

Hebrews:  
The Book of “Better” Things

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## Hebrews: The Book of “Better” Things

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## Session 1

### Hebrews: The Book of “Better” Things

The book of Hebrews presents Christ as God’s full and final revelation. In this letter, the two Greek words for “better” and “superior” occur 15 times.

Written in the context of suffering to Alexandrian/Hellenistic Jews. Because of severe suffering some were thinking about “going back” to their former beliefs and practices. Many of the early Jewish believers were slipping back into the rites and rituals of Judaism in order to escape the mounting persecution. This letter, then, is an exhortation for these persecuted believers to continue in the grace of Jesus Christ.

Although some include the Book of Hebrews among the Apostle Paul's writings, the certain identity of the author remains an enigma. Missing is Paul's customary salutation so common to his other works and the suggestion that the writer of this epistle relied upon knowledge and information provided by others who were actual eye-witnesses of Christ Jesus (2: 3) makes Pauline authorship doubtful. Some attribute Luke as its writer; others suggest Hebrews may have been written by Apollos, Barnabas, Silas, Philip, or Aquila and Priscilla. Regardless, Hebrews speaks with the same canonical authority as the other sixty-five books of the Bible.

The early church father Clement quoted from the Book of Hebrews in 95 A.D., however, internal evidence such as the fact that Timothy was alive at the time the epistle was written and the absence of any evidence showing the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system that occurred with Jerusalem's destruction in 70 A.D. indicates the book was written around 65 A.D.

#### Theme Verses:

Jesus as the revelation of God—“God, who at various times and in different ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son” (Hebrews 1:1-2).

Jesus as the salvation of God—“How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation” (Hebrews 2:3).

Jesus as the compassion of God—“Seeing then that we have a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but was in all points tempted as we are, yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need” (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Jesus as the determination of God—"Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has set down at the right hand of God" (Hebrews 12:1-2).

#### Summary:

In Hebrews we find a magnificently rendered portrait of Jesus Christ—the Author and Finisher of our great salvation (Hebrews 12:2). The writer of Hebrews continually makes mention of the superiority of Christ in both His person and work. In the writings of the Old Testament, we understand the rituals and ceremonies of Judaism symbolically pointed to the coming of Messiah—the rites of Judaism were but shadows of things to come. Hebrews tells us that Christ Jesus is better than anything mere religion has to offer. All the pomp and circumstance of religion pales in comparison to the person, work, and ministry of Christ Jesus. It is the superiority of our Jesus that remains the theme of this letter.

The writer of Hebrews gives ample encouragement to believers, but there are five solemn warnings: there is the danger of neglect (Hebrews 2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-4,13), the danger of spiritual immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-6:20), the danger of spurning the Son of God (Hebrews 10:26-39), and the danger of refusing God (Hebrews 12:25-29).

## Session 2

### Hebrews 1: 1-14 Jesus the Superior Mediator I: vs. Angels

*Because of sin we need a go-between to connect with God.*

#### I. Role of the Mediator

In this age of informality and equality we want to engage God directly, just as we approach other authority figures. God is unique, however, so the direct approach doesn't work. For starters, He made us; we can never be His equal. On top of that we've tried to break away from His rule. For all these reasons, and more, we need someone or something to help us reconcile our differences and to promote peace between us. The Apostle Paul wrote to Timothy, "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, a man, Christ Jesus." (1 Tim 2:5)

Why does the the author compare Jesus to *angels*? (Read Heb 2:2; Acts 7:53; Gal 3:19)  
What makes Jesus superior to the angels in the author's view?  
Who or what does the church today attempt to elevate above the person and work of Jesus?

#### II. The Supremacy of God's Son

Angels played a major role in the lives of the Jews. Moses, recounting his "visit" with Jehovah God on Mt. Sinai in Deuteronomy 33:2, says the LORD descended onto the mountain top with an entourage of 10,000 "holy ones", a reference to the presence of angel hosts. Stephen, preaching just prior to being stoned to death by the Jews, reminded them they had received the Law from angels. (Acts 7:53) Paul taught the Galatians the Law was ordained through angels. (Gal 3:19) The writer of this letter to the Hebrews later calls the Law "the word spoken through angels." (2:2) In fact one sect of Jews, the Essenes, afforded a cult status to angels. They taught that two messiahs were coming at the end of the age, one priestly and one kingly, and they would be subordinate to Michael, the archangel, in the world to come. In order to silence such speculation the author flatly states in 2:5, "For it was not to angels that God subjected the world to come." He reminds them in the first 14 verses of his letter that Jesus, the Son and rightful heir to the throne, surpasses the angels in several ways.

Jesus		Angels	
Son of God & Heir to Kingdom	Psalm 2:7	Servants in the House of God	Psalm 104:4
Sovereign Ruler of Heaven & Earth	Psalm 45:6	Ministering Spirits to Serve Us	Psalm 103:20
Creator & Sustainer of Universe	Psalm 102:25-27	Creatures Subject to God	Psalm 8:4-6

## Session 3

### Hebrews 2:1-4 Warning I: Neglecting our Great Salvation

The writer of Hebrews gives ample encouragement to believers, but there are five solemn warnings: there is the danger of neglect (Hebrews 2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-4:13), the danger of spiritual immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-6:20), the danger of spurning the Son of God (Hebrews 10:26-39), and the danger of refusing God (Hebrews 12:25-29).

In this session we will look at the first warning—neglecting our great salvation.

1. How is chapter 1 different from chapter 2 in content and tone?
2. How are you tempted to neglect your salvation?
3. What does “drifting away” mean?

In chapter one of Hebrews there are no commands for the church. We are not told to do anything. The whole chapter is a declaration and celebration of God's final word to the world -- Jesus Christ the Son of God. The chapter begins, "God, after He spoke long ago to the fathers in the prophets in many portions and in many ways, in these last days has spoken to us in his Son." This is the point of chapter one: something utterly stupendous happened in the coming of the Son of God.

Beyond what the Old Testament told us, whatever we need to know about God and how he relates to our lives we learn from what we hear and see in God's final, decisive Word, Jesus Christ.

That's what Hebrews 1 is all about: this final word of God, Jesus Christ. In summary, chapter one says that the Son of God is the heir of all things (v. 2), he made the world (v. 2), he is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of God's nature (v. 3), he upholds all things by the word of his power (v. 3), he made purification for sins (v. 3), he sat down at the right hand of God's majesty (v. 3) and he is greater than any angel (v. 4) because angels worship him (v. 6). He is the mighty God (v. 8).

That's the message of chapter one: God has spoken by his Son and this Son is Creator and Sustainer and Owner and Ruler and Redeemer of the world. There are no warnings for us here. Only declaration and celebration of the greatness of Jesus, the final Word of God.

But 2:1-4 is the first warning—do not neglect such a great salvation. In other words, God has spoken by his Son, so listen, listen very carefully.

What Hebrews is saying here is that in the Christian life we must go on listening to God's Word in Jesus. There is an urgency here in Hebrews 2:1. Literally it says, "It is *exceedingly necessary* that we give heed to what we have heard." And the whole first chapter is intended to make this a light burden and an easy yoke. The one we are to pay close attention to is the Creator and Sustainer and Owner and Ruler and Redeemer of the world. And what he has to say to us is a "very great salvation."

This is what verse 3 says: "How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?" So if we choose not to listen to Jesus and consider him and fix our eyes on him, then we are scorning his importance described in chapter one and we are neglecting a "great salvation." Now why would anybody want to do that? The only reason would be if we regard something else as more important to listen to and consider and fix our eyes on.

If we don't pay attention to Jesus, the danger is that we will drift away and into destruction. Hebrews says that if we do not pay closer attention, we will drift. Drifting is a deadly thing in the Christian life. And the remedy to it, according to Hebrews 2:1, is "Pay close attention to what you have heard." That is, consider what God is saying in his Son Jesus. Fix your eyes on what God is saying and doing in the Son of God, Jesus Christ. What he is saying and doing is amazing grace and salvation.

The argument given in verse 2 for why we will not escape if we drift and neglect our great salvation is that "The word spoken through angels proved unalterable, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense." In other words, in the Old Testament God did not yet speak directly through his Son on the earth. He spoke through intermediary messengers.

Now something much greater has come: God has spoken to us not through angels, but through the Son. God himself stood forth from heaven in Jesus and spoke a great salvation with his lips and his life and his death. Now, this writer says, if we neglect this great word, we are much more guilty than the Old Testament people who disobeyed the word of God given through angels, and therefore we will not escape.

This warning tells us that we will perish if we drift away from the Word of God and neglect our great salvation. However, we also hear that this Word is so amazing that it causes people to listen and linger. How could we not want to pay attention to this Word and consider him and fix our eyes on him?

## Session 4

### Hebrews 2: 5-18 Jesus the Superior Mediator II: Perfect Through Suffering

*Man is the crown of creation. The last Adam, Jesus, came to restore the dignity the first Adam lost.*

#### **I. The incarnation and crucifixion of Christ was the only fitting method of salvation.**

In the creation of Adam, then Eve, the LORD God put the finishing touches on the splendor of the universe They made out of nothing. This beneficent ruler then subjected the First Couple to a simple test of obedience. The reward for success; an eternity of bliss in Paradise. The penalty for failure; death. They failed the test, but God mercifully promised to send *another man* to redeem them. At just the right time, the Holy Spirit impregnated a Jewish virgin, and she gave birth to a male child. An angel sent from God told her the child would be the saviour of his people.

1. Why did the saviour of humankind have to be human? (Romans 5:12,18,19; 1 Cor 15:45)
2. Was it possible for Christ, the last Adam, to *fail* the test his heavenly Father gave him?
3. Name at least two of the benefits we gained by his success?

#### **II. To procure our restoration, God himself has met the demands of his own holiness.**

God's attributes include justice as well as mercy, and they cannot be separated. The first man's disobedience sentenced us all to death. Our redeemer had to be human so he could *die* in our place. He had not only to taste the full menu of humanity but also to be *sinless* and undeserving of death. The last Adam had to pass the test of obedience the first Adam failed. If he succeeded, by perfectly obeying God then sacrificing his life to pay the penalty for our transgressions, he would "render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil." The whole human race, in Adam's fall, became subject to the devil, who seduced our first parents to abandon their allegiance to Creator God. Our slavery most poignantly included an intense fear of death and the judgement that comes after it. In short, Jesus came to undo the work of the devil and rescue the people his Father had given him. The man Jesus and the "children God gave him" have the same origin - the Spirit of God. He caused Mary to supernaturally conceive and deliver a flesh-and-blood man, and we were born anew by the same Spirit when God the Father gave the word. So Jesus is not ashamed to call us brothers and sisters. The Lord's *body*, Athanasius said, "Is the root for *our* resurrection and salvation."

Taking on a human body and cruel suffering also qualified Christ to serve as our "high priest." Since he endured all the passion and pain *we* are going through, he feels for us in our weakness and helps us when we get desperate and put our trust in him. The power of his resurrection enables us to overcome temptation; his death assures forgiveness when we fail. Christ says, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and the one who comes to me I will never reject." This power and forgiveness belong to all who cling to Christ in times of trouble.

## Session 5

### Hebrews 3: 1-6 Jesus the Superior Mediator III: vs. Moses

*Moses was a servant in God's house; Jesus is the son who rules over the house.*

#### I. Christ Superior to Moses

The Jews venerated not only angels but also the towering Old Testament figure of Moses. In this brief segment, the author offers reasons for regarding Jesus as superior to Moses. Two major motifs of the book as a whole make an appearance: the command to “consider Jesus” (v. 1) occurs at several key moments in the book, and the writer never loses sight of his persuasive purpose to enjoin his readers to “hold fast” their confidence and hope (v. 6).

1. In what sense are some of today's churches venerating Moses?
2. When you “consider” Jesus, what image comes into your mind?
3. Have you been tempted lately to ditch your hope in the Christian faith? What else is out there?

#### II. The Adoration of Moses

Returning to the theme he initiated in chapter 1, the writer unravels another strand of the heresy pulling in some of these Jewish converts to Christianity. The Hebrew hero, Moses, held a special place in the hearts and minds of the Jewish people in Jesus' day. Some of them even thought Moses would return at the end of the age as a messianic figure. When the promised return of Jesus failed to materialize, some of the recipients of this letter were, perhaps, tempted to drift back into a more comfortable mode. They might have reasoned that the Rabbis and their Book of Rules were less hostile than the persecution they were enduring for the name of Jesus. The author pleads with them to think long and hard about Jesus. Yes, Moses was a faithful *servant* in God's shadow-house (Israel) but Jesus is the *son* who rules over the true house. If you want access to God, the King of Heaven, who are you going to trust to get you in? One of his servants or the king's own son? Jesus, by virtue of his authority as Son, was appointed “supreme head to the church,” God's true house. In fact he himself *built* the house! He said in Jn 5:46, “If you believed Moses you would believe me, for he wrote of me.”

Moses is still “hot” in some churches in America today. If you are in a congregation that leaves you feeling like you can't compete spiritually, you have probably stumbled upon one of them. You're just not that into neighborhood Bible studies. Soup kitchens and prayer groups aren't your thing either. You're not a doctor or a nurse, and you don't thrill at the prospect of building things in a third world country. Maybe you feel like you're being judged on your performance when in the presence of these modern day Pharisees. Jesus said, “*If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples.*” (Jn 8:31) As Philip Edgcumbe Hughes puts it, “The verses that follow (7-19) are designed to instruct the readers of this epistle that the sorry history of Israel under Moses provides a solemn warning to members of the Christian community of the dire consequences of insincerity.”

## Session 6

### Hebrews 3:7-4:13 Warning II: Unbelief

The writer of Hebrews gives ample encouragement to believers, but there are five solemn warnings: there is the danger of neglect (Hebrews 2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-4:13), the danger of spiritual immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-6:20), the danger of spurning the Son of God (Hebrews 10:26-39), and the danger of refusing God (Hebrews 12:25-29).

In this session we will focus on the second warning—the danger of unbelief.

1. Read Psalm 95 and compare it to this passage.
2. What are the various themes in this warning?
3. What are the consequences of unbelief?
4. How does this relate to Jesus' approval of the statement said to him in Mark 9:24, "Lord, I believe, but help my unbelief"?
5. What is the significance of "eternal rest" in this passage?

The rhetoric of the book now swings back from the theological argument about Christ's superiority to an exhortation to remain faithful. The point of departure (3:7–11) is a quotation from Psalm 95:7–11, with its stern warning not to harden one's heart and incur God's penalty of not entering his rest. Taking his cue from the concluding image of not entering God's rest (3:11), the author then unifies the entire remaining part of this unit around the motif of entering God's rest. The variations on the theme are as follows: a warning not be numbered among those who fail to enter God's rest because of unbelief (3:12–19); an intricate argument that God has promised a rest yet to occur in the future (4:1–10); a solemn exhortation to "strive to enter that rest" (4:11); accompanied by a reminder that God's word of judgment can be trusted to occur (4:12–13).

For us to understand this passage, the key is to understand the Sabbath. The Sabbath was originally good news, grace-filled, and celebratory. But religious folks turned it into burden and chore. The Sabbath is specifically about two things: *rest* and *celebrating freedom*. In creation, after six days of creating, God appointed the seventh day for the benefit of humans—for their happiness, joy, and refreshment. The purpose was to stop working and to rest. It is both a command and a gift. And then, in the ten commandments, the fourth commandment says this: "Remember you were slaves in Egypt and that the Lord your God brought you out of there. Therefore, observe the Sabbath day." The Sabbath was a day to remember and celebrate freedom and relief—they were once brutally enslaved in Egypt and God remembered them and delivered them. This is why Jesus says, "The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath." It is a reminder of God's graciousness, that God will provide for them, that God remembered them in their slavery, and that they are God's people.

## Session 7

### Hebrews 4:14-5:10: Jesus the Superior Mediator IV: Great High Priest

*Jesus is the perfect priest, because he can sympathize with us in our struggle against sin.*

#### I. We have a sympathetic high priest.

“After terrifying us the Apostle now comforts us,” commented Martin Luther on this passage of Scripture. The author of this letter to the Hebrews had just reminded his readers that nothing we say or do is hidden from the eyes of the one to whom we must give an account when our life on earth is done. In our trials and tribulations we fail often, bringing shame on ourselves and hurt on other people. Because the Son of God was *made man* he knows what it feels like to be tempted and tested. We can take comfort knowing he’s in heaven now, standing by to help us as we journey through this vale of tears toward our eternal rest. These words are written to encourage us to call on Christ in confidence when we feel we’re losing our way. God has given us, in the person of His own Son, a priest to represent us in heaven! This is no ordinary priest either, no mere man like Aaron, the Levite priest. Our great high priest comes from the order of the *universal* (non-Jewish) priest, Melchizedek, about whom we will hear more in Session 9.

1. Have you had times in your life that were so hard you wanted to turn away from God rather than “drawing near”?
2. How did you work through it?
3. How do you respond to those who say there are many roads leading to God, not just the one through Jesus?

#### II. Christ is the sole source of salvation.

Jesus Christ, in his perfect life and substitutionary death *in our place*, opened the way for his people to directly approach the throne of God’s majestic sovereignty. “This is nothing less,” says Spicq, “than a revolution in the fundamental concept of religion.” Only Christianity can give fallen, impure creatures the boldness to present themselves before God. The Jews, the Muslims, the Buddhists- all who deny the *uniqueness* of the person and work of Christ- do not have this access we enjoy. Jesus is the only means of approaching The Holy One because he alone lived an unblemished life, and he did not shrink back from the overwhelming terror of death by crucifixion. As a result he now sits, crowned with glory and honor, as the king of heaven *and* our faithful high priest. He alone is the “source of eternal salvation to all who obey him.” God the Father designated his son “high priest” after he learned obedience through the extremely and distressingly bad things he suffered in his humanity. When we approach God through Jesus we can be confident he will help us overcome temptation because he had to overcome it. At other times, when things look really dark and our failures are grieving us, he delights in comforting us.

In our culture a lot of people, places, and things compete with Jesus for our allegiance. His love for us is certain, his compassion endless. When you’re weary to the point of exhaustion, keep on clinging to him and calling on him. He will give you rest for your soul.

## Session 8

### Hebrews 5:11-6:20 Warning III: Falling Away (5:11-6:20)

The writer of Hebrews gives ample encouragement to believers, but there are five solemn warnings: there is the danger of neglect (Hebrews 2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-4:13), the danger of spiritual immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-6:20), the danger of spurning the Son of God (Hebrews 10:26-39), and the danger of refusing God (Hebrews 12:25-29).

In this session we will look at the third warning—falling away.

The text that contains the most solemn warning against falling away is also the most controversial regarding the doctrine of divine preservation of Christians. This passage strongly suggests that believers can and do fall away, totally and finally. How can this be?

1. In Hebrews 6:4-6, do you think it is describing believers or unbelievers?
2. Do you believe it is possible to lose your salvation? Why or why not?
3. How does God's preservation of you relate to your perseverance in the faith?

The full meaning of the passage is difficult for several reasons. The first is that we do not know for sure what issue of apostasy was involved in this text, since we are not certain of either the author or the destination of Hebrews. There were two burning issues in the early church that easily could have provoked this dire warning.

The first issue was the problem of the so-called *lapsi*. The *lapsi* were those people who during severe persecution did not keep the faith. Not everyone died happily for Jesus singing hymns during the persecutions. Some broke down and recanted their faith. When the persecutions died down, some of these people who denied the faith repented and sought readmission to the church. How they were to be received was a significant controversy.

The second issue was that provoked by the Judaizers. The destructive influence of this group is dealt with in several parts of other NT books. The Judaizers wanted to profess Christ and at the same time enforce the OT ceremonies. They insisted on circumcision. Most commentators think it was the Judaizer heresy that is being dealt with in our passage.

Another problem is to identify the nature of the people being warned against falling away. Are they true believers or are they people who *professed* faith in Christ but didn't *possess* faith in Christ? There are three categories of people we are concerned with here: believers, unbelievers in the church, and unbelievers outside of the church.

Hebrews draws several parallels with OT Israel, especially with those in the camp who were apostate. Who are these people in Hebrews? How are they described?

- once enlightened
- tasted of the heavenly gift
- partakers of the Holy Spirit
- tasted the good Word of God
- cannot be renewed again to repentance

At first this list looks like it describes true believers. However, it may be describing church members who are not believers, people who made a false profession of faith. All of these attributes may be possessed by non-believers. Non-believers who show up at church and hear the preaching of the Word of God are “enlightened.” They participate in all the means of grace. They join in the Lord’s Supper. They partake of the Holy Spirit in the sense that they enjoy the nearness of his special immediate presence and his benefits. They may even have made a kind of repentance, at least outwardly.

Some think this passage is discussing non-believers. However, the part about renewal makes it seem otherwise. The renewed repentance of which the author speaks sounds like the genuine kind.

The author here is arguing in an *ad hominem* style, which is to carry your opponent’s position to its logical conclusion. The logical conclusion of the Judaizer heresy is to destroy any hope of salvation.

The logic goes like this. If a person embraced Christ and trusted in his atonement for sin, what would that person have if they went back to the covenant of Moses? In effect they would be repudiating the finished work of Christ. They would once again be a debtor to the law. If that were the case, where would they turn for salvation? They have repudiated the cross. They would have no hope for salvation and no saviour. That theology doesn’t allow a finished work of Christ.

The key to our passage is 6:9—”We are confident of better things concerning you, yes, things that accompany salvation, though we speak in this manner.” Here the author notes that he is speaking in an unusual manner. The conclusion here differs from those who find here a text for falling away. It ends with a confidence of better things from the beloved, things that accompany salvation. Obviously, falling away does not accompany salvation. The text doesn’t say that any believers actually fall away. In fact, the opposite is stated. There is confidence that the readers will not fall away.

This passage is about the relationship between our perseverance and God's preservation. We are called not to fall away. Humanly speaking, it is possible to fall away. This is why Philippians 2:12 says "Work out your salvation by fear and trembling...." As we do this we are to look for God who is preserving us. Philippians 2:13 says "...because it is God who is working in you to will and to do his good pleasure." It is impossible that God should fail to keep us.

Imagine a father and child. It is possible for the child to let go of the parent's hand. If the parent is God, it is not possible that he will let go. Even given the promise of the Father not to let go, it is still the responsibility of the child to hold on tightly. Thus our passage warns believers against falling away. Luther calls this the "evangelical use of exhortation." It reminds us to be diligent in our walk with God.

Regarding the unity of perseverance and preservation, see Jeremiah 32:40—"I will make an everlasting covenant with them. I will not turn away from doing them good, but I will put my fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from me."

## Session 9

### Hebrews 7: 1-28: Jesus the Superior Mediator V: vs. Aaron

*Unlike Aaron, Jesus opened the way for God's people to come into His very presence in the heavenly sanctuary.*

#### I. Jesus is a whole different order of priest than Aaron and the Levite priests.

Jesus became a priest, not on the basis of a legal requirement concerning bodily descent, but by “the power of an indestructible life.” This makes him the mediator of a better system of salvation than the one conferred on the Old Testament Israelites. The Bible dates the founding of the Jewish nation to the call of Abraham by God to leave his family and go to a place God would choose. Abraham’s grandson, Jacob (later renamed Israel), gave birth to twelve sons, one of whom was Levi. God appointed the Levites, and specifically Aaron, to serve as priests in the wilderness tabernacle and later in the temple in Jerusalem. The first century Jewish Christians to whom this letter is directed appear to have drifted off into some dangerous speculation about a rebirth of the Aaronic priesthood in the age to come. They were perilously close to ditching their faith in Jesus and waiting for some messianic priestly figure to arrive and re-establish the system of temple sacrifices! The author of Hebrews takes great pains to disabuse them of the notion.

1. When the thrill of following Jesus is gone, do you sometimes dream of returning to a former way of life? What does that look like for you?
2. Do you realize you have, by faith in Christ, direct access to God’s ear for help?

#### II. The Aaronic priests were an imperfect copy of the High Priest God would send later.

The priest to come, writes the author, would be not like Aaron but like the mysterious figure in Genesis 14, Melchizedek. He was king and priest over Jerusalem in the time of Abraham, and he was superior to Abraham and his descendant Aaron. In a foreshadowing (Heb 5:6, quoting Psalm 110) he says this *coming* priest will be “a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek.” If the Levitical priesthood were perfect, he argues, why would the Holy Spirit make mention of another, permanent, priesthood to come later? The Levitical priesthood had some serious limitations, he reminds them. For one thing those priests died; they could not serve *forever*. For another they had to offer daily sacrifices for *their own sins* before offering for the sins of the people. Jesus Christ, in whose person Abraham and Melchizedek met again, came as a “holy, innocent, unstained” priest to offer a sacrifice, not of dumb animals, but of *himself*. He made his offering one time for all times when he gave up his life for the removal of the sins of his people. Here, says the author, is the bottom line:

The old system of religious rituals never permitted direct access to God. The new covenant based on faith in the atoning death of Jesus is better, because it makes the conscience clean and gives us the more certain assurance that *we are acceptable to God*.

## Session 10

### Hebrews 8:1-10:25 The New and Better Covenant

*The shadows of the system based on the law of Moses have given way to the reality of Christ's offering up himself.*

#### I. God always intended for the covenant with Moses to become obsolete.

Almost a thousand years after God gave the Israelites the law and its system of animal sacrifices through Moses and Aaron, the prophet Jeremiah wrote these words:

“Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord,/ when I will establish a new covenant with the house of Israel/ and with the house of Judah.” (Jeremiah 31:31)

So, what was wrong with the old system that was drawing back these Jewish Christians? It was, first, inferior in nature - earthly, physical and temporary. The new deal promised by God would be enacted in heaven, spiritual and never ending. The constant killing of calves had no power to cleanse the *conscience* of the worshiper, because animal deaths were insufficient atonement for man's failure to keep the loving standard of God's law. The relentlessly recurring animal sacrifices just reminded the people over and over again of their moral failures. The old system was also weak in that it lacked the power to *free them* from their selfish patterns of behavior.

1. Do you have a recurring sin from which you desperately long to be delivered?
2. When your sins are put in the spotlight are you usually inclined to defend yourself?
3. Do you sometimes feel, *through faith in Christ*, that God has forgotten your sins?

#### II. Jesus Christ is the mediator of a better covenant, one enacted on better promises.

Jeremiah continued to describe the coming new covenant by adding these words:

“After those days...I will put my laws into their minds/ and write them on their hearts/ and I will be their God/ and they shall be my people.”

God had also promised in the old covenant, “I will be their God/ and they shall be my people.” At that time, though, the promise came with a stipulation - perfect obedience to the law of Moses. The Bible makes it clear in many places that no *naturally generated* human being can fulfill this condition. The new covenant also contains a requirement for obedience, but with one major difference. God promised to send another man, *the last Adam*, to fulfill the requirement for all his people. He sent his Son, born of a virgin, to live the life we could not, in our impaired state, live for ourselves. When we fled in our guilt and desperation to Jesus for relief, God counted it as though *we were sinless!* Because he lived an unblemished life and poured out that life for us on the cross, the promises of God belong only to us who believe in him. The Scripture says, “All the promises of God find their ‘Yes’ in Him.”

To impart the *ability* to love God and other people, the Holy Spirit has written God's law on our *hearts*. In this “extreme makeover” He radically changed our nature. We are no longer determined to find a route to happiness *we can control*. Now our heart's desire is to love and serve God, and Jesus will come back to rescue those who are eagerly waiting for him.

## Session 11

### Hebrews 10:26-39 Warning IV: Spurning the Son of God

The writer of Hebrews gives ample encouragement to believers, but there are five solemn warnings: there is the danger of neglect (Hebrews 2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-4,13), the danger of spiritual immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-6:20), the danger of spurning the Son of God (Hebrews 10:26-39), and the danger of refusing God (Hebrews 12:25-29).

In this session, we will look at the fourth warning—spurning the Son of God.

Matthew 12:31-32 says: “Every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come.”

When Jesus gave the warning and distinguished between blasphemy against the Son of Man and blasphemy against the Holy Spirit it was at a time when he had not yet been made fully manifest. We note that this distinction tends to fall away after the resurrection, Pentecost, and the ascension. Note Hebrews 10:26-29.

1. How is sinning against Christ an insult to the Spirit?
2. What does it mean to willfully sin after we have received the knowledge of the truth?
3. Do Christians commit this “willful sinning” after knowledge of the truth?

In our passage, the distinction between sinning against Jesus and against the Spirit falls away. To sin against Jesus is an insult to the Spirit. The key to all this is the willful sin after we have received the knowledge of the truth.

If we take verse 26 as an absolute, none of us would have hope of heaven. We all sin willfully after we know the truth. A specific sin is in view here, not each and every sin. And many think that the specific sin in view here is blasphemy of the Spirit.

The unforgivable sin is to blaspheme Christ and the Spirit by saying that Jesus is a devil when you know better. That is, the unforgivable sin can not be done in ignorance. If a person knows with certainty that Jesus is the Son of God and then declares that Jesus is of the devil, that person commits blasphemy.

Who commits such a sin? This sin is common to devils and totally degenerate people. The devil knew who Jesus was. He could not plead ignorance as an excuse.

One of the fascinating facts of history is the strange way in which unbelievers speak of Jesus. The vast majority of people speak of Jesus with great respect. Saying Jesus is a devil is not something we see many people do. It is, however, possible for people to know the truth of Jesus and sink this low. One does not need to be born again to have an *intellectual* knowledge of the true identity of Jesus.

So, is it possible for a Christian to commit the unforgivable sin and lose their salvation? No. The grace of God makes it impossible. In ourselves, we are capable of any sin, including blasphemy of the Spirit. But God preserves us from this sin. He preserves us from full and final fall, guarding our lips from this sin. We perform other sins and other kinds of blasphemy, but God in his grace restrains us from committing the ultimate blasphemy.

## Session 12

### Hebrews 11:1-12:2 Faith

*Faith is the reality underlying our trust in God's promises, the guarantee of our future possessions.*

#### I. Faith is not primarily an intellectual exercise.

At the end of chapter 10 (10:35-39) the author warned his listeners against spurning the Son of God. "Do not," he says, "throw away your *confidence*, which has a great reward...the things God promised." Those promises, he reminded them, include Jesus' coming back for his people to take them with him to heaven. He finishes his exhortation by expressing his belief they *will* persevere and hold tight to their faith.

Faith, confidence, belief - all these words express the intangible idea that deep down inside, Christians *trust* Jesus to make good on the promises of God. Yes, we must suffer because he suffered, but one day he will deliver us from this present evil age forever. (Of course, that implies Christians see the worldly system as inherently bad, antagonistic to God).

1. How content are you with your life? Are you pretending the things you have really satisfy you? That the things you don't have really don't bother you all that much?
2. Do you long for a better, more permanent, place?
3. How certain are you that, when it's all over, you will be with Jesus in Paradise? Why or why not?

#### II. The pop culture view of faith is not the same as Biblical faith.

Faith, our author correctly asserts, is the *reality* underlying our hoping, our trusting; we are convinced about things we don't see yet. That reality is nothing less than the death of Jesus for our sin and his resurrection in power to be appointed judge of the entire human race. Without believing that, it's impossible to please God. You must also be convinced God exists. It cannot be proved by deductive reasoning, so God revealed it to us in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. You must believe what the Bible says about God in order to come into his presence with your petitions. It says we have access to God only through Jesus Christ, who opened up the way that leads to salvation. Because he is the pioneer of our salvation, he is the author of our faith. Verse 8 makes clear faith is confirmed by "obeying God," the way Abraham did. His life didn't always make sense, and yours probably doesn't either. That's where faith comes in. Reason is obscure and weak; grace is clear, and strong. We *trust* the One who sent his Son to redeem us from our bondage to sin. He is now in heaven where he's interceding for us and where he has prepared a place for us. (Earth is not our home!) We believe he will do for us everything he says he will. Get a Bible concordance and look up the word "will" where it occurs in the four gospels. Track down some of these "I wills of Jesus" to get a handle on the promises in store for us who obey him out of love and gratitude. They will make your faith grow strong!

## Session 13

### Hebrews 12:25-29 Warning V: The Danger of Refusing God

The writer of Hebrews gives ample encouragement to believers, but there are five solemn warnings: there is the danger of neglect (Hebrews 2:1-4), the danger of unbelief (Hebrews 3:7-4:13), the danger of spiritual immaturity (Hebrews 5:11-6:20), the danger of spurning the Son of God (Hebrews 10:26-39), and the danger of refusing God (Hebrews 12:25-29).

In this session, we will investigate the fifth warning—the danger of refusing God.

1. How do you feel about the idea of a judgment day? Why do you think and feel the way you do?
2. Do you feel secure before God?
3. What does it mean to worship God with awe and reverence?

God has appointed a great, final shaking of the earth that will mean the end of the world as we know it and the beginning of something infinitely better. Verses 26–27 discuss this: God's voice then shook the earth (referring to the shaking at Mount Sinai when he came to give the law, Exodus 19:18); but now he has promised (an allusion to Haggai 2:6), “Yet once more I will shake not only the earth but also the heaven.”

There will come a new heaven and a new earth on which righteousness dwells, but this world is going to come to a cataclysmic end some day, and there will be a removal of the world as we know it, and what cannot be shaken will remain—the kingdom of God and everyone who dwells in it.

There are several other places in the Bible where this is made clear. For example:

I will make the heavens tremble, and the earth will be shaken out of its place, at the wrath of the Lord of hosts in the day of his fierce anger. (Isaiah 13:13)

So there's coming a day, the Day of the Lord, of fierce anger and retribution and justice upon the earth for its sin, and the earth will be shaken out of its place. The foundations of the earth tremble. The earth is utterly broken, the earth is rent asunder, the earth is violently shaken. The earth staggers like a drunken man, it sways like a hut; its transgression lies heavy upon it, and it falls, and will not rise again. (Isaiah 24:18–20)

The sky vanished like a scroll that is rolled up, and every mountain and island was removed from its place. Then the kings of the earth and the great men and the generals and the rich and the strong, and every one, slave and free, hid in the caves and among the rocks of the mountains, calling to the mountains and rocks, "Fall on us and hide us from

the face of him who is seated on the throne, and from the wrath of the Lamb; for the great day of their wrath has come, and who can stand before it?" (Revelation 6:12–17)

A loud voice came out of the temple, from the throne, saying, "It is done!" And there were flashes of lightning, voices, peals of thunder, and a great earthquake such as had never been since men were on the earth, so great was that earthquake. The great city was split into three parts, and the cities of the nations fell, and God remembered great Babylon, to make her drain the cup of the fury of his wrath. (Revelation 16:17–19)

At this time, every person will face God. People outside of Christ should tremble at this thought because they are going to face God with nothing to stand on. However, those in Christ can point to Christ as their righteousness and can be confident on that day.

Before the end of this age, God is giving to everyone who believes in his Son a stable promise of hope and security that cannot be shaken and will never end. This is the message of the whole Bible. But to see it we should look at verse 28 of our text: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken."

We have *already* received it! Verse 27 says that what can be shaken will be swept away in one last great shaking, and that what is unshakable will remain. Then verse 28 says that we have already received that unshakable kingdom.

This is the great joy of being a Christian. You have a kingdom that has already been given to you, and your life in Christ is unshakable. Romans 8:23 says that "not only does the creation groan with birth-pangs, but we ourselves who have the first fruits of the Holy Spirit groan inwardly, awaiting the adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies." We share in the futility and decay of creation as long as we are in the body. Receiving an unshakable kingdom does not mean safety for the body in this world. It does not mean that we'll escape the earthquake. It means that "neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It means the deep and abiding certainty that "whether we live or whether we die we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, that he might be Lord both of the dead and of the living" (Romans 14:9). It means that "here we have no lasting city, but we seek a city which is to come" (Hebrews 13:14): a city whose builder and maker is God (Hebrews 11:10), a city that cannot be shaken (Hebrews 12:28)—forever.

Because of this grace—the free gift of an unshakable kingdom—we worship God with reverence and awe, remembering that our God is also a consuming fire. Verse 28: "Therefore let us be grateful for receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, and thus let us offer to God acceptable worship, with reverence and awe; for our God is a consuming fire."

## Session 14

### Hebrews 13 Strengthened by Grace: Past and Future

The first paragraph of this chapter says that we should love each other and show hospitality and care for prisoners and keep our marriage vows and avoid the love of money. This is to be done not by our own strength or ingenuity but by the power of the promise of God in verses 5-6: "I will never desert you, nor will I ever forsake you." So we confidently say, "The lord is my helper, I will not be afraid. What will man do to me?" Faith in the promises of God is the power to live a "Christian life." It takes strength to love. It takes strength to risk yourself with strangers. It takes strength to keep your marriage vows when it is not the way you dreamed it would be.

1. Where do you get this strength and how do you keep it?
2. What does the phrase "strengthened by grace" mean?
3. On what else, besides grace, do you frequently rely?
4. In what ways are forgiveness and hope nourishing?
5. What encouragement do you find in Jesus being the same yesterday, today and forever?

Verse 9 tells us where to get this strength: "Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited." Ephesians 3:16 says that you would be strengthened in the "inner person." Are you strong? Do you want to be?

If so, there is only one way. Verse 9 tells us where to turn for strength of heart and where not to turn. Turn to grace and do not turn to foods. "Do not be carried away by varied and strange teachings; for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods, through which those who were so occupied were not benefited." In the church Hebrews was written to, there were some strange teachings circulating about the power of foods.

Over against this misuse of foods, God says (in verse 9), "It is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods." So beware of "alien teachings" that elevate anything instead of grace to a place where they are the real strength and hope.

In verse 10, and picking up on this issue of being strengthened by grace and not foods, the author writes, "We have an altar from which those who serve the tabernacle have no right to eat." He's referring to the priests in Jerusalem who have rejected Jesus as their Messiah, but who go on "serving the tabernacle" that was meant to point to Jesus as the final sacrifice and the cross of Jesus as the final altar of sacrifice (Hebrews 9:26; 10:12). So the altar he has in mind is the cross where our final sacrifice was offered once for all for our sins. There is where our food is found. There is the "table" where grace was prepared.

If you want to be strong in your heart, when your heart is groaning with a sense of sin and failure, go to the altar of the cross to eat grace of forgiveness and hope.

In verse 11, the author continues that on the Day of Atonement in Leviticus 16, after the blood of the sacrificed bull and goat is taken into the holy of holies, and sprinkled there to cover the sins of the people, the bodies of the bull and the goat are taken outside the camp and burned (Leviticus 16:27).

"For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy place by the high priest as an offering for sin, are burned outside the camp." The nourishment the people received on the Day of Atonement was forgiveness and hope.

Notice verse 12: "Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people through His own blood, suffered outside the gate." In other words, Jesus has fulfilled the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement; they are completed in him; they find their final meaning in him. When you feel like a failure, when you feel discouraged and hopeless and dirty, don't turn to food...or anything else. It's a false remedy, and verse 9 says, it has not benefited those who walk in it. It only makes things worse.

Instead go to the altar of grace. And the food is grace - the grace of forgiveness and the grace of hope. The only way to be strong is to come back to this table again and again.

The only strength that really matters in life is the strength of heart that comes from feeding on grace and trusting in grace. The Lord takes pleasure in those who hope in his grace (Psalm 147:11).

Look at verses 7 and 8 and notice the sequence of the thought: "Remember leaders who in the past had faith, and now in the present you imitate that very faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever." The leaders trusted in Jesus. Now you continue trusting Jesus.

Something new is implied here that we didn't see in verses 9-10. If Jesus were only important for what he did on the cross then it wouldn't matter if he were the same today and tomorrow. All that would matter is that the past work on the altar of the cross is still valid. But the faith we are to imitate is faith in future grace, not just past grace. This is faith that the living Jesus who helped yesterday will help today and tomorrow.

We need the grace of forgiveness based on a great past substitutionary sacrifice on the cross, that covers all our sins. And we need the grace of promised help from Jesus today and tomorrow.