeing Jesus as our high priest and basis of the best covenant!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Able to Save Forever!

God spent a lot of time from Adam through Moses to Christ to establish a pattern that would make sense to a spiritually interested mind. The patriarchs, from Adam to Moses, could offer sacrifices to God, although there was the development of a general priesthood — Melchizedek, and others such as Jethro, priest of Midian and father-in-law of Moses. But with the giving of the law of Moses, in Israel only priests of the order of Aaron could offer sacrifices and burn incense. The priesthood had been narrowed down, and the types of offerings had been squeezed down and specifically defined. Thus the next logical step in the progression was one sacrifice and one priesthood. Hence our Lord Jesus Christ entered the earthly scene at the right time, was offered as the sacrifice, and ascended to glory to be declared the high priest.

- **The former priests** - The priesthood of the order of Aaron was introduced as a temporary measure, building the spiritual shadows necessary for an understanding of the one true priesthood to come. “And the former priests,” commented Hebrews’ author in regard to the priesthood of Aaron, “on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing” (Hebrews 7:23). Death stopped each of the many Old Testament priests; the logical sequence requiring one priest would also require that priest to live forever!
- **Permanent priesthood** - Sure enough. “But He [Jesus], on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently” (Hebrews 7:24). Because He first died as the sacrifice, He became the priest of the order of Melchizedek by “the power of an indestructible life”; He had to be resurrected! He who is alive forevermore is therefore high priest forevermore.
- **Always alive** - Those who are able to come under the sacrifice and mediatorial reign of Jesus are eternally blessed. “Hence He is able,” noted the author, “to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them” (Hebrews 7:25). “All have sinned,” is a foundational point never to be forgotten by each saint, and therefore each needs to be saved from his sin. But the ability of Christ to save was not a mere one time salvation; He is able continually to cleanse the faithful from errant activity or thought. Those who thus “draw near” have a powerful high priest, who is not prevented by death from making the necessary intercession for them, because He is alive and working forevermore.

One of the most destructive doctrines floating around is the idea of “Jesus’ finished work on the cross.” This doctrine, taken from Jesus’ words, “It is finished,” as He gave up His Spirit, purports that all that was necessary was the sacrifice of Christ. Once that sacrifice was offered, according to this teaching, the sovereign will of God was accomplished; and once the individual is “saved” by accepting this death for him, he cannot be lost because the blood of the Lamb has been applied to him. Such teaching ignores the tremendous body of New Testament doctrine concerning the High Priesthood of Christ. It must be re-emphasized: the sacrifice of Christ would have had no effect whatsoever if there were no priest to present the blood of the offering. The work of Jesus therefore was not finished on the cross; His work as High Priest did not begin until He ascended where His first action was making “purification of sins” (Hebrews 1:3). Furthermore, the key point of the passage of Hebrews which we are examining here is that Jesus “is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him”; that is, that His intercessory work continues again and again in behalf of those who appeal to God for forgiveness in Christ. Because He is not prevented by death from continuing, He can continue to intercede for the saint who needs Him!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Separated from Sinners

God has had a plan through the ages, and that plan is centered about producing a special people through Christ. “For whom He foreknew,” asseverated the apostle Paul, “He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, that He might be the first-born among many brethren” (Romans 8:29). This foreknowledge of who would be these special people fit in with a predetermined plan, that they would become conformed to the image of Jesus during the years of their earthly sojourn. “Whom He predestined,” superadded the apostle, “these He also called; and whom He called, these He also justified; and whom He justified, these He also glorified” (Romans 8:30). These called, justified, and glorified ones are “those who draw near to God” through Jesus Christ, and have His intercessory ministry operating on their behalf. “This will be written for the generation to come,” prophesied the psalmist, “That a people yet to be created may praise the Lord” (Psalm 102:18). The saints of Jesus Christ are that people!

- **Fitting for such a people** - The only reason earth exists is so that God can produce from a fallen race those people who can and will praise Him through Jesus Christ. “For it was fitting,” comments Hebrews’ writer, considering himself one of those of God’s favor, “that we should have such a high priest — holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” (Hebrews 7:26). Those Old Testament high priests were intercessors for a physical people, and they themselves were not holy in their behavior, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens. But Christians are a truly spiritual people, sons of God through faith in Christ, and therefore fitted to have such an exalted and holy High Priest.
- **The worthiness of Christ** - The Old Testament high priests were weak, members of a fallen race. But Jesus, previously described as holy and innocent, “does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer sacrifices — first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people — because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself” (Hebrews 7:27). Because those priests were defiled, they were continually undergoing purification rituals in order to be able to offer sacrifices on behalf of the people; Jesus is undefiled. Those men were sinners; the Lord Jesus is separated from sinners. Those men functioned on earth; Christ is exalted — above the heavens! They offered their rams, lambs, calves, and goats; Jesus offered Himself. They had to make their offerings daily; the Son of God offered Himself once, and for all. How can a better picture of the superiority of Christ’s priesthood be painted?
- **Made perfect forever** - The Law was based on the priesthood of Moses. But the priesthood of Aaron came from the Law. “For the Law,” the writer notes, “appoints men who are weak.” The hand of the Lord is very precise here; the covenant of the Law was based on the priesthood of Moses, and the covenant of the faith is based on the priesthood of Christ. The Law appointed Aaron as high priest; what then would appoint Christ as High Priest? “But the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever” (Hebrews 7:28). The decree: “You are My Son” (Psalm 2:7). The oath: “You are priest forever” (Psalm 110:4). Hence the resurrection of Christ to glory — “made perfect” — declared Him to be the Son, the High Priest of the order of Melchizedek.

Christ, the great High Priest, is separated from sinners; He has no fellowship with them. It follows, therefore, that those who have fellowship with Christ are not sinners. In fact, they are “sons, priests, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens” in Christ Jesus! This is the prophesied generation.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Main Thing Is

Christians have connections in high places! Consider in some small detail what has been done for them: they were sinners, now they are saints; formerly they were mere men, now they are sons of God; they were defiled and separated from God, now they are holy and innocent in fellowship with God; they were denied access to the courts of heaven, now they have a powerful intercessor Who invites them to come boldly to the throne of grace. How have these astounding and remarkable transformations been accomplished? Answer: through Him who loved us and delivered Himself up for us.

- **Getting to the point** - The writer of Hebrews has spent seven chapters, according to we moderns' breakdown, in preparing the readers for his climax. Brethren have been reminded of the superiority of Christ to the angels, have been talked through the superiority of deliverance by Jesus in contrast to Moses and Joshua, and have been introduced to the concept of Jesus' priesthood as superior to the Levitical priesthood. "Now the main point in what has been said is this:" is the blunt interjection of the writer. "We have such a high priest," he emphasizes to his readers, "who has taken His seat at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens" (Hebrews 8:1). The fact that the New Covenant has such a High Priest completely obliterates the need for an earthly high priesthood, and the Hebrew Christians can have confidence that their intercessor is indeed capable of assisting them, though the remains of the Jewish nation crumble around them.
- **Such a high priest** - The words of the writer are not necessarily expected here, although he had given a hint where he was going in his opening remarks of the epistle. "We have such a high priest," he notes, but adds words that could be surprising, "who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens." The words that would normally have been anticipated in connection with the high priest then follow, "a minister in the sanctuary" (Hebrews 8:2). The ultimate author of this epistle, the Holy Spirit, is — by referencing the throne in heaven — making it clear that Christ is thus the fulfillment of the prophecies of the union of the offices of High Priest and King! The same Psalm wherein it was said, "You are a priest forever," also stated, "Sit at My right hand" (Psalm 110:4,1). "He will be a Priest on His throne," was another prophecy (Zechariah 6:13). "We have such a High Priest!"
- **A minister in the sanctuary** - The earthly high priest, in Solomon's day, went into a holy of holies that was the most magnificent meeting place on this planet. Thirty feet by thirty feet by thirty feet, overlaid with gold, guarded by the winged cherubim, and housing the ark of the covenant, this sanctuary had been filled with the glory of the Lord — something no other building on earth could claim. But, under the new covenant, the followers of Christ have "a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man" (Hebrews 8:2). The spiritual tabernacle, then, is the true one, and the tent pitched by Moses and even the building erected by Solomon were just shadows. That's it: just shadows.

Once again, the principle God uses over and over is to use the physical to get to the spiritual. "The Law," says the writer, "appoints men as high priests who are weak." These physical priests operated through physical sacrifices in a physical sanctuary. But the Son, appointed with the word of the oath, is a spiritual Priest, offering spiritual sacrifices in a spiritual sanctuary. This is our High Priest: the Apostle from heaven, the Son, the Lord, the great King, indeed the immortal, invisible God. What better intercessor could a suffering saint possibly have!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Shadow to Substance

Forgiveness of sins cannot be seen. The indwelling Spirit cannot be seen. The intercessory work of Christ cannot be seen, at least with the physical eye. Hence it was necessary for God, in His spiritual economy, to build faith inside of willing men by beginning with the physical realm to get to where He could communicate effectively about the spiritual realm. The Bible, therefore, is truly an amazing book. Communicating the hand of God as He worked with man, the word of God shows His progressive development in moving mankind's understanding upward. In giving the Law to Israel, God instituted the tabernacle, its sacrifices, and its priesthood. That picture, intricately carried out and intricately recorded, makes it possible for the one who follows Christ to comprehend what has happened in the spiritual realm, and to know what the main point of the book of Hebrews is: We have a High Priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the true tabernacle.

- **Physical high priest** - The writer returns once again to the material high priests to make his point about the spiritual High Priest: "For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices," he emphasized. "It is necessary," he therefore reasoned, "that his High Priest also have something to offer" (Hebrews 8:3). It was clear that the Old Testament priest was appointed by God because God desired Israel to have a way of approaching Him. It is highly significant, then, that one of Jesus' major purposes in glory is to offer gifts and sacrifices in behalf of men! Man cannot make that offering; hence the great God Himself made provision.
- **Heavenly High Priest** - The writer of the Hebrew epistle now changes his tack. He has been generally reasoning from the perspective that the Old Testament priesthood was inadequate, and that therefore necessitates that there must be a spiritual priesthood that would be adequate. Now he switches, arguing from the perspective that Jesus "offered up Himself" to cover the sins of the world. "Now if He were on earth, He would not be priest at all," he reiterates, "since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law" (Hebrews 8:4). The reasoning here is that Jesus is clearly a priest since He offered Himself, but He must be a heavenly priest since there are those who are priests on earth.
- **Earthly copy** - Those earthly priests, offering their earthly sacrifices amid the trappings of the Law, were not God's final plan, and they were not the "real priests." They are those "who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, 'See,' He says, 'that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.' " (Hebrews 8:5). What Moses saw by revelation on Mt. Sinai was a physical representation of the things of Christ and the church. And because those earthly shadows were pointing to spiritual realities, they were to be constructed and conducted exactly as God had given instruction to His servant Moses.

The blood of 1500 bulls, the blood of 1500 goats, and the confession of sins over the head of 1500 scapegoats were a shadow of the good things to come. The somber rituals on the Day of Atonement year by year were magnificent types of the offerings of Christ Himself in heaven. These are "things which are a mere shadow of what is to come," averred Paul, "but the substance is Christ" (Colossians 2:17). What a blessing it is to be the people of substance, anticipated by the prophetic utterances of the Old Testament! "This will be written for the generation to come; that a people yet to be created may praise the Lord" (Psalm 102:18).

Mediator of a Better Covenant

The author of Hebrews writes that those Old Testament priests became such without an oath. But of Jesus it was written: “The Lord has sworn, and will not change His mind — You are a priest forever.” The Old Covenant was based on the priesthood of Moses, priest without that oath. “Jesus,” then, with the oath, “has become the guarantee of a better covenant” (Hebrews 7:22). The Lord, during the days of His flesh, anticipated the establishment of this new covenant, issuing this statement in connection with His giving of the Lord’s Supper: “This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in My blood” (Luke 22:20). Out with the Old; in with the New!

- **A more excellent ministry** - The Old Testament tabernacle and its implements were “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” The altar, which stood in front of the tabernacle/temple, was a foreshadow of the cross, where the transition from the physical to the spiritual took place. The shadow reaches over to a very “heavenly thing,” the Lord’s Supper, which is a weekly participation in the altar of sacrifice. “Are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?” was Paul’s query in making the parallel. “But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry,” Hebrews’ writer comments (Hebrews 8:6). Not only did Jesus die on the cross, but He ascended as High Priest to the heavenly holy of holies, of which the earthly is but a copy. This clearly is “a more excellent ministry” than any earthly high priest could have. The presentation of His spiritual blood on behalf of the sons of men is clearly a better sacrifice, and this High Priest has “something to offer.”
- **Mediator of a better covenant** - The first covenant was based on the priesthood of Moses. The second covenant is based on the priesthood of Christ. “He has obtained a more excellent ministry,” the writer stated, “by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant.” A will requires the death of a testator. But that testament (interchangeable here with “covenant”) does not really take effect until there is an executor of the will, empowered to implement its provisions. Until the executor moves, the will remains an idle piece of paper or empty desire of the testator. In this case Jesus is called “the mediator” of the covenant; there are no two parties to mediate between, and thus the word here is equivalent to “executor.” Jesus, then, positioned at the right hand of the Majesty on high, has the power and will to execute the “better covenant”!
- **Enacted on better promises** - This covenant, says the writer, “has been enacted on better promises.” The promises made through Abraham, the oaths of God, and the prophetic utterances to Israel all combined to establish the High Priesthood of Christ in the courts of glory. Jesus ascended to the power position, and as the executor of His own will, “enacted.”

“For if that first covenant had been faultless,” remarked the writer, “there would have been no occasion sought for a second” (Hebrews 8:7). The fault in the first covenant — the Law of Moses — required the establishment of a better covenant — the faith of Christ. “Therefore, holy brethren,” we are reminded, “partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.” Those Levitical priests who served on earth offered gifts and sacrifices according to the Law, a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. “For it was fitting,” it is again pointed out to us, “that we should have such a high priest ... exalted above the heavens.” Our High Priest is at the right hand of the Majesty in the heavens, ministering in the true tabernacle. “Let us therefore draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:16).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Effecting a New Covenant

“So then, the Law is holy,” affirmed the apostle Paul, “and the commandment is holy and righteous and good” (Romans 7:12). But that covenant — the Law of Moses — is regarded in this fashion by the writer of Hebrews: “For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second” (Hebrews 8:7). If the commandment — or covenant — is holy and righteous and good, where could the problem be? The Law was a good tool; the only problem was that it was not the right tool for the job of fixing mankind. The language of the writer of Hebrews is instructive: “For finding fault with them, He says ...” (Hebrews 8:8). The “them” is where the problem is, and fixing “them” is going to require the faith of Christ rather than the Law of Moses.

- **Prophecy of a new covenant** - It is highly significant that the seeds of the new covenant are found in the ground of the old. God, in giving the Old Testament to Moses, anticipated its failure to accomplish the preservation or the regeneration of fallen man. Hence it is evident that the Almighty was working on a plan of progressive revelation for “a people yet to come,” knowing that the failure of conscience and failure of law had to be demonstrated in the history of the human race in order to drive this lesson home: only the gospel of Christ could accomplish God’s redemptive and renewing purposes. “ ‘Behold, days are coming,’ says the Lord, ‘when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah, not like the covenant which I made with their fathers...’ ” (Hebrews 8:8,9 quoted from Jeremiah 31:31). The fact that this prophecy was uttered nearly 600 years before Christ establishes that God is the author of the coming change, and that He is operating on a scope and scale unable to be duplicated by would be religion-makers among the sons of death-ridden men.
- **Failure of the old covenant** - The new covenant, He says, is “ ‘not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them,’ says the Lord” (Hebrews 8:9). The voice of God thundered the Ten Commandments — the core of the Law — at Israel, gathered by the hundreds of thousands at the base of Sinai. But before Moses could complete forty days on the mountain, the people had already broken the Second Commandment in making and worshiping the golden calf. And their history never improved. They kept plunging into rebellion and idolatry until God carried them away or dispersed them. Even after Judah’s return from captivity, they drifted right back into profaning the sacrifices of the Lord and ignoring the statements of His Law. The Jewish heart was hard and stony; “You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit,” affirmed Stephen in his defense before the Jewish High Council, “you are doing just as you fathers did” (Acts 7:51).

The language of the Father is interesting: “I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt.” The Almighty demonstrated His power over the gods worshiped by the Egyptians, extricated Israel from slavery, and gently led them by the hand into a land of freedom and promise. Were they appreciative? No! Were they desirous of the responsibilities of freedom? No! So it will remain for “a people yet to come,” a people produced by a new covenant not like the one given through Moses, to be the kind of nation who could continue in His covenant, and a group of which it could be said by the Father, “I care for them!”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Written on the Heart

People are going to do what they want to do. God created Adam and Eve and gave them a choice in the Garden of Eden, to eat or not to eat. They ate the forbidden fruit by their own free will; they did what they wanted to do, and started the earth into its downward spiral.

As their descendants multiplied on the earth, their character was in general no better than their first ancestors. Brutal, treacherous, destroying with the tongue and with the club, their self-willed bent made it necessary for God to destroy “the earth that was,” and begin again with Noah and his descendants. These proved no better than the previous group, their collective downward spin only being slowed by a much slower population growth, a harsher climate, and a split into different language groups at the Tower of Babel. Even the Law of Moses did not prevent Israel from following the same cycle as the rest of the world; people are going to do what they want to do. The challenge facing the All Wise, then, was this: how to get them to want to do what is pleasing to God. Only “a better covenant, enacted on better promises” would be able to accomplish this almost impossible feat.

- **Failure of Law** - Any system of law is a failure when it is what is used to produce right behavior in people. “For if a law had been given which was able to impart life,” intoned the apostle Paul, “then righteousness would indeed have been based on law” (Galatians 3:21). If the Law of God, given through Moses, could not produce proper behavior, then any man-made system will certainly fail to produce a change of heart as well. Law will produce a certain level of external conformity, but it does not alter the inner man; hence, when the trappings of law are removed, the latent savagery of the corrupted heart rushes to the surface. “Finding fault with them,” were the words of Hebrews’ author, showing the problem was with the people and not with the Law.
- **Success of the Faith** - God does not sleep, and He is not idle. “When the fulness of the time came, God sent forth His Son” (Galatians 4:4). All the history from Adam down to the birth of Christ was necessary in God’s dealing with the human race; the Father could not send the Son any earlier because of the tremendous amount of preparation necessary for the acceptance of Jesus’ claims to be the Son of God. With Israel first of all, the stage for the new covenant was set. “ ‘For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days,’ says the Lord: ‘I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts.’ ” (Hebrews 9:10). Since the principles of free will are still obviously in motion under the terms of this new covenant, it is clear that having God’s laws in the minds of God’s new people, and having those laws written in their hearts means that the All Wise has finally produced a people who want to do His will!
- **What the Law could not do** - In his epistle to the Roman church, the apostle Paul approached the same topic from a different direction. “For what the Law could not do,” he adverted, “God did.” Through Jesus Christ He has produced a people who fulfill the requirement of the Law, “who do not walk according to the flesh, but according to the Spirit” (Romans 8:3,4).

How exciting it is for those of a good and honest heart that God has made a way for them to fulfill the requirement of the Law! How awesome it is for them to participate in the removal of the corrupted heart in immersion, and to be able to walk in newness of life with a circumcision “which is of the heart — by the Spirit, not by the letter [of the Law]” (Romans 2:29)! How wonderful it is to share in “the better covenant”!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Knowing the Lord

“This is eternal life,” said the Lord Jesus Christ, “that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom You have sent” (John 17:3). Getting people to know God is a major purpose of the scriptures, and the motivation for God’s sending Jesus into the world. “For since in the wisdom of God,” instructed the apostle Paul, “the world through its wisdom did not come to know God, God was well-pleased through the foolishness of the message preached to save those who believe” (I Corinthians 1:21). The only way to know God is through Jesus Christ.

The barrier to knowing God is sin. Adam died when he ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden; he who once was privileged to have God walk with him the afternoon now was separated; he who once was privileged to know God was now estranged. And thus it has been. As children move into adulthood, they lose their innocence and no longer know the eternal Father. God, through Christ and His covenant, has made provision for all of mankind to be restored to fellowship and “know” Him again!

- **God and His people** - It was God’s intention to fellowship with the people of Israel. If they would obey Him and keep His commandments, He said, “I will make My dwelling among you, and My soul will not reject you. I will also walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people” (Leviticus 26:11,12). Never happened! They were disobedient from the beginning, and God had to move the tent of meeting outside the camp because He could not fellowship with them. But for those of the new covenant, who have His laws written on their hearts and minds, “I will be their God, and they shall be My people” (Hebrews 8:10). This is a far superior people to that which graced the pages of Old Testament text!
- **Know the Lord** - In Israel the Levites were scattered throughout the land, and were to be teachers of the Law. These and later itinerant rabbis moved through the people, and their purpose was to teach the people to know the Lord as best as He could be known under the terms of the Old Covenant. But this primary teaching would not be necessary for this new superior people under the new superior covenant. “And they shall not teach everyone his fellow citizen,” the writer continues to quote from Jeremiah, “and everyone his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them” (Hebrews 8:11). The reason that it is not necessary to teach those under the terms of the new covenant to “know the Lord” is that knowing the Lord is the first thing necessary to even be a participant in the blessings of that covenant of Christ.
- **No remembrance of sin** - Since sin is the barrier to “knowing the Lord,” it is obvious that sin has to be removed before the prospective saint can have fellowship with the Majesty on high. The prophecy of Jeremiah actually explained: “For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more” (Hebrews 8:12). The sacrifice of Christ, completed in the High Priestly offering in the heavens, is capable of removing the sins of the individual from him as far as the east is from the west. Fellowship with the Father is thus restored, and He has no remembrance of any iniquity that the new saint may have ever committed!

Though once alienated from God by their own rebellion, both Jew and Gentile are welcomed in the presence of the great King. Jesus Christ is the saints’ high priest, “who offered up Himself once for all” (Hebrews 7:27). Christ indeed “has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises” (Hebrews 8:6).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Obsolete Trappings

From its inception, the Law of Moses was designed to be destroyed, and to be replaced by a superior system. Thus the temple buildings, the priesthood of Aaron, the sacrifices, and the feasts were at some point going to be eliminated, and the elements of the better system were to be erected on the foundation of the earlier prototype. Hence the prophecy of the coming of “a better covenant, enacted on better promises.”

It is worth recalling here that the nation Israel should never have come into existence in the first place. Abraham and Sarah should never have been able to produce Isaac, but by God’s hand and purpose Isaac was born within a year after the Lord appeared to Abraham with that great promise. The nation should have perished in the famine of Joseph’s day, but the All Wise was able to have the patriarchs preserved in Egypt. The people should have lost their identity through four hundred years in Africa, but by God’s intervention the Egyptians wouldn’t intermingle with shepherds. With an outstretched arm, the Almighty brought them out of Egypt and established them in the land of promise. He gave them the priesthood and the Law. He gave them prophets and the word. He gave them the tabernacle and then the temple. Although over their 1500 years of history, most of the nation was carved off and disappeared because of their lapse into idolatry, God preserved a remnant so that when Christ should come there was a people He could work among to establish that He was the Son of God, and there was a base for the church to begin.

The center for Israel was the temple. From the time that David made Jerusalem his capital, God was working to centralize Old Covenant worship at that location. “It will come about,” the Father had prophesied through Moses, “that the place in which the Lord your God shall chose for His name to dwell, there you shall bring all that I command you” (Deuteronomy 12:11). Following the erection of the temple under the leadership of Solomon, the high places of worship and service were successively eliminated, and by New Testament times, the Jews in practice would worship nowhere else. Jesus’ statement, therefore, to the Samaritan woman was a blockbuster: “An hour is coming when neither in this mountain [Gerizim, where the Samaritans had their temple], nor in Jerusalem, shall you worship the Father” (John 4:21). The Lord knew that the New Covenant was going to eliminate the Old.

- **First covenant obsolete** - It had been prophesied, “Behold, days are coming — says the Lord — when I will effect a new covenant.” The writer of the Hebrews epistle then makes a point that should be obvious, but one which had difficulty penetrating the Jewish mind: “When He said, ‘A new covenant,’ He has made the first obsolete” (Hebrews 8:13). That would mean that the priesthood of the order of Aaron would be gone, the Sabbath would be gone, the new moon festival would be gone, and the dietary regulations would be gone.
- **Disappearing act** - When the veil in the temple in Jerusalem tore in two at the death of Jesus, that signaled the end of the temple as the center for worship and sacrifice. “But whatever is becoming obsolete,” noted the author, “and growing old is ready to disappear” (Hebrews 8:13). The time had come, forty years later, for the temple to come down!

Jesus had prophesied the destruction of the temple, giving the Jews one generation to understand that He was the Messiah. The New Testament writings do not record the temple’s destruction; it was not a matter of importance for most Christians. The only reference to the destruction of the temple is this quotation in Hebrews, a reference preparing the Jewish Christians for what was to happen in the immediate future. “A better covenant, enacted on better promises,” was executed by the Mediator, the High Priest “who has obtained a more excellent ministry,” carried out in a heavenly temple, a better building, “the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A Look at the O.T. Temple

The average Jewish Christian would never have had opportunity to look inside the temple building. The only people allowed in were the priests, and even then those were chosen by lot to offer incense on each particular day. Now the temple [or tabernacle — the terms are used interchangeably because they had the same basic floor plan] was “a symbol for the present time” (Hebrews 9:9). In other words, it was a foreshadow or type of Christianity. Hence, because most of the Hebrews would have been only vaguely familiar with the temple pattern, it was necessary for the writer to give a modest description of the tabernacle of Moses’ day in order to communicate the points he has in mind.

- **First covenant** - The first covenant was flawed, not that there was anything wrong with the Law as such, but the Law could not produce a people who could keep it. Thus it was prophesied that the Lord would at some point institute “a new covenant.” The first covenant had no provision for forgiveness of sins as a stand-alone covenant, but flawed as it was, it still had a prominent place in the revelation of God. “Now even the first covenant,” stated Hebrews’ author, “had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary” (Hebrews 9:1). The New American Standard translation is a little weak where it translates as “worship” the derivative of the verb *latreuo*, which more directly indicates a ministration or sacrificial offering of a priest. The “earthly sanctuary” had all kinds of regulations for the service offered by the priests, who were the only ones allowed in that sanctuary.
- **Outer tabernacle** - The tabernacle was divided into two rooms: 1) the outer tabernacle wherein the priests went in and out on a daily basis, burning incense daily and eating the “shew bread” from the table of the Lord on the Sabbath; and 2) the inner tabernacle into which only the high priest could enter. “For there was a tabernacle prepared,” is the description, “the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place” (Hebrew 9:2). The outer tabernacle also normally contained the altar of incense, which the writer will describe here as being in the second room. Apparently, on the Day of Atonement, the practice was to move the altar of incense behind the separating curtain or veil so that the incense smoke from that altar would cover the ark of the covenant and mercy seat behind the veil.
- **Holy of holies** - The outer room of the tabernacle, behind the first door or veil, was about 30 feet by 15 feet by 15 feet in dimensions, and was separated from the second room by a very ornate veil, described here as the second veil. “And behind the second veil,” the author continues, “there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant” (Hebrews 9:3,4). This room was a perfect cube, 15 feet on a side. The top of the ark of the covenant was called “the mercy seat,” because here God rolled back the sins of Israel yearly. In addition to the Ten Commandments, Aaron’s rod, and the pot of manna, the ark also contained the book of the Law (Exodus 25:21).

The outer room or tabernacle was a foreshadow of the church. Christians, each of whom is a priest under the terms of the new covenant, participate in the Lord’s Supper every first day of the week, foreshadowed by the table of shewbread in the tabernacle. Christians offer their prayers, foreshadowed by the altar of incense, and Christians operate by the light of the word of God, foreshadowed by the lampstand.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Physical to Spiritual

Physical sacrifices are inadequate to cover the sins of the soul. However, although lacking the power to be effective in the spiritual realm, the physical trappings of the Old Testament tabernacle were necessary to communicate some important spiritual points. These elements of the Old Testament tabernacle (and later the temple) “serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” Hence “Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, ‘See,’ He says, ‘that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain.’ ” (Hebrews 8:5). Each aspect of the tabernacle was pointing to the spiritual truths of the new covenant, and thus it was necessary that the details not be altered in its construction. The outer portion of the tabernacle, “the holy place,” foreshadowed the church, the “table and sacred bread” as a type of the Lord’s Supper, and the lampstand as a foreshadow of the word of God, the only light allowed in the tabernacle. “Behind the second veil, there was a tabernacle called the Holy of Holies,” which typified heaven itself.

- **The mercy seat** - Inside the Holy of Holies in the tabernacle was the ark of the covenant, built of acacia wood and overlaid with gold. The ark originally contained the original scrolls of the Law, Aaron’s rod (which had budded miraculously, establishing that God had made him and him alone high priest), the tablets of the Ten Commandments, and the jar of manna which never spoiled. “And above the ark were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail” (Hebrews 9:5). The throne of God is often pictured as above cherubim or surrounded by cherubim (Ezekiel chapter one and Revelation chapter 4, for example). Hence the physical pictured the spiritual; and underneath the wings of the cherubim the high priest, once a year on the Day of Atonement, sprinkled blood on the mercy for the sins of the people. This set the stage for the eventual offering of Christ’s blood in the true holy of holies — heaven itself. But the writer could not give a detailed description of the mercy seat and appurtenances; it had not been seen since the Babylonian destruction of the temple of Solomon in 586 BC.
- **Outer room** - Once the furnishings were carved and overlaid, the tabernacle was ready for Israel to worship and serve the Lord their God. “Now when these things have been thus prepared,” noted Hebrews’ author, “the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle, performing the divine service” (Hebrews 9:6). In Israel, the people “worshipped”; the priests “served.” This daily service of the priests of the order of Aaron was carried out in the outer room of the tabernacle.
- **Inner room** - But on the Day of Atonement, late September or early October by our calendar system, the high priest would offer the blood of a bull for himself, and the blood of the a goat for the people. “Into the second,” comments the author, referring to the Holy of Holies behind the veil, “only the high priest enters, once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance” (Hebrews 9:7). Sins committed in ignorance would be the sin of stepping on a dead body without knowing it, or unwittingly eating out of an unclean vessel, for example.

With the clear picture of the Old Testament tabernacle in front of them, the readers of the Hebrew epistle would then be able to better comprehend the actions of Jesus. Sacrificed on Calvary, foreshadowed by the altar which sat in front of the tabernacle, He would ascend to heaven, foreshadowed by the inner room of the tabernacle. Heaven, being spiritual, is difficult to picture. The earthly tabernacle, being more readily understood, served as a necessary unit in God’s communication process, moving the interested from a physical to a spiritual perspective.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Symbol for the Present Time

Typology is one of the major ways God communicates spiritual truths, and establishes that He is the author of the scriptures. An honest contemplation of the tabernacle and its design, given 1500 years before the sacrifice of Christ, and its foreshadowing His sacrifice, His High Priesthood, His church, and His heaven will cause the thoughtful to recognize that only a divine, transcendent power could have planned and executed on such a scale. And for something physical to be designed to communicate something grander in the spiritual realm establishes clearly the existence of a spiritual God who is desirous of moving man from the physical to the spiritual in his understanding and focus. A type, then, generally is a physical foreshadow in the Old Testament record which represents the antitype, the real thing in the New Testament record. The abundance of such types, recorded by the Holy Spirit, is part of proof positive that God is the author of the scriptures.

- **Way into the holy place** - The writer of Hebrews listed the basic appurtenances of the outer and inner rooms of the tabernacle, doing so to paint a picture of the divine service accomplished by the Old Testament priesthood. The outer room in this description was called “the holy place,” and the inner room was called “the Holy of Holies.” But when Jesus died on the cross, the veil in the temple was torn in two, signifying in the physical realm that in the true tabernacle, there is but one room — the church (foreshadowed by the outer room) and heaven (foreshadowed by the inner room) are now one unit, called “the holy place.” With regard to the efficacy of the Old Testament priesthood and its sacrifices prior to the ripping of that veil, the writer notes: “The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed while the outer tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the present time” (Hebrews 9:8,9). The “outer tabernacle” is the physical edifice symbolizing (paralleling) the church. The “present time” is the time of the new covenant. From God’s perspective, the Temple ceased to be the acceptable place for offerings once Christ had been offered on the cross, and therefore not “still standing.” With the preaching of the gospel beginning in Acts two, “the way into the holy place has been disclosed,” and Christians through their high priest are in the true tabernacle of God and have access to the throne of glory!
- **Old Testament sacrifices not effective** - The Old Testament tabernacle foreshadowed the church and heaven, and the ministrations of the high priest of Israel were foreshadows of the high priestly ministry of Christ in heaven. Because the Old Testament offerings were shadows and not substance, they could not have been effective in the removal of guilt and sin. “Accordingly,” notes Hebrews’ author, of these Old Testament ministrations by the priests, “both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience...” (Hebrews 9:9). The use of the word “worshiper” here is a mistranslation in the New American Standard Version; it should be, as the New King James puts it, “him who performed the service.” The thrust of the book of Hebrews in this section is the comparison of the Old Testament high priest to Christ, High Priest of the order of Melchizedek under the New Covenant. “Him that did the service,” here refers directly to the offerings of Israel’s high priest, “first for his own sins” (Hebrews 7:27). If they were not effective in cleansing the high priest, then all lesser offerings were also ineffective.

The Old Testament tabernacle, its priesthood, its sacrifices, and its appurtenances were “a symbol of the present time.” They were necessary physical representations of the spiritual realm, but because they were not of the spiritual realm, they were not effective in solving spiritual problems. The ministrations of our High Priest in the spiritual holy of holies are effective, and those who have come under the terms of the new covenant are a greatly blessed people!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A Time of Reformation

“The Law,” affirmed Hebrews’ author, “appoints men as high priests who are weak.” By contrast, “the word of the oath,” which effected a new covenant, “appoints a Son, made perfect forever” (Hebrews 7:28). From Adam to Moses men were governed only by their consciences, which governance proved ineffective in producing a holy people. The Law of Moses, instituted in Israel, likewise proved unable to produce a people who could be holy and keep the statutes and ordinances. There was no remedy for the soiled consciences of those from Adam to Moses, and there was no remedy for a guilty conscience under the Law either. In Israel, for instance, “into the second [tabernacle] only the high priest enters, once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance” (Hebrews 9:7). The first thing the high priest had to do was to offer was “blood for himself.” But this blood and related “gifts and sacrifices” could not “make him who performed the service perfect in conscience”; it would take the offering a High Priest, “made perfect forever,” to make anyone who performs service to God “perfect in conscience.”

- **Worship and service** - The devil has managed to create a tremendous amount of confusion about worship and service. Satan’s desire is to keep new creations from worshiping God in Spirit and in truth; therefore he has obfuscated the issue by blurring definitions. Worship has to do with the initial bowing before God in a physical way exhibited by the patriarchs, and then was broadened to include the participation of the people — as contrasted to the priests — in the events at the Temple during the feasts days. Service has to do with the offering of sacrifices, and was narrowed to the priests’ being the only ones allowed to serve God at the altar in Jerusalem. All these references in this section of Hebrews have to do with someone serving, and are direct references to the priesthood, and most especially the high priest in Israel.
- **Perfect in conscience** - The gifts and sacrifices which the high priest of the order of Aaron offered did not make him perfect in conscience. The lesser gifts and sacrifices of the priests who continually entered “the outer tabernacle” therefore did not make those priests perfect in conscience, and their offerings for the people thusly did not make the people perfect in conscience. No adult-level mind from Adam through Christ had a perfect, clean, or clear conscience!
- **Regulations for the body** - The physical sacrifices of the Old Testament did not touch the inner man. Therefore the offerings of the high priest for himself could not make him perfect in conscience, “since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation” (Hebrews 9:10). A time was coming when the inner man could be changed.
- **A time of reformation** - A time was coming when all things would be “made right.” Adam was not a spiritual man; he was “of the earth, earthy” (I Corinthians 15:47). God’s intention, therefore, was not to go back merely to the Garden of Eden, wherein its inhabitants would be as Adam, who was not a spiritual man but inhabited a perfect earthly place. The plan of God was to produce an entirely new race or generation of spiritual people, a people holy and righteous, desirous of fellowshiping with Him who dwells in the heavens.

Jesus Christ, Son of God, High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, brought this “time of reformation” through His ascension to glory. For the first time in earth’s history, there will be a people of clean conscience. For the first time in earth’s history, there will be a people who are no longer earthy and whose focus is no longer on the physical; this time there is created a truly spiritual people who worship in Spirit and truth!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Good Things to Come

The earthly tabernacle, said Hebrews' author, "is a symbol for the present time." The typology involved is staggering to contemplate: a building designed 1500 years before Christianity came into existence foreshadowed all the great things of the church such as prayer, the Lord's Supper, the guiding light of the Word of God, the sacrifice of Christ, and the laver of immersion. But the concept of the tabernacle and its replacement — the temple — was not limited to its being just a foreshadow. The whole plan was to move man from a physical focus to a spiritual perspective, that man would move upward as he came to understand the differences between the Old and New Covenants. The honest individual, contemplating this physical-to-spiritual panorama, will recognize that it could only have been conceived and constructed by a transcendent God, and he will fall on his face and confess that Jesus certainly is Lord.

- **Appearance of Christ** - When the scripture speaks of the first coming of Christ, it is generally a reference to Christ's ascension to the throne. "One like a Son of Man was coming," prophesied Daniel, "and to Him was given dominion, glory, and a kingdom" (Daniel 7:13,14). This coming of Christ is often translated appearing. "But when Christ appeared," is the way the epistle to the Hebrews is brought forth in the NASB, "as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle ..." (Hebrews 9:11). Christ could not be a priest on earth; His appearance as high priest was in glory.
- **Not of this creation** - Jesus, upon His ascension, "entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation..." Christ had to enter the true Holy of Holies through the outer room, the true Holy Place. The outer room foreshadows the church, while the room behind the second veil foreshadows heaven. The picture here is that both the church and heaven itself (which are now contemplated as one room, because the veil in the physical temple was torn in two at Christ's death) are the "greater and more perfect tabernacle." That is interesting phraseology — more perfect tabernacle. The implication is that there was nothing wrong with the first one, but that it was incomplete. This new tabernacle is complete, and it is "not of this creation"; it is spiritual and nothing of the material realm enters there.
- **Not through blood of goats and calves** - On the Day of Atonement, the Old Testament high priest would first offer the blood of a bull calf for himself, then the blood of a goat for the sins of the people. By contrast, when Christ entered into heaven itself, it was "not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all having obtained eternal redemption" (Hebrews 9:12). For Christ to have the blood with which to enter the true holy place, He had to have been the sacrifice on earth, and to have shed physical blood on earth's dust. But when He entered the tabernacle not made with hands, it was spiritual blood which He had to offer. The Old Testament high priest entered into the physical holy place, "once a year, not without taking blood." The rules of the game, so to speak, required that Jesus have blood to offer in entering into the heavenly Holy of Holies.

Jesus only entered heaven one time; there were not multiple ascensions following His appearing to Mary Magdalene following His resurrection. "He entered the holy place once for all," is the terminology of the word. This one time entrance and one time offering of His spiritual blood purchased eternal redemption, and it is a redemption open to everyone. This grand and expansive concept should result in every Christian's thoughtful, grateful, and joyful desire to please Him!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A Clean Conscience

“If that first covenant had been faultless,” commented Hebrews’ author, “there would have been no place sought for a second.” The altar and temple in Jerusalem were the physical center of the old covenant, and the place where any ritualistic cleansing of Israel would occur. But those sacrifices and ritualistic cleansings could not touch the inner man; they were external rites relating “only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.” The dietary laws, the purification requirements, the ablutions were all on the outside, and could not even make the high priest “perfect in conscience,” much less anyone else. But Jesus, as a heavenly high priest of the order of Melchizedek, entered into the true holy place with His own spiritual blood, and with that “sprinkled blood,” He cleansed heaven itself and purchased for all who would obey the gospel “eternal redemption.” This is eternal because it was a one-time offering, and it was sufficient to obtain eternal life for any individual — Jew or Greek — who would be faithful to the covenant.

- **Cleansing of the flesh** - In front of the tabernacle was a laver of bronze filled with water. The priests were thus instructed that they “shall wash their hands and their feet from it; when they enter the tent of meeting, they shall wash with water, that they may not die” (Exodus 30:19,20). This is one of many examples of ritualistic cleansing in the Old Testament, done in connection with “the gifts and sacrifices offered which cannot make the one who performed the service perfect in conscience.” The purification ritual made it possible for him who attended the altar to approach the altar; there was indeed an outward cleansing. “For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled,” notes the author, “sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh ...” (Hebrews 9:13). The “goats and bulls” referenced here not only include the regular burnt offerings, sin offerings, and related sacrifices, but directly point to the special offerings of the high priest in Israel on the Day of Atonement. The “ashes of the heifer sprinkling” refer to the purification rituals connected to water of purification derived from water poured through the ashes of a burnt heifer (see Numbers 19:2 and related scripture).
- **Cleansing of the conscience** - Once again God is going to use the physical to get His disciples to an understanding of the spiritual. If those physical offerings cleansed the flesh and made the priest outwardly holy, “how much more,” the author Hebrews asks, “will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” (Hebrews 9:14). This blood of Jesus, offered in heaven, is powerful stuff — able to reach in and cleanse the conscience of the faithful follower of Christ!

There is no earthly remedy for a guilty conscience. The mental hospitals are overflowing with those whose unhandled guilty consciences caused them to check out of reality; the drug companies are profiting from the pharmaceuticals proffered to those who want to swallow a pill rather than face Christ; and the psychology/psychiatric industry is busy passing the blame onto others rather than the patient, attempting to shuffle off the guilty conscience instead of offering the only solution found in Christ Jesus. It is necessary, therefore, that the entire weight of the word of God be placed on these words: “How much more shall the blood of Christ ...” Thousands of sacrifices, hundreds of fulfilled prophecies, and some of the most striking typology of the scriptures are designed to communicate this point: the blood of Christ can cleanse the conscience of even the most depraved sinner!!!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Blood of Christ

Blood is not the first thing that comes to the fuller's mind when it comes to a cleansing agent for clothes. Blood stains, in fact, are some of the most difficult to remove from clothing. The All Wise, then, the perfect communicator, went to great lengths to associate water and blood so that the cleansing properties normally associated with water then became attached to blood. When someone in Israel died in his tent, for example, a "clean person" was to take ashes from the red heifer and mix it with flowing water. "And a clean person," stated the word of the Lord, "shall take hyssop and dip it in the water, and sprinkle it on the tent and on all the furnishings and on the persons who were there" (Numbers 19:18). To ritually cleanse a house after the removal of something "leprous," the priest was instructed: "Then he shall take the cedar wood and the hyssop and the scarlet string, with the live bird, and dip them in the blood of the slain bird, as well in the running water, and sprinkle the house seven times" (Leviticus 14:51). The red colors — the blood, the red heifer, the cedar wood, the scarlet string, and the hyssop (presumably red colored) — used in the cleansing ritual, used in conjunction with sprinkled water, impressed upon Israel the cleansing properties of blood and associated it with cleansing normally affixed to water.

- **Christ's blood offering** - Every arrow of prophecy and every shaft of typology pointed to Christ and His kingdom. The writer of Hebrews therefore through a discussion of the prophecies and typologies has laid a foundation of understanding the high priesthood of Christ for his readers — that Christ's high priesthood had to be in heaven, and that His offering had to occur in the heavenly holy place. Having pointed out that "the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh," he then can emphasize, "how much more will the blood of Christ" cleanse even the consciences of those purified under the terms of the new covenant. It was not the blood shed on Calvary that accomplished such cleansing; that physical blood was the touchstone to the spiritual blood — sprinkled in heaven — that purifies the soul!
- **Through the Spirit** - The writer brings in a somewhat unexpected modifier, that it was "through the eternal Spirit" that Christ offered Himself to God. No one was to offer a blemished animal to God; hence Christ as the earthly sacrifice was "without blemish" in that He was the pure and sinless Lamb of God. But in the realm "not made with hands" — the spiritual realm, the Holy Spirit was the spiritual agent through which Jesus offered Himself and His spiritual blood to the Father.

The blood and the water were intimately connected through the Old Testament foreshadows and cleansing rituals. Even at Christ's death on the cross, at the piercing of His side, it is noted, "there came out blood and water" (John 19:34). Thus, in acquiring the clean conscience — that great cleansing which never could occur through the physical offerings of the Old Covenant — blood and water are once again intimately connected. "Immersion now saves you," says the inspired Peter, "not the removal of dirt from the flesh, but an appeal to God for a good conscience — through the resurrection of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 3:21). The water of immersion puts the repentant believer into cleansing by the blood offered by Christ in His resurrection, "that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood" (I Peter 1:2). But since it was "through the eternal Spirit" that Christ offered Himself, there are three factors: the blood, the water, and the Spirit. When a person is immersed into Christ in water, he is forgiven through the blood, and he receives the gift of the Holy Spirit. "For there are three that bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood; and the three are in agreement" (I John 5:8).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Serving God

The Old Testament priest, as he approached the temple, had to be cleansed with water from the laver, or he would die. He could not serve God as a priest according to his own dictates; he had to serve God under the terms which God ordained. When Nadab and Abihu, sons of Aaron, offered “strange fire before the Lord” in the burning of incense, the Lord burnt them with fire from heaven. If a priest was to serve God, he had to serve him according to the terms which God dictated. Only the priests could serve God; the people could worship on feast days, but only the priests could minister at the altars. When King Uzziah, for example, “became strong, his heart was so proud that he acted corruptly, and he was unfaithful to the Lord his God; for he entered the temple of the Lord to burn incense on the altar of incense” (II Chronicles 26:16). But because he was not permitted to serve the Lord as were the priests, he was smitten with leprosy by the offended Almighty. Only the priests could serve God, and they could only serve according to the instructions they were given in the Law of the Lord.

- **Dead works** - The new covenant ordains an entirely new priesthood; the priesthood of the order of Aaron is set aside and the priesthood of the order of Melchizedek is now in force. Christ is the high priest, and each Christian is a priest who is to serve in the true tabernacle, not made with hands, which the Lord pitched and not man. The Hebrew, then, in the process of becoming a Christian, was to repent “from dead works,” and then to have his conscience cleansed “from dead works.” Thus the apostle Paul, as a demonstration of God’s perfect patience, had to be cleansed of his attempts to justify himself before God by his Jewish pedigree and his exploits under the Law.
- **Serving God** - The Christian inwardly worships God; his service is the offering of the thoughts and actions of the outer man to God as a living and holy sacrifice. Just as the Old Testament priests could not serve God unless they operated under His directives, even so no one can be a New Testament priest unless he serves under Christ’s directives, and those directives list as the first prerequisite a clean conscience. No one can serve God without a clean conscience; his attempts at service are unacceptable. The non-Christian needs to be immersed into Christ for his clean conscience; the Christian who has strayed needs to repent, confess, and get himself back on track. “To the pure,” Paul reminded Titus, “all things are pure; but to those who are defiled and unbelieving, nothing is pure, but both their mind and their conscience are defiled” (Titus 1:15).
- **The living God** - “God” is not a vague distant concept or an abstract entity. He is “the living God,” and He is interested and involved in the affairs of the world and the actions and attitudes of His saints. Even His word is described as “living and active” (Hebrews 4:12). “All things,” the author reminded his hearers, “are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do” (Hebrews 4:13). He, then, is aware of whether the individual has a clean conscience or not, and whether therefore his service is acceptable or unacceptable.

The goal of each sincere person will be truly to serve God. Knowing that an unclean conscience makes it just as impossible for him to do that as it was for Uzziah to offer incense, he will do whatever the Lord has stated in order to acquire that clean conscience. And, honestly, in the sight of God, he will continue to maintain that clean conscience, that his offerings might be acceptable in the courts of heaven. Otherwise, they are dead works performed by a soul on the way to hell.

Redemption for Transgressions

What about the eternity of those Old Testament saints? What about men like Moses, David, and Daniel who did not have Jesus as their intercessory High Priest? Were they lost forever, did God have some provision for them?

The character of God in regard to rescuing men is illustrated in verses such as II Peter 3:9: God is “not wishing for any to perish but for all to come to repentance.” It is clear, then, that He is not a “mean ogre in heaven,” looking to send as many to hell as possible. He earnestly desires that the maximum number of souls spend eternity with Him. The apostle Paul thus labors to establish that God is fair and just rather than changeable and arbitrary. After demonstrating that Christians are justified through their faith in the redemptive works of Christ, the apostle comments on the condition of those who passed on to their reward prior to the inauguration of the new covenant. “In the forbearance of God,” Paul stated of God’s ability to withhold His wrath from the Old Testament saints, “He passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25). What enabled Him to “pass over”?

- **Power of the Mediator** - Christ offered His own blood on behalf of those separated from God by their weakness and failures. “How much more,” says Hebrews’ writer when comparing the Old Testament ministrations to those of Christ, “will the blood of Christ cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?” Christ, having passed through the vicissitudes of death, is now exalted to the power position of heaven. “When He had made purification from sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). “For this reason,” the author notes, “He is the mediator of a new covenant” (Hebrews 9:15). Having died the death of a testator, He has risen to the office of mediator — the One who has the power to execute the benevolent provisions of His will.
- **All inclusive death** - Because God is fair, those — who if they had lived during the time of the new covenant would have become Christians, such as Abraham — Old Testament saints have been cleansed by the blood of Jesus also. Jesus’ power as Mediator of the new covenant extends backward, “in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant ...” (Hebrews 9:15). The blessings found through His death not only reached forward to all future holy ones, but also reached backward to include the redemption of those who lived under the Law and who were thus declared righteous! God exercised His “forbearance” through the redemptive work of Christ and justified the men of old who were also “of faith.”
- **The called** - Christ’s blood, shed on Calvary but offered in heaven, has the purchasing power to redeem all the lost of all the ages. By the fair provision of a just God, sins of the Old Testament faithful were rolled back year by year until the redemptive power of Christ’s offering could function on their behalf. This, said the writer, was in order that all “those who have been called may receive the reward of the inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15).

The old covenant did not have provisions who could redeem even those who were under its terms. How much superior, then, is the new covenant, what has the power to redeem those under its terms as well as to reach back and cover those who lived previously. The “called,” therefore — Greek or Jew, old or new — receive the great reward of the inheritance promised to those who are joint heirs with Christ. What person who has participated in this great and costly redemption could fail to praise the Lord?

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Division of the Covenants

“Be diligent,” Paul instructed Timothy, “to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, handling accurately the word of truth” (I Timothy 2:15). This handling accurately is based upon the principle of knowing where to divide the Bible into its appropriate parts. Implicit in the passage is that, as a swordsman must be trained so that he can handle his blade effectively, even so the one who claims to wield the sword of the Spirit must be trained so that he can properly distinguish the covenants of the scripture and know how to apply the teachings of each one. There are, said Paul, those who want “to be teachers of the Law, even though they do not understand what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (I Timothy 1:7). Let us be diligent, then, in understanding the most foundational division of covenants in the word of God.

- **Death necessary for a will** - A practice that is almost universal throughout the human race is that of having a will made to state the dying individual’s intent regarding the distribution of his properties following his passing. In English speaking countries, following the customs established in British common law, in probate court “the last will and testament” of said deceased is read. Will is derived from Anglo-Saxon roots and it the expression used in communicating to the common people; testament is Latin in origin, and is used in communicating to the nobility and lawyers; they are synonyms. Sometimes a testament will contain provisions which the recipient must meet in order to claim his share, in which case the will takes on the meaning covenant. Hence Hebrews’ writer animadverts, “For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it” (Hebrews 9:16). The premise is simple and easily understood: no death, no will!
- **In effect only after death** - A man may write several wills during his lifetime, or make changes to an existing will. The reason this can take place is that a testament only goes into effect at the death of the testator, and the final will and words are the ones that will be implemented. “For a covenant,” noted the writer, “is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives” (Hebrews 9:17). The writer, then, is taking a general principle found throughout the race of men and applying it to Christ.
- **Christ’s will took effect at His death** - The writer of Hebrews is working to emphasize to his first century readership that of necessity there is a new covenant because Jesus’ death would require one. His problem was to convince the readership of his day that the Old Covenant to which they were clinging was in fact a dead letter, and that a glorious New Covenant had been instituted through the death of Christ. The modern readership generally accepts the idea that there is a new covenant; the problem is that denominational preachers and teachers have blurred the line between the two covenants. Hence it is necessary to stress that Jesus often forgave sins under whatever conditions He chose — the thief on the cross, for example — but once He died, forgiveness is granted only on the basis of terms which began to be announced in Acts 2:38.

“Rightly dividing the word of truth” requires, as its first step, an understanding that Jesus lived and died under the terms of the Old Testament Law of Moses. His death put an end to the Law and its customs, and through Christ’s ascension, He has become the Mediator — the Executor — of a much more powerful New Covenant. The terms of this new covenant should occupy the focus of the brethren’s attention.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Blood of the First Covenant

The deception of Satan is great. And Satan's ministers, who masquerade as "ministers of righteousness," are very good at preying on people's ignorance in order to continue to promote their deception. Take the Mormons, for example. A Mormon will often be found carrying his "Bible," which in its thickness not only contains contents which are labeled "Old Testament" and "New Testament," but additions called The Book of Mormon (often termed "another testament of Jesus Christ") and Doctrine and Covenants. The titles and terms on these bring up an interesting question: Did Jesus die twice? It is an important scriptural principle that in order for there to be a covenant or testament, something or someone has to die. Joseph Smith, Jr., regarded as author of The Book of Mormon, died in a hail of bullets, but no one — especially Joseph Smith — would have claimed that his blood was necessary for "another testament" or "covenants," since those other documents were supposedly in place before Joseph's death (and Joseph was planning on living longer anyway). Did Jesus die twice, then? No, He did not, and these other claims are obviously bogus. Conclusively, then, there are only two covenants of general application: the Law of Moses, based upon the blood of sacrificed animals, and the faith of Christ, based upon the blood of Christ Himself.

- **First testament inaugurated** - In order for Christ to have His covenant, "a death [His death, and only once] has taken place." "Therefore," reasons Hebrews' author, "even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood" (Hebrews 9:18). The blood of Christ paid the price for the sins of those who lived before and during the time of the Mosaic law. But so necessary is the shedding of blood that the writer of this epistle, while emphasizing that only the blood of Christ was efficacious in the actual removal of sin, stated that even the first covenant could not take effect without blood. He illustrates: "For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.' " (Hebrews 9:19,20). This sprinkling of blood is recorded in Exodus 24:5-8. The writer of Hebrews is "mighty in the scriptures" [taken from Acts 18:24], able to conclude from the teachings of the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) that not only were goats sacrificed with the bulls, but that there would have also been the water, scarlet wool, and hyssop!
- **Cleansing the implements** - The initial consecration of the people took place in connection with the Father's giving them the Ten Commandments and the first instructions of the Law. A year later, on the anniversary of the Passover in their leaving Egypt, the tabernacle and its accoutrements were completed. The writer describes the action of Moses in their consecration: "And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood" (Hebrews 9:21).
- **The great principle** - The things of the Law, said Paul, were "shadow of what is to come; but the substance belongs to Christ" (Colossians 2:17). The actions of Moses, as directed by God, were designed from the beginning to set the stage for the covenant of Christ. The writer of Hebrews thusly summarizes the great principle that these cleansing rituals emanating from Moses established: "And according to Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without the shedding of blood, there is no forgiveness" (Hebrews 9:22).

The first covenant was inaugurated with blood. The book of the Law was sprinkled with blood. The tabernacle and its implements were sprinkled. Even the people themselves! These physical actions, carried out by Moses in the sight of the people, and recorded for posterity, were a necessary bridge in God's communication to man. By having the images of Moses, the peace and burnt offerings, the sprinkled blood and the people, the participant in the new covenant is able to see much more clearly how the blood of Christ can cleanse a person who has had a guilty conscience, and set him free to serve God!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Cleansed with Blood

“Slow of heart to believe,” said Jesus of the two men on the road to Emmaus. “Dull of hearing,” was the expression that Hebrews’ author used to describe his readership. And these are expressions for the good guys! “Stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears” is the stronger expression Stephen used to expose the nature of the Jewish High Council. The human race has a hard time learning God’s principles because their hearing is blocked by other interests. Therefore it takes God a long time with lots of repetition to get His message through.

Consider this concept: “All things are cleansed with blood.” It took God 1500 years of blood sacrifices in Israel to get this point firmly rooted in Israel’s mind. And the writer of Hebrews labored mightily to bring this point to significant saliency: “Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.”

- **Cleansing the earthly tabernacle** - The writer of this epistle had already made his point about Jesus’ offering His own blood “to obtain eternal redemption.” But he takes time to go back and stress that Moses, in inaugurating the Old Covenant, “took the blood of calves and goats” and sprinkled everything. A year later, “in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with blood.”
- **Cleansing the heavenly tabernacle** - “The blood of Christ,” the author had stated, “will cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” It becomes very evident to the individual who applies the gospel message to himself that he himself has sinned and needs cleansing through the sacrifices of Christ. The writer of Hebrews thus references that purification in the proper point in his logical presentation. But he then backtracks to Moses’ cleansing the earthly tabernacle to establish a point that generally would not have occurred to the reader: Heaven itself needed cleansed! Referencing the earthly tabernacle and its appurtenances such as the altar, the writer calls them “copies,” noting, “Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these [the sprinkling of blood, along with the water, scarlet wool, and hyssop], but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these” (Hebrews 9:23). The stripes and suffering of Christ, along with His “shed blood,” were the earthly side of His sacrifices. But it was His offering of Himself and His spiritual blood in heaven which cleansed “the heavenly things themselves”!
- **Why cleanse the heavenly things?** - The earthly tabernacle and its implements were a “copy” or a foreshadow of the “heavenlies”; in this case, the church and heaven itself. So why would these need to be cleansed? It is important to remember that, prior to Christ’s ascension, Satan had access to the courts of heaven, as described in the book of Job. A plausible reason for the “cleansing,” then, is that heaven was to be purified from having experienced the sinfulness of Satan’s rebellion.

Man, dull of hearing, has had a hard time making the connection that the shedding of blood is necessary for his forgiveness. God, however, moves the believer to the next point in his understanding: Christ offered spiritual blood in heaven for the cleansing of his conscience. The All Wise, however, elevates the thinking of the increasingly spiritual man to the next level, that heaven itself was purified through this spiritual blood of Christ. The principle is persistent and powerful — “All things are cleansed with blood.” Even heaven!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Consummation of the Ages

The epistle to the Hebrews has this opening point: “When [Jesus] had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high” (Hebrews 1:3). The writer then takes about nine chapters (according to the way we have divided the letter into sections) to properly develop his theme as to what this purification for sins is, and how it takes place. The earthly tabernacle and its offerings serve as “a copy and shadow of the heavenly things.” Moses was therefore instructed to “make all things according to the pattern” which he saw on Mount Sinai, since the details of the earthly were to be used to communicate the happenings in the spiritual realm.

- **Re-emphasis on the true holy place** - “Now the main point in what has been said is this,” was a major statement of the author, that “we have such a high priest, who has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man” (Hebrews 8:1,2). Having spent some space discussing the New Covenant and Christ’s offering His blood for the cleansing of the believers’ consciences, the writer then focuses on the purification of this spiritual tabernacle. “For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands,” is the re-emphasis, “a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24).
- **Superiority of Christ’s priesthood** - By our having a picture of the earthly priesthood and earthly tabernacle, the high priesthood of Christ and His heavenly tabernacle are now apprehensible. “Nor was it that He should offer Himself often,” the writer superadds, “as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood not his own” (Hebrews 9:24). The long-term inefficacy of those sacrifices, such as the offering of a bull and a goat on the Day of Atonement year by year, is evident in the fact that they needed to be repeatedly presented. Christ and His offering are far superior, as evidenced in that He was only offered once.
- **Apex of history** - The writer of this epistle was willing to backtrack to Moses’ sprinkling the blood to inaugurate the first covenant in order to set the stage for a major point in the revelation of God; he is about ready to reveal the most important day and event in the history of the universe. “Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world,” he references the fact that only one offering of Christ was necessary, “but now once at the consummation of the ages He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself” (Hebrews 9:26). Many versions translate the word rendered consummation by the NASB as end, so the expression comes out as “the end of the ages.” This tends to throw the mind into a framework where the reader is thinking in terms of time rather than purpose. But Jesus’ offering of His spiritual blood was not time wise at “the end of the ages”; His offering was the purpose to which all the ages pointed!
- **Manifestation** - The writer spoke of the appearance of Jesus the High Priest in the presence of God on our behalf in these terms: “He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” Paul spoke of this offering of spiritual sprinkled blood in the true holy place using similar terminology, referring to Jesus “whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith” (Romans 3:25). Even though the eye of man could not see this action of Jesus in glory, it is regarded as “public” or “manifest” by God, who makes it known to the sons of men through the gospel!

As important as was the day of Jesus’ crucifixion, it was not the “consummation of the ages,” nor was the day of His bodily resurrection from the dead. When He entered glory, THIS WAS THE DAY! “Christ Jesus is He who died, yes, rather who was raised, who is at the right hand of God, who also intercedes for us” (Romans 8:34).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Second Coming

The first appearance of Christ is described in these words, that Christ “entered heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us” (Hebrews 9:24). This – the consummation of the ages — is when Christ came on the clouds the first time, when He came up to the Ancient of Days to receive His kingdom (Daniel 7:13,14). Building upon some earlier statements of Jesus, as His ascension the angels informed the apostles (who had just seen a cloud receive Him out of their sight), “This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in just the same way as you have watched Him go into heaven” (Acts 1:11). Thus it is written of His second coming, “Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him” (Revelation 1:7).

- **Christ only had to die once** - The offering of Christ was a one-time offering, as contrasted to the high priests of Israel and their year-by-year offerings on the Day of Atonement. “The high priest,” stated Hebrews’ author, “enters the holy place year by year.” The fact that he kept having to make his offerings meant that the offerings were not accomplishing true forgiveness or really paying the price of redemption. Jesus therefore did not “offer Himself often” or “suffer often”; He died once, and ascended once.
- **Men die once** - One of the pervasive general teachings of God’s word is that men die only once. Of Abraham, for example, it is written, “And Abraham breathed his last and died ... and he was gathered to his people” (Genesis 25:8). The message is clear — men die once, and will be resurrected on the last day. It is resurrection, not reincarnation! “And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once,” affirms the author, “and after this comes judgment, so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many ...” (Hebrews 9:27,28). Christ died one death, and that one death — as contrasted to nearly countless Old Testament sacrifices — was sufficient to bear the sins of all mankind.
- **Reappearance of the high priest** - On the Day of Atonement in Israel, the high priest offered a bull for his own personal purification. Then, while the people waited expectantly in the courtyard outside, the priest offered the blood of a goat in the holy of holies for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. The high priest would then appear to the people, his mission of mercy accomplished. In the same way, Christ, having offered His blood in the true holy of holies, “shall appear a second time for salvation without reference to sin, to those who eagerly await Him” (Hebrews 9:28). The great hope of the Christian is his resurrection from the dead at Jesus’ coming; hence those who are truly spiritual are “eagerly” waiting for His reappearance.
- **Salvation** - Jesus’ death was “for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed,” not only for those who lived and died as Old Testament saints, but for all who would believe in Him up to the time of His second coming. Thus the saints are spoken of as “redeemed” or “saved”; that is, they are redeemed from their transgressions or saved from their sins. But, at Jesus’ second coming, there is a “salvation without reference to sin.” This is the salvation or “redemption of the body,” when Christ “will transform the body of our humble state into conformity with the body of His glory” (Romans 8:23; Philippians 3:21). This is our “one hope,” and “with perseverance we wait eagerly for it” (Romans 8:25).

As the children of Israel eagerly awaited the reappearance of their high priest, so the modern children of faith, of the current “Israel of God,” eagerly await the reappearance of Christ and the completion of His work in the true tabernacle of God. And if they are not eagerly awaiting His return, they need to make the spiritual adjustments necessary so that this eagerness is real. So, come Lord Jesus!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Shortfall of the Shadow

“Christ,” says Hebrews’ writer, “entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption.” Again, he writes, “now once at the consummation of the ages, He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.” The message is clear and emphasized: the one-time offering of Jesus — being both the sacrifice and the priest to offer the sacrifice — is sufficient to forgive sins committed under the covenant of Moses as well as those committed by the people of the New Covenant.

What about those Old Testament offerings? Wasn’t there forgiveness when the offerings were presented at the Lord’s altar? The writer of Hebrews has anticipated those questions, and has laid the groundwork for an appropriate response.

- **Outward cleansing** - “The blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled,” notes the author, “sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh.” They cleanse the outer man, but they don’t touch the conscience! Hence the individual offering the sacrifice would be ritually cleansed on the outside so that he could approach the altar of God, but the inner cleansing was going to have to wait “until a time of reformation” — the covenant of Christ.
- **Shadow not substance** - Having established that the Law could not rectify the problems of the inner man, the writer is then able to offer his next point: The Law, he says, is only “a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things” (Hebrews 10:1). The Law was a shadow; the substance is Christ! Shadows, by definition, have no power. A shadow on the trail, for example, has no capability of kicking a stone into the grass. Only something of substance has power to perform. Thus the Law “can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near” (Hebrews 10:1).
- **Cessation of offerings** - Christ, it has been established, offered Himself once on behalf of the sons of men. The offerings of the shadow, by contrast, are offered “continually,” and could not make perfect the priests who were to “draw near.” “Otherwise,” reasons Hebrews’ author, “would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers [actually, those who offer the sacrifice], having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?” (Hebrews 10:2). Good point!
- **What was accomplished** - Why did God keep having the priests perform the divine service if forgiveness was not really accomplished? “But in those sacrifices,” he notes, “there is a reminder of sins year by year” (Hebrews 10:3). The reminder is valuable; as part of the schoolmaster function, it thus points to the need of man for God to provide for his redemption. Through the shadow, God was gently herding the Jews’ understanding toward the need for a Savior.
- **Not through bulls and goats** - When God had Adam name the animals, He was reiterating that man has dominion over them and that animals are lesser creations than man. It follows that true redemption cannot be accomplished for man by offering a lesser substitute. “For it is impossible,” affirms the author, “for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins” (Hebrews 10:4). Christ, “made for a little while lower than the angels,” as a greater being than man, would be a fit and effective offering on behalf of man.

Christ is the substance and is therefore capable of removing the sins of those who would obey His gospel. Thus the Christian era is the era of substance. Israel according to the flesh, its tabernacle, its sacrifices, and its land were all the era of “shadow.” The shadow has been set aside, and the substantive gospel of Christ is conquering Judaism and paganism in the hearts of all honest men. Welcome to the real world!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A Body Prepared

“With what shall I come to the Lord?” asked the prophet. “Does the Lord delight in thousands of rams?” he further queried. How about sacrificing his first-born son, “the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?” (Micah 6:6,7). The man who desires to walk humbly with his God knows that God has to provide the Lamb as the sacrifice. Thus there was a plan prepared before the foundation of the world that Jesus, as the seed of woman, would come to crush the serpent’s head and rescue those who otherwise would be trapped in Hades.

- **When He comes into the world** - “He had to be made like His brethren in all things,” asseverated Hebrews’ author, “that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest.” It was anticipated, then, that Jesus should at some point come to earth as man. The writer phrases it thusly: “Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says . . .” and then follows an Old Testament quotation. It is apparent that Jesus wasn’t quoting the Old Testament when He said things such as “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” Rather, He said these things out of natural anguish, and David the prophet foresaw the events and recorded His statements before the happenings occurred.
- **A body** - As Jesus engaged in His conversation with His heavenly Father at His entrance into the world, He said, “Sacrifice and offering You have not desired, but a body You have prepared for Me” (Hebrews 10:5). The understanding was always there that animal sacrifices would not be effective in forgiving the sins of men’s souls. The New American Standard translation of Psalm forty in the pertinent spot reads: “My ears You have opened [dug, pierced]” (Psalm 40:6). The inspired interpolation through the Septuagint (Greek version of the Old Testament) is that Jesus willingly, as a bond-servant, took human form (Philippians 2:6,7). The tie-in with Psalm 40 is that a man became a bond-servant under the Law of Moses by having his ear pierced with an awl, the awl being driven through the ear lobe into the door of his master’s house.
- **Ineffectiveness of animal sacrifices** - The writer has already established the ineffectiveness of animal sacrifices, reasoning from the idea that if they were effective, they would have only been offered once. But now he is able to buttress his point with a quotation from the revered Old Testament: “In whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You have taken no pleasure” (Hebrews 10:6).
- **Doing the Father’s will** - After pointing out the inefficacy of animal sacrifices, the quotation from Psalm 40 continues, prophetically recording the conversation Jesus had with the Father: “Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come (in the roll of the book it is written of Me) to do Your will, O God.’ ” (Hebrews 10:7). What an amazing prophecy and quotation! The Son specifically states that the prophecies about Him were written on the scrolls, and that He was taking on an earthly body in order to offer Himself as an effective sacrifice.

This astounding quotation from the pen of David summarizes a huge portion of the plan of God. “A body,” said the Lord Jesus through the mouth of David, “You have prepared for Me.” For this to be accomplished, an appropriate virgin of the lineage of David had to be available, and of sufficient spirituality to rear the Holy Offspring. A perfectly placed surrogate dad in Joseph had to be on hand, of the lineage of David and heir to the throne, but also spiritual enough to provide proper guidance. The body had to be that of a male, and of no “appearance that we should be attracted to Him.” But it had to be sturdy enough to withstand the rigors experienced by an itinerant preacher and able to endure the lashings preceding the cross. It was a disciplined body, finishing strong to its dying breath, executing the will of the Father flawlessly. Praise God!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Father's Will

A testament is a directive, indicating what is to be done with a person's possessions following his passing from this earth. Testament, of Latin origin, has an Anglo-Saxon equivalent, will. Used in that context, the mind glances over the thrust of the word. But when put in terms such as "will power" or "strong-willed," the picture of a will takes on added significance, indicating the driving force behind the words written on a piece of paper. And such are the thought processes underlying the quotation from Psalm 40, as the author of Hebrews engages in an extensive commentary and application of the scripture to the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth.

- **Reiteration** - A writer will often quote from the scripture, and then go back and requote it in sections, making little comments to bring out the meaning or significance of the quote as he goes. The writer of Hebrews is not an exception to the practice. He writes, "After saying above, 'Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You have not desired, nor have You taken pleasure in them' (which are offered according to the Law), then He said, 'Behold, I have come to do Your will.' " (Hebrews 10: 8,9). The first part of the quotation is brought forth as the core of the sacrificial Law of Moses, and it is re-emphasized that the Lord did not particularly desire those. The second part of the quotation is then given added significance by contrast; the One who came to do the will of the Father would provide that which was pleasing to Him!
- **The weight given the will** - The writer of this epistle to the Hebrew brethren of Judea then brings forth his astounding commentary: "He takes away the first in order to establish the second" (Hebrews 10:9)! This would never have occurred to most of us: when Jesus prophetically said that He had come to do the Father's will, He was saying that He was instituting a new covenant. The "sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings" were part of the first will and were taken away in the institution of the new will attached to the sacrifice of the body of Christ. The writer thus provides further evidence for the Hebrew mind that the Law of Moses, its temple, and its sacrifices were to be set aside for a superior system.
- **Sanctification** - The Old Testament implements and people were set apart — sanctified, or made holy — by the blood which Moses sprinkled on them. The setting apart of the people of the Christian era was, as expected, accomplished through the sacrifice of Christ. "By this will," emphasizes Hebrews' writer, of the driving intent of God through the ages, "we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all" (Hebrews 10:10). This setting apart of the true people of God was necessary for fellowship with the Father to take place. "For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father," was the earlier annotation of the author, "for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren" (Hebrews 2:11). And this sanctification took place through the offering of the body of Christ.

Some have the mistaken impression that Jesus paid the price for man's sins by going to hell or Hades for him. Jesus, however, did not "descend to hell," as the man-made creeds are often rendered; He went to Paradise, which was the good portion of the general area described as Sheol in the Old Testament writings and Hades in the New. The price He paid for the sins of mankind was all paid in His body. "He Himself bore our sins in His body on the cross," adverted Peter (I Peter 2:24). "A body You have prepared for Me," was the affirmation of Hebrews' author in His quotation. The offering of the body of Christ implemented the will which offered full forgiveness of sins.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

One Offering for All Time

It was in the Garden of Gethsemane that Jesus issued His famous plea. “My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from Me; yet not as I will, but as You will” (Matthew 26:39). This will is the New Covenant, brought into existence through the offering of the body of Christ on the cross, and by the blood of Christ sprinkled in heaven itself. “I have come,” were the words of Christ recorded in prophecy, “to do Your will, O God.” To accomplish the will of the Father, Christ had to be both the sacrifice and the priest to offer the blood of the sacrifice. Jesus paid the price as the sacrifice of His body: we were healed by His scourging; He bore our sins in His body on the tree; and His blood poured from the side of His dead body. “My God, My God, why have You forsaken Me?” were the words of His anguish as He personally was separated from the Father in bearing the sins of all mankind (Matthew 27:46). The price He paid in being the sacrifice cannot be overly belabored!

- **Offering the sacrifice** - With all the emphasis on the cross, the work of Christ in heaven is generally overlooked in the modern emotional age. But it must again be stressed that the work of Christ was not finished on the cross; most of what was to be accomplished was accomplished when He ascended to glory. Christ ascended to be the High Priest, and offer His own blood for the redemption of mankind. “And every priest stands daily ministering,” Hebrews’ author references the priests of the order of Aaron, “and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; but He, having offered one sacrifice for all time, sat down at the right hand of God” (Hebrews 10:11,12). The Levitical priests were offering blood, particularly on the Day of Atonement; the “one sacrifice” offered for all time, in the parallelism, is the spiritual blood of Christ, offered in heaven itself. Purification of sins was not accomplished on the cross, although the blood of the cross was necessary. Purgation of sins did not occur until Jesus, as His first act in ascending, sprinkled His blood to cleanse the spiritual temple. This was the one time cleansing, offered in behalf of heaven itself and for the sons of men. Having accomplished His mission, then Christ “sat down at the right hand of God.”
- **Enemies subdued** - Psalm 110 prophetically connects the high priesthood of Christ with His kingship. “He will be a priest on His throne,” was Zechariah’s contribution (Zechariah 6:13). It is not surprising, therefore, to find the writer of the Hebrew epistle coming back to this theme. After stating that Christ offered the blood of His sacrifice for sins, he then noted that Jesus “sat down at the right hand of God, waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet” (Hebrews 10:13). No more sacrifices, sacrifices, sacrifices! Now He is waiting for His enemies to be subdued.
- **One offering** - The fact that He is sitting and waiting means that He is not standing and offering sacrifices. “For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified” (Hebrews 10:14). The individual to be redeemed only has to be “born again” one time; from that time forth he needs to be faithful to his calling, and is thus “perfected for all time.” “And the Holy Spirit bears witness to us,” is a saliency of the author, who is prepared to requote Jeremiah to establish that one offering is sufficient.

“Now where there is forgiveness of these things,” he writes, “there is no longer any offering for sin” (Hebrews 10:18). The faithful saint can thus have the blessed assurance that he is fully forgiven, and that he can press forward into the challenges of spreading the word of God!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Sufficiency and Confidence

The Holy Spirit of God communicates through the written word. He wrote His word in successive stages so that those of us upon whom the ends of the ages have come might know with certainty that the things written are true. Jeremiah, for example, had prophesied, some 600 years before Christ, the coming of a new covenant. This was recorded and circulated for hundreds of years throughout the Jewish synagogues; no one could then claim that it was a statement created out of thin air by the writer of the Hebrew epistle. The reader could then know that God Himself was the author of such prophecies, and gave His assurance to the promises contained therein.

- **The Spirit's witness** - The particular quotation from Jeremiah had been quoted a bit more extensively in chapter eight. But the writer of this epistle wants to re-emphasize and amplify some points out of the prophecy for the edification of the brethren. The quote is introduced in these words: "And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us, saying ..." (Hebrews 10:15). The witness of the Spirit is complete, sufficient, and conclusive!
- **The quotation** - The quotation is broken into two parts, introduced by the words "after saying." "This is the covenant," is the excerpt from Jeremiah, "that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My Laws upon their heart, and upon their mind I will write them" (Hebrews 10:16). The thrust of this is that people of the New Covenant want to do righteousness rather than being forced and only appear righteous on the outside. "After saying" this first portion, "He then says, 'And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.'" (Hebrews 10:17). This is what the writer of the epistle is driving at here: full forgiveness of sins is obtained only under the terms of this new covenant; it was never attainable under the terms of the old.
- **No need for continuing sacrifices** - The fact that God no longer remembers the lawless deeds and sins of the brethren means that they were forgiven. That they were forgiven means that there was an effective sacrifice. That there was an effective sacrifice means that it only had to be offered once rather than daily or yearly. "Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin" (Hebrews 10:18). No more offerings are necessary; when the temple came down in Jerusalem in 70 AD, and the sacrifices were no longer offered, it was to be recognized as being of no importance.
- **Confidence** - How many times and how many ways does the writer have to say it? The one time offering of the blood of Christ in the true holy of holies is sufficient to provide forgiveness for any individual covered by that blood. "Therefore," is the word Hebrews' author is going to use; because of the sufficiency of Christ's offering the brethren are to gather confidence. "Since therefore, brethren," he writes, "we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Christ" (Hebrews 10:19). The courts of heaven are open to the brethren, and the invitation is for them to "come on in"!

The brethren have no access to the true holy place apart from the blood of Jesus Christ — shed on Calvary, sprinkled in heaven. No one is going to take "an end run" around Jesus and come into the presence of the Almighty based on his own righteousness. But the exciting contrast is that those who have been immersed into Christ Jesus have been forgiven and have this access. The whole story of Christ, termed "His sacrifice," is sufficient to provide forgiveness for even the most abject of sinners, and to give even "the least of the brethren" absolute confidence in coming into the presence of God. Jesus, "having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God." Hallelujah, He reigns!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

A New and Living Way

One thousand, five hundred years of Israelite history, and one thousand, five hundred pages of scripture prove that a system of law does not provide forgiveness of sin or a clean conscience. While it seems to be an obvious statement of spiritual reality, the record is that the people of God have had a difficult time grasping the concept. That the Law of Moses was superseded by the Faith of Christ was not easily apprehended by the early church, as established by the controversies recorded in the book of Acts. The books of Romans and Galatians, as well as this book of Hebrews, are in a large measure devoted to establishing the superiority of the system of faith over that of the system of law. While the things of the Law were necessary in providing a physical backdrop, it is the essentials of faith that move man heavenward.

- **The holy place** - “Christ,” the writer of Hebrews stated, “through His own blood entered the holy place once for all.” “Within the veil,” he wrote in another place, “Jesus entered as a forerunner for us.” It is logical, then, in the progression, that we as Christians should join Christ within the veil, since we have been granted forgiveness of sins through our obedience to the gospel. “Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus,” is his next proposition (Hebrews 10:19). Since Christ is seated on the throne in the true holy place, it makes sense that, since He “raised us up with Him, and seated us with Him in the heavenly places,” saints are also in the true holy place (Ephesians 2:6).
- **New and living way** - “I will effect new covenant,” the writer of Hebrews had quoted from the prophet, “not like” the old covenant with Israel according to the flesh. Hence followers of Christ have confidence to enter the above-mentioned holy place “by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh” (Hebrews 10:20). This “new and living way” is thusly contrasted to the “old and dead” system which produced only “dead works” of the Law. This new way required, however, the death of Christ. When Christ died on the cross, the veil in the physical temple was torn in two from top to bottom; the writer uses this to describe the death of Christ as “through the veil, that is, His flesh.” The old covenant was inaugurated through the sacrifice of animals; the new and living was put into effect through the sacrifice of the very Son of God!
- **A great priest** - One of the lessons taught through the Law was that no one can approach God except through a priest. Christians, therefore, if they are to enter into the true holy place into the very presence of the Father Himself, must likewise have a priest. Provision has been made: “And since we have a great priest over the house of God,” is the notation of the writer (Hebrews 10:21).
- **Drawing near** - While the closest anyone could come to God during the days of the physical temple was in the holy of holies, the disciple of Christ can come into the very presence of God in heaven itself! “Let us draw near,” is the tendered exhortation, “with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” (Hebrews 10:22).

What a blessing it is to be invited into the inner sanctum of heaven itself, to be ushered into the presence of the eternal King, and to be welcomed at the throne! Herein is a test of spirituality: who is better off, the wealthy and powerful merchantman who bestrides the earth like a colossus and is lost, or the humblest slave girl who sleeps behind the millstones and has access to the presence of God?

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Hearts Sprinkled, Bodies Washed

Those who are interested in knowing God have always been the ones who come in as close as they can to “where the action is.” By contrast, there have always been those who make of pretense of loving God and demonstrating their religiosity, but have no interest in real spirituality or knowing God. “This people draw near with their words,” excoriated the Lord through the prophet, “and honor Me with their lip service, but they remove their hearts far from Me” (Isaiah 29:13). And the wise Solomon instructed, “Guard your steps as you go to the house of God, and draw near to listen rather than to offer the sacrifice of fools” (Ecclesiastes 5:1). The new covenant saint, then, must count it a great privilege to draw near to God, and to be able to draw near in a spiritual way never offered to anyone in the Old Testament. “Let us draw near,” stated Hebrews’ author, because: 1) We are privileged to enter the true holy place by the blood of Jesus; 2) We have a new and living way which Jesus inaugurated for us through His death; and 3) We have a great priest over the house of God. God has extended Himself greatly through Jesus Christ so that we have opportunity to approach His glorious presence!

- **Sincere heart** - Absolute honesty with God has always been a prerequisite for fellowship with Him. “The righteous God,” said David, the sweet psalmist of Israel, “tries the hearts and minds” (Psalm 7:9). The writer of Hebrews thus enjoins his readers, “Let us draw near with a sincere heart” (Hebrews 10:22). Three points of God’s part in opening up the courts of heaven are listed in the above paragraph; the responsibility on our side begins with a sincere heart.
- **Full assurance of faith** - The realm of faith is the unseen realm, revealed only by the truths of the Bible. As has been previously stressed, “we look,” said Paul, “not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen” (II Corinthians 4:18). No physical eye has seen God, and no physical eye has seen the glories of heaven. But “we see” with the eye of faith, and we therefore move forward in confidence. “Let us draw near,” encouraged the author, “in full assurance of faith.” The saint is not paralyzed with fear in the presence of the Almighty; rather he has the calm assurance that he has been invited in, and is therefore free to present his praises and petitions to the King of glory.
- **Hearts sprinkled** - “The blood of Christ,” was an earlier statement, will “cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God.” The individual must be active in pursuing the clean conscience; mankind is not automatically given blanket cleansing. “Having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience,” is the Hebrew writer’s description. But what is the forlorn sinner to do in order to have his heart sprinkled?
- **Bodies washed** - The heart gets sprinkled clean from an evil conscience when the repentant believer is immersed in Jesus’ name. “Immersion now saves you,” is Peter’s affirmation, “an appeal to God for a good conscience” (I Peter 3:20). The good conscience is naturally a part of the package with forgiveness of sins. “And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more,” God had promised; if He forgets, then the individual can forget also, and move forward with no pulls from the past to prevent his progress. “Having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water,” is the complete description from Hebrews.

No one has access to the courts of glory by his own merit, and no one is going to be able to enter there apart from the shed and sprinkled blood of Jesus. It is imperative that the individual be immersed into Christ; at that point his heart is sprinkled clean when his body is washed, and he can now “draw near in full assurance of faith.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Hold Fast the Confession

“Jesus,” noted Hebrews’ author, is “the Apostle and High Priest of our confession” (Hebrews 3:1). He proceeded forth from heaven on the special mission of rescuing mankind, provided Himself as the sacrifice, and returned to heaven as the high priest – sprinkling His blood to cleanse heaven, and to engage in His mediatorial reign as intercessor and King. This whole body of belief concerning Jesus and His new covenant is “the confession” — the system of the faith of Christ. The writer of Hebrews also calls this “the new and living way.” Because of that new way, and because “we have a great priest over the house of God,” we can boldly regard ourselves as in the presence of God by faith, and present our petitions and praises to Him in great confidence.

- **Hold fast** - Followers of Christ have their responsibilities in this covenant with Christ; Christ does not do everything and His disciples do nothing. “Let us hold fast the confession of our hope,” intones the author, “without wavering” (Hebrews 10:23). This confession — the homologia, saying the same thing — is centered about Christ. It is the body of belief wherein the followers “say the same thing”; that is, they agree or assent to the fundamentals of the same faith. Those who hold this same homologia are of “the house of God,” the true spiritual tabernacle which the Lord pitched and not man. The writer exhorts his readers to “hold fast” to this confession. The implication is that the forces of darkness and confusion will do everything they can to buffet the possessors of this confession and knock them off the pins of their faith. The warning is not to be taken lightly; hang on tightly!
- **Our hope** - “Our hope” follows our Lord Jesus Christ upward. He became the high priest of our confession by the “power of an indestructible life”; He rose from the dead and ascended to the power position in glory. “Exalted above the heavens,” He has entered “within the veil as a forerunner for us.” Because He lives forever within in the veil — into heaven itself — we have the hope of our own resurrection through Him.
- **Without wavering** - Because of the great things Jesus has accomplished, including His victory over death, saints of God are to have great confidence. Jesus is “inside the veil,” and by faith the saints reign with Him there. Thus, if there are things on earth that are challenging, they are not to affect the faith of the brethren, and there is no need for the brethren to falter. “Hold fast,” the writer says, “the confession of our hope without wavering.”
- **God’s faithfulness** - All the things Jesus accomplished were under the auspices of the Father. “God,” opened the writer in this epistle, “in these last days has spoken to us in His Son.” When the Son made purification of sin, “He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.” The Father receives the glory. “You are My Son,” the Majesty stated, “today I have begotten You.” “In the days of Jesus’ flesh,” is another illustration of His dependence upon the Father, “He offered up prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death.” God demonstrated His trustworthiness in keeping all the promises to Christ; He is therefore worthy of continued trust by the brethren. “Let us hold fast the confession,” is the exhortation, “for He who promised is faithful”!

It is “the confession of our hope” that God wants to exhibit to the world, that others might be drawn to the gospel of glory. For this, the apostles “have become a spectacle to the world, both to angels and to men” (I Corinthians 4:9). For this, the early Christians suffered at the hands of the Jews. For this, they faced the oppression of the Roman government at the close of the New Testament writings. For this, they were cut to pieces in the gladiator rings, and fed to the lions in the presence of thousands in the amphitheatres of the day. For this, they stand as our encouragement today.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Some Stimulation

Even marathon runners need encouragement. When they come in sight of the end of their long run, the adrenalin kicks in and they get a surge of energy to finish. But in the long, lonely miles between the fifth and twenty-sixth, the encouragement of the crowd can be a huge source of strength. This, then, is one of the differences between the Montana Governor's Cup marathon where there is no one for miles and miles, and the Boston or New York marathons, where the throngs line the way, clapping and cheering the runners onward.

The Christian life is generally like a marathon. There are a few who become Christians just before their earthly death and whose Christian life on earth is like a 100 yard dash, but most faithful followers of Christ are going to have a marathon-like experience in their earthly sojourn. Sometimes there are the lonely, lonely miles of prison time for one of God's precious saints, or exile such as on the Isle of Patmos. But most of the brethren need some applause along their way to encourage them to press on in the most important "race" of all.

- **Need for stimulation** - The Hebrew brethren were about to be uprooted from their surroundings, and the familiar environs of Jerusalem, its temple, and its rituals were about to be obliterated. "But when you see Jerusalem surrounded by armies," the Lord Jesus Himself had warned, "then recognize that her desolation is at hand. Then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains, and let those who in the midst of the city depart, and let not those who are in the country enter the city, because these are the days of vengeance" (Luke 21:20-22). The times were coming which would, if possible, shake the faith of those brethren. The writer of this epistle, knowing by the Holy Spirit that these "days of vengeance" were imminent, understandably writes, "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful, and let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds" (Hebrews 10:23,24). The brethren would need a great deal of encouragement during this time. They would really need to be creative in figuring out how to "stimulate" each other to reach out to others when the natural tendency would be to develop a hunker down in the bunker mentality.
- **Stimulation to love** - As Jesus predicted the time of the destruction of the temple, He described what would happen to the people caught up in the disruption. "At that time," He said, "many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another. And many false prophets will arise, and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people's love will grow cold" (Matthew 24:10-12). The saints would need to stimulate one another to continue to exhibit Christian love, reminding each other regularly of Jesus' words: "Love your enemies, and pray for those who persecute you, in order that you may be the sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matthew 5:44,45).
- **Stimulation to good deeds** - In an increasingly lawless society, it becomes hard to see the value of doing good. If a Christian were to stop and help someone out of the ditch, and then that person stole the Christian's wallet, it would be challenging for him to stop and help someone else alongside the road. Once again, in the midst of those difficult times, brethren would be need to be "stimulated" to those good deeds. "Do good," is Jesus' exhortation, "to those who hate you" (Luke 6:27).

When brethren begin to understand the importance of mutual applause and cheering on the marathon of the Christian life, they begin to understand the importance of their participation in the assemblies of the saints. During trying times, the golden rule is the best way to live: "Just as you want people to treat you, treat them in the same way" (Luke 6:31). Stimulate!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Assembly of the Saints

There was a time when Jesus entered the house of a Pharisee and did not perform the customary ritual cleansing. Excoriating the Pharisee for his short-sightedness, Jesus remarked, “Now you Pharisees clean the outside of the cup and of the platter; but inside of you, you are full of robbery and wickedness” (Luke 11:39). Then, as now, many were all about the outward show, but not willing to deal with the inward substance. Then Jesus made this blockbuster, rock-bottom, core statement: “You foolish ones, did not He who made the outside make the inside also?” (Luke 11:40). An important corollary can be drawn here: The same God who made such intricate provisions for the outer man — the precisely balanced gases of the atmosphere for breathing; the delicate balance of nature and provisions for food for man’s body; the hydrologic cycle and water for man’s drinking — has made intricate provisions also for the sustenance of the saints’ inner man. But because they are spiritual in nature, they are not so easily apprehended as those which provide for the outer man.

- **The assembly** - One of the most important ways in which God meets the needs of the inner man is in the assembly of the saints. Hence the injunction for the brethren to stimulate one another to love and good deeds includes “not forsaking our own assembling together” (Hebrews 10:25). This “synagogue-ing” [gathering] of Christians is a practice developed and implemented by the Lord Himself. The All Wise used the dispersion of the Jews beginning with the Babylonian captivity to develop the Jewish synagogue, their weekly gathering together on the seventh day of the week for the reading of the Law and the Prophets. Using the Jewish synagogue as a base, the Lord established His church (ekklesia — gathering) in Acts two. Since the practice of assembling was already ingrained, it was possible for Christ immediately to have the church “synagogue” [gather together] on the first day of the week for the breaking of the loaf (Acts 20:7).
- **Bad habits** - It is easy to form bad habits; all a person has to do is nothing, and the bad habits automatically form. It takes energy and effort to form good habits; lethargy and laziness have to be overcome on a regular basis. “The habit of some,” said the inspired author, is to forsake the assembly.
- **Need for encouragement** - God did not intend for the Christian or the Christian family to be isolated, “stand-alone units.” Rather, the saints are to assemble together, stimulating one another to love and good deeds, “encouraging one another.”
- **“The day”** - The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews anticipates the destruction of the temple and the desolation of Jerusalem. “Whatever is becoming obsolete,” he remarked, “and growing old is ready to disappear” (Hebrews 8:13). In the midst, then, of what Jesus called the worst that ever was or the worst that would ever be, the saints were not to forsake their assembling together, but to really encourage each other, “and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.”

Because the Jews rejected the Messiah, God destroyed their city. Because the trappings of the Old Covenant stood as a barrier to full acceptance of the New, the Omnipotent destroyed the temple, its priesthood, and its sacrifices. They were “growing old,” and had outlived their usefulness. In the same way, the peoples of this earth are in the process of rejecting the Messiah, and God will destroy them. The heavens and earth likewise are becoming “old as a garment”; they have nearly outlived their usefulness and will be “changed” for a new garment, the new heavens and new earth. Christians today, then, are not awaiting the destruction of Jerusalem; they are awaiting the destruction of the earth. We are therefore not to be “forsaking own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more, as you see the day drawing near!”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Hebrews' Willful Sin

A person could commit a sin in the Old Testament without knowing it. In fact, the offerings presented on the Day of Atonement, according to Hebrews' author, were "for the sins of the people committed in ignorance" (Hebrews 9:7). This would be something like eating out of an unclean vessel, not knowing it was unclean. But under the terms of the New Covenant, there are no sins of ignorance. Sins are what are often called sins of commission: "Sin is lawlessness," or, as the King James Version put it, "Sin is the transgression of the law" (1 John 3:4). Contrasted to the sin of deliberate action, there is also the sin of deliberate inaction, often called the sin of omission: "To one who knows the right thing to do, and does not do it, to him it is sin" (James 4:17). But for the Christian, there is another type of deliberate sin; "Whatever is not from faith," asseverated the apostle Paul, "is sin" (Romans 14:23). A Christian can even do the right thing, but if it is not actuated by the teachings of New Testament faith, it is still sin. The overriding point here is this: all sin under the terms of the New Testament is deliberate, or willful, sin.

- **Forsaking the assembly** - In the face of the great tribulation that was coming upon the region around Jerusalem, the saints of that time and that place were encouraged not to forsake the assembly. The brethren were not told that, because of the difficulty in making the assembly, it was okay for them to skip the church meeting. Instead, they were told that it was "all the more" important for them to be present with the saints (Hebrews 10:25). This lets us know the priority the Lord gives the assembly, and that He knows that He designed it for the spiritual sustenance of the saints.
- **Go on sinning willfully** - Christians have "a new and living way" in which they may approach God and be found in His favor. "Let us draw near," then, is a positive exhortation and invitation to the followers of Christ. "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope," the writer further adds, positively. This is followed with another positive exhortation, "Let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds. Then a negative shows up in the sequence: "Not forsaking our own assembling together," trailed by another positive, "encouraging one another." Tying into this reasoned series of thoughts comes this next one, obviously affixed to the only exhortation from the negative side: "For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth," affirms the author, "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" (Hebrews 10:26). The "sinning willfully" here is not a reference to all willful sin — which is all sin — but the specific sin of forsaking the assembly.
- **Terrifying expectation** - The Lord designed the assembly for the benefit of the saints. He knows that they need the constant reminder of what Jesus did for them, brought to the forefront when they participate in the Lord's Supper. The Lord knows they need the preaching and teaching; the Lord knows they need the fellowship; and the Lord knows they need the time of praise and thanksgiving. The structured and regular assemblage of the brethren assists them in successfully facing the challenges to their faith that arise during the week and moving forward to the prize of their calling. But if they habitually refuse to assemble, "after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries" (Hebrews 10:25,26).

The thoughtful saint recognizes what a tremendous price Jesus paid for his sin, and how much work He went through to be the resurrected High Priest, sprinkling the blood of the sacrifice on his behalf. So when the word of God says that the blessings of that sacrifice will be withdrawn — "there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins" — if he fails to assemble, then he makes his commitment to assemble every week, no matter what else is happening!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Fury of Fire

The consequences of God's Judgment Day are not to be minimized! People laugh about hell, and make jokes about it in order not to deal with its eternal consequences. But it is a real place prepared for the devil and his angels, and the justice of God will require that He throw the disobedient into its lake of fire. Saints of God, by His grace and mercy, are delivered from the consequences of their personal sins. By being immersed into Christ, as repentant individuals who believe in the Biblically revealed truths about Jesus, they have passed from death into life — they have come out of darkness into His marvelous light and are not to come “under judgment.” But what about those who willfully forsake the assembly of the saints? What about those who make a habit of absenting themselves from the table of the Lord?

- **Knowledge of the truth** - There are many things the babe in Christ must be taught after his immersion. He has entered a whole new life with a whole new range of actions and attitudes. One of the new actions about which he must be taught focuses on the Lord's Supper and the assembly of the saints. Through the teachings of the New Testament, he learns that the first century congregations assembled on the first day of the week for the purpose of breaking bread (another name for the Lord's Supper). He learns that in this participation he is following the exhortation of Jesus, “Do this in remembrance of Me.” But if he, after he learns of the importance of the assembly, begins to habitually miss the assembly due to laziness, peer pressure, or just wanting to “do his own thing,” he comes under the condemnation mentioned by the author of Hebrews. “For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth,” he emphasizes, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins” (Hebrews 10:26).
- **Expectation of judgment** - When a person knowingly, deliberately, persistently runs against the clearly revealed will of God, something starts to happen inside his thought processes. It may be compared to a person who starts driving west bound in the east-bound lanes of traffic; sooner or later he is going to schmuck a car or an 18-wheeler, and probably be killed in the head-on crash. To maintain any semblance of sanity under those conditions, he has to shut down portions of his brain, and think about something irrelevant. Similarly, for one who willfully sins after receiving the knowledge of the truth about assembly, but refuses, “there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries” (Hebrews 10:27). It is one thing for a person who is not particularly familiar with the Bible to make jokes about hell and thus release his mind from thinking about eternity. It is another for the Christian who decides to forsake the assembly; he has made a deliberate decision to run his life into the fires of eternity and perish there. No wonder, as such a one as this considers the “fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries,” that he often jumps over and believes in the false comfort of a false doctrine rather than facing the truth!

The Lord is committed to the assemblies of the saints. He is the One who ordained them through the teaching first delivered to the apostles. His Supper is the centerpiece of the assembly. His Word is the basis for the preaching. The prayers and praises are addressed to Him. Since, then, the Lord Jesus is the focus of His duly appointed assemblies, anyone who forsakes those assemblies places himself in the position of “adversary” of Christ Himself. And he will face the “fury of a fire” which will indeed consume all such enemies.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

No Mercy

It is instructive to see the inspired view of the sons of Israel. When the Lord instituted the Sabbath Day, the people were getting their food as manna on the ground. He directed them therefore to gather double on Friday morning because there wouldn't be any manna on Saturday morning. But surprise! "And it came about on the seventh day that some of the people went out to gather, but they found none" (Exodus 16:27). "How long do you refuse to keep My commandments and My instructions?" was the Lord's response. It took God 1000 years to get the Israelites to observe the Sabbath as a regular custom, and that with difficulty. To get the Jews universally to observe the Sabbath required the development of the synagogue as the center of the weekly meeting on Saturdays; in so doing God was setting the stage for the regular meeting of the church on the first day of the week. The Lord is committed to the assembly of the saints!

- **Law of Moses** - The "Law of Moses" was a general term used to describe the entire system of Old Testament law. Some of the foundational laws in the system were regarded as so important that violation of them required capital punishment. Murder, of course, required a life in return, but violations of some of the other Commandments — such as taking the name of the Lord in vain — also mandated the death of the perpetrator. Breaking the Sabbath was one of them. "Now while the sons of Israel were in the wilderness," is Moses' record, "they found a man gathering wood on the Sabbath day" (Numbers 15:32). The Lord then gave directions as to what should be done with him: "The man shall surely be put to death; all the congregation shall stone him with stones outside the camp" (Numbers 15:35). It is events like this that the author of Hebrews has in mind when he says, "Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses" (Hebrews 10:28). This sets the stage for his application.
- **Severer punishment** - The Israelites were to show "no mercy" to the individual who violated the provisions of the Sabbath. "How much severer punishment," asks the writer of Hebrews, "do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace?" (Hebrews 10:29). The person who "sins willfully" — and the thrust of the context is forsaking the assembly — is worthy of much severer punishment than death by stoning.
- **Vengeance of the Lord** - The God of all grace and all mercy is also the God of vengeance. The person who broke the Sabbath was to shown "no mercy" as directed by the Almighty Himself. The Lord, concerned about the brethren of the New Covenant as they faced the "great tribulation" of the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, did not want them forsaking the assembly. "For we know Him who said, 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.' And again, 'The Lord will judge His people.' It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:30,31). The great God was willing to execute His vengeance on those — from among the brethren! — who would trample under foot the Son of God.

The old proverb states: familiarity breeds contempt. Too accustomed to the grace of God, it is possible for the new covenant saints to forget the power and judgment of the Awesome God. The writer of Hebrews here brings another warning to the brethren about the importance of the Lord's assembly. Those in the Old Testament died "without mercy" at the testimony of two or three witnesses; those under the terms of the New Covenant will experience the wrath of God Himself — who needs no witness other than His own — for backing away from the specified appointments of the King.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Lord's Supper

It was understood that King David did not want the blind or the lame in his presence. What happened was that the Jebusites who still possessed Jerusalem were so confident that no one could capture their stronghold that they stated that the blind and the lame could turn away any attempt by a foreign army to enter their city. David off-handedly commented that the lame and the blind were hated by his soul in giving instructions as how to take the city. So from that time on they said, "The blind or the lame shall not come into the house" (II Samuel 5:8). Sometime later David wanted to show kindness to Mephibosheth, a son of David's deeply loved friend Jonathan, for Jonathan's sake. Mephibosheth, however, was crippled in both feet, and undoubtedly trembling when he was summoned to the presence of him who "hated the blind and the lame," especially as the grandson of the former King Saul. But David told him, "Do not fear, for I will surely show you kindness" (II Samuel 9:7). Mephibosheth was granted honor and "ate at David's table as one of the king's sons" (II Samuel 9:11).

- This serves as a great foreshadow of the blessing of participating in the Lord's Supper with King Jesus. Just as David's soul hated the crippled, even so God's soul hates sin. And as Mephibosheth was shown kindness by being allowed at the king's table, so we also are shown great kindness by being forgiven of sin and allowed to eat at the King's table as one of the King's sons! The Lord's Supper is therefore the centerpiece of the assembly where those who should be "dead dogs" are excited and privileged to dine with the King of the Ages.
- **Trampling Jesus** - The saints are exhorted not to forsake the assembling of themselves together. The assembly itself came about through the patient action of a mighty God, working through thousands of years so that everything was prepared for Jesus to be effective when He came to earth. And when He came, He paid a horrific price in His sufferings and death just in order to rescue man from sin. No wonder, then, that He would ask His brethren to participate in the Lord's Supper "in remembrance of Me." The saint, therefore, who is slack in his assembling with the brethren on the first day of the week, is placing a low value on the efforts of Jesus on his behalf. Just as Jehu regarded with contempt Jezebel, and she was thrown down from the tower in his presence, "and he trampled her under foot" of his horses (II Kings 9:33), even so those who forsake the assembly. Such a one "has trampled under foot the Son of God" (Hebrews 10:29).
- **Regarding the blood unclean** - God had set aside a number of animals and situations that were "unclean" under Old Testament regulations. The person who does not assemble with the saints and participate in the "cup of blessing" "has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified!" There is no greater thing a person could do to trash the name of Jesus than to regard His blood as unclean.
- **Insulting the Spirit** - God orchestrated all the events of history through His Spirit. Mary was overshadowed by the Spirit to conceive Jesus in her womb. Jesus, during the years of His earthly sojourn, was led by the Spirit, and it was "through the eternal Spirit" that He offered Himself without blemish to God. Thus the saint who forsakes the Lord's Table "has insulted the Spirit of grace," casually disregarding that which took centuries to establish for his benefit.

The Lord's Table is indeed highly regarded by the Lord Himself. It cost Him everything to make a way for "dead dogs" to be sanctified by His blood and thus be able to participate in His body and blood in the Lord's Supper. For the saints to willfully forsake such an assemblage is the highest degree of insult to the great King, and such temporally casual Christians will become eternal casualties!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Remember Former Days

It must not be forgotten that the church began in Jerusalem. And it must not be forgotten that the church had no more than come into existence than it began to suffer persecution. By the fourth chapter of Acts, Peter and John are on trial and the church needs to pray for boldness. By the close of the fifth chapter, the apostles have been jailed and flogged. In the seventh chapter, Stephen dies as the first martyr for the faith, and by the eighth the persecution is against the whole church, coming directly from the hands of one Saul of Tarsus. As the twelfth chapter opens, the people of Jerusalem have been so hardened against the gospel that the people are pleased when the apostle James is put to death with the sword, and would have welcomed the martyrdom of Peter. So intense was the desire of the Jews to destroy the church in Jerusalem that their efforts were a standard by which later persecutions were measured, as the apostle Paul noted in his comments to the church at Thessalonica: “For you, brethren,” he wrote, “became imitators of the churches of God in Christ Jesus that are in Judea, for you also endured the same sufferings at the hands of your own countrymen, even as they did from the Jews, who both killed the Lord Jesus and the prophets, and drove us out” (I Thessalonians 2:14,15). The early church was victorious, and the brethren nearly forty years later would need to build on those early successes.

- **Remember** - The worst that ever was and the worst that would ever be was coming upon Jerusalem. Their rejection of the Messiah and their continued hardening against the gospel sealed their doom. The church would endure suffering in connection with this tribulation (secular history shows that they were able to make their way to a place called Pella before the destruction of the temple and the butchering of the city in 70 AD). In preparation, they were exhorted: “But remember the former days,” was the opening phrase, “when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings” (Hebrews 10:32). The brethren survived — spiritually, although many perished physically — the early onslaught of persecution from the Jews; they were to remember their success to be able to face the oncoming Roman persecution.
- **Public spectacle** - “Enlightened” was the word the writer of Hebrews used. These people knew that prior to their immersions into Christ they were in darkness. Now, having found the truth and having become partakers of the Holy Spirit, they know the eternal value of the course they are on, regardless of what happens to them in the earthly realm. Because the church as a whole kept the eternal picture before their eyes, they succeeded in overcoming earlier tribulation. “You endured a great conflict of sufferings,” was the writer’s comment, “partly, he added, “by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations” (Hebrews 10:33). Some people shy away from bad publicity; the early Christians commendably faced, for the cause of Christ, having “their names in print” with bad smell attached to them. They were public spectacles in the beatings and tortures they endured that they might gain eternal glory!
- **Becoming sharers** - The church in Jerusalem suffered in part through personal ridicule and persecution, “and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.” There is a lot of pressure connected with having a person’s name associated with someone who is being publicly berated and punished. Peter, for example, caved in under pressure in the high priest’s courtyard, and claimed he did not know Jesus. By contrast, the saints in Jerusalem were commended for having their names “shared” with those who were publicly shamed and mistreated.

The saints, then, were to “remember” those former days of the church. They were to note how the church had survived and grown through the days of Jewish persecution, and to use that as springboard for victorious faith under the Romans.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Great Reward

The purview of God is huge. He allowed, for example, famine to come on the church in Jerusalem so that the Gentile Christians would respond in a generous way, and thus bring the Jewish and Gentile factions of the church closer together. In the same way, He allowed the tumultuous destruction of Jerusalem to be a portion of His great plan to bring the Gentiles into the church in massive numbers. The temple needed to be gone, the sacrifices needed to be gone, the priesthood needed to be gone, and the nation needed to be gone; in that way the trappings of temple worship would no longer be a confusing factor in the direction the church should go. Jerusalem had suffered before its final destruction, however, and the writer of Hebrews continues to use those earlier challenges as a springboard to encourage the saints in preparation for the final throes of Jerusalem's demise.

- **Sympathy to prisoners** - The church in Jerusalem had no more than come out of its birthing room when it began to suffer. By the fourth chapter of Acts the apostles Peter and John are on trial. By the fifth chapter the apostles are jailed. By the seventh chapter brethren begin to die for the faith. Many of the leading brethren were imprisoned at this time, and the brethren on the outside had to decide if they wanted their names associated with those on the inside. "Remember the former days," the writer had importuned. "For you showed sympathy to the prisoners" (Hebrews 10:34). Someone had to care for those imprisoned, bringing them food and water. Someone had to show their faces to the guards in order to assist those who were behind bars for the cause of Christ. It was no minor risk for someone to be identified with those who were known to be purveyors of the gospel!
- **Seizure of property** - Greed and its companion — rapacity — have always been hallmarks of those who possess a modicum of power they can use for their own benefit. The brethren were reminded of what had happened in the early days of the church, when those in a position to do so used the prevailing anti-Christian sentiment as a vehicle to grab real estate in the possession of the brethren. "You," recalled the writer, "accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one" (Hebrews 10:34). This grand theft and wholesale seizure by the authorities was joyfully accepted by the brethren because they knew that, compared to the value of their properties in heaven, the earthly losses were nothing more than "chump change." In the proper perspective, the "better" and "abiding" possession of the spiritual realm is so much more important that any losses or suffering the physical realm are regarded as minor inconveniences. No wonder they could be "joyful"!
- **Keep confidence** - The onrushing destruction of Jerusalem would be worse than what the brethren had suffered before. By being reminded of their earlier success in going through the sufferings and persecutions, the brethren would, it was hoped, be able to use that as a positive springboard in facing the next round of oppression at the hand of the Romans. "Therefore," the writer exhorts, "do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward" (Hebrews 10:35). It is interesting that "confidence" is something that can be thrown away! The brethren, then, were to keep their confidence in Christ regardless of the difficulty of the circumstances they might face in the upcoming Roman destruction.

There would be a great reward for those first century brethren who successfully maintained their faith through the worst that ever was or ever would be. Secular history records that the church in Jerusalem heeded the warnings of Jesus to flee Jerusalem when they saw the armies of destruction surrounding them, and they migrated to a place called Pella. There they continued to meet on the first day of the week for the breaking of the bread, faithfully maintaining the proclamation of Jesus' death and resurrection to the world. May we moderns do likewise and claim our great reward at the Lord's coming!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Need of Endurance

God has never promised His children of faith that earthly life would be a cakewalk. “And if it is with difficulty that the righteous is saved,” quoted Peter, “what will become of the godless man and the sinner?” (I Peter 4:18). Thus Christians of all ages need to be able to imitate the example of the successful brethren of Jerusalem, heeding the same types of instruction given them. And the writer of the Hebrews epistle is concerned about the brethren in Jerusalem; he earnestly desires that they survive the coming persecution, endure the shift away from the physical elements of the Law such as the temple, and move positively to embrace fully the spiritual truths of the faith of Christ. “Do not throw away your confidence,” he encourages, “which has great reward.” The modern Christian would do well to note the concern for those first century brethren, and govern his spiritual life accordingly.

- **Doing the will of God** - Oft times God needs men and women of faith who can maintain their faith and make positive progress in the midst of difficult or very challenging circumstances. God’s goal is not necessarily that each saint have an easy, fun-filled lolligag through earthly life. The Father needs soldiers who can carry out His assignments in spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness. Hence in Jerusalem the challenge was coming, and the troops needed to be readied for the onslaught on their faith. “For you have need of endurance,” points out the writer, “so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised” (Hebrews 10:36). “The will of God,” here, as established by earlier comments in this letter, has to do with faithful attendance in the assemblies, encouraging the brethren, and propagating the faith. “The promise” they would receive, in this context, is referred to earlier in the letter as “the eternal inheritance.” To receive this promise, they were going to need endurance, and lots of it!
- **Quotation from Habakkuk** - The Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the temple of Solomon in 586 BC was very parallel to the coming destruction of Jerusalem at the hand of the Romans. The writer of Hebrews then, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, quotes from the prophet Habakkuk concerning that Babylonian invasion, and applies it to the impending assault by the Romans. “For yet in a very little while,” he quotes, “he who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him” (Hebrews 10:37,38). The Lord Himself was sending the legions of Rome to punish Jewry for its rejection of the Messiah, and the preparation for the onslaught of those legions was already under way. The initial emphasis to the Hebrew brethren was that “he who is coming will come”; there was no sense in praying that the Romans would halt their advance, and that Jerusalem would be spared. The ones declared righteous would live by their faith is another major emphasis of the quotation. That faith would have to be strong enough so that there was no “shrinking back.”
- **Preserving the soul** - The scripture states very plainly that if someone shrinks back from carrying out the faith in the face of his personal challenges, God’s “soul has no pleasure in him.” The writer, having noted this in the quotation, brings a present, positive, affirmative outlook, following up with his statement: “But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul” (Hebrews 10:39).

“You have need of endurance,” the writer stated. It would be the development of the faith of the Hebrew brethren which would produce that endurance. By keeping their focus on Jesus the Apostle and High Priest of the confession, and seeing Him who is unseen on the throne of glory, the brethren would be able to endure the horrible suffering, death, and destruction of the Roman disturbance. When they finally breathed their last, they would victoriously receive the praises of Him who took pleasure in them, declared righteous because of maintaining their faith!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

What is Faith?

People have faith in many things. They have faith that the sun will come up in the morning, and that the lost dog will be found. The past track record is that the sun will come up in the morning, but past history is not so conclusive that the dog will be found. But when the Bible talks about faith, it is talking about a direction in life based upon a set of revealed truths about the realm of the unseen. “Now faith,” says Hebrews’ author, “is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things unseen” (Hebrews 11:1). Since “the righteous will live by faith,” and the unrighteous therefore perish through lack of faith, this statement in Hebrews about what faith is, is certainly worth unpacking.

- **Belief in Christ** - Faith begins with the revealed truth about the Christ. The apostle Paul chimes in, explaining, “So faith comes from hearing, and hearing by the word of Christ” (Romans 10:17). The thrust of Paul’s teaching to the brethren in Rome is that a person comes to believe in God and God’s overall plan by the message that establishes that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. What God does is to parade His witnesses before the hearers, bringing in turn everyone from Moses to the apostle John. God’s position is that the testimony of the witnesses is conclusive, that Jesus is proven to be who He claims to be, and that the people who do not believe in that testimony are shown to love darkness rather than light.
- **Saving faith** - What is sometimes called “saving faith” is the next step in the process. When a person has processed the testimony, and has concluded that Jesus is indeed Lord of all, then he proceeds to obey the gospel. The terms of salvation are clearly announced in the word of God requiring the fresh believer to repent, to confess Jesus as Lord, and to be immersed in Jesus’ name for the forgiveness of sins and the assurance that he will receive the Holy Spirit.
- **Assurance of things hoped for** - Having taken the above-mentioned steps, the Christian now moves into the sector marked out by the writer of Hebrews, to begin to have his life directed from the revelation of the unseen realm of faith. “Faith,” he says, “is the assurance of things hoped for . . .” In the examples of faith to follow in this, the eleventh chapter, each of the individuals held up as a positive example believed what he was told to believe. These men and women were not running rogue operations on earth; they followed either a direct revelation of God or a principle laid out in the direct revelations of God. Noah, for example, built an ark exactly as directed by revelation; Jacob worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff, in accordance with the principles put forward in previous revelations. The definition of faith includes the idea that if an individual will follow the instructions of God in building toward some future picture, the Holy One will be guarantee — assure — the completion of the picture.
- **Conviction of things not seen** - Faith is going to be tested. “The testing of your faith,” comments James, “produces endurance” (James 1:3). It is when the test comes that the individual finds out whether he really has Biblical faith, whether he has the firm conviction that the things written in the sacred word are really true. “Faith,” affirms the writer, is “the conviction of things not seen.” If he really is convinced about the truthfulness of what is written, he will make his decisions accordingly; if he does not, he will compromise with the world.

We, notes the author of the Hebrew epistle, “have faith to the preserving of the soul.” We are so convicted of the truthfulness that Jesus is risen to the position power at the right hand of the Majesty on high that we will continue to participate in the assemblies of the church, continue to live out the moral principles in our personal lives, and continue to propagate the faith once and for all delivered. Even if the Roman army destroys our land!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Gaining God's Approval

The faith revealed in the writings of the New Testament is ultimately sublime and spiritual. Because it is the culmination of the revelation of God, it is more intangible and seemingly ethereal than the more physically-directed faith of those in the earlier portions of God successive revelation to man. Abraham, for example, was blessed by God, and he was rich and a prince among the peoples of his day. Paul, by contrast, although more blessed of God than Abraham, was not rich nor a prince among the peoples. "To this present hour," he said, "we are both hungry and thirsty, and are poorly clothed, and are roughly treated, and are homeless" (I Corinthians 4:11). God had to begin with the more physical things connected with the results of faith, as in Abraham's case, to lay the foundation for the faith of men like Paul, whose rewards were spiritual and heavenly directed. The faith, then, of the Old Testament saints is instructive for those of us upon whom the ends of the ages have come, that we might build upon theirs and be exponents of the great faith of the New Testament.

- **God's approval** - "God," said the apostle Paul, "will judge the secrets of men through Jesus Christ" (Romans 2:16). Since the Almighty is the Supreme Judge, it is important to know the basis on which He is going to judge, to know the things which He favors. The core of the New Testament writings clearly point to the idea that it is our faith which pleases God, again as noted by Paul: "For by grace you have been saved through faith" (Ephesians 2:8). "For by it," superadds the writer of Hebrews, in reference to faith, "the men of old gained approval" (Hebrews 11:2). The writer points this out here to the Hebrew Christians of Jerusalem that they might, then, "have faith to the preserving of the soul" (Hebrews 10:39). As the men of old believed and followed the pictures and promises given to them by God, so the brethren of the New Testament times are to believe and follow the pictures and promises given by God in order to gain His approval and applause at the day of judgment.
- **Pleasing Him** - He has told you, O man, what pleases Him. "Without faith," the writer of this epistle points out, "it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him" (Hebrews 11:6). Each of "the men of old" stood apart from their pagan contemporaries; they looked at the evidence that the Creator God had provided them, they knew that He existed, and they desired to walk in fellowship with Him. Those "of faith" in Israel knew of the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and studied what written revelation existed during their lifetimes. They sought Him with their whole hearts, and God honored that by allowing Himself to be found by them.
- **Faith in Jesus** - New Testament faith is going to result as a preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ. "Through Him," affirmed Peter, you "are believers in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God" (I Peter 1:21). This faith in Christ will be tried in the challenges of life, as Peter again points out, noting "that the proof of your faith, being more precious than gold which is perishable, even though tested by fire, may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ" (I Peter 1:7).

The brethren from among the ranks of the Hebrews were going to have to maintain their faith in Christ regardless of what tribulation came their way. "My righteous one shall live by faith," was God's statement even from the Old Testament. "We," then, as the Hebrew Christians of the first century, "are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul." This is how we gain God's approval!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Creation to Enoch

Faith, from the Bible's perspective, is believing what the Bible tells you to believe. The writer of the Hebrew epistle laid the groundwork for his exhortations on faith in the opening words of the letter, referring to what God has spoken. "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways," was his first clause, "in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world" (Hebrews 1:1,2). "The men of old," who gained the approval of God were those who listened to what God had spoken, and then governed their actions accordingly. Correspondingly, then, the men of the new covenant are going to listen to what God has spoken through Jesus Christ, and govern themselves accordingly.

- **The Creation** - There have been many legends among the pagan peoples of the world regarding the formation of the earth and skies. But those who have believed in the true God have trusted in the accounts of those who were approved of God and handed them down through the generations until they were written by Moses. "By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God," the author notes, "so that what is seen was not made out of what is visible" (Hebrews 11:3). No human being was there at the Creation. So while men may have their flights of fancy and soaring speculations, the only One who can actually say what happened is God Himself. Thus it is that men of faith have believed in His testimony, and have understood that He created the universe ex nihilo — out of nothing! And that He did it by His word; He spoke it into existence.
- **Abel** - The first real man of faith was Abel. It is interesting that Adam is not listed, and the written revelation does not indicate his eternal end. Abel, by contrast, is exhibited as an example of faith for all generations. "By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain," is the recounting of Hebrews' author, "through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks" (Hebrews 11:4). God testified that Abel's offering of the firstlings of the flock showed that Abel was a righteous man of faith; the same testimony shows that Cain was not a man of faith but was rebellious against the will of God. It is highly significant that the first recorded man of faith on this earth was killed by a member of his own family because he acted in accordance with that faith!! "Though he is dead, he still speaks," and his message is "keep the faith."
- **Enoch** - Another great antediluvian character is Enoch. When Abel died, God raised up a son named Seth to take Abel's place, and the lineage of Seth's descendants were called "the sons of God" as contrasted to the rest of the race, of whom the females received the appellation "the daughters of men." In the line of Seth, those who "began to call upon the name of the Lord," arose Enoch, the seventh generation from Adam (Genesis 4,5). "So all the days of Enoch were three hundred and sixty-five years," is the inspired record. "And Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him" (Genesis 5:23,24). "By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death," comments Hebrews' author, "and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God" (Hebrews 11:5).

The realm of faith obviously is a realm where great things are accomplished. In the realm of faith the universe was created, Abel still speaks though dead, and Enoch never tasted death! This, then, is the realm where the truly intelligent live and invest.

Noah and the Flood

By the time of Noah, faith was almost nonexistent upon the earth. “Then the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great on the earth,” is Moses’ recounting, “and that every intent of the thoughts of his heart was only evil continually” (Genesis 6:5). Mankind had degenerated quickly from the time of Adam; of an estimated two billion people on this corrupted earth, only Noah and his family “found favor in the eyes of the Lord” (Genesis 6:8). “The end of all flesh has come before Me,” the Lord informed the faithful patriarch, “for the earth is filled with violence because of them; and behold, I am about to destroy them with the earth” (Genesis 6:13). Noah was then given instructions to build the ark of gopher wood 300 cubits by 50 cubits by thirty cubits (at least 450’x75’x45’). After 120 years of construction on the ark, and calling the people to repentance, Noah and his wife and his three sons and their wives entered the completed ark. After they and the animals in whose nostrils was the breath of life had entered in, God closed the door of the giant ship. Seven days later the rain began to fall, the floodgates of the deep opened, and the massive flood waters covered the entire surface of the planet. The old earth was destroyed in the immersion, and a new earth with a new beginning emerged from the subsiding waters. Noah and his family and the animals, having spent a year and seventeen days in the ark, stepped out on Mt. Ararat and found their way down the mountain, eventually forming the first post-flood civilization in the Tigris and Euphrates river valley.

- **Believing God** - All the great men and women of faith recorded the pages of the Old Testament believed God. When God gave them a promise, they believed He would keep it, and when He gave them a command, they therefore obeyed it. “By faith Noah,” recorded Hebrews’ author, “being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household” (Hebrews 11:7). It is pretty amazing that Noah believed in a coming worldwide flood, and did not waver in that belief; he was therefore able to complete the ark by persistent effort over a period of 120 years. With a reverential fear of God, he worked on the boat, and in the process was able to rescue his family and the future of the human race.
- **The world condemned** - Noah “prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world ...” The same waters which saved Noah and his family are the same waters which drowned the rest of the race. The patriarch, by his willingness to believe in the promised deliverance and prophesied doom, acted — and in so doing, he condemned or judged the world.
- **Reward of faith** - It was not easy for Noah to have enough faith to be certain that God would back the building of the ark, or for him to be able to have enough conviction to overcome the obstacles to its completion. But he did, “and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith” (Hebrews 11:7).

Mankind as a whole has a hard time understanding that the basis on which God judges each individual is whether he has faith as it is revealed in God’s word. In Noah’s case, because he believed in God’s warning about the judgment in the Flood and subsequently constructed the ark, God declared him to be righteous. He is recommended to us as an example, so that we would be those who would follow the revealed faith of the New Testament. In Noah’s case, it was the Flood that was to come. In the case of the Hebrew Christians, it was the Roman who was to come. In our case, it is the “new world order” that is to come. “For yet in a very little while, he who is coming will come, and will not delay. By My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Overall Look at Abraham

Abraham, patriarch of Israel and father of the faithful in Christ, was truly a great man of faith. He is featured in the teachings of Jesus, exhibited as an example in the argumentations of Paul and James, and serves as a point of reference in the Hebrew epistle. He is, in the words of Paul, “the father of circumcision to those who not only are of the circumcision, but who also follow in the steps of faith of our father Abraham which he had while uncircumcised” (Romans 4:12). He also “received the sign of circumcision, a seal of the righteousness which he had while uncircumcised, that he might be the father of all who believe without being circumcised, that righteousness might be reckoned to them” (Romans 4:11). Whether Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female, “if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise” (Galatians 3:29). Brethren in Christ, therefore, are “of the faith of Abraham”; Abraham’s faith is worth examining!

- **Abraham called** - The call of Abraham came in this fashion: “Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you.’” (Genesis 12:1). The writer of the Hebrew epistle notes, “By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going” (Hebrews 11:8). It is highly significant that the writer connects Abraham’s faith with Abraham’s obedience; faith without the designated action is not faith at all. And, as the writer also emphasizes, Abraham did not know where he was going when he left Ur of the Chaldees; he really was trusting God as he journeyed toward strange peoples with strange languages, strange customs, and strange food.
- **Living as an alien** - Along the way, God made a covenant of circumcision with Abraham, and with that covenant came the promise that Abraham’s seed would inherit the land. “By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land,” is the writer’s initial comment, “dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow heirs of the same promise” (Hebrews 11:9). God “gave him no inheritance in it,” was Stephen’s recounting, “not even a foot of ground” (Acts 7:5). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had to be nomads, expecting that in the future God would grant that the hunk of rock over which they tended their flocks would some day be possessed by their physical descendants.
- **Looking beyond** - But Abraham was not really seeking totally for the physical fulfillment of God’s promise. He was a man of truly great faith, and was looking to the spiritual dimension as well as the physical. “For he was looking for the city which has foundations,” affirms Hebrews’ writer, “whose architect and builder is God” (Hebrews 11:10). What pulled him through earthly life was a desire to be a part of the spiritual city, which we know from other scriptures is the spiritual Jerusalem. Through many years of disappointments; through many travels even into Egypt, through many personal frustrations, he persevered, believing that he would indeed “be a father of many nations.” This promise was not fulfilled until the time of the “Jerusalem from above,” the time when many Gentiles (ethnos — nations) would become a part of the body of Christ.

“Abraham believed God,” was the way Paul quoted the Old Testament, “and it was reckoned to him as righteousness” (Romans 4:3). Abraham believed God ... What awesome words these are! This was the one man out of the world’s entire population that God could count on! And the entire plan of God hinged on Abraham’s desire to walk in faith, Abraham’s desire to please Him. The plan worked.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Sarah, Mother of Isaac

The women of faith are regarded as important as the men of faith in the Bible. They are generally not as high profile as the men, but their faith, their commitment, and their ministrations all figure significantly into the forward movement of the plan of God. Hence, as the writer of Hebrews begins his list, Sarah — beloved and faithful wife of Abraham — takes her place in the great Hall of Fame of Faith!

God took Eve out of Adam's side as a "helper suitable for him" (Genesis 2:18). This creativeness of God is astounding when it is carefully considered. For woman, with all her emotions and relationship interests, is the perfect complement of man, with all his lacking thereof. She is as intelligent as he, she can walk and work alongside him, and, when both are properly directed, she can be as interested in the things of God as he. Such a woman was Sarah. This half-sister and wife of the patriarch was outstandingly beautiful well into her 60's, she willingly left her home and relatives to sojourn with him, and she endured all the trials and travels he encountered as his faithful and encouraging companion.

- **Believing God's promise** - Abraham was promised that he would be a father of a multitude. As time wore on and Sarah was unable to give her husband a child, much less a son, their faith was sorely tested. At one point, Sarah gave her handmaid to Abraham, but God made it clear that the issue from that relationship, Ishmael, was not the child of promise. When Sarah was about eighty-nine years old, the Lord and two angels appeared to Abraham at the oaks of Mamre. The Lord promised Abraham that within a year Sarah would give birth to a son. Sarah was a little incredulous at first, but stood with her husband to believe in the promise of God. "By faith even Sarah herself received the ability to conceive," is the annotation of Hebrews' author, "even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised" (Hebrews 11:11). It is a key expression: "she considered Him faithful who had promised." This is really the bottom-line definition of faith, to believe that God will carry out His promises. In the case of Christians, do we really believe that God is able to enable us to take "every thought captive to the obedience of Christ" (II Corinthians 10:5)? Do we believe, as did Sarah, that God is powerful enough to accomplish what is humanly impossible?
- **Born of one man** - The faiths of both Abraham and Sarah were tested. Abraham, in the words of Paul, recognized that his own body was "as good as dead since he was about one hundred years old." He also contemplated "the deadness of Sarah's womb" (Romans 4:19). Yet, in the face of what was humanly impossible, they believed that God was able to perform what He had promised, and through Sarah, "therefore, also, there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars in heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore" (Hebrews 11:12). Without Sarah's faith, the word "therefore" would not have been interposed, and thus there would have been no Isaac.

God's goal is to produce faith in Christ in the willing heart of any member of the human race. But the story of Christ is not going to be believable apart from the record of the faith of Abraham and Sarah. It is interesting how God squeezed His whole plan down to being funneled through one man and one woman. If Abraham does not believe, and if Sarah does not have faith to conceive, then Isaac is not born. And if Isaac is not born, then the promises of God that Abraham's descendants would be from many nations and innumerable as the sand of the seashore come to naught. But God knew the character of His special man and His special woman, and thus His plan moved on toward ultimate victory!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Strangers and Exiles

This world has always been hostile toward God. “The whole world,” adverted the apostle John, “lies in the power of the evil one” (I John 5:19). From the time that Adam and Eve first sinned, the wicked Satan, adversary of God, has held sway in the hearts of men. “He was a murderer from the beginning,” is Jesus’ commentary, “and does not stand in the truth, because there is no truth in him. Whenever he speaks a lie, he speaks from his own nature; for he is a liar, and the father of lies” (John 8:44). The world, then, consisting of the effects of the hearts of unbelievers, is full of lies and destruction, and is hostile toward God and God’s people. Hence it is that the true people of God have never been comfortable in this world; they are here on a pilgrimage, and their desire is to get to their true heavenly home.

- **Died in faith** - Enoch, Noah, Abraham, and Sarah begin the writer’s list of great people of faith from the writings of the Old Testament. But these people lived in the time of shadow and type, a preparatory people for those “upon whom the ends of the ages have come.” They, however, are commended to the future generations: “All these died in faith ...” Thus they succeeded in accomplishing the positive purpose of God, and will attain to the resurrection of the righteous.
- **Without receiving the promises** - The basis for the new covenant was laid down in the days of Abraham, long before the advent of the Law of Moses. “Now the promises were spoken to Abraham and his seed,” the apostle Paul points out. “He does not say, ‘And to seeds,’ as referring to many, but rather to one, ‘And to your seed,’ that is, Christ” (Galatians 3:16). The promises of the indwelling Spirit (Genesis 12:3), the intercessory high priesthood of Christ (Genesis 14:17-20), the new covenant (Genesis 15:18), and justification by faith in Christ (Genesis 15:6), were all spoken in the days of Abraham but implemented through the death and exaltation of Christ. Thus all the Old Testament saints “died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance” (Hebrews 11:13). They welcomed the promises; they would gladly trade places with those who possess the blessings of the new covenant!
- **Strangers and exiles** - Those who follow what the apostle Paul termed “the upward call of God” make their decisions on a different basis than those whose focus is on earth. They march to the steady sound of heaven’s drum rather than syncopate to the throbs of the world’s impulses. And the world is not happy when others do not conform. “If the world hates you,” said Jesus directly to the apostles, “you know that it has hated Me before it hated you” (John 15:18). Thus even the Old Testament greats who welcomed the New Covenant promises from afar “confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

The Hebrew Christians were about ready to undergo massive upheaval. They themselves, for the most part, would heed the prophetic warnings of Jesus concerning the Roman destruction of Jerusalem, and would emigrate to a town called Pella. They would witness the near destruction of the nation of Israel, they would note the leveling of the temple, they would be cognizant of the elimination of the priesthood of the order of Aaron, and they would be aware of the concomitant cessation of the sacrifices. Seeing, then, the collapse of the Jewish system that had been the structure of their lives would be a huge challenge to their faith. The pressure from the various branches of the Jewish fanaticism that developed would have been intense, and the presence of the Roman legions would have heightened the tension in the local atmosphere. These brave men and women who maintained their faith firm until the end would indeed also have “confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” And as this modern world plunges deeper into its darkness, Christians of today will need to make that same confession!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Desiring a Better Country

The ridges and valleys of the land known as Israel or Palestine is not the true promised land. God had spoken to Abraham, saying, “To your descendants I have given this land, from the river of Egypt as far as the great river, the river Euphrates” (Genesis 15:18). There are elements of the promises made to Abraham that were fulfilled in the physical sense, but God uses the physical to get to the spiritual. As far as the physical side of the promise to Abraham’s descendants, it is recorded: “Not one of the good promises which the Lord had made to the house of Israel failed; all came to pass” (Joshua 21:45). What remained to be mopped up in the promised land, accomplished “little by little,” was completed in the days of David. The apostle Paul stated, in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia, “And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—all of which took about four hundred and fifty years” (Acts 13:17). But the physical land was not the ultimate fulfillment of the good promises which the mouth of the Lord had spoken.

- **Saying such things** - All the Old Testament greats “died in faith,” but during their sojourn on this planet they “confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.” But if they were exiles on this planet, why would they be looking for a physical promised land? They would not; they would be looking for something better! “For those who say such things,” note Hebrews’ author, of those who confess to be strangers on earth, “make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own” (Hebrews 11:14). Interesting phraseology: “make it clear.” The writer is proceeding to reason that even these old covenant saints knew that the physical side was not the emphasis of God.
- **Opportunity to return** - Abraham went out from his country and from his relatives to a land that God would show him. It is very clear in his case, that in the physical realm, he could have abandoned God’s plan and returned to his original country. In the same way, those — including Abraham — men and women of faith, having left their earthly affections behind and having confessed they were strangers and aliens in this world could have abandoned the plan of God in the spiritual realm. “And indeed,” emphasizes the author of Hebrews, “if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they would have had opportunity to return” (Hebrews 11:15). The implication is clear: what you think about is where you are going!
- **A heavenly country** - The message of scripture through the ages is consistent: if you choose earth, it will cost you heaven; if you choose heaven, it will cost you earth. These great examples of faith turned their affections away from this earthly life, and focused on their eternal reward. “But as it is,” continues the author, “they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16). They were not really looking to inherit the physical land of Canaan; they were looking to the spiritual promised land. Thus God had prepared the eternal holy city, the Jerusalem which comes down out of heaven, for them.

The true promised land is not the land originally occupied by the Kenite, the Kenizzite, the Kadmonite, the Hittite, the Amorite, etc. The true land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob is the spiritual promised land of heaven itself, a land to be possessed by the true descendants of Abraham. But each inheritor will, like the faithful men of old, confess that he too is a stranger and an exile upon this earth, and will seek for the heavenly country. Then, like his spiritual forbears, God will not be ashamed to be called his God!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Offering Isaac

Faith, to be truly Biblical faith, must be tested. The test, in many cases, will be a hard challenge; how else would “great faith” be exhibited! The Bible is laden with examples of men and women of great faith, a partial recounting of the men and women of the Old Testament being presented in this portion of the book of Hebrews. Jesus Himself, the One who has inherited a more excellent name than angels, faced the ultimate test of faith. Being “made like His brethren in all things,” He faced all the temptations that come with having to live in a fleshly body, human in all respects. “In the days of His flesh,” it is then written, He prayed earnestly to Him who was able to bring Him forth “safely out of death”; He Himself had faced the ultimate test of faith, trusting that His resurrection would occur. The tests of faith of lesser men and women are recorded, and their examples are also encouraging. Hence the testing of Abraham’s faith is presented.

- **The setting** - Isaac was about twenty years old when the Lord tested Abraham. It was Isaac, of the sons of Abraham, through whom the promises were to come (to Abraham “it was said, ‘in Isaac your descendants shall be called.’ ” – Hebrews 11:18). When the Lord thus told Abraham to sacrifice Isaac on Moriah, it was a major challenge to all the dreams and hopes of the patriarch. But in faith, Abraham took Isaac and the wood of the sacrifice to the base of Moriah. “On the third day,” is Moses’ record, “Abraham raised his eyes and saw the place from a distance” (Genesis 22:4). Isaac, in the mind of Abraham, was dead for three days! At the base of Moriah, the wood of the sacrifice was loaded on Isaac’s back, and the two walked to the top of the mount. Having prepared the altar and the wood, Isaac was strapped down, and the knife was put to his throat by his father. But the angel of the Lord stayed the hand of Abraham, and a ram caught in a nearby thicket was offered instead.
- **Abraham’s obedience** - Abraham demonstrated that he believed God in obeying the commands of God, even to the extreme of making — for him — the ultimate sacrifice. “By faith Abraham,” is Hebrews’ author’s commentary, “when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son” (Hebrews 11:17). The writer of the epistle, under inspiration of the Holy Spirit, gives the title of “Abraham’s only begotten son” to Isaac; the Spirit obviously designed the Abraham/Isaac relationship to parallel that of the Father and Son.
- **Abraham’s faith** - Abraham knew that God had stated that the promises would all come through Isaac. Since God who promised was also the One who commanded that Isaac be offered as a burnt offering, Abraham drew the conclusion that God was going to raise Isaac from the dead. The writer states it this way: “He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead” (Hebrews 11:19).
- **The typology** - As Isaac, the only begotten son of Abraham, carried the wood of the sacrifice on his back to the top of Moriah, just so the only begotten Son of God carried the wood of His sacrifice to the top of the same mountain. As Isaac was dead three days in the mind of his father, so Jesus was dead three days in the heart of the earth. Abraham believed that God was able to raise men from the dead, “from which he also received [Isaac] back as a type” (Hebrews 11:19). The “resurrection” of Isaac on the third day was a foreshadow of Jesus’ resurrection on the third day as well!

Abraham obeyed the command of God, successfully passing the test of his faith. The Hebrew Christians, facing the onslaught of Roman order, would need lots of faith to pass their test. Modern Christians, facing the onslaught of the New World Order, will need lots of faith to pass their test. Press on!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

More from the Patriarchs

Faith has a forward look. The great examples of faith “are seeking,” said the writer, “a country of their own.” They are described, in regard to the promises of God, “as having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance.” Noah, looking forward, built the ark. Abraham, looking forward, left his country and followed God into a new land and new life. Sarah, looking forward, had faith to conceive at a very old age. Abraham, looking forward, was even willing to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, believing that God would be able to raise him from the dead and thus carry out the future promises through Isaac. The record of the faith of the other patriarchs also shows that same forward look.

- **Isaac** - Isaac and Rebekah were the parents of twin sons, Esau and Jacob. Esau was the older of the twins, and should have possessed the birthright. Being a fleshly-minded man, he sold the birthright for a bowl of stew to Jacob. Later Isaac desired to give the patriarchal blessing to Esau. Jacob and Rebekah tricked the old man in his blindness, and Jacob secured the blessing instead. Isaac made an attempt to pass something positive on to his favorite son, saying to Esau, “And by your sword you shall live, and your brother you shall serve; but it shall come about when you become restless, that you shall break his yoke from your neck” (Genesis 27:40). Isaac was prophetically looking to the time when the nation of Edom, descended from Esau, would serve Israel for awhile, but then would attain its freedom. The writer of Hebrews notes the forward look of Isaac’s faith in these words: “By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come” (Hebrews 11:20).
- **Jacob** - Of Jacob, the younger of the two, it was said, before the twins were born, “The older shall serve the younger” (Genesis 25:23). Hence the promises given to Abraham were coming through Isaac and then through Jacob, who was eventually given the name Israel. When he was an old man sojourning in Egypt, his favorite son Joseph brought his sons to their grandfather for another patriarchal blessing. Jacob reversed the order, placing the younger son Ephraim ahead of the older son Manasseh. Again, prophetically, the tribe of Ephraim would be more dominant than Manasseh after the children of Israel possessed the promised land. The forward look is expressed by the Hebrews’ author, “By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff” (Hebrews 11:21). This worship, by the way, is the only New Testament description of patriarchal worship, which was the physical bowing down or prostration before God.
- **Joseph** - Joseph was a great man of faith, maintaining a great attitude in spite of being sold into slavery by treacherous brothers, and, as an innocent man, being sent to jail by a scorned women over false sexual abuse charges. Knowing that God had used him to bring the family to Egypt for their long term preservation, Joseph also knew that the children of Israel would one day return to the promised land. This forward look is also noted by Hebrews’ author, “By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones” (Hebrews 11:22). Joseph’s orders were that his body was to be mummified, and carried back to the promised land when the Israelites were to be delivered from the Egyptians and allowed to return.

These patriarchs were men of faith who were courageously willing to demonstrate that faith by publicly giving their blessings and instructions. God worked with them, giving them the inspiration for the blessings and instructions, and executing those promises hundreds of years later. Joseph’s mummy, for example, stood amongst Israel for more than three hundred years as a reminder that the children of Israel would someday return to the physical land promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Thus faith was developed among those who were interested in Israel as they saw the hand of God carry out those promises. The forward look expanded to more people, and God’s plan moved on!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Faith of Moses

Moses was a great man of faith, and he came from a family of faith. In ways known to God but outside the boundaries of man's brainpower, the Omniscient was able to select Moses from before his birth and prepare him for the great task of leading God's people out of Egypt. In the words of Stephen, first martyr for the faith, "Moses was educated in all the learning of the Egyptians, and he was a man of power in words and deeds" (Acts 7:22). Thrust into the desert for forty years, he was thus prepared to be the deliverer of Israel from the oppression of Pharaoh. He was the law-giver, presenting the Law of God to the children of Jacob — his face shining in reflection of the Shekinah glory Moses encountered in the holy of holies in the tent of meeting. He was the foundational priest, the one who offered the first sacrifices of intercession for the Hebrews, and the basis for the Law. He was the covenant maker, "sprinkling both the book itself and all the people, saying, 'This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.' " (Hebrews 9:19,20). His faith, then, is worth examining as an example to the Hebrew Christians and their modern counterparts.

- **Faith of his family** - Pharaoh, afraid of the growing population of Israel in Egypt's midst, had ordered the death of all baby boys; they were to be drowned in the Nile River. Moses' parents chose not to drown him; rather, when he was past the totally tiny baby stage, set him afloat in the Nile in a little basket. By the hand of God, Pharaoh's daughter just happened to be approaching the river for her morning bathing ritual, found the boy floating along, adopted him, and had Moses' mother become his nurse. "By faith Moses," is Hebrews' author's comment, "when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king's edict" (Hebrews 11:23). Their faith in God was rewarded in the unusual circumstances which catapulted Moses into the position of ultimate leadership of the Israelite nation.
- **Moses' choice** - When Moses was forty years old, he visited the sons of Israel in their slavery. "And when he saw one of them being treated unjustly," was Stephen's remark, "he defended him and took vengeance for the oppressed by striking down the Egyptian" (Acts 7:24). At that moment he made his choice; He was a Hebrew and not an Egyptian. "By faith Moses," adds Hebrews' author, "when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter; choosing to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, rather than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin" (Hebrews 11:24,25). His choosing was no minor matter; all the wealth and privileges of Egypt lay before him, but he made his decision to cast his lot with the lowly Hebrews.
- **Seeing beyond** - Sin is pleasurable; the scripture admits that. But the pleasures are "passing" in that once the party is over, the hangover is terrible. The upfront appeal of sin's pleasures are enough to pull most people in, and leave them captives to the whims of Satan all their lives. Moses, however, was able to shove those aside to follow — in faith — God's call to be the deliverer of Israel from the clutches of Pharaoh, "considering," says Hebrews' writer, "the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward" (Hebrews 11:26).

Moses was truly an amazing man of faith! He set aside earthly perquisites, accepting instead the privation of the desert and the frustration of guiding God's people. He was able to focus beyond earth and its fleeting moments of fleshly gratification. He was able to see that even the reproach of Christ — not to speak of the reward of Jesus' accolades — was of greater value than anything earth could offer.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Moses' Picture

Throughout the ages, those of faith are those who listen to the instruction of God. They then set their priorities and make their decisions accordingly. Such a man was Moses. Although reared in the palaces of Egypt, and adopted as the son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses had at hand his birth mother who as his nurse was able to implant a powerful picture in the boy's mind. Jochebed was marked out as a great woman of faith herself, and it would not be unusual for such a mother to have high hopes and great expectations for a son who so obviously had the hand of God upon him. At the age of forty, then, it entered Moses' mind to visit his people, the sons of Israel. And having made his stand to be counted with Israel rather than with Egypt in putting to death the Egyptian slave driver, Moses again joined his brethren. Stephen, first martyr for the faith, recounts: "And he [Moses] supposed that his brethren understood that God was granting them deliverance through him, but they did not understand" (Acts 7:25). At the age of forty, forty years before the actual deliverance began, Moses had the faith picture of himself as being the one to bring Israel out of Egypt!

- **Leaving Egypt** - But Moses had to flee Egypt and go into the wastelands of Midian; for forty years his picture as the deliverer had to lie dormant. At last God called to him from the burning bush and commissioned him to secure the release of captive Israel from the grasp of Pharaoh. In this process Moses' faith was severely tested. When initial negotiations with the king broke down, the burdens of the slaves were increased, the foremen were being beaten for unachieved quotas, and Moses was being blamed for making a bad situation worse. But Moses persisted, eventually bringing ten plagues upon the Egyptians. In heated anger Pharaoh told Moses, "Get away from me! Beware, do not see my face again, for in the day you see my face you shall die!" (Exodus 10:28). But Moses, walking by faith, knew what the outcome would be. "You are right," were his last words to Pharaoh, "I shall never see your face again!" (Exodus 10:29). Moses was going to cross the Red Sea, and Pharaoh would be at the bottom of the deep with his chariots. "By faith he left Egypt," Hebrews' writer comments concerning Moses, "not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen" (Hebrews 11:27). The recording of Moses as seeing the unseen One is one of the great lines of the entire Bible, and brings to light in a concise way what it means to walk by faith.
- **Keeping the Passover** - The faith of Moses was also on exhibition in the institution of the Passover. The Lord informed him that the last plague was coming at midnight on the fifteenth day of the month, and gave him instructions to pass on to Israel regarding the blood of the Passover lamb. Moses was in the middle; not only does the plan of deliverance fail if God does not keep up His end, but it also fails if Israel chooses not to follow the instructions to sprinkle the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. God, of course, was not going to be undependable. But Israel...? A little reflection will help the modern Christian to understand why God had to bring the plagues on Egypt over a period of time, not just to establish His authority over the gods worshiped by the Egyptians, but to prepare Israel so that they would all sprinkle the blood of the lamb on their doorposts. Of Moses, Hebrews' author again notes, "By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the firstborn might not touch them" (Hebrews 11:28).

Moses' picture that he would deliver Israel from the Egyptians was still intact. It is easy to see, however, that his faith was really challenged in many ways, even in the process of getting the people started out of Egypt, much less what it would take to get them to the Promised Land.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Producing Israel's Faith

If Moses alone had faith, God's purpose would not have been served. God's goal was to use Moses as a point man to extend the knowledge of God to a larger portion of mankind and drive the promoters of idolatry backward. The writer of Hebrews, then, recounts the development of faith, beginning with that of the patriarchs. Abel is listed, followed by Enoch and Noah, bringing the record of the survival of faith in God through the Flood. Abraham and Sarah are noted, along with Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph, tracing the lineage of faith residing in these ancestors of the Israelites. By the time of Moses, this special people counted in the millions, and the potential for the number of those who believed in the one true God increased greatly. By the wonders God performed through Moses in the land of Zoan, the gods worshiped by those Egyptians were exposed as frauds, and the kernel of true faith in Israel increased. The writer of the Hebrew epistle, therefore, after noting the greatness of Moses' faith, goes on to comment on the next phases of the development and extension of this faith in the one true God.

- **Passing through the sea** - Israel, under the instruction and leadership of Moses, kept the Passover. They sprinkled the blood of the male unblemished lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their houses so that the plague of death did not enter there when the Lord struck the land of Egypt. It was "by faith" that Moses provided the leadership, but because Israel heeded the instruction, "he who destroyed the firstborn did not touch them." The writer of Hebrews is documenting the expansion: "By faith they passed through the Red Sea," he noted, "as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned" (Hebrews 11:29). "Tell the sons of Israel to go forward," God commanded Moses (Exodus 14:15). They followed God's command and were saved; the Egyptians were not instructed to go into the sea, and when they proceeded to do what they were not commanded to do, they perished. Israel had enough faith to follow instructions!
- **The fall of Jericho** - Most of that first generation of Israel to cross the Red Sea, unfortunately, did not have enough drive to sustain their initial faith. When they were informed of the mightiness of the peoples of Canaan and the strength of their walled cities, the Hebrew people lost their faith in God and wanted to turn back again to Egypt. That generation, for the most part, therefore perished in the wilderness, and the next generation was strengthened in faith and prepared to conquer the Promised Land. "By faith the walls of Jericho fell down," recounted the author of the epistle, "after they had been encircled for seven days" (Hebrews 11:30). Under the leadership of Joshua, the nation had faith enough to follow God's instructions, marching patiently around the city once a day for six days, then seven times on the seventh day, finally shouting and trusting in God to make the city walls come down.
- **Salvation of Rahab** - Not only is there a solid remnant in Israel that now has faith, the Gentile people in Canaan are taking notice. Rahab, a harlot whose house was on Jericho's wall, recognized that God was with Israel. She therefore hid the spies sent out by Joshua, and asked that she and her family be spared when the certain destruction of the walled city occurred. "By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient," points out Hebrews' author, "after she had welcomed the spies in peace" (Hebrews 11:31). Her faith was honored by God, she was spared, and became an ancestor of Jesus according to the flesh.

With this early base now established in Israel, the All Wise could begin to extend the knowledge of Him and His ways to the world, and set the stage for the coming of Jesus into the world. Fourteen hundred years of Israelite history and over a thousand pages of inspired record are to follow this initial thrust, expanding the knowledge of God and increasing the basis for faith among the peoples of the world. And "when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son" (Galatians 4:4).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Great Men of Faith

“The righteous shall live by faith,” Paul was wont to quote Habakkuk. Because God does not desire the death of the wicked, but earnestly desires that the righteous live, He lays out a scriptural education that will produce faith in the honest inquirer. Hence it is that the exploits of the faithful are exhibited in His holy word, along with the demise of the faithless, that the reader may learn and take heed. In the first section of Hebrews chapter eleven, the faith of the patriarchs, Moses, Israel under the leadership of Moses and Joshua, and Rahab the Gentile harlot are placed on exhibition to encourage the readers. The writer would like to recount once again all the history recorded in the Old Testament writings, but this would overtax the readership. Thus the author is content to summarize. “What more shall I say?” queries the author. “For time will fail me ...” (Hebrews 11:32).

- **The judges** - The judges were raised up by God to render judgment in legal issues, and were to make their rulings based on the Law given by the Almighty through Moses. Usually what happened was that Israel, once they had conquered the Promised Land under the leadership of Joshua, got fat and sassy and neglected their duties to God. As a result the Father allowed them to be overtaken by neighboring enemy states and oppressed by those who served other gods. When they then cried out to Yahweh, He answered them by elevating one of these judges. Oft times the character of these judges was weak, but it was recorded for the benefit of the readers, that the readership might understand that what was on exhibition was their faith, and that God justifies by faith. “For time will fail me,” the author notes, “if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah ...” Gideon was famous in that God used him and 300 chosen men to deliver Israel from the Midianites. Barak was the commander of the army who would not go up against the Canaanites unless the female judge Deborah went with him; victory was accomplished, but Jael the wife of Heber the Kenite received the honor of killing the enemy commander Sisera. Samson delivered Israel from the Philistines, in faith killing more of the enemy in his death than during his lifetime. Jephthah delivered the nation from the Ammonites, but made a rash vow which required him to sacrifice his daughter. The good, the bad, and the ugly is presented for the edification and faith of the reader.
- **David** - Israel drifted further and further from the founding principles of their republic, and due to lack of education and decline of morals, sunk to where they needed a king. After the death of the first king — Saul — David was installed on the throne. Sweet psalmist of Israel, prophet in his own right, and great motivator of men, David more than any other single person in the Old Testament writings serves as a foreshadow of Jesus the Messiah. As the good, the bad, and the ugly was all recorded, what shines through is the unwavering faith of David.
- **Samuel and the prophets** - Samuel was the last judge of Israel, and first in a long line of prophets. These were great men of God, pointing with one hand toward Israel and calling the people to repentance, and with the other pointing upward to God and the coming Messiah. These men had the faith to proclaim God’s message to a people who generally did not want to hear, and who often tortured and executed these prophets.

Earthly rewards did not always come to these great men and women of faith. But their exploits are positively exhibited in God’s great Hall of Faith; their accomplishments beckon the Christian to move forward in his faith, and do even greater things for the glory of God through the name of Jesus Christ!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Faith in Action

Because the first covenant was a physical covenant, the victories of faith were often accomplished in the visible realm. This was necessary, in the economy of God, because man is physical, and has to understand the physical before the spiritual makes any sense to him. Again, the principle is stated by the apostle Paul in his instruction on the resurrection from the dead: “However, the spiritual is not first, but the natural; then the spiritual (I Corinthians 15:46). Hence the writer of Hebrews is going to give a summary list of some of the great physical types of victories of people of faith in the Old Testament, to encourage the brethren of New Testament times to pursue their victories in the unseen spiritual realm.

- **Some physical victories** - Originally the descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were not numerous enough to constitute a nation. But after the nation was hatched in the incubator of Egypt, it needed land. It was necessary for the Israelites to conquer the nations east of the Jordan under Moses, and to subdue those west of the Jordan under Joshua. God had promised them the land from the brook of Egypt to the Euphrates, and they finally accomplished this under the succession of leaders, completed by faith under David. Paul noted, in a message delivered to the synagogue in Antioch of Pisidia: “And when God had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance — all of which took about four hundred and fifty years” (Acts 7:19). “By faith,” adverted Hebrews’ author, they “conquered kingdoms” (Hebrews 11:33).
- **More action** - Not only were such dramatic and visible acts such as the conquering of kingdoms accomplished, but they also “performed acts of righteousness.” Jonathan, son of King Saul, for example, righteously helped David escape the wrath of Jonathan’s own father; Barzillai the Gileadite sustained David’s household when he had to flee Jerusalem to escape the rebellion of Absalom. They also, in faith “obtained promises”; Elisha received a double portion of Elijah’s spirit. Daniel “shut the mouth of lions.” Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego “quenched the power of fire” (Hebrews 11:34). David, with many others, “escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness [was] made strong, put foreign armies to flight.” These great acts of valor and faith were recorded for our benefit, that we may have courage and may trust in God to assist us in our spiritual warfare.
- **Some resurrections** - Faith was not limited to Israelites. The writer of Hebrews brings up the point that “women received back their dead by resurrection” (Hebrews 11:35). The widow of Zarephath was a woman of faith, although a Phoenician; Elijah raised her son from the dead (I Kings 17:23). Then there was the Shunammite woman in Israel, whose son was raised from the dead by Elisha (II Kings 4:34). These women believed that the prophets worked on behalf of the mighty God of Israel, and were willing to appeal to those men in faith that they could raise the dead!

These great men and women of faith were not passive; they put their faith into action. It is easy to say, “I believe.” It is another to lay that faith on the line and engage in action, not knowing the outcome. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abed-nego stand as great examples. Threatened to be cast into the fiery furnace if they failed to bow to Nebuchadnezzar’s image they replied, “Our God whom we serve is able to deliver us from the furnace of blazing fire; and He will deliver us out of your hand, O king. But even if He does not, let it be known to you, O king, that we are not going to serve your gods or worship the golden image that you have set up” (Daniel 3:17,18). This is faith in action; they were going to worship God alone regardless of earthly cost. And God honored them!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Earthly Challenges to Faith

Just because a person has true faith in God does not mean that his earthly life is going to be without challenges. In fact, if a person is immersed into Christ because he thinks it will make his life have less challenges, he has the wrong motivation. An individual needs to become a follower of Christ because the message is true, and be willing to propagate that message regardless of personal cost. This is faith! In fact, it is the great faith that God has been looking to produce from the foundation of the world.

There were men and women in Israel who possessed the forerunner of this New Testament faith. Some, because the old covenant was a physical covenant for a physical people, looked to accomplishments of faith in the physical realm. David did kill Goliath, for example, and cut off the giant's head with the giant's sword. But there were others who looked beyond this life for any recognition of their stand for the truths of God.

- **A better resurrection** - God accomplished great and mighty acts through those who had faith as recorded in the pages of the written Old Testament. Elijah called down the fire of God in the challenge to the prophets of Baal on Mt. Carmel, at Hezekiah's prayer God sent an angel and destroyed 185,000 troops threatening Judah, and the Almighty destroyed three enemy armies while the singers sang at Jehoshaphat's command. "Women," said Hebrews' writer, even "received back their dead by resurrection," referencing physical results, "and others," he added, "were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection" (Hebrews 11:35). The earthly resurrection the Shunammite's son was temporary; the positive resurrection from the dead at Jesus' second coming is "the better resurrection," the one that really counts!
- **Challenges to faith** - In addition to those who exploits of faith are recounted in the sacred writings, there were many others whose stand for the truths of God whose was not recorded, at least on earth. "Zechariah, the son of Berechiah," according to Jesus, was "murdered between the temple and the altar" (Matthew 23:35). "Others experienced mockings and scourgings," noted the author of Hebrews, "yes, also chains and imprisonment" (Hebrews 11:36). There was an earthly price to pay for a heavenly faith.
- **Earthly privations** - "They were stoned," is the annotation, as in the case of Naboth of Jezreel, who refused in faith to turn the family plot allotted by God over to Ahab and Jezebel. "They were sawn in two," referenced the death of Isaiah. "They were tempted," the author continued, "they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated (men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground" (Hebrews 11:37,38). Daniel continued to pray with his windows open toward Jerusalem in the face of legislation that made it a crime, not yielding to the temptation to compromise. Most of the prophets died, some by the sword, as Jesus noted in looking to His own death, "for it cannot be that a prophet should perish outside of Jerusalem. O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those sent to her" (Luke 13:33,34). David and his band had to wander and hide in the hills, living in the caves and holes in the ground, no doubt wearing the sheepskins and goatskins. It would have been easier to compromise the faith, but they sacrificed earthly comfort for the sake of following the truth of God.

These were truly the men "of whom the world was not worthy." They stand as our shining examples of those who would hold to their picture of faith, even to the death if necessary. The saints in Jerusalem, facing the onslaught of Roman destruction, needed to draw courage from their examples, as do their modern counterparts of faith!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Promise

“For truly I say to you,” affirmed Jesus, “that many prophets and righteous men desired to see what you see and did not see it; and to hear what you hear, and did not hear it” (Matthew 13:17). In a similar statement, He noted that many “kings” as well had the same desire (Luke 10:24). Those who are truly spiritually inclined have always been those who looked for the great things God has done in the spiritual realm rather than focusing on the physical. The raising of Jesus from the dead, for example, was a much more powerful event than the Israelites’ crossing the Red Sea. Forgiveness of sins is much more important than deliverance from the Philistines. And the promised indwelling Spirit is the most awesome of all gifts, far surpassing the possession of the Promised Land. The spiritual greats of the Old Testament would really liked to have known much more about such a promise.

- **No greater gift** - “If you knew the gift of God,” said Jesus to the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well, “and who it is who says to you, ‘Give Me a drink,’ you would have asked Him, and He would have given you living water” (John 4:10). The “living water” promised by Jesus is the indwelling Holy Spirit (see John 7:37-39). He is the Christ who dwells in the hearts of the redeemed. He is the Spirit of God living inside newly created spiritual beings, that they may be filled up to all the fullness of God! “If you being evil,” taught Jesus, “know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more shall your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him?” (Luke 11:13). This is the ultimate gift! But how would a person proceed in asking for the Holy Spirit? What is the protocol for such a petition to reach the Almighty? “Repent,” said Peter and the other apostles, “and let each of you be immersed in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit” (Acts 2:38). This is how an individual would ask for the gift; these are the directions from heaven on the protocol for receiving the indwelling Spirit.
- **The promised Holy Spirit** - The coming of the Holy Spirit to dwell within the hearts of the God’s people was promised in the writings of the Old Testament. Ezekiel openly prophesied how God would put His Spirit within Israel (Ezekiel 37:14). And many other prophetic statements in the sacred writings also pointed to the coming of the Spirit of Christ to the Gentiles as well (Genesis 12:3; Zechariah 14:8). Redemption, said the apostle Paul, was granted to saints “in order that in Christ Jesus the blessing of Abraham might come to the Gentiles, so that we might receive the promise of the Spirit through faith” (Galatians 3:14). “You were sealed in Him,” affirmed Paul in another place, “with the Holy Spirit of promise” (Ephesians 1:14). Referencing the gift of the Holy Spirit in the Acts chapter two message, Peter thusly says, “For the promise is for you and your children, and for all who are far off, as many as the Lord our God shall call to Himself” (Acts 2:39).
- **Message to the Hebrew Christians** - After giving a brief review of the exploits of faith of the Old Testament greats, the writer of the Hebrews epistle comments: “And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive the promise, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect” (Hebrews 11:39,40).

The writer’s point is intended to be a very encouraging one: if those men and women of the Old Testament accomplished what they did without the indwelling Holy Spirit, how much greater victories can be won by those who are empowered by the Spirit of God within! Yes, indeed; those prophets and righteous men and kings would gladly trade places with those august personages, the truly spiritually great people of the new covenant!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Apart from Us

Some “women received back their dead by resurrection,” was a summary point of Hebrews’ author. But this resurrection to walk again on earth was only temporary; the grave would call again in each of those cases. Those resurrections, however, were very important in that they laid the groundwork for belief in a permanent resurrection from the dead on the last day. “Others were tortured,” continues the record, “not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection.” They had faith in God and hope for their eternal redemption, having listened to the messages God was delivering to the fathers through the prophets in many portions and in many ways.

- **Guarantee of resurrection to glory** - The indwelling Spirit is the guarantee of the Christian’s resurrection from the dead at Jesus’ second coming. “In Him, you also, after listening to the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation,” explained Paul to the Gentile brethren, “having also believed, you were sealed in Him with the Holy Spirit of promise, who is given as a pledge of our inheritance, with a view to the redemption of God’s own possession, to the praise of His glory” (Ephesians 1:13,14). The promise, the indwelling Spirit, is described by the apostle as the “pledge,” the guarantee God has made that He will keep His commitment to redeem the bodies of the saints. This hope — “the redemption of our body,” the resurrection from the dead — is the great motivation for those who have “the first fruits of the Spirit” (Romans 8:23). The holy ones of God look forward to the time when this mortal will have put on immortality!
- **Old Testament saints** - What about forgiveness for the Old Testament saints? Surely God has provision for men like Abraham, who lived in the age of the patriarchs, or men like Isaiah, who lived under the Law of Moses. The writer of Hebrews makes the point that the sacrifice of Christ and His high priestly ministry reached backward for the sake of the faithful of God prior to the new covenant. Jesus’ “death,” he said, “has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant, [that] those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance” (Hebrews 9:15). Paul superadds, “This was to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed” (Romans 3:25). The provision of God for those of Old Testament times was for the forgiveness of sins to be accomplished at Jesus’ ascension.
- **No resurrection apart from us** - But none of those in the Old Testament received the indwelling Spirit. That is not to say that the Holy Spirit was not working during Old Testament times; He appears in Genesis 1:2. But the indwelling Spirit, who makes it possible to be born again as new creatures in Christ, was not granted until after Jesus was glorified. Hence the guarantee of Christian’s proper resurrection from the dead was not possessed by those whose names are recorded in the sacred annals. So how is God, who is just and fair, going to solve this problem? “And all these,” noted the author, “having gained approval through their faith, did not receive the promise, because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect.” God, in His great mercy and grace, is going to put those Old Testament faithful into the ranks of those that constitute the church, so that they receive the proper resurrection along with those who are indwelt by the Spirit.

God is really so awesome! Those saints of the new covenant need the recorded faith of the Old Testament children of God, and those of the Old Testament need to be joined with the great people of new testament faith. When Jesus comes back, He is coming for the His bride, the church. By the provision of God, those faithful servants of the age of the patriarchs and of the Law of Moses will be “thrown in” and be a part of the bride. Praise God for His magnificent plan, and His ability to not lose any of the faithful along the way!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Faith's Marathon

If those of the Old Testament “experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment,” what about the brethren of New Testament times? The congregation in Jerusalem, they were exhorted to remember, had undergone severe persecution in its early days. “But Saul began ravaging the church,” records the historian Luke, “entering house after house; and dragging off men and women, he would put them in prison” (Acts 8:3). Later this same Saul was reported as “still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). The congregation therefore, in an earlier generation than that of the book of Hebrews, had been tested in matters of faith even more so than the Old Testament saints. But writer is concerned about the future persecution coming in connection with the Romans. “For yet in a very little while,” the author had noted, “he who is coming will come, and will not delay.” His goal, then, is to use the perseverance and faith of the Old Testament greats as a motivational springboard to encourage the brethren in the face of the severe destruction about to break loose in Judea. These men and women of the Old Covenant times were not indwelt by the Holy Spirit; what can these of the New Covenant successfully endure as the people upon whom the ends of the ages had come!

- **The witnesses** - The men and women of faith could not, in an earthly sense, know the outcome of their belief. David could not know that the giant was going to fall with one stone from the sling; he had to take the “risk” of meeting him on the field. Hence, as the brethren of Jerusalem were being prepared to face “the worst that ever was or ever would be,” the summary of the results of the Old Testament saints was trotted out and paraded before them. “You have heard of the endurance of Job,” was James’ reminder, “and have seen the outcome of the Lord’s dealings” (James 5:11). “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us,” is the writer of Hebrews’ exordium, “let us lay aside every encumbrance” (Hebrews 12:1). There were not just a few examples of the victories of faith from the ancient records, there was a great cloud of witnesses! The brethren should be able to go forward with shouts of praise and victory.
- **No weights on the ankles** - It is one thing to wear half ounce training weights in preparation for the big run, but it would be stupidity for someone to strap extra weight around his ankles for the race itself if he really intended to win against stiff competition. The writer of Hebrews thus paints a picture of the Christian life as a parallel to a long race, a marathon of faith, if you will. “Let us also,” he adds, “lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily besets us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.” Sin is regarded as a weight strapped on; it is an extra burden in the long, long run that is the Christian life. The picture is that sin is an active weight, traveling alongside and trying to fasten itself on the Christian; the saint must be very active in beating sin back, much like battling off a pesky mosquito. And there are those “encumbrances”: sometimes possessions, sometimes position in the community or in the company, are major hindrances to the intense race of faith. It would be much better to abandon them than it would be to lose the “race set before us.”

The Christian life is run of endurance; even an extra ounce wears the runner out and hinders him from finishing the race. But hearing the cheers of that great cloud of witnesses who have gone on before, and shedding the sins and other hindrances, the Hebrew Christians were to run on and on, keeping their faith through the Roman destruction. May we in the twenty-first century go and do likewise!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

All Eyes on Jesus

It is an honor for a band to be selected to march in the Rose Parade. It is a once-in-a-lifetime experience for a group to perform at the White House. Because of the high profile venue, the performers are going to put on their best show and watch to see if the key people in the audience, such as the President, are pleased. How much more, then, is the Christian privileged to be able to execute his responsibilities in the presence of the great King — Jesus, Lord of all!

As the saint runs his race, then, he is conscious that every step is taken in front of the “box seat” of the Lord. In most earthly marathons, by contrast, there are many miles of lonely road, where there the audience is sparse or nonexistent. But the spiritual marathon is run in the continual presence of Christ who encourages or applauds the runner on his way.

- **Looking to the Lord** - “Let us run with endurance the race that is set before us,” encourages Hebrews’ author, “fixing our eyes on Jesus” (Hebrews 12:1,2). The physical eye of man cannot see the Lord in the splendor of His glory. But man is not merely a physical being; at the core he is a spiritual being intended to be in the image of God. However, when man sins, he is separated from fellowship with his Maker, and his inner person becomes blind and darkened. Upon his immersion as a believing, repentant individual, he is now a new creation, in fellowship with God, and the barrier that prevents his inner man from seeing the glory of the Lord is removed. The apostle Paul, then, prays that “the eyes of your heart may be enlightened” (Ephesians 1:18). This new inner man, with the barrier of the body of sin removed, is able to “behold as in a mirror the glory of the Lord” (II Corinthians 3:18).
- **Object of our faith** - Man, by observation and reason alone, could never know about Jesus. His honest reflection about the creation would tell him that there must be an orderly and just God, but it could never tell him about the love and mercy of the Almighty. Hence the need for written revelation, focusing in at first on God in the flesh, Jesus the Son of God. The writer of the epistle to the Hebrews thus comments that Jesus is “the author and perfecter of faith.” As the “Author” of our faith, the Lord Jesus is the One who is the source, directing the Holy Spirit in orchestrating the history and recording the inspired message for the benefit of those whose hearts are interested; Jesus then is the Origin of our faith. As the “Perfecter” of faith, He is the goal, the end, the culmination of that written revelation. The writer of this epistle brings out several aspects of Jesus in glory, emphasizing that He is the High Priest and Apostle of our confession, the great King or Messiah, and the Son of God, complete revelation of the glory of the Father. Jesus on the throne, then, is the Object of our faith.

Those who live by faith will thus be those who maintain a consciousness of Jesus in the glory of His Majesty, fulfilling the prophecy of Isaiah, “Your eyes will see the King in His beauty” (Isaiah 33:17). Whatever they do in word or deed will be done in an awareness of the watchful and hopeful eyes of the King, knowing that what they do is “in His name,” and therefore reflects on His reputation among men. Their praises and thanksgivings will consciously ascend to His throne. They will zealously seek and save the lost, realizing clearly that was His purpose in leaving His glory for earth in the first place. And they will be willing to endure privation and persecution from a hostile world, following in the footsteps of Him who suffered first for man, knowing He would be glorified later. All eyes of God’s people are focused on the King!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Joy Set before Him

“Glorify Me,” said Jesus in His prayer to the Father, “with the glory which I had with You before the world was” (John 17:5). Jesus did not have to come to earth to receive glory; He had the glory before the world was. So there was something else going on besides the simple glorification of Jesus.

There is an interesting note by the apostle John in his gospel account as he records the events leading up to the Passover meal and the “Last Supper.” “Now before the feast of Passover,” is the annotation, “Jesus knowing that His hour had come that He should depart out of this world to the Father, having loved His own who were in the world, He loved them to the end” (John 13:1). Ultimately, the existence of this Creation and the existence of man are all about God’s desire to communicate the truth that “God is love” (I John 4:8). He created the angels (including the one who became Satan), He created Adam and Eve, and He created the tree of the knowledge of good and evil so that man would have choice. In rescuing man, easily beset by sin, from the clutches of sin and Satan through Jesus Christ, God can demonstrate to angels and to men that He really is LOVE!

- **Enduring the cross** - In the grand scheme of things, there had to be a sacrifice offered in behalf of fallen man, and there had to be a high priest capable of offering the blood of that sacrifice. Jesus, in taking the form of a bond-servant, was able to be the sacrifice. In assuming human form He was also able to identify with man, and thus communicated that man therefore was able to identify with Him as the high priest and intercessor. But as the sacrifice, He was going to have to face His crucifixion. Jesus, the great Author and Perfecter of faith, “endured the cross, despising the shame” (Hebrews 12:2). No one should minimize the anguish of the Lord on the cross, referenced earlier by the writer in these words: “He learned obedience from the things which He suffered” (Hebrews 5:8). As is often mentioned, not only was the physical pain nearly unbearable, but the spiritual pain the Lord experienced in taking on the burden of man’s sins was unimaginable.
- **Pulling through** - In order to power through something like the cross, Jesus needed to have a goal in front of Him, a goal so powerful and sublime that it enabled Him to not only endure but to go a step beyond and “despise the shame.” And it was not minor shame; the great God took human form — humiliating enough by itself — and then, though innocent, had to accept what looked to the public that He was a convicted criminal, finally dying naked on the cross, shamefully exposed to the world. Yet the writer says, “who for the joy set before Him, endured the cross.” That joy was more than a return to glory; that joy was the church, the salvation of those willing to accept their redemption. The scriptural comparison is: “As a young man marries a virgin . . . and as the bridegroom rejoices over the bride” (Isaiah 62:5).

Saints are encouraged to run their own races with endurance, fixing their eyes on Jesus. His example is awesome; He has endured the cross, “and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God” (Hebrews 12:2). And what motivated the Lord to go through such horrific suffering victoriously will also be the key motivation for the brethren of Jesus also. Not only will the upward call of their own resurrections motivate; not only will the reward of sitting with Jesus on His throne “charge up”; but also the bringing of many souls to glory will provide the ultimate impetus for the brethren to press on to ultimate victory. “For who is our hope or joy or crown of exultation?” asked the apostle Paul. “Is it not even you, in the presence of our Lord Jesus at His coming?” (I Thessalonians 2:19).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Overcoming Hostility

It is a surprise when the good news of Christ is greeted with hostility. In the night in which He was betrayed, Jesus tried to warn the apostles of the challenges that would face them following His resurrection. The significance of His words did not register at the time, but He knew they would be preserved by the Holy Spirit for the future edification and motivation, not only of the apostles but for all who would later come. “If you were of the world,” He informed them, “the world would love its own; but because I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you” (John 15:19). He also added, “If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you” (John 15:20). But it still is a bit of a surprise when the good news of Christ is greeted with hostility.

- **The early church** - The early church in Jerusalem received the glad tidings with great joy. “And day by day continuing with one mind in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they were taking their meals together with gladness and sincerity of heart, praising God and having favor with all the people” (Acts 2:26,27). But the “favor with all the people” was not to continue. By the fourth chapter of Acts, the Sadducees were “greatly disturbed because they were teaching the people and were proclaiming in Jesus the resurrection from the dead” (Acts 4:2). This resulted in Peter and John’s being put on trial and eventually threatened not to preach any more about Jesus and His resurrection. The congregation was afraid, and prayed to God to give them boldness to speak the word of the gospel. God answered the prayer by giving them a sign from heaven in shaking the building where they were meeting, and the early church was able to move forward.
- **As the church spread** - Opposition in Jerusalem continued to increase against the church. After the death of Stephen, Luke recorded, “And on that day a great persecution arose against the church in Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles” (Acts 8:1). After Saul of Tarsus was converted to Christianity, some of the persecution died down, again as Luke notes: “So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria enjoyed peace, being built up; and, going on in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it continued to increase” (Acts 9:31). But those periods were rare. When Paul of Tarsus took the gospel to the synagogues of what is now south-central Turkey, the opposition was violent, as he later recalled in his second epistle to Timothy, emphasizing “persecutions, and sufferings, such as happened to me at Antioch, at Iconium, and at Lystra; what persecutions I endured” (II Timothy 3:11). “I fought with wild beasts at Ephesus,” the apostle remembered of his third missionary journey (I Corinthians 15:32). “Of our affliction which came to us in Asia,” he also recalled, “we were burdened excessively, beyond our strength, so that we despaired even of life” (II Corinthians 1:8). Such opposition and persecution was typical of what the proponents of the gospel faced as they pressed forward with the message of salvation for all men.
- **Hebrew Christians** - The church in Jerusalem was about ready to experience another wave of persecution and affliction as the Romans prepared their onslaught against rebellious Jewry. The writer of the epistle, inspired by the Holy Spirit, wanted them to be able to come through the persecution successfully, and asked them to be motivated by going back to the roots of the Christian faith. “For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself,” was the exordium, “so that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3).

Christians then were not to be discouraged, not to lose heart. Christians now are not to be discouraged. Christians then were not to grow weary. Christians now are not to grow weary. Let us then “gain new strength.” Let us “mount up with wings like eagles, run and not get tired, walk and not become weary!”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Striving against Sin

Most Christians would like to lead a quiet life, raising gardens and kids, having things go reasonably smoothly, and then checking out of earthly life quietly. That, of course, is wanting to have Paradise on earth. But this world is in rebellion against God, and the forces of darkness never rest in their unrelenting war against God, against the welfare of the human race as a whole, and against Christians in particular. Hence it is that the Lord Jesus, recognizing the how the course of events transpire, made His sweeping statement, “Do not think that I came to bring peace on the earth; I did not come to bring peace, but a sword” (Matthew 10:34). It is not that the Lord Himself wanted the warfare, but that He knew the hostility the proclamation and propagation of His gospel by His people would engender.

- **Such hostility by sinners** - Those first century saints were exhorted to “consider such hostility by sinners” against Jesus, and use that understanding to be encouraged rather than discouraged at their own personal rejection and persecution by the world. The concern of Hebrews’ writer was that the saints might “grow weary and lose heart.” Implicit in the idea of “growing weary” is that the brethren were active in working with people, and that the failures or foibles of these people — sometimes including their backlash against the ones who worked with them — might affect the brethren negatively and cause them to slow down or cease in their efforts.
- **Spiritual resistance** - The “good ol’ boys” network in any community is set up to profit off of sin. Whether it is open sin such as prostitution rings or gambling establishments, or whether it is more subtle and hidden, money is to be made from marketing to human weakness. And all man-made religions and denominations are designed to pander to some fleshly desire, and often work “hand in glove” with the good ol’ boys. Hence it is that – when the gospel comes to town, calling people to repentance and a new way of life through faith in Christ – the good ol’ boys turn out not to be so good, and work overtly and covertly against the gospel and those who purvey it. The open reprisal of the gospel message had died down in Jerusalem, but was about to heat up for these brethren. “You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin,” was the writer’s note (Hebrews 12:4). As Roman legions advanced, the chaos and corruption inside Jerusalem would increase. “At that time,” Jesus had warned, “many will fall away and will deliver up one another and hate one another” (Matthew 24:10). The Hebrew brethren were thus exhorted to maintain their doctrine, their moral purity, and their continued propagation of the faith.
- **The Lord’s discipline** - Referring to the impending Roman onslaught, Hebrews’ writer had warned, “For yet in a very little while, he who is coming will not delay.” As massive and pervasive as this tribulation would be, the Almighty would be capable of having the circumstances orchestrated for the discipline and spiritual development of each saint. The writer introduces his point: “And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov’d by Him.’ ” (Hebrews 12:5). The underlying theme of this section, taken from Proverbs, is that, as a father loves and tailor-makes a disciplined instruction plan for his son, just so the Father would be lovingly disciplining each of the faithful in the midst of the oncoming destruction.

Pointing to the time of Jerusalem’s demise, the Lord had prophesied, “And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Matthew 24:12). The Christians would strongly need to overcome this downward pressure, resisting even to the point of having their own blood shed as they strove exhibit God’s love and call the people surrounding them to repentance.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Discipline of the Lord

Jesus Himself, affirmed Hebrews' author, "learned obedience from the things which He suffered." Like it or not, the faithful follower of Christ will also learn obedience through suffering. "For you have been called for this purpose," superadded Peter, "since Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example for you to follow in His steps" (I Peter 2:21). The tribulation that was coming upon Judea, executed by God through the Roman army, would leave devastation and desolation in its wake. "Unless," said the Christ Himself, "those days had been cut short, no life would have been saved; but for the sake of the elect, those days shall be cut short" (Matthew 24:24). The "elect" would have God's protective hand upon each of them; the amount and type of suffering that each was to endure would somehow be exactly what each saint needed for his own personal growth and perfection of his character.

- **No light regard** - "Do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord," was the exordium. The Christian caught in the tribulation could misunderstand the events he was going through. He could bemoan the loss of Jewish morality and their descent into chaos and corruption. He could rail against the Roman republic-turned-Empire and complain of the violation of its own constitution. But the Lord wanted the saint to understand that his specific placement in the midst of the upheaval was for his own personal discipline, and he was not to regard that "lightly." He too was to learn obedience through his suffering!
- **No fainting** - The events and circumstances of earthly life are not outside the Lord's control. The child of faith can be comforted and encouraged in each situation, knowing that the All Wise is managing the details so that a disciplined instruction program is in place specially tailored for him. Thus the word of God encouraged the first century brethren, telling them not to "faint when you are reproved by Him." There was to be no swooning at the specter in front of them; instead there was to be the expectation of lessons to be learned and attitudes to be adjusted.
- **The Father's love** - A good father is primarily interested in his child's character development. He wants his son or daughter to have the proper spiritual interests, to have a good work ethic instilled, to be able to handle finances and time, to be able to love and interact positively with other people, to be well educated. To accomplish these things, much discipline in many forms has to be implemented, so that the child will be trained in the way he should go. The Father in heaven loves each of His children, and even more fervently than earthly fathers is involved in each's training. The writer of Hebrews continues with his quote from Proverbs: "For whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives" (Hebrews 12:6). The idea of being scourged by the Lord seems a little rough in today's feminized society; but prevailing societal views cannot set aside the message being communicated. The suffering saints often have experienced is to be viewed as scourging from the Lord, and a positive perspective is to be developed about it.
- **Enduring discipline** - "It is for discipline that you endure," the writer notes. "God deals with you as with sons, for what son is there whom his father does not discipline" (Hebrews 12:7). One of the key aspects of discipline is the endurance connected with it, and the endurance it produces. This is critical in the eternity of the saint, and with the overall program of God.

Faith that endures the challenges of life — the persecutions, the sufferings, the difficulties, the personality problems — is the tested faith that is more precious than gold. This is what God desires to produce in His children through His word and through His discipline. That is why it is evident that whom the Lord loves, He disciplines!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Subject to the Father of Spirits

Spare the rod, and spoil the child! The American proverb, of course, is taken from the Old Testament: “He who spares his rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently” (Proverbs 13:24). The Biblical basis for discipline is obviously love, and a loving parent is not going to wield the rod indiscriminately or out of uncontrolled anger. Parents who have a Christian perspective think in terms of training their children, and use a combination of praise, positive instruction, and — if necessary — corporal punishment. “The rod and reproof give wisdom,” is another of Solomon’s pearls, “but a child who gets his own way brings shame to his mother” (Proverbs 29:15). A rod without reproof just produces anger and exasperation, but a rod in the proper setting drives foolishness out of the heart of the child.

The movers and shakers behind the destruction of Western Civilization have an agenda of eliminating corporal punishment. Their goal is to produce anarchy through a generation of unruly, undisciplined young people in order to establish the necessary tyranny which of necessity follows such anarchy. Thus it is that Paul writes to Timothy, noting that “in the last days difficult times will come,” bringing out as one the characteristics of such an age that children would be “disobedient to parents” (II Timothy 3:1,2). The ultimate goal of Satan, the ultimate mover and shaker in the realm of darkness, is to produce a people who will not accept the rod and reproof of the Almighty Himself.

- **Loving fathers** - “What son is there whom his father does not discipline?” was the question posed by Hebrews’ author. Children need the direction — the general guidelines laid out by the father, with cooperative assistance from the mother — in order to know the way they should go. God uses this picture of loving fathers to establish for the Hebrew brethren that His discipline (in their specific case, the upcoming Roman destruction of Jerusalem and devastation of Judea) was for the development of their Christian character.
- **Illegitimate children** - In most societies, illegitimate children have been shunned and barricaded from many of the doors open to children born in wedlock. The Holy Spirit ties these circumstances to continued instruction on the importance of discipline, and the saint’s ability to accept it from the hand of the Lord. “But if you are without discipline,” explained the author, “of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (Hebrews 12:8). Faced with the choice of being illegitimate, or accepting discipline, the thinking saint will quickly accept the discipline of the Lord with a good attitude.
- **Physical to spiritual** - Earthly fathers are tangible. They wrestle with their boys, hug their girls, oversee their education, watch over their character development, teach them to work, and apply the rod of discipline when necessary. They are present at the dinner table, fix things up around the house, and make sure the oil is changed on the car. God uses the physical dad picture to get the disciple of Christ to an understanding of His being the spiritual Dad. “Furthermore,” is the author’s connection, “we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live?” (Hebrews 12:9). The discipline of earthly fathers was more direct, coming from a rod or from such punishments as extra chores. But discipline from the Father in heaven is going to have to come through circumstances or people, or a combination of both!

Earthly fathers help their children through difficulties and challenges, and applaud them in their triumphs. Even though in the midst of the lessons the children might feel their fathers are “picking on them,” in the end they respect their dads for pushing them through and training them up properly. In the same way children of the Lord can respect and reverence the heavenly Father, and give Him praise through the trials tailored for their learning and spiritual development. They are thus joyfully “subject to the Father of spirits,” and because of the disciplined character He produced, they will live eternally!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

God's Training Program

The athlete who won't practice won't perform at his best on game day. Both mind and body have to be trained and trained and trained so that the individual can "get into the zone" when he is called upon to step forth and make the big plays for his team or make the major push if it's a solo sport. Hence it is that teams and track stars need coaches. The coach can guide, correct, teach, and push the athletes to the next level. Christians likewise need a coach to help them accomplish the same things in the race that is set before them. The guidance, correction, teaching, training, and pushing of the spiritual athletes come from a very special coach; His name is "the Father of spirits"!

- **Subject to the Father** - It is worth re-emphasizing that the trainee must be in subjection to the trainer. If the trainee is not willing to work the program laid out by the trainer, then the trainer is wasting his time. The great God in heaven, then, is personally interested in each of His children of faith. This attention of His is intense enough that He has a specially designed discipline program for each of His students; each child of grace is thusly exhorted to "be subject to the Father of Spirits, and live." To refuse to be subject to this continuing education is to die!
- **For our good** - Every human teacher the saint might have — in the form of parents, professors, or the friendly neighbor next door — may have his weaknesses and possible occasional misjudgments. Our earthly dads, for example, "disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them." (Yes, it is true that the period of time that parents actually have with their children is indeed "short.") But the All Wise Father in heaven "disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness" (Hebrews 12:10). It would be exciting for the Hebrew Christians to realize that the upcoming time of testing would impact each of them under the watchful eye of the caring Father, and to know that He would have whatever difficulties tailor-made so as to discipline and strengthen each of them. We modern brethren, too, can be positive about the parallels for us in our time, knowing that whatever comes to us personally is designed for our spiritual good, and that the lessons learned will be moving us in the direction of sharing His holiness.
- **Fruit of the training** - "No pain, no gain," is the proverb, the idea being that in the discipline of practice — in preparation for game day — there is going to have to be pain in conditioning the body for the rigors of full-fledged competition. This is also true in the spiritual realm. "All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful," is the author's observation, "yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness" (Hebrews 12:11). While the pain of the Lord's discipline is acknowledged, the gain of the training is guaranteed to the humble and thankful saint! And the gain is what is precious to God; interestingly enough it is the "peaceful fruit of righteousness," all the good results of saints' impact on the world around them.

One of the most challenging aspects of the Lord's discipline is the means by which it comes to the faithful follower of Christ. Just as the Lord blesses through people and circumstances, He also disciplines through people and circumstances. One of the major purposes of this epistle to the Hebrew brethren was to encourage them to remain faithful and productive to the kingdom throughout the time of the upcoming Roman onslaught. The Lord, then, would be disciplining each of His children through the people around them, through the Romans themselves, and through the concomitant circumstances. In this they were to rejoice; and we too are to follow their example. Discipline and disciple are words that just possibly might be related!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Strengthen and Straighten

“Man up!” is the exhortation. When the challenges have come, and the difficulties are descending, the Lord expects His children to do their part in stepping up and meeting their responsibilities. “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man,” is His explanation through Paul, “and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it” (I Corinthians 10:13). Whatever the Hebrew brethren were about to undergo was not going to be overwhelming for them; whatever temptations there would be to forsake the faith would be something that each of the brethren could overcome with God’s help, or that the Father Himself would have an opening for them to duck through. They were also to understand that if they were still physically alive when the onslaught by the Roman army began, it was because the Lord was providing discipline for the strengthening of their faith. “All discipline,” the writer reminded them, “for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.” Thus there was a mind-set that the brethren were to be developing — a mind-set that they would be able successfully to go through anything that was coming upon their land. “We are overcomers,” they would have to say to themselves. “Through Christ we are more than conquerors!”

- **Strengthen** - Many times the scripture will use a metaphor to paint a picture or make a point. “You are God’s building,” stated the apostle Paul to the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 3:9). Having introduced the metaphor, he was then able to make some points clear to the congregation. Similarly, then, the writer of the Hebrew epistle, introduces his metaphor, using man’s physical body to communicate some truths concerning the Christian’s spiritual walk. “Therefore strengthen the hands that are weak,” he exhorts, “and the knees that are feeble” (Hebrews 12:12). The individual saint was thus encouraged to take spiritual inventory, and shore up whatever weaknesses he might have in preparation for the oncoming destruction. Not only was this true for the individual Christian, but the church as a whole was likewise to assess where the members were, and strengthen the weaker brethren.
- **Straighten** - The Christian walk is often called “the strait and narrow,” taken from the King James Version’s translation of Jesus’ statement in the Sermon on the Mount. “Because strait is the gate,” said the Lord, “and narrow is the way, which leadeth unto life, and few there be that find it” (Matthew 7:14). The word strait means “small, or constricted,” commonly used in modern English to describe a constricted sea passage, such as the “Strait of Gibraltar.” But because modern English doesn’t use the word strait much any more, the Christian walk is often, through ignorance, described instead as the “straight and narrow.” It changes the meaning of Jesus’ statement, but still is a good description because of the writer of Hebrews’ comments. “Make straight paths for your feet,” he added, “so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed” (Hebrews 12:13).

The “straight” life is a life where there is discipline and order. The Christian living this life is one who is capable of planning ahead, having his finances in shape, his family in training, and moving forward spiritually. The Christian who has not yet arrived to this point is exhorted to work on these things; if he does so, many other things in his life will fit into place — the limb that is lame will not be put out of joint but will be healed. And in the body of Christ, the stronger members are to encourage their brethren along this “way,” strengthening and straightening, that the blessings of God might be manifest. And this would be true, even during the Roman — or modern — tribulation!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

What to Chase

People in general are “chasing” a lot of things. Men are chasing women; women want certain men to chase after them. Most are chasing earthly dreams — land, wealth, fame, power, security, a home. They have not yet learned what Solomon learned; it is vanity. “I have seen everything during my lifetime of futility,” adverted the sage (Ecclesiastes 7:15). The man who had everything, who tried everything ... did he find happiness in any of his pursuits? “So I hated life,” he said, “for the work which had been done under the sun was grievous to me; because everything is futility and striving after wind” (Ecclesiastes 2:17). A new home, a new car, a new girlfriend or guy friend, a new baby, a vacation, or a new project are all the types of things people try in order to find happiness and purpose; and just like the base of the rainbow is just out of reach, in the same way happiness is out of reach for people who pursue it in this way.

So what sort of things should the Christian be chasing after? What advice could be given to the saints of Jerusalem, about to experience the “abomination of desolation,” the Roman army sweeping through Judea? How should they direct their steps in their walk during the few remaining years of their earthly sojourn?

- **Pursue peace** - Anything really worth having must be pursued. Even the great salvation, although a free gift of God, must be sought after. “And without faith it is impossible to please Him,” the writer of Hebrews had earlier affirmed, “for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him” (Hebrews 11:6). In the upheaval connected with the upcoming Roman advance, there would be much confusion. The church would have to stick together, and there would be many potentially explosive personal situations which could develop to blow that unity of the Spirit apart. “Pursue peace with all men,” comes then the exhortation (Hebrews 12:14). This peace has to be pursued; it will not automatically develop. Furthermore, this peace must be pursued with all men, not just brethren who are members of the local congregation. “When we are reviled, we bless,” affirmed Paul the apostle; “when we are persecuted, we endure; when we are slandered, we try to conciliate” (I Corinthians 4:12,13). That is definitely going “the extra mile”; but that is what must be done to pursue this peace with all men.
- **Pursue sanctification** - Old covenant sanctification was done without choice; forks, shovels, and snuffers were set apart for use at the altar through sprinkled blood, and even the Levites were set aside as a wave offering without personal choice or performance being involved. New covenant sanctification, or holiness, is predicated upon the personal decision of the individual. Thus, there is an initial or, shall we say, “imputed holiness” attributed to the follower of Christ upon his immersion into the Savior. But that “imputed holiness” is to be translated into practicing holiness, as affirmed by the apostle Peter. “Do not be conformed to the former lusts which were yours in your ignorance,” was his appeal, “but like the Holy One who called you, be holy yourselves in all your behavior” (I Peter 1:14,15). This holiness must be earnestly and consistently sought for by the saint. “Pursue,” then, was Hebrews writer’s exordium, “the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.”

It is the earnest desire of the Holy Spirit that brethren be peace-seeking and holy in their behavior regardless of the difficulty of external circumstances. The “great tribulation,” the worst that ever was or ever would be, would certainly offer an excuse for not pursuing peace with all men, or not pursuing sanctification, if ever such an excuse were available. Christians therefore need to chase after peace. And they need to chase after sanctification. Or they won’t see the Lord!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Falling Short of Grace

The grace of God is big, and it will cover nearly everything. But “nearly everything” is not the same as “everything,” and it is possible to fall short of His grace, even as a Christian. Now it is important to understand that God has a careful balance that He must maintain here; God’s grace must be sufficient to cover anything that a struggling new convert might be dealing with as he strives to overcome his past, yet have the type of boundaries tied to faith in such a way that the saint would not try to take advantage of God’s goodness. The “battered reed” must not be broken off, and the “smoldering wick” must not be put out. Should the saint, however, “continue in sin that grace might increase?” The answer, of course, is: “May it never be!” (Romans 6:1,2). Hence it is that God works hard through His written word to produce a mind set in His disciples that they are honest with Him, and that they are striving with all spiritual effort to become like Christ.

- **Preparation list** - The Roman onslaught on Jerusalem was about to begin, and the Holy Spirit was concerned about the ability of the Hebrew brethren to maintain their faith in the midst of the upheaval. Hence He explained to them the nature of the Father’s discipline, wanting them to be encouraged when they personally were being tested by the events and circumstances surrounding them. The Spirit, through Hebrews’ author, exhorted the brethren to strengthen their hands, so to speak, and to make straight paths for their feet. They were enjoined to pursue peace with all men. And they were particularly charged to pursue “the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.” This warning stands as a base for the comments to follow.
- **Coming short** - “See to it,” the writer animadverts, “that no one comes short of the grace of God” (Hebrews 12:15). It is faith that saves the individual; hence it is that it is going to be faith that is tested. This precious faith is more valuable by far than gold, but it is going to be “tested by fire” (I Peter 1:7). And if the Hebrew brethren could not survive the test, they would come short of the grace that is granted an individual through his faith. But the wording of the exhortation is interesting; “see to it,” he said, “that no one comes short of the grace of God.” In other words, the members of the local congregation were to work really hard at encouraging the other saints to maintain their faith through the serious difficulties. The assembly of the brethren, thus, was critical for the disciples to receive the encouragement and instruction necessary to keep them from falling short of the grace of God!
- **No root of bitterness** - When God doesn’t run the universe in such a way as to make the Christian’s life easier, sometimes the Christian becomes angry with God, leading to an entrenched bitterness. The upheaval connected with the tramp of Roman soldiers was not going to be an easy thing for the saints in Judea to go through. They were about ready to be uprooted from their homes and gardens; history records that they migrated to a place called Pella, where they had to begin again. They were about to witness the destruction of their people, the Jews, and see the obliteration of any hope they might have of being a nation. They could have become angry and frustrated with God. But in the midst of this they were again exhorted to see to it “that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled.”

The Christian life is rightly called “the good fight of faith.” The modern saint, therefore, seeing the parallels between the circumstances which confronted the Hebrew brethren of the first century and those of our current times, can draw upon the lessons to be learned by those saints. He can encourage his modern brethren to stay within the grace of God, and to eliminate the anger and frustration which leads to bitterness. Encourage one another, then, “and all the more, as you see the day drawing near!”

Selling the Birthright

One of the great challenges of life is having the spiritual judgment to see those things which have the highest value. “But a natural man does not accept the things of the Spirit of God,” commented the apostle Paul, “for they are foolishness to him.” The problem here is not the ability of the individual to understand the words of God; the problem is the focus of the descendant of Adam. When man puts his attention on the physical realm, then the things of the truly spiritual realm are foolishness to him. Why, for instance, would a person contribute ten percent of his take-home to the Lord, when that money could be put to good use elsewhere? To a “natural man,” it is foolish to invest in the spiritual realm. “He cannot understand” the revealed truths of the Spirit of God “because they are spiritually appraised” (I Corinthians 2:14). Once again, it is not because he lacks the capacity; it is because he lacks the interest. His system of appraisal — of putting value on things — is wrong. He puts no value on whether he goes to heaven or hell, but he is intensely concerned about improving his golf game, his bottom line, or his social standing in the community. Such a man was Esau.

- **See to it** - The time of tribulation was coming upon the region of Judea, and the church was exhorted by Jesus to flee to the hills because of Jerusalem’s upcoming destruction. “And at that time many will fall away,” was the Lord’s prophetic utterance, “and will deliver up one another and hate one another” (Matthew 24:10). The Holy Spirit, then, in authoring the letter to the Hebrews, was through the writer exhorting the brethren to encourage one another to remain true to the faith so that they would not fall away. “See to it,” was His charge, that no one would come short of the grace of God, that “no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau” (Hebrews 12:16). If a Christian allows bitterness to invade his soul, he becomes a major trouble-maker; he is critical of everyone and everything. Furthermore, that bitterness creeps over and begins to infect other brethren’s attitudes. Such sourness proceeds from Satan himself, destroys fellowship between brother and brother, and ultimately destroys the individual’s fellowship with God. The church was to recognize even the root of bitterness developing, work to keep it from spreading, and salvage the bitter individual if possible.
- **Godless Esau** - “And many false prophets will arise,” forecast Jesus of the time of Jerusalem’s approaching destruction, “and will mislead many. And because lawlessness is increased, most people’s love will grow cold” (Matthew 24:11,12). The societal pressures in these conditions would be great, and many brethren obviously would be tempted to give up on their faith and follow the masses to their own destruction. The church was exhorted to help the brethren move upward, “that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal.” Esau, a man of flesh, sold the most valuable birthright in the history of the world to his brother Jacob in exchange for some red-colored stew! He was immoral, and his immorality blinded him to the value of spiritual truths. He became godless, and could not put the proper appraisal on the eternal and spiritual nature of that which had been handed down from Abraham and Isaac.

Would the Hebrew brethren, then, sell their “birthrights” as those born again to a living hope, as those inducted into the family of God and fellow heirs with Christ? And what about modern Christians? Will they sell those same birthrights in exchange for earthly survival? Will they cave into the demands of the onrushing “new world order,” or will they maintain the faith “once and for all delivered,” accepting their earthly deaths, if necessary, rather than compromising the truth and commitments of the gospel of Jesus?

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Loss of the Blessing

First the sacrifice, then the reward! Expressing this truth are words attributed to William Penn: “No thorns, no throne/No pain, no palm/No cross, no crown/No gall, no glory.” Penn, of course, was referring to our Lord Jesus Christ as the inspiration of these thoughts, drawing from the events leading up to His crucifixion and culminating in His exaltation. If then the followers of Christ will take up their respective crosses and deny themselves, they will be rewarded, standing before the Lord in glory — clothed in white robes and with palm branches in their hands (Revelation 7:9). “If anyone serves Me,” were the words of the Master, “let him follow Me; and where I am, there shall My servant also be; if anyone serves Me, the Father will honor him” (John 12:26).

But what is it going to take to receive that reward? “To him who overcomes ...” said Jesus repeatedly in His apocalyptic presentation (Revelation 2:7). Not only must the Christian, in the words of the apostle Paul, “fight the good fight,” but he must also “finish the course,” and “keep the faith” (II Timothy 4:7).

- **Immoral Esau** - Moments of opportunity come, and then they are usually quickly gone. “Seek the Lord while He may be found,” was the instruction from the All Mighty Himself, “call upon Him while He is near” (Isaiah 55:6). Esau’s moment of truth came when he sold the birthright for a bowl of stew. Instead of seeking the Lord’s will, and considering the value of the heavenly birthright, he basically gave it away; and in that moment, the entire history of the world changed. In that moment, Esau demonstrated himself to be an “immoral” and “godless person,” and the opportunity passed.
- **Esau rejected** - God gave Esau his opportunity, but he missed it. Jacob, whose name means “one who replaces another,” was already waiting in the wings by God’s foreknowledge. So when the time came for the patriarchal blessing to be passed on, Esau — having missed the opportunity for the birthright — was not going to get the blessing; one way or another it also was going to pass to Jacob. “For you know,” is the reminder from Hebrews’ author, “that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected” (Hebrews 12:17). Too late! God allowed the deception of Rebekah and Jacob to proceed, and Isaac was tricked into passing the patriarchal blessing to Jacob. Isaac had only one blessing to give; there was nothing left for Esau when he came into the presence his father.
- **No place for repentance** - The record from Genesis notes: “When Esau heard the words of his father, he cried out with an exceedingly great and bitter cry, and said to his father, ‘Bless me, even me also, O my father!’ ” (Genesis 27:34). But, as previously mentioned, his opportunity had passed much earlier when he sold the birthright. Therefore, comments Hebrews’ author, “he found no place for repentance, through he sought for it with tears” (Hebrews 12:17). In Esau’s case, the time of God’s mercy had passed, and he was not even granted the opportunity of repentance.

The author of Hebrews is recording the lesson from Esau to communicate to his contemporaries the importance of their faithful decisions in the upcoming critical moments. For each of them, there was the possibility that they would make a decision based on the flesh and cave in to doing things the easy way rather than the right way. They were about to be reminded that while Esau was before the Law, and that the Israelites received the Law at the base of the quaking Sinai, they themselves had come to the true mountain of God, the spiritual Mt. Zion. Hence they had much more reason to make the spiritual decision in the moment of opportunity!

The lesson also stands for us: when the moment of spiritual opportunity is presented, seize the day!

Spectacle of Sinai

God, the great communicator in the sky, uses examples in the physical realm as the basis for His great spiritual truths of the new covenant. The spectacle of a wall's falling on thousands of the enemy, the image of swarms of hornets chasing hordes of the hostile host, and the picture of the forest's devouring David's enemies are all designed to help us understand the power of God in the unseen realm, to apprehend the nature of the spiritual warfare against unseen forces of darkness. Hence, in the consideration of the two covenants, a graphic introduction of the physical covenant sets the stage for a spiritual introduction of the spiritual covenant. The physical covenant failed to produce a people who could keep it; the nation Israel lapsed into idolatry and collapsed under the onslaught of their enemies. But the truly spiritual people that arose under the terms of the new covenant would be capable of victoriously maintaining their faith through the worst that had ever happened to Israel according to the flesh.

- **Which mountain?** - The question for the Hebrew brethren would be: which covenant do you really want to be under? Would they want to return to the physical temple with a physical priesthood and physical sacrifices, or would they really desire to worship and serve God under the spiritual high priesthood of Jesus and in the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched? Which mountain would be of significance to them, physical Sinai or spiritual Zion? "For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched," emphasized Hebrews' author regarding Sinai. "But," he would say, "you have come to Mount Zion" (Hebrews 12:18,22).
- **Description of Sinai** - The apostle Paul and the Holy Spirit said that "Mount Sinai is in Arabia" (Galatians 4:25). Evidence pretty clearly points to Jebel al Lawz in northwest Arabia, located in the region of ancient Midian, as the mountain of God. The pagan altar for calf worship at its base, remnants of a simple altar for the type of sacrifice acceptable to God also nearby, the split Rock of Horeb from which water flowed, and the mountain's blackened top all match the Biblical description of this mountain from which the voice of the Lord thundered the Ten Commandments. The Hebrew Christians were reminded, though, that they had not come to Sinai, that they had "not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind."
- **Terror of Sinai** - "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom," is the sage's inspired insight into the foundation of faith, "and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding" (Proverbs 19:10). To inaugurate His covenant with Israel, the Lord had to strike fear into their hearts in order to have even the barest of beginnings. That is why there was the "darkness and gloom and whirlwind, and the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them" (Hebrews 12:18,19). And even though the mountain was "touchable," the command was that there was to be no contact with Sinai by either man or beast; if the order was violated, an arrow would come out of somewhere and the person or animal would be shot through, or a stone would somehow whistle through the air and strike the offender. "For they could not bear the command," is the author's note, " 'If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.' And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, 'I am full of fear and trembling.' " (Hebrews 12:20,21).

While the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and without that fear there is no beginning, such fear does not sustain the individual's commitment to God and His principles. Thus Israel's fear ended in failure. Not so, however, for the saints of the new and better covenant. "You," affirmed the author, "have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God." This new covenant, while having the ingredients for the proper respect of God, begins in compassion and ends in victory! Which covenant, then, will you choose?

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The March to Zion

One of the great themes of the scripture is centered upon “Zion.” Zion was the name of a land formation protruding down between the Kidron and Tyropoeon Valleys, and its meaning is derived from a Hebrew root word having to do with dryness. Because of the cliff-like walls on its south, east, and west sides, and because the spring Gihon was located there as the only readily available water, Zion became the “fortress” home of the Jebusites. Although Joshua had originally driven the Jebusites — one of the pagan Canaanite tribes — out of Zion, they crept back in, and the Israelites were unable to dislodge them from their fortress home until David captured the city early in his reign as king. David made Zion his capital, and the larger city that grew around the original fortress area was called Jerusalem. Zion is often used interchangeably with Jerusalem in the writings of the Psalms and the Prophets, and is one of the prophetic names for the church.

- **Zion, not Sinai** - Israel according to the flesh came to the base of Sinai to receive the Law and the terms of their covenant. Amidst the darkness and gloom, the trumpet blasts and the thundering voice of God announced the Ten Commandments to terrified Israel. By contrast, the Hebrew brethren had come under the terms of the new covenant given at a different, comforting, and spiritual mountain. “But you have come to Mount Zion,” were the soothing words of Hebrews’ author, “and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22).
- **Myriads of angels** - Because Zion is spiritual, its inhabitants are spiritual, and as such they are in fellowship with other spirit beings. You have come, the writer informed those first century brethren, “to myriads of angels.” Myriad is a Greek word meaning ten thousand, and has the connotation “too many to count.” What a blessing that the saints of God are in company with those thousands of good angels!
- **Church** - You have come, the writer remarked, “to the general assembly and church of the first born [ones] who are enrolled in heaven” (Hebrews 12:23). In the spiritual realm, all saints are in fellowship with one another, and their spiritual faces are all gathered together in one group picture — the camera being able to pan the audience and have everyone’s profile included. This is also called the church, the ekklesia or gathering of God’s people as one unit. The saints are called the first born ones who have been regarded as belonging to the Lord, and redeemed in accordance with all the Old Testament foreshadows. And their names are already enrolled in heaven!
- **With God and with righteous men** - You also, according to the inspired writer, have come “to God, the Judge of all, and to spirits of righteous men made perfect ...” The righteous who have been gathered to their fathers have gone on to their reward, having ceased from their labors. These righteous men are regarded as having been made perfect, in that, in the words of the apostle Paul, they are “absent from the body” and “at home with the Lord” (II Corinthians 5:8). Because Christians have “passed out of death into life,” they are in fellowship with these brethren!
- **With Jesus** - How comforting it is for those who bodies have to endure what earth has to offer, as in the case of the upcoming Roman persecution for the first century Hebrew brethren, to know that they are in fellowship with Jesus Himself. You have come, noted the writer, “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant,” to the very One who is in the power position to execute His will!

These brethren had also come “to the sprinkled blood [of Christ], which,” affirmed the author, “speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24). These Hebrew brethren, then, having made their march to the true Zion, and with all the comfort connected with that fellowship, would be able to be encouraged to come through their trials victoriously!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Church of the First Born

The last plague to come upon the land of Egypt during the time of Moses was the death of the first born male of man and beast. “For I will go through the land of Egypt on that night,” said the Lord, “and will strike down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both man and beast; and against all the gods of Egypt I will execute judgments — I am the Lord” (Exodus 12:12). In Israel’s case, however, the first-born were spared. They were instructed to kill a male lamb without blemish, and put some of the blood on the top and the door posts of the entrance to their houses. “And the blood shall be a sign for you,” further instructed the Lord, “on the houses where you live; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you, and no plague will befall you to destroy you when I strike the land of Egypt” (Exodus 12:13). Those first-born should have been dead. But since by the hand of the Lord, they survived, the Almighty declared from that time on, the first-born in Israel belonged to Him. “For all the first-born are Mine,” He declared, “on the day that I struck down all the first-born in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the first-born in Israel, from man to beast. They shall be Mine; I am the Lord” (Numbers 3:13).

- **First-born of clean animals** - The first-born male of clean animals was to be offered as a sacrifice, since it was sanctified. It was not to be redeemed; that is, there was to be no substitute sacrifice or price for the animal. “But the first-born of an ox or the first-born of a sheep or the first-born of a goat,” were the words of the Law of the Lord, “you shall not redeem; they are holy. You shall sprinkle their blood on the altar and shall offer up their fat in smoke as an offering by fire, for a soothing aroma to the Lord” (Numbers 18:17).
- **First-born of unclean animals** - A donkey, for example, was an unclean animal, and to offer it on the altar would be unacceptable. Hence, a substitute offering was required. “And you shall redeem with a lamb the first offspring from a donkey,” was written in the Law, “and if you do not redeem it, then you shall break its neck” (Exodus 34:20).
- **First-born sons** - Human sacrifice was unacceptable also (although the judge Jephthah made a rash vow and had to sacrifice his daughter as a burnt offering). “You shall redeem,” were the instructions given, “the first-born of your sons” (Exodus 34:20). Thus, when Jesus was born, as the first-born male to open the womb, a lamb was to be offered for His redemption. Joseph and Mary were too poor to sacrifice a lamb; hence, two turtledoves or two young pigeons were presented as His substitute (Luke 2:23,24).
- **The first-born ones** - The water of immersion is both a tomb and a womb. The old self is buried in its tomb; a new creation comes forth from its womb. The purpose of the Old Testament shadow was to set the stage for those for whom God was waiting all those years; these who come forth from the womb of the new birth are each “first-born.” They are the ones who are “holy to the Lord,” and the ones for whom the redemption price — the Lamb of God — has been paid!

“You have come,” said Hebrews’ author, “to the general assembly and church of the first-born [ones] who are enrolled in heaven” (Hebrews 12:22,23). At immersion, each of these that is now born again has his name recorded in the Lamb’s book of life, and has the opportunity to be a part of the most awesome gathering that there has ever been: the general assembly and church of the first-born! This collection of personages is so great that, although the church generally has the name of either the Father or the Son, here it takes its name from those who inhabit its environs. Rejoice in the honor!!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The City of God

What was a small village in the time of Melchizedek became David's capital and home to the magnificence of Solomon. Salem eventually became Jerusalem.

During the days of wandering in the wilderness, the children of Israel took the tabernacle of God with them. Once they had captured the promised land, however, they set up the tabernacle of God at Shiloh in the territory of Ephraim. For about 400 years the tabernacle remained in Shiloh, but after David located his capital at Jerusalem and had secured the kingdom, he moved the tabernacle to the high place at Gibeon, comparatively near by. After David's death, Solomon had the task of building the temple on the outskirts of the city, on the northeast side at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, which David had purchased before he died. Thus Jerusalem became both the political and religious center for the Jews, and from the time of Nehemiah on was also called "the holy city" (Nehemiah 11:1).

- **Physical Jerusalem** - By New Testament times, the estimated crowds sojourning in Jerusalem for the feasts of Passover and Pentecost were in the neighborhood of three million. "I was glad when they said to me," recalled the psalmist David, " 'Let us go to the house of the Lord.' " (Psalm 122:1). "Jerusalem," he stated, was the city "to which the tribes go up ... to give thanks to the name of the Lord" (Psalm 122:4). Therefore, when the crowds would assemble, by the hand of the Lord, the prophets would speak to the people. But the people's heart was hard and they would not listen. "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem," cried out our Lord Jesus, "who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her!" (Matthew 23:37). Eventually they would put to death the great Prophet, Jesus Himself, and the city would lose its standing with God. "Your enemies," Jesus informed them, will come "and will level you to the ground and your children within you, and they will not leave in you one stone upon another, because you did not recognize the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:43,44). "The present Jerusalem," stated Paul, in reference to the city between her 30 AD rejection of the Messiah and the 70 AD destruction by the Romans, "is in slavery with her children" (Galatians 4:25).
- **Jerusalem above** - God used physical Jerusalem to bring the church into existence. "Repentance for forgiveness of sins," affirmed Jesus, would "be proclaimed in His name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem" (Luke 24:47). The church, is "heavenly Jerusalem," the true holy city, populated by true "holy ones." This "Jerusalem above," asseverated the apostle Paul, "is free; she is our mother" (Galatians 4:26). As such, she is the fulfillment of multitudes of Old Testament prophecies concerning the coming city of God. "And they will call you the city of the Lord," predicted Isaiah, "the Zion of the Holy One of Israel" (Isaiah 60:14). "There is a river," spoke the sons of Korah, in regard to the indwelling Spirit and the new covenant people of God, "whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy dwelling places of the Most High" (Psalm 46:4). "You have come to Mount Zion," are the huge words of Hebrews' author, "and to the city of the living God."
- **Ultimate Jerusalem** - At the end, when the Lord Jesus delivers up the kingdom to the Father, the story of Jerusalem is complete. The church, including the Old Testament saints, has been resurrected, and moves into ultimate eternity. "And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem," recalled the apostle John, "coming down out of heaven from God, made ready as a bride for her husband" (Revelation 21:2).

Words cannot really express the blessings of being a part of the heavenly Jerusalem. Inside her boundaries are freedom, forgiveness of sins, eternal life, and the river of life (the indwelling Spirit). "And the name of the city," was the prophecy, "from that day shall be, 'The Lord is there.' " (Ezekiel 48:35).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

You Have Come to Jesus

The points of superiority of Christianity over Judaism are manifold. The writer of Hebrews himself details a series in which he presents his case for the superiority of the system of Christianity — the system of the faith of Christ — over the system of the Law of Moses. Christ, affirmed the writer, is superior to the angels; hence “the faith” which came through Christ is more excellent than the Law, “the word spoken through angels.” Christ is far above Moses and Joshua; the spiritual nation which was delivered from sin and came into the true promised land is far above the physical nation which was delivered from Egypt and came into the physical land of promise. The high priesthood of Christ — according to the order of Melchizedek, by the power of an indestructible life — greatly excels the priesthood of the order of Aaron, which was beset by weakness and who were prevented by death from continuing in their priesthood. And the sacrifice of Christ — the blood shed on Calvary but sprinkled in the true holy of holies — exceeds in magnitudes the animal offerings of the Aaronic priesthood. All this, then, brings us again to the superiority of the new covenant!

- **Have come to Jesus** - “You,” said the writer to the Hebrew brethren, “have come to God, the Judge of all.” Christians, because of the intercessory power of their high priest, have access to the Majesty on high, the great and awesome and eternal God. Saints are able “to draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith” to the presence of Him who is, to all others, the terrifying “Judge of all.” Believers in Christ “have come to the spirits of righteous men made perfect”; their faces, by faith, are already mingled with assemblage of those crowded about the throne, the great cloud of witnesses, the massive throng of the congregation of the wise and mighty. But, as a closing point of emphasis, the writer notes, “You have come to Jesus,” the elder brother of all and the great spokesman for God.
- **The mediator of the new covenant** - Moses, the servant of God, was a faithful mediator between the people and God in the giving of the first covenant. Moses, therefore, offered “the blood of the calves and goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop,” saying “This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.” Moses offered; God executed. But Christ, rather than being simply a servant in the house, was the faithful Son who willingly offered Himself as the sacrifice. Who, then, would execute? He is the sacrifice; but He is the priest who offered the blood of the sacrifice in the true holy of holies. Jesus offered; Jesus executed. Hence He is the mediator — the One who executes — of the terms of the new covenant!
- **Sprinkled blood** - Moses, it is said, “sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood.” Through the sprinkling of the blood, “the copies of the things in the heavens” were described as “cleansed.” “The heavenly things” — the church and heaven itself — were cleansed “with better sacrifices” than the elements of the earthly tabernacle. Just as the blood of goats and calves cleansed the earthly, so then it was the sprinkled blood of Christ which cleansed the heavenly. “You have come,” said Hebrews’ author, “to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:24). The blood of the goats and calves was sprinkled on earth; the blood of Jesus was sprinkled in heaven.

The apostle Peter joins the writer of Hebrews. When the body is washed, said Hebrews’ author, the heart is sprinkled clean from an evil conscience. Peter’s exhortation therefore is “that you may obey Jesus Christ and be sprinkled with His blood” (I Peter 1:2). Abel’s blood still speaks, but it cries from the ground. The blood of Jesus cleanses from heaven!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Listen to Him

At the Mount of Transfiguration, Moses and Elijah appeared along with Jesus. Moses and Elijah were bright and radiant, and Jesus as well was shining in a transfigured glory. Peter, always good at vocalizing his thoughts, suggested, “Let us make three tabernacles; one for You, and one for Moses, and one for Elijah” (Luke 9:33). The inspired record notes that Peter really didn’t understand the significance of what he was proposing, because he was implying that the standing of Moses and Elijah was equal to that of Jesus. A cloud suddenly overshadowed them, and the voice from heaven clarified the status of Jesus: “This is My Son, My Chosen One; listen to Him!” (Luke 9:35). Moses stood as the representative of the Law, and Elijah stood as the representative of the prophets. The point was that the Law and the Prophets pointed to Jesus, and the message of the ages is, “Listen to Him!”

- **The blood speaks** - The writer of the Hebrew epistle continually establishes the superiority of the system of faith which came through Jesus Christ, placing it in juxtaposition of that which came before the new covenant. Abel’s blood, spilt by the hand of his brother Cain, cried “from the ground.” “The sprinkled blood” of Jesus, noted the author, “speaks better than the blood of Abel.” Though Jesus’ blood likewise was spilt on the dust of the earth, the true blood was sprinkled in heaven. The best Abel’s blood can do is to cry from the ground; Jesus’ blood offers soothing redemption from the power position of heaven!
- **Do not refuse** - Though Cain tried to pretend that nothing had happened to Abel, God heard the voice of Abel’s blood crying from the ground. How much more, then, will He hear the voice of Jesus’ blood pleading for the redemption of God’s people, speaking from heaven! And if God hears that voice, the saints of God must of necessity hear it also.
- **Jesus speaks** - Moses and Elijah, the Law and the Prophets spoke in the writings collected in the what is called the Old Testament. Jesus, the mediator of the new covenant, came in the clouds of glory before the Ancient of Days and received His kingdom, and His covenant and kingdom is far superior to that which existed before and in Israel. “See to it,” emphasizes Hebrews’ author, “that you do not refuse Him who is speaking” (Hebrews 12:25). Listen to Him!
- **From heaven** - Moses was the mediator of the first covenant. “He took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, saying, ‘This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.’” Jesus, on the other hand, is the mediator of the new and superior covenant, having sprinkled His blood in the inner sanctum of glory. From there, as the great Prophet who speaks from heaven, He issues the terms of His covenant. “For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned from earth,” cautions Hebrews’ author, “much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven” (Hebrews 12:25). Their carcasses littered the wilderness landscape following the forty years in the desert because they did not listen to Moses; our spiritual carcasses will litter the landscape of hell for all eternity if we do not listen to the voice of Jesus.

The apostle Peter, in his second message to the Jews, noted, “Moses said, ‘The Lord God shall raise up for you a prophet like me from your brethren; to Him you shall give heed in everything He says to you.’” (Acts 3:22). God indeed “raised up” this Prophet; He “raised Him from the dead, and seated Him at His right hand!” He indeed “warns from heaven.” “And it shall be,” animadverted Peter, “that every soul that does not heed that Prophet shall be utterly destroyed from among the people” (Acts 3:23). The message is clear: Listen to Him!

Shaking Heaven and Earth

The spectacle from the base of Sinai was overpowering. “Now Mount Sinai was all in smoke,” Moses recalled, “because the Lord descended upon it in fire; and its smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace, and the whole mountain quaked violently. When the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and God answered him with thunder” (Exodus 19:18,19). “And so terrible was the sight,” was the commentary in this epistle to the Hebrews, “that Moses said, ‘I am full of fear and trembling.’” The purpose of all this was to produce in Israel the proper reverential fear of God so that they would put away their idols, worship and serve God, and follow His instructions for worship and living. Its further purpose was to produce this same reverential fear of the Almighty in future generations, and for all those of Gentile background who read of the laws of God in preparing them to understand their need for the Savior.

- **Shaking then and in the future** - Sinai was awesome, and served its purpose in those who would read and heed. But a more “terrible” event is soon to come. “And His voice shook the earth then,” Hebrews’ author notes, “but now He has promised, saying, ‘Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.’” (Hebrews 12:26). Jesus, looking to that time, as the great Prophet, affirmed, “Heaven and earth will pass away” (Matthew 24:35).
- **“Yet once more”** - The writer of this epistle to the Hebrew brethren and the Holy Spirit carefully laid down foundation thoughts early in the letter, which are pulled together as the epistle closes, just as loose ends are drawn tight before they are knotted to close the bag. Of heaven and earth, the writer had early on quoted from the Psalms: “They will become old as a garment, and as a mantle You will roll them up” (Hebrews 1:11,12). Near the close, he writes, “And this expression, ‘Yet once more,’ denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain” (Hebrews 12:27). He “upholds all things by the word of His power,” the author had noted (Hebrews 1:3). Jesus is going to speak once more; this time He will release that word, and the entire physical universe will disappear. “But the day of the Lord will come like a thief,” affirmed Peter, “in which the heavens will pass away with a roar and the elements will be destroyed with intense heat, and the earth and its works will be burned up” (II Peter 3:10).
- **“Cannot be shaken”** - But there are some things “which cannot be shaken,” things which will remain after the passage of the material universe. The eternal things are people — body, soul, and spirit! The unrighteous will of course pass on to their reward in the bowels of a Christless hell for all eternity. But the focus of God is on those who have been obedient to the gospel, and have exhibited the obedience of faith during their sojourn on the earth. These are those who constitute the “kingdom of heaven,” who have been called out of the world to a citizenship in heaven. They will remain, and “cannot be shaken.”

God will “shake” not only the earth but also the heavens. And anything that is a little “shaky” will certainly be gone! It is imperative, then, that each saint “make certain about His calling and choosing” (II Peter 1:11). “As you therefore have received Christ Jesus as Lord,” exhorted the apostle Paul, “so walk in Him, having been firmly rooted and now being built up in Him and established in your faith, just as you were instructed, and overflowing with gratitude” (Colossians 2:6,7). “Therefore, beloved, since you look for these things, be diligent to be found by Him in peace, spotless and blameless!” (II Peter 3:14).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Showing Gratitude

The immediate things of earth often override the important things of eternity. Since the outer shell of the Christian is bound to earth, and since earth is the only experience that anyone of human origin has had, it is not surprising that saints are challenged in the arena of making things of the unseen realm more important than that which is seen. It is obvious when a person needs daily bread for his physical nourishment; it is not so obvious when he needs his daily spiritual nourishment.

But the writer of the Hebrew epistle has warned us: the created things can and will be shaken; only “those things which cannot be shaken” will remain. The rational perspective, then, is to put the highest priority and attention to those things which cannot be shaken. Properly understood, the requirements of earthly existence — regardless of their clamor for immediate attention — must take their lower place in a list of carefully thought out daily tasks and goals. Then the stranger and alien to this world will be able properly to offer to God his gratitude for that which is truly and eternally important, as well as offering Him praise for the necessities of daily existence.

- **Receiving the kingdom** - The kingdom of God was anticipated before the foundation of the world, and delineated in prophecy beginning with David. Coming with great power on the Day of Pentecost, 30 AD, the kingdom continued to spread across the world in the first century. Every soul since then properly immersed and continuing faithful to the end constitutes a tremendous victory for the Lord, and the continuing extension of His kingdom. Finally, the grand end of the contemplated scheme of God is stated thusly: “The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord, and of His Christ; and He will reign forever and ever” (Revelation 11:15). This is what will be left standing when everything else is shaken. “Therefore,” notes Hebrews’ author, “since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken ...” (Hebrews 12:28). The value of everything of earth shrinks to nothing in comparison with this eternal and unshakeable kingdom!
- **Let us show gratitude** - The message of the scripture is more than crystal clear: none of us is worthy of the mercy, grace, and kingdom of God. We deserve, because of decisions to sin that we have made, to go to the fires of an eternal hell. But God, being rich in mercy because of the great love He has for us, opened for us a doorway of salvation through Jesus Christ, and made it possible for us to be born of water and Spirit in order to enter the kingdom of God. “Since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken,” adverts the author, “let us show gratitude by which we may offer to God an acceptable service ...” If the brethren then (as well as the brethren now) could keep their focus on what God had done for them in the spiritual realm, then they would be truly grateful. Even though a great tribulation was coming upon the land, these brethren were not only to be grateful to God for His love and deliverance expressed through Jesus Christ, but they were to show their gratitude by their actions.
- **Acceptable service** - Actions the Christian carries out in his body are service, the spiritual sacrifices offered under the terms of the new testament. True gratitude toward God will result in the saint’s making his sacrifices willingly, glad to do something in return for the great God who has effected such a wonderful salvation. Let us show gratitude, then, notes Hebrews’ author, “by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe, for our God is a consuming fire” (Hebrews 12:28,29).

True gratitude will not throw something God’s way and say, “Here, God, this is what you’re getting from me.” True gratitude will find out what God wants, and then offer Him what is pleasing and acceptable in His sight!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Love of the Brethren

The God of all grace and mercy is also a consuming fire. Thus, while God is desirous that the saint have bold and confident access to His throne, He does not want the child of God to abuse His privileges and become lax and arrogant. The nature of God's being a consuming fire is placed in careful juxtaposition, leaning with perfect pressure against the nature of His love and mercy, so that the balance between openness and casualness with the Father is maintained. Saints, then, are to be conscious and caring in offering up to God their acceptable service, presenting themselves and their actions with the appropriate reverence and awe.

The writer of Hebrews is Spirit-inspired to delineate what some of these items of acceptable service are. The new covenant priest is not going to be offering up the blood and fat of animals, which never did anything to make the ones who offered them perfect in conscience. The sacrifices of the new testament priests are going to be spiritual sacrifices, directed to pleasing God and benefiting mankind in general and brethren in particular. And the first item on the list of such spiritual service, not surprisingly, is: "Let the love of the brethren continue" (Hebrews 13:1).

- **Love of God** - The great commandment has not changed: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" (Matthew 22:37). Without this true love of God, there is going to be no love of anyone else; what often masquerades as love is in fact a selfish, empty sham.
- **Love of the brethren** - "We love," stated the apostle John, "because He first loved us" (I John 4:19). True love is first concerned about a person's soul, secondly about his earthly happiness. It is logical, then, that this type of love would have to begin with our recognition that God loves our souls and desires our eternity with Him, His having made the demonstration of that love through the sacrifice of Christ. From that recognition, the love of God would now begin to flow through us to concern for others. "We know love by this," affirmed the aforesaid apostle, "that He laid down His life for us; and we ought to lay down our lives for the brethren" (I John 3:16). If the injunction is that we are to lay down our lives for the brethren, anything less than that should be eminently do-able!
- **Let love continue** - "Well begun is half done," is the proverb. The purpose of the proverb, of course, is to help people overcome their natural resistance and get started on the task at hand. But half done is still only half done! And when it comes to loving the brethren, it takes a mind-set of being able to be steadfast until the end. Christians need to be "bearing with one another, and forgiving each other, whoever has a complaint against anyone; just as the Lord forgave you, so also should you" (Colossians 3:13). The tone of the apostle Paul's language here indicates that there might be some challenges in loving the brethren, that some of the brethren might be a little difficult to put up with at times. Hence the injunction comes: "Let the love of the brethren continue!"

"Whoever believes that Jesus is the Christ is born of God," is the apostle John's sweeping statement, "and whoever loves the Father loves the child born of Him" (I John 5:1). Membership in the body of Christ is open to "whoever believes." This means all different kinds of people with all different kinds of personal standards and mores are coming into the body of Christ. People with all kinds of weaknesses, driven by strong desires for help and peace from God, enter the gates of the kingdom. And they all need love. All the time!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Showing Hospitality

Extra people can mean extra hassle. Extra people can mean extra expense. Extra people can mean extra sacrifice. And extra people can mean extra social embarrassment.

There was a certain tanner named Simon, and he lived in a house by the sea. Being a nice guy, doing his Christian duty, he had invited a certain preacher named Peter to stay with him for a while in the city of Joppa. (For the purposes of this story, I am going to assume that Simon the tanner was married, and that his wife was a willing partner in letting this preacher stay in their house, occupy one of their bedroom spaces, and eat their food.) Now this preacher, Simon Peter, would often go up on the rooftop to pray just before lunch. But on this particular day, he did not come down on time (I can just see the text message: grrrrr!) Furthermore, totally interrupting lunch, three guys from somewhere up north — Caesarea was the name of the place — started beating on the door and asking if this Simon Peter was living in this house. Finally (it seemed like forever) the preacher guy made his way down the stairs and answered the door. Outside the door were three men (Gentiles! Could you believe that Gentiles were knocking at the door of this house in a nice Jewish neighborhood?) and they had this story about a Gentile centurion who was supposedly God-fearing and that the Jewish people of that area loved him and an angel spoke to him and told him to send and bring this Simon Peter preacher up to his place in Caesarea. And do you know what the preacher did? He on his own, without checking with anybody, invited these Gentiles in and had them stay in the house, a house he didn't even own. And what do you suppose all the neighbors had to say about that!

Yep! Extra people can mean extra hassle. Extra people can mean extra expense. Extra people can mean extra sacrifice. And extra people can mean extra social embarrassment.

- **Do not neglect hospitality** - The writer of Hebrews had enjoined upon his audience a need to let the love of the brethren continue onward as part of their service of gratitude to God. Now the writer is going to bring in another dimension of spiritual service. “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers,” he writes (Hebrews 13:2). This is a willingness to be good hosts as in the example of Simon the tanner and his presumed wife. By being “hospitable” to some strangers, by being willing to extend themselves financially and otherwise, by being willing to suffer some embarrassment about having Gentiles present (look – even tanners have some pride about their home!), they were able to play a significant role in the opening of salvation to the Gentiles, for the Gentiles to have their spiritual Independence Day.
- **To strangers** - It is one thing to be hospitable to friends and relatives; it is another to be hospitable to strangers, albeit strangers with some connections. “Show hospitality to strangers,” is the enjoinder, “for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it.” One of the more graphic stories that comes to mind is that of Abraham when he entertained the Lord and two angels. They appeared as three men, and showed up in the heat of the day for lunch. Both Abraham and Sarah were involved in fixin’ the finest for these guests, and were honored with the birth of Isaac a year later.

The plan of the ages and the gospel of God move on the wheels of hospitality. “Beloved,” wrote the aged John, “you are acting faithfully in whatever you accomplish for the brethren, and especially when they are strangers; and they bear witness to your love before the church; and you will do well to send them on their way in a manner worthy of God” (III John 5,6). Extra people can mean extra hassle. Extra people can mean extra expense. Extra people can mean extra sacrifice. And extra people can mean extra social embarrassment. All accomplished with smiles, of course, and in gratitude to God.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Remember the Prisoners

Prisoners? Who wants to be associated with a bunch of jailbirds?

It is important to remember that this world is in rebellion against God and overall it is hostile to God's spokesmen. "If you were of the world," said the Lord Jesus Himself, "the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, therefore the world hates you" (John 15:19). "We know that we are of God," said the apostle John in another place, "and the whole world lies in the power of the evil one" (I John 5:19). Because the sons of men are trapped in Satan's web and held captive to do his will, then it is no surprise if they resist the message of Jesus, often subjecting those who communicate the gospel to imprisonment and death. "If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you," reiterated the Lord. "But all these things they will do to you for My name's sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me" (John 15:20,21). The world did! And does!

- **Prisoners in general** - When the King comes again to take His place on His glorious throne, all mankind will be brought before Him. One of the parables illustrates the people's being separated as a shepherd would separate the sheep from the goats; the sheep (the righteous) will go to the King's right, and the goats (the unrighteous) to the King's left. One of the characteristics of the righteous is that they visited those "in prison" (Matthew 25:36). Some of those whose crimes caused them to be incarcerated come to their senses in the starkness of jail, and want to find the way to a different lifestyle. Hence it is good to work in the prisons, because some of those inmates will become the brothers of Jesus.
- **Prisoners for the gospel** - The apostle Paul repeatedly refers to himself and his associates as being in prison. In his letter to Philemon, the apostle opens with these words: "Paul, a prisoner of Christ Jesus" (Philemon 1:1). In the same epistle, he brings to Philemon's notice "Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus" (Philemon 1:23). Many of those early proclaimers spent a lot of time in prison for the sake of the gospel. The writer of Hebrews then enjoins his readers to "Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them" (Hebrews 13:3). Such prisoners need to be remembered in prayer, in visitation, in assisting in caring for their families, and whatever other needs they have that they cannot carry out because of the bars around them.
- **Those who are ill-treated** - Not only are promulgators of the gospel imprisoned, they often suffer physical punishment. For example, when the apostles were preaching very early on, they were put on trial before the Sanhedrin. The Council wanted to put them to death, but Gamaliel advised them not to do so. "And they took his advice," recorded Luke, "and after calling the apostles in, they flogged them and ordered them to speak no more in the name of Jesus, and released them" (Acts 5:40). Saints are also exhorted to remember "those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body" (Hebrews 13:3). Those who have endured such treatment at the hands of the world need to be remembered in prayer, in being cared for until they are recovered, and in being encouraged. The expression, "you yourselves also are in the body," should bring every Christian to a consciousness of how important it is to assist such suffering brethren; the free and untouched saint may be next!

"Let us show gratitude," is the overall exhortation, "by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe." Remembering the prisoners and being conscious of those who are ill-treated is part of this service to God. It is true: To the extent to which we serve one of these brothers of Jesus, we serve Him!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Hold Marriage in Honor

“From the beginning of creation,” animadverted Jesus, “God made them male and female” (Mark 10:6). On the inside both male and female are spirit beings, beings in the image of God. But externally and mentally, there are obvious major differences between the two halves of the human race. Woman is indeed a helper worthy of man, fitted to walk and work beside him, and capable of being his conversational companion on all topics. The sons of God still notice that the daughters of men are beautiful, and females are conscious of that from the time they are little. Hence a strong magnetism naturally develops between male and female, a magnetism that needs to be carefully monitored and kept inside the boundaries for which God intended it. Satan, of course, corrupt and angry, is desirous of taking that which is good between male and female, and turning it into that which is the most destructive. Love is twisted into lust, and commitment is twisted into convenience.

- **Honor** - Marriage can have its difficult moments. When Jesus brought up the point that a man is not to divorce his wife except for immorality, the disciples’ comment was, “If the relationship of the man with his wife is like this, it is better not to marry” (Matthew 19:10). They understood, by what is universally experienced, that a marriage relationship might be really rocky, and if it is going to be that difficult to get out of it, it might be better not to marry at all. Jesus’ comment was that not all men could really remain single; the implication is that most people are going to be better off in a marriage and working through their difficulties toward a happy and fulfilling relationship. Because of the pressure continually exerted on marriage bonds, as decaying societies regard marriage as being more and more passé, the word of God wants marriage to be elevated. “Let marriage be held in honor among all,” is the injunction (Hebrews 13:4). Marriage as an institution is to be regarded as highly valuable among Christians. It is to be venerated in the speech of older saints to the children; it is to be held up as that which is a sacred commitment to God. A civil marriage ceremony is recognized by God in all cultures, going back to the time of Adam and Eve. Hence in the days of Abraham, the man brought the woman into his tent as formal but simple declaration to his fellow nomads. In Jesus’ day, there was the ceremony of the marriage supper, somewhat akin to our marriage ceremony in Western Civilization. Ultimately, there will be the final ceremony: the marriage supper of the Lamb!
- **Bed undefiled** - God’s intention is that there be fidelity in the marriage. “Let the marriage bed be undefiled,” is the admonition here. Because men and women are spirit beings, there is a strong connection between faithfulness in marriage to faithfulness to God. God wants the physical union of man and wife to be holy in His eyes, and provide for bonding between the two as well as procreation.
- **God’s judgment** - God is not idle and He is not asleep. The record of the scripture shows that when any nation begins to trash the sacred sexual union between man and wife, and adultery and fornication are rampant, God executes His judgment on that nation. He also makes it clear that He will act on the individual violators as well: “Fornicators and adulterers God will judge,” is the specific statement.

The Christian must thoughtfully consider the teaching of God on this subject. When all the trash that currently emanates from Hollywood and from television pervades the home, marriage is not being held in honor. That is serious propaganda affecting the next generation to come along. Remember: this section on holding marriage up in honor is part of our showing “gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Content with What You Have

Financial stewardship is a character issue. Jesus Himself brought out the core issues in His parable of the squandering steward. “If therefore you have not been faithful in the use of unrighteous mammon,” was the Lord’s comment, “who will entrust the true riches to you?” (Luke 16:11). If a Christian cannot handle his personal finances, he cannot be trusted with other spiritual responsibilities. Financial stewardship is very much a spiritual and character issue.

Money, or “unrighteous mammon,” as the Lord called it, has a powerful tug on the individual. Money is necessary for survival, and more money gives a person greater flexibility. But the challenge of keeping money inside those boundaries is very great, and the desire for more money has ruined many a man or woman. The moral compromises people make to be upwardly mobile are horrendous. The words of the apostle still stand: “For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil” (1 Timothy 6:10).

And money is not the source of happiness. A lot of folks assume that if they had more money, they would be happy. As Jesus made clear in introducing another of his parables, “Beware, and be on your guard against every form of greed; for not even when one has an abundance does his life consist of his possessions” (Luke 12:15).

- **Free from love of money** - Money is always in scarce supply, and there are always more projects on the list than can be afforded. And money has to be watched very carefully, both in personal finances and in operating a business; money can go out “the back door” very fast. Some people get twisted around in their thinking, however, and become crooked or miserly with finances. “Let your character be free from the love of money,” exhorted Hebrews’ author, “being content with what you have” (Hebrews 13:5). That’s the key: being content with what you have! Contentment flows from within; it flows from being at peace with God and walking in the knowledge of His love. If a person is not content with what he has now, he will not be content at the next level more money will purchase. A new house, a new toy, a new baby, a new girlfriend, a new boat, a new plane, a new hunting rifle — none of these will satisfy that inner craving.
- **Trust in God** - One of the reasons people grasp for more money is that it seems to them to be a source of security. Their thought processes are that if they have enough money, then they will be able to buy their way out of any crisis. But there is no real security in a financial portfolio. The old adage is that money comes with wings, and has a tendency to fly away unexpectedly. It is also true that a fool and his money are soon parted. The exordium from scripture is to be content with what we have, “for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,’ so that we may confidently say, ‘The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me.’ ” (Hebrews 13:5,6). Our confidence must be rightly placed in the Lord Himself as the only security; and He, who never lies, has said that He will never desert us!

Another old wise saying is that man’s extremity is God’s opportunity. It is when people have run out of their own resources that God has the opportunity to show that He is God, and that He is trustworthy. Part of the saint’s offering service to God with gratitude is demonstrating his trust in the Almighty. When he sinks to the level of groveling for money for his security, then he is equivalent to Israel’s turning to Egypt for help instead of turning to the Lord. Those Hebrew Christians were to trust God in the midst of the upcoming Roman tribulation; we are to trust God in the one that is coming up for us.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Imitating Faith

The greatest men to ever walk the earth graced the gravels and cobblestones of Jerusalem. The Lord Jesus Himself walked through her dusty streets, preached in her temple, rode into town on the donkey, hid from stoning in her alleyways, and wept over her from the Mount of Olives. John the Immerser, greatest ever born of woman, undoubtedly entered her environs to participate in the feast days. Then there were the apostles, the best of the best (excluding Judas Iscariot), who watched the Lord die outside Jerusalem's walls but who first preached the message of spiritual deliverance to her sojourners. They were the ones around whom the early church gathered, who trained its future leaders and impressed the doctrines of Jesus Christ upon all disciples. They faithfully proclaimed the gospel amidst arrests, floggings, and even death to James the son of Zebedee. The apostles set things in order in Jerusalem before scattering to the four winds to take the message of salvation to the Gentiles in the remotest parts of the earth. These were the greatest men to ever walk the face of the earth, and they were the early leaders for the church in Jerusalem.

- **Remember** - To the remaining apostles, after Judas left the Passover table, Jesus said, "You are those who have stood by Me in My trials" (Luke 22:28). To them He was going to accord the high honor of sitting "on thrones judging the twelve tribes of Israel" (Luke 22:29). These were the great men, the early mentors for the Hebrew brethren in Jerusalem. "Remember," said Hebrews' author, "those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you" (Hebrews 13:7). Facing great tribulation from the Roman legions, the brethren were called upon to go back in the memories to the times of the apostles, to remember what those men and the early church went through, and to recall that what was significant was that the word of God was preached!
- **The word of God** - That which came through the apostles is clearly defined as "the word of God." This word, the writer had mentioned earlier, "was confirmed to us by those who heard, God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will" (Hebrews 2:3,4). This was the word delivered from heaven by the great Prophet Jesus, given to the holy apostles through the agency of the Holy Spirit, whose voice we are not to refuse.
- **Their conduct** - The apostles exhibited the perseverance and faithfulness to the word that Jesus desired. They were truly the greatest men to walk the surface of this planet; they were spiritual, dedicated, loving, and holding their faith intact to their deaths. The apostle Paul could rightly exhort, "Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ" (I Corinthians 11:1). "Considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith," writes the author of Hebrews. The results of their conduct were tremendous. Not only did they begin the congregation in Jerusalem, but they indeed executed the injunction of Jesus to carry the message to the remotest parts of the earth. On a personal basis, the love and compassion of Jesus shone through their souls to impact their contacts and move those contacts out of Judaism or paganism into the life and fellowship of the Son. On a broad scale, their zeal and passion turned their world upside down, and the base for the church of the Lord was established across the globe.

It is interesting that saints are encouraged to "imitate their faith." Because the details of circumstance and position in the body of Christ are so different for each disciple of Christ, saints are not necessarily encouraged to have the same actions as the apostles. But their faith is to be imitated, then as well as now. In this way the plan of the Lord gets accomplished all over the world in all times. "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever!" (Hebrews 13:8).

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Strengthened by Grace

The apostle Paul and the others were free men — free spiritually to accomplish the will of King Jesus. “To the Jews,” Paul commented, “I became as a Jew, that I might win Jews.” To the Gentiles, “to those who are without law,” he became “as without law, though not being without the law of God but under the law of Christ, that I might win those who are without law” (I Corinthians 9:20,21). For 1500 years the Israelites had been under dietary restrictions, but with the coming of the new covenant, those restrictions were no longer necessary or profitable. “What goes into a man from outside cannot defile him,” stated Jesus Himself. To which Mark and the Holy Spirit appended, “Thus He declared all foods clean” (Mark 7:18,19). The focus, then, was directed from what was going into the stomach to that which was coming from the heart!

- **No benefit** - One of the messages God was communicating through His use of the Law of Moses was that the Law was not effective in saving or changing people. There was nothing wrong with the principles of the Law; the problem is people’s response to law. Thus, the Law of Moses, in the words of the apostle Peter, became “a yoke which neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear” (Acts 15:10). But in a Hebrew society, the removal of dietary restrictions would be resisted by some, and there would be many twisted justifications or weird interpretations of the old law in circulation. “Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings,” wrote the author to the Hebrew brethren, “for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefited” (Hebrews 13:9). There were no particular universal health benefits to the dietary restrictions; their purpose was to make Israel separate from the pagan peoples surrounding them. The scriptural analysis is that there is no benefit in focusing on clean/unclean food issues, and that it is a waste of brain space worrying about them.
- **Carried away** - It seems that people as a whole get perspectives that are “out of whack,” and are also happy to propagate those to anyone willing to listen. Jesus, for example, healed a woman bent double on the Sabbath in a synagogue. The synagogue official, whose views were not about to be contravened by the events that had just happened at Jesus’ hands, stood up and authoritatively stated, “There are six days in which work should be done; therefore come during them and get healed, and not on the Sabbath day” (Luke 14:14). Just as Paul explained to Timothy: “they do not understand what they are saying or the matters about which they make confident assertions” (I Timothy 1:7). That’s why the writer of the Hebrew epistle warns the brethren not to be “carried away” by all these teachings about food and drink and regulations of the Law for the body.
- **Heart strengthened** - The heart is “programmable”; that is, what might be called “heart issues” can be solved through re-programming or renewing the mind. If a Christian is headed toward discouragement, he is about to “lose heart” (Galatians 6:9). The heart of the saint, then, is to be “strengthened through grace”; all the good things which God supplies are to be used to encourage the brother or sister. The Father is willing to supply forgiveness, a second opportunity, and the Holy Spirit to assist the saint in his fight of faith, along with many other tools out of the treasury of His wisdom.

The “acceptable service with reverence and awe” is not going to be focused on what kinds of foods are clean or unclean; those who made those issues a priority “were not benefited.” A heart that is strengthened by grace rather than struggling under law is the one that is able to charge into the spiritual warfare against the forces of darkness, which is the true spiritual service of a new covenant priest.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Spiritual Altar

Altars undoubtedly go back to the time of Adam and Eve, although the first direct mention of an altar is when Noah offered some clean animals to the Lord in thanksgiving after deliverance from the Flood. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob all built altars that were approved by the Lord, and offered their sacrifices. But Satan worked in the minds of men, and duplicated those early altars and twisted the terms so that the sacrifices were offered to demons rather than to God. Hence with the coming of the Law of Moses, the details for the altar and specifications for the sacrifices were spelled out for Israel.

It took God almost 1000 years to drive idolatry out of Israel. What became the northern nation was wiped out by the Assyrians in finality in 722 BC because of their idolatry. The southern nation, Judah, had to be taken into captivity by the Babylonians until they learned that sacrifices were not to be offered at the “high places,” but that the only approved altar was the one at the temple in Jerusalem. The Jews developed their synagogues, then, in order to have the Law read out loud to the people, and so that they would hold to the Law and the attendant customs.

- **Misguided intentions** - While the goal of the Pharisees, for example, was to help the people understand and observe the Law, those intentions got twisted or misguided. The emphasis on the external — food, drink, circumcision, feast days — resulted in the people’s going through outward motions but without coming to know the God for whom these things were to be done. The emphasis on clean and unclean foods did not strengthen their hearts spiritually. And those who ate of the offerings at the altar were not profited in their priestly service; “Accordingly both gifts and sacrifices are offered,” was the previous comment of Hebrews’ author, “which cannot make him who performed the service perfect in conscience” (Hebrews 9:9).
- **The Lord’s Supper** - In working to free the Corinthian Christians from the vestiges of idolatry, the apostle Paul described the Lord’s Supper. The loaf and the cup, he said, were the saints’ participation in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. To make his point, he brought forth some details in the service of the priests in Israel as well as the pagan priests who offered their meat on the altars to idols. “Look at the nation Israel,” he directed. “Are not those who eat the sacrifices sharers in the altar?” (I Corinthians 10:18). The priest, then, who ate a portion of the sin offering, for example, was a participant in the altar. Likewise, anyone who ate of the meat offered at one of the pagan altars was participant in that pagan altar. “The things which the Gentiles sacrifice,” was Paul’s inspired perspective, “they sacrifice to demons, and not to God; and I do not want you to become sharers in demons” (I Corinthians 10:20). The parallelism is this: that when a believer participates in the Lord’s Supper, he is participating in the sacrifice of Christ; he is a sharer in the spiritual altar foreshadowed by the old covenant sacrifices.
- **We have an altar** - Under the terms of the new covenant, every Christian is a priest. As the Old Testament priests got their living from “the altar,” just so the saint stays alive through his participation in the true altar wherein the blood of Christ is available. “We have an altar,” adverted Hebrews’ author, “from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat” (Hebrews 13:10). This is an amazing statement, and a blockbuster to those who still thought the physical offerings were the ones that were significant.

“We,” the saints of the new covenant, “offer to God and acceptable service with reverence and awe.” At the core of this service is our participation in the true altar — wherein the sacrifice of Christ is demonstrated in the emblems of the Lord’s Supper — and we need to elevate it in our understanding to the tremendous privilege it is!

Outside the Camp

God is the perfect communicator, and He worked for years to develop words and concepts which would be understood by His people. The apostle Paul, exponent of the gospel of God and chosen to be one of the communicators of the written word, explained: “Now we [meaning those inspired men such as the apostles] have received, not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might know the things freely given to us by God, which things we also speak, not in words taught by human wisdom, but in those taught by the Spirit, combining spiritual thoughts with spiritual words” (I Corinthians 2:11,12). Those of us who follow the lead of the apostles do not receive those spiritual thoughts and spiritual words directly; we must read them, ponder over them, have them expounded to us, and come to understand them. Hence we come to comprehend the marvelous interplay between the old covenant writings and the great spiritual truths revealed in the new covenant writings.

- **Israel’s camp** - When Israel left Egypt, they were nomads in the wilderness for forty years. The Almighty, having brought them out with His mighty hand and outstretched arm, gave specific instructions as to their camping arrangements. This setting became known as “the camp.” For example, instructions were given in regard to the unclean: “Command the sons of Israel,” stated the Lord to Moses, “that they send away from the camp every leper and everyone having a discharge and everyone who is unclean because of a dead person” (Numbers 5:2). This was called “outside the camp” (Numbers 5:3).
- **Burning outside the camp** - In order for the animals for sacrifice to be offered, the hides and non-sacrificial refuse had to be handled. In the case of the sin offering, as representative, “the hide of the bull and all its flesh with its head and its legs and its entrails and is refuse, that is, all the rest of the bull, he [the priest] is to bring out to a clean place outside the camp where the ashes are poured out, and burn it on wood with fire” (Leviticus 4:12). The writer of the Hebrew epistle, after noting the parallel between the old testament altar and that of the new covenant, accords, “For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp” (Hebrews 13:11).
- **Jesus, outside the gate** - So what parallel would the writer be pointing to? “Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood,” the writer delineates, “suffered outside the gate” (Hebrews 13:12). What an insight! Though Jesus’ blood was offered in the true holy place, heaven itself, His body like those of the old covenant had to be disposed of “outside the gate,” outside the confines of the “camp,” meaning the city of Jerusalem. He suffered and died outside of the fellowship of those in “the camp,” the nation Israel.
- **Joining Him** - The writer of this letter is now able to bring closure to an issue which has underlain the whole topic and tenor of the epistle. What is the relationship between the physical nation Israel (what remained of it) and these Hebrew Christians? “Hence,” he writes, drawing on the carefully exegeted parallels, “let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach” (Hebrews 13:13). Leave Israel behind! is his exhortation. Move on into the full blessings of the new covenant, bearing whatever reproach or suffering is necessary from the hands of the blinded physical nation.

What the Hebrew Christian experienced is a foreshadow of what will happen to the modern Christian. As the Jews rejected the Messiah, and the vultures fed at the rotting carcass of a dead Judaism, just so the world is rejecting the Messiah, and the vultures likewise will feed at the rotting carcass of a spiritually dead world. As the day of Roman judgment approached, so the day of God’s final judgment approaches. So what shall we do? “Let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The City to Come

“Why” is more important than “what.” As important as it is to do what is right and holy and good and productive, why it is being done is even more important. Without the proper “why,” there is no motivation for getting all the “what’s” done. The word of God, then, is going to spend many of its verses providing the proper “why’s” for God’s people, that they will be supremely motivated to carry out God’s will in a joyful fashion.

The apostle Paul, in discussing the question as to whether there is a resurrection from the dead, mentioned his fights with the animals in the colosseum at the capital of the Roman province of Asia: “If from human motives I fought with the wild beasts at Ephesus,” he asked, “what does it profit me?” In the same section, he asked a rhetorical question in regard to his suffering, “Why,” he emphasized, “are we also in danger every hour?” (I Corinthians 15:32,30). His overall point was that if there is no resurrection of the dead, there would be no motivation for him to go through all that suffering in getting the gospel to the lost. “Why” is more important than “what”!

- **Strangers and exiles** - The struggle in the mind of the “weary pilgrim” as he makes his trek through earthly life is whether he is going to be motivated by the upward call of heaven or be pulled downward by the gravity of earth’s attractions and interests. The writer of Hebrews has already referenced that Christians, walking a path primitively traced out by the Old Testament greats, confess that they are “strangers and exiles upon the earth” (Hebrews 11:13). Their desire — their why — affirmed the writer, is a heavenly country. They could have turned back to earth in their affections, but because they looked forward to the heavenly realm, God is not ashamed to be their God and “has prepared a city for them” (Hebrews 11:16).
- **Bearing His reproach** - The writer of the epistle has just painted a picture of Jesus’ suffering “outside the gate.” The very word outside conjures up a dark scene — alone, forsaken, bereft! The exhortation for the brethren, then, is: “Hence, let us go to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach.” The general thrust of this section of the epistle is the writer’s earlier statement, “Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe.” Part of the saint’s service to God as a priest of the order of Melchizedek is to “suffer outside the gate” with the Lord, to set aside the temporary appeals of earthly life and go for the gold of the eternal city!
- **The city to come** - The Holy Spirit continues to emphasize the importance of eternity in this letter to the Hebrew brethren. “For here,” notes the inspired author, in reference to living on terra firma, “we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come” (Hebrews 13:14). The challenge for many is that the eternal city seems too far off, too distant, something that will never come. Satan is then able to dangle some trinket in front of the eyes of such a weak pilgrim, and he pulls aside from his trek toward glory and turns to the mirage of an earthly oasis. But the stranger and exile who can keep his focus on the shimmer of the city which cannot be seen, but whose lights do reflect in the mind of the believer, will press on to victory!

The ultimate why for the Christian is to dwell in the eternal city of God! That’s why Paul could stand in the ring with the lions in Ephesus. That’s why Peter would exhort the brethren to look for new heavens and a new earth. That’s why John would assist the brethren so that they might have confidence in the day of judgment. That’s why Jesus resurrected from the dead, and has gone to prepare a place for us!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Spiritual Sacrifices

Worship of God is spiritual under the terms of the new covenant. It is worthy of note to recall that the only direct reference to worship under the terms of the new covenant was Jesus' statement that those who worship God must worship in Spirit and in truth (John 4:23,24). But writer of Hebrews has a great picture of how this worship is taking place, describing how saints "have the confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus" (Hebrews 10:19). By faith, the disciples of Jesus have been raised up with Christ and are sitting with Him on His heavenly throne; they have been ushered into the presence of the Majesty on high! Here, parallel to the picture of the twenty-four elders of Revelation, they cast their crowns before the great God, and worship Him who lives forever and ever. Because it is in the realm of faith, this worship is "in spirit and in truth."

Service to God under the terms of the new covenant is action carried out in the body. "Present your bodies," said the apostle Paul, "a living and holy sacrifice" (Romans 12:1). This presentation of the body to the Lord is the "spiritual service" (or the logical type of service you would expect for a spiritually oriented covenant). In other words, the body is to be offered to the Lord at all times under all circumstances. Hence, where anything connected with the body of the saint is involved, the proper term for the action is this service, and would fit in the list under the heading described in the book of Hebrews: "Offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe" (Hebrews 12:28).

- **Sacrifice of praise** — The Old Testament priest offered up the sin offerings, peace offerings, grain offerings, etc., to the Lord at the altar before the tabernacle of Moses or later at the temple in Jerusalem. This service of the Old Testament priesthood set the stage for the offerings the Lord really desires from the priesthood that is really capable of serving Him. As the Old Testament priests were of the order of Aaron and served under the high priest, so the New Testament priests are of the order of Melchizedek and serve under the headship of the High Priest of this order, Jesus Himself. "Through Him then," exhorts the author of Hebrews, "let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name" (Hebrews 13:15). Two items, commonly but mistakenly called worship, come under this heading of "sacrifice of praise": singing and praying. These are to be done continually, on a regular and repeated basis, including but not limited to times of the assemblies of the saints.
- **Doing good and sharing** — "And do not neglect doing good and sharing, for with such sacrifices God is pleased" (Hebrews 13:16). The goal of the true Christian is for God to be happy with his conduct, attitude, and priorities. Doing good is high on His list; the Father wants His children to go out of their way to help someone else, to go the extra mile in assisting someone. Jesus Himself "went about doing good"; His disciples should go and do likewise! The sharing mentioned in this verse has to do with financial contributions. The church in Philippi, for example, "shared" with Paul "in the matter of giving and receiving" (Philippians 4:15). Brethren are exhorted to share their toys and their pennies like good children of God, including but not limited to times of the assemblies of the saints.

The true sacrifices acceptable to God were not those offered by the Old Testament priests. God earnestly desires His people to do good, to share, to be ready for every good deed. He loves to hear the sacrifice of praise, coming from the lips of those who sing of His glories or who offer their praises in prayer. His ear is attentive to those who with thankful hearts confess the greatness of His name. Yes, with such sacrifices He is well pleased!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Obey Your Leaders

Is the church of the living God a structured or unstructured organization? Because of poor, unscriptural, or tyrannical leadership, some have concluded that there is no real structure for the local congregation, that the local church is a vague organism that somehow functions without being structured. Such thinking is not really in touch with human nature or how Christians act in partnership with each other. Even marriage, the most simple arrangement (believe it or not!) of human interaction, has to be structured, with the husband as head. The leadership of the church, then, originally was built on the foundation of the apostles and New Testament prophets (Jesus Himself being the chief cornerstone), and since then continues to consist of evangelists, pastors (elders) and teachers (Ephesians 4:11).

The congregation of the brethren in Jerusalem were exhorted, in the face of upcoming destruction from the hands of the Romans, to “offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe” (Hebrews 12:28). As the closing part of a broad list of such acceptable service, the writer of the epistle to the Hebrew Christians, under inspiration of the Spirit, writes: “Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” (Hebrews 13:17). The local congregation is structured, and needs to follow the direction of godly leaders.

- **Obedience to leadership** — If leadership is developed in the scriptural fashion, such leadership is much more likely to follow the example of Christ. “The Son of Man did not come to be served,” said the Master, “but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:28). True evangelists and shepherds are going to walk in those footsteps, “not lording it over those allotted to [their] charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (I Peter 5:3). These men will have come successfully through quite a number of tests to their character and faith, and will have earned the trust of those who follow them. Such “tested and trusted” leadership has demonstrated its concern for the eternity of the sheep, and its track record of good decisions is not to be set aside lightly.
- **Keep watch over your souls** — Every person is going to spend an eternity in either heaven or hell. Tested and trusted leadership honestly recognizes that point and has that concern as its primary consideration in its decisions and actions. Lost sheep need someone to go out and find them, and guide them to the safety of the church. New Christians need teaching and direction to show them how to live the successful Christian life and learn the principles of the word of God. The congregation as a whole needs continual shepherding to be aware of the wiles of the devil, and to continue to be pointed down the path of spiritual growth and seeking and saving the lost. Such men truly “keep watch” over the souls of the saints.
- **Accounting with joy** — At the Day of Judgment, there will be an accounting. The leadership of each of the Lord’s congregations will go over the membership of the flock of God allotted to their charge, and will give a report on each of the sheep. It will be important that the accounting be given in “joy,” because if the accounting is “with grief,” that means that said sheep is sent to the fires of the eternal hell.

The church in Jerusalem was about to undergo tremendous upheaval. In those types of situations, everyone has a different opinion and perspective as to what decisions need to be made. That is where the track record of such “tested and trusted” leadership is important; those men will be wise in the ways of the Lord, and in His wisdom make the right decisions. But the same principle is true in less extreme situations also. That is why the scriptural injunction is “Obey your leaders, and submit to them.”

Heavenward Through Hebrews

“Pray for Us”

There is a constant theme running throughout the new testament writings: PRAY! Jesus Himself led the way, praying early in the morning or all night. And in His example He taught us to address God as the Father, setting up an intimacy in prayer that would not have occurred to faithful followers if it were not for Jesus' opening that up that understanding. Saints are thus exhorted to pray for their daily bread and make petition on behalf of their national leaders. Disciples are instructed to devote themselves to prayer, keeping alert with an attitude of thanksgiving. They are to pray for the salvation of their enemies as well as for the eternity of their loved ones. The brethren are urged to make their entreaties for all men, or specifically praying that an apostle Paul might be delivered from his enemies. They are to ask for their own forgiveness and also for the rapid spread of the gospel. The children of God are invited to let their heavenly Father know their inner struggles and are exhorted to cast their anxieties upon the Almighty. Participants in the church of the living God are encouraged to pray at all times, under any circumstances, for all things in accordance with the will of God. The theme does constantly thread through the new testament writings: PRAY IN JESUS' NAME!

- **Hebrews' writer** — The writer of the epistle to the Hebrew brethren is no exception to the general pattern of those who wrote to the brethren in the new testament churches. We don't know for certain who he was; it seems certain that he was not an apostle since he did not hear the gospel directly from Jesus, but received it from someone else (Hebrews 2:3,4). It seems to be someone who associated with the same brethren as the apostle Paul, and who was working with a team in the vicinity of Rome. “Pray for us,” he writes, “for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things” (Hebrews 13:18). It was an amazingly good team that assembled to engage in the gospel onslaught on Rome; the writer could say with certainty that all of them had a good conscience! It is also significant that the writer mentions their desire to conduct themselves honorably in all aspects of their lives. Then, as now, there have been many who use the preaching and teaching of the gospel (often twisting it) for selfish purposes, and underneath their veneer are not honorable men or women at all. Saints who desire to follow Christ often need leadership and example to help them move forward. When those who are supposed to fill those positions are less than honorable, it is very destructive. Praise the Lord for this team of workers with the writer whose earnest desire was to conduct themselves in a manner worthy of Christ!
- **Prayer for restoration** — The writer of the Hebrew epistle was known to the brethren in Jerusalem, and intended to rejoin them and work among them in the near future. “And I urge you all the more to do this,” he stated, referencing his asking them to pray for him and his partners in the gospel, “that I may be restored to you the sooner” (Hebrews 13:19). This is an amazing request; the writer has spent numerous passages warning the Hebrew brethren of the upcoming destruction, and now asks them to pray that he can join them shortly instead of asking them to pray that he can be moved to London and far away from the fray!

The true love and concern the writer has for his brethren in Judea really shines through. His desire that they remain faithful to the principles of the new covenant is manifest, and his request that they pray for him and his fellow participants in the gospel shows his true fellowship with them. The brethren clearly knew him well, and thus his warnings in this epistle would have had maximum impact on the saints to learn and to continue to move forward.

Heavenward Through Hebrews

The Eternal Covenant

The book of Hebrews explains the shadows, the shadows that were cast backward in time. It is hard for us, time bound and locked in to the limitations of our reason, to understand a God who transcends time. “I am God,” said He, “and there is no one like Me, declaring the end from the beginning” (Isaiah 46:9,10). Before the events happen, He knows them; before the formation of the material universe, He had His plan. Of Christ He stated, “For He was foreknown before the foundation of the world, but has appeared in these last times for the sake of you” (I Peter 1:20). Hence it was that the true spiritual things really existed; the light of God’s glory shone on them, and they cast their shadow backwards in time into the types of the Old Testament writings. The “true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched and not man,” cast its shadow backward and the result was the tabernacle of Moses, pitched by man first in the deserts of Midian. Even “the new creation,” formed in the waters of immersion and brought forth by the Spirit, cast its shadow backward to the very first day of creation, wherein the physical creation was formed out of waters as the Spirit of God moved over them. Thus the covenant of Christ always was “the eternal covenant.”

- **Raising the Shepherd** — The Father raised Jesus from the dead, as evidenced by many scriptures. Jesus raised Himself from the dead, as He indicated in noting that He had authority to lay His life down, and authority to take it up again. And the Spirit was also involved in Jesus’ resurrection. But the writer of Hebrews brings a new perspective into Jesus’ ascension as High Priest and King. “Now the God of peace,” he informs us, “who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord ...” (Hebrews 13:20). There are some amazing concepts downloaded into this portion of the sentence! First, the idea of saints’ being sheep — mentioned in other books of the Bible — is reaffirmed. Then, there is the heavenly perception that Jesus is the great Shepherd of those sheep, guiding and directing them, accomplishing His work through spiritual leaders in the church. And then, there is the blockbuster that it was the blood that raised Jesus from the dead! That would be powerful blood!
- **The eternal covenant** — The covenant of Christ, therefore, was in existence before the foundation of the world. This covenant, centered in the power of the Mediator, or the Executor, of that will, was the one that cast its shadow backward to form the types of what is called the Old Covenant, because that one was the first to be clearly revealed to man. “However, the spiritual is not first,” is the principle as advanced by the apostle Paul, “but the natural; then the spiritual” (I Corinthians 15:46). Man has to have the physical, a hands-on concept, first; only then can he begin to grasp the great spiritual truths which were in God before the foundation of the world. Hence, “the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things,” served as a means by which the Almighty could communicate the spiritual blessings and power found in the covenant of Christ. The God of peace used the blood of the eternal covenant to raise up Jesus from the dead and seat Him in the position of power.

One of the main purposes of the book of Hebrews was to assist the Hebrew brethren in moving their attentions from the trappings of the covenant of Moses to the spiritual aspects of the covenant of Christ. The temple, the sacrifices, and the priesthood of the Old Covenant were ready to disappear in the Roman destruction. Their focus should thus be shifted upward, and they should be ready to fix their attention on Jesus on the throne, where all things connected with the blood of the eternal covenant had their powerful and continuing effects!

Heavenward Through Hebrews

Equipping the Sheep

The God of peace is powerful in His peace. The lack of peace on earth is not due to the character of God, but as a result of the rebellion of Satan and his minions, with willing participation on the part of man. God is so much the God of peace that He has been willing to make major steps in reaching out to wayward man. He reconciles him so that there is peace between God and the individual, and retrains that individual so that he also is now an ambassador for the peace of God. The God of peace, in order to establish His divine peace as the permanent and all abiding ambience of eternity, eventually will have to crush Satan under the feet of the saints. But as a major preparatory step, He raised Jesus from the dead by the blood of His eternal covenant. The devil and his angels were cast from the courts of heaven into the darkness of Tartarus, Jesus as high priest cleansed heaven, and then Jesus as the Messiah took His throne at the right hand of the Majesty on high.

- **Equipping the saints** — The children of light need to remember that they have been called out of darkness for the purpose of proclaiming the glories of Him who so called them. Brethren, in called to the peace of God, need to remember that their purpose is to be ambassadors of peace for the great God who is in the process of reconciling all men to Himself, if they are willing for the reconciliation to take place. Hence, as those who once were rebellious and agitated, the disciples of Christ need re-educated in the gentle and peaceful ways of Author of the gospel of peace. The prayer, then, of the writer of Hebrews is that, for the brethren, God would “equip you in every good thing to do His will” (Hebrews 13:21). It is the good things done on behalf of men — even and especially when they don’t deserve those good things — that are the olive branches of peace. Many times the branch is rudely brushed away and the proffer of peace is summarily rejected. The brethren need to be equipped in patience, in kindness, in confidence, in courage, in people skills, so that they can keep the message of peace moving through the masses of men.
- **Working that which is pleasing** — The gospel of God is not just concerned about forgiving the sins of those who will obey that gospel. Forgiveness brushes away past barriers, setting the stage for a specially equipped people who will be able to carry God’s positive plan of reconciliation to a confused and hostile world. The conscience is cleansed, we are reminded, “from dead works to serve the living God.” But the brethren need some supernatural help to accomplish this lofty and challenging purpose. Thus it is that the prayer of the writer continues, adding his desire that the Almighty be “working in us that which is pleasing in His sight” (Hebrews 13:21). How awesome it is that God would be doing His work “in us,” that we are not left on our own strength to try to carry out those things which are pleasing to Him.

How would we quantify those “good things” that accomplish His will? How would we reference those qualities which God works in us to perform what is pleasing to Him? No short list will do; it requires all the writings of the New Testament, buttressed by the lessons and shadows of the Old. Therefore, all this is to be accomplished “through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen” (Hebrews 13:21). This world has been prepared through Him, by Him, and for Him. The recipient of the mercy of God, extended through the sacrifice and intercessory priesthood of Christ, thus willingly allows God to work in him so that all the glory redounds to the Son of God! There is no higher calling.

Closing Comments

The Holy Spirit is the master communicator. The New Testament is the most compact and orderly communication of information in the entire universe, drawing on the principles, prophecies, and historical proclamations of the Old Testament. The modern disciple of Christ, then, has the entire wisdom of God — everything pertaining to life and godliness — in a small volume that he can carry in his pocket, if necessary, or she in her purse. And the book of Hebrews plays a key role in this communication. Without this epistle to the brethren of Judea, we would not have a clear understanding of the purpose of the Old Testament temple and its attendant sacrifices, nor would we understand Jesus' position as our high priest according to the order of Melchizedek. The letter, maybe more than any other, helps us move from the realm of the physical to the realm of the spiritual, using the types and foreshadows of the old covenant to teach us the tremendous significance of the power of new covenant imagery. But the Holy Spirit, knowing His overall plan to bring the word of God to the world in this one handy, portable volume, made sure every written word was finely honed.

- **Brief exhortation** — The writer knows that he would like to say more and give more details. But written communication requires that thoughts be crystallized and compacted into the smallest amount of space; there is no room for rambling when you are handwriting a letter in the Greek language — all capital letters, and run together with transition words making the line of demarcation between sentences. The writer thus comments: “But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly” (Hebrews 13:22). The word of exhortation was serious; the writer appealed repeatedly to the brethren to maintain their faith through the upcoming difficult times. And the exhortation was based on the powerful principles of Jesus' superiority over all aspects of the Law of Moses and its appurtenances.
- **Timothy** — The writer of this epistle was an associate of those who worked with the apostle Paul. “Take notice,” he says, “that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you” (Hebrews 13:23). It is interesting that, in spite of the upcoming persecutions that were about to burst upon the brethren in Jerusalem, that Timothy and the writer were planning on coming to encourage them in person. It is also worthy of note that Timothy, following in the footsteps of his spiritual father, the apostle Paul, came in for his share of jail time, a point not brought out elsewhere in God's holy word.
- **Leaders** — Saints, living by faith but walking in the fleshly body, need to be organized. Without leadership, they could not or would not accomplish much of note. Hence, the writer, having already mentioned that the brethren were to submit to their leaders, takes a moment in closing to make a point of emphasis: “Greet all of your leaders,” he pens, “and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you” (Hebrews 13:24). The letter, then, was written from Rome. And appropriately, the epistle closes with a typical but important prayer, “Grace be with you all” (Hebrews 13:25).

Thus ends one of the great documents of all history. The writer opened with a sweeping view of Jesus as the great Son and spokesman of God, co-Creator of the heavens and earth. Having been made for a little while lower than the angels, He ascended to the throne of God, the high priest ministering in the true tabernacle, executor of the new covenant, the One who intercedes for the sons of men. He is superior to the angels, His work exceeds the combined efforts of Moses and Joshua, and His sacrifice and offering of that sacrifice cleansed the heavenly things rather than just the earthly things. Furthermore, He offers to the priests of the new covenant opportunity to also enter into the true holy place, having certain access by faith to the great and eternal God. The message: hold fast to the terms of the eternal covenant, offering Him service with appropriate reverence and awe!