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HEBREWS

Introduction

At first glance, Hebrews appears to be one of the most difficult NT books to understand and relate to our modern world. Numerous OT quotations and allusions fill its pages and much detail about Israel's priesthood and sacrificial system dominates the argument. By the time some readers get to the comparison between Christ and Melchizedek in Heb. 7, they feel totally lost and wonder about the relevance of it all! Added to this, many feel unsettled by the warning passages (*e.g.* 2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 6:4-8; 10:26-31; 12:14-17), which seem to undermine the certainties established by other passages and suggest that believers can 'fall away' from Christ.

The argument is complex, but Hebrews is a gold mine for those who want to dig deeply. There is much treasure here to enrich our understanding of God and his purposes. Every carefully structured section contributes to the development of a central theme, providing distinctive insights into the person and work of the Lord Jesus Christ and the nature of our salvation. Although many OT texts are employed, some sections of Hebrews are based on the exposition of a single text, with others being used in a supportive role. In this way we are shown how to interpret the OT in the light of its fulfilment and can understand how the two divisions of the Christian Bible link together. Since the writer regularly relates his insights to the needs of those first addressed, we can learn how to apply his argument to our contemporary lives. Hebrews demonstrates that effective warning and encouragement are grounded in good theology.

The first-century audience of Hebrews was experiencing opposition to their faith in Jesus and facing pressure to give up. The writer reassures them that everything they seek can be found in Christ. Hope in Christ is so much better than what society has to offer. Once their entire lives are transformed in Christ, the believers can withstand any persecution the world throws their way.

Background

The author of Hebrews is unknown, and the audience is not clearly identified. Some early Christians grouped this letter among Paul's writings others suggested authors in the early church, including Barnabas, Luke and Clement of Rome.

The author appears to have known the recipients, but nothing else about them is clear. Because the book was written in Greek but is filled with Jewish imagery, the recipients probably were Greek-oriented Jewish Christians. These believers seem to have wavered in their faith when they faced suffering and adversity because of the Gospel. They also questioned whether Christ's sacrifice really dealt with their sins. As a result,

it had become increasingly tempting to abandon Christ and return to their former life of Judaism.

The Christians who first received Hebrews were probably the target of social rejection from Jews and increasing pressure from those of other religions. The recipients may have lived in Rome or the surrounding area, as indicated by the greetings sent by people from Italy (Heb 13:24)

Hebrews likely was written before the mid-90sAD, since its material is used in an early church letter (1 Clement) that dates to the late first century. Since Hebrews is not structured like a typical letter, it may have originally been a sermon that circulated among churches in the Roman Empire.

What kind of literature is this?

Is Hebrews really a 'letter' in style and format? It certainly ends like many NT letters (13:18-25), with specific encouragements and instructions for those addressed. Moreover, several of the passages of warning or appeal throughout the book show a personal knowledge of the situation of the original readers and an overwhelming concern for their welfare (*e.g.* 5:11-6:3; 6:9-12; 10:32-39; 12:4-13). Yet the book begins in a formal way (1:1-4), with no word as to who the author is or to whom he is writing, and with no hint of the relationship between them. The writer offers no prayers for his readers at this point and no expression of thanksgiving (*cf.* the introductions to most of Paul's letters).

Hebrews is an orderly and systematic treatment of the person and work of Christ, based on the exposition of certain key passages from the OT. For example, Ps. 8:4-6 is central to the argument of 2:5-18, Ps. 95:7-11 is expounded at some length in 3:1-4:13, Ps. 110:4 is the key text in 4:14-7:28, and Je. 31:31-34 is foundational to the argument in 8:1-10:39. Each text is used to show how OT ideals and institutions find their fulfilment in Christ. So, is Hebrews more like a theological essay or treatise?

Considering its rhetorical style (particularly references to the writer as one 'speaking' to his audience, *e.g.* 2:5; 5:11; 6:9; 8:1; 9:5; 11:32) and the use of OT passages as a basis of the argument in most major divisions of the work, it appears to be more of a sermon or homily in written form, with some personal remarks at the end. This is consistent with the writer's own description of his work as 'a word of exhortation' or 'word of encouragement' (13:22). The same expression is found in Acts 13:15 to denote a sermon following the Scripture readings in the Jewish synagogue at Pisidian Antioch. Hebrews was written by a preacher with great pastoral sensitivity, desiring to apply his scriptural insights to the needs of a particular group of Christians for whom he was concerned.

Structure

There are three main parts to Hebrews. The first two focus on portraying Christ as the ultimate expression of God: He is superior to angels, Moses, and Joshua (1:1 – 4:13), and he is also the great high priest, whose ministry transcends the work of all other priests, including the sacrifices made under the old covenant (4:14 – 10:18). This reason, among others, is why the author tells the believers to hold true to Christ, who was crucified for them and now intercedes in heaven on their behalf.

The third part of Hebrews describes the effects of Christ's superiority, particularly in believers' lives (10:19 – 13:17). This section includes a call to faithfulness (10:19-25), a warning against unfaithfulness (10:26-39), historical examples of faith in action (11:1-40), a call for endurance in suffering (12:1-11), a warning against refusing God (12:12-29), and exhortations to specific ethical actions (13:1-19). Christ's superiority has ramifications for all of life, particularly when it comes to standing firm against persecution and hardship.

Overall Outline

- The preeminence of Christ (1:1 – 4:13)
- The great high priest (4:14 – 10:18)
- Exhortations to faithfulness (10:19 – 13:25)

Themes

The central theme of Hebrews is that Jesus is the ultimate revelation of God. All the things that came before – angels, Moses, Joshua, the Levitical priesthood, sacrifices, the tabernacle – point to Jesus and find in Him their true fulfillment. The author essentially asks: Since Jesus is the supreme reality that everything else anticipates, why leave Him and return to a pale imitation.

For the recipients of Hebrews, following Jesus was creating tension with the surrounding world, and they were unsure of which way to go. The author of Hebrews was concerned that they were close to abandoning their faith in Jesus – and it seems that some from the community had already done so. He writes to remind these wavering believers that Christ is superior to everything else. He challenges them to remain committed to their confession and to bear suffering with patient endurance.

Rather than becoming discouraged by looking around them, they should look to Christ and to heroes of faith who have gone before.

When we face times of doubt and fatigue, we still have a source of hope: We will never find anything better to anchor us than Christ. He is worthy of our full devotion; he is the human incarnation of the image of God. And we know that in Him we have one who can sympathise with our weaknesses, for He Himself was tempted but was without sin (4:15) our hardships should not be the primary object of our focus – instead, we are called to turn our focus on Jesus.

Although God once spoke through mere mortals, He has now spoken through His Son, who is heir of all things, through whom He created the world (1:2; compare 11:1-3). Therefore let us set aside sin and cling to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of faith – who Himself bore the cross and unwarranted shame, and is now seated at the right hand of the throne of God (12:1-2; compare Isaiah 53:10-22).

When was it written?

When Hebrews was written, the readers had been Christians for some time (5:12) and had experienced a notable period of persecution (10:32-34). Some of their original leaders appear to have passed away (13:7) but Timothy was still alive (13:23). Perhaps several decades had elapsed since the beginning of the Christian movement. The first allusion to Hebrews in early Christian literature is found in the letter by Clement of Rome, which dates from around AD 96 or a little later. But there is reason to believe that Hebrews was written well before then.

The destruction of the temple in Jerusalem and the cessation of the sacrificial system took place in AD 70 but there is no reference to that state of affairs in Hebrews. Although most of the ritual details which figure in Hebrews are taken from the OT account of the tabernacle, the ritual of the temple was the ritual of the tabernacle and our author writes as if that ritual were still going on (e.g. 9:6-9; 10:1-4). Some allusion to the events of AD 70 would surely have strengthened his argument that the first covenant is now 'obsolete and ageing' (8:13). Consequently, it seems best to conclude that Hebrews was written some time in the decade before AD 70.

SERIES OUTLINE

JESUS – greater than

October 3	Hebrews 1:1-2:4	God's Final Word: His Son
October 10	Hebrews 4:12-16	The Word of God is alive
October 17	Hebrews 7:11-28	Melchizedek who?
October 24	Hebrews 9:11-28	The blood of Christ
October 31	Hebrews 10:19-31	Persevere in the faith
November 7	Hebrews 12:1-11	Run the race with discipline
November 14	Hebrews 13:1-18	Put it into practice

COMMENTARY

1:1-4 *God's final word*

We live in a world where many people doubt that God can be known and where there are many conflicting philosophies and religious viewpoints. Even amongst professing Christians there are sometimes claims of further revelation that contradict or claim to go beyond Scripture. However, Hebrews leaves us in no doubt about the fact that God spoke decisively to Israel through the prophets and that he has fully and finally revealed his character and will by his Son (1-2). The OT revelation came at many times throughout Israel's history and in various ways such as dreams, visions and angelic messages. But the ultimate revelation has come in these last days of human history, through Jesus Christ. The writer will go on to suggest that the OT was a preparation for, and the foundation of, this ultimate revelation (e.g. 8:5; 10:1). Indeed, God continues to speak through the OT Scriptures to Christians in a whole range of circumstances (e.g. 3:7-11; 12:5-6). However, to emphasize the finality of the revelation through Jesus Christ, the writer points to his surpassing greatness as the Son of God.

As the one who was with God from the beginning, he was the one through whom God made the universe (Gk. *aiōnas*, 'ages' or 'worlds', is similarly used for the whole universe of space and time in 11:3). Moreover, the Son has been appointed to possess and rule over all that he was originally instrumental in making: he is heir of all things (2, cf. Ps. 2:7-8). Though many deny his authority and continue to reject him, he must ultimately triumph. As the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, the Son reveals in his person, not merely in his words, what God is really like (3). He continues to sustain the creation and order the events of history by the same powerful word that brought everything into existence in the first place (3).

Since the object of divine revelation has always been fellowship between God and human beings, Hebrews soon makes it clear that the Son's role was to provide purification for sins (3). This anticipates the argument of 2:14-18 and later passages, which speak about the need for the Son to share fully in our humanity, to suffer and die, so that he might fulfil the high-priestly role of making atonement for our sins. In other words, God's final word to us is not simply the perfect revelation of his character in Jesus Christ but also his saving work, making it possible for us to enjoy everything promised by God for his people in these last days.

The sequel to his atoning work was his sitting down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven (cf. Ps. 110:1). So significant is the heavenly enthronement of the Son of God that Hebrews here makes no mention of the resurrection and ascension which made it possible. Rather, as the introduction comes to a close, the writer indicates that he is about to draw out the implications of that enthronement. He will establish the absolute superiority of the Son over the angels, those supernatural beings thought by Israel to be closest to God (4).

It would help to read through this whole section of Hebrews, to see how the pieces fit together, [p. 1325] before focusing on the details. Those to whom the letter was sent apparently had some difficulty in sorting out the relationship between Christ and the angels, but there is no way of being certain about the exact nature of their problem. From 2:5-9 it would seem that the Son's becoming 'a little lower than the angels' at the time of his birth needed some justification. How could he be greater than the angels and share fully in our humanity? Why did the one greater than the angels have to suffer and die, as the Christian gospel proclaims? The nature and purpose of what is technically called the 'incarnation' continues to be a much debated issue in our own time and Hebrews offers distinctive insights on the subject at this point.

From 2:1-4 it appears that the original readers held the popular Jewish belief that angels were involved in the giving of God's law to Moses (cf. Acts 7:53; Gal. 3:19). They needed to be assured of the superior status and character of the one who was the agent of the new revelation. Likewise, many people today need to be convinced that Jesus Christ is more than a prophet or an angelic messenger. No greater revelation of God has been given or can be expected. Hence the danger of disregarding the message of salvation that has come from him.

In 2:5-18 we are shown that the Son's earthly work was to achieve salvation from sin and its consequences, enabling believers to share his glory and honour in 'the world to come'. The greatness of our need and the incredible grace of God in meeting that need are stressed. The idea of Christ's heavenly rule comes to the forefront again, to assure us that everything will finally be placed 'under his feet' (2:8) and that, despite the obstacles, true disciples will reign with him.

The scriptural texts cited in this section have the effect of reinforcing and expounding some of the important themes already raised in the introduction (1-4). In particular, reference to the heavenly enthronement of the Son (3) quite naturally leads to an explanation of his position with regard to the angel world. Ps. 110:1 provides the framework in which these various OT texts are to be understood. It is alluded to in v 3 (he 'sat down at the right hand' of the Majesty in heaven) and is quoted in full in v 13. Thus, the subject of Christ's enthronement and heavenly rule is the focus of this section. Jesus used Ps. 110:1 to point to the exalted, heavenly status of the Messiah or Christ in OT expectation (e.g. Mk. 12:35-37; 14:61-62), and it was then regularly employed by the earliest Christians to make such claims about the resurrected Jesus (e.g. 10:12-14; Acts 2:34-36; 1 Cor. 15:25). There are further allusions to this key text in 8:1 and 12:2.

5 Ps. 2:7 is quoted because it is a prophecy applicable to the Messiah as Son of David and Son of God. The theological basis of this extraordinary claim is God's special promise to David and his dynasty in 2 Sa. 7:14, which is also quoted. When the sons of David were enthroned as God's earthly representatives in Jerusalem, they enjoyed a special relationship of sonship with God. Jesus is the one who ultimately fulfils these scriptures because he is the eternal Son of God (as in 1:2-3), whose resurrection and ascension restored him to the place of all authority and power in the universe, at the Father's 'right hand' (cf. the use of Ps. 2:7 in Acts 13:33).

6 No such promises were ever made to the angels. Their task has always been to worship God (cf. Dt. 32:43; Ps. 96:7). Consequently, they must worship the Son who sits at his right hand. Sharing fully in our humanity, he became for a little while 'lower than the angels', but is now 'crowned with glory and honour' (2:9). The introduction of God's firstborn into the world (Gk. *oikoumenē*, as in 2:5) is best taken in the context as a reference to Christ's entrance into what for us is still 'the world to come' (2:5). This happened when he ascended to the 'heavenly' realm.

7-9 The Greek text of Ps. 104:4 suggests that the angels were created to carry out God's commands with the swiftness of winds and the strength of fire. They are part of the created order and must be subservient to the Son, for he shares with the Father in the divine rule (throne) that will last for ever and ever. Ps. 45:6-7, which celebrates a royal wedding, is used with reference to Christ, the king of Israel, who supremely fulfils the ideal of sharing in the righteousness and joy of God's eternal kingdom.

10-12 The eternity of Christ and his rule is again stressed in Ps. 102:25-27. This is contrasted with the perishable creation which he founded and will one day roll up like a robe. Hebrews takes the Greek text of both these psalms to mean that the Father addresses his Son as God and Lord. Ps. 110:1 may have inspired this interpretation,

since the Lord there addresses someone else as 'my Lord' and invites him to sit at his right hand.

13-14 Returning to the text which appears to have been the starting point for his reflections, the writer uses Ps. 110:1 to insist that the angels do not exercise the authority and rule of the Son. As ministering spirits, they are meant to serve his purposes and execute his commands. Indeed, they serve God by serving those who will inherit salvation. Angels are higher than we are in the order of creation (Ps. 8:4-6), but they are [p. 1326] commissioned to help us in ways beyond our understanding, so that we may reach our heavenly inheritance (cf. 13:2).

2:1-4 *A call to hold fast to the Son and his message*

This paragraph draws out directly the practical consequences of the previous chapter. It is the first of several warning passages, revealing the writer's concern about the situation of at least some of his readers. Positively, the encouragement is to pay more careful attention... to what we have heard (1). Negatively, the warning is not to drift away, like people in a boat that has lost its moorings and is moving rapidly towards a waterfall. How people drift from Christ remains to be explored in later chapters. Here the point is simply to stress that drifting has disastrous consequences.

The message Hebrews has in mind is the gospel of salvation which was first announced by the Lord (i.e. Jesus) and was confirmed by those who heard him (3). The writer and his readers were not part of the first generation of Christians, but they certainly received the gospel from those who were. When the message was given to them by those who had received it from Jesus, God testified to its supernatural origin by signs, wonders and various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit distributed according to his will (4).

The gospel is of greater significance than the message spoken by angels to Israel at Mt Sinai. It is the message delivered by the Son of God himself, concerning eternal salvation and how it is to be obtained. If every violation and disobedience received its just punishment under the terms of that earlier revelation, how can there be any escape for those who ignore or neglect the terms of God's ultimate revelation (2-3)? The judgment facing those who turn their backs on Christ must be greater than any punishment experienced by Israel in OT times. The writer says more about this in 10:26-31.

This segment ends with a reflection on the word of God (Gk. *ho logos tou Theou*) and what it can achieve. There is no ground in the context for identifying this with the personal Word of God mentioned in Jn. 1:1-14. Most obviously, the expression refers to the gospel, which is described in v 2 as ‘the message they heard’ (Gk. *ho logos tēs akouēs*). The gospel brings the promise of salvation as well as the warning of judgment (cf. 2:1-4). However, it is also clear that Ps. 95 can function as the voice of God, calling us to faith and warning us about hardening our hearts. This scripture is the particular word of God that the writer of Hebrews wants his readers to hear in chs. 3-4. So what is said in vs 12-13 can apply as much to the preached word as to the word of God written in Scripture. In language recalling Is. 55:11, the word of God is said to be living and active, implying that it achieves the purpose for which it is uttered by God. However, Hebrews does not suggest that everyone who hears the message will automatically believe and enter God’s rest. The metaphor of the double-edged sword is used to paint what initially appears to be a rather frightening picture. God’s word penetrates to the deepest recesses of our being, opening us up and judging the thoughts and attitudes of the heart. It is the ‘critic’ (Gk. *kritikos*) by which all are judged. Indeed, confronted by the word of God, we are confronted by God himself, and nothing in all creation is hidden from God’s sight. When the writer says Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of God, the image is that of an animal with its head thrown back and neck bare, ready to be sacrificed! Put simply, we cannot hide our faces from the one to whom we must give account. If the word of God has its dissecting and exposing effect in our lives now, we will not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin and come utterly unprepared to face him on the day of reckoning. In the final analysis, then, this passage suggests that the negative or judging function of the word of God can be a help to us in pursuing the journey of faith.

16-18 18-19 The former regulation is the law establishing the OT priesthood on the basis of proper ancestry and physical purity. It was weak and useless because death prevented those priests from continuing in office (23) and their own weakness made it continually necessary for them to sacrifice for their own sins as well as for the sins of the people (27). Indeed, the law made nothing perfect (see note on 7:11-12), because it was only ‘a shadow of the good things to come’ (10:1). The regulation establishing the OT priesthood was set aside when God inaugurated [p. 1337] a new priesthood and provided a sacrifice to end all sacrifices (cf. 10:5-10). A better hope is introduced with the high-priestly ministry of Jesus, by which we draw near to God. The certainty

of a once—for—all cleansing from sin and of the possibility of continuing in an eternal relationship with God is at the heart of this better hope.

20-22 The promise establishing the priesthood of the Messiah was confirmed with an oath: the Lord has sworn and will not change his mind (Ps. 110:4). An oath attached to a promise makes 'the unchanging nature of his purpose very clear' (6:17). So the eternity of Jesus' priesthood is established. Because of this oath it can also be affirmed that Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. When the writer takes up the theme of this better covenant in later passages, he describes Jesus as the 'mediator' of a new covenant (8:6; 9:15; 12:24). This means that he inaugurates the covenant blessings predicted in Je. 31:31-34 (quoted in 8:8-12). The word guarantee (22) suggests even more: Jesus' priestly ministry continues to vouch for the fact that those blessings are readily available. The better covenant is the basis for the Christian's better hope.

23-25 The uniqueness and eternity of Christ's priesthood has really been the heart of the argument in this complicated chapter. There were many priests under the old covenant, because death prevented them from continuing in office. However, since the resurrected and ascended Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. He remains the same (cf. 1:8-12; 13:8) and his priestly office and work are absolute and unchangeable. The word therefore at the beginning of v 25 introduces the logical consequence to all this. Here is the practical application of the writer's teaching about Jesus as priest for ever in the order of Melchizedek. Jesus is able to save completely those who come to God through him. The idea of 'approaching', 'drawing near', or 'coming' to God is prominent in Hebrews (cf. 4:16; 7:19; 10:1, 22; 11:6; 12:18, 22). Fundamentally, it expresses the idea of a relationship with God. The OT priesthood and sacrificial system only imperfectly provided for such a relationship, but Jesus is able to save completely those who relate to God through him. The language of salvation here implies deliverance from the alternative, which is the judgment of God (cf. 2:1-4; 9:27-28; 10:26-31x). In fact, Christians can look to Jesus for help at every stage in their earthly pilgrimage, because he always lives to intercede for them (cf. Rom. 8:34; 1 Jn 2:1-2). The image of the heavenly intercessor is used to emphasize Christ's willingness and ability to go on applying to us the benefits of his once—for—all sacrifice (cf. 2:18; 4:14-16; 10:19-22). However, the image should not be pushed too far. Jesus sits at the right hand of God, claiming the fulfilment of the covenant promises for his children, not begging for their acceptance before the Father's throne!

26-28 Jesus meets our need as high priest firstly because he is holy, blameless, pure. These three adjectives recall the teaching about his sinlessness (4:15) and explain why his sacrifice was so perfect, needing no repetition. He remained obedient to God through a lifetime of testing. As a faultless high priest, he sacrificed for the sins of God's people once for all, when he offered himself (27; cf. 9:14). This is a new thought, explaining exactly how he made 'purification' (1:3) or 'atonement for the sins of the people' (2:17). Note the emphasis on the once for all nature of his sacrifice here and in

9:12, 26, 28; 10:10. Unlike the high priests of Judaism, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. The perfection of his sacrifice is associated with the perfection of the victim. Jesus also meets our need as high priest because he is now set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. His heavenly exaltation means that he always lives to apply the benefits of his saving work to us (25). The law of Moses appointed men who are weak as high priests, but the oath of Ps. 110:4 appointed the Son to be high priest of a different order. He was qualified to fulfil this role or made perfect for ever (28; cf. notes on 2:10; 5:9) by means of his obedient life, his sacrificial death and his entrance into the heavenly presence of God (as vs 26-27 suggest).

9:11-28 The achievement of Christ in his death and exaltation

Following on from the first half of the chapter, it could be said that this section is about 'the heavenly sanctuary' and its 'regulations for worship'. Jesus Christ is the high priest who ascended into *the Most Holy Place* in the heavenly realm (11). By the blood he shed on the cross, he *obtained eternal redemption* for those who rely on him. Right now, this means that our consciences can be cleansed from the defilement of sin and we can worship acceptably and *serve the living* [p. 1340] *God* (12-14). Ultimately, Christ's sacrifice makes it possible for *those who are called to receive the promised eternal inheritance* (15). So the shedding of his blood inaugurates the new covenant, with its promise of a once-for-all and decisive forgiveness of sins (16-23). He entered into heaven *to appear for us in God's presence* (9:24-25), having dealt with the problem of sin *by the sacrifice of himself* (26). When he reappears from the heavenly sanctuary, he will bring the full experience of salvation *to those who are waiting for him* (27-28). Thus, with the application of several OT concepts and images, this passage has much to teach us about the benefits of Jesus' saving work for us, now and in the future.

11-12 With the appearance of Christ as *high priest of the good things that are already here*, the things foreshadowed in the OT have become a reality! The writer explains this first by showing more precisely how Christ fulfilled the role of the high priest on the annual Day of Atonement (cf. 7:26-27; 9:7; Lv. 16:1-19). The high priests passed through the outer tent into the *Most Holy Place*. There they sprinkled on the place of atonement the blood of animals sacrificed outside the tabernacle and interceded for the people. Jesus, on the other hand, passed through *the greater and more perfect tabernacle that is not manmade, that is to say, not a part of this creation*. His priestly ministry opens the way into the heavenly sanctuary or *heaven itself* (24; cf. 8:1-2). After he had been crucified as a sacrifice for our sins, he ascended 'through the heavens' (4:14), to sit at God's hand and 'intercede' for us (7:25). He did not enter the

heavenly presence of God by means of *the blood of goats and calves* but by means of *his own blood*. And since his sacrifice was so perfect he entered the Most Holy Place *once for all*: his crucifixion and heavenly exaltation need not be repeated. Indeed, he has obtained *eternal redemption*. The word ‘redemption’ suggests liberation at the price of his life. A similar expression in 9:15 is translated *a ransom to set them free* and it is clear from the context that this liberation is from the judgment and guilt produced by sin. So *eternal redemption* is another way of speaking about the once–for–all and standing offer of forgiveness promised in Je. 31:34.

13-14 Outlining the practical consequences of Christ’s death, the writer compares the effect of offering animal blood or sprinkling *the ashes of a heifer* (cf. Nu. 19). These rituals were for the benefit of those who were *ceremonially unclean*, to *sanctify* them by making them *outwardly clean* (lit. ‘for the purification of the flesh’). Those who were defiled could be restored to fellowship with God in the sense that they were able to participate again in the worship of the community. The fundamental truth that blood ‘purifies’ and ‘sanctifies’, even if only at a ceremonial level, provides the basis for the *How much more* argument that follows. *The blood of Christ* is a way of speaking about his death as a sacrifice for sins. This was uniquely effective because *he offered himself unblemished to God*. Once again the writer alludes to Jesus’ life of perfect obedience to the Father, culminating in the cross (cf. 5:7-9; 7:26-27; 10:10). *Through the eternal Spirit* most likely refers to the power of the Holy Spirit upholding and maintaining him (cf. Is. 42:1), though some would take it to mean his own spirit, highlighting the interior or spiritual quality of his sacrifice. The blood of Christ is powerful enough to *cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death*. God requires repentance from such acts (6:1, lit. ‘dead works’), sins that defile the conscience and bring his judgment. But those who repent need to be cleansed from such defilement and only the death of Jesus can do this (cf. 9:9 with 9:14). The purpose of cleansing in the OT was that the people might be consecrated again to God’s service. The new covenant promise of a renewed ‘heart’, based on a decisive forgiveness of sins (Je. 31:33-34), is echoed in v 14. Only the cleansing provided by Christ can set us free to *serve the living God* in the way that Jeremiah predicted. The nature of this ‘service’ or ‘worship’ (Gk. *latreuein*) will be discussed in connection with 12:28.

15 The link between Jesus’ high–priestly work and the fulfilment of Jeremiah’s prophecy is further explored. By means of his death, Christ is the mediator of a new covenant (cf. 8:6; 12:24). First, he died as a ransom to set them free from the sins committed under the first covenant. As noted in connection with v 12, his death is the price of liberation from the judgment and guilt produced by sin (cf. Je. 31:34). The focus is on redeeming those who sinned under the first covenant, as promised in Je. 31:31-32. Indeed, Jesus’ sacrifice is retrospective in its effect and is valid for all who trusted God for the forgiveness of their sins in ancient Israel (cf. 11:40). But we also know that, by the grace of God, he tasted death ‘for everyone’ (2:9) and he is able to save all who ‘come to God through him’ (7:25). Secondly, on the basis of his death, those who are called may receive the promised eternal inheritance. Just as the old

covenant promised the land of Canaan as an inheritance for God's people, so the covenant inaugurated by Christ opens the way to an eternal inheritance. This is equivalent to 'the world to come' (2:5), the 'Sabbath—rest for the people of God' (4:9), 'the heavenly Jerusalem' (12:22) and other such descriptions of our destiny as Christians. Jesus has opened the way to his inheritance for us by dealing with [p. 1341] the sin that keeps us from drawing near to God.

16-22 The idea of an inheritance leads the writer to a play on words. The Greek word *diathēkē* is first employed in the technical and legal sense of a will (16-17). In ordinary human affairs, for the benefits of a person's will to be operative, it is necessary to prove the death of the one who made it. The same word is then used to refer to the covenant which God made with Israel in Moses' time (18-20). There was no need for the covenant-maker to die in this case but the first covenant was not put into effect without blood. The writer draws attention to the ceremony mentioned in Ex. 24:1-8, when Moses sprinkled the altar and the people with sacrificial blood and called upon them to obey everything that God had commanded. Thus, the relationship with the Lord was sealed and confirmed with the blood of the covenant and the sanctified status of the nation was proclaimed. Hebrews adds other details from OT cleansing rituals to indicate the comprehensive way in which blood was used for purification under the first covenant (21). This leads to a concluding observation (the law requires that nearly everything be cleansed with blood) and a fundamental principle (without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness). Although blood was largely used for ceremonial cleansing (13), these rituals pointed to the more profound needs of God's people for release from the power and penalty of sin.

23-24 The copies of the heavenly things —the tabernacle and everything used in its ceremonies—had to be purified with sacrificial blood. Israel's sanctuary was manmade and only a copy of the true one, which is heaven itself (24; cf. 8:5). When the writer says the heavenly things themselves needed to be purified with better sacrifices than these, he can hardly mean that heaven is defiled by human sin, otherwise God would have to leave it! However, he may be suggesting that the sacrifice of Christ had cosmic significance, removing a barrier to fellowship with God that existed at the level of ultimate reality and not simply in human hearts. The simple message behind the writer's tabernacle and Day of Atonement imagery is that Jesus entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence (cf. 7:25). He makes it possible for us to have access to God now and in eternity.

25-28 The better sacrifices mentioned in v 23 are in fact the single and unique offering of Jesus Christ. His sacrifice does not need to be repeated again and again, after the fashion of the high priests in their yearly ritual. It is wrong to suggest that his sacrifice needs to be continually presented to the Father, either in heaven or on earth. Jesus did not have to suffer many times since the creation of the world: his self-offering is sufficient and final for all history—past, present and future. In vs 26 and 28 the writer uses the expression once for all or once (cf. 7:27; 9:12; 10:10) to stress the decisive

and complete nature of Jesus' high-priestly work. In fact, his appearance signals the end of the ages, the time of fulfilment or the last days (cf. 1:2). The purpose of his coming was to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself (26). Put another way, it was to take away the sins of many people (28, lit. 'to bear the sins of many'; cf. Is. 53:12). So there has been a final settlement of the problem of sin by the action of Jesus at one point in human history and this gives a solemn significance to the present. There is 'a fearful expectation of judgment' for those who spurn the Son of God and his sacrifice (10:26-31). But for those who trust in him and eagerly await his second coming, there is the prospect of salvation —rescue from judgment and the enjoyment of the promised eternal inheritance.

10:19-31 Persevere in the faith

19-21 These verses summarize in very simple terms the doctrinal argument of chs. 7-10. There are two things that we have as Christian brothers and sisters, and on this basis the writer makes his threefold charge in 10:22-25. First we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus. The word translated confidence is found in four important contexts in Hebrews (3:6; 4:16; 10:19; 10:35). God gives this confidence to us through the gospel. Fundamentally, it is a confidence of free and open access to God (confidence to enter the Most Holy Place), based on the unique sacrifice of Jesus (by the blood of Jesus). There is an intimate connection between Christ's entrance into the heavenly sanctuary and our own (cf. 4:14-16; 6:19-20). He has opened a new and living way into God's presence for us, through the curtain, that is, his body (lit. 'his flesh'). The curtain in the earthly tabernacle was the means of access to the Most Holy Place for the high priest. Metaphorically speaking, Jesus' sacrificial death was the curtain or means of access to the heavenly sanctuary for him and for all who trust in him! The second thing that we have as Christian brothers and sisters is a great priest over the house of God. It is clear from 3:6 that 'the house of God' means the people of God. Our great priest makes it possible for us to draw near to God together and to share the hope of living for ever in his presence (cf. vs 22-23). But this allusion to our common experience as Christians means also that we have responsibilities to one another (cf. vs 24-25).

22-25 There are three exhortations in these verses, showing how we are to respond to the great doctrinal truths of the preceding chapters. They are in the present tense in Greek, indicating that we are continually to express faith (22), hope (23) and love (24-25). The call to draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith

specifically recalls 4:16 and the writer's teaching more generally about approaching God through Jesus (see note on 7:25). We are to enjoy the benefits of his sacrifice and heavenly rule by confidently praying for mercy and help in time of need. A sincere heart in full assurance of faith is a heart that demonstrates complete trust and devotion, fulfilling the promise of a new heart for God's people in Je. 31:33 and Ezk. 36:26-27. What makes this possible is having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience. The inauguration of the old covenant was associated with the sprinkling of the Israelites with blood (9:18-20). Jesus' blood was shed to inaugurate the new covenant and it is applied to our hearts, to cleanse our consciences from guilt, when we believe the gospel and put our trust in his sacrifice for the atonement of our sins (cf. 9:13-14). Having our bodies washed with pure water is probably a reference to baptism as the outward sign of the 'sprinkling' of our hearts.

The call to *hold unswervingly to the hope we profess* (lit. 'let us hold fast the confession of hope without wavering') recalls 4:14. It is a reminder that our salvation is yet to be fully realized (cf. 4:1; 9:28; 10:37-39; 13:14) and that our lives are to be controlled by *the hope we profess*. The relationship between faith and hope will be explored in ch. 11. The basis for maintaining a confession of hope is that *he who promised is faithful*.

The third call in this paragraph is let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds. Since we share in the benefits of Christ's high-priestly work as Christian brothers and sisters, we have a responsibility to minister to one another in love (cf. 3:12-13; 12:15-16). Two clauses in v 25 explain how we can provoke one another to godly living (these clauses are not separate as in the NIV). Negatively, we can care for one another by not giving up [p. 1344] meeting together. The writer uses a term for their meeting (Gk. *episynagōgē*, 'assembly') that is parallel in sense to 'church' and suggests a formal gathering of some kind. A few of their number are in the habit of neglecting this responsibility. The warning about apostasy that follows (26-39) implies that people who deliberately and persistently abandon the fellowship of Christian believers are in danger of abandoning the Lord himself! Positively, we can provoke one another to love and good works by meeting together to encourage one another. As in 3:13, such encouragement is best understood as involving a form of exhortation based on Scripture, following the writer's own example in his 'word of exhortation' (13:22). The urgency of this is underlined by an allusion to the nearness of Christ's return and the final judgment (and all the more as you see the Day approaching).

26-28 These verses take up the allusion to God's judgment at the end of v 25 and develop the warning about rebelling against God found in earlier passages (cf. 2:1-4; 3:7-4:11; 6:4-8). The NIV translation if we deliberately keep on sinning rightly conveys the sense of the present participle 'sinning' in Greek. However, it would be a mistake to think that this merely referred to the sinful behaviour which is sadly evident in all of our lives. The context and the parallel with previous passages indicate that the writer has on view the specific sin of apostasy or continuing rejection of Christ. If, through the

gospel, people have received the knowledge of the truth and then turn their backs on that truth, no sacrifice for sins is left. There is no alternative way of forgiveness and acceptance with God apart from the death of his Son. To abandon that once-for-all sacrifice for sins is to abandon all hope of salvation. All that remains for such people is a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will consume the enemies of God. Their fate is the same as those who never turned to Christ or who actively opposed the gospel! Even under the first covenant, anyone who rejected the law of Moses in deliberate rebellion died without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses (Dt. 17:2-7). How much more severely must someone be punished who renounces and opposes the provisions of the new covenant?

29-31 The awful nature of apostasy is described in three parallel clauses. The person who turns away from Christ has actually trampled the Son of God under foot, treading him with contempt by denying his true nature and identity. Such a person has also treated as an unholy thing the blood of the covenant that sanctified him. Christ's death inaugurates the blessings of the new covenant and brings us into a sanctified or holy relationship with God (cf. 10:10; 13:12). To abandon that relationship is to treat his blood as unholy (Gk. *koinon*, 'common, unclean') and not as the sacred means chosen by God to achieve our salvation. The person who turns away from Christ has also insulted the Spirit of grace. The Spirit of God brings us to trust in the grace of God, and to take hold of the benefits of Christ's work for ourselves (cf. 6:4-5). The Spirit also distributes God's gracious gifts, confirming the truth of the gospel (cf. 2:4). The inevitability of the punishment awaiting apostate Christians is then suggested by two quotations from the OT. It is God's role to avenge or repay sin of every kind (Dt. 32:35). But God has specifically revealed that he will judge his people (cf. Dt. 32:36), vindicating the true by removing the false. It is a dreadful thing to fall into God's hands when he is acting like that in judgment.

12:1-11 *Run the Race with discipline*

1 The appeal to run with perseverance the race marked out for us suggests that the Christian life is more a marathon than a short sprint. We are not to picture the great cloud of witnesses in ch. 11 as spectators in an amphitheatre, cheering us on in the race of faith. It is 'what we see in them, not what they see in us, that is the writer's main point' (J. Moffatt, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Hebrews* [Clark, 1924], p. 193). They are witnesses (Gk. *martyres*) of true faith for us because God 'witnessed' (Gk. *emartyrēthēsan*, 11:2, 4-5, 39) to their faith in the pages of the Bible. They demonstrate the nature and possibilities of faith for believers in every generation. As contestants in the race, we are to look to their example for encouragement. We are to throw off everything that hinders —any association or activity that handicaps us—and the sin that so easily entangles (the writer is concerned

here with sin itself, rather than with particular ‘besetting sins’). Otherwise, we may miss out on the prize, which is God’s gracious gift of eternal life to all who complete the race.

2-4 The greatest encouragement comes when we fix our eyes on Jesus (cf. 3:1). The NIV describes him as the author and perfecter of our faith but the word ‘our’ does not occur in the original. Faith in an absolute or general sense is meant (he is ‘the author and perfecter of faith’). Jesus is the perfect example of the faith we are to express. The word translated author (Gk. *archēgon*, as in 2:10) literally means that he is pioneer or leader in the race of faith. However, the context also suggests that he is the author or initiator of true faith since he opens the way to God and enables us to follow in his footsteps. When he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God, he achieved faith’s ultimate goal. He is faith’s perfecter. As the one who has realized faith to the full from start to finish, he has fulfilled God’s promises for all who believe, giving faith a perfect basis by his high-priestly work. Jesus endured because he looked beyond the shame and suffering of the cross to the joy set before him. We are to have the same perspective and to be encouraged by his endurance of opposition from sinful men not to grow weary and lose heart. In view of their past experience, this encouragement would have had special relevance for the first readers (cf. 10:32-34), though they had not yet been called upon to resist to the point of shedding your blood.

5-8 But why must God’s people suffer insult, rejection and persecution at all? Surely these experiences are enough to make them doubt God’s love and lose heart? The writer anticipates such questions when he charges the readers with having forgotten Pr. 3:11-12. That word of encouragement addresses believers in every age as sons or ‘children’ of God (cf. 2:10-13). It assures them that sonship and suffering go hand in hand, because the Lord disciplines those he loves. Christians are called to endure hardship as discipline, recognizing this as a practical proof of their special relationship with God (God is treating you as sons). Discipline (Gk. *paideia*) sometimes involves rebuke and punishment, as the text from Proverbs declares. But it also involves the positive teaching and training that loving parents will give to their children in a whole range of circumstances, to bring them to maturity. Indeed, in ordinary human experience and in relation to God, those who are not disciplined are illegitimate children and not true sons.

9-11 When disciplined appropriately by human fathers, we respected them for it. How much more should those who are disciplined by their spiritual father (the Father of our spirits) learn to submit to him and live! For God’s discipline is necessary to keep us on track to eternal life. Parental discipline is limited to our childhood years (for a little while) and may not always have been wisely administered (as they thought best). But God, in his infinite love and wisdom, consistently throughout our lives [p. 1349] disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. God’s holiness is his

distinctive life and character. He will share this ultimately and completely with everyone whom he brings into his kingdom. Meanwhile, he uses various trials to sustain faith and produce a harvest of righteousness and peace in those who have been trained or 'exercised' by his discipline. In other words, by his grace, we can begin to share God's holy life and character here and now.

13:1-18

Put it into practice

9-10 A negative note is struck with the warning not to be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. The writer only refers specifically to ceremonial foods which are of no value to those who eat them. Certain foods, and maybe some kind of ritual meal, were being presented to the readers as helpful for the nourishment of their spiritual lives. Yet, it is by God's grace, and not rules about food, that our hearts are to be strengthened (cf. Rom. 14:17; 1 Cor. 8:8; Col. 2:16, 20-23). Food laws are among the 'external regulations', now surpassed and outmoded by the work of Christ (9:10). With the insistence that we have an altar, the writer returns to the pattern of argument that dominated the central chapters of this book: the high-priesthood, sacrifices and sanctuary of the OT find their fulfilment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Altar is another cultic term used in a shorthand and figurative way for the sacrifice of Christ. Those Jewish priests who minister at the tabernacle, and who are authorized to benefit from its sacrifices (e.g. Lv. 7:5-6; Nu. 18:9-10), have no right to eat from the altar of the new covenant. They, along with anyone else attached to that way of worship, are pursuing the 'shadow' instead of the reality (8:5; 10:1). The writer of Hebrews does not here draw the inference that Christians may, even metaphorically, 'eat' from their 'altar', or sacramentally benefit from Christ's once-for-all sacrifice. It is remarkable that there is no treatment of the Lord's Supper in this context, even at the level of correcting false views of the community meal.

11-14 A further reflection on the ritual of the Day of Atonement leads the writer to a significant observation: the bodies of sacrificial victims were burned outside the camp (Lv. 16:27). To leave the area where the Israelites were encamped in the desert, even for this sacred duty, rendered a person unclean and necessitated a rite of purification before the camp could be re-entered (Lv. 16:28). So when Jesus suffered outside the city gate of Jerusalem, his offering was unclean and unholy according to those traditions! Yet, paradoxically, it is his sacrifice that makes the people holy under the new covenant (12; cf. 10:10). The death of Jesus marks the end of a whole way of thinking about religion and worship. Christians who have been cleansed and consecrated to God by the sacrifice of Christ must no longer take refuge in holy places and ritual activities but must go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore (13; cf. 12:2-4). For the first readers, this meant breaking decisively with Judaism and

identifying with the one who was regarded as cursed because of the manner of his death (cf. Gal. 3:13). The place of Christian service or worship is the uncleanness of the world, where there is unbelief and persecution! Yet nowhere in this world will we find out hopes fulfilled because we are looking for the city that is to come (14; cf. notes on 4:3-5; 12:22-24).

15-17 The passage draws to a close with two further explanations of what worship means under the new covenant. Through Jesus, Christians are continually to offer to God a sacrifice of praise. In language borrowed from Ho. 14:2 (LXX) this sacrifice is described as the fruit of lips that confess his name. In other words, it is a sacrifice consisting of praise, publicly acknowledging the name or character of God. This might take place when Christians meet together to encourage one another (cf. 10:24-25), or when they confess Christ before unbelievers in the world. To do good and to share with others is also acceptable worship, for with such sacrifices God is pleased (cf. Jas. 1:26-27). Such sacrifices cannot be regarded as cultivating God's favour, since Christian worship is meant to be an expression of gratitude for the love that he first showed us (cf. 12:28). Although the writer is obviously concerned about practical expressions of fellowship amongst believers (cf. 10:32-34; 13:1-3), there are also many opportunities for serving the needs of those outside [p. 1352] the Christian fellowship. Instead of reverting to Jewish ways of thinking or being influenced by strange teachings from other sources, the readers are urged to obey their current leaders and submit to their authority (17). They are to do this recognizing the special responsibility of Christian leaders and the need to encourage them in their God-given role.