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Our Hope:

JESUS

**The Heart
of**

HEBREWS

John Allan Lavender

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“OUR HOPE: JESUS THE HEART OF HEBREWS”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Heb. 5:11- 6:3

In Alexander Dumas’ brilliant novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*, a young man is wrongly accused of a crime and is imprisoned on a lonely, barren island. In the dungeon he meets a monk who, sensing the character of the young man, tells him of a great treasure hidden on Monte Cristo, another island far away in a distant corner of the sea. Soon the monk dies.

Through a series of harrowing events, the young man escapes. He travels at great peril to the island, where, following a map traced indelibly on his mind, he finds the hidden treasure. The monk, he discovers, had not exaggerated. There are gems and precious jewelry, objects of gold and silver in unbelievable abundance. Overnight, the youth is an extremely rich man.

In time, he becomes known as the Count of Monte Cristo. No one knows the source nor the extent of his wealth. He lives like a king with a never-ending supply of riches. Whenever his bankroll gets low, he simply returns to the hidden treasure of Monte Cristo and replenishes his supply.

I propose that we follow the Count’s practice in our approach to the book of Hebrews. Here, truly, is a treasure chest of spiritual riches in unimaginable abundance. Unfortunately for many of us, it remains hidden treasure. Apart from a few well-known passages, the typical Christian knows little or nothing of the vast wealth of hope and help God has tucked away in this virtually “deserted island.”

As a beginning, therefore, let me take you to this treasure chest for a fresh look at the book of Hebrews, give you the key that unlocks it, and show you the riches God has put there. Then, like the Count of Monte Cristo, you can return at will and, chapter by chapter, take handfuls of these

“OUR HOPE: JESUS IS FOR REAL”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Heb 1:1-14

God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways,² in these last days has spoken to us in His Son, whom He appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the world. ³And He is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature, and upholds all things by the word of His power, when He had made purification of sins, He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high; ⁴having become as much better than the angels, as He has inherited a more excellent name than they.

⁵For to which of the angels did He ever say, “Thou art My Son, today I have begotten thee”? And again, “I will be a Father to Him, and He shall be a Son to Me”? And when He again brings the first-born into the world, He says, “And let all the angels of God worship Him.”

⁷And of the angels He says, “Who makes His angels winds, and His ministers a flame of fire.”

⁸But of the Son He says, “Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever, and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom. ⁹Thou hast loved righteousness and hated lawlessness; therefore God, Thy God, hath anointed Thee with the oil of gladness above Thy companions.”

¹⁰And, “Thou, Lord, in the beginning didst lay the foundation of the earth, and the heavens are the works of Thy hands; ¹¹they will perish, but Thou remainest; and they all will become old as a garment, ¹²and as a mantle Thou wilt roll them up; as a garment they will also be changed. But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end.”

¹³But to which of the angels has He ever said, “Sit at My right hand, until I make thine enemies a footstool for thy feet”? ¹⁴Are they not all ministering spirits, sent out to render service for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

The prize jewel in the treasure chest of Hebrews is Jesus. With characteristic directness, our writer wastes no time in introducing us to Christ, the subject of his book. Rarely has so much been said in so short a span as in the first three verses of Hebrews. In fewer than one hundred words, the writer of Hebrews declares the unrivaled superiority of Jesus over every other form or

“OUR HOPE: JESUS GOD’S LAST WORD”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 2:1-4

For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. ²For if the word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense, ³how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard, ⁴God also bearing witness with them, both by signs and wonders and by various miracles and by gifts of the Holy Spirit according to His own will.

Hebrews, like the hidden treasure of Monte Cristo, is a storehouse of abundance. Like the Count, we will never run short of resources if we follow his practice of returning to the treasure chest for further handfuls of riches which can be converted into the stuff required for creative and abundant living.

In the Count’s case, he went after material riches. In the Christian’s case, hopefully, the quest is for the spiritual riches which are ours in Christ. I don’t mean to imply material things are not important. They are. I simply mean spiritual resources are more important.

If you question this, work with me for a week as I try to help people facing personal, family, marriage, vocational, health or moral problems. Stand with me at the bedside of the millionaire who is dying. Or at the graveside of anyone, rich or poor. Perhaps then you will understand why I say, from my perspective, spiritual riches get the nod over material riches every time.

A broken-hearted young husband who had lost his wife who was only in her mid-thirties, stopped by to say, “Pastor, I never knew how much her faith meant until she was gone. Now, her faith is my hope!” Material riches are useful. Of greater significance are spiritual riches. It is my profound conviction that the most desperate need of our time is for a clear, unwavering, authentic

“OUR HOPE: JESUS PUTS IT ALL TOGETHER”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 2:5-18

For He did not subject to angels the world to come, concerning which we are speaking. ⁶But one has testified somewhere, saying, "What is man, that Thou rememberest him? Or the son of man, that Thou art concerned about him? ⁷Thou hast made him for a little while lower than the angels; Thou hast crowned him with glory and honor, and hast appointed him over the works of Thy hands; ⁹Thou hast put all things in subjection under his feet."

For in subjecting all things to him, He left nothing that is not subject to him. But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him. ⁹But we do see Him who has been made for a little while lower than the angels, namely, Jesus, because of the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that by the grace of God He might taste death for every one.

¹⁰For it was fitting for Him for whom are all things, and through whom are all things, in bringing many sons to glory, to perfect the author of their salvation through sufferings. ¹¹For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified are all from one Father; for which reason He is not ashamed to call them brethren, ¹²saying, "I will proclaim Thy name to My brethren, In the midst of the congregation I will sing Thy praise." ¹³And again, "I will put My trust in Him." And again, "Behold, I and the children whom God has given Me."

¹⁴Since then the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; ¹⁵and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives. ¹⁶For assuredly He does not give help to angels, but He gives help to the seed of Abraham.

¹⁷Therefore, He had to be made like His brethren in all things, that He might become a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make propitiation for the sins of the people. ¹⁸For since He Himself was tempted in that which He has suffered, He is able to come to the aid of those who are tempted.

The book of Hebrews was written to a group of Christians who had come out of the rigid legalism

of tradition-bound Judaism into the glorious liberty and energizing life of Jesus. They had started well. Had run true for a time. Then, through neglect, stopped growing. They settled into a kind of organized mediocrity. Instead of being teachers, they needed to be taught. Instead of feeding upon the sincere meat of the word, they had to be “spoon fed” by their pastor

Because of the spiritual malnutrition springing from their laziness, they were on the verge of becoming dropouts. Of turning away from the tough liberty of authentic Christianity with its individual responsibility for one’s own spiritual state in Christ, to the easy legalism of, "Do this or that, and you can be sure everything is right with your soul." In short, they were saved-sinners in danger of suffering the devastating double loss discussed at length in our previous chapter.

The parallel between that first-century church and the twentieth-century church is startling. We, too, have Jesus Folk who came out of spiritual darkness into the light of Christ. People who were born again, and in many instances, joined some church. Ran true for awhile; then, for any number of reasons which seemed plausible at the time, fell prey to the disease of spiritual infantilism. From that point on, they grew little, if at all, in their understanding of and commitment to the person of Christ. Just as those first century believers were in grave peril, so, too, are their twentieth-century counterparts.

Because there is such similarity between the people to whom Hebrews was first written and many Christians today, it is important to see how the author of this book deals with this deadly threat. His solution is amazingly simple. He directs them to Jesus. He reminds them of who Jesus was. What Jesus did. All Jesus means in terms of practical daily living. He starts by emphasizing the deity of Jesus and makes seven statements about Christ which could never be made of a man, even a great and good man.

But the writer of Hebrews, who was himself so very human, seems to sense it is not the deity of Jesus which really touches the human heart. Because we are human, deity has no place to latch onto us. So, in urging his readers to really think through who Jesus was, our author not only

directs their attention to Christ’s deity, but asks them to remember and rejoice in His humanity.

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In chapter 1 he said seven things which could never be said of man. In chapter 2 he says seven things which could never be said of God.

1. Jesus was a little lower than the angels, on man’s own level (2:9).
2. Jesus suffered death, which God could never do (2:9).
3. Jesus possessed a human nature and called men brothers (2:11,12).
4. Jesus was made of flesh and blood (2:14).
5. Jesus had a human pedigree. He came from the seed of Abraham (2:16).
6. Jesus had all of the experiences of man, being made in the likeness of His brothers (2:17).
7. Jesus experienced temptation (2:18), which is impossible for God. As James explains, God cannot be tempted (James 1:13).

The seven things said of Jesus in chapter 1 could never be said of man, proving His deity.

The seven things said of Jesus in chapter 2 could never be said of God, proving His humanity.

Why did the writer of Hebrews take such pains to show Jesus was truly God and truly man?

Because, if Jesus is to be our hope, we must not only be able to look at Him and say, “Aha, so that’s what man was meant to be.” We must also be able to look at Him and say, “So this is what God is like.” Jesus puts it all together. As true man, He shows us what man was meant to be.

He also reveals what you and I can become through Him. And here we get to the nub of it, for if your heart is anything like my own, your deepest desire is to be better than you are. To be all you have the capacity to be.

God’s Intention

To get the full impact of Christ’s role as true man or, to use that figure we have employed thus far, to see the full value of this next handful of riches taken from the treasure chest of Hebrews, we turn to Psalm 8.

Here we have a portrait of man as God meant man to be. Despite what some Bible teachers say, I do not see that the eighth Psalm has any Messianic significance. It does not speak about Jesus, the Messiah. It is a lyric cry to the glory of man as God meant man to be.

“What is man, that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man, that Thou dost care for him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God, and dost crown him with glory and majesty! Thou does make him to rule over the works of Thy hands; Thou hast put all things under his feet” (Psalm 8:4-6).

This last sentence directs our search for understanding to the very first thing scripture says about man as God meant him to be. *“Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth’”* (Genesis 1:26).

When we find God’s intention for man as defined in Genesis 1, reiterated in Psalm 8:6, we know the statement is not a veiled reference to Jesus, the Messiah. Rather, it is one stanza in a hymn of praise to the glory of man as God meant man to be.

As the Psalmist ponders the question, *“What is man?”* he is overcome with wonder. As God originally made man, he was a creature of incredible dignity. There was in him a dimension which escapes all scientific formulations. Man was the crown of God's creation. Controlled by the Spirit of God dwelling in him, man was perfectly capable of properly administering this delicately balanced creation in which everything was in tune with everything else. As Shakespeare has Hamlet say, *“What a piece of work is a man.”* The Psalmist would agree. As God first made him, man was something!

Returning to Hebrews 2, we see how this literary gem brings the whole Biblical narrative together in mini-form. Beginning with verse 6, the writer goes back and picks up these phrases from Genesis 1 and Psalm 8 to declare that God's driving concern is, and always has been, man’s

redemption.

Man is the focal point of God’s concern. Our text places him “a little lower than the angels” (2:7). The original Hebrew says he is “*a little lower than God Himself.*” Think of it. Man, as God meant and made him to be, was someone exceedingly special. However, God’s intention soon met with frustration. Into this idyllic scene of perfect harmony a strident note was interjected. “But now we do not yet see all things subjected to him” (2:8b).

What you and I are today is something other than God meant us to be. Instead of a gradual evolution upward, man has been, and still is, in a steady slide downward from the pinnacle of glory on which he once stood. As things are, man is not the master of his fate. He is at the mercy of many forces and foes stronger than himself.

To put it plainly, as he is, man’s a flop. He can’t even control himself, let alone his destiny. This utter frustration of God’s intention for man is the product of one thing: disobedience. In the beginning, man had perfect and total domination over the earth on one condition: obedience. “*From the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat,*” God said (Genesis 2:17). Man ignored this simple injunction, partook of the forbidden fruit and fell. Thus, man as we know him today is a far cry from man as God made him and meant him to be. As a result, our world, country, home and private lives are a mess.

God’s Intervention

But don’t despair! There is hope! “*For we see Jesus*” (2:9, KJV). God’s frustration led to God’s intervention in the person of Jesus Christ. God will not be defeated. His intention for man has never changed nor been rescinded. When one man, Adam, failed to fulfill his intended purpose, God raised up another man, Jesus, who was fully capable of undoing the ugly implications of Adam’s sin.

When we look at these four words in their context, there are few more beautiful phrases than this

one: “*But we see Jesus.*” The last word about man has not been said until we see Jesus! At one time He was “*superior to (higher than) the angels*” (1:4). Then, to open a way for a man to become man as God meant him to be, He was made “*a little lower than the angels*” (2:9) Oh, the span Christ bridged. From “*higher than*” to “*lower than.*” In terms of His humanity, Jesus put it all together. He took on the flesh and blood characteristics of man in order that He might give us a living motion picture of man as God meant him to be, and as he can be, if he gives up his rebellion against God.

Because of the humanity of Jesus, there is hope. Hope for saved-sinners. The world looks at our sorry record of sin and puts a period. “That’s the end of it,” the world says. “There’s no hope. You’re through. Finished. No good!” God looks at the same sorry record of sin and puts a comma. He says, “Look to Jesus. Keep your eyes on Jesus. Stay close to Jesus. For Jesus is your hope.”

Jesus puts it all together. Unlike Adam who, through disobedience, lost his capacity to be what he was meant to be, Jesus, through obedience, rose to the full measure of manhood. He became a living demonstration of man as man was designed to be. As true man, He fulfilled the language of Psalm 8. As true man, Jesus exercised dominion over the earth. He stilled the sea. Called the winds to rest. Healed the sick. Raised the dead. There was nothing in creation which was not subject to Him.!

And hear this: What Jesus was, you and I can become! Sounds impossible, doesn’t it?. But that’s the thrilling claim of scripture. “The scope of His courage; the strength of His character; the stretch of His insight; the depth of His love; the width and breadth of His compassion; the energizing power of His life all belong by divine decree to the man or woman who will trust and obey.”¹ Wow!

That was God's intention from the beginning and it has not changed. Though it met with frustration at a tree in the garden, it was met by intervention at another tree on the hill of Calvary.

God, who in time past spoke in every conceivable way to man through the prophets, at long last spoke to the world through His Son. *“But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels for the suffering of death, crowned with glory and honor; that He by the grace of God should taste death for every man”* (2:9, KJV).

The Modus Operandi of Redemption

How did Jesus put it all together? How is it that, as true man, He made redemption possible, gave to us hope for tomorrow and the possibility of victory today? The writer of Hebrews says He accomplished this in three ways. Through His life, His death, and His reigning power.

His Life

First, by becoming man, and through perfect obedience remaining true man, Jesus put it all together in His life. *“For verily he took not on him the nature of angels; but he took on him the seed of Abraham”* (2:16, KJV). Jesus didn’t come to save angels, so He didn’t take on an angel’s nature. He came to save man, so He assumed a man’s nature. Jesus became man to help men. He became like us so we might become like Him. That was the purpose of the Incarnation.

When our author refers to *“the seed of Abraham,”* he is saying: only as man could Christ provide help or hope for man. To be an effective Savior, He had to be of the same species as those He came to save. That’s precisely what He was. Seed of Abraham. Bone of our bone. Flesh of our flesh. And, amazingly, he is not ashamed to be called our brother. *“For both He who sanctifies and those who are sanctified (that is both Savior and those who are saved) are all from one Father. He is not ashamed to call them brethren”* (2:11).

Think of it! In spite of the raunchy bunch we are, in spite of the depths to which we might fall, in spite of the ugliness of our sin, Jesus willingly and joyfully identifies Himself with us and is not ashamed to call us brother! How sad, how terribly, incredibly sad when we are ashamed of Him! When through silence or careless indifference we deny Him who tasted death for everyone (2:9).

His Death

Through His life He became like us. Then, through His death He became our Savior. This is really what Hebrews is all about. Bible-time people were expecting a conquering Messiah cut after the pattern of King David, who lifted Israel to her highest pinnacle of glory. “Take us back to that,” they said to Jesus. “Re-establish the glory of David's kingdom.” When Jesus didn’t do so, they turned away from Him in droves. They couldn’t understand why, if Jesus was so great, He had to suffer and die. Why He didn’t immediately claim His messianic throne and crown. The writer of Hebrews explains that “*only through death could He be crowned with glory and honor*” (2:9).

As we shall see later, the balance of Hebrews focuses largely on the significance of Jesus’ death. How it fulfilled (fills full of meaning) the Old Testament references to sacrifice and salvation. Our author’s purpose was to show those early sinner-saints it was pointless for them to try to add something to what Jesus had done. Jesus paid it all. Put it all together. Tasted death for every man.

Every man’s main adversary is the fear of death (2:15). This is true whether he be rich man, poor man, beggar man, thief, doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief. It is the fear of death which causes people to do all kinds of strange, destructive things to themselves. It is the fear of death which causes people to eat, drink and attempt to be merry.

Out of anxiety that tomorrow they might die and miss some “new” experience, folk take drugs. Sleep around. Amass money. Or what have you. It is fear of death which causes people to become creatures of time instead of citizens of eternity. To sell their soul for a mess of pottage.

For that reason, Jesus tasted death for every man to “*deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives*” (2:15). Another translation puts it this way: “*He drained the cup of death for every man.*” I love that. It means Jesus completely and fully defused our main anxiety, our primary adversary, the fear of death.

He did so to get men into heaven, yes. Thank God for that. But even more important, He did it to get God on earth in men who will not be controlled by the spirit of fear, but by the Spirit of life and love and liberty; the Spirit of God Himself.

His Reigning Power

Now, the only one who can make the life of God possible in you and me on earth is Jesus. Jesus, who put it all together in His own life, and wants to help us do the same! Through His life, he is our brother. Through His death, He is our Savior. Also, through His reigning power, He is our pioneer. The Greek word translated “*author of their salvation*” in verse 10 of our text, is translated “*captain,*” “*leader,*” and “*pioneer*” in others. I find this fascinating. The word really means trailblazer. It describes one who goes ahead through uncharted, perilous territory, breaking trail so those who follow can do so safely.

Someone has used this analogy. A ship crashes on the rocks. Everybody on board is in great peril unless someone swims to shore with a line. When attached to land, the line becomes a lifeline across which others may go to safety. The one who first makes that swim is “*the pioneer of their salvation.*”

That’s what Jesus has done. He is our pioneer. He doesn’t merely point the way to truth and life, He is the way, the truth, the life. He is our trailblazer. The One who opens a path for us and invites us to follow Him. Learn of Him. Live with Him. Thus, God can work in us and through us, here and now on earth, to do His will as it is being done in heaven.

Is Jesus qualified for this task? Indeed He is. He was made perfect through suffering. How could this One who *is* perfect, be made perfect? The answer is simple. The word “perfect” has two meanings. One has to do with moral and ethical perfection. It refers to one’s character. Obviously, this particular meaning has no relevance to Jesus. From the standpoint of character, He was without flaw.

But the second meaning is beautifully applicable. It speaks of the process of becoming completely effective in whatever task one has to do. In that sense, Jesus was made perfect. He became complete in terms of being and doing everything a savior needs to be and do.

To really put it all together in terms of humanity, to be the pioneer of our salvation, and to open a glory road over which the rest of us could safely travel, Jesus had to go by way of Gethsemane and Golgotha. Thus, He was made perfect through suffering. Not in terms of character, but saviorhood. Through the anguish and agony of the cross, He became utterly adequate to meet our need, and to be our hope.

Proof of this is found in the description applied to Him: “*merciful and faithful*” (2:17). These two words tell us Jesus not only puts it all together from man’s point of view, but from God’s perspective as well. God looks at Jesus who was subjected to the full fury of the tempter’s power without sin and calls Him “*faithful*.” Man looks at Jesus who was tempted, thus knowing what it’s like to be a man, and calls Him “*merciful*.” In the union of these two virtues we really see how Jesus puts it all together. He is the perfect mediator between God and man.

Jesus is not a weak-kneed jellyfish who doles out salvation to the good, the bad and the indifferent. He is “faithful.” Neither is He a stern, unrelenting, unfeeling judge who rejoices in seeing people slip into hell. He is “merciful.” He understands. He is our hope.

Thus, we come full circle to God’s intention. Never lose sight of what God meant you to be. Never lose sight of God’s intention for your life. It has not changed. God wants you to have dominion. He wants you to be all you can be. He has sent His Son to make that possible. He has given you Jesus who, in His own life, put it all together and now wants to walk and work with you so His dream for you becomes reality.

A preacher friend shares a digest of The Man of La Mancha, the story of Don Quixote.² Quixote was a chap who went through life never really seeing the actual, but more the potential. Because

of his buoyant spirit, his commitment to the good in people, his ability to draw out their best, the potential had a strange way of becoming the actual.

One day he went into an inn and met a wench of a woman by the name of Aldonza . She was a rough, brazen harlot. But Quixote didn't see her as such. He saw her as a queen. A creature of beauty, grace and loveliness. So he called her Dulcinea.

She didn't know what to make of this. No man had ever treated her that way before. At first she was furious. She said, “My name is Aldonza , not Dulcinea. I'm a harlot, you fool. Don't you understand?”

But in all their encounters, he never catered to the worst in her. Instead, he drew out the best. She remained for him Dulcinea. In the moving climax of the play, Don Quixote is on his death bed. Aldonza, dressed in a beautiful queenly gown, kneels at his bedside. When he asks, “Who is it?” she replies, “It's Dulcinea, my Lord. Don't you remember? Dulcinea, your queen.!” Because of his vision, the potential had become the actual. The wench had become a lady of queenly grace and beauty.

This is a modern parable of Christ and us. Jesus doesn't see us as other people see us. He doesn't even see us as we see ourselves. Instead, He sees us as we can become. As we were *meant* to be. He looks inside and sees our true potential trapped there. He says, I want to liberate that. I want to free your true self. I want to take the bits and pieces of your fragmented life and help you put it all together. So right now, today, here on earth, you can begin to experience the glory of your humanity by being the person God meant you to be.

Isn't that what you really want? More than anything in all the world, don't you want to be better than you are? All you were meant to be? It's possible. The secret is to “trust and obey, for there is no other way, to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey.”

Notes

1. Harley Swiggum, The Bethel Series. New Testament (Madison, WI: Adults Christian Education Foundation, P.O. Box 5305, Madison, WI 53705, 1961), p. 22.
2. A. John Nastari, Questions Christ Asked! (Lake Oswego, OR: A. John Nastari, 2890 SW Dellwood Dr., Lake Oswego, OR 97034), p. 64.

word of hope. Why, then, have I turned to Hebrews, unquestionably one of the most difficult, obscure, overlooked, underused books in the Bible? The answer is simple. No other book ties the Old and New Testaments so closely together. No other portion of scripture so clearly shows that God has been, and is, acting through history to win back His creation lost through sin.

When we grasp the awesome fact that God has His holy hand on human affairs and will not be defeated, we have hope. Not groundless, vulnerable, wishful thinking. Hope! Real hope rooted in both the living and written Word of God. Therefore, it will be worth all the effort required to put on our thinking caps and really wrestle with what the book of Hebrews has to say.

Apart from getting to know the person of Jesus Christ intimately, the one thing which has given me the greatest sense of hope is the Biblical record of God acting in history from the beginning to this very moment. Continued deeper perception of God’s grand theme of redemption recorded in the Bible and the discovery of Jesus’ part in that scheme have been a source of delight which sets my soul singing. Because of all I have seen God doing in the past, I have hope for what He is doing in the present and will be doing in the future.

One of the things that comes through loud and clear when we probe into Hebrews is that Jesus is not an isolated phenomenon. There is a link between the Old and New Testaments. Between the old and the new covenants. Between the old and new demonstrations of redemption. Standing behind all of them is the same God. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New.

And this God has never left Himself without a witness, as the opening verses of the book of Hebrews make clear. *“God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers [by] the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in His Son”* (1:1,2a).

Why has God gone to such pains to break through to man? To speak to man? For this simple reason: God and God alone can answer the question man is asking! Who is God? Only God can

say. What is God like? Only God can tell. How do you know Him and come into fellowship with Him? Only God can answer.

This is precisely what God has done. From the very first word of the very first verse of the Old Testament through the very last word of the very last verse of the New, God has been busy striving, in every conceivable fashion, to make His Word and will known to man.

Genesis 1 and 2 describe what God meant this creation to be. As He made it, it was a system in which everything was in perfect relationship to everything else. There was harmony between God and man. Between man and himself. Between man and his brother. Between man and his environment. To use contemporary language, there was theological, psychological, sociological and ecological harmony. That’s what God intended His creation to be.

Genesis 3 through 11 describes how man’s self-will, pride, lust, greed and folly destroyed the harmony which existed between God and himself. As a result, harmony no longer prevails at any level of creation. Havoc reigns. Beginning with Genesis 12 and continuing on through the book of Revelation, the Bible reveals what God has done, is doing and will do to restore the creation cursed through sin.

What we have in the tiny book of Hebrews is a capsule version of the Bible’s long story of God’s re-creative process. Here we have in mini-form everything God has said to make Himself and His will known to the world.

We have taken a long, hard look at the person of Jesus Christ. In a startling series of staggering statements which could not be made of prophets nor any man, nor of angels, the writer of Hebrews nails down the inescapable fact of Christ’s deity, dignity, majesty, eternity, equity, immutability, sovereignty and ultimate glory.

He, in the brief four-verse exhortation which opens chapter 2, focuses on three things. A great

salvation, the benefits of which are in peril because of a great danger which, if not guarded against, will result in believers suffering a great loss.

A Great Salvation

Look first at this great salvation. It is great for three reasons. One, it came through “*the Lord*” (2:3). Ours is a God-revealed salvation. It came directly through the lips and life of Jesus. Every other revelation of God’s intention to do something about the problem of sin came secondhand. Through ancient seers. Or angels. This was direct communication. God Himself speaking through the person of His Son. This was not a piecemeal, partial revelation like that of the prophets. It was, and is, a living, energizing, authentic word spoken by One who was Himself the fulfillment of all the prophecies the prophets had uttered. Truly, our hope is in Jesus, God’s last word!

In Luke 24 we are told that following His resurrection Jesus met a couple of His disciples on the road to Emmaus. There He showed them in the scriptures everything said of Him. Now remember, at that point in time there was no New Testament. By “*scriptures*” (Luke 24:45), He was referring to the Old Testament. Jesus took the Old Testament and showed them everything said about Himself there. Beginning with Genesis on through Malachi.

When Jesus came to earth and spoke God’s last, best word to the world, He opened up and filled full of meaning all the Old Testament symbolisms regarding the Messiah. For the first time these types and symbols made sense. The bits and pieces began to fit together. Ours is a great salvation because it is a direct and authentic word from the Lord Himself

Then also, this is a great salvation because it was confirmed by eyewitnesses. “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? After it was at the first spoken through the Lord, it was confirmed to us by those who heard*”(2:3).

We can put our faith in this great salvation, the writer of Hebrews says, because it is supported by

a two-part guarantee. First, the word of eyewitnesses who received the message firsthand and transmitted it to us uncorrupted. Second, the willingness of those same eyewitnesses to die for the very message they were proclaiming. This is a great salvation because it was confirmed by people who themselves were transformed from doubters to martyrs based on what they saw and heard. If they were willing to die for this salvation, we can have confidence to live by it!

Furthermore, this is a great salvation because of what it accomplished. When the Good News was introduced to the world, it produced signs. Wonders. Fantastic miracles. Angels appeared to announce the coming of this Savior. A heavenly host sang at His birth. Throughout His lifetime He performed miraculous deeds. Following His resurrection and ascension into heaven, that same miracle-working power was conferred upon His disciples.

The man at the temple gate arose and walked at the command of Peter and John. Peter, himself, was released from prison while Christians prayed. So similar were the lives of those first-century disciples to the miracle-working life of the Lord Jesus they were given His name. They were called Christians, that is, “little Christs.”

The reason for this remarkable power on their part was that this great salvation included the gifts of the Holy Spirit bestowed upon believers as God deemed best. The gifts of the Spirit were distributed “*according to His (God’s) own will*” (2:4). This is significant. It harmonizes perfectly with 1 Corinthians 12:11 where we are told the Spirit of God divides all spiritual gifts “*to each one individually just as He wills.*” If we are wise we will let God decide what gift or gifts He thinks we need. Our concern should be that our lives show forth the fruit of the Spirit which is love. Every day we ought to take our spiritual pulse to determine the love quotient in our life and witness.

Love for others was a primary characteristic of first-century Christians. It was the changed lives of those people that provided the best of all arguments for this great salvation. It wasn’t what

they said, or even what they did. It was what they *were* that made the difference. Intuitively those early believers knew they had to be real, as well as right!

Recently I came across something from the Christian Herald magazine by Kenneth Wilson:

“Christianity for my money has more to do with being real, in the sense of being non-phoney, than in being right in the sense of having all the answers.”

Yea and amen!

This is a great salvation! It is great because it came from God. It is great because it was confirmed by eyewitnesses who themselves were transformed from doubters to martyrs by what they had seen and heard. It is great because of what it achieves: change in the lives of people. Liberating them from the littleness of a Satan-dominated life to the greatness of a Spirit-led life.

Salvation is the greatest of God’s accomplishments. Greater far than the creation, is the re-creation God is achieving of that which was destroyed by sin. “*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation?*” A salvation that gives us a great Savior. Lifts us out of a great misery . Imparts to us a great holiness. Fills us with a great happiness. Is evidenced by a great love. And inspires us with a great hope. “*How shall we escape, if we neglect so great a salvation?*” The answer is we shan’t, for we can’t. There is no escape!

A Great Danger

Those first-century recipients of this great salvation were in grave danger because of their failure to appropriate and enjoy the numerous blessings available to them in Christ. This is what the author is getting at when he says, “*Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it*” (2:1).

As I pointed out earlier, we do not know as an absolute certainty who wrote the book of Hebrews. I am inclined to believe it was written by a pastor, because what he says in this second

chapter is clearly spoken from a pastor’s heart. The writer of Hebrews is not satisfied with doctrine for doctrine’s sake. He is not content to settle for right believing. He insists there must be a practical application of that believing to daily living. Christians must be real as well as right! This is the burden of every pastor’s heart.

In some versions the second chapter begins with the word “*therefore*.” Someone has said, “Whenever you find a ‘therefore’ in scripture, you must ask yourself what’s the therefore there for?” In this instance, it is an invitation to consider and act upon the logic of everything said in chapter 1.

This man with a pastor’s heart is saying to his flock: Look, friends, if I have made my case for the deity of Jesus, if He is in fact the message and not just the messenger, let me point out there is a moral to it all. There is a “so what?” element to my sermon. We must be on guard against drift instead of decisive Christian living.

Notice, please, the writer classifies himself with those to whom he is writing, “Therefore we.” He is pointing a finger at them, as every pastor is called upon to do, however painful at times, but he also has three fingers and a thumb pointing at himself. “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*” The great danger faces all believers. Layman and preacher alike.

Fritz Kreisler, the great violinist, was being interviewed. One of the questions was, “What would happen if you stopped practicing? How long would it be before others noticed the neglect?” He answered, “If I stopped practicing for a day, I would know the difference. If I stopped for a week, the musical critics would know the difference. If I stopped for a month, the whole musical world would know the difference.”

“*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*” Again I say, we shan’t. We can’t. There is no escape. The law of cause and effect is inexorable. Universal. We cannot neglect this

great salvation without paying a dreadful price. “*Therefore,*” the scripture says, “*we ought to give the more earnest heed;*” (KJV) that is, we ought to listen, really listen, with a very special kind of intensity to everything we have been told, and are being told, about this great salvation.

Our need is not for some new thing, though that seems to be the driving demand today. Our need is to really listen to, heed and act upon, “the old-time religion.” The great danger we face is that through indifference we will allow the blessings, privileges and joys of a great salvation to slip through our fingers.

Now, it rarely happens in a moment. There is hardly ever a specific time or particular moment when we deliberately and belligerently say “no” to the lordship of Christ in our life. It almost never happens that way. Instead, quietly, slowly at first, without our even perceiving it, surely without the world knowing or even caring, we begin to drift. Somewhere along the line it occurs to us how far we are slipping away from God, Christ and the church. But, oddly, it doesn’t bother us. It doesn’t seem to matter. We just don’t care.

A Great Loss

When we reach this point, we are on the verge of experiencing the third thing about which this scripture speaks: A great loss.

Our salvation is a wonderful gift from God. It is a glorious inheritance. But, it carries with it inescapable obligations and responsibilities. We are to grow in our understanding of what it is and how it works, so we can make it work for us and enjoy the fruits of it.

Someone has illustrated it this way. You are given a farm. Fertile, beautiful, productive land. It doesn’t cost a cent. You are given title and deed to it. It’s yours. At that point you can work it and make it productive. Or you can neglect it. If you do the latter, you do not forfeit title to the farm. It still belongs to you. But you will be deprived of the blessings and rewards the farm

might have brought had you properly worked it. Your neglect will make the farm a drag. A millstone. A liability even, because of its lack of productivity. The taxes, upkeep, and overhead will eat you up because there is no income to help defray them.

The same thing is true of our great salvation. It is a gift of God. We have title to it. We have deed to a place prepared in the heavens not made with hands. It’s ours. Now we have a choice. We can work it and make it productive. Or we can neglect it. If we follow the second alternative, it becomes a millstone. A burden. A drag.

Christianity is a liability to a person who doesn’t work it and let it work for him. It makes demands and provides the resources to meet those demands. But you have to work at this gift, and let this gift work for you, if there is to be a balancing out of resources to meet the responsibilities that go along with having it

Even more serious, the problem is not limited to time. It stretches into eternity. Your reward or loss at the harvest time in heaven depends entirely upon what you’ve done with this great salvation here on earth. *“For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad”* (2 Cor. 5:10).

First Corinthians, chapter 3, explains that at *“the judgment seat of Christ”* every Christian’s work will be tested by fire. If, when subjected to the test of fire, his life’s work is burned up, *“he himself will be saved, but only as through fire”* (1 Cor. 3:13-15).

The writer of the book of Hebrews puts himself in the same company as the people to whom he is writing. He was obviously a Christian. So were they. But these people who had received a great salvation were in peril of great danger: the suffering of a great loss. It’s possible for any of us, at any time, to exert our will and turn aside from the Lordship of Christ. When that happens, we

suffer a double loss. We lose the immediate joy which would have been ours had we continued to walk side by side with Him. We also lose the future rewards of faithfulness in heaven.

The Bible makes it clear that, based on the fidelity and service of each Christian when judged by Jesus at the judgment seat of Christ, rewards will be given (Mt. 25:14-30; Lk. 19:11-27). Rank will also be assigned. Jesus said His followers will range from least to greatest (Mt. 5:19) and will differ in nearness to Him (Mk. 10:35-40).

How can there be such differences between Christians, all of whom will be perfect in heaven? Consider newly manufactured light bulbs. Each is perfect. But 60 watt bulbs do not burn as brightly as 100 watt bulbs. Nor do 100 watt bulbs give the same light as those of 1000 watts. Each is perfect, yet not all glow with equal intensity.

The same must be said of Christians in heaven. Each will be perfect in Christ, yet each will differ in rank and reward. This knowledge explains our author’s urgency in asking, “*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*” The fact is, we can’t escape. Lost time and opportunity for Spirit-filled fidelity and service are irretrievable. Lost, too, are the blessings on earth and the rewards in heaven which walking in the Spirit would have produced. Since works of the flesh -- including the harvest of our wayward, willful, egocentric periods of life -- lack permanency much like “wood, hay and straw,” they will burn up. Though we survive personally, our loss will be severe.

The works of the flesh simply have no lasting value. And, on earth, we are either walking in the Spirit or working in the flesh. We are never partly Spirit-led and self-dominated at the same time. A mix of 51 to 49, for instance. Or even 99 to 1. No! It’s a clear case of either/or. Either we are 100 percent in the Spirit, or 100 percent under the flesh. We may switch from one to the other often and quickly, but we are never under the control of both simultaneously.

The graphic (see below) illustrates one saved-sinner’s walk with Christ. My objective in using the graphic is to make it painfully clear that what each of us must reckon with is the total loss of everything produced in the flesh. The impermanency of what our text calls “*wood, hay and straw*” is depicted by a dotted line. These include achievements won through what Watchman Nee calls “the latent power of the soul.” They may have temporal value. One can make a pretty good living dealing in “*wood, hay and straw*.” But the writer of Hebrews identifies them as “*dead works*” (Heb. 6:1; 9:14). In terms of making a life, they have no eternal value, in contrast to “*gold, silver and precious stones*,” shown as a solid line. He is speaking metaphorically, of course, but he makes his point.

word of revelation God has given to men. And God has given many such words. From the start He took the initiative to make Himself known to His creation (Genesis 3:9). In diverse ways and on numerous occasions throughout the ages, God has given man as much knowledge of Himself as could be understood at the time.

“In many portions and in many ways” (1:1) is an interesting phrase. It indicates that in the past God has spoken in bits and pieces. A portion here. A section there. But never was everything revealed to everyone. Meeting man at whatever level of understanding He found him, God gave a piece of the puzzle to this person. Another to that. Yet, over a great span of time, these various fragments fitted together in an ever-expanding revelation by God of Himself.

One of my favorite preachers is Clarence Cranford. For many years he pastored the great Calvary Baptist Church of Washington, D.C. A decade or so ago I heard “Cranny” preach a sermon in which he gave us something of the broad sweep of scripture as it unveils the glory and grandeur of God.

He took us back to the time when men thought there were many gods, believing them to be whimsical. Religion consisted pretty much of appeasing these capricious deities. Then “Cranny” led us into the Old Testament and showed us how, out of their wandering and suffering, a nation arose to say there are not many gods, but one. And, He is not whimsical, He is dependable. *“Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?”* asked Abraham (Genesis 18:25). It was more an affirmation of faith than a question.

But, dependable in what way? The prophet Amos said, I know we can depend on His justice. His justice is as stern as the laws of the desert in which I keep my sheep. God is like a plumb line. Anything not true to that plumb line will eventually topple over.

The prophet Hosea said, Yes, that’s true, but God is more than just. Even after my wife Gomer proved untrue to me, not once but several times, I loved her. When she was about to be sold as a

slave, I bought her back. God is greater than I. If I could love Gomer in spite of her infidelity, God can and does love Israel, though Israel has often been unfaithful to Him.

The prophet Jonah said, Yes, that's true. But God loves more than Israel. He told me to go to Nineveh to preach, but I didn't want to go. The Ninevites were our enemies. So I went to Joppa, and bought a ticket to Tarshish, heading as far in the other direction as possible. But I discovered you can't run away from God. He turned me around, sent me back to Nineveh, and there I preached. A great spiritual awakening took place. One day, as I examined a gourd destroyed by worms, God's truth flashed in on me. I realized if I could be concerned about a gourd vine, God could be concerned about something infinitely more precious, the soul of the pagan Ninevites.

Then the prophet Jeremiah drew a picture of God. He saw God as a potter, patently remaking a marred vessel. The prophet Isaiah went a step further, and painted a more accurate portrait. God, he said, is like a suffering servant who took upon Himself the sins of the world.

Still, the Hebrew people as a whole could not understand. A god of vengeance? That they could grasp. A god of seven thunders? Such a deity appealed to them. But a God willing to be afflicted with their transgressions and bruised for their iniquities? Such a God was beyond their comprehension

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Then, one day, that picture of a suffering servant took flesh, and God who “*in many and various ways*” had spoken to the fathers by the prophets, spoke at long last through His Son. No longer did men need to ask, “What is God like?” They saw Him revealed in a life. On a cross!

It's important to remember none of these great and good men of the Old Testament had the whole picture. They grasped it in bits and pieces. A wonderful revelation here. A glorious truth there.

Insight came to them in various modes. Dreams. Visions. Audible voices.

Then, for a period of three hundred years or so, God stopped speaking through the prophets. It was almost as if He had abandoned His people. Suddenly, at just the right moment (Galatians

4:4,5), God spoke again! This time in a life. The life of His Son. Through that Son, God gave more than a piecemeal revelation of Himself. In Jesus the world saw more than various shades and hues of light. They saw pure light. The Light of the world Himself!

The Bible is God’s unfolding self-revelation. It proceeds step by step. There is a steady progression up to the person of Christ. Beyond Him, progression stops. Jesus is God’s last word to the world. Without being blasphemous, we can look at Him and say, “That’s all there is, folks; there isn’t any more.”

God who, in various ways and at different times, in bits and pieces, spoke through the prophets, has in these last days, these gospel days, these good news days, spoken through His Son. In that Son, God has given the dearest, truest, finest, purest, clearest word about Himself. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

Introducing Jesus Christ

His Superiority. Obviously, this raises questions. Who is this Son? How does He stand in relationship to the Father? What are His credentials? What makes Him superior to the prophets?

The writer of Hebrews answers by making six staggering statements about Jesus. He is “*heir of all things*” (1:2). Ponder that. Had the scripture said He was heir of God’s things, we would have read the obvious. To learn He is heir of all things is incredible. The glory, riches and greatness of God? Yes. Also, the weakness, heartbreak and brokenness of man! This Son, who will one day rule by right of inheritance, will not be indifferent to our anguish. He knows what it’s like to be human. He’s been one! He is heir of *all* things. Therefore, we have hope. He who will reign has borne our pain.

He is also the architect of the ages “*through whom also He [God] made the world*” (1:2). This son is not merely the historical Jesus. He is pre-existent. Pre-incarnate. The one who said, “*Before Abraham was born, I AM*” (John 8:58). Jesus is the clue to all that is. The explanation

of creation. The interpreter of history. The one who alone gives meaning and sense to it all.

More than that, Jesus “*is the radiance of His glory and the exact representation of His nature.*”(1:3). No one has ever seen God's full glory. Even what we have in Jesus is a scaled-down version. Something we humans can perceive. Like a two-way mirror, Christ, at one and the same time, reveals and conceals. God looks at Jesus and sees His glory concealed there. Man looks at Jesus and sees God's glory revealed there. As the ancient hymn declares,

“The Sun of God in glory beams
Too bright for us to scan,
But we can face the light that streams
From the mild Son of man.”

Jesus scales down God’s glory so we can perceive it.

At the same time, Jesus faithfully reproduces the Father’s nature, bearing “the exact representation of His nature” (1:3). Do you ever wonder what God is like? Then look at Jesus. Whatever God is like, He is nothing less than Jesus. The Son is a perfect die cut of the Father. What God is in heaven, Jesus was on earth.

He is heir of all things. The architect of the universe. The reflection of God's glory. The perfect reproduction of the Father's nature. He also, at this very moment, “*upholds all things by the word of His power*” (1:3). Jesus is the glue which sticks life together. That which keeps it from flying apart. This, too, is a source of hope. The one who acted to create, is acting to operate. He who made creation knows best how to make it work. That’s what He is currently doing: holding things together “*by the word of His power.*”

However fantastic that is, it is nothing compared to the next statement our author makes. This truly is good news to saved-sinners. He “*purged our sins*” (1:3 KJV). Or, as the newer translation puts it, “*(He) made purification of sins, [and] He sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high.*”

Two things about that are precious to me. First, Jesus makes us clean. What is there about our sin which so appalls us? Is it not the sense of contamination with which it leaves us? The most ugly aspect of our sin is that it makes us feel unclean. Unworthy. Unable to gain access to God. The good news is this, “*The blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin*” (I John 1:7). “*There is therefore now no condemnation [that is, no contamination] for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

The blessed assurance this is so is the second thing which exhilarates me. When Jesus made purification for our sin, “*He sat down*” (1:3). It’s as if He said, all that needs to be done for the salvation of sinners *has* been done. “*It is finished!*” (John 19:30).

Now, please note that not one of these staggering things said of Jesus could be said of the prophets. Or of any man. The prophets were the friends of God. Jesus was the Son of God. They grasped a part of God's plan. Jesus was God’s plan. They pointed the way to truth and life. Jesus said, “*I am the way, and the truth, and the life*” (John 14:6). Therefore, He is superior to the prophets with their piecemeal, partial revelation. The revelation of Jesus is real. Complete. Final.

His Supremacy. The book of Hebrews is not content to merely say Jesus is superior. It goes on to insist He is supreme! Not only greater than the prophets, but also greater than all created things, up to and including angels (1:5). To a contemporary reader, this reference to angels may seem irrelevant. But when we understand who angels are and what they did in the mind of the ancient Jews, a precious truth emerges.

Angels are “*ministering spirits*” (1:14). God’s glorious “errand boys,” so to speak. Newer translations of Hebrews 1:7 describe them as having the characteristics of wind and fire. Swift. Effective. Elusive. We learn angels are the highest of created beings. Man is the crown of God's creation on earth. Angels are the crown of God's creation in heaven. So, when the writer of the book of Hebrews says Jesus is greater than the angels, who are next to God, he is saying Jesus is

God Himself. He is utterly and absolutely without peer. He is supreme!

This assertion is made through a series of proof texts demonstrating how, in a unique and exclusive sense, Jesus is for real. Jesus is Son, the angels are servants. Jesus is message, the angels are messengers. Jesus is sovereign, the angels are subject. Jesus is superior, yes! Even more, He is supreme.

His Deity. “*For to which of the angels did He (God) ever say, ‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten thee’?*”(1:5). Here is direct reference to the deity of Jesus. If anything can be said of a son, it is that he is of the same species as his father. By saying of Jesus, “*Thou art my Son,*” God is declaring Christ’s origin to be divine.

His Dignity. The book of Hebrews also calls attention to His dignity. At His birth, angels bowed down and worshiped Jesus (1:6). Obviously, this makes Him superior to angels, because the lesser always worships the greater. It is *they* who worshiped and continue to worship *Him*. Not *He* who worships *them*.

His Majesty, Eternity and Equity. Of the Son God said, “*Thy throne, O God*”-- His majesty -- “*is forever and ever*”-- His eternity, “*and the righteous scepter is the scepter of His kingdom*” -- His equity (1:8). There is hope. This regal one whose reign is without end shall dispense justice which is just!

His Immutability. Unlike the heavens which grow old and the stars which turn cold, the scripture says of Jesus, “*But Thou art the same, and Thy years will not come to an end*” (1:12). He is changeless.

His Sovereignty and Glory. To sum up his argument for the unrivaled supremacy of Jesus, our author refers to the time of His second coming. After the custom of Eastern potentates who put their foot on the neck of a conquered enemy to symbolize victory, the Lord Jesus will one day

enter His ultimate and final glory. He will sit at the right hand of the Father with His enemies as a footstool (1:13).

It's all there in the first chapter of Hebrews. His deity. His dignity. His majesty. His eternity. His equity. His immutability. His sovereignty. His ultimate glory. Jesus is not only superior, He is supreme. Greater than the prophets. Greater also than the angels. Which is to say: Jesus is for real. He is God Himself.

His Sufficiency. Therefore, Jesus is sufficient! This is the primary point the book of Hebrews makes. The writer exalts Jesus' superiority and supremacy to emphasize His sufficiency.

Our author is addressing a group of believers on the verge of becoming dropouts. Of forsaking their liberty in Christ. Of returning to the legalism of pre-Christian days. Instead of clinging to Jesus only, they were tempted to practice a religion of Jesus-plus. Jesus plus a dab of Judaism here. Jesus plus a touch of humanism there.

He says, Don't make that mistake. It not only isn't necessary, it won't do any good. There is no such thing as Jesus-plus, for He is God's last word to the world. Jesus is for real. He is It with a capital "I." He is Son, not servant. Sovereign, not subject.

Jesus initiated and completed a mission even angels could pull off. He made full and final payment for our sin. Proof of this is that He now sits, a symbol of completed work, on the right hand of God, the place of honor. Jesus makes possible a better, sweeter, dearer relationship between God and man than has been possible since the fall. A personal relationship. With nothing between. Not even the angels.

The ancient followers of Judaism were haunted by a feeling of God's far-offness. His transcendency. His other-worldliness. His out-there-ness. Because of this, they found it necessary to establish some connecting link between themselves and God. Their solution? A

highly developed form of angelology.

To put it plainly, they had angels coming out their ears. To the first-century mind, there were millions and millions of angels. They were everywhere. Every nation had its angel. As did every child. Every man. Every woman. Every force of nature -- wind, fire, rain had its angel.

According to William Barclay, so all-pervading was this doctrine of angels it is safe to say, "every blade of grass had its angel."²

Fearful Christ would, in time, become just another member of this pantheon of angels, the writer of Hebrews declares Jesus is for real. He is not some ethereal being from the nether world. Nor is He merely an historical figure trudging across the pages of the New Testament. The Jehovah of the Old Testament is the Jesus of the New.

Therefore, Christians need not and must not think in terms of Jesus-plus. He is superior. He is supreme. Best of all, He is sufficient, making possible an immediate and intimate relationship with God with nothing between. Not even angels.

It was important for those Hebrew Christians to know this. To have this reason for the hope which was within them. They were under tremendous pressure to turn back. Their peers, families, religious leaders, life itself, the residual effects of the Adamic nature within them, all were coaxing them to turn back from liberty in Christ to legalism.

If they were to stand tall in the face of this kind of coercion, they had to know for sure on whom they were standing. Was Jesus a fake as many said, or was He for real? Was Jesus sufficient, or did they need a religion of Jesus-plus? The answers came through the Hebrews author for them and us: Jesus is for real! He is sufficient. He has done what not even angels could do. He has cleansed us from sin. Removed all barriers between ourselves and God. Given us instant and intimate access to the Heavenly Father.

There's an important message in that for us today. While we do not make much of angels, we

have our own way of putting things between ourselves and God to make Him more comfortable to be around. We have our own form of angelology. Our own system of intermediaries.

Sometimes it's a person. A particular pastor. Life partner. Child. Or a Christian folk hero, like a favorite evangelist or a popular healer. “If that evangelist comes to town I'm going to go hear him because I can get saved when he preaches. Or, If that healer prays for me, I'll be healed for sure.”

Sometimes it's a place. A beautiful church. The great outdoors. A private prayer closet. That is where we feel we can really get next to God. That is our angel. Our intermediary.

Often it's a thing. A theological formula. A set of religious jargon. A particular ecclesiastical timetable. That makes God comfortable for us. Whittles Him down to size. Makes Him understandable. Logical.

But, God in a box is nothing more than a slightly sophisticated form of angelology. And, it's terribly dangerous. If our formula or jargon or timetable is proved ineffective, everything goes up in smoke. We don't want this to happen, so we cling defensively to our little box. We don't want to think. Struggle. Change. Grow. It's too painful. Too threatening. We concoct our own little system of angelology, be it person, place or thing. In this way we create a God big enough to help us if we're in trouble, but small enough to fit the markers of our puny minds.

But, such a God is not the God that is. He is greater than our theological formulations. Greater than our religious jargon. And, if we are to have a reason for the hope that is within us, we must know Him as He is.

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We can't be like the man who, when asked what he believed, answered, “I believe what my church believes.” “What does your church believe?” was the next question. He replied

blushingly, “I guess my church believes what I believe!” The tragedy of that little story is obvious. Many church members are borderline spiritual illiterates. Their lack of Biblical understanding is appalling. And, while we may laugh at the deacon who thought the Epistles were the wives of the Apostles, the story really isn’t funny.

The opponents of the Christian faith, the followers of the “isms,” know what they believe. They put the average Christian to shame when it comes to articulating convictions. That’s why we need a reason for the hope within us. We need to know all there is to know about this One who is for real and in whom we have believed. If you and I are going to stand true under the mounting pressure of our time, we must be sure about Him upon whom we stand. Mark it well, Jesus is for real. He is all-sufficient.

Therefore...

“For this reason we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it. For how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?” (2:1-3).

Escape what? Hell? No, that’s not the issue. Escaping hell and going to heaven are a matter of grace, not works. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast” (Ephesians 2:8,9).*

Your salvation is not at stake, fellow sinner-saint. That was taken care of at the cross, if you have been to the cross. From that point on, nothing can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:39). Nothing can pluck you out of the Father's hand (John 10:28).

This is the issue: having been to the cross, taken Jesus as your Savior, been cleansed of sin and given eternal life, what are you going to do about it?

Right believing unsupported by right doing is as sounding brass and a tinkling cymbal.

Conversion is only the first step in the Christian life. From that point on, we all must grow and go forward in grace. If we neglect this great salvation and permit it to go to seed, we cannot escape the consequences of that neglect, either in time or in eternity!

Notes

1. William Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews (Edinburgh: St. Andrew Press, 1955), p. 7.
2. Edited by William Barclay and F. F. Bruce, Epistle to the Hebrews -- Bible Guides (London: Lutterworth Press, and New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965), p. 65.

spiritual gems to provide resources for hope-full living.

There is no escaping the fact that the book of Hebrews has been a center of controversy. Churches have divided and Christians have broken fellowship with one another over doctrinal differences supposedly rooted here. Basically, there are two major interpretations of this most difficult book of the New Testament canon.

Some expositors argue that the book of Hebrews was written to Christians who were in danger of falling from grace, thus losing their salvation. This is the classical Arminian view. A second group claims the book was addressed to mere professing Christians, those who had only come part way to Christ and were in danger of drawing back before being finally and actually converted. This is the position of most Calvinists.

Both of the above pose monumental problems, pitting one portion of scripture against another, in violation of solid Biblical scholarship. But there is a third alternative, one which appears to have been obscured or missed completely by most students of this treatise. This view solves the apparent mysteries surrounding certain seemingly contradictory texts, and I believe it does justice to the book of Hebrews, while remaining true to the total teaching of scripture.

It sees the book of Hebrews as having been addressed to born-again Christians. People who had been saved prior to the time the book was written, were still saved at the time this message was put into their hands, and would continue to be saved for all eternity. But, and here is the nitty-gritty of it, they were sinner-saints. Saved people who had allowed sin to gain a foothold in their lives, and, as a result, had lost the confidence derived from an intimate walk with Christ. Even worse, though they were born again, they were in grave peril of losing their future reward. Both the joys of an abundant walk with Christ here on earth and the benefits of such a walk in their life after death were on the line. Dealing creatively with this dual peril is the thrust of Hebrews.

The Treasure Chest

Our first discovery is that there are a number of unanswered questions about this book. Who wrote it? When was it written? To whom was it addressed? Volumes have been written by scholars trying to unravel these mysteries, and we could speculate endlessly about them. But, when the Holy Spirit leaves certain questions unanswered, we should not be unduly distressed by His silence.

Our ability to appreciate and benefit from the treasure-chest of Hebrews does not depend upon knowing as an absolute certainty who wrote it, what date it was written, or even to what specific place it was sent. We do know this orphan book which begins like a sermon and ends like a letter, was directed to a group of Hebrew Christians who, under intense pressure from certain religious leaders and their Jewish friends, were in serious spiritual danger.

The author calls them “*holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling*” (Hebrews 3:1). He accuses them of being lazy and lethargic, on the verge of becoming spiritual dropouts. Through dull indifference they had lost much of their original dynamism. Their faith was stagnant. They had stopped growing spiritually. They had become lax in their church attendance, careless in their living and sloppy in their use of the scriptures. Their whole system of priorities was confused. They were no longer distinguishable from rank and file folk around them. Put simply, they were a lot like some of us!

We don't like to stand alone, either. We don't like to be isolated from our neighbors, family, or friends, either. The Hebrews' love of ease was no greater than ours. We, too, live by the myth that happiness is in having. So when what we have is threatened, we are threatened. And, Christian or not, we tend to turn tail and duck for cover. Our “classification” drops from “*spiritual man*” (1 Corinthians 2:15) to “*ordinary man*” (1 Corinthians 3:3). We are saved-sinners. And, having no real reason for the hope that is within us, in the truest sense, we have no hope!

The solution is the same today as it was when the book of Hebrews was written: *Jesus!* God’s answer then is God’s answer now. Through this unknown penman, our Heavenly Father urges all sinner-saints: turn your eyes upon Jesus! Take a long, hard look at Him. Get with Him. Stay with Him. Go on with Him to real maturity.

This is the single theme running through this spiritual treasure chest. This is the one strong cord to which we are told to cling. Several strands intertwine to create this one sure cord of hope. They are graphically given in the outline which follows: The Heart of Hebrews. As we carefully work our way through Hebrews, you will find these strands often are so enmeshed with each other they are difficult to distinguish. For that reason, no attempt has been made to divide the book chapter by chapter, or verse by verse. The strands overlay each other. Weaving back and forth from first word to last, but they are there just the same.

Look At All Jesus Was! That’s the first strand.

Look At All Jesus Did! That’s strand number two.

Look At All Jesus Means! That’s strand three.

Jesus is the heart of Hebrews! He is its richest treasure. Yet there are other precious jewels waiting to be discovered in this treasure chest. How do we unlock it to get to them?

The Key

I believe the key to this book is found in Hebrews itself, in verses 5:11-- 6:3. Here our author explains there are many things that should but cannot be said because, sadly, these Christian believers never grew up!

“Concerning him we have much to say, and it is hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing. For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for some one to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food. For every

one who partakes only of milk is not accustomed to the word of righteousness, for he is a babe. But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice have their senses trained to discern good and evil. Therefore leaving the elementary teaching about the Christ, let us press on to maturity, not laying again a foundation of repentance from dead works and of faith toward God, of instruction about washings, and laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment. And this we shall do, if God permits” (5:11 --6:3).

These seven verses form the key which unlocks the treasure chest of Hebrews. They declare the issue at stake in Hebrews is not spiritual birth, but spiritual growth! The things said to these people in this particular passage could not be said to non-Christians. Would the Spirit of God say to a non-Christian, “You ought to be a teacher of the word”? Would the Spirit of God say to a non-Christian, “You ought to be eating meat,” when they couldn’t digest milk? Would the Spirit of God say to a non-Christian, “You should skip on past the fundamentals of repentance and faith in God”? The Spirit of God would not insist people grow who had not yet been born.

So, through this key passage, Hebrews interprets itself. The people to whom this book refers were born-again persons. This is important. The Biblical references to the eternal security of believers in Christ are numerous and clear. They permit no uncertainty. “*He who believes in the Son has eternal life...*” (John 3:36). “*(Nothing) shall be able to separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 8:39). “*No one is able to snatch them out of the Father’s hand*” (John 10:29).

These and other references so frequently appear and are so obvious as to be beyond debate. The Bible is God’s word and God does not contradict Himself. Therefore, passages in the book of Hebrews which *seem* to suggest a saved person can be lost again need to be examined closely. When seen in the light of this key passage (5:11-6:3), we recognize that what is at stake is not salvation, but reward.

In various portions of scripture, the Holy Spirit has taken pains to warn it is possible to reject the lordship of Christ over our lives. It is possible *right now* to lose the joy of walking in company with Him. As a result, when we meet Him at the end of this life, it is possible that reunion will not be all it should be. We will have nothing to present to Him if our works are burned by the fire of His judgment (1 Corinthians 3:11-15). Against that dreadful possibility the writer of Hebrews hammers out the recurring theme --

Grow, Christian, Grow!

One of our Project Winsome International lay leaders was an engineer named Dick Schoof. At a Leaders Conference, Dick shared how he had finally gotten that message. “The more I know about the Christian life,” he said, “the more I see it as a ladder leading to heaven. Being born again is mounting the first rung. From there on out, it’s one rung after another. The further you go, the greater the distance between rungs, so you’d better g-r-o-w!”

There’s a lot of truth in that, and it’s in total harmony with what the book of Hebrews teaches: *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you have need again for someone to teach you the elementary principles of the oracles of God, and you have come to need milk and not solid food”* (5:12). Grow, Christian, grow!

Grow Intellectually.

Move on from basic Christian teachings to the more demanding aspects of life. Speaking with the crisp candor of many “Brits,” Major Ian Thomas, a noted Bible scholar from England, once said to me,

“I’m sick and tired of hearing Christians tell me to preach the simple gospel. What they usually mean by this is, ‘Tell me what I’ve always been told so I can hear what I’ve always heard. Then I can know what I’ve always known, believe what I’ve always believed, sit like a cabbage in the pew and never think, never struggle, never change, never grow.’”

The prospect of thinking, struggling, changing and growing is a painful one to many Jesus Folk.

That's why we must keep our heads on straight with a solid knowledge of God's written word. These deep truths will help immeasurably in our Christian growth

Few writers have undertaken a practical approach to the book of Hebrews. The reason for this must surely be an abysmal ignorance on the part of many Christians, coupled with a “Who cares anyway?” attitude about such vagaries as the law, the prophets, the sacrificial system and angels. Therefore, to say Jesus is greater than any of these means little or nothing to contemporary Christians. If you fit into that category, I hope this study will instruct and help you understand the significance of these things. This is a day when all God's children need a reason to hope. If we're to have that reason and be able to articulate that hope, we must grow up intellectually. We must move on from the ABC's of theological hair-splitting to something with teeth in it. Grow, Christian, grow!

Grow Spiritually.

Maturity in Christ means more than preoccupation with the elementary truths of Christianity, clutching a few theological cliches. It means exchanging the typical for the actual. The shadow for substance. The wrappings for reality. It means putting meaning into verbiage we view as sacrosanct.

When Lucille and I became engaged, I presented her with a large, exquisitely wrapped box.. She could not contain her excitement. She took off the lovely wrappings, opened the large box, and inside found a ring. Then do you know what she did? She kept the wrappings and the box and threw away the ring! Of course not! Though the wrappings were beautiful, that beauty was completely diminished when she was face to face with the reality of the ring and what it symbolized. A new life. A complete change.

That's what the book of Hebrews is all about. A new life! A complete change! That is to say, having begun a new life, you must not stop there! You must go on to maturity in Christ. Grow,

Christian, grow! You must stop fretting over whether you have been saying the right words when you pray. Or whether your baptism was as meaningful as it might have been. Or whether your understanding of communion is complete. Or whether you have all the “i's” dotted and the “t's” crossed in your thinking about prophecy.

There are some things only faith can settle, as is so gloriously declared in Hebrews 11. If you have faith enough to believe God could bring the world into being out of nothing (11:3), you have the faith for these first principles. These ABC's of Christianity. So accept them by faith, and grow, Christian, grow!

Grow Personally.

Go on from theory to practice. From creeds to deeds. Be willing to live for Christ now, *regardless*. I don't know who said it, but it is said so well.

“Faithfulness to doctrine is not mere faithfulness to beliefs, but to the whole of life.

Obscure doctrine which delves into the past or future and makes its bed in picayune triviality is about as vital as studying the mating instincts of the gnat.

Doctrine must have a bearing on life.” Amen!

The message of Hebrews is growth. To go on from the so called “simple gospel” to a “reason for the hope that is within you.” As a saved-sinner whom Satan tries to intimidate and neutralize by focusing attention on your many failures as a Christian, you must take a new look at Jesus. Who He really was. What He really did. What He is continuing to do. Here on earth. Now!

And, as your spiritual well runs dry from time to time, follow the practice of the Count of Monte Cristo. Return regularly to your “secret” source of spiritual treasure, the book of Hebrews. Take much, so much that you cease to live in spiritual poverty, and experience spiritual abundance!

OUTLINE

1. LOOK AT ALL JESUS WAS!

A. Greater than the Prophets (1:1-3)

(Their message was temporary and fragmentary. His message is final and complete.)

B Greater than the Angels (1:4-14)

(At best, angels are only servants, while He is Son.)

C. Greater than Moses (3:16)

(God gave the law to him, but Jesus is able to set people free from the law of sin and death.)

D. Greater than Joshua (3:7-4:13)

(He led the Israelites into an incomplete conquest. Christ not only leads us in, but on to total victory.)

E. Greater than Aaron (4:14-5:10)

(He was the high priest. Christ is the perfect priest, who made the perfect sacrifice, which having been made, never needs to be made again.)

2. LOOK AT ALL JESUS DID!

A. Gave us a better Revelation (1:1-3)

B. Gave us a better Relationship (1:4-14)

C. Gave us a better Hope (2:5-10:18)

1. What was meant to be will be! (2:5-18)

a. God's intention for man fulfilled in the man (2:5-9)

b. A trailblazer for us by Christ (2:10-18)

2. Victorious life here and now (3:16)

3. Abundant life here and now (3:7-4:13)

4. Forgiveness and freedom here and now (4:14-10:18)

- a. Through a better Covenant (8:1-6)
 - Providing better Promises (8:7-13)
- b. Through a better Tabernacle (9:1-10, 23-24)
 - Equipped with a better Mediator (9:11-12)
 - Offering a better Sacrifice (9:23-28)
 - Achieving a better Result (10:1-18)

3. LOOK AT ALL JESUS MEANS!

Because “we have” all that is declared above, “let us” avoid the ten deadly dangers of--

- A. Drift instead of Decision (2:1-4)
- B. Hardened Hearts instead of Help in Time of Need (3:7-4:16)
- C. Spiritual infantilism instead of Christian Growth (5:11-6:3)
- D. Laxity instead of Loyalty (6:4-20; 10:26-31; 12:15-17)
- E. Wavering instead of Boldness (10:19-23)
- F. Isolationism instead of Fellowship (10:24-25)
- G. Weariness instead of Endurance (10:26-39)
- H. Comfort instead of Discipline (12:1-11)
- I. Dull Indifference instead of Grateful Response (12:25-29)
- J. Expediency instead of Eternity (13:1-15)

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“OUR HOPE: JESUS SETS US FREE”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Heb. 3:1-6

Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. ²He was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was in all his house. ³For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. ⁴For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. ⁵Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; ⁶but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are, if we hold fast our confidence and the boast of our hope firm until the end.

The writer of Hebrews was a literary genius. He possessed a remarkable way with words. This becomes obvious when we tackle chapter three. In the short span of a single sentence, he tells his readers who they are and who Jesus is: “*Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.*”(3:1).

The phrase “*holy brethren*” does not refer to their daily performance. In terms of actions and attitudes those first-century saved-sinners, like ourselves, were far from being holy in the traditional sense. Rather, it describes a relationship. A very special kind of relationship existing between themselves and the Heavenly Father.

The word translated “*holy*” literally means “*set apart to God in a unique way.*” The fact they shared in “*a heavenly calling*” indicates this set-apartness was not something they maneuvered or managed on their own. It was something God had conferred upon them. The Lord Himself had made them members of His family. They had received a call to God -- from God. Their invitation to heaven was from heaven.

Good News for Saved-sinners

When we remember this invitation is both timeless and universal, including all people in all ages and areas who come to God through Christ, we have to realize there is something very positive and personal in this for Christians today. We, too, share a heavenly calling. We, too, have been set apart by God to God in a unique way. As brothers and sisters in Christ, we need to walk upon the earth with a special kind of dignity and humility. The intimate relationship existing between ourselves and the Lord is something He has initiated. “*You did not choose Me,*” said Jesus. “*I chose you*” (John 15:16). God has made a great investment in us. To take that fact lightly is to misunderstand the full measure of His mercy, love and grace.

Having told these Christians (and us) who they (and we) are, the author adds still another dimension to their awareness of who Jesus is. He is “*apostle and high priest*” (3:1). There is such a tremendous amount of truth in those few words, we shall only touch the surface. They tell us Jesus was, at one and the same time, God’s way to man (apostle) and man’s way to God (high priest).

“*Apostle*” literally means “*one who is sent.*” A representative. An Emissary. An Ambassador invested with the right and the authority to speak for the one who has sent him. When the writer of Hebrews refers to Jesus as apostle, he is saying there is nothing we need to know about God and the will of God beyond what Jesus has said. There is no more evidence of God’s love and forgiving grace than Jesus has revealed. The Good News God wants the world to hear is heard loud and clear in the person of Christ. He is the perfect emissary. The perfect ambassador. The apostle! God’s way to man.

Jesus is also “*high priest.*” That is to say, He is man’s way to God. The Latin word for “*priest*” is “*pontifex.*” It means “*bridge builder.*” A priest is one who builds a bridge between God and man. As William Barclay notes, to do that successfully, a priest must know two things: he must know man; he must also know God. “He must be able to speak to God for men, and to speak to men for God.”¹

Here we begin to see the deeper significance of everything said in Hebrews chapter one and two. Barclay continues, “Jesus is the perfect high priest because He is perfectly God and perfectly man. He can represent God to man. At the same time, He can represent man to God.” God finds Himself in this Person and is with man. Man finds himself in this Person and is with God. Jesus is the only person through whom God comes to man (*apostle*) and man makes his way to God (*high priest*). That’s awesome!

What has all this to do with Christ’s superiority over Moses (3:3)? Before getting into that, notice how the writer of the book of Hebrews is not only a skilled debater, he is a sensitive one. Before dropping his bomb, he takes time to build a bomb shelter! He was not unaware of the high place Moses held in the thoughts and affections of the Hebrew people. So, before presenting his argument for Christ’s superiority to Moses, he takes time to point out Christ’s similarity to Moses. Jesus “*was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as, that is, (like) Moses also was (faithful) in all His house*” (3:12).

In my various educational experiences, I’ve been privileged to sit under two or three really great teachers. These were people who were not only aware of their intellectual superiority, their ability to nail me to the wall with logic and knowledge, they were also sensitive to my interior integrity, my right to be what I was and believe as I did. They did not overwhelm me with their obvious superior knowledge. Instead, these great teachers met me where I was, respected my convictions, and helped me to expand my understanding. Whether or not I ultimately agreed with them, the end product was a better reason for “*the hope that is in me*” (1 Peter 3:15).

They could do this because they were intellectually and emotionally mature. The reason most of us are so dogmatic and belligerent about our beliefs, so unwilling to talk about differing and sometimes disturbing ideas, is because we lack intellectual and emotional maturity. We do not have the knowledge we ought to have. We know it. This makes us feel insecure. We cover our insecurity with a bombast of dogmatism. Like the preacher who had his sermon notes marked in

red, “Argument weak at this point. Pound the pulpit and yell.”

The writer of Hebrews had no such hang-up. He had done his homework. He could confidently meet his readers where they were. He acknowledged the greatness of Moses before attempting to show Jesus to be greater still. This could be done with integrity. Moses was a great man. He had poured out his very life in service to Israel. He had made every sacrifice for his nation. On one occasion, for the sake of his people, Moses was willing to be blotted out of the Book of God forever (Exodus 32:32).

Like all public figures, however, he had his critics. In the twelfth chapter of Numbers we’re told of the jealousy of Miriam and Aaron. Jehovah came to these two jealous critics. He told them He would speak to the children of Israel through prophets, but it would only be through dreams and visions. However, when He spoke to Moses, it would be, as the Old Testament puts it, “*mouth to mouth*” (Numbers 12:8). Moses alone would behold the form of God. The reason for this special treatment is that Moses alone was “*faithful in [entrusted with] all My household*” (Numbers 12:7).

The word “*household*” means Israel, the household of God. We speak of the house of David. Or the house of Rothschild. Or the house of Hanover. By these phrases we mean the family of David. The family of Rothschild. The family of Hanover. As far as the Old Testament era was concerned, Israel was the family, or “house,” of God. She was His unique and special possession. In that “house,” Moses was a faithful apostle and high priest.

Our author has not forgotten about Aaron. He will get around to him later. First, as F. F. Bruce suggests, the author wants us to see Moses as one of the few Old Testament characters who blended these two roles of apostle and high priest.

That Moses was apostle, speaking to the people for God, goes without saying. It is equally true, however, that Moses was priest. As such, he spoke to God for the people. As Bruce points out,

“After the idolatrous festival in honor of the golden calf in which Aaron himself was implicated, it was Moses whose prevailing plea procured pardon for his guilty people.”² Later still, when the spies brought back an evil report which aroused rebellion in the camp of Israel and caused the people to be inclined to return to Egypt, it was the prayer of Moses that led God to extend pardon.

Moses was his people’s most effective intercessor with God. This point is often overlooked, partly because Moses did so many things, and partly because the priestly function of the Old Testament is generally associated with Aaron. But before the appointment of Aaron, Moses fulfilled those duties. It was Moses who appointed Aaron, thus conferring upon his brother many of the functions which had previously been his.

While the writer of Hebrews will later talk about Aaron and show how Jesus put meat on Aaron’s bones, at this point he compares Jesus to Moses, giving them both the title of high priest. Thus, he traces the origin of the Old Testament priesthood back to its true fountainhead: Moses.

Showing the greatness and the faithfulness of Moses in these two functions, he now moves on to nail down his point about Jesus’ superiority *to* Moses. He does so in a most interesting way.

“For He has been counted worthy of more glory than Moses, by just so much as the builder of the house has more honor than the house. For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God. Now Moses was faithful in all His house as a servant, for a testimony of those things which were to be spoken later; but Christ was faithful as a Son over His house whose house we are . . .” (3:3-6).

As we have already seen, the word “house” refers to the family of God. In the New Testament, the “house” is the church, made up, as it is, of saved Jews and saved Gentiles. Using this metaphor, the writer of Hebrews shows that, great as Moses was, he was inferior to Jesus for two reasons. First of all, Moses was a member of the house. He was one whom God included in His family. Jesus was the maker of the house. The founder of the family. The progenitor from whom

all family members derive their very existence.

In Hebrews 1:2, our author revealed Jesus to be the architect of creation. In Hebrews 3:4 he declares the builder of all things is God. His point? You cannot distinguish between Father and Son in the creative enterprise! As progenitor from whom all members derive their very existence, Jesus is obviously superior to them. As the builder of a building is greater than the building he builds, however beautiful it may be, Jesus, the builder, is greater than Moses, who is a part of the building!

Second, the superiority of Jesus is linked to the fact Moses was servant, while Jesus is Son. “*Now Moses was faithful in all God’s house as a servant . . . but Christ was faithful over God’s house as a Son*” (3:5,6). Moses served in the household (3:5); Christ serves over the household as the Son whom the Father hath made “*heir of all things*” (1:2). Moses was faithful as servant; Jesus is faithful as Son. Thus, the second reason for His superiority.

About now you may be asking, “So what? What does all this business about Christ’s superiority to Moses have to do with good news for saved-sinners? Well, what was obvious to those Jewish Christians is less clear to us. We have to do some real “skull work” to get the point they grasped immediately.

As we’ve seen, Moses held an utterly unique place in the thoughts and affections of the Hebrew people. It was he with whom God spoke face to face. It was he through whom God gave Israel the law. Therefore, to the Jew, the law and Moses were identical. They were one and the same. When our writer says Jesus is greater than Moses, those first-century folk immediately knew he was saying Jesus is greater than the law!

What’s the point of that? Just this: the temptation confronting those early Hebrew Christians was to return to the legalism of the law. To believe in Jesus, but to be on the safe side, to practice a religion of Jesus plus certain practices and provisions of the law. They who had begun in faith

were now tempted to continue in the flesh. Having been saved by grace, they were now hoping to be kept by works.

Does that ring a bell with you? Have you ever had the impulse to pick up a few “brownie points” by a bit of human effort on God’s behalf? Have you ever harbored the thought that in this way you might atone for some of your failings as a sinner-saint? This is absolute folly, the writer of Hebrews says. Don’t put yourself under the law again. Jesus is greater than the law. He is greater than Moses. His grace is greater than your sin. To turn from Jesus to legalism is to leave the best for second-best.

Furthermore, it accomplishes absolutely nothing. Everything needed by sinners (both saved and unsaved!) was provided when Jesus tasted death for every man. Don’t turn back the clock, our author pleads. Turn to Jesus. Jesus sets you free. Don’t put yourself back in bondage again. Instead, grow, Christian, grow. Grow up in grace. Claim the freedom which is yours in Christ. Use it. Revel in it. Go forward with it. Take the risk of it. For, only through a full and responsible exercise of your freedom in Christ, will you enjoy abundant life here on earth and have the hope of a Christian’s reward in heaven.

I paraphrase the last half of verse 6: “*We, that is, the church, are His house, if we hold fast our confidence and pride in our hope*” (3:6). On the surface this seems to suggest someone who has been saved can be lost again unless he perseveres to the bitter end. The perseverance of the saints is taught in this text, but not for the purpose of salvation! The reason for a Christian’s persevering is that he might have a sense of assurance. Confidence. Joy. Hope. Hebrews 3:6 does not say, “*if we hold fast our salvation,*” but “*if we hold fast our confidence.*” It was not a question of losing their salvation, but of losing their assurance. And, as a by-product, their joy in time, and their hope of reward in eternity.

Perseverance as Christians

That’s a peril you and I also need to be on guard against. If, by a deliberate act of the will, we

receive the Lord Jesus as our Savior, our eternal salvation is secure. We need not be concerned about that anymore. But, it's one thing to be received into heaven with joyful commendation; it's another to get into heaven by the skin of your teeth. So, following conversion, we persevere as Christians, not to stay saved, but because we are saved. We engage in works of righteousness, not to round out a salvation Jesus didn't quite finish on the cross, but to earn spiritual rewards so we'll have an appropriate means of saying thank you to Jesus when we meet Him face to face.

Perhaps you are wondering, “How can I be sure I am laying up treasures in heaven? How can I be sure I'm earning a reasonable spiritual reward so I need not fear the grim prospect of meeting Jesus with empty hands?”

The answer comes from Jesus Himself. He is recorded as saying that anyone who meets a human need with something so insignificant as a cup of cold water will not lose his reward (Matthew 10:42). On another occasion, recorded in Matthew 25:35-40, when Jesus was describing the inheritance awaiting the faithful, He said the glory of God's Kingdom will go to those who feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, provide shelter to the homeless, clothing to the naked, comfort to the sick, and friendship to the lonely. If you do these gentle acts of kindness to even the least of people, He said, “*you (do) them to Me*” (Mathew 25:40).

There may be some question as to the enduring value of a large deed done in a loud way. There is positively no question about the enduring value of a small deed done in a loving way. It will merit reward. It will result in spiritual treasure which can be turned into a love offering to Jesus. I suppose all of us would love to be in a position to write a thousand dollar check to missions. But in the last analysis, it may be some tiny otherwise overlooked act of thoughtfulness and courtesy which has the greater value.

Writer A. John Nastari relates a heartrending story reported in the press.³ A Chicago father called a newspaper, told a reporter he was going to commit suicide, and then hung up. The reporter quickly tried to trace the call. By the time the police arrived at the particular telephone booth in

the tavern from which the man had made the call, he was dead with a bullet through his head.

His name was James Lee. In one of Lee’s pockets they found a child’s crayoned drawing, much folded and worn. On this drawing, James Lee had written, *Please leave this in my coat pocket. I want to have it buried with me.* The drawing was signed in a childish print, “Shirley,” his six-year-old daughter who had perished in a fire just five months before.

The grief-stricken father had gone up and down the streets of Chicago literally begging total strangers to attend his daughter’s funeral service. There was no one left in the family. Shirley’s mother had died when the child was only two. But, when the service was held, not a soul showed up. People were too busy. Too involved. Or just didn’t care.

Before he shot himself, James Lee told the newspaper man he was alone, had sold everything he owned, and wanted the proceeds given to the church where Shirley had gone to Sunday School, as a memorial to her. “Maybe in ten or twenty years,” he wrote, “someone will see that little memorial plaque, wonder who Shirley Ellen Lee was, and say, ‘Someone must have loved her very, very much.’”

Of course, there is something in a story like that which pushes our sensitivity button. All of us are moved to compassion. We readily say, “If I had only known, I would have shown that man love and friendship.” But, my friend Nastari points out, “The James Lees are all around us. Open your eyes. Unplug your ears. Look and listen if you dare. They may not pick up a phone and call you. They may not go up and down Main Street with a sandwich board sign saying, LOOK! I NEED HELP! I’M ALONE. WON’T SOMEBODY LOVE ME? But the signs are there just the same.”

When you look into a man’s face, see a need there and respond, you not only show love to that man, you show love to God. For, “*to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me*” (Mt. 25:40). And wonder of wonders, when you give,

you receive. You receive a new sense of confidence. A new sense of joy. A new sense of hope. You have assurance of the rewards of faithfulness. So, persevere. Not to keep your salvation, as if, saved by grace, you are now kept by works. No! Persevere to enjoy the rewards of faithfulness.

Right Use of Freedom

Likewise, our reaping is related to our sowing. “*For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*” (Gal. 6:7). The purpose of sowing is reaping. We are free to choose what we sow, where and how we sow it. But the harvest we reap is governed by the seeds we sow. If you sow criticism, you are not free to reap friendships of an enduring nature. If you sow dishonesty, you are not free to reap trust. On the other hand, sow kindness, reap kindness. Sow gentleness, reap gentleness. Sow compassion, reap compassion. Sow loyalty, reap loyalty. Sow love, reap love. Sow the deeds of righteousness, reap the crown of righteousness!

So go do your gentle, anonymous deeds in Jesus’ name. Not to be saved, but because you are saved. Not to add something to complete Christ’s work on the cross. What Jesus did there was sufficient. He paid it all. He set you free from the necessity of any kind of twentieth century counterpart to the ancient legalism of the law. Instead, because Jesus has been faithful, be faithful yourself. Use your freedom in Christ in such a way as to gain a golden crown. And remember -- Given in the right way, a cup of cold water forms the pure gold from which heaven’s crowns are made!

Notes

1. Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews. p. 25.
2. F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 56.
3. Nastari, Questions Christ Asked! p. 59.

“YOU CAN HAVE LIFE IF YOU WANT IT”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Jn. 1:1-4

Looking for Life in the Wrong Way

The problem of most people is *not* that they don't know how to live. The problem of most people is that *knowing* they don't know how to live, they set about learning in the wrong way. Their difficulty lies in the fact that they are more concerned with life spelled with a capital “I” than with life spelled with a capital “L”.

The Folly of Life Spelled with a Capital “I”

In their egocentric search for satisfaction -- and in the last analysis is not egocentricity the hard core of sin, this business of being all wrapped up in me and mine? -- in their egocentric search for satisfaction, they have turned in upon themselves more and more, until they have shut out the One who is the source of all satisfaction.

They are like the man who, when asked whether or not he belonged to a church, responded, “No, no. I belong to nothing. I belong only to myself, and I suffer.” That precisely is the problem of many of our contemporaries. They belong only to themselves, *and they suffer*. They have not discovered that life is found only by losing one's self in a love affair with God.

So many of our problems result from forever living life in the first person. Back in '69 I read a quote from Bob Hope, in which he jokingly said,

“Today my heart beat 103,369 times. My blood traveled 168 million miles. I breathed 23,040 times. I inhaled 438 cubic feet of air. I ate three and a quarter pounds of food. I drank 2.9 pounds of liquid. I perspired 1.43 pints. I gave off 85.6 degree of heat. I generated 450 tons of energy. I spoke 4,800 words, moved 750 major muscles, my nails grew .00046 inches and

my hair grew .01714 inches. I exercised 7,000,000 brain cells. Boy, am I tired!”
And he would be if, in truth and not in jest, he lived so self-conscious a life.

Some people *do* live that way, and they are miserable. By putting themselves everlastingly at the center of things, they inevitably wind up with “I” trouble, the worst trouble of all.

The Folly of Life Focused on Things

Another way of living which also leads to regrets is assuming that pyramiding one’s material possessions can prove satisfying. Now let’s admit it! When one gets down in the doldrums, a new hat, a new tie, or as in my case, a good shoeshine, give one’s spirit a lift. Let us also admit that enormous amounts of money are spent for entertainment that does not entertain, food that does not nourish, and appearances that do not really improve.

The assumption is that, if a few things bring a little happiness, many things will bring much happiness, is wrong. Nothing could be farther from the truth. There are many who have lived just long enough to discover that some of the things that seemed so enticing when they were being sought, have lost much of their allure when they have at long last been bought.

Looking for life in the wrong way is not the only reason folks miss out on life. Some fail to find it because they are --

Looking for Life at the Wrong Time

They forever put the quest off till tomorrow. Nels Ferre, in his book, [Making Religion Real](#), tells how, for several days, his little daughter Faith came to her mother asking anxiously, “Mama, is this tomorrow?” Mrs. Ferre would answer tenderly, “No, dear, this is today.”

One day she answered, “Darling, tomorrow never comes. Each day, as it comes, will always be today.” The little girl’s face fell. “But Mama,” she said, “Mariel and Kerstin promised me a popsicle tomorrow if I picked up their clothes. Everyday they say to me, ‘You can’t have it

today, dear, this is not tomorrow.” So every day the child had waited for her sisters’ reward on a morrow that would never come.

We can all sympathize with little Faith because most of us remember childhood experiences in which we were taunted by similar tactics. But now that we are grown, and know that yesterday died last night at midnight, and tomorrow never comes. It is sad indeed, that we persist in putting off the business of learning how to live *today!*

But for me to point out our folly is not enough. Telling a man he must stop putting life off is like telling a blind man to stop stumbling over things. Or a lame man to quit limping. His problem is that he doesn’t know *how* to live for today, and is often confused by the conflicting advice of the voices that would teach him.

A couple of years ago a dog inadvertently wandered onto the playing field up at the Stadium during a “Gades” football game. From every angle come the sound of voices as people called to him. But there was no *dominant* voice. In bewilderment the poor pooch ran around in circles. It was completely confused. Finally, one of the coaches picked the pup up, handed it over to a guard, who took it outside the stadium and turned loose, much to the little critters relief.

Perhaps you have been like that poor pup, at times. You’ve been listening to the sound of many voices, a veritable babel of them, calling,

“Here wisdom lies. Here rest and peace are found. Lo here. Lo there.”

And you are confused, because there is no *dominant* voice You are not alone.

“The world is weary of new tracks of thought that lead to naught,
Sick of quack remedies prescribed in vain for mortal pain.”

But I say to you,

“Above them all one figure stands with outstretched hands.

One voice sounds above the strife saying,

‘I am the way, the truth, the life.’”

My friend you can have life if you want it, all you need to do is make it your aim first, last and always, to know Jesus only.

In the passage which was read earlier this morning, John says,

"In *him* was life, and that life was the light of men."

There can be no satisfying experience of life apart from Jesus. Life will only work out one way, and that God's way, through Jesus who said, "I am come that ye may have life, and that more abundant."

The *purpose* of his coming -- life and that abundant -- is not attainable without the *Person* who came to make it possible.

Life is never built on an idea, but always on a person. As George Eliot points out:

"Great ideas dazzle us without actually laying hold upon our minds, but when they appear in a personality we love them, and take them to our hearts."

To give a negative example, fascism was built not on an idea, but upon the weird magnetism of a man called Mussolini.

Nazism gained a foothold in Germany and fanned a flame which nearly consumed all of Europe, not because it made sense as a way of life, but because of the powerful image of a shrewd man, Adolph Hitler.

Communism has fired the imaginations of men's minds, not so much as a great philosophy, but as the philosophy of a great personality, Lenin. He gave it substance and made it live.

In a similar, but much more significant way, the abundant life for which you are looking and longing, lies not in the many great ideas which the fertile mind of Jesus produced, rather it is to be found in the personality of Jesus Christ himself. "In *him* was life," said John. The *source* of abundant life is a Person. Apart from him, your attempts at living will be sterile and unrewarding.

It has been said that on the day Michelangelo finished his statue of Moses he stepped back to

study his work. For the first time he viewed the completed reproduction of this great legislator of the Jews. What he saw overawed him. Every feature and suggestion of movement was as strong and majestic as the granite in which it which it had been carved.

So real was this masterpiece that in a burst of enthusiasm, and in a tone of eagerness, Michelangelo struck the base of the statue and cried, “Speak!” But, of course, Moses did not speak. It was just a statue. The life of Moses only *seemed* to be real. The apparent reincarnation was mere illusion. Life, you see, is an internal quality, an *imparted* energy which only comes from life itself.

That’s why people need Jesus. That’s why I say to you this morning, You can have life if you want it, and if you center your quest for it in Jesus, who is life itself All other prophets *point* the way to the truth and life, but Jesus says, “I *am* the way, the truth, the life.”

Sensing that statement to be true, on one occasion Peter responded to Jesus’ question regarding the disciples’ future course by saying, “Lord, to whom shall we go? *Thou alone* hast the words of eternal life.” Peter knew by inspiration, what scientists have since learned by investigation. Life comes only from life. Spontaneous generation is impossible.

Fulton Sheen expresses it eloquently --

“Life is not a push from below, but a gift from above.
Human life is not a perfection of animal life,
It is an imperfect presentation of divine life.
There is no spontaneous generation in this world,
Either naturally or supernaturally.
Life must come from life.
When we return to it, we live,
When we depart from it, we die.
And that life, the divine life, the only life,

The life which all seek, many without knowing it,
Is the life of God, the life wherein all life rests."

On numerous occasions we read in the New Testament that Jesus was alone. He was alone in the garden. He was alone in prayer. He was alone in the temple. He was alone in the wilderness. He was alone before Pilate. He was alone on the cross.

But there is another kind of aloneness which the gospels attribute to Jesus, the aloneness reflected in his person. It was this aloneness, this uniqueness of character, which caused Charles Lamb to express the thought that we can compare every great and good man who has ever lived with another man just as great and just as good, until we come to Jesus Christ. Then we discover there is none so great and none so good.

He stands alone. He stands alone in the beauty of his life. He stands alone in the wisdom of his teachings. He stands alone in the purity of his speech. He stands alone in the majesty of his work. He stands alone in the kind and quality of life he offers.

Jesus is the Great Unlike. He is the one person, in all of history, who shines sublimely above the rest. An author, unknown to me, has written,

"When Mohammed sees a soul lying at the foot of the hill of difficulty he exclaims, 'It is the will of Allah.'

When Buddha sees a soul at the foot of the hill of difficulty, gazing wistfully toward the temple beautiful at the top of the hill, he says, 'When you pass through a thousand incarnations, you may begin to climb the hill of difficulty toward the temple beautiful.'

When Confucius sees a soul lying at the foot of the hill of difficulty, he says, 'If I had seen you before you fell I could have told you how to keep from falling down the hill.'

When Jesus of Nazareth sees a soul lying at the foot of the hill of difficulty,

he hastens down the hill, throws his arms of infinite tenderness and love about that one, bears him to the top of the hill, and together they enter the temple beautiful, the man leaping and walking and praising God.”

It is this quality, this capacity to redeem, that sets Jesus apart and makes him different, yea, indispensable! For life comes from life. To possess it, you must possess him. Life *with* Christ is an endless hope. Life *without* Christ is a hopeless end!

Homer Hock has some expressive lines which, when paraphrased slightly, apply beautifully to this One who towers above all citizens of time.

“There is no new thing to be said of Jesus.

There is no new thing to be said of the mountains, or the stars, or the sea.

The years go their way, and the same old mountains lift their granite shoulders above the drifting clouds.

The same silent stars keep holy vigil over a tired world.

The same mysterious sea beats against the shore.

But to mountains, and to stars, and to sea, men pay their unwearied homage.

It is thus with Jesus. He is mountain in grandeur of soul.

He is star in fidelity of purpose.

He is sea in the mysterious voice of loneliness.

And he abides!”

“I am come, that ye might have life, and that more abundant.”

“In him was life, and that life was the light of man.”

You Can Have Life If You Want It! You can have the gift Christ came to give you. But remember, life comes from *the* Life. It is dependent upon the person of Jesus.

Seek him and you seek life. Know him and you know life. Find him and you find life. Life at its fullest. Life at its best. Life which grows sweeter, as the years go by.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS LEADS US IN”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 3:7-4:1

Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, "Today if you hear His voice, ⁸do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness, ⁹where your fathers tried Me by testing Me, and saw My works for forty years. ¹⁰Therefore I was angry with this generation, and said, 'They always go astray in their heart; and they did not know My ways.' ¹¹As I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest.'"

¹²Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. ¹³But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called "today," lest any one of you be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. ¹⁴For we share in Christ, if only we hold our first confidence firm to the end, ¹⁵while it is said, "Today when you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion."

¹⁶For who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, were not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses? ¹⁷And with whom was He angry for forty years? Was it not with those who sinned, whose bodies fell in the wilderness? ¹⁸And to whom did He swear that they should not enter His rest, but to those who were disobedient? ¹⁹And so we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief. ^{4:1}Therefore, while the promise of entering His rest remains, let us fear lest any of you be judged to have failed to reach it.

Have you ever wished you could have heard one of the great apostles preach? Someone like Peter, or John, or Paul? If so, Hebrews, which begins like a sermon and ends like a letter, offers a superb specimen of first-century preaching. Even though we can't say as an absolute certainty who wrote this book, one thing is sure: he was a magnificent pulpiteer.

He gives us an excellent example of the kind of sermon first-century Christians heard when they went to church. He begins by accentuating the authority of scripture. He has no competence to speak in and of himself. The text he is about to tackle was spoken by the Holy Spirit (3:7).

Next, he reveals himself to be a Bible preacher. The authority with which he speaks is derived from the authority of scripture about which he speaks. He realizes what his hearers need is not the word of men but the word of God. So, he takes a text. In this instance, it is from the ninety-fifth Psalm.

Using this particular Old Testament passage in this church setting, he reveals something else about his pulpit ability and understanding: he is aware of the importance of instant identification with his hearers. Being Jews, his people immediately recognize the incident to which the ninety-fifth Psalm refers. By drawing upon their background and tradition for illustrations, he's able to catch and keep their interest.

This is a device all Jesus folk should master. The most effective sermon is that in which one man is the preacher and one man is the audience. We would all benefit from using this approach to personal witnessing. If we can use illustrative material out of the background of the person to whom we're witnessing, we will be more effective.

Some years ago I was in Augusta, Maine, leading a horse and buggy version of what is now called Project Winsome: a national training program designed to help laymen more effectively communicate their faith. [A Winsome Way to Win Someone](#).

When we arrived at the home of the man upon whom we were to call, my partner and I found him busily remodeling his house. He was hot and sweaty. Tired. Happy to have us call. It gave him a good reason to sit in his rocking chair for a few moments of rest.

Now, there are three things involved in making a decision for Christ. One, a realization of spiritual need. Two, a belief that Jesus Christ can satisfy that need. Three, a willingness to let Him do it. With the first two steps the man had no problem. He realized he was a sinner. He believed Jesus was the Savior. But he was having difficulty letting Jesus into his heart.

I was led by the Spirit to point out that when he decided to remodel his home, he needed certain kinds of building materials. He readily agreed. Obviously, he had found a lumber company which was happy to supply his building material needs. This he also acknowledged. However, I reminded him, until he made a decision, picked up the telephone, called the lumber yard and said, “Send me so many two-by-fours and a dozen sheets of wall paneling,” their ability to meet his obvious need would be frustrated.

“You could sit in your rocking chair and rock till your house fell down,” I continued, “and though you had a need they were qualified to satisfy, the need would go unmet because you failed to let them do for you what they were equipped to do.”

“The same thing is true in becoming a Christian,” I added. “You have a spiritual need. You believe Christ can satisfy it. But nothing will happen until you decide to let Him be your Savior. In fact, sir, realizing your need, and believing Christ can satisfy it, you can sit in your rocking chair and rock until you die. But unless you decide for Christ, you’ll die and go straight to hell!” I’ll never forget his reaction. Throughout the entire conversation he had kept the rocking chair in motion. When he saw the spiritual application of the lumber yard illustration, he suddenly stopped rocking, looked me in the eye, and said with great earnestness of heart, “Dr. John, tell me what to do. I want to put in my order for Jesus right now!”

It was a great moment. He experienced a glorious conversion. People had been calling on him for years. He had admitted his need and his belief in Christ. But, he always pled for more time to think about it. On this particular occasion, the Holy Spirit used an illustration out of his own situation to help him see he could no longer enjoy the luxury of delay.

Get the Message Clearly

The preacher to the Hebrews was a master in the art of reaching back into the history and tradition of his people for illustrations. In chapter 1, he did so by referring to the prophets and

angels. Later, by mentioning the law and Moses. Now he does it by referring to the Israelites' failure to claim the promised land, as we'll see in a moment.

Furthermore, he demonstrates keen sensitivity to the anxieties, preconceptions, prejudices and apprehensions of his people. He doesn't try to bludgeon them into agreeing with him, even though he has the knowledge to do so. Instead, he meets them where they are, in order to expand their spiritual understanding. By acknowledging the Holy Spirit to be the author of the ninety-fifth Psalm -- part of the Old Testament they dearly loved and upon which they were reared -- he builds a bomb shelter, defusing their anxiety so they can better hear what he has to say.

When he gets into the body of his sermon, as we shall see, he gives his audience a combination of timeless truths and present-day applications. He makes great statements of fact which have stood the test of time and are as true in one period of history as another. But he is not content to stop there. He insists upon showing the relevance of those truths. This is a preacher who is not satisfied to merely proclaim Bible facts, however true those facts may be. He insists upon what I call the “so what?” element of preaching. How does this affect me, preacher? In my situation? Where I live, work or play? So, he's careful to include a number of present day applications.

You see, the purpose of preaching is not to denounce sinners, but to announce God's deliverance from their sin! Lots of churchgoers feel they have not been preached to unless they have been preached at. They go to church for a kind of verbal spanking. Unless the pastor fans the fires of hell and holds their toes to the flames, they feel they've been deprived.

There are a number of reasons for this kind of attitude, not the least of which is many people are psychic masochists. They have a subconscious need to be punished. If they have a preacher who is a sadist and subconsciously went into the ministry to satisfy his need to punish, you've got quite a match. A sadist in the pulpit and masochists in the pews! And it's sick!

The element of judgment is real. But, if you read your Bible correctly, you'll see it is never

judgment for judgment’s sake. It is always judgment meted in love!.

A preacher was fired from his pulpit because he constantly told people they were going to hell. They secured a new preacher and the people loved him. When asked what the new preacher talked about, a member of the congregation said, “He tells us we’re going to hell.” “What’s the difference? Didn’t your other preacher do the same?” “Yes,” came the answer, “but the first fellow sounded as if he enjoyed it. When this pastor talks that way, we know it’s coming from a broken heart.”

One night I heard a most gifted preacher speak on hell. It was a stirring sermon. But right in the middle he stopped and said, “Boy, am I enjoying this!” I thought to myself, that’s sick! How any man could enjoy preaching on hell is beyond my comprehension. In twenty-five years I’ve preached on hell twice. Each time I did so with an aching heart.

Jesus said He had come to proclaim good news to the poor. To proclaim release to the captives. He didn’t deny the fact they were poor. Or that they were captives. They had real needs. But His emphasis was upon deliverance. And He commissioned His disciples to do the same.

The gospel is Good News! That’s what the world is longing to hear. Only real neurotics go out of their way to hear bad news. It’s the Christian’s joyful job to proclaim deliverance from sin, not to denounce sinners. That’s what the beloved pastor to the Hebrew Christians does: he proclaims good news about Jesus, the deliverer!

Now, I’ve taken time to write about this man as a preacher because all Jesus folk preach in one way or other. All of us are communicators. As Christians, we should be thought of as Good News folk. Not denouncing sinners, but announcing deliverance from their sin. Doing so with enthusiasm and joy.

Our author’s mention of Moses (3:1-6) illustrates the deadly danger confronting Christians who

wander in the wilderness of spiritual immaturity, failing to claim the inheritance which is theirs in Christ. To drive home his point, he quotes from the ninety-fifth Psalm, which reads, “*Today, if you would hear His voice, do not harden your hearts, as at Meribah, as in the day of Massah in the wilderness. When your fathers tested Me, they tried Me, though they had seen My work. For forty years I loathed that generation, and said, “They are a people who err in their heart, and they do not know My ways.” Therefore I swore in My anger, “Truly they shall not enter into My rest”*” (Psalm 95:7-11).

These four and a half verses from Psalm 95 (quoted in Hebrews 3) link together two incidents out of the wilderness wanderings of the ancient Israelites. The first, the water from the rock incident, is found in Exodus 17. If possible, take time to read verses 1-7. I want you to see the sweep of scripture and gain the hope which comes from realizing God has been at work from the very beginning, is at work today, and will go on working until history closes.

The Israelites were in the wilderness. Running short of water, they were getting uptight. They bitterly attacked Moses for leading them out of Egypt, where at least they had enough water to drink. Because of the bitterness of their attack against Moses, who was God’s man and stood for God in that congregation, the place of their rebellion was called Meribah (meaning “provocation”), or Massah (“temptation”). This is the historical background to the mention of “*the trial in the wilderness*” (Hebrews 3:8), and the provocation (3:15), when the people of Israel “*hardened their hearts. . .and tempted (God)*” (3:8,9).

The second incident is from Numbers 13:1 through 14:32. The children of Israel reached the border of Canaan. They sent twelve spies to case the countryside. After a good hike through the promised land, they came back with plenty of evidence proving it to be a land “*flowing with milk and honey*” (Numbers 13:27). But it was populated by “*giants*” ten of the twelve spies reported. They made us look like “*grasshoppers*” (Numbers 13: 32,33). There isn’t a chance in the world Israel can claim her inheritance, they said.

Once again, the people rebelled against their leader and sighed for the security of Egypt. Despite assurances and appeals as to God’s loving protection and leadership, they refused to go forward. As a result, they perished in the wilderness.

Now, these are not the only occasions when the chosen people tempted God. Or tried to see how far they could push Him. They are selected examples of the kind of mind-set or attitude of distrust and disobedience which turned the children of Israel into spiritual dropouts.

Don’t repeat their mistakes, the writer of Hebrews infers. Don’t fail to trust and obey God. Don’t be like that whole generation of the Jews who, on their way to the homeland -- headed for rest and fulfillment -- were waylaid by fear, inferiority feelings, guilt, and hostility, perishing short of the blessings God had planned for them.

What a pathetic sight the wilderness wanderers paint on the easel of our mind! Here were the people of God. His chosen children! Those to whom God had given tremendous promises. Wearily wandering in the wilderness. Hopeless and homeless. Falling one by one. Doomed to die in the desert. Their bodies buried in unmarked graves. Their bones bleached white by the desert sun. How sad! How terribly, terribly sad!

Don’t Miss the Application

Based on Israel’s mistakes, this writer to the Hebrews tells his fellow Christians: there’s a promised land awaiting you. It’s a land of blessing in the here and now. It’s a land of reward in the future. Don’t blow it because of fear born of faithlessness. Don’t lose it because of guilt born of sinfulness. “Trust and obey, for there’s no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey!” Believe God’s promises. Act upon them. Trust Jesus, not only to lead you out of your Egypt, but into your Canaan, with all the blessing God has for you.

What are the present-day applications we might draw from this passage, lessons as meaningful to us as to those folk to whom the book of Hebrews was first written? I came up with ten.

I. There Is A Canaan For Contemporary Christians.

“While the promise of entering His rest remains, let’s be on guard lest we lose it as they did” (4:1 paraphrase). Using Old Testament language, and applying it to our Christian experience, we can say the Christian life is a new and better Exodus. Led by a new and mightier Moses. Jesus Christ! Through whom a new and sweeter relationship has been formed. The relationship existing between Christ and his bride. The church!

Under the guidance of Jesus, the Christian’s great deliverer, a new and better journey has begun. Toward a new and grander land of promise, the Canaan of abundant living, here and now. For, God not only wants His children out of the Egypt of sin; He wants them in the Canaan of abundant living.

And it isn’t a long way! From Horeb, where the Israelites began, to Kadesh-barnea on the border of the land of Canaan, was an eleven-day journey (Deuteronomy 1:2). A symbolic way of saying the abundant life is not all that difficult. It isn’t far from Egypt to Canaan. There is a wilderness to cross, but we have God’s promise of safe passage if we trust and obey.

2. The Christian Life Is A Walk And Not A Stand.

From time to time I talk to people who are concerned about their standing in Christ. They wonder whether or not they’re saved and bound for heaven. Frankly, once we’ve received Jesus as Savior we should forget about our standing, and concentrate on our walk! Some Christians are so concerned about their standing, they do nothing but stand! They’re still standing in the same place they’ve been standing in for the past five, ten, fifteen or twenty years. But the Christian life is not a stand, it’s a walk!

The Israelites were out of Egypt. They were safe. But they were not in Canaan! Like a lot of contemporary saved-sinners, they were “saved,” but unsatisfied. They had lost sight of their objective: to claim the promised land. That could only happen if they stopped standing and

started walking! Whenever one is learning to walk he's bound to stumble. Don't be defeated or surprised if it happens to you. God isn't! He knows the ease with which new as well as seasoned walkers trip and fall.

A while back I watched a highly competitive track meet involving former and potential Olympic stars. In several of these events seasoned athletes stumbled and lost their stride. One world champion actually fell in the middle of his race. What happens in the field of athletics can happen in the Christian life. Seasoned saints can and do stumble. I don't claim to be a seasoned saint, but I stumble. I've stumbled in the past. I stumble now. I'll stumble in the future.

Satan is the super-adversary. His timing and technique are flawless. He knows the precise periods and areas of our vulnerability. But, while he may knock us down, he need not knock us out! There's hope and help in Jesus, who not only leads us out of Egypt, but if we'll let Him, leads us into Canaan.

3. There's A Difference Between Falling Down And Staying Down.

The reason the Israelites failed to reach the promised land is because they became habitually distrustful and disobedient. They were always going astray in their hearts (3:10). What's more, knowing their vulnerability to stumbling, to being tripped up by sin, they didn't do their spiritual homework. *“They did not know (His) ways”* (3:10).

Over in Leviticus 4-6, we have what I call the “broken record” theme. Notice the many times it says, *“and he shall be forgiven.”* Over and over again that theme is repeated. It begins in Leviticus 4 when the priest is told to bring a bull without blemish as an offering for the people's sin. That's an expensive offering. But as you read along, you discover an amazing thing. Because atonement is for our sake, not God's, the grace of God accommodates itself to the circumstances of the sinner.

As individual factors dictate, the offering is graded down. It begins with a bull without blemish. If the person in question does not own a bull, he can bring a male goat. If he can't afford a male

goat, a female goat will do. Or a lamb. On and on the downgrading of the value of the offering goes, until at long last, if the person is too poor to bring two pigeons or two turtle doves, all he needs is a tenth of an ephah of flour, which is a bit more than a handful.

From the very beginning God, who opposes sin, has been on the side of sinners! He is concerned about our salvation. He doesn't make it hard to be saved. To come to terms with Him. To find atonement. To be at one with Him. His grace accommodates the last and the least of the lost, until finally we discover we don't even need two turtle doves! Or a handful of flour! All we need is Jesus!

This is the message the writer of Hebrews is trying to nail down for his fellow Jewish Christians. In essence he says: don't make the mistake of your forefathers who fell in sin and were satisfied to stay there. There's a difference between falling down and staying down. Don't be like them and fail to know the way of God which leads to forgiveness and cleansing. He has made a provision for your stumbling. That provision is Jesus only. Not Jesus plus two turtle doves here, or a foreskin there. In Christ you are liberated forever from any contemporary counterpart to the old sacrificial system. Or circumcision. Or other provision. There's a Canaan for sinner-saints today. You can gain it through a walk with Christ. And, if you stumble in the walk, stand up and start again.

4. Do It Yourself Religion Is Doomed To Failure From The Very Start.

“So we see that they were not able to enter because of unbelief” (3:19). The problem of the Israelites was faith-less-ness. Because of their unbelief, they were unable to function. They were actually incapable of operating at a level anywhere near their full capacity.

Whether their distrust led to disobedience, as some commentators say, or disobedience led to distrust, as others argue, is irrelevant. The result is the same: incapacitation! These people became spiritual, emotional, even physical cripples. *“They could not go in”* (3:19 paraphrase). Perhaps it was due to fear born of faithlessness. Or guilt born of sinfulness. Or a combination of

both. In any case, they were crippled.

Similarly, because of unresolved guilt, there are cripples today. They are failing vocationally. In their marriages. In their relationships with other people. In their personal lives. Mark it down: sin in any form vitiates the human spirit. It makes us incapable of being and doing all we should.

It was not an arbitrary or capricious act on God’s part that kept the children of Israel out of the promised land. Nor is it God’s fault if you and I miss out on our contemporary Canaan. Jesus has led us out of Egypt. He wants to lead us into the promised land of abundant living. If we refuse, we shall stay in a state of spiritual limbo. Saved, but unsatisfied. Not really enjoying it. On the other hand, if we let Him, He’ll lead us from glory to glory, and victory to victory, until Canaan is ours.

5. The Minority Was Right.

This is what I call the Hebrew preacher’s Sunday punch. Twelve spies went out. Ten came back with a bad report. There is no chance of our taking the land, they argued. It’s a good land. The Jordan valley is plush. The hills of Lebanon are lush. The grapes, pomegranates and figs are fantastic. But we can’t win.

Only two of the twelve spies wanted to proceed with the invasion at once. They took a vote and the majority won. But the minority was right. The majority was wrong. As a result, they paid a terrific price. Their carcasses rotted in the wilderness.

The Jewish Christians, to whom this book was first written, immediately got the point. They were a distinct minority in their day. They lived in a Jewish community. They came from Jewish families. The majority of their friends were Jews. Their families were Jews. Their religious and governmental leaders were Jews. They themselves were Jews who had come out of Judaism into the freedom of Christ. The pressure from their peer group, families, religious and governmental

leaders was fantastic. They were a tiny, apparently inconsequential, minority. But this man’s message of hope got through to them. The minority had been right in the past. Perhaps the minority is right now. We must stand firm. And many did.

This is a principle we would do well to follow today. Often someone justifies his behavior on the premise, “Everybody’s doing it.” Everybody’s living by the playboy philosophy. Everybody’s smoking pot. Everybody’s chipping the corner off the cube of truth so it will roll in their favor. Or, “Everybody’s not doing it.” Everybody’s not walking with Jesus. Everybody’s not in church. Everybody is not being a faithful steward of his time, treasure and talent.

The writer of Hebrews would have us hear the message he proclaimed to those first-century Christians: the appeal to “everybody” is nonsense. Fallacious. Without validity. Wrong is wrong, even if everybody’s wrong. And right is right, if nobody’s right.

In the case of the Israelites, the minority was right. Whether or not there were more than just Joshua and Caleb who believed God, I don’t know. The Bible doesn’t say. It seems impossible that out of a million or more people who had witnessed the power of God there were just two who believed. If there were more, they were silent about it. They didn’t stand up for their convictions. And only the good Lord knows how history might have been changed had they spoken out.

Perhaps this reference to two out of a million-plus is the Bible’s symbolic way of declaring how few there are who ever trust and obey God to the point of rest and blessing. We look at some dear, saintly Christian and say, “She’s one in a million,” not realizing how terribly close to the truth we may be.

One in a million! How many abundant-life Christians do you know? How many Jesus folk do you know who are not only out of Egypt but in Canaan? Living with joy and victory?

One in a million? It may be pure symbolism. Certainly it's something to think about. And, while you're thinking, consider Jesus. He is our hope.

Heed the Exhortation

We have discussed five present-day applications of the truth that the land of Canaan which God promised to Old Testament Jews, is symbolic of the abundant life God promises to New Testament Christians. Have these thoughts shaken you up a bit? Spurred you on to measure up to what Jesus expects of you? Then heed the exhortation in the remaining five. To give you a memory peg on which to hang these, I have selected words beginning with “H.”

1. Hear.

“*Therefore, just as the Holy Spirit says, ‘Today if you hear His voice . . .’* (3:7a). The Bible tells us faith comes by hearing(Romans 10:17). The solid summons of Hebrews 3:7 is that Christians’ must learn to properly hear, that is, really listen to what God is saying to us in Christ so our faith will be strong. And God is speaking today. Notice the use of the present tense, “*says*” in verse seven. God, who in the past contrived in any number of ways to get His message through to the world, is still speaking. Today He is speaking through Someone greater than the prophets. Greater than the angels. Greater even than Moses. This greatly increases the importance of our hearing what God is saying to us through Jesus.

Hearing the good Lord involves more than just reading the Bible. Or going to Sunday School. Or attending a preaching service. Or being exposed to the sound of the still, small voice. Really hearing involves sensitivity, so one is able to apprehend, appropriate and apply what he hears to his daily life.

When our author uses the word “*hear*,” he is informing all of us saved-sinners it's possible to be so calm, cool and casual in our attitude toward Christ that what God is saying to us through Him

goes in one ear and out the other. As a result, we are not able to apply in daily life the hope which is ours in Christ.

2. Harden Not Your Heart

There are many reasons for sharpening our hearing. Not the least of these is that the right kind of reception goes a long way toward producing the right kind of application. Really hearing what God is saying to us in Christ will help keep us from hardening our hearts against His molding, shaping, directing, guiding action in our lives.

“Do not harden your hearts as when they provoked Me, as in the day of trial in the wilderness” (3:8). Everything in nature has a body. Everything in nature possesses physical characteristics which distinguish it from everything else in nature. The body of a carrot is different from the body of an onion. The body of granite is different from that of gold.

Many things in nature also have a soul. Among these are man and animals. The soul consists of mind, emotion and will. Man, in addition to body and soul, has a spirit. This is his true self. And, it distinguishes him from the rest of creation.

The word “*heart*” (3:8) refers to that middle part of our being, the control center of our lives. Our soul. Our mind, emotion and will. The application is this: unless we sensitize ourselves to the voice of the Spirit, our physical being may make some sort of mechanical or reflex response to auditory stimuli, but our inner being, our soul, misses it. As a result, our spirit, or true self, is not touched. Our ear picks up what God is trying to say, but our mind does not grasp the wonder of it. Our emotions do not give warm response to it. Our will does not respond with appropriate action.

Every day God speaks. Every day we have the option to hear and obey or hear and ignore. If we ignore with any kind of consistency, we put ourselves in terrible peril. Repeated resistance can

harden into the habit of resistance. Like the Israelites of old, we wind up existing in the wilderness instead of living in the promised land.

You may be familiar with the phrase, “hardened sinners.” These dear, deluded folk pose a particular challenge to the Christian Church. But rarely, if ever, are hardened sinners as rigid, callous and recalcitrant as hardened saints! In fact, there is no more difficult or depressing task than trying to bring hardened saints to repentance again. The book of Hebrews says it is almost impossible to do.

Hardened saints. Backsliders. Inactive church members. Religious dropouts. Whatever you choose to call them, they are the curse of Christianity. The cause of much heartache on the part of God and the servants of God. Thus, it is with loving urgency the scripture says, “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (3:8, 15).

God has only two ways of dealing with hardened saints. Chastening on earth. If this does not bring them to their spiritual senses, He has one alternative left: judgment in heaven. That doesn’t mean they die and go to hell. They die, go to heaven and meet Jesus with empty hands. How tragic! So, “harden not your hearts.”

The Christian life is not easy. It is a most trying, rigorous experience. There are many difficulties, disappointments and discouragements along the way. But don’t let these make you cynical.

When the spiritual going gets tough, the spiritually tough get going. God’s testing can make or break. You decide the outcome. There is nothing you can do to stop most things which happen to you. But, there is everything in the world you can do about your response to them after they occur.

Caleb and Joshua’s experience is a superb example. They were outvoted. Along with the

mistaken majority, this correct minority had to wander in the wilderness for forty years. Nevertheless, they stayed firm and fast in their faith. They did not succumb to self-pity and cynicism. They had heard God’s voice. Had wanted to obey God’s voice. But, when denied the opportunity to do so by a distrustful, disobedient majority, they did not become hard and bitter. They remained warm and responsive to what God was doing in their lives. Sensitive to the lessons God could teach them in the wilderness. In the end, they enjoyed the privileges and blessings of the Promised Land.

3. Heed.

“Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God” (3:12, KJV). The more obvious reference is to the sin of disbelief. But Hebrews 3:7 through 4:1 is not a collection of individual sentences. It is a single statement. Sweeping in its implications. Thus, the danger we must heed involves not only disbelief but delay.

Repeatedly we are urged to take action today. “Exhort one another daily, while it is called today” (3:13, KJV). “Today, if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts” (3:15a). The emphasis is always on today. Not tomorrow. Tomorrow may never come.

In Christ, God has spoken His final word to the world. If we do not heed what God is saying to us in Christ, God has nothing left to say. You and I are living in the ultimate period. The last “now” of time. The final and critical “today” of salvation. This is the decisive hour. Failure to heed God’s last, best word bears terrible consequences. It means missing an opportunity which will never come again.

Tomorrow is Satan’s today. He doesn’t care how good or great your intentions are provided you don’t act on them today. So, the danger you and I as saved-sinners must heed is twofold: the danger of disbelief and the danger of delay. “Today” -- while you still have the opportunity -- give God the trust and obedience you should give Him. Then you can begin to experience and

exhibit the vitality, vibrancy, freedom, and joy which are the norm for Christians.

So often we get the reason for trust and obedience reversed. We think it's for God's sake, when in reality it's for our sake. If you go to a doctor for diagnosis, he pinpoints your problem and says, “I can cure you if you obey my instructions.” The obedience he requires is not for his sake as doctor, but for your sake as patient!

Similarly, the purpose of our learning to trust and obey God is not to placate Him, as if He were some sort of adolescent potentate we need to keep “battered up.” It is to liberate us. To free us. To deliver us from the incapacity which results when we do not trust and obey.

Are you persuaded there are further blessings and release in Christ than you have yet experienced? Do you long to possess these? Well, what God asks will produce what you desire. He asks that you heed Him. That you trust and obey Him. If you do what He asks, you will have what you desire: happiness in Jesus. It's just that simple. “Trust and obey.”

4. Help One Another.

To say, “It's just that simple,” is not to say it's easy! I, personally, have found the Christian life to be a constant struggle between the “old man” who wants to serve Satan, and the “new man” who longs to serve Jesus. The devil, our adversary, is a dirty fighter. He will use anyone or anything to undermine us. So we need to stick together. To help one another daily.

“But exhort one another daily, while it is called ‘today,’ lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin” (3:13, KJV). The word “*exhort*” comes from the same root source as “*paraclete*” meaning comforter. One of the names of the Holy Spirit. So, when we are told to exhort one another, the Spirit is saying, help or comfort one another.

The exhortation must not be a preaching at, or putting down, of our fellow saved sinner. We are

to lift each other up. Encourage. Strengthen. Comfort our Christian brother or sister who may be under the devil’s gun.

Our previous word, “*heed*,” means: recognizing the danger, we must take sin by the throat. This word, “*help*,” means: since we’re all in danger, we must take our fellow sinner-saint by the hand. Often, I’m sorry to say, we reverse the process. We take sin by the hand and our comrades by the throat! That’s a shame. Our individual struggles are tough enough without having to hassle our brothers and sisters, too.

So we need one another. We need the insights and encouragement which come from regular contact and interaction with other spiritually turned-on people. Chapter 10 exhorts us, “*And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near*” (10:24,25). Be aware of the danger of isolationism.

As long as life lasts, we will be doing battle with the devil. We will not survive the battle if we go it alone. We need to love and help each other daily. This focuses our attention upon the complexity of modern life and the irrelevance of traditional churchianity. For how can we help one another when we don’t know each other? If you attended worship last Sunday, did you know the person sitting to the right or left of you? How about the person sitting in front or back of you? Do you really know your fellow Sunday School class members? Not just their names, them! The persons who wear those names. Probably not. Reason? In Sunday School, as in church, we tend to hide behind a mask of pretense, never venturing beyond the safe level of our intellectual discussions of Bible facts.

Do you know what it is to bear another’s burden? Or, to have someone help bear yours? How many times has there been a breakdown of your ministry as “*helper*” (1 Corinthians 12:28b) because you didn’t know the person next to you needed help?

I stopped at a coffee shop recently. A chap came in. We got to talking. In the course of the conversation I asked a casual question about his family and discovered his son had been gone for the better part of a week. They didn't have the slightest idea where he was and were deeply distressed over the boy's involvement in the drug scene. Had I not asked that casual question, I could never have gotten under that man's burden with him.

We live in little mental cells. Isolated from each other. Hurting for help. Not knowing how to get or even give it. That's why I find participation in a small group to be absolutely vital.¹ It involves risk, to be sure. One makes himself vulnerable. But in a healthy, Spirit-led small group there is a healing force found nowhere else. Such clusters do not take the place of Sunday morning worship. Or Sunday School. Or prayer meeting. They complement these, providing something the others do not provide: the acceptance, approval and affection essential to full-orbed spiritual maturity.

If we take the book of Hebrews seriously, we must and will find a contemporary way of fulfilling the command to “*help one another daily*” (3:13). A command as unavoidable as that to “*go into all the world and preach the gospel*” (Matthew 28:19). Or “*be born again*” (John 3:3). Or “*teach*” the saints (Matthew 28:20). Or fulfill other categorical imperatives of scripture. This is not an option. It is a command. “*Exhort [help] one another daily.*”

5. Hang Tough.

“For we have become partakers of Christ, if we hold fast the beginning of our assurance firm until the end; for who provoked Him when they had heard? Indeed, were not all those who came out of Egypt led by Moses?” (3:14,16).

The people who missed the promised land weren't vicious sinners. They weren't social outcasts or ugly criminals. They were a bunch of common folk who fed each other's fears instead of each

other's faith! They had much evidence of God's mercy right from the start. But, because they failed to hang tough, these for whom God had prepared so much, possessed so little. They came to a sad and sobering anticlimax.

God's grace had opened the way to the promised land. God's intention was for all the people to enter. God's power was available to every last one of them. But it was effective only to those who put their trust in God's power, and obeyed. Part of their problem was a short memory. They didn't remember the days of old. Their generation had witnessed more mighty acts of God than any generation before them, but they acted faithlessly because they failed to remember the victories of the past.

A sober warning to us. We, too, have witnessed more mighty acts of God than any generation in history. We have the life, death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus to remember. Two thousand years of church history to ponder. Many periods of renewal when God has broken through in joy and power. We must be on guard lest we, too, act faithlessly, failing to remember those moments when God has been close and real.

“Yesterday home runs do not win today's games.” But remember, yesterday's home runs may inspire the necessary confidence to hit another homer today! So, hang tough. Hold fast your confidence in Christ. Feed your faith in the future by remembering all God has been and done in the past. And, while you're at it, keep open to what He's doing today.

Today, not tomorrow, today! Hear what the Spirit says. Harden not your heart. Heed the ever-present danger of disbelief and delay. Help one another. Hang tough. And with it all, remember the sum total of these is: Hope. The Christian life is a walk, not a stand, so in trust and obedience walk with the Lord Jesus. Jesus, who leads us out, praise God! And, if we let Him, will also lead us in!

Notes

1. For information regarding small groups in your area contact Faith at Work, 279 Fifth Avenue, New York.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS LEADS US ON”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 4:1-11

Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any one of you should seem to have come short of it. ²For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also; but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard. ³For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, “As I swore in My wrath, they shall not enter My rest,” although His works were finished from the foundation of the world. ⁴For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, “And God rested on the seventh day from all His works;” ⁵and again in this passage, “They shall not enter My rest.” ⁶Since therefore it remains for some to enter it, and those who formerly had good news preached to them failed to enter because of disobedience, ⁷He again fixes a certain day, “Today, saying through David after so long a time just as has been said before, “Today if you hear His voice, do not harden your hearts.” ⁸For if Joshua had given them rest, He would not have spoken of another day after that. ⁹There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God. ¹⁰For the one who has entered His rest has himself also rested from his works, as God did from His. ¹¹Let us therefore be diligent to enter that rest, lest anyone fall through following the same example of disobedience.

Put yourself in the boots of those first-century Hebrew converts. Think of the stress and strain under which they lived. The persecution. Danger. Insecurity. Fear of imprisonment. The ever-present concern for loss of employment and property. Reflect upon the existential anxiety of those dear people living in a society wholly hostile to them, and you begin to understand how appealing a promise of rest would have been.

The practical thrust of our author’s message to them, and us, is that Jesus is immeasurably superior to any other road to God men might try to take. He is supremely and uniquely great. Therefore, it is sheer folly to not trust and obey Him fully.

To illustrate his point, he takes a brief excursion down memory lane (3:7-4:11). He asks his fellow Christians to reflect upon the implications of one of the saddest pages in Hebrew history. He reminds them of the children of Israel whom God freed from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Through a series of majestic and miraculous happenings, God guided them safely to the border of Canaan. Then, instead of claiming their inheritance, they turned back from the land of milk and honey to eke out an existence, and finally die, in the desert.

But, he says with great enthusiasm, the rest God prepared for the Israelites (and which they missed because of disobedience and disbelief) is now available to Christians. You can share the promised peace of God, if you do what they did not do: trust and obey!

But the message of hope is accompanied by a word of warning. History, to the writer of Hebrews, is not limited to the past. History is His-story. The record of God's action in life. The unveiling of eternal laws and principles. So this brief excursion down memory lane was not a mere nod to nostalgia. It was something loaded with practical implications for his contemporaries. And they knew it! Those young Hebrew Christians were in exactly the same boat as had been the children of Israel.

What was true of those first-century Christians is true of us. We, too, live under tremendous pressures from an alien society. The thought-forms and value systems which besiege us are almost wholly unchristian. Nor are we immune to the tensions characteristic of our time. The complexities of life take their toll upon saved-sinners and unsaved sinners alike.

However, the primary reason for the restlessness plaguing many of God's people is not external, it is internal. The product of indecision, divided loyalties, an inability or unwillingness to choose between God and mammon. Between ourselves and Jesus Christ. That's why we are restless. So the message of hope is accompanied by a word of warning, couched in the language of stern love, but, nevertheless a warning! To Christians floundering on the rim of a spiritual desert,

saved, but not enjoying it, the writer of Hebrews extends the promise of rest, provided they trust and obey.

God’s Rest Promised--If

What are the major strands in his message of hope and warning? There are several. I limit myself to three, and from them draw a simple conclusion. First, God’s rest remains and is ready for those who receive it. Second, hearing about the Promised Land and actually living there are two different things. Third, peace with God and the peace of God are not the same thing. My conclusion? When it comes to the everyday business of being a practicing Christian, trusting has trying beat ten to three. Look at these major strands and see how I came to that conclusion --

1. God’s Rest Remains And Is Ready For Those Who Receive It.

The message is unequivocal and clear. *“Therefore, let us fear lest, while a promise remains of entering His rest, any of you should seem to have come short of it”* (4:1). The promise of rest remains. It is unchanged. God’s rest is ready for those prepared to receive it and enjoy it.

That God takes pains to warn us against the danger of our denying ourselves His rest through disobedience or disbelief, is proof positive the promise of rest holds good today. Canaan Land did not exhaust God’s rest, our author argues. There is a counterpart for Christians. It is the promised land of abundant living. That land is open to all who trust and obey Jesus, just as the offer of Canaan was made to all Israel. *“We have had good news preached to us, just as they also . . .”* (4:2).

Nor is this an impersonal offer of peace. The gospel is no mimeographed notice stuck up on a post office bulletin board for any who may chance to see it. It is an intensely personal thing. It is written and addressed to each and all of us, regardless of our station or standing in life. God has gone to great pains to point out that, *“Whoever will call upon the name of the Lord will be saved”* (Rom.10:13).

The personal nature of God’s invitation to peace is expressed in a most interesting way: “*let us fear lest any of you should seem to have come short of it*” (4:1). There are two traditional interpretations of the little phrase: “*come short of it.*” The first one says God judges us, finds us wanting, and deprives us of His peace. The second says by distrust and disobedience, we put ourselves in a frame of mind which denies us God’s loving offer of peace, because we feel unworthy. There is a measure of truth in both.

One writer, however, suggests a third possibility which, to my way of thinking, fits the context better. Christians should not be afraid of having arrived on the scene too late to enjoy God’s peace.¹ To those AD folks who were tempted to think the good old BC days were gone forever and God was not blessing in the present as He had in the past, the writer of Hebrews issues a poignant and personal word of hope. This is still God’s today. There is still a Canaan for you as rich as the promised land was for Israel. God is still as good and generous today as He ever was!

God’s rest remains. It is ready for those who will receive it. Therefore, “*fear,*” lest you miss it. There is a Godly fear that is good. It makes us run to God, not from Him. We are not to fear in the sense of being gripped by a slavish dread which immobilizes us, and sends us scurrying for cover. Rather, we are to fear in the sense of being motivated by a driving desire to possess a priceless treasure-- the peace of God -- which, if missed or lost, leaves us with a feeling of indescribable regret. God’s rest remains and is ready for those who receive it.

2. Hearing About The Promised Land And Actually Living There Are Two Different

Things. Notice what it was they did not believe: “*For indeed we have had good news preached to us, just as they also, but the word they heard did not profit them, because it was not united by faith in those who heard*” (4:2). Think of that! They rejected the good news of a good report about a good land. And, incredible as it seems, chose rather to believe bad news of a bad report about a bad land.

They were impossibility thinkers. Grievance collectors. Fear feeders. People who went around

feeding their fear instead of their faith. As a result, they not only disturbed their peace, but destroyed any possibility of their entering into peace.

To be fair, we must admit this good news of a good report about a good land was the minority opinion. But it happened to be the right opinion! Because they failed to mix what they heard with the kind of faith which issues in action, the good news did them no good. As a matter of fact, it actually harmed them because it became one more level of insulation against the sound of God’s voice as He tried to lead them,

There are many kinds of hearing. Careless hearing. Critical hearing. Cynical hearing. If these persist long enough, they produce calloused hearing. One catches the sound of what is being said, but does not grasp its meaning. To really hear what is said, one must understand and act on it.

The reason the message God gave the Israelites did them no good was because they did not hear it. They did not understand and act on it. They did not mix God’s promise with trust in God’s power to keep His promise, which would have made the promise effective for them. In other words, they were unprofitable hearers.

I am afraid that’s a problem with many of us. Someone said it takes two things to make an effective sermon. A prepared preacher and a prepared people. In a quarter of a century of preaching, there has been only one time when I stepped into a pulpit unprepared. It came shortly after I had begun my first pastorate. A dear soul, trying to help, gave me some bad advice. She heard I was spending upwards of thirty hours a week preparing sermons. She thought there were other things I could be doing with that time and said, “You know, pastor, if you just stand up in the power of the Spirit, God will fill your mouth.”

I tried it, and He did. With hot air! After that debacle I pledged myself to never again stand in a pulpit place unprepared. It’s a pledge I’ve kept. For this particular study I’m spending upwards of sixty hours a week in preparation.

However, there have been many, many times when I sat in a pew unprepared. I was not a prepared listener. I was not ready, emotionally and spiritually, to hear what the Spirit of God would say to me through His spokesperson.

You may remember the story of a young preacher in his first pastorate. Everybody in town was anxious to hear if he could preach, and on his first Sunday the church was full. He delivered a tremendous sermon. With great expectations everyone returned the following Sunday to hear him again. To their amazement, he preached the same sermon, word for word. They thought it was an oversight due to inexperience, forgave him and came back the next week.

To their amazement, he preached the same sermon again, word for word. This time the deacons visited him. “Pastor,” they asked, “do you only have one sermon?” “No,” he smiled, “there are many messages I would like the congregation to hear.” “How is it you’ve preached the same sermon three times?” He answered, “Well, after preaching it one time I observed it had little effect upon you. After preaching it a second time I observed the same thing. I have decided to continue preaching this sermon until you start practicing it. Then I shall preach another!”

He had more nerve than I do! Yet, I empathize deeply. Many Christians are dying from information overkill. They run here and there, from this class to that, that group to this, seeking more information. To an interested bystander, many of them are not using the information they already have. I can’t help but believe their need is not for more information, but to hear, that is, understand and act upon what they already know, so it makes a difference in their lifestyle.

We may hear the sound of God’s voice -- although if we persist in careless, critical, cynical listening, our spiritual ear-drums may become so callous we can’t hear the sound of the still small voice -- but we do not hear the word God is trying to communicate. It’s a word of hope. Direction. Faith. Life. Joy. But because of dull hearing, it is not understood and acted upon. Thus, it does us no good.

Hearing without appropriation by faith is no more spiritual food, than a banquet table of goodies is physical food for a person who does not ingest it. There is only one kind of hearing with positive, saving, healing, helping value. That is faith-full hearing, whereby a man stakes his life on what God says and acts accordingly. We are all familiar with the saying, “Actions speak louder than words.” Whether you are aware of it or not, your actions are indicating to everyone about you that you are staking (resting) your life on something. The question is: Will what you are resting on see you through? All the way through. Not to the end. Beyond the end! Through eternity?

Hearing about the Promised Land and actually living there are two different things. The good news proclaimed to the Israelites did them no good, because it did not meet with faith on their part (4:2). But you and I can claim our Canaan if we connect God’s promise of peace with faith-full action. “*For we who have believed [do] enter that rest . . .*” (4:3). Which brings us to the third strand of this silver cord of hope and warning --

3. Having Peace With God And Experiencing The Peace Of God Are Different.

Throughout the book of Hebrews the writer uses the word “rest” (or peace) in three different ways. One has to do with the past. A second is connected with the present. The third is related to the future.

The past rest is the rest of salvation. It is being liberated from the bondage of slavery to Egypt.

The present rest is the rest of abundant living. It is entering into the Christian’s contemporary

Canaan. The future rest is the Christian’s great hope, when in heaven we finally appropriate the full provisions of our faith.

When we speak of having peace with God, we are referring to our past and future peace. Romans 5:1 says, “*Therefore, having been justified by faith,*” that is, liberated from Egypt, saved from sin, “*we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This is past, or salvation rest.

Other passages speak of our future peace with God, in heaven, when we shall see Him as He is, know as we are known, and rest from our labors.

Peace with God comes to us everlastingly at the moment we receive the Lord Jesus as our Savior. It is a gift of God. Therefore, it cannot be lost! Our peace with God does not rest upon what we do for Him, but upon our appropriation of what He has done and will do for us. It is His gift. Something we can never lose. Peace with God is an absolutely sure thing for the person who, by faith, receives the gift of life eternal which God’s grace makes possible.

The peace of God is something else again. It refers to the present. It does not depend on God, but upon us and our willingness to enter into what the writer of Hebrews calls “Sabbath rest”.
“*So then, there remains a Sabbath rest for the people of God*” (4:9).

We Can Have God’s Rest Now

The writer introduces the subject of sabbath rest with verse 6. “*For He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day, ‘And God rested on the seventh day from all His works’; and again in this passage, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’*”

The phrase, “*for He has thus said somewhere concerning the seventh day*” does not mean the writer of Hebrews doesn’t know his Bible, and can’t find the text he is about to quote. It is a literary device to introduce a quotation from Genesis 1 and 2. More about that in a moment.

The Israelites did not receive this rest because of disobedience (4:6). The psalmist David, although already living in the promised land, considered the rest not yet possessed by his people. He sees it as yet a promise to them if they would not harden their hearts (4:7).

Joshua (not Jesus as translated in the King James), who had led the people into the promised land did not give them rest or otherwise God, “*would not have spoken of another day after that*” (4:8).

Our Hope: Jesus Leads Us On!

“*There remains therefore a Sabbath rest for the people of God*” (4:9). There is an interesting and important switch of words in the Greek New Testament which does not appear in English. The Greek word for “rest” in verse 8 when speaking of Joshua, “*if Joshua had given them rest,*” is “*katapausis*.” It refers to that rest which might be defined as “cessation of travel.” The end of wandering. A chance to put roots down. Joshua’s rest meant going into Canaan and battling for survival! In the deepest sense of the word, “*katapausis*” or Joshua’s rest, left something to be desired.

Not so with Jesus’ peace. When the writer speaks of God’s rest (4:9, 10), the peace of God, he switches from “*katapausis*” to “*sabbatismos*” meaning sabbath rest. The use of “*sabbatismos*” sent the minds of his readers back to the creation story in Genesis 1 and 2.

These people had often heard their rabbis refer to a curious and wonderful fact . It was a favorite theme of the ancient Jewish teachers to point out that “on the first six days of creation it is said that morning and evening came. That is to say, each day (or period of time) had an end and a beginning. But on the seventh day, the sabbath, the day of God’s rest, there is no mention of evening at all. The other days came to an end. The day of God’s rest had no ending! It was eternal and everlasting. The rest or peace of God has no evening. No close to its day. It is forever and ever.”⁴ And, it is “*sabbatismos*” or the perpetual sabbath peace of God, our Father wants His children to enjoy in Christ.

Survival is no longer in question. We are out of Egypt. As Christians we’ve been saved from our sin. We have peace with God. Now, if we will let Him, the Lord Jesus, who led us out of Egypt and gave us peace with God, will lead us on to experience the peace of God. A peace characterized by the security and satisfaction of a completed task.

When God finished His creative work, obviously He wasn’t fatigued. “*Sabbatismos*” or the peace of God, does not refer to physical rest. It speaks of something far more wonderful, the

satisfaction God had in His finished work for creation.

God examined what He had made and liked it. “That’s good,” He said. “That’s good!” Over and over we find the phrase, “*and God saw that it was good*” (Gen.1:4, 10, 12, 18,21,25,31). He was pleased with what He had done. There was no need for further creative activity. With satisfaction He was able to contemplate the beauty, grandeur and completeness, the finished character of His work.

How could God ever enter into perpetual sabbath rest when in foreknowledge He knew sin would soon come along and soil His perfect work? Well, remember, God is not locked up in time as you and I are. He does not see things happening as a series of unrelated events. Rather, He sees all as a simultaneous happening. Part of an eternal now!

In His foreknowledge, God saw sin coming to soil His creation. Simultaneously, via His foreknowledge, God also saw the problems created by sin being solved through the birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus. Before “*the foundation of the world,*” God saw His marred creation redeemed by “*the precious blood of Christ*” (1 Peter 1:18-21; Hebrews 4:3b).

Before the problem of sin arose God had the problem solved! Thus, while sin grieved God, it did not destroy the peace of God. In His foreknowledge, God saw Satan defeated, and man, the crown of His creation, redeemed through Christ. Excuse me, but hallelujah!

This is something to really get excited about! God invites us to enjoy the peace He Himself enjoys. Sabbath peace. Creation peace. The peace of God. That means the problems besetting us need never overwhelm us. God, in His foreknowledge, already sees the problems as solved. Solved in a way that everything works together for the good of those who love Him (Rom. 8:28).

The Christian life is not careless, in the sense of being without care. Jesus said, “. . . *in the world you have tribulation . . .*” (Jn. 16:33). But the Christian life should be carefree, in the sense of

our not being imprisoned by the inevitable cares of life. *“In the world you have tribulation, but be of good cheer,”* Jesus said, *“I have overcome the world”* (KJV).

That’s why the sabbath peace of God has no ending. In the same way that He was satisfied with His completed work of creation, God was satisfied with Christ’s finished work of redemption. It works. It does the job. It meets the need.

When we put the finished work of Christ together with the foreknowledge of God, we have the peace of God. We have God, who exists outside of time, operating in time, to make real to us, what is already reality to Him. Thus, we are able to rest in the certainty of a completed task in which all things, even evil things, work together for good (Rom.8:28; Ge. 50:20).

I have a friend who had a particularly knotty personnel problem in his business. The normal way to handle it would be to dismiss the person involved. But, doing so would have created questions requiring answers which, if given, would bring pain and hurt to innocent people. I asked him how he planned to work out the problem. He said, “It’s already solved in the foreknowledge of God. The Lord knew about the problem long ago . He must have known I could handle it together with His help, or He would not have permitted it. He never allows us to be burdened with more than we can bear. In His foreknowledge God has the problem solved. My prayer is for patience to give God time to work it out in such a way that good will come to everyone involved.”

That man had peace! From time to time, he was agitated on the surface. But down deep inside he possessed the peace of God. The peace which came from knowing a problem he could not solve without hurting others, had already been solved by God in a way that hurt no one. That’s fantastic!

This is what God wants for you. If you grasp the wonder of it you will never be the same. You will never again be overwhelmed by insurmountable problems. Instead, like the ocean whose

surface is sometimes made rough by the restless winds which blow upon it, while far below the surface is an incredible calm, so, too, the surface winds of life may cause you to feel, even show, agitation at times. But, because of a faith-full appropriation of the peace of God rooted in His foreknowledge, there will be a deep calm at the center of your being which can only be described in the language of scripture, “*the peace of God, which passeth all understanding*” (Phil. 4:7 KJV).

You might think if people knew all your problems, they would wonder how you could possibly rest! From the human point of view, emotional chaos should reign. But you know something they don’t know. You know God, in His love, has a plan for you in which everything works together for good. In His foreknowledge every problem situation has already been solved creatively. Therefore, you have a peace the world cannot understand. Wow!

We come, then, to the conclusion drawn from the message of hope and warning. In terms of the everyday business of being a practicing Christian --

Trust In God Has Trying Beat Ten to Three.

A young Christian came to his pastor with a problem. “Why is it, pastor, that I continually fall prey to temptation? I don’t want to. I try so very hard not to. Every day I hope things will be different.”

The pastor smiled and said, “You’re giving the devil too many tools to work with.” “What on earth do you mean by that?” the young man asked. “Well,” said the pastor, extending all five fingers on both hands, “when you T-R-Y to be a good Christian,” he curled up three fingers, “you leave the devil a hand and two fingers to work with. When you H-O-P-E to be a good Christian,” the pastor curled up four fingers, “that leaves the devil a hand and one finger to work with. But when you T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M,” he said, curling up all five fingers on both hands, “you leave the devil no tools to work with.”

Let me repeat our conclusion. In terms of the everyday business of practicing Christianity --

T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M has any effort to **T-R-Y** it on your own, beat ten to three!

Does that mean there is nothing for us to do? Of course not. We must strive “*to enter that rest*” (4:11). Strive in the sense of maintaining eternal vigilance. The price of peace involves striving to maintain balance between satisfaction and struggle. Between the satisfaction of a finished work in which there is no striving because Jesus has paid it all, and the struggle to understand the full meaning of what Jesus has done so, you can apply it to your daily life.

Our human nature does not like to struggle. But as Christians we have been called to a pilgrimage. A lifelong trek of vital dependence upon Christ. As with the Israelites of old, the option is always present: we can go on, or we can go back. The challenge is to go on.

Our problem is how to maintain the spiritual glow. The best way I know is to keep a balance between God’s part and our part. Between being in His will and staying out of His way.

That’s tough. We all like to solve our own problems and feel self-sufficient. But in terms of the everyday business of practicing Christianity, **T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M** has any effort to **T-R-Y**, beat ten to three.

So, stop trying and start trusting! **T-R-U-S-T I-N H-I-M**. Trust in Jesus who is our hope. Jesus who not only leads us out of the Egypt of sin into the experience of peace with God, but, if we let Him, leads us on to experience the peace of God, today! And that’s what you want, isn’t it?

Notes

1. Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, p. 31.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS SEES IT ALL”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 4:12-13

For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and Spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart. ¹³And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.

The first-century Jewish converts were tempted to practice a religion of Jesus plus. They had become so comfortable and dependent on the external rituals of Judaism, they found it difficult to place full trust and hope in Jesus only. To be on the safe side, absolutely sure they were covering all the religious bases, they were seriously considering what they might add to that which Jesus had done for them on the cross.

This is not only unnecessary, but impossible. Nothing can be added to Christ's work on the cross. Everything necessary for the salvation of sinners has been done. All we can do is take the life He offers. Rejoice in it. Grow in our knowledge and appreciation of it.

The ancient Israelites missed the rest God prepared for them in the Promised Land because of the twin sins of disobedience and distrust. We Christians face the same problem. There is a Canaan for Christians called the abundant life. It not only includes peace with God, but an experience of the peace of God. However, if you fail to trust and obey Christ fully, you will miss out on your promised land just as those Israelites missed theirs. Therefore, strive, not in the sense of working for salvation, but of maintaining eternal vigilance against the tempter's snare, to enter that rest (4:10).

Learn from the sad experience of those who died in the wilderness of unbelieving self-sufficiency. Follow the heavenly Joshua as He leads you into the promised land and on to claim all of the

Christian’s Canaan. Thus the book of Hebrews speaks to us today.

We are urged to be diligent. To hasten to enter that rest and know the peace of God, lest we be swayed by such an example of disobedience. Jesus knows our heart. *“For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do”* (4:12,13).

Many commentators take our text to be a kind of parenthetical statement which is foreign to the author’s main argument, as if this is a strange place for this passage concerning the power of the word of God to occur. However, if we can grasp the full significance of this phrase, *“the word of God,”* we will see this tiny paragraph as the next natural step in the author’s thrilling unfolding of the absolute supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

A Word About The Word

Scholars differ as to the true or full meaning of the phrase, *“word of God.”* Some take it to be the gospel. The Good News. The inspired and authoritative word of hope that God, who hates sin, loves sinners and has taken the initiative to open a way whereby sinners can come back into relationship with him.

Others take the phrase to mean the whole process of God’s revelation of Himself through creation, the scriptures and incarnation. Still others say *“the word of God”* refers to all Holy Spirit inspired words of insight, whether they come from laymen or clergymen, prophet or pastor, teacher or evangelist. They argue, and quite accurately, that God has revealed many wonderful things about Himself through sermons, songs, poems and books. Certainly none of us would argue the fact that gifted, Spirit-filled men and women have been used of God to punch holes in the walls of our ignorance, helping us to see through to some great truth which lifted us to new levels of spiritual life and understanding.

Other scholars hold *“the word of God”* to mean the Bible. Quite probably this is the most common use of the phrase. When folk talk about Bible study, we often hear them speak of

getting into “the word.” There’s validity here, for the Bible is God’s written word. It does not merely contain the word of God. Or merely become the word of God. It is the written word of God. The Bible is God’s revelation of Himself in language, even as creation is God’s revelation of Himself in space, and Jesus is God’s revelation of Himself in human flesh.

Christians love this book. Preach this book. Probe this book to find the spiritual treasures hidden in it. Having said that, we must remember what Jesus said to the Pharisees, “*You search the Scriptures, because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is these that bear witness of Me; and you are unwilling to come to Me, that you may have life*” (John 5:39,40). In other words, we must never permit the Bible to become an end in itself.

The same is true of all God’s channels of self-revelation. Sometime ago Lucille and I visited Muir Woods, the beautiful redwood forest near Santa Cruz, California. It was an inspiring experience. Some of those majestic trees are incredible. They were well developed over 2,000 years ago when Jesus was on earth. Frankly, we were both overwhelmed. Lucille, in her own way, expressed this. I found myself quietly singing, “Great is thy faithfulness, Oh God, my Father, there is no shadow of turning with thee.” A deep sense of tranquility and trust surged through us as we stood beneath these noble giants. But with all their grandeur and beauty neither Lucille nor I worshipped them. Instead, we were drawn by them to worship the God who created them!

The same stance should be maintained in our use of scripture. I spend a great deal of time in the Bible. During a typical week when I have a full preaching and teaching load, I will spend up to forty hours in study alone. But, as I pour over this Book, seeking to extract the wonderful truths God has put in it, I do not view the Bible as an end in itself. It is a means to the end -- the Lord Jesus, Himself.

Again and again, I see the loving Father there. My face and heart are lifted to Him and I say “Thank you, Father, for yourself. For the knowledge that in having you I have all I need and more besides.” At other times it is Jesus who leaps out of these pages with fresh meaning. I find myself saying, “Jesus, thank you for loving me, accepting me, saving me and bringing healing to

my heart and life.” Often the Holy Spirit captures my attention and I quietly pray, “Thank you, blessed Holy Spirit, for making Jesus and the loving Father so real to me!”

The Bible is not the center of our worship. God is! This book leads us off from itself to its Author. It is in Him we rest, not in it. This is something we must remember as we move toward the goal of spiritual maturity. The challenge is to be Bible Christians without being Biblicists. We must learn to “*rightly divide the word of truth*” (2 Timothy 2:15), so as to not become wooden literalists who limit the power of Scripture to speak to our time. Bibliolatry is just another form of idolatry, and it has the same deadening effect upon our spirit.

Now, if those who say Hebrews 4:12 refers to the Bible are correct, then what we have here is a profound statement about the Old Testament. For, when the book of Hebrews was written, the New Testament did not exist. Of course, there are many wonderful and precious truths in the Old Testament, but Hebrews is not about the Old Testament. It is about Jesus. The opening paragraph says, “*God, who in times past, that is, Old Testament times, spoke through (Old Testament) prophets, has at long last spoken (notice the allusion to the word) through His Son!*”

Hebrews is about Jesus. That’s one clue. But the clincher for me is the double reference to the personal pronouns “*his*” and “*him*,” in 4:13. “And there is no creature hidden from His sight, but all things are open and laid bare to the eyes of Him with whom we have to do.” The references are clearly to a person. Putting all the above mentioned evidence together, I’m convinced the phrase “*word of God*,” as used here, is a reference to Jesus.

Jesus is “*the word*.” It is Jesus who is “*living and active*.” Who cuts to the very core of our being. Who scrutinizes the thoughts and motivations of our heart. From whom nothing is hidden. Before whom we all stand open and bare. Jesus sees it all. And it is Jesus with whom we all must ultimately deal. Jesus is “*the word*.”

If you’re still not convinced, consider a parallel passage from the Gospel of John.

“In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him; and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being. In Him was life; and the life was the light of men. He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name, who were born not of blood, nor of the will of flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:1a, 11-14, emphasis mine).

The parallel between those things said about Jesus in the first chapter of John and in the first two chapters of Hebrews is absolutely staggering. This “Son” of God spoken of in Hebrews 1:2,5 and John 1:14 first parallel, is the One described in Hebrews 1:2 and John 1:3 through whom creation was accomplished, second parallel. In a third parallel, Hebrews 1:3 says He “*reflects the glory of God*,” and John 1:4,14 says He reveals the light of God’s likeness to men. In a fourth parallel Hebrews 1:4,6 declares He was superior to angels, and John 1:1 declares He was God Himself. For a little while according to Hebrews 2:7, He was made “*lower than the angels*,” and in a fifth parallel John 1:14 says, He “*became flesh to dwell among us*,” that He “*might taste death for every one*” (Hebrews 2:9) and give men the “*power to become children of God*” (John 1:12) which is a sixth parallel). We could go on, but as you can see, the unity of the two passages is unmistakable.

In John, the personal pronouns “*He*” and “*Him*” are clear references to Jesus, the living Word. The personal pronouns “*His*” and “*Him*” in Hebrews 4:13, repeat the emphasis. To me, the evidence is overwhelming. The writer of Hebrews is saying “*the word of God*” is Jesus!

Some commentators divide verses 12 and 13. They argue the former speaks of the Bible and the latter of Jesus. But the central message of Hebrews is Jesus, not the Old Testament. The whole thrust of this book is to point out who Jesus was, what Jesus did, and how far superior Jesus is to anything the Old Testament reveals.

To preach the word is to preach Jesus. To know the word is to know Jesus. To be known by the word is to be known by Jesus. To lead people into the word is to lead people into Jesus. To probe the word is to probe Jesus -- His length, breadth, height and depth -- the wonder of this One to whom all things are known, and with whom all men must ultimately deal (4:13).

Jesus Reveals Us To Ourselves

Jesus, the word of God, is “*living and active*” (4:12). What a thrilling statement about the present ministry of Christ among us!

Earlier I wrote briefly of the “heart as the control center of life.” To grasp the full wonder of the Word’s, that is, Jesus’ current activity on our behalf, further development is in order. Now I recognize that no man-made diagram is ever fully sufficient for illustrating Biblical insights. However, the following diagrams have proven helpful to me in understanding the work of Christ’s Spirit in each of us.

All of creation has a body. That is, everything in the created order has certain physical properties and characteristics which distinguish it from every other thing. The body of gold is different from the body of granite. The body of an apple is different from that of an orange. The body of a cat is different from the body of a cow. In the following graphic we will use a simple circle to illustrate that which is common to all creation -- a body.

OUR HOPE: JESUS THE BRIDGE OVER TROUBLED WATER

Hebrews 4:14 - 5:10

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.¹⁵ For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but one who has been tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin.¹⁶ Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need.^{5:1} For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins;² he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided, since he himself also is beset with weakness;³ and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself.⁴ And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.⁵ So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, “Thou art My Son, today I have begotten Thee;”⁶ just as He says also in another passage, “Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.”⁷ In the days of His flesh, when He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and who was heard because of His piety,⁸ although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered;⁹ and having been made perfect, He became to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation;¹⁰ being designated by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.

Someone has said a really good communicator will tell his audience what he’s going to tell them, then tell them, then tell them what he told them. The writer of Hebrews follows that scheme when, early in his treatise (2:17,18) he tells us what he’s going to tell us later on (5:1—10:25). In essence, he says Jesus was wholly human that “*He might become a merciful and faithful high priest*” (2:17).

An immediate question pops into the mind of a questing, contemporary Christian, “Why all this

emphasis on the priesthood of Jesus?” There are two reasons: One is logical; the other is practical. From the standpoint of pure logic, it follows that, having shown Jesus to be superior to prophets, angels, Moses, and Joshua, the next thing our author must do is show Jesus to be superior to Aaron, the high priest.

Remember his purpose in writing this book. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he has been moved to strengthen the faith of his fellow Hebrew Christians. To instill hope in them. To infuse them with the will and courage to stand against the pressures and persecutions to which they were being subjected. One way to achieve this goal was to demonstrate the absolute superiority of Jesus over all the practices of Judaism and the people who performed them. One such key person was the high priest.

Very early in Hebrew life, God made it clear to the people they were to become a kingdom of priests (Exodus 19:6). In Exodus 36 through 39, the Lord gave Moses the details of the tabernacle. The book of Leviticus spells out with great care the functions of the priesthood, the high priest in particular playing a most significant role.

As history unfolds, the high priest becomes more and more important. In the inter-testament period, leading up to the time of Christ, this is especially true. After the exile, the kings and prophets who had been such a dynamic force in the shaping of Israel’s destiny during earlier days, were replaced by the temple priesthood. With one oppressor after another denying Israel a national life, she turned, almost out of sheer self-preservation, to a religious life. The high priest became the dominant voice in her affairs.

William Neil records how “during the Maccabean period in the second century BC, the role of the priest was almost synonymous with kingship.” Neil offers this to explain how Caiaphas, the high priest, and Annas, his father-in-law who occupied that post before him, could play such a prominent part in the plot to arrest and kill Jesus (Matthew 26:3; John 18:13,24). Politically

speaking, the high priest carried a lot of clout. In fact, from just about any way you wish to look at it, the priesthood was an exceedingly important part of Hebrew life.

It is entirely possible some well-meaning, first-century orthodox Jews -- in misguided concern for their friends who had become Christians -- were saying that, unlike Judaism, Christianity did not have a high priest. Therefore, it was an inferior religion. If such were the case, the book of Hebrews refutes the charge. It claims Christianity not only has a high priest, but “a great high priest” (4:14). One who is superior to Aaron in that He ministers, not in an earthly temple as Aaron did, but in the very presence of God Himself.

Along with this logical reason for emphasizing the priesthood of Christ, our author had a practical reason: sin. Every last one of us is faced with the fact of sin and the problem of what to do about it. We know what it is to be estranged from God. Along with our unsaved friends, we saved-sinners have a deep, often subconscious, longing for access and communion with Him in whom we have our ultimate rest. The burning question of all time is what to do about the problem of sin.

If you examine the great world religions, you will find in each of these systems a way of dealing with sin. It may consist of saying there is no such thing. But, if you look long enough, you will find in every religious faith a way of coping with this inescapable, painful fact of life.

In Judaism, the sin problem was resolved through a system of sacrifices and offerings culminating in the Day of Atonement about which we read in Leviticus 16. The Day of Atonement, or Yom Kippur, was the greatest day in the Jewish religious year, and still is. On this day, until the temple was destroyed in AD 70, the high priest entered into the Holy of Holies to stand between a righteous God and a wicked nation, representing each to the other. In that sense, the high priest was a bridge across the troubled waters between God and man.

The Day of Atonement centered around an awe-inspiring ceremony fraught with meaning and significance to a people plagued by guilt and shame. It began with an offering of a bull by the priest to “*make atonement for himself and for his household,*” the latter meaning his fellow priests (Leviticus 16:11). Using contemporary language, the minister and his associates needed to get right with God first.

There is a saying, “Water never rises above its source.” It is equally true a congregation rarely rises above the spiritual life and temperature of its pastor. Personally, this is something I do not take lightly. I never mount my pulpit stairs without first pausing outside the sanctuary to pray, not as a ritual but as a deep, personal act of confession and repentance, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner. Help me to preach as a dying man to dying men.”

The first act on the Day of Atonement was the offering of a bull for what we might call the sins of the clergy. (I hope the selection of animals is not too symbolic!) Then, having gotten right with God himself, having made this offering for himself and his associates, the high priest returned to the people, who had provided two goats. One of these was slain. The high priest re-entered the Holy of Holies to spread the blood of the slain goat around the Mercy Seat.

This completed, he came outside again and performed the most dramatic part of the ritual. Placing both hands upon the head of the live goat, he confessed the sins of the Hebrew people, praying God to forgive them. Then the scapegoat, as it was called, was led away into no man’s land, symbolically carrying away the iniquities of the people (Leviticus 16:21).

It was a powerful and effective visual aid to intensify their sense of having been forgiven. They could literally see their sins being carried away from them. One can imagine a shout going up from the congregation, “There they go! Our sins are gone!”

The leading player in this sacred drama was the high priest. Because these first-century Christians

also had a sin problem, as do we, the big question for them, as for us, is: what do we do about our sin? Is there forgiveness and cleansing for saved-sinners, as well as unsaved sinners? Do Christians have a high priest who can deliver us from our sense of shame, guilt and despair? Do we sinner-saints have a mediator between ourselves and God?

The writer of Hebrews answers, indeed, we do! Jesus is our bridge over troubled waters. He is our high priest. Our mediator before the Lord. He is sufficient to our every need. For, in a positively thrilling way, Jesus is *“to all those who obey Him the source of eternal salvation”* (5:9).

Jesus Is Our Bridge

There were two basic qualifications for the Old Testament high priest. First, he had to be a man among men. Second, he had to be a man appointed by God. *“For every high priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order to offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins; he can deal gently with the ignorant and misguided since he himself also is beset with weakness; and because of it he is obligated to offer sacrifices for sins, as for the people, so also for himself. And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was”* (5:1-4).

A high priest must be a man among men. He must be someone who is in touch with his fellows. Who is caught up in the human struggle. Who knows the heights and depths, strengths and weaknesses, joys and sorrows, hopes and fears, agonies and ecstasies of man because he himself is one. A high priest separated from the human situation could not in any way understand the weakness and sin of those for whom he was to minister.

By way of parenthesis, I’m positive that’s why God called some of us into the ministry. At least, I feel that’s why He called me. I’ve often looked at my life to find reasons why God put this mantle on me. In all candor, it is not because of any virtue, strength or special talent.

It may have been because, as a human being, I am able to identify with the weakness and sin of

my brothers and sisters. I, too, am weak and sinful. There have been times when I did not believe in God. There has never been a moment when I did not believe in the devil! He parks on my shoulder and dogs me all day. It's a constant struggle with the world, the flesh and the devil. Often I lose. My humanity keeps getting in the way.

I finally concluded some years ago, if I ever start being more of a minister than I am a man, I will cease being useful as a minister. I decided then and there that as long as God could use me, He would have me. Some people don't want a man for a minister. They want a kind of plastic saint who never doubts. Never gets mad. Never cusses. Never lusts. Never fears. Never loses his way. A super-sanctified soul who never shirks his duties. Never shrinks from the painful aspects of his calling. Never gets discouraged and wonders if it's all worthwhile.

But, that's not the kind of minister I am. I've been guilty of all these things and more. There is comfort in the Biblical revelation (5:2) that a truly helpful mediator for men, be he pastor, priest or rabbi, is a distinctively human being. Conscious of his own humanity. Able, therefore, to understand and accept the manhood of others. This was a qualification God Himself set for the high priest. He must be a man among men.

Second, he must be appointed by God. The priesthood was not something to which a man appointed himself. It was not an office he sought or took. Rather, it was a privilege, a servanthood, put upon him by divine appointment.

In the strictest sense of the word, the ministry of God among people was not and is not a career. It is a calling. If there is anything else on earth a young man can do and be happily fulfilled, he ought to stay clear of the ministry. The pressures, demands, frustrations and disappointments of this calling are such that only one who knows beyond any shadow of doubt this is something he has to do, can happily survive.

Bishop Hughes of the Methodist Church has an autobiography entitled, I Was Made A Minister.

I think that should be the feeling of every God-called man. He must be able to say I was made a minister; this was something I could not escape. *“And no one takes the honor to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was”* (5:4).

The writer of Hebrews takes these two qualifications for priesthood and, in reverse order, shows how Jesus fulfilled them. Jesus was appointed by God. *“So also Christ did not glorify Himself so as to become a high priest, but He who said to Him, ‘Thou art my Son, today I have begotten Thee.’”* (5:5). Jesus was priest by divine appointment.

At this point, our writer runs into a snag. The high priest must be a Levite. Jesus doesn't fill this bill. He was from the tribe of Judah (Numbers 24:17). So the writer of Hebrews goes on to show there is a priesthood superior to that of Aaron and his ancestor, Levi. It is the priesthood of that mysterious fellow called Melchizedek (5:6,10). Christ belongs to that order.

We will deal with Melchizedek more fully later on in this series. For now, Melchizedek was a contemporary of Abraham. Therefore, he was older than Aaron and Levi by at least three generations. Furthermore, he was King of Salem, thought by most scholars to be Jerusalem. Thus, his priesthood surpassed, both in antiquity and dignity, the priesthood of Aaron. To rank Jesus as *“a priest after the order of Melchizedek”* (5:6,10) was to identify Christ's priesthood as both royal and perpetual.

To further substantiate his claim for the superiority of Christ's priesthood over that of Aaron, and to fix the fact that He was appointed and approved by God, the writer to the Hebrews says, *“We have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens”* (4:14).

With our modern day interest in space travel, this is a little phrase with which we could spend a great deal of time. In a sentence or two, however, this reference to passing through the heavens does not mean Jesus moved through time and space as our astronauts do. Rather, He moved

outside time and space. He escaped the boundaries which cabin and confine us. He got outside the space-time continuum and is no longer limited by it.

If we are to have a grown-up faith adequate for our time, one with which our contemporaries can identify, we must learn to stop thinking of God and heaven in spatial terms. When we were little, because of the figurative language of the Bible, it was easy to think of going “up” to heaven and going “down” to hell. Now that we are grown, in the words of Paul, we can “*do away with childish things*” (I Corinthians 13:1 I), and realize the lovely language of scripture is trying to tell us heaven is outside of time and space.

Therefore, heaven can be around us, as well as within us, as Jesus said (Luke 17:21). God is not a distant, cosmic blur out there somewhere in space. Through the person and ministry of Jesus, He can and does actually live within our hearts. Thanks to scientific discoveries, we now know everything is in motion. Nothing is really “solid.” Every atom is in motion. The relative distance between the moving proton, neutron and electron of an atom is as great as the space between earth, moon and stars. Thus, it is possible for more than one creation to occupy the same space at the same time, with one not being aware of the other. It may be closer to the truth to think of Christ’s ascension, not as a trip to some distant place but as a step into another dimension of life where He is as near to us as hands and breath.

For first-century Christians, “*passed through the heavens*” (4:14) meant something super-special. They saw it as a clear reference to the Day of Atonement and the function of the high priest, who went through the curtain into the Holy of Holies. To them, the writer of Hebrews was saying, Christ, the Christian’s high priest, does not merely penetrate an earthly veil, He pierces the ultimate curtain to enter the very presence of God Himself. There, in God’s presence, He carries out His ministry on our behalf. Thus, He knows God. Not merely as a man may know Him, from afar, but as One who naturally lives and moves comfortably in God’s sphere because He, too, is God.

Having made this brief reference to the deity of Jesus, showing Him to be appointed to His high priesthood by God, our author hastens to reaffirm the humanity of Jesus. In other words, Jesus also met the second qualification for priesthood: He was a man among men. This fact is so important the writer mentions it three times (2:18; 4:15; 5:7,8). The latter reference transports us “to the shadows of Gethsemane and the mysterious darkness of Calvary.”² *“In the days of His flesh,”* when Jesus was a real man among men, *“He offered up both prayers and supplications with loud crying and tears to Him who was able to save Him from death, and who was heard because of His piety, although He was a Son, He learned obedience from the things which He suffered”* (5:7,8).

The agony Christ felt the night of His awful struggle in Gethsemane beneath the olive trees was not born of any fear of death or physical pain. Rather, it came from the overwhelming sense of shame, guilt and despair He felt as He began to get under the burden of man’s sin.

He had previously known, at the intellectual level, of the havoc and hurt sin can produce. There, in the garden, He began to know it experientially. Emotionally. At the gut level of His being. As the awful agonizing weight of undiluted evil began to press down upon Him, the whole of His humanity cried out for deliverance. And he was heard (5:7). Not in the sense of the cup passing from His hand, but “heard” because real communication occurred between Him and His Father.

Though His prayer was answered with “a shake of the head,” rather than “a nod,” there was no break in the relationship between Father and Son. He was heard. The prayer behind His prayer, that He might be the agent through which mankind could be saved, was answered. He was provided with the courage and strength of will to face the test before Him.

Actually, it is precisely because the cup did not pass that Christ is better equipped to be our high priest and share with us in our human struggle. Many of our prayers are greeted with a “shake of

the head,” rather than a “nod.” The divine vocabulary is not limited to yes answers only. No is an answer, too. So is, wait a while.³

Because Jesus exposed His humanity to the full fury of hell’s hot blast and stood firm, He is able to “*deal gently*” (5:2) with us when we face the tempter’s snare and fall. It’s difficult to do that. It’s difficult to “*deal gently*” with sinners. It’s easy to be severe with them. That doesn’t take any effort. It’s also relatively easy to be lenient with them. But to understand the devastation sin results in, to detest sin, and at the same time “*deal gently*” with the sinner, is hard. Yet, that’s what Jesus does.

That’s why He is such a great high priest. He is the only adequate bridge over troubled waters. Connected with God? Yes. Also connected with man. Able to understand what it’s like to be human. Capable, therefore, of “*dealing gently*” with us saved-sinners. He has “*passed through the heavens*” and we have hope.

There’s A True Man In Heaven

There’s a man in heaven! A complete man. A whole man. True man. And that’s powerfully important. Only true man, that is, man as God meant man to be, can really identify, empathize and sympathize with us in our struggle.

None of us is a complete person. Even as Christians we retain the residual effects of sin upon mankind (figures 4-B and 4-C, in the previous chapter). One would think we’d remember our own sin and be tender toward our fellow sinners. But, being aware of our weakness does not automatically produce understanding of others. As a matter of fact, the very toughness with which we sometimes judge others is a defense against the weakness we see in ourselves.

After ending a sermon one Sunday on the happy note, “Good or bad, Jesus loves me,” Monday morning I was talking to a worshiper who said, “I sure wish I could get my spouse to love that

way.” There was a wistfulness in the way this person described the conditional nature of so much of our human love. If someone is good -- makes us proud or happy -- we love him or her. But, if he (she) doesn't, look out!

A woman had been a real chore to live with. When her husband died, he left the bulk of his estate to other members of the family. Enraged, she went to the monument maker to have the words changed on his tombstone. “I'm sorry,” the workman said, “You ordered ‘Rest in Peace’ and it can't be changed.” “Well, then,” said the woman, “add, ‘till we meet again’!” Let's face it; many of our relationships are like that. Love on condition. But Jesus is different. That's what gives us hope. There's a man in heaven. A complete man. A true man. A man unencumbered by the residual effects of centuries of sin on human nature. His love is unconditional. Having been “*tempted . . . as we are*” (4:15). He is able to identify with us when we are tempted.

This little phrase, “*tempted in all things as we are, yet without sin*” (4:15), has caused folks a lot of problems. It does not mean Jesus was tempted to do exactly the same kinds of sins we fall into. We create many of our temptations. For instance, we sin, and then are tempted to lie to cover up our sin. This, of course, is a temptation Jesus never felt. Not having sinned in the first place, there was nothing for Him to lie about.

Nor was He tempted to drive fifty miles an hour in a thirty-five mile zone, or cheat on an exam at the university. His temptations were characteristic of His time. But, in one way or another, they ran the gamut of our temptation to cater to “*the lust of the flesh and the lust of the eyes and the boastful pride of life*” (I John 2:16). The most important thing to remember, however, is that there was no limit to the evil Jesus could have done had He made the wrong choices! Fortunately, there is a limitation to the evil you and I can do.

One night I stood on the pier of our lakeshore lodge in Wisconsin. The sky was clogged with stars. Their number was so vast I was overwhelmed. Intimidated by the size of the universe, I

felt small and weak. Ineffective against that vastness. “God, what good can I possibly do to in any way change that for the better?” The knowledge there was little by way of good I could do to positively affect the universe depressed me. Suddenly, however, the liberating thought came: “There’s nothing so evil you can do as to *upset* the universe either!” There’s a limit to what *our* sin can do.

But, because of who and what Jesus was and knew, there was no limit to the evil Christ could have perpetrated on the universe had He chosen the kingdoms of the world instead of the will of God. Therefore, the temptation He confronted had our temptation beat all hollow. Yet, He faced it without sin.

“Of course He did,” you say. “He had an edge. He didn’t have a sinful nature.” True. By virtue of His virgin birth, Jesus did not inherit, as we do, the residual effects of centuries of sin upon the make-up of mankind. Jesus was like Adam, not us. He was true man. Not the caricature of man we are. Thus, the comparison must be made between what Jesus did with His humanity and what Adam did with his. God does not expect us saved-sinners, with the residual effects of inherited evil, to perform perfectly. That’s why He has provided us with a high priest who makes continual intercession on our behalf.

Adam and Jesus both began with moral innocence. However, there’s a difference between moral innocence and virtue. Innocence is purity which has never been tested. Virtue is innocence which has been tested and found true. Adam began with innocence, tested it, fell and lost his purity. We’re in that mold. Jesus began with innocence, tested it, stood true, maintained His purity and gained virtue. He did it in the face of a fury of temptation neither you, nor I, nor Adam ever felt.

Most of us are like a candle which bends under minimum temperature. None of us has ever felt the fury of the tempter’s full blast. Long before it gets that hot, we capitulate. So, none of us can ever really understand the intense pressure under which Jesus worked and lived. His capacity for

evil, as well as good, was incredible. So were the temptations to which He was put.

This gives us reason to hope. There's a man in heaven. A complete man. A true man. A man who is able to sympathize with our weakness because He was “*tempted . . . as we are*” (4:15). Who “*learned obedience from the things which He suffered*” (5:8). Not that He disobeyed and had to be taught to obey. He learned obedience by discovering first-hand what obedience demands. What obedience implies. By personal experience, Jesus learned what it's like to obey when every fiber of one's being wants to disobey. Because of that, He's able to help us with our temptations. To recognize the wonder and extent of our victory if, and when, we win one.

“*Jesus passed through the heavens*” (4:14) into the presence of God. But, remember, He just changed His location, not His compassion! In fact, His location near to the heart of God only intensifies His compassion for us who struggle afar off. As someone has said, “Jesus may be out of sight now, but He is not out of hearing, nor out of sympathy, nor out of service.”⁴

Every Help We Need

How did Jesus win in His struggle with Satan? By keeping the lines of communication open between Himself and His Father. The writer of Hebrews instructs us to follow this example. “*Let us therefore draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and may find grace to help in time of need*” (4:16)

That word “*confidence*” is significant. It means the child of God, in the presence of God, need have no inhibitions. Play no games. Before our fellows we may tend to be cagey. There may be certain things we'd just as soon not discuss. Not so before Jesus our high priest. He knows it all, sees it all and understands! As T. H. Robinson observes, “There's just no point trying to hide something from Someone who knows us better than we know ourselves!”⁵

When you remember “*God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself*” (2 Corinthians 5:19), you realize that what we're saying about Jesus, we're saying about God! God knows it all, sees it

all and understands! Thus, with confidence we can draw near to the throne of God where we are received with mercy and given grace.

We are received with mercy. When we come to God through Christ He does not condemn us. He receives and redeems us. What good news that is! Jesus is not only able to sympathize with us, as did the Old Testament high priest, Jesus is able to save us (5:9). To reach down and lift us up. That's another reason He is a great high priest. He brings us the quality of mercy.

We are also given the provisions of grace. Not one of us is capable of living the Christian life alone. Try and you will fall flat on your face. When it comes to a contest between you and Satan, you're beat before you begin. We all are.

Therefore, we need grace. **God's Riches At Christ's Expense.** G-r-a-c-e. Grace! That's what we receive from our high priest. Being in the presence of God, all Jesus receives from the Father, He passes on to us. That's grace! So, put it down and don't forget it! There is help in time of need.

Dear fellow sinner-saint, don't let your sense of sin and feeling of unworthiness keep you from coming boldly to the throne of God. Christ's worthiness is the perfect counterpart for your and my unworthiness. If you come to God through Him, you will be greeted with mercy and treated with grace. Given every help you need. Every time you need it!

Notes

1. William Neil, The Epistle to the Hebrews, Ritual and Reality (London: SCM Press, 1955), p. 57.
2. Charles R. Erdman, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1934), p. 61.
3. For further development, see John Allan Lavender, Why Prayers Are Unanswered (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press).

4. Magazine clipping attributed to Perry F. Webb.
5. Theodore H. Robinson, The Epistle to the Hebrews, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, Ltd., 1933), p. 54.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS AND THE JUSTICE OF GOD”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Judgment of Sin (1 Peter 3:18; John 5:24)

For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God, having been put to death in the flesh, but made alive in the spirit. [Jesus speaking], “Truly, truly, I say to you, he who hears My word, and believes Him who sent Me, has eternal life, and does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life.”

Judgment of Self (1 Corinthians 11:2-32)

For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes. ²⁷Therefore whoever eats the bread or drinks the cup of the Lord in an unworthy manner, shall be guilty of the body and the blood of the Lord. ²⁸But let a man examine himself, and so let him eat of the bread and drink of the cup. ²⁹For he who eats and drinks, eats and drinks judgment to himself, if he does not judge the body rightly. For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep. ³¹But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. ³²But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world.

The Great White Throne Judgment (Revelation 20:11-15)

And I saw a Great White Throne and Him who sat upon it, from whose presence earth and heaven fled away, and no place was found for them. ¹²And I saw the dead, the great and the small, standing before the throne, and books were opened; and another book was opened, which is the book of life; and the dead were judged from the things which were written in the books, according to their deeds. ¹³And the sea gave up the dead which were in it, and death and Hades gave up the dead which were in them; and they were judged, every one of them according to their deeds. ¹⁴And death and Hades were thrown into the lake of fire. This is the second death, the lake of fire. ¹⁵And if anyone's name was not found written in the book of life, he was thrown

into the lake of fire.

The Judgment Seat of Christ (2 Corinthians 5:10,11; 1 Corinthians 3:9-15)

For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad. ¹¹Therefore knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade men, but we are made manifest to God; and I hope that we are made manifest also in your consciences.

For we are God's fellow workers; you are God's field, God's building. ¹⁰According to the grace of God which was given to me, as a wise master builder I laid a foundation, and another is building upon it. But let each man be careful how he builds upon it. ¹¹For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹²Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, ¹³each man's work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If any man's work which he has built upon it remains, he shall receive a reward. ¹⁵If any man's work is burned up, he shall suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.

The writer of Hebrews was a man with a pastor's heart. With an under-shepherd's compassion and concern, he deals fairly, but firmly, with the full spectrum of teachings which he knows his flock must hear.

Most of the time his message is joyous and hopeful as he discusses the marvelous provisions of God's amazing grace. At other times, his emphasis is somber and serious, as he deals with the awesome, inescapable responsibilities resting on the recipients of that grace.

Thus it is that we find, threading through this book fraught with hope, a recurring theme of judgment. No exposition of the book of Hebrews would be complete without some explanation of the Biblical teaching regarding judgment, particularly the little known, little understood revelation regarding the Judgment Seat of Christ. Without a clear grasp of the Biblical doctrine of

judgment, and that aspect of it which applies to Christians, we can, and many have, become hopelessly bogged down in needless theological controversy over passages in the book of Hebrews which appear to be in conflict with other portions of scripture.

Therefore, in preparation for a look at sections of Hebrews many expositors feel are among the most difficult to interpret in the entire New Testament (6:4-12; 10:2-39), we turn now to the subject of judgment.

A little five-year-old was busy one day with her colors and coloring book. Her mother watched her for some time with great interest. The child was thoroughly engrossed in what she was doing. Finally, the mother said, "What are you drawing, Mary?" The little girl answered, "I'm making a picture of God." Her mother replied, "But, Mary, nobody knows what God looks like." With an expression of triumph on her face, the little girl said, "They will now!"

What does God look like? Is He "sugar and spice and all things nice"? Is He a kind of cosmic Cheshire cat sitting on some sunny slope, gazing down indulgently upon the sinfulness of man with a sickly smile frozen on His face?

Is He, as someone has described Him, "a big, genial, expansive benevolence with about as much moral authority as Father Christmas, One who can be trusted completely to deal leniently with the sinner and his sin"? Is He "an easygoing deity with the vertebrae of a jellyfish" who can be manipulated and wheedled into winking good-naturedly at our rebellious disobedience?

There are people who believe in a God like that. One German philosopher said blithely, "Forgiveness? Of course, God will forgive you. That's what He's for!" In reaction against the savage, bare, cold, dark-ages concept of an aloof, indifferent and far-removed God, our generation has fashioned a God more to its liking. But is this feeble, mushy, sickly concept of God reliable? Is it Biblical? Is it childlike or childish? Simple or naive? Is God's love nothing more than shallow sentiment? Is He all sweetness and smiles? Or is there a somber side to God's

countenance?

For the answer we must turn to Jesus. Many times we look at a boy and say, “He’s a chip off the old block. He’s the spitting image of his father.” Well, Jesus is like that. He is a photograph of His Father. If we want to know what God is like, we need only look at Jesus.

When we look at Jesus, what do we see? We see love. Compassion. Mercy. Tenderness. Goodness. Graciousness. Understanding. Forgiveness. But is that all? No! We also see the flashing fire of righteous indignation as He drives the money changers from God’s temple. We see the gaze of cutting contempt for the false religiosity of the Pharisees as He denounces them with such words as “*whited sepulchres,*” “*generation of vipers,*” “*hypocrites,*” “*fools,*” “*blind.*”

We see loving arms extended, inviting whosoever will to drink from the fountain of life without having to pay (Revelation 21:6), but we also hear Him deliver such phrases as, “*The gate is small, and the way is narrow that leads to life . . .*” (Matthew 7:14). “*Not every one who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven*” (Matthew 7:21).

No, if we look into the face of Jesus we do not see a Cheshire cat’s frozen grin. We see love and compassion, but we find them intermingled with tears of grief as He contemplates the impending judgment of those who reject their day of grace.

We need only to see Christ standing above the city of Jerusalem with head and heart bowed to know there is a somber side to God’s face. We need only to hear Him crying out, “O Jerusalem, Jerusalem . . . how often I wanted to gather your children together the way a hen gathers her chicks . . . and you were unwilling. Behold, your house is being left to you desolate” (Matthew 23:37,38). We need only to hear this to know that after the day of opportunity comes the day of judgment.

Someone has said, “If it is idolatry to worship a false metal image of God, it is also idolatry to worship a false mental image of God.” Against the “half-a-Christ” our generation has served up to

please the tender minds of those who cannot bear the sight of a majestic God whose law is truth and whose judgment is sure, we need to proclaim the Christ of the New Testament.

When we see that Christ -- the Christ who put the dark, bubbling cup of man's sin to His lips and drank it dry; the Christ who picked up the staggering burden of man's rebellion and bore it to the hill of Calvary that it might be nailed with Him to a cross - - when we see that Christ, we know God is not “sugar and spice and all things nice.” There is a somber side to God's countenance.

The Bible teaches there will be several judgments. For our purposes, we will look at four: the judgment of sin, the judgment of self, the Great White Throne judgment, and the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Judgment of Sin

The judgment of sin took place nearly 2,000 years ago when Jesus Christ, bearing the sins of the world, was taken to a place called Golgotha and nailed to a cross. It was then God dealt fully and finally with sin. “*For Christ also died for sins once for all, the just for the unjust, in order that He might bring us to God. . .*”(I Peter 3: 18). The Apostle Paul adds the glorious and hopeful note, “There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1).

The Bible is plain beyond any shadow of doubt that when a person receives Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord, he “*does not come into judgment, but has passed out of death into life*” (John 5:24). No Christian will ever appear at the Great White Throne judgment. His sins have already been judged at Calvary, and he has “*eternal life*” (John 3:16).

Jesus gives us a beautiful description of our place of safekeeping as Christians. “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me; and I give eternal life to them and they shall never perish; and no one shall snatch them out of My hand. My Father, who has given them to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand*”(John 10:27-29, emphasis mine).

Two hands are mentioned here: the hand of the Son (verse 28) and the hand of the Father (verse 29). Jesus says those who trust in Him are in the hollow of His hand and no one or nothing is able to extricate them from His firm grasp.

Then, to make our security absolutely clear, He goes on to explain that the Father's hand is also involved in our safekeeping, and no one can pluck us out of the Father's hand. Where are you and I as sinner-saints? Safe in the hollow between the hands of the Father and the Son! Excuse me, but hallelujah!

To fix this wonderful fact firmly in your mind, cup your left hand. Think of it as the hand of Jesus. Picture yourself nestled snugly in that hollow. Now, cup your right hand. Think of it as the Father's hand. Cover your left hand by placing your right hand over it. Where are you? Safe in the hollow of the Father's and Son's clasped hands! Remember that the next time you doubt your salvation. Remember that, when the devil assaults you with concern about your security in Christ. Both Father and Son are involved in your safekeeping. Theirs is a grasp from which no one or nothing can ever pluck you away!

Judgment of Self

The second judgment is the judgment of self. *“But if we judged ourselves rightly we should not be judged”* (1 Corinthians 11:31). What does that mean? Another verse adds light. *“If we confess our sins, He [God] is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins . . .”* (1 John 1:9). If you realize you are wrong, admit it. Don't wait for God to chasten you. Sooner or later a judgment of sin must come. It is better that you and I judge ourselves than be judged by God.

As I write this, I have in front of me a news clipping about a couple found in a hotel room in New York City, apparently the victims of a suicide pact. Each left behind a mate and children. Each left a note. The woman's note read as follows, “e had been accustomed to laugh at the moral law, Fred and I. We had said it was a man-made law to frighten timid people into being

good. Now we've learned through sad personal experience, ‘he wages of sin is death.’” Too late this couple discovered what it means to face a judgment of self. Unfortunately, when they faced themselves, they didn't handle it creatively in the love of God, but took punishment upon themselves rather than hasten to the cross where they would have found forgiveness.

Someone has said the basis of conversion is a willingness to admit one is a sinner. If a man is not a sinner, for him there is no Savior. For him, Christ's gospel has no appeal. Jesus said, *“I did not come to call good folk but sinners to repentance”* (Matthew 9:13). The Bible says, *“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God”* (Romans 3:23). So, if we wish to escape the judgment of God upon our sin, we must be willing and ready to judge ourselves. To confess our sin. To repent of our sin; that is, to turn away from and stop doing that which defiles the image of God in us.

Sometimes that requires ruthless and painful surgery, removing us from people, practices and places which are destructive. We must confess, repent, make a beeline to Calvary, and there find the blessing, healing, cleansing and forgiveness God offers.

The Great White Throne Judgment

If we are not willing to do this, if we are not willing to seek insight about ourselves, face what we see, call our sin by its proper name, go to the cross and have it handled there, then we must face the third judgment mentioned in scripture: the judgment of the Great White Throne (Revelation 20:11).

There are several verses of scripture which record what Jesus said about the fate of those who eliminate God, His love and His son from their lives. As we go through them, notice He prefaces each reference to judgment with a statement of God's love. We can never appreciate the judgment of God apart from the fact of God's caring. A caring so fantastic He took upon Himself the full force of judgment when, in the person of Jesus Christ, He sought to reconcile the world to Himself through the cross.

“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him” (John 3:16,17). With that preface clearly asserting God’s love, notice what comes next. *“He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already, because he has not believed in the name of the only begotten Son of God”* (John 3:18). *“He who believes in the Son has eternal life; but he who does not obey the Son shall not see life, but the wrath of God abides on him”* (John 3:36). In the Gospel of Matthew we read, *“And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life”* (Matthew 25:46).

Each of these verses speaks of judgment in some form. Perish. Condemn. Eternal punishment. Wrath of God. The person using this strong language is not some Old Testament prophet raining down fire and brimstone upon a hard-hearted people. The spokesman is the loving and gentle Jesus who said God is a Father, affirming by every act and attitude the insight of the psalmist who said, *“Just as a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him”* (Psalm 103:13).

This is the sweet and compassionate Jesus who spoke about a God of love knowing how to give good gifts to His children (Matthew 7:11). This is the beautiful Savior whose outstretched arms beckon all men everywhere to come unto Him (Matthew 11:28), and find peace for their souls and a satisfying sense of security that banishes the fear of life and of death.

But this loving, gentle, sweet, compassionate, beautiful Jesus also knew there is a somber side to God's face. So he spoke of perishing. Condemnation. Judgment. The wrath of God. He wanted everyone everywhere to know it is a fearful thing to face God as judge!

What is the nature of God’s judgment? Someone has defined it in a single word: recognition. Just as a mother knows her child because of the characteristics of heredity or the reality of adoption

(both birth and adoption have beautiful Biblical overtones), so, too, God knows His children because they bear the image of His Son.

Judgment, then, is a matter of recognition. The person who has been born again by faith in Christ has taken on the likeness of Christ. When he who has been recreated in the image of Christ dies and enters the presence of God, there is instant recognition. He stands before God not as a stranger, but as one of the family. One whom God recognizes as His own.

But, even as a mother knows that all the kids on the block are not hers, so too God knows there are those who are not His. When such a person dies and goes to stand before God, there is no recognition. Only those dread words: “*I never knew you [I don't recognize you]; depart from Me*” (Matthew 7:23). And that’s hell! The product of recognition is acceptance and welcome. The result of non-recognition is separation. Total and final!

None of us has ever known what such separation is really like. Some have felt loneliness and alienation. Others have known what it is to be unwanted, perhaps unloved, on the human level. But no one has ever experienced the meaning of total separation from God. The end product of non-recognition is not alienation. That already exists. It is final separation. In this day of grace, God continues to woo people. Even though we may abandon Him, He doesn't abandon us. But when the day of grace is over and judgment comes, separation -- utter, final, and complete -- will occur. And that’s hell!

Now, whenever we talk about judgment, the question is raised, How can a loving God condemn anyone to hell? The answer, of course, is He doesn’t. God does not condemn people. He merely judges them.

Dr. Paul Kopp provides helpful insight when he says the doctor who accurately diagnoses an ailment as fatal unless his patient submits to surgery does not condemn that patient. He only judges him. If, overestimating his health, the man underestimates the doctor’s diagnosis and dies,

the patient condemns himself.

In like fashion, Jesus is painfully blunt about our condition. Men are lost, He said. They are sinners He came to seek and save (Luke 19:10). They are suffering from spiritual death (figure 4-A in chapter 8), and must yield to a divine operation in order to receive spiritual life. He called it being “*born again*” (John 3:3). If we ignore His diagnosis and refuse to submit to spiritual surgery, we perish. But the condemnation is ours. Not His. We have condemned ourselves.

William James speaks of “life’s living option.” He points out that every man has a choice to make. Every man has the ability to make that choice. There are consequences to the choice he makes. And, while the man is choosing, he is in one of the choices! In other words, he is in life’s living option.

Dr. Kopp brings this into focus with the illustration of a man whose car is stalled on a railroad track. A train is rapidly approaching. The man is in life’s living option. He has a choice to make. He can get out of the car and live. Or he can stay in the car and die. But while he’s making up his mind, he’s in one of the alternatives. He’s in the car.

Or again, the man with a serious ailment who is told by his doctor he must have an operation or die, is in life’s living option. A choice must be made: operation or no operation. The consequences are life or death. But while he’s making up his mind, he’s in one of the alternatives. He’s dying.

Move that over into the matter of spiritual judgment. Jesus said, “*For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world; but that the world should be saved through Him. He who believes in Him is not judged; he who does not believe has been judged already . . .*” (John 3:17. 18). What did He mean? He meant every man is in life’s living option. He has a choice to make. He may accept Christ, receive eternal life and go to heaven when he dies, or, he may reject Christ and remain spiritually dead. When he dies physically, he faces the judgment of God for his sin.

But, while he’s making up his mind, he’s in one of the choices. He is without Christ. Therefore, according to Jesus, he is “*condemned already.*” God does not condemn him. God merely judges him. He condemns himself.

The final judgment of God at the Great White Throne will not catch the sinner by surprise. Throughout his lifetime he will have been judged by God a thousand times in a thousand ways. He will have been judged by the memory of a Christian mother’s prayers. By the influence of a godly wife. By the witness of a faithful teacher. By the preaching of a Good News preacher.

He will have been judged by the message of scripture. By the singing of a gospel song. By the sweet innocence of a little child. By the testimony of a loving friend. No person, at least in this country of ours, will be able to stand before God and say, “I never knew. I never had a chance to receive and confess Christ as Lord.”

Nor will he be able to plead the fifth amendment. It will do no good on that day to say, “I refuse to testify on the grounds it may tend to incriminate me.” With infinite knowledge of the human heart, God will simply flash upon the picture screen of heaven every evil thought, act and attitude. Instantaneously he will know why, in God’s sight, a man outside of Christ is “*condemned already.*”

It really isn’t necessary for any person to stand before God at the Great White Throne. When Jesus died on the cross, God judged sin for all time to come. And, “*therefore if any man is in Christ, he is a new creature . . .*” (2 Corinthians 5:17). The ugly, dark past is gone, and “*there is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1).

I remind you, dear reader, if you have never received Jesus as your Savior, you are in life’s living option. You face the greatest choice a man or woman can face. You have the ability to make it. You are equipped with free will. Right now you have the opportunity to choose Jesus, receive eternal life, and know heaven will be your home. Or, you may reject Him, die and face final

separation from God.

While you are reaching a decision, you are in one of the options. You are without Christ and are “*condemned already.*” So, if you have not already done so, I urge you, respond to His love. Open your heart to Him. Receive Christ as Savior and move from death to life.

The Judgment Seat of Christ

There is another judgment about which I’m compelled to write. It is the judgment of works. Or what the scripture calls the Judgment Seat of Christ. In his letter to the Jesus folk at Corinth, Paul writes these heart-stopping words, “*For we must all appear before the Judgment Seat of Christ, that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body, according to what he has done, whether good or bad*” (2 Corinthians 5:10).

When you faced the fact of yourself, made a beeline to the cross, accepted God’s judgment of your sin and received Jesus as your Savior, at that moment you were born again. Your guilt was blotted out. Your sin was taken away. You were saved for time and eternity. The door of hell for you was slammed shut. The door to heaven was opened. Forever!

But, having become a recipient of God’s grace, you are now responsible to God’s grace. You are under the judgment of works. There will come a day when every child of God will stand before the Judgment Seat of Christ to give an account of his fidelity and service. The Bible is not entirely specific as to when or where this judgment of saved-sinners will occur, but every Christian will have his works inspected. His service graded. His obedience evaluated. The totality of his performance as God's child exposed to the test of the refiner’s fire.

“For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if any man builds upon the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw, each man’s work will become evident; for the day will show it, because it is to be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each man's work. If the work which any man has built

on the foundation survives, he shall receive a reward” (1 Corinthians 3:11-14).

What a happy thought! Faithfulness will not pass unnoticed. The Bible is replete with references to rewards, crowns, and various stations in the life beyond (Matthew 5:12; 6:4; 6:18; 10:41; 25:14-30; 25:31-46). Characteristically, the most deserving will be least willing to retain their rewards and will fashion them into trophies of love to lay at Jesus’ feet.

But all God’s children will not fare so well. *“If any man’s work is burned up, he shall suffer [painfully experience] loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire”* (1 Corinthians 3:15). There is a positive aspect to this, of course. It means all the trash and ugliness which have cluttered our thoughts and actions on earth will be consumed. In heaven we will be perfect. Thank God for that. But the painful part is that many carnal Christians will have little left with which to fashion a love gift for Jesus! That’s the real terror of the Judgment Seat of Christ.

Do you see it, fellow Christian? Each recipient of grace is responsible to grace. Each of us, from the moment of conversion, is under the judgment of works. One day we will stand before Christ to have our lives examined. For those who have run faithfully and well, it will be a joyous moment.

Others, sad to say, will get into heaven as Lot got out of Sodom -- burned out! They will stand before the Lord with empty hands. They will greet Jesus who loved them and gave Himself for them with nothing to lay at His feet as a way of saying thank you. What a tragic moment that will be!

It is the Judgment Seat of Christ to which the book of Hebrews is related. In fact, we simply cannot comprehend certain sections of this book (6:4-12; 10:26-39), until we understand the Biblical teaching regarding this particular aspect of judgment. When we get straight on that and realize our salvation is no longer at stake, but, as Christians, we are responsible for our behavior as believers, then we cannot gloss over what the Spirit of God would say to us in the “hard”

passages of this epistle. They speak to our situation. Our lives. Our need. And, we must take them to heart.

A famous painter, well-known for the careful manner with which he went about his work, was approached one day by a friend who asked him why he painted with such care. His answer was one we would all do well to remember. “I am painting for eternity.”

Dear Christian reader, there is nothing more sober or serious I can say to you than this: live with eternity’s values in view! Don’t let the world force you into its mold. Reject that distorted way of thinking which turns trinkets into treasures, and treasures into trinkets!

Based on their performance, some Christians seem to believe that, having become a Christian, it doesn’t matter how they live. They appear to feel free to do as they please. To ignore God’s edicts if they wish. To tithe or not tithe. To worship or not worship. To serve or not serve. To witness or not witness.

The Bible says otherwise, “*For whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*” (Galatians 6:7). God alone knows how many campers, new cars, boats, homes, wardrobes, kids, family or friends have been supported at God’s expense. Christians guilty of this misappropriation of God’s funds will be judged. There’s nothing wrong with campers. Or new cars, boats, nice homes, clothes, sending one’s kids to college, or supporting hard-up friends or family. If they are acquired or done via some sacrifice other than robbing God.

The tragedy for the Christian who tries to acquire acceptable, even worthy things on his own terms by robbing God, is that he never gives God a chance to prove His promises. He walks by sight, not faith. He never experiences the thrill of seeing God invade his situation and do the impossible, that is, meet a need, when from human perspective there is no way on earth that need can be met. The man is a double loser. He loses in time. And he loses in eternity when he stands at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

It is solemn to contemplate the fact that the future will be the harvest of the present. Yet that is what scripture says. “*Whatever a man sows, this he will also reap*” (Galatians 6:7). Eternal issues are at stake in what you are and do today. For sometime, somewhere, every child of God will be asked to give an accounting. Your work, life, time, stewardship, use and misuse of opportunity, will be tested by the fire of God’s judgment. If it survives, there will be rejoicing. If it is consumed, there will be regret. “*Saved as by fire,*” to meet the Lord Jesus with empty hands.

Look at your priorities. At your lifestyle. At the subtle ways in which the world has crowded you into its mold. Then do something about what you see. You can’t undo yesterday’s mistakes. Or recapture yesterday’s missed opportunities. But you can do everything in the world about today. And tomorrow. And all the tomorrows God in His grace gives you. Sieze the opportunity. If necessary, reorder your priorities, and build. Not just for time, but for eternity.

Notes

1. Paul W. Kopp, “Life by Choice” (Los Angeles: Los Angeles Baptist City Mission Society, 427 W. 5 Street, Los Angeles, CA 90013, 1965).

“OUR HOPE: JESUS SEES US THROUGH”

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Hebrews 6:4-12; 10:26-39

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. ⁹But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. ¹⁰For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having served the saints, as you still do. ¹¹And we desire each one of you to show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹²that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

^{10:26}For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. ²⁹How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” ³¹It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. ³²But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, ³³partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴For you showed sympathy to the

prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. ³⁷For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. ³⁸But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. ³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

In the view of many scholars, chapters 6 and 10 of the book of Hebrews comprise the most difficult of all New Testament passages to resolve. Taken together, they pose agonizing theological and practical problems for some people. Obviously, we shall not exhaust their meaning in the span of these pages. However, we will attempt to resolve the interpretative problem common to both passages. And, as space permits, deal with a few of the precious and practical applications of these truths to our situation as saved-sinners.

One mark of maturity is the ability to disagree without being disagreeable. Rarely is this virtue more to be desired than when we are called upon to “*rightly divide*” (2 Timothy 2:15) a passage of scripture which is not only complicated but, as in the case of Hebrews 6 and 10, controversial. Equally gifted and committed Bible teachers differ widely in their interpretation of these texts. That’s understandable. No one has a monopoly on God’s truth.

Unfortunately, instead of differing in love, some scholars have turned our text into a center of fierce theological debate which has often, and tragically, divided members of Christ’s body from one another. Hopefully, we can avoid this pitfall. And if, after approaching these passages with an openness of soul and spirit, after seeing what the scripture actually says; after cross-checking these verses with related passages (the Bible must never be made to contradict itself; most assuredly, it doesn’t do so on its own); if, after careful and prayerful analysis of these passages our conclusions differ, let’s agree to respect the right of each to his own honest opinion remembering that, while truth is infallible, no teacher of truth is, including this one!.

None of us has a monopoly on Biblical knowledge or understanding. Least of all me! So let us commit ourselves here and now to that level of Christian maturity in which, if we cannot agree, we shall agree to disagree without being disagreeable. Agreed? Great!

The best way to begin is to become thoroughly familiar with the scriptures under discussion. A careful reading will show Hebrews 10:26-39 to be a restatement, in slightly different form, of Hebrews 6:4-12. Perhaps chapter 6 is more succinct. Let us look at it in the Authorized Version. *“For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, and have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, if they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame”* (6:4-6, KJV).

The central question at stake here, and the issue around which the whole controversy swirls, is: who were these people described in these verses? Were they Christians? Half-Christians? Non-Christians? Were they possessors of a vital Christian faith, or mere professors of Christianity?

The Hypothetical Theory

There are some serious scholars who resolve the issue by saying the writer of Hebrews was discussing a hypothetical situation in order to strengthen his message of hope for readers beset by great temptation to turn away from Christ. To these particular interpreters, the big word is “if.” *“If they fall away”*(6:6). If it were possible, they say, for someone to be saved and then fall away, he could not be “re-saved” unless Jesus died a second time. Since that is impossible and unthinkable, the catastrophe described in chapters 6 and 10 is hypothetical rather than actual.

This point of view has a certain degree of charm because it clearly defines the people as being Christians, while at the same time it in no way contradicts the Biblical doctrine of the security of believers. But the weakness in this theory is that the entire thrust of the book of Hebrews is away from the hypothetical. Everything this writer has to say is by way of urging his readers to leave

the shadow for the substance. To turn away from that which is symbolic to that which is real. It doesn't seem consistent with this pattern of very careful logic to suddenly veer away from this emphasis upon realities and start dealing with hypotheses. So from my perspective at least, we need to look elsewhere for the solution to our apparent dilemma.

The Unsaved Or Half-saved Theory

A second and widely held view is that these folk were never really saved in the first place. They were near, but non-Christian. Professors, but not possessors of the faith. According to this view, they were half-saved people who saw the light, but did not walk in it. They tasted or sampled the bread of life, but did not devour it, that is, make it an integral part of themselves. They shared the blessings of the Holy Spirit as He acted in other lives, but experienced none of His power in their own. They heard the gospel eagerly, but did not act to receive and apply the good news to themselves. They witnessed the signs, wonders and miracles which authenticated the Lordship of Jesus, but shrugged them off as having meaning to other people, not to them. “Jesus healed other people,” they might say, “but will He never heal me!”

In other words, as a leading proponent of this point of view explains, “These were persons who had an outward acquaintance with Christianity, who never knew what it was to receive the Lord Jesus as their own personal Saviour.”¹

The appeal of this particular interpretation is that “churchianity” can be, and often is, mistaken for Christianity. I fervently believe this happened to millions of people during the post-war revival years of the late 1940s and early 1950s. At that time, there was a tremendous wave of religious interest in America. Hundreds of thousands of people intellectually investigated, philosophically evaluated, some were even emotionally titillated by, churchianity. But, they never really appropriated authentic Christianity through a vital, personal, life-changing relationship with Jesus Christ.

These dear deluded people were not half-saved, or nearly saved. They were, are and continue to

be unsaved. Even though they may belong to some church! If you were to ask them why they have been turned off by religion and have become church drop-outs, they might say, “We tried that ‘church bit’ once and it didn’t work.” Does that mean there is absolutely no hope for these folk? Yes! If you accept the view which classifies the people described in Hebrews 6 as professors, not possessors. For that’s what millions of mildly inoculated church members are: professors, not possessors!

According to this interpretation, there is no hope for folk who nibble at the gospel and then turn away from it. “*It is impossible,*” according to this reading of Hebrews 6:4, to renew them to repentance. They weren’t saved in the first place. Just because they investigated Christianity, gave it a whirl, didn’t make it work, and gave it up as a bad scene, it is now impossible for them ever to be saved. Does that make sense to you? Does that jibe with the Good News invitation “*whosoever will may come*”? Not to me.

Similar difficulty is encountered in an adaptation of this view which says these folk were half-saved, because they had gone so very far with Christ before turning back. Is it possible for a person to be half-saved? No more than it is possible for a woman to be half pregnant! Either she is or she isn’t. Either a person is saved or he isn’t.

Many things can and do happen to deny full life to a fertilized ova. There can be a miscarriage. A malfunction in the growth process which results in deformity. A stillbirth. Furthermore, many things can happen to a child after birth which inhibit natural development. Disease. Malnutrition. Physical mistreatment. But, to say the woman herself was, or had been, only half pregnant is to deny physiological fact.

What is true physically is true spiritually. Many things can and do happen to inhibit the spiritual growth of God’s children, But, to say deformed, misshapen, half-grown, grotesque Christians are not, or never were, Christians at all, is to say something no human being is in a position to say. God alone looks at the heart. God alone knows who does or does not belong to Him.

I am fully aware there is a difference between an enlightened soul and a quickened spirit. I know it's possible for a soul -- the mind, emotion and will -- of a person to be enlightened. For him to come under conviction of sin, be made aware of Christ's capacity to deal with sin so he is informed about the need to act. But if that conviction is not followed by action in actually receiving Christ as Saviour, this enlightened soul does not become a quickened spirit!

When Adam sinned, as we learned in chapter 3, the Holy Spirit, the very life principle of God Himself, left Adam. While Adam retained physical life, he died spiritually. He ceased to be true man. Ever since, the sons of Adam have fallen shy of being true men.

Given physical life, they are born in a state of spiritual death. That's why Jesus said, "I am come that they might have life"(John 10:10). Not physical life, we already have that! Spiritual life, so we can become the man or woman God meant us to be. But until that new life comes through Christ, ego remains in control. The person is physically alive, but spiritually dead, no matter how enlightened he may be about the Bible and theology.

Now, if the only available information about these people was that they were "*once enlightened*" (6:4), we might be able to buy the half-saved/unsaved, professors only, description of them on the premise that they were enlightened, but never quickened. However, the descriptives are heaped one on top of the other making an absolute ironclad case for their having been converted, with a capital "C." Look, for instance, at the word "*tasted*," which appears twice. "*Tasted of the heavenly gift*" (6:4). "*Tasted the good word of God*" (6:5). Those interpreters who suggest that these people "*tasted*" the gift and word of God in that they only nibbled at them, but didn't really devour or make them their own, also insist that when "*Jesus tasted death for every man*" (2:9), He drank the cup of death dry! He consumed it to its very dregs!

Yet, the original Greek word found in all three verses is the same. Careful exegesis does not permit a double meaning. You can't say it meant "*nibbled*" over here and "*consumed*" over there. Especially since the accurate English translation of the Greek is "*consumed, ate or devoured.*"

So we conclude these people were not only enlightened; they were so thrilled with the wonder of the Good News they drank it all in. They devoured it. They made it an integral part of themselves.

Furthermore, the entire text of Hebrews clearly indicates it was written to born-again people. People with whom the writer identifies himself when he repeatedly speaks of “we” (2:3; 3:14; 4:15; 8:1; 10:10 and 12:1 for example). People who bore in their lives the fruit of the Spirit, love (6:10), which is the supreme test of one’s Christianity (1 Corinthians 13). People whose past record of achievement and faithfulness is repeatedly commended (6:9, 10; 10:32-34). People who had gone far and grown well, but who now seemed on the verge of succumbing to what we might call a “middle-age spiritual letdown.” They were in peril of suffering a devastating loss. But it was not the loss of their salvation.

The reason many scholars are drawn to the theory these were half-Christian, or non-Christian people is because the Bible clearly teaches the eternal security of Christians. Yet, Hebrews 6 seems to say people who fall from grace are lost forever. That it is “*impossible to renew them to repentance*” (6:6). If this were true, it would be in direct conflict with the “once in grace, always in grace” doctrine. So the simple way out is to declare these folk were not Christians in the first place. However, this does not jibe with the evidence we have about them. Therefore, we need to look elsewhere for a happier solution to the problem. One which more fully fits the fact.

The Historical Situation Theory

A third, more cautious and ingenious solution is that which argues these passages in Hebrews 6 and 10 refer to a problem peculiar to first-century Jewish Christians only. Many Jews believed in Jesus as the Messiah, yet still clung to the temple rites as a kind of spiritual security blanket.

According to this interpretation, if those particular believers -- not Christians in general -- did not go on to full dependence upon Christ for salvation, there was nothing more God could do for them. They were absolutely without hope. “If they, that is, first-century Jewish Christians, fall, it is impossible to renew them to repentance.”²

The charm of this view is that it remains true to the historical situation. The problem is that consistency of interpretation would completely defuse the message of hope which threads through Hebrews. If these words of warning are “exclusively to a special class of people, in a special circumstance, at a special time in history which has forever passed away,”² what are we to do with the words of promise and hope? Are these limited to a special group, too?

No, proponents of this view say. The promises are for everyone. But can we logically lift out the hard passages which appear to be in disharmony with the glorious guarantees of eternal life for Christians given elsewhere in scripture, and say these difficult-to-harmonize verses are limited in their scope, while the theme of hope which runs throughout the book has no such limitations? Does that hope apply to us, but not to those first-century folk? I don’t think God’s grace is that specific. Thus, I’m drawn to find a more satisfying explanation.

Once Saved, Now Lost Theory

A fourth and a very widely held view regarding these chapters is that the people described here had been saved, but through some sin or sins, possibly loss of faith or apostasy, had backslidden, lost their salvation, were now unsaved and in peril of hell. This is what is called “falling from grace.”

In a nutshell, the teaching is that one can be saved and on his way to heaven, but unless he

perseveres, remains absolutely faithful and without fault to the very end, he may even on his deathbed, commit some such sin as blasphemy or doubt which will keep him out of heaven.

Now, I recognize the problem of preaching the blessings of grace without emphasizing the responsibilities of grace. But do we solve the problem by saying one gets saved by grace and then stays saved by works? Does that not place the whole burden of our ultimate salvation upon our own shoulders, as if to say the cross of Christ is not adequate and we need a religion of Jesus-plus?

That is the precise heresy against which the book of Hebrews speaks out so strongly. The heresy of Jesus-plus. Jesus-plus anything. It is a plain fact there isn't anything good enough a person can do to get salvation in the first place. Neither is there anything good enough a person can do to keep it once he's got it. Nor is there anything he can do so bad it will cause him to lose salvation. It was while he was at his worst, his face turned away from God, in a state of rebellion, guilty of blasphemy growing out of an intense determination to be his own god, that God loved him and reached out to save him. *“But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us”* (Romans 5:8).

The thrilling good news is that salvation is a product of God's sovereign grace. All we as humans are asked to do is be joyful, grateful recipients of that grace. *“For by grace you have been saved through faith; and that not of yourselves, it is the gift of God; not as a result of works, that no one should boast”* (Ephesians 2:8,9). We are saved by grace, through faith, plus nothing!

The most serious deficiency in this theory, however, is that if Hebrews 6 and 10 teach a person can be saved today, backslide and be lost tomorrow, then he never can be made right with God again. He's absolutely, utterly and finally without hope. *“It is impossible,”* according to this reading of Hebrews 6:4-6, *“to renew them again unto repentance.”*

Yet, when you compare that conclusion with everything else the Bible says, you find yourself in

deep discord. The Bible repeatedly offers forgiveness and restoration at any time, to anyone who genuinely repents. “*I will heal your faithlessness*” (Jeremiah 3:22), God promises. All of us in our own experience, and in the experience of others, know what it means to be healed of our faults and failings. To find God’s hand reaching out to us when we fall.

In preceding chapters we’ve seen how the book of Hebrews is in perfect harmony with such great chapters as John 10 and Romans 8, where the Holy Spirit uses His penman to pile argumentation upon argumentation, showing those in Christ are absolutely and eternally secure. The scripture is abundantly clear: when a person comes to God through Christ, the door to heaven is opened. The door to hell is shut. Nothing done, or left undone, can keep that person out of heaven, or put him in hell. “*For the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable*” (Romans 11:29). “*He who believes in the Son has*” - present tense - “*eternal life*” (John 3:36). If you have committed yourself to Christ, though you falter or even fall, you are eternally secure in Him.

While we’re thinking along these lines, let me give you a simple rule of thumb to help you interpret the Bible correctly. Whatever a particular verse seems to say, it must find agreement throughout the entire Bible to be valid. If this is not the case, you may not know what the verse does say, but at least you know what the verse does not say.

When you follow this principle, that is, comparing scripture with scripture in the case of these verses from Hebrews 6 and 10, you may not know what they do say, but you are absolutely sure of what they do not say! They do not say a man who has been saved can be lost. There is absolutely no Biblical support whatsoever for that idea. There are not more than a half dozen or so verses in the entire Bible which even remotely suggest that idea (Matthew 24:13; Mark 3:24; Luke 9:62; Hebrews 10:26; I John 5:16). Every one of these verses is open to another and better interpretation.

The clincher for me, however, is found in the book of Hebrews itself. In fact, it is found in chapter 6. I think I am safe in saying you will not find this line of reasoning in any of the

commentaries. If it speaks to your need, thank the Holy Spirit. If it doesn't, blame me. *“For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed; and it ends up being burned”* (6:7,8).

The first-century Bibleland people to whom these words were spoken belonged to an agrarian society. The industrial revolution had not yet taken place. Theirs was an agricultural economy. Therefore, when the writer of Hebrews used this illustration about a farmer burning his land because it produced briars and thorns instead of a useful crop, they knew immediately what he meant. They weren't worried for one moment about losing their salvation because he spoke in this fashion. The thought never entered their minds. Why am I so sure? Because they knew, as every farmer knows, burning a field doesn't destroy the land, it purifies it! Burning gets rid of the weeds and rubble. It prepares the soil. Gives it a chance to produce another, better crop. In our day, a farmer sprays and discs his land. In the first century, when the book of Hebrews was written, farmers achieved the same purpose by burning the land, a process still followed in certain parts of the world.

So, you see, this passage which has posed problems for so many, and which the devil has used to torment serious and sensitive Christians who, aware of their human failings as sinner-saints worry they may have fallen irretrievably into sin and live in dread of hell-fire, interprets itself. The very illustration the Holy Spirit uses proves it is not a question of someone losing his salvation, for the fire does not destroy. It cleanses. What is lost is not salvation, but the blessings, joy and rewards of a worthy harvest produced by a life of faithfulness! Isn't it amazing how the Bible casts light upon the commentaries?

A Credible, Biblical View

This brings us to the interpretation which, as I see it, harmonizes fully with everything God's written word says about His children, and how He intends to deal with them in time and eternity.

The book of Hebrews, by clear evidence, was written to born-again believers whose security in

Christ was absolute. They were people, however, like us, who were confronted moment by moment and day by day with the necessity of choosing. Every choice they made bore a consequence. When their choice was good, they went forward with Christ. They were not only given another star in their heavenly crown, they also experienced a fresh dimension of joy and serenity in Christ here on earth. They felt good about themselves. Secure in their Christian life. In other words, they were happy!

On the other hand, when they made a wrong choice and turned away from Christ, something was lost. The critical point is this: what they lost was not their sonship! Once again the writer of Hebrews helps us with an illustration (Hebrews 12:16). Esau lost his blessing. He tried to get it back, pleading tearfully, but he was unsuccessful. What did he lose? His sonship? No! That never changed. He remained Isaac's son. What Esau lost was the paternal blessing. That was irretrievable. Without it, Esau was miserable. Restless. Unhappy.

Similarly, when we make a wrong choice and turn in the wrong direction, we lose God's blessing upon us. For whatever period of time we are away from Him we struggle along alone. We're on our own. Furthermore, we lose the blessings and rewards which would have been ours had we stayed in intimate relationship with Him.

Let me use a diagram again to illustrate this thought. In figure 5 letter “A” represents Christ, and “B” is a typical saved-sinner. Following “B's” conversion, he and his Lord begin an intimate walk together. It's wonderful. Liberating. Joyous. They come to a crisis point (“X”). The Lord says, “Go this way.” “B” says, “No, I choose to go that way.” “B” exercises his freedom of choice, and goes the wrong way. He wanders through the maze of problems and difficulties “B” creates for himself. Somewhere along the line (“Y”), like the prodigal son (Luke 15:17), “B” comes to himself and returns to his Lord. He is forgiven and they go on together.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS HELPS US GROW”

Dr. John Allan Lavender
Hebrews 6:4-12; 10:26-39

For in the case of those who have once been enlightened and have tasted of the heavenly gift and have been made partakers of the Holy Spirit, ⁵and have tasted the good word of God and the powers of the age to come, ⁶and then have fallen away, it is impossible to renew them again to repentance, since they again crucify to themselves the Son of God, and put Him to open shame. ⁷For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God; ⁸but if it yields thorns and thistles, it is worthless and close to being cursed, and it ends up being burned. ⁹But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. ¹⁰For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. ¹¹And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, ¹²that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises.

^{10:26}For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, ²⁷but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. ²⁸Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses, ²⁹much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” ³¹It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God. “But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming

sharers with those who were so treated. ³⁴For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; and if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

A recent issue of Reader's Digest carried a story about a second-grader's exhibit in a primary school Science Fair. The exhibit consisted of a bright red flowerpot filled with rich-looking soil. Attached was the painful explanation in childish scrawl: "Some seeds don't grow."

There were several possible reasons for the lack of harvest. Too much water. Not enough sunshine. Inferior seed. Whatever the cause, there had been no growth. In his comment on this poignantly humorous anecdote, Ian Chapman points out, "Unfortunately, many Christians must wear a similar sign on their person: 'Some seeds don't grow.' And they haven't. Since their conversion experience, maturity has not come. The harvest has not been evident. Their experience with Christ is shallow and frothy."¹ Their lives have been a kind of spiritual dust bowl. Devoid of anything resembling growth.

The reasons for their spiritual sterility are as numerous as those which keep a seed from germinating, with one salient exception: there is nothing inferior about the Good News seed God plants in human hearts. The seed itself is flawless. The life force in it is strong. The potential for growth is eager for expression. So, if growth does not occur, we must look elsewhere for the cause.

That is precisely what the book of Hebrews urges and teaches us to do. The all-consuming practical concern of this book is what F.F. Bruce calls, “the grace of continuance.”² Not, as some suggest, to preserve salvation, but in order that we who have been given the gift of new life in Christ might grow and produce a worthy harvest.

The peril described in Hebrews 6 and 10 is not hypothetical. It is not a straw man put up to emphasize a point. Nor is it situational, that is, relating to first-century Hebrew Christians only. Nor is it addressed to people who were never really saved. Nor people who, once saved, were now lost. Rather, we concluded the peril described is actual. It constitutes a most serious danger to Christians who are accountable to God for their performance and productivity, as Christians. But what is in peril is not their salvation. What is at stake is their present joy and future blessings.

The agricultural illustration (6:7,8) bears a strong similarity to Christ’s parable of the sower (Matthew 13:24-30). It’s almost as if this spokesman for questing Christians is preaching a sermon. Earlier, he had been talking about the supremacy of Jesus. Who He was. What He did. Now he pauses for a moment to make a present-day application, as if to say, “Do you remember the story which came to us from our Lord Himself? The one about a man who went forth to sow, and how various kinds of ground produced various kinds of harvest? Well, let me give you a sequel to that parable. Land which produces is blessed by God. Land which does not produce is treated by God in such a way as to make it a blessing.”

As he warms to his subject, we can almost hear him say, “The Master explained how the world is a vast composite of various kinds of soil. The seed is the Good News that life has come to the world. The Master implied that every man’s life is a field of some sort. That every new birth is a planting. That the purpose of a planting is a crop. So our primary concern as Christians should be the harvest. That’s the key issue. That’s the matter of first importance. Now, I’ve been studying the harvest of some of your lives, and I don’t like what I see. Therefore, let me warn

you of the dreadful danger you’re in, and show you what you can do about it.”

When someone claims to be a child of God but lives like the offspring of Satan, that person crucifies Jesus on his own account and holds Him up to contempt (6:6). That doesn’t mean the person actually nails Jesus to the cross a second time. Rather, it describes the slow, steady, snuffing out of Christ’s influence in his life, as inwardly the person dies a little every day to the higher, nobler, sweeter, finer things of the Spirit.

Instead of doing as Paul did and crucifying the world (Galatians 6:14), egocentric sinner-saints crucify the Son. Instead of letting Jesus be Lord of their lives, they insist on doing their own thing, in their own way. Ego exerts itself. They permit self to usurp control. As a result, instead of Christ’s life showing stronger and more clearly through that person, it grows weaker and more difficult to discern. Such Christians put Christ “to an open shame” (6:6, KJV).

There’s an old saying to the effect that, for each person who reads the Bible, there are hundreds who read our lives. When we maintain our personal comfort by denying the Lordship of Christ over all of life, we deliver a body blow to Him and His body, the Church.

Someone asked Leslie Weatherhead what he had learned after forty years in the ministry. He said, “I have learned life will only work out one way, and that’s God’s way.” The famed preacher was right. Chip the corners off the cube of God’s truth and invariably you lose. The world, the flesh and the devil use that jaded cube against you!

That’s the whole point of this heavy emphasis on crucifying Christ in one’s self and putting Him “*to open shame*.” Jesus can stand the ridicule. He survived Peter’s cursing denial, and the other

disciples' hurried abandonment. And, while it's true, as Dick Shephard observed, “The greatest handicap to the Church is the unsatisfactory lives of many Christians,” the Church will survive. But, when we crucify Jesus afresh, we kill something inside ourselves. And that's what the Father is concerned about. Not what sin does to Him, but what it does to His creation and the crown of that creation, you and me!

Part of the shame we bring to ourselves, and the Lord Jesus, through our rebel days and years, is a harvest of bad fruit. It wouldn't be so bad if we only hurt ourselves. But there is a cycle of influence and reproduction we cannot escape. Bad fruit has a way of producing seed for more of the same.

Consider the irresponsible parents whose children grow up to be irresponsible parents. Witness the dope pusher who begets dope pushers. Think about the carnal Christian who, by his selfish example, pulls the spiritually newborn down to his level and produces another carnal Christian. Thus, since every man's life is a field and the New Birth is a planting, the pattern of growth and the quality of the crop should seriously concern us all.

The Good Farmer Works Hard To Improve The Soil So It Produces A Better Harvest

Ugly and unproductive ground is treated, sometimes harshly, in an effort to make it beautiful and useful. Depending on the condition in which the farmer first finds it, the process may be long and laborious. Or it may be relatively simple. But in every instance, the good farmer puts more into the ground than he takes out.

The improvement process may include leveling, grading, diking, irrigating and crop rotating, all aimed at enabling the ground to produce a better harvest. And, it's the farmer, not the farm, who is the best, most efficient judge of what is needed to improve the harvest. *“For ground that drinks the rain which often falls upon it and brings forth vegetation useful to those for whose*

sake it is also tilled, receives a blessing from God” (6:7).

“*The rain*” speaks to me of that abundant grace of God which is lavishly given to all, despite their personal situation. The phrase, “*useful to those for whose sake it is also tilled,*” points out that the purpose of land is not to serve itself, but to serve those who own it, till it, plant it, cultivate it. If the land is not fulfilling its intended purpose, the farmer has every right and obligation to treat the land in such a way as to enable it to do so.

The point of all this is that God, the best of all husbandmen, is not indifferent to the factors which condition us and affect the quality of our soil as persons. In fact, because He gave us soul qualities of mind, emotion, and will, God accepts part of the responsibility for what we are and for doing something about it.

God is not an indifferent bystander. He is the wise and interested owner of the life-field of those who come to Him in Christ. “*You are not your own . . . you have been bought with a price*” (1 Corinthians 6:19, 20). Having been “*bought with a price,*” you belong to the buyer. God, the good farmer, knows what the soil of each Christian’s life needs in order to produce a worthy harvest, which is useful to the One to whom the field belongs.

Our purpose as Christians is not to please and satisfy ourselves. Though that may seem unfair, it isn’t. It’s just another way of saying: God’s will for us is our highest good. God’s will frees us from the frustrations, strain, and dissatisfaction of false productivity. It enables us to fulfill our intended purpose, which is where freedom and happiness lie. Freedom and happiness do not come from doing what we want to do, but from doing the things we were intended by God to do. Being the person we were intended to be.

A bird was made to fly. A fish to swim. Take them out of their element -- expect the fish to fly

or the bird to swim -- and both lose their capacity to be happy and free. Similarly, the Christian was designed to grow and produce a harvest useful to God. If we are not fulfilling that purpose, because of sin or egocentricity, our heavenly husbandman uses all sorts of situations -- some kind, some caustic -- to help us become more productive and, thus, happier and freer. Happiness and freedom are by-products of accomplishing the things we were designed to do. Becoming the persons we were designed to be.

Sin and egocentricity always take a toll. There is no way you and I can get around that. The law of cause and effect always applies. In fact, there are only two courses we can follow when we err as sinner-saints. In both cases there are consequences. We can go God's way; which is to say, we can turn away from our sin and return to Him. When we do, the consequences of our sin remain in the form of psychic scars, lost blessings, irretrievable time, and opportunity, lost. But, by His grace, we do receive cleansing and forgiveness, plus an opportunity to start all over again, sadder but wiser.

Or, we can go our own way. We can persist in our rebellion and refuse to heed the gentle nudging of our God. If we choose this path, does the Lord smile benignly, shrug His shoulders and say, “Tsk, tsk”? No. Does He withdraw the gift of eternal life and send us to hell? No. God neither ignores nor withdraws.

Then, what does happen when we start wrong and stay wrong? God, in His love, chastens us in the form of consequences which spring from our choices. *“For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep [have died]. But if we judged ourselves rightly, we should not be judged. But when we are judged, we are disciplined by the Lord in order that we may not be condemned along with the world”* (1 Corinthians 11:30-32).

Let me hasten to say, every sickness is not a sign of spiritual staleness. The Bible says rain falls

on the just and the unjust as does the sunshine (Matthew 5:45). Our Christianity does not make us immune to illness. Nor does it surround us with a kind of invisible shield which protects us from catastrophe. Every sickness and distress are not some form of chastening. God permits many things He does not will.

But the Bible and psychology both agree that unresolved guilt can make a person sick, weak and even lead to death. Some sickness, some weakness, some distress of spirit are consequences which God permits in order to prepare the soil of our lives for a better harvest.

God’s disciplinary action is never an end in itself. It always has a purified person in mind as the ultimate result. The refiner’s fire here on earth is aimed at removing the dross and producing pure gold which we may lay as a love gift at the feet of Jesus. A good farmer will go to almost any length to improve the soil so it produces a better harvest. God, the best of all husbandmen, is no exception.

No illustration is wholly apropos when trying to understand the ways of God, and this one can be pushed too far. On the human level, the cost of treatment and development may be such that it is not economically feasible to save a certain piece of ground. But this is never true with God and His reconditioning of human soil. There are no lengths to which He will not go. No price He will not pay. The cross is evidence of that. And, following good farming practices in His treatment of human soil, God always puts in more than He takes out.

I shall never forget an automobile dealer in Kansas who said with joy and awe in his voice, “God is my partner. At the end of the year when my Partner and I add up the profits, He says, ‘Bill, you take ninety percent and give me ten.’ Wow! I’ll do business with that kind of partner any day!”

This principle always applies: God gives more than He takes. But another principle also holds

true: God will not force Himself on anyone. The choice is ours. We can go God’s way or we can go our own. In either case, there are consequences. Knowing this, how much better it is that we examine ourselves, judge ourselves, submit ourselves to the healing balm of God’s forgiving grace. Which means we must not only confess our guilt, we must also commit ourselves to change.

Change is never easy. Our author is so conscious of the difficulty involved, he says, “*It is impossible*” (6:6). Note, please, that the apparent impossibility does not relate to renewing one to salvation, but to “*repentance.*” Also, there’s no reference here to a limitation on God’s grace. “*For nothing will be impossible with God*” (Luke 1:37).

An interesting characteristic of Hebrew literature is hyperbole; that is, deliberate exaggeration for emphasis. From the context, this word, “*impossible,*” looks to me like an illustration of Hebrew hyperbole. In English, we may say about someone, “He or she is impossible!” By that we mean the person involved is extremely, even excruciatingly, difficult to deal with. I believe that’s what the scripture is saying here. Practically speaking, it is “*impossible,*” or psychologically improbable, certain carnal Christians will ever repent.

Many people have a penchant for tagging themselves as worthless. Hopeless. “*Impossible.*” When they say this, it sounds like humility with a capital “H.” Frankly, it’s a first-class cop-out. To admit worth, hope and potential is to admit the possibility of change. But this puts the burden of action on one’s own back. He becomes responsible for his attitudes and actions. Instead of wallowing around in the mire of self-pity, self-deprecation and self-deception, he must do something about himself. Change! Grow! Mature!

That’s difficult. For some, it is practically “*impossible.*” They are hardened saints. It is psychologically improbable they will ever respond, even to the amazing grace of God. But, what is psychologically true is not theologically true. With God, nothing is impossible. Anyone can

change!

While one may not return to Him with the wonder and thrill of first-love repentance, it's entirely possible he will experience a different, deeper, dearer repentance. I've seen marriages restored which appeared to be hopelessly fractured because the love vow had been broken. When the offending partner handled the situation redemptively, a deeper, dearer love developed, binding the couple more closely to each other than before.

Even a Christian who openly, and with cursing, denies his Lord can be restored to fellowship and useful service. Peter was! The same holds true for us. Does this mean we Jesus folk should sin that grace may abound? God forbid (Romans 6:1,2). But when we do sin, if we permit God to deal with our sin and our self creatively, He will take that evil, transform it and, in a remarkable way, use it for His glory, our gladness and the world's good.

Productivity Will Not Go Unrewarded Or Unnoticed

“But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things that accompany salvation, though we are speaking in this way. For God is not unjust so as to forget your work and the love which you have shown toward His name, in having ministered and in still ministering to the saints. And we desire that each one of you show the same diligence so as to realize the full assurance of hope until the end, that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promises” (6:9-12).

Our hope and joy as growing Christians come from two sources. They are the present and future products of trust and obedience on our part. They also derive from perfect memory on God's part. Those of you who are growing are doing well, the writer of Hebrews says. Keep it up. The growing process will make your faith dynamic and alive. You will be able to move aside the mountains of life. You will get a kick out of being a Christian. The fact of your security in Christ

will be supported by the feeling of assurance which comes from knowing all is well between God and you.

Then, while you are trusting and obeying, remember God has a good memory! Human merit doesn't count. We only succeed in the Christian life by letting Christ live His life through us. Nevertheless, God is not unmindful of your sacrifice and your service of love. He knows what trust and obedience require. When He sees it, even though He has no obligation to do so, He rewards it well.

“Some seeds don't grow.” Not because the seed is inferior, but because the soil is resistant. If you find this to be true in the life-field of your own heart, remember God wants to work with you to improve your soil condition so you can produce a better, more satisfying harvest. Let Him. No, do more than that. Actively, eagerly, earnestly involve yourself with Him!

Ruth Calkin, the poet, put it in a loving and openly human way:

When my rapport with You
Is disturbed, Lord,
My rapport with myself
Is utterly destroyed.

I am irritable
Little things get in my way
I am short with my family
The house is too small
My neighbors bore me
The phone frustrates me
Feelings of guilt gnaw at me.

“Just leave me alone” I tell You,
“I’ll do it myself.”
But You patiently wait to be gracious,
You gently nudge me to attention.

For knowing me as You do,
Loving me as You do,
You understand so well
That when I want You least
I need You most.³

Notes

1. From Morgan Park Baptist Church bulletin, Advance, Chicago (1971). Ian Chapman is the pastor.
2. F. F. Bruce, The Epistle to the Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Win. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964), p. 127.
3. Ruth Harms Calkins, Tell Me Again, Lord, I Forget! (Elgin, IL: David C. Cook Publishing Company)

“OUR HOPE: JESUS JAMS OPEN THE DOOR”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 6:13-20

For when God made the promise to Abraham, since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself, ¹⁴saying, “I will surely bless you, and I will surely multiply you.” ¹⁵And thus, having patiently waited, he obtained the promise. ¹⁶For men swear by one greater than themselves, and with them an oath given as confirmation is an end of every dispute.

¹⁷In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the Un-changeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, ¹⁸in order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us.

¹⁹This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, ²⁰where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us, having become a high priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

If you were to try to isolate the primary area of your own personal spiritual concern, in all likelihood it could be reduced to two fundamental questions: How do I get through to God?
How do I know it when I've done it?

These are primal questions. Central. Foundational. They have been from the beginning. Job, the oldest book in the Bible, raises the urgent question, “*Where is God my Maker, Who gives songs in the night?*” (Job 35: 10b). “*Oh that I knew where I might find Him, that I might come to His seat!*” (23:3).

The ancient Hebrews were harassed by the haunting questions of how one gained access to God and then knew it when it had happened. They were overwhelmed by a feeling of God's transcendence. His far-offness. His wholly other-ness. They were perennially plagued by the problem of bridging the awesome gap they conceived as existing between themselves and Jehovah. How could they gain access to Him? How could they do so with a sense of assurance

that once in His presence they would be heard?

So, the central questions of your heart and mine are also those of these Hebrew Christians. We're all in the same boat. We want viable answers to our vital askings: How do I get through to God? How do I know it when I've done it?

Why is this so important? So crucial? So foundational? Because, if a person can really know he has access to God any moment of the night or day, and if he can feel assured that when he speaks God listens -- that real communication occurs between them -- any problem of any size can be solved. Or at least be handled creatively. With God's help, anything is possible. The key is getting through to God and knowing it.

It is this primal concern of the human heart to which the writer of Hebrews now directs our attention in a most interesting and intriguing way. Just prior to this (5:12—6:12), he has really been laying the leather to his listeners. You've been playing games with God, he says. You've been toying around with the Christian life. Nibbling at the edges of commitment. Going thus far, but no further. As a result, you've stopped growing. You've fooled with the spiritual ABC's so long, you've become spiritually DEF! God is speaking, but you won't listen. Or, worse yet, can't hear any more. Unless you snap to -- repent -- you're in for a rude awakening when you face Jesus at the Judgment Seat of Christ.

It's a severe rebuke. The warning is extremely solemn. Their spiritual indolence, indifference and immaturity are not laughing matters. These are not attitudes they can casually shrug off. But, being a man with a pastor's heart, the writer of Hebrews is not content to leave it there. Having shaken them to their roots with the severity of his exhortation, he suddenly shifts gears. He switches from bad news to good news. From rebuke to reassurance.

Shortly after I began my first pastorate, a prominent businessman met me at the door one Sunday, "Pastor, I like coming to this church and I may join it. I'm tired of being told what to

do. I know that! The thing I appreciate is that, at long last, someone is trying to tell me how to do it.”

Prior to his comment, I was not conscious of giving a “how to” emphasis to my sermons. But following his comment, I made a deliberate effort to do so, because, as my friend pointed out, most of us know what to do. We’re not stupid or morally insensitive. We know right from wrong. But knowing how to do it, and actually doing it, are where we need some help.

So, it’s to the matter of teaching his readers how to grow in Christ that the writer of Hebrews now turns. “Do you want to grow in the Lord?” he seems to say. “Here’s how to do it. You grow in the Lord by growing in the Lord! Like Abraham of old, you build your faith (and, consequently, your hope) upon the character of God Himself. You grow in the Lord by growing in the Lord!”

This reference to Abraham was especially effective, for those Hebrew Christians remembered that over the years God had made many promises to Abraham (Genesis 13:15; 15:5; 17:4-8; 22:17,18), and He had kept every one of them! Notice this man’s name is spelled “*Abram*” in Genesis, until God changed it in Genesis 17:5 to “*Abraham*,” saying, “*for I will make you the father of a multitude of nations.*” At the same time God changed Sarai’s name to Sarah, saying that she would bear a son and call his name Isaac (Genesis 13:15-19).

Actually, these “extra” promises of God to Abraham were recapitulations, elaborations or clarifications, of His earlier promise to bless Abram and make him a great nation through whom the people of the world would bless themselves (Genesis 12:1-3). In fact, if there is an interpretive key which unlocks our understanding of the entire Biblical narrative, it is the covenant between God and Abram of Ur.

“Now the Lord said to Abram, ‘Go forth from your country, and from your relatives and from your father’s house, to the land which I will show you; and I will make you a great nation, and I will bless you,

and make your name great; and so you shall be a blessing; and I will bless those who bless you, and the one who curses you I will curse. And in you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (Genesis 12:1-3).

Abram was 75 years old and childless when God made this promise to him (Genesis 12:4). As the years rolled by, it became more and more unlikely that God could ever deliver on this particular commitment. As a matter of fact, Sarai, Abram’s wife, made a joke out of the fact that a couple of senior citizens like them were one day going to have overflow crowds at their family reunions (Romans 4:18). But, as the decades went by and Sarai began to realize the seriousness with which Abram took God’s promise, she decided to give the Lord a little help. She suggested her husband cohabit with Hagar, one of her maid-servants, and have a child by her.

I’ve often wondered why Abram succumbed to that particular suggestion. While he was by no means perfect, he was a man of high principles. At one time, I thought it might have been that Hagar was a slick chick decked out in a B.C. version of the miniskirt who posed such an enticement the old boy couldn’t handle it. However, when I recalled it was his wife who made this suggestion (knowing wives and the kind of women they’d pick for such an arrangement), I decided “Hag”ar was probably well named! I don’t think Sarai was taking any chances!

But, whatever the reason, Abram took the bad advice of his misguided wife. Hagar conceived and bore Ishmael, who has proved to be a thorn in the side of Israel from that day to this. Finally, twenty-five years after God made His promise to Abram, Sarai conceived, and Isaac, the child of promise, was born (Genesis 21:1-3).

As Abram watched this long-awaited son grow into young manhood, he must have scratched his head at times and wondered if God had gotten His wires crossed. Ishmael was so aggressive, while Isaac was hardly the strongest character about which we read in scripture. He was constantly being manipulated. First, by his mother. Later by his wife. Yet, despite these Caspar Milquetoast qualities, Isaac was the child of promise. On him rested the fulfillment of God’s prophecy regarding a great nation through whom the people of the world

would bless themselves.

Therefore, the directions God gave to Abraham must have seemed absolutely incredible. “*God tested Abraham, and said to him. . . ‘Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah; and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you’*” (Genesis 22:1,2).

When, in complete trust and obedience, Abraham did as he was told, God intervened at the very last moment, a sacrificial ram was provided, Isaac was spared, and the burnt sacrifice proceeded on schedule. At this point, God restated His earlier promise to Abraham, confirming it with a remarkable oath “*‘By Myself I have sworn,’ declares the Lord, ‘because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens, and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. And in your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice’* (Genesis 22:16-18).

Now, returning to Hebrews (6:13-20), we see how this all comes together. To get the full picture, we must take into account the earnestness and seriousness with which an oath was held in those days. The easy perjury of our own day was almost unheard of in Biblical times. An oath was the strongest surety a man could give. Usually, he invoked “the higher power” as a witness. If there were any question about the intentions of a person, the moment he swore in the name of the living God, saying such and such were so, that ended it. All speculation about his veracity was over. All doubts and misgivings were laid aside. The issue was settled. The deal was a deal.

With that background in mind, you can imagine the wide-eyed wonder of those who later read of this oath with which God had sealed His promise to Abraham. You can also begin to grasp why it was that they believed with unquestioning certainty that the prophecy regarding Abraham and his seed would be fulfilled.

Actually, of course, the mere fact that God said He would bless Abraham should have been enough. And it really was. His word is His bond. On the human level, though, that isn't always true; consequently, we sometimes have difficulty just accepting and believing God's word.

A number of years ago we had an opportunity to acquire a small cabin on a lovely lake in northern Wisconsin. The seller wanted cash and I was \$5,000 short of being able to give it to him. While praying and thinking about what I might do, I was led to call a man in Chicago who had loaned money to churches on various occasions. I explained my problem to him, offering a first mortgage as collateral if he would loan me \$5,000. He said he would think about it and call me back in a day or two.

A couple of days later when the phone rang, it was my friend, Van Maxson. “John, I've thought a great deal about this matter. You really should have that property. You work hard and take very little time off. You need a quiet place to get away so that the healing force of nature can do its work. But,” he went on, “I've got more first mortgages now than I need. I don't want any more. However, if you'll give me your word, I'll loan you the \$5,000 without collateral!”

Obviously, I was overjoyed. Even more, I was deeply moved by this expression of trust. Later, he accepted a signed note for the benefit of his heirs, were he to die, but no reference was ever made to it. Now, do you think I would renege on that obligation? Never in a million years! I would have sold everything I owned and, if necessary, lived in a tent before I would have failed the kind of trust Van Maxson placed in me.

The comparison is hardly the same, but the point is, God's bare word should have been enough. And, from Abraham's point of view, I think it was. But maybe, remembering the earlier debacle involving Hagar and Ishmael, God decided to shore up Abraham on his weak side. Whatever the reason, on His own initiative, God confirmed His prior promise with an oath! “*Since He could swear by no one greater, He swore by Himself*” (Hebrews 6:13), making His

covenant with Abraham doubly secure. God’s word backed by God’s good name! Two immutable, unchangeable, absolutely certain things. Thus, the issue was settled. The prophecy was dependable. Abraham and his seed were indeed blessed to be a blessing.

For twenty-five years, God’s word and God’s oath were all Abraham had. A quarter of a century passed before Sarah conceived and bore Isaac. Yet, through all this time, the patriarch remained faithful. Why? Because he knew in his heart God could not be untrue to Himself.

That was exactly the point the writer of Hebrews wanted to make. You grow in the Lord by growing in the Lord! You must put your faith in Him. In His person. His promises. His power. Not in any quality or cleverness of your own.

God had promised to do something tremendous through Abraham. “What God promised to do did not depend upon Abraham’s worth, merit, works or conduct,” says M. R. DeHaan, “but upon God’s person, God’s promise and God’s power to keep that promise. Biblical faith always rests in God. Never in itself or in the one who possesses it.”

So, we Christians can be hopeful. Not because of our steadfastness. Our faithfulness. Our cleverness. Our courage. These are not the guarantee of our faith. We are hopeful because behind, in and through it all is the nature and character of God Himself. God, who makes promises and keeps them. “That’s the kind of faith I want you to have,” the writer of Hebrews says, “faith that rests in God.”

Think about Abraham again. He didn’t have faith because he saw immediate results. He had to wait two and a half decades before his son was born. He didn’t have faith because it made sense. It was nonsense to believe a couple of old codgers like Abraham and Sarah would conceive a child (Romans 4). Nor, was Abraham’s faith strong because it was supported by the people around him. His own wife temporarily undermined his faith by giving him some bad advice.

The thing which made Abraham’s faith effective, which kept hope alive, was its rootage in the

nature of God Himself. Without seeing any result for twenty-five years, he clung to the character of God. That’s what true faith always does. That’s where true faith always rests.

Jane Merchant, a tremendous woman, is the victim of a baffling bone disease and has never walked. She was confined to a wheelchair at the age of two, and to her bed at the age of twelve. She lost her sight at the age of twenty-three, and now her hearing is gone. But in her darkness and despair, Jane Merchant found God. She reached out to Him. Believed what He said about Himself. Took a tremendous leap of faith, and, in the process, found hope.

She began writing poetry. Many of her poems have been printed in *McCalls*, *Harper’s Bazaar*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Atlantic Monthly* and other magazines. One of her poems describes her pilgrimage:

Full half a hundred times I’ve sobbed, “I can’t go on.”
Yet, full half a hundred times I’ve hushed my sobs and gone.
My answer, if you ask me how, may seem presumptuously odd,
But what keeps me keeping on when I cannot, is God.²

That’s the answer to our quest for reality and certainty: God! The loving, gracious, giving, dependable nature of God. The man of faith does not praise his unconquerable soul. He praises God. He does not say, “What a good boy am I,” but, “How great Thou art!” He does not say, “Seeing is believing,” because he knows believing is seeing! Biblical faith always walks without benefit of sight, resting its case upon the nature of God. His fidelity. His justice. His mercy.

If you want to grow in the Lord, grow in the Lord, get to know the truth about Him. Build your hope upon Him. Like Abraham, take Him at His word when it seems ridiculous to do so. And, like Abraham, you, too, shall see God work in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.

In college, my agnostic friends used to ask what they thought was a sophisticated question:

Can God close and open a door at the same time? If you said no, you were admitting God was not omnipotent. The answer, of course, was, “Yes, He can, but He won’t because God doesn’t do stupid things!” God operates within laws He Himself has established because He knows keeping those laws is the highest good. When God makes a promise, He keeps it. Not because He has to, but because He chooses to. That’s the way He is. That’s His nature.

But, more often than not, there is a time lag between promise and performance. In Abram’s case it was twenty-five years. During this time, between promise and performance, we have an opportunity to exercise our faith and, thus, make it stronger. When we fail to do that -- when, despite what we say to the contrary, we act as if God were dead, or a weakling who cannot deliver on His promises -- we miss the joy of proving Him good to His word, thus adding to our confidence. Fortifying our faith. Strengthening our hope. And that’s a shame. We miss the blessings which could be ours if we would trust God while we still face our problems, rather than after the problem is solved.

What is the big hurdle facing you at the moment? What is the overriding problem confronting you right now? What is the area of supreme improbability in your life? Make it a matter of surrender to God. Now. Today. While the concern exists. Take one of God’s promises and stand on it. The Bible is full of them. Then, like Abraham of old, let the good Lord work it out.

Remember the time lag, and use it as a time of testing. A time to walk by faith, not by sight. Be a bulldog of tenacious trust. Grab hold of the God who promises and refuses to let go. It may be a while before the answer comes. But when it comes, it will be doubly sweet. You and your faith will be better, stronger, more hopeful.

Perhaps you are thinking, “John, I’d like to do that. I’d like to cast myself in utter abandonment upon God, but I’ve got that hang-up you wrote about earlier. I suffer from the dual anxiety of wondering: How do I get through to God? and How do I know it when I’ve done it? Frankly, I don’t see any connection between God’s oath to Abraham, and my own

personal quest for reality and certainty.”

Well, the relevance lies in the fact that the promise was to Abraham *and his seed* (Genesis 22: 15-18). The Bible explains that Abraham’s seed is not literal, but spiritual. “*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free man, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus. And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham’s offspring, heirs according to promise*” (Galatians 3:28, 29).

The promise God first made to Abram of Ur has been extended to Christ’s church. How do we know? Think about it. The covenant God made with Abram included two prophecies. First, his seed would be multiplied. Abraham lived to see that part of the prophecy fulfilled through the birth of his son and his grandsons. Second, through his seed, the nations of the world would be blessed. This phase of the prophecy only began to become true at the birth of Jesus, Israel’s greatest son.

Now, if you have given yourself to Jesus Christ, been born again through Him, become part of His church through whom the world will be blessed and, at this very moment, is being brought back to God, then you are the spiritual seed of Abraham. Along with every other true believer, you are heir to all the promises God made to Abraham’s seed in perpetuity.

This is the foundation stone upon which your faith rests: you are heir to all the promises God made to Abraham. It is another wonderful reason for the hope which is within you as a Christian. Because God is God and His promises are doubly secure, you can get through to Him! And, you can know it when you’ve done it!

“In order that by two unchangeable things, in which it is impossible for God to lie, we may have strong encouragement, we who have fled for refuge in laying hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast and one which enters within the veil, where Jesus has entered as a forerunner for us” (Hebrews 6:18-20).

In a few weeks we will look at the Old Testament tabernacle. We will see it as a magnificent foreshadowing of the ministry of Christ. We will study the outer court, the inner court, the various furnishings and the Holy of Holies which was behind the veil. It was there, in that holiest of places, God was felt to dwell. So sacred was this spot, only one person was permitted entry. The high priest. And then only once a year for a very short time. We shall see, in thrilling detail, how Christ, the perfect sacrifice, made the ancient annual sacrifice completely unnecessary, for He ministers in the true tabernacle of God, constantly making intercession on our behalf.

For the moment, however, I want you to see a wonderful truth. Here is something to savor. To revel in and wonder at. Here is another reason for the hope that is within you. Jesus has gone through, or beyond, the veil. By so doing, He has opened the way to God, not just for Himself, but “*as a forerunner for us*” (6:20).

God, who before Christ was thought to be a distant stranger, is now known to be a loving friend. Because Jesus has gone “*within the veil,*” He who said, “*I am the door*” (John 10:9), has jammed the door open. And we, you and I, have access to God any time of the day or night. We have a place of refuge near to the heart of God. An anchor safe and sure (6:19). We have access to God and the assurance of being heard.

These references to a place of refuge (6:18) and an anchor safe and sure (6:19) are beautiful. The book of Numbers reveals a very interesting Old Testament provision (Numbers 35:9 ff). If a person accidentally killed someone and there were those who wanted to hold him accountable, possibly even put him to death, he could flee to what was called a “city of refuge.” In that city, he was safe. He could not be unjustly punished (Deuteronomy 4:41-43; 19:5; Joshua 20).

Do you see it? God, in His loving grace has prepared a perfect place of refuge for those of us

who are often in the role of fugitives. If we will flee to Jesus, we shall find Him to be our high and holy fortress, a strong shoulder on which to rest, a precious and loving Saviour in Whose company is fellowship and joy!

But, not only do we have a refuge, we have an anchor safe and sure. An anchor that rests, not in the hold of the ship, for our confidence is not in ourselves. Nor does it rest in shifting sands where it can be pulled loose by treacherous waves, for our confidence is not in our feelings which are affected by every wind of circumstance which blows. Rather, our anchor is “*within the veil*” (6:19). It is hooked on the “Rock of Ages.” It is moored on the only real immovable object there is: the throne of God Himself. Thus, we are secure for time and eternity.

Amid all the storms of life, our anchor holds. It finds its certainty in God. In the fact that Jesus, who entered “*within the veil*,” has opened the way to heaven and keeps it open. This is our hope. Jesus jams open the door. Therefore, we have access to God any time of the day or night. We can get through to Him. And, we can know it when we’ve done it!

Notes

1. M. R. DeHaan, Hebrews (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1959), p. III.
2. A. John Nastari, Questions Christ Asked (Lake Oswego, OR: A. John Nastari, 2890 SW Deliwood Drive, Lake Oswego, OR 97034), p. 64.

“ OUR HOPE: JESUS A PRIEST LIKE MEL WHO?”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 7

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, ² to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils, was first of all, by the translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then also king of Salem, which is king of peace. ³ Without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, he abides a priest perpetually.

Now observe how great this man was to whom Abraham, the patriarch, gave a tenth of the choicest spoils. ⁵ And those indeed of the sons of Levi who receive the priest's office have commandment in the Law to collect a tenth from the people, that is, from their brethren, although these are descended from Abraham.

Put the one whose genealogy is not traced from them collected a tenth from Abraham, and blessed the one who had the promises. ⁷ But without any dispute the lesser is blessed by the greater. ⁸ And in this case mortal men receive tithes, but in that case one receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives on. ⁹ And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes, ¹⁰ for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.

¹¹ Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron? ¹² For when the priesthood is changed, of necessity there takes place a change of law also. ¹³ For the one concerning whom these things are spoken belongs to another tribe, from which no one has officiated at the altar. ¹⁴ For it is evident that our Lord was descended from Judah, a tribe with reference to which Moses spoke nothing concerning priests.

¹⁵ And this is clearer still, if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek, ¹⁶ who has become such not on the basis of a law of physical requirement, but according to the power of an indestructible life. ¹⁷ For it is witnessed of Him, “Thou art a priest forever according to the

order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁸For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness ¹⁹(for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God.

²⁰And inasmuch as it was not without an oath ²¹(for they indeed became priests without an oath, but He with an oath through the One who said to Him, “The Lord has sworn and will not change His mind, ‘Thou art a priest forever’”); ²²so much the more also Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. ²³And the former priests, on the one hand, existed in greater numbers, because they were prevented by death from continuing, ²⁴but He, on the other hand, because He abides forever, holds His priesthood permanently. ²⁵Hence also He is able to save forever those who draw near to God through Him, since He always lives to make intercession for them.

²⁶For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; ²⁷who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. ²⁸For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever.

God’s purpose in sending His Son into the world was not solely to make saints out of sinners, but having accomplished that, to make servants out of saints. Once we have become Christians, our primary purpose for being here is to be to the world what Christ would be if He were where we are!

An attorney who properly understood his role and responsibility as a Christian was flying home from a legal convention. The only unoccupied seat on board was beside a young lady. They were barely airborne when he found a natural way to share his faith and to confront her with the person of Jesus Christ. It was a short flight. As he gathered his luggage at the baggage claim area, he met the young woman again, with her husband who had come to meet her. They exchanged pleasantries for a moment, said goodbye and parted. As the lawyer left, her husband said, “Who was that guy?” “Oh,” she explained, “just a man I met on the airplane. And guess what?” she

continued. “He asked me if I was a Christian.” “Did you tell him to mind his own business?” her husband asked. She replied softly, “You know, dear, it sounds strange, but the way he talked it was his business.”¹

The young lady perceived an important truth. When a person is genuinely born again, it is pointless to tell him to mind his own business. He is no longer in business for himself. From salvation on, like his Lord, he must be about his Father’s business. That involves being to the small sphere of his world what Christ would be if he were physically here Himself.

To equip us for this remarkable mission, the Holy Spirit has gone to great lengths to explain Who it is we represent. What His credentials are. How He is prepared to help us do our job. And, as usual, the author of Hebrews presents this necessary and supportive information in a most ingenious way.

To the modern mind, this reference to Meichizedek may not only seem mysterious, but actually superfluous. Some folk couldn’t care less about Melchizedek. However, the book of Hebrews was written to give saved sinners a reason to hope. It does so by declaring who Jesus was. What Jesus did. How Jesus affects life today and in eternity. Thus, there is more here than meets the eye. Beneath the surface are great and abiding truths placed here by the Holy Spirit for our enlightenment and encouragement.

The writer of Hebrews has already explained that the priesthood of Melchizedek is something about which he will have “*much to say*” and that it will be “*hard to explain*” (5:11). Therefore, we are not surprised to find chapter 7 both fascinating and difficult. It contains some of the “*solid food*” maturing Christians should be eating (5:12).

Few figures in scripture are more mysterious than Melchizedek. He appears briefly in the Biblical narrative and then nothing more is heard of him. Like Topsy who just grew, Melchizedek is suddenly flung on the stage of history without hint of ancestry. Genesis 14 (verse 18) introduces

him. Psalm 110 (verse 4) makes a brief prophetic statement about him. Add to these references the passages in Hebrews, and that's all we know about him. Because of the mystery surrounding Melchizedek, there has been a great deal of speculation about who he was. Some have said he was a Christophany; that is, a visible, physical, pre-Bethlehem appearance of Jesus Himself. Others say he was some sort of supernatural messenger, maybe a mighty angel. The Jewish Torah identifies him as Shem, the son of Noah.

For my part, except to say by his actions and attitude he was an excellent prototype of Christ, I don't think it's necessary to get terribly exercised over the man. As Harry Ironside, the famed former pastor of Moody Church, once said, "If anyone asks 'Who is Melchizedek?' the only proper answer is: 'Meichizedek!'"

Why, then, is he introduced at all? Genesis 14 provides a clue. Here is the story of a confederacy of kings which attacked Sodom and its sister cities. These kings succeeded in capturing the city-states, carried off a tremendous amount of loot and a large number of captives, including Lot, Abram's nephew. When Abram learned of Lot's disaster, he organized a small army of 318 well-trained, well-equipped servant-soldiers and set out in hot pursuit of the invaders. He overtook them near Damascus. Under cover of dark, using not-so-new guerrilla tactics, he launched a surprise attack. Routed the enemy. Recovered the captives and booty.

Word of his successful incursion apparently got back to the defeated king of Sodom. He went out to greet Abram (Genesis 14:17), to tell him he could retain the plunder he had recaptured from the confederacy of kings. However, before they met and the king of Sodom could make this tempting offer, Abram passed the little village of Salem (later called Jerusalem) on his victory march to the south.

“And Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; now he was a priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said, ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’ And

he [Abram] gave him a tenth of all” (Genesis 14:18-20).

Such are the scanty facts regarding this person about whom the writer of Hebrews makes so much. There is a second reference to this majestic figure, explaining the Messiah will be “*a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*”(Psalm 110:4), a prophecy the writer of Hebrews sees as being perfectly fulfilled by Christ and His ministry. Beyond what is written in Genesis 14 and Psalm 110, there is nothing.

At this point it is absolutely imperative to note that in developing his argument our author is not talking about Melchizedek, but about Jesus. The book of Hebrews is about Jesus. Who Jesus was. What Jesus did. All Jesus means in time and eternity. Remember that, lest you focus on the wrong figure. Everything said about Melchizedek is, in reality, a statement about Jesus. Unless you move past Melchizedek to Jesus, you’ll miss the whole point.

As already suggested, Melchizedek is a prototype of Christ. He serves one and only one purpose; that is, to prove the existence of another order of priesthood that is older, superior, and, thus, transcendent over both the Levitical priesthood and the law which rests upon it.

Once our author has made his point, he drops Melchizedek and focuses on Jesus. As Charles R. Erdman explains, this majestic figure stands for one short scene on the pages of scripture to establish the validity, dignity and efficacy of Christ’s priesthood, then disappears forever into the mystery from which he emerged.

Now, the writer of Hebrews was a most ingenious preacher. Chapter 7 is really a sermon on Psalm 110:4, “*Thou art a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.*” He starts his sermon by restating the facts recorded in Genesis 14. “*For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham as he was returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham apportioned a tenth part of all the spoils*” (7:1,2). From this bare beginning and by means of etymology and typology, the writer of Hebrews

fashions a most fascinating rationale for the priesthood of Jesus.

A Lesson In Etymology

First, he gives a lesson in etymology, the study of words and their origins. He points out that Meichizedek means “*king of righteousness.*” And, being king of Salem, meaning “*peace,*” Melchizedek was also “*king of peace.*” With great care, the Holy Spirit has guarded even the apparently insignificant matter of the order of the names by which this prototype of Christ is called. First, king of righteousness. Second, king of peace.

This order is in perfect harmony with other scripture . For instance, “*The work of righteousness will be peace, and the service of righteousness, quietness and confidence (assurance) forever*” (Isaiah 32:17). Notice which comes first: Righteousness, then peace. Righteousness, then assurance.

Earlier in the book of Hebrews we are informed that, because Jesus loved righteousness, the heavenly Father “*anointed Him with the oil of gladness*” (1:9). The scripture makes it clear that the happiness, security, and peace we so feverishly seek in various and sundry ways are only possible through obedience. Righteousness and joy are wed. Righteousness and assurance are wed. So, too, are righteousness and peace. In each instance, righteousness comes first!

Is it possible that you, like many others, have put the cart before the horse? Is it possible you have pursued happiness, security, and peace, only to find your dreams lying like bits of broken rainbow about your feet? The solution is to put first things first. Pursue righteousness. Then the assurance, joy and peace you’re seeking will come as an automatic outcropping of obedience. The priesthood of this prototype of Christ was righteous, peaceful and, thus, royal in the highest and truest sense of that word.

A Lesson In Typology

Continuing his sermon, the writer of Hebrews moves from etymology, the study of words, to typology, the study of symbols. He gives us a most interesting lesson in one kind of Biblical interpretation. He argues both from what the Bible says and from what the Bible does not say. When studying God’s written word, remember: what is included and what is excluded are both significant.

From the silence of scripture, he points out the permanence of Melchizedek’s priesthood. From the statements of scripture, he emphasizes the preeminence of his priesthood. Both of these, permanence and preeminence, serve to illustrate the durability and dignity of Christ’s priesthood. First, he builds an argument around what the Bible doesn’t say about Melchizedek’s ancestry and progeny. He is “*without father, without mother, without genealogy*”“(7:3).

Genealogy, the study of family pedigrees, is not too important to us, but it was absolutely vital to the Old Testament priesthood. If a person could not prove an unbroken descent from Aaron, he could not qualify as a Levitical priest. To be part of the Old Testament priesthood, one had to be a particular strand of “true blue Jew.”

This is the point the writer of Hebrews makes when he speaks of those who were priests according to a “law of physical requirement” (7:16). The striking difference between the Levitical priesthood, and that of Melchizedek and therefore, Christ, is that the former rested solely upon heredity. A boy became a priest because his father was.

Just before Aaron died, Moses took him to the summit of Mount Hor, removed his priestly garments and put them on Eleazar, Aaron’s son (Numbers 20:28). Later, when Eleazar died, the mantle succeeded to his son, Phinehas. And so it went, generation after generation. From the time of Aaron to the destruction of the second temple in A.D. 70, there were 83 high priests who functioned solely upon the basis of heredity.

Melchizedek could not claim priesthood by human succession (7:3). Neither could the Christian’s high priest, Jesus. Both were priests by divine fiat. The silence of scripture regarding the

genealogy of Melchizedek does not suggest he was some sort of biological anomaly who, like Topsy, just grew. Rather, the absence of any information about his ancestry or progeny, his life or death, is to emphasize the uniqueness of his priesthood. It was not based on who his father was, but upon the spiritual qualifications of the man himself. Thus, it was a priesthood of enduring nature.

Using Melchizedek as a prototype of Christ, the writer of Hebrews then argues his case for the permanence of Christ's priesthood. Like “Mel's,” the priesthood of Jesus is not based upon heredity. Jesus was of the tribe of Judah, not the tribe of Levi. Thus, like that of his prototype, the priesthood of Jesus rested on the character and quality of the man Himself. Furthermore, because Jesus died, rose again, and ascended to heaven, He now reigns as Priest without end. Thus, His priesthood is absolutely permanent.

From this point made by the silence of scripture, the writer of Hebrews turns to the statements of scripture. Based upon what the Bible does say, he emphasized the preeminence of Melchizedek and, thus, the preeminence of Jesus. See how great he is! Abraham, the patriarch, gave him “a tenth part of the spoils” (7:5). And Meichizedek “*blessed [him] who had the promises*” (7:6).

This was not an effort to deprecate Abraham, but to elevate Melchizedek. Simply put, the argument runs as follows: Meichizedek is greater than Abraham because he (Meichizedek) blessed the patriarch and accepted his tithes, both acts implying superior standing and authority. Levi was the great-grandson of Abraham. As explained in beautiful Hebrew picture language, he was “*still in the loins*” (7:10) of Abraham at the time of this incident.

Therefore, Melchizedek is greater than Levi. Symbolically, he collected tithes from Levi through Abraham, again implying greater standing and authority. Since Christ's priesthood is “*according to the order of Melchizedek,*” who was superior to Levi, Christ's priestly ministry, too, is greater than that of the Levitical priests. Ipsa facto, Christ, the Christian's high priest, enjoys pre-eminence as well as permanence.

At this point, the argument becomes somewhat more sophisticated. If this line of reasoning seems a bit strained, remember that, to the devout Jew, the ceremonial law was everything with a capitul “E.” To assault the ceremonial law and those who practiced it, to suggest that the law was inadequate, was to attack the jugular vein of Judaism. Yet, this is precisely what the writer of Hebrews does.

“Now if perfection was through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the people received the Law), what further need was there for another priest to arise according to the order of Melchizedek, and not be designated according to the order of Aaron?” (7:11). The key word here is “*perfection.*” Had it been attainable through the Old Testament priests and practices, there would be no need for Jesus. But, as everyone knew, the ceremonial law and the Old Testament priests who performed it could not attain this goal. They could challenge people to perfection, but they could not in any way empower people to achieve perfection. They could not cause a man to stop sinning, for instance. They could not make a man perfect, in either God’s eyes or his own. That’s why the old order was useless, for “*the Law made nothing perfect*” (7: 19a). Therefore, it had to go.

God, who had given it and used it as a temporary measure of dealing with His people, now removed it. “*For, on the one hand, there is a setting aside of a former commandment because of its weakness and uselessness (for the Law made nothing perfect), and on the other hand there is a bringing in of a better hope, through which we draw near to God*” (7:18,19).

A new day had come. The day of spiritual rebirth when, through Christ, a person became a new creature (2 Corinthians 5:17). When he was, in fact, perfect in the eyes of God. And, even greater, was given the very life of God Himself, whereby he had power to stop sinning. To live creatively, rather than destructively.

At this point, the writer of Hebrews draws his conclusion: Jesus is our hope. Jesus is “*a priest*

according to the order of Melchizedek” (7:17). Instead of belonging to that old order described as having many priests who died (7:23), who bequeathed their mantle to another without ever having helped one man know with finality he was right with God, the Lord Jesus belongs to a new priesthood, operating under a new covenant, in which there is one Priest who lives forever, whose authority and mantle are non-transferable (7:24). A Priest who, by offering Himself as the perfect sacrifice, makes it possible for those who put their trust in Him to be perfect in God’s sight, and Who gives them the privilege of drawing near to God with confidence and joy (7:25).

“For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens; who does not need daily, like those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins, and then for the sins of the people, because this He did once for all when He offered up Himself. For the Law appoints men as high priests who are weak, but the word of the oath, which came after the Law, appoints a Son, made perfect forever” (7:26-28). What a grand Amen to this tremendous statement regarding the permanence and preeminence of Jesus!

Let’s look at the marvelous statement regarding the peerless and impeccable character of Jesus Christ (7:26). In His relationship toward God, He was holy. In His relationship toward men, He was harmless. In His relationship toward Himself, He was undefiled. Jesus was “separated from sinners;” that is, different from the rest of us. Often, when tempted, we fall. But Jesus, tempted in all ways, remained unsullied by sin.

As a result, He’s “*exalted above the heavens*” (7:26). What a wonderful example of Hebrew picture speech and hyperbole! Today we might say, “He’s outa sight!” “He’s the greatest!” “He’s out of this world!” Our first-century penman said, He’s “*exalted above the heavens.*”

And He was. He is. Jesus is completely and forever “*able to save*” (7:25) all who respond to His gentle invitation. “*Come to Me*”(Matthew 11:28a). “*(He) who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out*” (John 6:37).

What does all this mean to you? Why should you care that Christ is a priest after the order of Melchizedek? The implications, as I see them, are four. Jesus wants to save you. Free you. Satisfy you. So He can use you.

Jesus Wants To Save You

When Melchizedek met Abram coming home on his victory march, he met a man who, by most human standards, had every right to enjoy the sweet taste of victory. The temptation was to do so by watering down his witness for God. The lesson God wanted Abram to learn was this: he didn't have to go to war to improve his Dun and Bradstreet rating. Nor did he need to enrich himself through the misery of others.

“God is your provider and protector,” Melchizedek seems to say. “It is He who has helped you gain the victory in this recent fracas. You are not a self-made man, Abram; you never will be. You are a man blessed by God to be a blessing. Everything you are, everything you hope to be, everything you become, will be the result of His action in your life. So now, in this moment of small victory, remember to Whom the glory is due.”

To his credit, Abram, who later became famous for his spiritual sensitivity, immediately recognized the import of Melchizedek's words. And he gave a tithe of the treasures he had recovered from the kings. This may seem a strange thing for Abram to do. But it was the tithing decision which kept Abram's purpose clear and his priorities straight. By tithing, he fixed in his mind the truth about ownership and stewardship. For, to give a tenth is to acknowledge God owns the whole. It is to admit one is only a temporary user of that which belongs to God.

Through the act of tithing, which God has been using for a long, long time as a means of molding men, the Lord was able, in a most profound and intensely personal way, to “*save*” Abram. In this manner, God helped Abram to win the greatest of all victories: the victory over Abram! Abram

was, in effect, saved from glorification of self. Fortified spiritually through this internal conquest, and physically through the bread and wine Melchizedek gave him, Abram was able to turn his back on the blandishments of the king of Sodom. As a result, no man would ever be able to say, “*I have made Abram rich*” (Genesis 14:23b). If the patriarch were to become an economic success, as in later life he did, the glory would always go to God.

Through His minister, Melchizedek, God met Abram at a crucial spiritual crossroad. Because of Abram’s response, God was able to give him the greatest of all victories, the victory over self. And, what God did for Abraham through Melchizedek, He wants to do for you through Jesus. He wants to save you from yourself. He wants to give you the greatest of all victories, the victory over self. He wants to help you, as a Christian, keep your purpose clear and your priorities straight.

Until you gain the victory over self, learn to trust God, and acknowledge Him as your patron and provider, you will be looking for an angle. You will be searching for an edge. An advantage which gives you a little extra leverage in the game of dog-eat-dog. But God says, “No! Trust Me. Remember, it is I who gives you the physical strength and the mental acumen, the time and talent, to win in this warfare against the confederacy of world, flesh and devil. Therefore, play it straight. By My rules. Even though it may seem costly. In the long run, the personal, spiritual, and perhaps material rewards will be great. Remember, as it was with Abraham, so it is with you. Tithing is not My way of getting your money. It is My way of getting you. It is My method of shaping you into someone I can trust and use, because you are someone to whom Jesus has given the greatest of all victories: the victory over self!”

Jesus Wants To Free You

Our Lord not only wants to save you from yourself; He wants to free you from the preoccupying power of a sinful past. Several years ago, I stood facing the ark with the members of a Hebrew congregation. When the Rabbi took the Torah, the Jewish Law, out of the ark and held it on his shoulder for a moment, I felt as if I were standing on holy ground. I remember thinking to myself,

“The world needs that law right now. It needs to know and obey that law. It needs to heed the warning of that law.”

But, as the Rabbi tenderly put the Torah back in the ark, it suddenly hit me! The law is not what the world really needs. The law can do no more for folk today than it did for folk in Old Testament times. It may raise man’s standards, but it cannot impart power to the people to achieve those standards. It may clarify one’s duties, but it cannot awaken the love to do those duties.

The law may threaten, but it cannot change. It cannot turn despair into hope. The more one reads the law, the more he is aware of what he hasn’t done. The law may widen the gap between a man and God, but the law can do nothing to bridge that gap. The law never made anyone perfect (7:19). It has only served to accentuate the fact of one’s imperfection.

Jesus does the opposite. He not only points out your imperfections, He gives you power to do something about them. He not only saves you from yourself, He frees you from the preoccupying power of unresolved guilt so, as a saved-sinner, you are free to be the blessing you were blessed to be.

When you come to Jesus and, in an attitude of genuine repentance say, “This is sin. I don’t want to want to go on sinning anymore,” the Lord Jesus gives you His righteousness. At that moment, you inherit His past. His past is perfect! You stand before God as if you had never sinned. Whiter than snow (Isaiah 1:18).

If, after that moment of initial commitment to Christ, you sin again, as we all do, you need only come to Christ in a fresh act of repentance. Each time you do so, the field of your past, which is now whiter than snow, expands. Day by day. Week by week. As long as life lasts.

Jesus Wants To Satisfy You

The Master not only saves you and frees you, He also satisfies you. Because He makes you perfect in God's sight and frees you from the preoccupying power of a sinful past, you can now draw near to God with confidence and joy, knowing you'll be received.

The Old Testament priesthood and law suffered from a vexing weakness. They could arouse within folk a longing for access to God. They could stimulate, inspire, even express, this deepest hunger of the human heart. But, they could do absolutely nothing to satisfy this hunger. Jesus can. He saves you. Frees you. Even more, He satisfies you. His priesthood, like that of Melchizedek, is not temporary but eternal. It is not earthly but heavenly. It is not based upon human succession, but is sealed by an oath of God. Therefore, there will never come a time when His ministry on your behalf becomes ineffective.

You will never turn to Jesus for help or hope and fail to find Him alive and active. He saves “*to the uttermost*” (7:25, KJV). Which means more than saving you from every kind of sin, though that's true. Even more wonderful, it means saving you forevermore! The ministry of Christ on your behalf will never cease. The door to God's presence is ever open. You will never find a “vacancy” or “job open” sign hung over the place of His employment.

Jesus Wants To Use You

Why does He do all this? Why does Jesus save you from yourself? Free you from the preoccupying power of a sinful past? Why does He go to such lengths to satisfy you by being exactly what you need, when and where you need it? Because He wants to use you. He wants you to be about your Father's business. Not butting in where you're unwanted and unwelcome. But being awake and sensitive to the opportunities all around you for witness and service in Jesus' name.

God's purpose in sending His Son into the world was not solely to make saints out of sinners, but having done so, to make servants out of saints. That's what He ever so much wants to make of you, a servant! A person who knows Whom he represents and, understanding Christ's

qualifications and capacity to help, will be to his contemporary world everything Jesus would be if He were physically here Himself!

A big order? You bet it is. But all it requires are the dual ingredients of genuine humility and sheer obedience. As one girl put it:

They tell me an angel
couldn't fit
the job description
on this assignment, so why did You hand it to me?

And --
when do You want me to start?³

Notes

1. Nastari, Questions Christ Asked, p. 41.
2. Harry A. Ironside, Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews (New York: Loizeaux Brothers, 1932) p. 85.
3. Nancy Spiegelberg (Minneapolis, MN: Decision Magazine, 1971).

"OUR HOPE: JESUS COMPLETES A NEW CONTRACT" Dr. John Allan
LavenderHebrews 8

Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, ²a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man. ³For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer.⁴Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; ⁵who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, "See," He says, "that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain." ⁶But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises. ⁷For if that first covenant had been faultless, there would have been no occasion sought for a second.⁸For finding fault with them, He says, "Behold, days are coming, says the Lord, when I will effect a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah; ⁹not like the covenant which I made with their fathers on the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; for they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them, says the Lord. ¹⁰For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws into their minds, and will write them upon their hearts. And I will be their God, and they shall be My people. ¹¹And they shall not teach every one his fellow citizen, and every one his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them. ¹²For I will be merciful to their iniquities, and I will remember their sins no more." ¹³When He said, "A new covenant," He has made the first obsolete. But whatever is becoming obsolete and growing old is ready to disappear.

When you receive Jesus Christ as Savior, the devil loses you for eternity. As far as life after death is concerned, the issue is settled. You belong to God. Having failed with Plan A, the devil then moves to Plan B. Having lost you for eternity, he seeks to capture you for time.

One of his most effective means of achieving this objective is to infect you with a chronic case of “me-on-my-mind-itis.” This is a dreadful, debilitating disease. Among other things, it causes you to develop an allergy to yourself. Usually it springs from unresolved guilt feelings which the devil cleverly uses to generate a towering sense of self-loathing and a loss of self-love.

By making you feel worthless, he succeeds in making you feel useless. Instead of being turned on for Jesus, you become turned in on yourself. You are neutralized as a vital force for God here on earth, and Satan, who lost you for eternity, succeeds in gaining you for time.

Now God, who made you and knows you far better than you know yourself, is sensitive to your vulnerability in this area. Long before you ever were, He prepared a creative means of handling guilt so you could be free to be the blessing you were meant to be. His plan is called forgiveness.

To grasp the wonder and thoroughness of God’s plan, we need a brief history lesson. About 4,000 years ago, God made a covenant with Abram and his offspring, promising to bless them and use them to be a blessing, on the express condition that they obey Him (Genesis 12:1-3). Through a series of subsequent and quite marvelous events, in which the hand of God is clearly seen, this small tribe of people migrated to Egypt where, in a kind of geographic isolationism, they took on the rough-hewn shape of a nation.

For a period of time they were subjected to the indignities of slavery, but this only strengthened their resolve to be free. At long last, they were released from the yoke of bondage, and they set out on their pilgrimage to the Promised Land. During the course of their journey, God gave them certain stabilizing influences. One was the moral law, or Ten Commandments. Another was a system of sacrifices which they were to offer when guilty of forsaking these Commandments.

Subsequent to the giving of the law, God reiterated His earlier covenant (Genesis 12:1-4; Genesis 15:5), promising to bless the offspring of Abraham if they obeyed Him (Exodus 23:20-30). The

covenant between God and man is different from most contracts worked out by two people who meet on more or less the same level. Two equals can haggle and argue over the terms of the agreement, each trying to make the best possible deal. But, as William Barclay explains, with God and man no such relationship can occur, for man is not and never will be on the same plane as God. “In any relationship between God and man, it is God alone who can take the initiative, and man can only accept or refuse both the offer and the conditions of God. Man cannot argue or bargain with God as he can with other men.”¹

In this particular instance, the people of God agreed to the terms of God. The covenant relationship was entered into. *“Then Moses came and recounted to the people all the words of the Lord and all the ordinances; and all the people answered with one voice, and said, ‘All the words which the Lord has spoken we will do! And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord. Then he arose early in the morning, and built an altar at the foot of the mountain with twelve pillars for the twelve tribes of Israel. And he sent young men of the sons of Israel, and they offered burnt offerings and sacrificed young bulls as peace offerings to the Lord. And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins, and the other half of the blood he sprinkled on the altar. Then he took the Book of the Covenant and read it in the hearing of the people; and they said, ‘All that the Lord has spoken we will do, and we will be obedient! So Moses took the blood and sprinkled it on the people, and said, ‘Behold, the blood of the covenant, which the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words’”* (Exodus 24:3-8).

Here’s the gist of it: God took the initiative and singled out Israel. He promised to bless her so that she might be a blessing. The condition was obedience. The people agreed to this stipulation. A sacrifice was made. The covenant was ratified in blood. The relationship between God and Israel was sealed.

Unfortunately, it didn’t work out as planned. Man proved incapable of keeping the laws and a giant snafu occurred. Each breach of the law created a breach in the relationship. To mend it, God instituted the plan of atonement (Leviticus 16). A whole hierarchy of priests and apparatus of sacrifice were instituted. The idea was that, when the proper sacrifice was made, this poor,

sinful, alienated people could at least receive a temporary sense of hope and healing.

Again, all the bases seemed to be covered. But, unfortunately, another flaw appeared. The blood of animals was inadequate. It could not then, and cannot now, take away sin (Hebrews 10:4). It cannot cleanse the human conscience (9:9). The organized priesthood and ritual of animal sacrifice were unable to accomplish what they were meant to do. They could not maintain the relationship between God and man.

Put simply, the covenant failed. So God interceded again and in the “*fulness of time*” (Galatians 4:4,5), He sent His Son into the world to do what no one and nothing else could do: establish a lasting relationship between the Father and His wayward children.

Aware of the inadequacies of the old covenant, and captivated by the all-eclipsing radiance of Christ, many first-century Jews turned to Jesus. During the early years of their Christian life, buoyed by the euphoric lift of first love, they did not find it too difficult to get by without the aid of temple, priest and visible sacrifice. But, as time passed and their early enthusiasm began to wane, many of these Hebrew Christians began to wonder what to do about the problem of “me-on-my-mind-itis.”

Even though they had accepted Christ as Saviour, they still had a problem with sin. They still succumbed to temptation. With each moral defeat, Satan, who had lost them for eternity, moved in to capture them for time. Taking the normal guilt mechanism God had put inside them as a protective device, Satan twisted and turned it into a tool with which to torture them with feelings of guilt, remorse, shame, self-loathing and uselessness. By so doing, he effectively neutralized them as a vital force for God on earth.

What were they to do? The Christian faith has no temple. No sacrificial system. No priestly order. How does Christianity propose to deal with the disease of “me-on -my-mind-itis” when it has no high priest to offer the proper sacrifice in the Holy of Holies?

The writer of Hebrews tells them they are worrying about a problem that doesn't exist: “*Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens*”(8:1). He then goes on to make three powerful points. First, a true high priest must have a place in which to minister, and Christ, the Christians high priest, has such a place. Second, a true high priest must have a sacrifice to offer, and Christ, the Christians high priest, has made the best of all sacrifices. Third, a true high priest mediates between God and man on the basis of an agreement or covenant which God has set up, and the Christians high priest does just that.

So much for the history lesson. Before we go on to see what all this has to do with you and Satans Plan B, lets quickly review what weve learned thus far from the book of Hebrews. Chapters 1:1 through 5:10 are devoted to proving Jesus is greater than the prophets, angels, Moses, Joshua and Aaron. The wee section consisting of 5:11 through 6:3 gives us the interpretive key which unlocks this spiritual treasure chest. The first half of chapter 6 and, as we shall learn later, the last half of chapter 10, issue stern warnings against certain deadly dangers which can lead Christians astray. Between these two caution lights is the marvelous parenthesis with which we are now concerned. It consists of chapters 7 through 9, and describes the utterly adequate intercessory ministry of Jesus, the Christians high priest.

Christ Is Gods Provision For Our Failing And Falling. He is the Great Physician who can heal us from “me-on-my-mind-itis.” He is the all-sufficient Savior who can free us to be the blessing we were blessed to be.

In chapter 7, too, as we have already learned, our author proves Christ's priesthood is greater than that of Aaron or Levi. It is by divine appointment, not human ancestry. It is supported by a godly oath which has never been revoked.

In chapter 8, to which we will turn in a moment, he shows Christ's ministry is also greater. It is spiritual and eternal, not earthly and temporary.

In chapter 9:1 through 10:18, the writer of Hebrews shows how Christ’s sacrifice is greater. It was one sacrifice, not many. It was offered once for all, not over and over again!

Our author is attempting to reassure these early Christians, who by tradition and experience have become accustomed to a visible temple, priest and sacrifice, that these Old Testament provisions were provisional. They were temporary forerunners of things to come. They pointed beyond themselves to that which would be final and complete.

To nail down his argument, the writer of Hebrews offers two illustrations. The first illustration has to do with the scene of Christ’s ministry. *“Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle which the Lord pitched, not man. For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices; hence it is necessary that this high priest also have something to offer. Now if He were on earth, He would not be a priest at all, since there are those who offer the gifts according to the Law; who serve a copy and shadow of the heavenly things, just as Moses was warned by God when he was about to erect the tabernacle; for, ‘See, He says, ‘that you make all things according to the pattern which was shown you on the mountain. But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, by as much as He is also the mediator of a better covenant, which has been enacted on better promises”* (8:4-6).

His line of logic is quite simple. Every high priest officiates in some sanctuary. Christ, the Christians high priest, officiates in the true sanctuary of which the tabernacle in the wilderness was just a copy or reasonable facsimile. We all know, for instance, that long before a house is built, it exists in the mind of the architect. What later appears on a plot of ground somewhere is just a copy, more or less imperfect, of the true house which eye has not seen and human hand can never touch.

The tabernacle in the wilderness was just such a copy, more or less imperfect, of the true sanctuary in heaven. It represented realities, known only to God, which He wanted to reveal, at least in part, to His children. Because Christ, the Christians high priest, operates in the real sanctuary, not a replica of the real, His ministry is superior to that of earthly priests. He deals with pure reality rather than mere ritual or fading replicas.

Does this suggest to you, as it does to me, that we ought to take another look at what we think is real? For the most part, we are committed to things we can see, hear, taste, touch and smell. If our senses confirm their existence, we say theyre real. Earth is our true home, we think. Heaven, if it exists at all, is uncertain and vague. There may be life after death, but we had better follow the safe course and eat, drink and be merry for this may be all there is. The Bible in general, and Hebrews in particular, says its the other way around. If anything is tentative and fragile, it is the world in which we now live.

The Lord Jesus gave us some mighty good advice when He said, “*And do not fear those who kill the body, but are unable to kill the soul;*” that is, your true self (Matthew 10:28). We would be wise to heed His words. We lavish far too much time, attention and money on that which is purely temporary. We overlook the eternal. How sad! God wants to give us the Pearl of Great Price. Yet often we settle for glass beads.

For his second illustration, our author directs our attention from the scene of Christ’s ministry to the substance of His ministry which centers around a new contract. It is a truism that a contract is only as good as the character of the people who sign it. We might say, therefore, the old covenant was not worth the rock it was written on. One of the signatories -- man -- was, and is, wholly incapable of keeping his end of the bargain.

This signaled the necessity for something new. Something deeper and more durable than a merely external agreement which was sure to be broken sooner or later.

It is the assertion of the writer of Hebrews; in verses 7-13, that this something new has been

worked out and made available by Christ. It is a new covenant, which is to be in the believers mind and written on his heart. All believers will know God -- know Him intimately -- because of Christ. The new covenant makes the old covenant obsolete, because it had failed.

The old covenant failed because of the frailty of man. It was not the law God found fault with; it was the people. He finds “*fault with them*” (8:8). Actually, the old covenant had been abandoned by both parties. “*For they did not continue in My covenant, and I did not care for them*” (8:9).

There had been a complete breakdown in the apparatus for release from “me-on-my-mind-itis.” Prophets who lived under the old covenant recognized this flaw and predicted a new covenant (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This new covenant would not be written on tablets of stone as was the covenant at Sinai. It would not be dependent upon animal sacrifice. And, most amazing of all, it would not be conditioned by human effort or response. It would entail an entirely new and utterly thrilling relationship, initiated by God, which would make possible what the old covenant could not do.

The old covenant was conditional. Its validity and continuance depended upon mans obedience. “If you will,” God had stipulated in the old agreement. In the new covenant, the word “if” does not occur once. Instead, repeatedly in verses 10 and 12 we have Gods promise, “I will.” “I will make a covenant;” “I will put my laws into their minds;” “I will be their God;” “I will be merciful;” “I will remember their sins no more.”

This is a better covenant, for now God doesn’t ask you to promise Him anything. All He asks is that you believe His promises! That may seem too good to be true, but thats the nature of the Good News. That’s the source of our hope. Jesus completes a new contract.

To borrow Pauls words, “*For what the Law could not do, weak as it was through the flesh, God did: sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and as an offering for sin, He condemned sin in the flesh*” (Romans 8:3). The defect in the old covenant did not lay in the law itself. The

law was good enough. The defect lay in the weakness of “the flesh” (Romans 8:3).

The same would be true of the new covenant if Christ had not fulfilled the conditions for us! You and I are no better, no stronger, no more resistant to temptation than Israel of old. But Jesus paid it all. He has taken our place. In our name, He has fulfilled the essential stipulation of perfect trust and obedience. Thus, God is able to deal with us on these liberal terms, permitting us to share in the blessings and benefits of a better covenant based on better promises.

This takes the pressure off of us. We no longer have to do anything to secure salvation. We merely trust in Him, believing that what God has promised He is able to perform. Our relationship with God is firm and final. It can never be broken. We are saved forevermore. Satan has lost the battle for eternity. So, in an effort to harass us in this life, he moves to Plan B. He uses sin to destroy our fellowship with God. But, if we learn to use the provisions of our faith, we can lick him on that score, too. Thus we beat him both ways! Hallelujah!

What are the practical applications of this for contemporary Christians? I see four: You can be yourself through the power of Jesus. Or you'll be a goose egg without God. You're blessed beyond belief. So you can be turned on instead of turned in.

You Can Be Yourself Through The Power of JesusThe problem with the old arrangement -- the old covenant -- is that the human material with which God had to work just wasn't capable of keeping the law. What was needed was a new nature. This is precisely what Christ provides. When He moves into your life, He installs a new kind of guidance system. It is internal rather than external. Spiritual rather than legal. Under the new covenant, God says, *“I will put My laws into their minds, and I will write them upon their hearts”* (8:10).

I was a Christian many years before I discovered this wonderful truth. I took the Christian life seriously. I wanted very much to be like Jesus and continually felt short. I was trying to be Jesus through the power of John Lavender. It just wouldn't work. One day I read where Jesus

explained He could do nothing on His own (John 5:19,30). That hit me like a ton of bricks.

If Christ couldn't do it alone, what hope was there for me? I was really in the soup. Shortly thereafter, I discovered the great principle of, “*Christ in [me], the hope of glory*” (Colossians 1:27). I was never meant to live the Christian life under my own power. I was only meant to permit Christ to live His life through me. So I stopped trying to be Jesus through the power of John Lavender and decided to be John Lavender through the power of Jesus! Things have gone much better ever since.

You can be yourself through the power of Jesus. Among the many gifts God gives you when you turn yourself over to Him is the gift of yourself. Your true self. The self you want and were meant to be. Under the terms of the contract Christ has completed, there are hidden springs of inner spiritual insight and energy which, if you are willing, can propel you down the right path. You can be you through the power of Jesus. But --

You'll Be A Goose Egg Without GodThe new covenant is not only spiritual; it is personal.

Under the terms of this contract, the heavenly Father says, “*I will be their God, and they shall be My people*” (8:10).

A little boy who had been listening to the sad state of world affairs as reported on the evening newscast, went to bed and in his night-night prayer was heard to say, “Dear God, take care of Mommy and Daddy. And my little sister. And Grandma. And please, dear God, be sure to take care of Yourself, 'cause if anything happens to You, were sunk!”

The little boy grasped an important truth. When the heavenly Father promises to be your God, He is promising to be your everything. Dr. Richard H. Bube, Professor of Physics at Stanford University, poses an interesting question. If God turned Himself off, what would happen? The good professor is bright enough to know philosophically and theologically such a thing is not possible. He only asks the question to force us to face our true feelings about the significance of God.

He says there are only four possible answers to the question. First, nothing would happen. Those who give that answer indicate they do not believe God exists at all. A second answer is that, while nothing physical would happen, morally there would be a serious breakdown. People would become less loving and more hateful. Less giving and more greedy. Less social and more egocentric. Those who give this answer indicate they do not see God as having anything to do with the physical order. If He exists at all, it is merely for the sake of moral values.

Third, there would be a gradual disintegration of life. Slowly, but surely, a breakdown in the physical order would occur. Those who give this answer reveal a belief in God as a vague, impersonal life force out there somewhere controlling the physical universe, but wholly unconcerned with man in a personal way.

Or fourth, the whole shebang would stop instantly! Dr. Bube suggests this is the only conceivable answer for people of the Book. To illustrate his point he draws upon an analogy made by Dr. D. M. MacKay of Keele University in England. A story is being acted out on the screen of a television set. The people are loving each other. Hating each other. Fighting each other. Helping each other. When the TV set is turned off, the people don't begin to stop loving each other. They don't gradually stop hating. Or fighting. Or helping each other. There is not a slow disintegration of the action being depicted there. Not at all. The whole story stops immediately, period!

The same is true with God. He is your everything. Without Him there would be no you. If God were to turn Himself off, the whole shebang would come to a grinding halt. Instantly. For He is your everything! Keep that fact on the first row of your mind. “*With God all things are possible*” (Matthew 19:26). He can provide you with the power needed to become what you were meant to be. But apart from Him, you're in trouble.

God cannot turn Himself off. But you can turn Him off! You can block Him out of your life.

You can decide to go it alone. But, the moment you do, you're in difficulty. He is your everything. And, while you can be yourself through the power of Jesus, you'll be a goose egg without God.

You Are Blessed Beyond BeliefThe new covenant is not only spiritual and personal, its universal: “*For all shall know Me, from the least to the greatest of them*” (8:11). Under the new arrangement which Christ has completed, there is no privileged class of people. God reveals Himself to all of the redeemed. Not just to a select few! Christ and the knowledge of Him become the least common denominator, binding all believers in Christian love.

Nor is there anyone standing between you and God. This knowledge of Him and His will for your life is not vicarious knowledge gained through a preacher. Or priest. Or teacher. It is a personal knowledge. The Lord Himself speaks and reveals Himself to you.

If one great truth shines through the book of Hebrews it is this: Christ has opened a way for everyone to enter into a new and dear relationship with God. Having that relationship, you are blessed beyond belief.

You Can Be Turned On Instead Of Turned InThus, we come full circle. Satan not only fails with Plan A, losing you for eternity when you meet Jesus at Calvary. He also fails with Plan B, losing you in time when, as a saved sinner, you meet Christ in an honest prayer of confession and repentance.

The new covenant is not only spiritual, personal and universal, it is final. “For I will be merciful to their iniquities. And I will remember their sins no more” (8:12). What incredible good news that is! God never says, “I told you so.” God never flings the past in your face. God never dredges up old mistakes and rehashes old sins. When God forgives, He forgets. Not because He takes sin lightly. He takes it very seriously. It cost Him His Son. But God forgives and forgets because He wants you to be free to be the blessing you were blessed to be.

God knows unresolved guilt is like a toothache. Distracting. Unnerving. Debilitating. It is impossible for you to be cured of “me-on-my-mind-itis” if you're constantly confronted with the harvest of past sins. That's why God says, “*There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus*” (Romans 8:1). None. Nada! Absolutely none.

When, as a saved-sinner, you come to Jesus with your sin, confess it, repent of it, receive God's cleansing from it, it's over! From that point on, God doesn't want you to waste five seconds in remorse over it. He wants you to get on with the business of being a blessing. If God doesn't condemn you, how can you possibly condemn yourself?

Satan would have you see yourself as a dirty, rotten sinner. If you accept his appraisal, you will slip into self-loathing and be utterly useless to the Kingdom. God wants you to see yourself as a dirty, rotten forgiven sinner! And, if you can see yourself in that light, you will be liberated from the disease of “me-on-my-mind-itis.” You will be lifted by the creative power of wholesome self-love to a new operational level. You will become a dynamic force for healing in a broken world.

If you forget everything else I have written, remember this: As a forgiven sinner-saint, you are free to do anything God has in mind for you. You may feel that, because of sin and failure as a Christian, you have forfeited your right to serve the Lord. Don't you believe it! As a forgiven Christian, you are free to do anything God has in mind for you. Get hold of that great truth. Let that great truth get hold of you. You will never be the same. You'll be turned on instead of turned in. And when that happens, Satan will be whipped on both fronts, in time and in eternity.

“Clay ship idling on its launching pad vapor leaking from its valves power to soar cancelled by the gravitation of self. “Begin the countdown, Lord! Order all systems go free this tethered craft fill each fuel cell ignite it with Your life then lift it off give it full thrust execute the burn maneuver it into orbit stabilize the gyration accomplish Your mission.”¹

Beverly Caviness

Notes1. William Barclay, Epistle to the Hebrews (New York and Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1965),

p. 76.2. Beverly Caviness (Minneapolis, MN: Decision Magazine

“OUR HOPE: JESUS IS ALL YOU NEED”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 9:1-15

Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. ²For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lampstand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. ³And behind the second veil, there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, ⁴having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron's rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant. ⁵And above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail.

⁶Now when these things have been thus prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle, performing the divine worship, ⁷but into the second only the high priest enters, once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. ⁸The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing; ⁹which is a symbol for the time then present, according to which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, ¹⁰since they relate only to food and drink and various washings, regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation.

¹¹But when Christ appeared as a high priest of the good things to come, He entered through the greater and more perfect tabernacle, not made with hands, that is to say, not of this creation; ¹²and not through the blood of goats and calves, but through His own blood, He entered the holy place once for all, having obtained eternal redemption. ¹³For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, ¹⁴how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?

¹⁵And for this reason He is the mediator of a new covenant, in order that since a death has taken place for the redemption of the transgressions that were committed under the first covenant,

those who have been called may receive the promise of the eternal inheritance.

Did you ever stop to think that members of the early Christian church never read the New Testament? For that matter, neither did the disciples. And for a very good reason. They didn't have it. Their Bible was the Old Testament. When Jesus sat down with His leadership team following His resurrection to teach them what scripture actually said about Him, it was the Old Testament from which He taught.

When, on the road to Emmaus, Jesus listened to two of His disciples talking of the tragedy of recent happenings, He replied to them by assuring them these events were not tragedies. Nor had they caught God off guard. Rather, they were things foretold in scripture. *“And beginning with Moses and with all the prophets, He explained to them the things concerning Himself in all the Scriptures”* (Luke 24:27).

Later, when the two disciples had rejoined the others in Jerusalem, Jesus appeared to the eleven and gave them an all-night Bible study, during which time He taught them from all three major divisions of Old Testament scripture: *“The Law of Moses and the Prophets and the Psalms”* (Luke 24:44). Jesus took their Bible, the Hebrew Old Testament, and *“opened their minds to understand the Scriptures”* (Luke 24:45). He gave the Old Testament back to them as a new book with new meaning. At long last, they were able to grasp the significance of everything which had happened to Jesus, and to see how it fit into God's great plan of the ages as foretold in their Bible.

It's important to keep all this in mind as you work your way through the book of Hebrews, lest you miss the importance of the Old Testament references which appear in chapter 9. A tent in the wilderness and the rituals performed there may seem pretty dry stuff until you recall data regarding them was included in those scriptures of which Jesus said, *“It is these that bear witness of Me”* (John 5:39). Then these antiquities suddenly excite our interest. They have something to do with Jesus!

One of the homey bits of knowledge my father passed on to me was a saying which read: “Never take a fence down till you know why it was put up.” Applied to the passage before us, this maxim suggests to me that an understanding of the Old Testament scheme will help us realize why, at long last, the good Lord put it aside. So, with this purpose in mind, let’s continue our study.

From the scene and substance of Christ’s ministry in chapter 8, our writer moves on to deal with the sacrificial nature and sufficiency of Christ’s ministry. He draws these conclusions: Jesus is all you need. He is the indispensable person. So, appropriate the power available to you through Him. Achieve your full potentiality in Him. Go on from victory to victory.

One of our author’s helpful literary devices is his habit of giving us a key to unlock puzzling passages. In chapter 9, we have a case in point. Two verses clarify what he is driving at in this rather lengthy parenthesis (7:1 – 10:18). “*For if the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer sprinkling those who have been defiled, sanctify for the cleansing of the flesh, how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered Himself without blemish to God, cleanse your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?*” (9:13,14).

If I were to give this chapter a subtitle, it might well be: “How to Handle a Nagging Conscience.” There’s a good deal of misunderstanding about the functions of conscience. It has been called, “a little red light in the soul.” Or, as one youngster put it, “Something inside which feels bad when everything else feels good.”

Conscience is that internal voice which monitors your attitudes and actions. It does not determine what is right or wrong. That is established by training. But once you know what is right or wrong, your conscience assesses the quality of a given attitude or action, gives its verdict and then goads you into doing what you think is right and avoiding that which is wrong. However, conscience has no power to determine the outcome. That is decided by your will.

Conscience can become warped. When that happens, it is a faulty guide. The Bible reveals several kinds of out-of-kilter consciences. Jonah had a dull conscience. Jacob, an elastic conscience. Pilate, a weak conscience. Saul of Tarsus, a misguided conscience. It is not always safe or sufficient to live by your conscience. It requires training. A marksman will hit his target only if the two sights of his rifle are correctly aligned with the bull’s-eye. Similarly, your conscience gives a correct verdict only when it is correctly aligned to and trained by the living and written word of God.

For the Jewish Christians to whom this book of Hebrews was written, the problem was not a conscience troubled with guilt spawned by wrongdoing. The nagging conscience plaguing them was one which needed to be purified from “*dead works*” (9:14). Barclay provides a bit of historical background which clarifies what I mean. “In the very earliest days, church and temple, so to speak, coexisted. We find Peter and John on their way to the temple at the hour of prayer as the most natural thing in the world. We read of them preaching in the temple courts as the obvious place in which to preach (Acts 3:1). At first there was no reason why a man should stop going to the temple just because he had begun going to church. So there was an age of transition in Jerusalem.

“But, bit by bit, something began to emerge,” explains William Barclay. “It began to be clear that devotion to the temple ritual was not an innocent extra. It was something which obscured the true meaning of Christianity. A religion of grace cannot be a religion of sacrifice; a religion based on the triumphant adequacy of Jesus Christ cannot have additions to Him and to His sacrifice. And so there came a time when there had to be a clean break.”¹

Try to imagine the quandary of these Hebrew Christians. The temple had been laid out by God. The Old Testament law had been written by God. The sacrifices had been prescribed by God. Were they to turn their backs on the only God-given religion on earth and surrender themselves lock, stock and barrel to One whom their leaders called an imposter? By throwing their traditions

overboard, weren't they giving up more than they gained? If those ceremonial cleansings and ritual sacrifices had value in the past, didn't they still have merit? And, if they stopped doing all these worthwhile things, how were they to handle the problem of a nagging conscience plagued with guilt over good deeds left undone? They were really between a rock and a hard place!

Some of them solved the problem by what we might call the old-time religion approach: What was good enough for Pappy is good enough for me. Goaded by sub-Christian guilt over supposed sins of omission, the good deeds of ritual cleansing and sacrifice left undone, these fledgling followers of Jesus shifted into a high gear program of religious activity designed to make certain they pleased God and were acceptable to Him.

We may smile at their naivete, but is there any perceptible difference in motivation between their ritual washings, dietary precautions and what have you, and the equally misguided contemporary Christian's continual round of ceaseless activity designed to help gain a sense of acceptance before God? None at all. Christ plus anything equals heresy! Though we have a lot of learning and growing to do after our salvation experience, nothing can add to what Jesus has done as a means of salvation. Jesus-plus just isn't possible.

Many twentieth-century saved sinners fall for the same old con job. Perhaps you have, too. You blow it with God in some area of your life. A short time later, Satan, who usually camps on the shoulder of most of us Jesus folk, whispers in your ear, “You're not worthy of all God has done for you. At least, not now. After what you've just done. Or left undone. In fact, if you face the truth about yourself, you'll admit you're not acceptable to God at all. You better get busy and do something to square accounts. Otherwise, you'll never be sure God approves of you.”

If you buy the devil's drivel, you'll set out on a feverish campaign designed to improve your situation. To rack up brownie points with God. To strengthen your standing in His sight. For awhile, you may perform like Super Saint himself. But in the process, you'll wear yourself to a frazzle -- going to meetings; serving on committees; passing out tracts; even teaching Sunday School -- hoping thereby to win the affection, approval and acceptance of God. You may be

doing the right things, but you will be doing them for the wrong reason. As a result, you end up frustrated. Joyless. Uncertain.

As one lady said to her pastor, “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I do all I can to serve the Lord, and I still feel guilty. Then I feel guilty about feeling guilty.” Precisely. It is discouraging to see all this laudable effort dismissed as “*dead works*.” It’s disconcerting to learn such effort, as a means of earning another spiritual merit badge, just doesn’t register with God. He simply isn’t impressed by feverish effort.

The Futility of Activity

What’s the answer? A secularized Christianity takes the “We’re number two” approach. Believe in Jesus and try harder. That sounds deceptively pious, but it is dangerously pagan. If we listen to what the writer of Hebrews says, we will quickly recognize the utter futility of activity when it comes to getting or staying in tune with God.

“Now even the first covenant had regulations of divine worship and the earthly sanctuary. For there was a tabernacle prepared, the outer one, in which were the lamp-stand and the table and the sacred bread; this is called the holy place. And behind the second veil there was a tabernacle which is called the Holy of Holies, having a golden altar of incense and the ark of the covenant covered on all sides with gold, in which was a golden jar holding the manna, and Aaron’s rod which budded, and the tables of the covenant. And above it were the cherubim of glory overshadowing the mercy seat; but of these things we cannot now speak in detail. Now when these things have been thus prepared, the priests are continually entering the outer tabernacle, performing the divine worship, but into the second only the high priest enters, once a year, not without taking blood, which he offers for himself and for the sins of the people committed in ignorance. The Holy Spirit is signifying this, that the way into the holy place has not yet been disclosed, while the outer tabernacle is still standing, which is a symbol for the time then present, according to which both gifts and sacrifices are offered which cannot make the worshiper perfect in conscience, since they relate only to food and drink and various washings,

regulations for the body imposed until a time of reformation” (9:1-10).

The tent (or tabernacle) in the wilderness was meant to be an object lesson pointing to Jesus, as shown in figure 1.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS IS WHAT’S HAPPENING”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 9:16--10:18

For where a covenant is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. ¹⁷For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives. ¹⁸Therefore even the first covenant was not inaugurated without blood. ¹⁹For when every commandment had been spoken by Moses to all the people according to the Law, he took the blood of the calves and the goats, with water and scarlet wool and hyssop, and sprinkled both the book itself and all the people, ²⁰saying, “This is the blood of the covenant which God commanded you.” ²¹ And in the same way he sprinkled both the tabernacle and all the vessels of the ministry with the blood. ²²And according to the Law, one may almost say, all things are cleansed with blood, and without shedding of blood there is no forgiveness.

²³Therefore it was necessary for the copies of the things in the heavens to be cleansed with these, but the heavenly things themselves with better sacrifices than these. ²⁴For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us; ²⁵nor was it that He should offer Himself often, as the high priest enters the holy place year by year with blood not his own. ²⁶Otherwise, He would have needed to suffer often since the foundation of the world; but now once at the consummation He has been manifested to put away sin by the sacrifice of Himself.

²⁷And inasmuch as it is appointed for men to die once, and after this comes judgment; ²⁸so Christ also, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, shall appear a second time, not to bear sin, to those who eagerly await Him, for salvation.

^{10:1}For the Law, since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year, which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. ²Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins? ³But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins year by year. ⁴For it is impossible for the blood of

bulls and goats to take away sins. ⁵Therefore, when He comes into the world, He says, “Sacrifice and offering Thou has not desired, but a body Thou hast prepared for Me; ⁶in whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin Thou hast taken no pleasure. ⁷Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come to do Thy will, O God.’ as it is written of Me in the roll of the book.

⁸After saying above, “Sacrifices and offerings and whole burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin thou hast not desired, nor hast Thou taken pleasure in them” (which are offered according to the Law), ⁹then He said, “Behold, I have come to do Thy will.” He takes away the first in order to establish the second. ¹⁰By this will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.

¹¹And every priest stands daily ministering and offering time after time the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins; ¹²but He, having offered one sacrifice for sins for all time, sat down at the right hand of God, ¹³waiting from that time onward until His enemies be made a footstool for His feet. ¹⁴For by one offering He has perfected for all time those who are sanctified. ¹⁵And the Holy Spirit also bears witness to us; for after saying, ¹⁶“This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the Lord: I will put My laws upon their heart, and upon their mind I will write them.” ¹⁷He then says, “And their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.”

¹⁸Now where there is forgiveness of these things, there is no longer any offering for sin.

Structurally speaking, the first eighteen verses of chapter 10 are a reiteration, with additional scriptural references, of everything the writer has said in chapters 8 and 9. As such, these eighteen verses do not require separate exegesis. However, they round out our grasp of Christ’s action on our behalf. “For the Law since it has only a shadow of the good things to come and not the very form of things, can never by the same sacrifices year by year which they offer continually, make perfect those who draw near. Otherwise, would they not have ceased to be offered, because the worshipers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have had consciousness of sins?” (10:1,2).

Usually the New American Standard Bible is more correct and clear than our cherished King James Version. In this case, the opposite is true. At the end of verse 2, the New American asks

the question, if the law were effective in getting through to God, wouldn't the cleansed person “*no longer have had consciousness of sin?*” If the NAS is correct, the inference is that Christians who do get through to God no longer have any consciousness of sin. But our author's argument throughout has been that under the old system, that is, Judaism, worshipers did not get through to God. Thus they were plagued by a continuing consciousness of sins which denied them rest. But we know from experience that, following cleansing, our consciousness of sins is often sharpened! Attitudes and actions we were once able to tolerate in ourselves are now unacceptable. In fact, the closer we get to Jesus, the greater our consciousness of sin.

The King James Version says worshipers who really get through to God “*have had no more conscience of sins.*” This, in my judgment, is the correct translation. The word conscience appears over 30 times in the New Testament. Each time the same Greek word is used: “suneidesis.” This is the word used by our author. It means more than mere intellectual knowledge or awareness. It involves the emotional life as well. It has to do with feelings of goodness or guilt.

The thing Jesus does, which that old system could not do, is cleanse the conscience, that is, the thinking, feeling center of our being. Once a sinner has turned from waywardness and committed himself to God in Christ, moral innocence is restored. A man in Christ has the past of Christ, which is perfect! Wholly acceptable to God. Therefore, while he may have a consciousness of sinning, there is, through confession and repentance, a cleansing of his conscience. The guilt may be remembered intellectually, but the sting of guilt is gone emotionally. The forgiven man knows he has sinned, but he no longer feels it.¹

Each time we come to God with the problem of recurring sin, as we saved-sinners surely must, and confess it, repent of it, claim forgiveness for it, we are given more of Christ's perfect past. And so it goes. Moment by moment. Day by day. Week by week. Year by year. As long as life lasts, the good Lord continues to give us more and more of Christ's past until at long last, when we are absent from the body and at home with Him, we present to Him a slate which has been

made clean by the blood of the Lamb.

The picture most helpful to me in this regard is that of a field of new blown snow stretching as far as the eye can see, and beyond! Freshness and whiteness are everywhere. The landscape is cloaked in purity. That’s a portrait of our past in Christ. It is spotless, from each moment of confession and repentance, back into the eternity of God. *“If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness”* (1 John 1:9).

This incredible truth! God cleanses us of all unrighteousness! Not just the sins we confess, but the sins we do not confess because we are not yet convicted of their sinfulness. There are things in my life I do not yet recognize as sin. Others may see them. My wife does (or so she insists)! But I don’t. The Holy Spirit has not yet revealed these chinks in my Christian character to me. Thus, I can’t honestly confess them as sin to God.

But the Lord knows the debilitating effect of unconfessed sin in a Christian’s life. Therefore, when I confess those sins of which I am conscious, God in His goodness cleanses me of all unrighteousness, including those things I do not yet recognize as sin. In that moment of God-washed-cleanness, I stand before Him spotless, with no past but the past of Christ, which is perfect. Hallelujah!

Does that mean past sins are forgotten? From God’s perspective, yes. From ours, no. We would all like to forget some of our sins, as well as some of those committed against us. But, to hope for that is to hope for something which cannot be. It is impossible. This brain of ours is a physical computer with a memory bank which cannot forget. A psychologist told me recently of new forms of treatment used to quicken areas of memory which were thought to be lost. Under prodding, however, memory was discovered to be still there.

Hoping to forget our sinful past is unrealistic. But, we can put a new meaning on our memory. It can serve to remind us of areas of danger we need to avoid because of past susceptibility.

Memory can serve to remind us of the amazing grace of God, and of those things of which He in His love has cleansed us. We still know we’ve sinned, but that knowledge does not plague us. To the contrary, it is a cause for rejoicing, for we also know, with even greater certainty, that we have been forgiven!

Jesus people are not spared from a consciousness of sins, but we no longer have a conscience of sin. Though we fail our heavenly Father, we can return to Him with absolute confidence, knowing “*the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses us from all unrighteousness*” (1 John 1:9). Thus, our conscience no longer sears us with burning regret over a past which God has completely cleansed and forgiven.

When you get that message loud and clear, you will no longer feel any compulsion to become involved in a feverish, ceaseless round of religious activity aimed at making yourself more acceptable to God. Christianity is not some feeble effort on your part to live a shoddy imitation of Jesus. Christianity is Jesus living His life in you, here and now. Right where you are. Through your set of genes, chromosomes and glands. In your set of circumstances.

In his first letter to the Corinthians, the Apostle Paul says, “*Do you not know that you are a temple of God, and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?*” (1 Corinthians 3:16). That ancient tent-tabernacle in the wilderness is gone. So, too, is the beautiful temple in Jerusalem. But the temple, the Christian believer, is more in evidence today than ever before. And, of course, that has been God’s game plan from the very beginning. God has not been primarily concerned with getting people into heaven, though that’s important to Him. His primary concern has been to find a way to get Himself back into man on earth. When we are “*born again*” (John 3:3), God’s purpose becomes possible. He is given a body through which to function. Your body. And mine.

That’s one of the amazing truths of the Christian faith. God’s tabernacle, or dwelling place today, is in Christian believers. If you are a Christian, the Lord Jesus clothes Himself in your personality, and lives His life over again in your circumstances. In the process, you experience the adequacy

of reality.

All the loving father was to Jesus, Jesus is to you! As a Christian you are plugged into a Source of spiritual supply which never runs dry. Your dependence is not upon “*dead works*” (9:14), but upon the free flowing power of the living Christ who dwells in you. Jesus is what’s happening. In heaven, yes. But also in your heart, right here on earth. “*You are a temple of God, and . . . the Spirit of God dwells in you*” (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Have you been slow to grasp this precious truth? Have you been quick to rush back to legalism and reject your liberty in Christ? Have you been an easy prey for Satan’s foil whereby he attempts to get you feverishly locked up in the futility of activity, trying to make yourself more acceptable to God? If so, write this down in living letters of fire upon your memory: Christ’s death completely satisfies God as far as your perfection is concerned. The blood of Jesus Christ is adequate. There is no adding to it. No mixing with it. No going beyond it. It is complete. Satisfactory. Final. Thus, you can reject the futility of activity as a means of grace and rest in the adequacy of reality.

The Efficacy Of Finality

The last thread in our author’s argument is the efficacy of finality. We see it in chapter 9, verses 11 through 28, describing the ministry of the high priest as he applies the blood of the sacrifice in the tabernacle rituals. Our author shows that when Jesus appeared as our high priest, He applied His own blood, once for all, in the holy place of the greater and more perfect tabernacle, one not made with hands, and thereby obtained our eternal redemption.

Among other things, efficacy involves power to perform. That old hymn, “There Is Power in the Blood,” comes to mind. “Would you be free from the burden of sin? There’s power in the blood. Would you o’er evil a victory win? There’s wonderful power in the blood.”

Many recoil at this coupling of blood with the Christian faith. Lucille, my wife, tells of a college

dorm mate who, when the blood of Christ was mentioned, said, “Ohhhhh, that sounds messy.” Others speak caustically of Christianity as a “slaughterhouse religion.” Their very words reveal their utter insensitivity to, and abysmal ignorance of, the scarlet thread which runs through scripture.

Just why blood is indispensable to the forgiveness of sin is a secret locked in the mind of God. But, surely, the repeated sacrifice of substitutionary animals, leading finally to the shed blood of Jesus, clearly fixes the fact that forgiveness is a costly thing. It’s no “tsk, tsk” matter. It involves brokenness.

Blood is a mysterious fluid intimately associated with life. We moderns who know so much about chemistry can easily lose the awe once felt by those who believed “*life is in the blood*” (Leviticus 17:11). For them to give God blood was to give God life, the highest and best of all gifts. When we turn that truth around and remember, “*God was in Christ [on that cross] reconciling [us] to Himself*” (2 Corinthians 5:19), we begin to see that in the blood of Jesus, God was offering us the best of His gifts. And, we begin to understand the true meaning of love.

One of our college students stopped by just now with what he termed a mind-blower. “I’ve been thinking about the meaning of love,” he said. “I’ve come to realize love says ‘I die for you.’ Not, ‘I will die for you.’ Nor ‘I would, if necessary, die for you.’ But ‘I do die for you.’ In other words,” he went on, “love says to the loved one, ‘From my perspective, you’re more important than I am. I put your joy, fulfillment and self-realization ahead of my own’”.

Well, as my young friend said, that is a mind-blower. For the Bible declares: “*God is love*” (1 John 4:8). Love says, “I die for you.” And God, who is love, did just that! When God in Christ was nailed to a cross, in effect, He was saying, “Man, from My perspective you’re more important than I am. I lay down My life for you. I put your joy, fulfillment and self-realization ahead of My own. I die for you.” When that wonderful truth penetrates, we concur with Isaac Watts: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

We begin to understand and to say, “Oh, no, God, that’s all wrong! *You’re* more important than I am, I die for *You*.” Thus, we stop sinning. That is, we stop trying to be our own God. We put Him first. Willingly. Joyfully. Increasingly. We say, “God, I die for You.” And, in the process of losing our life, we find it, just as Jesus promised (Matthew 10:39). God’s loving desire for us is accomplished. We are reborn. Made whole. Liberated from the ego which would rule us. And our joy is complete, for both the Redeemer and the redeemed.

Christ’s sacrifice was retroactive. He settled accounts for all who acted in faith under the terms of the old contract. The new covenant is greater than the old. The greater includes the lesser. Therefore, those Jews who were “*promised (an) eternal inheritance*” (9:15), received it through Christ. Their faithfulness to the light they had, met the qualification of salvation “*by grace ... through faith*” (Ephesians 2:8).

To further fix the indispensability of Christ’s blood in our heart, our author uses the illustration of a will (or covenant). “*For where a covenant [will] is, there must of necessity be the death of the one who made it. For a covenant is valid only when men are dead, for it is never in force while the one who made it lives*” (9:16,17).

His logic is clear. The benefits of a will only come to the beneficiaries after the death of the benefactor. The last will and testament of our Lord Jesus Christ, the new covenant, included many riches. For us to inherit these, it was necessary for Jesus to die. The shedding of Christ’s blood put the will into effect. But sometimes a will can be broken. The desires of the deceased are violated. So the writer of Hebrews announces some incredible news: Jesus is what’s happening! He not only died to activate His will, He made Himself executor of that new covenant. Because of His resurrection, He now lives to intercede for us. To guarantee that our adversary, the devil, will never succeed in breaking the terms of Christ’s will.

That’s what it means to have Jesus as our intercessor. He isn’t trying to convince God to be kind

and loving, as if God were otherwise. Nor is he attempting to get God to forgive us, as if God were unwilling to do so. Everything the Son does, He does on behalf of and in concert with the Father. As our intercessor, Jesus is bringing to bear upon our situation all the resources of heaven so Satan will never succeed in breaking the conditions of His will.

We often speak of the finished work of Christ, and we thank God for the fact that Jesus died “*once for all*” (9:26,28), and later “*sat down at the right hand of God*” (10:12) to dramatize the efficacy and finality of His all-sufficient sacrifice. In the Old Testament tabernacle, there were no chairs. Instead, day after day, year after year, century after century, the priests bustled about the tabernacle, coming and going, in the never-ending business of making sacrifices for sin. But when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sin, He “*sat down*” (10:12). His job was over. So, we thank God for the finished work of Christ. It gives us a great sense of security and serenity.

But we should also be grateful for the unfinished work of Christ! His ministry of intercession! “*For Christ did not enter a holy place made with hands, a mere copy of the true one, but into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God for us*” (9:24).

His sacrifice on earth was once for all. His intercessory ministry in heaven is perpetual. Through the first, we are put into relationship with God. Through the second, we are kept in fellowship with God. Our relationship is final and complete. Our fellowship must be renewed and refreshed day by day.

Someone has said, “Sin twines through my thoughts and slips into my prayers.” With each intrusion of sin, Satan, our adversary, tries to create a cleavage in our fellowship with God. But Christ, our high priest, steps in to intercede for us. To remind us His sacrifice covers all our sin, past, present and future, so there need never be even a moment’s break in our fellowship with the heavenly Father. This special intercessory ministry of Christ will never end as long as a solitary sinner-saint is in the place of testing here on earth. As long as one of us is under siege by Satan,

the intercessory ministry of Jesus will be working on our behalf to keep us creative and free.

Thank God for the unfinished work of Christ. Jesus is what’s happening! Now. Today. In heaven and in your heart. He is active at this very moment on your behalf, administering the conditions of a will He died to activate. A will in which you inherit forgiveness of sin. A cleansed conscience. Victory in time. Hope in eternity. The blessed assurance of immediate access to God any moment of the night or day.

While this is really too wonderful for words, the best is yet to be. “*Christ. . .shall appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to those who eagerly await Him*”(9:28). The Hebrew day of Atonement is in our author’s mind. He is thinking of the high priest who would take off his beautiful garments of glory and, clothed in a robe of white linen, go into the Holy of Holies to perform his tasks.

While the high priest was in the Holy of Holies, there was great anxiety among the people outside. It was a time of tense waiting. He had gone into the very presence of God on their behalf. To offer God their prayers of confession and repentance. Would these be acceptable? The reappearance of the high priest, now dressed in his royal robes, was an especially welcome sight. It meant God had approved of their sacrifice. God had forgiven their sins.

With all of this in mind, the writer of Hebrews thinks of Jesus, the Christian’s high priest, Who took off His garments of heavenly glory and, clothed in the white linen of spotless manhood, set out to make atonement for sin. This completed, He entered the heavenly sanctuary where He now intercedes for us. We need not worry or wonder if God will accept His sacrifice. Or hear His prayers of intercession. The resurrection is proof of that. It is God’s seal of acceptance on all Jesus was and did. His sacrifice was enough.

But one day He shall return in robes of regal glory. Not to deal with sin. He has already done

that. But, to bring final and total fulfillment to those “*who are (eagerly, constantly and patiently) waiting and expecting him*” (9:28, Amplified Bible). Little wonder Philip Bliss wrote in the hymn Hallelujah, What a Savior. “Man of sorrows, what a name, for the Son of God who came, ruined sinners to reclaim. Hallelujah! What a Savior!”

Notes

1. A. W. Tozer, “The Editorial Voice,” The Alliance Witness, 1962

“OUR HOPE: JESUS WILL COME AGAIN”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 10:26-39

For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, “but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries.”²⁸ Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses.

²⁹How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled underfoot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? ³⁰For we know Him who said, “Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.” And again, “The Lord will judge His people.” ³¹It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God.

³²But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, “partly, by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated.” ³⁴For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. ³⁵Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. ³⁶For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised.

³⁷For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come, and will not delay. ³⁸But My righteous one shall live by faith; And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. ³⁹But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul.

We come now to the beginning of the end of Hebrews. Our author’s monumental arguments for the superiority, supremacy and sufficiency of Christ are over. Because he is a seasoned teacher and recognizes the short-term nature of the average person’s memory span, he will yet reinforce

his argument with a few additional references to who Jesus was and what Jesus did, but, for the most part, his courtly comment on the unexcelled excellence of Christ is completed. Now he focuses our attention upon the everyday implications of this. His theme from here on out will be: the urgency of practicality.

A sensitive pastor, he will not neglect the “So what?” element in his teaching. He refuses to deal with doctrine in isolation from daily living. This has been characteristic of his style throughout. Instead of using a straight-line method of reasoning, he has followed a somewhat serpentine course. Interweaving the practical with the theoretical. Never failing to wed the two. On occasion, he has lifted us into the stratosphere of the Spirit with some soaring statement about the Saviour. But, before we become too other-worldly in our thinking, he has suddenly jerked us back to earth with a stunning rebuke or loving exhortation.

Along with being a seasoned teacher and a sensitive pastor, he is also a sound psychologist. To insure his words of warning have maximum impact, he uses an adaptation of the sandwich technique: compliment, correction, compliment. You will see this develop as we move along.

The opening sentence in his summation (10:19-25) blends together the three great Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. *“Since therefore, brethren, we have confidence to enter the holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way which He inaugurated for us through the veil, that is, His flesh, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our body washed with pure water”* (10:19-22).

According to the writer of Hebrews, faith is confidence to enter. To enter what? The Holy of Holies within our being; that is, our once dead spirit which has been quickened by Christ and where God through Christ chooses to meet us. *“Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?”* (1 Corinthians 3:16).

Faith perceives the incredible fact that God and the child of God are no longer two distinct

persons. Through Christ, you and He are one. God has become a part of your life as a Christian. You have become a part of God’s life and action in life. The veil has been torn in two. There is nothing between. The implications of this in terms of daily living are staggering.

Many saved-sinners act as if the veil were still in place. They still think of God as a vague, oblong blur. A distant Being out there somewhere in space. As a result, they’re lonely. Frustrated. Guilt-ridden. Despairing. They have no conception of the liberty and security which is theirs in Christ. They still think of themselves as people on probation who, if they work long enough and hard enough, will finally make themselves fit enough for fellowship with God. What they fail to realize is that their acceptability to Him and His accessibility to them does not depend upon any noble, but futile, effort of their own. The Christian’s “*confidence to enter*” is “*by the blood of Jesus*” (10:19).

Christ has cut out all middlemen. As a result, even the most feeble saint can enjoy intimate and immediate communion with God through faith in who Jesus was and what Jesus did. Therefore, “*let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful*” (10:23). (Note the second great cardinal virtue.)

A Christian is not a glorified gambler who leans on the law of averages hoping for a better roll of the dice the next time around. Such comfort isn’t Christian, it’s pagan. More than that, it’s cruel. It asks us to trust in chance. And, frankly, I don’t have enough faith to believe in chance. Fortunately, ours is a solid hope full of power and promise, because it rests on the God who promises, believing with boldness, “He who promised is faithful.”

Then, there is love. “*And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near*” (10:24,25). Our ministry of love as Jesus folk is to care, share and prepare. We are to care in the sense of being involved with our fellow Christians. Watching over one another. Studying how we may stir up, stimulate and incite

each other to love, helpful deeds and creative action.

We are to share by being aware of our interdependence. A Christian cannot be what Moffatt called “a pious particle.” A Christian in isolation, or selfish Christianity, is a contradiction of terms. To try to preserve love without sharing is to attempt the impossible.

“Faith and hope can be practiced by a solitary soul in a hermit’s cell or on a deserted island, but the exercise of love is possible only in community. It must have an object. Thus, the writer of Hebrews urges us to maintain our common Christian worship.”¹

This is very relevant today. It isn’t uncommon to hear people say, “I love Christ, but church is a bummer. It turns me off.” The book of Hebrews repeats to these twentieth-century pilgrims the same admonition given to those first-century folk who failed to see the importance of a loosely organized body of believers. The local church is not the Church for which Christ died, but it is a visible expression of that Church to the world in which we live.

Nowhere does scripture suggest God has abandoned the local church or declared it obsolete. Instead, we are clearly instructed not to neglect meeting together (10:25a). Because we care and share, we are to lovingly prepare each other for the coming of Christ with words of encouragement, enthusiasm and optimistic support. And, we are to do so “*all the more, as [we] see the day [of his return] drawing near*” (10:25b).

After this warm, rather reassuring word, our author makes a sudden shift from compliment to correction. He sticks in the middle portion of the sandwich. He confronts us with one of the most sober warnings in all of scripture. “*For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins*” (10:26).

Few truths are more self-evident than that there are many Christians who don’t live like it. Nor, is any Bible teaching clearer than the repeated pronouncement that, sooner or later, spiritual dereliction will be dealt with. Some who have a stunted understanding of God’s love would have

us believe He winks benignly at the Christian’s waywardness, permitting it to go by unnoticed. Others, with an exaggerated emphasis on the Christian’s role in redemption, would have us believe saints who sin following their salvation are irretrievably lost and bound for hell.

Neither of these two extremes is true to scripture. Both are blatant heresies. Nowhere does the Bible even remotely suggest Christians can sin and get away with it. Nor does it teach that born-again children of God who do sin are, or can be, lost.

Like everyone else, a Christian is responsible for his own acts and attitudes. If these lead him into sin, he has two alternatives. One, judge himself, repent, meet Christ at the cross, by faith appropriate the forgiveness God offers, and get on with the business of growing into spiritual maturity. Or two, he can remain in his sin, put off confession to God, wait to be judged by Christ at the judgment seat and, in the process, suffer the dual loss of confidence in the Christian life on earth and reward from the Christian life in heaven. Depending on which of these alternatives we saved-sinners take, we anticipate the second coming of Christ (and co-incidentally, death) as either an occasion of joy or judgment.

In terms of sin and the principle of cause-and-effect, four things are true. 1. Everyone has a choice before the fact. 2. Everyone has a choice after the fact. 3. Consequences spring from those choices. 4. Looking backward and forward is a wise way to keep moving upward.

Everyone Has A Choice Before The Fact

It’s amazing how complicated some folk can make the plain, simple teachings of scripture. Hebrews 10:26 is a classic example. *“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.”* What agony of soul and painful divisiveness have been spawned by those who fail to grasp the simple fact that all sin is deliberate, and God in His grace has provided for our willfulness.

When it comes to yielding to temptation, everyone has a choice before the fact. To sin or not to

sin is the universal option constantly open to us as Christians. It's true, as the Bible explains in Leviticus 4 and 5, that there may be an element of ignorance in our sinning; yet, when we think about it deeply, we must come to the inevitable conclusion that all sin is willful. At some point in the process, we become aware of what we're doing and choose to do it anyway!

We may be ignorant of the final outcome, the consequences. We may be ignorant of how diabolically clever the devil is. We may be ignorant of the fact hell is not nearly so nice as the road that leads to it. We may be ignorant of the devastating impact of guilt and a sense of guilt upon the psyche. We may be deluded into thinking some sins are not so sinful, and thus, be defrauded by Satan whose true power we do not fully realize.

But, in spite of these areas of ignorance, somewhere along the line in every act of sinning there is a moment of awareness in which we are awakened to the fact we are skating on thin ice.

However, despite the Spirit's warning, we deliberately choose to inch a bit closer to the edge.

It's just not possible to divide sin into two classifications: forgivable because done in ignorance, or unforgivable because deliberate. There is a willful element in all sin which can neither be denied nor disguised. The more honest, open, sensitive and Spirit-filled a Christian is, the more quickly he will recognize the deliberate nature of his wicked acts. That's why Hebrews 10:26 plagues so many. They take it seriously. And they should!

But, rightly divided, this word of truth will free us rather than frighten us. That right dividing begins by recognizing the verse is speaking of all sin. For all sin is in some sense deliberate. There are many ways to sin willfully or "*fall away from the living God*" (3:12). Most commentators want to limit this sin of willfulness to apostasy. The deliberate denial of something once believed. But apostasy itself cannot be limited to the result of intellectual speculation when, in a state of agnostic skepticism, one throws it all over because the Good News boggles his mind.

What about the "falling away" which will not take a burden to the Lord and leave it there? Does

that not also involve abandonment of belief in God’s promises and His power to keep those promises? What about the deliberate decision not to tithe in the face of God’s clear instruction that the first tenth is holy unto Him? What about the refusal to take time to pray or discipline one’s mind in a searching study of the scriptures? What about the willful reordering of life’s priorities leaving God the last and least, instead of the first and best?

All of these attitudes are apostate to one degree or another. They involve lack of trust in God and create a cleavage between Father and child. As someone has declared, “Sin comes down to a refusal to meet God where He wants to be met, on the terms He Himself has set.”

When we sin willfully, as Christians, are we lost? Yes, for the moment, painfully so! But only from our perspective, not from God’s. The heavenly Father knows nothing can separate us from Him. He knows nothing can pluck us out of His hand. But in our fallen-away-ness we forget that fact.

Part of the pain sin inflicts on sinner-saints is that, in our shame and regret, we “*cast away our confidence.*” For in that moment we forget who we are and Whose we are. We forget why we’re here and where we’re going. In a most poignant, piercing, personal way, we are lost. We dwell in severe darkness of soul. Hope is all around, but we cannot see it. The shades of our mind, emotion and will are pulled. We do not permit the Light of the World to come in, in a commanding, dominating, darkness-dispelling way.

Everyone Has A Choice After The Fact

When it comes to sin and the principle of cause-and-effect, everyone has a choice before the fact.

Everyone also has a choice after the fact. “*For if we go on sinning willfully (which at the deepest level involves all sin) after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins*” (10:26).

Did you notice that between the admonitions at the beginning of chapter 6 (1-12), and the end of

chapter 10 (19-39), there is the tremendous development in chapters 6:13 --10:18, of Christ as high priest functioning in the true tabernacle of God? With our Lord's never-ending ministry of reconciliation in mind, the writer of Hebrews now declares, *“If we go on sinning ... there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins”* (10:26).

In essence, he is saying, in Christ, God has done all He can do. There is no other Saviour to come and die for sinners. There is no other Jesus to seek and save the lost. So, when, as saved-sinners, we are guilty of anything which defiles the image of God in us, or denies the Lordship of Christ over us, there is only one thing we can do, and that is rush to the cross for the forgiveness God offers there and only there! There is no other sacrifice for sins!

To sin or not to sin is the universal option constantly open to Christians. To be forgiven or not forgiven when we sin is the urgent question each of us must answer for ourselves. In other words, like everyone else, we Jesus folk must assume responsibility for our sin and for doing something about it. The only thing we can do which has meaning is swallow our pride, do what does not come naturally from the psychological point of view (ego would still like to believe it can go it alone) and turn to the only Saviour for sinners, be they non-Christian sinners or saved-sinners.

The cross is ever and always sufficient for any who rest in it. Its only limitation is the one we set through lack of appropriation and application. God can do nothing more than forgive us. If we refuse to be forgiven, we must face a fiery purging at the judgment seat of Christ. The teaching of scripture is just that plain. *“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries”* (10:26,27).

People read these words and ask, “What do they mean?” I don't wish to sound flippant, but they mean exactly what they say! There is no mystery to the fact that, in a sense, at some point, all sin is deliberate. Thus, for Christians who sin following conversion, there is no other place to go for

forgiveness and cleansing but Calvary. If we refuse to do business with the gentle Jesus on His cross, we shall do business with Jesus, the Judge, on His throne.

These verses are not a call to faultless living. Only a mediocre person is always at his best! God is well aware of human frailty. And, the Good News is that He has done something about it. Hebrews 10:26,27 is a pronouncement of what He has done, a call to realize all sin defiles the image of God in us and must be dealt with swiftly, lest it harden into a lifestyle, effecting consequences of the severest sort.

Consequences Spring From Our Choices

Two things beg to be said about the inevitable and inescapable consequences which spring from the choices we make. First, for Christians who refuse to repent and accept Christ's sacrifice as adequate for their brand of sinning, there is something worse than stoning.

“For if we go on sinning willfully after receiving the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins, but a certain terrifying expectation of judgment, and the fury of a fire which will consume the adversaries. Anyone who has set aside the Law of Moses dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. How much severer punishment do you think he will deserve who has trampled under foot the Son of God, and has regarded as unclean the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, and has insulted the Spirit of grace? For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:26-31).

If there is a passage of scripture anywhere which confronts us with the serious nature of Christian discipleship, it is this one. It's important for us to fully understand it. Among other things, we must see this as an announcement that some Christians will never repent of their rebellion as sons of God. As a result, they will be judged accordingly. That judgment is called a “*fury of fire*” (10:27a), in harmony with Paul's statement to the Corinthians regarding the test of fire to which the Christians' works will be put (1 Corinthians 3:13-15).

But notice, the purpose of this “*fury of fire*” is not to destroy the sinner-saint, but “*to consume the adversaries*” (10:27b). It is the devil and his devilish work which the judgment fire will devour! Instead of turning His wayward children over to Satan, God in His grace purges us. He produces purified persons suitable for heaven. At the same time, He robs Satan, our adversary, of his intended victims.

Unfortunately, the Christian whose works are burned winds up tragically and sadly empty-handed. The recurring theme of judgment for Jesus folk threading through Hebrews relates to the Christian’s reward, as distinguished from his salvation. Our salvation is by grace, period. Our reward is the accrued and compound interest earned by faithfulness in service and self-giving. The judgment described as a “*fury of fire*” is not aimed at destroying the impenitent sinner-saint, but at purifying him while, at the same time, denying the devil another victim.

According to custom, violators of the law of Moses were condemned to death by stoning. However, there is something worse than stoning for saved-sinners who spurn the Lordship of Jesus. What is it? Having to live with the knowledge of their sin, and the fact there is no possibility of keeping it from Christ, no way of sparing Him the pain sin always inflicts upon Him and His body, the Church.

It is possible for someone, in a moment of weakness or loneliness, to break the marriage vow. If he or she handles that grievous sin redemptively at the cross, there is cleansing for the offender. And, if he or she handles it courageously, bearing the mark and memory of that sin alone out of love for his or her mate, the offended is protected from the pain, knowledge of the broken vow would produce.

But, in the case of our marriage relationship with Christ, there is no way we, His bride, can keep the fact of our willful waywardness and spiritual infidelity from Him. Therefore, when we remain unfaithful to Him, we bear a double pain. The pain a sense of guilt produces in us and the pain the fact of guilt inflicts upon Him. One who has even a scintilla of spiritual sensitivity finds this a

fate worse than stoning.

A further consequence springing from our persistent refusal as Christians to repent and accept the sacrifice of Jesus as adequate for our brand of sin is that God finally takes us at our word. Like the Israelites of old, He permits us to wander off into the wilderness and become “*castaways*” (1 Corinthians 9:27, KJV). The person involved is not eternally lost, though he has lost the confidence and joy of vital Christian living, and, that’s painful enough! But worse, his usefulness to God on earth is lost or, at best, limited.

This was the Apostle Paul’s great dread (1 Corinthians 9:27). What he feared more than anything else was not the loss of his salvation; he knew that was impossible. He was afraid of losing his confidence. His usefulness. His reward. Having proclaimed the Good News to others, he was fearful that, by some act of foolishness or faithlessness, he himself would become disqualified. One whom God had to retire from service until that day when he would be dealt with at the judgment seat of Christ.

Paul knew he would be saved until the end. Would be recognized as one of God’s redeemed. Would be made fit for heaven by the refiner’s fire. He also knew the wood, hay and stubble of any wasted years would go up in smoke, leaving him to face Jesus with empty hands. The very thought of it made his sensitive soul shudder. It should have the same effect on us!

When we sin and refuse to deal with it creatively at the cross, there is a fate worse than stoning, and we must live with the knowledge of what sin does to us and our Saviour. We must also face the peril of pushing God so far that He will finally disqualify us for further work here on earth.

A fact does not change because it is ignored. One inescapable fact is that Jesus is Someone whom all of us must meet, sooner or later (4:13). He would rather meet us as Saviour and Friend. If we refuse Him on those terms, we shall meet Him as Judge. I’m not trying to scare you, because it’s impossible to frighten anyone into the kind of loving relationship with Christ characteristic of

authentic Christianity. I am simply saying a personal encounter with Christ is inevitable. Sometime, somewhere, you shall meet Him.

A Cockney soldier put it this way. His theology may be a bit off, but his concern is correct:

There ain't no throne, and there ain't no books,

It's 'im you gotta see,

It's 'im, just 'im, that is the judge

Of blokes like you and me.

And, boys, I'd rather be frizzled up

In the flames of a burning 'ell,

Than stand and look into 'is face,

And 'ear 'is voice say, “Well?”

What a dreadful moment that will be! How miserably ashamed we shall feel if we miss the path that would have led to peace, joy and wholeness.²

The second thing begging to be said about the consequences of our choices is that no child of God need meet Jesus on the terms just described. For the saved-sinner who repents of his waywardness and receives God's forgiveness, there is something better than just getting by. There is hope born of the knowledge that God's justice is just.

“For we know Him who said, ‘Vengeance is Mine, I will repay.’ And again, ‘The Lord will judge His people.’ It is a terrifying thing to fall into the hands of the living God” (10:30-31). This text has often been used in an effort to flog the unsaved into action. But remember, these words are found in a passage which refers directly and specifically to Christians! It is *“His people”* whom the Lord will judge (10:30). But the big news is that this is a word designed to draw you to God in confidence, not drive you from God in dread. For Christians who trust and obey Him, falling into the hands of the living God will be a glorious experience.

After King David had sinned in his numbering of the people, he was asked to choose between

three forms of judgment. His wise reply, based upon previous experience with the grace of God, led him to say, “*Let us now fall into the hand of the Lord for His mercies are great*” (2 Samuel 24:14). When that question is put to us, into whose hands would we rather fall? Those of our fellow humans? Or those of our God from whom no one can pluck us away?

Before whom would we rather stand in judgment? Our fellow man? Or the One who says, “*Vengeance is Mine, I will repay*”? While it’s true no flimsy excuse, or pleading of the fifth amendment will get us by on that occasion, one thing is sure: God’s justice is just!

This is our hope. Jesus will see us through. He not only knows what we do, but why. He knows those things which inhibit faith. He knows the glandular excesses which make some so nervous they just cannot rest in Him. He knows the physical deficiencies which make some so morose they cannot enjoy their walk in the Spirit. He knows the ebb and flow of bodily functions so characteristic of this complicated piece of fleshy plumbing in which our spirit dwells, a tidal cycle so violent at times we are wholly preoccupied with ourselves. He knows all of that.

I remember talking with a leading psychiatrist in Chicago. He had a beautiful office on the twentieth floor of a building overlooking a park and Lake Michigan. It offered a spectacular view of water, flowers and trees. As we chatted about the kind of helping ministry that might occur through a wedding of his discipline and mine, he commented on this turned-in-ness of people. “You know, John, there are some folk who, when they come in to see me, are so distressed, so preoccupied with themselves and their feelings, they can look out this window at this magnificent view and never even see it.”

How many times have you been so caught up in distress of soul you weren’t aware the sun was shining? Or the flowers growing? Or the birds singing? Well, our Lord, who knows the end from the beginning and everything in between, is aware of the factors affecting faith. He knows those childhood influences which so brutalize some people they are plagued by feelings of inadequacy, fear of failure and dread of life in general until it’s virtually impossible for them to

experience even a modicum of the joy and peace Jesus came to give.

I'm grateful the One who will judge me is Jesus. I'm glad it is God's hand into which I shall fall. For if there's anything I know to be absolutely certain, it's this: God's great longing is to be our Friend as well as our Father. If we come to Him by faith, claiming the cleansing He offers, falling into His hands, the hands of our living and loving Lord, will be a holy and healing experience.

Looking Backward And Forward Is A Wise Way To Keep Moving Forward

“But remember the former days, when, after being enlightened, you endured a great conflict of sufferings, partly by being made a public spectacle through reproaches and tribulations, and partly by becoming sharers with those who were so treated. For you showed sympathy to the prisoners, and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and an abiding one. Therefore, do not throw away your confidence, which has a great reward. For you have need of endurance, so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what was promised. For yet in a very little while, He who is coming will come and will not delay. But My righteous one shall live by faith; And if he shrinks back, My soul has no pleasure in him. But we are not of those who shrink back to destruction, but of those who have faith to the preserving of the soul” (10:32-39).

With what comfort and encouragement this admonition closes! Our author completes the sandwich: compliment, correction, compliment. As in chapter 6:9-12, he ends chapter 10 on a hopeful note. He is a Good News man.

He says to his struggling, fellow sinner-saints, “Remember the days of old. Remember your first love. Remember the absolute confidence you had that anything was possible through Christ. Rekindle your first love if it has grown cold. Remember the joy of your earlier years of sacrifice and service. Recall how you came through the severest tests with flying colors.

“Don't sell yourself short. Don't believe the devil's lie that the worst things about you are the

only true things about you. In the past, you met grievous challenge to your faith, stood firm and won. Your hope of heaven helped you then. Let it help you now. Throw off your current spiritual indolence. Get caught up in the growing process again. Be an imitator of those who through faith gained the golden crown. And you, too, will reap a harvest of inexpressible joy.”

The writer of Hebrews doesn't stop with this appeal to a backward look. He urges them to take a forward look also. They are to be retro-spective. To remember how far they've come in Christ and to gain encouragement from that. But they are also to be pro-spective. They must remember where they are headed and be inspired by that. “Jesus is coming soon,” he says. “You'll not have long to wait. In view of that fact, hang tough! Evaluate everything in the light of His coming. Keep your record behind you, your hope before you, and you will emerge from the tests through which you are now passing stronger and better than ever.

Need I point out the message in that for us today? Jesus is coming soon. I know some doubters argue that Christians have been claiming this for 2,000 years, and that two millennia ago Christ said He would come back soon and He isn't here yet. They infer this promise cannot be trusted. But as God measures time, in which a thousand years are as a day, it's been less than two days since Jesus said He would return shortly! He hasn't broken His promise. Yet a little while and He will come. Keep that fact in mind. Look forward. Learn to live with eternity's values in view and you'll be liberated from the tyranny of the present.

While you're looking forward, look backward. Remember where you were when you began the Christian life and how far you've come by the grace of God. Gain encouragement from that. Don't throw away your confidence. Throw off your spiritual sluggishness. Keep the faith, and with it, confidence in Christ. Claim His sacrifices as wholly adequate for your sin. In this way, you'll be able to anticipate His coming as an occasion of joy, not judgment.

When George Mallory, the famed mountain climber, failed to return from his fatal attempt at conquering Mount Everest, a group of newsmen asked the other climbers what had happened to

him. I was greatly impressed with their reply. They said: “When last seen, he was still going strong toward the top.” God grant that we may possess the grace of continuance so that when our days on earth are done, it also may be said of each of us, “He perished in the pursuit of his goal. He was pressing onward. His face was upward. His heart was set on conquering. And when last seen, he was still going strong toward the top.”

Notes

1. Theodore H. Robinson, The Epistle to the Hebrews, (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1933), p. 144.
2. From “Sorrows of God” by G. A. Studert- Kennedy, quoted in Pulpit Digest, February, 1956.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS AUTHOR AND PERFECTOR OF FAITH”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 11:1-12:3

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ²For by it the men of old gained approval. ³By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things which are visible. ⁴By faith Abel offered to God a better sacrifice than Cain, through which he obtained the testimony that he was righteous, God testifying about his gifts, and through faith, though he is dead, he still speaks. ⁵By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death; and he was not found because God took him up; for he obtained the witness that before his being taken up he was pleasing to God. ⁶And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him. ⁷By faith Noah, being warned by God about things not yet seen, in reverence prepared an ark for the salvation of his household, by which he condemned the world, and became an heir of the righteousness which is according to faith. ⁸By faith Abraham, when he was called, obeyed by going out to a place which he was to receive for an inheritance; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹By faith he lived as an alien in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, fellow-heirs of the same promise; “for he was looking for the city which has foundations, whose architect and builder is God. ¹¹By faith even Sarah herself received ability to conceive, even beyond the proper time of life, since she considered Him faithful who had promised; ¹²therefore, also, there was born of one man, and him as good as dead at that, as many descendants as the stars of heaven in number, and innumerable as the sand which is by the seashore. ¹³All these died in faith, without receiving the promises, but having seen them and having welcomed them from a distance, and having confessed that they were strangers and exiles on the earth. ¹⁴For those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a country of their own. ¹⁵And indeed if they had been thinking of that country from which they went out, they

would have had opportunity to return. ¹⁶But as it is, they desire a better country, that is a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God; for He has prepared a city for them.

¹⁷By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac; and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; ¹⁸it was he to whom it was said, “In Isaac your seed shall be called.” ¹⁹He considered that God is able to raise men even from the dead; from which he also received him back as a type.

²⁰By faith Isaac blessed Jacob and Esau, even regarding things to come. ²¹By faith Jacob, as he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshiped, leaning on the top of his staff.

²²By faith Joseph, when he was dying, made mention of the exodus of the sons of Israel, and gave orders concerning his bones.

²³By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw he was a beautiful child; and they were not afraid of the king’s edict. ²⁴By faith Moses, when he had grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh’s daughter; ²⁵choosing rather to endure ill-treatment with the people of God, than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin;

²⁶considering the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures of Egypt; for he was looking to the reward. ²⁷By faith he left Egypt, not fearing the wrath of the king; for he endured, as seeing Him who is unseen. ²⁸By faith he kept the Passover and the sprinkling of the blood, so that he who destroyed the first-born might not touch them. ²⁹By faith they passed through the Red Sea as though they were passing through dry land; and the Egyptians, when they attempted it, were drowned.

³⁰By faith the walls of Jericho fell down, after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹By faith Rahab the harlot did not perish along with those who were disobedient, after she had welcomed the spies in peace.

³²And what more shall I say? For time will fail me if I tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets, ³³who by faith conquered kingdoms, performed acts of righteousness, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, ³⁴quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, from weakness were made strong, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵Women received back their dead by resurrection; and others were tortured, not accepting their release, in order that they might obtain a better resurrection; ³⁶and others experienced mockings and scourgings, yes, also chains and imprisonment. ³⁷They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with the sword; they went about in sheepskins, in goat-skins, being destitute, afflicted, ill-treated ³⁸(men of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in deserts and mountains and caves and holes in the ground. ³⁹And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they should not be made perfect.

^{12:1}Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.

²Fixing our eyes on Jesus the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

³For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart.

The week prior to my writing the sermon which served as basic research for this chapter, had been most exhilarating and demanding, reminding me again of my inability to be all things to all men. Throughout the week I had tried hard to be father to my children, especially my daughter who was home from college for a few hours. Husband to my wife. Pastor to my flock. A worthy minister of God to the community. A faithful student of God’s written and living Word. Yet, it was a week in which I had been unable to “get it all together.”

Preaching has always been excruciatingly difficult for me. Some men seem to have a natural pulpit gift. My effectiveness, if there be any, has come as the product of hard work. And, while I labor diligently over every sermon, rarely have I struggled with a message as much as the one in question.

When I finished writing my message on Friday, I threw up my hands in horror and informed my

secretary I would have to re-do the whole thing. It just wouldn't jell. I struggled with it Friday evening and all day Saturday. Finally, about 11:00 o'clock Saturday evening I was so exhausted I said, "Father, I don't know what's behind all this, but I'll have to leave this unfinished sermon with You, and get some sleep. I'm weary to the bone."

About 11:30, I drifted off to sleep. After sleeping about five, possibly ten, minutes the phone rang. It was a person gravely concerned about a friend in the Los Angeles area who had called long distance to say she was contemplating suicide. This person didn't quite know what to say or do to help her friend. We spent some time on the phone devising a plan whereby some support could be given by long distance, and contacts were made for additional support where the troubled friend lived.

I tried to go back to sleep and had just drifted off when the telephone rang a second time. It was another lady, one whom I did not know, who also had come to such a crisis point in her life she questioned whether life was worth continuing. For the better part of an hour, I ministered to her over the telephone. We prayed together. I hung up the phone and, though I needed sleep badly, I was bug-eyed. So I lay there praying for the people who had been brought to my attention. After a time, my prayer turned to asking God for some insight as to what this was all about.

He said, "Son, what is the primary crisis these people are facing?" "Well, Father," I replied, "it looks to me like a crisis of faith." He answered, "That's right. And many of My children are going through similar crises. I've let you struggle with the demands of this week, an unfinished sermon and these midnight calls as My way of telling you that, at long last, the time has come for you to share with others your own personal struggle in learning how to walk by faith."

And that's what I did. If I looked tired that Sunday morning, I was. But the fatigue was only physical. Spiritually, I was riding on the front bumper. To have more joy, I would have had to be two people. When the services were over, we all knew God had done something great in our midst. My sharing had been used to fortify others in their faith. The substance of that sharing is

included as part of this chapter, with the hope it will make this subject especially helpful.

The completed Jews to whom the book of Hebrews was originally addressed were having a tough time of it. When they turned from Judaism to Jesus, they laid down, ever so tentatively, the comfortable old security blanket of temple life with its bustling priesthood and carefully structured ritual sacrifice. In place of these visible, physical, religious activities on earth, they substituted the invisible, spiritual ministry of Jesus in heaven. As Christians, their life was to center on things hoped for and unseen. But now they were being pressured from every imaginable angle to revert to the familiar patterns and practices of pre-Christian days.

Could they withstand this pressure? Could they survive and grow strong without the religious props they had once depended upon? Could they hang tough in a hostile world? The writer of Hebrews says, “Yes, provided you walk by faith, not sight.”

Our situation is not dissimilar to theirs. The scenery has changed. We are not asked to forsake animal sacrifices and ritual cleansings. These have never been part of our religious paraphernalia. But we are asked to “*to walk by faith, not by sight*” (2 Corinthians 5:7). To move out into a dangerous, difficult world and maintain the keen edge of our Christian commitment and conviction. We are asked to trust God on what strikes some as slim evidence He even is. To walk by faith when the tendency of our time is to play it safe. To venture all for Christ when every secular voice we hear says self-sacrifice is stupid.

How are we to function in such an atmosphere? How are we to keep our goals in focus, our priorities in proper order? We are to do as the ancients did. We are to follow the instruction given to those first-century fledglings. We are to walk by faith, not by sight.

Description, Not Definition

What is faith? It is “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1).

It is important to note that what our writer gives us here is a description rather than a definition of faith. A definition is formal and exact. It includes all that belongs to the word being defined. It excludes all that doesn't. A description, on the other hand, is not formal or exact. Nor is it all-inclusive. Rather, it is a word picture which spotlights certain special features of that which is being described. Because our author is more concerned with what faith does than with what faith is, he gives us a description instead of a definition.

The writer of Hebrews sees faith as that fruit of the Spirit which will keep Jesus folk alive and well in a hostile world, without dependency upon visual aids of any kind. Faith will spare us the pain and loss of becoming spiritual dropouts. It will keep us keeping on. Help us run with patience the race set before us. In other words, this entire eleventh chapter of Hebrews must be seen in relationship to the underlying concern which threads throughout the entire book: God's concern that we, His children, persevere in the face of all kinds of pressure.

Elsewhere in scripture we are told how, through other facets of faith, we can stand before God in heaven. Here we are told how, through a mature, triumphant faith, we can stand before men on earth. According to his description, faith enables the Jesus person to know what other people do not know. To believe what mere mortals do not believe. And, to act upon that knowledge and belief.

Faith is not wishful thinking. It is not operating on a hunch. Or hoping for the best. Or acting foolishly when common sense and good judgment dictate otherwise. Faith does not renounce reason. It reaches beyond reason to discover those realities which reason alone can never perceive. Faith does not see what isn't there. It sees all that is there! It knows there is more to life than meets the eye. And, it puts us in touch with those things which, though invisible, are truly real.

“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for” (11: 1a). It enables us Jesus people to know with certainty what other folk can only surmise. Best of all, it permits us to experience the reality

of those things for which we hope, here and now. The “*assurance (or realization) of things hoped for*” is nothing more or less than the sure confidence that that which we shall appropriate fully in the future can be experienced and rejoiced in, at least in part, today. Knowing that is knowing what ordinary people do not know: the certainty that the better things for which we long are, in their beginnings, already present, through faith.

Faith is further “*the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1 b). It enables God’s children to believe what mere mortals do not believe. The secular world says seeing is believing. The spiritual world says believing is seeing. Faith operates on the premise that unseen things are not less real than seen things. Love, for instance, is not less real than lead. Sound is not less real than sod. As a matter of fact, it is the conviction of faith that spiritual things are more vital than material things. They are truly real.

Faith provides the Jesus person with convincing proof the unseen world, about which the writer of Hebrews has been talking in chapters 8-10, is the supreme reality. By faith, the soul sees what the eye cannot see. The heart hears what the ear cannot hear. The spirit understands what the mind cannot comprehend. Which is to say, faith empowers the Christian to believe what mere mortals cannot believe: the ultimate reality of things unseen.

But faith is more than knowledge and belief. It involves positive action upon the truth known, and the promise believed. Faith is never idle waiting. It is always belief and knowledge acting. Acting on what? The writer of Hebrews replies: the credibility of God. “*(For) without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (11:6).

The reason triumphant faith sees the invisible, hears the inaudible, believes the incredible and receives the impossible is because it is rooted in the God of Promises and in the promises of God. Faith is not the stuff of which daydreams are made. Faith is not a stained glass word. Faith is a tough-fibered, bare-knuckled thing which is convinced beyond any possible doubt that God is altogether worthy of our trust. Triumphant faith is not belief in the existence of any god, it is

belief in the existence of the God who makes promises and keeps them!

Lack of faith was the problem of those first-century Jesus folk. It is our problem, too. As a matter of fact, lack of faith has been mankind’s problem from the time of Adam and Eve. Sin is not disobedience, it is disbelief. The opposite of sin is not obedience, it is faith. Obedience is the by-product of a faith relationship. Disobedience is the inevitable result of the fracturing of a faith relationship.

The first sin recorded in Genesis was not Eve’s act of disobedience in eating the forbidden fruit. The original sin was unbelief. Before she ever disobeyed God, Eve disbelieved God. The serpent made more sense to her than the loving Father. She took Satan’s word over that of God, and the sin of disbelief led to disobedience.

That’s why faith is so important to God. That’s why, “*without faith it is impossible to please Him*”(12:6). Faith is the opposite of sin. Faith is that act whereby we venture our eternal interest on the bare word of God, believing Him solely on the basis of what He has said without asking for proof. And until we have given God that kind of unconditional trust, we haven’t really given Him anything.

This is something I learned rather late in life. For most questing Christians, there are three stages of faith. At the beginning there is the uncritical stage of faith, in which the experience of Jesus is so direct and compelling the questions have not yet had a chance to surface. Then there is the middle, or critical stage of faith, when the questions come faster than the answers. We find the so-called simple gospel is not so simple after all. Finally, there is the post-critical stage when, having been subjected to the fire of testing, faith emerges from the crucible more sturdy than ever before. Like a bone which has been broken, tested faith is stronger once it is healed. Stronger because it refused to run from the questions. Stronger because it was willing to face the darts of doubt. But, while becoming stronger, the period of brokenness and healing can be extremely painful.

It was during a spasm of that middle stage of faith that I came close to quitting the ministry a few years ago. I grew up in a highly rationalistic era when blind faith was widely ridiculed. To believe anything upon pure faith alone was considered unintelligent. Therefore, it was exceedingly important to me that I have a logical, defensible reason, unfettered and unfortified by faith, for the hope which was within me.

I was gripped by a desperate need to know. To have every question answered. Every issue carefully catalogued and pigeonholed with the “proper” response. And, for a number of years I got away with that kind of infantile concept of Christianity. Then, suddenly, for reasons far too complex to detail here, I was catapulted into situations in which I faced questions I could not answer. Issues I could not resolve.

I was in a terrible dilemma. I had not learned to “*walk by faith*,” and I was no longer able to “*walk by sight*.” My carefully structured, neatly pigeonholed caricature of Christianity had been shot out from under me. I was intellectually legless. Immobile. A spiritual paraplegic. Things deteriorated to a point where I actually questioned the existence of God. I didn’t deny Him. I simply awoke one day to discover I no longer believed in Him.

Now, ministers are not supposed to doubt, at least not doubt the existence of God. So I fought off facing the crisis of this middle stage of faith for several months. I went through all the right motions and said all the right words. During this period, people were converted to Christ and the church was blessed. Remember, God’s promise is to honor His word (Isaiah 55:11), not the person who proclaims it. Yet, despite the outward blessings, I was dead inside. Finally, it came to a point where I felt morally and ethically I could no longer take God’s money to tell people what they wanted to hear when I didn’t believe myself. I decided to leave the ministry.

At that point I took Lucille into my confidence for the first time, because a decision of that sort would have a profound effect on her. It would mean loss of income, home, and the minimal

amount of security the ministry affords. In fact, it would result in chaos for our entire family.

I remember vividly the Saturday night I asked her to ride with me into the country. I described the deep distress of soul through which I had been going. She listened empathetically. She didn't preach to me. Or inundate me with proof texts. She shared that she, too, had gone through periods of doubt and promised to pray for me.

The following Sunday morning I went through the first service, and, as I recall, people were converted. But inwardly I was miserable. When worship was over, I rushed into my study, locked the door, put my head on my desk and said, “God, if there is a God, you have one hour to make Yourself real to me. Unless something happens in the next sixty minutes, I shall have to announce at the second service my decision to resign the ministry.”

It's interesting I should have had that kind of conversation. As I reflect upon it now, it indicates I was not an atheist, or even a deist. I was simply caught in the agony and uncertainty of the middle stage of faith. The crisis point for me up to that time was an inability to “*walk by faith*.” I could walk by reason. Or logic. Or sight. But by faith? No! That was impossible.

As I sat there pondering my dilemma, a portion of scripture came to mind. It had been cropping up repeatedly for a number of weeks. “*He who comes to God must believe that He is (exists), and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (11 :6b). “But, God, that's my problem,” I argued. “I'm not sure You really are.” And God said, now I didn't hear a voice, but the conversation was as real as any I have ever experienced, “There's more to that verse; please look it up.”

I went to a concordance, searched out a key word, found Hebrews 11:6, and turning to my Bible, read: “*And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.*” Without faith it is impossible to please Him!

My reaction was quick and angry. “Thanks a lot, God! This just makes matters worse. My problem is that I’m short on faith. The very thing You want, is what I can’t give.” Then I asked God a question. “Why is it so important to You that I give You faith?” He answered my question with one of His own. “John, why is it important that your son have faith in you?” I answered, “That’s obvious. If Jeff didn’t have faith in me, there would be no possibility of a meaningful relationship between us. Life would be impossible if every time we sat down to dinner he said, ‘Has anybody run a chemical analysis on this food? Mom, you say it’s fit to eat, but how do I know for sure? Dad, you take the first bite and prove it to me.’ Or suppose he questioned everything I said. Doubted every comment I made. Asked for proof before he would accept the truth of the things I try to teach him. Why, it would be impossible to have any meaningful relationship with my son unless he had faith in me.”

Even as I gave God the answer to His question, I had the answer to my own. “Now I see what You’re trying to tell me, God. You’re saying the reason it isn’t possible to please You without faith is because without faith there isn’t any substance or meaning to our relationship.” I began to realize that until I gave God unconditional faith in the absence of answers, I hadn’t really given Him anything. I had given Him my life. My talent. My money. My family. But, I had not given Him unconditional trust.

Again, I put my head on my desk, “God, if there is a God, from this point on I surrender the need to know. By a deliberate act of the will, I commit myself to walk by faith, not sight.” As I continued to pray, I was at first surrounded, and then ultimately filled, with an overwhelming sense of the reality of God. I was gripped by “*the conviction of things not seen,*” and given an assurance that God is, which has not left from that day to this.

For decades I had tried to come to terms with my doubt. That morning I decided to come to terms with my faith. As a result, I passed from the desperate agony of questions I could not answer, to the exquisite joy of answers I cannot escape. And it has been wonderful!

I don't mean to imply all my problems were over. To the contrary. Since then I have faced the severest tests of my lifetime. I have made many serious mistakes. On occasion, I have gravely strained my fellowship with God. But, there has never been one moment when I doubted my relationship to God. I am convinced that, in His foreknowledge, my heavenly Father knew of the crises ahead, and prepared me for them in advance by permitting me to go through that earlier, agonizing middle stage of faith in which I learned beyond any shadow of doubt that God is, and that He “*rewards those who earnestly seek Him*” (12:6).

Like a bone which has been broken, tested faith is stronger once it is healed. It surrenders the need to know and in the process knows as never before. It gives up a dependency on proof and winds up with a form of proof which boggles the mind. It ventures everything on the bare word of God and discovers that this, though it defies reason, is altogether reasonable.

Faith, as the writer of Hebrews asserts, boils down to confidence in the credibility of God. Confidence in His living and written word for knowledge about Himself, rather than our own reasoned arguments. Confidence in His grace for the forgiveness of sin, rather than our own feeble efforts to right the wrongs. Confidence in His loving us, rather than our loving Him. In His choosing us, rather than our choosing Him.

Faith rests in God. In His hold on us, rather than our hold on Him. Faith knows and believes, but it also acts on what it knows and believes, and in the process, possesses “*the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen*” (11:1). As someone has said, “In the life of faith, proof and practice go hand in hand. The proof of faith is in the living of faith.”

Demonstration

From this beautiful description, our author moves on to a demonstration of faith. Many commentators have written extensively and well about the people, places and events mentioned in the remaining thirty-nine verses of chapter 11.

It will not be necessary for me to do so. Suffice it to say, these verses are laced with rich veins of spiritual ore which will readily yield their treasure to the patient and prayerful student.

I should only like to point out that the folk mentioned here were not selected at random nor picked by accident. The Holy Spirit guided this listing, because all of these people had certain things in common. Not the least of these was the fact that they had gone through the very things those first-century believers were being asked to go through. To leave the familiar and comfortable. To adventure into the unknown. To live with a minimum of security. To court danger and invite hostility. To go forward on the bare word of God. And, by faith, they had done just that.

The facets of faith which carried them through are those described by the writer of Hebrews. They believed in the God of promises, “*that He is (exists)*” (11 :6b). They also believed in the promises of God, “*that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him*” (11 :6c). Though the promises God gave them were all in the future, these people acted as if they were already operational. Thus they had the joy of doing and being something great for God. They experienced “*the assurance (or realization)of things hoped for*” (11:1 a). They believed there is more to life than meets the eye. They possessed “*the conviction of things not seen*” (11: ib). As a result, they were able to hang tough in a hostile world in the face of all kinds of logical and appealing reasons not to do so.

But the most endearing thing they had in common with those first-century Jesus folk, was their humanity. Not one of these people was perfect. They all had character flaws. Several were cunning connivers. One was a harlot. All were most unlikely candidates for sainthood. Without exception, they stumbled and fell. But, they did not stay down. Despite their humanity and hang-ups, they refused to roll over and play dead for the devil. When they were

down, they got up. When they were going the wrong direction, they did an about-face. When they pushed ahead of God and fouled up His program, they got back in His will and out of His way. They could have dropped out, but they didn't. In the face of insurmountable problems and unbelievable obstacles, by faith they pushed on. They hung tough in a hostile world.

If they could do it, so can you, says the author of Hebrews. To be sure, you're being asked to make major sacrifices for your Christian faith. To break with everything comfortable and familiar. To risk alienation from family and friends. To adventure into the unknown with no guarantee of safe return. But, this is nothing new. The history of God's working with His children is crowded with those who *“walked by faith, not sight.”* People who had nothing but the promises of God to go on and yet went forth, not knowing where they were going or what they would find when they got there. They came to their extremity and found it to be God's opportunity. They stepped out in blind faith and proved God to be altogether worthy of their trust. If you will take a similar leap of faith, he says, you, too, will hang tough in a hostile world.

Deduction

“Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith, who for the joy set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart” (12:1-3).

This is the conclusion toward which our author has been pointing from the opening line of his letter. Underlying every carefully honed argument and

patiently polished phrase is his practical concern for the spiritual survival of God's earthly offspring. If you miss the “So what?” element which pops up again and again throughout this epistle, you miss the primary thrust of the book. The whole argument is lost unless you realize we are told who Jesus is and what Jesus did in order that we might avoid the ten deadly dangers of:

Drift instead of decision (2:1-4)

Hardened hearts instead of help in time of need (3:7—4:16)

Spiritual infantilism instead of Christian growth (5:11—6:3)

Laxity instead of loyalty (6:4-20; 10:26-31; 12:15-17)

Wavering instead of boldness (10:19-23)

Isolationism instead of fellowship (10:24,25)

Weariness instead of endurance (10:26-39)

Comfort instead of discipline (12:1-11)

Dull indifference instead of grateful response (12:25-29)

Expediency instead of eternity (13:1-15)

God is concerned about the spiritual survival and success of His children. He has used the writer of Hebrews in a remarkable way to provide Christian earthlings with the necessary fortification to stand against the storm. To keep on day after day after day. Whether we're successful or not. Whether we're appreciated or not. Whether we're recognized or not. For, as the song says, “This world is not our home, we're just a passin' through.”

Others have run the same race. Abraham. Moses. Samuel. David. The prophets. The list goes on and on. They all persisted in faith and are now in the great grandstand of heaven rooting us on. They are not passive onlookers. They are intimately and personally involved in the outcome. Until all have finished the race, none shall receive the prize (11:39,40).

But along with this quite proper personal concern, there is an overriding interest in the ultimate outcome of the whole event. Relay runners, having passed the baton to those who run succeeding

laps, do not lose interest in what happens after they have had their run. Instead, they are concerned that all run well for the sake of the corporate effort. The “*great cloud of witnesses*” in glory share the same concern. They join Jesus in keen concern that we, too, “*run with endurance the race that is set before us*” (12:1b).

Furthermore, this “*cloud of witnesses*” are not mere spectators. Their supreme purpose as rooters is to witness to us as runners. Rather than their looking at us, we are to look at them. We are to remember the many dangers, toils and snares through which they, by faith, have already come. We are to remember how they learned to “*lay aside every weight*” which might hinder faith.

Most important of all, we are never, never, never to forget how, through faith, they conquered the sin which clings so closely, the ever present temptation to quit before the race is done. That’s “*the sin which doth so easily beset us*” (12:1, KJV). It’s the sin of slipping back. Of dropping out. Of failing to “hang tough in a hostile world.”

This sin is mentioned repeatedly in Hebrews. Again and again, we are warned against it. The Christian life is not a sprint. It is an endurance run. It requires sustained commitment, lest in falling by the wayside, we lose the satisfaction of doing well while the race is on and also miss the prize to be awarded when the race is done.

Therefore, those who were witnessed of in Hebrews 11 are now witnesses in Hebrews 12 to those of us still on the course. We are challenged to survey the achievements of these past heroes of faith, and to learn by their example. To face our contest with similar concentration and endurance. And, if this “*great cloud of witnesses*” does not provide sufficient fortification against fatigue, despondency and collapse, we have the privilege of “*fixing our eyes on Jesus*” (12:2).

Don’t you love the way the writer of Hebrews never misses an opportunity to slip in his favorite theme! Even when making a practical application, he can’t resist the temptation to put in a good word for Jesus. “*The author and perfecter of faith*” (12:2b). The One who has the first word and

the last. “*The Alpha and the Omega*” (Revelation 1:8), Who will never be superseded as either Savior or Keeper!

The author of Hebrews says, “If all other motivation fails, and you are still strongly tempted to give up the race, look to Jesus who, for the joy that was set before Him, endured far greater strain than you shall ever know. He now roots for you so that you, too, may share His joy and crown.”

Is your reaction, “Big deal! Why shouldn’t He be able to stick it out? Jesus was God”? True. God was in Christ (2 Corinthians 5:19). But no mention is made here of that part of His person. It is Jesus to Whom we are to look, not Christ. That’s an important distinction. Christ is the name used to describe His deity. Jesus is the name used to depict His humanity. And it is Jesus to Whom we are to look. Jesus, the true Man, who, by faith which is the opposite of sin, obeyed, endured, and gained the victory.

With what incredible care the Holy Spirit has guided the mind of His earthly scribe! He has taken pains to guard so small a detail as the very name of the One to Whom we are to look for power to persevere. We are to look to Jesus, who as true man is a picture in living color of what we can be through faith.

In a roundabout way, this brings us back to the basic meaning of faith. It is confidence in another. It is knowing God exists. It is believing He is absolutely worthy of our trust. It is acting upon that knowledge and belief to keep on keeping on, come what may. That is the way to enjoy the present reality of “*things hoped for*” and possess the sure conviction that the truly real and dependable is often “*not seen*.”

During the London blitz, a father took his little girl to a bomb shelter. The ladder was broken, so he jumped down and stood in the darkness below. It was pitch-black. The child, who was still at the top, couldn’t see him, though he could make her out dimly against the night sky. “Jump, dear, jump,” he called. She responded with great anxiety, “But, Daddy, I can’t see you. I can’t see

you.” “Yes, darling, I know. But I can see you. Now, jump!” So, in faith, she leaped into the darkness, to discover she had leaped into the strong security of her father’s arms.

Are you inundated by doubt? Are you tempted to quit the race? You can hang tough in this hostile world if you’ll just take the leap of faith. I promise you, from personal experience, you won’t be disappointed.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS ENDORSES DISCIPLINE”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 12:3-29

For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart. ⁴You have not yet resisted to the point of shedding blood in your striving against sin; ⁵and you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, “My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov- ed by Him; ⁶for those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives.

⁷It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹Furthermore, we had earthly fathers to discipline us, and we respected them; shall we not much rather be subject to the Father of spirits, and live? ¹⁰For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness.

¹¹All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness. ¹²Therefore, strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble, ¹³and make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint, but rather be healed. ¹⁴Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no one will see the Lord.

¹⁵See to it that no one comes short of the grace of God; that no root of bitterness springing up causes trouble, and by it many be defiled; ¹⁶that there be no immoral or godless person like Esau, who sold his own birthright for a single meal. ¹⁷For you know that even afterwards, when he desired to inherit the blessing, he was rejected, for he found no place for repentance, though he sought for it with tears.

¹⁸For you have not come to a mountain that may be touched and to a blazing fire, and to darkness and gloom and whirlwind, ¹⁹and to the blast of a trumpet and the sound of words which

sound was such that those who heard begged that no further word should be spoken to them.

²⁰*For they could not bear the command, “If even a beast touches the mountain, it will be stoned.”* ²¹*And so terrible was the sight, that Moses said, “I am full of fear and trembling.”*

²²*But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to myriads of angels,* ²³*to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of righteous men made perfect,* ²⁴*and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel.*

²⁵*See to it that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if those did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less shall we escape who turn away from Him who warns from heaven.* ²⁶*And His voice shook the earth then, but now He has promised, saying, “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth, but also the heaven.”* ²⁷*And this expression, “Yet once more,” denotes the removing of those things which can be shaken, as of created things, in order that those things which cannot be shaken may remain.*

²⁸*Therefore, since we receive a kingdom which cannot be shaken, let us show gratitude, by which we may offer to God an acceptable service with reverence and awe;* ²⁹*for our God is a consuming fire.*

It was Christmas. The toy department in the big city store was clogged with parents and kids. One little boy was creating a problem for everyone, particularly his mother. He would climb on a trike or wagon and charge down the aisle, bumping into other people. His mother, who had completely lost control of him, trotted alongside saying, “Now, darling, don’t do that. Come along now. It’s time for us to leave.” The youngster paid no heed.

The department head became sufficiently frustrated, went over and said, “Madam, it appears you are having a bit of trouble with your boy. We have a child psychologist on our staff. Would you mind if I invited him to come over and offer some help?” The harried woman replied, “Anything, sir, anything!” The child psychologist was called. “I want my boy to go home, but he won’t leave,” the mother explained. The man thought a moment, then said, “I believe I can help.” He

approached the boy, who was about to get into a kiddie car, leaned over and whispered something in the youngster’s ear. The kid looked startled, ran to his mother, grabbed her hand and said, “Come on, Mom, let’s go.” In amazement she said, “Stay right here for a moment. I’ve got to talk to that man.” “Sir,” she asked, “what on earth did you say to my boy? I’ve been trying to get him to leave for an hour. I’ve begged, cajoled, bribed, without success. You come down, whisper a few words in his ear, and he’s ready to leave. What on earth did you say to him?” “Why, Madam, it’s very simple,” the child psychologist explained, “I just leaned over and said, ‘Listen here, you little brat, if you don’t get out of here, I’m going to set your britches on fire!’”

This homey anecdote illustrates a grave truth about our time. In our eagerness for freedom and spontaneity, we have forgotten that discipline is indispensable to proper development. We are suffering from an anemic, saccharin-pale concept of love, when, in fact, love is anything but an easy sentiment.

At the core of tough love is the awareness that there is no strength of character or achievement without discipline. Nothing worthwhile is ever achieved without struggle, pain and sacrifice. Everything we have of value is cradled in a discipline that hurts. And, despite our sophistication, we never seem to outgrow the need for such discipline. As someone wisely observed, “Every man is as lazy as he dares to be.”

Tough love is hard for most of us. We’re too insecure. Too immature. We want and need to be loved too much. Fortunately for us, God is neither insecure nor immature. Among many things, He is security with a capital “S.” Maturity with a capital “M.” While He wants our love and has gone to great lengths to gain it, look at Calvary, God is unwilling to pay too great a price for our love. Whenever necessary, whether we like it or not, He chastens us.

C. S. Lewis spoke with keen insight when he said, “God whispers to us in our pleasure, speaks to us in our conscience, but shouts to us in our pain. It is God’s megaphone to rouse a deaf world.”¹

Now, it's important to distinguish between tough love and the wrath of God. Whenever anyone meets Christ at Calvary, God's wrath toward that person, because of his sin, is dealt with once for all. No Christian shall ever be subjected to the wrath of God. But the disciplines of the heavenly Father toward us saved sinners are for purification, not condemnation.

The word “chasten” springs from two French words. “Castus,” meaning “pure,” and “agere,” meaning “to drive.” To chasten someone is to be driven by a desire to make that person pure. It is this driving concern which causes God to chasten us, His children.

Those New Testament references to severe and sudden acts of God in dealing with His children are not outbursts of His wrath. They are indications of His righteous indignation expressed in tough love. God cares deeply for the spiritual health and growth of His children. He will not stand idly by while we remain weak and ineffective when, through discipline, He can make us pure and strong.

The New Testament speaks of two forms of discipline: gentle discipline and severe discipline. The gentle way is that purging which follows a confession of sins. “*If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us [make us pure] from all unrighteousness*” (I John 1:9). The severe way is through physical weakness and, in extreme cases, premature death. “*For this reason many among you are weak and sick, and a number sleep (have died)*” (1 Corinthians 11:30).

The scripture is also clear that we need never be subjected to this second or severe way if we will hasten to employ the first or gentle way. If we face up to the fact of our sin, call it by its right name, confess and turn away from it, God will forgive us and impart to us the purity of Christ. That's tender love. It is spoken of in the first two verses of Hebrews 12 where, with great empathy for our struggle, we are told to lay aside every weight. To run with patience and endurance. To resist the ever-present temptation to quit before the race is over. And, to do so by

faith in the bare word of God and the character of Christ who has run the race before us.

But, if we won't respond to tender love by voluntarily laying aside those things which encumber us, God loves us enough to exercise the tougher fiber of His love. God dares to discipline, and He does so just because He loves.

Tough Love

As our author will explain, training through discipline is never fun (12:11). There's a strong temptation to feel sorry for one's self. To develop a “Why me?” attitude. To wallow around in the slough of self-pity. So, he begins his discussion of tough love with this admonition: “*For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you may not grow weary and lose heart*” (12:3).

The best antidote for self-pity is to remember Jesus and what He went through. This will help you keep things in perspective. However heavy a burden you're having to bear, it is not nearly so sharp or serious as that which our Savior bore. “*He came to His own [home] and those who were His own did not receive Him*” (John 1:11). “*Though innocent, He was numbered with the transgressors*” (Isaiah 53:12). “*He endured the cross, despising the shame*” (12:2), and sought no relief.

On the other hand, we who elect to follow Him often want instant answers to all our problems. We look for swift, easy escape from all tension, trial and tears. We want the power of His resurrection without the fellowship of His suffering. But that isn't possible. The Christian life was never meant to be a picnic. It's bound to be rough. It was rough for Jesus. It will be rough for you. “*The disciple is not above his Teacher*” (Matthew 10:24).

After all, the writer of Hebrews declares, the very fact God bothers to discipline you is evidence of His love. “*And you have forgotten the exhortation which is addressed to you as sons, ‘My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor faint when you are reprov- ed by Him; for*

those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure; God deals with you as with sons; for what son is there whom his father does not discipline? But if you are without discipline, of which all have become partakers, then you are illegitimate children and not sons” (12:5-8).

But this stirring statement is not God’s final word on pain or suffering. As Charles R. Erdman says, “We must not conclude that God is the author of evil, nor that pain is always punishment, that suffering is a proof of sin.”² To do so would be to reach very cruel and quite erroneous conclusions. Christ suffered and He was without sin. I suspect we should have to be God to get all the right answers regarding suffering. One thing is clear, however; God does not ordain everything He allows. But, if we will let Him, He will use what He allows to fulfill what He ordains.

God ordained that I should be a minister of the gospel. God did not ordain that my mother should die of cancer at the age of 56. However, God has used what He allowed, her premature death, to fulfill what He ordained: that I might be a more effective, caring, compassionate pastor. As a result of having witnessed the long, difficult death of my mother, I have been able to enter with great empathy into the agony and pain of those who lose their loved ones. God does not ordain everything He allows. But, if we will let Him, He will use what He allows to fulfill what He ordains.

All suffering is not a result or a proof of sin. But all suffering can be used by God for our profit if we take the right attitude toward it. God wants to operate through our personal situations and circumstances to train us for more effective service. He does so because we belong to Him. Hebrews 12:5-8 and other passages (Genesis 50:20; Romans 8:28) should reassure and fortify us. They indicate that disciplines of one sort or another are evidence of our sonship. We belong to God. He cares what happens to us.

To put it another way, discipline is the opposite of indifference. It is a mark of true caring. A

precocious six-year-old grasped that truth. She and her sister were staying with us some years ago following the separation of her parents. To help them feel a part of our family, they were encouraged to call me Uncle John.

One day their mother explained the six-year-old was quite distressed because I hadn't given her any spankings. Actually, there had been no need to discipline her because she had been a model child. But she was anxious nonetheless and conveyed this to her mother, who passed it on to me. “Do you suppose Uncle John will spank me once in awhile, Mommy, just so I'll know he really cares?”

Love does not make discipline unnecessary. To the contrary, love and discipline are Siamese twins. If you are left without discipline, the writer of Hebrews says, you should really be concerned. A Christian's greatest problem is having no problem!

The other day I stopped by a business office in our town and ran into a young man whom I hadn't seen for months. I told him I'd missed him and asked how it was between him and God. “Not good,” he said. “But, oddly enough, it doesn't bother me. I've come to a kind of peace about it all.” As he spoke, a chill went down my spine. We are to be pitied most when we can sin and feel comfortable about it. It either means God has given up on us, or we were never His in the first place.

God doesn't discipline the devil's kids. He chastens His own. Discipline is God's method of training us for more effective service. Of preparing us for more strenuous tests to come. Of proving His love. When we see this, we will not only thank Him, we will worship Him with “*reverence and awe*” (12:28). Discipline implies love on the part of the discipliner (12:6). Don't rebel against it. Or drop out under it. Accept it. Grow strong through it. God only chastens His own.

Our author also explains there is nothing cruel or capricious about God's discipline. Human

parents sometimes goof in raising their kids. They do what they think is right and it turns out to be wrong. *“They disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them”*(12:10a). On occasion they err in both method and purpose.

God never goofs, the writer of Hebrews says. He works in the right way for the right purpose. *“He disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness”* (12: 10b). Though hard to endure, the end result makes God’s discipline worthwhile. *“All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness”* (12:11).

T.H. Robinson is correct in his observation that “no healthy person enjoys pain. It wouldn’t be pain if he did. But a person may be induced to tolerate it, even welcome it, if he knows it will result to his advantage.”³

For most of us, regular physical exercise is a bummer. It’s boring and difficult. We hate it, though we persist in it, because it feels so good when we’re done! The real reward comes, however, when those toughened muscles, lungs and heart are called upon to meet a sudden crisis and are equal to the challenge. Then the pain and boredom of discipline give way to the joy and satisfaction of achievement.

To pursue the illustration a bit further, when you get involved in a program of calisthenics and begin to work out regularly, the old tired cells within your body break down, die, and are sloughed off. But, if you properly nourish your body, those old dead cells are replaced by new, vital, stronger. larger, living cells. There must be a breakdown of the old before the new can come. It is this end result which makes the exercise program worthwhile.

So, too, with the disciplines of God. They are never fun when we’re going through them. The good Lord doesn’t want you to screw on a smile and run around shouting “Hallelujah, it hurts.” But when, through discipline of one kind or another, you begin to enjoy the *“peaceful fruit of*

righteousness” (12:11), then, though you can never say, “Hallelujah, it hurts,” you can say, “Hallelujah, it helps!” You are able to join the Psalmist in his bold affirmation:

“Before I was afflicted I went astray,

But now I keep Thy word.

It is good for me that I was afflicted,

That I may learn Thy statutes.” (Psalm 119:67,71).

No discipline is enjoyable while it is occurring, but afterwards there is “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*” I love that phrase. It is so true to life. Oh, there’s a kind of excitement and electricity about the early stages of the sinful life. But only for a season. Before long we literally become sick and tired of sinning. We are increasingly repelled and wearied by it all. As one young person said after he had experimented briefly with the drug scene, “It just wasn’t worth the hassle!”

That can never be said about “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness.*” It is worth the discipline involved to be able to look in the mirror and like what you see. To pillow your head at night knowing you are right with God, yourself and others. Feeling clean clear through is experiencing “*the peace of God that passes understanding*” (Philippians 4:7, KJV). And, though sin is slow to relinquish its hold on us, every taste of “*the peaceful fruit of righteousness*” awakens our desire for more, and strengthens our resolve to turn from sin toward God’s way.

Having discussed God’s willingness to resort to tough love when needed, our author returns to the firm but gentler appeal of tender love. “*Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble*” (12:12). Here he reverts to the language of the coliseum used earlier (12:1,2). We are to run with patience and perseverance, doing so for two reasons: one personal, the other corporate.

As we have already seen, some of those first-century Jesus folk had run out of gas. They were so low spiritually they had to reach up to touch bottom. They were discouraged. About to toss in

the towel. Their enthusiasm and interest was on the wane. Their commitment had grown thin. Those of more sturdy spiritual stock were instructed to hang tough for their own sake, to personally reach the goal, but also for the sake of their weaker, more weary fellows. We must do the same. “*Strengthen the hands that are weak and the knees that are feeble*” is a phrase to encourage flagging spirits. To deter potential dropouts.

But we are not only to run with patience and endurance. We must also lay aside every weight and be on guard against besetting sin. “*Make straight paths for your feet, so that the limb which is lame may not be put out of joint*” (12:13). Our calling is to persevere for our own sake and for the sake of others. We must walk carefully for the same dual purpose.

We are to be aware of our own peculiar areas of vulnerability and to shun those people, places and practices most likely to “*beset us.*” Following the hand-eye severance principle (Matthew 5:29, 30), we must deal forthrightly with that to which we are most susceptible. We are to go to the root of our problem. Cut it off. Dig it out. For our own sake and for the sake of others.

Our author’s reference to “*the limb which is (lame)*” (12:13) is another invitation to think Hebrew. He is drawing a word picture of those faltering between Jesus and Jesus-plus. Unless these limping Christians find spiritual healing they may soon be so disabled as to drop out of the race permanently, with serious loss of present blessing and future reward. “*See to it that no one comes short (fails)*” (12:15). With tough love, help each other to hang tough. “*Pursue after peace with all men, and after the sanctification without which no man will see the Lord*” (12:14).

Many have been bothered by this last statement, as stated in the Authorized Version: “*Follow peace with all men, and holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord.*” But its true meaning becomes clear when we realize that the same word translated “*holiness*” here is translated “*sanctify*” elsewhere in the book of Hebrews. To be sanctified is “to be put to the proper use.” That becomes possible when, by faith, you acknowledge God was in Christ and Christ is in you.

As that marvelous truth settles in, you know who you are and what you are. Knowing those two things, you also know how you are to be used. You know your talent, training, time and treasure are not to be used exclusively, or even primarily, for your own personal profit, but for God’s purposes. When you know how you are to be used, your priorities begin to change. Your values clarify. Your witness takes on the sound of certainty. Your life bears the mark of eternity.

You are being to the world what Christ would be if He were here Himself. And that’s holiness! Holiness of the highest order. Of a most practical kind. The holiness which enables you to see God more clearly, but, better yet, enables others to see God more clearly in you!

In and through all this, our author holds before us the grim specter of lost blessing and reward. Look after each other so no one fails to enjoy God’s best blessings (12:15a). Support, help and, if necessary, correct each other to avoid the tragic cost of bitterness and flippancy (12: 15b).

Bitterness is always wrong. Always. Without exception. No matter how justified. Bitterness is a contagious disease which, in its more virulent forms, can be spiritually fatal. The same must be said for its viral twin, flippancy. It actually ruined Esau. This man who came to stand for things earthy and sensual looked upon his birthright with such flippant disdain that he sold it for a single meal (Genesis 25:28-34).

That birthright was very important. It had to do with God’s promise to Abraham and the blessing his seed had been blessed to be. Esau was part of Abraham’s seed. When he treated this promise of God lightly, he was saying, in effect, what God offers to do in, to, for and through us merits little more than a shrug. This flippancy deprived Esau forever from blessing on earth and reward in heaven. The reference to “*no immoral or godless person like Esau*” (12:16) is not to physical adultery, but to spiritual whoredom, the worshiping of other gods than Jehovah.

Later, Esau had some second thoughts. He tried to gain back the paternal blessing (Genesis 27:1-38), but it was impossible. “*He found no place for repentance*” (12:17). This does not mean

Esau was barred forever from the forgiveness of God. It simply means that there are certain choices which cannot be undone. Certain consequences even God cannot, will not, change.

William Barclay gives a simple, but pointed, illustration. If a boy loses his purity or a girl her virginity, nothing can ever bring it back. Nothing can change the physical fact. The choice was made. The consequence stands. God can and will forgive. And, in His eyes, moral innocence will be restored. But God Himself cannot turn back the clock, unmake the choice and undo the consequence. Something has happened which can never be undone.⁴

Esau “*found no place for repentance*” (12:17). Isaac, his father, could not restore the blessing taken from one son and given to another. The birthright was lost, “*though he sought for it with tears*” (12:17). But notice: Esau did not lose his sonship. That’s important. He lost his birthright. He forfeited the opportunity to receive a blessing and be a blessing through the proper exercise of that birthright. But Esau was still his father’s boy.

This passage does not teach a child of God can be saved and then lost. What it does solemnly warn against is the danger of repeating Esau’s mistake. Of taking a flippant attitude toward our spiritual birthright as Jesus persons. Of looking casually and carelessly upon God’s promise to bless us in order that we might be a blessing, thus suffering the subsequent loss of time, opportunity and reward which can never be retrieved.

Therefore, our author urges, use all the resources available in resisting the ever-present temptation to sell God and yourself short. Victory will come, he says, only when you make full and proper use of your Christian birthright. You have not been called to Mount Sinai, the place of gloom. “*You have come to Mount Zion*” (12:22a), the place of grace. “*And to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem*” (12:22b), that spiritual kingdom within each believer which Jesus characterized as the Kingdom of God.

“*And to myriads of angels*” (12:22c), those ministering spirits who, at God’s direction, are

everlastingly busy bringing aid and comfort to us as we run our race. Yes, angels are part of our spiritual inheritance. And “*to the general assembly and church of the first-born who are enrolled in heaven*” (12:23a), that amazing fellowship called the church. A fellowship which conquers the differences dividing us, the difficulties facing us, the despair assailing us.

Thank God, the church is part of our resource and birthright. “*And to God, the judge of all*” (12:23b), whose every godly asset and attribute is at the disposal of those who belong to Him. “*And to the spirits of righteous men made perfect*” (12:23c), another reference to that “*great cloud of witnesses*” who cheer us on and remind us it can be done because they did it.

“*And to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant*” (12:24a), a new arrangement for living whereby everything God asks of us He gives to us in the person of Jesus. “*And to the sprinkled blood, which speaks better than the blood of Abel*” (12:24b). The blood of Abel cried out for vengeance and justly so (Genesis 4:10), but the blood of Jesus cries out for forgiveness and mercy (Luke 23:34).

All this is included in your spiritual birthright. It is yours, to help you run with patience, and resist the temptation to drop out. Reckon on all your resources. God is eager to aid if ask Him. A father watched his young son struggle to move a huge boulder which was in his way. The boy tugged and pulled, straining every muscle without success. Finally, the father walked over and said, “Son, why don’t you use all your resources?” In frustration the boy barked back, “Dad, how can you say that when I’m straining every muscle to budge this boulder? I am using all my resources!” “No, you aren’t,” his father replied quietly. “You haven’t asked me to help.”

Warning And Hope

The four final verses of chapter 12 contain a word of hope springing from tough love. The dominant note is one of assurance. The time will come when, through a single decisive act in history, God, who brought the material universe into being, will bring it to an end (12:26). But Jesus folk can rejoice and give thanks. We belong to a spiritual realm which cannot be shaken

(12:27,28). This is not to say Christians will escape the final shaking. But it is a promise we shall come through unscathed. We will survive. Why? Because, as we read in Romans 8:35-39, the one thing nothing can destroy is the relationship between ourselves and God.

Therefore, we should show our gratitude by our service offered with reverence and awe. “*For our God is a consuming fire*” (12:29). What a reason to rejoice! To give thanks and worship God with reverence and awe. We belong to a God who will resort to tough love when necessary. Who cares so deeply about us He cannot and will not stand idly by as we are made weak and ineffective by unpurged evil. So He subjects us to the refining fire.

Someone has wisely noted: fire will destroy what it cannot purify, and purify what it cannot destroy. The one thing which cannot be destroyed is the relationship between ourselves and God. Because our heavenly Father wants that relationship to be without spot and blemish, He submits it to the purifying fire of His love and light.

That fire is our hope! It means, my fellow sinner-saint, you will never come to God with an act of confession and repentance and turn away unforgiven. Nor will you turn away without having been made clean clear through by the consuming fire which purifies what it cannot destroy. God dares to discipline. He loves with a tough love. A love which insists upon destroying everything without and within which keeps us from being like Jesus, who one day will “*present (us) faultless (made pure by the consuming fire) before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy*” (Jude 1:24, KJV). Truly it begs to be said, hallelujah!

Notes

1. C. S. Lewis, *The Problem of Pain* (New York: The MacMillan Company, 1944), p. 81.
2. Charles R. Erdman, *The Epistle to the Hebrews* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1934), p. 132.
3. Robinson, *Epistle to the Hebrews*, p. 184.

4. Barclay, Letter to the Hebrews, p. 210.

“OUR HOPE: JESUS EQUIPS AND USES US”

Dr. John Allan Lavender

Hebrews 13

Let love of the brethren continue. ²Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it. ³Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body. ⁴Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge. ⁵Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, “I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you,” ⁶ so that we confidently say, “The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?”

⁷Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith. ⁸Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever. ⁹Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were thus occupied were not benefitted. ¹⁰We have an altar, from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat. ¹¹For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp.

¹²Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate. ¹³Hence, let us go out to Him outside the camp, bearing His reproach. ¹⁴For here we do not have a lasting city, but we are seeking the city which is to come. ¹⁵Him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. ¹⁶And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased. ¹⁷Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. ¹⁸Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a good conscience, desiring to conduct ourselves honorably in all things. ¹⁹And I urge you all the more to do this, that I may be restored to you the sooner.

²⁰Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, ²¹equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen.

²²But I urge you, brethren, bear with this word of exhortation, for I have written to you briefly.

²³Take notice that our brother Timothy has been released, with whom, if he comes soon, I shall see you. ²⁴Greet all of your leaders and all the saints. Those from Italy greet you. ²⁵Grace be with you all.

Who Jesus is and what Jesus did have been two of three major strands threading throughout the book of Hebrews. The third, what this means in terms of life for today and hope for tomorrow, has intertwined the other two so tightly at times it has been difficult for us to tell them apart. But, as our author draws his letter to a close, he spotlights this third emphasis, focusing our attention on certain practical applications of authentic Christianity, particularly those qualities we Jesus people must project in our working relationships with each other and in our witness to the world.

A list of these virtues might read as follows: empathy, hospitality, sympathy, purity, simplicity, loyalty, fidelity, charity and true piety. Capping them off is a blessed doxology followed by a grand amen. On the twin notes of peace and praise, the book of Hebrews ends.

Empathy

The first of these vital virtues we should point toward as Christians is empathy. “*Let love of the brethren continue*” (13:1). What our author commends here is more than a warm, tender feeling of affection. It is love in long trousers. Mature. Level-headed. Dependable. A core-deep tie which will bind Christians together, come what may.

Taken in the context in which it is set, brotherly love is an awareness of and sensitivity to the inner struggle through which our fellow saved sinners may be going.

Suspiciousness was a grave temptation for those early Hebrew converts. It was easy for them to be constantly evaluating the orthodoxy of their fellows because reversion to a religion of Jesus-plus was a constant threat. Brotherly love is that which can help them support each other, while avoiding the lurking impulse to become heresy hunters when right believing was so important to their spiritual survival.

For Jesus people today it means that, and more. As we have seen, the Christian life is not easy. To have empathy for one another is to climb into the other guy's skin and look back at life through his eyes, fears, doubts and tears, being so sensitized by what we see we can only nestle our fellow Christian in supportive, redemptive, liberating love and understanding.

This is what each of you needs and deserves from the other, the writer of Hebrews says. Don't judge or be forever suspicious of each other. Don't constantly test the other person's theological blood-type. Cling to God in Christ and hang loose on everything else. Let sensitized, empathetic, brotherly love continue.

Hospitality

“Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it” (13:2). Our author employs an intensely interesting Greek word in writing about *“hospitality to strangers.”* I can find only one other place in the New Testament where this particular Greek word is used. Every other Biblical mention of “strangers” uses Greek words having to do with foreigners. Aliens. Those who are completely unknown to us. Both of these New Testament references (13:2 and Romans 12:13) are to fellow Jesus folk. The strangers our author mentions here are strangers who should not be strangers! Members of the Christian brotherhood we should know better and love more than we do.

To those first-century Christians, where each local church fellowship was so small it was possible to be on a first-name basis with everyone, this *“hospitality to strangers”* probably meant being open and friendly to itinerant preachers who might be passing through town. Or to fleeing refugees who had been driven from their homes because of their Christian commitment.

In our time, I think it means something quite different. We are to be kind to Christian guests, of course. But the primary application of this principle for us today is the extending of hospitality or plain, old-fashioned Christian kindness to the “stranger” who sits next to us in the pew. The person we meet in church every Sunday, but only nod to. The isolated soul who is a member of the same Sunday School class. Who attends the same woman’s circle. Who participates in the same Bible study group. Who shares in the same youth activity, yet, whom we don’t really know or even care about.

In California, where I live, this may be a carry over of “the six-foot fence philosophy” which separates us from our neighbors, their hurts and their needs. In other parts of our country and world, different methods are used to isolate one’s self from the pain and problems of others. When these isolation methods creep into the church, as they often do, and become standard practice, as in many cases they have, we need to be jerked up short by this stern admonition, “*Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by this some have entertained angels without knowing it*” (13:2).

How true that is! Often we set out to provide some small ministry to another, only to wind up being ministered to ourselves. We sometimes entertain an “angel”-- a ministering spirit -- and discover we have been more blessed than we were a blessing. I recall a hospital call I made on a dear saint. Her name was Arnola Hershey. Though very old, she was as bright as a silver dollar. We visited about the many things of interest to her. Then, taking her hand, I prayed. For her son and daughter. Her grandchildren. Her church. The needs of others which were always high on her list of loving concern. I said, “Amen” and drew my hand away.

She reached out, pulled it back, and without a pause began praying for me. “And God, bless Dr. John, too. Bless his wife. His children. His work for our church. And never let him down in any important way.” For several minutes she held me up before the Lord.

I’ve made thousands of hospital calls and prayed for hundreds of sick people. But this was the

first time a patient ever prayed for me! I couldn't hold back the tears. As I left Arnola's room that day, I knew I had entertained “an angel unaware.”

Sympathy

“Remember the prisoners, as though in prison with them, and those who are ill-treated, since you yourselves also are in the body” (13:3). The characteristic here is sympathy, but it is sympathy of a very special kind. Not the clinically sterile, legislated variety so common today. That kind of pitiful pity demeans and dehumanizes people. Instead of a patronizing, professionalized sympathy, we are to express the compassion Christ expressed by doing as Jesus did. We are to take our place alongside those in need as if we were one of them. Remembering that, but for the grace of God, the tables might well be turned. It might be we rather than they in need of kindness and caring.

Purity

The fourth virtue our author says must spring from a vital life-changing relationship with Jesus is personal purity. “Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled; for fornicators and adulterers God will judge” (13:4). According to my friends close to the Jesus movement, particularly as it relates to college and career young people, sex is one of the last areas they are willing to put under the Lordship of Jesus.

In that regard, these Jesus kids are not terribly different from some segments of the first-century church. A proper use of the sex energy has been a challenge to many, if not most, Christians. Failure in this area has often been devastating to the spiritually newborn.

Dr. Earl Wilson, one of our Project Winsome lay leaders, holds a Ph.D. in clinical psychology and trains doctoral candidates in that specialty at the University of Nebraska. One night Earl and I were talking about the various crisis points for Christians. He indicated they had learned, on campus at least, the major danger point was immediately after a new Christian's first moral failure, which was usually of a sexual nature. Unless these young people had been told in advance that being a Christian did not make them immune to evil, that they would still be tempted and on

occasion might fall, they were so devastated by this failure they were ready to junk the Christian life on the premise, “It didn’t work.”

“But,” said Dr. Wilson, “if we can be there after that first big failure with the message of recurring repentance and forgiveness for recurring sin following conversion, they usually pick themselves up and go on from victory to victory, handling the various and occasional other defeats as a Christian should.”

Recent converts are not the only ones who have trouble in the area of sex. Some who become Christians before they could even spell s-e-x have had similar struggles in later years. In every instance, God has resorted to discipline. The question is, which form of discipline do we force Him to use? The gentle form springing from a burning conscience which must be cleansed through confession, repentance and forgiveness? Or the severe kind resulting in emotional, physical and spiritual illness of one sort or another? Let it be said again: God dares to discipline. He cares deeply about the well-being of His own. He knows the importance of stable Christian homes and will do everything He can to protect them. Therefore, the writer of Hebrews says, let personal purity be the hallmark of all your relationships. *“Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled”* (13:4).

Simplicity

Next, strive for simplicity in your life-style. *“Let your way of life be free from the love of money, being content with what you have; for He Himself has said, ‘I will never desert you, nor will I forsake you’”*(13:5). Hence we can confidently say, *“The Lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What shall man do to me?”* (13:6).

These verses are open to easy misinterpretation leading to the quite erroneous conclusion that money is evil and wealth is anti-Christian. Neither is true. The teaching here is not that we should avoid money, but the love of money. We are to steer clear of letting gold be our god.

There is a vast difference between love of money and a talent for making money. The first is hell-born. The second is God-given and, if used for His glory and mankind’s good, can be an enormous blessing.

Simplicity in the Christian’s life-style is, of course, a highly relative thing. Most Americans enjoy a standard of living exceeding that of kings a few hundred years ago. It seems to me, therefore, a safe guideline in this area for Christians is whether we own our possessions or they own us. Whether we are the user or the used. If the latter is true, we are in trouble. We are vulnerable to what men can do to us. But if we can say, “*The Lord is my helper,*” we will be able to take whatever comes with Christian grace, knowing God works in everything, wealth as well as poverty, for good to those who love Him (Romans 8:28).

Loyalty

Loyalty is another quality commended to Jesus people. “*Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the outcome of their way of life, imitate their faith*” (13:7). “*Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you*” (13:17).

In a sentence, be like my friend, Mel Anderson. Mel made a commitment to Jesus as a young man, that he would try, with God’s help, to be the kind of layman who would cause his pastor’s heart to rejoice. Whose name would precipitate feelings of gladness and gratitude, rather than grim regret at having to deal with such a difficult, negative person.

I can say from seven years of delightful experience as one of those privileged to be his pastor, Mel Anderson reached his objective. He was a pastor’s layman in the highest sense of that term. I was able to watch over his soul “*with joy, not with grief*” (13:17b). Be that kind of Christian, the writer of Hebrews says. Be a person who always gives more than he takes.

In his letter to the church at Philippi, Paul has a lovely sentence all Jesus folk might well wish was written to them. *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you”* (Philippians 1:3). What a beautiful thought! But even better, what a beautiful way to be thought of! It’s just that kind of memory I want your leaders to have of you, the writer of Hebrews says. I want them to be able to say, *“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you.”*

Fidelity

The seventh of these spotlighted virtues is doctrinal fidelity. While our author gives considerable space to this (verses 8-15), we shan’t, because it is a recapitulation of everything we have already covered in great detail: the unrivaled supremacy and unchanging sufficiency of Jesus who is the same today as He was yesterday, and as He shall be tomorrow (13:8). He identified Himself with us in our disgrace *“outside the gate”* (13:12). Therefore, we should be willing to bear any abuse for His sake (13:13), remembering it is no virtue to conform to this world when our true citizenship is in heaven (13:14).

Charity

Moving on, we discover charity to be a virtue of great value for sinner-saints. *“And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased”* (13:16). How reminiscent of the words of our Lord: *“Truly I say to you, to the extent that you did it to one of these brothers of Mine, even the least of them, you did it to Me”* (Matthew 25:40).

In Barre, Vermont, there is a famous granite quarry called “The Rock of Ages.” It is tremendous. Over 200 feet deep, I’m told. One day a friend of mine, Dr. Clarence Cranford, visited the quarry. As the superintendent pointed out the vastness of this excavation, he made an interesting comment. “We’ve gone as deep as we can without going wider.” “What do you mean?” Dr. Cranford inquired. “Just that,” the man explained. “Even though the walls of the quarry are solid granite, the pressure from the surrounding earth is so great that if we go deeper without going wider, we could have a cave-in. We’ve gone as deep as we can without going wider.”

Many of us Jesus folk say, “Oh, God, deepen my Christian life!” Could God be saying, “Oh, child of Mine, widen your Christian life! You can’t go deeper till you go wider. Reach out to those about you. Share what I have given you in such abundance, both materially and spiritually. In the process of going wider, you will go deeper. You will find your own relationship with Me growing stronger and sweeter.”

Piety

The last of these qualities elevated in our thinking is piety. Not “pietism,” a situation in which the means often become an end in themselves, but piety. That is, true spirituality defined as prayer, a clear conscience, an honest life (13:18). “*I urge you all the more to do this*” (13:19a).

Volumes could be written on the next two verses. They contain one of the most gracious of all benedictions. One of the most inspiring of all doxologies. “*Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant, even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen*” (13:20,21).

Our God is the God of peace. Our God is the God of life. Our God is the God who both shows us His will and equips us to do it through Jesus. Jesus, the Great Shepherd, who not only guides God’s flock, but also gave Himself for our eternal safekeeping through a new relationship signed and sealed in His blood. On the twin notes of peace and praise the book of Hebrews ends.¹

The persistent theme throughout our study has been Jesus. Who He is. What He did. All He means in terms of life for today and hope for tomorrow. A book such as this on a theme such as that cannot properly end without one last invitation to let Jesus Christ be Saviour and Lord. I extend it through the pen of Billy Rose.

Years ago in one of his newspaper columns, Mr. Rose told the story of an Albany surgeon who was awakened at 2:30 one morning by a call from a fellow physician at the hospital in Glenn Falls,

New York, some sixty miles away. A small boy was critical. Without immediate surgery, the child would die. He was the only qualified surgeon within driving distance. They could keep the boy alive for up to an hour and a half. Would the surgeon come? Of course!

He quickly dressed, backed his car out, drove down the residential streets to the main intersection of downtown Albany. While waiting for a red light to change, the door opposite him opened and a man jumped in. The doctor noted the intruder wore a dirty brown cap pulled low over his eyes, a brown suede jacket, a sport shirt open at the throat and a pair of grey slacks. In his hand was a gun.

“Drive on,” he said. The doctor did as he was told. Each time he tried to engage the man in conversation, the reply was, “Shut up and keep driving.” When they were well outside the city, the man said, “Pull over and stop.” The doctor obeyed. “Get out,” the man ordered. Risking his life the physician pleaded, “I’m a surgeon on an emergency mission. A patient will die unless I am there within a very short time.” “I don’t care about that,” the man retorted, “get out!” He forced the doctor out of the car and drove off into the night.

The surgeon hurried to a nearby farmhouse, awakened the family and, using their telephone, called a cab company in Albany. As quickly as possible, the taxi transported him to Glenn Falls. By the time he arrived two hours had elapsed. The surgeon dashed up the steps to the hospital and through the doors, where he was greeted by the physician who had called him. “It’s too late. The boy just died.”

Crestfallen, the surgeon explained the delay. His friend understood. They could talk about it later over coffee. “But right now, come into the waiting room. The boy’s father is here. It will comfort him to know you tried so hard to get here.” The doctor entered the waiting room. There sat the father, head in hands, his shoulders shaking convulsively with grief. On the chair beside him lay a dirty brown hat. He wore a brown suede jacket, a sport shirt open at the throat and a pair of grey slacks. Here was the father who had pushed out of the car the only man on earth who

could have saved the life of his son.

The application is clear. Do not push out of your life the only One who can complete it. Do not reject Jesus! Or, if you have already received Him, do not neglect Jesus. He is “*the same yesterday, today and forever.*” (13:8). To paraphrase another, as far as your own life and time are concerned: yesterday is already a dream and tomorrow is just a vision, but every today lived with Jesus, will make every yesterday a dream of happiness, and every tomorrow a vision of hope!

Notes

1. Barclay, The Letter to the Hebrews, p. 299ff.