

Jesus vs. Judaism: The Book of Hebrews

Our present study examines the book of Hebrews. The author of this epistle vigorously confronts Jewish saints who, under the stress of persecution, are entertaining a return to their Mosaic roots. The main objective of the book is to portray the surpassing excellence of Christ in contrast to the shortcomings of Mosaic Law. The book is full of exhortations to faithfulness.

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1. Introduction

While volumes of speculation have been written in a vain attempt to identify the author of Hebrews, he evidently felt that such publicity was unnecessary. It is apparent that he was known to the readers and had their confidence. The author summarizes his correspondence thusly: *“And I appeal to you, brethren, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words”* (Heb 13:22). When one considers the magnitude of his thesis; viz., the superiority of Christ and His covenant to Moses and the Law, the epistle is truly brief. The book of Hebrews is filled with logical argumentation, awe-inspiring revelations, sober reminders and fearsome warnings. The author pulls out all stops to arrest the apostasy that he sees developing in these Jewish Christians.

1. What would Hebrews 13:19 indicate about the author and the readers?
2. Consult a reference work and give one argument in favor of and one argument against Paul as the author of Hebrews.

2. The Power and Glory of Christ (Heb 1:1-4)

The author dispenses with customary greetings and plunges into the heart of his argument: Jesus Christ is the final authority in all things. In relationship to the Father, Jesus is His spokesman, Son, heir and exact likeness. In relation to the material universe, Jesus is the creator and sustainer. Regarding redemption, Jesus “purged our sins.” Compared to angels, Jesus is superior in name and rank. These themes will all be further emphasized in chapter 1 and throughout the epistle.

3. Who is “the Majesty on high”?
4. How are OT revelation and the new covenant contrasted?
5. What is the significance of Jesus’ present position of “sitting at the right hand”?

3. Jesus: The Worshiped Son (Heb 1:5-6)

Since the Old Law was “spoken through angels” (Heb 2:2; Ac 7:53), these beings would have significance to the Jew. The writer thus concentrates on Old Testament passages indicating the supremacy of the Messiah to angels. He begins with the special designation “Son,” quoting from Ps 2:7 and 2 Sam 7:14. No angel has been endowed with this title. Then the writer notes that at the incarnation of the Son the angels are directed to offer Him worship. The quote in Heb 1:6 is indefinite: it appears in the LXX version of Dt 32:43 and Ps 97:7. It is clear, however, from the nativity account of Lk 2:9-14 and the vision of John in Rev 5:8-14 that, as angels offer worship rather than receive it, and Jesus receives worship – and that from angels, He is superior to them in every way.

6. What is the significance of “firstborn” in Hebrews 1:6?

4. The Divine King and Angelic Servants (Heb 1:7-12)

The next contrast regards rank: angels are merely messengers or servants while the Son is God, King and Creator. Psalm 104:4 is cited to show that the authority of angels resides not in their nature but in God “*who makes His angels spirits (winds, NASB) and His ministers a flame of fire*” (Heb 1:7). That is, angels exist to do the bidding of God via transmitting His word, discharging miraculous power or providentially altering events. The Son, on the other hand, sits as God on His everlasting throne and rules with a scepter of righteousness (Ps 45:6-7; Heb 1:8-9). Further, the Hebrew writer applies Ps 102:25-27, a passage extolling the eternal existence of the Creator, to the Son (Heb 1:10-12). Not only did the Son create the heavens and the earth, the day will come when He will fold them up like a worn garment. Again, asserts the writer, Jesus the Son is the ultimate authority by virtue of His supreme rank.

7. What three terms are connected with the present rule of Jesus (Hebrews 1:8)?

8. Of whom is it said, “*You are the same, and Your years will not fail*”?

5. The Ruling Conqueror and His Ministers (Heb 1:13-14)

The author makes his final argument of Christ’s superiority by an appeal to Ps 110:1. This psalm is quoted several times in this epistle and elsewhere in the NT. It is a crucial passage in establishing the present rank and position of the Messiah. Hebrews 1:13 is a picture of oriental victory with the conqueror’s foot on the neck of the vanquished (see Jsh 10:24). God the Father grants His Son to sit (a ruling, not a resting, posture) at His right hand as over the course of future events all enemies will be made subject to Him. In contrast, the angels do not sit in rule but are “*ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation*” (Heb 1:14). As the Son rules over the saved as head, the angels do His bidding on their behalf. This is not a promise of miraculous activity today, nor is it affirmation that saints have a “guardian angel.” It does affirm, however, that the Lord is an *active* ruler and employs angels to execute His will for the benefit of His people. How angels operate today is not detailed, but the heart of faith accepts this truth without sensational embellishment. What a blessing to have Jesus as King and angels working on our behalf!

9. How many rhetorical questions are asked in this chapter to prove the author’s point?

10. What did Jesus inherit (Hebrews 1:2, 4)? What do the citizens of the kingdom inherit (Hebrews 1:14)?

1. The Danger of Neglecting Salvation (Heb 2:1-4)

After his lofty opening which exalted Jesus to the highest position, the author now issues the first of many exhortations: *“Therefore we must give the more earnest heed ... lest we drift away”* (Heb 2:1). The book of Hebrews stands as a clear rebuttal to the Calvinistic heresy of “once saved, always saved.” The entire epistle is an effort to drag weak brethren back from the brink of apostasy. Not once does the writer suggest that their salvation was a sham or pretense. In fact, he will expressly affirm their fellowship with God (i.e., Heb 6:4-6). If people were not predisposed to believe in eternal security, it would never occur to them when reading passages such as Heb 2:1-4. The author uses a “lesser to greater” argument: if the Law of Moses (“the word spoken through angels”) carried with it grievous punishments for violation, **how much more** the Law of Christ (“so great a salvation”) if neglected? The readers are offhandedly reminded of the abundant confirmation which had accompanied the gospel. If they drifted away, they could not blame it on a vague or garbled message from God.

1. List the three-fold process by which the gospel was delivered and established.
2. What was the express purpose of miracles in the first century?

2. Jesus: The Ideal Man (Heb 2:5-9)

The author next turns to the subject of Jesus’ incarnation. This was hinted at by the phrase *“when He had by Himself purged our sins”* (Heb 1:3), for such purging could only be accomplished by vicarious sacrifice. This involved the Creator assuming the likeness of men and temporarily being *“made a little lower than the angels”* (Heb 2:9). What a demotion! But it was one He was willing to endure for the sake of His creatures who had failed so miserably to rise to the level of rule as He had wished (2:7-8). If man is ever to reach the full potential for which he has been created, it will only be through Jesus Christ who was *“crowned with glory and honor”* (2:9).

3. What did Jesus taste for everyone?
4. What was originally put in subjection to man? What is not yet under man’s control?

3. Bringing Many Sons to Glory (Heb 2:10-13)

Not only was it difficult for the Jewish mind to accept the Creator appearing in fleshly form, it was especially repugnant to think of their Jehovah God *suffering*. Yet the author of Hebrews boldly affirms that such was a necessary part of God’s plan. *“It was fitting for Him ... to make the author of their salvation perfect through sufferings”* (Heb 2:10). If it is man’s lot to suffer, then the Messiah would likewise suffer in order to completely bridge the gap between heaven and earth: *“For both He who sanctifies and those who are being*

sanctified are all of one ...” (2:11). “*In bringing many sons to glory*” God created one family of sanctified people in which the Creator-Son identified Himself with them as brother (2:11b-12). The overall picture is that of the Creator descending from His glorious, exalted position to temporarily take on flesh, suffer with man, offer Himself as a sacrifice, return to His throne in heaven and, in the process, redeem unto God a people who desire fellowship with Him. This is the same old gospel told from a different point of view.

5. Who is the “author of salvation”?

6. What OT text is quoted in Hebrews 2:12? What is the main subject of this OT text?

7. Who is Jesus not ashamed to call His brethren?

4. Free At Last (Heb 2:14-16)

As man is a creature of flesh and blood, Jesus willingly took on the same nature. He did not exempt Himself from any aspect of distress which afflicts fleshly creatures, including death. It was God’s plan that death, the dreaded foe of all mankind, would be vanquished by death. That is, Jesus ultimately identified Himself with His sanctified brethren by descending into the valley of the shadow of death. In that moment when the biological life of Jesus ended, atonement was provided and the devil’s stranglehold over mankind was broken.

8. How did the devil have the power of death? Why then do men still die today?

9. Why should man not now fear death?

10. Who does/does not benefit from the works accomplished by Jesus in the flesh?

5. A Merciful and Faithful High Priest (Heb 2:17-18)

The author now introduces a subject unique to the NT and to which he will later return: the high priesthood of Jesus. To serve as an intermediary between man and God, Jesus “*in all things had to be made like His brethren*” (Heb 2:17). Jesus was not only subjected to suffering but temptation as well (2:18). Again, Jesus did not exempt Himself from sinful impulses. Had He done so, men would have had little confidence in approaching Him with their own weaknesses and failures. God demonstrates both wisdom and love in providing a Savior who draws men to Him by shared nature and experience.

11. Describe God’s attitude toward sinners on the basis of what is revealed in chapter 2.

12. If Jesus aids those who are tempted, and He does not give aid to angels, what might we conclude about angels?

1. The Apostle and High Priest (Heb 3:1-2)

The author now turns his attention to the superiority of Jesus over Moses. This is a delicate matter as Moses was highly revered among the Jews for obvious reasons. But the comparison does not cite Moses' faults; rather, it acknowledges that "*Moses was faithful in all His house*" (Heb 3:2). Like Moses, it is affirmed that Jesus was sent with heavenly authority; viz., "*the Apostle ... of our confession*" (3:1). But Jesus also fulfills Aaron's role: He is the "*High Priest of our confession.*" The writer urges his readers to "consider" Jesus in these roles, to think soberly and carefully about their implications.

1. In what circumstances did God proclaim Moses faithful in Numbers 12:7?
2. Comment on the term "holy brethren" from chapter 2.

2. More Glory Than Moses (Heb 3:3-6)

While Moses was a faithful servant, he was a servant nonetheless. And while Moses inherited a nation to lead, Jesus *built* His nation/house: He is "*a Son over His own house*" (Heb 3:6; cf. "*I will build My church ...*" – Mt 16:18). This anticipates the author's next exhortation, for as Moses was faithful over an *unfaithful* people, his readers must not become like unfaithful Israel. Christians remain the house of God only "*if we hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end*" (3:6). This exhortation clearly makes salvation conditional upon each believer maintaining his/her own faith.

3. If Jesus built His house, and "He who built all things is God," then Jesus is _____.
4. What should the builder of the house receive?

3. The Rebellion of Israel (Heb 3:7-11)

The author has concluded his first main thesis – that Jesus Christ is superior to all, including angels and Moses – and now exhorts and warns his readers from Heb 3:7-4:13. He first quotes from Ps 95 where God expresses His anger with the persistent rebelliousness of the Israelites. They complained about their provisions; they challenged Moses' leadership; and finally they refused to take the land of promise by force. Says God, "*So I swore in My wrath, 'They shall not enter My rest'*" (Heb 3:11). The unbelief of this generation consigned the whole congregation to forty years of arduous wandering in a desolate wilderness where they witnessed the power of God over and over again (3:9). This passage is similar to 1 Cor 10:1-11 where Paul reminisces about the glorious exodus of Israel from Egypt under Moses illustrious leadership. In spite of such a grand beginning, "*with most of them God was not well pleased, for their bodies were scattered in the wilderness*" (1 Cor 10:5). The recipients of Hebrews are in danger of the same fate.

5. Who was responsible for the words in Ps 95:7-11?

6. What was the source of Israel's obstinacy and rebellion (Hebrews 3:10)?

4. The Hardening of the Heart (Heb 3:12-15)

A most grave warning is introduced with the word "beware" followed by two "lests": "*lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God*"; and "*lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin*" (Heb 3:12-13). The antidote to apostasy is "*exhort one another daily*" (3:13a). The author picks up on the word "today" from the quotation of Psalms in 3:7 and makes fresh application: "... *while it is called 'Today' ...*". That is, the words of the Holy Spirit in reference to Israel's unbelief are ever applicable to God's people. The coming of grace through Jesus Christ has not made apostasy impossible; it does not safeguard the believer against willful rebellion. These words are absolutely pointless if a true believer cannot depart from God. The author says one **can** defect and become unfaithful. Many today say such is impossible. Which shall we believe?

7. On what condition do we become partakers with Christ?

8. Were these people believers or unbelievers at the time this epistle was written (3:12)?

9. How can sin harden our heart?

5. Disobedience and Unbelief (Heb 3:16-19)

Note the process which took place among the Israelites: They heard (3:16); they sinned/did not obey (3:17-18); their hearts were hardened (3:13, 15); they were overcome by unbelief (3:12, 19); they rebelled or apostatized (3:12, 16). Consequently, God was angry with them and swore that they would not enter the land (3:17-18), "*whose corpses fell in the wilderness.*" It is important to differentiate sin and apostasy. The NT affirms that all men and women of faith will occasionally sin through weakness, but apostasy is the settled choice to abandon God altogether. It is this ultimate departure that is not only *possible* but *likely* if these Christians continue on their present course.

10. Under whose leadership did Israel depart from God? Is this a reflection on his leadership?

11. Discuss how people who had seen the plagues and the parting of the Red Sea could become unbelievers.

12. God was angry "*with those who sinned*" (3:17). With whom was He **not** angry?

1. Falling Short of God's Rest (Heb 4:1-2)

The chapter break should be ignored, for the warning continues with a third “lest”: “*let us fear lest any of you seem to have come short of it*” (Heb 4:1; cf. 3:12-13). The Israelites had “good news” preached to them: a promised land of no bondage or war, abundant produce, ready-made cities, freedom of worship, etc. But this good news “*did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in those who heard it*” (4:2). Sometimes human nature can be mystifying: God promises everything we could ever want or need; yea, He offers glory and splendor we could never achieve on our own. Yet without faith, these magnanimous offers fall on deaf ears. God's people must *fear* unbelief, not deny it. We must constantly examine ourselves for signs of waning faith or indifference.

1. Explain the term “gospel” as used in Hebrews 4:2.

2. Entering God's Rest (Heb 4:3-5)

The author begins to focus upon the reality of an eternal rest offered by God. His first point goes back to the creation week in which “*God rested on the seventh day from all His works*” (Heb 4:4; Gn 2:2). This rest was established at the beginning and is a state into which God, Himself, entered. Further, it is a state which He desires to share with man. This rest is not the Jewish Sabbath, although that weekly respite was modeled after creation (Ex 20:8-12), neither was it the entrance into Canaan, as will be shown in 4:8. The disobedient Jews did not merely miss Canaan by their apostasy, they missed *heaven*, for the rest God offers is nothing less than fellowship with Him in eternity.

2. What is the condition of entering into God's rest (Hebrews 4:3)?

3. “There Remains Therefore A Rest” (Heb 4:6-10)

The offer of rest was not exhausted as Joshua led the people into Canaan, for several hundred years later “*He designates a certain day, saying in David, “Today ...”*” (Heb 4:7). That is, the rest offered by God was still available as David wrote Ps 95. Further, the Hebrew writer says it is still available as he writes, and by extension it remains available today. The author considers the word “today” from Ps 95:7 crucial, for he mentions it five times (Heb 3:7, 13, 15; 4:7 – twice). God ever offers to man heavenly, eternal relief from the mental, physical and emotional burdens which accompany earthly life. This rest is not cessation from activity, even as God has not ceased His activity following the sixth creation day, but rather the absence of exertion and stress that so often accompany earthly endeavors (4:10). Still lurking is the admonition, “*Do not harden your hearts ...*” (4:7). Human history is strewn with the bones of men and women who were offered heavenly rest along with capable leadership and divine assistance but who “*did not enter because of disobedience*” (4:6).

3. Who spoke of another day of rest after Joshua?

4. From what do those who enter heavenly rest cease?

4. The Living and Powerful Word (Heb 4:11-13)

The author again urges diligence “to enter that rest” and cites a fourth “lest”: “*lest anyone fall after the same example of disobedience*” (Heb 4:11). One cannot in light of these passages deny human responsibility respecting salvation. Calvinistic theologians strive to place salvation on God’s shoulders entirely and scoff at the notion of the believer *doing* anything to ensure it. But the writer has urged his readers to “give the more earnest heed” (2:1), “hold fast” (3:6), “beware” (3:12), “exhort one another” (3:13), “fear” (4:1) and “be diligent” (4:11).

However, salvation is not *entirely* dependent upon the resources of the individual. The author now turns to the assistance of God’s word available to all. Since he has stressed the heart as the seat of obstinacy and unbelief, the author extols the virtues of the word in accurately assessing and exposing the heart. The word of God is “*living and powerful*”; the Scriptures are not outdated words on dusty scrolls but vibrant, relevant and unassailable truths which ever retain their vitality. God’s word pierces to the very thoughts, intentions and ambitions of every man. No one can escape its discerning power; no part of the soul can be hidden from its whetted edge (4:13). Respect for this truth will lead one to embrace the surgical benefits of such an instrument: removing from the heart the fatal growths of sin and unbelief.

5. Living words come from what kind of God (Hebrews 3:12)?

6. What must all men give to God eventually?

5. Come Boldly to the Throne (Heb 4:14-16)

The present exhortation ends with a transition to the subject of the high priesthood of Jesus. Not only do we have the benefit of the living word but a High Priest “*who has passed through the heavens*” (Heb 4:14). He serves in the very place of the offered rest: “*at the right hand of the Majesty on high*” (1:3). Further, He can “*sympathize with our weaknesses*” having shared our fleshly nature. In the author’s mind, this all adds up to one thing: **boldness** before the throne of God. This boldness is available in our darkest hours – “*In time of need*” (4:16). Unfortunately, we tend to shy away from God in situations of shame or discouragement. This must be overcome in the knowledge of God’s great efforts to provide redemption and encourage reconciliation. God *never* discourages man or woman from returning to Him after sin.

7. The throne of God is a throne of what? What will we find from God in time of need?

8. To what must we hold fast?

1. Compassion: A Requirement of Priesthood (Heb 5:1-3)

The discussion of the high priesthood of Jesus begins in 5:1 and continues through 10:18. This is the core doctrinal plank of Hebrews: Christians have a great High Priest who ministers on their behalf in heaven. The author refers to the Levitical priesthood and notes the importance of the high priest's compassion. It was the role of the high priest to represent sinful men before a holy God. He served on behalf of those "*who are ignorant and going astray*" (Heb 5:2). The word "compassion" (*metriopatheo*) is defined thusly: "To treat with mildness, or moderation, to bear gently with ... The idea is that of not being unduly disturbed by the faults and ignorance of others ..." (Vine, p. 53). To maintain this outlook the high priest needed to remember that "*he himself is also beset by weakness*" (5:2b).

1. Where must high priests come from? Who do they represent?
2. On whose behalf did the high priest offer sacrifice?

2. The Appointment to Priesthood (Heb 5:4-6)

Another element of priesthood is that one legitimately served in such capacity by divine appointment (Heb 5:4). Beginning in 5:5, the author begins to make his applications to Jesus. First, he asserts that the same God who declared Jesus to be His begotten Son (as established in Heb 1:5) "*also says in another place: 'You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.'*" Note that the author bases his arguments on the OT itself. Time and time again the author reasons with his Jewish brethren from the ancient writings as he seeks to bolster their confidence in the messiahship of Jesus.

3. Who was appointed by God as first high priest over Israel?
4. What OT passages are quoted? Where are these psalms previously cited in Hebrews?

3. The Suffering Priest (Heb 5:7-8)

The author here makes the point that Jesus qualifies as *compassionate* high priest by virtue of His own sufferings. This suffering came "*in the days of His flesh,*" and in that form Jesus "*learned obedience by the things which He suffered.*" It is the ultimate act of suffering upon which the author focuses – the struggle Jesus experienced at His death. Note the intensity of Jesus' appeal to His Father: He "*offered up prayers and supplications, with vehement cries and tears ...*" (Heb 5:7). He also prayed with "*godly fear*" (5:7b). Jesus desperately wished for a change in circumstances; He petitioned God to alter His will so that He would not have to endure the physical and emotional agonies of the cross. But He also submitted Himself to the will of God: "*nevertheless, not as I will, but as You will*"

(Mt 26:39). We are given the assurance that, although God did not spare Jesus the death to which He had been assigned, Jesus “*was heard because of His godly fear.*” God acknowledged Jesus, comforted Him through an angel (Lk 22:43) and glorified Him afterward, *but He did not comply with His wishes.* In the struggle between His own concerns and God’s intent to provide atonement for sin, Jesus “learned obedience.” As a man, Jesus completely subjected Himself to the rigors of obedience. Obedience *isn’t always easy!*

5. What was God able to do for Jesus, but declined?

6. What does “vehement cries and tears” suggest about Jesus?

4. The Author of Eternal Salvation (Heb 5:9-11)

Not only did Jesus learn obedience by His own experience, He *teaches* it by example. As He demonstrated obedience, He now demands it from His disciples. Thus “*He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him*” (Heb 5:9). This ties the present discussion back to the admonitions of obedience in 3:18. “Author” is from the word *aitios* and refers to that which causes something. Vine struggles to capture the exact essence of the word in English but makes the point that Jesus did not merely *provide* salvation but *is* salvation in a direct, personal sense. Those who obey Him are grafted into the source of life itself, Jesus Christ the mediating High Priest between God and men. Having established Jesus’ qualifications as high priest and His appointment to the position, the writer now wishes to explore the order of His priesthood. He is hampered from doing so, however, by the spiritual immaturity and intellectual dullness of his readers (5:11). He thus pauses to rebuke them for their neglect.

7. In what sense was Jesus “perfected”?

8. T/F Jesus is not the author of salvation for those who disobey Him.

5. Rebuke of Willful Immaturity (Heb 5:12-14)

It would be foolish to blame a six year old for not being as developed mentally and physically as a twelve year old, for natural growth patterns cannot be circumvented. However, the brethren addressed in Hebrews have failed to mature through a lack of effort: “*by this time you ought to be teachers*” (Heb 5:12). Instead, they now need to be re-taught the very basics of the gospel – the ABC’s if you will. “Use it or lose it” is the slang expression of what has happened to these brethren. Unfortunately, those “*unskilled in the word of righteousness*” (5:13) lose their ability to “*discern both good and evil*” (5:14). Consequently, these brethren are floundering between the blessings offered by Christ and the old yoke of Mosaic Law. The author is attempting to recover them if at all possible. His parenthetical rebuke runs from 5:12-6:20.

9. How do we learn to discern both good and evil?

1. Building on the Basics (Heb 6:1-3)

Again, the chapter division is unfortunate as the thought continues from Heb 5:14. The author recognizes that there are foundational principles in the gospel just as there are in other academic disciplines. These things would involve basic life-changes, questions of curiosity, false conceptions and other matters of interest to a young Christian. While these things must be periodically reinforced, Christians must press ahead in their understanding of deeper aspects of truth. The writer intends to provide such instruction “*if God permits*” (Heb 6:3).

1. What are “dead works”?
2. What “baptisms” might be referred to in Heb 6:2?

2. The Fate of Apostates (Heb 6:4-8)

This section has fueled endless debates across the centuries as men grapple with the implications of what the author sets forth. The crux of the issue is “*if they fall away*” (Heb 6:6). We must remember what the author is addressing in this book: not merely succumbing to occasional temptation but deliberate, calculated apostasy. He has warned against “*departing from the living God*” through rebellion and unbelief (3:12, 16, 19). This was a chronic state of mind, a conscious hardening of the heart (3:7, 15; 4:7) which caused them to abandon their original confidence and confession (3:6; 4:14). Having fully and completely experienced the joys and benefits of reconciliation in Christ (6:4-5), these brethren choose to withdraw and, in the process, “*crucify again for themselves the son of God, and put Him to an open shame*” (6:6b).

What is the result of such a mindset? “*It is impossible ... to renew them again to repentance.*” This truth is so unsettling that our first impulse is to soften or circumvent it. Please note that the text does not say that an apostate cannot be forgiven. What it says is that the apostate’s frame of mind precludes his repentance. In other words, conscious rejection of the truth can result in a “point of no return” wherein no value is seen in Christ and, consequently, no impulse to repent is generated. This person is likened to a patch of earth that drinks in life-giving rain but only produces thorns and briars (6:7-8). Although it is beyond human capability to determine when such a person is irrevocably apostate, this does not nullify the author’s warning: such a condition is possible and his readers are dangerously flirting with it.

3. Explain the significance of the word “tasted” (Heb 6:4-5). Compare Hebrews 2:9.
4. Explain the context of this warning. What failure has led these brethren to the brink of disaster?

3. On a Positive Note ... (Heb 6:9-12)

The author follows the above hammer-blow with gentle optimism. He assures them that their past and present work has not gone unnoticed by God and they need to “*show the same diligence to the full assurance of hope until the end*” (Heb 6:11). “To the end” is a key phrase of perseverance (3:6, 14). A steady, patient faith has always been required of God’s people to “*inherit the promises*” (6:12).

5. Of what is the writer confident concerning his beloved brethren?

6. How does Hebrews 6:10 complement Hebrews 6:4-5?

4. God’s Confirming Oath (Heb 6:13-18)

As an example of tenacious, enduring faith the author cites Abraham. God had asked so much of this man: to leave his homeland, to live a nomadic life, to believe that he would produce offspring beyond virility, to sacrifice his son. Yet God gave Abraham every assurance that He was trustworthy and His promises were sure. Part of that assurance was His swearing of an oath upon His own name. This was not done because God had other options; He could not violate His promise for “*it is impossible for God to lie*” (Heb 6:18). But because of the suspect nature of man’s promises, “*an oath for confirmation is for them an end of all dispute*” (6:16). This being true, God, as it were, condescended to man’s level and added an oath to His promise. As the Scriptures reveal how God has fulfilled His redemptive promises made so long ago through Abraham, we are given “*strong consolation ... to lay hold of the hope set before us*” (6:18b). What a loving and understanding God who adapts His behavior to the frailty of man!

7. The quotation in Hebrews 6:14 follows what incident in Abraham’s life?

8. By what do men swear? By what did God swear?

5. Hope: The Anchor of the Soul (Heb 6:19-20)

The imagery here is vivid. As a boat is stabilized by anchoring itself to the bottom of the sea, the Christian is stabilized by casting his hope into heaven itself, “*which enters the Presence behind the veil*” (Heb 6:19). Jesus is our heavenly high priest, and all our hope rests upon Him. He has gone on ahead as a forerunner and represents us before the throne of God, making atonement for our sins and presenting our petitions to God. God has done everything He possibly can to give us confidence in forgiveness and eternal life; we must therefore “*hold fast the confidence and the rejoicing of the hope firm to the end*” (Heb 3:6). Thus ends the parenthetical exhortation from 5:12, and the author returns to his main thesis: the priesthood of Melchizedek.

9. What two qualities are associated with hope as an anchor of the soul?

1. Melchizedek and Abraham (Heb 7:1-3)

Melchizedek has long been a somewhat enigmatic and mysterious character, a shadowy figure who generates a lot of head scratching and blank stares. But we may simplify the author's present reference to him in the following manner: Melchizedek simply represents a priestly order which predated the Levitical priesthood and was superior to it. Jesus, he asserts, was made a priest after this Melchizedekian order, rendering the Levitical priesthood defunct. The facts concerning Melchizedek are these: 1) He served as king and priest simultaneously (Heb 7:1); 2) Abraham gave a tenth of his war spoils to Melchizedek (7:2); and 3) Melchizedek's priesthood was not dependent upon lineage, neither was it transferred to his posterity (7:3). His priesthood was a unique appointment and was bestowed singularly upon him by God. It is in this sense that he *"remains a priest continually."* His was a position of honor never revoked or transferred to another.

1. What is the "slaughter of the kings"?
2. What did Melchizedek do for Abraham (Hebrews 7:1)?

2. Melchizedek and Levi (Heb 7:4-10)

Several arguments set forth the superiority of Melchizedek's priesthood: 1) Abraham's tithe to Melchizedek was voluntary whereas tithing for Levitical priests is commanded by law (7:5a); 2) Abraham was not related to Melchizedek whereas Levitical priests receive tithes from their own brethren (7:5b-6); 3) While Abraham was a great man to whom God issued the redemptive promises, he received a blessing from Melchizedek (7:6b, 2). *"Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better"* (7:7); 4) When Levitical high priests die, they cease to be priests and the honor passes to their descendant. However, no such succession occurred with Melchizedek's priesthood, *"of whom it is witnessed that he lives"* (7:8). Again, this is not some mysterious statement about Melchizedek's immortality but simply the acknowledgement that his priesthood was unique to him. He did not die and leave his priesthood to another after him; 5) Levi even representatively paid tithes to Melchizedek through his ancestor Abraham (7:9-10).

This argument carried more force in the ancient past when ancestry was so important and the representative behavior of illustrious ancestors was of great significance. However, we make similar comparisons when we say, "Before you were even thought of ..." or "Before you were a gleam in your parents' eyes ...". The Hebrew author's point is that, long before the tribe of Levi and the Aaronic priesthood, there existed a greater man than Abraham who had a unique priesthood peculiar to him. Levi was not the be-all and end-all of priesthood; in fact, as the author will show, the priesthood that originated with him was flawed.

3. What was given to the Levites instead of a portion of land (Num 18:21-24)?

3. The Change of Priesthood and Law (Heb 7:11-19)

This is a crucial moment in the argument of the epistle. The implication of Jesus' Melchizedekian priesthood is that the Law of Moses has been abrogated. The Levitical priesthood and the Law are inseparable, for the national existence of Israel depended upon their observance of sacrifices, feasts and other worship under the leadership of the priests. *"For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law"* (Heb 7: 12). Why was the law changed? *"Because of its weakness and unprofitableness, for the law made nothing perfect"* (7:18b-19a; comp. Rom 3:20, 28; Gal 2:16; 3:10-13). The unspoken conclusion of this is: These Jewish brethren *have nothing to go back to!* The Law of Moses is defunct. It is the law and priesthood of Christ *or nothing*.

4. What psalm is again quoted to substantiate the eternal nature of Jesus' priesthood?
5. What precludes Jesus from serving as a priest under the Mosaic covenant?
6. What does our "better hope" in Christ allow us to do?

4. An Unchangeable Priesthood (Heb 7:20-24)

To what is the superiority of Jesus as high priest attributed? He is priest *"according to the power of an endless life"* (Heb 7:16b); *"He, because He continues forever, has an unchangeable priesthood"* (7:24). Further, His priesthood is bestowed upon Him by divine oath (7:20-21), and the author has already stressed the force of such an oath (6:13, 17-18). Upon this better priesthood rests *"a better covenant"* (7:22). Why, then, would these brethren wish to go back to the defunct, the inferior, the weak and unprofitable?

7. What is a "surety"? Who is the surety of the new covenant?
8. Levitical priests were appointed without what?
9. Why were there many Levitical priests?

5. Jesus: The Quintessential High Priest (Heb 7:25-28)

The author now begins to draw all his points together in praise of Jesus. His eternal nature ensures true salvation and effective intercession for the believer (7:25). His holiness and purity has allowed His exaltation *"higher than the heavens"* (7:26). His perfect sacrifice – of Himself – does not need repetition as did the animal sacrifices of the Mosaic Law (7:27). These all qualify Jesus to be forever appointed as high priest by the unchangeable oath of God, Himself (7:28). Jesus is all there is, all there will ever be, all we will ever need in finding acceptance before God.

10. Did the word of the oath come before or after the Law? Of what significance is this?

1. A Heavenly High Priest (Heb 8:1-2)

The truths set forth by the author of Hebrews all point to *heaven*. Our hope is in *heaven* (Heb 6:19). Our rest is in *heaven* (4:9-10). Our high priest is in *heaven* (4:14; 8:1). The true tabernacle in which He serves is in *heaven* (8:2). The whole Mosaic system was preparatory. The earthly hope and rest (Canaan), the earthly high priest, the earthly sacrifices, the earthly tabernacle of wood and fabric were all designed to raise men's sights to a higher plane. Now that God's purposes are fulfilled and Jesus ministers at His right hand, these brethren are being tempted to abandon the heavenly for the earthly.

1. Who erected the true tabernacle in which Jesus now serves as high priest?

2. Copies and Shadows (Heb 8:3-5)

The author now establishes the necessity of a heavenly sanctuary for Jesus' ministry by reference to the purpose of high priests. Since "*every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices*" (Heb 8:3), where is it that Jesus can offer His? Not on earth, for the only perpetuated priesthood had been Levitical, and it had not been replaced by any other earthly tabernacle or priesthood after it was nullified. Why had the tabernacle/temple not been replaced? Because they were constructed only as a "*copy and shadow of the heavenly things*" (8:5). Jesus' offering of Himself had provided once-for-all atonement for sin thus eliminating the need for manmade tabernacles, sacrifices and related accoutrements. [Note: The present tenses "who offer" and "who serve" strongly suggest that the book of Hebrews was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. After this time, the author could not point to these Levitical activities as ongoing.]

2. Why would Jesus not be a priest according to Mosaic Law (comp. 7:14)?

3. What warning was given to Moses concerning the construction of the tabernacle?

3. A Better Covenant (Heb 8:6-9)

Some elaboration is now made upon an earlier point from chapter 7: "*of necessity there is also a change of the law ... there is an annulling of the former commandment ...*" (Heb 7:12, 18). The author affirms that Jesus is "*Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises*" (Heb 8:6). The comparative term "better" flavors the entire epistle, for the writer confidently asserts that what Jesus offers is *better* than what Moses offered (see 1:4; 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16, 35; 12:24). The first covenant was inferior, else "*no place would have been sought for a second*" (8:7). A note of caution: God did not enact a covenant that itself was imperfect or less than intended. The writer hastens to say, "*Because finding fault with them ...*" (8:8a). This is similar to Paul's point in Rom 8:3: "*For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh ...*". The Law in and of itself was

“holy and just and good” (Rom 7:12), but the weakness of man was so pervasive and chronic that none could perfectly observe it. The “fault,” then, was that the Law provided no adequate restitution for violation. The author then offers a quote from Jer 31:31-34 which indicates that the Law, itself, spoke of its own future eclipse by a new covenant (8:8). This change of covenant was made possible by the faithlessness of the Jews, *“because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the Lord”* (8:9). God was thus freed from any obligation to maintain the first covenant.

4. About how long was it from Jeremiah’s prophecy to its fulfillment?
5. The new covenant was not according to what?
6. Who is mentioned in Hebrews 8:8 as ones with whom a new covenant would be made? Who is not mentioned?

4. Differences in the New Covenant (Heb 8:10-11)

A Jew was a covenant member by heritage and circumstances of birth. His “religion” was outward in the sense that he had no choice but to conform to God’s law with the nation. He was a Jew first, then a believer in God. But under the new covenant, God would **first** *“put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts”* and **then** *“I will be their God, and they shall be My people”* (8:10). Further, *“None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, ‘Know the Lord,’ for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them”* (8:11). In other words, one must first come to a knowledge of God and learn to appreciate Him; then he can enter a covenant relationship with Him. The sad history of the OT is the Jewish nation plummeting time and time again over the precipice of rebellion, immorality and self-will. All the promises and blessings offered them could not make them faithful without individual conviction and commitment. The new covenant would begin with the individual, not the group.

7. Did God expect the Law of Moses to be taken into the heart? See Dt 6:4-9; 11:18.
8. How do men come to know God before they commit their lives to Him?

5. True Forgiveness (Heb 8:12-13)

The writer had said that the new covenant was established on “better promises” (Heb 8:6). Those promises are, in a word, *forgiveness* (8:12). This is what the apostles went forth proclaiming to the Jews (Ac 2:38; 3:19, 26; 4:12, etc.). From Jeremiah’s viewpoint the first covenant was already obsolete; it was only a matter of time before it would vanish forever. As the author indicates in various ways, that time has now come.

9. Under the new covenant, how does God respond to unrighteousness and lawlessness?

1. The Earthly Tabernacle (Heb 9:1-5)

The author continues his reasoning on the superior priesthood of Christ by demonstrating the inferiority of and limitations associated with the earthly tabernacle. As the basic floor plan and furniture of the tabernacle is described, one notes the material make-up of the structure. Though many things were made of or overlaid with gold, it was still a manmade, temporal structure – a far cry from heaven itself where our present High Priest currently serves.

1. Over what were the wings of the cherubim stretched? What is its significance?

2. Symbolic Rituals of the Tabernacle (Heb 9:6-10)

Services relative to the tabernacle allowed daily activities in the outer chamber and very limited access to the inner chamber. There only the high priest could enter, and then only once a year, and “*not without blood*” (Heb 9:7). These restrictions did more than signify the holiness of God; they indicated “*that the way into the Holiest of All was not yet made manifest while the first tabernacle was still standing*” (9:8). That is, on its own merits, the tabernacle worship “*cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience*” (9:9). Spiritual access to heaven, i.e., full fellowship with God, was unattainable by the ordinances of Moses. A genuine Israelite should have been aware that ultimate forgiveness was yet in the future, and that in his present time he was granted a favorable position by God’s grace via these “fleshly ordinances.” How this should have made him long for the “the Lamb of God” to take away his sins!

2. Who is said to be teaching deeper spiritual truth through tabernacle worship?

3. The fleshly ordinances of the tabernacle were imposed until when?

3. The Perfect Tabernacle (Heb 9:11-15)

The author’s argument reaches its full force in this section. The shadows and symbolism of the earthly priesthood and tabernacle were finally dispelled in the coming of Jesus. He serves in the tabernacle “*not made with hands, that is, not of this creation*” (Heb 9:11). He entered the Most Holy Place “*not with the blood of goats and calves, but with His own blood*” (9:12). His sacrifice surpasses the “*purifying of the flesh*”; it is able to “*purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God*” (9:14). His nature and accomplishments make him “*the Mediator of a new covenant*” (9:15), a covenant of the “better promises” of eternal redemption and eternal inheritance (8:6; 9:12, 15). But what is it exactly that sets the sacrifice of Jesus apart from all others? It involved the free-will offering of an eternal spirit (9:14). Translators added the capital “S” according to their own opinion, thus obscuring the meaning. The blood of animals had nothing to do with free will, the spirit or moral purity. They were fine physical specimens of no moral sig-

nificance slaughtered against their own will. While this satisfied God's requirements of ritual purification (see, for example, Lev 12), there was no ultimate cleansing of the conscience from transgression. The sacrifice of Jesus, on the other hand, was morally pure, eternal spirit freely offering Himself for the sins of others. Not only was this offering effective, it was *eternally* effective – “*once for all*” (9:12). This was the ultimate plan of God before the world began – to redeem sinful men to Himself by the blood of His Son.

4. What kind of redemption did Jesus obtain with His own blood?
5. What effect does the blood of Jesus have upon sins under the first covenant?
6. From what is our conscience purged by the blood of Jesus?

4. Death and the New Covenant (Heb 9:16-22)

The phrase “Mediator of the new covenant, by means of death” (Heb 9:15) is now further developed. The author makes three points to establish the necessity of the death of God's Son – a huge stumbling block to the Jew. First, having just described salvation as an “eternal inheritance,” he notes that a will only goes into effect when the testator dies (9:16-17). This should further help the Jew accept why his Messiah had to die. Secondly, blood has always been associated with the dedication of holy things (9:18-21). If the Jew could accept at face value the necessity of the Law, the tabernacle and its furnishings being dedicated with blood, could he not see the necessity of the new covenant and the heavenly tabernacle being dedicated with divine blood? Thirdly, “*without shedding of blood there is no remission*” (9:22). The penalty for violating God's law is death. By grace God had previously accepted the death of an animal in lieu of the death of the transgressor, but this was insufficient. Ultimate forgiveness required ultimate bloodshed.

7. Compare Hebrews 9:20 with Matthew 26:28. What now represents the blood of the covenant once shed by Jesus?

5. The Better Sacrifice (Heb 9:23-28)

The words “necessary” (Heb 9:23) and “of necessity” (9:16) are important. What had transpired regarding Christ was not happenstance but deliberate: it *had to be*, and God had orchestrated it. In addressing the “once-for-all” sacrifice of Jesus (see 9:12, 25-26, 28), the author brings the future into view: 1) “*It is appointed for men to die once*”; 2) “*But after this the judgment*”; 3) “*He will appear a second time, apart from sin, for salvation.*” The death of Jesus reaches far into the past as well as into the future.

8. What is the significance of the phrase “at the end of the ages” (Hebrews 9:26)?
9. Contrast Jesus' first and second comings. Who will enjoy salvation when He comes?

1. The Inferior Sacrifices of the Law (Heb 10:1-10)

The author now elaborates upon his previous statements about the ineffectiveness of animal sacrifices under the Law. He has previously noted that they “cannot make him who performed the service perfect in regard to the conscience” (Heb 9:9), and he asserted that they merely had the effect of “purifying the flesh” (9:13). Now he bluntly says, “For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins” (10:4). The repetition of the sacrifices is evidence to the author that they were impotent and served as a constant reminder to the Jews that their sins hadn’t adequately been dealt with. As proof of the inadequacy of these sacrifices Ps 40:6-8 is cited. The author makes two points: 1) Animal sacrifices didn’t satisfy God’s justice, and 2) God intended to send His Son to provide atonement and, in the process, establish a new covenant (10:8-9). The once-for-all offering of Jesus is proof of its efficacy (10:10).

1. In whose mind is there a reminder of sins by the animal sacrifices of the Law?
2. Describe the Law of Moses from Hebrews 8:5; 9:9, 23-24; 10:1.

2. One Sacrifice for Sins Forever (Heb 10:11-18)

This section concludes the discussion of priesthood/sacrifice begun in Heb 5:1. Note again the present tense “stands” (10:11), an indication that the book was written before the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. In summation, Jesus offered one sacrifice which “perfected forever those who are being sanctified” (10:14). A final appeal is made to Jeremiah confirming that the new covenant which granted true pardon has come to pass.

3. For what is Jesus now waiting?
4. Comment on the role of the Holy Spirit from Hebrews 10:15; 9:8 and 2:4.

3. “Let Us ...” (Heb 10:19-25)

The remainder of the Hebrew epistle is an impassioned plea to avoid apostasy. Hebrews 10:19-21 encapsulates the great blessings of the new covenant. In view of this rich, bold access to heaven, three imperatives follow, each with amplification: 1) **Let us** draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith (10:22). On what grounds? The purification of Christ which fully cleanses our evil conscience; 2) **Let us** hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering (10:23). With what assurance? For He who promised is faithful; 3) **Let us** consider one another in order to stir up love and good works (10:24). In what way? By mutual exhortation arising from occasions of public assembly (which some had already begun to neglect). The phrase “as you see the day approaching” (10:25) has induced much controversy. If it is a specific event, it is most likely the destruction of Jerusalem which could have extended fallout among these brethren. Cer-

tainly this would be a calamitous day accompanied by definite signs (Mt 24:4-28). If the warning is general, it could have reference to the day of judgment. Some object to this explanation on the grounds that no one will “see” that day approaching. But the faithful man understands that life is brief and uncertain (Jas 4:13-14), and spiritual maturity brings a sense of urgency. Truly *“our salvation is nearer than when we first believed”* (Rom 13:11). Thus we should take advantage of every opportunity to correct and exhort brethren who are drifting from the Lord.

5. What kind of way has been consecrated for us by Jesus?

6. What should we stir up in others? How do we go about this?

7. What are some consequences of forsaking the assembling of the saints?

4. Trampling the Son of God Underfoot (Heb 10:26-31)

“For if we sin willfully ...” (Heb 10:26) indicates a condition more fully described as *“trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant ... a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace”* (10:29). This is apostasy, not the occasional sin which beleaguers every faithful saint. Further evidence of this is the warning from the Law: *“Anyone who has rejected Moses ...”* (10:28). God is not to be trifled with, and His love for man though deep and genuine will not excuse rebellion: *“Vengeance is Mine, I will repay ... The Lord will judge His people”* (10:30).

8. What is not available for the one who rejects Christ (Hebrews 10:26)?

9. What is a fearful expectation for those who are rebellious?

10. What phrase(s) indicate that the prospective apostate was truly saved at first?

5. The Former Days of Faith (Heb 10:32-39)

The author now urges his readers to reflect upon their earlier days of faith when *“you endured a great struggle with sufferings ... and joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods”* (10:32, 34). Since that time they had forgotten *“that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven.”* Persecution can weary the soul, and these brethren *“have need of endurance”* (10:36). God asks different things of different people. From some He asks perseverance amid trials. But *“we are not of those who draw back ...”*.

11. When do we receive the promise of God?

12. In whom does God have no pleasure?

13. What do you know about the relationship between the author and readers?

1. Righteousness According to Faith (Heb 11:1-7)

Having just referred to Habakkuk's timeless declaration, "*The just shall live by faith*" (Heb 10:38; Hab 2:3-4), the author now develops the concept of faith by appeal to historical possessors of it. Those cited in this famous chapter would be acknowledged as heroes by those of Hebrew ancestry. His aim is to help these brethren see that their adherence to Christ is parallel to the faith of Noah, Abraham, Moses, etc. Faith is able to "see" what is invisible; it is a confidence in God that accepts and obeys His word when one's experience, feelings and desires are to the contrary. Thus "*by faith Noah, being divinely warned of things not yet seen, moved with godly fear, prepared an ark ...*" (Heb 11:7). Without this quality of faith, "*it is impossible to please*" God (11:6).

1. What witness was born to Abel by virtue of his sacrifice?
2. What was the testimony of Enoch?
3. T/F Absolute, objective proof exists that God created the material universe.

2. Yearning for a Homeland (Heb 11:8-16)

The author next pauses at Abraham, the quintessential patriarch of faith, and examines the seeds that grew into an ancient and storied nation. To inherit the land so beloved by Israel, Abraham had to leave his home for an unknown destination and, once there, reside in tents as an outsider (Heb 11:8-9). For a nation to arise from him, he and his wife faithfully acted in accordance with God's promises (11:11; Rom 4:19-21). Thus the lives of Abraham and Sarah present an analogy of the Christian endeavor, for we are likewise on a journey and living as sojourners. Abraham not only had his sights on a tract of land, "*he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God*" (11:10). Had he been otherwise minded, he would have simply returned to Ur (11:15-16). And if these brethren turn back from God now, they would betray the very ancestor in which they had so much pride.

4. Of whom is God not ashamed? What has He done for them?
5. What did Abraham only see afar off?
6. What encouraged Sarah to conceive by Abraham?

3. Faith in the Lineage of Abraham (Heb 11:17-22)

The author here connects faith to the prospect of death, for this is faith's ultimate challenge. Regarding God's command to offer Isaac as a burnt offering, Abraham obeyed "*accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead*" (Heb 11:19). That

degree of trust is astounding, but Abraham possessed it nonetheless. Isaac, Jacob and Joseph possessed a similar faith that enabled them to look beyond their own lives and confidently assert what would be in the future (11:20-22). Too, these ancestors all *per-severed in faith unto death*, a fitting reminder for these weak brethren.

7. Can you explain the apparent contradiction between Hebrews 11:13 and 11:17?

8. In what way did Abraham receive Isaac from the dead?

4. Moses' Choice (Heb 11:23-29)

Another ancestor is cited as parallel to the readers' predicament. Just as they had chosen to leave Judaism for Christ and are presently suffering for it, even so Moses chose to "*suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the passing pleasures of sin*" (11:25). Moses had at his disposal all the power, prestige and privileges of royalty yet abandoned them "*esteeming the reproach of Christ greater riches than the treasures in Egypt, for he looked to the reward*" (11:26). Like Noah who "saw" rain, and Abraham who "saw" Canaan and a resurrected son, and Joseph who "saw" the eventual exodus from Egypt, Moses "saw" spiritual reality through his faith in God: "*he endured as seeing Him who is invisible*" (11:27). God has always challenged men to "see" through the medium of faith, to accept the reality of His existence, the resurrection, judgment, heaven and hell and other truths lying beyond our senses. This expectation has always remained constant regardless of the specific covenant in force.

9. How did faith preserve Moses' life as an infant?

10. What does faith understand about sin?

11. How did Moses' faith figure in the exodus?

5. The Great Feats of Faith (Heb 11:30-40)

The author enumerates specific examples of faith (Heb 11:30-32), then notes general accomplishments of faith (11:33-35a) and finally chronicles occasions of suffering experienced by the faithful (11:35b-38). Undeniably, God's people have done the seemingly impossible, radically changing the face of the world. Unfortunately, God has also allowed unimaginable hardship to befall them. Of such "*the world was not worthy*" (11:38), and they endured "*that they might obtain a better resurrection*" (11:35). This most notable chapter on faith in God is an exhortation which says to all who read, "Others have done it. You can do it, too!" We must aspire to such courageous, steadfast faith.

12. What is remarkable about these acts of faith according to Hebrews 11:39?

13. What do Christians and these ancient saints have in common (Hebrews 11:40)?

1. “Let Us Run with Endurance ...” (Heb 12:1-3)

The author turns to athletics for his next exhortation, likening the Christian life to running a marathon. All encumbrances must be shed and all distractions ignored; we must “run with endurance the race that is set before us ...looking to Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith,” who now waits for us across the finish line. To further enhance the image, the “cloud of witnesses” of chapter 11 are figuratively pictured as spectators urging the Hebrew brethren on. But as marathons exhaust the human body, so persecution tires the spirit of man. The author thus counsels his readers to carefully reflect upon Jesus “lest you become weary and discouraged in your souls” (Heb 12:3). Thoughtful contemplation of Jesus is always the best cure for what ails the true believer.

1. What, unfortunately, easily ensnares men?
2. What enabled Jesus to endure the cross?

2. The Pain and Profit of Chastening (Heb 12:4-11)

Ancient wisdom held that suffering indicated God’s disfavor, but revelation reveals otherwise. God, as a faithful Father, chastens, rebukes and scourges His children “for our profit, that we may be partakers of His holiness” (Heb 12:5-6, 10). The author states several truths about chastening or punishment: 1) “Whom the Lord loves He chastens” (12:6); 2) The absence of chastening suggests illegitimacy or neglect rather than favor (12:8); 3) Discipline can be imperfectly administered and still be effective (12:9-10); 4) At the moment of implementation chastening is grievous; however, it is later appreciated for its instructional value (12:11). *Does suffering then imply guilt?* No, for while one may not be overtly sinful, he may still stand in need of further development of character, godliness and self-control which may best be forged by trial (Remember, sinless Jesus “learned obedience by the things which He suffered” – Heb 5:8). We would do well in times of tribulation to inventory our lives and search for what is amiss. But we may always take comfort in knowing that, whatever the cause, we can benefit from the hardships of life.

3. Persecution against these brethren had not yet gone to what length?
4. How do we feel about our earthly fathers who disciplined us in our youth?

3. “Lest Anyone Fall Short of the Grace” (Heb 12:12-17)

This section contains several exhortations and a grave warning. “Hands which hang down, and the feeble knees” (Heb 12:12) suggests weariness and discouragement among some in the congregation (comp. 12:3). They are in need of strength, healing and renewed commitment to the “straight paths.” Three “lests” follow: 1) “lest anyone fall short of the grace of God” (12:15a), an odd thing to say if, as according to the Calvinists,

one cannot be lost; 2) *“lest any root of bitterness springing up cause trouble ...”* (12:15b); 3) *“lest there be any fornicator or profane person like Esau ...”* (12:16). Esau was so impulsive and base that he bartered away his birthright for the satisfaction of momentary hunger. The transaction was irrevocable. So it is with immorality, which is the immediate context. Regret for such thoughtless and foolish actions, though wrenching and torturous, cannot change many of the consequences which naturally follow.

5. No one will see the Lord without what quality?

6. What defiles many of God’s people?

4. Coming to the Mountain (Heb 12:18-24)

The author yet again turns to an OT contrast “to stabilize his readers in their faith and to convince them that there is no alternative open to them except Christ” (Lightfoot, *Jesus Christ Today*, p. 237). Mt. Sinai represents the vast gulf between man and God. So holy and mighty was God that neither man nor beast could approach the mountain without God’s express permission. *“And so terrifying was the sight that Moses said, ‘I am exceedingly afraid and trembling’”* (Heb 12:21). Mt. Zion, on the other hand, stands for the heavenly abode of God into which access has been secured by Jesus. This is the city in which Abraham desired to dwell (Heb 11:10, 16), and it is yet to be possessed by the living (Heb 13:14). Nonetheless, citizenship in that city is assured by faith (Ph 3:20). This city is populated by countless angels, already departed saints and God, Himself. And the One who makes our residence in this city possible is Jesus, *“the Mediator of the new covenant.”* To abandon Him is to forfeit citizenship in heavenly Jerusalem.

7. What did Israel beg of God as He spoke to them from Mt. Sinai?

8. Described redeemed people from Hebrews 12:23.

5. Our God Is A Consuming Fire (Heb 12:25-29)

Hebrews 12:25 brings us back to the thoughts of the opening chapters. God has spoken from heaven through His Son: *“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?”* (Heb 2:3); *“Much more shall we not escape if we turn away from Him who speaks from heaven”* (12:25). While the author has declared the great promises of God regarding redemption fulfilled, he mentions the last and dreadful promise of God which is yet future – the promise to shake heaven and earth so as to annihilate all but His everlasting kingdom. *“Our God is a consuming fire”* (12:29), and when all around us begins to vaporize with the incendiary breath of God, how wonderful to be safe and secure in the insulated walls of the kingdom!

9. With what attitudes should we serve our awesome God?

1. The Lord Is My Helper (Heb 13:1-6)

The author now appends the main body of his epistle with various closing exhortations. Brethren must be loved (Heb 13:1); strangers must be received (13:2); the persecuted must be supported (13:3); marital partners must be honored (13:4). The context of the great promise “*I will never leave you nor forsake you*” is covetousness. Insecurity promotes an inordinate clinging to material things. Covetousness and all other insecurities are overcome by the knowledge that, with God as our ally, we have nothing to fear from men (13:6).

1. Read and comment upon Ps 27:1, 56:4 and 118:6.
2. What is undefiled? What is the eventual lot of fornicators and adulterers?
3. With what should we be content?

2. The Same Christ, the Same Doctrine (Heb 13:7-9)

The next exhortation concerns doctrinal purity. The author encourages his readers to remember those who originally taught them the truth and lived consistently with it to the end of their lives (Heb 13:7). He then makes an observation that, as with 13:5, must be viewed in its immediate context: “*Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever*” (13:8). The proper application of this truth is that the doctrines first issued by Jesus and then by “those who heard Him” (Heb 2:3) remain unchanged. What saved men in the first generation of the kingdom still saves in the second (and third and fourth and ...). The author warns against “strange doctrines” which have to do with dietary restrictions (Heb 13:9). This was a constant problem in the early church as evidenced by the many passages which address it (Rom 14:2-3, 15-17, 20-23; Col 2:16, 20-22; 1 Tim 4:3-5). Truly, Jesus Christ is the same today, for His will has not changed since first issued two thousand years ago.

4. What outcome is to be considered by the readers of this epistle?
5. Upon what principle is the believer’s heart to be established? What does this mean in the context?

3. Outside the Camp (Heb 13:10-14)

It is hard to fully appreciate the price early Jewish converts had to pay for their conversion to Christ. There was social, religious and family rejection along with consequent economic hardship. This cost is addressed in an analogy between the Jewish sacrifices being burned outside the camp and Jesus being crucified outside the walls of Jerusalem. His exhortation is that the brethren must be willing to “*go forth to Him, outside the camp,*

bearing His reproach” (Heb 13:13). Godly principles often conflict with earthly values. God’s people, whether Jew or Gentile, must weather ostracism and ridicule, exclusion and prejudice – the very things that Jesus, Himself, had to endure. If He was willing to suffer these indignities for us, should we not be willing to suffer them for Him? After all, it was His blood that was shed “outside the gate” (13:12) that provided “*an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat*” (13:10).

6. If we are cast outside the “city” of human approval, what do we look for in the future?

7. What must we bear for Jesus in view of His sacrifice for us?

4. The Sacrifices of Praise and Service (Heb 13:15-19)

Many false religious systems incorporate sacrificial rituals in their worship. Since Jesus was the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, there are no ongoing atoning offerings. Instead, the sacrifices are spiritual, acts of praise and service offered to God by the worshiper out of love and gratitude. Both words and actions are emphasized (Heb 13: 15-16). One manifestation of proper attitude toward God is submission to the leaders whom God has chosen by divinely mandated characteristics. Elders are to be obeyed out of respect to their function (13:17). Israel’s rebellion toward God was demonstrated in their resistance to Moses’ authority. God therefore taught in some very graphic lessons that His appointed leadership was not to be trivialized or undermined (Num 12 [Aaron & Miriam]; Num 16-17 [Korah, Dathan and Abiram]). The author also urges that prayers be diligently offered for a speedy reunion with his readers (13:19).

8. With proper support, how will elders view their burdensome responsibilities?

9. Through whom must our spiritual sacrifices be offered in order to be acceptable?

10. Of what is the author confident about himself?

5. God’s Work in Us (Heb 13:20-25)

These closing inspirational thoughts summarize the gospel: Jesus shed His blood of the everlasting covenant, was raised from the dead, has become the great Shepherd of the sheep, and through Him God works in us and through is “*what is well pleasing in His sight*” (Heb 13:20-21). If these truths are allowed to sink down into the depths of our soul, we will persevere through all the trials of life and stand victorious in the end.

11. How does the writer describe his now-completed epistle?

12. What had befallen Timothy later in life?

13. Compare Hebrews 13:21 with Philippians 2:13. How is “work” a mutual effort?