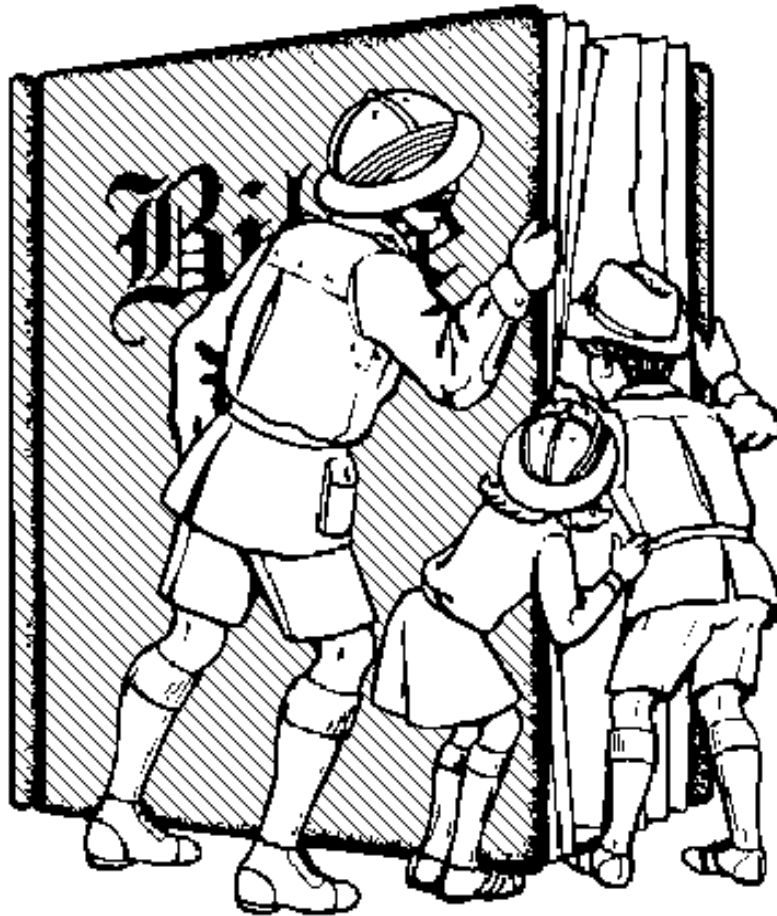


Fellowship Bible Church



Mid-Week Theology Class

Epistle to the Hebrews Part II

“The High Priest of Our Confession”

Summer/Fall 2008

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Week 1: A Sympathetic High Priest**Text Reading: Hebrews 4:14 - 16**

*"Christ has put on our feelings
along with our flesh."
(John Calvin)*

It has been our working hypothesis thus far in our study of the Epistle to the Hebrews that what we call an 'epistle' – a *letter* – is actually the transcription of a *sermon*. Perhaps it was a sermon that was never meant to be preached to a congregation, but was rather written down to be sent to a congregation – an assembly of believers undergoing a unique and intense form of temptation. These believers were converts to Christianity from Judaism, and apparently they were under a great deal of pressure to convert back to Judaism. The theory upon which we are working in our exposition of this wonderful treatise, is that the recipients of this 'epistle' were Jewish Christians residing in Rome after the repeal of the Claudian exile decree. Jews were permitted back into Rome, but they were not really welcomed – and rabble rousers among them would certainly find themselves empty-handed on the road to exile again...*or worse*. The temptation was very strong, therefore, to at least downplay their devotion to the Messiah Jesus Christ, if not to deny their allegiance to Him altogether. Franz Delitzsch proceeds upon this same thesis in his commentary: "The danger to which the Hebrew Christians were exposed from the synagogue, was that of suffering themselves to be deterred from making this profession, or even brought to abandon it."¹



Franz Delitzsch (1813-90)

Again, this is a working hypothesis; one that ought to be challenged as we progress through the book itself. Perhaps it will not survive the study, but will be replaced by a better theory. Yet if the scenario reflects the actual historical

¹ Delitzsch; p. 218.

situation, then we would expect the contents of this special sermon to forcefully address the temptation, and to give both encouragement and admonition to the assembly to stand firm. So far that is exactly what we have found, but we are only just finishing up chapter 4. Nonetheless, the author is about to embark upon the most extended defense of the superiority of the ministry of Jesus Christ to anything once offered under the old Covenant: an exaltation of the *High Priesthood* of Jesus that will run from the closing verses of chapter 4 through chapters 5, 6, and 7.

In order to kick off the exposition of this lengthy section, we must first *retreat* to the beginning of chapter 3. There we find the verse that sets the tone and scope of the author's meditations from chapter 3 through chapter 7,

*"Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of a heavenly calling, consider Jesus, **the Apostle and High Priest of our confession.**"*

In this verse the author unites in one man – Jesus – the two most important offices within the covenant nation of Israel: the *apostolic* and the *priestly*. Beginning in verse 2 of chapter 3, he favorably compares Jesus with the greatest apostle the Jewish nation ever knew: Moses. This comparison occupies the larger portion of chapters 3 and 4, a relatively short discussion when contrasted with what follows. In chapter 4, verse 14 the author picks up the second of the official titles, that of the *High Priest*, and proceeds to prove to his readers how Jesus Christ is the High Priest *par excellence*.

It is hard for Gentile believers to appreciate the centrality of the High Priest to the life of the nation of Israel under the Old Covenant. In the biblical record, to be sure, the High Priest was often not as visible or charismatic as the Davidic king. But that fact must not diminish the importance of this man and his office. A striking illustration of this truth can be seen in the story of King Uzziah, an otherwise righteous king who overstepped his limits and ventured into the province of the High Priest:

But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the LORD his God by entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. So Azariah the priest went in after him, and with him were eighty priests of the LORD – valiant men. And they withstood King Uzziah, and said to him, “It is not for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD, but for the priests, the sons of Aaron, who are consecrated to burn incense. Get out of the sanctuary, for you have trespassed! You shall have no honor from the LORD God.” Then Uzziah became furious; and he had a censer in his hand to burn incense. And while he was angry with the priests, leprosy broke out on his forehead, before the priests in the house of the LORD, beside the incense altar. And Azariah the chief priest and all the priests looked at him, and there, on his forehead, he was leprous; so they thrust him out of that place. Indeed he also hurried to get out, because the LORD had struck him. (II Chronicles 26:16-20)

No matter how good or how powerful the king may have been, there were definite limits to his authority and to his role in the life of the nation. *He* was not the mediator between the people and Jehovah, and between Jehovah and the people – that was the sole responsibility and honor of the High Priest. For the faithful Jew, it may be said, the High Priest was a far more important personage than the king. The latter could (by God’s grace) bring victory over Israel’s enemies, peace and prosperity to Israel’s people. But only the former could secure those blessings of Jehovah upon which the king’s success was contingent. And only the High Priest could secure the nation’s good standing before the God of Israel through the annual atonement offering on *Yom Kippur*.

After the fall of the Davidic dynasty, the Babylonian Exile, and the dynastic instability that followed the return to Palestine the role of the High Priest as the leader of the nation was intensified. In Jesus’ own day no man had more influence over the people of Israel than the High Priest, and the house of Annas and Caiaphas were the dominant voices in affairs both political and religious. It is true that the priestly family held its power in trust from the Romans, but foolish was the Roman governor who attempted to circumvent or ignore the singular position of the High Priest in Jewish culture. And this influence extended beyond the boundaries of Palestine to the Jews of the Diaspora.

It is evident from the language of Hebrews that the role of the High Priest was still being played out in Jerusalem: the Temple was still standing and the descendant of Aaron still officiating. Jewish converts to Christianity would still have a tender spot in their hearts for the office of the High Priest in Jerusalem – if not, perhaps, for the particular man filling that office – in much the same way as Catholic converts to Protestantism often have an abiding reverence for the papacy today. But that ‘tender spot’ in the Jewish Christian heart (and the former Catholic) can quickly become a vulnerable point of temptation (a phenomenon that explains why many Catholic converts eventually return to the Roman fold). This danger is all the more acute when the believer suffers persecution due to his or her abandonment of the previous faith (Jewish or Roman Catholic), or when the occupant of the High Priestly office is an especially noble man. While we cannot know the character of the man who occupied this exalted office when this epistle was written, we can be sure of the fact that the Hebrew Christians to whom it was written were being sorely tried because of their departure from Judaism to embrace Christianity. The author therefore vigorously argues not only that Jesus Christ *is* a High Priest (in spite of the fact that He was not of the tribe of Levi or the family of Aaron – a point that will be addressed further on), but that Jesus is a High Priest of a vastly greater character and compassion than any who occupied that office in Jerusalem.

“Therefore, having a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast the confession.” (4:14)

The essence of this particular verse is that of exhortation – the author drives our attention to the last clause, *“let us hold fast the confession.”* The verse begins, of course, with the ground and basis for the exhortation, and this train of thought will continue in verse 15 and onward. But we must not lose sight of the very practical focus – the *pastoral* emphasis – of this whole treatise. Hebrews is not merely an excellent commentary upon the Old Covenant and its complete

fulfillment in Christ, thought it is that. The book is, first and foremost, a clarion call to steadfastness among all believers in all ages and against all temptations to apostasy. Thus the hortatory imperative, *let us*, becomes a constant refrain interspersed amidst the author's inspired exposition of the Old Testament and its worship. We will begin, therefore, in the second half of verse 14 and proceed from there to the author's treatment of the office and nature of the great High Priest Jesus Christ.

Let us hold fast - the author uses a word here (for this phrase in English is but one word in the Greek) that signifies intense effort and exertion in the retention of some thing. Vine's Expository Dictionary highlights the fact that this word is the most intense within the particular family of Greek words of which it is a member, noting that the verb most literally means "to be strong, mighty, to prevail." John Owen notes that the word "intimates another frame of mind, and more severe endeavor...*kratein* (*kratei=n*) is to hold a thing 'strongly, 'firmly,' 'with all our strength, by all lawful means, with resolution and intension of mind.'"² This is the word used when Herod 'seized' John the Baptist and imprisoned him, obviously with no intention of letting him go. By the same word the wicked servant 'laid hold' of the servant who owed him money, refusing to let him go until he had paid off his debt. And of course it was the desire of the religious leaders to 'lay hold' of Jesus because His teachings were so damaging to their reputations.

The significance of all of this is not hard to see - whatever it is the author desires his readers to 'hold fast,' he wishes them to do so in a manner that precludes all possibility of letting go. That which they are to 'hold fast' is 'the confession.' The NASB inserts the possessive 'our' before confession, as does the KJV and NKJV, though this personalizing of the matter is not present in the original Greek. This may not seem to be a great matter, for it is indeed one's personal profession of faith that saves and not the general faith of a family or

² Owen, John; p. 399.

community. But there is the danger, more so in the modern church, of so personalizing the confession as to lose sight of the universal and abiding truth that it reflects. Thus the author exhorts us to hold fast *the* confession. By holding fast to the confession we do, of course, personalize it; in fact, the confession never becomes *more* personal than when it is *held fast* in the manner spoken of here.

So what *is* the confession? Whatever it is, it is the same confession of which Jesus Christ is the 'Apostle and High Priest' as we have seen from the opening verse of chapter 3 (where, interestingly, it is 'our' confession). It would seem, therefore, that the confession of which the author speaks is somewhat more than just the verbal profession of the deity and messiahship of Jesus Christ. This is the confession of which the apostle Paul writes in Romans chapter 10, one of the most famous evangelistic passages in the Bible,

*...if you **confess** with your mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in your heart that God has raised Him from the dead, you will be saved. For with the heart one believes unto righteousness, and with the mouth **confession** is made unto salvation.*

(Romans 10:9-10)

If the author of Hebrews was speaking of the very same confession as the apostle Paul, then we would have a situation where Jesus Christ is both the confession itself and the 'Apostle and High Priest' of the confession. It does seem that the author of Hebrews speaks of something more, something deeper, and perhaps of the same confession that we read about in Paul's first letter to Timothy,

*Fight the good fight of faith, lay hold on eternal life, to which you were also called and have **confessed** the good **confession** in the presence of many witnesses. I urge you in the sight of God who gives life to all things, and before Christ Jesus who witnessed the good **confession** before Pontius Pilate.*

(Timothy 6:12-13)

It is possible that Paul is referring to a portion of Jesus' conversation with Pontius Pilate that has not been recorded, but it is also possible – and more likely – that the 'good confession' of which the apostle speaks is the testimony to the

truth that Jesus bore in the presence of the Roman governor. The most extensive record of that famous conversation is found in the Gospel of John, chapter 18,

Then Pilate entered the Praetorium again, called Jesus, and said to Him, "Are You the King of the Jews?" Jesus answered him, "Are you speaking for yourself about this, or did others tell you this concerning Me?" Pilate answered, "Am I a Jew? Your own nation and the chief priests have delivered You to me. What have You done?" Jesus answered, "My kingdom is not of this world. If My kingdom were of this world, My servants would fight, so that I should not be delivered to the Jews; but now My kingdom is not from here." Pilate therefore said to Him, "Are You a king then?" Jesus answered, "You say rightly that I am a king. For this cause I was born, and for this cause I have come into the world, that I should bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth hears My voice." Pilate said to Him, "What is truth?" And when he had said this, he went out again to the Jews, and said to them, "I find no fault in Him at all.

(John 18:33-38)

Jesus' good confession, and the confession that the Hebrew Christians were to 'hold fast' are one and the same – the confession of the "*truth as it is in Jesus Christ.*"³ The word translated 'confession' in all of the preceding passages is *homologios* (o(mologi/aj), which literally means 'the same word' or 'to say the same thing.' The exhortation to 'hold fast the confession' is, therefore, an admonition never to waver from speaking that which is 'the same word' as was spoken by Jesus; in other words, the *truth* about Him, His mission, and His exaltation. Simply put, the Hebrew Christians are being warned against departing from the truth by either diminishing their profession of Jesus Christ as the Messiah, or by denying it altogether.

Christians should at all times be purveyors of truth. Believers should not be easily moved by enticement or promise, by political spin or denominational prejudice. The confession of the believer, to which he holds fast with vigor, is simply the 'same word' that the world and the universe is just such a reality as God has said that it is, and that the advent of the Son of God into this world has revealed this divine word, this divine truth, with a power and clarity from which we cannot shrink or waver.

³ Ephesians 4:21

This, then, is the exhortation that forms the practical center of the verses under our current investigation. Verse 14, however, begins with the grounds or basis for the exhortation: *Having a great High Priest who has passed through the heavens...* With these words the author appeals to a phenomenon peculiarly Jewish, one that Gentile Christians might have difficulty immediately understanding. The words are carefully chosen and must be carefully read – Jesus as the ‘great High Priest’ has *passed through* the heavens. Some English translations and some commentaries have rendered this action as ‘passed into’ – that Jesus upon His resurrection has ‘passed into’ or ‘entered’ heaven. But there are several grammatical reasons to reject this interpretation of the words. First, the word heaven is plural: *heavens*. Second, the participle has ‘prepositional prefix’ *dia* (δια), which always signifies movement *through* a space or area, not *into*. Again, the concept would be familiar to the Hebrew readers of this letter: this Jesus of whom the author speaks has passed through the multiple heavens (by some count, three, by others seven) and has thus entered into the ‘heaven of heavens’ – the very dwelling place of God Himself. John Owen writes, “he passed through them, and ascended above them, into that which is called ‘the third heaven,’ or the ‘heaven of heavens,’ where is his blessed residence.”⁴ It was from this exalted abode that the vision of Jesus Christ was revealed to the first Christian martyr, Stephen, as he saw ‘the heavens opened.’

*But he, being full of the Holy Spirit, gazed into heaven and saw the glory of God, and Jesus standing at the right hand of God, and said, “Look! I see the **heavens opened** and the Son of Man standing at the right hand of God!”*
(Acts 7:55-56)

One might argue that this is all academic, since Jesus ends up in the same place: the highest heaven. Yet again we find the Jewish flavor of the epistle coming through – for it is not just the risen Lord who has passed into the highest heaven, but the *great High Priest* who has *passed through* the heavens. What was it that the High Priest *passed through* under the ritual of Old Covenant worship? It

⁴ Owen; p. 395.

was the veil that separated Jehovah from His people, the Holy of Holies from the rest of the tabernacle/temple complex. This will be a recurring theme or thread that runs through the book of Hebrews – that Jesus, as the supreme and final High Priest, has done that which the Jewish High Priest only foreshadowed each year when he entered behind the veil. The argument the author is making is one which is called *ab minor ad major*; from the lesser to the greater. The role played by the High Priest under the Old Covenant was sufficient to instill hope and confidence in the faithful among Israel – their sins had been atoned for and the favor of God was renewed upon their land by the shedding of the atoning blood upon the mercy seat beyond the veil. If that which was merely earthly, and had to be repeated annually in a temple that itself was but a type of the true abode of God, was enough to encourage the people of God to continued endurance, how much more the should entrance of the great High Priest into the real presence of the Father fortify His people to ‘hold fast the confession.’

The implication of this line of reasoning will become more explicit as the treatise progresses, but it is not absent even here. It has been our working hypothesis that the ritual services of the Temple in Jerusalem were still active at the time the letter to the Hebrews was written and sent. In other words, the Jewish High Priest was still officiating, still entering beyond the veil (undoubtedly sewn up after the strange events surrounding the death of Jesus of Nazareth) once a year. Jewish converts to Christianity were probably subjected to a constant barrage from their unbelieving family and synagogue neighbors, challenging them to return to the ministry that was set in place by God through Moses – the ministry of atonement under the ministry of the High Priest. Converts to Protestantism from Roman Catholicism are often tempted by the same form of persuasion – the antiquity of the priestly ministry, the visibility of an earthly priest and pope, all designed to give comfort to the worshiper; but it is a false comfort. It was important to the author of Hebrews, and should be important to modern Christian pastors, to show that the believer has suffered

absolutely no loss in regard to the privileges once enjoyed under the Old Covenant. "But treating with the Jews, he satisfies them that they lost no advantage thereby, but had all their former privileges unspeakably heightened and increased."⁵

And one of the most comforting aspects of this earthly priesthood is something that was perhaps most vividly displayed in recent memory by the papacy of John Paul II – *human feeling and compassion*. John Paul II had a reputation for being a man who sympathized with those for whom he interceded as the Pope. This has not always been the case, either with popes or with High Priests. Eli was not very sympathetic toward Hannah in her distress. Nonetheless, it could always be argued that the High Priest (or the Pope) was a man of like nature, and like weakness, to those for whom he ministers. The added feature of the High Priest as a *nice guy* (like John Paul II) increases the temptation to go back, especially when compared to a majestic, cosmic, and invisible High Priest in heaven. But is Jesus Christ an unsympathetic High Priest because He is an exalted one? The author immediately answers this potential objection.

"For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but [One] who has been tempted in the same manner [as we], yet without sin." (4:15)

The author clearly desires to stir his readers to awe and reverence for the One who has *passed through the heavens* and who now sits at the right hand of majesty in the highest heaven. But awe and reverence do not often coexist with compassion and intimacy, at least not within the common human relationships with which the readers would be familiar. The High Priest, the King, the Emperor – even the priest, the governor, and other lower officials – were often remote and harsh, unsympathetic and not infrequently just down right cruel. It is the beauty of the Christian faith that it reveals an awesome and majestic God

⁵ Owen; p. 417.

drawing His people 'with cords of love.' The author of Hebrews takes pains, therefore, to show that the unsurpassed exaltation of the great High Priest Jesus has not rendered Him either remote or unsympathetic.

This he does through the use of the double negative, a grammatical *faux pas* in English (the second negative negating the first, resulting in a positive) but an intensification of the negative in the Greek. By stating the matter in this way – “We *do not* have a High Priest who *cannot* sympathize...” the author is as much as saying, “By no means do we have an unsympathetic High Priest...*perish the thought!*” So far from the truth is the concept of the great High Priest being unsympathetic to the needs of His people, that the author must employ the strongest negation available to him in his language. But even the strongest negation is weak without something upon which to base it, to establish it as true. So the author proceeds again to show us the path that this High Priest had to take on the way to His exaltation – a path of temptation and pain.

The second part of verse 15 has been a matter of discussion and debate, and disagreement, among Christians for two millennia: *...but was tempted in the same manner as we...* If Jesus was sinless, how could He be tempted in the same manner as sinners? That Jesus was and remained sinless the author is quick to affirm: *...yet without sin.* How then can we compare the temptations that Jesus underwent with those we face every day? Was it possible for Jesus to succumb to the temptations? In other words, was it possible for Him to sin? If not, how can it be said that His temptations were of the same nature as ours? And, more to the immediate point, how can a sinless High Priest sympathize with sinners?

These questions have not always been answered in an orthodox and biblical manner, and far too often the answer has been that in order to be like us, Jesus had to have sinned. Modern liberal Christianity accepts – even embraces – this conclusion, somehow without losing interest in their Christianity altogether. Recently this whole concept and controversy of a tempted Christ made headlines through the film *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988) which many Christians felt

was both heretical and debasing to the honor of Jesus Christ. While the movie did indeed portray the temptations undergone by Christ purely from the standpoint of a normal (not divine) man, and thereby completely missed the biblical mark, it is nonetheless true that believers still struggle with the concept of Christ having been tempted 'in the same manner' as we have.

Let us first establish, biblically, just how it was that Jesus *was* tempted. We know, of course, of the temptations laid before Him in the wilderness before the commencement of His earthly ministry. These temptations were of the same nature as those set before Adam and Eve at the dawn of time. In the wilderness temptation Jesus was fulfilling His role as the second Adam, and doing so 'without sin.' Afterward it is not said that Jesus was 'tempted' again, but nonetheless it is recorded that He underwent many of the same emotions and struggles – hunger, anger, frustration, despair – that beset every human being. So we do have two strands from the biblical record itself that show how Jesus was tempted 'in the same manner' as we are: He was tempted by Satan in His role as the second Adam, the federal head of a new race; and He was beset with the frailties of humanity, those weaknesses that are not in themselves morally wicked.

We must, however, be careful to draw the line with regard to that which temptation found in Christ, versus that which temptation finds in fallen man. Temptation, in and of itself, is not tantamount to sin. John Owen puts the matter brilliantly, "Whatever is the moral evil in temptation, it is from the depraved intention of the tempter, or from the weakness and sin of the tempted."⁶ In the wilderness there was a deeply depraved intention in the heart of the tempter, Satan, but because there was no weakness or sin in the tempted, Jesus Christ, the devil's temptations fell harmlessly to the ground. What is important to note in this case is that Jesus *felt* the power of the temptations, though the power of His sinless life was stronger. He nevertheless felt the same power that we feel when

⁶ Owen; p. 426.

we are tempted, though we often lack the inner moral fortitude to stand up under the temptation.

In the second aspect of temptation we simply acknowledge that Jesus Christ was truly man, that, as Calvin so beautifully put the matter, “Christ has put on our feelings as well as our flesh.”⁷ Yet even these feelings were those as we would have if indwelling sin had not utterly corrupted our hearts. Perhaps the reason we have so much difficulty in understanding how it was that Jesus was tempted ‘in the same manner’ as we are, is because we cannot understand how to see the world from any other perspective than that of a sin-stained mind and heart. Certainly it was from a sin-stained perspective that the *Last Temptation* was filmed. Yet it is not so unreasonable to say that the very same temptations will have drastically different results in a man corrupted by sin than in a man who was ‘without sin.’ Knowing Jesus Christ to be such a man as was without sin, we may confidently accept the biblical testimony that He was “*tempted in the same manner*” as we are, without fully understanding just how that must have been for Him. The temptations were the same, the outcome significantly and savingly different.

“Therefore let us approach with bold confidence the throne of grace, in order that we might receive mercy and might find timely grace to help.” (4:16)

Another first person plural imperative, *let us* approach the throne of grace. This is a famous verse, very popular among believers who often do not fully appreciate the weight of its glory. Perhaps only a Jewish believer, having lived under the Old Covenant and now brought by divine grace into the New, could fully appreciate the privilege of ‘approaching’ God in such an intimate and personal way. But even for such a worshiper the concept of approaching with ‘bold confidence’ must have been almost unbelievable. Still, we must not conclude that the worshiper now has such immediate access to the divine throne

⁷ Calvin; p. 55.

as precludes all need of a mediator. This is the mistake made all too often by modern Christians who frequently cross over into crass irreverence as they speak of ‘jumping into their heavenly Daddy’s lap’ and asking for this or that. We cannot lose sight of the fact that, in a sense, the exact same situation exists now as that which prevailed under the Old Covenant – that the approach to God was made through a mediator in the person of the High Priest. The believer’s confidence now is founded in the nature and identity, and the fullness of the work, of the *great* High Priest, Jesus Christ, who continues that mediatorial role



William Gouge (1575-1623) that was foreshadowed by the High Priests of old. The *completeness* of Christ’s High Priestly work is what grants ‘bold confidence’ to the worshiper under the New Covenant, as Puritan commentator William Gouge states, “For Christ our priest hath done to the full whatsoever is requisite to satisfy justice, pacify wrath, procure favour, and obtain acceptance; on which grounds we may well go to God with an holy boldness and confidence.”⁸

It is commonly viewed that the ‘throne of grace’ spoken of by the author is the same mercy seat that the High Priest approached once a year when he took the blood of atonement through the veil. While this is possible, it would be the only place in Scripture where that place was called a ‘throne.’ It seems more likely that the author is drawing from another Old Testament prophecy and allusion, one that is often overlooked in the consideration of the fulfillment of messianic prophecy. As the writer has been, and will continue for a while to be, discussing the concept of the High Priest, the phrase ‘throne of grace’ stands as an anomaly. Kings had their thrones, but not priests. Except, that is, for the One in whom both the royal authority of the King and the mediatorial role of the

⁸ Gouge, William; Commentary on Hebrews: Volume I; p. 340.

Priest would combine. We read of this One, called the 'Branch,' in the writings of the post-exilic prophet Zechariah,

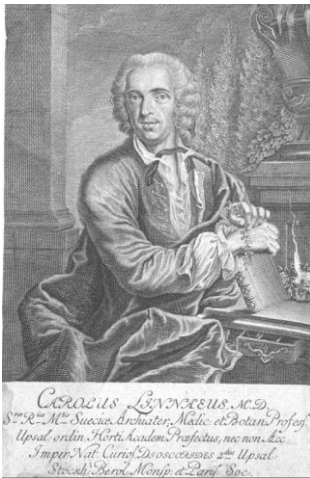
*Behold, the Man whose name is the BRANCH!
From His place He shall branch out,
And He shall build the temple of the LORD;
Yes, He shall build the temple of the LORD.
He shall bear the glory,
And shall sit and rule on His throne;
So He shall be a priest on His throne,
And the counsel of peace shall be between them both.*
(Zechariah 6:12-13)

Jesus Christ is the Branch, the sprout that has grown from the stump of Jesse – the Davidic King who is also the great High Priest and who now sits in majesty upon His throne in the highest heaven. Moved with the fellow-feeling that He has for His own, the Priest-King ever lives to make intercession on their behalf, and to dispense mercy and grace to help in their time of need. Nothing that Old Covenant Judaism could offer compares to this, no High Priest of the sons of Aaron could boast such power and authority along with such perfect sympathy and concern. To fall away from such a High Priest as we have in Jesus Christ would not only be tragic, it would be foolish.

Week 2: The Order of Melchizedek**Text Reading: Hebrews 5:1 – 10**

*"Prayer creates a sanctuary in time
when one may not be available in space."
(William Lane)*

In the eighteenth century, a Swedish scientist by the professional (Latinized) name of Carolus Linnaeus developed a new and systematic method of categorizing plant and animal species. Linnaeus' work turned out to be one of



Carl von Linné (1707-78)

the most influential and enduring contributions of any single scientist of the past four or five centuries. By this new system botanists and biologists have been able to carefully separate different living organisms, using numerous criteria, into distinct 'kingdoms' and 'orders' and 'families' and so on. Linnaeus founded the science of *taxonomy* – a name derived from a Greek word found in our focus passage in this lesson: *taxis* (ta/cij) which means 'order.' But whereas Linnaeus

and his scientific descendents have concentrated on the *taxis* of living organisms, the writer of Hebrews is interested in an entirely different sort of 'order' – the order of 'priesthoods.'

Most students of Scripture are familiar with the 'order' of priesthood known, perhaps somewhat scientifically, as 'Aaronic.' This is the office of the Jewish High Priest, first established by God through the appointment of Moses' brother, Aaron, to serve Jehovah in the ministry of the tabernacle. This 'taxon' of priesthood passed upon Aaron's death to his son, Eliezar, and thence forth from father to son along the lineage of Aaron. Thus it was not sufficient for a man to serve as High Priest that he was a member of the tribe of Levi, he must further have been a direct descendent of Aaron. To borrow from Linnaean terminology, the High Priest was of the 'order' *Levi*, but of the 'family' *Aaron*. This priestly

classification is both very familiar to the author of Hebrews, and very important to the line of argument he has taken up. It should be especially noted that this 'Aaronic' order of priesthood represented a completely different category (may we say 'Kingdom') than that which was occupied by the civil ruler of Israel: Order *Judaic*; Family *Davidic*.

The Aaronic priesthood is, as we said, the more familiar of the ancient orders of priesthoods; but there was another even more ancient. Israel was quite unique in its separation of the royal and the priestly functions into two different men, and two different families. There were, in fact, two different 'kingdoms' or orders of priesthood that predate the Aaronic by many generations. In the biblical record we read of the 'patriarchal' order of priesthood – represented by such sacrifice-offering fathers as Job and Abraham. But the most common order of priesthood, as testified by extra-biblical history – is that of the 'royal priest.' From the days of the Sumerians to the time of the Romans, the civil ruler of a nation also served as that nation's High Priest, or *pontifex maximus* as the Roman Emperor was termed.

Within this most common of ancient priestly categories there stood one most unusual and most significant. It is the first 'priesthood' explicitly mentioned in the Scriptures and became prophetically an 'order' of priesthood that not only superseded the Aaronic in time, but also in eternity. We are, of course, referring to the 'order of Melchizedek' as in, "*You are a priest forever, according to the order (taxi) of Melchizedek.*" What is of most significance to the author of Hebrews, is the fact that Jesus Christ, obviously not a member of the priestly order *Aaronic*, is however the most exalted member of the priestly order *Melchizedek*. "The appeal to Melchizedek, who as the first priest mentioned in Scripture is the archetype of all priesthood, validated Jesus' priesthood as different from and superior to the Levitical priesthood."⁹

⁹ Lane; p. 123.

The author of Hebrews has more to say about this ‘order of Melchizedek’ than any other New Testament writer. Whereas the prophetic Psalm 110 is the most frequently quoted Psalm among New Testament authors, only the writer to the Hebrews quotes verse 4 of that Psalm, and does so six times. He defers development of the theme until chapter 7, but it is evident from the two quotations here in chapter 5 that the identification of the High Priesthood of Jesus with that of Melchizedek forms a central part of the author’s thesis, and therefore a critical piece of the interpretive puzzle of the entire book.

It is not hard to understand the importance of the matter. The author has already claimed that Jesus Christ is not only *a* High Priest, but *the* great High Priest – yet not even from the tribe of Levi let alone of the family of Aaron. Liberal theologians and modern church-growth advocates might play fast and loose with the ‘regulative principle’ of Scripture, but biblical authors never do. The shift from an Aaronic priesthood to one ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’ *must* answer to biblical prophecy, and the author begins in chapter 5 to show that it does. Later, beginning in chapter 8, he will show that this prophesied shift in priesthood brings with it, of necessity, a change in the covenant under which the priesthood operates. It is no exaggeration to say that the priesthood ‘according to the order of Melchizedek’ is one of the most important threads that tie the book of Hebrews together.

“For every High Priest taken from among men is appointed on behalf of men in things pertaining to God, in order that he might present gifts and sacrifices for the sake of sins.”
(5:1)

A verse-by-verse analysis of any passage of Scripture always runs the danger of ‘missing the forest for the trees.’ This verse, for instance, seems somewhat academic and obvious – that the High Priest was taken from among men, etc. Some commentators (most, actually) seem to find here proof of the necessity of the High Priest being a man rather than an angel. Typical are the comments of John Owen, “He is, and must be, partaker in common of human nature with the rest of mankind, or he is not, on many reasons, meet for the discharge of this office.”¹⁰ While that is true, it represents a completely different concept from that which the author is developing in these chapters. He is not defending the *humanity* of Jesus Christ, but rather the *priesthood* of Jesus Christ. The operative words of this verse – those that best tie it together with what follows – are the verbs *taken* and *appointed*. The thrust of the author’s argument is not that the High Priest was taken *from among men* and appointed *on behalf of men*, but that the High Priest was *taken* from among men and *appointed* on behalf of men. The emphasis is not to be found in what the High Priest did, although that is important, but in the *call* of the High Priest that comes from God alone. In this way the author will highlight both the similarities between the Aaronic High Priest and the priesthood of Jesus Christ, and the vast difference between them as well.

At the very beginning of the life of Israel as Jehovah’s covenant people and nation, the act of God *taking* and *appointing* is made very clear in Scripture,

*Now **take** Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron’s sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. So you shall speak to all who are gifted artisans, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron’s garments, **to consecrate him**, that he may minister to Me as priest.* (Exodus 28:1-3)

Two events later in the wilderness wanderings would serve to emphasize the *divine* choice of Aaron and his family as the High Priesthood, and no other.

¹⁰ Owen; p. 444.

The familiar narrative of the rebellion led by Korah and Dathan, and the budding of Aaron's rod, emphasized the fact that the High Priestly role was not one that Aaron abrogated to himself, but one for which he was chosen by Jehovah. Moses' response to Korah proves that the issues were the priesthood, to whom it belonged, and the dangerous arrogance of seeking it for oneself,

Then Moses said to Korah, "Hear now, you sons of Levi: Is it a small thing to you that the God of Israel has separated you from the congregation of Israel, to bring you near to Himself, to do the work of the tabernacle of the LORD, and to stand before the congregation to serve them; and that He has brought you near to Himself, you and all your brethren, the sons of Levi, with you? And are you seeking the priesthood also? Therefore you and all your company are gathered together against the LORD. And what is Aaron that you complain against him?" (Numbers 16:8-11)

God's choice of Aaron was put to the test by Korah, and was emphatically validated – and subsequently solidified by the divine execution of Korah and those who rebelled along with him.

But there is another event of the wilderness journeys that shows that the choice of High Priest was God's and God's alone – an event that would not seem to figure in to this argument – Aaron's sin regarding the 'holy cow.' Aaron's willingness to go along with the people in their abandonment of Moses and their desire for a 'god' to lead them proves that the occupancy of the High Priestly office was not based upon merit or worthiness, but rather on the sovereign choice of God. The author of Hebrews develops this point for a very good and necessary reason – it is well known that Jesus of Nazareth did not descend from the lineage of Aaron and was not even a member of the tribe of Levi. To claim a High Priesthood for Jesus demands evidence of a divine call, one not only of the same nature as that given for Aaron, but one that was even higher.

The role of the High Priest in the life of the covenant people is indecipherable apart from a biblical doctrine of sin. The essence of pagan religion is the manipulation of a god or gods to serve the needs, or avoid the dangers, faced by a people. Paganism has no concept of a holy deity offended by

the rebellion and sin of its created being, man. True religion, however, has *atonement* as its centerpiece – the acknowledgement and satisfaction for sins committed by a people against a holy God. Man's needs (rain, harvest, reproduction) are not the main focus, but rather God's demand for satisfaction. Thus the author rightly summarizes the entire function of the High Priest so succinctly, *"that he might present gifts and sacrifices for the sake of sins."*

Some commentators see in this verse an emphasis upon the annual day of Atonement, *Yom Kippur*, on which the High Priest entered the Holy of Holies to make atonement for the entire nation. No doubt that most solemn day was foremost on the author's mind; but probably not to the exclusion of the whole cult of sacrifice and offerings over which the High Priest presided throughout the year. The wave offering, heave offering, drink offering and peace offering, as well as the sin offering and burnt offering, and all the rest, are comprised by the phrase *gifts and sacrifices for the sake of sins*. Thus the issue of *sin* is paramount to our understanding of the author's reasoning – the people's sins for which the High Priest made atonement, and the *sins of the High Priest* for which he had to make atonement as well.

"Being able to deal gently with the ignorant and wayward, since he himself is also beset with weakness. And because of this he is required, just as for the people, so also on behalf of himself, to offer [sacrifice] for sins." (5:2-3)

The High Priest was taken from among the people to serve in the presence of God on behalf of the people. Consequently he was held to a higher standard than that of the people in general, and his own sins and those of his family were of even greater weight than those of the general populace. Examples are not lacking of the grievous effects of High Priests whose sons were disobedient to the law of God – Eli and Samuel among the most well known. Yet every High Priest was a sinner, and that fact is illuminated in a passage dealing with the relative 'cost' of the sins of certain classes of Israelite society. The 'Law of Atonement' in

Numbers 16 specified that the Aaronic priest was to offer a bull for himself and for his household, but the sins of the people only required the sacrifice of a goat.

However it is not the sinfulness of the High Priest, or his need to make atonement for himself and for his family, that is the focus of the author's analysis in verses 2 and 3, but rather the *fellow feeling* that this weakness engendered in the High Priest for the weakness of the people for whom he ministered: "*being able to deal gently...*" A caveat is in order here. The High Priest was *able* to deal gently, but that does mean he always did so. The fact that he more often than not failed to deal gently with the people will serve to highlight the superiority of the priesthood of Christ.

To *deal gently* is the English translation of a Greek word found only in this verse in the whole of the New Testament. Literally the word means 'to measure feeling.' The Greek word *pathos* - 'feeling' - lies at the root of this word as it does such common English words as *sympathy* and *empathy* and *pathetic*. To this root is prefixed another common Greek term - *metros* - from which the English words *meter* and *metric* derive. Thus the High Priest, because of his shared weakness, is able to 'measure feeling' - to respond in a measured way - to the struggles and sins of the 'ignorant and wayward.' This is a specialized form of compassion (from the Latin derivation of the same Greek root), one that should be characteristic of every minister. Thus measured, the response of the High Priest was to be a balance between undue anger against the sinner on the one hand, and permissive indulgence of sins on the other. Delitzsch defines the term as "the disposition of mind which keeps the right mean between excessive feeling and sheer indifference."¹¹ Owen adds, "The high priest is one who is fit and able to bear moderately and quietly with the failings, miscarriages, and sins of those for whom he executes his office; not breaking out into any anger or excess of indignation against them by reason of their infirmities."¹²

¹¹ Delitzsch; p. 229.

¹² Owen; p. 454.

“And no one takes to himself the honor but is called by God just as Aaron.” (5:4)

The author is about to transition from a general discussion of the Aaronic order of priesthood to that order of which Jesus Christ is both a member and the most exalted member, the order of Melchizedek. Later in the sermon he will shift focus from the priesthood to the covenant represented by the priesthood – and will show that just as the priesthood has been divinely changed from Aaronic to Melchizedekan, so also has the covenant shifted from ‘old’ to ‘new.’ All of this would be (and was) charged with the highest crime of blasphemy and heresy if there were not a Scriptural and divine ground upon which to base the assertions.

It is remarkable how many doctrines and practices have developed within the life of both the Jewish and the Christian congregations on the pragmatic basis of ‘it sounded good’ or ‘it seemed to work for us.’ The development of a hierarchy of diocesan bishops culminating in the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, is but one example of the Church’s ability to create ecclesiastical structures where none exist in Scripture. The modern evangelical movement away from the ‘foolishness of preaching’ to forms of entertainment such as multi-media, video and even mime serve to show that Protestants are as adept at ecclesiological creation *ex nihilo* as Roman Catholics. The writers of Scripture, however, would have none of this practice. It is from the eighth-century BC prophet Isaiah that we hear the true litmus test for all doctrinal and practical innovations,

To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, it is because there is no light in them. (Isaiah 8:20)

The author of Hebrews is following this timeless and necessary edict. He will carefully establish the fact that the priesthood of Jesus Christ far from a novel invention (as modern liberal theologians claim it to be), but a divinely

ordained *call* replacing the order of Aaron with the earlier and superior order of Melchizedek.

“In the same manner Christ did not glorify himself to become High Priest, but it is said concerning Him, ‘You are My Son, today I have begotten You.’ Just as also in another place He says, ‘You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.’”

(5:5-6)

These two verses serve as the hinge for a somewhat chiasmic parallel structure tying verses 1 through 10 together, as the author transitions from primarily focusing upon the Aaronic order to focusing upon the order of Melchizedek. The second quotation listed here, from Psalm 110, fits more obviously into the flow of the argument; the first, from Psalm 2, is less obvious though no less significant. We must remember the nature of the ‘order of Melchizedek’ – that of a *royal* priest, a ‘Priest-King’ rather than the singularly priestly order of Aaron. Thus the insertion of the ‘Coronation Psalm’ – Psalm 2,

*Why do the nations rage,
And the people plot a vain thing?
The kings of the earth set themselves,
And the rulers take counsel together,
Against the LORD and against His
Anointed, saying,
“Let us break Their bonds in pieces
And cast away Their cords from us.”
He who sits in the heavens shall laugh;
The Lord shall hold them in derision.
Then He shall speak to them in His wrath,
And distress them in His deep displeasure:
“Yet I have set My King
On My holy hill of Zion.”
“I will declare the decree:
**The LORD has said to Me,
‘You are My Son,***

***Today I have begotten You.**
Ask of Me, and I will give You
The nations for Your inheritance,
And the ends of the earth for Your
possession.
You shall break them with a rod of iron;
You shall dash them to pieces like a potter’s
vessel.”
Now therefore, be wise, O kings;
Be instructed, you judges of the earth.
Serve the LORD with fear,
And rejoice with trembling.
Kiss the Son, lest He be angry,
And you perish in the way,
When His wrath is kindled but a little.
Blessed are all those who put their trust in
Him.*

Psalm 2 is a *royal* psalm, announcing the anointing of the eternal King, the Son of God, “*See, I have set My King on My holy hill of Zion...*” We anticipate the author’s later detailed explanation of the priestly order of Melchizedek when we remember that Melchizedek was the *king* of Salem, which was the most ancient

name of the city of Jerusalem. Thus through the adept use of two short Old Testament quotations, the author brings together into one man the two anointed offices under the Old Covenant, and successfully shifts the paradigm from the order of Aaron to the order of Melchizedek.

The lineage of Jesus from the tribe of Judah and the family of David was well attested and accepted. Thus any claim of royalty on behalf of Jesus had at least the tribal plausibility, not to mention that such a claim was made by Jesus himself in his interview with Pilate. Jesus' references to His role as a High Priest, however, were far more elliptical – He speaks of Himself as a sacrifice, as one who both lays down His life and takes it up again; He speaks in another place as One who would build the true temple of God; but nowhere does He specifically and explicitly refer to himself as a High Priest. This nuance of His divine ministry was perhaps one of those things that the disciples were not yet ready to receive, and which waited on the outpouring and indwelling of the Holy Spirit to illuminate to their minds. Nonetheless it is a doctrine that has ample support from the Old Testament, and that is what the author of Hebrews endeavors to show with these quotations.

The quotation from Psalm 110 is but one verse from that psalm – verse 4. The whole Psalm, however, would have been quite familiar to the Hebrew readers of this letter, and it would not have escaped their notice that verse 4, *“You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek”* was spoken by the Lord to David's greater Son, thus tying Psalm 110 inextricably to Psalm 2.

*The LORD said to my Lord,
“Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool.”
The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies!
Your people shall be volunteers
In the day of Your power;*

*In the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning,
 You have the dew of Your youth.
 The LORD has sworn
 And will not relent,
 "You are a priest forever
 According to the order of Melchizedek."* (Psalm 110:1-4)

The concluding verses of Psalm 110 further connect the thought lines of the two psalms, and help to illuminate the thinking of the writer of Hebrews,

*The Lord is at Your right hand;
 He shall execute kings in the day of His wrath.
 He shall judge among the nations,
 He shall fill the places with dead bodies,
 He shall execute the heads of many countries.
 He shall drink of the brook by the wayside;
 Therefore He shall lift up the head.* (Psalm 110:5-7)

The author is carefully building his case that Jesus Christ is the 'Priest on his throne' prophesied by Zechariah. He is a King and a Priest or, in the biblical manner of speaking, *"a priest according to the order of Melchizedek."* Thus the author makes the connection between Aaron and Jesus – they were both *called* by God – and the disconnection between the two – Jesus is both a King and a High Priest, of a totally different order. One very important feature of this order of priesthood lies somewhat in the background for the time being – the fact that the 'order of Melchizedek' is an *eternal* priesthood – *"You are a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek."* More on that in subsequent chapters.

"Who in the days of [His] flesh offered up, with loud weeping and tears, petitions and pleas to the One who was able to save Him from death, and was heard on account of godly fear." (5:7)

The exposition of this verse and the following two is both simple and very difficult. The simplicity flows from the symmetry of the author's presentation, for it is evident that he is now establishing the same 'fellow-feeling' being in

Jesus Christ as was to be found in the Aaronic High Priest. Thus verses 7-9 correspond in thought and purpose to verse 2. The difficulty in properly understanding these verses, however, is more philosophical and Christological. The Aaronic High Priest possessed fellow-feeling because he was a fellow sinner; this Jesus was not, and the author has already established that important point of distinction. How, then, did Jesus develop the ability to sympathize, to 'measure feeling' with those for whom He serves as High Priest? An even stickier question follows from the subsequent verses – How was the eternal Son of God *perfected* through suffering? At the heart of the matter is the need to understand how a sinless man can, and did, develop fellow-feeling with sinners. And this must be done without the expedient made by too many liberal theologians – to conclude that Jesus Himself must have sinned in order to sympathize with sinners. Aaron sympathized because he *shared* the same weaknesses; Jesus *partook* of the weakness of humanity, but He did not *share* in it.

Verse 7 seems to refer specifically to the deeply emotional prayers of Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane, where his fervency in prayer resulted in sweat as drops of blood. Yet the phrase '*the days of flesh*' requires a broader application – probably spanning from Jesus' inaugural temptation in the wilderness to His plaintive cry from the cross, "*My God, My God, Why hast Thou forsaken Me?*" We may struggle to understand how a sinless man could feel the same depth of emotion as a sinner, we not only accept the biblical testimony but realize that *because of Jesus' sinless nature* He felt these things *more deeply* than we, as sinners, do. William Lane writes, "These moving words express how intensely Jesus entered into the human condition, which wrung from Him his prayers and entreaties, cries and tears."¹³

Theologically the situation is presented to us by the apostle Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians – Christ, *who knew no sin, became sin for us*. It should not be hard to see that a sinful nature – a fallen nature – is more amenable

¹³ Lane; p. 119.

to sin than is a sinless one. In other words, sin is at home in the nature we inherited from our first father Adam; it is completely foreign and anathema to the perfect nature of the second Adam, Jesus Christ. Therefore, far from not being able to 'feel with' us the bitterness of sin, Jesus felt it more deeply than any of us will ever know or experience. The closest parallel has to be the initial horror that overwhelmed Adam and Eve upon their first transgression; but as a race we have become progressively immunized against the shame of sin. Not so Jesus. We will see in subsequent passages that He retains the same intense fellow-feeling that He gained 'in the days of His flesh' and is therefore able to continually make intercession for His people.

A sidebar in the interpretation of verse 7 is the manner in which we are to understand how Jesus' prayers were 'heard' by 'the One who was able to save Him from death.' Jesus died, so how was it that His prayers were heard? It does not suffice to say that they were heard, but not answered. It is clear that the author means 'answered' when he writes 'heard' in the same manner as Jesus did when He said to the Father, *"I know you always hear My prayers."* How, then, were those prayers answered?

There are two main lines of exegetical reasoning here. The first and simplest points to the resurrection and concludes that Jesus was not praying for salvation *from dying* but from the realm of death itself. In that manner the Father did most certainly 'answer' Jesus' prayers and delivered Him so that the Holy One *"did not undergo decay."* This is the interpretation of no less a commentator than James Haldane, "...his being saved from death refers to his resurrection, being brought from the fearful pit and miry clay."¹⁴ Yet Jesus' prayers cannot be simplified in this manner, for in Gethsemane He *did* pray to be delivered from the cup that was set before Him to drink. In other words, He *did* pray to be delivered from dying.

¹⁴ Haldane, James A. An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews; p. 140.

Thus the second line of reasoning focuses on the manner in which Jesus' prayers were answered: in such a way as to solidify His desire to exalt the Father's will over His own, to move from praying to be delivered from death to praying "*not My will, but Thine be done.*" We could diverge here into an entire treatise on the nature and purpose of prayer, but it is sufficient to say that the 'answer' one chooses will depend greatly on whether prayer is viewed as getting what one wants, or as the vehicle or instrument by which one's mind and will are conformed to the mind and will of God. It does appear, however, that the second option fits better with the overall flow of the author's argument here in these verses, especially with the one immediately following,

"Although He was a Son, yet He learned obedience through His sufferings." (5:8)

Again, while it may be (and is) hard for us to understand how the eternal Son of God and the sinless Son of Man *learned obedience*, yet we cannot deny that this is indeed the testimony of Scripture. Liberal scholars have tried to show that Jesus only came by parts upon an understanding of the fullness of what His ministry entailed and some, like the famous Albert Schweitzer, believed that Jesus finally recognized His utter failure and therefore desperately chose martyrdom as a last-ditch effort to get His point across to the people. Such views are not only heretical, they are utterly unfaithful to the biblical record which is, of course, the *only* record we have of Jesus' sufferings. As Jesus' earthly ministry was introduced by the loud proclamation, "*Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world*" it is hard to understand why some would persist in thinking that Jesus only slowly developed a sense of His impending death. Nonetheless, as that death approached, Jesus naturally and righteously recoiled from it.

Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? 'Father, save Me from this hour'? But for this purpose I came to this hour. (John 12:27)

Jesus aversion to death is not a sign of weakness, but rather proof positive of His sinlessness – for to Him death was indeed an unwelcome intruder, an enemy, and not the wages of sin as it is for all other men. Therefore once again we see that Jesus’ sufferings are not made *less* intense because of the fact that He was without sin, but rather even *more* intense because the sin for which He suffered was so completely foreign to His nature. What was it, then, that compelled Him to embrace that which was so abhorrent to Him? Obedience to the will of the Father. “Jesus learned that his passion (i.e., ‘suffering’) was grounded in the saving will of God and could not be severed from his calling.”¹⁵ Calvin adds, “He renounced His own will and gave Himself over to the Father to the extent of meeting death, which He dreaded, freely and willingly.”¹⁶ The apostle Paul recognized this obedience as the cause leading to the effect of Christ’s eternal and heavenly exaltation:

And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name...

(Philippians 2:8-9)

“And being perfected, He became to all who obey, the Author of eternal salvation.”
(5:9)

In order to understand how it was that a perfect man could be ‘perfected,’ we must follow the parallelism developed here by the author. The context of the whole passage is the comparison between two orders of High Priests – that of Aaron, and that of Christ. The trouble that we have with verses such as this one is due to the fact that the Greek word translated here as *perfected* has a more nuanced meaning than our English word conveys. First, we must understand that *perfection*, as the Greek word implies, does not necessarily require prior

¹⁵ Lane; p. 121.

¹⁶ Calvin; p. 66.

imperfection. The word is more closely tied to the achievement of a particular goal or end – the attaining of that for which something was originally purposed.

The second feature of this word is tied closely with the ministry of the Aaronic High Priest – something that is not immediately apparent to readers of the English Bible. The same word found here in verse 9, translated ‘perfected,’ is used in the Greek Old Testament (LXX) to signify ‘consecration.’ Thus we read in Exodus 29,

*And you shall gird them with sashes, Aaron and his sons, and put the hats on them. The priesthood shall be theirs for a perpetual statute. So you shall **consecrate** Aaron and his sons.*
(Exodus 29:9)

It fits well with the context of this overall passage to understand Jesus not as moving from imperfection to perfection, but rather as being progressively ‘consecrated’ and made ready for His High Priestly role. Consider the opening lines of what has come to be known as Jesus’ ‘High Priestly Prayer,’

Jesus spoke these words, lifted up His eyes to heaven, and said: “Father, the hour has come. Glorify Your Son, that Your Son also may glorify You, as You have given Him authority over all flesh, that He should give eternal life to as many as You have given Him. And this is eternal life, that they may know You, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom You have sent. I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do. And now, O Father, glorify Me together with Yourself, with the glory which I had with You before the world was.
(John 17:1-5)

Therefore, in keeping both with the context of this section of Hebrews and with Jesus’ own testimony regarding His ministry, we can accept the interpretation of ‘perfection’ given by William Lane, “Through his sufferings and the accomplishment of his redemptive mission, Jesus has been perfected by God as the priest of his people and exalted to the divine presence.”¹⁷ Part of this exaltation was that Jesus would now and forevermore occupy an order of priesthood different from and superior to the old order of Aaron.

“He has been designated by God a High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

¹⁷ Lane; p. 122.

(5:10)

We have already noted that the author of Hebrews is the only New Testament author to utilize this particular reference from the Old Testament – Psalm 110:4 – and that he does so six times in the letter. It bears noting at this point that he refers to this one verse more than to any other Old Testament verse. It is obvious that the relationship between Melchizedek as the type and Jesus Christ as the antitype is a very important and central concept to the whole argument. But he cannot go further at this time, for his audience has become ‘dull and hard of hearing.’ And so, with him, we temporarily suspend discussion of Melchizedek...

Week 3: Gentlemen, This is a Football**Text Reading: Hebrews 5:11 - 14**

*"By the very law of our constitution,
if we do not move forward,
we slip backward."
(A. W. Pink)*

The story is often told in leadership seminars of the time legendary coach Vince Lombardi watched his Green Bay Packers suffer a lop-sided defeat in a game they should have won. Versions differ as to when he made the now-famous quote – whether it was at halftime of that game, or at the beginning of the next practice session – regardless, Lombardi gathered his veteran players together, held aloft a ball and said, “Gentlemen, *this* is a football.” It was evident to the coach that though his players were experienced and talented, there were some fundamental issues of the game that they had forgotten. Lombardi reset the clock, as it were, and began to coach his team as if they had never played the game before. It was not that the players had totally forgotten the fundamentals of football, but rather that they had grown ‘dull of hearing’ like the Hebrew Christians to whom the book of Hebrews was originally addressed. Lombardi did not have to really start over, he simply needed to shame his players into realizing how far they had fallen from what they knew.

Good teachers will do the same thing when necessary. When a mathematics instructor grades Algebra exams on which he finds numerous simple arithmetic errors, he may begin the next class by writing on the board: ‘ $2 + 2 = 4$.’ He has no intention of leading his class back to elementary school and re-instructing them in basic addition and subtraction. Neither does the writer of Hebrews intend to re-educate his audience in the ‘first principles’ of the Christian faith. The passage before us in this lesson is a necessary diversion – as was Lombardi’s speech to his players – to sound a wake-up call to some sleepy believers. The author fully intends to return to his established line of reasoning

regarding the High Priesthood of Melchizedek/Jesus, and he will do so at the beginning of chapter 7.

However this diversion is by no means incidental or unimportant. To forget basic principles of football will cost a team a few wins, a championship, a Super Bowl. To forget basic arithmetic will cost a student a letter grade or two. But to grow 'dull of hearing' in matters concerning Christ and salvation could cost an eternal soul. The author has already indicated the critical necessity of paying close attention to the things his readers have already heard,

Therefore we must give the more earnest heed to the things we have heard, lest we drift away. For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward, how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation...
(Hebrews 2:1-3)

These words from chapter 2 are mild compared to what will follow our current passage, in chapter 6. And the severity and pertinence of the warning has not worn off with the passing of two centuries. There is a basic spiritual principle at work here that is as much a 'law' of spiritual growth as gravity is of the natural world. Arthur Pink puts the matter very succinctly, "if we do not move forward, we slip backward."¹⁸ The instructional affliction that so concerns the author regarding these Hebrew Christians is of even



A. W. Pink (1886-1952)

greater significance because it is *self-inflicted*. One gets the distinct impression that not only had these professing believers been taught, they had been *taught well*, as Lombardi's players had been coached well. That makes the dullness of hearing all the more serious and dangerous, on the principle that "*to whom much is given, much is required.*"

The opinion of the author is that by this time (whenever the letter was written, of course) his readers ought to be the instructors of others. Such a broad

¹⁸ Pink, A. W.; An Exposition of Hebrews; p. 264.

generalization cannot usually be made of any individual congregation, unless that congregation had been fortunate enough to have sat under some really good teaching. The apostles, of course, had the best of all instruction – they sat with Jesus throughout His earthly ministry. The companions of the apostle Paul – the theologian of the early Church – were also blessed with incomparable instruction. Apparently these Hebrew believers were the recipients of a similar educational experience, or at least the author seems to think so.

Though this cannot be a determinative factor in the ‘working hypothesis’ of this study, it is not hard to see that if, in fact, these Hebrew Christians were once Jewish exiles from Rome, and had once received Christian instruction from no less than the apostle Paul and the talented Apollos, then it is no wonder that by this time they should be teachers themselves. The subject matter is admittedly difficult – *“some things hard to explain”* – but this fact should not hinder these well-taught believers from understanding what the author has to say. The difficulty “was not merely on account of the grandeur and depth of the subject, but on account of the spiritual condition of the Hebrews, whom he is addressing.”¹⁹ The admonition contained in these closing verses of chapter 5 should not be difficult to apply to the spiritual condition of believers today. Hopefully all that will be needed is the same humbling jolt that Lombardi delivered to his football players, and that the author of Hebrews delivered to his half-deaf students.

“Concerning whom we have much to say, and some things hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.” (5:11)

There is some disagreement among the commentators as to what exactly the author is referring to, about which he has ‘much to say.’ The relative pronoun can be either masculine or neuter (the Greek word has the same spelling for each gender). If masculine the antecedent would be Melchizedek; if neuter,

¹⁹ Adolph Saphir; quoted by A. W. Pink; p. 262.

then the author is delaying his discussion about the High Priesthood of Jesus being “*according to the order of Melchizedek.*” The structure of the subsequent discourse lends itself to the first view, for at the beginning of chapter 7 the author seems to pick up the strand that he lays aside here:

For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him... (7:1)

While it is true that the subject matter regarding Melchizedek as the type and shadow of Jesus’ perfect High Priesthood is lofty – the author indicates in this passage that it is ‘strong food’ – the problem does not lie entirely in the intrinsic complexity of the subject. Clearly the author is not drawing attention to the difficulty of the matter at hand as to the dullness of his readers ‘hearing.’ And this condition was not one that always prevailed among the Hebrew believers – the author soberly indicates that his readers *have become* dull of hearing. Literally he writes, “...since dull you have become, of hearing.” Delitzsch writes of these Christians, “They are deficient in quickness of spiritual apprehension, and that...in consequence of a falling back from their previous position to an alarming and unnatural degree.”²⁰

A. W. Pink quotes the Puritan scholar John Brown as to the meaning of this diagnosis, “To be ‘dull of hearing’ is descriptive of that state of mind in which statements may be made without producing any corresponding impression, without being attended to, without being understood, without being felt. In a word, it is descriptive of a state of mental listlessness.”²¹ This is a serious condition to which all professing Christians are susceptible. Long years spent hearing the preaching and teaching of the Word of God *ought* to cause spiritual growth and spiritual maturity, but too often this is not the case. Sadly it is the case of many today as it was of the Hebrew professors, “It had become to

²⁰ Delitzsch; p. 259.

²¹ Pink; p. 263.

them like a sound to which the ear had been long accustomed – the person is not conscious of it, pays no attention to it.”²²

This is a very insightful observation. Due to the sin which still indwells believers, it is indeed possible that sound biblical teaching can become nothing more than background noise in the otherwise busy life of the Christian. The mind tends to block out background noise, and to focus its attention on other sounds deemed more important and more immediate. This condition is not necessarily the result of an active apathy (there’s an oxymoron), but comes about from the failure to actively advance in knowledge. There are many professing believers who think that the ‘first principles’ are all that is necessary to know; further study is purely optional, and more often than not, avoided. Many pastors dole out a weekly ration of ‘milk’ to their congregation, never instructing them in the weightier matters of the faith, and never realizing that this insipid diet is stifling their spiritual growth.

But individual believers are responsible as well for their growth in knowledge and grace – and the two do seem to go together as far as the biblical teaching is concerned. William Lane points out that the evident fault in the case of the Hebrew Christians lies not with their instructors (of whom the author might very well have been one), but rather with the believers themselves. “What is implied is a lack of responsiveness to the gospel and an unwillingness to probe the deeper implications of Christian commitment and to respond with faith and obedience.”²³

This should not be taken to mean that every single believer must become a theologian, must attend seminary, must learn the biblical languages and line his or her bookshelves with systematic theologies and commentaries, though this would not necessarily be a bad thing! It does mean, however, that every single believer is to progress further and deeper in his or her understanding of the faith,

²² *Ibid.*; p. 264.

²³ Lane; p. 136.

and not plateau at some intermediate level of knowledge convenient and comfortable. Each will progress at a different pace, and will attain differing degrees of understanding; but none may stop, for stopping is tantamount to regressing. Apathy is fatal. "If this apathetic attitude was not checked, it would lead to spiritual inertia and the erosion of faith and hope."²⁴

"For by this time you ought to be teachers, yet once more you have need of someone to teach you the first principles of the word of God and have come to have need of milk and not solid food." (5:12)

Some may object that not all believers are to become teachers, but that is not the thrust of what the author is saying here. He is not saying that all of his readers should have a teaching ministry in the church, but rather that all were sufficiently instructed in the matters of the faith and of the word of God to be qualified to teach, whatever the venue might be. In short, they had been well taught, and thus ought to be able to teach others. The focus is not on what they *should* be doing, but rather what is still necessary *to be done to them*.

While it is true that not all believers become ministers of God's word in the context of congregational life and instruction, it is also true that every believer should and will find an outlet of instruction for the influx of knowledge he or she has attained. Husbands to wives, parents to children, masters to slaves – in each of the basic relational settings of life there are the instructed and the instructors. Growth in Christian doctrine is assumed as one progresses through life as a believer, so also the ability to give instruction to those less well informed is a presumed duty for all believers. The course of congregational life among the Hebrew Christians was, however, well short of the mark. A. W. Pink describes their sorry state, "First, they had been converted long enough to be of help to others. Second, instead of being useful, they were useless, needing to be grounded afresh in the A. B. C. of the Truth of God. Third, so far from having

²⁴ Lane; p. 136.

the capacity to masticate strong food, their condition called for that which was suited only to a stunted babyhood.”²⁵

The ‘A.B.C’ that Pink refers to are the ‘first principles’ of verse 12 – the *elemental* matters of the beginning of Christian instruction. Calvin follows the same line of thinking, “In order to drive home the shame even more, he uses the words *first principles*, just as one speaks of the alphabet.”²⁶ The word in the Greek is *stoixeia* (stoixei=a) from which the Chemistry term *stoichiometry* is derived – the study of the elements of the physical world. The elements of the Periodic Table are the fundamental building blocks of all chemical behavior in the cosmos, and understanding *stoichiometry* is foundational to learning Chemistry (in which there are things ‘hard to explain’!) Yet while *stoichiometry* is important and indispensable, it does not represent a knowledge of the field of Chemistry, but merely of the ‘alphabet’ of Chemistry. In a similar way it can be said that the Hebrew Christians had learned their Periodic Table once, and had progressed so far beyond that as to be qualified to instruct others, but had regressed to the point of needing to learn the ‘elements’ once more. Delitzsch writes, “The Hebrew Christians are again in need of instructions as to the fundamental principles of Christianity, because, instead of building on them further, they have lost that very apprehension of those doctrines themselves which is necessary for any further development.”²⁷

The author once again highlights the fact that the spiritual condition of these Hebrews Christians was one of regression, a falling away from a more elevated position once held. He is emphatic when he states that they “*have come to have need*” – speaking of a retrograde movement in respect to their spiritual maturity. Delitzsch comments on their need for milk as a “consequence of a lamentable relapse which has brought them back to the age of childhood (needing milk), and the stage of catechumens, needing primary instruction, when

²⁵ Pink; p. 265.

²⁶ Calvin; p. 68.

²⁷ Delitzsch; p. 260.

they ought to be at man's estate, which requires the solid food of higher truth."²⁸ The connection Delitzsch makes between 'the elemental principles' and 'milk' is evident in verse 12 – the author's further definition of 'solid food' awaits the subsequent verses.

This sad condition was by no means unique to the Hebrew Christians to whom this letter/sermon was first addressed. It is a problem that is endemic to all communities of faith throughout the ages. Israel under the Old Covenant had become 'dull of hearing,' and the Lord chastised them through the prophet Isaiah in much the same way as the author of Hebrews does here. Although a famous modern Bible ministry is named after the passage from Isaiah, the original intent was actually a stern rebuke to the children of God for their childishness and ignorance in the knowledge of the Lord.

*Whom will he teach knowledge?
And whom will he make to understand the message?
Those just weaned from milk?
Those just drawn from the breasts?
For precept must be upon precept, precept upon precept,
Line upon line, line upon line,
Here a little, there a little."
For with stammering lips and another tongue
He will speak to this people...* (Isaiah 28:9-11)

Thus if the condition of 'dullness of hearing' was true of the Hebrew Christians of the first century, and true of the Jews in Isaiah's 8th century BC, it is undeniably true of modern Christians. Many social commentators within the evangelical community – most notably George Barna – have lamented the abysmal level of biblical literacy in the modern American church. Here are some symptoms of the currently epidemic disease of biblical illiteracy:

- Although 92% of American homes have at least one Bible (the average is three), only 59% read the Word occasionally, and only 15% participate in any form of structured Bible study.

²⁸ *Ibid.*; p. 261.

- 80% of professing 'born again' Christians (including the current President of the United States) believe that the phrase "God helps them who help themselves" is from the Bible (it was actually coined by Benjamin Franklin, hardly an evangelical!)
- More people polled thought that Billy Graham delivered the Sermon on the Mount than thought that Jesus was its preacher.
- Although 80% of Americans can name the ingredients of the Big Mac ("two all-beef patties, special sauce, lettuce cheese" and so on), only 60% could name the sixth commandment.
- Even though it's a relatively low percentage, the fact that 12% of professing Christians think that Noah's wife was named Joan of Arc is a sad testimony not only to biblical literacy, but also American's knowledge of general history.

In order to attempt to address this dearth in biblical knowledge, the translators of the New International Version of the Bible (NIV) published their English translation on a *seventh grade* reading level. Considering the fact that the NIV was first published in 1978, coupled with the perennial statistical analysis showing a decrease in biblical literacy, it would appear that the translators failed. One can easily imagine that if the author of Hebrews were to come back and visit an average American congregation on any given Sunday morning, he would not begin with a discourse on the High Priesthood of Melchizedek.

"...for everyone who partakes of milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, for he is a babe." (5:13)

Here is a verse that contributes to the ongoing sense that the apostle Paul was the author of Hebrews. Many who hold that view point to the similarity between these words, and those Paul wrote to the Corinthian church,

And I, brethren, could not speak to you as to spiritual people but as to carnal, as to babes in Christ. I fed you with milk and not with solid food; for until now you were not able to receive it, and even now you are still not able... (I Corinthians 3:1-2)

Though the similarity is obvious, it still falls short of proving Pauline authorship. Paul's influence within the first century church went beyond simply

planting churches, he influenced the way the early Church thought and the terminology in which that thought was communicated. Thus we find many 'Paulinisms' in Clement's First Letter to the Corinthians, a document that no scholar wants to attribute to the apostle. If our working hypothesis is accurate, and the author is Apollos, then it is quite understandable that he would use this metaphor of 'milk and babes,' having served with Paul in Corinth for a number of years.

What is truly significant about verse 13, however, is not its similarity to Pauline phrases from other epistles. It is, rather, the use of the term 'word of righteousness.' It is hard to say exactly what the writer signifies by the use of this phrase, but it is fairly clear that he is not just speaking about the Bible, the 'word of God.' Indeed, with reference to God's Holy Word the apostle Peter uses the metaphor of milk in an entirely different manner,

Therefore, laying aside all malice, all deceit, hypocrisy, envy, and all evil speaking, as newborn babes, desire the pure milk of the word, that you may grow thereby.

(I Peter 2:1-2)

It is clear, however, that the author of Hebrews is using 'milk' in a pejorative sense, indicating stunted and inhibited growth, and a state of spirituality well below the level at which these Christians ought to have been. When he speaks of those who 'partake of milk' he does not mean that grown men cannot drink milk. He is speaking of those who are dependent upon milk for their sole source of nourishment and nutrition. Spiritually-speaking, he is referring to believers who, as Isaiah says, have not yet been weaned from their mother's breasts. In other words, they are unable to digest more difficult teaching than the most basic elements of the faith.

Thus it would appear that the 'word of righteousness' with which these babes are so unskilled, refers to something more, and something deeper, than the Word of God *per se*. He speaks, apparently, of the *doctrine of righteousness* – of the righteousness of God, of His Law, of His Christ. The laying out of this doctrine

and the explanation of its themes, types and antitypes, and ultimately its perfect revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ, the author considers to be 'solid food.' "This only is already obvious here, that the high priesthood of Christ and its character resembling that of Aaron (by way of antitype), and that of Melchizedek (according to prophecy), is reckoned by our author among the higher subjects of Christian knowledge."²⁹

Although these verses stand as a gently rebuke to professing believers who are acting well beneath their spiritual age, and who have regressed from adulthood back to childhood, the principles contained herein are valuable to all who endeavor to instruct others concerning the faith. It is evident that the author does not view all Scripture as equally simple and plain; rather he understands that within the Holy Writ there is 'milk' and there is 'solid food.' Young believers ought not to be fed on solid food, and old believers should not need to subsist on milk. To each his proper food in his proper season. That clearly is the basic problem the author has with these Hebrew Christians, is it not? Properly they ought to be able to feast on the deeper truths of revelation concerning the higher doctrines regarding the nature, character, and work of Jesus Christ. It must have grieved the writer to think of these believers choking on fare they once ate with gusto. To see an old man who once thoroughly enjoyed his steak, now consigned to gumming wet bread and slurping broth is sad enough; but to see mature Christians unable to masticate and digest sound doctrine is both tragic and pathetic.

The application of this phenomenon to the modern church is once again too obvious to miss. No prior age in church history has had the hermeneutical resources available to the believer of 21st century America. The preaching of earlier times no doubt was better on the whole, but the availability of study aids, concordances, cross-reference Bibles, commentaries, etc., has made solid food more available and more digestible than in any earlier time. Nonetheless the

²⁹ Delitzsch; p. 262.

average professing Christian of our era is truly a partaker of milk, and is completely 'unskilled' in the word of righteousness. It is remarkable that a Christian today would even recognize the name Melchizedek, let alone understand that ancient priest's typical significance to the person and work of Jesus Christ. Peanuts creator Charles Schultz once said that there was a great difference between a philosophy and a bumper sticker. We can paraphrase that quote by saying that there is also a great difference between a diet of sound doctrine and snippets of Scripture on refrigerator magnets.

No one likes to be called immature, let alone 'a babe.' The author uses these terms as a verbal slap in the collective face of his readers. We must note that he does not, in fact, proceed to feed them milk, but progresses along his original line of reasoning – solid food. There is, therefore, the encouragement of knowing that the understanding once gained by these believers has not been entirely lost – the writer clearly believes he can stir it to life again, and also that he can tap into that understanding as he progresses through his discourse on the priesthood of Christ. It is to be hoped that the sorry state of the modern church needs only to be 'slapped' in a similar way in order to rouse it from its stupor and revive a dormant understanding of the deep things of God. If this is not the case – and the continued downward spiral of biblical literacy seems to argue that it is not – then the condition of modern evangelicalism in America is a far worse and more dangerous state than that of the Hebrew Christians two thousands years ago.

"But solid food is for the mature, who through practice have had the senses trained to discern good and evil." (5:14)

In this verse the writer finally shows us what was the *cause* of the regression in understanding experienced by the Hebrew Christians – *lack of practice*. Biblical instruction, whether it be milk for the young believer or solid food for the mature, must be *improved*, to use a term popular among Puritan

writers. What the Puritans meant by this word is that there must be some profit gained, some growth manifested in grace, some sin mortified or some virtue strengthened, by every instance of Christian instruction. Up to this point the author has been focusing more on the negative aspect – stunted growth, childlikeness, retrograde knowledge. Here in verse 14 he offers a positive and encouraging perspective – that with *practice* even these babes can once again be as mature men.

The word translated here as ‘mature’ is the same word as is translated ‘perfected’ earlier in reference to Jesus Christ. The word has a wide variety of possible English equivalents, but its basic meaning is that of being suited to an intended purpose or end. It is the end and purpose of every human baby to grow into a human adult; and it is the end and purpose of every young believer to advance stage by stage into the realm of spiritual maturity. The rate of progression will differ, as will the degree to which believers will attain growth in this life – nonetheless *spiritual growth* is presupposed.

This highlights another misconception in the modern church. Too often today the concept of growth is applied not so much to the knowledge and understanding of individual believers, but to the size of individual congregations. Modern church-growth books often make the point that it is natural for a living organism to grow, and unnatural and unhealthy for such an organism to stop growing. There are some fallacies here in both the biological metaphor and the spiritual reality. Many living organisms do, in fact, stop growing without any detrimental impact upon their viability or health. It is true that some animals, such as elephants and whales, continue to grow throughout life. But it is also true that whereas the whale’s ever-increasing size is sustained by the buoyancy of the water, the elephant will one day out-grow his own ability to stand up, and will consequently die.

Numerical growth in professing believers is an encouraging thing to see; but the issue of numerical growth is never found to be a matter of discussion

among biblical authors, and is not so here with the writer of Hebrews. Spiritual growth, on the other hand, is both expected in its presence and lamented in its absence. It is once again a sad testimony to our age that so much concern and attention is focused in modern literature on numerical growth, and so little on growth in sound doctrine – *solid food*. Is it any wonder that we now have behemoth churches filled with spiritual babes who could not digest solid doctrinal food if their preachers were ever inclined to serve them any? These verses in Hebrews 5 come across as a fairly gently slap in the face to the original readers, but to today's church they ought to sound and feel like a wicked left hook.

We must recognize that stunted growth within a congregation can come from either of two causes, or both. In the case of the Hebrew Christians to whom this book was originally addressed, the fault did not lie with those who had instructed them in the 'elements' of the faith. They had been taught so well that by this time they themselves ought to have been teaching others. Theirs was a self-inflicted degeneration from adulthood back to childhood. But this is not always the case, and it is probable that the modern case of severe spiritual immaturity cannot be entirely blamed upon those who sit in the pews. Modern evangelistic teaching has emphasized, in an unbalanced way, the importance of *saving souls* at the expense of *growing disciples*. It is hard to think that any of the apostles would have seen these two concepts as being in any way in conflict, but sadly they have become so in the modern church. "Dry orthodoxy" is the charge against doctrinal teaching, and Christian instruction has in large measure been reduced to pamphlet size form – the Four Spiritual Laws, for instance.

Approximately 1.5 billion copies of the Four Spiritual Laws have been printed and distributed since their development by Campus Crusade for Christ several decades ago. The intent in their promulgation was to assist believers in bringing the gospel to the lost, but their effect was to supplant the diet of the American church, substituting milk for solid food. Consider these 'laws' and

compare them to the 'word of righteousness' of which the author of Hebrews speaks.

1. God loves you and has a wonderful plan for your life.
2. Man is **SINFUL** and **SEPARATED** from God. Therefore, he cannot know and experience God's love and plan for his life.
3. Jesus Christ is God's **ONLY** provision for man's sin. Through Him you can know and experience God's love and plan for your life.
4. We must individually **RECEIVE** Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord; then we can know and experience God's love and plan for our lives.

When one considers the huge impact and influence these 'laws' have had on the evangelical community over the past generation, one begins to envy the first century Hebrew Christians for their spiritual maturity! There is a great deal of discussion among prophecy conference goers about 'the marriage feast of the Lamb.' What do modern believers think the Lord will be serving at that feast, *milk* or *solid food*? May this stern admonition from the author of Hebrews, and from the Holy Spirit, be used to awaken the slumbering church of the 21st century, and may it bring us back to the table to partake of solid food once more.

Week 4: The Unpardonable Sin**Text Reading: Hebrews 6:1 - 8**

*"A foundation is laid
for the sake of the building."
(John Calvin)*

In the year A.D. 250 (according to the Christian calendar, of course) the Roman Emperor Trajanus Decius launched what would come to be known as the sixth of ten imperial persecutions of Christianity dating from the reign of Nero to just before the advent of the first 'Christian' emperor, Constantine I. The Decian persecution, though of relatively short duration, was quite intense, and cost the lives of many believers, most notably the Bishop of Rome, Fabian. But the primary significance of this persecution was in its effect upon the church *after* the edict of persecution had been repealed. The Emperor Decius was attempting to restore the old glory of Rome, both militarily and religiously, and hence required all citizens to offer sacrifice to the pagan gods on behalf of the emperor. Those who did so received a certificate called an *libelli* – a Latin word from which the English *libel* derives.

The command to sacrifice to or on behalf of the emperor was most obnoxious to the Christians, and it was with them in mind that Decius issued his decree. Professing Christians who offered the required sacrifice were granted the *libelli* and were thus freed from further persecution and, of course, delivered from death. But those who compromised in order to save their lives soon found that their problems were not over. Decius rescinded the edict of persecution in A.D. 251, only months before he was killed in battle. With the cloud of persecution lifted, those who had succumbed to compromise desired re-admittance to the communion of the Church. Fabian's successor at Rome, Cornelius, maintained the right of the bishops of the church to admit the lapsed back into communion. In this he gained crucial support from the famous and

influential Bishop of Carthage, Cyprian. But he was also vehemently opposed by another claimant to the Roman bishopric, Novatian. The latter believed that readmittance for those who had committed murder, adultery, or *apostasy* could only be granted at the Last Judgment by the Lord Himself. Cyprian, Cornelius, and the majority of the Church prevailed against Novatian, and the latter's position was marked as a heresy (the 'Novatian' heresy).

The significance of this historical episode to our study consists, of course, in the primary passage used by Novatian in promoting his stricter view of the right to communion for those who had 'fallen away' during the recent persecution. That passage was Hebrews 6:4-6. Novatian believed that these verses were in reference to Christians and to a form of apostasy from which, humanly speaking, it was *impossible* to recover. We say 'humanly speaking' because Novatian, like many scholars and commentators from his day on, combined the 'impossible' of Hebrews 6:4 with the words of the Lord, "*Nothing is impossible with God*" to arrive at a meager hope of reconciliation owing only to the mercy of God at the Final Judgment. The church situation in the days of Cornelius and Novatian, and repeated several times since, presented believers in that day with the difficult task of interpreting and applying one of the most troublesome passages in the New Testament, if not the whole Bible.

There have been many variations of interpretation concerning these verses, but the majority of views tend to fall within several broad categories of perspective. The issues revolve around the identity of those who *fall away* (v. 6) and the nature of their spiritual condition *before* falling away. At the very root of the problem is the perennial question, 'Can a true Christian lose his or her salvation?' Many believers are greatly troubled by this question, aware as they are of their sins and shortcomings, and the words of the author of Hebrews in chapter 6 rarely give such sensitive souls much comfort. Here are some of the salient points surrounding the passage:

1. First, are those addressed in verses 4-6 *true Christians*? William Lane unequivocally answers in the affirmative. Speaking of the participial clauses the author strings together in verses 4 and 5, Lane writes, "Together, these clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed."³⁰
2. Second, does the condition described here as 'falling away' entail the loss of eternal salvation? This may seem obvious by the language of the author, but the issue still stands as to whether he is talking about the impossibility of a renewal to fellowship *in this life* (as Novatian believed), or of a more serious impossibility of eternal salvation.
3. Finally, if the author is '*convinced of better things*' concerning his readers, why does he '*speak this way*'? What is the purpose of writing these verses to an audience of which he is convinced they do not apply? And how then are such troublesome verses to apply to believers since that day?

Let us consider some of the ways these verses have been handled over the years.

First, there is the very straightforward view that holds that the writer is speaking of true believers who have utterly and irretrievably abandoned their profession of faith – they have turned their back on God and on Christ – and thus they have *lost* their salvation. This view is held by those whose Arminian theology is consistent, and the passage before us in this lesson is among the key 'proof texts' for those who hold that a true believer can fully and finally lose his or her salvation. The problem with this view – as with Arminian soteriology as a whole – is that it places the responsibility of man's salvation (and the loss thereof) entirely upon man. It is forgotten that in this very same book the author tells us that Jesus is *able to save to the uttermost* those who come to him. But even closer to home, this view neglects to do justice to chapter 6 verse 9 – an immediate caveat given by the writer to ward off just this interpretation of his previous words: "*But, beloved, we are convinced of better things concerning you, and things which accompany salvation.*"

Another view widely held throughout the years is that the author is presenting his audience with a hypothetical situation, but not a real one. In this

³⁰ Lane; p. 141.

view the author is practicing an early form of the 'Scared Straight' tactic used in recent times in an attempt to keep school students from a life of drugs and crime. The strength of this argument rests in the underlying truth that a professing believer ought never be secure in his or her salvation if current behavior, attitude, and spiritual ambition do not warrant it. Commentators of all views are quick, and right, to point out that the sin described in verses 4-6 does not consist in the everyday failings of every believer, but rather in complete apostasy. Calvin describes the spiritual fall of the ones described here,

He is referring to a complete falling away from the Gospel, not one in which the sinner has offended God in some one part only, but in which he has utterly renounced His grace...The one who falls is the one who forsakes the Word of God, who extinguishes its light, who denies himself the taste of the heavenly gift, and who gives up partaking of the Spirit. This is complete renunciation of God.³¹

Thus accepting the seriousness of the 'fall' described in Hebrews 6:4-6, scholars who maintain that the truly saved can never fully and finally fall are thereby challenged to understand the purpose for which the author uses such severe and grim language. The 'hypothetical' theory concludes that, by presenting the audience with the horrible consequences of falling away, the author strives to reinvigorate them to the work of 'pressing on.' The problem with this view are manifest, in that such an interpretation amounts to subterfuge, the author 'threatening' that which he knows cannot happen – the loss of salvation for those who are truly believers.

Another view along similar lines – accepting that those addressed are Christians and that 'falling away' is tantamount to the loss of salvation – many Reformed scholars have concluded that those who descend down this path of apostasy merely prove in the end that they were never really believers in the beginning. Thus it is held that professing Christians can go along very well for a long time, only to finally abandon their profession later and thereby prove that

³¹ Calvin; p. 75.

they were never regenerated to begin with. Calvin seems to hold this view as he explains both why the author uses such language, and what the 'falling away' actually proves,

If anyone asks why the apostle makes mention of this kind of apostasy when he is addressing believers who are far from such sinful treachery, my answer is that he is giving them early warning of the danger, so that they may be on their guard against it...Therefore there is some knowledge in the reprobate, which later vanishes away either because it drives its roots less deep than it ought to, or because it is choked and withers away.³²

Finally, there is the interpretive view that holds that those of whom the author speaks are not actually Christians at all. They are Jews – Jews who have held fast to the Mosaic covenant and have rejected the promised Messiah Jesus Christ. This view is not widely held, for the language of verses 4 and 5 certainly seem to speak of the experience of salvation. But it is a view that comes to the fore as the others fall under the unbearable burden of their assumptions. For instance:

1. It is clear from other passages of Scripture that those whom God has saved in Christ – those whom the Father has given to the Son will in no wise be cast out, etc. Thus the proper and sound hermeneutic of allowing the clearer passages of Scripture to shed light upon the less clear prevents the conclusion from Hebrews 6:4-6 that *true believers* are capable of losing their salvation.
2. Yet if it true that the experience described in these verses represents the experience of salvation – of *regeneration* – then one cannot say that the 'falling away' proves that such salvation never really existed in the first place. Clearly it is the same person who has experienced the wonders of verses 4 and 5 – who has *been enlightened, tasted the good gift of God, partaken of the Holy Spirit* and so on – who *falls away* in verse 6. If verses 4 and 5 represent the regenerative experience, then it is the regenerate who fall away in verse 6.

Passing by the 'hypothetical danger' as beneath the author of Hebrews, we find that the other views are untenable. This leaves only the view that will be elaborated and defended here – that the author is not describing an experience

³² Calvin; pp. 75-76.

that must be regenerative – though the regenerate do indeed have the same experience. In short, those of whom the author speaks were never regenerated, and the author does not assume that they were. While this view is certainly a minority view among commentators old and new, it does have the honorable distinction of having been held by Jonathan Edwards. The important thing, however, is that the interpretation fits the text. And so we now proceed with the exposition of Hebrews 6:1-8.

“Therefore, leaving stand the beginning of the word of the Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from dead works and faith toward God, teachings on baptisms and of the laying on of hands, or the resurrection from the dead and of eternal judgment. (6:1-2)

Verse 1 sheds some light on verse 12 of the previous chapter, where the author refers to the ‘elementary principles’ of the word of God. It is reasonable to make a direct connection between the ‘elementary principles’ and the ‘first words’ of this verse. Thus it is clear that the writer is speaking about the early and foundational teachings concerning the person and work of ‘the Christ’ as being the elementary principles of ‘the oracles of God.’ In other words, Christ is the one to whom all Scripture points, as Jesus Himself said to the Pharisees,

Do not think that I shall accuse you to the Father; there is one who accuses you – Moses, in whom you trust. For if you believed Moses, you would believe Me; for he wrote about Me. But if you do not believe his writings, how will you believe My words?

(John 5:45-47)

We are again reminded with these words that some Christian doctrine constitutes the *foundation* of the faith – the first principles upon which the fullness of Christian instruction is to be built. The use of the term ‘foundation’ is intentional – to draw the readers mind to the construction of a building, as Calvin says, “A foundation is laid for the sake of the building.”³³ As with building, the foundation is not only to be laid, it is to be laid well – deep and

³³ Calvin; p. 71.

strong so as to support the structure for which it is intended. Additionally, the foundation is laid *once*, not over and over again (except for very difficult clients or by very poor contractors!) The concept of the foundation is that it is to be set in place and then the work is to move on. Again Calvin, “We lay our foundation as it were in the first principles, but there must follow the more advanced teaching which completes the building.”³⁴ The author of Hebrews intends merely to remind his audience of what this foundation constituted, and then – Lord willing – to move on to the construction of the building of more mature understanding.

In the first two verses of chapter 6 there is a list of doctrinal items that comprise the ‘beginnings’ of the word of Christ, or the ‘elementary principles’ of the word of God:

- Repentance from dead works
- Faith toward God
 - Teachings on baptisms
 - And on the laying on of hands
 - And on the resurrection from the dead
 - And on eternal judgment

The indentation used in the presentation of these bullet items is a matter of interpretive conjecture. The Greek structure of the verses can be set out in a number of ways, but it does appear reasonable from that structure that the ‘foundation’ that the author does not want to lay again is the foundation of *repentance from dead works and faith toward God*. Repentance and faith are often paired in Scripture, especially when the discussion is soteriological – ‘Repent and Believe.’ Theologically they are the two sides of the coin of conversion, and so it makes sense to view them as conjoined here to make up the foundation of the beginning principles of the doctrine of Christ. Jesus came preaching repentance and calling upon men to believe on Him – repentance and faith.

³⁴ Calvin; p. 71.

'Teachings' come next – instruction in the faith that comes as the gift of God (Ephesians 2:8). The word – *didaxais* (*didaxh=j*) is only found once in the passage – in the first clause of verse 2. Thus it may be that the author is speaking only of the teachings of *baptisms*, but it seems more reasonable that the term in the plural – 'teachings' – refers to a set of doctrinal propositions: *baptisms, laying on of hands, resurrection of the dead, and eternal judgment*. Thus Delitzsch writes, "Properly we have only four points of doctrine preceded by two features of Christian life – Repentance and Faith."³⁵

These four teachings, though considered to be foundational by the author, have given occasion for a multitude of various interpretations by more modern commentators.

The first, *baptisms*, is plural – a form of the word never used in the New Testament in clear connection with Christian baptism. The plural form is used in other passages with reference to the ritual lustrations required by the Levitical priesthood, and practiced by the Pharisees. It is difficult, however, to see how these ritual washings could be considered as 'first principles' of the word of Christ. Perhaps we have a hint from the incident in Ephesus when the apostle Paul first visited there,

And it happened, while Apollos was at Corinth, that Paul, having passed through the upper regions, came to Ephesus. And finding some disciples he said to them, "Did you receive the Holy Spirit when you believed?" So they said to him, "We have not so much as heard whether there is a Holy Spirit." And he said to them, "Into what then were you baptized?" So they said, "Into John's baptism." Then Paul said, "John indeed baptized with a baptism of repentance, saying to the people that they should believe on Him who would come after him, that is, on Christ Jesus." When they heard this, they were baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus. (Acts 19:1-5)

Here we have two baptisms – that of John and that of Jesus. We could add to that the proselyte baptism that was practiced in the first century on Gentiles who converted to Judaism. But even if we leave that non-biblical practice aside, we do at least have Paul instructing these Ephesian disciples in

³⁵ Delitzsch; p. 269.

‘the teachings on baptisms’ – differentiating between the baptism of repentance (John’s baptism) and the baptism in the Holy Spirit (Jesus’ baptism).

‘Laying on of hands’ is another difficult matter for interpretation. Clearly it is something that was done in the early church, for the apostle Paul reminds Timothy of the ‘gifts’ he received by the laying on of hands by the presbytery. The new believers of Samaria were granted the gift of the Holy Spirit by the laying on of hands by Peter and John (Acts 8:17). It is interesting that the passage there speaks of the believers having “*only been baptized in the name of the Lord*” but not having received the Holy Spirit until the apostolic laying on of hands. Delitzsch comments on the intimate biblical connection between these two Christian rites – baptism and the laying on of hands,

Baptism brings the man as a person into the state of grace, the imposition of hands qualifies him for bearing witness; the former translates him out of the world into the fellowship of Christ, the latter by means of marvelous gifts enables him to serve Christ in the world; the former ministers the divine *charis* (xa/rij), the latter the manifold divine *charismata* (xari/smata).³⁶

That the teachings on the resurrection of the dead and eternal judgment are ‘foundational’ should not surprise us, for again we find the apostle Paul invoking these doctrines in an early evangelistic sermon on Mars Hill,

Truly, these times of ignorance God overlooked, but now commands all men everywhere to repent, because He has appointed a day on which He will judge the world in righteousness by the Man whom He has ordained. He has given assurance of this to all by raising Him from the dead.
(Acts 17:30-31)

This foundation is comprehensive, taking the young professor of Christianity from the advent into the new life all the way to the judgment seat of God. These four blocks contain both basic instruction and deep nuance. The laying on of hands, for instance, has reference not only to the apostolic practice but also to the vicarious imposition of one’s sins to the sacrificial animal under the Old Covenant system. It is easy to begin building from each block, but it is

³⁶ Delitzsch; p. 275.

apparent that the Hebrews Christians were instructed in a more careful manner – the foundational, elementary principles were established firmly in their minds before the deeper meanings, allegories, and types/antitypes of Scripture – the Melchizedeks, for instance – were added. But they were added, and the author has every reason to assume that the instructional edifice that he himself probably helped to build was still present in the minds of those to whom he writes. Therefore he will let the foundation stand, and move on.

“And this we shall do, if only God permits.” (6:3)

It is proper and biblical, not to mention eminently wise, to always submit one’s plans to the will of the Lord. Puritan writers (and more recently A. W. Pink) were in the habit of placing a *D.V.* after any written plan or purpose they had in mind – the Latin *Deo Volente*, or “Lord willing.” This practice, of course, follows from the stern words of James in his epistle,

Come now, you who say, “Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a city, spend a year there, buy and sell, and make a profit”; whereas you do not know what will happen tomorrow. For what is your life? It is even a vapor that appears for a little time and then vanishes away. Instead you ought to say, “If the Lord wills, we shall live and do this or that.” But now you boast in your arrogance. All such boasting is evil.

(James 4:13-16)

It does not, however, seem appropriate that the author of Hebrews intends his ‘if the Lord wills’ in the same manner as it is to be used by uninspired believers. The author intends to press on, but he does have a very serious concern – not that the Lord will not allow him to continue his discourse, but rather that his audience will have proven to have fallen away beyond the point of no return. Anticipating the metaphor he will use just a few verses later, the author perhaps wonders if the Lord is still watering, still blessing, these professing Hebrew Christians. Or perhaps they have committed the unpardonable sin – and have fallen beyond the reach of repentance.

"For it is impossible, for those who have once been enlightened, and who have tasted the gifts of heaven, and who have become partakers of the Holy Spirit, and who have tasted of the good word of God and of the powers of the age to come..." (6:4-5)

In an attempt to make the English translation of this troublesome passage (verses 4-6) flow more smoothly, the New American Standard Version moves the opening word from verse 4 – 'impossible' – into verse 6. But in so doing the translators have diminished the emphasis intended by the author and, of course, by the Holy Spirit who inspired the author. *Adunaton (A)du/naton), Impossible!* That is how the author begins the passage – one word expressing a very solemn fact – that the circumstance that he is about to describe renders those who he describes as beyond the reach of repentance. Greek is not a 'word order' language in the same sense as is English; in the Greek the order of words expresses emphasis, and a word brought to the very beginning of a sentence is an expression of the highest emphasis. We must keep this in mind as we progress through this passage, lest we minimize the solemnity of what the author intends to say.

The NASV makes a translation error at the beginning of the passage; the King James, New King James, and New International versions make a mistake at the end. In each of these English translations, in verse 6, the conditional *if* has been added: "*If they fall away...*" But this conditional is not in the original, nor apparently was it in the mind of the author. The 'falling away' of those he describes is not a possibility, but is either an impending or an already accomplished *fact*. Here the NASV renders the Greek correctly: *Having fallen away...* It is an aorist participle and is as much an accurate description of these people as are the positive clauses in verses 4 and 5. Perhaps a rough, literal outline of the whole passage will reinforce its gravity, and the seriousness of the one who first penned the words:

V.4 *Impossible! [It is impossible]*
V.4 *Those who once **having been enlightened***
V.4 *And who **having tasted** the heavenly gifts*
V.4 *And **having become** partakers of the Holy Spirit*
V.5 *And **having tasted** of the good word of God*
V.5 *and of the powers of the age to come*
V.6 *And **having fallen away***
V.6 *To renew them again unto repentance...*

This analysis of the original text allows us to understand that the set of people described by the positive phrases of verses 4 and 5 is coextensive with the set of people who fall away in verse 6. This is not a hypothetical 'if' situation, this is a reflection by the author on the actual, current, and perhaps imminent condition of a group of people who illustrate the principle or caveat he has just stated in verse 3, *"If only God will permit."* Thus we are faced with the gravity of their situation in all of its present-ness, and not with some theoretical case study. "This situation of apostasy is very real, a very terrible possibility that must be earnestly avoided."³⁷

It is evident that the author has a particular group of people in mind, and though he does not explicitly tell his readers who those people are, there are strong hints that will allow us to make at least a convincing guess.

We may, first of all, confidently conclude that those to whom the writer refers in these verses *are not* the same group of people as those to whom he writes. The author makes a noticeable shift from the first and second person – *we* and *you* – to the third person: *those*. A. W. Pink writes, “In considering the persons spoken of it is of first importance to note that the apostle does *not* say, ‘*us* who were once enlightened,’ or even ‘*you*,’ instead he says ‘*those*.’³⁸ Notice carefully the progression: from the close of chapter 5 into the opening verses of chapter 6 the pronouns are ‘*you*’ and ‘*we*.’ This perspective is again resumed in verse 9 of chapter 6, “*But, beloved we are convinced of better things concerning you...*” It is only here, in the troublesome passage of 6:4-6, that the author speaks

³⁷ Phillips, Richard D.; Hebrews: Reformed Expository Commentary; p. 187.

³⁸ Pink; p. 289.

of a group of people distinct from his own circle and from those to whom he writes. John Owen summarizes the authors overall viewpoint:

And he doth not herein express his judgment that they to whom he wrote were such as he describes, for he afterwards declares that he 'hoped better things concerning them;' only it was necessary to give them this caution, that they might take due care not to be such.³⁹

Thus while we must pursue more deeply the actual identity of those about whom the author speaks, we may begin by asserting who they are not: they are not those to whom he writes. Yet the lack of a more explicit declaration of who they are does seem to imply that the author expects his readers to readily understand of whom he speaks, for an illustration that is not understood will hardly fulfill its purpose. In other words, the author holds up for display a group of people whose spiritual condition is known and, therefore, whose identity is known, by those to whom he writes. Considering the peculiar temptation to which the Hebrew Christians were faced, and the intent of the author to pull them back from the precipice, it should be somewhat clear just *who* he is speaking of in verses 4 – 8.

A very common answer to this question, however, is that the author is describing true, regenerate believers in this passage. Charles Spurgeon, certainly an able expositor of Scripture, boldly disagrees with such Puritan luminaries as John Owen and John Gill in his sermon on this passage:

If you read Dr. Gill, Dr. Owen, and almost all the eminent Calvinistic writers, they all of them assert that these persons are not Christians...If the Holy Spirit intended to describe Christians, I do not see that he could have used more explicit terms than there are here...With all deference to these learned doctors, and I admire and love them all, I humbly conceive that they allowed their judgments to be a little warped when they said that; and it think I shall be able to show that none but true believers are here described.⁴⁰

³⁹ Owen; Volume 5, p. 71.

⁴⁰ Spurgeon, Charles; *The New Park Street Pulpit*; Sermon No. 75; Volume 2; p. 169.

We should be as reluctant to disagree with Spurgeon as he was to disagree with Gill and Owen; but perhaps the fact that this particular sermon was



delivered relatively early in his ministry (he was 22 at the time) may indicate that his judgment, while not 'warped,' was not necessarily mature. For as he progresses through the sermon he does not 'show' that the author of Hebrews describes 'true believers' by each description, but rather assumes that what is described

C. H. Spurgeon (1834-920 *must* refer to true believers. It is undoubtedly true that those things we read of in verses 4 and 5 *do* apply to true believers. The question, however, is whether they can *also* apply to unregenerate professors. This was the conclusion of 'Drs. Gill and Owen,' and Spurgeon fails to prove them wrong.

Spurgeon says that "a child, reading this passage, would say, that *the persons intended by it must be Christians.*" But no one ever said that this passage was intended for a child to read! In fact, that seems to be the very problem the author has with those to whom he is writing! They are 'children' when they ought to be 'mature.' Spurgeon's conclusion may indeed be the same as a child would make, but a child would not be able to understand the erroneous implications of his interpretation. If, in fact, the author describes true believers in verses 4 and 5, then there are only two possible conclusions that can be drawn from verse 6,

First, that true believers can fully and finally perish through apostasy, and be eternally lost. This is a conclusion that Spurgeon could not accept.

Second, that the passage is hypothetical and really does not represent a real situation at all – it is only used, in a sense, to 'scare' the Hebrew Christians out of their spiritual lethargy.

Neither of these options suited Spurgeon, so he opted for a unique interpretation. Convinced as he should be that true salvation is eternal because it is the work of God, yet also convinced that Hebrews 6:4-5 speaks of true believers, Spurgeon concluded that the author wrote about something that could never happen (a true believer falling away) in order to prove that a true believer could never fall away! Listen to some excerpts from the sermon,

But some one says, 'What is falling away?' Well, there never has been a case of it yet, and therefore I cannot describe it from observation...

Now, God has never revealed a supplemental salvation for men on whom one salvation has had no effect; and until we are pointed to one scripture which declares this, we will still maintain that the doctrine of the text is this: if grace be ineffectual, if grace does not keep a man, then there is nothing left but that he must be damned. And what is that but to say, only going a little round about, that grace *will* do it? So that these words, instead of militating against the Calvinistic doctrine of final perseverance, form one of the finest proofs of it that could be afforded.⁴¹

The child that would so readily conclude from verses 4 and 5 that the author was speaking of true believers, would probably never come up with the same conclusion to verse 6 as Spurgeon has. Spurgeon, however, follows the error of the King James, New King James and New International Version (though only the first was available in his day), in that he reads verse 6 as a conditional statement: *If they fall away...* But more on verse 6 later.

Who *are* those of whom the writer says such wonderful things in verses 4 and 5? Is it possible that someone could experience this litany of blessing and still not be regenerate? Or must we conclude with William Lane that only true believers experience these things? "Together, the clauses describe vividly the reality of the experience of personal salvation enjoyed by the Christians addressed."⁴² Let us look at each 'blessing' in its turn.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² Lane; p. 141.

Having once been enlightened. The word translated 'once' is the Greek *hapax* (a/(pax) which is a word that always means not only 'once' but 'only once.' Later it will be used by the same author with reference to Jesus' sacrifice, in Jude it is used to describe the faith *once* delivered unto the saints. Thus we are pointed near the beginning of the author's description of this unknown class of people, to know that what they experienced they experienced *once and only once*. It is possible that, though the word 'once' appears only in verse 4, it may indeed govern each of the clauses that follow, as in *once* enlightened, *once* having tasted the heavenly gift, *once* having become partakers of the Holy Spirit. Whether this is so or not, it is still apparent that the writer is referencing an event or experience that had manifestly impacted the lives of those about whom he writes. The question is, of course, whether or not that impact was salvation.

What does it mean to be 'enlightened'? William Gouge defines it as "a work of the Holy Ghost, whereby man's mind is made capable of understanding the things of God, and able to discern divine mysteries."⁴³ Clearly this is something that takes place at salvation, but not only at salvation. Saul (the Old Testament one, not the apostle from Tarsus) was wrought upon by the Holy Spirit so that those who saw him thought that he had become a prophet. Yet later that same Spirit left the king, and settled upon his successor David. An example with a more positive outcome is that of Peter, who was illuminated by the Father's Spirit to understand the true nature and identity of Jesus, the Christ. It was a 'revelation' from heaven, not instruction by flesh and blood that assured Peter that Jesus was the Messiah. Yet later he would deny the Lord three times on the evening of Jesus' betrayal. Back to the Old Testament, we find Balaam prophesying the future of Israel, under 'illumination' by God's Spirit, yet he was never to be numbered among God's elect.

In a sense we may say that all who come into some contact with Jesus have been exposed to the light, for He is the 'light which entering the world,

⁴³ Gouge; p. 396.

enlightens every man.’ But man prefers his own darkness. In the early days of the Church there were several notable examples of men and women who had apparently come to an understanding and an acceptance of the Gospel message, but who afterward turned out to be false professors. Simon Magus is perhaps the most famous, but Ananias and Sapphira, and later Demas, and Alexander are in the same crowd. One may say that these people ‘lost’ their salvation, but that would be to assume as true what is proven false elsewhere in Scripture.

Jesus himself warned his disciples that there would many who *received the Word with gladness*, but would not endure because the seed had not taken good root. We will have occasion in this lesson to revisit the Parable of the Sower, for it has a tremendous interpretive bearing on the present passage.

Having tasted the gifts of heaven. Traditionally, commentators have struggled manfully to show that this clause must refer to Jesus, since He is heaven’s supreme gift. But the word in the clause is plural: *gifts* – and while Jesus is without doubt the greatest gift from heaven, He is not the only one. Perhaps the meaning will become clearer if one remembers to whom the author is writing – *Hebrew Christians, converted Jews* – and also reads this clause along with one shortly to follow: *having tasted the good word of God*. What would a Jew think of when someone makes mention of ‘tasting’ a ‘heavenly gift’? Would it not be the manna in the wilderness? And were not those who tasted this manna the same as those who perished because God was not pleased with them? Remember, it was the same author to the Hebrews who just recently brought the fate of that wilderness generation to the remembrance of his readers.

But the author does not want his readers to think that he is somehow locked in a time capsule, circa 1400 BC. Those of whom he speaks in this passage did indeed taste the heavenly gifts, but what they tasted was not the manna that was given through Moses, but the true ‘bread of life’ – Jesus, the Word from heaven. Consider the Lord’s teaching in John 6 that caused so many of those who had been following Him to ‘fall away and walk with Him no more.’

I am the bread of life. Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness, and are dead. This is the bread which comes down from heaven, that one may eat of it and not die. I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world.
(John 6:48-51)

It is not unreasonable to conclude that the 'heavenly gifts' and the 'good word of God' – both of which have been 'tasted' by these people – is the preaching of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Gospel. Furthermore, it bears noting that the author uses the word 'taste' rather than 'eat' – the latter being what Jesus required of those who would follow Him: *if anyone eats of this bread...* We should also note that the good 'word' tasted by these people is the *spoken* word – *rhema* (r(h=ma) – as opposed to the more common *logos* (logo/j).

Some commentators attempt to show that 'tasting' is the same as 'eating' by pointing out that Jesus Himself 'tasted' death,

But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, for the suffering of death crowned with glory and honor, that He, by the grace of God, might taste death for everyone.
(Hebrews 2:9)

While it is true that Jesus did die, the life having gone out of Him the moment He gave up His spirit, it is not true that His experience of death was that same as that of other men. It can be said that Jesus only tasted of death, since His body did not undergo decay nor was He abandoned in the grave. Fallen man, so to speak, *eats* death to the full (or perhaps it is death that devours fallen man?). But Jesus' experience of death was different – a taste rather than a full meal – because of His sinless perfection: death could not keep Him in its grasp.

Having become partakers of the Holy Spirit. This is the toughest one among the blessings of verses 4 and 5. How can someone be a partaker of the Holy Spirit and not be saved? Spurgeon assumes that this participation in the Holy Spirit is a sanctifying work that can be wrought only in those who have been born again. "Then the Apostle gives a further description, a higher state of grace:

sanctification by participation of the Holy Ghost."⁴⁴ Spurgeon speaks of the Holy Spirit as "an indwelling Spirit; he dwells in the hearts, and souls, and minds of men; he makes this mortal flesh his home; he makes our soul his palace, and there he rests."⁴⁵ Yet it is not necessarily obvious that it is the indwelling, sanctifying, *saving* work of the Spirit of which these people had become 'partakers.'

The word translated 'partakers' is different from the more familiar and intimate *koinonios* – communion – that describes the participation of the believer in Christ, and of the divine nature (II Peter 1:4). The word in Hebrews 6:4 is *metoxous* (*meto/xouj*), which signifies a partnership or fellow participation in an endeavor. That endeavor may indeed be one's salvation, although only the Arminian believes that man and God 'work together' for man's salvation! But the word may also signify fellow participation in the ministry of the Holy Spirit within the Church, something that *has* been done by those who were never regenerate. In chapter 3, the author speaks of his readers as those who have 'participated' in the same heavenly calling – a calling that in the previous chapter he noted could be rejected. Later in chapter 3 he uses the word again in a conditional statement, "*For we have become **partakers** of Christ if we hold the beginning of our profession steadfast to the end.*"

This partaking is of a more general sort and nature than the communion in the Holy Spirit that is true only of the regenerate. It is an outward, visible participation as opposed to an inward, invisible one. This is not to say that *koinonia* can be present without the more outward *metoxous*; but simply that the latter can be present without the former. To be partakers (*metoxous*) of the Holy Spirit is true of those who are partakers (*koinonia*) of the Holy Spirit in salvation; but there will be those who have 'partaken' of the Holy Spirit without having

⁴⁴ Spurgeon; *op cit*; p. 170.

⁴⁵ *Idem*.

been regenerated. Consider the remarkable example of those of whom the Lord speaks concerning the day of judgment,

Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of My Father in heaven. Many will say to Me in that day, 'Lord, Lord, have we not prophesied in Your name, cast out demons in Your name, and done many wonders in Your name?' And then I will declare to them, 'I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practice lawlessness!'
(Matthew 7:21-23)

True, the passage does not tell us by what power these erstwhile disciples cast out demons and worked wonders, but it remains true that these types of outward works were of the same nature as those wrought by the apostles and by Jesus. And we do indeed have at least one example of a man who 'participated' in the sense of being a fellow worker, in the ministry of the Holy Spirit – Judas Iscariot. It often escapes our notice that Judas was among the twelve, and later among the seventy, who were sent out by Jesus to proclaim His coming – sent out with power to heal and to subdue demons in the name of Jesus Christ, *"demons are subject to us in your Name!"* and Judas stood with the twelve when they said this. Surely his participation in this work – and no one can doubt that it was empowered by the Holy Spirit – was far short of the saving and sanctifying work of the Spirit in true believers. Of this twofold work of the Holy Spirit, Owen writes, *"many are made partakers of him in his spiritual gifts who are never made partakers of him in his saving graces."*⁴⁶

Having tasted...of the powers of the age to come. We have already discussed the tasting of the good word of God in connection with tasting the heavenly gifts. But what does it mean to have tasted of the 'powers of the age to come'? In the understanding of the Jews, the 'age to come' was the Messianic Age – the age when the Promised One would deliver Israel from bondage and re-establish her sovereignty and glory. To the early Christians, the 'powers of the age to come' – which age had *come* with Jesus Christ who inaugurated His eternal kingdom – were manifested through the 'signs of the apostles' – the miracles that were

⁴⁶ Owen; p. 81.

performed by the apostles as confirmation to the revelation they brought. "Wherefore these 'powers of the age to come,' were the gifts whereby those signs, wonders, and mighty works, were then wrought by the Holy Ghost, according as it was foretold by the prophets that they should be so."⁴⁷

The overflow of the Spirit (remember the prophecy of Joel?) seemed to fall upon both the regenerate and the unregenerate. The seven sons of Sceva cast out demons in the name of Jesus and of Paul, until they met their match one day and were themselves cast out! The church at Corinth was 'spiritual' above all other churches, lacking in no manifestation of the Spirit; but it can hardly be said that it was a healthy church, nor can one reasonably doubt that there were unregenerate professors in that church.

It was primarily on the occasion of the Great Awakening, and the overflow of manifestations of the Spirit's working, that prompted Jonathan Edwards to more deeply analyze this passage from Hebrews 6, and particularly the apparent operation of the Holy Spirit on those who are not regenerate. There were, Edwards maintained in his *Thoughts on Revival*, both true and false professors attendant with any revival of the Spirit. In fact, Edwards reasonably argues, it is the very working of the Holy Spirit that renders the subsequent apostasy so irremediable, so final and 'beyond repentance.'

"...and having fallen away, to renew them again unto repentance, having crucified to themselves the Son of God and exposed Him to public ridicule." (6:6)

The reason this particular apostasy, this 'falling away,' puts those who do it beyond the pale of repentance is because it is the same as the *blasphemy against the Holy Spirit*, the 'unforgivable sin.'

Therefore I say to you, every sin and blasphemy will be forgiven men, but the blasphemy against the Spirit will not be forgiven men. Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man, it will be forgiven him; but whoever speaks against the Holy Spirit, it will not be forgiven him, either in this age or in the age to come. (Matthew 12:32-33)

⁴⁷ Owen; p. 83.

These words were spoken to the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day, the religious leaders, that is: the Pharisees. They had attributed the works which Jesus had done by the power of the Holy Spirit, to the empowerment of the devil. This apparently was the official position of Judaism relative to the ministry of Jesus while He was alive, and intensified and solidified after His resurrection and the spread of the Way within the Jewish community throughout the Roman world. The Jews could not deny that miraculous works had been done by Jesus – the evidence was just too public; too many people had either been personally touched by Jesus, or had witnessed His miraculous powers. Thus the only recourse was to attribute those powers to the prince of darkness, which is what Judaism has done for two millennia. This fact enables us to begin to identify those about whom the author of Hebrews writes in verses 4 and 5.

We remember that the occasion for this sermon/epistle was the danger faced by the Hebrew Christians regarding drifting back from Jesus to Moses, from Christianity back to Judaism. But to do this would be tantamount to saying the 'amen' to Judaism's official line regarding the person and work of Jesus! Having experienced all of the manifestations of miraculous powers both in Jesus' life (by report) and in the lives of the apostles, the ultimate question facing Hebrew professors was the *motive force* behind those miraculous powers. Was it the Holy Spirit – in which case it could not be denied that Christianity *was* the fulfillment of Judaism – or was it the devil. If those who professed faith in Jesus Christ out of Judaism returned, they committed the unpardonable sin by doing so. This was Edwards' view on the passage:

It may be observed that those of the Jews or Hebrews who were unbelievers were wont to ascribe the miraculous operations of Christ and his followers, which were the extraordinary influence of the Holy Ghost, to the devil. They had no other way to account for them on their principles. And therefore we may well suppose that those of the Christian Hebrews who themselves had partook of these extraordinary gifts and operations of the Spirit that apostatized and renounced Christianity and again joined with the unbelieving persecuting Jews I

say that we may well suppose that they ascribed those miraculous gifts and powers which they themselves had while professing Christians to the devil as other unbelieving Jews did who were generally most malignant spiteful enemies to Christ and all Christians.⁴⁸

When we dig through Edwards' excessive use of words, we find that he is simply saying that Hebrew Christians who returned to Judaism must of necessity accept the official line regarding the undeniable miraculous powers associated with Jesus Christ and the apostles – that they were worked through the power of the devil. This is the blasphemy of the Holy Spirit; this is the unpardonable sin – and those who had already committed it were 'nigh unto a curse' and 'soon to be burned.' But more on that – verses 7 and 8 – in our next lesson (D.V.)

⁴⁸ Quoted by John Gerstner, The Rational Biblical Theology of Jonathan Edwards; pp. 310-11.

“For the land that drinks in the rain that often comes upon it and yields plants useful to the one who cultivates it, receives upon itself a blessing from God. But bringing forth thorns and thistles, it is worthless and next to a curse; its end is to be burned.”

(6:7-8)

The most common error that can be, and has been, made concerning the interpretation of these two verses is to separate them from the previous discussion in verses 4 – 6. Far from being a distinct thought, or an additional metaphorical illustration, the analogy to the fertile or infertile earth is inextricably tied to the author’s analysis of the apostate people from the earlier verses. In fact, this agricultural metaphor actually helps us to identify just who it is that the writer is speaking of in those earlier verses. The two sections, verses 4-6 and verses 7-8, are connected with the Greek word *gar* (ga=r), which is translated by the English ‘for.’ The word is not just a simple transition from one thought to another, but rather serves as a deepening explanation or reason for what has already been said. In this case, the *gar* of verse 7 introduces an explanatory thought that would not have been lost on the first *Hebrew* readers.

If we follow the flow of the author’s thought from verses 4-6 to verses 7-8, it becomes apparent that the ‘land’ or ‘earth’ of which he speaks in verse 7 is a metaphorical representation of the people of whom he spoke in the earlier verses. There are not *two* plots of land in verses 7 and 8 – *one* good and *one* bad – but rather one plot of land that is either blessed by God because it yields a harvest, or cursed because it yields ‘thorns and thistles.’ This is an important point to the exposition of the verses, for it tells us that the author has but one antitype in mind: one correlation between the ‘earth’ and the people represented. Let us develop the metaphor a little more.

When a farmer cultivates a section of his land, he takes care to make sure that he gives every possible chance for the earth to yield a productive and profitable harvest. He removes rocks and weeds; he tills the land deeply; he waters and fertilizes, etc. Good soil will respond to this kind of treatment, and will consequently ‘*drink up the rain that often falls upon it.*’ This last clause

indicates that the part of farming that is outside the farmer's control – the rain – is, in this case, amply provided. Thus any failure in the harvest cannot be blamed either upon the one who tended the earth, or upon the lack of rain – the fault lies with the *soil*.

And that is the point of the metaphor. The opening statement of verse 7 is a statement of fact – God's blessing is upon fertile, productive soil. But the thrust of the metaphor is in verse 8, and once again these two verses *are not* conditional – there is no 'if...then' here as there was not in verses 4-6.

The point of this metaphor is that the earth of which the author speaks *failed* to produce a harvest, even though it was thoroughly cultivated, and even though the rain 'often fell upon it.' Therefore, not only is this metaphor a further illustration and explanation of the earlier verses, it is also *prophetic* in the sense



that the author is proclaiming a situation that existed in his day, and a judgment that was impending. John Owen writes, "For here is not only a threatening of what might come to pass, but a particular prediction of what would come to pass, and a declaration of what was already in part accomplished."⁴⁹

John Owen (1616-83)

And as the author expected his readers to understand his allusion in verses 4-6, he also expected that they would properly identify the 'earth' in verse 7. Their minds, guided by their understanding of the Old Testament scriptures, would naturally move to the Song of the Vineyard from Isaiah chapter 5,

⁴⁹ Owen; Volume 5; p. 93.

*Now let me sing to my Well-beloved
 A song of my Beloved regarding His vineyard:
 My Well-beloved has a vineyard
 On a very fruitful hill.
 He dug it up and cleared out its stones,
 And planted it with the choicest vine.
 He built a tower in its midst,
 And also made a winepress in it;
 So He expected it to bring forth good grapes,
 But it brought forth wild grapes.
 "And now, O inhabitants of Jerusalem and men of Judah,
 Judge, please, between Me and My vineyard.
 What more could have been done to My vineyard
 That I have not done in it?
 Why then, when I expected it to bring forth good grapes,
 Did it bring forth wild grapes?
 And now, please let Me tell you what I will do to My vineyard:
 I will take away its hedge, and it shall be burned;
 And break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
 I will lay it waste;
 It shall not be pruned or dug,
 But there shall come up briars and thorns.
 I will also command the clouds
 That they rain no rain on it."
 For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel,
 And the men of Judah are His pleasant plant.
 He looked for justice, but behold, oppression;
 For righteousness, but behold, a cry for help.*

(Isaiah 5:1-7)

Verse 7 of Isaiah 5 clearly tells us who the vineyard is – Israel – and the whole song leaves no doubt as to who is the One who is cultivating the vineyard – Jehovah. The Song of the Vineyard is the prophetic refrain to the blessings and cursings that were delivered to Israel at the beginning of their national life – the cursings of Mt. Ebal and the blessings of Mt. Gerazim (Deut. 27). This prophecy of Isaiah has had several fulfillments over the course of the centuries, one of which was *past* relative to the author of Hebrews, and one *future*. The one that was past was, of course, the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent seventy-year exile of Israel from the land. But that was only a foretaste of the judgment that would ultimately come upon the land and the people when their hardness and rebellion had reached its peak.

It is easy to forget that prophecies such as the Song of the Vineyard hung over Israel's head for centuries during their continued disobedience against God. The nation did seem to overcome its idolatry in the period between the return from Babylon and the advent of Christ. But they did so by replacing the deaf and dumb idols of wood, stone and gold with an idol of the Law. Therefore, while there was a great deal of hope and promise in the preaching of Jesus, there was also a foreboding, a cloud of doom that He clearly perceived (of course) hanging above Israel, and centered upon Jerusalem. This knowledge of impending judgment underscores the entire Olivet Discourse. But the cause of the judgment – Israel's continued recalcitrance to the grace of God, now shown by the sending of His own Son – underlies other familiar dominical sayings, such as the parable of the vineyard,

Hear another parable: There was a certain landowner who planted a vineyard and set a hedge around it, dug a winepress in it and built a tower. And he leased it to vinedressers and went into a far country. Now when vintage-time drew near, he sent his servants to the vinedressers, that they might receive its fruit. And the vinedressers took his servants, beat one, killed one, and stoned another. Again he sent other servants, more than the first, and they did likewise to them. Then last of all he sent his son to them, saying, 'They will respect my son.' But when the vinedressers saw the son, they said among themselves, 'This is the heir. Come, let us kill him and seize his inheritance.' So they took him and cast him out of the vineyard and killed him. "Therefore, when the owner of the vineyard comes, what will he do to those vinedressers?" They said to Him, "He will destroy those wicked men miserably, and lease his vineyard to other vinedressers who will render to him the fruits in their seasons. (Matthew 21:33-41)

The gist of this parable is different in some respects to the Song of the Vineyard, but the identity of the 'vineyard' would have been obvious to those who heard our Lord tell this parable. The vineyard motif was a common one for Israel since before the days of Isaiah. The Isaianic passage speaks of the failure of the vineyard to produce a crop acceptable to the one who cultivates it; the parable above speaks to the intense effort made by the vineyard owner to realize his just due from his land. In either case, the vineyard is Israel, and the result is judgment.

It is in the context of the Song of the Vineyard and the Parable of the Vineyard that we find the proper interpretation and meaning of the author of Hebrews here in chapter 6. Whenever a Jewish rabbi, or Christian preacher in the early days of the church, would use the metaphor of land and harvest, any Hebrew listener would immediately understand him to speaking about Israel. It is perfectly reasonable to assume that the Hebrew Christians who first read or heard this sermon would have made the very same connection. And in so doing, they would have fully understood just who it was that the author was speaking about in verses 4-6 – the Jews of their day who had utterly rejected the Lord Jesus Christ, and who were the ones to crucify Him.

But even more important, the audience would have understood the ramifications of what was being said – the terms used in verse 8: *next to a curse...its end is to be burned* were words not only of judgment, but of *impending* judgment. In other words, *something* was about to happen to this unfruitful plot of land, something very, very bad. Delitzsch is perhaps too guarded in his view that “it is possible that the apostolic writer may have had floating in prophetic vision before his eyes the fiery judgment then impending on Jerusalem, which, along with those unbelieving Jews who had once raised the cry of ‘Crucify him, crucify him!’ would sweep away the apostates who should have relapsed to Judaism.”⁵⁰ The unspoken warning here is that if any of the Hebrew Christians chose to apostatize back to Judaism, they would suffer the very same fate as their countrymen according to the flesh.

The fulfillment of these prophecies is clear enough to us, with the vantage point of history to our advantage. The beginning of the end was in AD 66, when the Roman general Vespasian was called upon by the Emperor Nero to quell a revolt among the Jews in Galilee. The war ended seven years later when the last Jewish stronghold of Massada was breached. In the middle, in AD 70,

⁵⁰ Delitzsch; p. 297.

Vespasian's son Titus successfully invested Jerusalem, resulting in several days of wanton destruction and the leveling of the Temple itself. Jewish casualty numbers are lost to history, but second-hand reports from historians such as Josephus place the number in excess of one million people. Given our working hypothesis concerning the date of the Book of Hebrews as some time in the



The treasures of Jerusalem (from the Arch of Titus in Rome)

early sixties, it is understandable that the author would refer to the 'burning' of the unfruitful land as being so close at hand. The repercussions of the Jewish defeat in Judea would resonate around the Roman world, and the peace and quiet that Hebrew Christians thought they would find by returning to Judaism would turn out to be a tragic illusion.

But it was not the Romans that the author was concerned about; they were but the instrument of God's wrath. He leaves unsaid just who it is that will curse and burn the unfruitful land; but it is clear by implication. It is God who blesses the fruitful land in verse 7, therefore it is God who curses and destroys the land in verse 8. The author cannot promise that the Hebrew Christians will not suffer persecution if they remain faithful to their profession; in fact, later in the sermon he will endeavor to prepare them for just such an eventuality. He cannot, therefore, falsely give them comfort that if they remain faithful and refuse to go back to Judaism, all will be well – that would be to speak 'Peace, peace' when there is no peace! But what he can do, he does. He informs them very soberly that if they *do* go back to Judaism, all will be *worse*!

Week 5: The Judgment of Charity**Text Reading: Hebrews 6:9 - 12**

*"Endurance is the true proof of a faith
that is not passing or transient."
(John Calvin)*

The deeply troubling passage just reviewed – Hebrews 6:4-8 – continues to stand as evidence to many that a true believer in Jesus Christ can fully and finally lose his salvation, and perish eternally. This is, of course, one of the major reasons why the passage is so deeply troubling. We have seen that one of the major hurdles that must be overcome in the interpretation of the passage is the understanding that those things predicated in verses 4 and 5 do not necessarily apply to true believers. But when a student of Scripture as competent as Charles Spurgeon states that such things as ‘having been enlightened,’ and ‘having partaken of the Holy Spirit’ *cannot* apply to any *but* believers, one can easily understand why it is a hurdle many others do not clear. Fortunately we do not have to conjure up an interpretation of verses 4-6 that defies a ‘childlike’ reading of the passage – for the author himself interprets for us in verse 9. We do not have to hypothesize that the writer is not speaking in the earlier verses concerning those who have truly received salvation, for he explicitly says as much in verse 9.

So many readers of verses 4-6 stumble over a hurdle that that author himself takes down in verse 9! The change in pronouns from the second person in the opening verses of chapter 6, to the third person in verses 4-6, and then back to the second person in verse 9, amazingly escapes the notice of many, too many, commentators, preachers, and believing readers of the middle section. It seems that for some underlying, perhaps psychological, reason many think that the writer *must* be talking about true believers in verses 4-6 and, therefore, true believers *must* be capable of becoming once again eternally lost.

Perhaps the problem is found not so much in the exegesis of the text as it does in the reader's ability to comprehend the logic and purpose of the author. The confusion enters when one tries to figure out *why* the author would write such a sober and frightening passage concerning a *completely different* group of people than the ones to whom he was writing. Another way of looking at the conundrum is this: If it is true that a true believer cannot lose his or her salvation, then why 'threaten' those who you believe to be true believers with the possible loss of their salvation? The bogey-man of eternal perdition is not lurking behind the door or under the bed of those who have been truly regenerated, so it seems a bit disingenuous for the writer to lead his audience to wonder if he is. Thus it is often objected to the view that the persons represented in verses 4-6 are not true believers, that if such were the case the writer would not have said what he does say to the Hebrew congregation.

But once again, verse 9 comes to our rescue. Not only does the author there disavow any connection between those of whom he speaks in verses 4-6 and those who are saved, but he also indicates that he *is* speaking in a manner that does not (in his opinion) apply to those to whom he writes. In other words, it is not for the later expositor of the passage to conclude that the author would not write in a certain way, when he himself says that he is writing in a certain way. Hear his own words: "*But we have been persuaded of better things concerning you, beloved, and **which accompany salvation, even though we have spoken in this manner**...*" Therefore, since the author *has* 'spoken in this manner' and since he *has* disavowed any connection between those represented in verses 4-6 and those whose expectation is of things 'that accompany salvation,' we are left not to deny either, but rather to figure out *why* he has spoken in this way. That will be the focus of our investigation of verses 9-12 in this lesson.

First, however, since the hurdle of acceptance has grown so high against the view that the writer is not threatening the possible loss of salvation to those who are truly saved, some attempt ought to be made to at least lower the bar of

opposition. We can do this simply by asking whether it is so odd or unusual for someone to speak of something by way of warning that he has good reason to believe does not, and will not, apply to the one to whom he is speaking. Consider the case of a teacher who notifies his class that if they fail to study diligently for an upcoming final examination, they will undoubtedly fail the examination. He knows that the material has been faithfully disseminated to the class throughout the year (they have been enlightened). But he also knows that the final examination, being cumulative, will test the students' endurance in the things that they have learned. Indeed, it will show whether they have learned the material at all, or simply and temporarily held the information in their minds for a time (they were *once* enlightened!). He also knows that due to the fact that the final examination comprises 60% of the final course grade, a failing grade on that examination will translate into a failing grade for the course.

These are the facts as they would apply to any body of students in any year. But in this particular year – the year of our example – the instructor has noted that the students have been diligent in their work, their intermediate examinations have earned high marks, and their interaction with him in the classroom manifests a thorough understanding of the material. In other words, *he is persuaded of better things concerning them* with regard to the final examination. Nonetheless, the earlier facts still stand. In addition, Spring Fever has begun to infect even this above average class of students and their diligence has lagged of late. Still confident of their ultimate success, the instructor attempts to stir them to their earlier vigor by means of a truthful, though probably inapplicable, example of failure. Obviously the stakes are much higher with regard to someone's eternal salvation. Yet the 'manner of speaking' that the author of Hebrews employs need not betray a belief that those to whom he writes are in imminent danger of perishing, any more than that the instructor's class is in imminent danger of failing. Perhaps this is considered by some to be 'scare tactics' and therefore beneath the dignity of Scripture (and maybe even of school

teachers), but it is both common and effective in the communication of urgency from one man to another.

If we pause to reconsider the working hypothesis of this study regarding the identity and life circumstance of the original recipients of this sermon/epistle, we are confirmed as to the urgency of the warning the author is trying to convey. The sin of verse 6 is clearly 'unpardonable,' and is therefore 'the unpardonable sin.' Many are the sins of believers, and therefore many should be the admonitions and rebukes of their shepherds. But the sin of apostatizing from the Christian profession and returning to the Jewish religion is tantamount to crediting the miracles of Jesus to the impetus and motivation of the devil – the blasphemy against the Holy Spirit. Certainly, then, there can be no fault found with the author for reminding his audience of the unique blessings experienced by the Jewish nation – and most especially by those within that nation who had initially responded to the Gospel. Nor is there anything wrong with intimating by way of a vivid and time-honored metaphor, the ultimate fate of that nation. If our interpretation of the passage is correct, its application to a Jewish congregation of professing Christians, tempted by circumstances around them to return to the Jewish religion, seems both appropriate and correct.

But Gentile believers have struggled with this passage for another reason, born of a twofold error. First, there is the error of failing to remember that the Christian faith was born and nurtured in a Jewish nursery. Christianity is the fulfillment of the divine promises delivered to the Jews; it is the *New Covenant* that fulfills the *Old*. When we interpret the passage in this light, remembering the unique position the generation of Jews that experienced the coming of the Messiah held vis-à-vis God's redemptive plan, we realize the unique danger faced by these Hebrew Christians, tempted as they were to return to the old ways.

But there is a second error that has become prevalent within evangelical Christianity of late – a failure to understand that there are different types of ‘belief.’ The influence of Arminian soteriology, coupled with the earnest and sincere desire of evangelists to see conversions, has combined to produce a widely held view that ‘to believe’ immediately and in all cases means ‘to be saved.’ Many today view any other opinion to be nothing less than a ‘works salvation’ and a denial of the Gospel of Grace. It is very telling to note that the author of Hebrews bases his ‘persuasion’ of better things concerning those to whom he writes, upon their ‘works’! But more on that as we progress through the verses themselves. At this point, however, we would be well served with a reminder of the famous Parable of the Sower, and of the equally significant adage set forth by our Lord, “By their fruit they will be known.”

Then He spoke many things to them in parables, saying: “Behold, a sower went out to sow. And as he sowed, some seed fell by the wayside; and the birds came and devoured them. Some fell on stony places, where they did not have much earth; and they immediately sprang up because they had no depth of earth. But when the sun was up they were scorched, and because they had no root they withered away. And some fell among thorns, and the thorns sprang up and choked them. But others fell on good ground and yielded a crop: some a hundredfold, some sixty, some thirty. He who has ears to hear, let him hear!

(Matthew 13:3-9)

It is fairly standard for modern commentators and preachers to interpret this parable in such a way that *three* of the plots of ground represent true believers – those who ultimately will be saved. All are agreed that the seed that falls by the wayside and is devoured by the birds is representative of those who meet the preaching of the Gospel with rank unbelief. The seed does not penetrate the soil, belief does not take root, the person remains in his or her sin. In addition, all are agreed that the fourth plot of ground not only represents true believers, but also that this is the condition that should represent all who profess faith in Jesus Christ. The disagreement arises over plots two and three – the stony ground and the weed-infested ground. And the disagreement is not limited to the modern church. Irenaeus, a second-century bishop of Gaul,

believed the second, third, and fourth plots to represent different levels of heavenly bliss in the afterlife. He quotes Jesus' promise that 'in My Father's house there are many dwelling places' as indicating places of relatively low esteem and places of high esteem. But in this interpretation Irenaeus reads into the passage something that is simply not there, and misses one very important point that is.

Parables are life stories used to illustrate moral or ethical principles, and as such they are to be understood in the simplicity of their setting. With respect to the Parable of the Sower, one must not lose sight of the fact that the Sower sows his seed *with a view toward the harvest*. He does not consider the mere growing of plants that fail to produce a grain to be successful sowing. In other words, and dominical words, *by their fruit they will be known*. Simply ask the Sower which plots were 'successful'! The seed that fell by the wayside was obviously lost, but the seed that gave the false hope of harvest – plots two and three – was no less an absolute failure to him: a waste of good seed without the reward of grain.

What makes the Parable of the Sower significant to our understanding of Hebrews chapter 6, is the fact that those people who are represented by plots two and three *believed*. They 'received' the word that was sown in the preaching of the Gospel, and for a time participated in what appeared to be the new life of a Christian. Ultimately, however, the nature of their 'belief' becomes evident through their falling away. In other words, theirs was not 'true' faith, it was not the faith of the regenerate. The nature of the difference in the two types of faith lies in the nature of faith itself, and in its ultimate source.

Many modern professors view faith as the act of man in response to the message of the Gospel presented through preaching, writing, singing, or the testimonials of others. In other words, faith is what the sinner does in response to the offer of salvation from God. Many Calvinists, in opposing this view, fail to understand and acknowledge that faith *is* something that man *can* do. Man can

believe, and can even place his trust in the object of his faith. He can believe that the message that he just heard from the pulpit is the truth, and that by receiving it his life can be changed and improved. He can do this with the same faculty of mind with which he believes in gravity, so that he refrains from walking off the edge of a skyscraper or a cliff. But whereas his belief in gravity will preserve his life from the sudden stop at the end of a long fall, mental assent to the truth of the Gospel will not save a man from eternal condemnation.

The apostle Paul explains the difference in the famous passage from Ephesians chapter 2, in which he tells us that faith is ‘the gift of God.’ This is where the Reformed soteriology surpasses the Arminian – in its understanding that true, saving faith does not find its source within the sinner, but rather it comes from God in the very process of regeneration itself. *This* is the faith that saves, and *this* is the faith that perseveres to the end. It must have been of great comfort to the Hebrews believers that the author of this wonderful letter was persuaded that they possessed *this* kind of faith.

“But we have been persuaded of better things concerning you, beloved, and [things] which accompany salvation, even though we have spoken in this manner.” (6:9)

What the author has just said in verses 4-8 had the potential of leaving his readers with a sense of both fear and hopelessness. Although he made a significant shift in pronouns through his illustration, he did not want his audience to mistake his meaning, or to directly apply the illustration to their own condition. He has much yet to say to them, to encourage them in their faith and to urge them to perseverance. Therefore he is careful to leave them warned and concerned, but not despairing. “There is nothing that has a greater effect in alienating us from listening to teaching than to see that we are thought of as hopeless.”⁵¹ But the author has hope, and a hope founded on enough data to leave him ‘persuaded’ that his readers are, in fact, on the path of salvation.

⁵¹ Calvin; p. 78.

We should investigate the nature of the author's being persuaded – what did that mean for him, and on what basis was his confidence founded? It is here that a sound and reasonable view of the inspiration of Scripture is necessary, even critical. Whereas we acknowledge that the Bible was written by *men moved by the Holy Spirit*, we also acknowledge that they were men. Thus when the author speaks of himself as 'persuaded,' we must not interpret him as meaning 'infallibly certain.' This is due to the fact that, while the Holy Spirit has certainly preserved the writers of Scripture from error in matters of doctrine and practice, the same writers have not been granted infallible insight into the hearts of other men. We find, then, degrees of persuasion among the authors of the Bible. Paul, for instance, is persuaded that the One to whom he entrusted his soul was able to preserve it against the Day of Judgment. But this persuasion was based upon divine revelation, upon the very nature of God as both the source of salvation and as the faithful sustainer of the same.

We can be, in a sense, infallibly persuaded of those things that God has revealed to us about himself and about His redemption, through the reading of His word. But concerning matters within the hearts of human beings, including even our own hearts, the level of persuasion must rest on something less than revelation. Concerning the favorable opinion the author holds towards these Hebrew Christians, Franz Delitzsch writes, "it is not so much an inward confidence, as a conviction, the result of observation, which leads him in this case to look for better things."⁵²

This is an important comment, because it causes us to investigate just what it was about the Hebrew Christians that engendered this conviction within the author that they were, in fact, saved. But it also reminds us that this conviction, no matter how strongly held, was not of the nature of infallible knowledge. Therefore the concern expressed by the author regarding their

⁵² Delitzsch; p. 297.

progress in faith, and the stern and frightening warning of verses 4-8, are both very pertinent and applicable to those to whom he is writing.

“For God is not unjust to forget your work and [labor of] love which you have shown toward His Name, having ministered to the saints and ministering still.” (6:10)

The writer proceeds to show his readers that his confidence is not merely wishful thinking, nor is he simply trying to pick them up after having laid them low. His persuasion as to their hopeful state is built upon the two strong pillars of divine promise, and gracious work. It is unnecessary to say which of these is the more important, for it is the teaching of Scripture that both flow from God – the promises and the work. Yet what the writer says here in verse 10 has often been misinterpreted as either advocating a salvation of works, or as teaching a cooperative effort of faith and works as in the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church. In order to properly understand his meaning, it must be remembered that he is not speaking about the cause of their salvation, but rather the cause of his confidence – these are two entirely different things! Calvin reminds us that this passage, “is not referring expressly here to the cause of our salvation, and therefore no conclusion should be drawn from this passage about the merits of works.”⁵³

The first pillar is that of the divine promise – God is not unjust to forget, or, to put it around in the positive manner, God will be just and will remember. What will God remember? He will remember the works of love that the Hebrew believers have done (and were still doing) for others in His Name. To draw from the previous discussion concerning the Parable of the Sower and the importance of bearing fruit, we can say that God is not unjust to fail to recognize fruit but rather will be faithful to His own promise to gather the grain into His garner. There are only two ways that this comforting and challenging promise can be interpreted. Either God looks upon our own deeds and rewards them, or God

⁵³ Calvin; p. 79.

graciously performs His work in and through us, and even more graciously rewards us in the end. The first view is predicated upon the faulty concept of an ability within man to do that which is pleasing and acceptable to God. In Roman Catholic theology it is taught that divine grace cooperates with human will to produce works that are truly man's – their source is found in the will of man – and yet are also meritorious in the sight of God. Modern Arminian theology, represented by teachers and preachers such as Zane Hodges and Charles Stanley, holds that God's work of grace is the *sine qua non* of salvation, but that heavenly rewards are determined on the basis of the self-directed good works of the saved. These two views are but a variation upon the same theme – that man is capable of doing something worthy of divine praise, albeit with the assistance of divine grace.

The second view is believed by Calvinists to be a more accurate interpretation of biblical anthropology – that the works which God faithfully remembers and rewards are simply the gracious works that He has performed in His children through the power of the indwelling Holy Spirit. So Calvin, "He looks not so much on our works as on His grace in our works."⁵⁴ This view is founded upon many different passages in Scripture that reflect upon the deleterious effects of sin upon human 'ability.' But perhaps there is no stronger 'proof text' than the self-evaluation of the apostle Paul concerning works that undoubtedly far surpass anything the average Roman Catholic, Arminian, or Calvinist can ever claim:

But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me.
(I Corinthians 15:10)

The nature of the 'works' that God is not unjust to forget is also very significant. In early and medieval Christian theology it was taught and believed that asceticism and monasticism were the highest 'works' that a believer could

⁵⁴ Calvin; p. 79.

perform – to remove oneself from the course of human life and to spend one's days in meditation and contemplation. This is a view unknown to the Scriptures. It is borne of the common religious (mis)conception that a man can doing anything for a god. Transferred to the Christian walk, it manifests itself today in the belief that traveling thousands of miles on a 'missions trip' is somehow a more worthy 'work' than staying at home and serving one's neighbors and brethren. Missions conferences are full of emotional pleas for the attendees to be the 'hands and feet' of Jesus by going where He can no longer go. But it is interesting to contemplate the type of 'work' that the author of Hebrews says will not fail to receive both divine approbation and reward. It is the service of ministry to the saints – to other believers.

This is a principle that Puritan writers caught hold of and frequently wrote about – that God has instituted a devotional system wherein He is to be served by proxy. Jonathan Edwards, who was a Puritan 'untimely born,' said that since God cannot be served in anything by man – for He has need of nothing that man could possibly supply – He has ordained that man's service to Him is to be rendered to man's own neighbor. In a negative way this principle is illustrated by Jesus' words to the persecutor Saul of Tarsus. By asking Saul why he continued to persecute *Me*, Jesus is clearly setting forth the principle that actions done against those who bear His Name are tantamount to actions done against Him. On the positive side, we again have the words of our Lord, "*When, therefore, you have done it unto the least of these My brethren, you have done it unto Me.*" A. W. Pink comments, "It is both blessed and solemn to know that whatever is done unto the people of God, whether it be good or evil, is done toward the name of Christ."⁵⁵ To this Delitzsch adds,

The ultimate object of their love was that name of God in which He has revealed Himself as that whereby He would be named and known and confessed; and this

⁵⁵ Pink; p. 329.

love they manifested by ministering, and continuing to minister, to those by whom that name was borne and confessed and known.⁵⁶

It is worth noting that the 'ministering' that these Hebrew Christians have done and were doing, and that all Christians must do if they are to properly manifest the 'works' that God blesses, is the familiar Greek word *diakonia* (diakoni/a). This word is normally translated by variations of the English words 'ministry' or 'service,' but it is also well-known as the Greek word for 'deacon.'

"Now we earnestly desire that each of you show the same diligence to the fullness of hope until the end." (6:11)

Just as the author tempered the solemn warning of his earlier illustration with the comforting revelation of his persuasion of 'better things,' he tempers his own confidence with his 'earnest desire' that those to whom he is writing prove him correct through their own perseverance. If there was a word that singularly summarized the exhortative portion of this book it would without doubt be the word 'Persevere!' The concepts of perseverance and endurance are found throughout the book, and form the common thread of all that the author desires for the Hebrew Christians – that they manifest the reality and vitality of their profession of faith through steadfastness *to the end*.

Again we must guard against putting the cart before the horse, as many have done, and somehow concluding that one's salvation is dependent and contingent upon one 'making it' to the end. As we have noted before, the issue is not endurance as a cause of one's salvation, but rather endurance as the ultimate proof of one's salvation. Returning once more to our earlier discussion about the two types of faith – one flowing from man's own will and the other from God's divine grace – we find that it is only the latter that will endure unto the end. Indeed, it is of the very nature of gracious and saving faith to persevere, whereas it is of the nature of human faith to fall away eventually.

⁵⁶ Delitzsch; p. 299.

The author's pastoral wisdom is manifest in this earnest plea, for he shows us that any flagging of diligence is cause for concern. We may acknowledge that, due to the weakness of our flesh and the 'law at work in our members,' we do not maintain the same degree of devotion and vigor in our faith at all times. This is to be, unfortunately, expected. However it is never to be excused, and certainly never to be complacently accepted. *Every* step backwards is a potential step toward apostasy, and every cessation of forward progress is a potential movement in reverse. The author of Hebrews will not allow believers to rest on past laurels, or to at any time willingly and knowingly ease their vigilance in the race. This is a consistent theme we will encounter over again as we work through this book.

"In order that you may not become sluggish, but rather become imitators of those who by means of faith and patience inherit the promises." (6:12)

Perhaps the author is guilty of using the 'carrot and stick' approach to motivate his readers to steadfastness and perseverance. But if the stick is real, and the carrot, then there is nothing immoral or unethical about the approach. Thus the stick of verses 4-8 has become the carrot of the promised inheritance.

It is significant that the author uses the same word here, translated 'sluggish,' as he did in chapter 5, verse 11. In the former passage he was chastising the Hebrew Christians for having become sluggish – dull of hearing. In this verse he is exhorting them to the way that this spiritual malady was not only to be cured, but avoided in the future. Only constant and unremitting diligence will serve to keep the believer sharp in mind and spirit. Faith is to be coupled with patience. Indeed, true faith cannot be found apart from patience, for it is that which lays hold of unseen things. The words of Delitzsch on this verse are incomparable – he speaks of diligent faith as that which "awaits with courage the long delaying future."

This long delayed future is of shorter duration than that which was faced by the patriarchs, and the 'great cloud of witnesses' of which the author will speak later on. Yet their steadfast faith not only under opposition, but more importantly under delay, serves as both an example and a motivation for us to remain diligent. Having put the hand to the plow, the true believer not only cannot, but must not, look back.

Week 6: The Anchor of the Soul**Text Reading: Hebrews 6:13 - 20**

*"The firm grip of the anchor's teeth
holds the ship fast."
(Virgil, Aeneid)*

"I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help me God." We have heard this oath uttered countless times on television programs (think 'Perry Mason' for the older readers; 'Law and Order' for the younger) and in movies. It is, however, only the Hollywood version of the classic law court oath used in the United States from the time they were just the British colonies. Pennsylvania's oath, still in use, gives an example of why Hollywood has abridged the more time-honored versions:

"You do swear by Almighty God, the Searcher of all hearts, that the evidence you shall give this court [and Jury] in this issue now being tried shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth and as you shall answer to God on the last great day."

It may seem amazing that modern American courts would still use such archaic, and *religious*, language in their proceedings, but not to worry! In 1961 our esteemed protector against the encroachment of all things religious, the Supreme Court, upheld the right of any conscientious objector to refuse to take the oath on the basis of personal religious belief (or unbelief). Still, the oath is given every day in courts all across the country, and in forms not all that different from the one quoted above. One bailiff, commenting on the effect such oath-taking seems to have on witnesses, said "It may make witnesses think before they go up there, 'Hey, maybe I should tell the truth.'" What a concept – *Hey, maybe I should tell the truth!*

Oaths are inextricably bound to the concept of 'telling the truth,' but in a somewhat convoluted way. If the truth be told, oaths would not be necessary if people just told the truth all the time. Certainly this is the gist of our Lord's

injunction to His disciples to “*let your yes be yes, and your no be no, for anything else is of the evil one.*” So central was truth-telling thought to be to the Christian faith, that the Anabaptists of the Reformation era made the abjuring of oaths a stone in their theological foundation. The Schleithem Confession, formulated by the persecuted sect in 1527, states the following concerning a Christian’s taking of oaths,

The oath is a confirmation among those who are quarreling or making promises. In the Law it is commanded to be performed in God's Name, but only in truth, not falsely. Christ, who teaches the perfection of the Law, prohibits all swearing to His (followers), whether true or false - neither by heaven, nor by the earth, nor by Jerusalem, nor by our head - and that for the reason He shortly thereafter gives, For you are not able to make one hair white or black. So you see it is for this reason that all swearing is forbidden: we cannot fulfill that which we promise when we swear, for we cannot change (even) the very least thing on us.⁵⁷

One has to admit that the Anabaptists have a point (and the Supreme Court did admit this point in granting the conscientious objection ruling). Christians *are* supposed to tell the truth at all times and, therefore, the oath is at best superfluous. At worst, however, the taking of an oath seems to indicate that the truth might otherwise be withheld. This is where human nature comes in, human *fallen* nature, that is.

Consider this. The likelihood that a man will lie is indirectly proportional to the benefit gained – or the penalty avoided – by telling the truth. In a court of law the stakes can be very high, and so the likelihood of a witness or defendant lying is also very high. But a man who will tell a lie without the burden of an oath will not scruple to tell a lie *under* an oath! The only hope – and it is a slim hope at best – is that the invocation of another witness to the testimony of the witness or defendant will possibly impact the conscience of the would-be liar. Therein we find the very essence of the oath – not to impose religion upon a man but rather to remind the witness that the very foundation of all truth is in the

⁵⁷ *Schleithem Confession*; February 24, 1527; Article VII.

One who is Truth – God Almighty. The first century Jewish scholar and philosopher Philo stated unequivocally, “an oath is nothing else than to call God to bear witness in a disputed matter.”⁵⁸

The Anabaptists view was noble, but has been rejected by most Protestant theologians and denominations over the past five hundred years. This rejection of what seems to be a reasonable interpretation of the dominical command, ‘*Let your yes be yes, etc.*’ was based on two principles. The first is the knowledge of the human condition – both unregenerate and redeemed – and the residual sin that indwells all flesh. Without the invocation of the oath, it is reasoned, free reign will be given to lying, and there will be no publicly acknowledged threat or promise of ultimate judgment. The witness of God upon the social and judicial interaction of men will be effectively removed from men’s eyes, and the moral foundation of such interaction will be taken away as well. It is one thing to agree with the apostle Paul that “*there is no fear of God before their eyes*” and it is quite another to therefore cease to remind them of such fear.

The second reason for which the Anabaptist view was rejected is more subtle, and more to the point of a *believer’s* testimony. The Anabaptist viewed the oath as evil in that it bears the presupposition of an inclination toward the lie. But when a believer invokes the name of God it ought not to be because of an inclination to lie, but rather because of an intention to tell the truth. Thus the Christian – aware of the sin which indwells him and tempts him to lie – proclaims by means of the oath his fear of God and his underlying intention to tell the truth. The oath then becomes a witness of its own sort – a witness to the invisible presence of the Author of Truth, the One who searches men’s hearts and gives to each according to what He finds there. It is a declaration that truth is of the nature of God and, therefore, of the nature of those who have been reborn. The believer, in pronouncing the ‘so help me God’ to his testimony, is far

⁵⁸ Quoted in Lane; p. 152.

from necessarily practicing evil as the Anabaptist maintained. He is, in fact, imitating his God who, *“when He could swear by no one higher, swore by Himself...”*

“For, when God promised to Abraham, since He had no one higher by which to swear, He swore by Himself saying, ‘I will surely bless you, and multiplying I will multiply you.’”
(6:13-14)

Verse 13, and what immediately follows concerning the patriarch Abraham, keys off of the phrase *“inherit the promises”* in verse 12. The Jewish mind returned to Abraham whenever the thoughts of inheritance and promise were brought to the forefront, as they are in the preceding verse and passage. The story of God’s dealings with Abraham were of second nature to the Jew, and no less to the Jewish convert to Christianity. The fact that Abram was for many years without an heir; the attempt to supply that need through Sara’s maidservant Hagar, and the persistent promise of God that Abraham’s heir would come from his loins and Sara’s womb. But the promise was not merely of a single son, but rather of a multitude of people – kings and nations. The promise was both temporal and redemptive – the inheritance of the land, and the Seed in whom all nations would be blessed. Indeed, the life of Israel and the religion of Judaism both found their ultimate conception in the divine promises to Abraham.

Abraham’s was a name calculated to provoke interest in any Jewish audience. For this reason, perhaps, *“there is in Hebrews a sustained interest in Abraham.”*⁵⁹ While the transition from the inheritance of the promises in verse 12, and the promises given to Abraham in verse 13 is quite seamless, yet we must not think that the author is simply throwing illustrations and examples into the air to no purpose. The subject matter is Abraham, but the theme of the current passage and its purpose have not differed from what has gone before. The theme is the faithfulness of God through Jesus Christ His Son, and the purpose is the steadfast endurance of the Hebrew Christians in their faith. No one in Jewish

⁵⁹ Lane; p. 150.

history better illustrated these two concepts than Abraham. The Hebrew Christians had already faced persecution for their faith, and continue to endure pressure to convert back to Judaism, pressure that could easily turn again to outright persecution. As the author will remind them several times, they *had need of endurance*. Thus he bids them consider the steadfast, patient faith of the patriarch, who “*never wavered in unbelief*” because of the faithfulness of God who promised.

The specific reference made here in verse 13 is from the Greek translation of the Old Testament – the Septuagint. The historical context is the offering up of Isaac according to the divine command, and the provision of the ram in place of Isaac.

But the Angel of the LORD called to him from heaven and said, “Abraham, Abraham!” So he said, “Here I am.” And He said, “Do not lay your hand on the lad, or do anything to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me.” Then Abraham lifted his eyes and looked, and there behind him was a ram caught in a thicket by its horns. So Abraham went and took the ram, and offered it up for a burnt offering instead of his son. And Abraham called the name of the place, The-LORD-Will-Provide; as it is said to this day, “In the Mount of the LORD it shall be provided.”
(Genesis 22:11-14)

The redemptive nature of this narrative is unmistakable – here is the context for that often misused and misunderstood name of God, *Jehovah Jireh* – ‘the Lord will provide.’ And the provision is, of course, that of a Substitute: for Abraham a ram; for mankind the Lamb of God. Yet it is not to this aspect of the historical event that the author of Hebrews turns, but rather God’s response to Abraham upon seeing the latter’s obedience and faith,

*Then the Angel of the LORD called to Abraham a second time out of heaven, and said: “**By Myself I have sworn**, says the LORD, because you have done this thing, and have not withheld your son, your only son – blessing I will bless you, and multiplying I will multiply your descendants as the stars of the heaven and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your descendants shall possess the gate of their enemies. In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.*
(Genesis 22:15-18)

Abraham is commonly revered as the ‘father of the faithful,’ and he is held up as the exemplar of true faith by the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans. When believers think of Abraham, therefore, they tend to think of ‘faith.’ But often we fail to realize just how comprehensively Abraham exhibited true faith. We live in an ecclesiological culture that emphasizes the act of ‘believing in Jesus’ as being the sum total of saving faith. It is widely taught in modern churches that the simple act of believing that Jesus is the Son of God is not only sufficient, but exhaustive, for the salvation of a sinner. With regard to ‘faith’ there is nothing more (what remains for the believer, it is taught, is *sanctification*, which is a work). Abraham is often quoted as the example, “*And Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness.*”

But is this the whole story concerning Abraham? Simply believing? Unfortunately for modern believers, the lesson of Abraham has been diluted to the point that the apostle Paul would hardly recognize. For the apostle, the patriarch represented the *fullness* of the life of faith, a fullness that included two concepts almost totally absent from modern teaching on the subject: the *obedience of faith* and the *endurance of faith*. The first phrase is used verbatim several times by Paul in his letter to the Romans, and the second is of the very essence of this exhortation to the Hebrews. To put the matter plainly, if we think that Abraham represents simply those who have believed in God through Jesus Christ, and leave out his obedience and his patient endurance, we have almost completely missed the meaning of his life.

To return to the historical context of the ‘promise’ referred to in Hebrews 6:13, we find that it was not at the beginning of Abraham’s spiritual journey with God, but actually rather near the end (the end, at least, of the unfolding of the covenantal promises). Abraham has traversed the walk of faith from being an old, childless man married to an old, barren woman; to usurping the divine prerogative in the conception and birth of Ishmael; to the gracious provision of Isaac; and now to the point of willingly sacrificing that promised son at the

command of Jehovah. This journey is what is meant by both of the phrases mentioned above: the *obedience* of faith and the *endurance* of faith. In consequence of Abraham's obedience and endurance, God strengthens the patriarch's faith by reiterating the promise of blessing and progeny. This time, however, he interposes with an oath, "*By Myself I swear...*"

This is not the first time God has testified to the veracity of His promises to Abraham. The first time, however, was not so explicit as this later one. The first occurred toward the beginning of Abraham's spiritual journey, when as yet he was childless and the heir of his household was a servant. God again came to Abraham and reiterated the promise with which He called the patriarch from his ancestral home. When Abraham questioned the nature and form of the promise, God cast a deep sleep upon him, and in a dark dream Jehovah established a blood covenant with Abraham – only with God alone as the surety. This is the meaning of the dream that Abraham saw in his sleep,

And it came to pass, when the sun went down and it was dark, that behold, there appeared a smoking oven and a burning torch that passed between those pieces. On the same day the LORD made a covenant with Abram... (Genesis 15:17-18)

The cutting of animals and placing them opposite each other, and the walking between the animals, was an ancient Middle Eastern custom for two men to confirm the validity and perpetuity of a covenant between them – the dead and severed animals representing the blood oath between the living men. The remarkable thing about Abraham's dream is that there was only one being that passed between the animals – the 'smoking oven,' the presence of God. God took upon Himself the blood oath of the Abrahamic covenant.

Abraham, however, still had much to learn and to endure. It would be many years before the promised son was born, and though he lived to a ripe age of 175, Abraham himself never did see the multitude of nations and the kings that were to descend from his loins. Nonetheless Abraham did not waver but kept believing through it all, and finally, after having obeyed God to the point of

almost killing Isaac, Abraham receives the firmest possible confirmation of the divine promise: *"God, having no one higher by which to swear, swore by Himself..."* God entered into an explicit, verbal oath on behalf of Abraham, and pledged His eternal honor to the enduring validity of the Abrahamic promises. *"The divine oath provides the guarantee that excludes doubt and affirms the abiding validity of the promise."*⁶⁰

Here again is the point at which the Anabaptists stumbled in their interpretation and prohibition of the oath. Certainly the fact that God took an oath does not in the least imply the possibility, let alone the intention, of God to lie. Rather the reason for the oath was affirmation of His eternal and unchangeable faithfulness, and the consequent comfort and strength that this affirmation gave to Abraham. God swore, because God fully intended to remain faithful to His promises to Abraham. Far from introducing doubt regarding truth, as the Anabaptists claimed the oath invariably does, God's oath was intended to remove all doubt. The believer's oath should be of the very same nature.

"And in this manner, having patiently endured, he received the promise." (6:15)

The author of Hebrews does not plan to stay long upon the topic of Abraham, mainly because Abraham is not yet his intended topic. His focus is still upon the endurance that the Hebrew Christians were to pursue and possess; Abraham is but an example. Thus verse 15 is a brief and summary statement that moves the reader back to the main point, and back to a focus upon his own endurance in the faith.

Nonetheless, even this short verse has caused its share of problems. This is because it seems to contradict something the author says regarding Abraham later on, in the 'Hall of Faith,' chapter 11. In that chapter, having spoken of the enduring faith of Abraham, and of Sarah, the author then writes,

⁶⁰ Lane; p. 151.

*These all died in faith, **not having received the promises**, but having seen them afar off were assured of them, embraced them and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on the earth.* (Hebrews 11:13)

Some have sought to remedy this apparent contradiction by seeing the earlier 'promise' - Hebrews 6:15 - as having been fulfilled through the birth of Isaac. The obvious problem with this 'solution' is that the context of Hebrews 6:13-15 is the *offering* of Isaac, clearly already born! The liberal choice, of course, is simply to accept that the author contradicted himself; but this is not a choice that one would make and continue to find anything worth reading, much less studying, in the book of Hebrews. We will opt for another explanation, one that will be more fully developed when we (DV) reach chapters 11 and 12.

The first clue to the answer is in the opening clause of Hebrews 11:13, "*These all died in faith...*" What this means is that the patriarchs had not received the promise *at the point of their death*. The author goes on in chapter 11, verse 13 to elaborate on the meaning of this fact, telling us that the ancient faithful "*confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on earth.*" But not having received the promises at the time of their death is not the same as not having received the promises at all. Jesus himself indicates that Abraham's living hope extended beyond the grave,

Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad.

(John 8:56)

The endurance of which the author of Hebrews speaks, and persistently exhorts his readers to pursue, is an endurance which encompasses the entirety of life on this earth, and holds no infallible hope of receiving the promises before departing this life and world. In this Abraham is the example *par excellence*, and takes perhaps the first seat of honor in the "*great cloud of witnesses*" of which the author writes in chapter 12. There is no contradiction, therefore, between Abraham's not having received the promises *in this life*, and his having ultimately received them in the city to which his pilgrimage directed him.

"For men swear by that which is greater than themselves, and to them every argument is brought to an end with the giving of an oath as confirmation." (6:16)

The writer shows us in verse 16 that his immediate focus is not the patriarch Abraham, but rather the oath that God had given to him. He digresses slightly to remind his readers of the nature of an oath, and the influence it has upon matters of disagreement between men. There are two things to note with regard to the author's line of reasoning. First, he is speaking ideally – he is not so naïve to think that an oath removes all forms of distrust, or of lying. Nonetheless, it is the primary purpose of an oath to settle a dispute by calling upon a higher power or authority to bear witness, and to return judgment, upon the truthfulness of what is being said. No doubt the author lived in a day not so heavily populated by lawyers! There have been eras in the history of mankind – even in our own not-so-distant past – in which a man's word was truly his bond, and the oath served only to solidify a basic level of trust which already existed. Our current world is not such a time as this, and the oath is now either replaced or augmented by the contract, the signature, the collateral, and the lawyer.

The second thing to note about the author's comments is that it is a form of the classic *ab minor ad major* – from the lesser to the greater – form of argument. Choosing the ideal situation between men, that in which an oath is sufficient to settle an argument, the author will then move to the even greater marvel – that God should validate His own immutable word with an oath. Thus the writer moves from the commonplace to the gracious, and in doing so offers a great deal of comfort to all who have placed their eternal souls in the care of God through Jesus Christ.

"In the same way, God, wishing to make known to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed an oath." (6:17)

The author moves with the same ease as the apostle Paul, from the patriarch Abraham to the disciples of Jesus Christ. The oath of which he speaks earlier was given to Abraham and regarded his heirs, therefore the oath itself

stands not only for Abraham, but also for those heirs. In this verse, however, the comfort that is derived from the oath now takes center stage. We see here quite clearly that the proper purpose of an oath – that purpose for which God Himself takes an oath – is not to introduce the possibility of the lie, but to solidify the expectation of truth. God's purpose for giving Abraham, and his heirs, the oath founded upon His own name, was to settle him and them forever in the unchangeableness of His purpose. The comment of Delitzsch on this verse is sublime, "[God] pledges the eternity of His being for the inviolability of His promise."⁶¹

This immutability of purpose is a recurring theme in Scripture, and it represents one of those fundamental attributes of God by which we come to have a knowledge of His eternal nature. In other words, God is not One whose plans and purposes ebb and flow as circumstances change. The 'open theist' ought to have this verse (and many others) plastered as frontlets between his eyes! Paul makes it abundantly clear that God seeks no other input into His purposes and plans than His own will and wisdom, and thus has no need to alter that which He determines, and has determined, from eternity past,

*...having made known to us the mystery of His will, according to His good pleasure which He purposed in Himself, that in the dispensation of the fullness of the times He might gather together in one all things in Christ, both which are in heaven and which are on earth – in Him. In Him also we have obtained an inheritance, being predestined according to the purpose of Him who works all things according to the **counsel** of His will...*
(Ephesians 1:9-11)

The word translated 'counsel' in Ephesians 1:11 is the same as is translated 'purpose' in Hebrews 6:17. It represents the eternal determinative purpose or counsel of the Godhead, by which all things are sovereignly and wisely directed in their paths. This is predestination, plain and simple; but that is not the emphasis of the author of Hebrews here. Instead he is focused on one particular aspect of the divine purpose – that which pertained to the promise given to

⁶¹ Delitzsch; p. 312.

Abraham, the fulfillment of which is found in God's Son, Abraham's Seed, Jesus Christ. Pink writes, "Still more specially the 'counsel' of God in Heb. 6:17 concerns the holy and wise purpose of His will to give His Son Jesus Christ to be of the seed of Abraham for the salvation of all the elect."⁶² The author leaves this unsaid, at least explicitly, in verse 17; but it will become immediately apparent that he has Jesus in mind even here.

To return to God's purpose, however, in interposing the oath. Perhaps we do not realize how remarkable a thing it is that God should commit Himself in this way – to take an oath, to swear by His name – when His mere word is sufficient to remove all doubt and unbelief. Delitzsch is certainly correct when he writes that God's word is the same as God's oath, and so the interposition of a distinct oath is a remarkable addendum to God's inviolable word,

Men, when mistrusted, have recourse to the oath to gain credence for themselves; but God when simply speaking is worthy of belief, so that His words are in themselves, by reason of their own stability, nothing different from an oath.⁶³

The wonder of God's having sworn by His name, when His mere word ought to be enough to settle forever the heart of man, is not lost on the author of Hebrews. He addresses this phenomenon in the very next verse,

"In order that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we have strong encouragement, who have taken hold of the hope set before us." (6:18)

This has been a perennially difficult verse for believers due to the fact that the author states that there are 'two' things here which are unchangeable and in which God cannot lie. He has been speaking about the divine *oath* for several verses, but what is the *other* unchangeable thing? Lane is probably closest to the correct answer when he states, "Although the two items remain unspecified in

⁶² Pink; p. 349.

⁶³ Delitzsch; p. 312.

the text, the reference is almost certainly to the promise of God and his oath.”⁶⁴ This would fit well with what was said in verse 13, “God, *having promised* to Abraham...*swore* by Himself.” It boils down, however, simply to two aspects of one transcendent concept – the *word* of God. Be it the word of promise, or the word of oath, it is the immutable word of God and it cannot be changed any more than God can be changed. It is hard to overstate the importance of this concept for the stability of a believer’s faith, a point the author will soon make.

Let us consider for a moment, however, what God has disclosed to man concerning His nature and the immutability of His will and word. This divine attribute did not escape the attention of the mercenary prophet Balaam, who in all other respects was not someone to emulate. Asked to curse the children of Israel, and offered money for the same, Balaam replied to Balak,

*God is not a man, that He should lie,
Nor a son of man, that He should repent.
Has He said, and will He not do?
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?* (Numbers 23:19)

The true prophet Samuel knew the same God, and rebuked King Saul for thinking that the Divine One might be persuaded to change His mind,

So Samuel said to him, “The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today, and has given it to a neighbor of yours, who is better than you. And also the Strength of Israel will not lie nor relent. For He is not a man, that He should relent.”
(I Samuel 15:28-29)

No doubt this self-disclosure of God presents theological, ethical, and practical challenges for man, not the least of which is the nature and efficacy of prayer. Yet our own confusion and ignorance cannot erase the fact that God has revealed Himself as One who does not change His mind, and it is by this self-revealed attribute that the holy writers of Scripture know Him and present Him to us. For Balak and for Saul this unchangeableness of purpose was by no means

⁶⁴ Lane; p. 152.

a source of comfort, for they were both out of His way and under His wrath. For believers, however, such as the Hebrew Christians, the immutability of the divine mind is a source of 'strong encouragement.' The reason for this should be obvious, for the hope that any believer has is just the same hope as the patriarch Abraham had – eternal salvation through the promised Seed. This hope has been set before us in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, and those who have through faith laid hold on this hope should be greatly encouraged to know that God has both promised and sworn, and *He cannot lie*. A. W. Pink offers an excellent summary of this matter,

For the stay of our hearts and the full assurance of our faith, God has graciously given to us an irrevocable deed of settlement, namely, His promise, followed by His oath, whereby the whole inheritance is infallibly secured unto every heir of promise.⁶⁵

"This [hope] we have as an anchor for the soul, one both sure and steadfast and which passes through the veil." (6;19)

The imagery here is clearly (at least for any Jewish reader) that of the tabernacle and Temple – of the veil that barred access between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies, through which only the High Priest could pass and that only once per year. Other meanings that have been given to the metaphor of the veil, such as it representing the 'veil of death,' are simply Gentile accretions to what is a fundamental word picture not only in Scripture, but in the whole divine plan and history of redemption.

What *is* unique about this verse, however, is the mixture of the biblical metaphor with the nautical metaphor of the anchor. Without intending to be facetious, it is hard to imagine the High Priest casting a large metal anchor at the veil of the Temple. What is more, the mental picture that the author of Hebrews draws is that of an anchor being thrown into the heavens, passing into the very

⁶⁵ Pink; p. 353.

presence of God. Clearly we ought not take the particulars of this metaphor too literally!

The metaphor of the anchor, while uncommon to Scripture, was nonetheless very common to the novels and philosophical treatises of antiquity. The Roman author Virgil wrote, “the firm grip of the anchor’s teeth holds the ships fast,” and this was as much a commentary on the stability of a man’s life as it was a nautical fact for mariners. “In Greek literature the metaphor was used constantly to evoke the notion of stability provided by adherence to virtue, and especially to hope.”⁶⁶ It is for that purpose that the author, perhaps trained himself in Greek literature, employs the metaphor here.

Anchors are used to hold a ship in place and to keep it from drifting. Yet anchors can fail – they can break, or the strength of the storm and current can overwhelm the anchor and the ship be lost all the same. Therefore the author intensifies the metaphor, strengthening it so that no one will confuse his meaning or mistake the assurance that he offers here, for the anchor of the believer’s soul is *‘both sure and steadfast’* and is one that has already set down firmly at the ultimate destination – *passing within the veil*. This anchor, to explain and expound the metaphor, is the One who has already passed through the veil, the One who the author represents as *‘seated at the right hand of Majesty’* and has having entered into the presence of God as the ultimate High Priest. This One, of course, is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Seed of Abraham who is both the fulfillment of the divine promises to Abraham, and the promise itself.

Believers should meditate on the phrase *“anchor of the soul”* in verse 19. It indicates that the demeanor of the believer, especially as he or she matures, ought to take on a steadiness and stability that resists being tossed about in life as an anchorless ship is upon the ocean. “As a ship is held fast when at anchor,

⁶⁶ Lane; p. 153.

the life of the Christian is secured by hope that binds that life to Christ, who has entered the heavenly sanctuary."⁶⁷

"...where as a Forerunner on our behalf, Jesus has entered, having become a high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek." (6:20)

With the smoothest of transitions, the author prepares to return to the main topic of this section of the book/sermon – Melchizedek. Like the High Priest, who annually bore the tribes of Israel upon his breastplate when he entered the Holy of Holies, so High Priest Jesus has borne our names upon His breast when He entered into the holy presence of His Father. The difference, of course, is in the nature of both the Priest and the priesthood. Aaron and his descendents entered beyond the veil only to come back out again, and to do it again year after year. The incompleteness of this form of atonement will become a major theme to the author of Hebrews as he progresses through the book.

Jesus, however, is of a different class (remember the taxonomy?) of priesthood, a perpetual and eternal priesthood – *a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek*. Concerning this Melchizedek the author has much to say, and will return to that them with the opening verse of chapter 7.

⁶⁷ Lane; p. 153.

Week 7: The Mysterious Melchizedek**Text Reading: Hebrews 7:1 – 4**

*“Melchizedek appears like a meteor in the sky –
suddenly, unexpectedly, mysteriously –
and then as suddenly disappears.”*
(Alfred Edersheim)

The author of Hebrews proceeds here in the opening verses of chapter 7, with a hermeneutical methodology that has given scholars – *conservative* scholars – fits for millennia. It is called the ‘allegorical’ method of interpretation, and it has been so frequently used to justify flights of imaginative fancy that many evangelical commentators and theologians simply dismiss it altogether as a valid mode of interpreting Scripture. In the late second century, the Alexandrian theologian Origen employed this method of biblical interpretation to excess – believing that every passage of Scripture contained a ‘deeper’ and truer meaning that had to be uncovered by the scholar. His exegesis of Scripture was notorious for its utter disconnect from the actual written word, and though it was popular with many in that day, never found a place within the mainstream of Christian biblical interpretation.

During the Reformation era Martin Luther was quite prone to the allegorical interpretive methodology and, like Origen, often developed wild and unbelievable meanings from plain historical texts. Luther once preached an entire sermon on the allegorical significance of the Three Wise Men (never mind that there were undoubtedly more than three magi present!) The main problem with the allegorical method of interpretation is that the *meaning* being assigned to the text is not *prima facie* from the text itself – it is imposed upon the text by the interpreter. Thus it is inherently subjective in nature, not having an objective connection with the actual words utilized by the biblical author. In other words, it can quite often be nothing more than the product of an overworked imagination on the part of the expositor. Conservative scholars such as John

Calvin were very wary of allegorical interpretations, even to the point of difficulty when they encountered this type of exegesis *in the Scriptures themselves*.



Bernard Ramm (1916-92)

hermeneutics, offers this definition, “*Allegorical interpretation* is the interpretation of a document whereby something *foreign, peculiar, or hidden* is introduced into the meaning of the text giving it a proposed deeper or real meaning.”⁶⁸ Henry Virkler adds, “allegory intertwines the story and its meaning.”⁶⁹ In an allegory, an event that is viewed as

historical is ‘reinterpreted’ with a meaning entirely different from what the original participants would have understood the event to have meant. One can easily see that there is but a fine line between the allegorical method of interpretation and the all-too-common practice of *eisegesis* – ‘reading in to the text.’

Given the many pitfalls and dangers of allegorical interpretation, why not simply reject the method outright, and read biblical history in its pure, literal form? Well, one good reason is that this is not the way biblical history was intended to be read! God’s revelation of His eternal redemptive plan has been given in a ‘living historical’ form, meaning that the history of the antediluvians, the patriarchs, and the nation of Israel was, in large measure, *typical*. In recording the events of ancient times, the Holy Spirit was not merely passing down historical narrative, but rather revealing divine truth *through* historical narrative. Simply put, there *is* a hidden or deeper meaning in much (if not all) of the historical narratives of the Old Testament.

⁶⁸ Ramm, Bernard; Protestant Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker; 1970); p. 223.

⁶⁹ Virkler, Henry A.; Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation (Grand Rapids: Baker; 1981); p. 173.

Take the famous narrative of the life of Joseph, for instance. Though the connection is not explicitly made within the Bible itself, it is hard to miss the typological similarity between Joseph's life and the life of Jesus Christ: beloved of his father, but hated by his brothers; 'killed' and left for dead; 'risen' and exalted to the right hand of power, with gracious forgiveness for those who had done him the most harm. Is this allegorical interpretation? It certainly is. Is it *eisegesis*? Probably not. If we were to reject allegorical interpretation wholesale, we would inevitably miss a great deal of the typological meaning of the history of the biblical culture.

A second reason why allegorical interpretation should not be entirely rejected is that the writers of Scripture themselves employ the method. We see that it is used here in Hebrews chapter 7, but we are also reminded that the Book of Hebrews was slow of acceptance into the New Testament canon. Nonetheless, we can turn to another New Testament book the acceptance of which was both early and universal, and find the apostle Paul using this very same hermeneutical approach. Paul's treatment of the history of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar found in his epistle to the Galatians, is a classic example of allegorical interpretation. Indeed, the apostle himself explicitly calls his exposition 'allegorical,'

*For it is written that Abraham had two sons, one by the bondwoman and one by the free woman. But the son by the bondwoman was born according to the flesh, and the son by the free woman through the promise. **This is allegorically speaking,** for these women are two covenants: one proceeding from Mount Sinai bearing children who are to be slaves; she is Hagar. Now this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.* (Galatians 4:22-26)

Another important passage in this regard is from Paul's first letter to the Corinthian church. Paul recounts briefly the historical experiences of the children of Israel in the wilderness, and then allegorically connects those historical events with the present (and future) generation of Christians.

Now all these things happened to them as examples, and they were written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the ages have come. (I Corinthians 10:11)

We must conclude that the allegorical method of biblical interpretation, while subject to misuse, is nonetheless a valid and necessary hermeneutic if we are to more fully understand divine revelation. The methodology, because of its susceptibility to subjective imagination and fancy, requires earnest care in its use. There are many cautionary rules offered by teachers of hermeneutics, but the following two are perhaps the most important and universal.

1. First, no allegorical interpretation of an event, person, or activity from the Old Testament can contradict a plainly presented doctrinal principle from either testament. Allegorical interpretations, if they are to be considered valid, must conform and augment clear, non-allegorical biblical teaching.
2. Second, the modern exegete is on safest ground when he can find some *biblical* warrant for an allegorical interpretation of a historical event, person, or activity.

The second of these principles is most clearly illustrated by the author of Hebrews here in our focus passage, chapter 7. The historical narrative of the person and activity of the man called Melchizedek is quite brief – occurring only in Genesis chapter 13. Edersheim's quote is very appropriate to his character and role in Scripture, "Melchizedek appears like a meteor in the sky – suddenly, unexpectedly, mysteriously – and then as suddenly disappears."⁷⁰ Since we already know that the book of Hebrews was looked upon with some skepticism by the early church, we have some warrant to ask by what right does the author of this letter/sermon *allegorize* someone who shows up so briefly in the biblical history. The answer: by right of the prophecy of Psalm 110,

⁷⁰ Edersheim, Alfred; Bible History: Old Testament (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson; 1995); p. 60.

*The LORD has sworn
And will not relent,
"You are a priest forever
According to the order of Melchizedek."* (Psalm 110:54)

This prophetic passage, clearly messianic in import, brings this obscure ancient character into view again in a new light. David's prophetic words regarding his Greater Son thrust Melchizedek back into the spotlight after an absence of over 1,000 years. And this one verse from the Psalms means that there was more to the historical interchange between the patriarch Abram and the priest-king Melchizedek than first meets the eye in Genesis 13. Another 1,000 years would pass, however, until the Holy Spirit would inspire the author of Hebrews to explain – allegorically – just what that deeper meaning was.

"For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all..." (7:1)

With this opening verse of chapter 7 the author reaches back to chapter 5, verses 9-11,

And having been perfected, He became the author of eternal salvation to all who obey Him, called by God as High Priest "according to the order of Melchizedek," of whom we have much to say, and hard to explain, since you have become dull of hearing.

We have maintained throughout this study that the author was very familiar with his audience, and was probably one of the men who taught them when they were young in the Lord. His awareness of where they ought to be in regard to their knowledge and understanding would seem to demand a personal knowledge of the recipients of the letter, and even more, a personal involvement in their spiritual development. Be that as it may, it does seem clear that with this developing teaching on the person and significance of Melchizedek, the author is entering into new territory as far as these Hebrew Christians are concerned. He is about to lay a slab of spiritual beef in front of them, a meal that he has not served to them before.

What the author is about to say about this Melchizedek is all the more significant and intriguing in that he is definitely providing *new revelation* here. Much of what he has written up to this point simply corroborates the teaching of the Old Testament and of the apostolic writings of the New Testament. He has introduced no new theological or doctrinal tenet, but simply reiterated and reinforced the *faith once delivered unto the saints*. But what he is about to write regarding Melchizedek is *new*, and is either divine revelation or personal opinion – depending on one's view of inspiration!

The author begins with the historical data recorded in the Old Testament. The reference passage is found in Genesis chapter 14, and is worth re-reading in order to orient ourselves within the historical context,

*Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said:
"Blessed be Abram of God Most High,
Possessor of heaven and earth; And blessed be God Most High,
Who has delivered your enemies into your hand."
And he gave him a tithe of all.* (Genesis 14:18-20)

Abram had just returned from fighting and defeating five kings who had recently campaigned in the area of Sodom and Gomorrah and who had carried off Abram's nephew Lot among the hostages. The original battle did not involve Abram – it was four kings against five. There is some significance in the fact that Abram – a sojourner in the land yet the putative owner of it all by reason of divine promise – did not involve himself in the political and military affairs of his neighbors, *until they impacted him directly*. At that point the servant of God, strengthened by the power of God, soundly defeats the four kings who had just defeated the five. An underlying theme of the historical narrative, therefore, is the conflict and ultimate victory of God's kingdom against the kingdoms of man.

But that is not the issue for the author of Hebrews. Yet in order to understand his subsequent allegorical interpretation of the historical narrative, it

is important to be very familiar with that narrative. Therefore we should also note that immediately after Abram's encounter with Melchizedek, he has a remarkably different interchange with a remarkably different character. The King of Sodom comes out to meet Abram, to congratulate him on his recent victory, and to offer him the prize money. Abram, who just gave a tenth of all his booty to Melchizedek, would not accept so much as a gold ring or a silver coin from the King of Sodom. Without doubt the day in which Abram met Melchizedek was quite full of events, but the Holy Spirit has chosen to juxtapose two opposite men, and two opposite encounters: Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God, and the king of a city soon to be destroyed by that God. We could do a little allegorizing of our own with that picture!

But let us rather return to Hebrews, and to the inspired allegory now developed by the author of that letter. The salient points that he draws from the Old Testament narrative are first, that Melchizedek was both a *priest* to the Most High God and a *king* among the kings of the land: the King of Salem. The second important point from the historical narrative contains two sub-points: Melchizedek *blessed* Abram, and Abram *tithed* to Melchizedek. Given the importance of Abram in the developing redemptive story of Genesis, it is quite impressive to find another man to whom Abram pays so much deference and honor. The author of Hebrews now begins to fill in some of the historical blanks regarding this mercurial Melchizedek.

"...first being translated 'king of righteousness' and then also king of Salem, meaning 'king of peace'..."
(7:2)

The author begins simply by translating Melchizedek's name and rank for the Hebrew Christians – telling them something they probably already knew from their own native tongue. 'Melchizedek' is a compound name, or possibly a title and not a personal name (this was very common with ancient kings). It is a combination of the Hebrew *malek* (מלך), meaning 'king,' and *tsadek* (צדק),

meaning 'righteousness.' This may not have been the king's actual name, but perhaps was a title of honor given to him as a 'righteous king.' On the other hand, it was also not uncommon for proper names to be derived from conjunctions just like this one. But the fact that this sort of a name was so very common as a royal title led to the development of some interesting traditions within Jewish rabbinic teaching concerning the identity of the king of Salem.

King of 'Salem' is the anglicized form of King of *Shalōm* which means, of course, king of *peace*. Thus far all the author has done is translate the Hebrew parts of Melchizedek's name and rank into the common vernacular of the Hebrew Christians which was, at that time, Greek. But he has, in fact, done more than that – and this is where biblical meaning can be lost if an allegorical approach is not taken. The author is highlighting two usually opposite things: *righteousness* and *peace*. Melchizedek was surrounded by unrighteousness in the form of the nine warring kings, and most pointedly by the presence of the king of Sodom; yet he himself was a righteous king and priest to a righteous God. One cannot picture Melchizedek bringing bread and wine, and divine blessing, to the four kings who had just recently been victorious over the five kings. Yet he does this for Abram. This is because Abram, though he has just fought and subdued five kings, was a man of *peace*. More importantly, Abram was the beneficiary of the covenant of peace inaugurated by the very same God that Melchizedek served as priest. Righteousness and Peace come together in this man, Melchizedek King of Salem; and they come together to bless the man Abram. Perhaps it is anachronistic to suppose, but one can easily imagine a banner flying over Abram's victorious camp that day, with Psalm 85:10 emblazoned upon it,

*Mercy and truth have met together;
Righteousness and peace have kissed.*

At this point the author of Hebrews moves from the text of biblical history to the interpretation of allegory.

"...without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually." (7:3)

At this point – the beginning of the allegorical interpretation – commentaries fly off in a multitude of different directions, trying to comprehend what the author is attempting to say. Did he believe that Melchizedek was a *theophany* – a pre-incarnate manifestation of the Son of God? Did he believe that Melchizedek's priesthood was perpetual, and perhaps even then still in force? In a word, who in the world (or out of it) did the author of Hebrews think Melchizedek was?

There is a very good possibility that the writer of Hebrews, a Jewish convert himself, would have been very familiar with the traditional view or views concerning the identity of Melchizedek. The most common, and to us Gentiles the most remarkable, of these views was that Melchizedek was not the man's proper name, for that name was *Shem*. Yes, Shem; as in Noah's son. This is not as outlandish as it may seem, for a comparison of the life-spans of the post-diluvian patriarchs will show that even Noah was still alive during the early years of Abram, when he lived in Ur. The origin of this traditional understanding of the identity of Melchizedek is obscure, but it probably arose simply from the fact that whoever this man was, he was worthy of the respect and even reverence of the patriarch Abraham – he *must* have been some great personage of antiquity. From Abraham one has to go all the way back to Shem to find the most recent recipient of divine blessing, *ergo* Melchizedek is Shem. Listen to this interesting exchange from the Talmud on the topic of the righteous man's handling of his beasts,

The same moral (i.e., the proper treatment of one's animals) taught in this legend: 'Abraham said to Melchizedek, 'How is it you came forth safely from the ark?' 'By means of the charity we practiced there.' 'But what charity was there for you to practice? Were there any poor in the ark? Only Noah and his sons

were there, so to whom could you have been charitable?' 'To the animals, beasts, and birds. We did not sleep but gave each one food throughout the night.'⁷¹

Evangelical scholars from the Reformation to the present have uniformly rejected this traditional Jewish interpretation, and even the more modern edition of the Talmud just quoted refers to the interchange between Abraham and Melchizedek as 'legend.' But the rejection of one identification does not lead to the establishment of another, and the identity of Melchizedek is still just as shrouded in mystery as it was in the days of the Hebrew Christians. The author of the book of Hebrews speaks of Melchizedek as *apator* (a)pa/twr), 'without father,' *amātor* (a)mh/twr), 'without mother,' and *agenealogatos* (a)genealo/ghtoj), 'without genealogy.' These terms can be interpreted, and have been interpreted, in several different ways. If they are taken literally, then it is apparent that the author of Hebrews considered Melchizedek to be an angelic being of some sort, possibly a theophany. This view would be supported by Melchizedek's sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance from the biblical narrative. The blessing that he gives to Abram, and the tithed he receives would support a contention that he was, in fact, divine or at least angelic. The content of the blessing, "*blessed be God Most High*," need not be taken as an argument against the theophany view, for it would not be unbiblical for God the Son to bless God the Father.

This view, however, has generally been rejected among evangelical scholars due to the fact that the historical narrative itself refers to Melchizedek as a *priest* of God Most High. This would be, to say the least, a very unique way of speaking about the pre-incarnate second Person of the Godhead. Furthermore, and to the point of the exegesis done by the author of Hebrews, it is the fact that Melchizedek was a priest that will figure most importantly in his ongoing treatise on the man and his typological relationship to Jesus Christ. All that the

⁷¹ Cohen, A.; Everyman's Talmud; p. 236.

author has written would seem tautological if the one to whom he compares Jesus Christ *was* Jesus Christ!

Another way of interpreting the terms used in verse 3 is along cultic lines. As a priest, Melchizedek did not belong to any known priestly family; he did not descend from priests (as far as the biblical record shows) nor were any of his kinsmen (if he had any) mentioned as priests. As the Levitical heritage could be passed to a man either from his father or from his mother, this interpretive view simply sees the third term, '*without genealogy*' as summarizing the first two, '*without father, without mother.*' This view is not as 'literal' as the former, but it does fit in very well with the line of argument that the author of Hebrews develops through the rest of chapter 7. Indeed, he will shortly bring Levi into the picture, as having honored Melchizedek through the paying of tithes while still in Abraham's loins. On the face of it, therefore, this seems to be the best way to interpret the 'without' terms in verse 3.

But there is a problem – the *perpetuity* of Melchizedek's priesthood: "*he remains a priest continually.*" While it is significant that the author does not use the word 'eternally,' the significance of this fact is not readily apparent! How is it that Melchizedek remains a priest continually if he really was a man? This perpetuity is obviously tied somehow to the fact that he was '*made like the Son of God*' but that is just another difficult phrase to interpret. This is where the practice and principles of an allegorical hermeneutic come to the rescue.

Allegories are somewhat like parables; they are 'extended parables' and often, as opposed to parables, derive their content from real historical people and real historical events. Their similarity to parables does, however, provide us with some hermeneutical principles to follow. First, let us reconsider the brief definition of the allegory provided earlier: "allegory intertwines the story and its meaning." This principle teaches us not to try to make too rigid a connection between what the author is saying vis-à-vis his allegorical interpretation and what he is saying regarding the historical event being interpreted. In other

words, when the author speaks of Melchizedek in verse 3, he is speaking allegorically and interpretively, not historically. He has moved from the historical person Melchizedek to the typological significance of that historical person, on his way to the connection to be made between Melchizedek and Jesus Christ, the "*high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.*"

Even though the author is engaging in allegory, it is highly unlikely that he viewed Melchizedek as anything other than a real man, a real king, and a real priest who ministered to and blessed the patriarch Abraham several millennia before. Another fundamental principle of sound allegorical interpretation is that it does not mutilate or abrogate the historical events upon which it is based. It is the *history* that has *allegorical meaning*; dispose of the history and you dispose of its meaning. This places allegory in an entirely different category from myth and legend, in spite of modern liberal theologians' attempts to lump them all together. But the author of Hebrews was no liberal, and he returns to the historical event involving Abram and Melchizedek in the next verse.

"Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils." (7:4)

The first thing we can say about this verse is that the author is remaining true to form. Whenever he desires to lift up someone, he does not do it by denigrating someone else. His ultimate goal is to exalt Jesus Christ. This he does by first honoring the *patriarch* Abraham, then speaking of a man *greater than* even him, and finally showing that Jesus Christ is far greater even than Melchizedek. It does not serve the author's purpose to raise up Jesus by lowering Abraham, or Moses, or Aaron, or Melchizedek. Let them be as highly esteemed as they deserve, Jesus still outshines them one and all.

So far from denigrating Melchizedek, the writer bids us *consider* his greatness. So let us do just that. We do not have much to work with, however, except the same material available to the author – he was great enough that even

the patriarch Abraham paid him a tenth of the spoils. Is there any reasonable *conjecture*, however, as to who this great man might have been? If we are to *consider* him, are we off base if we try to consider just who he might have been?

We will stop short of identifying him by any other name than Melchizedek. That he may have been Shem is the purest of conjecture and is without any warrant beyond Jewish tradition (not the most reliable of sources, either!). But let us conclude this particular passage by *considering* this great man Melchizedek.

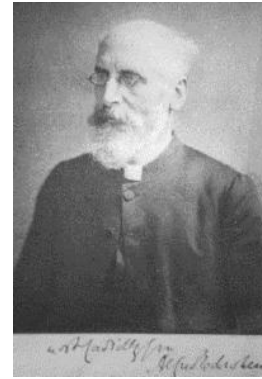
Charles Spurgeon was by all accounts a conservative theologian and biblical exegete, and was not given to Jewish traditions. In his sermon on Hebrews 7:2, Spurgeon sets us off in a good direction in our consideration of Melchizedek. Speaking of the fact that Melchizedek was a "*priest to the Most High God*," Spurgeon writes, "he was one who worshipped God after the primitive fashion, a believer in God such as Job was in the land of Uz, one of the world's gray fathers who had kept faithful to the Most High God."⁷² Spurgeon makes a very important point here, and one that fits in very well with the logical flow of the letter to the Hebrews. God has dealt 'in many parts and portions' in the past, and we can read of the different dispensations and covenants under which man was related to God in His sovereign rule and redemptive grace. Melchizedek was a man of the Noaic Covenant; Abraham was the progenitor of the next, the Abrahamic Covenant. Thus the history of the interchange between Abram and Melchizedek is the history of the transition from one covenant to another, not unlike the transition from the Abrahamic to the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

Melchizedek was not, however, *just* a ancient worshipper of the class of Job. Job was indeed a righteous man, a patriarch and a family priest; but Melchizedek was the 'king of righteousness' and evidently his priestly function found scope well beyond the limits of his own family. Furthermore, Melchizedek was so great a man in his day that *even the patriarch Abraham*

⁷² Spurgeon, Charles Haddon; Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit; Volume 30/1884; p. 121.

honored him and readily acknowledged his peculiar relationship vis-à-vis man and God. In other words, Spurgeon sets us in a good direction, but falls far short of fully 'considering' Melchizedek.

Another 19th century Christian scholar takes us further along the path. His name was Alfred Edersheim, and he is significant in this regard in the fact that he was born and raised *Jewish*, converting to Christianity when he was college age. Perhaps because of his Jewish heritage, Edersheim has by far the most thorough and interesting analysis of the identity of Melchizedek of any evangelical theologian or commentator of the past five centuries. His analysis, to be sure, is not altogether free of the ancient Jewish view linking Melchizedek to Shem, but Edersheim holds back from making that direct connection of identity.



Alfred Edersheim (1825-89)

The focus of Edersheim's remarks is upon the transition between the Noaic and Abrahamic Covenants. He writes, "In fact, we stand here at the threshold of two dispensations. The covenant with Noah had, so to speak, run its course, or rather was merging into that with Abram."⁷³ Edersheim understands that the kernel of worldwide redemption that was sown in the blessing of Shem – "*and Japheth will dwell in the tents of Shem*" found fertile soil in the Abrahamic promise that "*in your seed all the nations of the earth will be blessed.*" While it may be fanciful to see Melchizedek as Shem in the flesh, it is nonetheless reasonable to see the lineage of Shem in much the same light as the lineage of Seth before the Flood. We know that there was still some knowledge of the true God in the family of Abraham (who descended from Shem); could it be that there was another branch of the family still holding true to the faith?

Edersheim thought so. He viewed Melchizedek as probably the last in the lineage of that branch, though the details of its genealogy are absent from the

⁷³ Edersheim; p. 61.

biblical record. In Edersheim's view, Abram's being blessed by Melchizedek was a foretaste of the covenant that was coming into being, and his paying of the tithe to Melchizedek was a tribute to the covenant then in force. There was no abrupt movement from one covenant to another, no shutting down of the Noaic in order to establish the Abrahamic. Rather representatives of the two covenants meet together over bread and wine (somehow Rome sees the Eucharist in this!), a blessing from the older to the younger, and a sacrifice from the younger to the older. A beautiful picture of covenant theology at its best!

Edersheim sees a microcosm of this transitional 'passing of the baton' again in the interchange between John the Baptist and Jesus Christ - a transition from the Mosaic to the New Covenant. But the Mosaic was just a part of the Abrahamic, and so the transition from it to the New Covenant was somewhat of a subplot in the overarching redemptive plan of God. The Abram-Melchizedek interchange was part of the big picture. This interpretation of the events recorded in Genesis chapter 4, allegorized in Hebrews chapter 7, cannot be defended dogmatically because it lacks explicit biblical support. But it is reasonable, and goes far along the path of 'considering' the great man to whom Abraham paid a tenth of the spoils. We conclude, therefore, with Edersheim's identification of the mysterious Melchizedek, "Melchizedek was probably the last representative of the race of *Shem* in the land of Canaan...he was the last representative of the *faith* of Shem, in the midst of idolatry."⁷⁴

⁷⁴ Edersheim; p. 61.

Week 8: **In Lumbo Patris**

Text Reading: **Hebrews 7:5 - 10**

*"Christ is at once the true Melchizedek,
and the promised seed of Abraham."
(Franz Delitzsch)*

In the current passage, the author continues developing his somewhat intricate and 'hard to explain' reasoning concerning the relationship of Abraham to Melchizedek to Jesus Christ. Starting in the opening verse of chapter 7, the reader has been doing what the author exhorts him to do in verse 4 – to *consider this man* – that is, Melchizedek. The mode of argumentation is classic – to exalt Melchizedek by a favorable comparison to the exalted Abraham, followed later by the exaltation of Christ through a favorable comparison to Melchizedek. The ascending stages of glory are powerfully developed and ought to be sufficient to convince any open-minded individual of the supreme 'betterness' of Jesus Christ, the *High Priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek*.

It is important that the reader keep in mind that this quotation from Psalm 110 is, in fact, the governing passage for this section of the book of Hebrews. Much else has been and will be said, and other passages of Scripture alluded to; but all the while the author does not leave Psalm 110:4, and the reader should not either. Even though we are bidden to *consider how great* this man Melchizedek must have been, it is only to prove *how much greater* is Jesus Christ. It should not be difficult, therefore, to project the author's line of reasoning and to see just what it is he is attempting to show. It will become evident in the next section of chapter 7 what major obstacle must be overcome before the writer has successfully established the *priesthood of Jesus Christ* in the minds of his readers: Jesus was not a Levite! It may seem to be a journey over-the-river-and-through-the-woods to get from Melchizedek to the Levitical priesthood, but the author takes an inspired short-cut, and does not get lost either.

He does not move historically *forward* from Melchizedek to Levi, but rather moves Levi historically *back* to Melchizedek, placing Levi at the very scene recorded in Genesis 14. *In lumbo patris* – ‘in the father’s loins.’ In this case the ‘father’ is the patriarch Abraham, the founder of the Israelite nation and the progenitor of the Levitical priesthood. By establishing the relative superiority of the blessed versus the one who blesses (Abraham vis-à-vis Melchizedek), the author proceeds to establish the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood over the Levitical by the principle of *representation*. This principle is a time-honored legal mechanism by which the ‘heirs and successors’ of a party to a contract are bound by the terms of that contract. It is common ‘legalese’ in modern purchase contracts, business agreements, limited partnerships, and so on, and is a means of protecting one party to a contract from the arbitrary cancellation of the contract by the successors of the other party. In short, when a man signs a contract containing this *representative* language, he is contracting on behalf of his children and grandchildren, though they may as yet be unborn. Thus we see that the argument developed by the author of Hebrews, while perhaps ‘hard to explain,’ is not so incredibly novel after all.

Nonetheless there is an aspect of biblical *representation* that raises it far above the merely legal ‘heirs and successors’ clause of modern contract terminology. In the redemptive history of Scripture, *representation* is *covenantal* in its character. The other party to the covenants is, of course, God. Thus the feature of representation moves from the strictly legal (which can be reversed by other legal language) to the metaphysically real and eternally binding. In other words, when God enters into a covenant with a man – be it Adam, or Noah, or Abraham – He enters into that covenant with that man as the *representative* of his offspring. In the case of Adam and Noah, all of mankind was represented by the men involved; in the case of Abraham, the nation of Israel that was to arise from Abraham’s loins. A. W. Pink writes in regard to Abraham, “in his patriarchal character and acts, he stood forth as the representative or federal head of the

nation, so far as all the promises, privileges, and institutions of the Judaical were concerned.”⁷⁵ This principle of representation is theologically designated as *federal headship* and applies to several important genealogical relationships along the stream of redemptive history:

Adam as the Federal Head of the human race under probation in the Garden

Noah as the Federal Head of the nations under the Noaic Covenant for the population of the earth

Abraham as the Federal Head of the nation of Israel under the Abrahamic Covenant

Jesus Christ as the Federal Head of the elect under the Covenant of Grace or Redemption

In each of these representative covenants, the human party was the historical personage with whom God made the covenant. Yet in each case God did not covenant with the individual man as an individual man, but rather as a representative man for a much larger segment of the human race. The reality of this representation is made manifest when we consider that the covenant itself remained fully binding and irrevocable upon the ‘heirs and successors’ of the individual with whom the covenant was originally made. And the biblical basis of this perpetual enforcement was the *in lumbo patris* principle we find here in Hebrews chapter 7. “The principle of federal representation lies at the very base of all God’s dealings with men, as a careful study of Rom. 5:12-19 and I Cor. 15:45-47 reveals.”⁷⁶ Let us consider the most important of these federal relationships – that of Adam to the human race and of Jesus Christ to the elect – as elaborated by the apostle Paul in Romans chapter 5.

The key passage describing the federal headship of both Adam and Christ begins in verse 12,

⁷⁵ Pink; p. 377

⁷⁶ *Idem.*

Therefore, just as through one man sin entered the world, and death through sin, and thus death spread to all men, because all sinned – (For until the law sin was in the world, but sin is not imputed when there is no law. Nevertheless death reigned from Adam to Moses, even over those who had not sinned according to the likeness of the transgression of Adam, who is a type of Him who was to come. But the free gift is not like the offense. For if by the one man's offense many died, much more the grace of God and the gift by the grace of the one Man, Jesus Christ, abounded to many. And the gift is not like that which came through the one who sinned. For the judgment which came from one offense resulted in condemnation, but the free gift which came from many offenses resulted in justification. For if by the one man's offense death reigned through the one, much more those who receive abundance of grace and of the gift of righteousness will reign in life through the One, Jesus Christ.) Therefore, as through one man's offense judgment came to all men, resulting in condemnation, even so through one Man's righteous act the free gift came to all men, resulting in justification of life. For as by one man's disobedience many were made sinners, so also by one Man's obedience many will be made righteous.
(Romans 5:12-19)

Paul establishes in this passage that the prevalence of death in the world is due solely to the entrance of sin into the world, by the sin of one man – Adam. But all men die, even those who have not sinned ‘in the likeness’ of Adam’s sin. Paul’s explanation? *All sinned* in Adam. Adam sinned not as a private individual, but rather as a representative or ‘federal’ head of the human race. He stood probation in the Garden not merely for himself, but for his entire progeny. This is a principle that many have railed against, considering it unfair that many should be condemned for the failure of one. And it should be quickly stated that this principle of representation is not *natural* or *necessary* to the state of the creature, for it does not prevail in the realm of angelic beings. Nor does the principle of federal representative headship apply to all action of a man with regard to their consequent implications upon his offspring. The Scripture is clear that the son will not be punished for the sins of his father,

The soul who sins shall die. The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son. The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself.
(Ezekiel 18:20)

Therefore, when we discuss the theological concept of federal headship – which we must do within the context of Hebrews chapter 7 – we necessarily limit

our understanding of the federal relationship to that of a *covenant* made by God and binding upon the individual man *and his offspring* represented *in lumbo patris*. Paul reiterates this principle in I Corinthians chapter 15,

For since by man came death, by Man also came the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, even so in Christ all shall be made alive. (I Corinthians 15:21-22)

From Paul's treatise in Romans chapter 5 we also discover that the principle of federal representation is, indeed, a very gracious one. One may object to having Adam's sin imputed to the entirety of Adam's offspring, but it is only upon this same principle that the righteousness of Jesus Christ is imputed to His 'offspring.' One might object that he did not sin in the manner of Adam – a point that the apostle takes into account in Romans 5 – and therefore does not deserve the 'original sin' of Adam's transgression. But it is equally, and more, true that no man possesses the righteousness of Jesus Christ as a native virtue, and thus would have no claim whatsoever upon that righteousness apart from the gracious principle of federal headship.

The biblical concept of federal headship is the theological foundation of that most frequent of Pauline phrases concerning believers – that the Christian is 'in Christ,' or 'in Him.' The elect are 'in Christ' at the time of the Covenant of Peace – in eternity past, before the foundation of the world, when the Father and the Son covenanted together to save a people to the glory of God. 'In Christ' believers are now seated in the heavenly realm at the right hand of majesty. Even a cursory glance of the 'in' statements of Paul would constitute a lengthy study. Yet these numerous references to the federal headship of Christ on behalf of all believers often go unnoticed, and certainly under-appreciated.

Many scholars view the principle of representation as metaphorical and 'virtual,' rather than ontological and 'real.' In other words, they view such concepts as Levi having paid tithes to Melchizedek through the patriarch Abraham as being figures of speech, and it would seem that the manner in which the author presents the concept in Hebrews chapter 7 would confirm that view.

He states in verse 9, “*And, so to speak, through Abraham even Levi, who received tithes, paid tithes.*” We will have occasion to investigate the ‘so to speak’ phrase later in this lesson. At this introductory stage, however, we must give attention to the *effects* of representation in order to determine the *reality* of it.

It is the clear intention of the author of Hebrews that his writers understand the relative superiority of two priesthoods – the Levitical with which they were familiar, and the prophetic priestly order of Melchizedek. The superiority of the latter over the former needs to be established *in fact*, and not merely *in a manner of speaking*. Figures of speech do not establish facts; facts establish facts. The actual superiority of the priestly order of Melchizedek over the priestly order of Levi can only be established *in fact* if the Levitical priestly order – establish roughly four hundred years *after* Abraham – was submitted to the priestly order of Melchizedek *in fact*. This the author sets forth, not in figurative speech, but as having actually taken place *in lumbo patris*: as Abraham tithed to Melchizedek, so also did Levi. Although this passage does not deal explicitly with the federal headship of Jesus Christ for the elect, it represents one of the most important passages in the whole of Scripture toward the proper understanding of this crucial biblical concept. Keeping the theological principle in mind, let us now examine the author’s precise reasoning in Hebrews chapter 7.

“And indeed those who are of the sons of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham.” (7:5)

Once again we find the author employing excellent didactic skill as he leads his audience through matters ‘hard to explain.’ Rather than proceeding to the quantum theory of federal headship, he returns to that which his readers already and clearly understand – *the Mosaic law* and the Levitical priestly order. Nothing is stated in verse 5 that is calculated to raise one eyebrow in consternation – all Jews fully understood and accepted the right of the tribe of

Levi, the priests, to receive tithes from the other tribes. Though all twelve tribes were of equal physical descent from the patriarchs, Levi alone was singled out to function as mediators between Jehovah and His people. For this honor Levi sacrificed his share of land, receiving no inheritance among the tribes. In compensation for this loss, God commanded through Moses that the other tribes pay the tithe to the tribe of Levi.

"Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting. Hereafter the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting, lest they bear sin and die. But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting, and they shall bear their iniquity; it shall be a statute forever, throughout your generations, that among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance. For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the LORD, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance; therefore I have said to them, 'Among the children of Israel they shall have no inheritance.'"
(Numbers 18:21-24)

Thus the author firmly establishes the superiority of the Levitical priesthood over any priesthood that might arise from any other Israelite tribe. In this manner he already begins to defuse the one seemingly insurmountable obstacle to his contention that in Jesus Christ believers have a High Priest. He does this by first admitting the undeniable principle: the priesthood was not ordained for any other tribe of Israel, but Levi alone. *Judah* was not set apart for the ministry of the tabernacle, nor was he commanded to receive tithes from his brethren. Therefore, any priesthood arising from 'the loins of Judah' – from whom our Lord traced His physical heritage – must be established on higher and firmer ground than the Law.

Once again we find that the biblical writers held to a stronger view of inspiration, and of the immutability of Scripture, than many modern theologians, preachers, and professing believers. One might hear the argument today that the Levitical priesthood just 'did not work out' so God closed down that dispensation and initiated another one in which the High Priest came from the tribe of Judah. Such an argument would never have convinced first century

Jewish converts to Christianity of the validity of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, nor would the thought have ever crossed the minds of Peter, John, Paul, or any other inspired penman of Scripture, including the author of Hebrews. The priesthood of Levi was established *by commandment* from God as a 'statute forever' so long as the typical sacrificial ministry of the tabernacle/temple remained unfulfilled. Simply pushing the Levitical priesthood aside in favor of a Jehudite priesthood in deference to the heritage of Jesus Christ, was an unacceptable convenience. Fortunately for the author of Hebrews, no such pragmatic approach was necessary, for Scripture itself promised the higher and firmer ground upon which a greater priesthood would be built – *The Lord said to my Lord...Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.*

"...but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises." (7:6)

It is a little anachronistic to say that Melchizedek, who lived three generations *before* Levi, was not descended *from* Levi. But it serves the author's purpose, which is to nail down in his readers' minds the biblical fact of a *different* and *superior* priesthood to the one with which they had been familiar all their lives. To do this he indulges in a statement of the obvious in order to bring to the forefront of the argument the fact that Melchizedek was not of the same Abrahamic lineage as Levi, and certainly not of Levitical heritage. This fact enables the author to move beyond the bounds of Israelite heritage and to show that the superior priesthood of Melchizedek was not in any way diminished by the fact that that Priest-King was not from the family of Abraham.

We must note here that the author is not saying that the messianic priest could have come from outside the nation of Israel, for that would have contradicted too many other prophecies concerning the Coming One. Such a conclusion would be guilty of reading too much into what the author states in verse 6, which is simply that *Melchizedek* was not of the heritage of Levi. When

we remember that it is the *order* of Melchizedek – the *taxos* of this priesthood – that is primarily of interest, we are better suited to properly interpret the author's meaning. That meaning is, that the *order* of Melchizedek is not circumscribed by the legal requirement that the priesthood derive from the tribe of Levi. Combined with the balance of Old Testament prophecy concerning the messiah, the author is well on his way to establishing the legitimacy of a different and *better* priesthood arising from the tribe of Judah.

"Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better." (7:7)

The judgment is rendered, and in such a manner after such an argument as to preclude any objection: Melchizedek blessed Abraham, thus Melchizedek is better than Abraham. "The giver of the blessing is always raised above the receiver, over whom he spreads or on whom he lays the benedictory hand, and pronounces the blessing over him in the power of God."⁷⁷ Abraham validated this relationship by paying tithes on the spoils of war to Melchizedek. In other words, Abraham recognized the superiority of Melchizedek in things pertaining to God, even though he was himself the beneficiary of the Abrahamic Covenant. Thus "the writer assumes that the issue of the relative greatness of Melchizedek and Abraham is decided in Gen. 14:18-20 in favor of the priest of God Most High."⁷⁸ With this judgment the author returns to the relationship of Levi to Melchizedek vis-à-vis the patriarch Abraham.

"Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives." (7:8)

This is undoubtedly the most difficult verse in the passage, and probably in the whole discourse concerning Melchizedek. The first part is simple enough – the Levitical priests were mortal men, literally *men upon whom death comes*. But what does the writer mean when he speaks of Melchizedek as one *of whom it is*

⁷⁷ Delitzsch; p. 344.

⁷⁸ Lane; p. 169.

witnessed that he lives? Once again the key to the correct interpretation is to be able to recognize and discriminate the literal from the allegorical. To conclude that Melchizedek was immortal (the proper and literal opposite of mortal) would be to prove too much. The correct approach is to focus on what the Scripture teaches concerning the two priesthoods – that of Levi and that of Melchizedek.

Of the first it is clear that the mortality of the priests was an issue in regard to their ministry. Aside from the high priest, the lesser members of the Aaronic priesthood served only twenty years: from age thirty to age fifty.

And Moses, Aaron, and the leaders of the congregation numbered the sons of the Kohathites by their families and by their fathers' house, from thirty years old and above, even to fifty years old, everyone who entered the service for work in the tabernacle of meeting...
(Numbers 4:34-35)

This requirement pertained to those members of the Levitical priesthood who performed the daily and manual labor of the tabernacle. The rule was, however, different for the man who singularly embodied the mediatorial role of the priesthood – the High Priest. Here mortality was everything, for the High Priest served in that role until death, at which time he was succeeded by his son. The passing of High Priests marked the passing of generations in Old Testament Israel, so much so that the death of the High Priest meant the safe release of wanted men from the cities of refuge. Thus we see that the entire ministry of the Levitical priesthood was somehow circumscribed by the mortality of the men who served in it.

The writer then shifts to what is *witnessed* concerning Melchizedek. By this he means, *what does the Scripture say*, and for this we have but two passages: Genesis 14 and Psalm 110. The first of these is historical narrative, the second is prophetic. In the first passage we simply have the manifestation of the priesthood of Melchizedek – the *priest of God Most High* (El Elyon). Nothing is said ('witnessed') concerning the duration or termination of his priesthood. Of course, such was not the concern of Moses in recording the encounter of Abram

with Melchizedek – it was not given to Moses to elaborate upon the Melchizedekan priesthood: how he came by it, who if any would succeed him, etc. Melchizedek simply appears, blesses, receives tithes, and disappears. For another five hundred years this is all that is ‘witnessed’ concerning him.

The second Old Testament reference to Melchizedek is the prophecy of Psalm 110, written by another King in Jerusalem, David. In this passage Melchizedek moves from the historical to the prophetic, and here his mortality does become an issue. Picking up on the silence of the earlier passage, David expands on the typological significance of the priesthood of Melchizedek. He moves from the historical *man* to the typological *priesthood*. Moses spoke of the individual priest Melchizedek; David speaks of the *order* of the priesthood of Melchizedek. Thus the movement is made from the apparent timelessness of the individual man to the *high priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek*.

By this historical-prophetic interpretation of Scripture, the author of Hebrews is able to speak of Melchizedek that *it is witnessed that he lives*. In the first instance, there is the witness of silence – Melchizedek appears and disappears with no mention of his birth or death. In the second instance, there is the witness of prophecy – that the priesthood of Melchizedek is *forever*. The author of Hebrews, under the very same inspiration as Moses and David, moves the Melchizedek narrative from the historical and prophetic to the soteriological and messianic. His line of reasoning moves inexorably toward the one, true, *forever* High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek: Jesus Christ.

“Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.” (7:9-10)

The interpretation of this passage often hinges upon the meaning of the phrase translated by the New King James and New American Standard versions, “so to speak.” The NIV translation renders the phrase, “one might even say,” which along with the first two versions seems to mitigate the validity of the modified

phrase. In other words, the phrase seems to lessen the impact of whatever is then said, in this case the matter of Levi having paid tithes ‘in the loins’ of Abraham. Thus translated, the shorter phrase lays emphasis on the metaphorical nature of Levi paying tithes while in the patriarch’s loins, as John Owen recognizes in his commentary, “The words are as if that which is expressed were *actually* so, namely, that Levi himself paid tithes, whereas it was so only *virtually*.”⁷⁹ This is a view that Owen himself rejects.

We have seen in the introductory remarks that the principle of covenantal representation cannot be restricted to the metaphorical without doing great damage to the subsequent principles and doctrines that rest upon it. It is one thing to say that Levi *actually* and *physically* paid tithes to Melchizedek – something that he did not do and that the writer of Hebrews does not intimate that he did – and quite another thing to say that Levi only paid tithes to Melchizedek *metaphorically*. The truth lies somewhere in between, where the reality of Levi’s having paid tithes to Melchizedek is preserved, while the historicity of Abram’s having paid tithes to Melchizedek is not defiled.

Delitzsch recognizes that the relationship between Levi and his great-grandfather was more than physical, since it was covenantal. He writes,

When the sacred writer thus speaks of Levi (both patriarch and tribe) as being then contained in the person of his ancestor, his words must be understood as expressing not only a physical, but also an ideal truth. Levi pre-existed in Abraham not only in the way of nature...but by the counsels of God.⁸⁰

William Lane understands that Levi’s ideal and covenantal presence *in lumbos patris* is crucial to the argument set forth by the author of Hebrews. “The corporate solidarity that bound Israel to the patriarch implied that Levi was fully represented in Abraham’s action...the superiority of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood is not merely theoretical but has a basis in history.”⁸¹

⁷⁹ Owen; p. 383.

⁸⁰ Delitzsch; p. 347.

⁸¹ Lane; p. 170.

There is another way of both translating and interpreting the problematic phrase, rather than the 'so to speak' of the NKJ and NASV, or the 'one might say' of the NIV. The Greek phrase is actually an emphatic use of the verb 'to say' in which two forms of the verb are used side-by-side. When this is done, in either Hebrew or Greek, the writer is far from trying to minimize or restrict what he is conveying. Indeed, this is a standard form of emphasizing and strengthening the message. Thus instead of rendering the phrase 'so to speak,' it would be more accurate to borrow from the English and translate it as "*I do say...*" Owen writes, "For my part, I rather incline to judge that he useth this phrase for..." To sum up in a word, to put an issue unto this dispute between the Levitical priesthood and that of Melchisedec, I say, not only Abraham, but even Levi himself was tithed by him."⁸² Later Owen summarizes the proper interpretation of the author's teaching,

Wherefore it was not merely Levi being in the loins of Abraham with respect unto natural generation, whence he is said to be tithed in him, but his being in him with respect unto the covenant which Abraham entered into with God in the name of his whole posterity.⁸³

The author of Hebrews has thus completed his argument regarding the biblical and prophetic superiority of the priesthood of Melchizedek over the Levitical priesthood. In so doing, he has laid the groundwork for his subsequent discussion regarding a 'better' ministry than that of the Levitical priest and the temple then standing. Taking Psalm 110 as his firm ground and starting point, he methodically shows the Hebrew Christians that it was the *priesthood according to the order of Melchizedek* for which the nation of Israel was to look and hope, not the temporary and typical priesthood of Levi. "His argument in vv. 9,10 is to the effect that Melchizedek had been as much and as truly honoured by Abraham as

⁸² Owen; *op cit.*

⁸³ *Ibid.*; p. 386.

though the whole Levitical priesthood had personally done him homage.”⁸⁴ There is now only the smallest of steps left to the full completion of this teaching concerning Melchizedek, and it is time for the author cease his consideration of ‘how great this man’ was and to resume his primary consideration – how great must be the one who is even greater than Melchizedek. This will be the topic of our next lesson.

We close this lesson, however, in the manner of its beginning – the significance of the biblical doctrine of federal representation or headship. The representation of Levi in Abraham was but a shadow of an even greater federal headship, that of the elect in Jesus Christ. Of this glorious and comforting truth, assumed and illustrated by the writer of Hebrews in the passage before us, A. W. Pink writes,

The all-important and inexpressibly blessed truth for us to lay hold of is that in vv. 9,10 we have an *illustration* of the most soul-satisfying truth revealed in Holy Writ. Just as Levi was ‘*in Abraham*.’ Not only seminally but representatively, so every one of God’s children was ‘*in Christ*’ when He wrought out that glorious work which has honoured and pleased God high above everything else. When the death-sentence of the law fell upon Christ, it fell upon the believer, so that he can unhesitatingly say, ‘I was crucified with Christ.’ So too when Christ arose in triumph from the tomb, all His people shared His victory. When He ascended on high, they ascended too. Let all Christian readers pray earnestly that God may be pleased to reveal to them the meaning, blessedness, and fullness of those words ‘In Christ.’⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Pink; p. 378.

⁸⁵ *Idem*.

Week 9: A Priest from the Tribe of Judah?**Text Reading: Hebrews 7:11 - 17**

*"Popery is as much the masterpiece of Satan
as the gospel is the masterpiece of God.."*
(C. H. Spurgeon)

No where in either time or place upon this globe has human society been found without religion. While it is undeniably true that not every member of any particular culture was *devout* in terms of that society's religion, it is equally undeniable that every society known to history or present has possessed some form of religion. Even modern 'secular humanism' has distinct overtones of religious character, as man in his perceived ideal state takes the place of deity. The universality of religion across the wide spectrum of human history and culture seems to argue incontrovertibly for a human 'need' of religion. Modern Christian evangelists call this the 'God shaped hole' in every man's heart. The writer of Ecclesiastes speak of it in terms of 'eternity' set within the heart of man. The evolutionist, of course, chalks it up to nothing more than residual primitive superstition.

The prevalence of religion among human cultures is paralleled by another curious commonality - one that seems to indicate that man has at all times possessed a common concept with regard to his relationship to deity. That other characteristic of religion found almost universally is the *priesthood*. Somehow, without a cosmic owner's manual to work from, man has everywhere and at all times coordinated his religion with a priestly caste. It is as if the human mind is pre-programmed to understand the necessity of a *mediator* - an intermediate person to operate between the common population and that population's god. The nature of the priesthood is not nearly as universal as its presence, however. A cursory analysis of the 'priests' (they are not always denoted by that term) will show stark differences in functions. Nevertheless, even in those religions whose ritual is farthest from what we might consider 'sacrificial,' there always exists a

class of people who are set in a commanding position vis-à-vis the rank and file 'worshippers.'

Even the differences in priestly function among the ancient and modern religions of the world is explainable in terms of the doctrine of each particular religion. This is especially true with regard to the religion's doctrine of *man* and of *sin*. Pagan religions tend to have an underdeveloped sense of the sin of individual men, and an overdeveloped sense of the wrath of deity. Hence the main function of pagan priests is *appeasement* – to keep the gods happy, or to placate their anger or, better yet, to somehow redirect the divine wrath toward the enemies of the particular society represented by those priests.

Religions that tend to place man on more or less par with deity usually have a more didactic priesthood rather than a sacrificial one. In other words, the 'priests' of such religions are there to tell the people what the deity has to say with regard to how they are to live life. Islam is such a religion, with a very shallow doctrine of human sin, and an equally shallow view of the holiness of God. Thus Islam does not have 'priests' in the common conception of the term, but rather 'imams' whose function it is to instruct the faithful concerning the teachings and commands of Allah.

Religions such as Judaism and Christianity, with a more highly developed sense of human sin and of the holiness of God, have priesthoods geared less toward *appeasement* and more toward *atonement*. God is not by nature wrathful and arbitrary, as in paganism, but is justifiably offended by the continued sins of men. Thus the priesthood offers sacrifice not to appease the deity, but rather to atone or pay for the sins of the people. This was the primary function of the Levitical priesthood of which the author of Hebrews speaks in chapter 7. It was a priesthood that was associated with a particular doctrine or law, the Mosaic Law. The Jews, having received the law from the great Moses, naturally considered the priesthood that was associated with that law to be as inviolable and perpetual as the law itself. This is the underlying thought paradigm that the

author is seeking to shift in the minds of the Hebrew believers to whom he writes. It is not an easy task to take a priesthood away from a people.

Christian history has shown that not only is it very difficult to take a priesthood away, it is also very hard to *keep* the priesthood away. The universality of both religion and its associated priesthood shows us the basic human understanding of the possibility, and even desirability, of a relationship between man and god. When we recognize how prevalent a visible priesthood is to every human religion, we can better understand how such a priesthood *reappeared* in the Christian religion – the priesthood that developed into the Roman Catholic Church. Charles Spurgeon referred to the sacerdotal system of Rome as ‘neo-Judaism,’ a comment that was typically insightful. In the Roman system, the Lord’s Supper has become a ‘bloodless sacrifice’ by Jesus at the hands of the priest, the priesthood has been reestablished as an intercessory and *necessary* mediation between God and the faithful, masses are offered up in perpetuity for the un-purged sins of the dead, and the hierarchy of the priestly caste rivals anything to be found in the Levitical priesthood of the Old Covenant.

How has this come about? The author of Hebrews has taken great pains to show the biblical warrant for the change from a Levitical priesthood to one *after the order of Melchizedek*. In the passage before us in this lesson he comments on the intimate connection between a priesthood and the ‘law’ under which it is established: *For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there is also a change of the law* (7:12). The change of ‘law’ that justified the alteration from a Levitical priest to a Jehudite priest was foretold in Psalm 110:4, the fundamental verse of the author’s treatise. But where is the passage that justifies the establishment of the Roman priesthood? Where is the biblical warrant for the resurrection of Judaism in Christian garb. Having carefully followed the writer’s setting forth of the Melchizedekan priesthood, and the obvious implication thus far that *Jesus Christ* is *the High Priest* “according to the order of Melchizedek,” can anyone honestly

believe that there would be others? Or that *another* priesthood, 'according to the order of Rome' would be established centuries later?

We live in 'tolerant' times, at least for those who tolerate all religions as being equally true, or equally false. There is little tolerance today for anyone who dares to claim that the tenets and practices of another religion are wrong. There is even less tolerance in America for those who refuse to accept the Roman Catholic religion as merely another branch of Christianity. However, when one considers the unbelievable arrogance in the *post*-Melchizedekan priesthood of Rome, it is hard to 'accept' it as a 'Christian' religion at all. As a priesthood, the Roman Catholic hierarchy undermines the entire argument set before us here in Hebrews chapter 7, and blasphemously robs the true and final priest *after the order of Melchizedek* of His just honor and glory, a glory that He will not share with another. Far from being grounded in Scripture, the Romish religion and the priesthood on which it stands are, as Spurgeon so forthrightly put it, "as much the masterpiece of Satan as the gospel is the masterpiece of God."

The point of the foregoing discussion was not to 'bash' Catholicism, and most certainly not to denigrate Roman Catholics themselves. A brief review of the Roman priesthood, however, serves to show that the teaching of the author of Hebrews, though directed specifically toward the legally established Levitical priesthood (something that has disappeared from the human scene), still has powerful application in the modern church. Mankind needs religion, and man's religion has need of a priesthood. If we fail to understand the 'hard to explain' doctrine concerning Melchizedek and Christ, we will be tempted to establish a 'priesthood' of our own – a false and dangerous one that has no biblical warrant and therefore no standing before God. We will do well to carefully study the principle upon which the author (and the Bible) establishes the unique and everlasting priesthood of Jesus Christ *according to the order of Melchizedek*, for the writer of Hebrews, *though dead, yet speaks*.

"Therefore, if on the one hand perfection was through the Levitical priesthood – for under it the people received the law – then why on the other hand was there a need for a different priesthood to arise according to the order of Melchizedek and not called according to the order of Aaron?" (7:11)

The author of Hebrews intensifies the logic of his argument, and brings the full force of the meaning of Psalm 110:4 to bear upon the sensibilities of his audience. With this rhetorical question he powerfully sets his readers in the days of King David, the sweet Psalmist of Israel, as he penned and published the inspired Psalm 110. The author here merely asks the same, simple question that any Israelite *should* have asked one thousand years earlier, as he first read the words of Psalm 110:1-4,

*The LORD said to my Lord,
"Sit at My right hand,
Till I make Your enemies Your footstool."
The LORD shall send the rod of Your strength out of Zion.
Rule in the midst of Your enemies!
Your people shall be volunteers
In the day of Your power; in the beauties of holiness, from the womb of the morning,
You have the dew of Your youth.
The LORD has sworn and will not relent,
"You are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek."*

These poetic and prophetic words ought to have rattled the cages of those who first read them, and those who continued to read them generation after generation until the time of Jesus Christ. The first verse of the Psalm as the Jews would have read it is not the same as verse 1 in our English Bibles. In the original Hebrew that which constitutes the 'heading' in our Bibles was the first verse: *"A Psalm of David."* This type of authorial prescript is common in the Psalms, but nowhere more significant than here in Psalm 110. It is in this psalm that we read of David speaking to his exalted offspring and successor – David the King speaking to *his* lord. The Jews easily and correctly recognized the address, *the Lord said to my Lord*, as referring to God speaking to the 'Son of David,' the Messiah. Jesus Himself tested the Jews of His day on this,

While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them, saying, "What do you think about the Christ? Whose Son is He?" They said to Him, "The Son of David." He said to them, "How then does David in the Spirit call Him 'Lord,' saying:

*The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool'?
If David then calls Him 'Lord,' how is He his Son?"*

(Matthew 22:41-45)

The Pharisees were correct in their answer, but had failed to understand the implications of that answer. The promised Messiah was indeed the descendant of David, the 'Son of David.' But it was contrary to ancient Middle Eastern custom for a *son* to be exalted over his father. Jesus challenges the Pharisees, therefore, with a verse He knew they would know – Psalm 110:1. In other words, as they read Psalm 110 and saw that David was speaking of *his* own Lord, they ought to have understood that he was speaking of the Promised One, the Christ, David's Greater Son.

This thought may have occurred to some of the Jews as they read Psalm 110:1, and indeed it would not have troubled them as they continued reading through verse 3, *"Sit at My right hand until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet..."* These verses represented the very thing the Israelite nation was looking for in a Messiah – strong military rule and complete victory over Israel's enemies! This was the attitude even of Jesus' disciples when they asked the risen Lord, *"Lord, is it at this time that You will establish Your kingdom?"* The Messiah as conquering King – that was a concept all Israel embraced.

But somehow they never made it to verse 4 of Psalm 110. The 'Lord' is still speaking to David's 'Lord' in verse 4, but what He says is nothing like what the Jews were expecting, *"The Lord has sworn and will not relent, 'Thou art a Priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.'"* The author of Hebrews, in chapter 7, verse 11, takes his audience back to the time when David wrote these words, and challenges them to fully comprehend the implications. Why would the Lord prophesy through David that *another* priest would arise in Israel *not from the tribe*

of *Levi*? The writer drives home the implication: *if* another priest has been promised, *then* there must have been something insufficient and incomplete about the *Levitical* priesthood that was then in existence. "The dramatic question posed rhetorically in v. 11 is a deduction from Ps 110:4: the Levitical priesthood must not have been sufficient, because the oracle proclaimed a new priest 'like Melchizedek' and not 'like Aaron.'"⁸⁶

The issue for the writer of Hebrews (as it should have been for all Jews reading Psalm 110:4) was the manner of the insufficiency of the Levitical priesthood, and hence the necessity of another, *non-Levitical* priest. The complaint against the Levitical system could not have been leveled against its institution, for it was instituted by God through Moses. Nor could the insufficiency been found in the mechanism of the Levitical priesthood – the sacrifices, the rituals, the feasts – for these, too, were established by ordinance from God. In fact, the inspired author of Hebrews does not even try to find fault with the Levitical priesthood *per se*, but only with the incompleteness of its *results* – the failure of that particular priesthood to attain its desired end: *perfection*. We may reasonably paraphrase the author's rhetorical question as follows,

*"For if **perfection** was [possible, attainable, realized] through the Levitical priesthood, then why was another priesthood needed...?"*

The word translated 'perfection' is *teleiosis* (*telei/wsij*) which is derived from the Greek word meaning 'end or goal.' The word signifies the attaining of an intended *purpose* and is thus, biblically, a very *eschatological* term. It is used both of the individual and of the corporate society – personal sanctification *and* cosmic consummation. A. W. Pink writes, "'Perfection' means the bringing of a thing to that completeness of condition designed for it. Doctrinally it refers to the producing of a satisfactory and final relation between God and man."⁸⁷ In

⁸⁶ Lane; p. 180.

⁸⁷ Pink; p. 381.

the context of the Levitical priesthood, therefore, *teleiosis* ought to be construed as *meeting the purpose for which the priesthood was established*. The purpose of the priesthood established under the Old Covenant is a full study in itself, but perhaps it can be summarized sufficiently for our use here. It was the main function of the priesthood to *mediate* the covenant from Jehovah to His people, and from the people to their God. The priest, therefore, was the instrument of communion between God and man under the covenant for which the priest was established. Calvin highlights this feature of any priesthood, but particularly the Levitical, when he writes, “we must keep in mind the axiom that no covenant between God and men is confirmed and ratified unless it is supported by a priesthood.”⁸⁸

This function of mediation is, perhaps, the primary and most significant function of any priesthood. All of the sacrifices, intercessions, rituals, etc., of a priesthood are intended to serve this end: the establishment and preservation of communication and communion between a god and the people. *Perfection*, then, would necessarily mean a *perfect communion*, one that is without hindrance and without end. *This* the Levitical priesthood was unable to bring about. And this failure should have been of grave concern to the Israelite worshiper, for it was only through the priesthood that he could approach God, atone for his sin, and maintain fellowship with God. Delitzsch comments that “the central importance of the Levitical priesthood for the constitution of Israel under the law: the people, in their striving and longing after *teleiosis*, were directed to that priesthood.”⁸⁹

It will be the later argument of the author of Hebrews that the Levitical priesthood could never have brought the perfect communion desired and needed by the faithful worshiper, since it was based on shadows and not substance – the sacrifice of animals for the sins of man. In this early portion of that line of reasoning, however, the writer merely wants to show that the

⁸⁸ Calvin; p. 95.

⁸⁹ Delitzsch; p. 351.

insufficiency of the Levitical priesthood *was already prophesied* under the Old Covenant, through David and Psalm 110. The true worshiper of Jehovah must seek that which could not be attained through the priesthood with which he was familiar, a perfect communion with God, as Delitzsch writes,

*Teleiosis, moral and religious perfection, is the establishment of complete, unclouded, and enduring communion with God, and the full realization of a state of peace with Him, which, founded on a true and ever-valid remission of sins, has for its consummation eternal glory: in one word, it is complete blessedness.*⁹⁰

It may appear that the author is finally showing some disrespect to the old ways – something that he has avoided throughout his sermon thus far. But in speaking of the insufficiency and impotence of the Levitical priesthood, he cannot be said to attribute that failure to the priesthood as it was ordained by God. To find and place the blame, we must understand the implications of the author's comparison between the Levitical priesthood and that *after the order of Melchizedek*. The problem with the Levitical priesthood, according to the author, was not with the God who instituted it, but rather with the mortality of the men who filled it. It was a 'fleshly' ordinance in that it was performed by men whose term of office was circumscribed by physical decay and death. This contrast between the Levitical and the Melchizedekan priesthoods will become explicit in just a few verses.

There is, however, another reason why the priesthood under the Old Covenant was found to be impotent; a reason why it could not have been otherwise. This is explained by the apostle Paul in his epistle to the Romans,

For what the law could not do in that it was weak through the flesh, God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh, on account of sin: He condemned sin in the flesh, that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us who do not walk according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. (Romans 8:3-4)

⁹⁰ Delitzsch; p. 350.

Not only were the Levitical priests subject to mortality because of sin, but those for whom they served – the people – were sinners. Sin rendered the ordinance of law, and the priesthood supporting that law, impotent. Thus we will find that the priesthood that would actually achieve *teleiosis* – perfect communion between God and man – must address the twofold weakness of the Levitical priesthood, law, and community; sin *and* death. The author of Hebrews will positively show that the fulfillment of the Melchizedekan priesthood fully and finally deals with both of these debilitating issues.

“For the priesthood being changed, of necessity there must also be a change of law.”
(7:12)

The author now delves into the deeper and more profound implications of Psalm 110:4. Recognizing the promise of a new and different priesthood, one no longer circumscribed by the Levitical requirements, he logically derives the connection between a new *priesthood* and a new *law*. By law he does not mean the moral or ethical law that governs human conduct and judgment, but rather the covenantal law by which sin is atoned and fellowship with God is established and maintained. In other words, he means the *law* as it pertained and functioned in and through the Levitical priesthood. Scholars often refer to this aspect of law as the *ceremonial* or *sacrificial* ordinances of the Old Covenant. These were the statutes that pertained most directly with the operation of the tabernacle in the wilderness and, later, the Temple in Jerusalem. Thus these were the daily rituals and sacrifices with which the Hebrew believers were most familiar, having grown up under them prior to their conversion to Christianity. Furthermore, these were the ordinances and statutes to which these Hebrew believers were tempted to return in order to avoid the friction, opposition, and persecution of their faith from those who still adhered to them.

Among those unbelieving Jews comments like verse 12 were incendiary, to say the least. The apostle Paul was accused by the Jews of “*speaking against*

Moses” when he preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Paul was almost torn limb from limb because of the perception that he was leading Jews away from Moses and the law. It was not a line of reasoning to be taken up lightly! But the author of Hebrews, perhaps taught by the apostle himself, understood the intimate connection between the law of the covenant and the priesthood of the covenant – when one changes, it is because the other has changed as well.

The Levitical priesthood was established upon the Mosaic law. By implication, a *new* priesthood, as prophesied in Psalm 110:4, must of necessity come on the heels of a new law. Since both the law and its associated priesthood are covenantal in nature, we may reasonably substitute ‘covenant’ for ‘law’ – for it is the covenant that underlies the law, just as the law underlies the priesthood. In other words, a *new* priesthood implies a *new* covenant. The author will proceed to show in chapter 8 that this *new covenant* was just what was prophesied under the old covenant.

“...for concerning the one of whom these things are spoken, he belongs to another tribe, from which no one has served at the altar.” (7:13)

Just in case the reader of Psalm 110:4 misses the point, that the one of whom David speaks as ‘my lord’ is his descendant, the Christ, the author of Hebrews spells it out clearly in verse 13. The ‘one of whom these things are spoken’ refers to the one of whom David speaks in the first four verses of that psalm. Delitzsch paraphrases verse 13 in a manner that highlights the radical nature of the priesthood of Psalm 110:4,

Not to the tribe of Levi, but to another tribe, which has never been, in any one of its members, called to the sacrificial service of the priesthood, does He belong of whom the 110th Psalm prophesies.⁹¹

Delitzsch also points out in his commentary that the comment made here by the author of Hebrews is not *strictly* true. There were occasions in which

⁹¹ Delitzsch; p. 353.

members of the tribe to which the one spoken of in Psalm 110 belonged – that is, Judah – *did* participate in the service of the altar. Uzzah, a member of the tribe of Judah, reached out his hand to steady the ark of the covenant upon the carriage, and was immediately struck dead. King Uzziah, obviously of the tribe of Judah, offered incense upon the altar and received for his services, leprosy. But the author of Hebrews was not being disingenuous when he overlooked these instances, for he has been speaking strictly in accordance with the *law* under which the priesthood of the Old Covenant was constituted, and that law prohibited any member from any other tribe than Levi from serving at the altar. Delitzsch writes, “any self-willed action contrary to the law is not here taken into account.”⁹² The results of those other attempts to do so simply prove the point.

Once again we recognize that statements such as verse 13 are merely statements of the obvious. But their very nature as clear and indisputable points of Mosaic law was somehow overlooked by the majority of Israel in reading Psalm 110:4. The advent of a completely different priesthood, prophesied infallibly through David in Psalm 110, should have alerted the Jews that a corresponding change in redemptive economy was in the works. “The supersession of the Levitical cultus envisioned in the psalm oracle implicitly involved the setting aside of the Mosaic law, which the writer perceived in terms of priesthood and sacrifice.”⁹³

The line of reasoning used by the author here in chapter 7 may continually be used by evangelicals when discussing the biblical faith with either Jews on the one hand, or Roman Catholics on the other. To the former a challenge ought to be given on the basis of Psalm 110:4 as to the nature of the ‘new’ priesthood, and its redemptive implications, prophesied by David. To the latter a challenge ought to be given as to the biblical warrant for *another* priesthood, the Romish, that has risen *since* the time of Christ. Unfortunately both challenges will in all

⁹² *Idem.*

⁹³ Lane; p. 182.

likelihood go unmet, as both groups in general do not view that authority of Scripture as decisive.

“For it is very obvious that it is from Judah that our Lord has arisen, of which tribe Moses has said nothing regarding the priesthood.” (7:14)

Nothing could be clearer that anyone who laid claim to being the Messiah must also have derived his ancestral heritage from Judah, that much was readily accepted by all Jews. Thus the Hebrew Christians, having accepted that Jesus was the Christ, implicitly accepted that He was the Son of David, from the tribe of Judah. “When they recognized Him as Christ it was also necessary to be convinced that He was the Son of David; for He who was promised could not come from any other origin.”⁹⁴ It was likely that by the time this letter to the Hebrews was written, the Gospel of Matthew, and perhaps even Luke’s Gospel, had already been circulated, with their detailed genealogy of Christ. This information, however, would have served only to confirm what Jewish believers would have already known – that the Christ was and had to be from the tribe of Judah.

This provision of the prophecies of the Old Testament was as sacrosanct as that of the descent of the priesthood from the tribe of Levi. The only difference was that there had been no mitigating prophecy, like Psalm 110 in the case of the priesthood, altering the tribal requirement for the Messiah. All through the prophetic development of Scripture it became increasingly clear that the Christ was ‘the Branch from the stump of Jesse.’ The most common metaphor used in the Old Testament regarding the Christ was that of David the shepherd, who would once again gather His flock into one fold. By the time of Christ there were few points of Judaic doctrine more universally agreed upon than the physical lineage of the Promised One from the tribe of Judah. It was indeed, ‘very obvious.’

⁹⁴ Calvin; p. 97.

The author of Hebrews uses an interesting word in verse 14 to describe Christ's having been from the tribe of Judah. He does not use the word that would normally be used for 'descent,' but rather uses a word that means 'to rise up.' William Lane points out that this term in the Greek was nowhere used in the classical writings, the Septuagint, or the papyri within the context of physical genealogy - the author is borrowing a word that was normally used in a completely different context. But that different context itself explains *why* the author uses this word. Lane writes, "The verb is used in the LXX, however, for the rising of a star or the sprouting of a branch in contexts that have traditionally been recognized as messianic."⁹⁵ In other words, the author of Hebrews is subtly emphasizing the prophetic point that the one of whom David speaks in Psalm 110 was also the star that would arise out of Jacob (Numbers 24:17) and the Branch that would rise up from the barren stump of the family of Jesse. So much meaning from just a single word!

"And it is even more evident if another priest arises according to the likeness of Melchizedek who has come not according to a law of fleshly commandment, but according to the power of an indestructible life." (7:15-16)

The author draws together the various strings of logic he has employed in this inspired exposition of Psalm 110:4. That the prophecy was given was undeniable, as was the fact that it introduced a *new* priesthood not confined to the requirements of Levitical descent that bound the current priesthood. Rather the priestly function was divinely moved from the tribe of Levi to the tribe of Judah. Now in the concluding remarks to his argument, the author shows that the principle underlying the new priesthood is of greater power and worth than even the Mosaic law upon which the Levitical priesthood was built.

The latter he refers to as having been established on 'a law of commandment of flesh.' This is a round about way of saying that the ordinance governing the Levitical priesthood was based primarily upon physical (fleshly)

⁹⁵ Lane; p. 182.

descent from a particular tribe, and not upon the merit of the individuals who occupied that priesthood. The history of Old Testament Israel, and the fact that many of those who served as priests and High Priests were personally worthless and unfaithful, would confirm to any right-thinking Jew the incompleteness and weakness of that priestly ordinance. There was something inherently wrong with a hereditary priesthood, just like there is something inherently wrong with government by hereditary monarchy: physical descent does not often translate into moral worth.

The phrase 'according to a law of fleshly commandment' is parallel to the earlier phrase 'like Aaron' from verse 11. "The negative expression, 'not by virtue of a legal ordinance concerning physical descent,' is complementary to the negative phrase in v. 11, 'not like Aaron.'"⁹⁶ Now to show what was the more powerful and meaningful basis upon which the Melchizedekan priesthood was to be established, the author returns to the line of reasoning he has employed concerning the *eternity* of that promised Priest: "*Thou art a priest forever, according to the order of Melchizedek.*"

'The power of an indestructible life' transcends the mere lack of genealogy in the case of Melchizedek, and the mere fact that Christ was of the tribe of Judah rather than the tribe of Levi. It was not enough that the new priest was simply from outside the faulty priesthood of Levi, for if he were merely mortal (and thus a sinner), then his priesthood would be limited by the very same weaknesses that prevented the Levitical priesthood from attaining *perfection*. Thus the author shows that the Melchizedekan priesthood fulfilled in Jesus Christ is truly a *forever* priesthood, for it belongs to One whose life is 'indestructible.' "The promise was fulfilled in Christ, who *is* actually what Melchizedek *was* symbolically, an eternal priest who exercises his priestly prerogatives in a nonlegal, universal ministration."⁹⁷

⁹⁶ Lane; p. 183.

⁹⁷ *Idem.*

To what does the author refer when he speaks of Christ's life as 'indestructible.' Later he will refer to Jesus as 'ever living to make intercession' – a practical implication and application of the indestructible life of which he speaks here. It seems most reasonable, considering the fact the Jesus *did die* on the cross, that the indestructibility of His life is a quality that was conferred upon Him when death was conquered through the resurrection. "The sacred writer means, of course, the Lord Jesus, and is thinking not of His life as commencing with His miraculous conception, but of that which began with His resurrection to glory."⁹⁸ Though Jesus' life was, in a sense, 'destroyed' by the crucifixion, the power of death was impotent to extinguish the principle of life in a sinless Man, and thus the power of an indestructible life was conferred upon Jesus by God through His resurrection from the dead. "Although Jesus' human life had been exposed to 'destruction' through crucifixion, his life was not destroyed by the death suffered on the cross."⁹⁹

Now this High Priest, according to the order of Melchizedek, cannot be taken from His people, will not be succeeded by another on account of death, and 'ever lives to make intercession' for those whom He mediates a New Covenant between God and man. Lane summarizes this glorious fact beautifully,

The power of life that the resurrection conferred upon Jesus demonstrated that his priesthood is not limited by the temporal, transitory character of the old priesthood based on physical descent; it is undergirded by a power that overcame mortality and corruption, and consequently is beyond the reach of mortality and corruption.¹⁰⁰

To such sentiments we can only add, Amen.

⁹⁸ Delitzsch; p. 357.

⁹⁹ Lane; p. 184.

¹⁰⁰ *Idem.*

Week 10: A Better Priest with a Better Covenant**Text Reading: Hebrews 7:18 - 22**

*"His indissoluble life as Priest and King
is the indissoluble bond which unites us with God."
(Franz Delitzsch)*

The short passage under consideration in this lesson is a hinge upon which the author of Hebrews swings from one aspect of the excellencies of Jesus Christ to another. In fact, the actual 'hinge' is a word found in this passage – the word *covenant*, used for the first time in the book here in chapter 7, verse 22. The word marks the author's transition from the order of the priesthood of Jesus Christ to the economy upon which that priesthood is based. The writer tacitly assumes that his readers will understand and accept the principle that when the priesthood changes, so also does the law or covenant change within which that priesthood functions. A. W. Pink notes "that the revocation of the Aaronic order necessarily involved the setting aside of the whole dispensation or economy connected therewith."¹⁰¹

The author has thus far in chapter 7 clearly established the biblical basis for the priesthood of Jesus Christ. But as important as this doctrinal point is, it is only preparatory to the 'meat' of the writer's thesis – that with Jesus Christ has come the *New Covenant* prophesied in the Old Testament. So central is the concept of 'covenant' to the message of Hebrews that the author utilizes the word, beginning with verse 22 of chapter 7, a total of *eighteen* times in the remainder of the book. Hebrews has by far the greatest concentration of this word in the New Testament. This fact points to the crux of the matter facing the Hebrew Christians – a test between two covenants, the *Mosaic* on the one hand and the *Christic* on the other. The first was the 'old' covenant of their fathers, observed for over fifteen centuries and still in force among the Hebrew

¹⁰¹ Pink; p. 393.

Christians' unbelieving countrymen. The second was 'new,' both in time and in essence – it had no temple, no priesthood, no daily or annual sacrifice, no tribal designations: even Gentiles were admitted without circumcision! Establishing the biblical justification for this incredible paradigm shift was of paramount importance to those who first preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the Jews. Pink understands the magnitude of the difficulty they faced. He comments concerning the transition of the author's thought in chapter 7, calling it,

...the most difficult and delicate part of his task, namely, to satisfy believing Jews that God had set aside the entire system which He had Himself instituted in the days of Moses. It is exceedingly difficult for us to form any adequate estimate of what that meant to them; in truth, it was the severest test to which the faith of God's people has ever been put. To be assured that God had discarded as dead and useless the entire order of solemn worship which He had appointed in so glorious a manner and which He had accepted for so many generations, was indeed a sore trial of faith.¹⁰²

So important is it to catch the flow of the author's writing (or preaching) as he moves from the issue of the priesthood to that of the covenant mediated by the priesthood, that it warrants a lengthy quotation from Pink's commentary on the matter:

Difficult as it was for the Jew to be weaned from that system in which he had been brought up and to which he was so deeply attached, nevertheless, his very salvation turned thereon. Therefore we are not to wonder at the apostle's insisting so much on the setting aside of Judaism, for that was the very hinge on which the eternal salvation or destruction of the whole Nation did turn. If they would not forego their old priesthood and worship, their ruin was unavoidable. Christ would either be received by them, or 'profit them nothing.' Thus it was that it fell out with the great majority of them! turning away from the Lord Jesus, they clung tenaciously to their ancestral institutions and perished in their unbelief.¹⁰³

The fact that the passage before us in this lesson is a transition from one line of reasoning to another not only highlights what is coming – the *covenant* – but also gives occasion to review and solidify what has gone before – the

¹⁰² Pink; p. 390.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*; pp. 394-5.

priesthood. While the author's discourse on Melchizedek, and the order of priesthood associated prophetically with that name, is not the most important subsection of the book, it is nonetheless *very* important as it underlines the biblical validity and prophetic certainty of a completely different, non-Levitical priesthood. Let us, therefore, take a few moments to once again consider the manner in which the author ties together two of the most consistent strands of thought from the Old Testament – the 'two anointed ones' of the Lord: the *king* and the *priest*.

A great deal of emphasis has been placed in theological literature upon the threefold nature of the ministry of Jesus Christ as *Prophet, Priest* and *King*. There is undeniable truth to this manner of viewing Christ's person and work, but there is also the danger of over-emphasizing this paradigm and consequently missing another, equally biblical, one. It is significant that nowhere in the Old Testament is the Promised One referred to *explicitly* as combining in His own person and work the three functions of prophet, priest, and king. That the Messiah was to be a *prophet* was accepted by all rabbinic scholars on the strength of the promise of Deuteronomy 18:15,

The LORD your God will raise up for you a Prophet like me from your midst, from your brethren. Him you shall hear...

But it should not come as a surprise that the Messiah would be a prophet, for it was to be expected that any true servant of God was also to be an oracle or mouthpiece of God. David the king is also called a prophet, as is Samuel the priest. Moses, in whom both the royal and priestly roles combined at the nation's birth, was the prophet *par excellence* and the model upon which the Promised Prophet was cast. Christian exegesis, however, has tended to focus disproportionately upon the prophetic ministry to the detriment of the royal and priestly offices. This phenomenon has several explanations. First, with the advent of the New Covenant and the destruction and dispersion of Israel, both

the royal and the priestly offices have ceased to exist. Among the apostles there was no 'king' or 'high priest,' though there were many prophets in the early church who were not themselves apostles. Another possible explanation for the lack of attention paid to the offices of king and priest is the fact that most of the occupants of the Davidic throne and the Aaronic priesthood were not of the highest moral caliber. Throughout most of the history of Israel the dignity of these two offices was highlight more by the degree to which the men who held them denigrated the office. The number of righteous kings of Judah (there were none in Israel after the civil war) can be counted on one hand, and the number of worthy High Priests was even less. By comparison the prophetic 'office' could not help but be magnified! But this is not the most accurate assessment of the historical record, for there seems to have been far more 'false prophets' than true. In the days of Ahab of Israel only one true prophet could be named amidst a multitude of false.

Whatever the reason for the disproportionate emphasis upon the prophetic at the expense of the royal and priestly, it remains true to the biblical record that there were only *two* anointed offices established among the Israelites, the king and the priest. It is, therefore, significant that the prophecy that forms the central thesis of this portion of Hebrews - Psalm 110 - re-introduces a historical character who was *both* king and priest, Melchizedek. But other evidence also exists from the Old Testament to show that although God spoke through the prophets, the direction of His redemptive revelation pointed always to the dual offices of king and priest. There is good reason to understand the prophecy of Zechariah chapter 4 as referring to these two offices rather than to two distinct and identifiable individuals,

Then I answered and said to him, "What are these two olive trees – at the right of the lampstand and at its left?" And I further answered and said to him, "What are these two olive branches that drip into the receptacles of the two gold pipes from which the golden oil drains?" Then he answered me and said, "Do you not know what these are?"

And I said, "No, my lord." So he said, "These are the two anointed ones, who stand beside the Lord of the whole earth."
(Zechariah 4:11-14)

It disturbs Western epistemology to think of one person in terms of two, and so it has been generally the case that modern commentators have sought to identify these 'two anointed ones' as two individuals rather than as the two offices that were instituted by the anointing of oil. The same exegetical practice seems to govern the interpretation of a similar passage in the Book of the Revelation,

And I will give power to my two witnesses, and they will prophesy one thousand two hundred and sixty days, clothed in sackcloth." These are the two olive trees and the two lampstands standing before the God of the earth. And if anyone wants to harm them, fire proceeds from their mouth and devours their enemies. And if anyone wants to harm them, he must be killed in this manner.
(Revelation 11:3-5)

Although the term 'anointed' is not used in this passage, the similarity of context and language to the prophecy from Zechariah is striking. While the two witnesses *may* designate literal individuals, it is also possible that they are once again references to the royal and the priestly functions. Returning to Zechariah we notice a verse that impinges even more directly upon the interpretation of Hebrews chapter 7,

Take silver and gold, make an ornate crown and set it on the head of Joshua the son of Jehozadak, the high priest. "Then say to him, 'Thus says the LORD of hosts, "Behold, a man whose name is Branch, for He will branch out from where He is; and He will build the temple of the LORD. "Yes, it is He who will build the temple of the LORD, and He who will bear the honor and sit and rule on His throne Thus, He will be a priest on His throne, and the counsel of peace will be between the two offices."
(Zechariah 6:11-13, NASB)

The reference here to the 'Branch' is clearly Messianic, as that designation for the Promised One derived from the prophet Isaiah several centuries earlier. The prophecy of Zechariah 6, therefore, is as stunning in its implications as that of Psalm 110:1-4. Perhaps the only reason the author of Hebrews did not utilize Zechariah 6 is that it was necessary for him to firmly establish the *fact* of the

priesthood of Christ, from a tribe other than Levi, before he could proceed to discuss the implications of that priesthood. For this purpose Psalm 110:4 is perfectly suited.

The importance of the dual lines of royalty and priesthood cannot be properly dealt with here, as it would ultimately detract from the other important themes of the Book of Hebrews. Yet recognizing that this double strand of prophetic history has been often neglected and minimized offers a challenge to redress the wrong, and to once again investigate a beautiful facet of divine redemptive revelation. Flowing through time along the well-defined channels of Judah and Levi, the King and the Priest find their foreordained confluence in the person of the Melchizedekian High Priest, Jesus Christ. This fact is undeniably established by the author of Hebrews here in chapter 7. 'Hard to explain,' yes; but by the grace and power of the Holy Spirit, he has done an admirable job. But now it is time to transition with the writer to the main course of his sermon – the *new covenant* that accompanies this *new priesthood*.

"For on the one hand there is a setting aside of the former commandment due to its weakness and uselessness, (for the law perfects nothing), but on the other hand there is the bringing in of a better hope by which we draw near to God." (7:18-19)

On the surface these two verses seem to represent an easily understood 'on the one hand...on the other' type statement. Upon further review, however, one notices that the two things being compared do not appear to be 'apples and apples.' The first thing mentioned, 'the former commandment,' is of a nature that the Hebrew Christians would readily understand – the Mosaic law and the Levitical priesthood. The author is able to use the singular 'commandment' here due to the fact that the entire Hebrew nation viewed the Mosaic covenant, with its commands, statutes, and rituals, as a unity. The faithful of Judaism were never so prone to the smorgasbord approach to theology so popular among modern evangelicals! But because the 'old' or 'former' commandment was viewed as a unity, and as a God-given one at that, this statement by the author is

much more controversial than Gentile readers appreciate. With apparently no more than a stroke of a pen, the writer has 'set aside' the former commandment.

But he does not merely 'set aside' the former commandment, for that translation is actually a bit weak in regard to the Greek original. The word literally means 'to annul' or 'to nullify.' The word is a legal term that means to abrogate the validity and power of a law or a debt. Lane comments on its ancient use, "Its force is brought out in the papyri, where it assumes a technical legal sense for the annulment of a decree or the cancellation of a debt."¹⁰⁴ It means to remove the law from the books, so to speak, and not merely to 'set it aside.' The latter translation just does not convey the thoroughness with which the *former commandment* was being removed from the scene, never to return.

An episode from South Carolina's history will help us understand the implications of this word. During the presidential administration of Andrew Jackson the nation went through what became known as the 'Nullification Crisis,' a crisis led (not surprisingly) by the government of the state of South Carolina. It was the view of the members of that state, that federal laws were to be subject to state approval or disapproval. In other words, once a law passed through the federal Congress and was signed by the President of the United States, the individual states still possessed the power to 'nullify' the law within their boundaries. Although he was himself a Southerner (possibly born in South Carolina, the border was somewhat fluid then), Jackson recognized the implications of such state power - to effectively destroy the vitality and effectiveness of the federal government and with it, the Union. Jackson's threat of military intervention was taken at face value, and the government of South Carolina backed down.

But the author of Hebrews did not back down, for he had it on divine authority that the former commandment was to be nullified. It did, however, cause a crisis! A crisis of faith and of understanding among the Jews, many of

¹⁰⁴ Lane; p. 185.

whom rejected this teaching and with it, Jesus Christ. It was apparent to the writer that the Hebrew believers to whom he writes, having accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah, still did not fully appreciate the implications of this latest and final development in redemptive history. Therefore he forthrightly states with regard to the former commandment, "*It has been annulled.*"

But 'on the other hand,' has been placed, according to verse 19, not 'a later commandment' but rather 'a better hope.' Here is where the two things being compared do not seem to match: a 'former commandment' on the one side, a 'better hope' on the other. The two things are not really antithetical, of course, for the author highlights in the second what is lacking in the first – a firm and perfect hope that the method of worship being followed under the 'former commandment' was sufficient. The writer does not leave this interpretation to our imagination, but makes it explicit by the use of a parenthetical statement in the middle of the passage: *for the law perfects nothing.*

We have had occasion to discuss the author's intent in using the word 'perfect' with regard to worshipers of God in this life. He is not referring to 'sinless perfection' as was taught to be possible by such eminent scholars as John Wesley in the 18th century. His use of the term 'perfect' reflects the degree to which a system of worship enables the worshiper to approach God in communion with a clean and clear conscience. This the 'former commandment' did, but not to perfection. The worshiper under the old regime left the service of sacrifice 'cleansed' of his sin by faith – trust in the faithfulness of God to accept the blood of the animal in lieu of a more proper payment, the sinner's own life. There was always, however, the nagging awareness that the blood of bulls and goats was not sufficient to truly cleanse the conscience of a sinner, that something more was needed. The fact that these sacrifices had to be repeated over and over again confirmed the inadequacies of the system, as the author of Hebrews will elaborate in subsequent chapters.

To true worshipers, therefore, the desire is not for a 'better commandment' but rather for a 'better hope.' And the author's characterization of this 'better hope' recalls the one thing the Israelites were both unwilling and unable to do - 'draw near to God.' At Sinai, with the glory of Jehovah encompassing the mountain in fire, smoke and thunder, the people cowered from the mountain and begged Moses to intercede on their behalf. 'You go up,' they said to Moses, 'and not us, lest we be consumed!' It is debatable whether their fear was holy or slavish, or perhaps some of both; but it is clear that 'drawing near to God' was not something they really wanted to do right then! Later, under the ministration of the tabernacle and the Temple, closeness to God was forbidden them: only the Levitical priesthood could serve in the presence of Jehovah, and only the Aaronic High Priest could enter into the most intimate presence, the Holy of Holies, and that only once a year. The levels of both architecture and priestly ministers laid between the Jewish worshiper and his God were a constant reminder that even with the blood of bulls and goats, the sinner was not really 'drawing near to God.' Calvin writes,

Allusion is made to the form of the tabernacle or the temple. The people stood far off in the courtyard, and no one was allowed any closer approach to the sanctuary except the priests. Only the high priest went into the inner sanctuary. But now that the tabernacle has been abolished God admits us into His intimate presence, from which the fathers were prohibited.¹⁰⁵

It should not be concluded, however, that the faithful worshiper of the Old Covenant did not have a relationship with God - that is not what the author of Hebrews is claiming, nor would he accept such a claim. He is merely stating what would have been obvious to a truly faithful worshiper - that the old system was inherently imperfect; it did not bring about the cleansed conscience and the unfettered access to God that was both needed and desired. Tying the 'better hope' to the 'new priesthood,' the author presents the Hebrew Christians what

¹⁰⁵ Calvin; p. 100.

they and their fathers should have been seeking all along. Delitzsch writes, “a better priesthood, which not only accomplishes *more* than the law, but also does that in truth and reality which the law had done only in type and shadow.”¹⁰⁶

As stunning and disconcerting as the thought of setting aside the Mosaic law had to have been to the Hebrew believers of the first century, the setting forth of free access to the throne of God should have been equally stunning, and comforting. “Through this ‘better hope’ the new people of God have secured the assurance of a quality of access to and a relationship with God that were not possible under the Levitical institution.”¹⁰⁷ Believers should not seek to restore that which the Lord sovereignly annulled and removed – a priesthood and layers of obstacles between God and His people. Delitzsch reminds us that there is to be no return to the Judaic system, nor a Roman system erected in its place,

But now and henceforth no *cultus* connected with animal sacrifices, and no sacerdotal order of men bound by natural and mundane conditions, stand any longer between us and our God. The access to Him is free to all believers: the holy of holies, so far as it is invisible to eyes of flesh, has still a veil suspended before it; but inasmuch as Jesus our Forerunner has already entered it, it has for the eye of faith no veil.¹⁰⁸

“And inasmuch as He was not made priest without an oath (for they have become priests without an oath, but He with an oath by Him who said to Him: ‘The LORD has sworn and will not relent, ‘You are a priest forever.’” (7:20-21)

In case there were any among the Hebrew Christians who doubted the superiority of the Melchizedekan priesthood to the Levitical, the author reminds them once more that the former was accompanied by a divine oath, whereas the latter was not. The oath given to David’s Lord, the Messiah, is repeated here with all the firmness of divine immutability: *The LORD has sworn and will not relent...* The remainder of Psalm 110:4, included in the New King James, New American Standard, and King James versions, is most likely a later addition of a

¹⁰⁶ Delitzsch; p. 361.

¹⁰⁷ Lane; p. 186.

¹⁰⁸ Delitzsch; p. 362.

copyist as it is not found in the older manuscripts. The focus is no longer the priesthood of Melchizedek, but the enduring foundation upon which that priesthood – *as it is fulfilled in Jesus Christ* – rests: the divine oath and the divine immutability. We might well represent the author's thought through the use of modern font characteristics: The LORD *has sworn* (the 'oath') and **will not relent** (the immutability). The writer is driving home the remarkable difference between the Levitical and the Melchizedekan priesthood, for he intends to build upon that fact the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. "This contrast expresses forcefully that the difference between Jesus and the Levitical priest is not one of degree (lesser and greater) but of kind, demonstrating that Jesus is the eschatological priest of the new age."¹⁰⁹

Having spent a great deal of time expounding the first part of Psalm 110:4 regarding the man Melchizedek as priest and king, the author now addresses the second part – the divine oath whereby the Promised Messiah is denominated a *priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek*. The writer contrasts the manner in which the Levitical priest ascends the office – by natural generation through the tribe of Levi and the family of Aaron – versus the manner by which Jesus has ascended to the higher office – by divine oath. Because it is the LORD (YHWH) who makes the promises, we can say with William Lane, "the function of the oath is to characterize the promise as final, eternal, and unchangeable."¹¹⁰ Lane continues,

The formal decree of installation was prefaced with a solemn oath. The finality of the oath is strengthened by the provision that the Lord 'will not change his mind,' thus guaranteeing the utter reliability of the promise.¹¹¹

Again, the author does not mean to denigrate the Levitical priesthood *per se*, but only seeks to point out the superiority of the Melchizedekan. He does not claim that the Levitical priesthood arose from any other source than divine

¹⁰⁹ Lane; p. 187.

¹¹⁰ *Idem.*

¹¹¹ *Idem.*

commandment, for that would be a manifest falsehood. We first encounter God's plan for a priesthood in Exodus chapter 28,

Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron's sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar. And you shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother, for glory and for beauty. So you shall speak to all who are gifted artisans, whom I have filled with the spirit of wisdom, that they may make Aaron's garments, to consecrate him, that he may minister to Me as priest. And these are the garments which they shall make: a breastplate, an ephod, a robe, a skillfully woven tunic, a turban, and a sash. So they shall make holy garments for Aaron your brother and his sons, that he may minister to Me as priest. (Exodus 28:1-4)

We read of the consecration of the Aaronic priests, and the anointing of Aaron with oil, in the next chapter, chapter 29. Later, in Numbers 25 we read of the perpetuity of the Aaronic priesthood. But nowhere do we read words of a divine oath confirming the Levitical and Aaronic priesthood with the same *eternal* firmness as the Melchizedekan priesthood of Psalm 110. Again, the finality conveyed by such an oath regards not only the priesthood that is promised, but also the covenant under which that priesthood operates – that is the point to which the author is directing our attention.

“By so much also Jesus has become the surety of a better covenant.” (7:22)

The purpose for which the writer highlights the fact that the Melchizedekan priesthood was accompanied with an oath, whereas the Levitical/Aaronic priesthood was not, was to present a parallel to the comparison. Jesus, as the fulfillment of the Melchizedekan priesthood, stands not only in a superior position as priest vis-à-vis the Levitical priesthood, but also occupies a superior position with respect to the *covenant* He mediates as priest. Yet even here the author throws in a subtle but important shift between the former and the latter priesthoods. For the Levitical priesthood *mediated* the old covenant; Jesus has become *surety* for the new. Jesus is, of course, also the *Mediator* of the New Covenant, but as *Surety* He occupies a higher place than the

Levitical priest who did no more than mediate. A *mediator* is essentially a go-between, one who arbitrates between two parties, representing each to the other. A *surety*, however, is one who pledges himself on behalf of one or both of the parties – he himself becomes the substance and guarantor of the negotiated covenant. “The ‘mediator’ steps into the gap between two parties, but the ‘guarantor’ stakes his person and his life on his word.”¹¹² William Gouge adds,

As *mediator*, Christ standeth betwixt God and man, to make intercession to God for man, and to declare God’s will to man. As *surety*, he engageth himself for man to God, and for God to man.¹¹³

Another historical example from the early years of our country might help illustrate the subtle but important difference between these two words. During the years leading up to the American colonies’ declaration of independence from Great Britain, Benjamin Franklin lived in London and served several colonies as their agent. In this capacity Franklin mediated trade deals, attempted to represent the colonial position on pending legislations, and generally sought to stand in for the colonies that he represented before the king’s court and Parliament. In this capacity he also communicated the King’s decrees to the colonies he represented, and sought to keep them abreast of both current and future developments that affected them. As colonial agent, Franklin was a *mediator* between the colonies and the king.

In June and July of 1776, colonial patience running out with the king’s high-handed treatment, a group of colonial representatives meeting in Philadelphia put their signatures to a Declaration of Independence. The closing lines of this document have stirred the hearts of men seeking freedom from oppression from 1776 to the present, “*And for the support of this Declaration, with a firm reliance upon the protection of Divine Providence, we mutually pledge to each other our Lives, our Fortunes, and our sacred Honor.*” What these men committed to one

¹¹² Lane; p. 188.

¹¹³ Gouge; p. 521.

another, and by implication to the people they represented, was not mere *mediation*, but rather *surety*.

The author is now moving on to his next subject: the *new covenant* in Jesus Christ. Yet as he transitions from his 'hard to explain' treatise on Melchizedek, he once again places before his readers the majesty of Jesus Christ, exalted above the Levitical priesthood, the Aaronic High Priest, and even the great man Melchizedek himself, the honored ancient Priest-King. The superlatives flow to Jesus from all lesser occupants of divine service. And the benefit of all of this flows to those who are in Christ, and for whom He has become surety of a better covenant. "As truly as He is Priest and King, so assuredly will the promises of the covenant be fulfilled in us, - a covenant which, in distinction from the impotence of that of Sinai, has for its objects true perfection and eternal realities - free, unclouded communion with God - eternal glory."¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Delitzsch; p. 368.

Week 11: **Holy, Innocent, Undefined, Separated**

Text Reading: **Hebrews 7:23 - 28**

*"Where there is death or change,
you will look in vain for salvation."
(John Calvin)*

With the conclusion of chapter 7 we come to the end of the author's landmark treatise on the priesthood of Jesus Christ *according to the order of Melchizedek*. He has already moved away from speaking specifically about the man Melchizedek and his significance, and is moving toward a very thorough discussion regarding the New Covenant beginning in chapter 8. His closing thoughts on the 'hard to explain' doctrine of the Melchizedekan/Christic priesthood are not just a 'wrap up' of what has gone before. They are a deeply comforting conclusion to a powerfully logical and fully biblical argument. The author of Hebrews does not seek merely to prove an academic and theological point, but rather to confirm in his audience a steadfast faith in the One true High Priest, Jesus Christ. Therefore, once he has exhaustively established the biblical warrant for a 'new' priesthood, he moves quickly to application and soul-satisfying comfort. The never-ending ministry of Jesus Christ as High Priest is not just the fulfillment of the Davidic prophecy from Psalm 110, but is an inexhaustible source of security and hope for those (believers) for whom Christ ministers, *a priest forever*.

As we move along with the author through the transition of the closing verses of chapter 7 into the consequent discussion of the New Covenant in chapter 8, let us consider one last time why it was (and is) so important that the readers of this epistle 'get it,' so to speak. Modern believers, no less than the Hebrew Christians who first received this letter, are constantly berated for being intolerant, for maintaining that there is no other way to God but through Jesus Christ, for setting the Christian religion above all others. For the most part

evangelicals are able to answer such objections to the faith from the words of Christ himself, *"I am the Way, the Truth, and the Light; no man comes to the Father but through Me."* Our faith is exclusive simply because *it is*, not because we have designed it to be. And it is better to be exclusively right and saved, than to be inclusively wrong and lost.

There is a more subtle point of comparative religion upon which many modern evangelicals still get tripped up and confused, and that is the status of the Jewish religion within God's overall plan for the world and humanity. Many modern Christians do not understand, or do not accept, that the Mosaic system of worship – and with it the special significance of Jewish identity *as Jews* – has been 'annulled,' done away with, abrogated, *forever*. A large segment of modern American Christianity firmly believes that the Levitical priesthood will one day be reestablished in Jerusalem, the Temple rebuilt, and the whole Mosaic form of worship reinstituted for the physical descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Modern preachers speak of the Jews as fellow heirs with Christians, and politicians regularly lump the two religions of Judaism and Christianity together, without the slightest objection from Christians. Indeed, Jewish rabbis are more likely to object than are fundamentalist Christian preachers!

The cloud has moved, but too many modern believers have not moved with it or are waiting for it to come back. The author of Hebrews has definitively shown, and will continue to show, that the old system is gone and is not coming back – there being absolutely no need for it any more. Nor should there be a desire for it, seeing that the Levitical system was incapable of bringing perfect communion between the worshiper and God. But thought patterns that have been established over a long period of time are hard to change. The Hebrew believers to whom this epistle/sermon was first delivered had been raised in a religious system that had existed, with the express sanction of God, for over fifteen centuries. The system under which many modern evangelicals think has not been around for quite so long; nonetheless it has been in vogue since around

the middle of the 19th century. Thus it has held sway in American fundamentalist circles for four generations or more. That is a long time to be waiting for the divine cloud to return.

The cloud in the wilderness is a perfect illustration, allegorically speaking, of what the first century Hebrew Christians were going through, and what 21st century American Christians *need* to go through. The forty years spent by the children of Israel in the Sinai desert were not random and purposeless meanderings, they were at all times *directed* by the Spirit of God through the cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. When the cloud moved, the people moved; when the cloud remained in one place, the people remained in that very same place. To do otherwise was not only rank disobedience and rebellion, it was stupid, for it could only result in getting lost and perishing in the desert.

So it was always: the cloud covered it by day, and the appearance of fire by night. Whenever the cloud was taken up from above the tabernacle, after that the children of Israel would journey; and in the place where the cloud settled, there the children of Israel would pitch their tents. At the command of the LORD the children of Israel would journey, and at the command of the LORD they would camp; as long as the cloud stayed above the tabernacle they remained encamped. Even when the cloud continued long, many days above the tabernacle, the children of Israel kept the charge of the LORD and did not journey. So it was, when the cloud was above the tabernacle a few days: according to the command of the LORD they would remain encamped, and according to the command of the LORD they would journey. So it was, when the cloud remained only from evening until morning: when the cloud was taken up in the morning, then they would journey; whether by day or by night, whenever the cloud was taken up, they would journey. Whether it was two days, a month, or a year that the cloud remained above the tabernacle, the children of Israel would remain encamped and not journey; but when it was taken up, they would journey. At the command of the LORD they remained encamped, and at the command of the LORD they journeyed; they kept the charge of the LORD, at the command of the LORD by the hand of Moses.

(Numbers 9:16-23)

If we may indulge in a little allegorical interpretation of this biblical history (uninspired, of course), we may see how absolutely critical it is for man's well-being and salvation to 'follow the cloud' as it were, and to move when God moves. The parallel can be drawn allegorically between the literal historical travels of the Israelites in the wilderness, and the progressive revelation of God

Himself, and of His redemptive plan for man. In the passage quoted at length above, we are told that the children of Israel moved when the cloud moved, and stayed when the cloud stayed. No reason is given for the cloud's moving, or for its staying – except the will of God. Yet Scripture has not left us so devoid of an understanding of God as to think that the reason for the movement of the cloud was arbitrary. Nor was it motivated in any way by the attitude or behavior of the Israelites themselves. God moved the cloud, or caused it to remain in one place, *according to the counsel of His good pleasure*, as the apostle Paul tells us God does all things. Not knowing when the cloud would move again, nor why the cloud moves one day but not the next, yet the Israelites obediently moved with the cloud, for the cloud *was* the manifest presence of God and the manifestation of His will for them.

Allegorically, the cloud may be considered to represent the self-disclosure of God and of His redemptive purpose for man. Man, if he wishes to have forgiveness of sins and communion with God, must move with the cloud, and find himself always under the *most current* self-disclosure of the divine Person and Will. Abraham was blessed by Melchizedek who, as many hold and as we maintain in this study, was the perhaps-final representative of that system of worship that had its source and foundation in the covenant God made with Noah. Abraham was, as the writer of Hebrews remarks, *blessed by the greater*. Yet it would not have been right at all for Abraham to simply move to Salem and abide under this august priest of the Noaic covenantal system! The cloud was moving on, and Abraham was leading the way into a further self-disclosure of God and a new dispensation of the revelation of redemptive grace for the world. Although the Bible does not further develop the priesthood of Melchizedek as it was in Abraham's time and shortly thereafter, it would not be a stretch of biblical truth to say that with the advent of the Abrahamic Covenant, the Noaic system of worship was 'annulled.'

It was the Abrahamic Covenant, and whatever system of worship prevailed therein (on this the Bible is silent) that governed the life of faithful believers from the days of Abraham to the time of the Exodus. Then the cloud moved again, this time alighting on Mt. Sinai. The Mosaic Covenant was established, and the form of worship acceptable under the Abrahamic dispensation was no longer. One can hardly imagine an Israelite offering sacrifices on behalf of his children – aside from the ministry of the Levitical priest – with the excuse that ‘Father Abraham did it this way.’ So important did the Levitical priestly caste become to the worship of Israel, we even read of members of the tribe of Dan searching high and low for their own Levite to ‘sanctify’ their own idolatry (Judges 18).

Thus the Noaic Covenant, in place for around eight hundred to a thousand years, was subsumed into the Abrahamic. This, in turn, was the governing system of true worship for another six to eight hundred years, followed by the Mosaic system of worship. Fifteen hundred years later, the author of Hebrews claims that this system has now gone the way of those that preceded it – it has been annulled. But this development of redemptive history seems to lead to two very serious questions. First, how can worshipers under one system of acceptable worship *know* that their system is incomplete and is to be changed? Second, how do worshipers under the latest, the Melchizedekan or Christic system, *know* that there will not be another?

A common answer to these two questions flows from one parallel concept – *change* and *immutability*. The contrast between these two aspects of durability is exactly what the author of Hebrews is bringing to light in chapter 7 of this epistle. We may summarize the logic of his argument by simply saying that if there is *change* within a system of worship, then one may properly conclude that eventually that whole system will be *changed*. And without doubt the primary ‘change agent’ to be found in all of the previous covenantal systems of worship was *death*. As Calvin insightfully writes, “Where there is death or change, you

will look in vain for salvation.”¹¹⁵ The mortality of Noah, of Abraham, of the Levitical High Priest, all pointed to the fact that the systems of worship acceptable to God during their ‘dispensations’ were every one of them subject to change. It is not that these systems were, in their time, *unacceptable* – they were graciously accepted by God inasmuch as they were graciously ordained by God. The issue is not ‘worthlessness,’ but rather the inability of each prior system to bring the relationship between the sinner and God to perfection. Simply put, that which is subject to change is inherently and logically imperfect.

Consider that last statement for a moment, for it lies at the heart of the logic employed by the writer of Hebrews. The truth of the statement lies in the fact that *change* represents one of two things – either *improvement* or *corruption*. One *can* philosophically imagine a completely neutral change – neither improving nor corrupting the state of being – but if all change were thus neutral, the changes we observe all around us would be devoid of any meaning and even the words ‘improve’ and ‘corrupt’ would fall from our vocabulary as empty concepts. It is more to the experience of all mankind that change *does* represent either improvement or corruption. And if a being is changed by way of improvement, then it is clear that the being was not perfect; likewise corruption can only mean a lessening of whatever degree of perfection once existed. The writer of Hebrews, therefore, is on solid logical ground when he maintains that the mortality of the Levitical priests *proved* that the whole system of worship over which they presided was incapable of bringing to perfection the worship of God.

But how do we know that the system now in place will not change? How do we *know* that the Mosaic system will not come back again, and the Levitical priesthood reinstituted, and Temple worship re-consecrated? The answer, again, lies in the same concept of change; only this time the fact of the matter is *changelessness*. It is the unchangeable and never-ending life (“the power of an indestructible life”) that defines the Christic priesthood, and establishes the

¹¹⁵ Calvin; p. 101.

logical conclusion that no further change of priesthood is to be sought or expected. Christ's resurrection and exaltation has forever established His victory over death and thus the immutability of His consequent priesthood. William Lane summarizes the author's argument and highlights the fact that 'unchangeableness' is the trademark of the Great High Priest,

[Jesus] authenticated the priestly character of his mission through a series of events that culminated in the offering of himself as an unblemished sacrifice. His subsequent exaltation obtained for him unhindered access to the presence of God, which is the fundamental qualification for the exercise of a perpetual priesthood. The expression *eis ton aiōna* (ei)j to\ n ai)w=na), 'forever,' emphasizes the continual effectiveness of his priestly intercession.¹¹⁶

When one considers the logic of the argument set forth in the seventh chapter of Hebrews, and the perfection with which Jesus Christ fulfills all that the author has to say regarding the perpetual priesthood typified historically by Melchizedek, the thought of another priesthood either supplementing or supplanting the Christic is not only illogical, it is blasphemous. Furthermore, as the author now proceeds to explain in the closing verses of chapter 7, another priesthood is not to be desired, as our High Priest *ever lives to make intercession* for us.

"And on the one hand there were many who became priests, prevented as they were by death from continuing..." (7:23)

The Greek of this verse is a little difficult, and it is hard to determine whether the author is speaking of the Levitical priests in concurrence or succession. It may be that he is referring to the fact that *many* priests were ordained and served at any given time in the service of the tabernacle and temple. Or he may be referring to the fact that the Aaronic High Priest was constantly succeeded, generation after generation, from Aaron's day to his own. Both interpretations, of course, have the advantage of being true to the history of

¹¹⁶ Lane; p. 196.

the Levitical priesthood. John Owen notes that “from Aaron, the first of them, unto Phinehas, who was destroyed with the temple, there were inclusively fourscore and three high priests.”¹¹⁷ This record apparently Owen received from Josephus, for William Lane cites the latter in his commentary, “According to Josephus, a total of eighty-three high priests was installed from the inception of the Aaronide priesthood to the cessation of temple worship in A.D. 70.”¹¹⁸

Therefore it is true that there were many priests since they were prevented from continuing in office by death, as the author states in verse 23. But the sense of the verse seems to indicate a greater plurality than eighty-three. There were ‘many’ priests, or ‘many’ became priests, because continuance in the office was prohibited by death. It is possible that the author had in mind the passage from the Pentateuch in which we read of Aaron *and his sons* being consecrated as priests by Moses.

Now take Aaron your brother, and his sons with him, from among the children of Israel, that he may minister to Me as priest, Aaron and Aaron’s sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar, and Ithamar.
(Exodus 28:1)

If it is the case that the author of Hebrews is considering the concurrent plurality of priests, rather than the successive occupants of the High Priestly office, when he speaks of ‘many priests,’ the point he is making is simply that the inevitability of death necessitated a continuing apprenticeship from priest to priest, father to son, and brother to brother. There was a morbid dynamism to the Levitical priesthood – every man knew that his service to the Lord in the tabernacle was delineated by the length of his days. “Consequently, the continuity of the Levitical priesthood was repeatedly disrupted.”¹¹⁹

Modern readers of the Old Testament take the succession of priests, and the concurrent plurality of priests, in stride without much critical thought. But if one were to envision himself as a devout Israelite, dependent upon the Levitical

¹¹⁷ Owen; p. 515.

¹¹⁸ Lane; p. 188.

¹¹⁹ *Idem.*

priesthood for intercession and atonement, it should become apparent that the continual succession of priests by reason of death would be very disconcerting. In a way somewhat analogous to the feelings of a congregation when a long-term pastor dies, there is a sense in which one's connection to God has been, at least temporarily, severed. It should not be that way with Christians, for their Priest ever lives and their connection to God is not mediated by a pastor. But it was undoubtedly that way for faithful Jews. And it also cannot be doubted that some of the priests were more 'pastoral' than others, some more gentle and caring than others, and thus some more missed when they died! But disruption by death was a fact of the Levitical priesthood, and if the devout worshiper would have stopped to ponder the reality of this, he might have recognized the inherent imperfection of that system. That is the point the author of Hebrews is now driving home as chapter 7 comes to a close.

"...but, on the other hand He, because He continues forever, has a permanent priesthood." (7:24)

Here is the crux of the author's thesis – change disrupts continuity and is therefore imperfect; continuity without change thus implies both permanence and perfection. The Levitical priesthood was constrained by the former condition, whereas the latter condition characterizes the perpetual priesthood of Jesus Christ. "In contrast to the Levitical priests, whose ministries were continually disrupted by death, there is no temporal limitation to the ministry of a priest who lives forever."¹²⁰ Lane, in his excellent commentary, points out that the fundamental feature of an effective priesthood is *access to God*. Man has caused a separation between himself and God through sin, and as it is God who is the offended party, access to God was consequently curtailed. It was only by divine grace and mercy that such access was not removed entirely. The expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden, and the posting of angelic sentries

¹²⁰ Lane; p. 189.

guarding against their return, is the most vivid historical example of this separation between Man and God. In the tabernacle and, later, the Temple this separation and limited access was manifested most poignantly by the annual Day of Atonement, the only day in the year that even one man was permitted to have access to the presence of God in the Holy of Holies.

But no single High Priest of the Aaronic order maintained uninterrupted access to God forever, for each died and was succeeded by another. Thus access to God under the Levitical system was doubly limited: circumscribed by the rigors of the system itself, and finally prevented from continuing by the death of the priest. The perfect High Priest *according to the order of Melchizedek*, is a priest forever by virtue of His never-ending life. As for access to God, the author has already established the fact that this glorious High Priest has such access as no other priest before Him ever enjoyed, having, *passed through the heavens* (4:14) and having *sat down at the right hand of Majesty* (1:3).

“For which reason also He is able to save completely those who come through Him to God, ever living to make intercession for them.” (7:25)

This verse provides us with an excellent occasion to investigate the varied usage and sense of the word translated ‘to save’ in the New Testament. We cannot, of course, do an exhaustive word study; but it is necessary at least to recognize that the word does not have the stringent, singular meaning that is often imposed upon it by modern believers. The ‘once saved, always saved’ theology of modern evangelicalism tends to view every occurrence of this word – at least as it is translated ‘save’ by our English versions – as signifying that one time act of conversion when a person ‘believes.’ Unfortunately the Greek word *sōdzein* (s%/zein) is more nuanced and can mean anything from physical healing to eternal salvation. Often the context is determinate as to the sense intended by the author, as it is here in Hebrews 7:25. But when one thoroughly considers the context of this verse, it becomes apparent that the writer is *not* referring to that

wonderful day in the past when his readers 'walked the aisle' or 'signed the card' or 'made a decision for Christ' or were baptized. In fact, it is evident that he is speaking of an *ongoing* process that is dependent for its ultimate success upon the *ongoing* intercession of Christ in heaven. For many modern believers, this is a very troublesome thought.

Several features of verse 25 work together to establish this ongoing aspect of salvation. First, the tense of the verb 'able' is present, not past, signifying that the act of salvation is progressing and is not a point in past time. Christ's ability to save is much more than the ability to regenerate at conversion, it is the ability to maintain, sustain, and advance that salvation from the time of conversion onward to eternity. It is an ever-present ability to save. Second, this ongoing ability to save is predicated upon Christ's "ever living" to make intercession for those who come through Him to God. In other words, one's salvation is concurrent with Christ's eternal life and intercession – both of which therefore are ongoing.

The ongoing character of salvation does not diminish the reality of that moment in time when a sinner is regenerated by the power of the Holy Spirit through faith in Christ. Nor does it minimize the importance of God's election of a sinner to salvation from before the foundation of the world. But it does show us that the word so often considered as a 'point' verb – *to save* – has past, present, and future connotation. By election we are ordained unto salvation from eternity past, through regeneration we are brought to salvation at a point in our own personal history, and by virtue of the ongoing intercession of Jesus Christ we are being saved unto eternity.

Rather than being a troublesome thought, believers are to be encouraged by the knowledge that 'no weapon fashioned against them can prosper.' Christ is not only able to save at the point of conversion, but *completely*. Delitzsch

writes, “Christ is able to save in every way, in all respects, *unto the uttermost*; so that every want and need, in all its breadth and depth, is utterly done away.”¹²¹

Many commentators, in discussing verse 25 through the end of the chapter, continue to labor upon the distinction drawn throughout the chapter between the Levitical and Christic priesthoods. Technically the distinction remains in what the author writes, but practically and pastorally such an emphasis misses the point. The author/preacher has tangibly shifted his tone from didactic to pastoral – from *teaching* to *comforting* and *encouraging*. Verse 25 clearly shows this change in tenor: the focus now being on applying the truth of Christ’s superior and never-ending priesthood to the hearts and minds of believers, establishing and comforting them in their faith. Lane writes,

With his exaltation to heaven, Jesus became the permanent intercessor for his people. His ministry involves an active advocacy role in the presence of God on behalf of the oppressed. The direct result of his intercessory activity is the sustaining of the people and the securing of all that is necessary to the eschatological salvation mentioned in the previous clause.¹²²

Believers are thus reminded that their Great High Priest does not need to wait for that one special day each year in order to bear their sins and their prayers before God’s throne. Christ’s ministry before the divine throne is perpetual – daily, moment-by-moment, intimate and dynamic. Further, believers are also exhorted not to think of Jesus’ having ‘sat down at the right hand of Majesty’ as indicating passivity in any sense. “The whole energy of that endless and unbroken life is expended, as it were, in mediatorial interposition on our behalf.”¹²³ Christ’s work on earth was undeniably finished on the Cross, but His priestly work in heaven has proceeded without interruption from the time of His ascension to now, and will proceed in like manner until the day of the

¹²¹ Delitzsch; p. 371.

¹²² Lane; p. 190.

¹²³ Delitzsch; p. 372.

consummation of all things. The writer of Hebrews, therefore, offers his readers the same daily comfort as does the apostle John in his first epistle,

My little children, these things I write to you, so that you may not sin. And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous.

(I John 2:1)

"For such a High Priest was appropriate for us: holy, innocent, undefiled, separated from sinners and having become higher than the heavens." (7:26)

On a technical note, the author provides yet another indication that he has moved on from his discussion of Melchizedek and the comparison of priesthoods. No longer does he use the shorter word for *priest*, but now employs the longer, *High Priest*. "The change in these verses from *hierus* (i(ereu/j) to *archierus* (a)rxiereu/j), 'high priest,' is explained by the simple literary consideration that the writer is moving beyond the warrant of Ps 110:4."¹²⁴ In doing this, he not only brings to a close that section of his discourse centered on Melchizedek, but also closes a much larger section that began back in the opening verse of chapter 3, "Therefore, holy brethren, partakers of the heavenly calling, consider the Apostle and **High Priest** of our confession, Christ Jesus..."

On another technical note, one must decide how many of the descriptive clauses mentioned in this verse are governed by the last word in the sentence, 'having become.' Most translators have assigned this verbal participle to the very last description: 'higher than the heavens,' but symmetry of the Greek used probably indicates that the word governs the two preceding participial phrases. In other words, the overall descriptive clause should read like this,

...such a High Priest -
 holy
 innocent
 undefiled
 having become
 separated from sinners
 higher than the heavens

¹²⁴ Lane; p. 191.

The opening phrase of verse 26 is simply an eloquent way of saying that Jesus Christ is just the sort of High Priest that sinners so desperately need. This comment again shows the author's shift in focus from what God has both promised and provided in Jesus Christ, to what we as sinners need and have been given. The author then proceeds to show how the exalted High Priest Jesus possesses those qualifications that were lacking in the Levitical priesthood: *holy, innocent, undefiled...*

These words are terms frequently used in relationship to the auspices of tabernacle and temple worship – with reference at times to the priests, at other times to the worshiper, and at other times to the sacrifice offered. Commenting on the first term, *holy*, Lane writes, “In the LXX it describes those whose relationship to God and to others reflects fidelity to the covenant.”¹²⁵ The second term, *innocent*, “signifies not only that Jesus was guileless in his relationship with other people, but that he was not touched by evil.”¹²⁶ A. W. Pink makes an interesting and insightful comparison between these first two words, “As ‘holy,’ He loved the Lord His God with all His heart; as ‘harmless,’ He loved His neighbor as Himself.”¹²⁷ Finally, *undefiled*, denotes that purity without which the priest could not perform his ministerial duties in the sanctuary. These qualifications, as they apply to Jesus, were manifested not in a monastic separation from sinners, but rather in the midst of a most intimate association with ‘harlots, publicans, and sinners.’ Jesus touched the lepers, and did not refrain from touching the dead – yet He remained undefiled and pure, able to continually minister before God on behalf of His people. “The three terms are not descriptive of static moral qualities but of dispositions demonstrated by the incarnate Son in spite of his complete involvement in the life of common humanity.”¹²⁸ There is a powerful lesson of example in this fact.

¹²⁵ Lane; p. 191.

¹²⁶ *Idem.*

¹²⁷ Pink; p. 420

¹²⁸ Lane; p. 192.

Consequent to His perfect life, Jesus was exalted to the right hand of the Father – *separated from sinners* and *higher than the heavens*. These two clauses are of similar construction in verse 26, and are different from the single word descriptions *holy, innocent, undefiled*. Thus it seems most reasonable to apply the verbal concept, *having become*, to both phrases: *separated from sinners* and *higher than the heavens*. The significance of these two clauses, taken together, is to once again show that this High Priest is wholly different from the ones that served God in the physical tabernacle and temple, men who returned to the realm of sin and sinners after having performed their priestly duties. Jesus *remains* in the holy presence of God at all times, having already come to the earth and mingled, as it were, with sinners. Thus not only was Christ *holy, innocent, and undefiled* during His time in this world among humanity, He will forever remain so in heaven. “The clause affirms that Jesus’ life among sinners ceased with his ascension. He has left the sphere characterized by testing, hostility, and suffering and has been exalted to the sphere of God.”¹²⁹ That is exactly where we should want our High Priest both to be and to remain.

“...who does not need daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifices, first for His own sins and then for the sins of the people, for this He did once for all when He offered up Himself.”
(7:27)

The author here contrasts the repetitive nature of the Levitical priest’s duties with the singular efficacy of the sacrifice of the Great High Priest after the order of Melchizedek. Not only were the High Priests under the Old Covenant required to repeatedly offer up sacrifice – year after year, and day by day – for the sins of the people, they had to preface each sacrifice with another one offered up in atonement for their own sins. The perfect nature of Christ’s one-time sacrifice of Himself will become a central theme throughout the rest of the book of Hebrews; the author merely introducing it at this point. In this place the thought is subordinate to the overall purpose of comfort and encouragement that

¹²⁹ Lane; p. 192.

the author is following in these closing verses of chapter 7. He is emphasizing for his readers the perpetuity and the perfection of Christ's High Priestly ministry in comparison to the discontinuity and imperfection of the Aaronic.

Implicit in this verse is the equally significant distinction between *what* the priests offered upon the altar. Later the author will discourse on the inefficacy of the blood of bulls and goats – that which the Aaronic High Priest had to offer – compared to the spotless blood of a Lamb unblemished, the self-sacrifice of the High Priest Jesus. “The perfection of his sacrifice matches the spiritual and moral perfection of the high priest who is simultaneously the unblemished offering.”¹³⁰

“For the law appoints as high priests men who have weakness, but the word of the oath, which came after the law, appoints the Son who has been perfected forever.” (7:28)

The author closes his argument here with a return to the underlying passage for the whole of the discourse, Psalm 110:4. Without putting undue attention on the sins of the Levitical and Aaronic priests, he yet points out that they were fallen men with ‘weakness’ no less than those for whom they ministered. While it was not a case of the ‘blind leading the blind,’ it was one of the ‘weak leading the weak.’ Therefore the foundation that undergirded the Levitical system was too weak for the holy habitation to be built as high as it needed to go: to heaven itself. Now we have a High Priest ‘made perfect forever,’ undergirding a worship that carries the believer beyond the veil into the intimate presence of God, forever.

*“Jesus, as such a Priest, is the foundation and the goal of a better hope,
Surety of a nobler covenant, the eternal and all-perfect Helper,
and ever-living Representative of those who enter into communion with God
through Him.” (Franz Delitzsch)*

¹³⁰ Lane; p. 193.