

# OpenTheo

## Hebrews: Chapter-by-Chapter Commentary

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## **Transcript**

While the book of Hebrews has epistle-like elements at its conclusion, in many other respects it reads very different from the epistles of the New Testament, such as the letters of Paul. Rather, it has more of a sermonic quality to it at many points, not least in this opening chapter. It often feels like an oral communication to a congregation that has later been committed to writing.

It begins with a description of divine revelation. God has revealed himself in many ways over the course of Israel's history. We often speak about revelation as if it were a single sort of thing.

However, there is considerable variety in its forms. Sometimes God dictates, sometimes people see visions, sometimes people are inspired to write history, other times people are inspired to write psalms. God speaks in various ways.

Revelation is also historical. The messages to the prophets are connected with God's actions in the history of Israel. They aren't just theological propositions detached from history.

Divine revelation was not a once-off event, but a self-revelation of God sustained with the people of Israel over the course of many centuries. However, while sustained, God is not flitting from nation to nation and context to context in his self-revelation, but is communicating himself progressively to a particular people over history. It is also episodic.

It happens at various and often surprising points, often followed by extended silence. It isn't predictable or controllable. The prophets are, as it were, divine mouthpieces.

God speaks by them. The prophets aren't merely philosophically speculating about God or trying to communicate mysterious dreams and visions about the Supreme Being. They are bearers of articulate speech from God.

A God who speaks is a God who calls us to account and disrupts us. A God who speaks is not a God that we can project our own notions onto. Christian revelation is divine self-

revelation, and divine self-revelation not merely in inscrutable, mysterious, and awe-inspiring theophanic manifestation, but self-declaration in intelligible speech.

Into this sustained self-revelation over the history of Israel bursts something new and unexpected, as the God who has been revealing himself over that history reveals himself in the person of his Son. Even amidst the variety of the earlier forms of revelation, this is a radical novelty. In the place of the intermediaries of the prophets, we have God's Son coming in person.

While in some sense is continuous with what has gone before, this is also an apocalyptic break. We might remember the parable of the wicked vine dressers here, which expresses the significance of the sending of the Son, albeit from the aspect of judgment. Matthew 21, verses 33-37 Hear another parable.

There was a master of a house who planted a vineyard and put a fence around it and dug a wine press in it and built a tower and leased it to tenants and went into another country. When the season for fruit drew near, he sent his servants to the tenants to get his fruit, and the tenants took his servants and beat one, killed another, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did the same to them.

Finally he sent his son to them, saying, They will respect my son. This has occurred in these last days. God has at last spoken in this particular way, bringing his ongoing self-revelation to a fitting yet surprising climax.

These last days are also days that mark the end of the old age and the dawn of a new one. God has spoken by his Son. This is the definitive word.

It's also a personal word. God speaks not through the intermediation of prophets, but by his own Son. The author of Hebrews gives a number of glorious descriptions of Christ.

He is the heir of all things, the Son into whose hands all things will be given. The destiny of all of the cosmos, the entire heavens and the earth, is to be the inheritance of Christ. He is the final definitive word of God.

He brings to a climactic conclusion the progressive revelation through the prophets in a decisive self-revelation of God. He is also, however, the first word of God. He is the one through whom the world was made.

He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature. Using language similar to the description of wisdom in intertestamental literature, the author describes Christ as the one in whom God is seen clearly. His very nature and glory is made manifest in him.

Christ is not just one among many of the different ways in which God reveals himself.

One of the various ways mentioned in verse 1. He is the definitive revelation of God. He is the one in whom we see God himself.

As Jesus says to Philip in John's Gospel, the one who sees the Son has seen the Father. Christ is THE image of God as the Son. He is not just someone made in the image, as we are.

He upholds the universe by the word of his power. Not only is he the one through whom the world was made, he is also the providential word that sustains all things in being. In association with his upholding of the creation, he is also the one who delivers the creation, making purification for sins.

This passage, which closely associates Christ's supremacy over creation with his supremacy in the new creation achieved through his redemption, might well remind us of Colossians 1, verses 15-20. He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities.

All things were created through him and for him. And he is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the church.

He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of his cross. Christ has sat down at God's right hand, at the position of greatest power in the universe, raised over all other powers and authorities.

Christ came as a humble saviour and has now been exalted above all, much as Paul describes in Philippians 2, verses 5-11. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself by taking the form of servant. Being born in the likeness of men, and being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

Therefore God has highly exalted him, and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. Much as Paul in Philippians, Hebrews speaks of the name that Christ receives in his exaltation, a name greater than any of the angels, the name that is above every name. While the angels are powerful and prominent, Christ is exalted over any of them.

Hebrews will proceed to elaborate upon the significance of Christ's superiority over the angels as the Son. There was a lot of speculation and literature about the heavenly

powers at this point in the history of the Jews. One can well imagine the danger of people thinking that Christ was some heavenly being, perhaps one of the higher angels, but nothing greater.

Hebrews challenges this misconception by showing just how exalted Christ is. The author of the book asks his hearers a rhetorical question. Has any angel been addressed in the ways that God has addressed the Son? He quotes Psalm 2 verse 7 and 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14.

Both of these verses relate to the Davidic King in their original context. Psalm 2 verse 7 addresses the special relationship that the King enjoys with the Lord as his son, 2 Samuel chapter 7 verse 14, from the original revelation of the Davidic covenant, is similar. These verses took on an even greater force when read in the light of the events of Christ's baptism and transfiguration, when Christ's Sonship was directly declared by the Father, a Sonship that exceeded the mere covenantal Sonship that many might have envisaged in the context of the Davidic covenant.

The angels surround God's throne and they exercise considerable authority. However, to contrast the Son with them, Hebrews quotes Old Testament verses concerning them, showing that while they are exalted, they do not compare to the Son. His first point is that the angels are instructed to praise the firstborn Son.

The Son is placed above them, and when God brings the firstborn into the world, the angels must worship him. What God bringing his firstborn into the world is referring to isn't exactly clear. It may be referring to the Incarnation, or to Christ's exaltation as the firstborn from the dead.

In the context of the Incarnation, for instance, we might remember the appearance to the shepherds near Bethlehem in Luke 2, verses 9-14. And an angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were filled with great fear. And the angel said to them, Fear not, for behold I bring you good news of great joy that will be for all the people.

For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord. And this will be a sign for you. You will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased. He follows this with a quotation from Psalm 104, verse 4. That verse speaks of God making the natural elements his messengers or angels. The author of Hebrews, following the Septuagint, uses it to characterize the angels themselves.

They are creatures who serve. The Son, by contrast, is one who rules eternally in justice.

He quotes Psalm 45, verses 6-7.

Your throne, O God, is forever and ever. The sceptre of your kingdom is a sceptre of uprightness. You have loved righteousness and hated wickedness.

Therefore God, your God, has anointed you with the oil of gladness beyond your companions. This is from a psalm that, like a number of the other texts quoted in this chapter, were important messianic texts in the early church. It seems that the Son is addressed in these verses as God.

His throne is eternal, and his rule is identified with God's own rule, which sharply contrasts with that of the angels, whose authority is limited and derivative as servants. He quotes Psalm 102, verses 25-27, in which Jesus is now addressed as Lord and is spoken of as the immortal creator of all, who endures eternal, while others perish and fail. He is the one who laid the foundation at the beginning, and he is the one who will outlast them all.

He is the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. This section began with the rhetorical question, to which of the angels did God ever say? Now, as the author brings it to its head, he repeats that question, quoting what is the most popular messianic verse of them all, Psalm 110, verse 1. The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool. Christ is both Davidic King and the eternally enthroned Lord.

We might recall Jesus' challenge to the Pharisees in Matthew 22, verses 41-45. Now, while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them a question, saying, What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he? They said to him, The son of David. He said to them, How is it then that David in the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, The Lord said to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.

If then David calls him Lord, how is he his son? In this passage we see, as elsewhere in the New Testament, these two identities held together in Christ, recognising that the term son means more than we might originally have thought in its associations with the Davidic covenant. It also relates to the divinity of the one of whom it is spoken. By contrast, the angels then are servants ministering to the heirs, to those who will enter into the inheritance of the Son.

Hebrews begins by giving its hearers an elevated understanding of Christ. This one isn't just like the angelic beings and heavenly creatures. He is God himself.

Consequently, as he enters fully into human life and experience, he can take it upon himself and transform it, delivering us from the dominion of death in a way that no angel ever could. Unless we have a high view of Christ, it will be difficult for us to recognise all of this. However, once we see the true glory of the eternal and exalted Son, who has

assumed our condition, everything else changes.

A question to consider, what are some of the ways that the Son functions as divine revelation in the understanding of the writers of the New Testament? Hebrews began with a grand presentation of the glory of Christ as the exalted and eternally supreme Son, far greater than any of the angels. In chapter 2, however, the author turns to the questions of the appropriate response to this. If Christ indeed is far more than merely one of the heavenly beings, being God himself, then the manner of people's response to his work is a matter of so much greater significance.

Seeing the faithful suffering of Jesus the Messiah is important. However, without a robust account of the fact that Christ came from the heights of heaven, that he is the one through whom the creation was made and the one who is the unique son of the Father, and the fact of his ascension over all other powers, the true significance of Christ's suffering simply will not be recognised. The author of Hebrews wants his hearers to be in no doubt as to the power and exaltation of Christ and what this means.

Christ isn't just another in the line of the martyrs, for instance. He is the Lord of all. Knowledge of Christ's exalted power is not something that we can gain by sight, although Christ's sufferings occurred in the realm of sight.

Knowing of his exaltation requires heeding the spoken message that has been delivered to us in the Gospel. The greater revelation that we have received through the Eternal Son, a revelation that exceeds the revelation given through the prophets in past times, should lead us to pay much closer attention. It can be very easy to forget the exaltation of Christ in the situations of our lives, especially when we face resistance and persecution.

However, once we have this reality clearly in our awareness, everything else takes on an added gravity. The angels had been involved in delivering the message of the law at Sinai, a word that had been reliable and enforced with divine judgement. The message brought by the Eternal Son is of a far greater significance.

It isn't a message merely delivered by emissaries, lesser messengers and various other intermediaries such as angels and prophets. It is delivered by the Son in person. The message of the Son was then corroborated by the message of the apostles and other witnesses of his earthly ministry, who testified to its truth.

Their message was confirmed by the accompanying witness of divinely given signs with their teaching. Signs, wonders, miracles and gifts of the Spirit were part of the means by which the apostolic teaching was divinely confirmed. This seems to have been especially important in the foundational period of the Church's life.

After churches were established and the New Testament scriptures completed and

widely accessible, such signs, wonders and miracles seemed to become less prominent. In verses 3-4 we see each of the persons of the Trinity as well, all involved in the work of witnessing to the message of the Gospel. First of all the Son declares the message in person, then the Father bears witness with signs and the gifts of the Spirit also testify.

The author of Hebrew turns back to his treatment of the Son in relationship to the angels at this point. The book began with the Son exalted above all of the angels. However now we will see the Son taking a position lower than the angels.

Exploring the nature and the importance of the relationship between the Son's states of exaltation and his state of humiliation, the author will be able to strengthen his point. The angels are exalted, but they are not going to rule the world to come. As the Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 6.3 Do you not know that we are to judge angels? That privilege of rule belongs to humanity in the Messiah.

He quotes Psalm 8.3-6 When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the Son of man that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands. You have put all things under his feet.

This great statement probably relates primarily to the Davidic King. The Psalm is not about the exaltation of the generic human being, but of the representative man, the Davidic King of the people. It is about God establishing the King as his Son in the Davidic Covenant and establishing his rule over all of his works through him.

The reference of the quotation is to Christ. Christ fulfills the meaning of Psalm 8. He was made lower than the angels for a period of time, but has now been exalted to the throne, everything placed in subjection under his feet. However, although Christ has been exalted in this way, it isn't visible to us yet.

Not everything seems to be under his feet. Indeed, the claim that Christ is the exalted Lord of all seems to go against all appearances. However, what we do see is Jesus.

He is the one who was made lower than the angels. He was seen and heard by many witnesses. We now also perceive by faith that he has won the victory through his death and is crowned with glory and honor.

Visible appearances alone will be deceptive. A fuller understanding of who Christ is and the nature of his work will make apparent the fact that he, as the one given by God for the purpose, enters into the reality of death and deals with it for everyone. Christ is the founder of our salvation.

He is a great conquering hero who leads the way. He goes before his people. He was the one who founded the world, and now he has also founded our deliverance through his



suffering.

He brings many sons to glory, and in so doing he pioneers the path that they will have to walk. This is the appropriate way that things should be. The way of the Son is the way of the deliverance of the many sons.

The Son is made perfect through suffering. It is the means by which he attains to true maturity, and the people of God will also be brought to their maturity in a similar manner. The Son fully enters into our condition so that in entering into his life we might be rescued from the power of death within it.

Christ is one with humanity. He does not just stand between God and humanity as a sort of intermediary being. He is fully divine and fully human.

He is our brother and speaks of us as his brothers. The quotation from Psalm 22, I will tell of your name to my brothers in the midst of the congregation I will praise you, is from the most famous psalm speaking of the Messiah's suffering and victory. It is the principal psalm that is found on Jesus' lips on the cross.

The gospel writers also allude to it on several occasions in their crucifixion accounts. Like the verses that follow from Isaiah 8, 17 and 18 they present the victorious Christ surrounded by the human beings he has delivered with himself as their champion, their chief, their forerunner and their redeemer. He sings in victory as one of them, leading them in song.

He trusts in the Lord as one of them. We will see later on that he is the author and the perfecter of faith. He presents them as people given to him by God as his children.

From speaking of the Son chiefly as the hero and forerunner the author moves to the Son as the deliverer. The children given to him were under the dominion of the one with the power of death. So in order to deliver them from it the Son entered into their condition.

While the devil does not ultimately have the power to give or to take life of his own accord, death is destruction and the devil is the destroyer. Death, even though introduced by God, is a means by which the devil can achieve his purposes. The thrall of any power also is generally wielded much more through fear than it is through direct coercional force.

The power of death that keeps us in slavery is mostly the fear of death. If people stop fearing the punishments of a king that king will lose his power. Even if the punishments might still occur people will far more readily rebel against him.

Christ disarms the devil chiefly in his power of wielding fear. By openly overcoming the finality of the power of death and destruction that the devil boasts in that power ceases

to terrify as it once did. Former prisoners can now rise up and people can be set free.

Christ's identification with and deliverance of the prisoners and the hostages of death and the devil is exclusive to human beings. Angels have not received such a salvation. The Son is also a high priest in addition to being this hero and liberator.

In order to be effective as such he needs to be one of us able truly to act as our representative. Through his suffering he has experienced the extent of the human condition so he is one to whom we can turn in our struggles. A question to consider what are some examples of the ways in which the devil wields his power over us through the fear of death.

Hebrews has presented Christ in his exalted relationship to God and over the angels chiefly in the first chapter. In chapter 2 his relationship to mankind was explored as the one who fully partakes in our condition and after his humiliation is lifted up as our representative our champion, our deliverer and our high priest. Chapter 3 now continues to speak of Christ as our high priest especially in the first six verses which speak of his status.

This is followed by an exhortation from Psalm 95 verses 7 to 11 until the author returns to the theme of Christ as our high priest at the end of chapter 4. Thomas Long observes a sort of theology of the church in miniature in the opening line of this chapter As brothers we are one bound together in the family of God we are holy, set apart by God we are apostolic, formed by the message of the great apostle Jesus Christ himself which is then passed on to his ministers The author begins by comparing the faithfulness of Christ and his calling to the faithfulness of Moses before proceeding to contrast the stature of these two figures. Moses is an extremely important figure in the Old Testament he's the paradigmatic leader he's the great leader of Israel during the exodus Moses' relationship to the Lord was unique in the Old Testament Exodus chapter 33 verse 11 reads Thus the Lord used to speak to Moses face to face as a man speaks to his friend The author references one of the key passages concerning Moses in Numbers chapter 12 verses 6 to 8 where the Lord speaks to Aaron and Miriam concerning Moses who is described as the most meek man on the face of the earth and he said Moses was made as God both to Aaron in Exodus chapter 4 verse 16 and to Pharaoh in Exodus chapter 7 verse 1 Moses saw the Lord's back and entered the very presence of the Lord at Mount Sinai Moses was regarded as a lower sort of God by the Israelites who sought to replace him with the golden calf when they feared that he had died He intermediated for the entire people bearing and leading them before the Lord In Sirach chapter 45 verses 2 to 5 we have a sense of how Moses was viewed by other people of this period There were various legends about Moses circulating at this time and many early Jewish Christians would wonder where Jesus might stand relative to Moses The point is not to diminish Moses so much as it is to elevate Jesus Behind both this chapter and chapter 1 we might perceive many of the other chapters We should also probably consider the

place of Deuteronomy chapter 18 verses 15 to 19 and the expectation that this represented The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you from your brothers It is to him you shall listen Just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more lest I die And the Lord said to me they are right in what they have spoken I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their brothers and I will put my words in his mouth and he shall speak to them all that I command him and whoever will not listen to my words that he shall speak in my name I myself will require it of him Jesus is much greater than Moses though Playing with the concept of Moses' faithfulness in God's house in Numbers chapter 12 the author of Hebrews explores different aspects of that concept, the concept of the house Long uses the illustration of the jewel so that the viewer can see different facets The author starts by exploring the concept of the house as a physical building Moses is part of the house but Christ is the builder of the house Now a different facet is seen The house is the household Moses is the faithful servant and steward but Christ is the son who is over the entire house as it belongs to him Finally, one further aspect is seen as we ourselves are identified with the house We are the household of the son and we are the building that he is constructing His glory says something about our elevated status as his people too We are the people of Christ as Old Testament Israel were the people of Moses The author has both compared and contrasted Moses and Christ Now he develops this point by relating a warning given on the basis of the failure of the wilderness generation led by Moses in Psalm 95 to his hearers situation in the 1st century AD At the beginning of chapter 2 after he had demonstrated the supremacy of Christ over the angels in chapter 1 he had delivered a warning to pay closer attention If rejection of the law given by means of the angels came with such punishment how much more rejection of the message of Christ? The logic of the quotation of Psalm 95 after his argument for the supremacy of Christ over Moses is much the same The author will return to unpacking the character of Christ as high priest after this mini sermon but here his point is to drive home something of the practical import of the supremacy of Christ over Moses Within the passage that follows he will especially work with the key hook words of today and rest As he has connected and contrasted Moses with Christ the author is now able to relate Old Testament scriptures concerning Moses and his people to the situation of the recipients of the book It is worth noting the way that such typology serves the task of preaching by placing Christians into clear analogical relationships with former groups of God's people and enabling words delivered to them to speak directly into our present situations too Paul does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 10 where he employs the cautionary example of the Israelites verses 6-11 of that chapter read Now these things took place as examples for us that we might not desire evil as they did Do not be idolaters as some of them were as it is written The people sat down to eat and drink and rose up to play We must not indulge in sexual immorality as some of them did and 23,000 fell in a single day We must not put Christ to the test as some of them did and were destroyed by serpents nor grumble as some of them did and were destroyed by the

destroyer Now these things happened to them as an example but they were written down for our instruction Psalm 95 emphasizes the urgent importance of hearing the word of the Lord This was also the point stressed in 2 1-4 The term today is one that he returns to on several occasions Today stresses the urgency of the message and the danger of failing to respond to it Sin hardens us Those who delay their response will find that their capacity to respond diminishes over time Before long we might have closed our window of opportunity and become insensitive to the message If you hear God's truth, respond immediately Do not delay Do not let that slight twinge of conscience that you feel be the last dying embers of a grace that you have long sought to quench and will soon utterly extinguish Nothing matters more than this In the hardening that the author describes we might also remember the cautionary example of Pharaoh who progressively hardened his heart to his own utter destruction The progressive yet almost imperceptible character of such developments are particularly significant for the author of Hebrews We must take care for this reason Our own hearts are treacherous They can betray us and sin can outwit us We must be vigilant and be on our guard The danger of falling away from the living God is real One of the ways that the Lord preserves us as his people is through such serious warnings It is imperative that we heed them In verse 6 the author wrote If indeed we hold fast our confidence and our boasting and our hope He makes a similar statement in verse 14 For we have come to share in Christ if indeed we hold our original confidence firm to the end Both of these are rather surprising statements They seem to make one's current status dependent upon future perseverance However, this may not be all that strange Future actions can definitely change the past in certain ways The meaningfulness of our past sacrifices, for instance depends largely upon what becomes of them If we abandon past commitments the past actions made in service of those commitments are emptied of their meaning and our past selves can be betrayed and robbed Our current participation in Christ is a participation in hope It is anticipatory The meaning of my current participation in Christ depends largely upon whether I will persevere in it or not If I abandon it, my current participation is also robbed of much of its force I will have betrayed my current self and deprived myself of the sure hope that I currently found my faith upon The Israelites, of course, had the promise of entering into the rest of the promised land They ventured out into the wilderness to receive it However, by abandoning their faith they robbed themselves of the promise and emptied their former decision to follow Moses and the Lord out of Egypt of its meaning, by not following through with it They ended up going out into the wilderness to die Later events can poison past ones as anyone who has experienced a bitter divorce or betrayal can testify Memories are curdled Sacrifices are made in vain Years of our lives devoted to a particular cause can be wasted As participants in Christ we currently have in our hands the most precious treasure of all We must be careful never to reject it because our current possession of it depends greatly upon how we persevere in it or not Chapter 3 ends with the author recapitulating the story of Israel's unfaithfulness in the wilderness as a cautionary tale for Christians Their story did not end well While the author of Hebrews is confident of much better things for

his hearers he wants them, as the people of Christ to learn from the example of the people of the lesser Moses He will develop this sermon further in the chapter that follows A question to consider Where else in the New Testament do we see Christ compared and contrasted with Moses? The author of Hebrews presents the experience of the Christians to whom he is writing in terms of the experience of the generation of the children of Israel in the wilderness during the Exodus Like the Israelites, they are in a realm between realms no longer in the wilderness but not yet having entered into the rest of the awaited promise They must faithfully persevere Hebrews chapter 4 is part of an argument that the writer has been developing since the preceding chapter expounding Psalm 95 verses 7-11 and exhorting the people in terms of it As Paul does in 1 Corinthians 10 he encourages the hearers of the epistle to consider themselves in terms of the experience of Israel learning from their cautionary example All of the Israelites were delivered from Egypt but on account of their unbelief an entire generation was taken from them before entering into the land into the rest that God had promised them The people to whom Hebrews is written are the people of Christ who is greater than Moses Moses was the one who led the Israelites and they need to learn from the failures of the people of Moses If Hebrews chapter 3 mostly looks back to the cautionary example of the wilderness generation of the Israelites reading the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Numbers chapter 14 and the judgment that came upon them Hebrews chapter 4 focuses upon looking forward to the rest promised to us and reads the verses from Psalm 95 against the backdrop of Genesis chapter 2 verses 1-3 where God first establishes the Sabbath In chapter 4 verse 1 the fear is repeated not so much in terms of rebellion and punishment as it was earlier but in terms of missing out on promise as in 1 Corinthians chapter 10 the point is strengthened by heightening the awareness of an analogy between the experience of the Christians that are being addressed in the epistle and the experience of Israel Good news! A gospel came to Israel just as it had come in their days However the good news of the rest of the promised land that the Israelites received did them no good as they failed to grasp hold of it by faith The seed of the word fell on poor soil True faith effectively receives the promise of God responds with obedience and holds fast to Him Those who believe do enter into the promised rest the rest that is testified to even in the warning of Psalm 95 verse 11 That rest is God's own Sabbath rest established when He first created the world At this point He is moving from the unbelief of the wilderness generation that we should learn from and focusing upon the promise that is still held out to us Psalm 95's mention of rest was not merely about the promised land of Canaan being offered to the wilderness generation It looked beyond that to entering into the fullness of God's Sabbath rest the rest that is described in Genesis chapter 2 This movement from the immediate promise of entry into the land to promise of entry into a greater a more fundamental and more permanent rest is already anticipated in the Psalm which takes the historical statement made to the wilderness generation and addresses it in the present to those singing and hearing the Psalm They are expected to recognise that behind the historic rest of the land promised to Israel is a greater rest The very fact that entering God's rest is spoken

of as it is in Psalm 95 implies something that is still open for us God promised that people would one day enter into His rest a promise that looks all the way back to Genesis chapter 2 where God rested from His work in creation on the Sabbath day This promise remains It's a fact testified to by the word today within Psalm 95 from David's day This clearly demonstrates that even though Joshua brought them into the land this did not achieve full entry into God's rest Canaan wasn't the great Sabbath for which they had been waiting Even as they enjoyed the land of Canaan Israel recognised that there were sojourners and pilgrims awaiting a greater homeland Hebrews chapter 11 verses 13-16 and 39-40 say And all these, though commended through their faith did not receive what was promised since God had provided something better for us that apart from us they should not be made perfect This notion is not novel to the New Testament Leviticus chapter 25 verse 23 declares Even when settled in the land Israel still hasn't truly arrived at rest and their true homeland Consequently there remains a Sabbath rest for us to look forward to and to strive to enter as the people of God Jews and Gentiles alike The heroes of Hebrews faced the same danger as the Israelites of the wilderness generation If they didn't strive to enter into God's rest they could fall short through disobedience like the Israelites The word of the living God is itself living and powerful to discern and to test the thoughts and intentions of the heart As God speaks he exposes hearts Every creature is naked and exposed in God's sight to him to whom we must give account Faced with the wonderful continued promise of rest the fearful risk of falling short of it and the unmasking power of the word of God we must respond to that dividing word with faith holding on firmly to the promise of sharing in God's Sabbath and entering into it A question to consider Where in the Old Testament might we see a connection between God's rest on the Sabbath day and his work of bringing Israel into the land? Hebrews introduced the theme of Christ as the Great High Priest back at the end of chapter 2 Therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every respect so that he might become a merciful and faithful High Priest in the service of God to make propitiation for the sins of the people For because he himself has suffered when tempted he is able to help those who are being tempted Therefore holy brothers, you who share in a heavenly calling consider Jesus, the Apostle and High Priest of our confession who was faithful to him who appointed him just as Moses also was faithful in all God's house Now after an exhortatory interlude the author of Hebrews returns to the theme One of the things that he will be demonstrating is that Christ both enters fully into our weaknesses and can graciously act on behalf of us in his strength Both dimensions of this will be very important to his argument The final three verses of chapter 4 are the transition into the chapters that follow concerning the priesthood of Christ Jesus, the Son of God has passed through the heavens and sat down at God's right hand He has gone in advance of us as our Great High Priest completing his sacrifice and entering into rest However, despite his character as the great champion that goes before us, he has entered into the same struggle with temptation that we face The temptation here isn't so much with sin as such as it is with the temptation to draw back from our calling to fail to persevere through suffering to the end the temptation of not firmly holding onto God's

promise and entering into rest Despite being tempted to divert from the pain of the cross Jesus endured the pain and the shame and has entered into the glorious rest of God as the High Priest and the leader of his people This is an assurance to us that we will enter too We must faithfully follow Jesus and look to him Through him we also can draw near to God's very throne which is a throne of grace for us a place where we will find aid when we need it and from where we will discover the strength that we need to persevere and to receive the promise of rest that God holds out to us There will be many times of need times when we feel the weakness of our flesh the empty seductions of Satan the bitter assaults of others and the darkness of a veiled heavens Christ has been there before us When we come to him we come to the one who has gone before us and blazed a trail for us We come to the one who fully entered into our struggle so that we might fully enter into his life His throne is the throne of grace not the throne of one who is seeking to trip us up but one who desires as our great High Priest to bring us to God The opening verses of Hebrews 5 give a sort of job description of the High Priest The author of Hebrews will seek to demonstrate that not only does Christ fulfil the requirements for High Priest he fulfils the duty of a High Priest more perfectly than any other could The argument of verses 1-10 of Hebrews 5 takes a rough there and back again or bookended character what scholars can often call a chiasm It begins with the function of the High Priest in verse 1 moves to the person of the High Priest in verses 2-3 proceeds to the appointment of the High Priest in verse 4 then it moves back through these aspects of the High Priest like drawing the boxes that a High Priest needs to tick before going back through the list placing a big tick in every one of the boxes However, while doing this he shows that not only does Jesus clearly fulfil each of the criteria he goes far, far beyond He begins with his appointment in verses 5-6 then moves to his person in verses 7-8 before concluding with Christ's fulfilment of the function of his High Priesthood in verses 9-10 The High Priest is appointed to act on behalf of men in relation to God, offering both gifts and sacrifices for sins They are representatives, acting on behalf of the people to whom they belong They are also mediators acting on behalf of that people towards God going between the people and God However, while these official functions of the High Priest role are important and primary to the definition of what he is about his person matters too The High Priest is not only a representative and a mediator he is also a shepherd of the people He needs to pastor those under his oversight exhorting and encouraging them in faithfulness As a fallen human being, like those to whom he is ministering the High Priest should be all too aware of the struggles those in his flock are experiencing Consequently, he is gentle in dealing with the weak the wayward and those lacking in wisdom However, given his own sinful nature he must sacrifice both for his own sin and also for the sins of those to whom he is ministering His greater suitability as a pastor comes at the expense of his capacity to act vicariously for them He always has to deal with his own sins first The High Priest doesn't appoint himself nor for that matter is he appointed directly by the people he is serving He is a minister of God Aaron who was directly chosen by God is a clear example of this Christ meets the criterion of divine appointment To prove this, the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 2 verse 7 and Psalm 110

verse 4 Like a number of the other ways that he uses the Old Testament scriptures these might seem rather strained as proofs at first glance However, this is almost certainly because he expects his hearers to be familiar enough with and as imaginatively steeped in the story of Christ and the scriptures to be able to join the dots we should be able to reconstruct the reasoning that led him to connect these things The first quotation from Psalm 2 verse 7 speaks of the anointing of the Davidic Messiah as King However, anyone familiar with the story of Christ should know that this verse corresponded with an event in Christ's life In Luke chapter 3 verses 21 to 23 the baptism of Christ is described Now when all the people were baptized and when Jesus also had been baptized and was praying the heavens were opened and the Holy Spirit descended on him in bodily form like a dove and a voice came from heaven You are my beloved son, with you I am well pleased Jesus, when he began his ministry was about 30 years of age Throughout Luke's gospel the temple and priesthood are prominent from the first announcement of the birth of John the Baptist to Jesus' presentation in the temple to the boy Jesus in the temple through to the end of the book when they are continually in the temple praising God Priestly themes pervade the book There is a need for the purification of the Lord's house and John the Baptist, the son of a priest announces the coming one who will accomplish this In the Old Testament entrance into priesthood involved the baptism as we see in Exodus chapter 40 Levites, and we should probably assume priests also began their ministry at the age of 30 Christ's sonship had already been connected with his presence in the house of his father Beyond this a number of scholars have noted the presence of several names in Luke's genealogy with suggestive associations with priesthood Jesus will later implicitly appeal to John's baptism as the basis of the authority by which he cleansed the temple John's baptism is framed then as a baptism into and an anointment for a sort of priesthood a priesthood that perhaps might also remind us of the prophetic priesthood of Ezekiel whose ministry also begins with an appointment in the 30th year by a river with opened heavens and a vision from God Ezekiel is also frequently called son of man At the heart of Jesus' baptism however are the words of the father You are my beloved son These are the words with which Jesus' public ministry begins The words of the father's approval and as the early readers of scripture recognised the words of his appointing to office The words allude back to the words of Psalm 2 verse 7 The author of Hebrews is not randomly reaching for a text here but is alluding to the event of Christ's baptism an event with a manifestly priestly character as the fulfilment of the messianic appointment spoken of in Psalm 2 And the second text is similar It comes in another psalm which is more famous for its first verse the verse that is the Old Testament verse which is the most quoted in the New Psalm 110 verse 1 which he himself had quoted in chapter 1 verse 13 The Lord says to my Lord, sit at my right hand until I make your enemies your footstool That verse connects not with the beginning of Christ's priestly ministry but with the elevation of Christ into the heavenly temple in his ascension having completed his once for all sacrifice To the mind of the reader that is familiar with scripture and the story of Jesus it should be clear that the author of Hebrews has selected two texts that between them sandwich the full reality of



Christ's priestly ministry in divine statements of appointment Going back through his list the next box that needs to be ticked is that of personhood Is Christ suitable not just as one properly appointed but also as an effective pastor of the flock compassionate and gentle We are to be left in no doubt He has experienced the same struggles as we have His anguish in wrestling with God in the tribulation of Gethsemane and on the cross at Calvary set the pattern for the tribulations that come upon his people What priest has experienced such extremes of suffering? What priest has such acquaintance with the depths of human anguish and struggle? Yet while the typical high priests were sinful in their flesh and so their compassionate acquaintance with the struggles of their flocks came at the cost of effectiveness as vicarious servants on their behalf Christ is faithful in his suffering Christ is the Son himself one with all of the prerogatives and authority that come with that Yet he also enters fully into the reality of suffering and is formed in his humanity by the full trials of suffering that we experience How much more effectively can he represent us? Acquainted with the weakness and the struggle of faithfulness in the flesh but uncompromised by sin and enjoying all of the privileges of the Son so that while acting with gentleness and compassion he can act with power on our behalf The function of the high priest was to act on behalf of men in relation to God to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins They were limited in their performance of this function by their human sin and frailty But Christ is the source of salvation His salvation is eternal not something that requires the continual repetition of sacrifices His priesthood is also unending as he is a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek Christ not only ticks the box of the high priestly function the last box of the list he completely eclipses anything that any other high priest could perform A question to consider In relation to Christ's priesthood this passage alludes to Christ's baptism his sufferings in the garden and on the cross and his ascent into heaven Where else in Jesus' earthly ministry can we see him as the great high priest? It may seem as if the author of Hebrews has been taking us into rich territory of biblical insight yet he feels keenly the limitations of his hearers He wants to take them so much further but he just isn't sure that they are ready for such advanced teaching They still don't seem to have grasped many of the basics He remarks upon the poor progress of his hearers at the end of chapter 5 Considering how much teaching they had received and how much time they had been learning they should have grown so much further in their understanding to the point of being teachers themselves Indeed, he wonders if their grasp of the fundamentals themselves isn't a bit shaky at this point Perhaps they have even regressed in their understanding to the point of being like babies needing to be fed milk, unable to take solid food They are students with the dunce's hat on their head being placed in the remedial class They are unskilled and childlike They lack the necessary capacity both to digest solid food or the powers of discernment required of healthy eaters who are active in discriminating and determining what they take in One can perhaps imagine the author of Hebrews saying all of this with a slight twinkle in his eye By presenting the teaching that he wishes to give them as beyond their capacity and level of maturity they will be provoked to protest that they are ready Had he simply ploughed on into it they might have grumbled that his teaching was

too difficult and challenging. However, now they have been given something to prove and will be eager to pay closer attention. Within this, we should also recognise the emphasis that the author of Hebrews, along with the other New Testament authors places upon advancing Christians in their understanding always pushing them to the next level. The author of Hebrews is concerned that his hearers are at the point where they can understand complicated and challenging teachings about Old Testament symbolism, narrative and typology. Wisdom involves the knowledge of good and evil, the ability to discern between these things, the wise person has moved beyond the basics of pre-digested food and they are able to test things for themselves. They are active learners committed to growing in their own knowledge, having learnt some of the skills by which one can discern the difference between truth and error and feeding themselves consistently. Having needed his hearers by suggesting that they are not yet prepared to advance in their study of the Christian faith, the author of Hebrews hopes to provoke them to try to prove him wrong. Verse 1 of chapter 6 presumes that after such a challenge the hearers will be eager to progress. OK then, let's move forward. They should leave the basic classes behind, not having forgotten or abandoned their lessons but moving on to the more advanced classes in which the fundamentals are far more developed. They are moving forward to perfection or maturity, the same thing that Christ attained to through his sufferings in chapter 2 verse 10 and 5 verse 9. What are the most fundamental teachings or the elementary doctrine of Christ? The list might be divided into three pairs: repentance and faith, baptisms and the laying on of hands, and the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement. Repentance is repentance from dead works or from works that lead to death. The dead works are almost certainly not works done to attempt to earn salvation but rather sinful works that have death and judgement as their natural harvest. Repentance involves turning away from such things and having turned away from them we turn towards God and faith. Faith is the counterpart of repentance. Instruction about washings or literally baptisms refers to the instruction concerning the meaning of Christian baptism, quite possibly in its relationship to other baptisms such as the baptisms of the priests in the Old Testament, the baptism of John and other ritual washings. The laying on of hands is another ritual action of importance in appointment to office, in blessing, in healing and also in connection with baptism. It is probably on account of its relationship to baptism that it is mentioned here. The resurrection of the dead and eternal judgement are the final foundational teachings that the author of Hebrews lists. These concern the last things. At the end the dead will be raised and will face final judgement. The judgement is eternal. Its outcomes, positive or negative, will be both final and enduring. The list of fundamental doctrines that he gives here might be a little surprising. They have a more practical weight to them. They concern how we are personally to respond to the message of Christ, how we are initiated into Christian community and the horizon to which we must live. The author wants to take his hearers beyond the basics and trusts that God will make his teaching effective in this regard. He is deeply concerned for their progress in no small measure because standing still is not an option. Those who are not progressing are in real danger of falling away. He

is exhorting them to continued growth expecting that they will heed him. However, his exhortation consists not merely of encouragements and promises but also of very serious and grave warnings. Although these warnings are framed in a more generic fashion not addressed to any particular group of or among the hearers of the book and the author is confident that his hearers will respond appropriately the warnings are not empty ones. Indeed, I believe that they refer to a specific group of people especially. The language is the language of Christian experience but I suspect that he is here referring to the unbelieving Jews of that generation and previous generations who opposed the gospel and rejected Christ. He is earlier spoken of people who received the good news as those who were in the wilderness led by Moses. They had a similar sort of experience but they did not respond by faith. The apostle Paul does a similar thing in 1 Corinthians 10:1-4. The purpose of such a way of speaking is to get Christians to recognize the similarities between them and the children of Israel who were led by Moses into the wilderness. He had already been doing this in chapters 3 and 4. Once they recognize the similarities they will be warned about any presumption that they might have appreciating that such great gifts can be forfeited by those who respond to God's immense goodness with unbelief. The children of Israel were once enlightened. They had the fire of God's presence in their midst. They were led through the waters and declared to be God's own people. God lighted their way both physically and spiritually. They tasted the heavenly gift. As Paul puts it, they ate the same spiritual food and drank the same spiritual drink. They participated in Christ himself. They shared in the Holy Spirit. Isaiah 63:11 speaks of the Lord placing His Holy Spirit in the midst of the people of Israel when He brought them out of Egypt. There are similar claims in Israel's national confession of sin in Nehemiah 9. For instance in verses 19-20. You and your great mercies did not forsake them in the wilderness. The pillar of cloud to lead them in the way did not depart from them by day nor the pillar of fire by night to light for them the way by which they should go. You gave your good spirit to instruct them and did not withhold your manner from their mouth and gave them water for their thirst. They tasted the goodness of the word of God having actual first-hand experience of God's good provision. They had tasted the powers of the age to come. They had experienced His might over creation in judgment and healing in the plagues of Egypt and in the miraculous provision of the wilderness. However, even after first-hand experience of all of these things an experience also shared by many non-believing Jews they still rejected the word of the Lord and fell in the wilderness. At such a point, after they had experienced so much yet determinedly hardened their hearts and what is more, rejected such a great salvation so decisively there was no remaining hope for them. They were condemned to destruction and they perished, their bodies falling in the wilderness. Christ was once crucified made an open shame before others. For the author of Hebrews, it is as if those who reject the gospel are inflicting a sort of a second crucifixion upon Christ if that were indeed possible holding Him up for shame to the world and cutting Him off from themselves. However, they are the ones who will lose out they are doing this to their harm. The author of Hebrews describes such a situation by contrasting land that is well-watered and responds with fruitfulness and a good crop to

that land if it bears thorns or thistles It is the same land, but two different potential responses It seems to me that he is here referring to the poor response of Israel to the many blessings of God over the centuries and to the fact that the judgment of God is about to fall upon it Behind this might lie Old Testament passages such as Isaiah chapter 5 The point of this is that the recipients of the book ought to see a cautionary resemblance between themselves and the people of Moses who failed in the wilderness If they are careless, they could fail too Beyond this, however, they face the temptation of falling back into the unbelieving Judaism that they left behind However, that unbelieving Judaism was doomed on account of its unbelief It had experienced all of these blessings yet persisted in its unbelief There was no hope of salvation to be found there However, the author does not believe that the judgment awaiting the unbelieving Jews awaits those to whom he is writing All of the signs in their case point in a far more promising direction To this point, they have manifested commitment and fruitfulness in their faith and love and they continue to do so Yet they should beware of complacency or presumption at this point They must earnestly press forward grasping hold ever more firmly of the promised reality that they await The more sure their grip upon that the more prepared that they will be to persevere inheriting the promises in the end Perseverance for the author of Hebrews is related to our grasping hold of God's promises and people can be strengthened in their perseverance as they are assured of the strength and the surety of God's promises He ends this chapter by directing their attention to the power of God's promise Not only did God make a promise which he would not lie about or renege upon he also accompanied the promise with a vow swearing by himself to give us two things of certainty that we can rest upon For the author of Hebrews, the sure and certain promise of God is like an anchor which through Jesus has been placed in heaven itself We are able to cling onto a promise that is attached to God's very throne Christ's high priestly status assures us in all of this He is the high priest who has gone ahead of us into God's holy presence into the heavenly realm that corresponds to the Holy of Holies A question to consider What lessons about Christian growth might we learn from this passage? In chapter 7, the author of Hebrews moves on to discuss the character of Melchizedek Melchizedek is relevant to his discussion because he quoted Psalm 110 verses 1-4 earlier on You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek Having introduced this difficult text into the discussion the author of Hebrews wants to consider the character of Melchizedek and what his priesthood tells us about the priesthood of Christ Melchizedek is a strange and unexpected figure He only appears once and rather abruptly in an Old Testament narrative at a surprising and significant juncture yet without any real explanation in the text We find him in Genesis 14 verses 14-20 The king of Sodom went out to meet him at the valley of Sheba that is, the king's valley and Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine He was priest of God Most High and he blessed him and said Blessed be Abraham by God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything Melchizedek is a mysterious character and the fact that he is mentioned as

he is in Psalm 110 verse 4 is probably testimony to the fact that he was already a source of interest long before the book of Hebrews was ever written. Having seen the significance of Psalm 110 verse 4 we are propelled back into Genesis chapter 14 to consider why Melchizedek might actually be raised as a figure of importance to consider why Melchizedek might actually be raised as a figure of importance. Even within that text there are ways that he stands out. First of all we notice that he is given no introduction. He appears briefly on the page of the text and then vanishes, almost as suddenly as he had first appeared. However he quite clearly stands out from the character of the king of Sodom. However he quite clearly stands out from the character of the king of Sodom. While Abraham refuses to receive anything from the king of Sodom lest the king of Sodom say that he had made Abraham rich. Not only does he receive a blessing from this character, Melchizedek, king of Salem. He also gives him a tithe of everything that he has. Elsewhere the tithe is always given to God or to the appointed priests. Yet here is a figure who has not descended from Abraham who is receiving this tribute of a tenth as the priest and is also blessing Abraham. He is identified as the priest of God Most High. He is a priest of the true God. Yet he is not someone who belongs to the Levitical priesthood that will later be established. Indeed we are given no details of his genealogy or what qualifies him for his role. Indeed we are given no details of his genealogy or what qualifies him for his role. By itself this would invite much reflection. However when we look even more at the context, further things open up. Many of the stories of Genesis and particularly the story of Abraham have anticipatory qualities. They play out the story of the descendants of Abraham in advance. In chapter 12, Abraham goes into the land. There is a famine that leads him away from the land. He goes down to Egypt, there are plagues upon Pharaoh and then he is let out with many gifts. He goes back to the land of Canaan which was inhabited by the Canaanites at the time. He spies out the land, the Lord declares that he will give the land to him. Having separated from his nephew Lot, Lot is then captured. Abraham wins a great victory against those who have captured Lot and engages in a sort of conquest of the entire land and having done all of that he is met by the king of Jerusalem who comes bearing bread and wine. He is described as a priest of God Most High and then he blesses Abraham and receives a tithe. As a figure in the story, Abraham represents his descendants. They are going to be delivered from Egypt. They are going to spy out the land and then they are going to win a great conquest in it and finally they will arrive at Jerusalem. But just at the point where we would expect Abraham representing his descendants including the tribe of Levi to take centre stage we have this other mysterious figure and that, I believe, is why he is seen to be so significant. The point is not that the character of Melchizedek was necessarily some miraculous figure. Rather it is what he stands for as a figure. Whoever he was as a historical person he stands for so much more in the context of the text and the way it has been told. He is clearly anticipating and standing for something very important yet it is very mysterious to us. Much as we might wonder about the significance of the sacrifice of Isaac on Mount Moriah and the importance of the ram caught in the thicket and other details like that we might wonder about the character of Melchizedek. Who does he represent? What does he

stand for? Why is this figure presented as someone who is greater than Abraham who takes the centre stage at this very important moment Of course, as he is the king of Salem he might make us think of David, who became the king of Jerusalem The priest king of Jerusalem corresponds to a Davidic Messiah that will arise and having been raised up as this character as a king of righteousness and peace he will bring about something that eclipses the Levitical priesthood Consequently, although Christ does not fulfil the requirements for the Levitical priesthood he can belong to a different type of priesthood a different order the order of Melchizedek He is the one who is prefigured by this character within the story of Genesis 14 and once this foreshadowing is appreciated so many of the mysteries and conundrums of the story of Genesis 14 fall into place We begin to understand what this mysterious character of Melchizedek is doing there at that juncture We also begin to understand better Psalm 110 verse 4 why this great figure who is elevated might be described as having the priesthood of Melchizedek and now that we have an eternal priest according to this order we no longer need the Levitical priesthood which was only temporary that priesthood was never going to bring perfection and in contrast with that priesthood appointment to this priesthood comes with an oath the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind you are a priest forever because Christ is an eternal priest according to the order of Melchizedek he is able to bring us to God in a far greater way than any of the Levitical priests could do not just because they were sinful but because their priesthood was limited his priesthood eclipses theirs he is so much more suited as a high priest to bring us to God he is one who is holy, innocent, unstained separated from sinners and exalted above the heavens he is like the unblemished lamb the one that can represent people and bring them into God's presence he is the one who participates fully in flesh but is not stained by its sin and as a result he can represent us fully and compassionately enter into our life while still being able to act in a powerfully vicarious manner for us as he is separated from sin he does not need to offer sacrifices for himself first nor indeed does he need to offer repeated sacrifices for the people he offered himself once and for all as a complete and perfect sacrifice one that was perfectly suited to bring people to God the law appoints men in their weakness as high priests but the word of God's oath which comes later than the law and surpasses the law appoints this son, the one who has been perfected forever he is the one by whom we can be brought fully into the presence of God a question to consider what role is the immortality of Christ playing in the author of Hebrews argument? the author of Hebrews has been contrasting the priestly order of Melchizedek with the Levitical priesthood and continues to do so into chapter 8 in chapter 8 he moves into a contrast between the old covenant order in terms of which the old Levitical priesthood operated and the new covenant with its Melchizedekian priesthood he also contrasts the nature and the context of their service our high priest, Jesus Christ is high priest according to the order of Melchizedek he is a priest in the heavenly places in the true tabernacle of the heavens high above any earthly priest Hebrews works with a sort of vertical typology when we talk about typology we are generally talking about horizontal typology where former events anticipate later events and later events explore or develop the patterns of earlier

ones however there are other ways in which typology can operate a vertical typology thinks about the relationship between different levels of reality a heavenly reality above is impressed upon an earthly reality beneath so the tabernacle of the heavens is a place the tabernacle of Moses does not just anticipate things that are to come it also relates to something that already exists in the heavens above heavenly realities are mirrored in the earthly realities of the sanctuary the Levitical priesthood operates in the realm of the earthly model the copy and the shadow of the heavenly temple according to the order of which the pattern for the tabernacle was given to Moses on Mount Sinai the book of Hebrews has both horizontal and vertical elements of typology which often come together the copy and the shadow are not empty of meaning they are however like a replica of a great heavenly reality through which people could relate to the heavenly realities in an indirect manner Christ would not qualify as a Levitical priest on account of his coming from the tribe of Judah consequently for him to be a priest some change would need to occur in the terms of the covenant order or it would have to relate to some other covenant order entirely Christ comes with a new covenant a new covenant with much better promises as it is concerned not just with the earthly model and replica but with the heavenly realities it is much more effective, much more powerful in bringing people near to God the first covenant was hamstrung by the sins of the priests and by the unfaithfulness of the people in verse 8 we read that he found fault with them where was the problem with the old covenant? it was with the people for they did not continue in my covenant and so I showed no concern for them declares the Lord we see in verse 9 a new covenant had to deal with the most fundamental problem which was with the rebellious and resistant hearts of the people the Lord had to write his law upon their hearts so that the core problem, the problem of the people turning astray could be dealt with the tabernacle and the temple were among other things the tabernacle was not just models of the heavens above but also models of the true person the person who has the word of God treasured within the word of the covenant that is stored in the treasure house of the heart they bear the light of the Lord's truth like the lampstand of the temple and then they also feed upon the word of God like bread like sacrifices ascending they offer themselves up to God their prayers ascend like incense to his house and living water flows out from them as they give life to all around them however under the old covenant this was not realized there was an architectural replica of the faithful people but there was no actual people to correspond with it in the new covenant we have a new temple the new temple is Jesus Christ himself and the people formed in him by his spirit and that new temple has the law of God dwelling in its heart the work of the spirit by which people are transformed the core problem of the old covenant was seen all the way back in Deuteronomy the Lord offered countless blessings to a faithful people and promised them life however the people consistently rebelled and failed Deuteronomy chapter 30 verses 1-6 and when all these things come upon you the blessing and the curse which I have set before you and you call them to mind among all the nations where the Lord your God has driven you and return to the Lord your God you and your children and obey his voice in all that I command you today with all your heart and with

all your soul then the Lord your God will restore your fortunes and have mercy on you and he will gather you again from all the peoples where the Lord your God has scattered you if your outcasts are in the uttermost parts of heaven from there the Lord your God will gather you and from there he will take you and the Lord your God will bring you into the land that your fathers possessed that you may possess it and he will make you more prosperous and numerous than your fathers and the Lord your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your offspring so that you will love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul that you may live facing the reality of exile the Lord later promised that he would restore his people and deal with the fundamental problem of the covenant their hearts in Ezekiel chapter 36 verses 24-28 I will take you from the nations and gather you from all the countries and bring you into your own land I will sprinkle clean water on you and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers and you shall be my people and I will be your God Christ is the mediator of this new covenant he is sinless and entirely faithful he is ever living to intercede for us before God's very throne so we are preserved in relationship with God his spirit is writing the law of God upon our hearts so that we are conformed to him Now that the Old Covenant has been surpassed it is about to be removed altogether The Old Covenant will finally be removed in the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple in AD 70 when the sanctuary is destroyed and sacrifice is rendered inoperative A question to consider Implicit in this passage is a contrast between the people of the Old Covenant and the people of the New Covenant In what does this contrast consist? How might this contrast inform our reading of Hebrews more generally? Having already contrasted the Old and the New High Priesthoods and the covenants corresponding to them In chapter 9 the author of Hebrews describes the Old and the New Sanctuaries and the priestly service corresponding with them He begins by roughly describing the order of the tabernacle that was constructed according to the plans that were given to Moses on Mount Sinai Moving from the high place, with the lampstand, the table and the bread of the presence he takes us into the most holy place The attentive reader of the Old Testament might scratch his head at some of the details here The golden altar of incense is not in the most holy place nor are the manna or Aaron's rod in the Ark of the Covenant In Exodus 16, verse 34, the manna was seemingly placed before the testimony In Numbers 17, verse 10, Aaron's rod was also placed in the same location In 1 Kings 8, verse 9 we read There was nothing in the Ark except the two tablets of stone that Moses put there at Horeb where the Lord made a covenant with the people of Israel when they came out of the land of Egypt We have a number of problems here then before we move on to consider the meaning of these things First, how can the author of Hebrews say that the golden altar of incense is inside the most holy place? Second, how can he say that the manna and Aaron's rod are inside the Ark of the Covenant? Most commentators simply say that the details are inaccurate However, it is



usually the case when reading scripture that seemingly inaccurate or imprecise details are clues to the fact that something more is going on. To the first question concerning the location of the golden altar of incense, some have suggested that it is to an incense burner rather than to the golden altar of incense that Hebrews is referring. This seems tenuous to me. While it was not unlikely that there was an incense burner in there for the incense brought in, the far more significant piece of furniture was the altar of incense. Another intriguing suggestion is that with texts such as 1 Kings 6, verse 22 in mind, the author of Hebrews is recognising that although the golden altar of incense is part of the furniture of the holy place, it is especially tied to the Ark of the Covenant and in some sense belongs to that part of the tabernacle. It is by means of the altar of incense that one ascends to the most holy place. You might think of it this way: To which room does the ladder belong? The lower room from which it goes up or the upper room to which it ascends? Leviticus chapter 16, verses 12-13 gives us some sense of this: "And he shall take a censer full of coals of fire from the altar before the Lord and two handfuls of sweet incense beaten small and he shall bring it inside the veil and put the incense on the fire before the Lord that the cloud of the incense may cover the mercy seat that is over the testimony so that he does not die. The incense then is the means by which one ascends from the lower part which is the holy place to the upper part which is the most holy place. The second question concerning the location of the manor and the rod is also challenging. However, even if there is technical imprecision here, it is instructive. For instance, the golden altar of incense is very clearly connected with the Ark of the Covenant even though divided from it by the veil. It has to be placed before it. The rod and the manor are placed before the testimonies connecting them with the tablets of the Covenant, not merely the Ark itself but its contents. The relics of the rod and the manor were not present in the Ark when it was placed in the inner sanctuary in 1 Kings chapter 8. However, the relics of the rod and the manor might also make us think of the furniture of the holy place. The holy place contains the altar of incense which connects to the Ark of the Covenant with the lampstand and the table of showbread. The most holy place contains the Ark of the Testimony with the rod and the manor. The rod with its almond blossoms connects with the lampstand with its almond blossoms. The manor, the heavenly bread that God provides in the wilderness, connects with the showbread. However, after this teasing glimpse into the tabernacle, the author of Hebrews takes us out once more. Having briefly described the tabernacle, he describes the way that the service of the priests related to the sections of it. The key term here is first. The priest's service was overwhelmingly in the first section, not in the second. The high priest was the only one who served in the second section and then only once a year to take blood on the Day of Atonement. The limited access to the second section, though only a replica of the heavenly temple, represented the truth of the lack of access enjoyed by the people to God's special presence. The Day of Atonement was a feast with eschatological symbolic import. It was an anticipation of the great day of the Lord, when there would be a great division with some being expelled and others granted full access. It symbolized the movement from the present age of the first section to the age to come of the second.

section when the sins of Israel would be dealt with decisively. The first section of the tabernacle represented the state of the people in the age prior to the work of Christ: a realm of limited access. The Day of Atonement was essential to the functioning of the entire sacrificial system. It rebooted it every year. Yet its reality was an eschatological one: a reality awaiting the future, where it would be confirmed and enacted. The entire sacrificial system is contingent upon the future time when, with some greater sacrifice, the Lord would open the way for a passage into His very presence. This would be achieved not just in some symbolic building, but in heaven itself. The tabernacle order was characterized by fleshly rituals which couldn't deal with the root problem of the people's hearts: the problem of the Old Covenant described in the preceding chapter. The symbols of offering always anticipated a greater work to come and their efficacy rested upon this Christ: the one in whom this movement from the first section to the second section, from this present age of the flesh to the age to come, is finally accomplished. He accomplishes this movement not in an earthly model of the true temple but in the heavenly reality itself. He enters by means of His own blood, by means of His own self-sacrifice. It isn't merely the blood of goats and calves but the true self-offering that the law and its ceremonies always anticipated and awaited. This redemption is not merely a symbolic entry once a year, anticipating some future reality. It is a once-for-all, decisive and complete entry into God's presence. The author concludes by contrasting the efficacy of the blood of goats and bulls and the ashes of a heifer, referring to the rite of Numbers chapter 19 which could cleanse and render people richly holy with the blood of Christ. Christ's blood is not merely related to the symbolic cleansing or sanctification of bodies. Such fleshly cleansing or sanctification through sacrifice and washing served as a ritual framework for self-offering to God. However, Christ performs the perfect self-offering as the mediator of a new covenant. He offers himself up without blemish to God through the Eternal Spirit and in the process he deals with the deep downroot problem of the covenant: the sinfulness of human hearts and successfully brings us into God's very presence. A question to consider: What positive purpose did the tabernacle serve in the author of Hebrews' understanding? The author of Hebrews concludes chapter 9 by comparing and contrasting the deaths by which the Old and the New Covenants were inaugurated. Christ is the mediator of a new covenant, a new order of affairs between God and humanity. His death redeems those who have been called from their transgressions under the First Covenant and the judgment that had been upon them. Christ isn't just the broker of some new agreement. He is a redeemer. Verses 16-17 are extremely challenging. The key question is whether the word translated as will in the ESV, *diathēke* should be translated as will or testament or whether it should be understood as covenant. In verses 15 and 18 the word clearly refers to covenant. Of course it is entirely possible that the author of Hebrews is engaging in some wordplay in these verses. Both a covenant and a will involve death on some level. There are many leading commentators that lean in both directions. However, Scott Hand's treatment of the passage in a 2005 paper has tipped many commentators in favour of the covenant reading. There are a number of other difficulties or questions raised by these verses. For instance, the word

translated as be established in the ESV or be proven in some other translations in verse 16 in order to make sense of the reading as testament or will is not the most naturally read in this manner The translation be born might be a better one Verse 16 then could be rendered For where there is a covenant, in the context clearly a broken covenant the death of the covenant maker must be born This develops the point of verse 15 The transgressions of the people under the first covenant had to be dealt with in order for the covenant to be established Verse 17, which literally refers to deaths, not just a singular death a detail that causes some problems for reading the text as a reference to testaments or wills then relates to the way that the covenant is not enforced until it is enforced The deaths of covenant breakers, or deaths bearing their sins needed to occur before the covenant could be enforced As long as the covenant breakers remained alive, the covenant was not truly enforced The author of Hebrews describes the inauguration of the Old Covenant in the covenant ceremony of Exodus 24, verses 4-8 And Moses wrote down all the words of the Lord He rose early in the morning and built an altar at the foot of the mountain and twelve pillars according to the twelve tribes of Israel And he sent young men of the people of Israel who offered burnt offerings and sacrificed peace offerings of oxen to the Lord And Moses took half of the blood and put it in basins and half of the blood he threw against 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 And Moses took the blood and threw it on the people and said Behold the blood of the covenant that the Lord has made with you in accordance with all these words If blood was needed to deal with the breach of the covenant it was also needed for its inauguration In the covenant ceremony the blood of the burnt offerings and peace offerings were placed upon the altar and the people Various parts of the tabernacle were also purified with blood Without shedding of blood, forgiveness of sins is not possible Some party needs to die to release people from the judgment lying upon their sins, purifying them In verses 23 and 24 the author of Hebrews returns to the theme of the sanctuary Christ is a minister of the heavenly, not the earthly sanctuary He is a minister in the true and the archetypal sanctuary not the humanly constructed earthly replica that corresponds to it The rites of the earthly sanctuary, the shedding and placing of animal blood and the like purify the copies of the heavenly realities They symbolize the greater sacrifices that are necessary in the heavenly realm The need for better sacrifices to deal with the realities of the heavenly sanctuary underlines the importance of the greater sacrifice offered by Christ, our glorious High Priest There is an analogy between the operations of the heavenly sanctuary and the earthly sanctuary However, the heavenly sanctuary is the greater of the two and the earthly sanctuary and its sacrificial rites therefore point to the need for better sacrifices than it is able to perform itself The earthly sanctuary needed cleansing on account of the sinfulness of the people enabling access on their behalf to God's presence The work of Christ objectively changes the situation of humanity relative to the greater sanctuary of heaven itself removing the barrier of our sins that once prevented our access Christ deals with the problem of our sins not simply in the replica of the heavenly a limited representation of

much higher and more mysterious things rather, he enters the very reality that they only symbolized entering not merely into an earthly most holy place or inner sanctuary but into heaven itself Nor was this a process constantly to be repeated year on year without ever being completed like the High Priest's annual entrance into the most holy place on the Day of Atonement with sacrificial blood of some animal If this were the case, Christ's work would be an endlessly recurring cycle of entering and re-entering from the foundation of the world until its end No, the sacrifice of Christ by which he enters is decisive and complete It is a once-for-all event that need not be repeated an entrance achieved by his own blood We should probably recognize that the point of the blood of Christ here is not the mere physical cleansing provided by the blood of animals for which animals of a certain kind were largely interchangeable Rather, the blood of Christ that saves us is not so much a physical bodily fluid as such It's the offering of his uniquely faithful life symbolized by the pouring out of blood He has been poured out to death for us an offering applied to us and into which we are included Christ's sacrifice is not a constant cyclical movement It's a definitive passage from one age to another Christ deals with sin decisively at the end of the ages sin in its singular form sin as a dominant and determinative ruling force in the world There is still sinfulness in the world but the ruling power of sin has been nullified and we need no longer live in its thrall In Christ it no longer excludes us from God's presence In Christ the condemnation no longer lies upon us in the same way Christ's dealing with sin is a sort of a last day's appearance It is the great apocalyptic event that the recurring day of atonement always awaited and anticipated As human beings we die once and judgment occurs after death Christ's work corresponds with our need He bears the death due to us in his first coming so that in his second coming, his coming in judgment he might deliver us into enjoyment of God's promise rather than having to deal with our sins once more A question to consider How does Hebrews' contrast between the copies of the heavenly things and the heavenly things themselves help us better to understand how the earthly tabernacle and temple worked? Chapter 9 ended with Christ once for all dealing with sins in the heavenly places themselves opening the way to God that was once closed off in a manner symbolised by the lack of access to the most holy place in the earthly tabernacle In the opening verses of chapter 10 he drives the point home The law of Moses and its ceremonies had only an anticipatory shadow of the realities that had been brought in by Christ The most holy place of the tabernacle was not the heavenly reality of God's throne but an earthly symbolic representation All of the sacrifices performed in the old sanctuary could not ultimately perfect the worshippers bringing them to the clearly intended goal of the system The old covenant was Sisyphean It had to repeat the same cycle again and again and again year by year while never actually attaining to its goal of decisively dealing with sin and bringing the worshipper into the presence of God Had it done so, the sacrifices wouldn't have continually been offered The worshippers would no longer have needed repeated reminders of their sin The sacrificial system constantly brought sin and the division that it caused to the forefront of the worshippers' consciousness However, with the offering of Christ the burden of sins upon the worshippers' consciousness can be

removed The obstacle of our sins needs no longer be a constant preoccupation when the true way into God's presence has been secured This contrasts markedly with the old covenant in which year after year there were repeated reminders of that obstacle of sin a constant nagging recollection of the barrier between God and humanity that had not been lifted And while the blood of bulls and goats offered a symbolic cleansing of the body they could never truly take away sins and deal with the deeper reality of sin that obstructed people's access to God's heavenly presence Christianity talks a lot about the blood of Christ and other such things Some people can think of this as if the physical blood of Jesus has quasi-magical properties However, blood was always a symbolic manifestation or representation of something more fundamental One's blood is one's life especially one's life laid down or offered or transmitted in some manner The use of the physical substance of blood helps us to communicate or to understand the more fundamental reality of the transmission of the qualities of someone's life and death to others Likewise, the concept of animal sacrifice always related to the communication and offering of oneself and one's works to God The author of Hebrews makes this point by quoting Psalm 40 verses 6-8 as if it were the statement of Christ just before taking human flesh Animal sacrifices were unable to deal with sins and to establish righteousness They constantly recalled the presence of an obstacle and the need for something to deal with it And while they might symbolize the solution they were unable to affect that solution themselves They were not ultimately pleasing to God God wanted something more the true obedience and self-offering of human life David's words to the Lord in the Psalm are most fully realized in his greater Son who accomplishes the true will of God by coming to render the true service and human offering that the sacrifices were unable to achieve The author of Hebrews tweaks the verse to strengthen his sermonic point The original text reads In sacrifice and offering you have not delighted but you have given me an open ear burnt offering and sin offering you have not required then I said behold I have come in the scroll of the book it is written of me I delight to do your will oh my God your law is within my heart Verse 6 more literally reads ears you have prepared for me which Hebrews expresses as a body you have prepared for me Perhaps the author of Hebrews is wanting his hearers to hear that divergence from the original text and to recognize that he is unpacking the point of the original The open ear or the prepared ears are bodily instruments given and prepared by God for obedience Christ in his incarnation realizes and more gloriously fulfills what the psalmist is speaking of and the author of Hebrews tweaking of the verse makes this more apparent it reinforces his argument The body of Christ's incarnation is a God-given means of his full obedience to the will of God It's a means by which what God always most deeply desired from humanity can be realized God the Son became man in order that the will of God might be fulfilled in true human obedience The law of God is within his heart This was written of in the scroll of the book which now refers not merely to the law of kingship or even to the Pentateuch more generally but to the entire Old Testament which anticipates or speaks of its expected fulfillment in the obedience of one who is to come When such human obedience is offered and we are by the Spirit caught up in the slipstream of

Christ animal sacrifices and offerings are no longer needed and indeed they can be done away with The once for all, decisive and final offering has now occurred Animal sacrifices are nullified now that the true human obedience that the law always anticipated and awaited and desired has been established And now the author of Hebrews is at a point to return triumphantly to the point at which he began But now we have the eyes to see its true wonder and glory The Levitical priests are engaged in that Sisyphean task of repeatedly offering the same sacrifices sacrifices that are ultimately futile in the task of taking away sins However, Christ offered a single, efficacious sacrifice for sins achieving once for all what the old, repeated sacrifices were unable to do no matter how much they strived towards it Having offered this once for all sacrifice he can now sit down at the right hand of God in the position of intimacy He enjoys all the prerogatives of sonship and rule He waits for all things to be subjected to him to be placed beneath his feet The great contrast here is one of posture between the Levitical priests who stand daily at their service and Christ who is seated Their work is never completely done However, Christ's work is truly complete and as a result he has entered into his rest at God's right hand in fulfilment of Psalm 110 verse 1 the verse concerning the ascension of the one who is eternally the priest according to the order of Melchizedek He now awaits the final judgement as all enemies and opponents are subdued under his feet He constantly intercedes for us from his position of rule as through and in us his enemies are overcome Recognising the efficacy of Christ's once for all sacrifice is imperative for our understanding of the Christian faith The old sacrifices could never take away sins but the offering of Christ has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified The pollution and the guilt of sin have been decisively dealt with and we now have access to God We have been made holy However, Christ's work is also continuous and progressive as we are being conformed over time to the reality of who he is and what he has achieved for us We have been perfected but we are also being sanctified We must continue to participate in Christ growing into full possession of him and of his life All of the things the author of Hebrews has written of are witnessed to by the promise of the new covenant in Jeremiah chapter 31 There are two parts of this promise speaking both of the dealing with the principle of sin within the people of God and dealing with the guilt and condemnation of sin Christ in his self-offering deals with both of these things His self-offering deals with the condemnation of death that lies upon humanity as he takes up the destiny of humanity within himself and bears it sin Christ is also the word or the law made flesh the complete incarnation of the will of God By the communication of his life by the spirit to us this writing of the law upon the heart the enfleshing of the will of God becomes a reality for us too The attentive reader of scripture will have noticed earlier that when the author of Hebrews quotes Psalm 40 he cuts off at the end of verse 7 but verse 8, which a biblically literate hearer would have been familiar with is the real powerful verse I delight to do your will, O my God Your law is within my heart The true obedience of David's greater son is the means by which the new covenant will be fulfilled A question to consider What might we learn from the way that the author of Hebrews uses the Old Testament within this passage? In the last few chapters the author of

Hebrews has been concerned with the high priesthood and the greater sacrifice of Christ presenting the heroes of the book with a sermon that now reaches its applicatory punch in the second half of chapter 10. A new way into God's presence has been opened up to us by the once for all sacrifice of Christ. The effectiveness by which this route has been opened up means that we can now enter with an appropriate confidence. This way did not formerly exist. It's now a reality for those who believe. The holy places of which the author is speaking are not just the copy and the shadow that existed in the most holy place in the tabernacle but the heavenly realities to which they testified. Our access is by the blood of Jesus by his self-offering and by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain. The curtain of the old sanctuary was a veil dividing the first section of the sanctuary from the second which could only be entered once a year by the high priest on the day of atonement and then only with blood. As the author has already written this anticipates the movement from the old age to the new age that we have entered in Christ. The former situation in the tabernacle testified to the fact that the way had not yet truly been opened. Many have seen an association between the curtain and Jesus' flesh here I think it's more likely that verse 20 should be read in closer parallel with verse 19. So entering the holy places corresponds with the way through the curtain and the instrumentality of the blood of Christ in verse 19 corresponds with Christ's flesh in verse 20 as in his body and flesh Christ offered himself for our access to God's presence. The way that we have into God's presence is a new and living one. It was inaugurated and consecrated by Christ's sacrifice. It is also always new in some sense. It is never going to age, become defunct or deteriorate. Hebrews has already spoken of the importance of the eternal life of our Melchizedekian high priest and the same point is significant here. Our access into God's presence is not just through some physical building but through the eternally enduring person and work of Jesus Christ. Such a living way, a living way established by the eternally living Jesus and the eternal spirit, is best suited to bring us to the living God. Jesus is a great high priest over the house of God. He is not merely a servant within the house, as Moses was but the reigning son, the one who is placed over the entire house as its lord. The access and authority enjoyed by such a person greatly exceeds anything that a mere steward of the house could enjoy. Knowing these things about the way that we have access into God's presence the appropriate response is to draw near. We must do this with a true heart and in full assurance of faith. The true heart contrasts, among other things, with the hardened hearts of the Israelites who fail to enter into God's rest. The full assurance of faith is the sure confidence in the certainty of the promise of God that will cause us to grasp hold of what he has set before us. The heart's sprinkle clean from the evil conscience probably refers to the consciousness of sin that afflicts those under the old covenant where sins still had not been decisively addressed also to the uncleanness of their hearts that had not yet been purified. Behind this we might hear the new covenant promise of places such as Ezekiel 36, 25-27. I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean from all your uncleannesses and from all your idols. I will cleanse you and I will give you a new heart and a new spirit. I will put within you and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart

of flesh and I will put my spirit within you and cause you to walk in my statutes and be careful to obey my rules The sprinkling of clean water recalls various old covenant rituals but it is now fulfilled in the gift of the Holy Spirit By the gift of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost the underlying heart problem of the people of God as a whole is addressed as the Spirit communicates Christ's life the life of the one faithful one the one who offered himself as a true and perfect sacrifice of human obedience that life is communicated to us The body is the means of access and our bodies are washed with pure water There is likely some reference to baptism here The priest had his body washed in order to enter the service of the sanctuary as described in Exodus 40, 12-15 Then you shall bring Aaron and his sons to the entrance of the tent of meeting and shall wash them with water and put on Aaron the holy garments and you shall anoint him and consecrate him that he may serve me as priest You shall bring his sons also and put coats on them and anoint them as you anointed their father that they may serve me as priest and their anointing shall admit them to a perpetual priesthood throughout their generations We have our bodies washed with pure water as a seal of our access to God's presence The body is the foundation of the self Before we ever developed a sense of self, interiority, subjectivity and agency or a clear will, we are and were bodies Our washed bodies assure us that we have true access to God's presence that we are welcomed as persons into God's house Our faithful confidence to enter God's presence draws confidence from the faithfulness of the God who called us God has not only promised, but he backed up his promise with an oath so that there might be no doubt The author of Hebrews follows his exhortation to hold fast and unwavering the confession of their hope with a second exhortation The heroes of the book should also stir each other up to love and good works They must take an active concern in the spiritual well-being and growth of their brothers and sisters desiring that they will be encouraged in love and good works which are the appropriate fruit of a true faith A particular concern here is that they are committed to their meeting together The danger they faced was that of abandoning their duties to each other and abandoning the ministry that other Christians performed towards them They would fail to stir other people up to love and good works and they would neglect the other people who would stir them up to love and good works The value of meeting together is not just some message from the front, as it were It's the constant mutual encouragement that occurs in our fellowships The neglect of such assemblies seems to have been a real issue among the people to whom the author of Hebrews writes However, he wants them to feel the urgency of faithfulness at that time The day was drawing near I suspect by this he is referring not to the final day of judgment but to a more imminent day of judgment that is nearer in time the day of judgment that would occur in A.D. 70 as judgment would come upon the Temple and upon the Jews who had rejected Christ in that generation His tone at this point shifts It goes from encouragement to a stern warning There are those who purposefully turn away from God who reject all the good gifts that have been given to them and end up bringing greater judgment upon themselves He has already presented similar warnings earlier in the epistle The contrast between the salvation received by the Israelites under Moses and that received through Christ is an important



spur to this It allows him to make an argument from the lesser to the greater If rejection of the salvation given through Moses was so significant how much more so that which is received through Christ? Intentional, willful, persistent sin after receiving the truth faces serious consequences We know the reality of the salvation given in Christ and if we turn our backs upon it then there remains no hope for us There is no salvation left in the Judaism to which such people could return Judgment is going to fall upon Jerusalem and its Temple All its efficacy looked forward to the efficacy of a sacrifice that would be offered in Christ There is no hope to go back now All that awaits is literally the fury of fire that will destroy that whole system in a few years' time Reject the sacrifice of Christ and there's no other sacrifice towards which you can turn There's no other way to get access to God All that awaits is eternal loss If there was a death sentence for those who formerly apostatized and rejected Moses' law how much more for those who reject Christ? They face that eternal loss, there is no hope for them There's a three-fold description that he gives of what rejecting Christ means They have trampled underfoot the Son of God, profaned the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified and outraged the Spirit of Grace Such a person who willfully rejects Christ, even knowing what that salvation means is someone who tramples Christ underfoot They profane the blood of the covenant by which that new and living way into God's presence was made open for us treating that blood of Christ, his sacrifice, as a mean or a common thing something of no value, even though it is the most holy and precious thing of all There is a contrast here between sanctification, that which renders us holy and profanation, that which despises or holds something up to contempt Such a devaluation or denigration of the sacrifice of Christ is a deeply serious matter Such an apostate is also insulting or outraging the Spirit of Grace disdaining the one who communicates the grace of God and the life of Christ to us This is what the rejection of Christ and his sacrifice will lead to and the consequences for such a person are of the utmost severity The author of Hebrews does not want to give any ground for presumption While he seeks to spur Christians to a proper confidence in God's promise and the surety of his word he does not allow them to take confidence just in a once-saved-always-saved position, for instance True salvation requires perseverance in the faith, holding on to God's grace and not letting go Those who once received God's blessings and abandoned them and reject them and despise them face the devastating prospect of eternal loss While some might be tempted to look back to their first start in the faith as a source of presumption that once they had received the grace of Christ there was never any risk of their losing it the author of Hebrews wants them to look back in a different way to look at the start that they made in the faith to seek to keep up that same spirit that enabled them to face the challenges of persecution and opposition to recognize how much they valued the hope and the promise that they had been given at that point and not to let go They had looked forward to a greater reward which enabled them to hold their earthly possessions with an open hand to be prepared to sacrifice or lose much on account of the much greater gain and reward that they awaited They once had that confidence and they should not throw it away It is invaluable. Don't give up what you began Recognize those earlier

sacrifices and commitments that you made Follow them through Abandon those sacrifices at this point and all that you once suffered will have been in vain There is a value of looking back here not to take presumption but to redouble your commitment The salvation of God will surely come even though it might appear to tarry Here he quotes Habakkuk chapter 2 verses 2-4 It will not lie.

If it seems slow, wait for it. It will surely come. It will not delay.

Behold, his soul is puffed up. It is not upright within him. But the righteous shall live by his faith.

That passage speaks of God's judgment upon the Chaldeans that would occur even if it appeared to take time Paul also quotes this in Romans chapter 1 The author of Hebrews here quotes from the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament which he is using and he tweets it in order to strengthen the contrast between living by faith and drawing back The wilderness generation were those who drew back but the people of Christ should be those of faith Righteousness, proper standing in good relationship with God is confident faith in the certainty of God's promise The author gets his hearers to look back, to look at the start that they made to look forward to the hope that they await and to redouble their energies and their commitment, striving to enter into the promise that God has set before them The confidence with which they began is of inestimable value To abandon it at this point would be a tragedy indeed He is like the coach encouraging the runner on the last leg of the race Don't give up now. Think of all the sacrifices that you have made Think of all the things that you are looking forward to as a reward for this victory Do not let go. Do not give up.

Continue and persevere. Grasp hold of what you are awaiting It is all so close. There's only a little further to go At the beginning of chapter 12 he will turn to this language of a race A race that must be run with endurance and talks about the witnesses that help us in pursuing this The great gallery of faith to which he will introduce us in the following chapter A question to consider Can you identify some of the sources of confidence and commitment that the author of Hebrews directs our attention to in this chapter? Hebrews 11 is one of the most famous chapters of the New Testament It's a great roll call of the faith It takes the heroes from the beginning of creation to the coming of Christ As Gareth Cockerell observes, it serves a number of purposes within the argument of the book It clarifies the nature of faith that the heroes of the book are being charged to emulate It provides us with models to follow and motivation for faithfulness in the present The models provided by the faithful of the past are also partial prefigurations of the faithfulness of Christ the ultimate example of faithfulness, by which the full reality is finally realised Finally, the company of the faithful from all generations is an alternative community to which to belong and with which to identify, especially in contexts of great pressure to apostatise such a community is of immense value The examples of the saints of all ages have long served as examples for Christians to follow helping them to

persevere and be faithful in difficult times The list of this chapter gives the Christians being addressed a sense of their heritage But it is not just a straightforward telling of the story of Israel The unfaithfulness of Israel, especially in the wilderness generation had served as a cautionary example earlier in the book Now we are presented with another way of reading the Old Testament history one that traces the theme of faith throughout one that reaches its climax in Christ and one in which we can find ourselves The examples that are given inspire and encourage and they also give more clarity, giving us a sense of what faith will look like in various situations We should recognise also the way that this chapter unpacks the meaning of Habakkuk 2, verse 4 The righteous shall live by his faith The chapter begins with a definition of faith Faith is oriented to the future and also to that which is present but unseen concerning God's existence and work In 2 Corinthians 5, verse 7, the apostle Paul contrasts walking by faith to walking by sight Faith enables us to perceive things that others do not, things that are invisible The person of faith can live in terms of God's existence, his promise, his providence, his power and his faithfulness This is the horizon in terms of which they live their lives And this way of living by faith enabled the great heroes of old to do their great deeds Without such faith, the sort of faith that the recipients of the book need at that moment in time they would not have done what they once did The opening statement, faith is the assurance of things hoped for, might be better translated in stronger terms Faith is the reality of things hoped for It isn't just a subjective sense Faith, for the author of Hebrews, is not just a state of mind, it's a concrete way of life Faith operates in terms of the reality of the things that are anticipated While others can drift aimless as if through empty space, faith moves in the powerful gravitational field of the realities hoped for and promised by God Again, faith is the evidence of things not seen, not merely the conviction of them, as the ESV translates Faith itself is objective evidence of unseen things Much as the movement of a body in space in its orbit can serve as evidence of a much larger yet unseen body that's acting upon it When we look at the lives of people of faith, we can see something of the power and the reality of something much greater than anything that can be seen acting upon them And the author of Hebrews starts with creation, in order to move sequentially through the entire Old Testament But a deeper claim is made in verse 3 What he is saying is that the ultimate reality, the thing that underlies everything else, that is deeper, more real and more true than everything else is the word and the power of God The most fundamental reality is not what is visible and immediately tangible God founded the creation by his word and power, and it is by these things that true reality here and now is also determined Those who act in terms of the unseen facts of God's power and word are living in terms of foundational reality itself And he retells the primeval history Abel, of course, is the first martyr, but yet he is praised not for his martyrdom so much as something that happened before it his offering of a more acceptable sacrifice Cain responded to his rejection of his sacrifice with anger, revealing something about the character of his offering As an attempt to control God, he was angry when he did not get what he wanted from God Whereas Abel, by contrast, offered in a way that was accepted It's not just the objective reality that he offered, it

was the way that he offered too He's an example of true sacrifice, which anticipates his martyrdom, when he will offer himself up in some sense Sacrifice was also here, as Hebrews is suggesting, always about faith, not mere visible ritual What really mattered was not just the offering itself, it was the faith by which it was given Earlier he has quoted Psalm 40, verse 6, to make the point that what God wants is not primarily sacrifice and offering but the heart that is oriented to do his will, with the law of God written upon it And Abel is, of course, an example of this His offering of a right sacrifice arises from a heart of faith that is set towards God From the example of Abel, he moves to Enoch Enoch was taken by God, so that he did not experience death, he was saved from death This was evidence that he pleased, or walked, with God Abel and Enoch, in their particular ways, both pleased God And the author of Hebrews reasons, in both cases, from their pleasing of God, Abel by his sacrifice and Enoch by the fact that the Lord took him, back to their faith Without faith, it is impossible to please God Faith pleases God because it is faith that corresponds to God's power and his promise It is faith that lives in terms of God's existence, the things not seen And it is faith that lives in terms of the future that he proclaims, things hoped for Both Abel and Enoch exemplify this Noah is a further example from the primeval history He's an example of the future orientation of faith With reverent fear, he acted, he recognizes the reality of God's power and holiness and lives and acts accordingly The story of the flood is a paradigmatic example of the last judgment in the New Testament And the author of Hebrews has been encouraging people to live in terms of the seriousness and severity of God's judgment As in the case of Noah, the prospect of God's judgment in the future should shape their action in the present Verses 3-7 concern the primeval history And verses 8-22 move into the patriarchal history Abraham, of course, is the father of the Jews and also of the faithful Abraham and Moses receive the most attention within this chapter because they are such central figures Abraham had to surrender his past for the sake of a promise He had to leave behind his country, his kindred and his father's house and move forward to receive a promise that God held out for him He had to hold all of these things that he once possessed with an open hand and allow God to remove them from it He had to surrender all of the things that seemed so solid and sure and immediate for the sake of a word from God concerning the long distant future He lived as a stranger and a sojourner in the land that was promised to him He looked forward to something even greater, of which the promised land was just a symbol He looked for a city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God This city is a thing not seen, it's a thing hoped for And yet, despite that fact, the author of Hebrews wants us to have a sense of its great solidity God is the builder of this city The God who created the world has created this city too Our cities here may seem secure, but the implication of this statement is that they lack foundations This is the city that has true reality The deepest reality is not what is immediate to us, but what lies in the realm of God's promise and word Sarah receives the power to conceive The child of promise is not just the child of the flesh It isn't just that she has a child, but rather that the child, and all the future that the child holds in store is received from the promise and the power and the purpose of God The child is not

received through human power, and the child's purpose will not be achieved through human power Faith weans people off the immediacy of the world Those things that once seemed so powerful and secure begin to be recognised as insubstantial creatures of time Things that will soon pass Only the word of God will endure We ground ourselves in something beyond the present age and the immediacy of what is before us We recognise that we have a much greater homeland This isn't just some idyllic past that we have left behind and desire to return to It's the promise of God's future, the promise of a heavenly city and homeland God is not ashamed to be called the God of such persons Faith corresponds to his power and his promise, and thereby pleases him The point of faith is not some power inherent in faith itself but rather its responsiveness to a power and reality outside of itself Abraham offers up Isaac This is the final test At the beginning, with his call, he had to surrender everything from his past And in the offering up of Isaac, he has to surrender everything that he thought was certain about his future God's promise had to be recognised as surer than life itself His trust was not in the son that he could see and touch but in the promise of God that gave that son to him and if that son were to die, could give him back again We have an example of this, of course, in the story of the Shunammite woman She receives a child from the Lord and when that child is taken by death, goes to the prophet Elisha and in faith receives that child back Isaac, Jacob and Joseph are all mentioned as those who blessed their sons concerning things to come Jacob's blessing of the two sons of Joseph is particularly singled out It is a more theological blessing than some of the others We see this in Genesis chapter 48 verses 15-16 and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth He's passing on, transmitting the blessing that he himself has known looking towards the future, acting towards that horizon of God's promise and Joseph does the same He calls for his bones to be taken up out of Egypt in the future In anticipation of the exodus, he makes those instructions of all the events of Joseph's life This is the thing that stands out to the author of Hebrews He sees this future event of the exodus and he makes instructions concerning his bones his deliverance from death, as it were his deliverance from the land of Egypt into the land of Canaan and when they go out of Egypt, they take Joseph's bones and the very end of the story of Joshua is the burial of Joseph's bones Joseph anticipates a deliverance from the grave a deliverance of his bones into the land of promise a deliverance that anticipates a greater deliverance from the grave the deliverance of resurrection Joseph anticipated the exodus in the instructions that he gave concerning his bones and the story of Moses and the exodus follows in verses 23-31 There are parallels with the Abraham section parallels that play out in reverse order There's deliverance of Moses from death, like Isaac was delivered from death There's opposition from the world, like the alienation faced by the patriarchs The departure from Egypt corresponds with Abraham's departure for the place of God's promise Moses' parents are introduced as people of faith There is a heritage of faith that Moses continues in They perceive that he was a beautiful child Acts 7.20 maybe conveys something of what is meant by this At this time Moses was born and he was beautiful in God's sight Like Isaac was only begotten they recognised that there was something

special about Moses through faith Abraham had other children beyond Isaac but Isaac was uniquely singled out as the child of promise and it seems that Moses' parents recognised something similar about him He wasn't just a child that they loved dearly he had some part to play in God's purposes and they weren't afraid of the king's edict concerning the killing of the baby boys because they recognised something greater, a power that exceeded the power of Pharaoh Moses accepted persecution with the people of God he forwent his privileges as a son of the daughter of Pharaoh such an identification was costly he had to give up the fleeting pleasures of sin for persecution for the promises of God things that are far more enduring and valuable He took on the reproach of Christ Considering that Moses lived long before the incarnation of Christ it may seem strange to talk about him taking on the reproach of Christ However, faith is fundamentally that which acts in terms of God's appointed future and those things that are unseen Moses had some sense of the glories that awaited and lived in terms of them He acted as one seeing God and seeing the future that he held out This was seen in the Passover and the crossing of the Red Sea events that exhibited God's power over those things that are trusted by those who live by sight and here the Israelites also showed faith they walked through the Red Sea on dry ground trusting God while the prospect of death lay around them on all those other sides The power of God was seen as the people responded to him in faith and the falling of the walls of Jericho were also an example of the people's faith God gave them an instruction, an instruction that seemed entirely nonsensical but unless they did this they would not have known the victory This was something done in a situation of great peril They had crossed the Jordan into the Promised Land This was the first city that they were facing and if they lost at this city or faced some setback there would be no easy route of retreat Indeed, if they saw signs of weakness the people of the land might well get together and crush them It took a lot of bravery to take such an action but that bravery made sense in the light of faith They saw the power and the promise of God and they acted accordingly Rahab is the last of the main examples of the list of persons of faith She was someone who responded to God's word, his power and his promise She had heard reports of the Lord and his promise and she believed what she heard and acted accordingly She was a prostitute, blessed not on account of what she deserved but on the basis of God's grace and good pleasure She was delivered from death as she identified with the people of God even at that moment where they might have seemed most vulnerable and where their identification could prove most costly The author of Hebrews could continue the tour through the Old Testament but he hastens us through the long corridor past many doors he could have shown us into a number of them quite surprising We might not expect to see characters such as Samson and Jephthah in the list for instance He traces the story through these characters, through the judges, into the story of the kingdom and through that into the story of the prophets Faith is seen in a host of different situations in battle, in perseverance through suffering, in accepting opposition and alienation We can notice a movement from battles and military struggles to a focus upon persecution, suffering, rejection from the faith of judges and kings to the faith of the prophets whose struggle

was often a much lonelier one We should also recognise a number of the events that are alluded to from tradition and from scripture The Shunammite woman in 2 Kings chapter 4 is an example of a woman receiving her dead son back According to tradition, Jeremiah was stoned, Isaiah was stoned in two Wandering about in the wilderness might remind us of Elijah The world considered such people unworthy and despised and rejected them However, in the process they presented themselves as unworthy of the people of faith There is throughout scripture a test of hospitality that's given If the people of God are welcomed in a place, that place can often be blessed on their account but if they are rejected, that place will suffer judgement The faithful heroes of the book of Hebrews are to look to these figures as their forerunners in the faith as with them of a promise of God But the forerunners did not receive that promise It's only through Christ's high priestly work that the promise of God has been brought into more concrete reality The people of God now more directly receive benefits that these forerunners could only anticipate and await We have been perfected, made fit to enter God's presence through Christ's work and now they can share in what we have received A question to consider What are some of the ways in which we can grow through the examples of the lives of the forerunners in the faith? What are some ways in which such lives testify to the truth of God? Following the great list of the forerunners in the faith in chapter 11 chapter 12 points us to the one in whom the entire story of faith reaches its climax Jesus Christ, the pioneer and the perfecter of faith He does not just run the way of faith himself He also trailblazes the way to its heavenly destination He is both our example and our deliverer He both leads the way and clears the way He opens our way to approach God here and now but is also the high priest who establishes our final and complete access to God's presence The way of faithfulness is most perfectly exemplified in him but he is also the one to whom our faith looks as its object Without the salvation of Christ, faith would be in vain The promise and the deliverance to which it looks would not be realized In this respect, Christ is both like and unlike those who live by faith He faithfully obeys and perseveres through suffering but while his people must depend upon his work by faith to have a way to God he is the one who creates this way for them as the faithful son He does not need this way himself Rather he takes flesh and suffers so that he might furnish a way for others The author of Hebrews paints a picture for his hearers of a race before a vast audience but not just of mere spectators This is like a relay race of faith with each generation passing on the baton to the generation succeeding them We saw this relay race in the preceding chapter where generation after generation the people of faith passed on the torch of faith to those after them Now these persons who have completed their leg of the uncompleted race are watching us run ours They exemplify what faithfulness looks like and we look forward to Jesus who has blazed the trail ahead of everyone to the finish line He has brought the entire race of faith to its glorious completion In him we see an example of faithfulness in extreme suffering and an example of one who overcame through suffering He endured the shame of the cross, a death that was ignominious and humiliating but also a death in which he bore the shame of mankind the sin by which man lacks integrity and is cut off from God's face He entered into our condition and bore

our condition and he did so for the joy that was set before him. The shame of the cross is set over against the joy that is awaited beyond it and here we have a similar contrast to that which is drawn in 2 Corinthians 4, verses 17-18. For this light, momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, as we look not to the things that are seen, but to the things that are unseen for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal. Christ is the one who can look beyond the shame of his death. He can look beyond and see the power and the promises of God and as a result can persevere through suffering. In this respect, he is the example to all who would follow. The author of Hebrews wants his hearers to consider the example of Christ lest they become weary and faint hearted. Compared to the sufferings of Christ, their sufferings have been relatively minor. They've not yet had to shed their blood. They've not experienced the same degree of shame or of hostility from others. In chapter 4, verse 15, he had written He is one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin. The author of Hebrews does not think of temptation as all the little sins that might tempt us on the way. Rather, he sees it as the more fundamental temptation of turning back or turning aside from the path that God has set before us. In this respect, Christ is our great example to follow. He has faced the full onslaught of the devil's temptation to turn back or to turn aside and persevered through suffering and difficulty and tribulation the like of which we will never experience in order to obtain the glory and the joy that was set before him by the Father. He quotes from Proverbs chapter 3, verses 11-12, a passage about fatherly instruction. Christ learned obedience through what he suffered. Hebrews chapter 5, verses 7-8. In the days of his flesh, Jesus offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to him who was able to save him from death and he was heard because of his reverence. Although he was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered. Christ's heavenly exaltation came through the path of earthly obedience. As human beings, we grow in strength and character through suffering. Our mettle is tested and proved in such times. Christ is the Son who directs our attention to the Father and he is the model and pattern of our obedience. He learned obedience through his suffering and this is a model of sonship and the model that we must follow ourselves. Sonship is learned through suffering. We could think of the example of Job for instance. It is precisely on account of God's special regard for Job, his servant that he is subject to the sort of suffering that he experiences. Suffering is a mark of legitimacy. The suffering in view is not merely or even primarily punitive. It can be punitive on occasions, but much of the time and primarily it is for the purpose of growth through testing. In Romans 8, verses 13-19 we have a similar point. God forms us in the character of sonship through suffering. Rather than drawing back from suffering then suffering should be welcomed as a sign and proof of sonship a sign of God's fatherly concern for our well-being and growth in character. We submitted to earthly fathers. How much more to our heavenly father? If we trusted our earthly fathers to develop character in us by following their instructions how much more the instructions of God? Discipline has a purpose and its value is seen in its fruit in the character that it produces in those who have been trained by it. Suffering is educative throughout scripture so that people



might mature through testing This consideration should spur us to redoubled efforts What undermines people is not suffering, so much as meaningless suffering When we truly grasp the end and purpose of our suffering it ceases to undermine us and actually can spur us to growth We can think of the hand from which we are receiving suffering The story of Job shows that it is not ultimately Satan who brings suffering to Job but God God has a purpose in the suffering that Job experiences He wants Job to grow through the experience of suffering so that he might enter into a fuller experience of what it means to be a son of God If we know and trust God as our heavenly father we will receive suffering from his hand knowing that whatever purpose he has in it, it is a good one We have a birthright as sons and daughters of God and we must not squander it Peace and holiness are essential Indeed, without holiness, no one will see the Lord We are charged to undertake a collective pursuit here We are striving for peace and holiness together It's one of the reasons why meeting together is so imperative We must look out for each other, ensuring that no one falls short And the author of Hebrews alludes to the covenant warning of Deuteronomy 29, verses 14-20 here It is not with you alone that I am making this sworn covenant but with whoever is standing here with us today before the Lord our God and with whoever is not here with us today You know how we lived in the land of Egypt and how we came through the midst of the nations through which you passed And you have seen their detestable things, their idols of wood and stone, of silver and gold, which were among them Beware lest there be among you a man or woman or clan or tribe whose heart is turning away today from the Lord our God to go and serve the gods of those nations Beware lest there be among you a root bearing poisonous and bitter fruit one who, when he hears the words of this sworn covenant, blesses himself and his heart saying I shall be safe, though I walk in the stubbornness of my heart This will lead to the sweeping away of moist and dry alike The Lord will not be willing to forgive him but rather the anger of the Lord and his jealousy will smoke against that man and the curses written in this book will settle upon him and the Lord will blot out his name from under heaven Esau is put forward as a particular example of such a person who fell short and squandered his birthright and blessing Esau is a negative example in contrast to the positive examples of the preceding chapter The danger of such persons is that they will infect others that their pattern of unbelief and unfaithfulness will be taken up by others Esau is described as sexually immoral and unholy There is debate in the commentators about whether that term should be translated as sexually immoral However, it seems appropriate to the story of Esau Esau was a man who squandered the great blessings that he had received He gave up the invaluable gift of the birthright of the covenant of being the one who would carry on the legacy of Isaac for just a small meal He devalued these things out of his sexual desire marrying Canaanite women when he should have been faithful to the covenant His desires were entirely for this world and what is seen He could not live in terms of the unseen and his final end was tragic and as a result cautionary He could not undo what he had done in selling the birthright and losing his blessing He had set his course by his behaviour He may have mourned his loss but he never seemed to truly repent of his sin There is a real danger of apostasy and the

author of Hebrews is concerned to drive this home to his readers and hearers Do not throw away what you have received Learn from the positive example of the people of faith and learn also from the cautionary example of people like Esau A question to consider Much of the book of Hebrews is devoted to the consideration of examples of faith and unbelief How can we make more and better use of the examples of others in the path of faith both positive and negative? A recurring pattern in the book of Hebrews is warning followed by reassurance The intent and the expectation of the new covenant is great blessing but yet there is considerable danger for any who reject or abandon what Christ has offered The author of Hebrews wants to be absolutely certain that the recipients of the book grasp hold of what they have been given in Christ and do not let go To this end at the conclusion of Hebrews chapter 12 he presents us with two alternative mountains Mount Sinai and Mount Zion The contrast between Sinai and Zion is between two relationships between us and God's presence the terrifying and threatening theophany and the fearful restriction and the glorious admittance and celebration He takes his description of Sinai from Exodus In Exodus chapter 19 verses 17 to 25 And God answered him in thunder set limits around the mountain and consecrate it And the Lord said to him Go down and come up bringing Aaron with you but do not let the priests and the people break through to come up to the Lord lest he break out against them So Moses went down to the people and told them And then again in Exodus chapter 20 verses 18 to 19 Now when all the people saw the thunder and the flashes of lightning and the sound of the trumpet and the mountain smoking the people were afraid and trembled and they stood far off and said to Moses You speak to us and we will listen but do not let God speak to us lest we die The author of Hebrews describes all of this in a way that is designed to have a powerful rhetorical effect He describes the meeting with God at Mount Sinai in a way that draws upon the different senses Touch what may be touched, a blazing fire Sight, darkness, gloom and tempest and hearing the sound of a trumpet and the voice of words The most terrifying thing on the mountain is God's voice and the fear of his judgement The people refused to draw near because of fear and Moses had fear also Yet his fear comes at a different point in the story Moses' fear is referred to in Deuteronomy chapter 9 verse 19 For I was afraid of the anger and hot displeasure that the Lord bore against you so that he was ready to destroy you But the Lord listened to me that time also What he describes here is the terrifying anger of God at sin In that situation there was not any effective way to deal with the people's sin He had to mediate for the people but the people could not come close because of their sin and if they did come close, the anger of the Lord might break out at them and they might be destroyed There is something a bit more subtle than a straightforward contrast between the Old and the New Covenant being drawn here God is present of course both on Mount Sinai and on Mount Zion but in very different ways On one he is inaccessible to a sinful people that face his judgement On the other he is accessible to a people who are granted access to his presence through Christ It is also important to remember here the relationship between Sinai and the tabernacle The tabernacle was based upon the foundational theophanic event of Sinai The tabernacle was a sort of a movable mountain

It moved around the pattern of God's appearance to the people at Sinai to different places. The pattern was received on Sinai for the tabernacle, but Sinai itself was part of the pattern for that tabernacle. And much as Sinai was the place of God's awesome and dreadful presence and glory that was inaccessible to sinful human beings, so the tabernacle was something that kept out the people of Israel. They all had to remain outside lest God's holy wrath break out against them. Indeed, not only human beings were kept out, but even if an animal came near, it had to be stoned to death. Mount Zion, by contrast, is a very different sort of place. Mount Zion is an assembly. It is a place of fellowship and festivity. It is associated with Jerusalem. It is a site of dwelling with God dwelling in the midst of his people. There are innumerable angels. The angels came at Sinai, but the people were kept far off. The angels had to intermedicate between God and the people. Now, however, the people are invited to join the angels' own assembly. This is the church of the firstborn. It is associated with all of God's people in Christ, who is the firstborn. They're enrolled in heaven. Heaven is their true home. God's presence, of course, is at the heart of it all. The spirits of righteous people made perfect are here. Those who have died in Christ and been brought into the fullness of his presence. This realm of fellowship and festivity of access and presence is possible because we have been granted access and welcome by Christ's blood, and there is a contrast drawn with the blood of Abel. In Genesis chapter 4, verses 10-12, we read: "And the Lord said, 'What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground.'

And now you are cursed from the ground, which has opened its mouth to receive your brother's blood from your hand. When you work the ground, it shall no longer yield to you its strength. You shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth.

Abel's blood condemned Cain to exile and exclusion. The blood of Christ, by contrast, grants us admission and access. The forbidding image of Sinai is a picture of a lack of access to God's presence, a place where there is no sacrifice of Christ for a sinful people, and they must be held afar off or subject to God's judgment.

Many of the warnings and encouragements of the book to this point might be heard here. Once again, he is comparing the wilderness generation of the Exodus with the first generation of the church to follow Christ. Once again, he is arguing from the lesser to the greater. Learn the lessons from the wilderness generation.

Do not turn back. Do not reject what is set before you. If you reject Christ or turn back from Him, your judgment will be far more severe than what faced the wilderness generation at Sinai.

They heard God's word on earth, but we have the voice of Christ from heaven. There is a new earth-shattering revelation. Christ has warned us from heaven, not just a word spoken by angels, but now by the one who is greater than all of the angels.

Quoting Haggai 2, verses 6-7, he speaks of a coming judgment. "...so that the treasures

of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory," says the Lord of hosts. This judgment shakes the heavenly realm also.

Christ has entered into the heavenly temple, into God's presence itself, and so the heavenly order has been changed also. Man now has access to God's heavenly throne itself. Yet there still remain things shaken to be removed.

The Christians to which the author of Hebrews writes are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken. Yet there are elements in this world that are to be shaken, and even in the heavens themselves. Perhaps we should even hear some reference to the events of AD 70 here.

The earthly sanctuary of the temple is about to be removed in a few years time. Once that has been removed, it will be clearer that there is no rival way of access into God's presence than that that is offered through Jesus Christ. Recognizing all of this, we will approach God with reverence, awe, and with a godly fear.

The god that we are approaching is the god of Sinai, the same god that provoked terror in Moses and the people. And now we have access to his presence, access that gives us peace with God, that gives us an enjoyment of his admittance and his acceptance. And yet, if we reject, we are in a far more serious position than the Israelites were.

We must not turn back. We must not give up. We must receive what God has given us in Christ, and joining with that heavenly throng, offer God acceptable worship.

A question to consider, how might the vision of the heavenly company described in this chapter change the way that we consider Christian worship? In Hebrews 13, the final chapter of the book, there are concluding exhortations, and the author sums up the message of the book. It begins with four pairs of exhortations, with reasons attached to the first, third, and fourth. The first pair is, The second pair is, The final pair is, It's interesting to consider that these are the fitting responses to the message of the book.

Much of it gives attention to the life of the community of the people of God. We are members of the same household. If we have the same father, we should treat each other as brothers and sisters.

This is not just about individual ethics. Continued love towards brothers must be accompanied by love towards strangers, in the form of hospitality. The author of Hebrews plays upon the word love for brothers, with the word that he uses for love for strangers.

It could be very easy to love the brothers, and do so in a way that ignores strangers. He observes that some of those who have exercised such hospitality towards strangers have entertained angels unawares. This might naturally be seen as a reference to Genesis chapter 18 and 19, as the angels that go to inspect Sodom are entertained first by

Abraham and then later by Lot.

We might also think of Matthew chapter 25, where Jesus speaks of a sort of test of hospitality, as persons later described as his brethren are ministered to and served by various others. And on the basis of their welcome of his brothers, they are blessed. Christ identifies with his brothers.

He comes incognito in the poor, the person who needs a drink, the person who needs to be visited in prison, the love that should be shown to people of the household of faith, needs to overflow to those outside. And Christ, coming incognito in his servants, presents a sort of judgment that comes unawares upon a people. Sodom, like the villages and towns of Israel later in the story of Christ, is tested with a secret test.

They do not know the time of their visitation, and yet they are judged according to their treatment of those who came to them when they were unawares. They are called to associate with those in prison or being tortured, particularly those who are suffering for their faith. Marriage is to be held in a special honour.

This is a more general, cultural and social commitment to the institution of marriage. It's not just for the married, but for everyone. Marriage is particularly important to uphold.

It requires an honouring of the commitment to marriage, a restriction of sexual relations to the marriage bed, the ordinary expectation that people will get married. While there is no sin per se in not getting married, and the married should not be seen as above the unmarried, there is a special honour in the institution of marriage, and that meaning of marriage must be guarded and protected and celebrated. It is not just to be a private commitment for married persons.

It is not just about affirming the married as individuals. It is about a social value that all of us must maintain. And the positive exhortation here is followed by a negative counterpart.

The marriage bed should not be defiled. In employing the language of defilement, the marriage bed is being implicitly presented as if it were holy. This holiness must be maintained by the marriage partners, and also by everyone else around them.

The author of Hebrews particularly focuses here upon the judgment on the sexually immoral. Just as there was a positive exhortation followed by a negative exhortation in the commandment concerning marriage, now there is a negative exhortation followed by a positive counterpart concerning greed. Greed is extremely dangerous, and contentment is necessary.

If the reason given for avoiding defiling the marriage bed was God's judgment upon adulterers and the sexually immoral, here the reason given for contentment is God's blessing of His continued presence. There is probably an allusion here to statements

given by Moses to Joshua in Deuteronomy 31, verse 8, and it's followed by a quotation from Psalm 118, verse 6. The fact that the New Testament so often and so consistently focuses upon these two particular sins, upon sexual immorality and greed, probably has a lot to say to our particular age. Verses 7 and 17 contain exhortations about leaders.

They must learn from past leaders and learn from present leaders. The author here also sums up the key thrust of the book to persevere. It really is important to have examples to look to, and people with whom to associate.

A very great deal of this book is devoted to the presentation of positive and negative examples. The negative examples of the wilderness generation and characters like Esau, and the positive examples of the heroes of the faith, and most particularly Christ himself. Now the founding leaders of the community are presented as further examples.

They must pay attention to the outcome of their faith, to the fruit that they bore, and to the impact that they made upon their community. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever. He is the eternal Son.

He is faithful in all times and in all generations. He does not change. He is the same one to whom people looked in times past, and the same one that people will look to in the future.

He is a fitting guarantee of all of God's promises, and the definitive and enduring word of God. This message about the eternity of Christ has been throughout the book of Hebrews. There is, however, the danger of novel teaching leading people astray from Christ.

The alternative to being led away is for the heart to be strengthened. Foods like the rituals of the tabernacle were utterly powerless to deal with the core issue of the heart. We have an altar, a table to participate in, perhaps something symbolised by the Eucharist.

Ongoing participation in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ is necessary. We should contrast this with those who remain in the way of the Old Covenant after Christ has come. There is a danger of giving up the riches received in Christ by continuing to go back to something that has no life in it, no future in it.

The sin offering, which was most particularly associated with the Day of Atonement, the day that anticipated the eschatological passage into the New Age, had more specific regulations for its sacrifices. The bodies of the animals had to be disposed of very carefully after their blood had been used Leviticus 16, verse 27 And the bull for the sin offering, and the goat for the sin offering, whose blood was brought in to make atonement in the holy place, shall be carried outside the camp. Their skin and their flesh and their dung shall be burned up with fire.

The animals whose blood accomplished the movement from the first section to the inner section of the tent were burned outside of the camp. Christ also suffered outside of the gate according to this same pattern. It's the place of rejection, of exclusion, and of shame.

And there is no meal for that particular sin offering. In chapter 10 of Leviticus, the priests ate the sin offerings of the people. In some respect, they bore the sin of Israel in doing this.

Leviticus chapter 10, verses 16 to 18 Now Moses diligently inquired about the goat of the sin offering, and behold it was burned up. And he was angry with Eleazar and Ithamar, the surviving sons of Aaron, saying, Why have you not eaten the sin offering in the place of the sanctuary? Since it is a thing most holy, and has been given to you that you may bear the iniquity of the congregation to make atonement for them before the Lord. Behold its blood was not brought into the inner part of the sanctuary.

You certainly ought to have eaten it in the sanctuary, as I commanded. That sacrifice involved going outside of the camp to burn up the animal in a clean place. In Leviticus chapter 6, verse 30, sin offerings whose blood was brought into the holy places had their flesh prohibited for eating.

The fact that we can eat the sin offering of Christ, that we can eat the sacrifice on that particular altar, suggests that we have a far holier status than we ever did before. A far holier status than the priests even did in the old covenant. They could eat some of the sacrifices for the sin offering that were offered by the people, but they could not eat any of the sin offerings whose blood was brought into the holy places.

However, in Christ we can. This suggests that we have a far higher status. There is a new form of sacrificial worship.

It involves a sacrifice of praise, with the fruit of lips offered up to the Lord. Animal and vegetable sacrifices symbolise continuing human sacrifices, the ways that we offer our bodies and our lives and our lips. The sacrificial service of good deeds and charity is also mentioned here.

The person who gives to the poor lends to the Lord. It is a form of sacrificial worship that God truly desires. In verse 17 he speaks of the importance of obeying and submitting to leaders.

They keep watch over our souls and they must give an account to God, and it is important to give them joy by being responsive to their service. The mutual benefit of good leaders and responsive people under their leadership must be recognised. Leadership is a collaborative task.

We must be those who are able to be led and we must be those who have good leaders

over us. Although the book has more of the character of a sermon, it ends in a similar manner to other letters. There is a request for prayer, there is a blessing, exhortation, travel plans and final greetings.

In verse 20 we might hear an allusion to Isaiah chapter 63 verses 11 to 14. Then he remembered the days of old, of Moses and his people. Where is he who brought them up out of the sea with the shepherds of his flock? Where is he who put in the midst of them his Holy Spirit, who caused his glorious arm to go at the right hand of Moses, who divided the waters before them to make for himself an everlasting name, who led them through the depths? Like a horse in the desert they did not stumble, like livestock that go down into the valley, the Spirit of the Lord gave them rest.

So you led your people to make for yourself a glorious name. In this allusion, once again, he sets up Jesus and Moses alongside each other. Jesus, the one who brought up his people from the dead through his resurrection.

He is the new shepherd of the sheep. If Moses was like a shepherd of the sheep, he is the one who led the flock to Mount Sinai in the first occasion and then later the flock of Israel to Mount Sinai. And now, much as Moses led the flock of Israel through the wilderness, opening up the passage of the seas so that they could travel through and bringing them to Mount Sinai, Christ has brought us to a better mountain.

Christ has torn open the abyss of death so that we might walk through on dry ground. We must have the courage of faith to go out to him, being prepared to face the rejection and exclusion that we'll suffer as we are associated with Christ, and bearing his reproach to look towards a better country, to be those who despise the shame because of the glory that is set before us. We don't know for sure who wrote the book of Hebrews, but the reference to Timothy suggests that it may have been, if not Paul, someone of his party.

A question to consider, what might the author of Hebrews mean by the expression by the blood of the eternal covenant?