

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week One: Introduction & Overview (Hebrews 1:1-4)

From the first few verses, the epistle to the Hebrews continually discusses the special nature of God's Son Jesus Christ. It tells us of the radiance of God's glory we can see in Jesus, it tells us of the unshakable kingdom of heaven that he has brought us to, and it also tells us of the new covenant he makes with those who follow him - a better covenant founded on better promises.

God Has Spoken By His Son (Hebrews 1:1-4)

The epistle opens by describing Jesus' central role in our relationship with God. Moreover, Jesus has replaced all of the temporary ways God once communicated with his people, and he has replaced all the sacrifices and regulations of the old law. Whatever else humans may rely on, all of them fall short of bringing us to God, while Jesus brings us all near by the cross.

As the writer recalls the many times and ways that in the past God spoke through the prophets (1:1), there is a contrast with the new covenant, yet there is also a connection. The message of Jesus is found in the prophetic books, the psalms, and even in the Law of Moses (Luke 24:44-47). The purpose of God's heart has been the same yesterday, today, and forever.

So 'in these last days,' the time of the new covenant, God speaks through his Son Jesus (1:2). The New Testament often refers to this era as the 'last' days* or the 'last' times* because Jesus has now done everything necessary for everyone in the world to know God through him. Hebrews explains both why this is so and what it means to us.

* These phrases are also used in Acts 2:17, 2 Timothy 3:1, James 5:3, 1 Peter 1:20, 2 Peter 3:3, Jude 1:18.

God speaks not only through the words of Jesus, but also through who Jesus was. The Son of God himself has come, the Word has been made flesh (John 1:14), he was in very nature God. He was full of grace and full of truth, and there is no imperfection in him. In these last days, everything in our relationship with God centers on the Lamb of God.

He is also described as the heir of all things, and as the one through whom God created the universe. These concepts are not meant so much to be analyzed, as they are rather to remind us of the transcendent nature of Jesus, and to help us realize that there is even more to Jesus than the extraordinary physical human being who walked the earth two millennia ago.

The writer then develops these thoughts further, telling us that the Son sustains all things in this universe (1:3). In a physical sense, we are dependent on God for water and air and food; yet this also refers to the love and mercy and understanding that God has for all of us. God's grace and his kindness sustain even the worst sinners in this life, as he gives them a chance to turn to him.

Jesus is also a reflection of God. He is the radiance of God's glory (2 Corinthians 4:6) and the exact representation* of God (John 14:6-7). He reflects everything about God that we can see or grasp in this temporary universe - not God's physical form, but rather in Jesus we see the radiance and representation of God's nature, character, and personality.

* Other versions say, 'express image' or 'exact imprint'. The Greek word is *χαρακτηρ*, which is transliterated 'character'; it meant an imprint or distinguishing features.

Moreover, Jesus' love and grace provide our only hope to be purified from and forgiven of our sins. One of the epistle's key ideas is that Jesus' sacrifice for sins was once for all, which the writer here expresses by the image of Jesus providing purification for sins and then returning to heaven and sitting down at God's side (that is, not standing ready to offer another sacrifice).

These opening points are next linked to the first main section of the epistle, by pointing out that Jesus is superior to the angels (1:4), both in name and in nature. This is developed in the verses that follow, and from there the writer will help us see the implications of this, and then continues to show that Jesus is also greater than the Law, than Moses, than all of the Levitical priests.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does God communicate differently now than he did under the old covenant? Why is it appropriate to call this 'the last days'? Consider the statements made about Jesus so far - why is each one significant, and what do they tell us about God?

Background & Message Of Hebrews

Some of the historical facts are uncertain regarding the background to Hebrews, yet its essential themes and its key teachings do not depend on these - indeed, its themes are timeless. As we read the epistle, it becomes clear that the original recipients were questioning the value of following Jesus, so the epistles reassures us that Jesus is always the Way, the truth, and our life.

The book's title in the early church was always "To The Hebrews", and the book itself shows that it must have been written to an audience that included many Jewish Christians. Like the author's name, the destination city is not mentioned. Most early Christian commentators understood it to be to Rome, though this would not significantly affect the message.

The date of the epistle is likewise uncertain. Most early church commentators thought that it was written in the middle of the decade of AD 60-69, or at least before AD 70, when the temple was destroyed by the Romans and brought the final end of the Levitical sacrificial system. Yet again the exact date makes little if any difference to the message of the book.

The identity of the human author of Hebrews was not known even in the late 1st century AD. Most of the early Christians thought that Hebrews was written by one of Paul's associates, though not by Paul himself*. Modern commentators often credit the epistle to Paul, and some to various others, but all of these are mere speculations that do not affect the message of the epistle.

* Some of the early church commentators suggested that the author may have desired to remain anonymous (except perhaps to the original recipients), or that the original title plate may have become detached (as often happened).

As we go through the epistle, we gradually see why Hebrews was written. First, we see how consistently the epistle emphasizes Jesus' perfection, and it repeatedly reminds us that faith in Jesus is central to our relationship with God. Then, from numerous remarks in the course of the epistle, it also becomes clear that the writer is addressing discouraged or disappointed believers who have begun to drift away from Jesus, some even considering a return to the old covenant.

In any era, discouragement, disappointment, hurt, and many other such things can make believers question the value of following Jesus, or can induce them to turn back to relying on outward performance or accomplishments or even on earthly things. Yet Hebrews teaches us that whether things in this world are good or bad, whatever how they seem on the outside, Jesus is the same forever, only he can save us, and only he can give us lasting hope and peace.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How much of the background to the book of Hebrews do we have to know for it to be useful to us? From what is usually understood about the book's background, how might it be of use to us? What might we expect to learn about God's nature? How can we identify with the recipients' struggles, and how can we hope that the message of Hebrews may speak to us?

Overview Of Hebrews

Just to get an idea of the themes and ideas that we shall find in Hebrews as we study it over the weeks ahead, we'll do a brief overview and shall focus on just a few key scriptures. As we do so, we'll take note of any ideas or words that especially stand out, as well as any significant questions that may come to mind.

Chapter 1 starts by telling us that God now speaks to us by his Son, and begins to explain why this is important to our relationship with him (Hebrews 1:1-4). Chapter 2 compares Jesus with human expectations of a 'savior', and then tells us how Jesus was made like us in every way (Hebrews 2:14-17). Chapter 3 gives us some examples from the Old Testament, and gives us God's reminder not to harden our hearts (Hebrews 3:13-15).

Chapter 4 builds on this, reminds us simply to remain faithful, and then talks about what Jesus did for us, so we may receive mercy and find grace (Hebrews 4:14-16). Chapter 5 continues to explain how Jesus came to become our high priest, and how he became the source of eternal salvation (Hebrews 5:7-9).

Chapter 6 gives us some sober warnings, yet it also reassures us that Jesus has given us a hope that is an anchor for the soul (Hebrews 6:18-20). Chapter 7 leads into further discussion of why the New Covenant through Jesus is a better covenant (Hebrews 7:22-25). Chapter 8 explains that it is established on better promises, and then tells us about some of God's best promises (Hebrews 8:10-13).

Chapter 9 then talks about the Levitical sacrificial ministry, and how it ceremonially (outwardly) brought cleansing - then the writer asks us to think about how much more will the blood of Jesus will cleanse us (Hebrews 9:13-14). Chapter 10 continues the contrast between the two sacrificial ministries, and tells us how Jesus alone was able to offer one sacrifice for all time that brought cleansing and sanctification (Hebrews 10:11-14).

Then the writer digresses to remind us of examples of walking by faith, and tells that they too wanted something better than this world, for they were longing for a heavenly country (Hebrews 11:13-16). Chapter 12 then tells us that by enduring the cross, Jesus has brought us to a kingdom that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:26-28). Chapter 13 brings the letter to a conclusion, and reminds us that Jesus is the same yesterday and today and forever (Hebrews 13:8-10).

- Mark Garner, September 2017

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Notes For Week Two: Jesus, Timelessness, & Salvation (Hebrews 1:5-2:4)

Hebrews opened by emphasizing the uniqueness of Jesus and the essential role he plays in making it possible for us to seek and know God. It also helped us understand the ways that God now speaks to us through his Son. The writer now continues with a comparison between Jesus and the angels, and explains why Jesus surpasses them in every way.

Jesus & Angels - Different In Nature (Hebrews 1:5-6)

The first way that Jesus surpasses the angels is in his very nature. As God's only begotten son, he is inherently above all created things, even those as glorious as angels. The first couple of scriptures quoted here illustrate Jesus' nature and his relationship with our Father in heaven. Notice that they are not used as 'proof texts,' rather they are illustrations of Jesus' pre-eminence.

Jesus alone has a natural family relationship with God the Father* (1:5). The quote "You are my Son, today I have become your Father" comes from Psalm 2:6-8, a Messianic psalm that also refers to God's 'anointed one'. This relationship is further emphasized in in the New Testament, as best known from John 3:16's reference to God's "only begotten son".

* Although the Scriptures do not say so in so many words, angels are understood to be created beings. Psalm 148:2-5 and Colossians 1:16 are often assumed to demonstrate this. Even aside from this, Jesus is singled out as God's only "begotten".

The word 'Today' that appears in Psalm 2:7 will appear later in Hebrews in similar contexts. Here, the writer uses it to emphasize that, in a sense, Jesus' relationship with God* found complete fulfillment in the cross.

* Note also that some versions translate the second part of verse 7 as, 'today I have begotten you.'

In the next quote, the writer uses God's relationship with David's family as a forerunner of his relationship with Jesus (2 Samuel 7:12-15). In the original context, when God says "I will be his father, and he will be my son", he refers to Solomon, with whom his closeness with David will continue. God's promises for Solomon find complete fulfillment in Jesus: the establishment of a kingdom that will endure forever, his everlasting love, even the suffering Jesus underwent for us.

Next, we are reminded that the Son of God is worthy of worship (1:6). In contrast, even angels are not worthy to be worshiped; rather, he says "Let all God's angels worship him." Though the original meaning of the scripture quoted is ambiguous*, it still serves to establish the contrast between Jesus and the angels. New Testament scriptures also remind us of this distinction (see, for example, Revelation 19:9-10 and Revelation 22:8-9).

* The quote in Hebrews 1:6 comes from Deuteronomy 32:43, although it is quoted from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was begun in Alexandria in the third century BC. For this reason, it will read differently in most English translations.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What is the purpose of comparing Jesus to the angels? What reasons are given for Jesus' superiority to them? Consider the quotes from Psalms and 2 Samuel - what do they tell us about God's nature? Do they tell us anything about our own relationship with God?

Jesus & Angels - Different In Ministry (Hebrews 1:7-14)

Jesus also surpasses the angels in his ministry. The writer next quotes a few more scriptures that illustrate the timeless nature of Jesus and of his ministry, and they tell us of the timeless form of justice and righteousness that only Jesus could have brought. The ministry of angels is valuable and helpful in its own right, yet it is limited and less vital than that of Jesus.

The writer now turns to the ministry of angels (1:7, 1:14). Literally, an angel (in Greek, *αγγελος*, 'angelos') is a messenger or an announcer. Here they are described as 'winds' and 'flames of fire' (see Psalm 104:2-4*), referring to the unseen ways that they may serve God's purposes.

* Again, Hebrews quotes from the Septuagint. Most English-language versions use the word 'messenger' in Psalm 104, yet the word can also be translated 'angel' (as it is in the Septuagint).

Next they are called ministering servants, sent to help the saved. Hebrews 2:2 also reminds us that angels would sometimes make proclamations about salvation (see, for example, Luke 1:26-38 and 2:8-14). Thus the angels have an important ministry, yet not an all-important one. The one indispensable part of our salvation is Jesus.

The ministry of the Son of God is more far-reaching and essential (1:8-13). The Hebrews writer mentions here a few of the key differences with the ministry of angels. The quote from Psalm 45* describes Jesus as a king, with his 'throne' being founded on justice and righteousness (Psalm 45:6-7, compare also with Psalm 89:14 & Psalm 97:2). Jesus brings a kind of justice and righteousness that far surpasses all human efforts.

* Psalm 45 was widely regarded as Messianic, and it was also written in part to commemorate a royal wedding, a concept reflected in the New Testament imagery of believers as the bride of the Lamb.

The next quotation starts with the idea of "In the beginning", by way of connecting Psalm 102 with the coming of Jesus (compare, for example, John 1:1-4). Being in very nature God, and having been with God from the beginning, Jesus has an eternal ministry (Psalm 102:25-27). We see again the image of Jesus participating in the Creation (recall 1:2); and throughout Hebrews we shall see the significance of the eternal nature of Jesus' ministry.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How does Hebrews describe the ministry of angels? (As a tangent, you could look for examples.) What characteristics of Jesus' ministry does the writer mention here? What do they show us about God's nature? How do they contrast with angels' ministries? How do they fit in with the crucifixion?

The Message Of Salvation (Hebrews 2:1-4)

Neither angels nor philosophies nor human leaders can save us or bring us to God. Only Jesus himself can bring us salvation, only Jesus could have made a once-for-all-sacrifice for sins, only

the Lamb of God could have reconciled us with our Heavenly Father. The good news of Jesus is our one and only way to be redeemed; Jesus is the truth and the Way and the life.

Thus the epistle urges us to pay the most careful attention (2:1), so that we won't drift away from God. With all the voices and distractions and activity around us, it can be difficult just to pay attention to Jesus. Thus, when three of the disciples saw the transfiguration, and began talking aimlessly, they hear the voice say, "This is God's Son, listen to him" (Matthew 17:4-8).

Drifting away can take many forms. It can be a simple matter of being bogged down by the world's troubles and distractions, becoming so discouraged that we begin to lose hope in Jesus (Mark 4:17). Yet on the other hand, if we begin to think we have 'arrived', if we become certain that we have the answers, if we think our beliefs are now beyond question, then we are running ahead of Jesus (2 John 1:9), which can be even more dangerous.

God gives us the same counsel with these and any form of drifting away - take the time to keep pondering and reflecting and meditating on the message of Jesus and him crucified. The message can be easily distorted or misinterpreted; yet when we pay close attention, it will clear away our preconceptions, it will be calming to our spirits, and it will renew us inwardly day by day, for it is a message of life and hope and eternal things.

For indeed Jesus has brought us "so great a salvation" (2:2-4). The message of Jesus and the wonders he would do to redeem us was announced long ago by the Lord (Isaiah 25:1). And the writer reminds us that, as the ancient Israelites did not take the Law of Moses lightly, so also Jesus brings a message not to be ignored.

Hebrews expresses this in what may seem to be an ominous way, yet this also reminds us of how eager God is to remain close with us. He understands how easy it is for anyone to be led astray or to lose hope or to begin to harden our hearts. The writer reinforces this by reminding us of all of the ways and all the times that God has testified to this message.

Only Jesus could have overcome the world (1 John 5:5-12), only in the Lamb of God can we escape its snares and its deceptions, only in Jesus can we find redemption and truth and lasting peace. The message of Jesus is in harmony; the Spirit and the water and the blood testify, and they all tell us that Jesus poured out his blood to reconcile us with God. And they tell us that whoever has the Son has life - the eternal life of being with our God.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Why might have the readers of this epistle have ceased to pay careful attention? Can we tell if we have done the same thing? If so, how can we respond? Why does the writer compare the message of Jesus with the old law? What do the various ways that God 'testifies' to Jesus tell us about God's nature?

- Mark Garner, September 2017

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Notes For Week Three: *Make A Little Lower Than The Angels* (Hebrews 1:1-10)

Having demonstrated that Jesus is superior to the angels both by his nature and in his ministry, the writer of Hebrews now also discusses Jesus' uniqueness. Although Jesus is superior to the angels in every way, he nonetheless accepted a position lower than the angels, in order to carry out his earthly ministry. This unusual concept is one of the keys to understanding Jesus.

The Son Of Humanity (Man) (Hebrews 2:14)

This scripture quotes Psalm 8, an expression of praise to God and his mindfulness of humanity. In its original context, David meditates on the love, understanding, and majesty of God in creating the universe and in then allowing us to benefit from it. In Hebrews, we see how this Psalm is fulfilled more completely through Jesus, the Son of Man.

It is not to angels that God's creation is subject, nor is the world to come (2:5). Instead, it will be subject to the Son. The writer will mention soon that this world does not seem to be subject to God, yet the world about which he is speaking, and the world that will last forever, will be subject to God and to Jesus.

The quotation from Psalm 8 begins with a question always well worth pondering, "what is mankind* that you are mindful of him?" The psalmist (David) considers this because he does not take God's attention for granted, and he understands that he could never earn blessings from God; rather he wonders why God would pay any attention to humans at all.

* Or in some versions, simply 'man', meaning humanity rather than male individuals. In the original Psalm, the Hebrew word ("enosh") is a poetic word that connotes mortal humanity. In the Greek translation, the word used here is ανθρωπος ("anthropos"), from which we get words like 'anthropology' and the like, meaning human beings, or humanity in general. There is a different word, ανηρ ("aner"), which means 'male individual', which can sometimes clear up ambiguity in English translations.

The Psalm points out that humanity, while of course being lower than the angels, is said specifically to be only a little lower than them. What is more, and what also caused David to ponder, is that God lets humans use and often misuse the wonderful creation he made ('put everything under its feet'). Yet in Jesus we see the full depths of God's mindfulness of us, his understanding of our needs, our weakness, and his compassion for us (Isaiah 57:18-19).

Note how the application of this idea to Jesus retains the key themes, while making an important reversal. Humans, by nature, are lower than the angels, yet God gives the world to us. Jesus, by nature, is above the angels, yet he came to earth in a form lower than the angels. And, as we write will shortly mention, although Jesus is Lord and heir of the world, he is recognized by only a small fraction of humanity.

Questions for Discussion Or Further Study: Read Psalm 8 in its original context - what are the main thoughts? To what degree are they also present here in Hebrews? What does this tell us of God's nature? How does the phrase, 'a little lower than the angels' apply differently to humans and to Jesus? Are there ways in which it applies the same to both? What does Hebrews tell us of God's mindfulness of us?

☐very☐ing ☐nder ☐esus (Hebrews ☐:☐b-☐)

As we apply the thoughts from Psalm 8 to Jesus, it may at first seem inconsistent. Though it says that everything has been put under Jesus, this surely does not seem to be the case when we look at the world around us. Yet it is a defining characteristic of Jesus' ministry that, though his very nature was divine, he did not come to this earth to rule, but to serve and to sacrifice himself.

So, at present, it hardly looks as if everything has been made subject to Jesus, or has been put under his feet (2:8b). The promise that this world belongs to Jesus is very much at odds with outward appearances, and John even wrote that, 'the whole world is under the control of the evil one' (1 John 5:19).

In terms of the things that happen in this world, and in terms of what human beings say, think, and do, Jesus is only occasionally, even rarely, truly recognized or honored. Yet, as so often, when we look at things from God's perspective, Jesus already reigns, for he reigns in our hearts and he is able to give eternal life to those who believe in him (John 1:9-12).

Moreover, when we let God 'open the eyes of our hearts', we do see Jesus (2:9). He was in very nature God, and indeed he allowed himself to be made lower than the angels. In doing so, Jesus reversed the perspective of the world. Instead of grasping as much authority and as many possessions he could get, he gave it all up to become like us, and willingly suffered death, to fulfill our deepest needs (Philippians 2:5-8).

The wages of our sins is death, yet Jesus tasted, experienced, and endured death for all of us once for all. So he has already been crowned with glory and honor; he is already reigning at God's side (Philippians 2:9-11).

Questions For Discussion or Study: Why does God allow the world to continue in not recognizing Jesus as their rightful Lord? How does Hebrews help us to understand this? What does this tell us about God's nature? How does Jesus' attitude contrast with the attitude of the world? What does it mean to 'taste death'? In what sense did Jesus 'taste death' for all of us?

☐esus & His ☐a☐i☐y (Hebrews ☐:1☐-1☐)

☐ecause of the extraordinary ministry that Jesus undertook in his time on this earth, we can be joined with him in a family relationship. These verses emphasize first, that it took Jesus' suffering to bring this about, and second, that because of his ministry he accepts us as his brothers and sisters. We thus obtain, entirely by grace, this special and priceless relationship.

The writer now points out that God used a fitting means to prepare Jesus to bring salvation (2:10). He brought us, his sons and daughters, to see his glory. This in turn can only come if our sins are wiped away, so that we may be rejoined with God, instead of being blocked by the barrier of sin between God and us. Our sins come from our inability to resist fleshly desires, so Jesus was made perfect* by suffering and sacrificing. We indulged our desires, so he resisted his.

* 'Perfect', in this sense, implies 'complete'. Jesus was already sinless, but his suffering and sacrifice made him a complete Savior.

Therefore, we are now accepted as family by God and Jesus (2:11-13). Since Jesus is holy and sinless, he could make us holy by his blood. We were once made in God's image, and Jesus can restore us to fellowship with him through his blood. As a result, we come into the family relationship with God that he desired for us all along. Though Jesus is the natural Son and we are adopted children, God graciously gives us all the blessings of natural children.

Further, Jesus is not ashamed to recognize us as his brothers and sisters. Many humans are embarrassed by certain family members, and try to avoid being connected with them. But Jesus always wants to be known as our brother, even when we don't deserve the honor. The quotes from Psalms and Isaiah emphasize this, and help us see how Jesus views our family relationship.

The first quote here comes from Psalm 22 (verse 22), which is one of the most significant messianic Psalms. The verse depicts the Messiah and the saved acknowledging God and worshiping God as one. The other two quotations come from Isaiah 8, where God uses the names of Isaiah's children as prophetic signs to the people.

Just as Isaiah's children were themselves a part of his ministry, so God's adopted sons and daughters are essential to him, to Jesus, and to their ministry (Isaiah 8:17-18). Each of us is a 'symbol' of God's abundant grace.

Jesus recognizes us as his family, as he did with the believers who listened to his words (Mark 3:31-35). When someone told him that his earthly family wanted to see him (and later they would become part of his spiritual family) Jesus pointed instead to those seated in a circle around him, listening and learning as he unfolded God's truths. Jesus calls us too his sisters and brothers, and each of us is dear and special to him.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why was it fitting for Jesus to suffer as part of becoming our Savior? Was it also necessary? How does Jesus make us holy? What does our family relationship with Jesus tell us about how God feels about us? Read the quotations in verses 12-13 in their original contexts. What do they tell us about God?

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THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Four: He Shared In Our Humanity (Hebrews 2:14-18)

Although Jesus is by nature divine and eternal, he willingly lived on this earth as a human, and he experienced all of the limitations, trials, and constraints that we ourselves must endure. This week's scripture explains why this was such an important part of Jesus' ministry, and will help us better understand what he did for us.

Children Of Flesh & Blood (Hebrews 2:14-18)

At the heart of Jesus' earthly ministry was his understanding that we humans are flesh and blood creations, fragile and vulnerable to all kinds of dangers, both physical and spiritual. By living as one of us, Jesus showed us God's compassion, he was able fully to experience what it is like to be a mortal being, and by tasting death for us he released us from the hold of death and sin.

Since we his children are mere dust, mere jars of clay, Jesus shared in our humanity and our mortality and our weaknesses (2:14). Moreover, he experienced our mortality even to the point of dying, and by doing so he broke the chokehold of death. Every human being dies, yet Jesus death was unique, it was a victory, not a defeat. It was a beginning, not an end.

His crucifixion destroyed the iron grip of sin, so Jesus underwent death voluntarily, "for the joy set before him he endured the cross" (Hebrews 12:2). The devil may have rejoiced over the pain and suffering Jesus faced on the cross, it nevertheless broke the devil's hold on us (1 John 3:8).

Not only did Jesus' death bring freedom from judgment and condemnation, Hebrews also tells us that it also brought freedom from fear (2:15). We were once held in chains by the fear of death; for whether or not we consciously acknowledge it, each of us will die some day, and we cannot take our earthly possessions with us. The accuser finds it very easy to exploit this fear.

The innate awareness of death compels many humans to frantically try to obtain and to 'enjoy' as many things or accomplishments as we can in this world, before death comes. The better choice is to look beyond this world for something lasting to live for - yet this is tremendously difficult for the flesh, so we can be enslaved by this simple fear of death and its implications.

Yet Jesus has won the victory over sin, and he has won the victory over death itself (1 Corinthians 15:55-57). He has reassured us of God's understanding and his care for us, and he brings a hope in imperishable things.

Questions for Discussion or Study: How does Jesus' death differ from other humans' deaths? How does it differ from the deaths of the animals sacrificed under the old law? How does it destroy Satan's hold over us? Does this tell us anything about God's nature and his understanding? How does the fear of death rule the lives of most humans?

Merciful & Faithful High Priest (Hebrews 2:17-18)

Hebrews now presents another aspect of Jesus' ministry, as it describes how Jesus became a high priest for us. This concept will be developed further throughout the epistle, and we'll see the contrast human priests and the priesthood of Jesus. Here, he will explain how living as a human being especially qualifies Jesus to become our merciful and faithful high priest.

The writer now reminds us that it is not angels that Jesus came to help (2:16), just to re-emphasize his awareness of our spiritual needs. Angels live in God's very presence, yet Jesus is aware that we've never seen God, and we have only a dim sense of spiritual reality. So Jesus came to help Abraham's descendants, a term that Hebrews uses deliberately (Romans 4:11-12*), to remind us of God's call to walk by faith.

* Hebrews uses this phrase in a manner similar to what Paul had in mind in Romans 4, when he refers to Abraham as the father of all who believe, whether circumcised or not.

Now Hebrews introduces the image of Jesus becoming a merciful and faithful high priest* (2:17). He came to be our intercessor, to bring us back to God, and thus he was made like his brothers and sisters in every way. He could be hurt, he could be tempted, he could become tired and hungry and thirsty and sad. He had to endure all of the constraints of living in a mortal body.

* In Greek, the word for priest is ἱερεύς ('hierous'), literally meaning someone who deals with holy things or who has been made holy. It is derived from ἱερός ('ieros'), meaning holy. The Hebrew word for priest is כֹּהֵן ('kohen'), literally a mediator, referring specifically to a mediator between humans and God.

As our 'high priest', Jesus made atonement for the sins of the people, to intercede with us before God. Yet, as we shall see in Hebrews, there are some key differences between the Levitical ministry under the Old Covenant and Jesus' ministry under the New Covenant. Unlike the other priests, Jesus did not need to offer sacrifices for himself, a key distinction. Moreover, Jesus made one sacrifice for everyone in every nation and for every time, not for a limited community.

Besides his suffering, Jesus also endured temptation (2:18). We do not always think of Jesus as having endured genuine temptations, but not only did he do so, he also suffered when he was tempted. He tasted the frustration and tension that temptations bring, and he was tempted in every way, just as we are - the difference is that he successfully resisted every temptation in his life, no matter how small or how large (Hebrews 4:15).

Thus, Jesus is able to help us in our own times of weakness, when we are tempted and when we are discouraged. Hebrews continues to point out aspects of Jesus' ministry that we do not often consider and may not even understand. We are meant to meditate on them, to ponder them, so we may see how deep God's understanding is, and to consider how enduring God's love is.

God remembers that we are dust, and he is mindful of what we need. (Psalm 103:8-18). Jesus came to remove our transgressions from us once for all, to show us the fullness of God's mindfulness and compassion. The world forgets us, yet God remembers us, and we are worth more to him than many sparrows. His love is from everlasting to everlasting with those who revere him and walk in the light of Jesus.

Questions for Discussion or Study: In what ways is Jesus now our high priest? Consider the many ways that Jesus was made like us - what does each of them tell us about God? Why was Jesus tempted in every way? Does this tell us anything about God's nature?

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THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Five: Today You Hear His Voice (Hebrews 3:1-11)

The writer of Hebrews now makes a comparison between Jesus and Moses. This is, in part, because many of his discouraged readers are thinking about returning to the old Law of Moses so Hebrews helps us understand why following Jesus is far better. Moses' generation also holds some significant reminders for us, especially, as Hebrews encourages us, to keep our hearts soft.

Fixing Our Gaze On Jesus (Hebrews 3:1-11)

Since Jesus is greater than the angels, he is also greater than Moses, as Hebrews now carefully explains. Since the ongoing comparison between the Old Covenant and the New is especially significant in the epistle's message, the writer also wants his readers to clear their minds of any misconceptions or unrealistic expectations that may have caused them to become discouraged.

Since we share in a heavenly calling (3:1), the writer's call to fix our thoughts on Jesus is a timely reminder. This basic idea is at the root of the problem that the readers of Hebrews were having. They had lost sight of who Jesus really was, and thus were looking at following Jesus as a matter of activities or routines or obligations. It is easy to fall into the habit of depending on filling a 'checklist', or of being motivated by entertainment or outward results.

So God calls us to appreciate Jesus on a higher and more spiritual level. Hebrews now describes him as our 'apostle'* and our high priest (see last week's notes about 'priests'). The epistle's teachings about Jesus' transcendent nature may at first seem abstract; yet when we 'pay the most careful attention' (see Hebrews 2:1), God can help us understand these ideas, and they can provide a source of reassurance and hope far better than any earthly motivation.

* An 'apostle' (Greek *αποστολος*, 'apostolos') literally means 'one who is sent', that is, someone sent to carry out some particular responsibilities - so in this sense, Jesus was an 'apostle'.

Another comparison now follows, as the writer compares the faith of Moses with the faith of Jesus (3:2-6). Hebrews also uses the image of a house and the builder of the house; for the house is a created thing that could not have made itself, whereas the builder had both the understanding and the intention that brought the house into being.

As the writer says, Moses was faithful as a servant in God's house, enduring and persevering through many difficult times (Deuteronomy 34:10-11). Moreover, God had often spoken to Moses about things to come in future generations, so he also testified about the future of Israel*.

* See, for example, Deuteronomy 4:25-31 and Deuteronomy 18:14-22.

So Moses was indeed a faithful servant, yet not nearly on the level of Jesus. But Jesus was faithful as a Son, a natural Son who was in very nature God, who had a natural relationship with God, and who alone could bring the fullness of God's grace (John 1:17-18). Unlike Moses, Jesus could build a living 'house'; and as the writer says, we are his house, a house built with living stones (1 Peter 2:6-7).

Questions for Discussion Or Further Study: What does it mean to fix our thoughts on Jesus? What is the meaning of the illustration of the builder and the house? What does this teach us about God? How do the responsibilities of Jesus and of Moses contrast? In what ways were they similar? What does this tell us about God and his nature?

□o □o **Harden □our Hear□s (Hebrews □:□-1□)**

Hebrews now quotes from Psalm 95, which contrasts God's eagerness to bless us and care for us, with the human weakness that can cause us to harden our hearts. God spoke directly to the exodus generation, and showed them some of his most striking miracles, yet they so often became faithless and calloused. So Hebrews teaches us how we can learn from this sad example.

The lengthy quotation from Psalm 95* is another reminder for us to listen carefully to the message of Jesus (3:7-11, see also Psalm 95:7b-11). This scripture recalls the rebellion in the desert, when the Israelites time after time hardened their hearts, rejecting God's counsel or grumbling about what God had given them, despite all the care and miracles he showed them.

* The rest of Psalm 95 praises and honors God for all the things he made and for all the ways he takes care of us. The exodus generation is brought up to remind us to take the time to appreciate what God does for us, since it is easy to forget what God gives us. See below for thoughts on the rest of Psalm 95.

The exodus generation reminds us that our faith should not depend on God doing what we think he should do, for their hearts went astray despite all that God had done for them. As they drifted away (see Hebrews 2:1), God reluctantly decided that they could never enter the physical rest of the Promised Land. So instead, they wandered without rest in the desert for forty years. So God simply asks us not to harden our hearts.

We face a long path in this world; thus Hebrews asks us to hold firmly to our faith to the end (3:12-15). We will face sadness, hurts, temptations, and fears, so God simply asks us to keep our hearts soft, so that we will not become hardened by sin's deceitfulness or by the world's false hopes or its distractions.

Likewise, the writer reminds us to encourage and reassure one another, as long as it is called 'Today' (see also Hebrews 4:7). God has made this 'Today', the last times, the time of his favor and the day of his salvation; he is near and he will answer when we call on him in truth (Isaiah 49:8); he is eager to cleanse us and to give us the mercy and grace we need (Isaiah 55:6-7).

We have come to share in Christ, we now share in his joys and in his sorrows, we now share in his blessings and in his afflictions; and if indeed we keep our hearts soft and walk with him by faith, we will have the eternal life of being with him and with God (Romans 8:16-17). Sharing in Jesus involves having these realistic expectations as we live in this fallen world, and it promises us imperishable blessings to give us an enduring hope.

The writer now poses a rhetorical question, 'Who were they who heard and rebelled?' (3:16-18) They had indeed been led out of □gypt and delivered from slavery, yet the community described so negatively in Psalm 95 is the very generation that had been led by God's hand out of □gypt. In spite of all the reasons for faith that they had been given, their hard hearts and their belief prevented God from letting them enter the rest he had prepared for them.

This example also illustrates the close relationship between hardness, pride and unbelief (3:19), for these can form a vicious cycle (Hebrews also ties these in with deliberate disobedience). When we do not believe God or trust God, we often think that we know better, and choose to harden our hearts (which in turn can cause us to disregard what he tells us).

By contrast, faith and humility and softness of heart can also work as partners, in a much more positive sense, and in turn they can help us to learn to follow God's paths. The negative spiral that brought down the exodus generation can be changed to a positive cycle that keeps us growing closer to God; and this cycle begins with paying the most careful attention to the message of Jesus.

Returning to Psalm 95, we see that he is our God, and we are the flock of His pasture (Psalm 95:1-7a), images of God's closeness and his eagerness to give us what is good. He is our Rock of salvation, our sure foundation, images we so often see in Scripture. We also see the combination of God's majesty and understanding and his compassion. He made the earth and the heavens; the depths of the earth and the mountain peaks are in his hands; yet he has each of us in his care.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Read Psalm 95 in its original context. Why does the psalmist refer to such a negative example in a psalm of praise? What else can we learn from Psalm 95, and what does it tell us about our relationship with God? What are we meant to learn from the example of the exodus generation? How can God help us to get out of the cycle of hardness and faithfulness, and into a positive cycle of faith and humility and kindness instead?

- Mark Garner, October 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Six: God's Promised Rest (Hebrews 4:1-13)

Hebrews continues discussing the example of the Israelites in the desert, and then develops further the idea of God's promised rest. The writer helps us see that this rest is something far better than physical rest or physical satisfaction. At the same time, Hebrews again reminds us of God's caution for us not to harden our hearts.

Since His Promise Still Stands (Hebrews 4:1-7)

The writer reassures his readers (many of whom are discouraged) that there is still the promise of a rest, a 'promised land,' for God's people. Thus, since it is still today, he reminds us to keep our hearts and minds open and soft. Hebrews also explains that unbelief cannot be blamed on circumstances, and likewise it cannot be blamed on the message itself.

With these thoughts in mind, Hebrews again encourages us to remain faithful, and to help one another to remain faithful, so that none of us may fall short (4:1-2). The good news has been proclaimed to us, and to the rest of the world. Sadly, the message had no value to many of those who heard it (1 Corinthians 1:22-24). The message of Jesus sounds foolish or even irksome to those who do not yet accept it, yet it brings life and hope to those who believe it.

Those who do not enter God's rest have in actuality made the decision for themselves, since those who believe enter that rest (4:3-7). In the Old Covenant, God established one day of each week for physical rest, as Hebrews tells us that God himself rested after the creation of the world had been completed. Moreover, he had provided Canaan, a place where they could find some degree of rest. In the New Covenant, the whole idea of rest takes a new and deeper form.

Now in a different sense God's 'works' have also been finished, since Jesus has offered for all time one sacrifice for sin (see John 19:30), and afterwards he 'sat down' at God's right hand (see Hebrews 1:3 and 10:12). Likewise, God has a different kind of rest for those who believe the good news of Jesus.

We get again the sobering reminder that some will enter this rest, while some will not. This is not meant to intimidate us or to frighten us or to make us feel guilty, rather to help us understand God's eagerness in giving us this rest. Those who do not enter have not been rejected or banned by God, rather they have hardened their hearts and thus cannot appreciate or accept what God has done.

God has indeed set a certain day, a day when anyone anywhere may hear his words and his promises, a day when his gates are open, a day when he simply asks us not to harden our hearts. And he calls this day Today, and it is still Today (recall Hebrews 3:13-14).

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What can we tell so far about God's promise of rest? Why does Hebrews keep reminding us that some will enter this rest while others

won't? Put in your own words what God's idea of 'Today' means. What does this tell us about God and his nature? What does it tell us about our relationship with God?

We Can Enter That Rest (Hebrews 4:8-13)

The writer of Hebrews now presents an apparent paradox, in telling us to 'make every effort' to enter a 'rest'. This becomes clearer as we understand the kind of rest God has in mind, and the type of effort he speaks of. After this we read Hebrews' familiar description of the word of God, which reminds us of the depths of God's understanding.

Whether or not we can fully understand what it means, the idea of entering God's rest is reassuring and comforting; and indeed we can enter that rest (4:8-11). The ancient Israelites looked to Canaan as their rest, a perfect place, an everlasting paradise; yet it was very temporary and brought at best a tenuous kind of physical rest. So Canaan was not this rest, and indeed no earthly land or place could have provided enduring peace or lasting rest for our spirits.

Instead, God offers his people what the writer calls a 'Sabbath-rest*'. The time will come when we will have eternal rest, yet even now, though our bodies cannot rest, we can find rest for our souls (Matthew 11:28-30). Just as God rested from his work after the Creation was completed, so we ourselves rest from our own work when we enter God's rest; not a physical rest, yet a rest for our souls and spirits.

* The Greek word used here is σαββατισμος ("sabbatismos"), and it seems to have been invented by the writer, since it does not appear in anything written in Greek before the time of Hebrews. When Hebrews discusses rest elsewhere, it uses a conventional Greek word for rest, with its usual possible meanings. So the writer seems to be implying that there is something to this 'Sabbath-rest' that goes beyond mere physical rest or contentment.

Though we do not yet have physical rest from our daily activities and routines, we no longer need to be consumed with them, we no longer need to panic or fret about outward appearances. Moreover, we have rest from the nagging sense that we might not have 'done enough' for God to accept us, since he reassures us that our salvation depends on his grace and love for us, and the sacrifice he asks for is the living sacrifice of our hearts.

This can also help us understand why Hebrews tells us to make 'every effort' to enter this rest. This does not mean extreme physical exertion, rather it means to keep our hearts soft and our minds open so God can strengthen and renew us inwardly. It does not mean to devise impressive theologies or effective methods, rather it means to keep our eyes on things above, let God's words teach us about unseen and eternal things (Colossians 3:1-4, see also Hebrews 12:1-2).

Many of the ancient Israelites misunderstood the seventh, or Sabbath, day, to be a day when all physical activity was prohibited, so Jesus frequently pointed that physical effort in itself was not the issue*. Thus the Sabbath-rest God gives us now has less to do with avoiding physical exertion as it does with letting go of things that hinder us from knowing God. Likewise, the effort Hebrews calls for is more about letting God nurture the seed of faith he has planted in us.

* See, for example, Matthew 12:1-14, Luke 13:10-17, Luke 14:1-6, John 5:8-18, John 7:21-24.

It is Today, and God's Word is alive Today (4:12-13). The Word of God is not meant to be a rulebook or a how-to manual, rather it is a message from God, a message of his love for us and his desire to have us know him. The Word of God is not meant to be an academic subject or a philosophy text, rather it is living and active, it is full of the Spirit and full of life (John 6:63).

Hebrews also reminds us that God knows our thoughts and our beliefs and our ways, yet this too is not meant to intimidate us; rather, it reassures us that he still wants us to know him, he wants to be with us, and God wants to make a covenant of peace with us (Isaiah 57:18-19). Nothing is hidden from God's sight, so there is no need for us to bother hiding anything from him; moreover, it is another reminder that God looks at the heart rather than outward appearances.

In a chapter where the prophet gives us some thoughts about what worship means to God, Isaiah also gives us some thoughts about finding joy in the Lord (Isaiah 58:13-14). With Hebrews in mind, it reassures us that when we learn why God's Sabbath-rest is indeed a delight to our spirits, a comfort, and learn to appreciate it instead of following our own ways, then God will help us find our joy in knowing him.

This in turn can help us understand the rest that our Heavenly Father has in mind, and how we can 'make every effort' to enter it. Moreover, we can appreciate the inheritance that our Father in heaven gives us, the inheritance of eternal life with him.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Explain what kind of rest God offers us, both now and in eternity. How does this differ from the rest that the Promised Land brought to the Israelites? Does it have any similarities with the Sabbath in the Old Covenant? What does it mean to 'make every effort' to enter a 'rest'? What does the description of God's word tell us about God?

- *Mark Garner, October 2017*

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Seven: Jesus, Our Perfect High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-5:10)

Hebrews mentioned earlier that Jesus has become our high priest, one of the many roles he plays in our relationship with God. Now the writer will discuss this idea in more detail, and will explain what it means for Jesus to be a high priest, a mediator, an intercessor on our behalf with God. This will also help us better understand what it means for us to be able to know God.

A Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14-16)

This comforting scripture points out the contrast between Jesus and human priests. It helps us remember why we can rely on him now, it reminds what Jesus endured to become our high priest, and it reassures us that we can approach him and receive God's grace in our time of need - and indeed, we need God's mercy and understanding every moment.

We do indeed have a great high priest in Jesus (4:14). Many religions have some form or other of priests, but they are mortal humans who have never ascended to heaven; none of them has lived in eternity nor has seen God's spiritual realms, yet all of this is true about Jesus (Ephesians 4:8-10). We thus should hold firmly to our faith in him, since Jesus is uniquely qualified both to guide mortals to God and also to atone for us, having shared in the natures of both.

And he is, as Hebrews has mentioned before, a high priest who understands us and who knows what we need (4:15). He has empathy with our struggles, our disappointments, our hurts, and our weaknesses, since he experienced them all. He was even tempted in every way that we are tempted* - with the important distinction that he alone withstood all of these temptations, and never gave in to sin.

* This implies that being tempted in itself is not sin. Hebrews more than once indicates that Jesus went through actual temptations and that he suffered when he withstood his fleshly desires. When we feel desires for the wrong things, this is not necessarily sin in itself, since Jesus also felt the pull of temptation. Where he was different was that he never indulged his fleshly desires.

This human experience adds an important quality to his high priesthood. Becoming human gives him the ability to understand us, while being sinless and divine enable him to overcome this world, and to call us to follow him.

Thus, the writer uses the image of approaching God's 'throne of grace' with confidence (4:16, see also Hebrews 10:19-22). This confidence is not in the strength of our faith, rather this confidence is in God's nature and in Jesus, whose unique nature ensures that he perfectly understands the need for grace, and that he is also perfectly qualified to dispense grace.

Because of our own fallen nature, we often have great difficulty trusting in God's grace. Yet Hebrews reassures us that whenever we need mercy and grace and understanding and compassion - and when don't we need them? - we can put our 'mustard seed' of faith in Jesus, and God will be there, simply waiting for us to come to the right place for what our souls need.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why is it significant to his high priesthood that Jesus ascended into heaven? What kinds of temptations and other experiences helped him to

empathize with us? What can give us confidence that God will be there to give us the grace we need? What does Jesus as a high priest tell us about God?

The Ministry Of A High Priest (Hebrews 5:1-6)

These verses describe the role, the ministry, and the qualifications of a high priest. It also explains the nature of the calling of a high priest - and then helps us see the uniqueness of Jesus' high priesthood. We shall see some significant parallels between Jesus' high priesthood and that of the Levitical priests, yet we shall also see some key differences.

As he begins a detailed comparison between the Levitical priesthood and Jesus' priesthood, the writer next describes what a high priest does (5:1-3). He is appointed to represent humans before God, and a key aspect of this is to intercede for them by offering gifts and sacrifices to God on their behalf. This basic priestly role is often seen in religions around the world, both in history and even today.

Yet all human high priests are themselves subject to the same human weaknesses common to us all. They sin, and must thus, on occasion, offer sacrifices for their own sins, in addition to offering sacrifices for the sins of others. This principle is seen with particular clarity in the Levitical priesthood (see, for example, the sacrifices offered on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16).

This, though, is also one of the essential differences between Jesus and human priests. They could never offer themselves as sacrifices, since they themselves had sinned and thus needed sacrifices to be made on their own behalf; moreover, their sacrifices could only provide atonement for their own community. But Jesus was sinless, and he was divine, and thus he could sacrifice himself once for all to provide full redemption for the sins of the world.

The nature of the calling of a high priest also helps us to understand Jesus' priesthood (5:4-6). Human skill or ambition or credentials cannot make someone a true high priest, for the call must come from God and from God alone, and it must then be willingly and humbly accepted. Hebrews reminds us that even Jesus did not seek honor by becoming a priest, but humbly accepted the role by his Father's will.

The quotations here from Psalm 2:6-8 and Psalm 110:4 help to illustrate that Jesus' priesthood came about in this way. Both of these scriptures emphasize God's choice and his promises that come with his call*.

* Psalm 2:7 was also quoted in Hebrews 1:5, and a different verse from Psalm 110 was quoted in Hebrews 1:13. Psalm 110 brings up the idea of being a high priest 'in the order of Melchizedek' - this will be discussed at length when we come to Hebrews 7.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Describe the basic role and the purpose of a priest. What are the implications of a human priest's need to make sacrifices for his own sins? What is significant about Jesus' call to priesthood? What similarities have we seen so far between the Levitical priesthood and Jesus' high priesthood? What differences have we seen so far? What does this tell us about what it means to know God?

Preparation For Becoming A High Priest (Hebrews 5:7-10)

Hebrews now describes how God prepared Jesus for his high priesthood. Yet this took place in some unexpected ways, as it discusses the discipline and hardship Jesus had to undergo while he lived in human form. These ideas may at first seem paradoxical or even unsettling, yet they touch on some crucial aspects of who Jesus is and what he did for our sakes.

During Jesus' life on this earth, he experienced what it is like to be human, to an even fuller degree than we can fully grasp (5:7-10). These verses bring out the ways that Jesus was constrained by his human nature, even before going to the cross. He prayed and petitioned his Father constantly, as we know, yet we see here that it was with 'loud cries and tears'.

One well-known example is in Gethsemane (Mark 14:32-36), yet Hebrews now tells us that such prayers were frequent throughout Jesus' life. He felt many of the same things we feel, and he gave every concern over to his Father in heaven, who was also 'the one who could save him from death'. The implication is that this does not merely mean physical death.

Jesus' reverent submission allowed God to keep him safe from all spiritual harm, and it helped him to become a complete* (or perfect) high priest. Jesus focused his every thought and action on God, and if we consider the responsibility he carried, then we can begin to see why his prayers and his submission to God were so reverent. We also see again the role that suffering played in Jesus's earthly ministry (see Hebrews 2:10 and 2:18.)

* In fact, in many places where the New Testament says, 'perfect', it is using the word in this sense of being 'complete' or 'whole'. The Greek word is *τελειος*, 'teleios', which comes from the Greek word for 'end'. Its literal meaning refers to something that has ended or has been completed or has been perfected.

Jesus was able to fully understand and sympathize with the weaknesses and struggles of his brothers and sisters, and he was also able to bring us the full redemption we needed. Jesus became our perfect high priest and also the source of eternal salvation for those who believe in him and turn to him. He is a high priest in the order of Melchizedek, not the order of Aaron - a figure of speech that Hebrews will explain in chapter seven.

Another of Jesus' memorable prayers is found in the gospel of John, when he prays to give God glory on the cross, a different kind of glory from what the world values (John 17:1-5). Jesus was wounded that he may give us healing, and he gave up his life that he might give eternal life to those who follow him - the eternal life of knowing our true God and being with him and Jesus.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What does it tell us about Jesus that he prayed 'with loud cries and tears'? In what sense did God the Father save him from death? How did this help Jesus become a complete (or perfect) high priest? What does this tell us about our walk with God? How does Jesus help us understand God's nature?

- Mark Garner, October 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Eight: Elementary Truths & Solid Food (Hebrews 5:11-6:12)

In the middle of the discussion of Jesus as our high priest, the writer of Hebrews now makes a digression to discuss some of the key aspects of knowing God. Parts of this scripture may sound ominous, yet when we understand what they mean, they will instead help us see God's understanding of us and his desire for us to be with him.

A Lifetime Walk Of Faith (Hebrews 5:11-6:3)

The original readers of Hebrews were drifting away from God because they thought they had 'arrived', yet that they were not getting the things they desired. So Hebrews explains that 'maturity' is not a state we reach by memorizing a few sayings nor by accomplishing a few key tasks; rather, it means following Jesus is a lifetime walk of faith and humility and learning.

The writer would prefer to proceed immediately to a discussion of the Levitical priesthood, and Jesus' high priesthood, and what 'the order of Melchizedek' means; yet first he must address a more basic problem, for his original readers are stuck in 'infancy' (5:11-14). They've learned the basics about Christianity, have memorized a few handy pat answers, and have learned how to follow the routines to look 'spiritual' outwardly.

So Hebrews encourages us all to take the time to understand and contemplate God, for he has not made this too difficult for us (see Deuteronomy 30:11-14). To illustrate this need, the writer uses the imagery of a person living on milk, and not being ready for solid food. Milk is good for newborns (1 Peter 2:1-2), but now we need solid food. And indeed, to have this solid food, we should keep our hearts soft and humble.

Building on the elementary truths of Jesus does not mean academic study nor looking for the answers we want; instead it takes constant use, constant learning, and constant reflection, so we may become familiar with God's teachings and themes, to let God 'write them on our hearts'.

Likewise, moving beyond the elementary teachings (6:1-3) does not mean to ignore them nor to forget them. Quite the contrary, this means building on them, it means for each of us to continue developing understanding of God. The problem that these believers faced was two-fold, and it is a common problem in any era. They had stopped building, and thus as result their foundation had also become faulty.

Building on a sure foundation involves developing our own faith, a closeness between us and our God, not merely quoting scriptures, rather understanding them and why they are true, instead of having a 'second-hand' faith or a faith that desires worldly things (1 Corinthians 3:10-11). Yet the writer uses the ironic phrase, 'God permitting', that we may be able to develop such a faith, for he knows of course that all along this has been God's desire for each of us.

Questions for Discussion or Further Study: Explain why we'll always need to continue learning. Does this tell us anything about God's nature and his purposes for us? What kinds of things might the writer want his readers to learn now?

Crops Or Thorns (Hebrews 6:4-12)

This scripture contains a somber caution, yet it is immediately followed by a hopeful exhortation. This scripture is often misinterpreted, yet its core teaching is its reminder that without Jesus there is no other way to come to God; there isn't another way to be forgiven of our sins. So Hebrews simply calls us to continue following Jesus, to drink in his words and drink the 'water of life'.

The key point in this difficult scripture is that those who drift away or fall away* from Jesus will find no other alternative to come back to God (6:4-6), and the passage is less confusing with this in mind. Knowing that he is writing to a group of believers who are looking for ways of knowing God without remaining faithful to Christ, the writer describes this as an impossibility.

* The word translated 'fall away' in verse 6 literally means to fall to the side, or to fall to the wayside.

The description of those who have 'tasted the heavenly gift' and 'shared in the Holy Spirit', and have 'tasted the goodness of the Word of God' is meant to emphasize the extraordinary blessings we all have in Jesus, even when we don't realize what we have. Indeed, his readers already have all these blessings, though at the moment they only dimly understand them. Thus this description refers all believers, including, as he has described, those in 'infancy'*.

* Notice the terms such as 'tasting' and 'sharing' that remind us that these are blessings given to even the newest and weakest believers. Some commentators don't like this interpretation, because they erroneously fear that the passage says that those who fall away can never return.

So, if Christians fall by the wayside (or fall away, or drift away), can't they be brought back to repentance; and does this mean that they are lost forever? God will, of course accept them back lovingly, though in some cases they may not be able to regain the same kind of closeness with God that they would have if they persevered through their present struggles*.

*Many modern translations (including the NIV) use the phrase that they cannot be 'brought back to' repentance. The phrase literally says that they cannot be 'renewed again to repentance' (as it is translated this way in the KJV and NASB).

Yet this also has deeper implications, and it also gives the writer's discouraged readers some stronger reasons to continue following Jesus. There is no place else where they can have their sins forgiven, no place else where they can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, and no place else where they can find salvation. If they leave Jesus, the only good option they will have will be to return to him after all.

If we think we've found a new way to know God, if we think we've found something better or more satisfying than knowing Jesus; or if we think we now know enough or have done enough, then the vivid image of re-crucifying the Son of God should give us caution against chasing these false hopes. The only thing that makes it impossible for us to return to God is a hard heart, a proud heart.

Just as Deuteronomy says in a different context (see Deuteronomy 30:19-20), God offers us the choice between the blessings of following Jesus or the curse of not knowing him (6:7-8). The analogy tells of a land that drinks in rain from above - just as God's words and his living water are freely available - and this lets God produce a crop of the fruit of the Spirit. Likewise, the land that produces thorns has chosen to harden itself, for God gives it his care too (Isaiah 5:1-2).

To make sure that we won't misunderstand, Hebrews gives us hope for better things, whether we may be concerned about a fellow believer, or even if we fear that we ourselves may have strayed (6:9-12). The writer is confident that we will find things that have to do with salvation, for this confidence does not come from ourselves nor even from our faith, since this confidence is in God's unfailing love and his eagerness to have us know him and be with him.

In our walk with God, each of us does many good things and many bad things, we make good decisions and bad decisions. So Hebrews reassures us that God washes away our sins, yet he does not forget what we have done; he remembers our acts of kindness and the times when we rejoiced in knowing him.

Moreover, if we fear that we may be drifting or straying, or if we just don't feel close with our Heavenly Father. God remembers the good things we have done. This does not mean that these give us 'credit', rather it tells us that even when we are faithless, God is faithful. It means that no matter how far we have drifted, he will faithfully call us back over and over, and he will always be right there, so that when we turn to him we will find him.

So we see again the reminder to be diligent and to continue to remain in Jesus. As the writer explains what this means, he reminds us that through faith and patience we will inherit what God has promised us (Isaiah 30:15).

The Scriptures often use images of God nourishing us inwardly just as he nourishes the earth, and one of the Psalms uses this imagery in a prayer for God to restore us (Psalm 80:7-27). God has transplanted us like a vine from Egypt's dry ground, he lavished his care on the vine and he nourished it. Yet its walks have broken down and it has fallen into ruin and despair; this vine has taken its eyes off of the One who gives it what it needs.

So this psalm reminds us of God's eagerness to renew us, and it encourages us not to let our hopes and our confidence rest on ourselves nor on our good works nor on our knowledge, rather to rest our hopes and our confidence on the Son of Man.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Describe in your own words the main point(s) that the writer makes in verses 4-6. How can we tell, either from the text or elsewhere in Scripture, that those who fall away are not prohibited from repenting and returning? So what reasons does Hebrews give us to still remain faithful? What better things does God promise? What does this tell us about God and his nature? Explain how faithfulness and patience can work together.

- *Mark Garner, November 2017*

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Nine: An Anchor For The Soul (Hebrews 6:13-14)

Hebrews now resumes the comparison between Jesus' sacrificial ministry and the Levitical sacrifices. First, the writer emphasizes the unchanging nature of God's promises, and the hope they give us that can be 'an anchor for the soul.' Then, he explains why God calls Jesus a high priest 'in the order of Melchizedek'.

Unchangeable Things (Hebrews 6:13-14)

Going back to God's promises to Abraham, Hebrews reminds us that God's promises and his purposes are unchanging. This scripture reminds us of the ways that God has made this very clear, and it also explains how this can help us and give us hope. He also touches on another aspect of what Jesus does for us: he is our forerunner who has entered God's Most Holy Place.

God's promises to Abraham are often mentioned in the New Testament, and here Hebrews looks at them from a slightly different perspective, emphasizing the way in which God made these promises (6:13-15). The writer notes that God swore by himself*, that is, by his own nature, as a way of emphasizing the certainty of his promise to Abraham - for nothing except God's nature could have made it any more definite.

* Here, the reference is to the promises God made in Genesis 22:15-18, shortly after God told Abraham that he didn't have to sacrifice Isaac.

After displaying the patience that the writer wants his readers also to develop, Abraham was blessed with descendants and in many other ways. So, Hebrews uses Abraham's faith and patience as another reminder to live by faith, and to trust the certainty of God's promises instead of focusing on human expectations.

Likewise, God makes very clear the nature of his purpose to redeem us in Jesus (6:16-20). God confirmed his promise to Abraham with two unchangeable things, his promise and his oath, knowing that either would be sufficient assurance in itself; since God could not have lied in either. God wanted to make Abraham and his descendants doubly certain of the promise.

In Jesus, we have even more certainty, and we have a better hope set before us, including the promise of being in God's presence, the promise of complete cleansing from sins, and an eternal inheritance in him (1 Peter 1:3-6). Hebrews thus describes this as an anchor for our souls, a sure foundation that we can count on (Luke 6:47-48). Whatever may happen in this world, our souls can know beyond a doubt that God will be with us, and eternal things await us.

Expanding on the Old Testament parallels with Christianity, Hebrews uses the image of Jesus going behind the curtain (of the temple or tabernacle), entering into the inner sanctuary where only the high priest is allowed, and even then only at special, pre-determined times (see, for example, Leviticus 16:2-4). Jesus can do this because he has become a high priest forever; he is our forerunner, who has opened the way.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Consider some of the ways that God's promises to Abraham are significant to us; what is the significance of the oath God made concerning these promises? What does this tell us about God's nature? How do these promises give us a hope that is 'an anchor for the soul'? In what sense has Jesus entered the 'inner sanctuary'? How does this also give us hope, and what does this tell us about God?

Chapter 11: The Order Of Melchizedek (Hebrews 7:1-10)

Hebrews now reviews who Melchizedek was, and explains his unusual role in the Old Testament. Beginning with Abraham's deference to Melchizedek, the writer shows us some figurative parallels with the priesthood and sacrificial ministry of Jesus. This additional connection with Abraham is another reminder to continue living by faith in Jesus and what he has done for us.

Melchizedek's meeting with Abram (later, Abraham) is his only personal appearance in the Old Testament, yet he is significant in his own way* (7:1-3; see Genesis 14:11-20). Abram had defeated a coalition of kings who had captured his nephew Lot in a raid; and as he was returning, Melchizedek met Abraham, brought out bread and wine, blessed Abraham, and received from the patriarch a tenth of what Abraham had captured in battle.

* A number of ancient Jewish commentators also discussed the possible significance of Melchizedek and his brief appearance. Probably the best known of these commentators was Philo of Alexandria, who drew parallels between Melchizedek's ministry and other events in Israel's ancient history.

Melchizedek's name means 'king of righteousness' in Hebrew, and since Salem means peace*, he could also be called 'king of peace'. The writer mentions these deliberately, to make the parallels with Jesus' ministry obvious. Likewise, in Genesis Melchizedek is described with two titles, King of Salem and Priest of God Most High, so again Melchizedek's dual role as both priest and king is unusual, and again paralleling the roles that Jesus filled.

* In ancient Hebrew, 'Salem' was a variant of the familiar word 'shalom' ('peace') with a different spelling.

The description of Melchizedek is also unusual in that there is no mention of his father or his genealogy; and his death and the end of his priesthood are also not recorded*. These were not meant to imply that he didn't have a father nor that he didn't die, rather Hebrews uses these to show us that his priesthood was not based on his lineage. And figuratively, in a sense since his end is unknown, his priesthood parallels that of Jesus, who has become a priest forever.

* Because of these unusual details, a couple of ancient Jewish commentators suggested that Melchizedek might have been an angel, though in the Old Testament they are invariably described as such. Early Christian commentators understood Melchizedek to be a 'normal' mortal human whose ministry simply held symbolic or figurative significance.

The Hebrews writer also draws some parallels from comparing the statuses of Abraham and Melchizedek (7:4-10). That Abraham gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:20) was significant even in its own time. It was much later that the Law of Moses directed that the Levites should receive a tenth, yet Abraham clearly recognized Melchizedek's standing as a priest, and this recognition came entirely apart from genealogy.

Melchizedek also blessed Abraham (Genesis 14:19-20) and, as the writer says, it is generally the

person of greater status who blesses the lesser. The combination shows that Abraham was entirely willing to defer to Melchizedek and to accept him as a high priest. This recognition from Abraham suggests a high status for Melchizedek, yet he then disappears once for all from history (which made him something of a mystery for the ancient Israelites).

Each of the Levitical priests, who would later collect the tenth, eventually died. The writer suggests that Melchizedek's right to collect the tenth is still figuratively in effect, since he was never said to be dead. And in any case Melchizedek has clear precedence over Levi, since Levi's own ancestor paid the tenth to Melchizedek, rather than expecting it from him.

Yet now we have been redeemed by One who lives forever, who lived among us, who died for our sins and then was raised, and who has ascended to heaven (Acts 1:9-11). The simple images about Melchizedek, like so many other shadows in the Old Testament, have been more than fully met and far more in Jesus.

Jesus is, was, and will always be our Living One (Revelation 1:12-18). This Scripture gives us glimpses of Jesus' full nature: his desire to be among us, his voice that sounds like rushing waters like the living water that flows from his presence, the radiance of his glory, and more. He is our First and our Last, our Beginning and our End. He was dead for our sakes, yet now he lives for ever and ever - and he brings the same eternal life to those who believe him and follow him.

Questions For Discussion or Study: Read the Genesis account that includes Melchizedek. What significance does he seem to have at the time? In Hebrews, which of the writer's statements about Melchizedek are meant literally, and which are intended to be understood in a figurative sense? What is he telling us about the ministry of Jesus? What do they tell us about God?

- Mark Garner, November 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Ten: A Permanent Priesthood (Hebrews 7:11-17)

Jesus has become our high priest 'in the order of Melchizedek', that is, a different kind of high priest, a new kind of intercessor. Hebrews now uses this idea to help us understand why this kind of priest is far better than the Levitical priests or any other kind of human priesthood. Moreover, Jesus has assumed a permanent priesthood, a priesthood that lasts forever.

Change Of Priesthood & Better Hope (Hebrews 7:11-17)

Jesus could not have been a priest based on the old order, yet instead he has brought a change of priesthood, and he brings a ministry quite different from that of the Levites. The old Levitical ministry was limited in its effectiveness because it could make nothing perfect, so Jesus brought about a change of priesthood that brings us a better hope.

Through Jesus, there is unmistakably a change of priesthood (7:11-14). He came because there was a need for a new priest to come; for human priests and leaders cannot bring us the light our souls long for, they cannot meet our deepest needs (Isaiah 59:9). The Levitical priesthood could at most provide temporary atonement for sins, so Jesus established a new order of priesthood, and he offered himself as a sacrifice once for all to redeem us and to save us (Isaiah 59:15-16).

And since the priesthood has been changed, the law has also been changed. Jesus descended from Judah, rather than from Levi; so instead of entering the Most Holy Place in the physical temple*, he went through the 'greater and more perfect tabernacle' (see, for example, Hebrews 9:11) to offer himself; he thus became our forerunner and opened the way for us.

* Note that Jesus never entered the parts of the temple that only the Levitical priests were supposed to enter. He was often in the temple courts, where any ceremonially clean Jew could go, yet he never entered the physical Holy Place or the physical Most Holy Place.

Moreover, Jesus has become a high priest not based on any human credentials, rather on the basis of his indestructible life (7:15-17). Like Melchizedek*, Jesus' ministry did not depend on his ancestry; rather, his qualifications were more deeper and lasting, including his immortality and his divine nature. The writer again quotes Psalm 110, in order to emphasize that Jesus' priesthood is the eternal one.

* See last week's notes for a discussion about Melchizedek and the reasons why Hebrews uses his ministry as a metaphor for Jesus' high priesthood.

In Jesus, God has set aside the former regulation; and as Hebrews 8 will tell us, the old covenant and the old system have been declared obsolete (7:18-19). Although the old system was itself established by God, our Father in heaven knew all along that it was weak and useless*, for it could never give us complete and lasting cleansing, and especially it couldn't have given us the closeness with God that he wanted all along - a closeness that Jesus could bring (Romans 8:1-4).

* This may at first seem puzzling; this will be addressed in part in Hebrews 10.

Jesus also brings a new hope, a better hope, that draws us near with his Father (Ephesians 2:13). As Hebrews will soon discuss in more detail, Jesus' ministry eliminates the necessity of a human intermediary between God and us. This is a significant improvement from the Levitical ministry, for indeed with the change in priesthood there has been a change in the law.

Questions For Discussion or Study: In your own words, describe why a change of priesthood was necessary. Could the Israelites have realized this before Jesus' coming? How do Jesus' qualifications compare with the qualifications of the Levitical priests? How does Jesus' priesthood bring us a better hope? What has Jesus' ministry taught us so far about God's nature, and what has it told us about knowing God?

Change Of Priesthood & Better Covenant (Hebrews 7:11-12)

Besides the better hope that Jesus brings, he also brings a better covenant. This covenant and the hope it brings are more certain, more lasting, and they bring us better promises. Moreover, as Hebrews reminds us, Jesus is our high priest who truly meets our deepest needs. His sacrifice has cleansed and sanctified us once for all, and he lives forever so he will always be there for us.

With Jesus comes the guarantee of a new and better covenant, a new and better basis for our relationship with God (7:20-22). Moreover, Jesus' priesthood did not come about as a matter of routine succession to an office, rather it came as result of special promises from God, and it is founded on his unique qualifications to give us what we really needed.

Moreover, the writer quotes Psalm 110 once more to reassure us that God will not change his mind, so that Jesus' ministry is permanent. Jesus has become a priest forever, and he came to make an everlasting covenant with those who believe in him and follow him (Ezekiel 37:26-27). This promise in Ezekiel again reminds us of God's desire to live among us, to make his 'sanctuary' among us.

Because Jesus lives forever, he is not constrained by the limitations that death imposes on human priests or human friends or family members (7:23-25). With Jesus, we will never have to deal with his death, nor will he ever move away, nor will he ever drift away from God. He always lives, he has risen from the dead, so he will always be ready to intercede for us (Romans 8:33-34), he will always be there to mourn with us, he will always be there to guide us.

Jesus is the perfect priest, the complete priest, and he is our high priest forever (7:26-28). He comes from above; he is holy, blameless, and pure - qualifications no human could ever have. And such a high priest truly meets our needs. He has a perspective that transcends human understanding, he was also able to meet our deepest needs, and Jesus was uniquely qualified to offer himself as the one sacrifice for sins, once for all.

Thus there is no longer any need for endless sacrifices for sin. Jesus replaces all the goats and lambs and bulls; he replaces the numerous burnt offerings, since he went willingly, and he was a pure, flawless sacrifice, so he did not need to make sacrifices for himself. Jesus also replaces all human theologies and speculations and methodologies, for he has replaced them with the good news of grace and redemption, with the message of the cross and the empty tomb.

One priesthood came via the Law that God gave to Moses, while the other came later via the Word made flesh and the promise that God made to his Son Jesus. This later priesthood completely replaces the first priesthood, and it does so without the weaknesses and limitations of the Law. It therefore superseded the first priesthood and rendered it obsolete.

□very human being, whether they are priests or leaders or rulers or authorities, is just as weak as you or I, and each of us has the same deep need for God's mercy and his guidance every moment. In Jesus, weakness has been replaced by perfection and completion, and all of God's promises are fulfilled in him.

Jesus brings us the food and drink we need (John 6:48-58), food that nourishes our souls and drink that renews our spirits. Jesus brings us the bread of life that comes from heaven. The manna was a miracle in its own way, yet Jesus has done a greater miracle by bringing us living bread that we can eat and have eternal life. So Jesus calls us to feed on him, to open our hearts to him and let him fill us with what is good for our souls.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What have we seen so far about the ways that the covenant that Jesus brings is better than the old one? What does his new covenant tell us about God and his nature? How does it help us to know that Jesus will live forever? What characteristics make Jesus such a perfect (complete) priest?

- Mark Garner, □ovember 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Eleven: The Coming Of A New Covenant (Hebrews 8)

Hebrews has told us that Jesus' sacrificial ministry and his permanent high priesthood are better than the Levitical ministry. Now the writer will tell us about some of the many ways that the New Covenant is far better than the old one. Moreover, we'll also start seeing some of the ways that the Old Covenant was full of 'shadows' that have now been replaced by spiritual realities.

A Copy & A Shadow (Hebrews 8:1-6)

Through Jesus and his ministry, God's promises can now be fulfilled on a deeper and permanent level. The things of the Old Covenant were copies and shadows, and Jesus has come to replace them with eternal, unchangeable things. The Old Covenant is now obsolete, for it has been replaced by a better covenant founded on better promises.

As the writer says, the point of the previous discussion is that we do have such a high priest; the high priesthood of Jesus is not a theoretical concept, rather it is reality (8:1-2). The hope of our souls to be with God, the prophecies, the promises, are all fulfilled in Jesus. He has completed his sacrificial ministry, and he lives forever in the true tabernacle; for he came from our Heavenly Father and has now returned to him (John 16:28, see also Hebrews 9:11 & 9:24).

In comparing earthly human priests with the heavenly priest Jesus, we've seen both parallels and differences (8:3-4). Jesus brings gifts and sacrifices to God that are far different than those prescribed by the old law. Indeed, there was no need for Jesus merely to bring the same kind of sacrifices that the other priests were offering, for the Levitical priests were capable of offering these sacrifices of limited effectiveness.

No number of animal or grain sacrifices could ever have brought complete redemption nor total forgiveness of sins, so Jesus brought the sacrifice of himself. None of us could have brought God the gift of a perfect life or a perfect heart, so Jesus also brought him these gifts - and of course he also brings us gifts far better than anything the world could give us.

Likewise, there are both parallels and differences between the earthly sanctuary and the heavenly sanctuary (8:5-6). The earthly sanctuary - that is, the tabernacle and later the temple - was a shadow of what is in heaven*. The implication of this is that the earthly sanctuary held significant symbolic and teaching significance (and, as Hebrews points out, it thus had to be built just as God had directed), yet it held limited power for bringing us to God.

* Hebrews will discuss this further in chapter 9.

All of this helps us to appreciate and understand Jesus even more. He is a far better priest; and the covenant he brings is far better, because it is permanent and it is the reality, not the shadow. And the New Covenant is established on far better promises (2 Corinthians 1:20), that we can appreciate when we keep our focus on things above, not on earthly things. Here again, the writer of Hebrews wants to help his readers with their discouragement.

Looking ahead, we will see more of these shadows and realities in the rest of the epistle, and the writer also helps his disheartened readers understand what Jesus came to do for us and the blessings he gives those who follow him: for example, complete cleansing (Hebrews 9:14), being close with God (10:19), the gift of eternal life (11:16), and a kingdom that cannot be shaken (12:28). And these are lasting blessings, since Jesus is the same forever (13:8).

Questions for Discussion or Further Study: Why does the writer emphasize that Jesus has become our high priest? How is it significant that Jesus serves in a tabernacle not built by humans? How can the physical things be a shadow, while the unseen, spiritual things are a reality? How are the promises of Jesus better than earthly promises could have been? What does all this tell us about God and what is important to him?

We Will All Know God (Hebrews 8:7-13)

Hebrews now quotes from Jeremiah, who foretold that the time would come when God would bring a new and better covenant. Hundreds of years before Jesus, God had already long planned to replace the first covenant with a new one that would bring a better way for us to know God. This Scripture gives us a summary of these better promises and these better blessings.

Jesus would not have needed to come to earth if there had been nothing wrong with the Old Covenant (8:7), that is, if it could have given everyone the chance to have complete cleansing so we could be near with God and know him. The old law could not do this, so indeed it was never meant to be more than a copy, a shadow, an important but temporary measure. As the need for a priest was evident, so also was the need for a new, permanent covenant (Matthew 5:17).

God declared the coming of a new covenant long before it came to pass (8:8b-9). The quotation here from Jeremiah 31:31-34 was written roughly 600 years before the birth of Jesus*. Even then, the drawbacks of the first covenant were evident. It failed not because of its own defects, but because of human faithlessness; so God in his faithfulness had already planned to bring a new and better covenant that would bring lasting spiritual healing (Isaiah 57:13).

* Jeremiah's ministry began in about 626 BC. The scripture quoted here was probably made not long before the Babylonians' final conquest of Jerusalem in 586 BC.

The animal sacrifices and everything else in the Levitical system were always sharply limited by human faithlessness, so God promised that the coming covenant would not be like the old one. Since Jesus was perfectly faithful, his ministry could bypass the human priesthood altogether.

The characteristics of the New Covenant show why it is far better (8:10-13). God wants to write his Word on our minds and hearts (2 Corinthians 3:3), for he gives us the gift of his Spirit to help us understand them. Then, rather than depending on spiritual 'superiors' (such as priests) to intercede for us with God, all believers can experience the closeness to God that can come with the presence of the Holy Spirit; so all of us can know him, from the 'least' to the 'greatest'.

Moreover, instead of needing to atone for each sin we commit, instead of having to offer the same sacrifices over and over without end, Jesus' sacrifice once for all means that God has forgiven and forgotten the sins of those who trust in the Son of God.

Since the New Covenant does everything far better, the first covenant is now obsolete, it is meant to fade away. Like many other obsolete things, the record of it remains and it is still quite instructive; the Old Testament teachings tell us a lot about God and his nature, and they still give us hope and comfort. Yet the Old Covenant itself was always meant to be replaced the New Covenant*, so we should now seek God through Jesus' grace, his mercy, and his understanding.

* Not long after the epistle of Hebrews was written, in AD 70 the Romans destroyed the temple in Jerusalem, ending the Levitical ministry once for all - one more reminder of the limitations of the Old Covenant and its dependence on human intercessors.

God has done a new thing (Isaiah 43:18-21), so he calls us not to dwell on the past, he reminds us to rely on God's love and care for us rather than on our efforts or abilities. To illustrate this, Isaiah uses the familiar imagery of God making a way through the wilderness and providing streams in the wasteland. As the jackals and owls honor God for his care, we too are living in a wasteland where we need him to sustain us each step - so it is good to proclaim his praise.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why did God make the first covenant, if he knew it was inferior? Is it significant that the Old Covenant was declared obsolete centuries before Jesus came? What do the characteristics of the New Covenant tell us about God and his nature? What does it mean to you that he can write his words on our hearts? What are the implications of his promise that we can all know him?

- Mark Garner, November 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Two: The Way Into The Most Holy Place (Hebrews 9:1-14)

In the tabernacle and the temple, there was a room called the Most Holy Place, a room rarely accessible, a room where on certain occasions the high priest could be in the presence of God. Like everything else in the Old Covenant, this was a shadow. Jesus has now shown us the way into the true Most Holy Place, where without constraints nor fears we can be with God.

The Holy Sanctuary (Hebrews 9:1-9)

The details of the layout and the furnishings of the original tabernacle and the temple were essential to the ministry of the Levitical priests. Moreover, they helped the Israelites understand the significance of having God near, and also to teach them about God's holiness. Hebrews now uses these 'shadows' to help us understand the better things that Jesus brings us.

The tabernacle and the Holy Place within it were the location of the daily ministry of the Levitical priests (9:1-2). The Old Covenant's regulations for worship had to be followed closely (Deuteronomy 12:28), for they permitted the community to have God near them; and they taught how and when to come before God, how he cleansed them, and how he was able to maintain his presence among them. They taught about God's holiness and what it means to have him near.

Likewise, the tabernacle had been constructed according to God's precise descriptions. Its first or outer room, the Holy Place, was set off from the outside courtyard by a curtain. This room was accessible to all Levitical priests (though to them only), and it held a lampstand (or menorah*), a separate table on which was placed consecrated bread**, and an altar of incense***. These were all basic to the priests' daily ministry.

* In this case, this is the seven-branched candelabrum with all seven branches lined up in a row, one in the middle with three to each side of it. See Exodus 25:31-40 and 37:17-24.

** Also called the Bread of the Presence, or showbread. See also Exodus 25:30 and Leviticus 24:5-9.

*** As Hebrews is usually translated, the text implies that the altar of incense was located inside the Most Holy Place (see verse 4), though Old Testament references indicate that it was placed in the Holy Place. Several suggestions have been made to explain this apparent inconsistency. The term translated 'altar of incense' literally refers to a censer, which may explain the Hebrews reference. Another possibility is that the altar of incense belonged thematically to the Most Holy Place, but physically resided in the Holy Place.

The heart of the tabernacle was the second or inner room, the Most Holy Place (9:3-5). It was separated from the Holy Place by a second curtain, and was not directly accessible from outside of the tabernacle. Here is where the ark of the covenant was kept. The ark, along with its contents (the subject of such speculation and legend over the years*), served as a tangible expression or demonstration of God's presence.

* When the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem in 586 BC and looted the temple, they presumably took the ark and its contents with them. The ark has not been seen since that time, and it could well have been inadvertently lost or demolished in Babylon. In any case it, and the temple itself, like everything else in the Old Covenant, were shadows of the better things that Jesus brings.

The objects within the ark were all reminders of God's presence and his understanding. The gold jar of manna reminded the Israelites of God's constant attentiveness to their needs (see Exodus 16:32-33). Aaron's staff was a display of his position as the high priest, and by implication of God's authority (see Numbers 17:10). The stone tablets combined both ideas, and the top of the ark, known as the atonement cover (or mercy seat), was decorated with two cherubim.

The writer mentions all of these things because of the ideas that they convey. Their exact description and purpose are secondary to his main points, since he wishes instead to proceed to discuss how Jesus' own priesthood in the 'true tabernacle' has replaced these physical things.

The ways that the priests were and were not able to enter the rooms of the tabernacle are again connected with God's holiness and his presence (9:6-7). In the Levitical ministry, the outer room or Holy Place was entered regularly by the priests, but the average Israelite was prohibited from ever seeing any of the objects it contained. Although this room was not in the direct presence of the ark, access was restricted; it was 'close' to God.

The inner room, the Most Holy Place where the ark and God's presence were to be found, was only entered once a year. On the Day of Atonement (see Leviticus 16:11-13), the high priest (only) carried a blood sacrifice* into this room, and offered sacrifices so that his own sins and the sins of the community could be atoned for.

* Moreover, the high priest also had to take burning incense from the incense altar so that the smoke from the incense was so thick that he could not even see the atonement cover (Leviticus 16:13).

Questions for Discussion or Study: Why does Hebrews describe all of these objects and locations? For each of the things mentioned, what was its original purpose? What possible parallels in the New Covenant might each of them have? Explain in your own words why only the priests could enter the Holy Place, and why only the high priest could enter the Most Holy Place. What does all this tell us about God and his holiness?

Greater & More Perfect Tabernacle (Hebrews 9:11-14)

Under the old covenant, access to the Most Holy Place was severely limited, and even then had to be approached with great care. Jesus has bypassed the old sacrificial system by completely fulfilling all of the sacrifices with the sacrifice of himself. Instead of showing us the way into the earthly Most Holy Place, he has shown us the way into God's presence.

These arrangements tell us several things about God, for as the writer says, the Holy Spirit is showing us several things (9:8-10). Most of all, the Old Covenant, with its priests and sacrifices and laws, was not the way into God's presence. The Levitical system illustrated the holy nature of God, and the inherent weakness of humanity to make ourselves holy, to justify ourselves, or to earn God's favor.

Moreover, with all this the Levitical sacrifices never cleansed the people once for all. Their consciences could never be completely cleared, there was never an end to the sacrifices, no one could experience the full presence of God, no one could have the closeness with God that our souls desire. This explains why the whole system and its regulations were, by God's intent, only temporary (Galatians 3:23-25).

Although Jesus never entered the physical tabernacle or the temple that stood in his time on this earth, he nevertheless entered the Most Holy Place (9:11-12). The Most Holy Place that he entered was part of 'a greater and more perfect tabernacle', part of the heavenly realms, unseen with earthly eyes, not part of this creation; and we can enter it now when we understand our need for Jesus (Isaiah 66:1-2).

And it was not the blood of animals, shed involuntarily, by which he gained atonement for sin. It was by his own blood, offered for sins he did not commit, that gained all of us access into the Most Holy Place. 'From the least to the greatest' we can receive the gift of the Holy Spirit, in contrast to the restrictions placed upon entry into God's presence under the Old Covenant*.

* All of the Old Covenant restrictions were by no means arbitrary rules, for God's righteous, holy nature prevented access to his presence to the unclean. It was actually a protection for the Israelites, who otherwise might have died (recall, for example, the cautions to Aaron). But now, the perfect blood sacrifice of Jesus has taken away the curtain of separation, and has given us these great spiritual blessings.

The Old Covenant brought outward cleansing, 'ceremonial cleansing', yet the New Covenant of Jesus brings inward cleansing, a complete cleansing (9:13-14). The Old Covenant used animal sacrifices to bring outward cleanness, and it maintain a delicate equilibrium between God's love for people, his desire to be near them, and his holiness. In the New Covenant, our hearts and consciences can be cleansed completely with the blood of Jesus.

This kind of cleansing our consciences is not in the callous fashion with which human nature devises rationalizations for our sins - rather, when we remain in Jesus, our consciences can be clear because we know that God knows all our sins and our flaws, yet he justifies us with the sacrifice of Jesus because of his compassion and his desire to be with us. This frees us both to know God and to serve him in ways never possible without Jesus' ministry.

Through the ministry of Jesus, God has made his home with us (John 14:20-27). We are in Jesus, and Jesus is in us, a paradox that expresses the closeness God wants with us. Because of the complete and lasting cleansing and sanctification Jesus brings, he sends his Spirit to live in us, and our Advocate reminds us of the truth. And Jesus leaves us with peace, a peace different from the world's kind of peace, a lasting peace, the peace of knowing that God is always near.

Questions for Discussion or Study: Explain why the old covenant didn't show the way into God's presence. What does it tell us about what it means to know God? What is the 'tabernacle' that Jesus entered? Why does Hebrews describe this as a tabernacle? How does Jesus cleanse our consciences? What implications does all this have in our walk with God? What does this tell us about God's nature?

- Mark Garner, December 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Thirteen: The Blood Of The Covenant (Hebrews 9:1-11)

Hebrews has described many of the blessings that Jesus brings to those who believe in him, yet the most essential is the forgiveness of sins. Without God's grace and mercy, our sins would be an impenetrable barrier between ourselves and God. So Hebrews now discusses the blood of the covenant that brings this forgiveness.

Mediator Of The New Covenant (Hebrews 9:11-15)

For God to give us the spiritual blessings he had prepared, he first needed to forgive our sins so we could live in closeness with him. At the same time, all of the sins we had committed had to be atoned for; and scripture gives us the somber reminder that 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.' Hebrews uses the establishment of the Old Covenant as a parallel.

Jesus is the mediator of a New Covenant, and he also sets us free from the hold of sin and death (9:15-17). This enables God also to give us the other blessings of the covenant, and so that in particular we may receive the promised eternal inheritance. To give us the opportunity to receive this inheritance, Jesus died to set us free from our own sins, to redeem us (buy us back), to release or 'ransom'* us from the slavery into which we had sold ourselves.

* The NIV uses the vivid image of being 'held for ransom'. Most other translations use the image of being 'redeemed' (bought back).

Jesus' sacrificial ministry can be described as fulfilling a covenant, a testament, or a will*. The terminology is appropriate in view of the promise of an inheritance, for an inheritance is generally received only after an ancestor or predecessor has passed away. Indeed, the writer here makes this analogy explicit. Note that this parallel should not be stretched to a literal extreme, but rather used as one way of understanding the importance of Jesus' death.

* The Greek word διαθήκη ('diatheke') can be translated as either 'covenant', 'will', or 'testament', and thus some commentators attempt to determine exactly what it should mean in each case. Yet this is not necessary, since the point is that Jesus' ministry is all these things and more.

Receiving our eternal inheritance is an essential promise of the New Covenant. This required Jesus' death, though not as the fulfillment of a legal obligation of his own, rather to cleanse us and to allow us to become suitable heirs. Although we have always been God's intended heirs, our sin disqualified us from receiving the inheritance. The Old Covenant could never take away this sin, but now Jesus cleanses us by his blood, and allows us to become his heirs.

Establishing the first covenant provides a useful parallel and a reminder (9:18-22, see also Exodus 24:1-8). Blood sacrifices were an integral part of this covenant, and they were even needed just to put it into effect. When Moses led the Israelites in formally implementing this covenant, the sprinkling of blood and water - upon the written commandments and upon the people - was an essential part of this ceremony.

Likewise, cleansing with blood is prominent throughout the Old Testament, especially in the ministry of the Levitical priests. The tabernacle and its furnishings were cleansed by blood, even though they were inanimate objects that could not 'sin'. They still had to ceremonially be cleansed and sanctified, made holy*. The writer also says that 'nearly everything' had to be cleansed with blood, for example, the cleansing of the priests themselves (Exodus 29:19-21).

* For example, the altar of sacrifice was cleansed with blood (Exodus 29:12, Leviticus 8:15). The altar was also anointed with a special blend of oil (Exodus 40:9-11, Leviticus 8:10-13). Likewise, we have been cleansed and sanctified by Jesus' blood, and we now belong to God.

The concept 'without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness of sins' is also familiar in other ancient Jewish writings outside of the Scripture. It is most clearly stated in Leviticus 17:11, which equates blood with life. The life of a sacrificed animal is considered to reside most essentially in its blood; thus the spilling of its blood is, in effect, a thorough yielding of its life.

'The wages of sin is death', so sin requires death, lifeblood, to atone for it. In the Old Covenant, the sacrificed animals died to atone for the community's sins. Jesus himself has now died by crucifixion, a horrifying manner of dying that leads to the loss of large amounts of blood, an image that also suggests God's eagerness to forgive anyone who accepts Jesus and follows him.

Questions for Discussion or Further Study: How is forgiveness of sin necessary for us to receive our eternal inheritance? How would the ideas of a covenant, a will, and a testament be appropriate to describe Jesus' ministry? In what sense is a creature's life in its blood (Leviticus 17)? How does this relate to forgiveness? What does all this tell us about God's nature?

□ **Better Sacrifice (Hebrews 9:11-14)**

Jesus' sacrifice can be better appreciated and understood against the background of the Levitical sacrifices. Like them, Jesus shed his blood to reconcile us with God. Yet Jesus' sacrifice was once for all, it put an end to the need for repeated animal sacrifices, and it brought about the complete fulfillment of the promises that accompany the New Covenant.

The writer again contrasts the earthly copies (shadows) with the heavenly things (9:23-24). Sacrifices of animal blood were suitable to cleanse the earthly objects of worship, since they were mere copies and shadows of heavenly things. But the heavenly things* required a better sacrifice. Heavenly cleansing requires a heavenly sacrifice, not sacrifices of mere earthly creatures - so the sacrifice of God's Son brought complete cleansing to our hearts and souls*.

* Our eternal souls and spirits are the most significant of the 'heavenly things' mentioned here. These 'heavenly things' may also include other entities, yet here it refers to the cleansing of our souls.

Jesus was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many (9:25-28). So Jesus did not merely enter the Most Holy Place of an earthly sanctuary, bringing animal blood as a sin offering. Instead, Jesus entered heaven with his own blood, to make a once-for-all sacrifice, and to establish a better covenant (compare Exodus 24:8 □ Matthew 26:27-28).

Jesus' also brought an end to the need for repeated, endless animal sacrifices. This in turn

eliminated any reason for the original readers of Hebrews to return to the old law. Some of them may have been wishing that they had stuck with the old law, so Hebrews keeps reminding them that it could never have cleansed them, and that Jesus is the right way into the Most Holy Place.

Likewise, Hebrews reminds us that our faith must thus be in Jesus, and in the salvation he brings, rather than in what we know or what we have done. God simply tells us to walk in his light, remain in Jesus, believe in him and be humbly thankful.

This scripture even says that Jesus has 'done away with sin' (NI¹)*; that is, he has washed away the sins of everyone who turns to him (Isaiah 53:10-11). Sin has not ceased to exist, of course, yet sin has lost its power to enslave us and to separate us from God. Jesus' sacrifice was so perfect and complete that it only needed to be offered once. Jesus will never again need to offer himself as a sacrifice. And the next time Jesus comes, he will bring eternal salvation.

* Or has 'put away sin' (NJ¹, NAS¹, and RS¹).

For we have indeed been crucified with Christ (Galatians 2:16-21). Here Paul reminds the Galatians that a person is not justified by the works of the law, so God appeals to them to let go of this false hope. When we believe in Jesus, we are justified in him; we are justified by his love rather than by our own deeds, we are justified by God's desire to be with us rather than by our knowledge. Jesus lives within us, and his Spirit reminds us what he has done for us.

Questions for Discussion or Study: What exactly are the earthly 'copies', and why are lesser (animal) sacrifices sufficient for them? What are the heavenly things that Hebrews mentions, and why must a more perfect sacrifice be offered for them? What practical implications does it have to understand that Jesus' sacrifice was effective once for all? What does this tell us about God's nature and about our walk with him?

- Mark Garner, December 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Fourteen: A Once-For-All Sacrifice (Hebrews 10:1-10)

Hebrews now discusses the implications of Jesus' sacrifice being 'once-for-all'—that is, that it was complete and perfect in every respect. Once more the writer draws a comparison with the Levitical sacrifices, and again we see the reminder that the law and its regulations are just shadows. Further, Hebrews reassures us that the realities have come with Jesus.

Shadows & Realities (Hebrews 10:1-10)

Hebrews helps us realize that the law itself demonstrates its imperfection. The writer refers here to the Law of Moses, yet these thoughts would also apply to any system that attempts to establish human-based righteousness. Hebrews also connects Jesus' unique nature with a quotation from Psalm 40, and helps us understand God's remarkable patience, understanding, and mercy.

Hebrews has shown us many of the law's imperfections, and now it reminds us that it was always meant to be just a shadow (10:1-4). The law was always meant to be replaced by the good things, the realities, the spiritual blessings that God planned and announced well in advance. Following laws and the sacrifices we make cannot save us; they cannot make anyone perfect, and most of all they cannot cleanse us inwardly.

Followers of law never reach a point when they have finished and can stop; moreover, law provides cleanness only in the present, never the future. Law demonstrates its own futility by its inherent quality of requiring that the law be observed in perpetuity. So, as Hebrews keeps reminding us, there was a need for a better covenant, better promises, a better priesthood, a better way into the Most Holy Place - so Jesus has brought these good and better things for us.

All of these Levitical sacrifices were meant to remind us of our sin, to teach us about our need for God and for his forgiveness, and to help us understand why we cannot make ourselves righteous by following the law and its regulations.

When Jesus Christ came into this world, his life and ministry showed us God's desire for all of humanity to have the chance to know him (10:5-10, see also Psalm 40:6-8*). As the reference from Psalms tells us, all of the sacrifices under the old law were no more pleasing to God than they were satisfying to those who wanted to be closer with him. Yet, as Hebrews explains, they were necessary** under the law until the realities, the New Covenant, the good things, had come.

* The writer quotes Psalm 40:6-8 from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The phrasing is thus different from that in our Old Testaments, which were translated from Hebrew originals.

** This helps us understand why a number of Scriptures refer to the old sacrifices being pleasing or 'a pleasing aroma' to God. Such references generally indicate that God is pleased with his people's willingness to offer these sacrifices so he could remain near. God's dissatisfaction with the animal sacrifices was their inability to cleanse and sanctify anyone once for all.

Yet God had prepared a body for Jesus, a body of flesh and blood for his only Son (Matthew

1:18-23), a human body that would eventually be offered as a once-for-all sacrifice that would be a perfect and pleasing sacrifice that would reconcile us with God. And when Jesus saw the body his Father had prepared, he willingly said, "here I am", and set about to fulfill the Father's will, knowing full well what that would involve (Mark 14:32-36)

The first kind of sacrifice was thus set aside, and the new (second) kind of sacrifice was established; the old covenant was set aside to establish a better one. Jesus' willingness to do God's was in establishing the New Covenant. It allows his sacrifice to be of an entirely different type than the Levitical sacrifices, it cleanses once for all those who believe, and it enables God to make us holy by the blood of Jesus.

Questions For Discussion or Further Study: How does law itself reveal its inability to save? Explain why God was not pleased with the Levitical sacrifices, yet they were still required. What does this tell us about God's nature and what matters most to him? What things did Jesus 'set aside'? How is his willingness to do God's will significant to us? How can all of this help us in our walk with God?

no longer any Sacrifice or Sin (Hebrews 10:11-14)

Under the old law, the same sacrifices and rituals had to be repeated over and over, yet they never did more than providing outward cleanness. There could never be a hope that somehow the Law and its sacrifices would make anyone perfect or completely cleansed. It took Jesus to bring to completion everything for God to offer eternal salvation to those who believe in him.

Day after day, the Levitical priests continued to offer the same sacrifices and practiced the same rites and rituals, knowing all the while that none of this activity would ever bring complete and permanent cleansing, for they could not take away sin once for all (10:11-13). This unending series of observances shows the law's futility convincingly.

Yet Jesus made one sacrifice for all time, he brought to completion God's desire to provide eternal salvation for all who believe in him - and Jesus made this sacrifice and then 'sat down' at God's right hand (Ephesians 1:18-23). This simple image reassures us that his sacrificial ministry has been completed, and it also suggests how pleased our Heavenly Father himself was to see things come to completion.

By one sacrifice, then, Jesus has given everyone, everywhere the chance to come to God, to be forgiven of our sins, and to be reconciled with him (10:14). Jesus made a complete sacrifice, a perfect sacrifice and because of this he gives us a certain future. His sacrifice has made us perfect* forever, clean forever, sinless forever.

* Or 'complete', or what the Old Testament calls 'clean', or 'pure'.

Jesus' blood also makes us holy, and he helps us day-by-day to appreciate and understand what this means (1 Thessalonians 5:23-24). We belong to God, and as Jesus said, we are no longer of this world. We are God's holy people, yet at present we only dimly realize this. God has done all this, so when Hebrews says that we are 'being made holy', it simply means that as we remain in Jesus, we can slowly realize and appreciate the closeness with God he has brought us.

So Hebrews again reminds us of the Covenant God makes with us (10:15-18), once more quotes Jeremiah 31, and reassures us of the closeness God desires with us, the promise to write his words on our hearts, and his promise that our sins and lawless acts are remembered no more.

Because of Jesus' unique ministry, our sins have been forgiven and forgotten, washed away by his lifeblood. On our own, we could not possibly have done or even conceived anything that could have obtained such extraordinary blessings. This is the nature of the New Covenant, as God planned long ago. So there is no need for further sacrifices for sin, no need for us to try to prove ourselves worthy, no need for us to try to earn God's favor.

We can never offer enough to earn the forgiveness of our sins, but Jesus offered more than enough to cover us all with his purifying blood. The world desperately searches for new theories, new heroes, and new methods; yet Jesus himself has always been the Way, he is the truth, and he is our life. Jesus came and carried out a faithful ministry despite severe opposition, and then he waits patiently for us to consider and appreciate all that he has done for us.

Many, Lord, are the wonders you have done (Psalm 40:1-5). He lifted us out of the slimy pit of sin and spiritual death, and he gives us a firm place to stand, the sure foundation of Jesus. God puts a new song in our hearts, a song that sings of God's mercy rather than of human strength, a song that sings of God's truths rather than of human reasoning. Truly none can compare with God; truly if we listed all the things he does for us, they would be too many to declare.

Questions for Discussion or Further Study: Why does the writer keep mentioning the repetitive nature of the Levitical sacrifices? In what sense are we 'made perfect forever' in Jesus? How does it help us in our walk with God to realize that there is no need for further sacrifice for sin? What does all this tell us about God and his nature?

- Mark Garner, December 2017

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Fifteen: Draw Near To God (Hebrews 10:1-14)

Having completed a detailed discussion of Jesus' sacrificial ministry, the writers of Hebrews now calls his readers to reconsider the implications, to come to a renewed appreciation of what God has done, and thus to draw near to God. Indeed, it is good for us too whenever we take the time to set aside all of the distractions and to prayerfully think about the good news of Jesus.

Holdings Unswerving to Our Hope (Hebrews 10:1-14)

The epistle's original recipients had allowed their hearts to drift away from Jesus, some of them were questioning the benefits of following him, and were openly considering a return to the old Law. Hebrews does not scold them, but instead calls them to refocus their minds on the things that really matter to God. This will not take dramatic acts of penitence, rather, a change of heart.

Faith can bring a full assurance, not from the 'strength' of our faith, rather from the One in whom we have faith (10:19-23). Jesus gives us confidence to enter God's Most Holy Place, to approach him and to ask him for forgiveness and understanding (see Hebrews 4:14-16). Jesus has opened the way, and he has encouraged us by opening the curtain* so that we may come in.

* Jesus' body is the 'living way' through the curtain, not the curtain itself. Some English translations are ambiguous on this point, but the imagery makes it clear. The curtain was an obstacle to God's presence.

We thus can draw near to God with sincere hearts that seek God for his own sake, and that understand our need for him. This is possible because our hearts have been sprinkled with Jesus' blood to purify us from within, just as our bodies were 'washed' with water when we turned to Jesus. The images here combine the shedding of blood for our forgiveness with the image of washing with water, to emphasize the thorough cleansing Jesus does for us.

Since Jesus' blood sacrifice was effective for cleansing the sins of the world, and since it was a once for all sacrifice, we are thus able to hold unswervingly to our hope in him. The cross shows us God's eagerness to forgive those who turn to Jesus, and it also teaches us the impossibility of earning forgiveness through our own power or wisdom.

If our hope were in our own ability to remain in a sinless state, then our hope would be weak and wavering indeed. But since our hope is in Jesus and in his perfection as a Savior, we may have a lasting hope in spite of our weakness and our imperfections. Moreover, he who promises these things is faithful (1 John 1:7-9). God promises us these things if we simply remain in Jesus, walk by faith, and fix our eyes on him.

Hebrews calls to continue encouraging one another, to continue reassuring one another of what Jesus has done, to remind one another of God's promises (10:24-25). Because it can be easy to be discouraged, Hebrews asks us to remind one another to continue in love and continue doing good deeds, whether or not they are appreciated (Galatians 6:9-10). The NIV uses the word 'spur', the NASB uses 'stimulate'* - the meaning is actively to reassure, not to critique or scold.

* Older English versions sometimes translate it 'provoke' here. Yet also in that case it meant positive reinforcement (with the original meaning of 'provoke', to call forth), rather than negative motivation.

We are called to live a life of love and good deeds, not in order to earn something from God. God's outpouring of grace in Christ removes any reason to compare ourselves with one another. Meeting together is thus meant to be a time of mutual encouragement and edification. And all the more as we see the Day approaching - as we understand more and more the importance of eternal things - the more we can comfort and reassure one another.

Questions for Discussion or Further Study: What should be the basis of our confidence? How does an understanding of Jesus' sacrifice help us to have sincere hearts? How does an understanding of God's nature help us to hold to our hope in him? What does Hebrews have in mind by meeting together and stimulating one another to continue in love and goodness?

Perseverance in Sin or (*Hebrews 10:26-27*)

This Scripture is often the source of misunderstandings and fears, yet when we look at it in its context, it is simply an earnest reminder of how vitally we need to rely on Jesus and the grace he brings us. Likewise, the call to persevere is a reminder to remain in Jesus. Yet these scriptures are phrased strongly to help us understand that there is no other way to draw near to God.

The writer has repeatedly emphasized that, since the crucifixion of Jesus, no other sacrifice for sins is left (10:26-27). Any separate attempts to obtain forgiveness of sin would be both unnecessary and inappropriate. It is with this principle in mind that these verses should be interpreted. Likewise, we should keep in mind the consequences if we were to 'deliberately keep on sinning' - the fearful expectation described here with grim imagery.

Thus the reference to those who 'deliberately keep on sinning'* does not refer to those who struggle with one or more specific sins after becoming a Christian. Nor is it establishing a crucial distinction between 'deliberate' and 'unintentional' sin. Rather, it means those who persist in trying to justify themselves by the law, or those who deny their need for Jesus' forgiveness, despite knowing that the offer of grace has been made (see, for example, Galatians 3:10-11).

* This is the NIV's phrasing. Other versions use 'sin willfully', 'go on sinning willfully', 'willfully persist in sin', or other similar expressions.

So this scripture discusses those who deliberately try to find some other way, besides the blood of Christ, to obtain forgiveness of sins, those who make the willful choice of trying to draw near with God by their efforts or knowledge. Any such attempt to pursue a relationship with God while rejecting the blood of Jesus cannot bring lasting hope.

For this indeed what the original readers were considering - as we've seen, they were drifting away from Jesus, beginning to harden their hearts, thinking of seeking God by Law. Yet for all this, God still cares for them, so this Scripture is not meant to condemn them, rather to encourage them to remain in Jesus, to reassure them that he is still and will always be the Way.

So the writer now helps us understand what it would mean to turn back from the New Covenant

that Jesus has brought us. To reject Jesus, to deny our need for him, would indeed be to 'deliberately keep on sinning', to trample Jesus underfoot. Likewise, to think that we need less grace than someone else, or to rely on our will power instead of on God's love, this profanes the blood that Jesus poured out for us all.

When we think that we can make ourselves righteous with our own deeds, this would be an insult to the Spirit of grace, who credits us with righteousness when we simply put our mustard seed of faith in Jesus. These vivid images in Hebrews are sobering reminders of our ongoing need for Jesus' grace and understanding. Yet we don't need to agonize over them as long as we continue walking in the light of Jesus.

The writer now reminds his readers that they can draw encouragement from their own past (10:32-35). Remember all the times God has carried us, how he helped us to endure hardships, sorrows, and disappointments. God has not changed, and the same grace and wisdom are still there for us. From time to time we may take them for granted, so God continues to remind us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

Even when we aren't aware, God helps us to endure this 'great conflict'. For indeed, each of us has our own 'great conflict,' whether or not it is evident to others, whether it involves matters that seem large or small to this world. God cares about each of us, whatever others may think. And once again, we see the reminder to endure things together and to help one another.

The writer again reminds us to keep our confidence in God, not to 'throw it away'. In spite of present circumstances, God is with each of us, and he protects us from dangers we're not even aware of. God understands that sometimes we may focus on worldly things, or we may start relying on ourselves, yet all he asks us is to set aside all these distractions and false hopes, and just draw near to him and let him renew our minds with the message of Jesus (Isaiah 44:21-22).

We can also draw encouragement from the future (10:36-39); we can look ahead to the final fulfillment of all of the promises that God has made to us. He who is coming will not delay, as the quotation from Habakkuk 2* reminds us. Jesus will return, and though it may seem to us like a long wait, it is still just as certain.

* This Scripture is quoted from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, so it will read differently from the present-day translations of the Old Testament. (We have seen this before in Hebrews.) See also below for the original reading in Habakkuk.

God's call is to live by faith, don't shrink back from trusting in Jesus, don't return to the old way of relying on our performance and our achievements, don't give in to the world's thinking. As long as we continue to believe in Jesus, walk humbly with him, he who is faithful promises that he will save us.

As the prophets often tell us, God has made his revelation plain, he has made very clear the 'mystery' of Jesus (Habakkuk 2:2-4). His message will not prove false, for when we turn to him he will take off the veils so that we can see him more clearly. It may often seem as if God lingers, it may often be difficult to see that God is near, so our Father in heaven patiently calls us to wait for him, for he has always been with us, and he understands what we have to endure.

In this world, the righteous will live by faith, rather than by sight. The faithful will fix our eyes on Jesus, set our hopes on eternal things, not on what earthly eyes can see - for indeed what is currently unseen is eternal, imperishable, unchangeable.

Questions for Discussion or Further Study: Explain in your own words what the caution not to 'deliberately keep on sinning' means. How do the vivid images here help us understand what it actually means? Why does Hebrews use such fearful imagery here? What positive things do they tell us about God? How can we find encouragement from the past? From the future? What does this tell us about God's nature?

- *Mark Garner, January 201*

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Sixteen: Living By Faith (Hebrews 11:1-17)

The eleventh chapter of Hebrews is best remembered for the many examples of Old Testament figures who lived by faith. Each of them is encouraging in itself, and they also help us to realize how many others have experienced the same things as we do. Moreover, the point is to give us numerous different illustrations of faith, to help us understand what God means by faith.

By Faith (Hebrews 11:1-3)

The opening words in this chapter are not meant to be a dictionary definition; rather, they help us to think about the numerous aspects of faith. Likewise, the following examples of faith are meant to show us that many ways that we can 'walk by faith'. Instead of comparing ourselves with these people, they reassure us that God will be with each of us on our path of faith.

By its nature, faith involves belief in the unseen, and having a hope in future things (11:1-3). Even this simple idea has many implications. Faith involves accepting present weaknesses and disappointments, since we will have confidence in what we hope for. Note that this is not in itself a complete description of faith, since many unbelievers have a kind of 'faith' in getting the worldly things they hope to obtain.

Thus, faith in God goes beyond the mere mental belief in the unseen or in the future. Indeed, since God himself is too vast and profound to be reduced to a dictionary-style definition, faith in him can only be understood by considering its many aspects.

Belief in God as the Creator is another basic aspect of faith (11:3). God has always claimed openly to be the only true and living God, who alone created our universe and us. There are also some important implications to the idea that the visible was formed out of the invisible. Our whole physical universe, vast and complex though it may be, is impermanent, and it is the lesser and temporary reality. It was formed out of the permanent, the eternal, and the spiritual.

Genuine faith in God as the Creator means much more than simply rejecting the idea of random evolution. It involves a realization that our whole physical universe will soon come to an end, to be replaced by something much better. It means having faith in our Maker, an understanding that he cares for us enough to fulfill his promises (Psalm 8:3-4). Thus faith in God is, in one sense, a simple idea; yet in another sense, it is a deep concept to contemplate.

In practice, our walk of faith may call us to make difficult decisions or to face earthly dangers, yet it also may call us simply to be patient and endure things in this world. The examples of Abel, Enoch, and Noah encourage us to ponder this (11:4-7). Abel is remembered for his simple faith in bringing God a 'better' offering than Cain did. Abel simply offered God the firstfruits of his flock, and it pleased God considerably.

Though Abel was slain out of Cain's resentment*, Hebrews says by faith Abel speaks, since his example is a reminder to us that we too can please God by simply and humbly acknowledging that everything we have comes from him (compare with Hosea 6:6).

* Genesis does not give us the exact details why God did not approve of Cain's sacrifice. As has often been noted, Cain offered God merely 'some' of his harvest. Then later, God's caution to Cain suggests that it was a matter of Cain's heart and/or his motivation.

Likewise, Enoch's walk of faith shows us that faith might never involve anything dramatic or spectacular (see Genesis 5:22-24). Enoch simply 'walked with God', living in closeness with God, enduring the world's pains since he knew that something better was waiting. So God simply took him home one day, as if Enoch walked into heaven.

Besides anticipating better things, these two, like all of the other examples in Hebrews 11, also believed that God lived, that not only does he exist, that he is alive, that he is 'I Am' (Exodus 3:13-14), that he is God in the heavens above and on the earth below.

In Noah's life, faith took a different path, for indeed it involved dramatic events. Yet even here, the same thing is said of Noah as about Enoch, that he walked faithfully with God (see Genesis 6:9). Because of his holy reverence ('fear') for God, Noah was able to endure the ordeal of building the ark and the flood and its aftermath. So he is indeed an example of the righteousness that comes by faith, as Abraham (see below) is often described.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: What are some of the things we hope for in Jesus, of which we can be sure? What are some of the things we cannot see, of which we can be assured? What do these tell us about God's nature and about our walk with him? Compare Abel, Enoch, and Noah. What ways did they live by faith in unseen things? What is different in the paths their walk of faith took? What does this tell us about God?

Why Foundations (Hebrews 11:1)

Next Hebrews reminds us of Abraham's faith, and afterwards the writer shows us the common thread that connects Abraham and all of the other examples. Each of them realized, in one way or another, that there was something better than anything this world. It is human nature to pursue earthly goals by earthly means, yet God calls us to fix our eyes on eternal things.

Abraham is used in numerous ways in the New Testament as an example of faith, beginning with his willingness to live like a stranger in a foreign country - though this earthly land had been promised to him (11:8-12). At first, this seems like a simple example of faith: he heard God's call to go to Canaan, he obeyed, and he went. Yet, when we consider how hard it can be for us to live by faith, this was more than just an outward action.

Abraham went, though he didn't know where he was going, and he had never been there (Genesis 12:1-3). He was willing to change his entire lifestyle, leaving a prosperous place and moving farther away from one of the most advanced civilizations of its time*, to live in tents in an unfamiliar land, just because he had faith in God and trusted God.

* Abraham had originally lived in Ur of the Chaldeans, which was part of Babylon, one of the few advanced civilizations of the time. Later Abraham moved with his father Terah to Haran, a trading center on a branch of the Euphrates River. From here, after Terah's death, God called Abraham to go to the unfamiliar land of Canaan. (See Genesis 11:27-12:5.)

Hebrews also tells us that Abraham was conscious of even more than God's caring hand in the present. He also sensed that there was something greater, and willingly became a part of it. He had already realized that this world was not his true home, despite all its wealth and comforts; he was looking forward to a city with foundations - an eternal city, with the foundations of God and his presence.

Likewise, God was able to give Sarah and Abraham many descendants, since by faith they trusted what he said, in spite of their physical limitations. Abraham believed this promise, because again he had faith in God, he knew that he could trust God's promises - and, as Scripture tells us, his 'mustard seed' of faith was credited to him as righteousness.

All of these persons were longing for a better country, something lasting (11:13-16). All of them had only a distant view of 'the things promised', for none of the Old Testament figures of faith saw the coming of the Savior, the Messiah. Yet each of them in their own way was aware of what God was doing*, they rejoiced to be a small part of it, and they had faith that God would fulfill his promises.

* See, for example, what Jesus says about Abraham in John 8:56.

These faithful believers also recognized that they were foreigners in this world; they confessed that they were strangers in this world, and they trusted in God, not the world's ways, to guide them (Psalm 119:18-20). They could sense that the world could never give them anything to satisfy their souls, it had nothing permanent; they knew that something better and lasting was out there.

God's faithful, then and now, are longing for a heavenly country, a country of their own. No earthly nation or land can fulfill the soul's longing to be with God. Like Abraham and the others, the more we realize the limitations of this world, we will no longer think of what we've left behind, and won't want to go back to its futile ways. Whatever earthly blessings we may have, God has prepared better and more enduring things for those who walk by faith.

God has indeed prepared a city for us, and he has already opened the gates so that we can already have a foretaste of what it means to dwell with him (Revelation 21:2-3). He is well aware of our weaknesses and our mistakes, yet he is not ashamed to be called our God.

Those who live by faith will simply walk in the name of the Lord forever (Micah 4:1-5, see also Isaiah 2:1-5). God has established the mountain of the Lord's temple, for Jesus has opened the way into God's Most Holy Place, so that anyone from any nation may know him. When we come to him, he will teach us his ways, so we may walk in his paths, and he will reassure us of eternal, unchanging, imperishable things.

Questions for Discussion Or Further Study: What might have Abraham and the others

have understood about the 'heavenly country' and about the coming of a Messiah? How may they have found hope in things they would never see being fulfilled? What does this teach us about our walk with God, and about God's nature?

- *Mark Garner, January 201* □

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Seventeen: God Planned So *et* in *Better* (Hebrews 11:1-4)

By its nature, living by faith involves a belief in unseen things, and it involves a reliance on hope in what lies ahead. Thus it follows that faith will involve endurance, perseverance, the ability to endure this world's problems and its sorrows and its fears. Likewise, walking by faith will mean having patience, for we know that God has planned something better.

God carries *e* *ai* *fu* (Hebrews 11:1-4)

In the next few paragraphs, Hebrews calls to mind several generations of Abraham's descendants. In each case, the writer is not asking us to compare ourselves with them; instead, he is using this wide assortment of examples to show us that when we walk by faith, God can give us a hope that can carry us through our disappointments and confusion and struggles in this world.

When God requested Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac (11:17-19), not only was Abraham asked to kill his son, but also to risk all of the promises that God had linked to Isaac. Yet, by faith Abraham believed in God's promises, so he reasoned that God would be able to raise Isaac back from the dead*. Although the details of Abraham's expectation turned out to be incorrect, what matters is that he trusted God, and he got Isaac back from death after all (Romans 11:33).

* Due to this, commentators have often understood Genesis 22:5 to imply that Abraham had the belief that is described here in Hebrews.

As Abraham in faith understood that he was part of a bigger picture, so also Isaac, Jacob and Joseph had this same kind of faith (11:20-22). Each of them knew that his own lifetime was only one link in the chain that God was piecing together. It mattered little to them that they would never see the final results in this world, for they rejoiced not in results, but in God himself.

Though Isaac got caught in the middle of the rivalry between his two sons, he passed along the blessings as God wished, trusting in God to iron out any difficulties. Jacob, likewise, blessed the sons of his son Joseph, and worshiped God even as his life was ebbing away. As his end also came near, Joseph believed that God would someday lead the Israelites out of Egypt and back to Canaan, so he left instructions that his bones be taken there when the day came*, centuries later.

* Joseph's request is found in Genesis 50:25. Moses himself brought Joseph's bones out of Egypt, as described in Exodus 13:19. Joseph's request was not completely fulfilled until Joshua 24:32.

Moses lived in times that were quite different, and his walk of faith took a different direction, yet we still see the common elements of living by faith (11:23-28). First, we see the faith of Moses' parents, who risked punishment from the Egyptians in order to protect their baby, and they thought that, 'he was no ordinary child'. Their faith allowed them to hope that God would let their son have a future, even though they had no idea in what manner this might come about.

* Literally, they saw he was a 'beautiful' child, as the phrase is translated in the NASB and the NRSV. The KJV uses the phrase 'a proper child', which reflects an older meaning of the Greek word. See also Acts 7:20-22 and Exodus 2:1-10.

Though brought up as a prince of Egypt, when Moses had grown up he also had a spiritual awakening. Although it could bring him no possible earthly gain, he chose to be counted as a Hebrew, he chose mistreatment and 'disgrace for the sake of Christ', rather than continue in a life of pleasure and earthly authority.

Like the others before him, Moses had learned about the emptiness of the world's treasures, he had learned his own weakness, and he was looking ahead to unseen things, not the things of this world, to satisfy his spirit. Like Abraham, Moses probably did not have a clear idea of the Messiah, yet in his own way he had 'seen him who is invisible,' and he understood that by living by faith he would be a small part of God was doing, so he rejoiced in knowing God.

The events of the exodus and the times of Joshua also echo the lessons of faith (11:29-31). The people passed safely through the sea because they trusted in God's unseen hand as he held back the waters, they had faith in God and they simply needed to walk through the sea, looking beyond the appearances (see Exodus 15:11-13).

The walls of Jericho fell when the people humbly followed God's instructions, and trusted in him to win the victory for them. Likewise, the prostitute Rahab was blessed and commended for putting her faith in the living God instead of standing with the idols she had been raised with. When God called her, she also had faith that her past no longer mattered to God.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Why would God have asked Abraham to sacrifice his son? Does this tell us anything about our own walk with God? What might have helped Abraham and Moses to understand that they were part of something larger? Can their experience help us today? Recall that the reason for these examples is not to compare ourselves with these persons - with that in mind, what can we learn from them?

e ai fu n is or d (Hebrews 11:4)

As the writer points out, there is almost no end to the examples of faith that we could look at, and more that could be said about those we've already seen. Yet this panorama is meant simply to show us that no two walks of faith will be the same. They may involve 'victories', which may take different forms. Likewise, they may involve afflictions, which too may take different forms.

The writer first gives us numerous examples of the kinds of obstacles that God overcomes for us through our faith (11:32-34, see also 1 John 1:4-5). Even 'big names' like David and Samuel are mentioned only in passing, for the purpose here is not to list every great act of faith, rather to help the epistle's discouraged readers to renew their own faith in Jesus.

Winning battles, surviving perils, and the like may be encouraging to read about, but the writer wants us not to admire them but to experience, on our own level, the 'victories' that faith brings. Simply acting justly and graciously ('administering justice') is indeed an act of faith in this hostile and unforgiving world. Likewise, simply being patient and waiting for God to give us the peace and understanding he promises takes a walk of faith.

The idea of weakness being turned to strength characterizes many of the things we read about in this chapter (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). There was nothing necessarily special about any of these persons; they made mistakes, they had flaws, they often misunderstood, they despaired, they

were frightened; so they simply walked by faith in God, the same God we know through Jesus.

We must also be aware of the sufferings and afflictions of the faithful (11:35-38). The writer makes prominent mention of the hope of resurrection, which motivated even ancient believers. There were instances of physical resurrection*, and of those who endured additional suffering because of their faith in a future resurrection**.

* Verse 35 refers here to two women whose sons were raised from the dead - see 1 Kings 17:17-14 (Elijah and the widow at Zarephath) and 2 Kings 4:14-37 (Elisha and the Shunammite).

** This other reference in verse 35 refers to an incident that took place in the 2nd century BC. As some Jewish believers were being tortured and were about to be killed, some of the unbelievers taunted them as to whether they believed that God could bring them back to life. The believers responded that they were hoping to have a better resurrection (that is, an eternal life).

By our faith, the world may at times mistreat us; and by faith, God will help us to endure them. The writer makes mention of a few of the many ways that the ungodly may treat believers, from facing jeers to flogging or abandonment and neglect, as Jesus himself tells us (John 15:19-21). Most of the examples mentioned here come from the Scriptures, while a couple come from other ancient accounts*.

* As one example of the latter, some ancient Jewish sources describe how the idolatrous king Manasseh had the prophet Isaiah sawed in half.

The world was not worthy of such men and women who lived by faith. The earthly events, fads, celebrities, and achievements of our own generation and every generation are just a mist, but the promises of God are an anchor for our souls. God simply calls us to walk by faith, whether that leads to significant developments or to a lifetime of quiet humility or to enduring the world's sadness and cruelty - and to let God be the one to decide the path our lives will take.

For God has indeed planned something better for them and for us - and in turn we cannot make ourselves worthy of the eternal blessings God has in mind to give us (11:39-40). These men and women were not able to see with their own eyes the completion of Jesus's Messianic ministry, so together with Jesus, God has made them and us complete, 'perfect', whole, sanctified to him by the lifeblood of Jesus.

As Jesus told the apostles, we have reaped what we didn't work for (John 4:38). Yet God's call is the same as it has always been, to live by faith, let his grace and his compassion sustain us through this life, for he can give us the hope and the endurance we need to get through it.

The Lamb of God has made this the time of God's favor, and in the time of God's favor he will answer us (Isaiah 49:8-16), and in the day of salvation he will help us. God will be with us when we walk on the barren heights and he will nourish our souls; our Father in heaven will be with us when we endure the desert heat, and he will renew our spirits with living water. God has compassion for each of us; he made us, and he will not forget us.

Questions For Discussion Or Future Study: What is the purpose of mentioning some of the 'victories' won by these faithful persons of the past? Why does Hebrews mention all of these sufferings of faithful believers? Explain in your own words how they are 'made

perfect' only with us? What does this tell us about God and our walk with him?

- *Mark Garner, January 201* □

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Eighteen: Fixing Our Eyes On Jesus (Hebrews 12:1-13)

Faith is essential in every aspect of our walk with God, yet it often does not come easily for us. As God reminds us to fix our eyes on eternal things, he also understands that this can be difficult. God reassures us of the message of Jesus and what he did for us and at the same he often needs to discipline us, in order to draw us away from fleshly distractions and temptations.

Consider His Endured (Hebrews 12:1-13)

When we become discouraged or tired, remembering Jesus' love for us and what he endured for our sakes can be the first step towards recovering our faith and our hope in God. In this Scripture, we see the remarkable image of Jesus undergoing the excruciating agony of the cross, while at the same time being content with what he was doing.

Perseverance in this world is never easy, yet keeping our eyes on Jesus can make it more bearable (12:1-2). As the writer explains this, he reminds us of the faithful persons in the past whom God carried through their difficulties, how God brought them to his 'city with foundations', and how they learned to walk by faith, as their examples reassure us that God is with us too.

Part of this struggle is learning to throw off the hindrances to faith and the entanglements that distract us. Note that Hebrews includes sins with these, yet indicates there are other dangers to our faith that do not come from the most obvious or 'worst' sins - and that may not even be sinful in themselves. The subtle ways that the world tries to get us to adopt their perspectives and values can be some of the most difficult threats to handle.

One of these pitfalls is the temptation to think that we can throw off these things with our own energy and ingenuity and will power. Instead, Hebrews calls us to fix our eyes on Jesus, to have our eyes on our 'author', our 'pioneer', our forerunner, our 'perfecter*' of faith. This ties together many of the ideas that the writer has been describing throughout the epistle.

* The word translated 'author' or 'pioneer' can also be translated 'leader'. Likewise, the word translated 'perfecter' can also be translated as 'finisher' (as in the KJV).

Jesus is our Savior and our example, he is a mighty Lord and a compassionate brother. By knowing him and appreciating the things he did when he lived on this earth, we can learn to focus our own faith on the things that mattered to Jesus. On earth, Jesus lived a life of sacrifice that contrasted sharply with his life in heaven with his Father. He also endured more suffering and pain than we are likely ever to experience.

The Messiah did all this because he knew it would lead to blessings that would far outweigh the sufferings, and he thought of 'the joy set before him' rather than the things he did not have in this world. His endurance and hope and faith enabled him to overcome sin and death and everything that opposed God. Then (as we've seen a number of times), he sat down at God's right hand, to reassure us that the curtain was now open to the true Most Holy Place.

In our own struggle against sin, God understands that we need reassurance and encouragement; and he also realizes that we need to be reminded of the truth (12:3-6). Enduring opposition, persecution, and even harm from the sinful is an unavoidable part of living in a fallen world. Likewise, as Jesus used to remind the disciples, we will have trouble in this world.

So as we face these things, God reminds us to consider Jesus and who he is, so that we will not lose heart (see also 2 Corinthians 4:14-16). This has many aspects - to consider why Jesus suffered for us, to remember the love of God that nothing can separate us from, to recall how God carried him too, to think about what Jesus brought for us. These thoughts can help us not to despair, for each of them gives us hope and endurance.

The quotation that "the Lord disciplines those he loves" helps us understand that discipline is not a sign of his displeasure or annoyance; quite the contrary, it is a sign of his love and concern for us (the quotation comes from Proverbs 3:11-12). Our fleshly desires are often in opposition to God's will, so when we walk by faith we will face this kind of conflict every day.

Yet, as Hebrews reminds us, most of the time for us it will be a bloodless struggle. God's discipline is more likely to be a minor failure or frustration to remind us that we need him every moment, or to help us realize that we really understand so little. It is human nature to resist God's will or to dispute with what his Word teaches us, so this scripture reminds us that it is better instead to struggle with our desires and sins.

When God disciplines us, we should not make light of it by ignoring his message or by pretending that we didn't need it. Nor should we lose heart, since his discipline always comes with his love. None of us can save ourselves, yet through God's abundant grace and his patient guidance and his unfailing love he keeps our souls safe.

Questions for Discussion Or Further Study: What are some of the things that hinder our faith, or that entangle us? Which of these may not be 'sin' in themselves? How can fixing our eyes on Jesus help us throw off these hindrances? What does it mean to 'fix our eyes on Jesus'? Why might God need to discipline us? Explain the difference between punishment and discipline. What does this tell us about God's nature?

Strengthening Our Feet (Hebrews 12:1-13)

As the writer discusses how God disciplines his children, he again acknowledges that this will never seem pleasant. Instead, he calls us to endure it with our eyes on Jesus, and to have our hope in imperishable things. The discipline of human parents is always imperfect, yet God's discipline is so that we may share in his holiness and that we may draw closer to him.

Like many of God's teachings, enduring hardship as discipline is a lot easier in theory than it is in practice (12:7-11). Moreover, we often misunderstand the ways that God disciplines his children, because we are used to the ways that humans in positions of authority arbitrarily discipline and punish others. God does not punish for punishment's sake, rather he is treating us as children - indeed, as beloved children (2 Samuel 7:14-16).

This world is cruel and harsh, and sometimes it does awful things to us. But God is caring and

patient, and he does not discipline us beyond what we can bear. Instead of sending horrors, he often allows us to endure the anxieties, disappointments, frustrations, and pains of daily life as a form of discipline, teaching us that this world is not our home, and that it will never be perfect.

Such things in our daily lives are often necessary in teaching us that we should live for eternal things rather than for earthly successes and prizes. Indeed, if we weren't disciplined by God, it would be as if he didn't accept us as his children, or as if he no longer cared what happened to us.

The analogy with our human parents can help us to understand this and other aspects of God's discipline. The discipline that human parents enforce upon their children is not always perfect; as the writer says, they disciplined as they thought best, and most of the time it was with our best interests in mind, as they best understood them.

Yet God's discipline is truly designed for the good of our souls, to help us understand how much better it is to seek him instead of living for this world. God's discipline isn't meant to make us more successful in this world, nor is it even to make us conform to an external code of behavior. Rather, his discipline leads to closeness with God and to an eternal relationship with our Creator. It produces a future harvest of righteousness, peace, and other priceless blessings (1 Peter 5:8-10).

Thus Hebrews encourages us to strengthen our 'feeble arms and weak knees', and to help bring healing for the lame and the weak - that is, for the discouraged and fearful and broken-hearted (12:12-13). True encouragement does not involve pretending that everything is fine no matter what, but rather in helping one another to persevere and continue living by faith in God. This in turn comes from helping one another to focus on Jesus, on eternity, and on godly things.

Likewise, in this way we can help one another in 'making level paths', that is, paths that bring us calm and peace instead of restlessness and confusion (see also Isaiah 26:7-9). As we reassure one another of God's understanding and his care, we can help one another to endure and persevere. God's discipline produces neither guilt nor pride; rather it instills endurance and hope in our hearts, as we reassure one another of the truths of the gospel.

It is good to trust in the Lord (Proverbs 3:5-20), and it is good to learn not to lean on our own understanding. Blessed indeed are those who gain understanding from God instead of from the world. All her paths are peace, for God's understanding guides us on level paths that bring our spirits peace even in troubled times. By God's wisdom he gives us life and breath, and he patiently waits for us to seek him, so he may give us what our souls need.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How can we learn to look at things from a long-term, spiritual perspective? How can we learn better to appreciate God's discipline? What do these ideas tell us about God and about our walk with him? Explain in your own words what Hebrews means by 'feeble arms and weak knees'? What does the image 'level paths' mean? How does fixing our eyes on Jesus help us with these things?

- Mark Garner, January 2011

THE RADIANCE OF GOD'S GLORY: A STUDY OF THE EPISTLE TO THE HEBREWS

Notes For Week Nineteen: Coming To Mount Zion (Hebrews 12:14-17)

The more we learn to fix our eyes on Jesus, the more it helps us to see things from a different perspective. Things in this world begin to look differently to those who look beyond the surface, walking by faith helps us better understand God's Word, and living by faith also moves us to re-evaluate our priorities. The better that we can see Jesus, the more it will change us.

12:14-17:1) e Have come to Mount Sinai (Hebrews 12:14-17)

Hebrews now explains some of the ways it can help us when we fix our thoughts on Jesus. It makes it easier for God to explain what holiness and godliness mean; and it helps us better appreciate the blessings he wants to give us. Next, the writer compares Mount Sinai, an image of seeking God by works and the law, with Mount Zion, an image of seeking God through Jesus.

Living in peace and holiness is one of many things that comes more easily and more naturally when we keep our eyes on Jesus (12:14-17). Although God's Word exhorts us to come out of the world and to turn away from its values, at the same time it calls us to live in peace with others. This is much easier to understand and to follow by focusing on Jesus instead of relying on a method or a checklist.

This also harmonizes with Hebrews' call to live in holiness. Despite all of its distractions, we are called not to allow the world to stain us with its corruption and emptiness; moreover, despite its harshness and its unkindness, we are called not to sink to its level by fighting or disputing in a worldly manner. So again, this is another reason for us to keep our minds on Jesus, and to think about how he handled all of these difficulties.

Again we see Hebrews exhorts us to watch out for one another, so that no one 'falls short of God's grace', that is, so that we won't be lured away by the 'bitter root' of worldly thinking, or be caught up in the godlessness of worldly ways. These bitter roots and godless ways can take many different forms; so again the writer's advice is to reassure one another to remain in Jesus.

This had additional significance for his original readers, whose discouragement and disappointment had distorted their view of Jesus, and in turn led them to considering a return to seeking God through the old law. We can help each other to look at one another as Jesus does, and reminding one another that Jesus simply asks us to walk humbly in his light.

Hebrews uses Esau as an example of 'falling short of God's grace', describing as 'godless' Esau's disdain for his birthright (Genesis 25:27-34). This led to Esau losing also his blessing as the firstborn (Genesis 27:19-38). Esau's belated desire for the blessing came too late, as Jacob had obtained it*. This example calls us to appreciate the spiritual blessings we have in Jesus, rather than seeing them as a mere afterthought compared to the worldly blessings we may desire.

* Note that the Scriptures do not commend Jacob for the deceitful means that he used to acquire Esau's blessing and birthright. But Jacob was blessed nonetheless because he valued and wanted these things, valuing them more than the earthly things that Esau prized.

The description of 'a mountain burning with fire' looks back to the relationship God had with the Israelites when he brought them out of Egypt (12:18-21). The fearful sights and sounds described here (see Exodus 19:10-13 and 19:16-19) were as much a part of things as his miracles and his providence. This imposing display of God's holiness was necessary, to prevent the other Israelites from coming too close to God's presence, and risking destruction by so doing.

Likewise, when the rest of the Israelites were overwhelmed by God's voice, and literally pleaded that God not speak to them directly (Exodus 20:18-20), Moses again explains the reason for this formidable experience. Yet even Moses himself trembled with fear as he thought about the unfathomable vastness and the incalculable might of God.

All this is preserved in God's Word so that we might appreciate how lucky we are that we do not have to have this kind of distant, fearful relationship with God. Moses and many others devoted their lives to ministry, without ever having the better blessings and the closeness we have received in Jesus. Human nature may wish we could see the dramatic miracles, yet our spirits are deeply comforted by the wonders of grace God does for each of us.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: How are we meant to help one another 'not fall short of the grace of God'? Why does it use the image of a 'bitter root' for worldly thinking? Explain why Esau was 'godless'. What can we learn from this example? Why was God's relationship with the Israelites characterized by fearful things? What should we learn from this? What do these things teach us about God and his nature?

□ *e Have* □ *o* □ *e* □ *o God's Heaven* □ *y* □ *i* □ *y* (*Hebrews 12:18-24*)

God has brought us to a new city, a kingdom with many extraordinary characteristics; yet they are not like the imposing physical sights that the Israelites saw on Mount Sinai. This Scripture describes the sights we can see when we let God open the eyes of our spirits; these sights cannot be seen with earthly vision, for they are eternal and unchangeable things.

In Jesus, we have not come back to Mount Sinai, but rather we have come to the heavenly Jerusalem (12:22-24). This is the city of the living God, the city with foundations that Abraham, Moses, and all the rest had longed for. The church is a small part of this city, a gateway into a city whose real dimensions we cannot yet even begin to comprehend.

The heavenly Jerusalem is home to many thousands of angels, joyfully assembling before God. It is the eternal home and the city of those whose names are written in heaven in God's book of life, confirming that we are no longer citizens of this world. This is where God dwells, the God who is Lord of all and whose words stand forever, a Judge who judges with justice instead of judging by appearances.

This heavenly Jerusalem is home to God himself, and here our own spirits will find their resting place and their eternal home with him, having been made perfect through the blood of Jesus. And there we can see the Lamb himself, whose sprinkled blood cleansed us and made us righteous, will be there forever, rejoicing in his Father's glory, rejoicing in our salvation, and rejoicing that we can finally be together (Isaiah 60:1-2).

And there we can experience the full blessings of the covenant he brought us (Isaiah 54:9-10), for like God's words and the purposes of God's heart, this covenant will endure forever - he will know each of us forever, whether the world considers us great or small; and Jesus has washed away our sins once for all.

Fixing our eyes on eternal things also allows us to see Jesus with unveiled hearts (2 Corinthians 3:13-18). As with Moses and the Israelites, there are many veils that keep us from understanding and appreciating Jesus. Instead of trying to remove them with our own efforts, we can just turn to Jesus, look at him, and pray for him to take them away. As we see him more clearly and understand him more deeply, he himself transforms us into his image.

Questions For Discussion Or Further Study: Contrast these two 'mountains' and explain what these images stand for. What do each of them teach us about God? What do they tell us about our walk with God? Consider each of the aspects of the heavenly city, and explain why each image is appropriate and why it is a blessing. How does Hebrews call for us to respond to these images?

- *Mark Garner, February 201* □