

NT - Commentary on Hebrews - MDHarrisMD

Hebrews 1

V1 – The writer of Hebrews, whose name is known but to God, began his letter abruptly. Paul typically introduced himself and his audience in the first two lines of his letters (Colossians 1:1-2, Philippians 1:1, etc.), but this author did not. Instead he began with reality of God's communication with His people. Based on the content of the book, it is likely that Hebrews was written to Jews. The phrase "in many portions and in many ways" refers to the fragmentary nature of the old revelation. God taught man through many different people in many different circumstances at different times and in small amounts that they could understand and follow.

V2 – Now God no longer spoke by means of human prophets but by His own human and divine Son. This revelation was concentrated, with every word and action of the Son an exact picture of the Father, and limited in space and time. The kings and prophets of old through whom God spoke were mortal men whose revelation of God was diluted and obscured by their personal sin. Such was not the case with Jesus.

To make sure that the reader did not misunderstand the nature of the Son, he wrote that the Son was the Creator and therefore heir of all things. This was no ordinary son, but a co-equal with the Almighty.

V3 – The writer went on describing the Son. He had the same glory as the Father, the same Image as the Father, and the same power as His Father. The Son suffered and died to carry away the sins of man, and therefore had the authority of the Father. Since His work was now done, He was figuratively sitting in the place of honor at His right hand.

V4 – Hebrews was written in the second half of the first century AD, a time of unrest, rebellion and ultimately destruction for the Jewish people and their nation. As a result of the times, angels and other unseen beings gained a special importance in Judaism. The author began his argument by stating that Jesus had a greater name than the angels.

In modern times, a name usually merely differentiates one person from another; Sally is not John and Maria is not Enrique. In ancient cultures, however, the name was a word which crystalized the whole person, revealing their character as well as their relation to others. God will give those who overcome a new name revealing who they truly are (Revelation 2:17).

VV 5-7 – However powerful angels are, they do not have the relationship of "son" with the Father. Instead the angels are to worship the One who is the Son of the Father. Angels serve the Son, because He is infinitely greater than they.

VV 8-9 – The Son is the master, the king sitting eternally on the throne of the universe. He rules by perfect righteousness, and as a result the Father made Him glad and put Him above all others.

VV 10-12 – The author now called the Son "Lord", and reaffirmed His role in creation. Though the creation would wear out and pass away, the Son never would. Time would change His works, but because He was both inside and outside of time, the Son would be unchanged.

V13 – Contrast the status of the Son with that of the angels. The Son is Lord, and the Father guaranteed Him victory over His foes. Do not be disheartened by this language. Though the Son is positionally subordinate to the Father, the Son is fully God in knowledge, power and goodness.

V14 – Angels are servants, not only for the Son but also for human believers. Therefore humans should not worship angels but worship only God.

Hebrews 2

V1 – Because of the Son's greatness, His equality with the Father, and His everlasting power, man ought to pay close attention to Him. The Son's message is the most important message in the world, and those who have heard it dare not ignore it, lest they slip and fall into judgment.

V2 – The words of angels, from the words of Michael (Daniel 10:9-21) to the words of Gabriel (Luke 1:26-38), were true and reliable. To disbelieve these words and to disobey the commands of God through angels was to receive a sure punishment.

VV 3-4 – To disbelieve the words of the Son, the One who is infinitely higher than the angels, is to risk certain eternal death. The salvation of God was spoken by the Son and confirmed by those who followed Him. The words of Jesus and the Apostles were backed up with mighty wonders and the Spirit of God gave powerful gifts to His people. The Almighty could have done no more to reach the hearts of man. If man chooses to ignore this testimony, woe to him.

VV 5-8 – The author restated the fact that God did not place the earth and all creation under the authority of the angels. However, referring to Psalm 8:4-8, the author tied God's promise to man to the person of the Son. Jesus emptied Himself of His divine prerogatives when He became man, becoming a "little lower than the angels" but because of His humility, God exalted Him.

V9 – The Son also suffered in a way that angels never do, but man does. Because of His suffering Jesus was "a little lower" than the angels, but because of that suffering he saved the race of Men.

V10 – There was never a time when Jesus was not perfect in power, glory, knowledge, beauty, and every divine attribute. However the word perfect (*τελειόω teleioō*) in this verse does not mean flawless but rather complete. The meaning is therefore that Jesus was somehow completed in suffering, and that His work was not complete until He had suffered and through His suffering brought His children into glory.

This creates many questions. In the Aristotelian view of the divine, God is wholly separate from the universe and unaffected by anything that happens therein. This position is certainly logical, since a God who is morally flawless and infinite in all attributes could not be less than perfect and could not change. In a common modern view of the divine, God is neither morally flawless nor infinite in His attributes and is therefore changing constantly.

The Bible teaches neither view. God is morally flawless and infinite in His attributes, and yet He is genuinely impacted by the thoughts, words and actions of man. In some real way, God changed His plans because of the prayers of Abraham (Genesis 18:16-33) and Moses (Exodus 32:9-14). Likewise He will change things in response to the prayers of modern saints (James 5:14-18).

The implications for believers today are profound. Just as Jesus needed to suffer to become complete, so we must endure our allotted portion of suffering to become what God intends us to be. Just as the saints of old influenced the Almighty through their prayers, so we must do the same.

V11 – Jesus is the One who sanctifies (make holy) and those who follow Him are the ones who are sanctified. Because Jesus was fully man, part of the race of men, both came from the same Father, the Creator God. All mankind is therefore literally a brother of Christ by descent and He is able to save them. People who are saved through His work, made holy and separated to God, are also His brothers by

relationship. Because He made these people, known as Christians, right with the Father, neither the Father nor the Son is ashamed to call them their people.

VV 12-13 – The author tied his statements to passages in the Old Testament, including Psalms 22. His theme is that man will put his trust in Jesus and proclaim His name while God will treasure His people.

V14 – Man is composed of flesh and blood, and because of that he faces inevitable death. Jesus took on flesh and blood, and because of that He faced inevitable death. By having the same limitations and overcoming them, the Son forever broke the power of the Evil One.

V15 – More than anything else, man is afraid of death. As a result we spend much of our lives in unconscious flight from death. Jesus' resurrection, however, guaranteed that those who follow Him will rise again. Though physical death is still the lot for all men, eternal life will the Father is the promise of grace.

The fear of death is the greatest fear of man and the source of all other fears. Because we will die, we fear that we might be insignificant; a forgotten piece of flotsam on the waves of time. Because we will die, we fear that our lives have no meaning. Because we will die, we fear that we will be forever alone. Jesus promised significance, meaning, companionship, and eternal life.

God had to become man because He alone had the ability to live a sinless life in mortal flesh, and still rise from the dead. Because He did it, we shall also. This is the ultimate freedom.

V16 – God did not give help to the angels when they rebelled against Him, but did give help to people.

VV 17-18 – Because Jesus was absolutely human, He suffered all that people do. Because He was absolutely divine, He overcame the penalty for sin and rose again.

Hebrews 3

V1 – The audience for the book of Hebrews was Jewish Christians who were well familiar with the Law. They, just like their counterparts in John 6, felt Moses to be the deliverer of their people, the most important character in Hebrew history. Jesus taught that He was better than Moses because God, not Moses, was the real benefactor of the Hebrews during the Exodus, and Jesus was God (John 6:31-51).

VV 2-6 – While Moses was faithful to the command of God, he was merely a servant, whereas since Jesus Christ was God, he was a Son. Moses was a creature, while Christ was the Creator. Therefore Jesus Christ was infinitely better than the one that Hebrews considered to be the greatest among them.

V7 – Having concluded that Jesus was superior to Moses, the author related the conclusion of the Holy Spirit to the matter.

VV 8-11 – The children of Israel hardened their hearts against the words of God through Moses, and they suffered the judgment of God as a result. If people, and even those who claimed to be Christians, hardened their hearts against the word of God through Jesus, who was immeasurably greater than Moses, how would they escape the judgment of the Lord?

V12 – Hardness of heart is caused by unbelief; refusal to believe in the character of God. Belief in this sense is not mere intellectual assent but belief that results in changed living. The Greeks and their children in the modern West have tried to mentally divorce believing from doing but this thinking would have been incomprehensible to many in the ancient Near East. Such thinking is actually foolish today because it is impossible. At all times and in all places people have done differently than what they say they believed, but people always do what they really believe.

Consider a married man who has met a beautiful single woman. Things start innocently enough but soon they spend more and more time together, sparks begin to fly, and they fall to passion. The man may say that he believes that adultery is wrong, but his actions reveal that he really believes that adultery, at this time with this woman, isn't wrong at all. At least he believes that it is less wrong than the alternative of denying himself this pleasure. Even if the act happened in the heat of the moment, there were plenty of moments before which were less heated and he could have acted differently if he had really believed that adultery was wrong.

V13 – We are not merely responsible to hold ourselves to good conduct; we are responsible to hold others as well. During the day, while we yet live on earth, we are to encourage and teach each other to do what God commands. We are also to rebuke those who refuse to obey Him, lest their refusal generate hard hearts, moving them away from Him and into eternal separation and despair.

V14 – Christians are indwelt by the Spirit of the Living God, as if we drunk Him into our bodies as Living Water. Therefore we must hold true to our Christian convictions until our final day.

V15 – The author of Hebrews again reminded His readers not to harden their hearts.

VV 16-19 - He then reminded them of the sin of the Hebrews of old in the Exodus.

Hebrews 4

V1 – Hebrews 3:18 brought up the concept of the rest of God, and Hebrews 4 further expanded that concept. Hardening of the heart was identified as a way to miss out on that rest. The rest of God is mentioned in Psalms 95:7-11 in the same context as hardening one's heart. Jesus provided a glimpse of the rest that He alone could give in Matthew 11:28-30.

To ignore that work of Christ is to miss the rest of God. His work was an amazing thing, far greater than the work of Moses, and the penalty for rejecting His work is terrible. God revealed Himself partially through Moses, but completely through Jesus. To ignore Jesus Christ is to ignore the greatest revelation that God Almighty can give, and therefore to deny oneself eternal life; the perfect rest of the Creator.

V2 – The gospel is preached to many people, providing knowledge to everyone who hears it. Some respond to that knowledge with faith and are saved. Others respond without faith and remain lost.

VV 3-5 – People who believe in Christ enter into the rest of God. This rest is the same type that God enjoyed after creating the universe. The God's actions after Creation illustrate some of the characteristics of the rest of God.

1. It is rest after all the appointed work – God created the heavens and the earth out of nothing, doing something that only the Almighty could do. He fulfilled His self-appointed mission in the grand drama of the universe. Similarly people enjoy the rest of God after they complete all the work that God has commanded them to do at that time. We are to do our God-appointed mission, and others are to do their God-appointed missions. We cannot achieve the rest of God by doing someone else's work.
2. It is rest after doing good – God evaluated His work and proclaimed it good. He did not do less than His best so that He could rest earlier and He did not query others about the quality of His work. The Lord knew within Himself that His work was good. Similarly people enjoy the rest of God when they know, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, that their work is good, regardless of what others say about it.
3. It is rest after limited work – God created the heavens and the earth and then stopped. He did not roll one project into another in a ceaseless cycle of work without rest. After a good period of rest, He

embarked on His next task. Similarly we must not be hamsters on the endless treadmill of work, never stopping to rest, but begin, end, rest, and begin again throughout our lives and into eternity.

4. It is rest in right proportion – God worked six days and rested one, not the other way around. Our ratio of work to rest should be about the same.
5. It is a healing rest – God did not need to heal but He did need to provide a good example for those of us who do need to heal. No athlete becomes a champion by working out seven days per week, because the body needs a day to recover. To do otherwise is to over train, resulting in poor performance, disease and injury. What is true for athletes is true for all of us.

VV 6-7 – Some of the Hebrews, the people to whom the revelation of God was first given, accepted it; first in the Law of Moses and second in the Messiah Jesus. Other Hebrews unfortunately rejected God's revelation. The author was writing to Hebrews, but he mentioned that at the appointed time, this day, others (Gentiles) were entering in. Though Gentiles were coming into the Lord's rest, He still wanted Hebrews to come, and quoting David, asked them not to harden their hearts.

VV 8-10 – The Old Testament was the story of God's people as a physical nation, Israel. Near the beginning of the story, Joshua led the Hebrews into their appointed geographical territory, the land of Canaan. This gave Israel the nation rest from slavery in Egypt and from the oppression of other nations. However this rest was only partial because the people still afflicted themselves in sin. Jesus provided a spiritual rest, deliverance from sin, and eventually God's people will enjoy a physical and spiritual rest together.

VV 11 – The author's audience had been wavering in their commitment to Jesus Christ, so he encouraged them to remain strong in their faith and faithful in their obedience. To do so would guarantee that they would enter God's rest, both now and in eternity. To do otherwise would be to follow the example of their Hebrew forefathers, and suffer punishment.

VV 12-13 - The Word of God has two meanings in the New Testament. It refers to the written scriptures (2 Timothy 2:15) and refers to the person of Jesus Christ (John 1:1-3). In this passage the author hints at both of them. If his readers were faithless, the Word of God would find them out and judge them with perfect justice. No matter how hard they tried to hide their intentions, the Holy One would not be fooled.

VV 14-16 – The author did not wish to end this section on a note of fear, but of love. We should follow Christ not primarily because of His penetrating insight and just judgment but because He is a great high priest who truly understands us and gave Himself up for us. As a result, despite our sin, we can draw near to the Father to receive the mercy and grace we need for our lives.

Hebrews 5

V1 – The Hebrew high priest was of the tribe of Levi and a direct descendent of Aaron, the brother of Moses. His purpose was to stand between God and man, offering gifts and sacrifices for his people, and for himself, in accordance with the command of the Almighty.

Atheists sometimes scoff that religious people try to curry favor with supernatural beings by these gifts and sacrifices. In truth, God created everything and therefore owns it, so in the absolute sense we can give him nothing. Since He is God, our sacrifices do not benefit Him either; as if He needed the smell of roasting meat and incense from the altar. We can never curry favor with God, for there is nothing that He needs and nothing that we can do to benefit Him. To think that we can do so is foolishness.

Giving God a gift is a little like my daughter giving me a birthday present purchased by my wife with money that I have made. The joy that I receive is not in the gift but in my daughter learning to give to others. Her growth, her maturity, and her pleasure are my joy. Similarly having her apologize sincerely, the rough equivalent of sacrificing, does me no direct good. Rather I rejoice that she is acknowledging her wrongdoing and trying to change. It is her good, not my own, that I seek in her “gifts” and “sacrifices”. The same is true to God, but even more so because He is perfect and I am not. Therefore we cannot “curry favor” with God by our good works but rather we grow into what He created us to be.

VV 2-3 – Since the human high priest is weak, confused and sinful, he can have compassion on others’ weakness, confusion and sin. The fact that he shares the infirmities of his people motivates him to help them with their sins as well as his own.

V4 – It is the greatest honor to represent God to men, and to represent men to God. However, it is an honor bestowed by God on whom He wishes; it is not something that man can grasp for himself.

VV 5-6 – Even Jesus Christ, God the Son and the Son of God, did not grasp the honor of being the high priest of the people. Instead the Father bestowed that honor on the Son. Further, Jesus was not a priest from the line of Levi and Aaron, a descendent of Abraham, but a priest of Melchisedec, a spiritual authority over Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20). Jesus actually was descended from the line of Judah, the house of the kings of Israel.

V7 – When Jesus was walking the earth in the flesh of man, is suffered terribly and responded in prayers and tears to the Father. The Father heard Him, because the Son honored the Father.

VV 8-10 – Though Jesus was the second person of the Godhead and in perfect relationship to the Father, the first person of the Godhead, He still was not complete until He suffered. It was obedient suffering which finished the work of Jesus. Since He suffered and thereby became perfect (complete), Jesus became the source of salvation, the High Priest of the highest order who cannot be superseded.

V11 – There is no end of things that need to be said about Jesus, but the author’s audience was not able to hear it (cf. John 16:12). Their sin and disbelief had made their hearing dull to the words of God. This happens to us as well. Every time God nudges us to do something, whether through the Bible, circumstances, or the voice of others, and we obey, our ears grow attuned to His future instruction and our hands grow better able to serve Him. Conversely if we disobey, our ears grow dull and our hands slow to serve Him.

V12 – These Jewish Christians had been in the faith many years and should have been continually growing in the knowledge and grace of Christ. Unfortunately they had not. Therefore the author had to go back to the basics over and over again.

VV 13-14 – Infants cannot tolerate solid food but live strictly on milk so that their bodies can grow. Adults can handle wide varieties of food to sustain. Just the same Christians who are young in their faith, or who have not developed as they should, can only tolerate the basics of Christianity and not the more difficult doctrines.

Hebrews 6

VV 1-3 – Every living thing, whether bacteria, tree, or man, grows. After reaching maturity they may not grow in size but they still develop and renew until the day they die. Physical growth is not uniform but rather occurs in spurts. Growth can be stunted by harsh conditions or lack of nutrients, but regardless of

the circumstances, growth still occurs. Until death, cell division and multiplication occurs even in those who are starving. Absence of growth, of regeneration and development, is proof that a thing is not alive.

In the same way every person who is alive in the Spirit of God grows; it is inevitable because God makes it so (Philippians 2:12-13, 2 Timothy 1:12). The Lord who justifies us (gives us salvation) also sanctifies us (makes us like Him) and glorifies us (gives us the riches of God). Spiritual growth occurs in fits and starts, “growth spurts”, as it were, and likewise can be stunted but not stopped by spiritual starvation. As in the natural world, absence of spiritual growth in one’s life is proof that he or she is not spiritually alive.

The writer of Hebrews was addressing a group of readers who had displayed little or no spiritual growth. At best they were starving for lack of the Bread of Life and at worst they were not alive at all. This being an audience of Jewish readers, “Elementary principles” referred to the key Old Testament teachings about the Messiah. It also referred to the key gospel teachings about Jesus. After so many years these readers should have understood the key doctrines of Christ, His life, death, resurrection, substitutionary atonement, and deity; leading to justification. They should have been focused on Christian living, faith, worship, evangelism, the fruits of the Spirit, and other key doctrines leading to sanctification. If they were Christians, God had already done His mighty work of saving them, and they needed to do their part of “working out their salvation with fear and trembling.” If they were not Christians, some had heard the gospel so many times and secretly rejected it that they were unlikely ever to accept it.

Believers are not to forget or abandon the key principles of Christ, but these principles provide a foundation on which the house of faith is built. Principles of sanctification as mentioned above comprise the wood, metal and stone with which we build our house. Christians must lay a firm foundation and then build the house, for no one can live on a foundation alone.

VV 4-6 – This is one of the most challenging passages in the Bible. Some interpreters suggest that the writer of Hebrews is setting up a hypothetical situation, such as “If it were possible to fall away, to reject Christ, then it would not be possible to be renewed.” Another interpretation is that it refers to a community and not each individual. In this case, God could reject a community for their disobedience (like He rejected the Jews in the late kingdom period), but not individuals. Still another is that the people that fell away were true believers and because of their falling away they would be liable to punishment but would not lose their salvation. A common view is that the people mentioned were indeed true believers and that they actually did lose their salvation.

The readers to whom the author referred were either real Christians or they were not. The passage speaks of people whose minds were illuminated, whose tongues tasted the Bread of Life, and who shared with others (*μέτοχος metochos*) in the Holy Spirit. In short, it seems that these people were genuine Christians. The author warned that if these people abandon the faith, they can never be Christians again. It seems a lot like a statement that believers can lose their salvation, and many people believe that this is exactly what it means.

The explanation sometimes given is that Jesus Christ died for all of your sins but only those for which you have repented have been forgiven. Since we can only repent for sins in the past because those are the only ones that we have actually done, sins in the present and future are not forgiven. To sin, in this way of thinking, is to “crucify again the Son of God and put Him to open shame.”

My grandmother spent her entire life in the Church of Christ and she believed this. She taught her children and grandchildren that one sin, if unrepented, would undo years of faithful Christian service and condemn the sinner to hell. A housewife for most of her adult life, she said that if a person was standing on a stool

putting dishes away, dropped a plate, cursed, fell off the stool, hit her head and died, she would go to hell. If that woman managed to breathe a word of confession before dying, however, she would gain eternal life. Grandma was fond of using this passage in support of her lessons. I do not know whether or not this is official doctrine of the Church of Christ, but this is what at least one faithful follower believed.

There are many problems with my grandmother's beliefs in this area, and those of many like her. In her illustration, if a single sin was enough to "fall away", then that same sin would be enough to prevent the sinner from coming back. The woman who cursed could breathe that last word of confession, but it wouldn't restore her; and she would have no hope. If "falling away" was more than a single sin, how many sins would it take: 10, 100, 1000? Those who believe that Christians can lose their salvation must also, on the basis of this passage, believe that they can never regain it.

The only other possibility is that these people were not Christians. They seemed to be believers, they learned Christian doctrines, they heard the word of God and they saw of the work of the Spirit in others. These men and women may have been faithful members of their church, regarded among the brethren, but they never actually believed. If that is the true spiritual state of these readers, and because of persecution, tragedy in their lives, or doubt they leave the church, it is almost inevitable that they will never actually become Christians. To have heard the power and glory of the story of Jesus, to see the mighty works of God, and to reject them repeatedly, is to deny yourself the chance of salvation.

The internet has plenty of sites written by people who call themselves former Christians, including some who were pastors, and now reject the Faith. Some are angry and some are even vehement in their rejection of the creed that they once held. These people are the ones that this author is talking about.

Sidebar – An Example of Falling Away

Charles Templeton (1915-2001) was a pastor of a major church, an evangelist of the first rank in America in the 1940s and a close friend of Billy Graham. Over the years doubts arose in his mind about the gospel, and in 1957 he renounced Christianity. Over the millennia few Christians, pastors and parishioners, have followed the same path. They have an experience that sets them on fire for the gospel; use their considerable God given talents to serve Him for a while, sometimes like Templeton even gaining prominence. But over time the day to day struggles of life, unresolved doubts about the faith, and (usually) a series of moral lapses erodes their hope in Christ and they reject the faith. I have seen a few of these men years later and things had not gone well for them. Some never return to the faith.

Human psychology is such that once people make a decision they are likely to stick with it. The longer they have followed that course and the more they have invested into it, the more likely they are not to change. If they do change, often related to a traumatic experience, doubts and/or moral lapses as noted above, they rarely go back. Templeton was internationally known as a Christian leader, his wife was a believer and he had spent 21 years following Christ. The decision to forsake the faith was hard, it took him nine years to finally do it (1948-1957), and once he left Christianity he never came back.

But was Charles Templeton ever a Christian? Many passages in the New Testament, especially Paul's work in Romans, suggest that Christians cannot lose their salvation. Other passages, especially this one, are used to "prove" that genuine believers can lose their salvation. The Church of Christ in which my grandmother was a member taught this. These are the two basic possibilities:

1. The people mentioned in this passage were Christians, lost their salvation, and can never come back, or
2. They were not Christians, never had salvation, and can never gain it.

Because of Paul's clear statements about the perseverance of the saints, especially in Romans 8, it is difficult to believe that the people mentioned in Hebrews 6:4-8 are genuine believers. Nonetheless, the language must be addressed. The people who had fallen away and now could not be renewed to repentance had the following characteristics:

1. They had been enlightened. Bruce mentioned that some see "enlightened" in terms of baptism (145), but the word (*φωτίζω phōtizō*) suggests that this refers to illumination. Thus these people had at least intellectual knowledge of the truths of Christianity.
2. They had tasted the heavenly gift. Bruce suggested that this probably meant that they had partaken of the Lord's Supper (146). It can also be interpreted more broadly to include all of the spiritual blessings in the sacraments.
3. They had become partakers of the Holy Spirit. The ultimate heavenly gift is the Holy Spirit indwelling believers, but the presence of the Holy Spirit living in these people would mean that they were Christians. Bruce opined that these people had experienced the laying on of hands, the means by which the Spirit was sometimes conferred in the early church (146). Simon Magus received the gospel, was baptized, helped Philip in ministry, and even had the hands of the apostles laid on him, but he was still unsaved (Acts 8:9-24). According to church fathers such as Justin Martyr and Irenaeus, Simon became an implacable opponent of the gospel.
4. They had experienced the goodness of God's word and the power of the age to come. Many people in the early church experienced the teachings and miracles of Jesus and of the apostles. However, experiencing miracles does not make one a Christian. Ten lepers were healed by Jesus in Luke 17:11-19 but only one showed any evidence of salvation. Even working miracles does not make one a Christian. Jesus said that many will come to Him in the Day of Judgment having worked mighty miracles and He will say to them "I never knew you" (Matthew 7:22-23).
5. They had fallen away. The Greek word (*παραπίπτω parapiptō*) suggests deviating from the right path, turning aside or wandering. My grandmother's pastor would have argued that "fallen away" means sinning after salvation. Some authors allow no forgiveness for Christian sinners (148). Others affirm that the falling away referred to here is the conscious rejection of Christianity. If no one who sins after salvation can be a Christian then no one is a Christian because sin is inevitable for fallen men.

Interpreting this passage in light of Acts 8:9-24, Luke 17:11-19 and Matthew 7:22-23 provides great insight into a difficult text. Men like Charles Templeton intellectually understood the basics of the faith. He had certainly taken the Lord's Supper and had probably had hands of faith laid on him. Templeton had seen the saving power of the Spirit in His crusade, but then had fallen away. His last book, published in 1996, was entitled *Farewell to God*. No mortal man has ever seen the Book of Life (Revelation 21:27) and no one can be certain, but his fruit suggests that Charles Templeton was never a Christian. Tragically, this man who had been used of God to bring salvation to so many may have missed it entirely himself.

The point about Arminians believing that Christians can lose their salvation but not believing that they can never be saved again is apropos. Some believe that people could fall away (lose their salvation) and be restored many times, but the line "impossible to be renewed to repentance" would be terrifying if you really believed it. Another difficulty with the view that these people were Christians and then lost their salvation is that Paul wrote that people in Christ are a new creation. He followed that all things have become new (2 Corinthians 5:17). It is difficult to conceive that a person could accept Christ, become a new creation, reject Christ and revert back to being an old creation, and then accept Him again to become a new creation.

The logical consequences of the belief that Christians who fall away can never again be renewed to salvation are macabre. If once people become saved they cannot fail away without certain and irredeemable condemnation, the best way to make sure people did not fall away is to deny them the opportunity. This would result in religious tyranny at best and murder, ending their earthly lives before they had a chance to reject Christ, at worst. It would also be a large disincentive to becoming a Christian.

Arminians argue that believers can be saved and lose their salvation many times. Calvinists argue "once

saved always saved". Who says "get saved but don't give up afterwards? If you blow it once, you can never get back in again!"

References

Hebrews 6:1-3 (Bruce 139-143)

Hebrews 6:4-8 (Bruce 145-148)

FF Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1990

VV 7-8 – The Word of God and the Spirit of God bring forth fruit in good soil, the hearts of people whom God has prepared and who respond in faith. However the Word of God and the Spirit of God bring forth thorns and thistles in bad soil, the hearts of people whom God has not prepared and who do not respond in faith. The first group receives a blessing from the Lord, but the second group receives judgment.

V9 – After this terrifying warning, the author encouraged his readers of his confidence that rejection and punishment would not be their fate.

V10 – His readers had been faithful in work and in love, serving the brethren and showing love towards God. Because the Lord is just, He would not forget the efforts of His people.

VV 11-12 – Some of the audience had been more faithful and some less so. The author encouraged both groups so that they could receive the full blessings of God until the end of their days. For many, sluggishness in the faith is a greater danger than outright apostasy, because apostasy requires a clear decision while sluggishness needs only passive acceptance. Rather, Christians needed to imitate the faithful to receive the Lord's full blessings.

VV 13-15 – From time immemorial, God intended to bless man. Therefore He swore by the highest being in the universe, Himself, in the presence of Abraham, the ancestor of the people of God, to do this. Abraham patiently worked and waited and in due time, received God's blessing. Notably Abraham did not live to see all of Jehovah's promises fulfilled. He saw his son Isaac and his grandsons Jacob and Esau but died before their descendants grew into a great nation.

In the same manner, the readers needed to work and wait, serving God and each other faithfully. In due time, they would receive His blessing. They would probably see some during their lives, but most would come after they had departed the earth and lived with Him.

Using Abraham as the example would have been especially meaningful to the Jews since they considered him to be their father. His perseverance would encourage them to persevere. This is also a good example of the importance of family and ancestry in Hebrew culture. The people took pride in the faithfulness of their forebear, and that inspired them to do the same.

VV 16-18 – In every culture a promise is given weight by the gravity of the promise and by witnesses to the promise. In 1001 Arabian nights, Queen Nur al-Huda swore "by the king's head" (night 809), Simon Bolivar promised "I swear before you, I swear before the God of my fathers, I swear by my fathers, I swear by my honour, I swear by my country..." and the ancient Scythians would "swear by the king's throne." The custom of swearing by someone or something higher than yourself derived from God and God used it in His dealings with man.

Jehovah did this for us to give us strong confidence in the truth of His words and the unshakeableness of His intent. He did it to encourage us through the troubles that we would face in life.

VV 19-20 – Using many metaphors to reach the minds and hearts of his readers, the writer of Hebrews described the effect of God's promise to bless His people. It would anchor our souls through the storms of life, it would keep us sure and steadfast throughout life and as we face death. Jesus passed through death ahead of the readers of Hebrews and as such preceded them as high priest, guaranteeing their acceptance by the Father.

Hebrews 7

Beginning at the end of chapter 6, the author now dove into detail about the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Since Hebrews is written to churches populated largely by Jewish Christians, who because of persecution were being tempted to lapse back into Judaism, his purpose was to remind his readers of the supremacy of Christ in every area. To religious first century Jews, nothing was more important than the Law of Moses and the priesthood of Aaron, because these things ordered their lives before God and Man. In chapters 1-6 the author had shown that Jesus was higher than the angels, than Moses and than Joshua, he needed to show that Jesus was higher even than the Law and the priests.

VV 1-2 – Melchizedek, whose name means King of Righteousness, received from Abraham a tenth of the spoils of war (Genesis 14:18). David prophesied that the Messiah would be an eternal priest of the order of Melchizedek (Psalm 110:4). The writer of Hebrews quoted the Psalmist (Hebrews 5:6) and then repeated and expanded on the assertion that Jesus was this priest (Hebrews 5:10, 6:20).

After Abram's victory against the forces allied with Chedorlaomer, Melchizedek blessed him (Genesis 14:18-20). Since Melchizedek had come from Salem, probably Jerusalem, he was also the king of peace.

V3 – There is only one person in all of history who had no father, no mother, no lineage, no beginning and no end, and that is God Himself. The fact that He inhabited time and space in the person of Melchizedek shows that this is the second person of the Godhead, the Son of God...Jesus Christ. Therefore Melchizedek is Jesus Christ.

VV 4-7 – For Abram, the Father of the Jews, to give tithe to Melchizedek, the preincarnate Christ, demonstrated that He was above the Jews, having higher rank than they, even though in the flesh He was a Jew. Melchizedek (Christ) also blessed them, as the greater will do for the lesser.

VV 8-10 – In normal Hebrew worship mortal priests received tithes but in the case of Abram and Melchizedek an immortal priest received them. Levi, the ancestor of the entire priestly line of Israel, was “in the loins” of his great-grandfather Abram. Therefore when Abram paid homage to Melchizedek, the whole priestly line was paying homage to Jesus Christ, the immortal priest because He rose from the dead.

V11 – The Levitical priesthood was a beautiful thing, given by a loving God for the good of His people Israel. The Law of Israel, the most righteous and humane code of justice of its time, instituted the priesthood and helped the people align properly with God and man. However it was not perfect because the priests were not perfect and as a result they were mortal.

V12 – Priests served as intercessors between the people and God according to the rules written in the Law. This worked in Israel for centuries. However when the new and perfect priest, Jesus Christ, came into the picture, the Law had to change as well.

VV 13-16 – Jesus was not from the tribe of Levi and descended from Aaron, and as a result He was not eligible to serve as a priest of Israel under the Law of Moses. Instead Jesus was from the line of Judah and descended from David, and as a result He was eligible to serve as King of Israel. Jesus could be high

priest, however, not through the genealogical order of Aaron but through the immortal order of Melchizedek.

V17 – The author had used the Law to show that there was a priesthood higher than Aaron's, and also that, by virtue of His resurrection, Jesus was eligible to belong to that priesthood. In fact, Jesus was Melchizedek. Now he quoted David to demonstrate that the Messiah would be a priest after Melchizedek.

VV 18-19 – The former covenant, the Law of Moses, failed in the mission to bring the people in right relationship to God. The new covenant, the Law of Christ, was a much better hope in bringing people near to God.

VV 20-22 – Referring back to the writings of David, the author reemphasized Jehovah's commitment to install the Messiah as a priest according to the order of Melchizedek. As such Jesus, who was the Messiah, became of the priest of the new covenant.

VV 23-24 – Men were priests but death limited their service. Jesus was a priest, and having conquered death, became a priest forever.

V25 – Because Jesus is the permanent priest, He is the permanent intercessor for the people, and not just in one generation as is the case with men, but in all generations.

VV 26-28 – Sin and death made earlier priests weak and ineffective, even as the Law was weak and ineffective, for God's purpose of restoring men to a good relationship with Him. Jesus knew no sin and had conquered death, and therefore was neither weak nor ineffective. It was this kind of power that people needed to save them.

Hebrews 8

VV 1-2 – The author summarized his argument. In former times, weak, sinful and mortal human priests stood between man and God in earthly structures (the Tabernacle and the Temple) in accordance with the Law of Moses. This was not enough to restore the relationship between God and man. In present times, one strong, righteous and immortal priest stood between God and man in heavenly structures (the True Tabernacle) in accordance with the Law of Christ.

VV 3-4 – Priests of Israel offered gifts to God in the form of sacrifices of the people. Jesus the perfect high priest offered Himself as a gift to God, obviating the need for further sacrifices.

V5 – The whole religious system in the Old Testament was merely a shadow of worship which is to come, just as the tabernacle was based on a pattern of the True Tabernacle in heaven.

VV 6-7 – The author repeated his contrast of the Old and New Covenant, and emphasizing the superiority of the New.

VV 8-12 – Quoting Jeremiah 31:31-34, Hebrew's writer summarized key points about the New Covenant. Rather than people telling each other to know the Lord, each person would know the Lord because He would make it so. Rather than blessings being contingent upon obedience as in the Law of Moses, blessings would be contingent only on God's grace and mercy to His people.

V13 – With the coming of the New Covenant under Jesus Christ, the Old Covenant was disappearing. Why, then would Jews associated with the church (some Christians, some not) consider returning to the Old Covenant?

Hebrews 9

VV 1-2 – The covenant established by the Law of Moses had rules for worshipping God. It also had specified structures, such as the temple and the tabernacle, and dedicated items, such as lampstands and bread, to facilitate such worship.

VV 3-5 – Within the tabernacle there was a smaller place, a local where the high priest actually met with God. This area also contained items to facilitate the encounter with the Most High, including the Ark of the Covenant and its contents. Meeting with God there was too amazing to be described.

VV 6-7 – The priests worked daily in the main portion of the tabernacle, but did not enter the holy of holies. Only the high priest could enter there, and only once per year. Further, he had to take the blood of a sacrifice with him when he entered, because without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins. The blood was to cover the ignorant sins of the people and of the priest himself. In the ancient Hebrew system the animal gave all its blood to cover the sins of the people. In the New Covenant Jesus Christ gave all his blood to cover the sins of the people. Part was not enough.

VV 8-10 – While the Old Covenant, the covenant of regulations and physical structures, was still in place, the way to salvation was less clear. The common people were forbidden from entering the Tabernacle, and even the Temple; they had to remain in the courts outside. This is because though gifts and sacrifices were offered, they could never bring about the forgiveness of sin, since the blood of animals could never pay the price for the sin of men. Thus the sacrificial system in the Old Testament was a symbol of what was to come.

When Christ provided the real sacrifice, the only adequate one, then the path from man to God was opened. The veil of the Temple which figuratively and literally separated God from His people was rent asunder by God Himself (Matthew 27:51).

VV 11-14 – Christ's work was so much greater than anything which had come before. His tabernacle was not of the earth but of heaven, and His sacrifice was not the blood of bulls and goats but of Himself. As a result, the redemption that Christ provided was perfect, not like the shadow of redemption which was all that was possible under the Law. Recall also that while sacrificial animals were used to pay the price for mans' sin without their understanding and against their will, Jesus Christ came to the altar knowing full well what was to come and intending whole heartedly to do it.

The author has repeated his point, and done so in a litany of ways, so that his readers would hear and understand. The Law was good, but it was weak. The Law could effect salvation through the grace of God, but was only a shadow of the amazing grace of the work of Christ. Jesus Christ was God incarnate, and everything that He was and did were the person and actions of God, the Everlasting One.

VV 15-22 – The author switched to a legal argument to illustrate his position. The Law of Moses was the old covenant between God and man, inaugurated with the death of sacrificial animals. The Work of Christ was the new covenant between God and man, inaugurated with the death of the Sacrificial Lamb, Jesus Himself. While the blood of animals could never pay the penalty for the sin of man, the blood of a Man could and did pay the penalty for the sin of man. Furthermore, since Jesus rose again from the dead, He has guaranteed resurrection for those whose sins are washed away by His blood.

VV 23-26 – Summarizing the main points, the Law of Moses and specifically the Levitical priesthood was a copy, a shadow, of the real work of redemption to come.

VV 27-28 – There is no reincarnation. Man lives on the earth once and dies once. Afterwards he is judged for what he has done, and what he has failed to do. Jesus Christ lived on earth once, died, and will be the judge. Then He will take those who love Him to be with Him forever.

Hebrews 10

VV 1-4 – Chapter 10 continues the argument from chapter 9 about the limitations of the Law in effecting the salvation of man. The Law was an early shadowing, a foreshadowing, of God's ultimate sacrifice, but sacrifices of sheep and goats could never remove the sins of men.

If they could, there would have been no need to keep offering them. Sacrifices were offered repeatedly so that offerer would remember his ongoing sin.

VV 5-9 – The author used several quotations from Psalm 40:6-8 to tell a simple story. Men who offered the blood of bulls and goats for their sin, but were not pure in heart, would never know forgiveness. However even men who offered the sacrifices with a pure heart could not, by those offerings, be saved. A perfect sacrifice was required.

Knowing that the sacrifices of old could never absolve sin, Jesus did not come to offer any except for Himself. To be the perfect sacrifice, the ultimate offering, was what the Father wanted for His Son.

V10 – Lovers of Christ have been saved once and for all by His sacrifice.

VV 11-14 – Human priests must minister every day of their lives, offering sacrifices that cannot ultimately save from sins, until they themselves lie down in death. Jesus, by contrast, made one sacrifice and then arose to sit on the right hand of God in ultimate power and glory. His sacrifice made His people perfect for all time.

The word perfect (*τελειόω teleioō*) refers to completeness, so Jesus' final victory made His people complete, whole, and lacking in nothing. In the world to come, His work will make His people morally flawless.

VV 15-17 – The author had previously referred to Jeremiah 31:31-34 and now he returned to it. The Holy Spirit had told the prophet Jeremiah that in the final days, the days of the last covenant, known now as the New Covenant, God would put His law into the hearts and minds of His people, and would forget their sin.

VV 18-20 – Since the sins of believers, past, present and future, have been remitted forever by Jesus' sacrifice, we no longer have to be ashamed before God. We no longer have to worry about whether the Father has really forgiven us before we approach Him. Therefore we can come to the Lord who loves us with boldness.

Old Testament saints never had this kind of access. They always looked at the shadows of the forgiveness to come, but we get to look at the glory of the work of Jesus. They saw how salvation might be accomplished, but we get to see how it was accomplished.

VV 21-22 – The wonder of Christ, our perfect high priest, bears repeating. Jesus' work was so good, and so complete, that His people never need fear. Because our sins are totally gone, our hearts are completely clean, without the slightest tinge of iniquity remaining to stain us in the eyes of God, we can approach the Father with confidence that He will accept us.

The hardest part of this truth is that it seems false in light of our lives. Even the most faithful of Christians sins every day, and those most advanced in the Lord's service struggle in many ways. How can we believe that Jesus has made our hearts clean in light of these facts?

1. Jesus took our sin. At no point in our earthly lives will we conquer sin entirely, but at the moment of salvation the guilt for our wickedness fell on Him. We are not clean because our character has advanced so much, but because Christ capacity to take our evil is so great. Our character is far worse, and His far better, than we can possibly imagine. When we sin, we suffer the natural consequences of that sin, but Jesus' suffers the eternal penalty for it. Our moral perfection is not attributable to our actions but to His grace.
2. The more advanced we are in the faith, the more we are aware of our sin. I have spoken to young medical residents who believed that they knew most of what they needed to know in medicine, but I have never spoken to a senior physician, seasoned by decades of study and intense patient care, who has said the same thing. Greater knowledge makes us more aware of our deficiencies. In the same way greater righteousness makes us more aware of the areas where our sin remains. A filthy car is filthy everywhere and the owner may barely notice, but an immaculate car with one filthy spot is intolerable.

If believers fail to come to God with joy and assurance, it is not because of any defect in His work, but because we did not want to come.

VV 23-25 – Because Jesus Christ has made us pure, and because He is faithful to bring us ultimately to Him, we must hold fast to our Christian faith. We must not only love and do good deeds ourselves, but also help others.

1. Pray that God helps us love, and gives us and others opportunities to demonstrate our love by good deeds. Pray that we take them.
2. Encourage ourselves and others to do good deeds.
3. Invite others to participate in the good deeds that we are doing.
4. Arrange situations for others to do good deeds. Christians can tell each other about a crisis pregnancy center, a food bank for the homeless, or a ministry that repairs the homes of the poor.
5. Provide money to help others do good deeds, such as sponsoring a student on the youth choir mission trip.

Part of stimulating one another is spending time together in Christian fellowship. It has been said that a big part of success in life is just showing up. This is true in the Church as well.

VV 26-27 – Jesus' sacrifice washed away our sins, but He also put His Holy Spirit into our newly clean hearts. God cannot abide sin, and the Holy Spirit will not go into a heart which is not righteous under God. The work of the Spirit is to reform our moral nature so that eventually we are as perfect in our conduct as we are in our standing before God. For those who have been truly cleansed by Jesus, the Spirit will not fail, and over their lifetime they will show moral improvement. Like the life of a tree, growth will be irregular and sometimes even stop for a time, but the overall trend will be up.

People who keep on sinning, regardless of what they espouse, demonstrate that the Holy Spirit is not working within them and that their hearts have not been made clean. For those people, the only end is terrifying judgment; an eternity separated from the Lord of the Universe.

VV 28-31 – The Law of Moses was weak and shadowy, unable to bring about righteousness. Nevertheless those who rejected the Law were judged. The Work of Christ is powerful and clear, able to save men from

their own wickedness. How much more shall those who reject Him be judged? God will repay each person according to his or her deeds.

VV 32-34 – The readers had been faithful to Christ in the past. They had suffered for their faith, and been humiliated in the eyes of others. They had stood nobly with their persecuted brethren. These Christians had visited other believers in prison, and had even had their property taken away. While they had not resisted to the point of shedding blood (Hebrews 12:4), they had certainly suffered for the name of Jesus.

VV 35-36 – The author of Hebrews knew that past performance is the best predictor of future performance, and that reminding his readers of their victories in the past would help stir them on to victories in the present and future. The very next chapter, Hebrews 11, did exactly that.

The people were going through a time of discouragement and this discouragement had shaken their confidence. They had started well but had bogged down in their faith; as a result they needed help to endure.

VV 37-39 – Jesus was coming again. The readers would see Him shortly, either because He was coming soon or because their lives would be over soon and they would see Him in heaven. As it occurred, over 2000 years later Jesus Christ has still not returned to earth in the long awaited Second Coming. However the readers of Hebrews, and the millions of now departed believers since, saw their Lord at exactly the right time.

Because all Christians see Jesus at exactly the right time for them, we must not shrink back from our faith. To back away from Christ is to advance into destruction, but to courageously follow Him is to preserve the soul.

Hebrews 11

In one of the most famous, and most encouraging, passages in the Bible, the writer of Hebrews provided his readers a catalog of famous Hebrews, and even Gentiles, who lived lives of faith. Though they spent all of their time on earth under the Old Covenant, their faith made them heirs of the New Covenant. As such they were predecessors and encouragers of future generations. This included those in the first century who read these words for the first time, and even us today.

V1 – Faith is the firm conviction of the truths and person of God, even when evidence for Him seems to be lacking. It is also an abiding devotion to the Lord, even when circumstances would seem to suggest otherwise. Faith is not belief in the absence of evidence, but it is belief while carefully and humbly considering the available evidence. When evidence fails, it is trusting in the character and power of God to accomplish His perfect result. Faith ultimately is not in circumstances or anything else on earth; faith is in God as He is.

V2 – By such faith the early Hebrew leaders were justified before God. By such faith men and women today are justified before God.

V3 – Though many ancients believed that the universe existed forever, those of faith recognized that it did not. Therefore the things that could be seen were not ultimately made out of other things that could be seen. Rather God used unseen things to make the universe. This view was millennia ahead of its time, for early scientific proof that the universe had a beginning came in 1929.

V4 – Cain murdered his older brother Abel (Genesis 4:2-17), but through his faithfulness, Abel lived on, both in his example and also in his eternal life. What an encouragement, and proof, that no deed of man which is done in faithfulness to the Lord will be lost. The Christian's work endures forever.

How did Abel speak after his earthly death?

1. His example spoke through the pages of the Bible.
2. His life spoke through the lives of his descendants (Exodus 20:5-6).
3. His body spoke in the Better Country.

How can we speak after our earthly death?

1. Our teachings speak through whatever we say and write.
2. Our example speaks in the lives of anyone who has seen us live, whether our biological descendants or others we have influenced. This is especially true if we are written about.
3. Our work speaks through the institutions that we have influenced.
4. Our decisions speak to those who follow us by directly influencing them.
5. Our body speaks in the Better Country.

Jonathan Edwards is a good example of how faithful believers speak before and after their deaths. He was a powerful preacher and prolific writer, penning such classics as "Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God." His children followed his example and became preachers, lawyers, professors, politicians, and faithful servants of the Lord in America, irrevocably shaping our country. People today learn from his teachings and his example. Princeton University, of which he was president for a short time, felt his influence and has in turn influenced millions of others. Jonathan's great grandfather, William Edwards, born in London in 1618, changed the lives of his descendants forever when he came to Connecticut. Finally, Jonathan Edwards, though dead on the earth since 1758, lives on and speaks in God's better country.

V5 – Enoch and Elijah were the only two people in the Bible to have escaped death, and both did so in God's providence and through faith.

V6 – Since faith involves an accurate assessment of who God is and a faithful response to Him, it is impossible to please God without faith. My children must know me and my relationship with them and act in accordance with that knowledge for them to please me.

V7 – God told Noah something which seemed impossible, but Noah faithfully obeyed. His obedience was not just once, but thousands of times of scores of years as he was building the ark. Aside from the promise of God, he had no way to know if his work would be in vain. But His promise was enough.

VV 8-10 – Likewise Abram left his homeland and traveled over 1,000 miles in search of the fulfilment of the promise of God. Abram sought the physical promised land of Canaan, but even more he was searching for the eternal, heavenly kingdom of the Lord.

VV 11-12 – Abraham's wife Sarah had every reason to believe that she would die childless, thereby failing to do the culturally most important thing in her life. But God had other plans, and Sarah believed. The Lord promised them that their descendants would be a great nation, innumerable as the sands of the sea. They did not live to see it on earth, with Sarah dying shortly into Isaac's adulthood and Abraham lasting to the adulthood of his grandsons Esau and Jacob, but they believed it.

VV 13-16 – These patriarchs, the ancestors of Israel and some of the greatest heroes in the Hebrew mind, sought a different country, a better country, a heavenly country. They lived on earth for a time, but never felt earth to be their home. Abraham was a man of great faith, and he had moved from Ur to Haran to Hebron, covering the entire Fertile Crescent and much of the known world. Nonetheless his sights were focused on the country and the life to come. Had he felt like Ur or Haran had been home, he could have returned. Later the Israelites wanted to return to their life of slavery in Egypt each time they faced the slightest trouble, but Abraham stayed where God commanded even after Abimelech took his wife, he had to flee to Egypt, and he nearly had to sacrifice his own son. By faith Abraham stayed in the earthly land he had been promised, and looked forward to the heavenly land that God had in store for him.

How can we not be at home in this world; how can we seek a better country?

1. Be intentional that we are strangers and aliens in this world, that we do seek a better country.
2. Do things that will impact the better country, such as prayer, Bible study, good works, and the other spiritual disciplines, even though they may seem like a waste of time, and even though they may seem foolish. We work for the better country, but know that only in so doing can we have the maximum good effect on this country.
3. Help others to seek and to find the better country.

The more time you spend in this world, the more you become tied to this world. Simultaneously the closer you get to the next world, you either spend thinking about it or more time dwelling in the past on this world. The saints of God never dwell in the past.

VV 17-19 – Abraham honestly believed that God had called him to kill his son Isaac, and so he obeyed. As scandalous as this is to modern minds, child sacrifice was not uncommon in the Ancient Near East, and was often used as the ultimate test of a man's devotion to his god. What is shocking is not that God ordered Abraham to sacrifice his son but that God provided a substitute just before the deed was done. Other "deities" such as Asherah, Molech, and Baal did not provide such grace for their people.

Why did Abraham do it? Because he knew that God was good, was utterly devoted to Him, and knew that He would keep His promise, even if He had to raise Issac from the dead.

VV 20-22 – Patriarchs Isaac and Jacob looked into the future with the eyes of faith, looked to the fulfillment of God's promises, and blessed their children in accordance with God's plan. Joseph, though all Israel was in Egypt and there seemed no hope, or even need, of restoration, foresaw the exodus of the Hebrews four centuries later.

VV 24-29 – Though raised in fame, money and power, Moses sacrificed his position to stand with his people. Though he could neither see nor hear Christ, he instinctively responded to His message and was saved by His work. Moses heard the word of God and kept it, as well as any man could, through the plagues, the Passover and the Red Sea, despite those who discouraged, mocked, and opposed him.

VV 30-31 – After wandering 40 years, Israel finally believed, and that faith carried to victory in the Promised Land. As the first Gentile in the "Hall of Faith", Rahab transcended the belief system in her culture to follow the One True God.

VV 32-38 – The people of God, the heroes of the Faith, did mighty things through and suffered terribly for their faith in God.

VV 39-40 – By now the readers would have mental images of the greatest men and women in history. Perhaps one person thought “How mighty they were!” and someone else thought “I wish that I could have been them.” Many probably felt that they could never match the faith of these giants.

Imagine their shock, then, when the author wrote that they “did not receive what was promised.” “What?! How could these giants of the faith, legends in their time, not receive? How could they not be made perfect apart from the all too ordinary people reading the letter?” It was a scandal, but it was true. Jesus Christ had changed everything, and He had completed everything. The writer of Hebrews wanted his readers to understand this pivotal fact.

Hebrews 12

VV 1-2 – Believers in every era are surrounded in their life journey by other saints traveling with them, and by all of the saints that have gone before. We can see those living in our day, but we can only study and remember those whose lives preceded our own. The past may seem gone forever, but in reality it is ever present. The great Christians of yesterday, whether mentioned in the Bible, mentioned in history, or known only in our own lineage, having finished their own race, now stand along our path, watching and encouraging us to remain faithful in Christ.

Imagine that. Even as Abel still speaks of the life of faith to people today, so do Martin Luther, John Knox, David Livingstone, and Charles Spurgeon. If the saints of yesterday do not seem to have much of an impact on us, it is because we are not listening. Encouragement in the toughest moments through their lives and works is available, but we must listen.

As a result of this amazing cloud of witnesses, living proof that it is possible to live the Christian life to the end, we must drop the burdens which slow us down and remove the cords which tie us up and run the race, fixing our eyes on our prize, which is Jesus. This was exactly what Jesus did when He endured the cross for our sakes.

VV 3-4 – Jesus’ trials were far greater than the readers’ trials would ever be. They had suffered discrimination and recrimination but they had not yet been tortured and killed for their faith.

At this point in the chapter the author began teaching his readers about suffering. There are three typical categories of suffering, all of which are due to sin:

1. Suffering which results because the universe is fallen and therefore is common to mortal man. This includes routine sickness, accidents, pain and even death but is irrespective of what the individual, or anyone else, has done. Natural disasters such as earthquakes and hurricanes may cause such suffering.
2. Suffering which results from the sin of the individual. When a drunk driver has a collision which kills others and maims himself, his emotional and physical suffering is due to his own sin. When a woman has casual sex which leads to a sexually transmitted infection, pregnancy, and abortion, she has brought her suffering upon herself. Christians suffer in this way because we still sin.
3. Suffering which results from the sin of others. This can be personal, such as abuse directed at an individual, or impersonal, such as when national leaders start a war or terrorists blow up a building. Christians suffer both in the same way as non-Christians, but also we sometimes are targeted simply for following Jesus.

VV 5-10 – Category 2 above is our author’s focus, and brings up an unpopular issue in modern life. The technology of man in the modern world is breathtaking, but it is easy to suspect that his arrogance has

grown apace. As the concept of god has shifted from focus on another to focus on ourselves, we bristle at the idea that we sin, and that such sin has consequences.

How a man or woman views his or her relationship with the Lord is very important.

1. If a man sees God as a concept to be accepted or rejected, he will respond as a judge.
2. If a woman sees God as an impersonal force, she will respond as a user of that force, eventually hoping to become a master of it.
3. If a man sees God as his friend, he will respond as a friend.
4. If a woman sees God as her husband, she will respond as a wife.
5. If a man sees God as his king, he will behave as a subject.
6. If a woman sees God as her Creator, she will respond as a creature.
7. If a man sees God as his father, he will behave as a son.

Those reading this passage had certain undergone suffering from category two, and probably also category three. The writer of Hebrews therefore reminded his readers of the Father-son relationship of God and man, and reminded them that just as human fathers punish their human sons, so the Heavenly Father punishes His sons.

While suffering for our own sin usually involves taking the natural consequences of that sin, those natural consequences can also be interpreted as the punishment of God. Because the Lord made the universe, everything about it corresponds precisely with His nature.

1. God is orderly so nature is orderly.
2. God is beautiful so nature is beautiful.
3. God is complex so nature is complex.
4. God is creative so nature is creative.

We could go on at length about attributes of God that we find in nature. These give nature an unyielding character in which predictable results follow good and bad actions; actions in compliance with or in opposition to God's nature. The man who drinks too much invariably decreases his ability to interact with his environment. Should he try to drive, he puts himself and others at risk for suffering. This suffering is a natural consequence of the character of God and therefore can be seen as punishment from Him for sin.

The author of Hebrews implied that God's punishment for sin is active, not passive. Allowing natural consequences to occur seems passive, but is not. For example, God raised up opposition to Solomon as a result of Solomon's sin (Hadad - 1 Kings 11:14, Rezon - 1 Kings 11:23, Jeroboam - 1 Kings 11:26). However the verses cited also explain why these men rose against Solomon, and skeptics would argue that human nature, not God, was the cause.

The readers respected their earthly fathers, even though those fathers were weak, sinful, and often made mistakes. Even more they should respect their heavenly Father, who was mighty, holy, and perfect.

V11 – Though punishment is not pleasant, it is necessary to build character. In truth, God disciplines us because He loves us. For good earthly fathers and for our heavenly Father, a lack of discipline is proof of a lack of love.

V12 – Punishment demonstrates love, but it is still painful. Therefore believers should encourage even those who sin and are being punished. People tend to judge the sins of others harshly, but their own sins gently. We devise dozens of ways to make evildoers suffer, and hundreds of ways to justify our own iniquity. King David epitomized this truth. When Nathan came to him after he had sinned with Bathsheba,

David pronounced a punishment far more severe than the Law required (2 Samuel 12:5-6). However when he sinned against the Lord he begged Him not to let him fall under the judgment of man (2 Samuel 24:10-14).

The author of Hebrews knew that justice would be done, but he always wanted it tempered with mercy, just as the Lord does. Christians help our brothers and sisters even when they sin, for that is the heart of Christ. Furthermore, we will need them to help us when we are being punished for sin.

We also encourage those who are suffering for other reasons as well, such as unjust persecution or the routine trials and misfortunes of life. It is true that others will know that we are Christians by our love.

V13 – The saints of God do not merely encourage those who are suffering, but we help straighten their way so they avoid sin and minimize suffering in the future. It is not enough to encourage a man enslaved to pornography; brothers in Christ need to help him destroy his magazines and restrict his computer use. It is not enough to soothe a woman trapped in depression and anxiety because she has failed to forgive; sisters in the Lord need to help her find forgiveness and deliverance.

V14 – Followers of Jesus must seek to be at peace with all men (cf. Romans 12:18). We must also separate ourselves from sin and to the Lord's service.

V15 – The author provided another example of how Christians must help each other. Men and women in church must be looking out for the spiritual lives of those around them, lest anyone fall away. This usually occurs when a misunderstanding between believers causes bitterness to spring up between them. Early on this root is barely noticeable and easily ignored, but soon it grows into a plant which cannot be forgotten. If nothing is done the relationship suffers, and seeds from the first root of bitterness spread and grow into other "plants of bitterness" in their relationship. If nothing is done the relationship ruptures, and one or both might even leave the fellowship of believers.

Notice how passive all of this is. Because of our wicked nature roots of bitterness are bound to spring up, and like all plants they will grow, spread their seeds, and produce more plants of bitterness. Christians must actively pull these roots from their relationships. No part of the Christian life is passive; everything God has called us to do requires work. But the fruit, fellowship with God and harmony with man, is more than worth it.

VV 16-17 – Esau's sin was not that he wanted food but that his priorities were so askew that he valued something nearly worthless over something that was priceless. Similarly we value the passing pleasure of sin over the eternal goodness of godliness.

Tears do not necessarily signify repentance. How many of us have cried over a loss but refused to change the thing that caused the loss? I have seen patients struggling with alcohol addiction that cried bitterly after losing a job, losing a spouse, or getting in trouble with the law. Nonetheless, they kept drinking. Modern psychology would teach that they were incapable of stopping, but the word of God is not so cruel (1 Corinthians 10:13). There is no sin or addiction so great that the man of God with the power of God cannot overcome it.

VV 18-21 – In keeping with his practice of referring to Old Testament events, the author reminded his readers that Moses and the people could not touch Sinai, the mountain of God, that terrifying sight before which even Moses shuddered (Exodus 19:16-25). Anyone who touched that mountain would die, and the God of the mountain was a distant, forbidding One.

VV 22-24 – Instead, through the work of Christ, the readers of Hebrews were approaching Mount Zion, on which they would find the city of God, the beautiful angels, and the redeemed of the Lord. They would find God the mighty Judge, and Jesus the mediator of the new covenant.

V25 – The pattern throughout the book of Hebrews has been a morsel of truth followed by an exhortation to believe, and this chapter followed the same pattern. The author first discussed punishment and encouragement, and then contrasted the mountain of the Old Covenant with the mountain of the New Covenant.

The gospel is so good, and God's grace is so all-consuming, that to reject it is to reject any hope of eternal life. The prophets of the Old Covenant were mortal men of the earth and they spoke from the earth. Jesus was the God-man who came from heaven and spoke from heaven. To reject Him is to encounter certain judgment.

VV 26-27 – Quoting Haggai 2:6, God shook Mount Sinai in Exodus 19. From Mount Zion, however, He will shake the entire universe in the final judgment. Nothing which is temporal shall survive, but only those things which are eternal.

VV 28-29 – Those in Christ have an eternal kingdom which can never be shaken. As a result, we must serve God with honor. As noted in Deuteronomy 4:24, God is truly a consuming fire and is worthy of all reverence.

Hebrews 13

V1 – Having made a compelling and comprehensive argument that Jesus Christ is superior in every way to anything that might be compared with Him, and that His work is the only hope of salvation, the author of Hebrews moved on to how his readers should live as a result. This is a constant refrain in the Bible; the writer never imparts doctrine without soon imparting instructions on godly living.

Good conduct in a Christian community can be encapsulated in the phrase “brotherly love” (φιλαδελφία philadelphia). The audience already demonstrated such love and here was exhorted to continue.

V2 – Hospitality is an integral part of love, for real love must be manifested in real actions in the real world. Feelings of goodwill towards others are useful only if they result in actions of goodwill towards others, whether those actions are prayer, encouraging, feeding and clothing, or any of a hundred other possibilities. To say that you love someone and yet do nothing for them is to prove that you do not love them at all.

Love is the ultimate motivation for hospitality, but the author of Hebrews also argued that his readers should exercise hospitality because they may be entertaining angels. In cases such as Abraham and Sarah (Genesis 18), Lot (Genesis 19:1-2), Gideon (Judges 6:11-26) and Manoah and his wife (Judges 13:3-21) they knew that they were entertaining angels, and in other cases they did not. In these cases, hospitality involved feeding their guests, and in the case of Lot, giving them a place to stay for the night.

Is it really possible that Christians today may be entertaining angels without knowing it? Absolutely, but if we don't know that they are angels, it may be impossible to prove. Much more goes on in the world than we see with our eyes or imagine with our minds, for God works beyond us. However we are surely to treat others as though they were angels.

V3 – Many people were prisoners in ancient Rome, and Christians had a knack for finding themselves in prison. Therefore followers of Christ needed to be especially faithful to visit those in jail; to encourage them

and tend their needs. As noted in the preceding chapter, believers also had to help those suffering adversity.

V4 – Marriage is the cornerstone of all relationships on earth, more fundamental than brother-sister, parent-child, friend-friend, or any other bond. It is also the cornerstone of all groupings of people on earth; when marriage fails, society fails. Therefore the Church must hold marriage in the highest regard. The breakdown of marriage is the breakdown of the nation.

V5 – Desiring what someone else has, whether goods, accomplishments, relationships, opportunities or reputation inevitably destroys the relationship with that person. The Way of Christ is above all else a relational system, first the relationship with God and then the relationship with everyone else in the body. These relationships are the highest priority.

Also, nothing is greater or more valuable than the presence of the living God, and all believers have that in equal measure. How then can we break fellowship with each other over temporal things which are nearly worthless by comparison (Philippians 3:4-11)?

V6 – Man can cause suffering and kill the body (Luke 12:4-5), but God ensures that the suffering is within bounds and that the body does not stay dead. Therefore man's power to do anything to Christians is limited and temporary. As a result, believers should have perfect courage to serve their Master.

V7 – Temporal rulers have an important task; to ensure that their people can live in relative peace and justice under the law. Spiritual rulers, the leaders in the church, also have an important task; to speak the word of God to their people and to demonstrate its working out in their own lives. Both need and are worthy of the prayers of their followers.

V8 – In one of the most encouraging passages in Scripture, the author of Hebrews assured his readers that Jesus Christ, amazing as He is, will also never change. He will never grow old, will never change His mind, and will never lose His power to heal and to save.

V9 – It has been rightly said that bad theology is a hard taskmaster. Therefore Christians must pursue the pure word of God and learn good theology; having a clear picture of who God is and what He does. “Established in grace” refers to peace and stability in the heart and mind. “Meats” refers to the rituals of the old order. The man who rightly understands God will be established in grace, but the man who does not will be forced to follow rituals which do not satisfy and which he does not understand.

V10 – Christians look to the altar on which Christ was sacrificed for their sins, while others look to the altars on which they sacrifice animals. These altars can never come together, for nothing can compare to the sacrifice of God Himself. No one who “serves the Tabernacle” and therefore rejects the sacrifice of the Lord can partake of the forgiveness that His sacrifice provides.

VV 11-13 – In the Old Testament system, animals were sacrificed outside the camp of Israel. In the crucifixion, Jesus Christ was sacrificed outside the city of Jerusalem, the assembly of the people. Believers must follow Him outside the camp, to separate themselves from the unbelieving world in faith and in conduct. In context, this would require these readers to leave the Levitical system.

V14 – The great saints of Hebrews sought a better country, and in the same manner Christians throughout the ages seek a better country. We have no city of our own on this earth, but we seek the City of God which is to come.

V15 – The work of Christ, the glory of His salvation and the hope of a new City are grounds for eternal thanks to God and praise for Him on the lips of His people.

V16 – Right actions and sharing generously with others are the only sacrifices acceptable to God on the part of His people (cf. Psalm 51:16-17).

V17 – The leaders of the church watch over the bodies and the spirits of their people. As watchmen, they will give an account not only for the words they have spoken, but also for the lives of those under their authority. The people should submit to their teaching and their guidance in matters of life, but they should submit with joy so that their leaders will be joyful, and everyone will benefit.

What was true in the 1st century AD is true today. Pastors and teachers in the modern church are responsible to God for the salvation and spiritual growth of those in their communities and congregations. They must speak the right word, show the right work, and serve in the right way. Such servants of the Lord must faithfully interpret and reveal the Holy Scriptures and the person of Christ in their words and lives. Pastors must live in roughly the same economic sphere as those to whom they minister.

For their part, people in communities should respect the local pastors whether or not they attend their church, or any church. Parishioners especially owe their pastor high regard. Pastors in ages past commanded far more respect, and even money, than pastors today, but their responsibilities are just as great. In showing honor to faithful local pastors, communities and congregations receive greater blessings from God.

V18 – Christians must pray for one another, especially that each would endure in doing good with a good conscience.

V19 – The author was once physically with his readers and longed to be so again. He asked his readers to pray that they would be together again soon. Note that real Christians love to be in the presence of other believers. They relish the fun, fellowship and faithfulness that they can enjoy together. People who call themselves Christians but cannot stand to be around other believers throw their own faith into question.

VV 20-21 – This phrase is not a request but a statement and ultimately a promise. The Prince of Peace who did such wonderful things in effecting the salvation of man is more than enough to equip His saints to do the job He has for them. Not only can he do it, He will do it.

V22 – For the last time the author asks his readers to carefully review and remember the teachings in this letter.

V23 – Timothy had been imprisoned, although the details are obscure. He had been released.

V24 – The author sent his heartfelt greetings. “Those from Italy greet you” may mean that he was in Italy when he wrote or simply that saints in Italy had told the author to pass on their greetings to his readers.

V25 – A final promise of the peace of God to his readers.