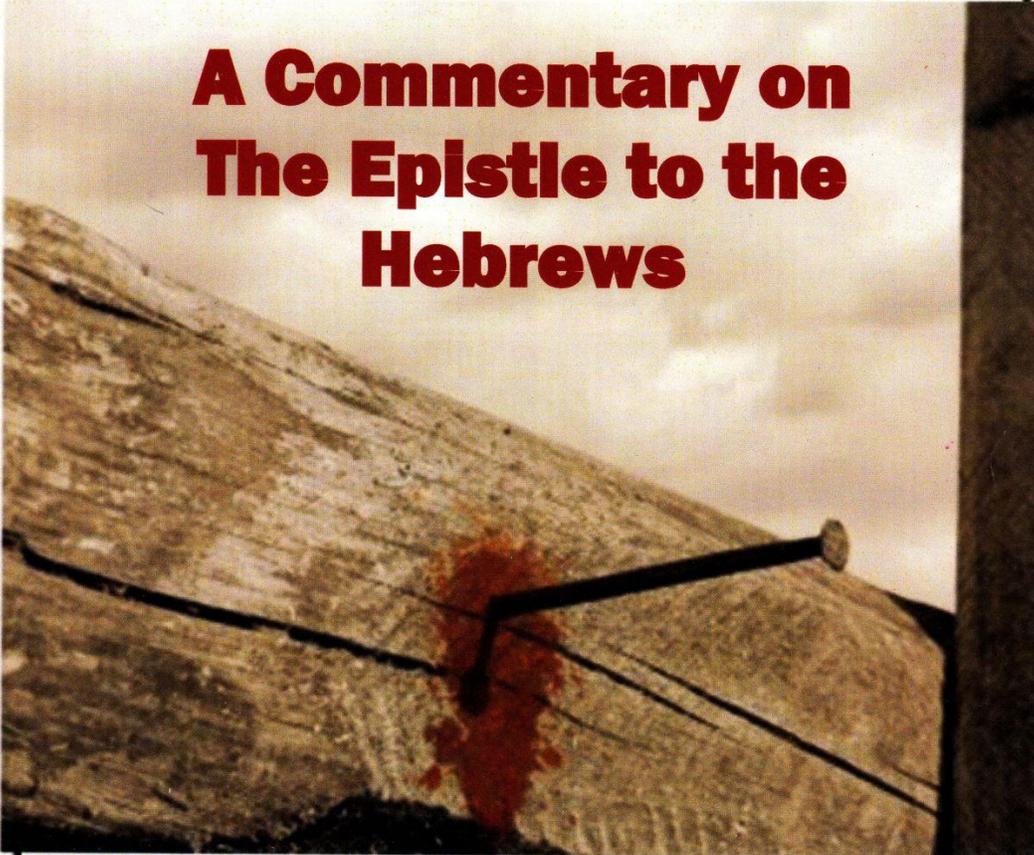


The Blood of a Better Covenant

**A Commentary on
The Epistle to the
Hebrews**



J. Paul Tanner

ThM, PhD

Contents

Preface	3
Abbreviations	4
An Introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews	5
Date of Composition	5
Authorship	6
Background and Setting	6
Purpose of the Epistle	8
I. The Prologue (Heb 1:1-4)	8
II. The Superior Person of Jesus Guaranteeing the Superiority of the New Covenant (Heb 1:5--7:28)	10
A. The Son's Superiority to the Angels who Mediated the Old Covenant Revelation (Heb 1:5--2:18)	10
1. The Son's superiority to the angels proven (Heb 1:5-14)	10
2. The first warning--not to neglect our future salvation (Hebrews 2:1-4)	12
3. Reasons the Son was briefly lower than the angels (Heb 2:5-18)	14
B. The Son's Superiority (as High Priest) to Moses and Joshua, Leaders of the Old Covenant (Heb 3:1--5:10)	17
1. The importance of being faithful to the High Priest of the New Covenant (Heb 3:1--4:13)	17
2. The help available from the merciful High Priest of the New Covenant (Hebrews 4:14--5:10)	26
C. The Superiority of the Son's Priestly Ministry Over the Levitical Priests (Heb 5:11--7:28) .	29
1. Confrontation and motivation to move on to maturity (Heb 5:11--6:20)	30
2. The superiority of Jesus as High Priest of the Order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-28)	37
III. The Superior Ministry of Jesus and The Sacrifice of Himself Guaranteeing the Superiority of the New Covenant (Heb 8:1--10:39)	43
A. The Foretelling of the New Covenant That Would Bring Forgiveness of Sins (Heb 8:1-13)	43
B. The Perfect Sacrifice of the New Covenant Presented in the Heavenly Tabernacle (Heb 9:1-28)	45
C. The Adequacy of Christ's Sacrifice for Eternal Forgiveness Contrasted to the Inefficacy of the Sacrifices under the Law (Heb 10:1-18)	51
D. The Proper Response to Christ's Superior Sacrifice: Believers Must Endure in Their Allegiance and Service to Jesus Christ (Heb 10:19-39)	54
IV. The Means and Responsibilities of New Covenant Life (Heb 11:1--13:17)	64

A. The Life of Faith That Pleases God and Brings Reward (Heb 11:1-40)	64
B. The Benefit of Discipline in the Quest to Endure (Heb 12:1-13)	73
C. A Final Warning to be Faithful to the New Covenant (Heb 12:14-29)	76
D. Spiritual Sacrifices Appropriate for New Covenant Believers (Heb 13:1-17)	80
V. The Epilogue to the Epistle (Heb 13:18-25)	85

Preface

Writing a commentary on The Epistle to the Hebrews has proved to be a daunting task, even though this work is only of modest length and technicality. At the same time, I cannot convey strongly enough what joys I have received in the study, reflection, and writing of this commentary. I trust that the reader will find much benefit in the following pages, and that whatever insight that might be gained will lead him or her to a closer walk with the Lord Jesus, for whose glory this has been prepared.

The English version of this commentary was originally written for the ministry of BEE World using the NET Bible as the primary biblical text. To help make the commentary more beneficial for a broader audience, all Greek and Hebrew words have been transliterated.

J. Paul Tanner

Abbreviations

AD	anno Domini (“in the year of our Lord”); reference to years since the birth of Christ
BC	"before Christ"; reference to the years preceding the birth of Christ
BDAG	The 3rd edition of <i>A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature</i> (by Walter Bauer, W. F. Arndt, F. W. Gingrich, and F. W. Danker; revised and edited by Frederick William Danker; The Univ. of Chicago Press, 2000)
cf.	compare
e.g.	for example
esp.	especially
Eng	English
ff	following (usually refers to "following verses")
Gk	Greek
Heb	Hebrew
i.e.	that is
lit.	literally
LSJM	The 1996 updated 9th edition of <i>A Greek-English Lexicon</i> (compiled by Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott; Oxford: Clarendon Press)
LXX	The Septuagint (the Greek translation tradition of the Old Testament)
Macc	Maccabees (books found among the Apocrypha)
NASB	New American Standard Bible

NIV	New International Version
NKJV	New King James Version
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament
Sir	Wisdom of Ben Sira (a book of the Apocrypha)
p	page
pp	pages
v	verse
vv	verses
viz.	namely

An Introduction to the Epistle to the Hebrews

The Epistle to the Hebrews is one of the most theologically profound books of the entire Bible. It exalts the person of Christ, His work on the Cross, His ministry as a high priest, and it anticipates His return to reign over His kingdom. Yet in the early church this epistle was slow to be accepted as part of the NT canon, and at times it was even listed among the disputed books. This was largely due to the debate concerning the authorship of the epistle. Today, however, Hebrews is clearly recognized as a legitimate part of the NT. It is also significant for the contribution it makes to discussions about salvation, perseverance, eternal security, the matter of rewards and what it means to reign with Christ.

Date of Composition

Since Clement of Rome (c. AD 95-96) makes a clear reference to the epistle, it is certainly to be dated prior to this time (see 1 Clement 36:1-5). Internal references in the epistle, moreover, suggest that it was written prior to the destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish temple in AD 70. Since the author strives to prove the superiority of Jesus' sacrifice to the Levitical sacrifices of the Old Covenant, he would certainly have pointed out the temple's destruction to support his case. That he does not suggests he wrote before this happened. Furthermore, other verses in the book (e.g., Heb 8:4; 13:10) imply that the temple was still standing and the sacrificial system was operational.

Another possible clue to the book's date is the reference to Timothy's imprisonment in Heb 13:23. Most likely this is the same Timothy who ministered with the Apostle Paul. Yet the NT does not refer elsewhere to an imprisonment of Timothy, although Phil 2:19-20 might allow for it. In any case, it is doubtful that Timothy was imprisoned prior to Paul's own imprisonment. Paul's first Roman imprisonment is probably to be dated AD 60-62, implying that Hebrews would not be earlier than this. The likelihood, then, is that Hebrews was written between AD 60 and 70. If Timothy's imprisonment is after Paul's last epistle (since there is no clear reference to it in Paul's writings), then Hebrews may have been written after Paul's own martyrdom, perhaps about AD 68-69.

Authorship

The authorship of Hebrews has always been a controversial issue. Of course, the Apostle Paul has always been one of the prime candidates. Since there is no salutation for the epistle naming the author (as is customary for Paul's writings), we cannot be certain of the author.

There are many arguments for and against Pauline authorship, far more than can be listed here.

Obviously, the author's profound insights into the Old Testament and his acquaintance with Timothy (Heb 13:23) would argue in favor of Paul. In the Eastern Church, Pauline authorship was typically assumed from early on, certainly as early as Clement of Alexandria (c. AD 155--AD 220). Origen (c. AD 185--AD 254) frankly admitted that only God knows the true author. The Western Church tended to reject Pauline authorship for quite some time, at least until the time of Jerome and Augustine in the 4th century AD. Today, however, scholars tend to reject the notion of Paul as the author. The Greek of the epistle is more literary and polished than is typical of Paul, and there are significant vocabulary differences between Paul's other writings and Hebrews.

Numerous other suggestions have been put forward, including Barnabas, Apollos, and Luke. Despite the immense amount of scholarly effort that has been expended on solving this issue, it still remains a mystery. Though the author cannot be identified with any certainty this does not detract from the book's inspiration. There can be no doubt that this is revelation from God and is a vital part of the NT Scriptures.

Background and Setting

The epistle contains some 34-40 quotations from the OT, in addition to many OT allusions. We also observe that the author is exceedingly burdened to show the superiority of the New Covenant in regard to the Old Covenant established at Sinai. Along with this, he strives to prove the superiority of Christ's

sacrifice, and the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood to the Levitical. Finally, in Hebrews 13:13 he calls for the readers to go "outside the camp," bearing the reproach of Jesus (see commentary on this verse). This seems to be a call for the readers to make a decisive break with Judaism and all its legalistic system in order to identify with Jesus and the new program of God through the New Covenant. Taken together, all this points to a predominantly Jewish audience.

Furthermore, and most importantly for the interpretation of the book, the readers are identified as *genuine believers* who possess eternal life in Jesus Christ. This is an important point, since some commentators (especially those in the Reformed tradition) assert that the strong warnings in the epistle are not really addressed to Christians, but rather to those who have only *professed* a faith in Christ without truly being saved. Yet in Hebrews 3:1, they are called "holy brothers." An analogy is drawn between the present readers and the wilderness generation (Heb 3:16-19), most of whom were undoubtedly regenerate (see Exod 14:31). The readers who are seriously warned in Hebrews 6:4-6 are the same as those who ought by now to be teachers (Heb 5:12). This suggests that their problem is their lack of maturity, not of personal salvation from the penalty of sin (i.e., imputed righteousness). Earlier, the readers had demonstrated faithfulness, even at the expense of suffering for their faith (see Heb 6:10; 10:32-24). Finally, the stress of the book is on endurance, holding fast one's confession, and maintaining faith (Heb 10:36), all of which would be possible only for believers.

The author seems to be writing to a particular community, not just to Jewish Christians in general. The readers have a definite history (Heb 6:10; 10:32-34) and the author intended to visit them (Heb 13:23). It seems that some of their spiritual leaders had already died (Heb 13:7), with the result that the readers were drifting away from their teachings (Heb 13:9). Some had even begun to forsake meeting with fellow believers for worship (Heb 10:25).

There is also evidence that the readers had been undergoing significant trials and persecutions (Heb 10:32-34), though apparently not yet to the point of martyrdom (Heb 12:4). Yet they were growing weary in their Christian pilgrimage and were tempted to give up. The author was concerned that their spiritual wavering and immaturity might result in hardened hearts and outright rebellion against God (Heb 5:11; 3:12). He was also concerned that if this were not reversed, their rebellion might incite God's judgment against them (Heb 4:11; 10:26-31). Their endurance in faith, on the other hand, would result in obtaining God's promises, rewards, and blessings in the coming kingdom of Christ upon His return (Heb 6:11-12; 10:35-36).

Purpose of the Epistle

The Epistle of Hebrews is written to a particular community of Jewish Christians who were suffering for their faith and thus were growing weary and were being tempted to give up their confession. The author was warning them of the dangers of their present immaturity and the consequences of rebelling against Jesus, and therefore was seeking to motivate them to an enduring faith that would be greatly rewarded at the return of the Lord Jesus Christ. To accomplish this, the author uses numerous arguments for the superiority of the New Covenant, combined with warnings against covenant disobedience and rebellion that might bring God's judgment.

Commentary

I. The Prologue (Heb 1:1-4)

With the death of Christ, the New Covenant has now replaced the Old (Mosaic) Covenant. The prologue introduces several important themes related to the coming of the New Covenant. Some of these themes (e.g., the Son being better than the angels) will be further developed in the remainder of chapter 1. Others are further developed elsewhere--such as God's speaking through the Son (see Heb 2:1; 2:3; 12:25), His position at the Father's right hand in fulfillment of Psalm 110 (see Heb 8:1; 10:12; 12:2), and the Son's priestly work of purification of sins (see Heb 2:17; 5:6; and chaps. 7--10). The prologue conveys that God has given His ultimate revelation through the exalted Son of God, who as high priest has atoned for our sins and as King awaits His final inheritance. This prepares the readers for the challenge to be faithful to the Son and the New Covenant He has ushered in.

A. The Basic Assertion: God Has Made His Climactic Revelation (Heb 1:1-2a)

To say that **God has spoken to us in a son** means that He has made His climactic revelation to man through Jesus, the Son of God. Furthermore, He has done so **in these last days**, not the "end times," but, given the context of Hebrews, at this new stage in God's program that has been inaugurated by the New Covenant (see the expression "days are coming" in Jer 31:31).

B. The Supporting Assertion About the Son's Greatness (Heb 1:2b-3)

These verses depict the greatness of the Son's person and accomplishments, which serve to underscore the importance of that which God has now revealed through Him. First, the author mentions the Son's

appointment as **heir of all things**. This speaks of the Son's destiny, when in His future reign as King, He will receive His inheritance of a world-wide dominion (see Gen 1:26; Ps 72:8-11). The author is alluding to Psalm 2 (note Heb 1:5), which unites the thought of God's Son being King (Ps 2:6) with His inheritance of the nations (Ps 2:8). The OT anticipated that the kingdom would be given to the Son-Messiah (2 Sam 7:11-16; Isa 2:1-4; Dan 7:13-14). This destiny will be fully realized at His Second Coming (see Heb 1:6; 2:5; 9:28; 12:28). The Son's destiny also has profound implications for the readers, namely that those who faithfully endure with Christ will share in His inheritance and be rewarded.

Second, he mentions the Son's role in creation, **through whom he created the world** (see John 1:3; 1:10; Col 1:16). In contrast to His kingly role in the future, this looks to the distant past and His greatness "in the beginning." Since He is our Creator, He is entitled to be King and to demand our allegiance.

Third, He points out the Son's *nature* as God, being **the radiance of His glory and the representation of his essence**. The word *representation* translates the Greek word *charaktēr*, meaning a faithful representation (of God). The words *of His essence* translate the Greek word *hupostaseōs*, which stresses one's real being (what he fundamentally is). Together, these boldly state the Son's deity--He bears the glory of God and faithfully depicts His essence.

Fourth, not only is the Son the original Creator, but He currently **sustains** this creation by His all powerful word. Believers should obey His word (which is so powerful), and they can be assured of His ability to sustain them as they go through trials (see Heb 2:18).

Fifth, he points out the Son's atoning work for mankind, **cleansing for sins**. This looks to the Son's priestly work, in which He Himself became the very sacrifice that made purification from sins possible. This opening paragraph shows the Son to be both King and Priest, a combination that will be emphasized again in the epistle (see Heb 5:5-6). Since the purification of sins is complete, the Son has **sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high**, an obvious allusion to Psalm 110 (see Heb 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). In contrast to Old Covenant priests, He can sit down now that His priestly work is finished. Consequently He was given a place of supreme authority and highest honor at the time of His resurrection and ascension (see 1 Kgs 2:19).

C. The Conclusion to the Prologue (Heb 1:4)

The mention of **angels** links verse 4 with Hebrews 1:5-14. By tradition, angels were mediators in the giving of the Old Covenant (Heb 2:2; see Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19). The superiority of the Son over angels confirms that the revelation of the New Covenant is superior to and replaces that of the Old Covenant. Though the Son has always been superior to the angels, the author indicates that He **became so far better**

than the angels. With the completion of His redemptive work and His resurrection and exaltation to the Father's right hand, He has entered into the far superior role that the **superior name** of Son signifies.

II. The Superior Person of Jesus Guaranteeing the Superiority of the New Covenant (Heb 1:5–7:28)

In the first half of the epistle (Heb 1:5--7:28), the author looks back to the period of the OT, and makes comparisons between Jesus, who brought in the New Covenant, and several leading figures involved in the establishment and operation of the Old Covenant. He will compare Jesus (1) to the angels, who mediated the Old Covenant revelation; (2) to two key human leaders, first Moses (to whom the Law was given) and then Joshua (who led God's people to their "rest" in the land); and (3) to the Levitical priests (responsible for the priestly ministry under the old order). In each case, Jesus is seen to be superior, and thus the New Covenant established by Him must be superior to the Old Covenant.

A. The Son's Superiority to the Angels who Mediated the Old Covenant Revelation (Heb 1:5–2:18)

The comparison with angels is the central concern of this whole section, though the author will pause in Hebrews 2:1-4 to exhort the readers.

1. The Son's superiority to the angels proven (Heb 1:5-14)

In the remainder of chapter 1, the author gives a rapid-fire quotation of seven passages from the OT to substantiate the Son's superiority over the angels.

a. Psalm 2:7 and 2 Samuel 7:14 (Heb 1:5)

Hebrews 1:5. The author begins by linking Psalm 2:7 with 2 Samuel 7:14. The latter was one of the most crucial messianic verses in the OT, promising David that one of his descendants would eventually have an eternal throne-kingdom. This is called the Davidic Covenant. Psalm 2 is a highly messianic psalm written by David (note Acts 4:25-26), in which he envisions the fulfillment of the promises that had been made to him. Although earthly rulers have purposed to rebel against God's "Anointed One" (i.e., the Messiah), nevertheless God will install Him as King on the heavenly Mt. Zion, far above all (see Ps 2:6 with Heb 12:22). Thus, the promise in 2 Samuel 7:14 that the Davidic king would be **my son** finds its ultimate fulfillment in Messiah

Jesus, the Son *par excellence*. The author's main point is that this title “**my son**” was never given to any angel.

But when was the Messiah **fathered**? In Ancient Near Eastern thought, when a god elevated a person to kingship, the king assumed the status of being the deity's “first-born.” This analogy is applied to the Messiah in Psalm 89:3-4; 89:26-27. Therefore, this has nothing to do with physical birth or origin, but the time of coronation. The time of this begetting is **Today**, that unique occasion when the Messiah is elevated to the status of Davidic King. Note that Acts 13:33 connects Psalm 2:7 with the resurrection of Jesus. By His resurrection and ascension to the Father's right hand, Jesus has been declared “the Son of God” (see Rom 1:3-4), though He must await the Second Coming for the formal inauguration of His kingdom. Lastly, we should also note that Psalm 2 goes on to speak of Messiah's inheritance, “You have only to ask me, and I will give you the nations as your inheritance” (Ps 2:8). This is the basis by which the author can say that the Son has been “appointed heir of all things” (Heb 1:2). Clearly, no angel ever attained the honor that this Davidic Son has.

b. Ps 97:7 (Heb 1:6)

Hebrews 1:6. The source for this quotation is debated, but most likely it is drawn from the Septuagint text of Psalm 97:7. Psalm 97 is one of several *enthronement psalms* that look forward to the Lord's universal rule over the nations (note esp. Ps 96:13). The words **when He again brings** suggest that the author is thinking of the Second Coming event. The author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 97, because it contrasts the Son's reception at the Second Coming with the role the angels will have. The Son will be welcomed as the universal King, whereas angels will assist Him and worship before Him (see Matt 24:30-31; Rev 19:6; 19:14). It is important to note that from the outset of the book, the author is thinking of our Lord's return, an event having important implications for believers (*viz.*, rewards are in store for the faithful).

c. Psalm 104:4 and Psalm 45:6-7 (Heb 1:7-9)

Hebrews 1:7. In light of the Hebrew parallelism of Psalm 104:4, the first quotation is better translated “Who makes His angels **winds**” (so NIV and NASB) rather than “Who makes His angels *spirits*” (as in the NET Bible and NKJV). Like the wind and like a flame of fire, the angels are transitory. The Greek text suggests that verses 7 and 8 of Hebrews 1 are meant to be contrasted. Thus, in contrast to the Son's eternal throne (Heb 1:8), the angels have merely temporal roles to play as God's messengers (the Heb word translated “angel” basically means “messenger”).

Hebrews 1:8-9. Psalm 45:6 indicates that this eternal throne is for **God** (Heb *Elōhîm*), yet the author ascribes it to the Son. This verse not only points out the eternal nature of the dominion exercised by

the Son, but sharpens the contrast to angels by pointing out that the Son rules as God. Apparently the author of Hebrews extends the quotation to include Psalm 45:7, because of its mention of the king's **companions** (Gk *metochous*), a term he later applies to believers who participate in the heavenly calling to the New Jerusalem of the New Covenant (see Heb 3:1).

d. Psalm 102:25-27 (Heb 1:10-12)

Hebrews 1:10-12. Not even the creation itself is eternal, but the Son is. As Creator, He existed before the creation (v 10), and He will outlast it. In contrast to the eternal Son (whose **years will never run out**), the present creation is likened to an old outer **garment** to be **changed**. Yet when the present creation is destroyed, His kingdom will not be shaken (see Hebrews 12:27). He is the Creator of all, whereas the angels were created.

e. Psalm 110:1 (Heb 1:13)

Hebrews 1:13. The seventh and final quotation is drawn from Psalm 110:1, a prominent verse in the epistle (see Heb 1:3; 8:1; 10:12; 12:2). No angel was ever invited to sit at the Father's **right hand**, but the Son now sits in this exalted position.

f. Conclusion to Heb 1:5-14

Hebrews 1:14. The author concludes by pointing out that the angels are **ministering spirits** (v 7 in view). Unlike the Son whose destiny is King over an eternal throne-kingdom, the role of the angels is to minister, not reign. In fact, they minister to **those who will inherit salvation**. By *salvation*, our author is thinking not of our Lord's saving work on the Cross, but of a *future salvation* associated with His Second Coming (note the emphasis on the Second Coming in chapter 1). This is quite clear in light of his use of "salvation" in Hebrews 9:28, as well as his explicit mention in Hebrews 2:5 that he is speaking to the readers in regard to "the world to come." Although there is a salvation for believers to inherit, this can be jeopardized by their neglect (Heb 2:3). Thus, the author will pause in Hebrews 2:1-4 to warn his readers before continuing the discussion of the Son's superiority to angels.

2. The first warning--not to neglect our future salvation (Hebrews 2:1-4)

The word **Therefore** in Hebrews 2:1 connects this paragraph with chapter 1. Before continuing the discussion about angels, the author pauses to warn his readers of the failure to heed the superior revelation through the Son.

a. The danger of failing to heed (Heb 2:1)

Hebrews 2:1. In earlier times, God spoke at Mt. Sinai when the Old Covenant was given. Now God has spoken through the Son who has established the New Covenant. Thus believers must **pay closer attention** to these things (i.e., the revelation associated with the New Covenant), knowing they have the potential to **drift away** (Gk verb root *pararreō*). This verb (used only here in the NT) has the idea of something *drifting by*, as though it were being carried away by flowing water. The Greek translation (LXX) of Proverbs 3:21 uses this verb in reference to someone gradually departing from or losing sight of God's wisdom. This suggests that the fundamental nuance is of a *gradual* departure rather than an abrupt one. Nothing in the context suggests that unbelievers are in view, or that the danger is one of rejecting the offer of the gospel. Rather, true believers (note that the author includes himself) are capable of departing from what God has revealed through the New Covenant. Knowing that some of his audience had already become “sluggish in hearing” (Heb 5:11), he warns these believers that a subtle drift in their relationship with the Lord can lead to disaster in the Christian life (though the danger does not appear to be loss of personal salvation).

b. The analogy to recompense under the Old Covenant (Heb 2:2-3)

Hebrews 2:2. The **message spoken through angels** refers to the Mosaic Law that was given at Sinai, which angels were involved in mediating (see Acts 7:38; Gal 3:19). Under this Old Covenant administration, “curses” (divine discipline) were given for disobedience (see Deut 28:15-68; Lev 26:1-46). These were primarily temporal in nature, and could be experienced by true believers. The word translated **penalty** is the Greek noun *misthapodosia*, meaning “recompense” when used in an unfavorable context, as it is here. The point is that under the Law, every violation had its own recompense (a negative consequence or penalty).

Hebrews 2:3a. The author deduces that if even the Old Covenant mediated by angels had its consequences (or discipline) for disobedience, certainly the superior New Covenant brought in by God's Son would have even more severe consequences for those who disobey it. The believer who drifts away from Jesus and the New Covenant should stop to consider that he cannot **escape** the consequences of such a choice. The author does not state what these consequences might be, though he will have more to say later about God's discipline for the believer (in chapter 12). To **neglect** (Gk verb *ameleō*) means to be careless or cease to be concerned about something (see Jer 38:32 in LXX

=Jer 31:32 in Eng). [The reader should be aware that the verse numbering in both the Greek LXX and the Hebrew text often differs from that in our Bible translations today]. Yet the object of neglect is **such a great salvation**. The word *salvation* (Gk *sōtēria*) is not limited in meaning to what occurs at the moment of initial faith in Christ, but sometimes focuses on the climactic aspect that takes place at the Lord's Second Coming. It is used this way, for instance, in Hebrews 9:28 (see Rom 13:11; 1 Pet 1:5). The reference in Hebrews 1:14 to “inheriting salvation” and in Hebrews 2:5 to “the world to come” confirm that the author is thinking of this eschatological sense of the word.

Our Lord began His ministry by proclaiming “the kingdom of God” that was near (Matt 4:17), though He later revealed that it would not be fully inaugurated until His return (see Matt 25:31; 25:34; Luke 21:31). Thus, to neglect “such a great salvation” does not mean a rejection of the gospel, but rather a failure to properly care about the future aspect of our salvation connected with our Lord's Second Coming and kingdom. Later in the epistle he will clarify how this *neglect* takes place. Believers can do this by failing to endure in their Christian walk, by abandoning their confession of the Lord Jesus, and by failing to live by faith. For these Jewish believers, this might be accompanied by a retreat into some form of Judaism and its system of animal sacrifices.

c. A reinforcement to the author's argument (Heb 2:3b-4)

Hebrews 2:3b-4. The author reminds the readers that God's program of salvation culminating in the kingdom has been confirmed to them by **those who heard him** personally, and was further authenticated by the display of supernatural **miracles** and **gifts of the Holy Spirit**. [Note the emphasis elsewhere placed upon apostles in these miraculous manifestations--Acts 4:33; 5:12; 14:3; 2 Cor 12:12]. The readers had ample evidence to put them on a solid course: believing in Jesus as the Christ, His kingdom teachings, and this new calling unto the New Covenant that replaces the Old.

3. Reasons the Son was briefly lower than the angels (Heb 2:5-18)

Following the warning of Hebrews 2:1-4, the author now continues his comparison of the Son with angels. Though the Son is clearly superior to angels (1:5-14), it was necessary for Him to be temporarily *made lower* than the angels (i.e., to become incarnate), in order to accomplish important things for man.

a. To fulfill the dominion promise of Genesis 1 (Heb 2:5-9)

Hebrews 2:5. In verses 5-9 the author reflects on God's original plan for man, namely, for him to have dominion over His entire created order (see Gen 1:26-28). Though the fall of man in Genesis 3 undermined that plan, God will yet fulfill this in the future kingdom of the Lord Jesus, which the author designates **the world to come**. [The Greek term for “world,” *oikoumenē*, is used in Psalm

93:1 and Psalm 96:10 in the context of the Lord's eschatological reign]. This kingdom was not given to angels but to the Son to reign over (a further proof of His superiority to angels). This kingdom is the same as that already introduced in chapter 1 (e.g., Heb 1:8) in fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant promise of an eternal throne and kingdom (Heb 1:5).

Hebrews 2:6-8a. The author appeals to Psalm 8:4-6, in which David reflects on the dominion promise of Genesis 1. The psalmist marveled that God would honor lowly man (made **lower than the angels**) so highly by entrusting the rule of His created order to him. In doing so, God had **crowned him with glory and honor**. The psalm itself states that God's intention was to put **all things under his control** (Heb 2:8), and the author of Hebrews underscores this point by stating, **He left nothing outside of his control**. Though this psalm originally referred to the first Adam, the author of Hebrews finds its fulfillment in the last Adam, Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 2:8b-9. The problem is that this divine intention was not *fully* fulfilled in mankind, due to Adam's sin. In fact, man himself became a slave to sin and subject to the assaults of Satan and his demonic forces. Also, "death" still holds sway over man and keeps him in bondage (locked in fear). For this reason the author adds, **At present we do not yet see ALL THINGS under his control**. Mankind does not have complete dominion over creation.

This paves the way for the promise to be fulfilled in Jesus, who has been appointed heir of *all things* (Heb 1:2). By His incarnation, He has joined the ranks of mankind as **lower than the angels for a little while**, and is thus a qualified candidate to exercise dominion over God's created order. Though He waits for His enemies to be completely subdued before His formal inauguration as king (Heb 1:13), He is already **crowned with glory and honor**. Mankind is crowned with glory and honor by virtue of his God-given privilege (that of ruling), but this promise from Psalm 8:5 comes to have a more significant fulfillment in Jesus. He has been resurrected and exalted to the right hand of the Father (see Heb 1:3), and from that position He exercises authority over everything (see Matt 28:18).

Jesus' incarnation also gives Him the opportunity to suffer on the Cross and so **experience death on behalf of everyone** (a topic the author will take up in verses 10-18). Thus because **we see Jesus** in His suffering and work of redemption, we can have *hope* as we await His coming kingdom. This hope is founded on His resurrection, which ensures that His atoning work was successfully completed.

b. To suffer for the many sons He is bringing to glory (Heb 2:10-18)

Hebrews 2:10. Verse 10 highlights three ways in which the Son's sufferings uniquely benefit believers. First, the words **all things** recall verse 8 and that which man was originally to have

dominion over. The Father has granted the “dominion rights” to Jesus Christ and (in turn) to those who follow Him and “inherit salvation” (recall Heb 1:14).

Second, just as the Son passed through His sufferings to arrive at glory, so the Father is at work in **bringing many sons to glory**. The word *glory* recalls Psalm 8 again (see Heb 2:7) and how Christ experienced glory in resurrection and exaltation. To bring *many sons to glory* looks at the affirmation of God's plan for believers to also share in glory as Christ Himself did after successfully completing His earthly pilgrimage. Because of their faith in Him, they will eventually receive the glory of resurrection *and* (if they do not neglect the “so great a salvation”) a sharing in the glorious reign and dominion of the Son. Obviously the latter privilege is conditional in light of Hebrews 2:1-4 (see Heb 4:1ff).

Third, the Father made **the pioneer of their salvation perfect through sufferings**. The word *pioneer* (Greek *archēgos*) basically means leader, and therefore His mission is to lead us (or, safely guide us, pioneering the way) to this future eschatological salvation that awaits us. In this context, “salvation” should be understood the same way as in Heb 1:14 and Heb 2:3. Just as He Himself had to pass through sufferings, so we too must do so on our earthly pilgrimage that leads to His kingdom. The verb **make perfect** is from the Greek verb *teleioō*, meaning to bring something to its goal. Jesus was not made more holy (He was eternally sinless). Rather, His endurance of sufferings served to complete the goal for Him to experientially learn obedience to the Father (see Heb 5:8).

Hebrews 2:11. The words **makes holy** (Greek *hagiazō*, to set apart) in this context and in light of Heb 10:10 refer not to progressive sanctification, but to the believer being set apart once for all by the atoning work of Christ (i.e., positional sanctification). [This is referred to as justification in Paul's epistles]. As Christ is the leader of our salvation, we share a deep intimacy with Him. He has sanctified us (offering His body as our sacrifice), and we are sanctified. Therefore, He unashamedly views us as **brothers and sisters** [lit., “brethren”].

Hebrews 2:12-13. The author quotes two passages from the Greek Septuagint version of the OT to support this concept of being Christ's *brethren*. The first is from Psalm 22:22, in which David's experience *typifies* the experience of Messiah (both are “king” over their congregation). The second is from Isaiah 8:17-18. In a time when the nation was turning from the Lord and resorting to Assyria for help, Isaiah put his trust in the Lord (v 17) along with his disciples (“the children” of v 18). In doing so, they *typify* the Lord Jesus (who trusted the Father) and the disciples (Jesus' “children”) who have followed Him in faith.

Hebrews 2:14-16. These verses state very positively what Christ has done for His brethren. He has annulled the power of **the devil**, the one who had **the power of death**, and in so doing has delivered

us from the **fear of death**. Man was created by God to rule (have dominion)--as Psalm 8 highlighted--but ironically became paralyzed through the fear of death. Satan's plot to get man to sin and thus suffer death was used to bludgeon humanity with fear. The death of Christ removes this fear, because His resurrection and exaltation to the right hand of the Father assures us of our own ultimate resurrection. Yet this **concern** (Christ's death that *aids* sinners) is of no benefit to angels, but only humans (those who share in flesh and blood). Christ's atonement does not apply to angels but rather to **Abraham's descendants**, i.e., those who are the *spiritual seed of Abraham* by faith in Christ (see Gal 3:7).

Hebrews 2:17-18. The final two verses of the chapter depict the Son as **a merciful and faithful high priest**, ready to **help** believers **who are tempted**. His incarnation in order **to make atonement** for sins also exposed Him to the realm of human temptation, as He learned experientially what we go through. In particular, He experienced firsthand the temptation of giving up and turning away from the living God. Because He remained faithful, however, He knows what it takes to endure and can thus help us do the same. The mention of *High Priest* in verse 17 (first of many occurrences in Hebrews) serves to prepare us for what lies ahead, namely, the role of Christ as a high priest. If we are to be successful in our earthly pilgrimage and receive a full inheritance in our eschatological salvation, we will need the help of this High Priest. In this role, He is both merciful and faithful, and focuses all of His attention on aiding us in trials and temptations in order to bring us to glory.

B. The Son's Superiority (as High Priest) to Moses and Joshua, Leaders of the Old Covenant (Heb 3:1-5:10)

In this new section, the author continues his argument of demonstrating the superiority of the New Covenant to that of the Old. Yet his concern shifts from contrasting the Son with angels to contrasting Him with two key human leaders involved in the initial stages of the Old Covenant, namely, Moses and Joshua. The Son is faithful in a more significant way than Moses through whom the Old Covenant came. His task is also superior to that of Joshua, since He leads the people of God to a greater "rest." In this new contrast, however, the author emphasizes the role of the Son as a *merciful and faithful* high priest, a thought with which he concluded the previous section (recall Heb 2:17). His faithfulness is a key theme for Hebrews 3:1--4:13, while His mercy is a key theme for Hebrews 4:14--5:10. Furthermore, the author shows how these themes of His faithfulness and mercy have significant implications for New Covenant believers.

1. The importance of being faithful to the High Priest of the New Covenant (Heb 3:1--4:13)

This unit looks back to the role Moses and Joshua played under the Old Covenant. Moses was faithful in building the Old Covenant tabernacle, while Joshua faithfully led the people of God to their “rest” in the land of promise. What Jesus does is similar, yet it has far greater significance.

a. The model of Jesus' faithfulness (Heb 3:1-6)

It is not without significance that our author would choose to draw a comparison between the work of Moses and that of Jesus. In the eyes of most Jews (including the recipients of Hebrews) Moses was regarded as the greatest person who ever lived. He led Israel out of bondage in Egypt, constituted Israel as a nation at Sinai, and inaugurated the Old Covenant that gave the people the Law. Yet Moses was also associated with the priestly side of the Old Covenant. Of Levitical descent himself (Exod 2:1-2), he was the one to whom the plans for the tabernacle were revealed and who was responsible for its construction. This paragraph highlights his role in building the Old Covenant tabernacle.

Hebrews 3:1-2. Significantly, the author begins by addressing his readers as **holy brothers and sisters** [lit., holy brethren]. This is a direct allusion to Hebrews 2:11, in which the “many sons” were made holy (positionally made righteous) and called His brethren. [The words “holy” and “made holy” are related to the same verb root *hagiazō*]. By saying this, the author not only links this section with the previous one, but clearly identifies his readers as genuine believers!

He also states that they are **partners in a heavenly calling**. The word *partners* (Gk *metochoi*) has the sense of being participants in something, or partnering in a common endeavor (recall Heb 1:9). Yet the *heavenly calling* is not the call to the gospel. In light of the context of the epistle as a whole, this is a calling to the greater heavenly realities associated with the New Covenant, culminating with participation in the New Jerusalem of the messianic kingdom (see Heb 11:16). This is the pilgrimage on which they have embarked, one which will hopefully result in sharing in the dominion and inheritance of God's King-Son.

The readers are admonished to **take note of** Jesus, i.e., to contemplate and focus upon the One who is **the Apostle and high priest whom we confess**. This *confession* refers to their public affirmation that Jesus is the Messiah and to their belief in the gospel (see John 9:22; 12:42; 2 Cor 9:13), which apparently they were being strongly tempted to abandon (Heb 4:14; 10:23). That they must not do. Instead they must focus upon His faithfulness as a model for their own.

Hebrews 3:3-5. The remainder of the paragraph focuses on the word **house**. By *house* is meant the tabernacle where priestly activities were conducted. Drawing on Numbers 12:6-8, the author presents Moses as being **faithful in all God's house as a servant**. Moses had been commissioned to build the

tabernacle carefully according to God's precise instructions (Exod 25:9), and he was faithful to do so. This was important, because it served to **testify to the things that would be spoken afterward**. That is, the Old Covenant tabernacle was intended as a type of the greater realities that would come later when the heavenly tabernacle was disclosed (see Heb 8:4-5).

Hebrews 3:6. By way of comparison, Christ's involvement with God's house is far greater than Moses. Moses did so as a servant, but Christ as a Son. Moses was faithful *in* all His house, but Christ is faithful *over* His house. Moses' ministry related to the symbol, but Christ's to the reality itself. Thus, there is more at stake, and care must be taken to respond appropriately. The author alludes to this in verse 6 when he says, **We are of his house, if we hold firmly**. There is truly a condition that the readers must be prepared to meet, that of "holding firm." There are two crucial questions related to verse 6. Who is it that must "hold firm"? What danger is there for failing to do so?

A reliable interpretation depends on two things. First, we should keep the context in mind with its emphasis upon the house (=tabernacle) as a place where priestly activities take place. In light of 1 Peter 2:5, we are "built up as a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood and to offer spiritual sacrifices." Believers have these priestly responsibilities in this New Covenant "house," which the author will remind them of later in the epistle (see Heb 12:28; 13:15-16). Only as one faithfully fulfills these obligations is he "being the house." [Clearly, this has nothing to do with proof of being one of "the elect"]. Obviously any withdrawal in faith (especially abandoning their confession) would mean they were falling short of their goal.

Second, we should note the striking similarity that this paragraph has with Hebrews 10:19-25. Both passages emphasize the readers as "brethren" and Christ as High Priest over the house. Also both refer to the "confession," and "hope" of the readers. The latter passage, however, indicates that the need of the readers is not to believe the gospel (since they had already done that), but to "hold unwaveringly to" and "draw near." In Hebrews 10:23 "let us hold unwaveringly to" is not merely a conditional matter but an exhortation, i.e., it is an obligation for believers. In neither passage is loss of personal salvation (eternal life) presented as a danger for failure to do so. The danger is a failure to grow up into the building (house) of God in Christ. Such failure may lead to temporal judgment from God (Heb 3:7-19).

Thus, Hebrews 3:6 confronts the readers with a grave concern. Will they remain faithful believer-priests of Christ's house over which He is High Priest? The fact that they are already genuine believers does not guarantee they will do so. In their earthly pilgrimage to the Son's kingdom, they must be sure to "hold fast." This must be accompanied by endurance and doing the will of God (see Heb 10:36). Though failure to do so may bring about temporal judgment (Heb 3:7-19), faithfulness

in doing so will ensure them of successfully entering the “rest” to come where blessings and rewards await them (Heb 4:1-13).

b. A warning from Psalm 95: The Unbelief of Kadesh-barnea (Heb 3:7-19)

Hebrews 3:6 suggested that genuine Christians have a responsibility as believer-priests in the greater spiritual house over which Christ presides as high priest. The author now strengthens this warning by drawing an analogy to the wilderness generation that experienced God's temporal judgment as a result of hardening their hearts against God. [For the background story, see Num 13:1--14:45]. In their rebellion they made a fateful decision of unbelief at Kadesh-barnea. This decision not only brought temporal judgment (death in the wilderness) but also cost them their future, for they forfeited their opportunity to experience God's “rest” in the land of Canaan. The author of Hebrews saw an analogous situation for these New Covenant believers to whom he wrote.

Hebrews 3:7-11. The author quotes extensively from Psalm 95, because it provided a commentary on the wilderness generation that rebelled against God and lost their future inheritance in the land. The psalm begins by calling the people of God to worship Him and be humble. The latter half, however, transitions to a warning about guarding oneself from a “hardened heart.” The quotation begins with the words **Oh, that today you would listen as he speaks**. It is crucial to observe that the word “you” in this verse is identified in the previous line of the psalm as those who are “the people of His pasture, the sheep he owns.” In other words, this warning is directed to God's people (genuine believers) indicating that believers are capable of hardening their hearts against God and experiencing His judgment. To suggest that all those who died in the wilderness were unbelievers (and eventually went to hell) is simply not sustainable (see Exod 15:13).

We notice in the words quoted from Psalm 95 that the word **hearts** occurs twice. This emphasis upon the condition of believers' *hearts* is significant, for it is in the heart that one either exercises faith or unbelief. Yet the “unbelief” in this situation was not a failure to trust God as Savior or to believe in the Messiah, but a failure to believe Him in leading them to Canaan. This was a faith issue of their *mission*, not of their personal salvation (i.e., their justification). The unbelief seen as early as Meribah and Massah (Exod 17:1-7) eventually manifested itself in full-blown rebellion against God at Kadesh-barnea (see Num 14:4; 14:9; Deut 1:26). This reflects the danger of hardening one's heart against God, for it can easily lead to a catastrophic outcome. In the instance of the unbelieving Israelites God swore, **“they will never enter My rest.”** “Rest” is a symbol not of heaven but of the promised inheritance in the land of Canaan.

Hebrews 3:12. Following the quotation, the author provides his explication of the psalm, beginning with a word of caution. The words, **See to it, brothers and sisters**, indicate once again that our author regarded the readers as genuine Christians. His concern is that some of them might have an **evil unbelieving heart**. As in Psalm 95, the real issue is one of the heart. The *unbelief* in view is not related to their personal salvation from sin. This is clear from the context, and especially verse 19 in which the very same word for “unbelief” (Gk *apistia*) is used. The wilderness generation did not enter the land “because of unbelief.” They failed to believe God’s promises that He would give them the land, and thus they forsook their mission. To speak of a believer having an “evil heart” is not inappropriate. The word for *evil* (Gk *ponēros*) is used for the disciples in Luke 11:13, for believers with “evil motives” in Jas 2:4, and in 1 Corinthians 5:13 for an immoral person in the church that had to be disciplined (note that the principle in this latter case applies to true believers as well as those who might not be--anyone who bears the name “brother”).

The author’s concern is that such a heart of unbelief might result in their **forsaking the living God**. The word translated forsake (Gk *aphistēmi*) is rendered in some translations as “falling away” (NASB). Ordinarily in the NT, this word means to depart from someone or a place literally (for theological usage, see 1 Tim 4:1 and Luke 8:13). The word occurs much more frequently in the LXX, and in several cases has the clear nuance of “forsaking” God by turning to idols (Deut 32:15; Josh 22:19) or of “rebell” against the Lord (2 Chr 26:18; 30:7). This nuance of “rebell” against the Lord precisely describes the actions of the wilderness generation. What they did at Kadesh-barnea was a *rebellion* against the Lord (Num 14:4; 14:9; Deut 1:26). Seen in the light of Hebrews 3:6, the author seems to be saying, “Hold fast, and don’t rebel against God!”

Hebrews 3:13. The author now offers a remedy for unbelief and rebellion. They are to continually **exhort** (or encourage) **one another**. Because any Christian can succumb to a hardened heart of unbelief, all need to avail themselves of a caring, encouraging community of believers (see Heb 10:24-25).

Hebrews 3:14. The author firmly warns his readers to stick with what they have undertaken. The words **partners with Christ** echo the thought in Hebrews 3:1 of being “partners in a heavenly calling.” The word *partners* (Gk *metochoi*) is the same in each verse. When they trusted the Lord Jesus as their Messiah and Savior, they embarked upon a *partnership* with Him involving their pilgrimage to His kingdom and the heavenly Jerusalem. To share in His dominion and inheritance, they need to endure in a life of faith, doing the will of God (see Heb 6:11-12; 10:36).

Remaining Christ's *partners* is conditional. We do so, only **if in fact we hold our initial confidence firm until the end**. The word translated *confidence* (Gk *hupostaseōs*) can have the idea of an undertaking or endeavor that one has obligated himself to (BDAG, 1040). By sticking with their original undertaking, they will enter the kingdom successfully, inheriting great rewards. Failure to do so will not mean loss of salvation (the author never suggests this!), but rather loss of reward (and possibly temporal judgment while on earth). Hence the author closes this paragraph with some final reminders about possible judgment from God.

Hebrews 3:15-19. Once again the author reminds them of the wilderness generation that hardened their hearts and rebelled against God. For those Old Covenant believers, this was sin that led to their death in the wilderness (temporal judgment from God). The implication is all too obvious: Something analogous awaits New Covenant believers who harden their hearts and rebel! Furthermore the wilderness generation spoiled their future and forfeited their opportunity to enter **rest** (the land of Canaan). Similarly believers under the New Covenant who fail to believe and obey will suffer something much more dire. This will be the subject of the next section.

c. Our goal of entering God's greater rest (Heb 4:1-13)

God's judgment on the wilderness generation under Moses was exclusion from His "rest" of inheriting Canaan (Ps 95:11). The land was regarded on the one hand as a resting place because of the rest they could have from their enemies, and yet on the other hand as an inheritance (or gift) from the Lord (Deut 12:9-11). Yet this "land rest" did not exhaust the full intentions of the Lord. The psalmist was able to say to a new generation living in the land, "Oh, that you would listen." This implies that it was still possible to mistakenly harden one's heart, thereby forfeiting God's rest. This led the author of Hebrews to conclude that "rest" ultimately had a greater significance than the land-rest. It was typological of a greater rest to come. Furthermore he connected this theme with the creation rest, when God rested after the six days of creation.

Bible students hold different views regarding the identification of this "greater rest." Each view must not only account for all the details of the passage but must satisfactorily explain the danger mentioned in Hebrews 4:1--**we must be wary that ... none of you may seem to have come short of it**. In the first view, the rest is regarded as equivalent to heaven (or the eternal bliss awaiting believers there) when the believer will have unbroken fellowship with God. The rest is a future experience, based on Heb 4:1--while the promise of entering his rest remains open (see Heb 4:11). In this view, the danger of coming short (vs 1) is then a failure to believe the gospel and be saved. However, this view is fatally flawed. The "rest" in chapter 4 depends on Psalm 95 for its analogy, a

psalm that has Old Covenant believers in view (for whom saving faith was not the issue). Also Hebrews 4:11 clarifies that the rest may be jeopardized by following **the same pattern of disobedience** as the rebellion at Kadesh-barnea when they refused to believe that God would give them the land. Also the author admonishes the readers in Hebrews 4:14-16 to hold fast their confession and to confidently approach the throne of grace for help. These admonitions would be inappropriate for unbelievers who were falling short of believing the gospel.

A second view is that the greater rest is a present Christian experience of peace--what some refer to as a "faith-rest life" (see Matt 11:28-30) when a believer stops trying to live the Christian life in his own *fleshly* works and learns to "trust God." Proponents of this view argue that the present tense of the verb "enter" in Hebrews 4:3 (*eiserchometha*) supports the interpretation of a present (rather than a future) experience. Yet this view is not convincing. While it is true that the verb "enter" in verse 3 is in the Greek present tense, there are other ways to understand this use of the present tense (see comments on v 3). The most problematic issue for this view is that it understands that the believer's works are regarded negatively or carnal, contradicting the analogy to God's works in verse 10. Furthermore, one should "make every effort" to enter this rest, that is, make great effort (Heb 4:11).

A third view is that the greater rest is equivalent to being in the millennial kingdom (the 1000 year rule of Christ on earth). While this view correctly understands the rest as a future experience in light of Hebrews 4:1, and connects the promise to the kingdom in light of the broader context of the epistle, there are concerns. First, why limit this to only the 1000 year rule of Christ on earth since Christ will rule forever and ever (Rev 11:15)? Also advocates of this view tend to see the promised rest as the destiny of *all* regenerate believers, thus nullifying any danger for true believers. This is contrary to the analogy of the wilderness believers in Hebrews 3.

A fourth view is preferable, namely, the experience of receiving one's inheritance and ruling with Christ in the Messianic Kingdom. While this is similar to view three, there are important differences. This view includes the millennial kingdom but also extends throughout the New Creation (Rev 21--22), i.e., the messianic kingdom refers to the entire rule of Christ following His Second Coming. More importantly, entering the rest is not merely being *in* the kingdom (which all true believers are entitled to), but also focuses on the inheritance and reward awaiting *faithful believers* (and which *unfaithful believers* may very well jeopardize). Primarily, this "rest" will involve a share (as one's inheritance for faithfulness) in the dominion over God's creation (recall Hebrews 2).

This last view has the best support for the following reasons. First, this view understands the rest to be a future experience in keeping with Hebrews 4:1 ("the promise of entering his rest remains

open”). Second, the epistle began by stressing that Christ is the heir of all things, a promise which finds its fulfilment at the Second Coming, when all His enemies have been subjected to Him (see Heb 10:13). Third, the author has been concerned about those who would *inherit* salvation (Heb 1:14) in the "world to come" (Heb 2:5; see Heb 9:28). Fourth, this period of salvation will make it possible for man to have dominion over God's created realm, satisfying His original intentions for man (Heb 2:5-9). Fifth, this view is consistent with the analogy suggested in chapter 3 (recall Ps 95), in which God's children (not unbelievers) failed to gain their potential inheritance on account of unbelief and disobedience. Sixth, the matter of rewards for faithfulness is an ongoing motif of the epistle (see Heb 6:11-12; 10:35-36; 11:6; 11:26; 11:39). Seventh, this epistle stresses Messiah's kingdom (see Heb 1:8; 12:28), and the concept of "rest" was even linked in such passages as Isaiah 11:10 with Messiah's kingdom of peace when all the nations will resort to Him.

Hebrews 4:1-2. The author's question "how will we escape" in Hebrews 2:3 has now been strengthened to **we must be wary** (also translated as, "let us fear"). The author's point in verse 1 is that there is a rest yet remaining (see Heb 4:6; 4:9; 4:11) above and beyond the "rest" of Joshua's day. This greater rest is for the faithful believer upon receiving his inheritance in Messiah's kingdom. The words **we had good news proclaimed to us** translate one Greek verb *euēngelismenoi*, used here in a nontechnical sense of "preaching good news" in general rather than the gospel message specifically (see Luke 1:19; 1 Thess 3:6). The wilderness generation heard the good news of the offer to inherit Canaan (see esp. Num 13:30; 14:7-9), but New Covenant Christians have been offered a far superior *good news*--the privilege to exercise dominion with Jesus in God's future rest. In both cases, however, a response of faith and obedience is required (see Heb 3:18-19).

Hebrews 4:3a-b. In verses 3-9 the author presents his proof that God's promise of rest remains good. He begins in verse 3 by giving the basic principle for entering the greater rest, namely, faith. This rest is for those of us **who have believed** (the aorist participle *pisteusantes* is best viewed as a "durative aorist," stressing the progress of the action in past time). This faith is not that of a single occasion (such as one's original faith in believing the gospel), but a faith that has persevered over time. It is we who have persevered in faith that **enter** this rest, as the preceding context indicates (see Heb 3:6; 3:14). The present tense of the verb *eiserchometha* ("enter") is probably a *gnomic* present, stressing the *principle* involved and not the time of fulfilment (see Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, pp 523-24). The author's appeal in verse 3 to the words from Psalm 95 supports this conclusion. Likewise, the principle has a corollary--failing to respond in faith may disqualify one from entering God's rest.

Hebrews 4:3c-5. In verses 3-5 the author seeks to draw lessons from God's creation rest. God Himself entered into rest upon completion of His work at creation. Two conclusions are drawn from this: (1) any subsequent offer of rest on God's part reveals that even the creation rest is not an end in itself but must foreshadow something greater; and (2) "rest" was intended by God to be enjoyed by those who complete their works (as He Himself modelled). The latter suggests that "works" should not be viewed negatively. Works--at least those done in faith through the enabling power of the Holy Spirit -- are what believers should be faithful to do in this present life (see John 14:12; Eph 2:10; 2 Tim 2:21). In fact, there is a connection between faithfulness in doing good works that God has ordained for us and ruling with Christ after His return (see Rev 2:25-27). Just as God rested after His creation work, so this *greater rest* is offered to believers who faithfully endure and complete their works (note Heb 4:10).

Hebrews 4:6-9. In these verses, the author clarifies that this *greater rest* to come is still available (implying we should definitely pursue it). The author is thinking primarily of Psalm 95 and particularly the word "Today." If God's "rest" had been fulfilled in Joshua's day, the psalmist (writing many years later) would not have made the same offer and warning to his generation. So, both the rest associated with creation as well as the rest in Joshua's day point toward a *greater rest* in God's program which He has promised. **It remains for some to enter it**, i.e., the opportunity to successfully receive an inheritance in this future rest (God's ultimate Sabbath rest!) remains available to New Covenant believers, unless they disqualify themselves **because of disobedience**.

Hebrews 4:10-11. The author once again highlights the importance of **works**. When believers complete their earthly pilgrimage, the opportunity for *works* will be over. There is no opportunity to go back (to relive one's life) and try to do it better. Hence, he says to the readers in verse 11, **Thus we must make every effort to enter that rest**. Obviously, one does not *make every effort* (Gk *spoudasōmen*) to merit forgiveness and eternal life. The gospel promises eternal life as a *free gift* on the basis of faith alone in Christ alone (Rom 6:23). But diligent effort is appropriate for successfully entering this future rest where our inheritance in Christ's kingdom is at stake. This is not a call to self-effort, however. By no means! Throughout the Epistle to the Hebrews the author makes clear that this call to diligent effort is through a life of faith, endurance, and reliance upon the enabling grace of Christ, our High Priest. The believer who neglects this call to *diligent effort* is in danger of "falling," if he follows the **same pattern of disobedience** exhibited by the wilderness generation of Moses' day. [The author's use of the term "fall" (Gk *piptō*) is a deliberate allusion back to Hebrews 3:17 and the outcome of those who in unbelief disobeyed the Lord--"whose dead bodies *fell* in the wilderness"].

Hebrews 4:12-13. Having called the readers to make diligent effort to enter this future climactic rest and having warned them of the possibility of disqualifying themselves, the author now sternly reminds them that there is no way to escape the penetrating scrutiny of God. God is able to see to the very inner core of our lives and is **able to judge the desires and thoughts of the heart**, for it is precisely in the heart that hardening takes place and unbelief arises. Since entering God's rest--receiving an inheritance and reward in Messiah's kingdom--is conditional, such a judgment by God is necessary and inevitable. One day, at the Judgment Seat of Christ, each believer must face such a scrutinizing judgment by God (see Rom 14:10-12; 1 Cor 3:12-15; 4:4-5; 2 Cor 5:9-10). As sobering as God's judgment is, we are not left helpless. Fortunately, Jesus is available to us now as our High Priest with the grace and mercy we need for the trials we face, as the next section explains.

2. The help available from the merciful High Priest of the New Covenant (Hebrews 4:14--5:10)

The previous unit (Heb 4:1-13) focused on the importance of being faithful to the High Priest of the New Covenant in order to enter God's greater rest. The wilderness generation living under the Old Covenant failed to enter God's land-rest in Canaan, because they hardened their hearts against God until finally rebelling at Kadesh-barnea. By analogy, believers under the New Covenant can fail to successfully enter God's greater rest of Messiah's coming kingdom, that is, to obtain their potential inheritance. Yet New Covenant believers need not "come short of it," for there is ample provision of help from Jesus, the merciful High Priest. Following an exhortation to avail oneself of His mercy and grace, the author then substantiates Jesus' qualification and preparation as High Priest.

a. An exhortation to hold fast by availing oneself of the grace of Christ (Heb 4:14-16)

Hebrews 4:14. The author resumes his consideration of Jesus as High Priest that he began in 3:1. The qualifying words **who has passed through the heavens** remind us that this High Priest has not gone into the mere earthly holy of holies, but into the ultimate heavenly one. Consequently we must not abandon our confession of faith in Him (recall Heb 3:1), but rather **hold it fast**.

Hebrews 4:15. Despite His exalted position, this great High Priest does not stand uncaringly aloof from us. Rather, He can truly **sympathize with our weaknesses**, meaning that He can understand just how difficult our earthly pilgrimage is and how weak we are in the face of so many temptations that war against our souls. In light of the preceding context, the author is probably thinking of the particular weakness (and temptation) of succumbing to unbelief and rebelling against God. He Himself has felt the full force of what it means to be tempted, not the least of which was Satan's temptations against Him in the wilderness (Matt 4:1-11). The author hastens to add these words **yet**

without sin, for sin would have disqualified Him as a perfect sacrifice . In every temptation He faced throughout His earthly ministry, He did not yield to sin (see 2 Cor 5:21; Heb 7:26).

Hebrews 4:16. In facing temptation, God's solution is **the throne of grace**, and we are invited to **confidently approach** it. Hodges writes, “Such a conception of the presence of God into which beleaguered Christians may come at any time, suggests both the sovereignty of the One they approach (since they come to a ‘throne’) and His benevolence” (Zane Hodges, “Hebrews,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, New Testament edition, ed. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck [Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1983], 790). Those who frequent this throne of grace do not need to fear coming short of His rest.

b. Jesus' qualification as High Priest of the New Covenant (Heb 5:1-6)

Until now, Jesus' qualification as High Priest has been presumed. Since this “throne of grace” is so important to our earthly pilgrimage and attaining to God's greater rest, the author now substantiates His qualification to be our great High Priest.

Hebrews 5:1-4. In these verses the author points out several characteristics about high priests who served under the Levitical system: (1) they were taken **from among the people**; (2) none were self-appointed; and (3) since every priest was himself a sinner (as evidenced by the fact that he even had to offer a sacrifice **for himself** according to Lev 16:6; 16:11; 16:15-17), he could quite naturally be compassionate with those whom he served.

Hebrews 5:5-6. The author now shows both the continuity and discontinuity between Christ and the Levitical priests. The discontinuity is obviously the issue of the sin condition (Christ had no sin). Yet there is also continuity: Levitical priests were not self-appointed, and neither was Christ. The author quotes from Psalm 2:7 and Psalm 110:4 (two well-known messianic texts) to show that **Christ did not glorify himself**.

By linking these verses, he calls the readers' attention to the fact that the Messiah was not only appointed to a royal position as the Davidic Son-King but also to a unique priestly ministry. Furthermore Psalm 110 reveals that Messiah would be of a different priestly order than that of the Levites. If He were of the Levitical priesthood, His priestly ministry would be no better than that offered by the Old Covenant. Yet because the New Covenant is superior to the Old, it is important that the priesthood associated with the New be distinct and qualitatively better. Indeed it is, for Christ is a priest of **the order of Melchizedek**, not that of Levi. The author will return in chapter 7 to elaborate this different priesthood.

c. The perfecting of Jesus as High Priest (Heb 5:7-10)

In these verses, the author now shows the relationship between the sufferings and endurance of Jesus in His earthly experience, and the help that He is able to give to New Covenant believers today.

Hebrews 5:7-8. These verses highlight the difficulties and trials that Christ encountered in His earthly pilgrimage, especially in His experience at the Cross. Even the eternal Son learned to cry out to the Father for help. In doing so, He found that the Father was **able to save Him from death**. The word *save* (Gk *sōzō*) does not carry a soteriological sense here, but rather has the common OT meaning of “deliver.” Jesus was **heard**, meaning that the Father answered Him favorably. The point is that, though Jesus fully participated in death (Heb 2:9), He was delivered from its bonds through resurrection.

From His sufferings (climaxing at Calvary), the Son *learned obedience*. He did not need to learn *how* to be obedient, for He was never disobedient. Rather, He learned firsthand all that obedience entails, especially that doing the will of God often brings suffering.

Hebrews 5:9-10. Through His sufferings (and especially what He experienced on the Cross), Jesus was **perfected** (Gk *teleiōtheis*). This cannot mean that Jesus became any more *perfect* in His nature, for as the Son of God He is eternally perfect. The Greek verb means to bring something to its intended goal. These sufferings served to complete the goal of preparing Him for the role He would have as our High Priest (see Heb 2:10).

This accomplished, He became **the source** (Gk *aitios*, the responsible cause) **of eternal salvation to all who obey him**. If we say that *salvation* in this verse means personal salvation (or redemption) that comes from believing the gospel, then we have a theological problem, in that the verse seems to condition this salvation on *obedience*. Yet the New Testament is elsewhere clear that one's personal salvation can only be received as a free gift on the sole basis of faith alone in Christ alone, and thus only by God's grace (Rom 6:23; Eph 2:8-9; Titus 3:5). It simply will not do to say here that those who truly believe the gospel and are saved will assuredly go on to live obedient lives.

There are several reasons why *eternal salvation* in this verse does not refer to redemption from sin based on Christ's atonement (even though the Cross is certainly part of this context). First, of seven occurrences of “salvation” in this epistle (Heb 1:14; 2:3; 2:10; 5:9; 6:9; 9:28; 11:7), not once does it clearly mean *salvation from sin*. In several cases (Heb 1:14; 9:28; 11:7), it clearly means something else, which should caution us from presuming a soteriological meaning in Hebrews 5:9.

Second, Christ's experience in Hebrews 5:7-8 is meant to parallel that of believers. He suffered, He cried out to the Father for help, and He was “saved,” i.e., rescued through resurrection to share in glory. The “salvation” of Hebrews 5:9 cannot overlook the use of this word in regard to Christ's own experience just mentioned in Hebrews 5:7!

Third, the context has **not** been talking about a sinner's need for salvation from sin. This unit (Heb 4:14--5:10) began with the exhortation for *believers* (those who can already be said to “have a great high priest”) to hold fast their confession and turn to the throne of grace for help in dealing with their weaknesses.

Fourth, the obedience mentioned in verse 9 must be seen in light of the preceding verse. The verb “obey” in Hebrews 5:9 (from *hupakouō*) is clearly associated with the word “obedience” in Hebrews 5:8 (from the related noun, *hupakoē*). Thus the believer's obedience in Hebrews 5:9 is meant to be seen in comparison with Christ's obedience in Hebrews 5:8, namely, *obedience connected with sufferings* in the course of being faithful to God! He is not talking about obedience in general. Furthermore this call for obedience to Christ stands in contrast to the *disobedience* that disqualified the wilderness generation from attaining their rest (see Heb 3:11; 4:11). This suggests that the author is thinking primarily of the specific obedience of holding fast one's confession and not rebelling against the Lord, especially in the face of sufferings and persecutions.

If these verses do not refer to justification and personal salvation from sin, then what do they refer to? The context has highlighted how Christ was perfected for His role by obedience through sufferings, following which he experienced “salvation.” Now He is in a position to help His “brethren” (those already justified) who are being brought to glory (Heb 2:10). Through Him, they can attain to “eternal salvation” (*eternal*, because it cannot be taken from them). In the context of Hebrews this means an eschatological salvation in which one shares in Christ's inheritance and reigns with Him (exercising dominion). Yet this is not automatic for believers; it is for those who **obey him**--not a self-reliant obedience, but one possible through reliance upon Christ as High Priest. Primarily, this includes the obedience of holding fast one's confession and drawing near to God rather than rebelling (recall Heb 4:14 and compare the issue of rebellion in Heb 3:12).

C. The Superiority of the Son's Priestly Ministry Over the Levitical Priests (Heb 5:11--7:28)

The theme of Christ's priestly ministry is obviously of great importance to the author. Part of the New Covenant's superiority to the old Mosaic Covenant is the fact it introduces a new and superior priesthood. The author introduces this theme in Hebrews 4:14--5:10, and then returns to it in chapter 7 to compare

and contrast Christ's priestly ministry with that of the Levitical priesthood. The material in between (namely, Heb 5:11--6:20) constitutes another warning passage to the readers, confronting their immaturity and seeking to motivate them to a life of persevering faith. A proper interpretation of this difficult warning passage depends on keeping the wider context in view. Since the author has been showing that Christ has a greater ministry than the Levitical priests and all they performed under the Levitical system, the author now warns his readers against returning to that system.

1. Confrontation and motivation to move on to maturity (Heb 5:11--6:20)

To make his point about the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry, the author wants to relate this to the promise in the OT of a differing priesthood founded upon Melchizedek. This kind of discussion, however, presumes a certain level of spiritual maturity on the part of the readers, and yet it is precisely the issue of their spiritual immaturity that makes it difficult for the author to reason with them. The material in Hebrews 5:11--6:20 is meant to address this concern, in preparation for the presentation in chapter 7 of the Melchizedekan priesthood.

a. Confrontation regarding the need for maturity (Heb 5:11-6:12)

This section is strongly confrontational. Not only will their immaturity hinder them from comprehending the truth he wants to present, but continued persistence in this condition could result in their "falling away" (Heb 6:6), which the NET Bible translates as committing "apostasy." That situation would not only invite God's judgment upon them (Heb 6:7-8), but would also jeopardize their inheritance (Heb 6:11-12).

Hebrews 5:11. As one progresses toward spiritual adulthood, he should grow in his ability to comprehend spiritual truth. Yet time alone does not guarantee this. In the case of the readers of Hebrews, they were in fact **sluggish** (*nōthroi*) **in hearing**. This Greek word basically means "slow" or "sluggish" and suggests they did not "hear" well when it came to comprehending spiritual truth. This term occurs again in Hebrews 6:12 (only other use in the NT), thus forming an inclusio that marks the beginning and ending of the subunit. This observation is significant, suggesting that the same group of people are addressed throughout. Thus all the severe things that he will say to them in Hebrews 6:1-8 stem from their spiritual immaturity (not their lack of regeneration).

Hebrews 5:12. The readers had certainly had time by now to mature and progress in spiritual understanding. Some time earlier they had been taught **the beginning elements of God's utterances**. [Most Bible translations--but not the NET Bible--include the word "again" in verse 12 (Gk *palin*)]. The word for *elements* is the Greek word *stoicheion*, which means the fundamental truths of the faith or what we might call the ABCs. This term was used elsewhere of the letters of the

alphabet that a school child would learn. The author likens these basic principles of the faith to **milk** in contrast to **solid food**. Only those who have worked their way through the “milk stage” are ready for deeper spiritual truth. Yet the author is not going to teach them their ABCs again. Instead, he issues a serious warning to them, and then exhorts and motivates them to obey.

Hebrews 5:13-14. The author reminds them that a milk diet is only suitable for infants (hoping to prompt them to desire a heartier spiritual diet). Yet a milk-only diet leaves one unskilled in **the message of righteousness**, i.e., the Word of God that is intended to help one grow in true righteousness (see Heb 12:11). Solid food, on the other hand, is for **the mature**. One who would desire the “solid food” of God’s Word must realize that he cannot gain it apart from the process of maturing. This is a difficult process in which one’s spiritual perceptions are **trained by practice**. The words translated *trained by practice* are from the Greek word {i-gumnazō and suggest rigorous training. Yet this training process is worth the price one pays, for in this way he comes to **discern both good and evil** (an essential element of maturity).

Hebrews 6:1. Immature believers could waddle in the playground of spiritual ABCs indefinitely, and fail to ever make progress. That would not be desirable, and in fact could even be dangerous (jeopardizing their inheritance, Heb 6:12). So the author exhorts them to **move on to maturity**. The word “maturity” is translated in some Bibles as *perfection*, though the author certainly does not mean “sinless perfection”. Rather, the Greek term for *maturity* is *teleiotēta* (derived from *teleioō*, “to reach a goal”), which looks at true Christian maturity (the opposite of “infant” in Heb 5:13). Such a summons implies that the opportunity to “move on” is still available to them.

Hebrews 6:1b-2. If the original readers of the epistle were Jewish, their faith in the Lord Jesus and participation in the New Covenant had called for a radical reassessment of certain foundational truths (though the author did not wish to go over these again. These foundational truths were of two general types: (1) repentance from dead works and faith in God; and (2) instruction in various matters. **Dead works** are referred to again in Hebrews 9:14, where it is said that Christ’s blood is able to cleanse the conscience from them, in contrast to the blood of animal sacrifices which cannot. The *dead works*, then, represent the efforts connected with the earthly sanctuary system to secure cleansing and acceptance before God. Now that the Messiah had come and made a perfect sacrifice, Jewish believers who turned to Him in faith had to reassess (repent of--change their mind about) the Levitical approach to God. This called for an adjustment to their theology, one of placing their faith completely in the Lord Jesus as the sure and final atonement for their sins.

The author also mentions at least four areas of instruction that needed to be corrected in light of Messiah's ministry. One example would be **teaching about baptisms** (or washings). This probably does not refer to Christian baptism but to Levitical ritual washings (note the use of *baptisma* in the plural in Heb 9:10). Purification by the blood of Christ has accomplished infinitely more than what Levitical washings did under the Old Covenant. The **laying on of hands** was formerly associated with the symbolic placing of one's sin on a sacrifice before it was slaughtered or sent outside the camp (Exod 29:10-19; Lev 8:14-21; 16:21), or for the consecration of Levites for ministry (Num 8:10). This act now indicated placing one's blessing on a fellow Christian to send them out into the world for ministry (Acts 13:3-4). Even their understanding of the **resurrection of the dead** (though taught in the Old Testament, e.g., Dan 12:2) would have to be corrected in light of Christ's resurrection from the dead. All **judgment** was now given into His hands by the Father (John 5:22), and even New Covenant believers must be prepared to give an account of themselves at the Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Cor 5:10).

Hebrews 6:3. The mention of judgment suddenly brings the list to a close, for the author thought of the potential judgment that some of his readers might incur. They were on a downward slippery slope. This is evidenced by labelling them "sluggish in hearing," exhorting them to hold fast their confession, and warning them in Hebrews 4:11 that they might follow the same example of disobedience as the wilderness generation. They were dangerously close to spiritual disaster, and continuation in this negative direction could mean that God might not permit them to "move on" to maturity.

Hebrews 6:4. In Hebrews 6:4-8, the author presents just such a case in which God might not permit spiritual advancement for those who "fall away" or "commit apostasy." Though an obviously serious situation, there is nothing in the passage that explicitly states they might lose their salvation for this, any more than the sin of the wilderness generation meant loss of salvation for them. The analogy in chapter 3 with the wilderness generation suggests they may face temporal judgment and loss of their inheritance.

Verses 4-6 are one complete unit of thought. In the Greek text, the emphatic word **impossible** is placed up front in verse 4, while the complement "to renew them again to repentance" follows in verse 6. In between, is a series of five participles describing those who cannot be renewed to repentance. Since all five participles are governed by one definite article in the Greek, they describe not two different situations but the same situation. That is, the one who "commits apostasy" is also one who had been enlightened, tasted the heavenly gift, etc. Assuredly these verses describe a genuine Christian for at least three basic reasons: (1) The author had expressed statements of concern

about his readers earlier in the epistle (e.g., Heb 3:12) while referring to them as “brethren;” (2) What he has to say about them in Hebrews 6:4-6 cannot be divorced from what he has said about them at the beginning of the literary unit in Hebrews 5:11-14, namely, that they are spiritual infants who have not matured; and (3) The terminology in Hebrews 6:4-5 is most naturally descriptive of Christian experience, not that of unbelievers.

The author’s first description of them is that they had **once been enlightened**. He uses this expression one other time in the epistle in Hebrews 10:32, pointing out how they had suffered for their faith after being *enlightened*. This surely points to their regenerate state, for it is hardly imaginable that they--especially being first century Jews--would suffer persecution for Christ had they not truly come to know Him as their Savior.

Second, they had **tasted the heavenly gift**. Some commentators have erroneously tried to argue that the word "taste" implies that the original audience had only *sampled* the heavenly gift, but had not fully partaken of it. That is, they stopped short of "salvation" and failed to truly become Christians. Yet the word *tasted* (*geusamenous*) does not imply just a mere sampling. The same word was used earlier in Hebrews 2:9 to refer to Christ having “tasted death for everyone” (i.e., He fully experienced it). Thus the readers had truly experienced *the heavenly gift*, that is, God’s gift of eternal life in Christ (see John 4:10; Rom 6:23). Third, they had become **partakers of the Holy Spirit**, having received the Holy Spirit at the moment of saving faith (see Eph 1:13-14).

Hebrews 6:5. Fourth, they had **tasted the good word of God and the miracles of the coming age**. They tasted (fully embraced) the Christian message, which in turn was accompanied by miraculous confirmations (recall Heb 2:3-4).

Hebrews 6:6. The final participle **committed apostasy** (or “fall away,” as some translations have) indicates that it is possible for a regenerate person who has experienced everything described in verses 4-5 to meet with spiritual disaster. The Greek term for *commit apostasy* (*parapiptō*) is not used elsewhere in the NT, but it does occur eight times in the Greek LXX translation of the OT, frequently meaning “to transgress” against the LORD (e.g., Ezek 15:8; 20:27). Perhaps of greater insight is the use of the related cognate form *piptō* earlier in Hebrews 4:11. The readers might “fall” through following the same example of disobedience, in contrast to those who were diligent to enter God’s rest. There is also a very close connection with the word “forsakes” in Hebrews 3:12 (which had the Kadesh-barnea incident in mind). Though a lexically different word, it is conceptually related to *parapiptō* in Hebrews 6:6. We can thus conclude that “falling away” or “committing apostasy” in Hebrews 6:6 is to transgress against the Lord in a way that parallels what happened at

Kadesh-barnea when the Hebrews rebelled against the Lord with a heart of unbelief. Their hearts were hardened against the Lord. In light of the author's exhortations in Hebrews 4:14 and Hebrews 10:23, he is probably thinking of a rebellion involving an abandonment of one's confession of faith in Christ.

The author is telling his readers that there is a point beyond which it is impossible to restore such a rebel to a state of repentance. This would presume that his heart had become severely hardened. The guilty one does not return to a repentant state, for this would be tantamount to recrucifying the Savior and publicly humiliating Him. The severity of such an action will be pointedly made later in Hebrews 10:26-31. [Author's note: Despite my preference for the above-stated interpretation, some scholars hold a similar view of the audience but with repentance being possible. They would take the final two adverbial clauses as *temporal*, and translate "while they again crucify to themselves the Son of God and put Him to open shame." In this view, the impossibility of returning them to repentance is true only so long as they continue doing this, implying that restoration is possible].

Hebrews 6:7-8. The author follows this somber warning with an illustration designed to drive home his point. The fact that he only uses the word **ground** once, signifies that the author is not describing two different grounds, but rather two possible outcomes for the same ground. In a similar way, every Christian has the potential to produce "useful vegetation" or "thorns and thistles." Regardless of the outcome, the ground has received the **rain** and care needed for growth. This probably speaks of God's divine care and provision for spiritual growth in the life of a believer. If a believer's life is not fruitful, it is not because God has not cared for him and done His part. The contrast in verses 7-8 is most likely that between a faithful believer who is fruitful and an unfaithful believer who should have produced but did not. In the latter case, however, it does not mean the loss of eternal life. Recall that mature and immature believers have been in view since Hebrews 5:11.

Hebrews 6:8 is a deliberate allusion to Genesis 3:17-18 (note the use of **thorns and thistles**, as well as being **cursed**). The first man, Adam, received a curse for his disobedience, and the allusion to this brings to mind the *temporal judgment* that fell on the first man's disobedience. Elsewhere in the OT, the word "curse" signified God's temporal discipline upon His people for their disobedience to the covenant (see Deut 28--29). To be **useless** (other translations may use "worthless") need not imply loss of eternal life. The Greek term for "useless" (*adokimos*) was used by the Apostle Paul of himself in 1 Corinthians 9:27 in the sense of being "disqualified" as a result of not disciplining himself (meaning that he feared jeopardizing his eternal reward). Thus the unfruitful ground of Hebrews 6:8 is "useless," implying that the offender is considered unfit and has not gained God's approval. He may be in store for God's discipline and eventual loss of reward.

When the author says **its fate is to be burned**, he is not thinking of burning in hell. Though the metaphor of fire could be used in that sense, it is also used in the Bible to speak of God's scrutinizing judgment of regenerate Christians, as in 1 Corinthians 3:12-15. In such a case, fire is used for revealing the *quality* of the believer's works, as a prelude to dispensing rewards. Two things in the following context suggest the author does have the works of believers in mind: (1) he specifically mentions their *work* in Hebrews 6:10; and (2) rewards are in view in Hebrews 6:12 when he speaks of those who inherit the promises because of their faith and perseverance.

Hebrews 6:9. The last four verses of this unit move on to look at encouragement and hope for the readers. The author, though quite concerned for his readers, apparently does not feel that they have yet gone to the extreme situation of "committing apostasy" as depicted in Hebrews 6:4-6. Thus he ends on a more encouraging note. Most likely, **salvation** (*sōtēria*) is being used in the same eschatological sense as earlier in the book, and as it will be used in Hebrews 9:28 in reference to the Second Coming. The author thinks of the time when man shall be crowned with glory and honor in the resurrected state, ruling jointly with Christ. This is the glorious destiny of believers who are faithful to Christ in this life (see Rev 2:26-27).

Hebrews 6:10. Now he states his reason for the confidence he has in them. He apparently had firsthand knowledge of them, and recalls their past faithfulness. This faithfulness is evidenced by their **work** and their brotherly **love**. They had indeed begun their Christian pilgrimage well, and it is important that they finish well.

Hebrews 6:11-12. Demonstrating **eagerness** suggests *making great effort* (recall Heb 4:11 where the cognate verb form *spoudazō* was used for making every effort to enter God's rest). They must be eager or diligent about their Christian life, while remaining assured of their **hope**. A similar concern was voiced in Hebrews 3:6. [Some translations use "the fulfilment of your hope," but the word translated *fulfilment* (Gk *plērophorian*) means to "have complete certainty" about something (BDAG, 827)]. Based on the preceding chapters, the author is thinking about their confident hope that Jesus is the Messiah and has provided the sufficient sacrifice for their sins by His blood (see comments below for Heb 6:18-19). Therefore it is necessary that they persevere in maintaining their confession of Him and resist the tendency to be **sluggish**. The word *sluggish* (Gk *nōthroi*) is the same word translated "sluggish in hearing" in Hebrews 5:11. They must move forward in faith, and leave their *spiritual sluggishness* behind. By doing so, they can join with other saints who **inherit the promises** of God. These are no doubt the promises held forth earlier in the book regarding the "eschatological salvation" and entering the greater rest to rule with Christ. Disobedience and

unbelief may jeopardize these future promises (see Heb 3:12; 3:19; 4:1; 4:3; 4:11), but faith and perseverance help secure them.

b. Motivation for maturity (Heb 6:13-20)

In this paragraph, the author immediately turns to a perfect example of a man of God who through faith and perseverance inherited God's promise, Abraham the "father" of the Jews. Surely these Jewish Christians would want to follow his example.

Hebrews 6:13-15. We should take note that when the author uses Abraham as an example, he does so not in regard to his justification, but to his faithfulness as a believer. This has important implications for the preceding warning in Heb 6:4-8. The quotation in Hebrews 6:14 is drawn from Genesis 22, which records Abraham's loyalty when he was tested by God's instruction to sacrifice Isaac. Following the successful completion of the test, God declared several promises to Abraham (see Gen 22:17-18). Significantly God introduced these promises with a statement that implied an oath: "By Myself I have sworn" (Gen 22:16). The point the author of Hebrews is trying to make is that God did not simply reward Abraham with promises for his faith and obedience; He *strengthened* the promises by the addition of an oath.

Of all the promises uttered to Abraham in Genesis 22:17-18, the author of Hebrews highlights the one pertaining to blessing and multiplied descendants, for that promise was the one that was most threatened by the sacrifice of Isaac, upon whom the covenant program depended. God's reassurance of the promises, however, came after Abraham had **persevered** (from *makrothumeō*, a cognate term to "perseverance" in Heb 6:12). This is an important lesson for the readers: perseverance in faith and obedience secures God's promises all the more!

Hebrews 6:16-17. It was enough that God would reiterate these promises to Abraham, but the fact that he added the element of an **oath** provided even more assurance to Abraham. Since God never lies, the oath was actually unnecessary. Furthermore God could not swear by a higher power than himself. [Recall that in the OT, believers were allowed to make an oath in the name of Yahweh-- Deut 6:13; 10:20]. So, He swore the oath in His own name. The addition of the oath to His word of promise underscored all the more (for Abraham's benefit) how immutable was God's intent to do what He said. The readers of Hebrews could (and should!) learn a great lesson from this.

Hebrews 6:18-20. Just as Abraham and Sarah were **heirs of the promise**, so the author's readers had promises from God before them to inherit, promises connected with the New Covenant and reigning with Christ in the future. Yet, just as Abraham first had to patiently endure and *by faith* obediently proceed with the sacrifice of Isaac, so the readers of the epistle must first **hold fast to the hope set**

before them. The words *hold fast* (Gk *kratēsai*) draw our minds back to the same verb used earlier in Hebrews 4:14, “let us *hold fast* our confession” (see the similar verb *katechō* in Heb 3:6; 3:14; 10:23). They had already taken hold of this hope, and the author is concerned that they hold it fast.

But what is this hope (Gk *elpis*)? In the context of Hebrews, this hope is *the blood of Christ*, the foundation of the New Covenant. In contrast to the sacrifices associated with the Levitical priesthood, the author declares in Hebrews 7:19, “a better *hope* is introduced, through which we draw near to God.” It is Christ’s blood, not animal blood, that has entered **inside behind the curtain**. The veil of the earthly tabernacle separated the holy of holies from the tabernacle proper. Once a year, the sacrificial blood was brought into this most sacred room behind the veil. Yet the author is thinking here of the fulfilment of the typology. Christ’s blood has entered into the Heavenly Tabernacle and the very presence of God (see Heb 9:11-12).

The ones who are entitled to **strong encouragement** are those who *continue holding fast* to this hope of Christ’s atoning sacrifice. Indeed, it is **an anchor for the soul**. Those who turn away from this and retreat back to some form of Judaism will find no consolation there. With this beautiful statement about the atoning blood of Christ, the author has returned full circle to the topic he had introduced earlier in chapter 5, i.e., the Lord’s ministry as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. He will now elucidate the full significance of this in chapter 7.

2. The superiority of Jesus as High Priest of the Order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-28)

Since Jesus was descended from the tribe of Judah, He was not qualified to be a Levitical priest. The OT, however, actually validates another priesthood known as the “order of Melchizedek.” Jesus is a priest of this order, which is immensely superior to the Levitical priesthood. Now that Jesus has entered into His priestly ministry, there is no need for the Jewish believers to whom the author wrote to continue participating in the priestly ministry of the Temple led by the priests of the Old Covenant order. All of that has now been replaced by something better.

a. The greatness of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-10)

The author begins by reflecting on the person of Melchizedek and how great he actually was, though the OT revelation about him was so brief (only Gen 14:18-20). Yet he was clearly superior to Abraham, and, by extension, to Levi as well.

Hebrews 7:1-2a. The Genesis passage highlights three things about Melchizedek: (1) He was a **king of Salem** and a **priest** of God, implying that he was a *king-priest*, a combination not possible under

the Old Covenant; (2) He blessed Abraham; and (3) He received a tithe from Abraham. Each of these demonstrates something of his superiority.

Hebrews 7:2b. The author of Hebrews even found significance in the meaning of Melchizedek's name. The name Melchizedek is a compound name formed from the Hebrew noun *melek* ("king") and *tsedeq* ("righteousness"). Appropriately then, he is **king of righteousness**. Yet since Salem, apparently an ancient name for Jerusalem, means "peace," he is also **king of peace**. Both were indeed appropriate for this ancient king-priest who serves as a type of Christ.

Hebrews 7:3. The comments about Melchizedek in this verse do not mean he was not a real person. Indeed he was. But unlike Levitical priests, the biblical record offers no **genealogy** for him. No mention is made in Genesis of his parents or line of descent. In contrast to the Levitical priesthood, which was based on proven hereditary lineage, Melchizedek's right to priesthood is based solely on the call of God. Similarly, the Lord Jesus' *call* to priestly ministry was based on God's oath to Him in Psalm 110:4. Furthermore, there was no record of Melchizedek's death, which gives him an *eternal appearance*. Yet what was prefigured in Melchizedek is realized in Christ, who is truly eternal. Just as there is no record of the termination of Melchizedek's ministry, so he prefigured Christ who would be "a priest forever."

Hebrews 7:4-7. Melchizedek is not only unique as a type of Christ, but the Genesis record also implies his superiority to the Levitical priests. This is seen first of all in Abraham's payment of a tithe to Melchizedek. The text highlights Abraham as **the patriarch**, the father of the nation. Abraham is not merely acting as an individual in this account, but is representative of the entire nation that stems from him. Abraham's act of giving a tithe is significant, for under the Old Covenant the Levitical priests collected tithes from the people (Num 18:21-24). Furthermore Melchizedek blesses Abraham upon the payment of the tithe, which is significant in light of the fact that the one who is greater blesses the one who is lesser.

Hebrews 7:8-10. In these verses, the author draws out the typological significance of the observations reported above. In contrast with the Levitical priesthood, no record is given of Melchizedek's death and no provision is made for his succession. This gives him the appearance of an "unending life and ministry," though in reality he did die. In this way he typifies the Lord Jesus Christ who literally has an unending life and priestly ministry.

If Abraham acts in a representative fashion as "patriarch" and head of the nation, then in essence Levi, who was in Abraham's loins, was paying a tithe to Melchizedek. That, of course, would imply that the Melchizedekan priesthood was superior to the Levitical priesthood. Thus, Messiah Jesus,

who was declared by an oath from God to be a priest of the order of Melchizedek in Ps 110:4, is a priest of a more superior priesthood than the Levitical one. How fitting it is, then, that the New Covenant has its own priesthood and high priest, and these are superior to those of the Old Covenant. Consequentially there should be no hesitation for Jewish believers in the first century to embrace Jesus as their new High Priest and to abandon the sacrifices of the Levitical system.

b. The appointment of Messiah to the Order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:11-28)

Whereas Hebrews 7:1-10 focuses on the person of Melchizedek as he is introduced in Genesis 14, the remainder of the chapter focuses more on the appointment of the Messiah to the “order of Melchizedek” as recorded in Psalm 110:4. In both cases, the implications are drawn out to argue for the inferiority of the Levitical priesthood to the present priestly ministry of the Lord Jesus.

Hebrews 7:11-14. The author could see that the announcement in Psalm 110:4 that Messiah would be “a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek” had important implications. Psalm 110 was a psalm of David, written about 1000 BC. Yet the Old Covenant Law (on which the Levitical priesthood was based) dated back to 1446 BC, when the Hebrews received it at Mt. Sinai after leaving Egypt. Obviously, then, Psalm 110, coming later, was introducing a change to the earlier priestly arrangements. This must mean that the Levitical priesthood was only a temporary arrangement, and the plan revealed in Psalm 110 must be superior to and a replacement of it.

By **perfection**, the author probably means the ability of the Levitical priesthood and its sacrificial system to make the worshiper perfect in conscience because of the certainty of having one’s sins eternally forgiven before God (see Heb 9:9; 10:1; 10:14). If the Levitical priesthood had indeed been able to give the worshiper this, there would certainly have been no need to make any changes to the priestly system. Yet Psalm 110 clearly indicated a major change. Significantly, how could Messiah be a priest, since other OT passages clearly presented him from the tribe of Judah (see Gen 49:8-10; 2 Sam 7:12-16)? **Moses said nothing about priests** being of the tribe of Judah, but only of the line of Aaron from the tribe of Levi.

Thus the revelation of Psalm 110 (coming later than the Law) and the obvious introduction of major change in the tribal origin of the priest himself pointed to the fact that this was not merely a modification of the system but an actual replacement of it. Of course the time of the actual implementation of the new system was still unclear. Though announced in David’s day, it would apparently come later in history, whenever it was conferred upon Messiah. Yet the significance could not be missed: there would be a change of priesthood at some future point! This, in turn, had implications for the covenant itself. The Levitical priesthood is an inherent part of the Old Covenant.

There can be no change in the priesthood, unless there is a major change in the covenant arrangement that legitimizes it. Now that Messiah had come, the temporary provision of the Old Covenant and the Levitical priesthood accompanying it were no longer operative. Levitical rituals were now obsolete!

Hebrews 7:15-17. The author now turns the attention of the readers to one specific word within Psalm 110:4, namely, the word **forever**. Under the Old Covenant, the high priest had to be of the line of Aaron, and each individual high priest was *limited* in the duration of his ministry. The **legal regulation about physical descent** dictated that a new high priest could not take office until the previous high priest had died, and he would continue as high priest only until his own death. Yet the priest of the new order of Melchizedek would not have this time constraint, for his time of office would be “forever.” In order for one to be **a priest forever**, however, he would have to be more than an ordinary human. Only a person with an **indestructible life** could fulfill such a requirement. This was a powerful case for the new priest’s superiority, and thus the superiority of the covenant on which his priesthood was based.

Hebrews 7:18-19. In these two verses, the author does not put forward a new argument for the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood. Instead he highlights the conclusion to which all of this is leading. If there is a new priesthood because the former one was inferior, then this must imply that the new priesthood makes possible a better sacrifice that gives people a better hope before God.

By **a former command**, the author means the entire set of commandments that made up the Old Covenant Law. The Law has been **set aside**, that is, put out of commission or made inoperative, **because it is weak and useless**. Of course, the Levitical sacrificial system was not completely “useless.” After all, it was instituted by God and served a purpose, namely, to teach the concept of substitutionary sacrifice *pointing forward* to the work of Christ in His atonement for sins. Yet it was weak and useless in the sense that it had no inherent power to provide a basis for forgiving sins or cleansing the conscience of the worshiper. Animal blood simply could not accomplish that. On the other hand, the precious blood of Christ provided a far **better hope** for the person wanting to **draw near to God** (i.e., to be able to *approach* Him).

Hebrews 7:20-22. In these verses, the author puts forward a new argument for the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood that confirms Jesus as a high priest. Its announcement in Psalm 110:4 was attended by a **sworn affirmation**, or “oath,” as reflected in the introductory words **The LORD has sworn**. [This is a similar argument to that used by the author in Heb 6:13-20].

Of course the Lord could have appointed Messiah as a priest of the order of Melchizedek without making any oath. A command from God is valid because of who God is, not because it is accompanied by an oath. Yet the presence of the oath in this verse gives additional force to what is being said. The Levitical priesthood was not established by oath, whereas Jesus' appointment to this new priesthood was. This makes His appointment all the more certain, and also points to the greater superiority of the priesthood that He represents and the New Covenant of which it is a part.

The author concludes by saying that Jesus has become a **guarantee** of a better covenant. The word translated *guarantee* (Gk *enguos*) only occurs here in the NT. However, it does occur three times in the LXX (2 Macc 10:28; Sir 29:15,16 [These are books found in the Apocrypha, a collection of non-biblical religious works that were included in the Greek LXX.]). In those cases, the word is used of a pledge or guarantee for something, i.e., something given as an *assurance* that a promise will be kept (such as pledge money). This oath introducing Psalm 110:4 strengthens the argument that Jesus is our guarantee that the New Covenant is indeed a better covenant.

Hebrews 7:23-25. In Hebrews 7:15-17, the author had called attention to the word "forever" in the promise of Psalm 110:4 to argue for the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood. In contrast to the Levitical priests who had short-lived ministries because of death, Jesus has an eternal ministry because He lives and serves *forever*. Over the years, there were many high priests under the Old Covenant, not to mention the many assisting priests. The first high priest was Aaron, but when he died he was replaced by his son Eleazar (Num 20:25-29). Eleazar in turn died and was replaced by his son Phinehas (Josh 24:33). According to the Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews* 20.227), eighty-three high priests officiated from Aaron to the fall of the Second Temple in AD 70. The newer Melchizedekan priesthood, by way of contrast, does not have this succession of priests, because Jesus lives and serves forever.

The author's point, however, is not simply to repeat the same argument, but rather to draw out a significant implication arising from Jesus' unending and unchangeable priesthood. He is able to **save completely** those who come to God through Him, since He ever lives to make intercession for them. What exactly does the author mean by *save completely*? Does he mean that Jesus is saving sinners from the penalty of sin (speaking soteriologically)? If so, then this verse is saying that He does that because of His intercessory ministry that He continues to carry out on their behalf.

Yet that is precisely what the author is *not saying*. It would be theologically inaccurate to say that a Christian's personal salvation from the penalty of sin *depends on* Christ's ongoing intercession for him. That depends solely on Christ's work on the Cross! That is why Jesus cried out from the Cross,

“It is finished.” That is also why Paul, in Colossians 2:13-14, could proclaim that God has forgiven us all our sins and wiped out the "certificate of indebtedness"--the list of requirements we failed to fulfill--having nailed it to the Cross. That kind of salvation is not dependent on the Cross *plus* ongoing intercession!

More likely, the author has something different in mind than personal salvation from the penalty of sin. Since the verb “to save” (Gk *sōzō*) and the noun “salvation” (Gk *sōtēria*) are used predominantly in Hebrews in regard to an eschatological salvation, it is likely that he is thinking of a future salvation connected with the Second Coming of Christ.

It is also important to observe the objects of this particular saving ministry. It is **those who come to God through Him**. The word used for *come to* is *proserchomenous*. This verb is used seven times in the epistle (Heb 4:16; 7:25; 10:1; 10:22; 11:6; 12:18; 12:22). In Hebrews 4:16, for instance, the author had admonished his Christian audience, “Let us confidently **approach** the throne of grace to receive mercy and find grace whenever we need help.” “Approaching” the throne of grace (or as some translations put it, “draw near”) is not for personal salvation, but is a resource for finding help in light of “our weaknesses” (Heb 4:15). This speaks of post-conversion activity (see a similar situation in Heb 10:22 concerning the brethren who are admonished to “draw near”). Consequently, this *saving ministry* of Christ is for those Christians who avail themselves of Jesus’ priestly role, and who want to “draw near” to God (i.e., receive his grace and mercy for their Christian pilgrimage).

The adverb **completely** (Gk *eis to panteles*) does not have a temporal force (some translations wrongly have “forever”), but rather conveys the *thoroughness* of His saving work. For those Christians who rely on Christ’s priestly role and intercession for them, they find that He is able to carry them *completely* through all trials and difficulties to arrive at their eschatological salvation, qualified to enter the greater rest.

Hebrews 7:26-28. The final argument for the superiority of the new priesthood with Christ as High Priest is that this priest is perfectly holy and righteous. By contrast, the Levitical priests obviously were not holy and undefiled, for they had to **offer sacrifices** for their own sins before they could offer up sacrifices for others. Furthermore the Levitical priests had to offer up sacrifices *every day*, in contrast to Christ who provided a final sacrifice once for all.

The words **made perfect** (*teteleiōmenon*) in verse 28 remind us of all that was involved in God’s preparing Jesus to be the High Priest for His people. This would include both His lifetime of sufferings (recall Heb 2:10; Heb 5:8-9), as well as His final act of suffering upon the Cross. The former prepared Him to help His brethren who struggle in their sufferings, while the latter enabled

Him to present His blood on their behalf to provide forgiveness of sins. Indeed, in so many ways chapter 7 portrays Jesus as an infinitely superior priest to all those who served under the Law.

III. The Superior Ministry of Jesus and The Sacrifice of Himself Guaranteeing the Superiority of the New Covenant (Heb 8:1--10:39)

Beginning with chapter 8, the author embarks upon a new major section of the epistle. In the previous unit, the author argued for the superiority of the New Covenant on the basis of the superior priesthood in which Jesus serves as High Priest, namely, the Melchizedekan priesthood. The focus of chapters 8--10 is on the nature and accomplishment of *the sacrifice* that this High Priest makes and which forms the foundation for the superior New Covenant.

A. The Foretelling of the New Covenant That Would Bring Forgiveness of Sins (Heb 8:1-13)

Before elaborating the details of what makes Christ's sacrifice better than those of the Levitical system, the author first looks at God's intentions for the Old Covenant and its sacrificial system. Two major observations show that it was only intended to serve a temporary purpose. First, the whole tabernacle design was a *copy* of a greater heavenly reality (i.e., the earthly tabernacle pointed forward to something greater to come). Second, the Lord Himself announced through the prophet Jeremiah that the Old Covenant would be replaced at some future point by a New Covenant.

1. The introduction of Christ as a High Priest of the heavenly tabernacle (Heb 8:1-2)

Hebrews 8:1. With the words **Now the main point of what we are saying**, the author indicates a major turning point in the epistle. Of all the author has talked about in the preceding chapters, the *main thing* is the matter of Christ being a High Priest. This was mentioned in every chapter except chapter 1, and even there it was implied in Hebrews 1:3. Even the thought that He **sat down at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in heaven** was first enunciated in Hebrews 1:3 (the word "majesty" is a figure for God the Father). From this lofty position, He represents us as High Priest!

Hebrews 8:2. Verse 2, on the other hand, looks forward to a new facet of His priestly ministry. Christ is not merely a legitimate High Priest (substantiated in chapter 7), but He has carried out His priestly sacrifice in a "tabernacle" of far more significance than the earthly tabernacle/temple. He has carried out His priestly ministry in the **true tabernacle** itself, i.e., the heavenly tabernacle. Once again the author makes use of contrast to prove the superiority of Christ's priestly ministry. The Levitical priests merely functioned at the level of the earthly tabernacle but Christ at the heavenly level.

2. Christ's more excellent ministry than the Levitical one (Heb 8:3-6)

Hebrews 8:3. The author begins this paragraph by directing our attention to what Christ might have to offer. If He is a High Priest (and He is!), surely He must have **something to offer**. This anticipates what the author will expound on in chapter 9 concerning the offering of Christ's own blood.

Hebrews 8:4-5. For now, however, the author wants to call attention to the priestly activities taking place **on earth**, i.e., as performed by the Levites. [Verse 4 seems to imply that Herod's Temple was still standing at the time the author of Hebrews wrote the epistle]. The Levitical priests did this on a daily basis, and the high priest (in the line of Aaron) brought a special sacrifice once a year into the earthly Holy of Holies. But this whole system was merely a **sketch and shadow of the heavenly sanctuary**. This should be clear from the very instructions that God gave to Moses in Exodus 25:40, "Now be sure to make them according to the pattern you were shown on the mountain." Everything about the tabernacle was to be **according to the design** shown to Moses. The word *design* (from Gk *tupos*, meaning a pattern or model) implies that the tabernacle system is not the ultimate structure of God's dwelling place, but a *model* that reflects this greater reality. The "sketch" and "model" must be inferior to that which it is patterned after. The point here is that Christ has gone into the *original* itself, not the *sketch* of the original. This demonstrates how much more significant is that which He has done (because of *where* it is carried out).

Hebrews 8:6. Yet Christ has **a superior ministry**, because it involves Him mediating **a covenant** that is **better** and which is **enacted on better promises**. All the priestly activity performed by the Levites was done in accordance with the Old Covenant. The promises attached to the New Covenant that Jesus mediates are decidedly *better* than any promise associated with the Old Covenant given to Moses. Probably the author is thinking primarily of the promise of eternal forgiveness of sins, because that is the climactic statement of his doctrinal teaching in Hebrews 10:14-18. If the promises of the New Covenant are better, then the New Covenant itself must be better.

3. Implications of the announcement of the New Covenant (Heb 8:7-13)

Hebrews 8:7-12. In Jeremiah 31:31-34 the prophet announced that the Lord would make a New Covenant with His people. Although it is not stated when this covenant will go into effect, it is clear that it will be a replacement of the Old Covenant that was made with the nation at Mt. Sinai when the Hebrews came out of Egypt. Without even looking at the provisions of this New Covenant, the very fact that a second covenant was deemed necessary demonstrates that the first covenant was inadequate.

The *timing* of this announcement by Jeremiah is significant. This was made about the year 586 BC when Jerusalem and the Temple were about to be destroyed by the Babylonians and the people led away into

exile. God was allowing this to come upon His people because of their covenant unfaithfulness, just as He had forewarned them in Deuteronomy 28--29. Therefore in Jeremiah 31:22 he calls the people an “unfaithful daughter.” In Hebrews 8:8, the author introduces the quotation from Jeremiah with the words **showing its fault**. The invasion and destruction by Babylon in Jeremiah’s day made it clearly evident that the Lord had found fault with His people. After over 800 years of failing to live up to the terms of the Old Covenant, it was apparent that the people were unfaithful. This led to the implementation of the Lord’s plan to have a New Covenant replace the old one, and for Jeremiah to announce it to the nation.

The New Testament is clear that this New Covenant was inaugurated by the blood of Christ shed at Calvary and has been operative since that time (Luke 22:20; 1 Cor 11:25; 2 Cor 3:6). At the Cross the Old Covenant was replaced by the New Covenant, and all believers since then are participants in the New Covenant and are no longer under the Mosaic Law (Rom 7:4-7; 1 Cor 9:19-21; Heb 7:18). Though inaugurated at the Cross, it would be best to think of the New Covenant as being *progressively fulfilled*, since there is still an aspect of it that awaits fulfillment with Israel as a nation (see Rom 11:25-27). Although the promises of the New Covenant were originally given to Israel as a nation, it became clear in the progress of revelation that the Church would also participate in this covenant. This is especially true regarding the spiritual benefits of the forgiveness of sins and the pouring out of the Holy Spirit mentioned in such passages as Ezekiel 36:22-32 and Joel 2:28-32.

Hebrews 8:13. The author ends the chapter by pointing out that the mere mention of **a new covenant** in Jeremiah should have alerted the people to anticipate that the Old Covenant would one day be replaced. Since this announcement made **the first obsolete**, the people should have expected that a change was coming. With Christ's first advent the moment of change had arrived, and the time had now come to set aside the Old Covenant and all the rituals associated with the Levitical priestly ministry. With this understanding, the author is now set in chapter 9 to expound on the superior sacrifice of the New Covenant.

B. The Perfect Sacrifice of the New Covenant Presented in the Heavenly Tabernacle (Heb 9:1-28)

Beginning in chapter 8, the author focused on the *sacrifice* of the New Covenant that Jesus, the High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, had to present. The sacrifice He offered is far superior to any offered by the Levitical priests, which argues even more strongly that the New Covenant is superior to the Old. Chapter 9 highlights this sacrifice, which is nothing less than the perfect sacrifice of Himself in the greater tabernacle, the very presence of God. Throughout this section, the author draws comparisons and contrasts to the sacrifices of the earthly tabernacle.

1. The sacrificial ministry of the Old Covenant at the earthly tabernacle (Heb 9:1-10)

As a backdrop to speaking about Jesus' sacrifice, the author begins by reminding his readers about the earthly tabernacle of the Old Covenant.

a. The Old Covenant's regulations of worship and the earthly sanctuary (Heb 9:1)

Hebrews 9:1. The author mentions that the cultic system of the Old Covenant had two primary aspects: (1) regulations for worship and (2) an earthly sanctuary. He briefly describes the latter in Hebrews 9:2-5 and then the former in Hebrews 9:6-7.

b. A brief description of the earthly sanctuary (Heb 9:2-5)

Hebrews 9:2-3. The author points out that the tabernacle had two rooms, the outer one called the **holy place** (Gk *hagia*), and the inner one called the **holy of holies** (Gk *hagia hagiōn*). [Some translations prefer to call the latter the Most Holy Place]. Among the items placed in the outer sanctuary were the **lampstand** (Exod 25:31-39) and the **table** that held the **loaves** (Exod 25:23-30). Each of these items had some typological significance. For example, the lampstand reminded the people of God that their purpose was to be a light to the world, a kingdom of priests (Exod 19:5-6). This function of being a light to those in darkness is ultimately fulfilled in Christ Himself, who is the *Light of the World* (Jn 8:12; 9:5). In turn, Christians are to be lights in the world (Matt 5:13; Eph 5:8; 1 Thess 5:5). The oil for the lamp signified the Holy Spirit who keeps the light going. On the table of showbread were twelve loaves of bread (Lev 24:5-9), one for each of the twelve tribes of Israel. The loaves spoke of God's sustenance of spiritual life through fellowship with Him (which explains why Jesus would refer to Himself as the *Bread of Life*; Jn 6:35; 6:41; 6:48-51).

Hebrews 9:4-5. Now he mentions the items that were placed in the inner room (the holy of holies). The key item was **the ark of the covenant**, in which was (1) **the golden urn containing the manna**, (2) **Aaron's rod that budded**, and (3) **the stone tablets of the covenant**. On the top side of the ark's lid was **the mercy seat**, because it was here that once a year the high priest placed the sacrificial blood on the Day of Atonement. Above the mercy seat were the representations of two angelic creatures called **cherubim**. Unfortunately, the author did not provide more explanation.

The mention of the **golden altar of incense** (Gk *chrusoun thumiaterion*) is confusing. This translation is problematic, since the author seems to associate it with the holy of holies, although the Old Testament clearly locates it before the veil in the main sanctuary (Lev 16:12-13). The best solution to the problem is to adopt the translation offered by the English NKJV, namely, "the golden censer" (rather than golden altar of incense). The author is speaking about the golden censer, in

which were placed coals from the altar of incense and then brought inside the veil into the holy of holies. Incense placed on these coals would fill the room with smoke, sending forth a pleasing fragrance. As support for this interpretation, whenever the term *thumiatērion* is used in the LXX, it is clearly used for a censer (2 Chr 26:19; Ezek 8:11). Also, there is a clear reference to the altar of incense in Luke 1:11, but that verse uses a different expression in the Greek. Regardless of the translation problem, the typological significance of the incense itself should not be overlooked. In light of verses like Revelation 5:8 and Revelation 8:3-4, the incense typifies the prayers of the saints before God (see Ps 141:2 and Lk 1:10). The high priest would take the coals from the incense altar (located in the outer sanctuary) and would bring them inside the holy of holies using the golden censer. As he placed incense on the coals, the fragrant smoke filled the room. Correspondingly, our great High Priest, the Lord Jesus Christ, brings our prayers into the very presence of God as a fragrant aroma.

c. The ministry (divine regulations) of the earthly tabernacle (Heb 9:6-7)

Since the author will show the parallels between the work of Christ and what the earthly high priest did on the Day of Atonement (see Lev 16), he points out that access to the holy of holies was greatly restricted. Ordinary Levitical priests could enter the main sanctuary (i.e., the holy place) for daily ministry activities (e.g., keeping the lamps lit and changing the loaves of bread), but they could never enter the holy of holies. Only the high priest could enter the holy of holies, and even then only once a year on the Day of Atonement. In the holy of holies dwelt the *shekinah* glory of God. [The word "shekinah" refers to God's presence *dwelling* in the tabernacle, the Hebrew verb *shākan* meaning to "abide, dwell"; see Exod 40:34-35]. Even though God is omnipresent, He did manifest His glorious presence in this place, thus making it very sacred. Furthermore even the high priest could not enter without taking blood from the sacrificial animals for the sins of himself and the people.

We learn several lessons from this. First, entering the holy of holies patterned the very presence of God in the heavenly tabernacle. The only person who was qualified to enter was the high priest. Second, just as the holy of holies was entered only once a year, so Christ would enter the heavenly tabernacle on our behalf only one time. Third, just as sacrificial blood (for sins) was required for the priest to enter the holy of holies, so sacrificial blood was required for Christ to enter the heavenly tabernacle. In the latter case, however, the blood was not for His sins, but only for the people He represented, namely, all humanity.

d. The significance of the restrictedness of the Day of Atonement (Heb 9:8-10)

Hebrews 9:8-9. When the author mentions **the holy place** in verse 8, he does not mean the earthly one but the greater reality of God's very presence in heaven (see Heb 10:19). As long as **the old tabernacle**--the earthly one--was still standing and operational (which it was as long as the Old Covenant was in force from Sinai to the Cross), the way into the heavenly tabernacle was not made evident. During that long period that the people were under the Law and the Levitical priesthood was practiced, they could not clearly see what God intended by all these things, that they were a **symbol** for that time.

With the coming of Christ, however, the *types* became clear, and thus could now be set aside. Everything the earthly tabernacle and its rituals were meant to portray had now been fulfilled with Christ. The earthly tabernacle was indeed characterized by its *restricted access*, but the author is going to point out in Heb 10:19-20, that the way is now plainly open and accessible for us to enter God's presence, now that Christ has gone before us and the New Covenant has been put into effect.

Furthermore there is no need to keep clinging to the *sketches* and *shadows*, because they are unable to **perfect the conscience of the worshiper**. The emphasis here is not on God's ability to forgive, but upon the worshiper's need for a cleansed conscience. The point is that no one could have confidence that the blood of animals had adequately dealt with his sins, especially since the ceremony was repeated year after year. But a cleansed conscience is essential for one seeking to serve God effectively.

Hebrews 9:10. The gifts, sacrifices, and other rituals under the Old Covenant (though willed and commanded by God) were valid only until **the new order** (Gk *diorthōseōs*) came. This *new order* refers to the new arrangements brought about by the establishment of the New Covenant.

2. The better accomplishment of Christ in the Heavenly Tabernacle (Heb 9:11-15)

In this paragraph, the author points out two primary contributions of the atoning work of Christ: (1) eternal redemption, and (2) a cleansed conscience for serving the living God.

a. The provision of eternal redemption (Heb 9:11-12)

What was implied before is now made explicit. The author points out three major ways in which the priestly ministry of Christ is superior to the ministry of the Old Covenant. First, Christ has gone not into an earthly tabernacle made with human hands, but into the **more perfect tent** of heaven (the actual presence of God). Second, Christ has presented His own blood for sins (based on a sinless life), not that of animals. Third, Christ has done this **once for all**, not year after year. As a result, He obtained **eternal redemption**. The word *redemption* (Gk *lutrōsin*) means releasing from obligation

by virtue of payment (as with ransom money paid to release prisoners of war). Christ has made the full payment for our sins, so as to release us forever from the debt we owe God. This is the blessing that awaits any sinner who accepts the free gift of eternal life in Christ Jesus by trusting Him alone for salvation (see Rom 6:23).

b. The provision of a cleansed conscience to serve the Living God (Heb 9:13-15)

Hebrews 9:13-14. The benefit of Christ's sacrifice is not limited to eternal redemption, for it also provides a cleansed conscience **from dead works**. By *dead works* the author may be referring to the person who went through the motions of the Levitical rituals without faith and thus obtained no spiritual benefit (see Heb 6:1). This type of worshiper could never escape a defiled conscience. He may go through the rituals outwardly, but inwardly he still struggled under the burden of guilt. On the other hand, the worshiper who recognizes the New Covenant and thus rests in the finished work of Christ (and that alone) can enjoy a cleansed conscience altogether.

Yet this is not an end in itself. Knowing his sin is totally and eternally paid for and forgiven, he experiences the freedom to **worship the living God**. [Note the contrast between "*dead works*" and "*living God*"]. The word for *worship* (Gk *latreuō*) literally means to "serve." Yet this has overtones of worship and priestly service, not mundane work. The choice of this word to describe "worship" would suggest to the reader the responsibility for priestly service as an appropriate part of worship, drawing our attention back to chapter 3 where the author was concerned that the readers actively be part of the worshiping community as the "Son's house."

Hebrews 9:15. The death of Christ, by which He mediated the New Covenant, sets in motion a chain of events that leads to the attainment of **the eternal inheritance he has promised**. The latter part of this complex sentence is a *purpose clause* in the Greek. The purpose of His mediating the New Covenant and obtaining eternal redemption for us is that we might ultimately receive an inheritance that we can eternally enjoy and benefit from. The text does not say, however, that all believers will automatically receive this. The "eternal redemption" is absolutely free, but not necessarily the "eternal inheritance." The latter appears to be conditional for at least two reasons.

First, the author has just mentioned "*worshipping the living God*" in verse 14 (which looks at our priestly service now enhanced by a cleansed conscience). The idea of the tabernacle-house (suggesting priestly service) was expressed in Hebrews 3:6 as a conditional matter. Proper "priestly service" is a prerequisite for this inheritance. Second, a study of the word group related to "inheritance" (Gk *klēronomias*, used eight times in Hebrews 1:2; 1:14; 6:12; 6:17; 9:15; 11:7, 8; 12:17) suggests that *inheritance* is a conditional matter related to faithfulness. This is highlighted in

Hebrews 6:12 where the author tells his audience that they could not be sluggish if they hoped to *inherit the promises* but must have faith and perseverance. Thus faith and perseverance (i.e., patient endurance) are prerequisites for inheriting (see Heb 10:36).

The appropriation by faith of Christ's sacrifice grants us eternal redemption. In addition to this, believers can also have an eternal inheritance, provided they exercise faith, persevere through the trials and difficulties of their earthly pilgrimage, and faithfully render their priestly service.

Obtaining this eternal inheritance is at the heart of what it means to "enter His rest" (see Heb 4:1-11).

3. The role of blood to inaugurate the Old Covenant (Heb 9:16-22)

a. The importance of death to covenant making (9:16-17)

The author prefaces what he will teach about the inauguration of the Old Covenant with a brief comment about the role death plays in covenant making. The Greek word he uses for "covenant" (*diathēkē*) can mean either a biblical covenant or a last will and testament, and scholars debate which of the two is in view here. Whether the author intends a human will or a divine covenant, the point remains the same. A death is necessary to activate it. [If a biblical covenant is in view, the death would be that of an animal as a substitute for the one ratifying the covenant].

b. The Old Covenant inaugurated by blood (Heb 9:18-22)

In the case of the Old Covenant, it was activated by the death of animals. That is, their blood was ceremonially used to inaugurate the covenant. The author is thinking here of the ceremony described in Exodus 24:1-8 when Moses received the Law code from God. At that time, blood was sprinkled on both the people and the altar, which foreshadowed the blood of Christ inaugurating the New Covenant. Although the first covenant utilized animal blood and the second the blood of Christ, nevertheless they both taught the demand of blood as crucial for God's forgiveness.

4. The role of blood to inaugurate the New Covenant (Heb 9:23-28)

Hebrews 9:23. Just as blood inaugurated the Old Covenant, so blood inaugurates the New Covenant. However, the latter had to involve **better sacrifices**, since it was conducted in the heavenly tabernacle.

Hebrews 9:24-26. Echoing what he had said earlier (Heb 9:11-12), the author again lays out the rationale for Christ's sacrifice being better. First, it is offered in heaven in the very presence of God (v 24). Second, it involves the blood of the sinless Son of God, not animal blood (v 25). Third, it is offered only once, not yearly, thereby proving its effectiveness (vv 25-26).

Hebrews 9:27-28. Whereas the benefit of Christ's first coming was to **bear the sins of many**, the benefit of His second coming is **to bring salvation**. Obviously what the author means by "salvation" in this context is something different than the atonement for sins that Christ provided in His first coming. This salvation needs to be seen in light of the broader context of Hebrews, an eschatological salvation wherein the faithful share in the dominion over creation with Christ (see Heb 2:5-8). Yet, just as the eternal inheritance in Hebrews 9:15 was conditional, so here the author seems to imply that this "salvation" is conditional (or limited to a smaller circle than all the redeemed). It is for those believers who **eagerly await him** (from the Gk verb *apekdechomai*, used seven times in the New Testament in regard to the Second Coming of Christ; see esp. Phil 3:20 and 1 Cor 1:7). This term is contrasted with the "many" who benefit from His bearing their sins. In this *Second Coming salvation*, Christ will "strike the nations" (Rev 19:15), deliver the world from the bondage of Satan, and bring in a new order of righteousness in which faithful believers will reign with Him and receive their inheritance in the "greater rest." Thus they "inherit salvation," to use the words of Hebrews 1:14. Part of the secret to *faithfully enduring* in the Christian life is to be eagerly awaiting the return of our Lord Jesus.

C. The Adequacy of Christ's Sacrifice for Eternal Forgiveness Contrasted to the Inefficacy of the Sacrifices under the Law (Heb 10:1-18)

This is the author's final exposition about Christ's sacrifice for sins before exhorting the readers once again in Hebrews 10:19-39. The emphasis upon the "once for all" nature of Christ's sacrifice (see Heb 9:12; 9:26) carries over into chapter 10. The author is trying to convey that only this "once for all" sacrifice is adequate for cleansing the conscience of the worshiper and providing an assured forgiveness of sins.

1. The repetitious cycle of sacrifices under the Law (Heb 10:1-4)

Hebrews 10:1. The entire Law system with all its Levitical rituals and sacrifices was nothing more than a **shadow of the good things to come**. The word *shadow* (Gk *skian*) was used earlier in Hebrews 8:5, and conveys the typological nature of this Law system (see Col 2:16-17). The *good things to come*, on the other hand, refer to the priestly ministry of Christ as He entered the heavenly tabernacle in the presence of God the Father to present His blood once for all as a sacrifice for the sins of mankind (note the use of this phrase in Heb 9:11).

If the Law system was only a *type* of what Christ would do (foreshadowing His work), then obviously one should not look to the type in which to put his confidence. Furthermore the repetitive nature of the type (**continually, year after year**) reveals its inferiority. The author is probably thinking primarily of the

sacrifices connected with the yearly Day of Atonement, as it is that ritual more than any other that typifies Christ's sacrificial blood entering the heavenly tabernacle.

When the author refers to the law never making **perfect those who come to worship**, he is thinking about the inability of the Levitical sacrifices to decisively help the **conscience** of the worshiper. Support for this is two-fold. First, the author uses the word "perfect" in Hebrews 9:9 in stating how the gifts and sacrifices under the Old Covenant could not make the worshiper "perfect in regard to the conscience." This is in contrast with the blood of Christ (Heb 9:14) that could cleanse the conscience from dead works. Second, the author refers in the very next verse (Heb 10:2) to the matter of having consciousness of sins.

Hebrews 10:2-4. There never seemed to be an end to the repetitive sacrifices under the Old Covenant, and the people never got to the point where they could say that **the blood of bulls and goats** (the animal sacrifices) had been enough. The **consciousness of sin**, therefore points to the worshipers' sense of sin, which became most pronounced on the Day of Atonement when confronted with the holiness of God.

2. The replacement of the sacrifices anticipated (Heb 10:5-10)

a. *The quotation of Psalm 40:6-8 (Heb 10:5-7)*

Hebrews 10:5. Heb 10:5-7 is a quotation from Psalm 40:6-8, an Old Testament passage anticipating that a representative of God was coming who would provide something better than the Old Covenant animal sacrifices. In his quotation, the author seems to rely primarily on the LXX translation of these verses (Ps 39:7-9 in the LXX), which differs slightly from the original Hebrew text. The words **but a body you prepared for me** appear in the Hebrew as "ears You have dug for me." The sense, however, is the same. The LXX translators realized that the word "dug" was a figure of speech (a metonymy). God bore out the holes in our head, as it were, putting the apparatus in our head to hear His Word. The word "ears" represented another figure of speech (a synecdoche--substitution of a part for the whole). If God has our ear, then He has our body, i.e., our whole being. Thus God "bore the ears" (for hearing) with the intention that one's whole person (body) would hear His Word and be completely disposed to doing His will.

Hebrews 10:6-7. The author of Hebrews was apparently led by the Spirit of God to change the wording of the quotation in Hebrews 10:6 (concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin) from "You have not required" to **You took no delight**. In doing this, he may have had Psalm 51:19 in mind (50:19 in the LXX). The word for *take delight* (Gk eudokeō) was used in this psalm to speak about the sacrifices God is pleased with, in contrast to those He is not pleased with. So the author quotes Psalm 40, but his mind is so steeped in the terminology of God's delight (or lack thereof) with sacrifices in the OT psalms, that he readily substitutes a word he was familiar with from similar

contexts within the Psalter. Psalm 51 indicates that it is ultimately the condition of the worshiper's heart, not the activity of bringing an animal sacrifice, that really matters with God ("a humble and repentant heart you will not reject").

b. The implications of Psalm 40 (Heb 10:8-10)

Hebrews 10:8. Whereas "the body" became a way for the LXX translators to capture the point of the Hebrew text ("ears You have dug"), the author of Hebrews seizes the rendering to identify Christ as the perfect fulfilment. He is the "body" that has come--via His incarnation--perfectly desiring and doing the will of God (see John 4:34; 8:29). Furthermore with the sacrifice of His body, He has superseded the Levitical sacrifices. The quotation from Psalm 40 substantiates that God always anticipated something better than animal sacrifices, and this was recorded even while the Old Covenant was still in operation. The fact that this body (i.e., the One who perfectly obeyed the Father) is then itself given up as a sacrifice makes the Levitical offerings pale in comparison.

Hebrews 10:9-10. The author also finds significance in the *order* in which ideas are stated in the psalm. After the comments about sacrifices, we read **Then I said, "Here I am: I have come."** This implies that the one who has come is superior to the sacrifices, and thus replaces the need for them. By **his will**--the will of God that planned the offering of the body of Jesus as a once for all sacrifice for sins--all true believers in Christ Jesus are **made holy** (Gk *hagiazō*). In this context, as in Hebrews 2:11, the author is thinking of our *positional sanctification* because of Christ's redeeming blood, whereby we are given a righteous standing before God **once for all**.

3. The significance of Christ having sat down (Heb 10:11-14)

The author concluded the preceding paragraph with the thought that Christ's sacrifice (unlike animal sacrifices) was "once for all." Now he links that thought with the matter of His having **sat down at the right hand of God**. These words are from Psalm 110:1, where David's "Lord" was told, "Sit down at My right hand until I make your enemies your footstool." It would be very natural to relate these words to the Messiah, since this is the very same psalm that commissioned Him as a Priest according to the order of Melchizedek (vs 4). These words from Psalm 110:1 have been used earlier in the epistle to demonstrate the exalted status that the resurrected Christ has attained to (see Heb 1:3; 8:1). The author now wants to draw out an additional significance of this verse, namely, the fact that He *sits* rather than stands.

Under the Old Covenant, priests did not "sit" in their priestly ministry (so to speak). Their ministry could be summarized as "standing," since they always had to carry out more sacrifices. In contrast, the High Priest of the New Covenant sits. He can sit in His priestly ministry, precisely because He does not need to offer further sacrifices. The offering of Himself was sufficient. The fact that He "sits" is thus an

anticipation from the pages of the Old Testament that by the offering of Himself **He has perfected for all time** those who have trusted in His sacrifice.

Furthermore He sits *in anticipation* of what is coming. Verse 13 indicates that He is **waiting until his enemies are made a footstool for his feet**. He has not yet received the full benefit of what the Father intends for Him. He sits (now that His sacrifice is completed and He has ascended to the Father's right hand), but His enemies have not yet been fully subjugated. That, however, will all change at our Lord's Second Coming. All enemies (whether earthly rulers, the Antichrist, or demonic forces) will be subdued and forcibly disengaged, thus setting the stage for Him to rule as King of the earth in His millennial kingdom (see Ps 2:1-2; 2:8-9; Ps 72:8-11; Rev 19:19-21).

4. The New Covenant's assurance of forgiveness (Heb 10:15-18)

In the final paragraph of this section, the author returns again to the passage from Jeremiah 31 (which was quoted at length in Heb 8:8-12). This time, however, he is more selective in what he quotes, choosing to highlight that part of the New Covenant prophecy which promised that God would remember **their sins and their lawless deeds** no more. This fact obviously implies an *assured forgiveness* for those who participate in this New Covenant. But if this is a promise of eternal forgiveness (and it is!), then this would imply that further sacrifices would not be necessary once this New Covenant came into operation. This is the confirming argument that the sacrifice of Christ is the once-for-all payment of our sins. For the readers to turn back to the Levitical system with its unending demand for animal sacrifices would be to deny what we were rightfully made to expect by the announcement of the New Covenant in Jeremiah 31.

In summary this section from Hebrews 10:1-18 is actually a series of proof texts from the Old Testament that argue for the once-for-all nature and superiority of Christ's sacrifice. Those trusting in His sacrifice need not have a troubled conscience, and can be absolutely assured of God's eternal forgiveness of their sins.

D. The Proper Response to Christ's Superior Sacrifice: Believers Must Endure in Their Allegiance and Service to Jesus Christ (Heb 10:19-39)

These verses conclude the unit that began in Hebrews 8:1. Up to this point, the author has carefully elaborated on the superior sacrifice that the New Covenant High Priest has offered in the greater tabernacle in heaven. This sacrifice is immeasurably superior to those of the Old Covenant, and is a once-for-all sacrifice that brings perfect forgiveness and a clear conscience. This grand truth, however, has implications which the author will now highlight in Hebrews 10:19-39. The proper response of New

Covenant participants is to remain faithful to the Lord Jesus, to serve Him, and to patiently endure as they await His return.

1. The admonition to draw near to God and faithfully participate in the community of believers (Heb 10:19-25)

The New Covenant inaugurated by the Lord Jesus has ushered in astonishingly new realities for God's children as compared with those who worshiped under the Old Covenant. The earthly tabernacle having served its purpose, the greater tabernacle in heaven is now the point of focus and that which believers have access to. The author now presents two primary *reasons* why believers ought to remain faithful to Christ and the New Covenant realities, following which he sets forth several *exhortations* to faithfulness.

a. Two reasons to draw near (Heb 10:19-21)

The author begins by once again addressing his readers as **brothers and sisters**. What he has to say to them, he says as to justified (regenerated) believers. They had previously believed in Christ and now have the forgiveness of God promised in the New Covenant. Despite one's past act of faith, sluggishness and immaturity that is left uncorrected (recall Heb 5:11--6:12) can make one susceptible to delusion, even to the point of abandoning one's outward confession of faith in Christ. Such a disastrous choice would invite God's chastening judgment. Yet there are good reasons to firmly hold on to New Covenant truth. It is these reasons the author lays out for his readers.

Hebrews 10:19-20. In light of his presentation in Hebrews 9:1--10:18, the author affirms that believers have free access to **the sanctuary**, meaning the heavenly tabernacle itself. The presentation of the blood of Jesus in the heavenly "holy place" gives us **confidence** that we can enter there ourselves.

Under the Old Covenant only the high priest could ever enter the holy of holies, and he first had to pass through the **curtain** which separated the two rooms of the tabernacle. Hence it could be said that one cannot enter the innermost holy area without first passing through the curtain. This curtain served two purposes: (1) it hid the *Shekinah glory* of God, and (2) it gave access to the presence of God (though only for the high priest). The counterpart under the New Covenant is not a curtain at all, but rather **his flesh**, that is, the body of Jesus. While on earth, Christ's human body was like a shield, preventing others from seeing the glory of God (and thus being overwhelmed by it). Furthermore by coming through *His flesh* (i.e., trusting in Christ as our substitutionary atonement), we can have access to the presence of God. Old Covenant believers never had such immediate access, and no one at that time would dare to enter the holy of holies except the high priest. Yet under the New Covenant, we have "confidence" (or boldness, Gk *parrēisian*) to enter there, a revolutionary thought

creating an irresistible urge. The rending of the temple curtain at the time of Christ's death signified this new access (see Matt 27:51).

Hebrews 10:21. The second fact the author presents in hopes of motivating them to firmly hold on is that New Covenant believers are part of a greater spiritual temple headed by Jesus Christ as priest. The phrase **house of God** reminds us of the cautionary words in Hebrews 3:6, "we are of his *house*, if in fact we hold firmly to our confidence and the hope we take pride in." New Covenant believers are part of a spiritual temple and are called to exercise a priestly ministry in accordance with this new reality. Turning from Christ to retreat to the shadows of the earthly temple would not only be foolish, but would be tantamount to abandoning one's priestly calling and responsibilities to the real "house of God."

b. Admonitions to faithfully participate in the New Covenant community (Heb 10:22-25)

With the two preceding provisions of the New Covenant in mind (Heb 10:19-21), the author gives three exhortations to faithfulness.

Hebrews 10:22. First, he exhorts them to **draw near with a sincere heart in the assurance that faith brings**. Earlier in Hebrews 3:12, the author had cautioned the readers of having an "*evil, unbelieving heart* that forsakes the living God" (as was true of so many in the wilderness generation). Now they are exhorted to have a sincere heart, a genuine heart that is fully assured, and with this to "draw near."

In drawing near, they are to do so with a heart that has been **sprinkled clean from an evil conscience** and a body **washed in pure water**. The word for *sprinkled* (Gk *rantizō*) is used three other times in Hebrews (Heb 9:13; 9:19; 9:21) to speak of the Old Covenant inauguration ceremony of Exodus 24:1-8. In that ceremony, the blood of animals was sprinkled outwardly on the covenant participants, and obviously it had no inner effect on their conscience. By contrast, the blood of Christ has had a profound effect on those embracing the New Covenant, for as pointed out in Hebrews 9:14, it is effective to "purify our consciences from dead works to worship the living God." The body washed with pure water refers not to Christian baptism, but (in contrast to Old Covenant ritual washings) to the washing of regeneration accomplished by the Holy Spirit that leads to personal holiness in the Christian life (see Titus 3:5).

Hebrews 10:23. The second exhortation is for the readers to **hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess**. The author issued this exhortation earlier in Hebrews 4:14 (see Heb 3:1). Of course this presumes that they had actually made a previous confession of faith in Jesus as their Messiah. They are not instructed here to make the confession, but rather not to waver as they hold fast to it. The

exhortation is followed by the rationale, **the one who made the promise is trustworthy**. One would not hear these words without thinking of the references to God's *promises* mentioned earlier in the book, promises connected with the idea of inheritance (see Heb 6:12; 9:15) and the future coming salvation (Heb 9:28). When the Lord returns to establish His kingdom and bring the eschatological salvation, He will be *faithful* to render what He promised to those who persevered and actively served in the true "house of God."

Hebrews 10:24-25. The third and final exhortation pertains to faithful participation with the New Covenant community. The author wants them to **take thought of** ways they can **spur one another on to love and good works**, fostering a New Covenant *esprit de corps* (see Gal 5:6). Since all of us are weak and easily falter, there is mutual benefit in communal worship and interaction. Unfortunately some had apparently already withdrawn from gathering publicly with other Christians, and thus the author warns them about not **abandoning** their **own meetings** together.

Mutual encouragement is needed, and all the more as they might **see the day drawing near**. It is doubtful this refers to the time of judgment that fell on Jerusalem in AD 70 when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem and the temple. His reference to the Second Coming salvation in Hebrews 9:28 and to the Lord's soon "coming" in Hebrews 10:37 suggests that the author is thinking of that period of judgment known in Scripture as "the day of the Lord" that accompanies the Lord's Second Coming. Nevertheless, church history is full of many *trying times* when believers desperately need mutual encouragement from one another in order to remain faithful.

2. The warning of severe judgment for those who turn away from Christ (Heb 10:26-31)

The previous paragraph reflects the author's hope that the readers would respond positively to his exhortations. If some were not to respond positively, that would be a disastrous choice inviting the chastening judgment of God. So, the author reminds them of the consequences. The evidence from the context (both the preceding and following paragraphs) argues that those in danger of judgment are genuine believers. To suggest they only profess to being Christians while in actuality being unregenerate is to ignore the straightforward evidence of Scripture. In Hebrews 10:19, they are called "brothers and sisters" (those who have been "made holy" according to Heb 2:11), while in Hebrews 10:32-33 the author recalls past experiences of suffering for their faith.

a. "Willful sin" under the New Covenant (Heb 10:26-27)

Hebrews 10:26. The use of the first person plural (**we**) in the opening conditional statement refers to those the author has been addressing in Hebrews 10:19-25. These are the ones he has exhorted to hold fast their confession. Indeed, they have received **the knowledge of the truth**, a technical

expression used at least four times in the pastoral epistles to speak of authentic Christian experience (1 Tim 2:4; 2 Tim 2:25; 3:7; Titus 1:1). These genuine Christians are then warned not to **keep on sinning**. Unfortunately, the translation *keep on sinning* is not the best translation and misses the point altogether. The Greek text does not have the words "keep on" (compare the NASB's "go on sinning" and the NRSV's "persist in sin"). Rather, the Greek text has a verb (in the present tense) meaning to "sin." In this particular case, however, the present tense is not indicating *continual action*, but is simply indicating that sin has occurred. It would have been better translated "if we sin willfully" (so NKJV). The context suggests that the author is thinking of a particular sin rather than a lifestyle in which one *continues* to sin.

First, he just admonished them in Hebrews 10:23 to "hold unwaveringly to the hope that we confess," suggesting that he was concerned they might not do that. The same concern had been expressed earlier in Hebrews 3:6 and Hebrews 4:14. Second, the word he uses for *sinning* (Gk *hamartanō*), though a common verb, has only been used by our author one other time, namely, in Hebrews 3:17. There it was used to describe the precise sin committed by the wilderness generation of *rebelling* against God at Kadesh-barnea, on account of which they experienced God's temporal judgment. Third, the adverb *deliberately* (Gk *hekousiōs*) suggests a connection with what is known as "willful sin" in the Old Testament, or "sin of a high hand" (Num 15:30-31)--the case where serious violation of the Law was done intentionally (with full knowledge and purposeful transgression). Moses used the combination of *aekeusios* (an antonym of *hekousiōs*) and *hamartanō* ("to sin") in Numbers 15:27 to describe the concept of "sinning unintentionally," implying that the opposite idea ("to sin intentionally") would be expressed by *hekousiōs* and *hamartanō*--which is exactly what the author of Hebrews does. This observation is significant, for the issue in Numbers 15 was not *persistency in sin*, but a certain kind of sin serious enough to warrant physical death.

Furthermore this helps explain why the author of Hebrews says that for this case **no further sacrifice for sins is left for us**. When one had "sinned intentionally" according to Numbers 15, he should have realized he had crossed the point of no return, and there was no sacrifice to offer that would avert God's judgment. This was a temporal judgment of capital punishment, not eternal punishment in hell.

Hebrews 10:27. The probable sin that the author of Hebrews has in mind (parallel to "intentional sin" of Numbers 15) is the sin of abandoning one's confession of faith (see v 23). For this sin, there can only be a **certain fearful expectation of judgment**, though he does not say what form or when this judgment will come. The words **fury of fire that will consume God's enemies** appear to be drawn from the LXX translation of Isaiah 26:11 (see Zeph 1:18). The metaphor of fire was used in

the Old Testament to speak of Yahweh's anger toward His failing covenant people, in which He brought judgment resulting in their physical death without any suggestion of hell (see Lev 10:1-3; Num 16:35). The allusion to Isaiah 26:11 suggests he is thinking of the eschatological judgment that will befall the world in the Day of the Lord. Isaiah 24--27 describes this period of time (see especially Isa 24:3). Metaphorically God's judgment on the world at that time is compared to a burning fire (Isa 24:6). The wicked rebels among Judah at that time are warned that fire (representative of God's judgment) would devour God's enemies (that is, His adversaries, those who were taking sides against Him). A similar fate of God's temporal judgment could await New Covenant believers who rebel.

b. A comparison of punishment for serious sins under the two covenants (Heb 10:28-29)

Using a style of rabbinic argument, the author reasons that if the New Covenant is superior to the Old, then a greater punishment ought to await those who violate the New Covenant.

Hebrews 10:28. The words **put to death without mercy** appear to be an allusion to Deuteronomy 17:6 in which the death penalty would be given for more serious sins such as murder (see Deut 19:15). In such cases, it was necessary that two or three witnesses testify against the guilty one who had committed such a flagrant sin. Committing this sin was tantamount to rejecting **the law of Moses**, that is, rejecting the covenant obligations.

Hebrews 10:29. Having recalled this severe penalty stipulated by the Old Covenant, the author reasons that if rejection of those covenant obligations resulted in the temporal judgment of death, a greater punishment ought to be due the person who lives in outright rebellion against the greater New Covenant. The author does not say what form such punishment might take. Since he makes no clear statement that it might be loss of salvation and consignment to hell, we should not make that assumption.

The author does, however, describe the characteristics of New Covenant rebellion in three ways. First, the rebel, in essence, has **contempt for the Son of God** (lit., has *trampled* under foot the Son of God).

Although the word *trample* (Gk *katapateō*) can mean literally to trample underfoot, it also carries the figurative meaning of "to look on with scorn, to treat with disdain" (BDAG, 523). To look on Christ and what He had done on the Cross with contempt would be a most grievous sin for a Christian.

Second, the rebel **profanes the blood of the covenant that made him holy**. Obviously, the author has in mind the blood of the New Covenant, that atoning blood of Jesus which is infinitely superior to the blood of goats and bulls (Heb 9:11-14). The word *profanes* is a translation of two Greek words (*koinon hēgēsamenos*) meaning "to regard as common/unclean." The word *koinon* can have the

meaning of “common,” but can also be used in the cultic sense of that which was *defiling* under the Law. In Acts 10:14-15, for instance, Peter responded to the vision of the unclean animals from heaven, “Certainly not, Lord, for I have never eaten anything defiled and ritually unclean!” How ironic (and tragic!) that the very blood of Christ would be regarded similar to things considered “unclean” under the Law.

Significantly, the author points out that it is this blood **that made him** (i.e., the New Covenant rebel) **holy**. Some have sought to dodge the seriousness of this statement by claiming that the pronoun could be translated “it” rather than “him,” implying that it is the covenant that is sanctified by Jesus’ blood, not the person. Such an interpretation overlooks the author’s use of this key term “make holy,” i.e., sanctify (*hagiazō*), in the epistle. Earlier in chapter 10 the author stated, “we have been *made holy* through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all” (Heb 10:10; see Heb 10:14). In Hebrews 10:29, therefore, the author is clearly confronting *true believers* who have been made holy or sanctified (i.e., justified) by Christ’s perfect atoning sacrifice. A believer who would forsake his confession of Christ and regard His sacrificial blood so lowly is truly guilty of a great sin before God, a sin that ought to be appropriately punished.

Third, such a New Covenant rebel **insults the Spirit of grace**. There is no need to equate this statement with that of blasphemy against the Holy Spirit (Mark 3:22-30), since the contexts differ significantly. Rather, the author is probably thinking of the Spirit as the agent who dispenses grace from the heavenly throne (recall the “throne of grace” in Heb 4:16). An abandonment of one’s faith in Christ and His atoning blood was an *insult* to the Holy Spirit who had actively worked to make grace available to the Christian pilgrim on his way to God’s greater rest.

c. Reminders that God does indeed judge His own people (Heb 10:30-31)

The previous verses suggested that there is serious New Covenant sin that should be severely judged by God. The author now recalls two Old Testament verses in which God did indeed judge His own people. Since God does not change, the principle still applies. Those who rebel should be prepared to face God’s temporal judgment.

Hebrews 10:30. Both quotations are drawn from Deuteronomy 32, a lament for Israel who worships idols (other gods) rather than Yahweh who had blessed her. Although scholars debate whether these particular quotations (from Deut 32:35-36) pertain to unfaithful Israel or her enemies that afflicted her, the more natural understanding is that unfaithful Israel is in view. The following verses (i.e., 32:36-38) focus on Israel being overwhelmed by calamity, so that her “power has disappeared.” This will cause her to see the futility of her trust in idols, for these idols will not be present to rescue her

in the time of God's judgment. When this is sufficiently demonstrated, the LORD will proclaim to His people: "See now that I, indeed I, am he! . . . and there is no other god besides me" (Deut 32:39). If verses 36-38 describe the calamity of Israel, this would substantiate that verses 34-36 are also speaking about God's vengeance on Israel. Thus God will execute **vengeance** against His own covenant people Israel, and **repay** them for their sin of forsaking Him by turning to other gods. In doing so, He will **judge His people**.

Some Bible translations, however, have rendered Hebrews 10:30 differently, "God will vindicate His people" (NASB), claiming that the word for *judge* in Deuteronomy 32:36 (Heb *dîn*) can also mean "vindicate." Such a translation would change the meaning from God judging His people to God vindicating His people. Those who favor this translation argue that the following line in Deuteronomy 32:36 (NASB: "have *compassion* on His servants") supports this. [The NET Bible's translation "will change his plans concerning his servants" is more ambiguous]. More likely, however, these two lines are meant to be *contrastive*. God will first bring judgment upon unfaithful Israel, and subsequently have compassion on her. The same thought is reiterated a few verses later in Deuteronomy 32:39: "I kill and give life; I smash and I heal." This is precisely how God revealed He would ultimately deal with the nation (see Deut 4:30-31). Thus, the translation "God will judge His people" is the preferred translation, as it fits the context better.

In conclusion, the two quotations from Deuteronomy 32:35-36 are speaking about God's vengeance and judgment upon His covenant people Israel. This substantiates the principle that God does not shrink from bringing harsh judgment upon His own people. He did so with those who rebelled against Him under the Old Covenant, and He does so with rebels under the New Covenant.

Hebrews 10:31. Finally, the author reminds his readers: **It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God**. These words are drawn from 2 Samuel 24:14, in which case David fell into the hands of the Lord, who sent a pestilence (temporal judgment) that caused seventy thousand Israelites to die. The expression "living God" was also used in Hebrews 3:12 to warn the brethren of the danger of succumbing to an evil heart of unbelief that might result in rebellion against the "living God."

What then is the "terrifying thing" the apostate should expect? Since the author does not say it is loss of eternal life (which, in any case, cannot be lost), we should not presume that. Both within this paragraph and in the epistle at large, we find clues that God's temporal judgment is in view. Also, the author has repeatedly reminded his readers of the concern for rewards (or the forfeiture thereof) at the Second Coming of Christ. For God to remove a believer by physical death *and* for that

believer to experience *eternal* loss of reward certainly constitutes a “greater punishment.” The remainder of the chapter confirms this. In contrast to such a punishment for rebellion, Hebrews 10:35-36 offers a blessing for the believer who endures and does not cast off his confidence. Such faithfulness will result in a "great reward" and receiving "what is promised."

3. An encouragement and call for endurance through faith (Heb 10:32-39)

The stern warning in the previous paragraph is followed by words of encouragement and then by an admonishment to patiently endure by faith in light of the expected return of the Lord Jesus who will reward those who have been faithful.

a. A call to reflect on their past sufferings (Heb 10:32-34)

One of the strongest arguments that the previous warning is directed at genuine believers is found in these following verses. The author exhorts the readers to recall the earlier days when they had suffered so much for their faith. The exhortation for the readers to recall the earlier days of suffering for their faith strongly argues that the previous warning is directed at genuine believers. It is hard to imagine that the author's Jewish audience (especially in the first century AD) would have been willing to suffer so much for their faith, if they had not truly already come to believe that Jesus was the promised Messiah. These were sufferings after they **were enlightened** (Gk *phōtisthentes*). This is the same word used in Hebrews 6:4, and which speaks of the spiritual enlightenment brought to their souls because of regeneration. Verses 33-34 recall some specific ways they had been made to suffer for their faith. They had been willing to undergo these trials because they **certainly had a better and lasting possession** for themselves. No doubt the author is thinking of what awaits them in the New Jerusalem of Christ's kingdom (see Heb 11:10; 11:16; 12:22; 13:14). All earthly sufferings are worth enduring, if one knows that he stands to gain so much in eternity. In the earlier days of their Christian pilgrimage they had willingly endured much suffering, and the author's reminder of this is meant to rekindle in them that same spirit, to the end that they might finish their Christian race well.

b. A call to endure in order to receive the promised reward (Heb 10:35-36)

Hebrews 10:35. Consequently the readers were exhorted not to **throw away** their **confidence**. The word *confidence* (Gk *parrēsian*) was used in Hebrews 10:19 to speak of the confidence or boldness that New Covenant believers have to enter the *heavenly* sanctuary by the blood of Jesus (see Heb 3:6; 4:16). Their confidence in the priestly work of Jesus should by no means be abandoned! To do so would be to invite God's stern judgment described in Hebrews 10:26-31. On the contrary, faithful adherence to it held hope for **great reward**. The context of the book suggests that this reward

consists of sharing in the Son's ultimate dominion, successfully entering the *greater rest*, and inheriting "the promises" mentioned in Hebrews 6:12.

Hebrews 10:36. Yet the author reminds them that such future reward is contingent on **endurance**. This word (Gk *hupomonēs*) speaks of the steadfastness and perseverance needed in one's Christian pilgrimage, especially in light of the pain, difficulties and hardships along the way. Jesus Himself set the example in this regard. One endures such challenges precisely because he is more committed to doing **God's will** than his own. Such commitment and endurance is a sign of maturity in the life of a Christian. All temporal pain and discomfort, however, is temporary. More importantly, one's faithful endurance entitles him to **receive what is promised** (see comments on Heb 11:39-40). It is not far-fetched to say that verses 35-36 are the key verses to the entire book!

c. The need for faith in light of Christ's expected return (Heb 10:37-39)

The thought of ultimate reward in the preceding verses is now connected with thoughts of the *time* of such reward, namely, when Jesus returns. Quoting from the LXX translation of Habakkuk 2:3-4, the author reminds them that **he who is coming will arrive and not delay** (recall Heb 9:28). Our Lord's return should mean good news for believers, but for some it could mean shame (see 1 John 2:28). Consequently he reminds them that God's **righteous one** is to **live by faith**--an enduring faith that he will illustrate in chapter 11--and not **shrink back**, that is, to turn cowardly from the Lord (by abandoning one's confession). The *righteous one* (Gk *dikaios*) can potentially do either, but by "shrinking back" the Lord will take **no pleasure in him**, that is, He will not be pleased with such an unfaithful believer. The author concludes the chapter by saying, "We, however, are not of those who cowardly turn back *resulting in* destruction, but we are of those *who exhibit an enduring* faith *resulting in* the preservation of the soul" (my own translation). The NET Bible translation **and thus perish** in verse 39 might better be rendered "to destruction" or "resulting in destruction." [The Greek text, *eis apōleian*, does not involve a verb, but rather a preposition followed by a noun]. In any case, there is no need to read into this the idea of *perishing in hell* (though the word *apōleian* can have that nuance in certain contexts, such as Rom 9:22). On the other hand, this term (*apōleian*) can be used of people (including believers) in cases where eternal damnation is not in view (such as 1 Tim 6:9 and Acts 8:20). Also, the related verb form (*apōllumi*) can refer to temporal physical destruction (e.g., Mark 4:38 where the disciples were worried that they might *perish* at sea). Most likely the author is thinking once again of the stern judgment and "worse punishment" that he had spoken of in Hebrews 10:29. Since he had just spoken of the fate of the believer when the Lord returns, this could mean not only temporal destruction but a negative experience at the judgment seat of Christ (recall the danger in Heb 4:1 of coming short of God's rest). Any thought, however, that verse 39 might have

soteriological faith in view (as the NIV translation suggests) must certainly be rejected in light of the fact that the author clearly portrays in chapter 11 that the faith he has in mind is *a life of walking by faith* in which one pleases God.

IV. The Means and Responsibilities of New Covenant Life (Heb 11:1--13:17)

In the author's closing remarks of the previous section, he exhorted the readers to respond positively to the doctrinal exposition of Christ's perfect sacrifice by *drawing near* to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith (Heb 10:22). If, on the other hand, they "throw away their confidence," they are warned that they will face God's severe judgment (Heb 10:26-31). Yet remembering their former sufferings and faithfulness, he exhorted them to "endure" by responding in faith and living by faith. Such a life of faith results in great reward and inheriting God's promises (Heb 10:35-36; see Heb 6:12).

Hebrews 11 begins a new major unit with a focus on the means and responsibilities for the believer under the New Covenant. The author wisely begins by giving examples and motivations for living a life of faith. If unbelief resulted in exclusion from God's rest for the wilderness generation under the Old Covenant (Heb 3:19; 4:11), then certainly faith will be critical for New Covenant believers who wish to enter successfully into God's greater rest.

A. The Life of Faith That Pleases God and Brings Reward (Heb 11:1-40)

This chapter is not merely a long list of examples of faith from the Old Testament. There are also several other themes woven together in the chapter that are very relevant to the overall concerns of the epistle. This would include living in such a way as to "receive God's commendation," living as aliens in the world because of the treasure that awaits us beyond this life, willingness to suffer persecution and ill-treatment in the interim, and eventually obtaining one's inheritance and rewards in God's timing.

1. The prologue (Heb 11:1-2)

Hebrews 11:1. The author begins by defining faith and the value it has. He says it is **being sure of what we hope for**. The Greek word translated *being sure* (Gk *hupostasis*) is quite flexible in meaning, but in this context it probably stresses the more active meaning of the *confidence* or *assurance* that one has in something (see LSJM II 4, 1895; see the use of the synonym *parrēsia* in Heb 10:35). This active sense would fit the description of faith in verse 6 as something that believers do that pleases God (see Heb 10:39). Also this is consistent with the author's concern in Hebrews 10:38 that believers "live by faith" (i.e., be confident in what God has said and act accordingly).

The word translated **being convinced of** (Gk *elegchos*) should be understood as “a conviction about” something (BDAG, 315). The NET Bible translation of verse 1 is accurate: “Now faith is being sure of what we hope for, being convinced of what we do not see.” In light of the examples cited, the author has in mind an assurance about things God has revealed or called a person to do (not things one wishes to happen).

Hebrews 11:2. The readers of the epistle should remember that it was “by faith” that **the people of old received God's commendation**. By *people of old* (Gk *presbuteroi*), the author means their ancestors who lived before the time of the Cross (i.e., Old Testament saints). The words *received commendation* are actually one word in the Greek text (*emarturēthēsan*). This is a key term in the chapter, found in verses 2, 4, 5 and 39. Its use in the prologue and epilogue forms an *inclusio* for the chapter). The NASB translates this word as “gained approval,” and the NKJV as “obtained a good testimony.” The point is that by their faith they obtained a good testimony *in the eyes of God*, thus gaining His approval and meriting His rewards (note the stress in vv 5-6 of “pleasing God” and being rewarded). Hopefully the readers will want to emulate the lives of these men and women of faith, and thereby be well commended by God.

2. Examples and lessons from the primordial period (Heb 11:3-7)

Hebrews 11:3. The author begins with the biblical account of creation. Since there was no human witness to this event, only by faith can we know that the world was created by a word from God. From the beginning, then, there is this principle that we must depend on what God has revealed rather than on what we can see. The readers of the epistle would be wise to apply this principle to their own situation.

Hebrews 11:4. In the Cain and Abel story, Abel's gift to God was regarded as **a greater sacrifice**. The reason is due, not to the substance of the sacrifice itself, but to the faith behind the gift. Abel's gift was motivated by a faith that sought to please God. Genesis 4:4 indicates that Abel “brought some of the firstborn of his flock--even the fattest of them,” i.e., he gave the best portions to God. He recognized what constituted a “greater sacrifice,” and then was obedient to offer that. Likewise, the readers should recognize and rely on the “greater sacrifice” that Christ has made for them (not on animal sacrifices).

Hebrews 11:5. God's favor on Enoch was evident, because he was **taken up** by God rather than experiencing death. In Genesis 5:24 we are told that he “walked with God.” The author of Hebrews, however, followed the Greek LXX, which translated these words as **he was pleasing to God**. The sense, however, is the same: the fact that he walked with God *resulted in* his pleasing God. We should not expect the same outcome as Enoch (God used Enoch to demonstrate a theological point that He was master over death), but we should seek to please God as Enoch did through a life of faith.

Hebrews 11:6. The author extends the example of Enoch by emphasizing that **without faith it is impossible to please** God. Yet, what does it mean to **approach God**? This is the same word (Gk *proserchomai*) translated “draw near” in Hebrews 10:22 (see Heb 4:16), and pertains to those who are already Christians. The author is not talking about non-Christians coming to God for personal salvation from sin, but how Christians *draw near* to their God. Christians can draw nearer to God by believing not only that God is, but that **he rewards those who seek him**. This reinforces what the author had said about rewards and receiving God’s promises in Hebrews 10:35-36 (see Heb 6:11-12). The one who lives by faith can expect God’s eternal reward(s) in the kingdom of His Son.

Hebrews 11:7. Throughout this epistle, the author has warned the readers to hold fast their confession of faith in Jesus and follow in the ways of the New Covenant. Noah is a good model of a man who heeded God’s warning and acted in faith (though his actions put him at odds with the world). The ark he built provided for **the deliverance of his family**, that is, their physical deliverance and escaping God’s judgment. For this act he became an **heir of the righteousness that comes by faith**. This does not mean that his obedience gained him a righteous standing with God. Like Abraham, God’s righteousness could be secured only by faith (Gen 15:6). Genesis 6:9, on the other hand, bears witness that Noah was already a righteous man before he ever built the ark, and (like Enoch) he walked with God. So Noah already had the “righteousness that comes by faith.” But his faithful obedience to God in building the ark enabled him to *also* become an “heir,” that is, an inheritor. This same Greek word for “heir” (*klēronomos*) was used in Hebrews 1:2 of Christ, the *heir* of all things. Furthermore use of this term (and the related verbal form) in Hebrews 6:12 and Hebrews 6:17 reminds us that Christians become heirs with Christ as a result of a life of enduring faith (see Titus 3:7). The idea of becoming an “heir,” then, complements what the author had said about rewards in verse 6.

3. Examples and lessons from Abraham and the patriarchs (Heb 11:8-22)

The author now turns to Abraham and the patriarchs. He had introduced Abraham earlier in the epistle as an inheritor of God’s promises (Heb 6:13-20). The mention of Noah as an “heir” in the previous verse forms a natural transition to Abraham. The latter was particularly important, for he was considered by Jews as the father of the nation. Of all the men whose life they might wish to emulate, certainly Abraham’s would be foremost.

a. The quest of Abraham and Sarah (Heb 11:8-12)

Hebrews 11:8-10. Abraham’s quest for an inheritance in the land of promise sets the pattern for those under the New Covenant. It was a challenge for Abraham to leave that which was familiar (Ur of the Chaldeans) and obey God’s calling. The readers face something similar as they embark on

their New Covenant undertaking (leaving behind the trappings of the Old Covenant). Likewise they have an inheritance, but in the Son's kingdom. They also need to see themselves as "sojourners" (those dwelling in a foreign country) who live in temporary dwellings (tents). That is, their real home is elsewhere, and their time here on earth is only a temporary pilgrimage.

Yet Abraham and Sarah were not alone, for Isaac and Jacob were **fellow heirs** (Gk *sugklēronomōn*) **of the same promise**. In all this, Abraham realized that earthly Canaan was not his ultimate destiny. He was waiting for **the city with firm foundations, whose architect and builder is God**. In light of Hebrews 11:16, the author has in mind the "heavenly Jerusalem"--a city beyond this earthly life (Heb 3:14)--to be realized in Jesus' messianic kingdom (see Heb 12:28). Abraham may not have clearly understood his, but the author of Hebrews realizes that this was the real destiny to which God was taking him.

Hebrews 11:11-12. Female readers of the epistle would take particular encouragement in Sarah, the woman of faith who accompanied Abraham. In her old age she bore Isaac, the child of promise. Despite her moments of doubt (note Gen 18:9-15), she **regarded the one who had given the promise to be trustworthy**. [Some English Bibles (e.g., The NET Bible and NIV) translate this verse in such a way to suggest that it was Abraham, not Sarah, who regarded God as trustworthy. A number of modern commentators (e.g., Lane, Bruce, Ellingworth, and Koester) also argue that verse 11 has Abraham's faith in view. The discussion is too technical and complex to treat here, and thus is best left an open question for now]. Regardless how verse 11 should be translated, it is remarkable that Abraham and Sarah (at an age when most people would be dead) finally received the son in whom God would fulfill His promise of a great seed! This is a good lesson that God is always faithful to fulfill His promises. If Abraham and Sarah could follow the One faithful to His promises, certainly the readers of Hebrews should be confident that their own endurance in faith--doing the will of God--would result in obtaining His promises at Jesus' Second Coming (Heb 10:36).

b. The author's commentary on Abraham and Sarah (Heb 11:13-16)

Verses 13-16 form an interlude in the author's presentation of Abraham and the patriarchs. Here he highlights some of the important implications from their lives of faith.

Hebrews 11:13. What was implied in the previous verses is now made explicit. Abraham and the patriarchs regarded themselves as **strangers and foreigners on the earth**. This is how the person of faith must see himself, for God's ultimate promises are not meant to be received in this life. That is why the author states, **These all died in faith without receiving the things promised**. The author concludes this chapter on the same thought (see Heb 11:39).

Hebrews 11:14-16. Though Abraham by his own confession was a stranger and a pilgrim even after reaching the land of Canaan (Gen 23:4), he certainly did not regard Ur (or Haran) as his true homeland. Had that been the case, he could have easily returned. There was a **better land** for him, a **heavenly one** (the author is thinking again of the “heavenly Jerusalem”). Such an attitude wins God's approval, and thus the author can say that **God is not ashamed to be called their God** (see Heb 2:11). This is evidenced by the fact that God **has prepared a city for them**, a city that will be an integral part of the Son's kingdom (see Heb 12:22; 12:28). A city prepared by God Himself is undoubtedly a wonderful destiny. These heroes of the faith, headed for New Jerusalem, stand in contrast to the wilderness generation that rebelled at Kadesh-barnea and failed to enter God's “rest” because of unbelief.

c. A faith that looks beyond death (Heb 11:17-22)

In the previous paragraph, the author pointed out that Abraham and the patriarchs were people who lived life in light of their ultimate destiny in the eternal city of God. Because of this perspective, their faith evidenced itself in ways that looked beyond death.

Hebrews 11:17-19. Abraham's offering up of Isaac (Gen 22) is a case in point. Testing in the Christian life is not unnatural, for even Abraham himself was subjected to God's testing. Furthermore there was a lot at stake in this test. The Abrahamic Covenant and God's whole theocratic program to bring universal blessing (see Gen 12:1-3) were contingent on the promised “seed” to Abraham. After waiting so long to finally have the promised son, would he really be able to obey God's command to sacrifice Isaac?

Prior to the testing itself in Genesis 22, Abraham was given the specific promise in Genesis 21:12, **“Through Isaac your descendants will be counted.”** How could he reconcile this promise with God's command? Most likely, he did not know how God would fulfill this promise if he were to sacrifice Isaac. Yet he had learned over the years that God keeps His word. From this he apparently reasoned that even if he were to sacrifice Isaac, God would somehow miraculously bring him back to life. [He need not have fully understood the doctrine of resurrection to have reasoned to this conclusion]. As the test progressed, however, Abraham did not actually have to kill Isaac. Thus in one sense Abraham received the gift of having his son back. It was as though he received him back from the dead. Even this aspect (receiving back his son) became a type of what would come later, when God the Father would receive back His only Son by virtue of His resurrection from the grave. Hence the author of Hebrews could say of Isaac's *virtual death*, **in a sense he received him back from there**. To pass this test, Abraham needed a faith to trust God for life beyond death.

Furthermore his successfully passing the test brought great blessing from God and hope for the future (see esp. Gen 22:15-18).

Hebrews 11:20-22. Having considered Abraham's faith--a faith that looked beyond this life--the author now presents similar examples from each of the next three patriarchs (Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph). Isaac, for instance, blessed both Jacob and Esau **concerning the future**. That is, just before he died, Isaac uttered a blessing for each of his sons regarding their future (Gen 27:27-29 for Jacob and Gen 27:39-40 for Esau). In both cases the fulfillment would come after Isaac's own death. The promised blessing for Jacob included the words, "May peoples serve you and nations bow down to you" (Gen 27:29). These words went far beyond the lifetime of both Isaac and his son Jacob, finding their ultimate fulfillment in Christ Jesus (see Ps 72:8-11; Dan 7:13-14).

The author then recollects Jacob's dying moments. The words, **worshiped as he leaned on his staff**, reflect the LXX translation of Genesis 47:31. Some translations of Genesis 47:31 have "bed" rather than "staff," but the word for staff (Heb *mittah*) is easily confused for "bed" (Heb *matteh*). The translation "staff" in Genesis 47:31 is favored by the NIV, and this seems preferable (recall the importance of Jacob's staff in Gen 38:18). The main point is that Jacob, at the end of his life, was still a worshiper (not one who turned from God). Also in his blessings for Joseph's two sons (Gen 48:8-22), he looked ahead to the future.

Finally Joseph, looking ahead to God fulfilling His promises to Abraham, at the end of his life requested his bones be carried up to Canaan when the nation left Egypt (Gen 50:22-26).

4. Examples and lessons from Moses and the conquest period (Heb 11:23-31)

The main point of this section is that faith confronts (rather than retreats from) opposition and hostility.

Hebrews 11:23. Even the parents of Moses **were not afraid of the king's edict** to kill the newborn infants (Exod 2:1-4). Rather, they obeyed God in the face of such hostility.

Hebrews 11:24-26. As he grew older, Moses himself had to make a difficult choice, namely, what he would live for. He could retain the honor and privileges of being **the son of Pharaoh's daughter**, or he could identify with the people of God. The author of Hebrews is subtly suggesting to the Jewish Christians reading this epistle that they needed to identify with New Covenant worshipers. That choice was not an easy one for Moses and caused him to be **ill-treated**. [When Pharaoh tried to kill Moses, he had to flee the country in disgrace; Exodus 2:15]. Obviously Moses needed a strong motivation to give up **the treasures of Egypt** he could have had. The reproach (or disgrace) that he suffered was anticipatory of what Christ would later have to undergo, though not nearly to the same extreme.

Yet he could do it, because **his eyes were fixed on the reward**. The Book of Exodus does not clearly say what reward he hoped for, but it may have been the future of the nation in the land promised to Abraham. At the birth of his first son, Moses named him “*Gershon*,” to reflect that he had been a *sojourner* (Heb *gēr*) in a foreign land. Also the emphasis of Exodus 3 is on God calling Moses to lead this people to the promised land (see Exod 2:24 and compare Exod 3:7-10). Moses realized in this that a faith that endures is rewarded by God, and the rewards of God meant more to him than anything Egypt had to offer.

Hebrews 11:27-29. These three verses all relate to the Exodus event. Like his parents, Moses chose to obey God regardless of the opposition. Thus **he left Egypt without fearing the king's anger**. One should recall that Moses' encounters with Pharaoh were many, not just a single face off, thus necessitating his *endurance* as God brought plague after plague on Egypt. But Moses had encountered the **invisible** God (Exod 3), and by faith **could see the one who is invisible** (kept his focus on God), and thus was able to endure.

In the Passover event (Exod 12), Moses learned the value of **the sprinkling of blood** on the doorposts and lintel. Similarly the author of Hebrews hopes the readers will place their confidence in “sprinkled blood,” namely, the superior blood of Christ typified by the Passover lamb (Heb 9:23-24). By putting their confidence in the sprinkled blood, Moses and the Hebrews avoided judgment. **The one who destroyed the firstborn did not touch them** (recall the warning in Heb 10:26-31!).

Finally, Hebrews 11:29 indicates that they journeyed on to cross **the Red Sea**, whereas the Egyptians were drowned in their attempt to do so. They lived to experience God's salvation-deliverance, which vindicated them. How much more glorious will it be, then, for New Covenant believers who live to experience Christ's “salvation” at the Second Coming (recall Heb 9:28).

Hebrews 11:30-31. The final two verses of this paragraph highlight the Jericho victory under Joshua's leadership. God's way of victory against Jericho (the walls were encircled **for seven days**) may have seemed unorthodox, but it proved true. What seems reasonable to human logic, however, does not always match God's ways. **Rahab the prostitute** (a sinful Gentile) probably seemed out of place among God's people, yet her faith had gained her that privilege. This was a good reminder to the Jewish Christians reading Hebrews of God's love for Gentiles and their place in His program. Gentile inclusion in the New Covenant is no reason to shy from association with it (and Gentiles can be encouraged in reading this!)

5. Examples and lessons from the post-conquest period (Heb 11:32-38)

In this final paragraph before the conclusion, the author looks beyond the time of the conquest to consider other heroes of the faith before the time of Christ. Obviously there are too many to highlight. The author

first considers those who were victorious in faith (Heb 11:32-35), and then difficulties encountered by people of faith (Heb 11:35-38). His point is that faith is valiant, but also is prepared to suffer.

a. Examples of victorious faith (Heb 11:32-35)

Hebrews 11:32-34. The author begins by mentioning four names from the period of the Judges, one king (David) and then Samuel and the prophets. Certain *deeds of faith* are enumerated, most of which are readily apparent. The one who **shut the mouths of lions** was obviously Daniel (Dan 6:22-23), and those who **quenched raging fire** were Daniel's three friends (Dan 3:25-28).

Hebrews 11:35. Worth noting is the concluding note that **women received back their dead raised to life**. This is a reference to two incidents from the Old Testament, 1 Kings 17:17-24 and 2 Kings 4:17-37, one involving Elijah and the other Elisha. In both cases, an only son of a woman unexpectedly dies, but is subsequently resuscitated by a prophet (in the case of Elijah in 1 Kings 17, a Gentile woman of Sidon is the recipient of God's grace). By concluding on this note, the author suggests to his readers that resurrection was the grand hope and the supreme achievement of faith. Our hope ought to be firmly fixed in the God who resurrects people of faith and can give them a life beyond death.

b. Persecution and hardships encountered by heroes of faith (Heb 11:35-38)

With verse 35 the tone quickly changes, and the remainder of the paragraph discusses challenges that might be considered defeats. Heroes of faith often encountered persecution and hardships, but these were really not defeats at all for them. Why? Because they looked to the distant future to see their sufferings in light of the resurrection and the reward that awaited them. This provides a lesson for the readers of Hebrews: present-day sufferings can be endured in light of expected rewards in the future world!

Hebrews 11:35. When the author mentions those who were **tortured, not accepting release**, he may have had in mind certain individuals from the intertestamental period during the persecution under Antiochus IV Epiphanes (see 2 Maccabees 6:19, 28; 7:9, 11, 14). Rather than recanting their faith (that might have brought their deliverance), they remained faithful to God at the cost of their own lives. Yet they were motivated by hopes of obtaining a **resurrection to a better life**, not merely resuscitation. In this resurrection to come, they were consoled in knowing that God would reward them for having suffered for their faith.

Hebrews 11:36-38. The author then lists numerous ways in which their ancestors had suffered for their faith. The reference to being **stoned** may refer to Zechariah in 2 Chronicles 24:21. Being **sawed apart** may be a reference to the death of Isaiah, as there is a tradition recorded in one of the books of

the Pseudepigrapha that the famous prophet died in this way (see *Ascension of Isaiah 5:1-16*). The author honors such heroes of the faith who suffered for the Lord by saying that they were people of whom **the world was not worthy**. By saying this, the author is inviting the readers to join their elite company, and thus to endure all hardships in hopes of entering God's greater rest.

6. The epilogue (Heb 11:39-40)

Hebrews 11:39. What the heroes of old did gain by virtue of their faith was being **commended** in the eyes of God--they gained His approval (recall Heb 11:2). What they did *not* gain, however, was that which **was promised** (lit., *the promise*--a noun in the Gk text). At least they have not gained "the promise" yet, though it will be something they receive in the future. The use of the definite article with the word for promise (Gk *tēn epangelian*) suggests that the author may have something specific in mind. Just as Abraham died in faith without receiving the promises of the land inheritance of Canaan--an earthly *rest* (Heb 11:13)--so the other faith heroes are made to wait for the ultimate realization of what God has promised them. In Hebrews 4:1 the author had called to their attention the promise that remained of entering His rest. The conclusion was reached that this "*rest*" will involve a share (as one's inheritance for faithfulness) in the dominion over God's creation as described in chapter 2. It is this promise of God's *greater rest* in the messianic kingdom that the author seems to have in mind.

Hebrews 11:40. This verse explains why God's faith heroes have not yet received this promise. God has **something better** in mind, namely, that the saints of the Old Testament would **be made perfect together with us** of the New Covenant. The words *be made perfect* are actually one word in the Greek text (Gk *teleiōthōsin*). This word (from *teleioō*) means being brought to completion or reaching an intended goal. Although the author had said earlier in Hebrews 10:14 that Christ's sacrifice "has perfected forever those who are being sanctified," he seems to have something more in mind in Hebrews 11:40. Since this verse implies that these Old Testament saints have not yet been perfected, this would indicate that it is not something attained in the present life but awaits consummation in the future.

In light of the context of the epistle stressing Messiah's kingdom and in light of the promise itself in verse 39 of God's greater rest, the author seems to be thinking about that final state that we will be brought to in Messiah's kingdom when our full salvation is realized. The saints of God throughout the ages will enter this new era together, having been sanctified as a result of Christ's sacrifice, resurrected and glorified, and finally rewarded (individually) to live and serve in Christ's kingdom. Perhaps the greatest *perfecting work* of God in us will be that which is expressed in 1 John 3:2, "Dear friends, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet been revealed. We know that whenever it is revealed we will be like him,

because we will see him just as he is.” God’s grand work in us will then be complete, all to the praise of His glory!

B. The Benefit of Discipline in the Quest to Endure (Heb 12:1-13)

Because the readers of the epistle had experienced difficulties in their Christian pilgrimage, they were tempted to turn away from the faith. The author was concerned that a retreat in unbelief could jeopardize their future and the rewards in store for them at Christ’s return. So in Hebrews 10:36 he reminded them that they needed *endurance* in order to receive God’s rewards. Having considered the role of faith for Christian endurance in chapter 11, the author now turns to highlight another benefit of enduring trials. Though painful at times, the Christian who sees this as being from God and submits to it will grow in holiness.

1. The call to endurance (Heb 12:1-3)

Hebrews 12:1. The author likens the Christian pilgrimage to an endurance race. The threefold repetition of "endure" emphasizes this theme. As we run, a **great cloud of witnesses** watch us, as though we are running before them in a stadium. These are the Old Testament heroes of chapter 11 whose victorious lives inspire us on. Because this race is so important, any unnecessary weight and hindrance must be eliminated. In antiquity, runners in the Greco-Roman world often removed their clothing before running so nothing would impede them. This metaphor teaches us to discard everything that might interfere with a total commitment to Jesus Christ, especially any distracting sin.

Hebrews 12:2. As inspiring as these Old Testament heroes are, the author carefully points the readers to the supreme example of persevering faith, Jesus Christ. Our eyes must stay fixed on Him in our Christian pilgrimage, for He is **the pioneer and perfecter of our faith**. The word *pioneer* (Gk *archēgos*) was used earlier in Hebrews 2:10, and carries the idea of one who is a “leader” or who "pioneers" the way. He has blazed the trail before us pointing us in the right way and to the right goal. The Greek word for *perfecter* (*teleiōtēs*) occurs only here, but is related to the verb *teleiōō*, "to perfect or bring to completion." This suggests that Christ is the *perfect* example of enduring faith we are called to live out, and the One who *perfects* it in us.

His endurance of the Cross has become the model for the endurance we are called to undertake. Christians feeling shame should remember that the shame of the Cross did not deter Jesus from His mission. If shame is felt in the Christian life, we must remember that He despised all the **shame** that the Cross brought Him. This shame did not deter Him from His mission. Also He was eventually victorious, for He **has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God** (a reference to Ps 110:1; see Heb 1:3). Likewise eschatological victory and joy await the believer who endures in faith.

Hebrews 12:3. The author (with great pastoral concern) yearns that his readers not **grow weary** and **give up**--to tire before completing their race. He urges them, therefore, to contemplate the **opposition by sinners** that Jesus Himself had to endure. They may face hostile opposition to their faith, but so did our Lord.

2. Instruction about the positive value of discipline (Heb 12:4-11)

“Rough” experiences in the Christian life should not be construed to mean that their New Covenant commitment had been a mistake. Such experiences are a normal part of the Christian life and are actually beneficial for growth in Christlikeness.

a. Trials must be put in perspective (Heb 12:4-6)

The readers had indeed suffered for their faith (Heb 10:32-34), but their sufferings need to be put into perspective lest they overreact or draw the wrong conclusions.

Hebrews 12:4. **Resisted to the point of bloodshed** probably speaks of martyrdom, but the author reminds them that they had not suffered to this extent (as their Lord did). Every believer is engaged in a **struggle against sin**, and ultimately it is this battle that is connected with our sufferings. [Some think that “sin” in this verse looks at *sinful men* who oppose believers, but the following context dealing with holiness suggests that personal sin is in view]. None of us has fought this battle as vigorously as we should, and we need God’s intervention in our life (in the form of discipline) to help us overcome the sin that impedes our running the race.

Hebrews 12:5-6. God’s love for His children includes not only the forgiveness of our sins, but also His efforts to free us from sin’s bondage. The author quotes Proverbs 3:11-12 (from the LXX) to reinforce this point. Though discipline may sometimes reflect God’s displeasure, it is primarily a *mark of sonship*.

The word **discipline** (Gk *paideia*) has the sense of *child training*. Proverbs 3:11-12 reminds us that troubles should be seen as a training ground, providing lessons that help us to move ahead and mature in the Christian life. Submitting to them not only leads to maturity, but (since faith and obedience are involved) to eventual reward as well.

b. Discipline is a good sign (Heb 12:7-8)

Hebrews 12:7. The word **endure** can be understood as an imperative (so NET Bible: “Endure your suffering as discipline”) or as a simple statement of fact (NASB: “It is for discipline that you endure”). In either case, the end result is the same. There is a relationship between endurance and discipline, for in the process of enduring, we receive discipline, that is, we are trained. By giving up

prematurely, we miss out on the discipline-training that God intends for us and which we so desperately need. On the other hand by enduring, we get the full benefit of the training God wants us to have.

Hebrews 12:8. Discipline should not be viewed negatively, since all true sons partake of this. The words translated **shared in** are actually not a verb but a noun in the Greek text, which could be translated *participants* (Gk *metochoi*)--"of which all have become participants." Earlier the author used the word to speak of our *participation* in the heavenly calling (see Heb 1:9; Heb 3:1). If we are to be *metochoi* with Jesus on the pilgrimage to the heavenly Jerusalem, then we must also willingly become *metochoi* of God's discipline that helps us successfully arrive there.

c. Appreciation of the benefits of discipline (Heb 12:9-11)

Hebrews 12:9. **Earthly fathers** corrected us with discipline without our losing respect for them. How much more we should respect our Heavenly Father and welcome His discipline. In this context, the words **submit ourselves** (from Gk verb *hupotassō*) have the idea of voluntarily submitting oneself to what God has chosen to bring into one's life as divine training. This implies a right attitude toward discipline and cooperation with God's Spirit in the process. As James 1:2-4 suggests, we need to count God-given trials with joy in light of the positive things God will accomplish in us as we endure them.

Hebrews 12:10. In the relatively short time (**a little while**) that our earthly fathers **disciplined us**, they did so as seemed best to them--though they were not perfect and made many mistakes. In contrast, God's discipline is always perfectly administered, without mistakes. Furthermore our earthly fathers may have disciplined us at times with impure motives or wrong attitude (e.g., uncontrolled anger). Yet our Heavenly Father always acts with the purest of motives, doing what is **for our benefit**. This benefits us because ultimately it is designed that we may **share his holiness**. Though holiness is one of the greatest possessions in life, it does not come easy. Money certainly cannot buy holiness. This comes only as we endure God's discipline and subject ourselves to Him, seeking to learn what He wants to teach us.

Hebrews 12:11. The author acknowledges that God's discipline seems at the time to be more **painful** than joyful. Yet by cooperating with God, we are **trained by it** and experience the resulting benefits. The word *trained* is from the Greek verb *gumnazō*, from which we get the word "gymnasium," a place of training. Like any athlete who has learned that the pain of grueling workouts eventually pays off, so God's sons must focus on the long-term benefit rather than the immediate pain. This benefit is not larger biceps, but **the fruit of peace and righteousness**. This righteousness conforms

us to be more like the Lord Jesus, who loves righteousness and will rule over His kingdom with a scepter of righteousness (Heb 1:8-9).

3. The call to render mutual help and encouragement (Heb 12:12-13)

The word **Therefore** signals an inference from the preceding discussion. Since God's discipline is good for all, we should be concerned for one another's successful participation in it. These two verses look at the mutual care and concern that New Covenant believers should give one another (see Heb 3:13; 10:24-25). The temptation to give up under discipline can be offset by helping others (especially those who are weak and struggling).

Hebrews 12:12. The mention of **listless hands** and **weak knees** should be understood in light of the opening metaphor of the chapter depicting the Christian pilgrimage as an athletic race. The proper response is commitment to enduring the struggles of the race, being ready with flexed arms and strong knees. Yet some in the community of faith are already struggling and "sluggish" in their readiness (see Heb 5:11; 6:12). Those who are stronger spiritually need to **strengthen** these weaker members. Verse 12 is an allusion to Isaiah 35:3. In that context, Isaiah 35:3-4 are words of encouragement offered in light of the coming "eschatological salvation" that follows the Lord's "day of vengeance."

Hebrews 12:13. The terms **feet**, **lame** and **healed** in this verse are simply metaphorical, helping paint a word picture for the readers. Making **straight paths** is an allusion to Proverbs 4:26. The context of Proverbs 4:25-27 deals with single-mindedness of purpose in remaining committed to the will and way of the Lord. Likewise, we must not swerve from the track of faithfulness, if we are to finish our race well! As we do, we must remember those around us who are weaker (**lame**) and in danger of falling out of the race altogether (**put out of joint**). By our example of rightly responding to hardship and discipline and by our helping them, they might even be "healed," that is, made spiritually well again and moving on to maturity and endurance.

C. A Final Warning to be Faithful to the New Covenant (Heb 12:14-29)

The author wants all the readers to finish their Christian pilgrimage well. Despite the difficulties involved, they should *endure* them because rewards from God await those who finish well. If the readers would commit themselves to a life of faith (as the heroes of old did) and see their struggles and trials as part of God's beneficial discipline for them, this would help them endure the difficulties of their Christian pilgrimage. Furthermore eternal rewards would await them for finishing well. For those tempted to respond negatively, the author issues a final "warning passage."

1. A Word of caution for the disobedient (Heb 12:14-17)

The author had called upon the readers to set their feet on straight paths and to help the “weaker” ones of the community (vv 12-13). So the whole community has a responsibility to look out for any who might drift away from the Lord.

Hebrews 12:14. The author exhorts them to **pursue peace with everyone**. By “everyone,” he means all in the community of faith, since both the preceding and following contexts have these in view. By the word *peace*, the author may have in mind the Hebrew concept of “shalom,” which to the Jewish mind is not merely peace but one’s whole welfare. To *pursue peace* with everyone in God’s family would be to seek for their total welfare, especially their spiritual well-being. The words translated “pursue” and “peace” are also found in combination in Romans 14:19, in a context calling for mutual concern and edification among believers. “So then, let us *pursue* what makes for *peace* and for building up one another” (see Ps 34:14).

Each believer also needs to pursue **holiness** (or “sanctification,” Gk *hagiasmos*). This is the only occurrence of this particular word in Hebrews (though the related verbal form occurs several times). This normally denotes *progressive sanctification* (e.g., Rom 6:19), and the preceding context confirms that meaning here (note those who “share his holiness” in Heb 12:10). This is essential for one to **see the Lord**.

In light of the epistle's eschatological concerns (Christ's return was referred to in both 9:28 and 10:37), “seeing the Lord” probably looks forward to that future moment that completes the sanctification process when each believer will see the Lord face to face and be like Him (see 1 John 3:2). Though none of us will become completely like Christ in this life, yet because this is our ultimate destiny, we ought to pursue sanctification now (cooperating with God in His discipline of us).

Just as all true sons partake of God’s discipline (Heb 12:8), so also all enter the sanctification process, progress to some degree, and ultimately see the Lord. The text is not saying that people will be saved in the final analysis because they attain to a certain level of holiness. Simple faith in Christ and His atoning work is the sole basis by which people go to heaven, not the extent of their sanctification.

Hebrews 12:15. The spiritual concern for the community of believers includes being on the lookout for anyone who **comes short of the grace of God**. The stress on progressive sanctification in this chapter suggests this does not mean a failure to believe the gospel (coming short of “salvation in Christ”). In light of the context of Hebrews (especially the weak and failing ones mentioned in Heb 12:12-13), this probably looks at the failure to appropriate God’s grace for successfully completing one’s Christian pilgrimage (see Heb 4:16). This can lead to a **bitter root** in the believer’s life (see Deut 29:18-21), that

further a hardened unbelieving heart and eventually leads to withdrawal from the community into apostasy. Like a bad disease, this can spread to others and defile them.

Hebrews 12:16-17. These two verses focus on the tragedy of Esau (see Genesis 27) to illustrate the lesson that community concern must include being on the lookout for immoral believers. Immaturity in the Christian life (and spurning the grace of God) can degenerate into an immoral lifestyle that further hardens a believer's heart. In Esau's case, he was the first-born son and therefore entitled to the first-born's inheritance rights. Later on he wanted that privilege back, but found it was too late. Hence, **he found no opportunity for repentance**, i.e., Isaac, his father, would not *change his mind*. Not even tears could change his father's mind and restore the privilege that he, Esau, had forfeited (Gen 27:34; 27:38). One must be careful not to follow in Esau's footsteps in light of the future eschatological "rest" (and inheritance) at stake.

2. The contrast of two covenants (Heb 12:18-24)

The thought of Esau forfeiting his inheritance is analogous to any who might jeopardize his future by turning back to the Old Covenant. The author carefully contrasts the Old and New Covenants in preparation for one final warning against forsaking the New Covenant.

a. *The Old Covenant and Mount Sinai (Heb 12:18-21)*

The author draws from four passages of the Old Testament that describe the fearful giving of the Old Covenant at the mountain **that can be touched**, that is, Mount Sinai (see Exod 19:16-20; 20:18-21; Deut 4:10-13; Deut 5:22-27). This scene was terrifying to the people, not *inviting* at all. In Hebrews 12:21 the author also includes the occasion when Moses came down from the mountain and beheld the golden calf that the people had made (see Deut 9:19). The situation was so **terrifying** that Moses expressed how fearful he was. The author's point is this: the very conditions and mood at the time of the Old Covenant's inauguration reflect the nature of the covenant itself. Though the laws of the covenant witnessed to the holiness of God, the covenant itself fostered fear and distance from God.

b. *The New Covenant and Mt. Zion (Heb 12:22-24)*

Hebrews 12:22. The New Covenant is far more inviting, and Mount Zion (the heavenly Jerusalem) stands in stark contrast to Mount Sinai. By the words **you have come to Mount Zion**, the author means that this is the destiny for those of the New Covenant. The idea of God's city as the believer's hope occupies much attention in the closing chapters of the book (Heb 11:10; 11:16; 12:22; 13:14). That this is the blessing awaiting New Covenant believers *in the future* is confirmed in Hebrews 13:14, "For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come." This city is the very

same “New Jerusalem” as portrayed in the Book of Revelation (see Rev 3:12; 21:2; 21:10-27) to be introduced in the messianic kingdom. According to Revelation 21:23, the city is illumined by the glory of God and therefore needs no other light.

Hebrews 12:23. The attractiveness of the New Covenant is also affirmed by those in attendance in the heavenly Jerusalem. Certainly God and the angels will be there, but also many people who have been redeemed throughout the ages. Possibly the author intends to differentiate people within this list. Although the expression **assembly** in verse 22 (Gk *panēgurei*) is used only here in the New Testament, the historian Josephus uses the term for a “public festival,” in which everyone’s participation was expected (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 2, Chap. 4.3). Included among these are **the congregation of the firstborn**. The word *firstborn* (Gk *prōtokōn*)—here an adjective used substantively—is very similar to the noun form in Hebrews 12:16 for “birthright,” that is, firstborn inheritance rights (Gk *prōtokia*). This may suggest those faithful believers who have gained their eternal inheritance, and thus a more restricted group. [Although the Greek word for *congregation* is the word often translated “church” (Gk *ekklēsia*), most commentators agree that this is not a technical expression for “the church” (the body of Christ), but an *assembly* of people in general. Therefore, the NET Bible is quite correct to translate it “congregation”].

Hebrews 12:23-24. The reference to **God, the judge of all** reminds us that even believers must face the scrutinizing judgment of God (at the judgment seat of Christ). Highlighting this heavenly city will be the Lord Jesus Christ, the very One who mediated the New Covenant. The **sprinkled blood** is, of course, His blood shed at Calvary, which inaugurated the New Covenant (see Heb 10:22). Though Abel’s blood cried out to God for justice and judgment (Gen 4:10), the blood of Christ **speaks of something better**. It speaks of redemption and eternal forgiveness for sinners.

3. The final warning and expected response (Heb 12:25-29)

By portraying the New Covenant in terms of the New Jerusalem in which it results, the author in one last bold stroke has implied that it is utterly foolish to turn back from this covenant to the Old Covenant. A choice must now be made.

a. The warning not to disobey (Heb 12:25-27)

Hebrews 12:25. The exhortation **Take care not to refuse the one who is speaking** hearkens back to the epistle’s opening words, “in these last days he has *spoken* to us in a son.” There is only one logical alternative: God has clearly revealed His will—the Old Covenant has served its purpose, and the New Covenant based on the perfect sacrifice of Jesus has been inaugurated. To refuse God’s plan in Christ Jesus, however, is to choose God’s judgment from which there is no escape. Under the Old

Covenant those who refused God at Kadesh-barnea met stern judgment (barred from entering the *rest* of Canaan). How much more, then, should those who rebel against the heavenly New Covenant expect His judgment (recall Heb 10:26-31). Those doing so will certainly be subject to temporal judgment in this life and eventually be denied their inheritance rights and reward when they stand before the Lord.

Hebrews 12:26-27. Whatever shaking of the earth was experienced at Sinai is not nearly as earth-shattering as that to come in the future. The author now turns to the promise (from Hag 2:6; 2:21) that God will **shake** the earth once more. This is a reminder that the present world order is not always going to continue as it has. At some point, God is going to intervene and radically change things. In the context of Haggai, this will include a political shaking of the kingdoms of the nations (note Hag 2:22).

b. The demand of a response (Heb 12:28-29)

Hebrews 12:28. The one thing that will remain after God's future "shaking"--His judgment upon the nations of this world--will be Messiah's kingdom, just as the Old Testament had foretold (see Dan 2:44). This kingdom is **unshakable** and cannot be destroyed (see Dan 7:13-14). This kingdom will be formally inaugurated at the Second Coming of Christ, and at that time all things will be put "under control" of Jesus (recall Heb 2:8), the "heir of all things" (Heb 1:2). This is "the world to come" that the author has sought to impress on the readers of the epistle (see Heb 2:5).

Hebrews 12:28-29. The thought that God has graciously destined us for this everlasting kingdom ought to arouse a *thankful* spirit in us. If indeed we are thankful, then we will respond obediently and be responsible believer-priests acting in faith as we **offer worship pleasing to God**. The verb translated *offer worship* (Gk *latreuō*) is often used of those engaged in priestly spiritual service (see Heb 13:10; 9:14). On the other hand, if we are not thankful but refuse Him, we must remember that **our God is indeed a devouring fire**. These words (drawn from Deuteronomy 4:24) warn that He is a jealous God who judges those who turn from His covenant. He should not be provoked to anger!

D. Spiritual Sacrifices Appropriate for New Covenant Believers (Heb 13:1-17)

In Hebrews 3:6, the author had used the expression "We are of His house" to speak of those believers who remained faithful and held fast their confidence. By house, the author is thinking of the worshipping community of believers and their active participation in it. This is the New Covenant counterpart to the Old Testament temple, and of which Jesus serves as "a great priest over the house of God" (Heb 10:21).

The use of the verb *latreuō* in the call to “offer worship pleasing to God” (see Heb 12:28) underscores that those under the New Covenant are all “believer-priests” with responsibilities for spiritual service (see Rev 1:6). Hebrews 13 provides some clues as to the type of spiritual sacrifices appropriate to the New Covenant (vv 15-16).

Furthermore the reference to prisoners (Heb 13:3), having no fear of man (Heb 13:6), Jesus’ suffering (Heb 13:12), and “bearing the abuse he experienced” (Heb 13:13) were appropriate remarks for those who might be discouraged and tempted to withdraw because of opposition they faced. The type of *communal spirit* and brotherly love to which they are commended in this chapter would certainly strengthen them for the challenges they would face as a believing community.

1. Personal morality and social responsibilities (Heb 13:1-6)

Throughout the epistle, we have seen repeated emphasis on the responsibility for brotherly concern (Heb 3:12-13; 10:24-25; 12:12-13, 15).

Hebrews 13:1. The author begins with a general exhortation, **Brotherly love must continue** which sets the tone for all that follows in the chapter. A strong loving fellowship was essential to counter the temptation to forsake their assembling with other Christians on account of persecution and hardships. Such brotherly love ought to manifest itself in good deeds and sharing, which indeed are *true sacrifices* before God (see Heb 13:16).

Hebrews 13:2. To **not neglect hospitality** meant the readers ought to enthusiastically practice Christian hospitality, which ought to be done “without complaining” (see Rom 12:13; 1 Pet 4:9). Practicing hospitality was important in the first century when mission work was expanding, travel was difficult, and many had to flee persecution as refugees. In fact it was considered a mark of spiritual leaders (1 Tim 3:2; Titus 1:8). In Genesis 18:2 and Genesis 18:16 Abraham and Sarah literally **entertained angels** (without being aware of it) by their hospitality. The author's point is not that we should expect angels to also visit us, but that we may have the honor of helping someone who is on a divine mission for God.

Hebrews 13:3. **Those in prison** are clearly those who had been imprisoned for their witness and service to Christ (recall Heb 10:34), and who had suffered under extremely unpleasant conditions. [Perhaps it was Timothy’s recent imprisonment that spurred this comment (see Heb 13:23; see Col 4:18)]. To **remember** them suggests more than praying for them (though that is a good starting point). After all, the readers were also human and ought to be able to feel **their torment** (lit., are in the body). Because those imprisoned (and their families) might be in need of material help, believers were not to be handicapped by the love of money.

Hebrews 13:4. Sexual temptation was as severe a problem in the first century as it is today. Those who turn from covenant faithfulness are in great danger of going off into a lifestyle of sin (recall Esau in Heb 12:16). Hence believers need to guard themselves against two extremes. First, there are those who look upon marriage negatively, as an indication of weakness or carnality (a sub-Christian interest in the pleasures of this world). Such an attitude led some to “prohibit marriage” (see 1 Tim 4:3) and to foolishly advocate celibacy for all. To this the author counters that **Marriage must be honored among all** (which could be translated as an exhortation, as does the NIV). Marriage, conducted God’s way, is a wonderful gift from the Lord, and this is the norm to be expected.

The other extreme is to seek sexual gratification illicitly, outside the bounds set by God. To these the author warns that **God will judge sexually immoral people and adulterers**. Christians who disobey God in this vital area are warned that God will bring judgment on them (recall Heb 10:30).

Hebrews 13:5-6. In these verses the author addresses the subject of money and possessions. Contentment is the goal of the Christian life, not accumulation of wealth (see 1 Tim 6:6-10). Hence we are to be **free from the love of money**. This is a requirement of spiritual leaders, for their affections must be on the things of the Lord in order to lead God’s people (1 Tim 3:3). This does not mean, however, that being rich is wrong. God at times may choose to greatly prosper certain individuals to help fund His work. These must learn to be generous in giving (see 1 Tim 6:17-19).

The author combines a quotation from Deuteronomy 31:6 with another from Psalm 118:6. The point of both is to alleviate fears and help one find his security in the Lord. Since the Lord will **never leave or abandon** us, we can be comforted in knowing that whether we have money or not, we can always have the greatest treasure of all, namely, God’s fellowship. Those in the community who feared what man might do (e.g., persecution and loss of possessions), could claim the promise, **The Lord is my helper, and I will not be afraid**.

2. Community religious life (Heb 13:7-17)

The references to leaders in verse 7 and again in verse 17 mark the boundaries of the paragraph and unify this section.

a. Dismay over the passing of former leaders (Heb 13:7-8)

Hebrews 13:7. The readers are to **Remember your leaders**. The word *leaders* here is actually a participle used substantively. The *tense*, however, should be understood from the second verb **who spoke** (aorist tense in Gk) and translated “those who led you.” That is, this is probably referring to *previous* leaders (who are no longer alive) who had formerly preached the Word of God to them.

They had apparently been faithful, and the readers would do well to carefully observe **the outcome of their lives** (i.e., how they finished their earthly pilgrimage) and thus **imitate** the faith they had lived out.

Hebrews 13:8. The departure of these early leaders need not be unsettling or disruptive for those left behind. There is security in knowing that **Jesus Christ is the same** always. The king over all remains on the throne, and our focus must be on Him, not His subordinates.

b. A warning about false legalistic teachings (Heb 13:9)

In contrast to the faithful teachings of these early leaders, the readers were apparently encountering **all sorts of strange teachings**. Such teachings may have promoted legalism (as was true of first-century Judaism), and the reference to **ritual meals** (lit., foods) would tend to confirm this (see Heb 9:10). Under the Old Covenant, priests partook of certain foods as part of the sacrificial system, though this in itself did not benefit them spiritually. Yet the author is thinking not merely of the food aspect but also of the entire Levitical cultus and Old Covenant regulations. By the first century AD, the Pharisees had turned God's Law into a dismal legalistic system that brought people into bondage. Jesus came to teach the true way of God and to free the people from the bondage of legalism (see Matt 11:28).

Thus the author reminds them that it is **good for the heart to be strengthened by grace**. Teachings that emphasize the grace of God are what strengthen the heart. We come to know God through the gospel of grace, and we are to draw on His grace for our spiritual pilgrimage to God's rest (Heb 4:16). Above all, we must guard against those who distort the gospel of grace. The gospel that is all of grace--offering eternal life as a totally free gift from God for the undeserving sinner--is meant to be *followed* by a commitment to discipleship that results in a righteous lifestyle. Failure in the latter, however, does not negate God's gift, though it could result in temporal judgment and eventual loss of rewards.

c. The contrast of priestly systems (Heb 13:10-16)

Hebrews 13:10. The thought about Old Covenant legalism in verse 9 prompts an extended discussion contrasting the two systems. Hence the author reminds them that **we have an altar** that those **who serve in the tabernacle** (adhering to the Old Covenant) have no right to. This *altar* is a figure of speech (metonymy) for the "sacrifice of Christ" and the benefit to believers of eternal forgiveness. The priests of the Old Covenant had certain benefits, including the right to eat some of the sacrifices (see Lev 7:35-36), but they are not entitled to the benefits of the Cross and the New Covenant.

Hebrews 13:11-12. The author now turns for a final time to the ceremony of the Day of Atonement (see Lev 16:27). On this occasion the blood of the animals was brought into the tabernacle, but the bodies (i.e., carcasses) were taken **outside the camp** to be **burned**. The very animals that provided blood for the atonement were regarded as “unclean” (rejected) and therefore “burned” (made to suffer) outside the camp. The author recognizes a divine typology in this. The Lord Jesus was led outside the city of Jerusalem to be crucified by those who rejected Him as Messiah.

Hebrews 13:13-14. Consequently the author exhorts the readers to **go out to him, outside the camp, bearing the abuse he experienced**. In this play on words, to go “outside the camp” would mean to decisively *leave* the camp of Judaism, choosing to align oneself with God’s Son and the New Covenant He has inaugurated “in these last days.” Such a choice may entail reproach or persecution from those remaining steadfast in Judaism, but one can do this when he knows the Lord Himself bore such reproach.

The idea of reproach and rejection by first-century Judaism would be painful for those who loved the earthly Jerusalem. Yet their hopes need to be set on something of more enduring value, namely, **the city that is to come**. This is the heavenly New Jerusalem that awaits New Covenant believers and in which they can share in Christ’s dominion and enjoy His rewards for a life faithfully lived. Like Abraham who left his earthly city, we should **seek** this city that God has prepared for us (recall Heb 11:8-10).

Hebrews 13:15-16. To leave behind the Old Covenant, however, does not mean we are left with no sacrifices to offer to God. There are appropriate (and better) New Covenant sacrifices than that of animals. (Of course, the foundational sacrifice has already been offered once for all by Christ Himself). Even Old Covenant sacrifices were meaningless, unless the worshiper was praising God in his heart. So, to offer **praise to God** is to capture the heart of *real sacrifice*. The phrase **acknowledging his name** is literally “confessing His name” (see Heb 3:1; 4:14; 10:23). The first aspect of our “sacrifice of praise” is the willingness to confess His name--not just to hold fast this confession, but openly to *confess* Jesus as Messiah and Savior. Further sacrifices that please God are **to do good and to share**. Such brotherly acts of love encourage one another and foster that sense of “family” that helps believers withstand the pressures and persecution coming from outside.

d. Submission to spiritual leaders (Heb 13:17)

Hebrews 13:17. The author now turns to consider the relationship of the readers to their **leaders**, that is, their present spiritual leaders (contrast v 7). This call to **obey** the leaders seems to imply that it was the followers, not the leaders (possibly house-church leaders), who were wavering in their faith

and being tempted to withdraw from the worshipping community of believers. The author urges them to **obey** and **submit** to these leaders. God has raised them up that they might **watch over your souls**. This exhortation implies that a certain tension had developed between the two parties, and in light of the preceding context (note v 9) this would most likely be the readers' allurements to false teaching and legalism. Specifically, this is the false teaching that rejected Jesus as Messiah and called for adherence to the Old Covenant. The readers should remember the responsibility that these leaders carry as those who **will give an account** to God. Hence the followers should not make their task more difficult, but should faithfully endure and thus bring **joy** to the leaders rather than **complaints!**

V. The Epilogue to the Epistle (Heb 13:18-25)

In these last eight verses, the author concludes this beautiful epistle with a request for prayer, the pronouncement of a benediction, and the extending of greetings.

A. The Author's Request for Prayer (Heb 13:18-19)

Hebrews 13:18. By imploring the readers **Pray for us**, the author aligns himself with the leaders mentioned in verse 17, suggesting that he had had a close relationship with them. This might imply he had once lived or ministered in their area. His confidence in their **clear conscience** is uttered in defense of their integrity of motive and behavior, for they desired **to conduct** themselves **rightly**, that is, in a commendable way, as had the former leaders mentioned in verse 7. Furthermore both he and these leaders had sought God's will for the readers and their ultimate welfare so that they might be numbered among those "who through faith and perseverance inherit the promises" (Heb 6:12). Just as the leaders should lead in a godly way (with a good conscience that they are shepherding the sheep in the will of God), so the flock needs to be in continual prayer on behalf of them.

Hebrews 13:19. The author urges special prayer that he might be **restored** to them as soon as possible, implying he must have known them personally.

B. A Benediction for Their Spiritual Progress (Heb 13:20-21)

Hebrews 13:20. The author's request for prayer is balanced with a benedictory prayer on their behalf. **The God of peace** (the Father) has **brought back from the dead the great shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus** which calls to mind His resurrection, the solid evidence of His messiahship (see Rom 1:4). This resurrected Jesus is also **the great shepherd of the sheep**, whose rejection by the nation was anticipated in the Old Testament (see Zech 11:4-14; 13:7), but who nevertheless "lays down His life for the sheep" (John 10:11). In doing so, His **blood** provided the basis for **the eternal covenant**. The latter is certainly a

reference to the New Covenant. The same expression (in the Greek) is used in the LXX of Ezekiel 37:26 to refer to the New Covenant that God will establish with His people and that eventually culminates with Messiah coming to reign as king (see Isa 55:3). [The latter phrase in Ezek 37:27--that the LORD will be their God and they His people--is drawn from the New Covenant announcement in Jer 31:33].

Hebrews 13:21. The very same God who resurrected Jesus also stands ready to equip the readers in every good thing **to do His will**. The reference to doing “God’s will” hearkens back to Hebrews 10:36, where the reader was assured that he might “receive what is promised” on the basis of endurance in doing the will of God.

For God to accomplish in us **what is pleasing before him**, there must be a cooperative exercise of faith. In Hebrews 10:38, the reader was told that God is not pleased with the one who “shrinks back” (cowardly in unbelief). Rather, God looks for faith, for that is what pleases Him (Heb 11:6). The words **through Jesus Christ** also remind us of our need for Christ as our High Priest. Through Christ’s high priestly help and by our response in faith to God and His Word, we can live to do His will.

C. An Epistolary Closing With Greetings To Be Extended (Heb 13:22-25)

Hebrews 13:22. The author calls this epistle **my message of exhortation**. The use of a similar expression in Acts 13:15 suggests that the author was thinking of an edifying discourse that followed the public reading of Scripture in the synagogue. This implies that the author wanted this read as a homily in the public assembly.

Hebrews 13:23. He alerts them that **our brother Timothy has been released**. The word *released* (from Gk *apoluō*) is commonly used for the release or pardon of a prisoner (e.g., Matt 27:15; Acts 16:35). This is apparently the same Timothy who ministered with Paul, and implies that Timothy was imprisoned for his faith (though this is not recorded elsewhere in the NT). Paul had once exhorted Timothy not to be ashamed of the fact that he (Paul) was a prisoner and to be willing to suffer for the gospel (2 Tim 1:8), words Timothy faithfully heeded.

Hebrews 13:24. Greeting **your leaders** would hopefully foster reconciliation with the community leaders. Greetings are also extended from **Those from Italy**. This might mean fellow Christians currently in Italy (implying the author wrote from Italy), although it could also mean those who had once been in Italy but who had been forced to relocate--such as those affected by Claudius’ expulsion of the Jews from Rome (see Acts 18:2).

Hebrews 13:25. The epistle ends on a grand note, **Grace be with you all**, reminding them of the inexhaustible grace of God available to them in their spiritual pilgrimage to God’s *greater rest* and the

heavenly New Jerusalem. Such grace is available daily from God's "throne of grace" (Heb 4:16) and the endless mercy of our High Priest over the house of God (Heb 7:25).

Those who avail themselves of this precious grace can faithfully endure, and (having once done the will of God) will one day reign with His Son, the Heir of all things through whom God has spoken in *these last days*.