

### Epistle to the Hebrews Part III – Table of Contents (tentative)

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**Week 1: The Sum of All Things****Text Reading: Hebrews 8:1 - 2**

*“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)*

The serious student of the Bible comes upon many instances where the chapter and verse divisions of our English translations are less than fortuitous. Since the divisions themselves are not part of the inspired writ, moving them around in one’s study hardly constitutes blasphemy, and is sometimes necessary for preserving the sense and flow of the immediate context. But sometimes the



**Robert Estienne (1503-59)**

**First to add chapter & verse divisions to  
Greek New Testament**

vantage point of chapter 8, verse 1 the reader may survey the landscape of the author’s treatise in both directions – he has reached the ‘main point.’

The first word in chapter 8 is the Greek diminutive *kephalaion* (κεφαλαίον), which literally means ‘little head.’ But it is a term used only metaphorically in Greek writing, and signifies either (1), the chief or main point of an argument or treatise, or (2), the sum of a column of numbers tallied and

organizational contribution of the 16<sup>th</sup> century scholar, Robert Estienne, is right on the mark. This is certainly the case with the first verse of chapter 8 in the Epistle to the Hebrews. The opening word of this verse in the Greek proclaims the fact that the author/preacher has attained the *summit* of his argument thus far. This is not to say that everything that follows is of lesser importance, but rather that from the

reported at the 'head' of the column (as opposed to our long addition, where the total is given at the bottom of the column). Either sense will work in verse 1. In the latter, the author is saying that 'adding it all up, this is what we come to...'; whereas in the first sense he is stating that 'the culmination of his argument thus far, and the key to what follows is...' In either case we realize that we have arrived at an important place in this intricately woven epistle/sermon, tailored as it has been to drawing its audience back from the brink of apostasy. Therefore it is also an excellent place to do exactly what the opening word, *kephalaion*, encourages us to do - to survey what has gone before as we anticipate what lies ahead.

We begin with a recap of the situation and audience of the original epistle, or sermon, as our working hypothesis has been. Without reiterating the various theories of authorship and destination, we simply summarize the view which we are using as a framework for the exegetical study of the Book of Hebrews, and see how well it has held so far. Thus we hold that the author was first the preacher - Apollos, perhaps - having preached the majority of the content of Hebrews as a fervent exhortation to a particular congregation of believers who were in grave danger of apostatizing. The nature of that danger, as it is implied by the statements of the book itself, helps us to identify the congregation as one made up predominantly of Christians who had converted from Judaism. Clearly the fact that the book reads almost like a commentary upon the Mosaic books of Exodus and Leviticus strongly indicates that the original audience was of Jewish heritage - Gentile believers would undoubtedly be familiar with the broad outlines of Jewish history, but the more intricate references and allusions made by the author of Hebrews assumes a deeper knowledge of that history, an *ethnic* knowledge.

This fact also helps to further define the particular form of apostasy against which the author/preacher battles - a falling away *from* Christianity *to* Judaism. The congregation that first received this letter, who may also have been

the congregation that first heard the sermon, was being sorely tempted to lay aside their insistence on the primacy and messiahship of Jesus Christ, and to return to the teachings and practices of Mosaic Judaism. Our working hypothesis therefore places the congregation in Rome about the time of the return of the Jews from the exile formerly imposed upon that race by the Emperor Claudius. To the Romans of the first century, Christians were little more than an aberrant sect of an aberrant religion – a subset of that despised group of monotheistic fanatics, the Jews. When Claudius exiled the Jews, he made no distinction between Jews who adhered to the Old Covenant, or Jews who had embraced the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Likewise, when the edict was repealed by Claudius' successor, Nero, no distinction was made.

Based on several tangential comments by Roman historians of this time, particularly Seutonius, it is quite possible that a great conflict had arisen among the Jewish population of Rome over a certain 'Chrestus,' a name that could easily have been mistakenly put by Seutonius for 'Christ.' While we cannot prove with any certainty, nor consequently hold with any dogmatism, there exists a logical connection between this inter-religious conflict and the Claudian exile. In other words, the Jews who – believers and non-believers alike – suffered *"the plundering of your goods"* (10:34) as a result of the edict were now very motivated to lay low in order to avoid a repeat offense. For Jewish Christians this would mean sliding back into their religious heritage, a very easy thing to do. Such is the gist of our working hypothesis concerning the original recipients and the original purpose of this wonderful book. And so far, while there perhaps has been nothing in the first seven chapters to positively confirm this hypothesis, neither has there been anything in the earlier chapters to overturn it.

Now we come to the 'main point,' and as a main point it fits very well with the theory outlined above regarding the social context of the original audience. *"We have such a High Priest...who ministers in the True Sanctuary..."* These words are already pregnant with meaning, especially to Jews (and

especially in light of what is about to happen in history, in Jerusalem, and to the Temple). But they take on even greater weight when coupled with a desire – as our theory puts it – for Jewish Christians to ‘blend in’ and go with the religious flow. This is because one of the most glaring and offensive and confusing aspects of this new sect, particularly to the Roman pagans who observed them, was the fact that this religion had neither *priesthood* nor *temple*. One can almost hear the mocking of neighbors, “*Every religion has a temple – where else would their god live?*” And how can it be said that God is worshipped without an intermediary priesthood? A High Priest? A *Pontifex Maximus*? Christianity appeared to have none of these things.

But appearances can be deceiving, and in a very dangerous way. On the one hand the truth concerning the fulfillment of the High Priesthood and of the Temple/tabernacle is very appealing and comforting to those who have been given the grace to believe. But on the other hand, the lack of any visible priesthood, or of a visible central place of worship, might deceive those who are wavering in their faith into feeling that something was lacking, that something vital was missing from their religion. To believers who had converted from Judaism – at least prior to AD 70 – the solution might present itself quite readily as a return to their old religion, complete with priesthood and Temple (and a great deal of history, too). After the destruction of the Temple, and of Jerusalem, and the dispersion of the Jewish nation (priesthood included), this temptation would not be nearly as great. This consideration helps us place the time of the writing of the Book of Hebrews (as does a specific verse in Chapter 8) prior to AD 70.

All of this is conjecture, but hopefully logical and reasonable conjecture. And hopefully not unfruitful to a better understanding of the Book of Hebrews itself. One final note on this point: is it simply irony that the succeeding centuries would see the development of a ‘Christian’ priesthood, a ‘Christian’ High Priest, and a ‘Christian’ temple, all concentrated within and moving out

from the city of Rome? The Roman Catholic priesthood, the Roman Bishop as the 'Pope,' and such cultic centers as the Basilica of St. Peter & St. Paul and the Vatican, are not identical to the old Aaronic and Levitical priesthoods or the tabernacle/Temple, but the parallels are both striking and disturbing.

In any event, our author takes pains to make it clear, in the opening verse of Chapter 8, that Christianity will take no back seat to Judaism or paganism in the matter of a High Priest and of a Holy Sanctuary. Christianity has both, and of a greater and truer nature than anything the readers have either seen or heard of before. Christianity not only has the great High Priest Jesus Christ – the focus of the author's treatise up through Chapter 7, but this High Priest continues to minister in the 'true tabernacle' to which Moses' tent in the wilderness merely pointed as a type and shadow. It is important to note, again, that the author does not intend any disrespect to the old tabernacle or the old sanctuary – in fact he will accord these historical places the highest respect due them, below that which deserves even higher honor. In doing so he touches upon a consideration of the tabernacle/sanctuary phenomenon often lost upon Gentile readers of the Old Testament – the *symbolism* of the place that Moses built "*according to the pattern*" he received on Mt. Sinai. When speaking of the tabernacle, the Jewish rabbi or the early Christian preacher spoke of "great realities, indeed...but those of an ideal and archetypal character."

The author of Hebrews has already dealt in great length upon the 'priesthood' of Jesus Christ and, though he will have some more to say on that topic incidentally, it is to that discussion that the reader *looks back* from the vantage point of Chapter 8, verse 1. The 'main point' or summation of which he speaks in verse 1 is the fact that believers *have* their High Priest, and One truly greater than any priest of the order of either Aaron or Melchizedek. But the 'main point' also *looks forward* from this verse to the new and true tabernacle in which this great High Priest continues to minister and to the new covenant of which He has been made the chief and only minister/priest. The hinge point

between the discussion of Jesus Christ as the High Priest, and the New Covenant of which He is the High Priest is the current discussion in the opening verses of Chapter 8 concerning the sanctuary/tabernacle complex in the wilderness. As this is the focus of the author, this will be the focus of our current study.

*“Now this is the main point of the things we are saying: We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a Minister of the sanctuary and of the true tabernacle which the Lord erected, and not man.”* (8:1-2)

Verse 1, aside from announcing the arrival of the audience/reader to the summit of the ongoing treatise on the supremacy of Jesus Christ, is a brief recapitulation of the divine dignity now held by ‘Our Man in Glory.’ The second part of this verse sounds very familiar to the opening section of the book itself:

*God, who at various times and in various ways spoke in time past to the fathers by the prophets, has in these last days spoken to us by His Son, whom He has appointed heir of all things, through whom also He made the worlds; who being the brightness of His glory and the express image of His person, and upholding all things by the word of His power, when He had by Himself purged our sins, **sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...*** (1:1-3)

Recurring phrases like the one in these two passages are a very effective form of instruction by writing, but they perhaps even more effective as an oratorical device – driving home important points within the sermon or lecture through the use of a common refrain, slightly modified to prevent boredom! The Hebrew audience needed to be reminded, sternly but gently, just *who* this Jesus was and *where* He had His authoritative abode. Yet since this phrase, important as it is, is a reiteration of something the author/preacher has said before, it probably is not the focus of his current thought. Indeed, we arrive at that with verse 2 and the mention of the ‘sanctuary and true tabernacle’ in which Jesus Christ now ministers.

In order to fully understand what the author means when he writes, *“which the Lord erected, and not man”* we must pull a passage from a few verses ahead, where the writer in verse 5 reminds the readers that Moses constructed



the tabernacle and sanctuary in the wilderness, “*according to the pattern shown you on the mountain.*” With these two passages the author is reminding his Hebrew audience that there was something very, very special about the original tabernacle. In fact, based on what we know about rabbinic teaching in the first century, he was reminding them of something they had undoubtedly been taught before. This was the view held by orthodox Judaism that the tabernacle was *symbolic* in its design and construction, that every item and every material used held a deeper meaning, a typological meaning. Sometimes this teaching became pretty far-fetched, but the various strands all took their point of departure from the biblical fact that although Moses was the builder of the tabernacle, he was not its architect.

The ‘pattern’ that was given to Moses during his forty day hiatus on Mt. Sinai was not, remarkably, given to us within the Scriptures written by Moses. When we read the various passages in the Book of Exodus wherein Moses is instructed to build this out of that, to fashion this vessel or that utensil using this or that metal, etc., we cannot come away with anything looking like a blueprint from which we could reconstruct the original items. Moses was instructed to *build* the tabernacle after a divinely given pattern, but he was not instructed (or perhaps he was instructed *not*) to write down that pattern. This is a point of some exegetical importance, and of some exegetical danger too.

First, it is important in that it interjects the element of mystery into the meaning of the construction of the tabernacle. It tells us that the ‘pattern’ itself – the prototype, if you will – was something not accessible to everyone’s eyes but only to the eyes of Moses. Coupled with the fact that the pattern was given in the midst of the awe-inspiring fire of Sinai, this ‘eyes only’ feature hints at the nature of the pattern itself. What Moses saw, and what he was to replicate in the design and construction of the tabernacle was *holy* and *divine*, the type of thing that made Moses’ face glow and frightened the Israelites below. Even the work itself could not be done simply by the instruction of Moses, the Holy Spirit was

imparted to the chief craftsmen to enable them to understand and fulfill the 'pattern.' This was to be no ordinary ancient near eastern temple complex, this was to be the abode of God among His chosen people. But more on that in a little bit.

The exegetical danger of the lack of detailed information regarding the design and construction of the tabernacle – the 'pattern' – is that such lack always leads scholars, Jewish and Christian alike, down the path of unfruitful speculation. Brevard Childs, late professor of Old Testament at Yale, highlights this problem in his commentary on Exodus,

The basic methodological problem turns on the fact that nowhere does the Old Testament itself spell out a symbolism by which the role of the tabernacle is to be understood. Therefore, it remains very dubious to seek an interpretation on the basis of symbols constructed from other parts of the Old Testament or from the general history of religions.

By the time the Book of Hebrews was penned this speculation had matured through many generations of rabbinic and philosophical musings, to the point that every minute feature of the tabernacle as related in Scripture was

given an un-Scriptural meaning. Perhaps the most famous of these allegorical works with regard to the tabernacle is that of the Jewish philosopher Philo Alexandrius. Philo combined Greek philosophy with Jewish theology into his own mixture of allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament Scriptures. Philo's works were very popular with early Christians, in part due to their desire to appear



**Philo (20 BC – AD 50)**

'philosophical' in the eyes of the Gentile philosophers who tended to sneer at the new religion.

With regard to the tabernacle and its contents – our immediate context – Philo's writings illustrate the popular idea among Jewish teachers that there was a deeper meaning in the 'pattern' that was given to Moses. Philo, unlike more

biblically-grounded rabbis, tended to look for that meaning in the realm of natural science and even Greek platonic philosophy. Read in the light of modern science, Philo's analysis of the deeper significance of the tabernacle and its contents approaches the ridiculous. Consider these excerpts from Philo's *Life of Moses*:

The candlestick he placed at the south, figuring thereby the movements of the luminaries above; for the sun and the moon and the others run their courses in the south far away from the north. And therefore six branches, three on each side, issue from the central candlestick, bringing up the number to seven, and on all these are set seven lamps and candle-bearers, symbols of what the men of science call planets.

But, in choosing the materials for the woven work, he selected as the best out of a vast number possible four, as equal in number to the elements - earth, water, air, fire - out of which the world was made, and with a definite relation to those elements; the byssus, or bright white, coming from the earth, purple from the water, while dark red is like the air, which is naturally black, and scarlet like fire, since both are bright red.

[Speaking of the ark of the covenant within the Holy of Holies] It appears to be a symbol in a theological sense of the gracious power of God; in the human sense, of a mind which is gracious to itself and feels the duty of repressing and destroying with the aid of knowledge the conceit which in its love of vanity uplifts it in unreasoning exaltation and puffs it with pride.

It quickly becomes apparent that Philo was the epitome of groundless speculation at the time the letter to the Hebrews was written. Yet a more sober mind of the same era also speculated on the meaning of the tabernacle, finding in it a representation of the universe. Josephus, the historian of the Jewish nation at the court of Emperors Vespasian and Titus, tried to defend the faith of his people by making it look very much like the 'faith' or philosophy of his captors and rulers, the Romans. Making the same mistake regarding the four elements, and incorporating the signs of the Zodiac into the design of the tabernacle, Josephus writes in his *Antiquities of the Jews*,

Now here one may wonder at the ill-will which men bear to us, and which they profess to bear on account of our despising that Deity which they pretend to

honor; for if any one do but consider the fabric of the tabernacle, and take a view of the garments of the high priest, and of those vessels which we make use of in our sacred ministration, he will find that our legislator was a divine man, and that we are unjustly reproached by others; for if any one do without prejudice, and with judgment, look upon these things, he will find *they were every one made in way of imitation and representation of the universe*. When Moses distinguished the tabernacle into three parts, and allowed two of them to the priests, as a place accessible and common, he denoted the land and the sea, these being of general access to all; but he set apart the third division for God, because heaven is inaccessible to men. And when he ordered twelve loaves to be set on the table, he denoted the year, as distinguished into so many months. *By branching out the candlestick into seventy parts, he secretly intimated the Decani, or seventy divisions of the planets; and as to the seven lamps upon the candlesticks, they referred to the course of the planets, of which that is the number*. The veils, too, which were composed of four things, they declared the four elements; for the fine linen was proper to signify the earth, because the flax grows out of the earth; the purple signified the sea, because that color is dyed by the blood of a sea shell-fish; the blue is fit to signify the air; and the scarlet will naturally be an indication of fire...Each of the sardonyxes declares to us the sun and the moon; those, I mean, that were in the nature of buttons on the high priest's shoulders. *And for the twelve stones, whether we understand by them the months, or whether we understand the like number of the signs of that circle which the Greeks call the Zodiac, we shall not be mistaken in their meaning*.

These are just a sampling of the fanciful notions that have arisen from the lack of detailed information regarding the 'pattern' given to Moses for the building of the tabernacle. Still, these flights of fancy should not lead us (as it has led some scholars) to abandon altogether the symbolic aspect of the tabernacle. The juxtaposition made by the author of Hebrews of the tabernacle pitched by Moses and the 'true' tabernacle built by the Lord leads us to conclude that the former did indeed have a typological relation to the latter (though the words 'former' and 'latter' are only biblical chronology! For the 'latter' is clearly the 'former') Delitzsch makes an important point concerning this relationship,

The 'true' tabernacle, I which our High Priest now ministers, is the original, essential, and archetypal one; not a work of human hands; not constructed of perishable materials, but a supra-mundane work of God Himself, the product of an immediate divine operation.

Can we come to a sober analysis of the typological meaning of the Mosaic tabernacle? There appears to be some evidence in the biblical record itself, both in the description of the tabernacle that is given, and in subsequent passages. When we consider closely the designs and colors and objects of tabernacle art, we may find that the likes of Philo and Josephus – allegorical excesses and scientific inaccuracies aside – may not have been all that far off the mark. It is beyond the scope of this study to do an item by item analysis of the tabernacle, but a few comments may suffice in our quest to find the hidden meaning of the ‘pattern.’

First, it is of significance that the fabrics that were woven to furnish the coverings and walls of the tabernacle were to be decorated throughout with a multitude of cherubim. We are not told much in the Bible about these creatures, but what is recorded there is consistent – the cherubim are those angelic beings that abide in the presence of Almighty God. Perhaps there is a connection between the depiction of cherubim on the tapestry of the tabernacle, and the vision of the cherubim filling the outer court of the Temple, given to the prophet Ezekiel,

*Now the cherubim were standing on the south side of the temple when the man went in, and the cloud filled the inner court. Then the glory of the LORD went up from the cherub, and paused over the threshold of the temple; and the house was filled with the cloud, and the court was full of the brightness of the LORD's glory. And the sound of the wings of the cherubim was heard even in the outer court, like the voice of Almighty God when He speaks.*  
(Ezekiel 10:3-5)

Of all of the cherubim woven into the fabric of the tabernacle, none was more significant than the one(s) depicted on the veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. This veil, of course, separated the priests who ministered on behalf of the people to their God, from the immediate presence of that God. It is perhaps not a stretch of allegorical fancy to see in the cherubim on the veil a pictorial reminder of that original barrier set up by God on the outskirts of Eden,

*...therefore the LORD God sent him out of the garden of Eden to till the ground from which he was taken. So He drove out the man; and He placed cherubim at the east of the garden of Eden, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to guard the way to the tree of life.*  
(Genesis 3:23-24)

There may be a sense, then, in which the tabernacle did reflect the created universe as Josephus maintained. It certainly represented both a place where God dwelt in mystery and holiness, and a place where man dwelt in separation from God.

Another passage that bears on this study is the famous scene from Isaiah chapter 6,

*In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up, and the train of His robe filled the temple. Above it stood seraphim; each one had six wings: with two he covered his face, with two he covered his feet, and with two he flew. And one cried to another and said:*

*“Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory!”*

*And the posts of the door were shaken by the voice of him who cried out, and the house was filled with smoke.*  
(Isaiah 6:1-4)

Unlike the vision of Ezekiel quoted earlier, it is evident that the prophet Isaiah is seeing a vision of the *heavenly* throne of God and that the ‘temple’ mentioned in this passage is not to be confused with the temple in Jerusalem. There is not much in the way of descriptive language in this passage, so its usefulness to our inquiry is limited. Nevertheless, it does speak of God’s throne as a ‘temple’ and therefore provides another hint as to the original symbolism of the tabernacle. The apostle John was to see a similar awesome sight during his exile on the island of Patmos,

*I was in the Spirit on the Lord’s Day, and I heard behind me a loud voice, as of a trumpet, saying, “I am the Alpha and the Omega, the First and the Last,” and, “What you see, write in a book and send it to the seven churches which are in Asia: to Ephesus, to Smyrna, to Pergamos, to Thyatira, to Sardis, to Philadelphia, and to Laodicea.” Then I turned to see the voice that spoke with me. And having turned I saw seven golden lampstands, and in the midst of the seven lampstands One like the Son of Man, clothed with a garment down to the feet and girded about the chest with a golden band.*

(Revelation 1:10-13)

The candlestands mentioned in this passage are a clear reference to the candlestands in the tabernacle/temple complex. It appears from these passages that the typological significance of the earthly tabernacle was in its reflection of the antitype – the ‘temple’ of heaven wherein God dwelt among His angelic host. There are other passages that corroborate this thought, such as the presentation passage of the Son of Man in Daniel 7, but perhaps there is no more significant biblical evidence of the similarity between the tabernacle on earth and the temple in heaven than the rending of the veil upon Jesus’ death on the cross. This tearing of the ancient barrier (ancient, as in, since Eden) signified in a powerful way that the type had become the antitype, the shadow was engulfed in the light, and the ideal was replaced by the real. As in the previous chapters of Hebrews, the author maintains his consistent message – a movement away from Christ would be a movement backwards along the path of progressive revelation and, consequently, a fatal movement away from God.

**Week 2:                    Mediator of the Covenant**

**Text Reading:        Hebrews 8:3 – 6**

*“...there is always somewhere a glorious creaturely heaven, not forming indeed a definite part of the created universe, and yet having, from the very nature of those who belong to it, a certain definite localization.”*

(Franz Delitzsch)

Our working hypothesis throughout this study advanced a little in our last lesson, to surmise that the original recipients of this epistle/sermon were

undergoing a severe temptation to return to the 'faith of their fathers,' to Judaism. One aspect of this temptation may have been the taunt delivered by unbelieving Jews that this new sect of Christianity was devoid of both Sanctuary and High Priest, a taunt that the author of Hebrews skillfully refutes. Perhaps it is true to the historical setting of the letter, that the unbelieving Jews of Rome were trying to coax their converted countrymen back to the Jewish faith by holding out to them the prospect of a mediating High Priest. If so, however, then the temptation was one full of tradition and empty of substance. It is no historical theory to say that the men who occupied the office of High Priest in Jerusalem had long since abandoned the actual faith of which they were the prime mediator, and had become Machiavellian political operatives who bought the office of High Priest...or killed for it. Of the last High Priest before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, Josephus simply writes, "A man altogether unworthy."

It was not supposed to be that way, of course. The man who was alone charged with the sacred duty of approaching Jehovah on behalf of His people was to be a holy man, and a man who treated God as Holy. God himself emphasized this criteria with an exclamation point, with the fiery deaths of Aaron's sons Nadab and Abihu.

*By those who come near Me I must be regarded as holy;  
And before all the people I must be glorified.* (Leviticus 10:3)

Other than the two sons of Aaron who died before the Lord, the lineage of the High Priesthood of Judaism started out pretty well. Aaron's son Eleazar and grandson Phinehas were righteous men jealous of God's glory. Phinehas displays a zeal for the Lord's honor that would shock the tame sensibilities of modern 'priests.'

*And indeed, one of the children of Israel came and presented to his brethren a Midianite woman in the sight of Moses and in the sight of all the congregation of the children of Israel, who were weeping at the door of the tabernacle of meeting. Now when Phinehas*



*the son of Eleazar, the son of Aaron the priest, saw it, he rose from among the congregation and took a javelin in his hand and he went after the man of Israel into the tent and thrust both of them through, the man of Israel, and the woman through her body. So the plague was stopped among the children of Israel.*

(Numbers 25:6-8)

Unfortunately for Israel, her history of High Priests reads very much like her history of kings - a few good ones in the midst of many bad ones. According to the records of Josephus, eighty-two High Priests officiated successively from the time of Aaron to the destruction of the Temple in AD 70. Few were worthy of notice in either the Scriptural record or Jewish histories. Eli was the infamously overweight priest who failed to control his wicked sons, but Jehoiada was the courageous defender of the Davidic line, hiding and protecting young Joash and then instructing him when he came of age to claim his throne from the evil Queen Athaliah. For the most part, however, the High Priests were non-descript and warrant little mention in the pages of Scripture.

Still, their role in the social and religious life of Israel should not be underestimated. Long after the ruling dynasties of the Northern Tribes (Israel) and the Southern (Judah) faded into memory, the office of High Priest continued uninterrupted. During and after the Babylonian Exile, the people of Israel/Judah looked more to the High Priest for civil as well as religious leadership, and this fact politicized the office to a great extent. A famous story/legend recorded by rabbinic writers as well as Josephus illustrates the transition of the High Priest from religious figurehead to civil leader.

The story revolves around the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. In Josephus' account the High Priest is Jaddua, in the Jewish account it is Simon the Just. In both accounts it is the High Priest who delivers Jerusalem from the destruction that Alexander had visited upon countless cities by the time he reached Judea. Hearing of the devastation that the Greek army had wrought along its path through Asia Minor into Palestine, culminating in the razing of the seaport city of Gaza, the High Priest in Jerusalem decided to

approach the Macedonian king/conqueror in full priestly regalia leading a multitude of priests and citizens. When Alexander saw the High Priest coming toward him, he fell on his face and worshipped the God for whom this High Priest officiated. Alexander was challenged by one of his generals, for up to this time it was the custom of Alexander to *receive* homage as to deity and not to *pay* homage to the gods of conquered nations. Alexander explained that he had seen a vision of the Jewish High Priest in a dream while he was still in Macedonia, seeking divine direction as to his intended invasion of the East. Jaddua/Simon then showed Alexander the Book of Daniel, and the Greek king naturally concluded that the prophecy of conquest over the Persians applied to him. The High Priest led Alexander back to Jerusalem, and instructed him through the offering of sacrifice to Israel's God. Subsequently Alexander granted the Jews unparalleled freedom of worship, not only in Judea but also in Egypt and Babylonia when these lands came under Greek dominion.

The story has the trappings of legend, yet it is undeniable that Alexander granted unusual favor to the Jews, who offered him little in the way of political or military advantage. Furthermore the Greek king was not what one would call a religious man; as far as history records he did not even possess basic human morality. Perhaps the story, or legend, is rooted in historical fact. In any event it gained the stature of truth by the first century, and lent a certain amount of prestige to the office of the High Priest, whether the man who occupied the office warranted it or not.

Perhaps the Jews of the first century - the neighbors to the Roman Christians who first received this epistle to the Hebrews - looked to the Jewish High Priest less as a mediator between them and God, and more as (hopefully) one who might stand in the gap between them and their Roman overlords. It is true to history that by the time of Christ's first advent the office of the High Priest was purely political, bought and sold to the highest bidder. Earlier High Priests involved themselves in the civil war between Julius Caesar and Pompey,

and in the intrigues of Cleopatra and Marc Antony. And when the time came to revolt against the Romans, in AD 63, the High Priest led the way.

Logically, or theologically as the case may be, there should have been little temptation for the Hebrew Christians if they only considered the path that the Jewish High Priesthood had taken over so many previous generations. Yet the fact remained from Scripture that the High Priest did occupy an important place, an absolutely critical place, between the faithful worshipper of Jehovah and the divine countenance. Even the political High Priests of the day continued their religious duties – their daily officiating at the Temple and their annual offering in the Holy of Holies. The author of Hebrews properly ignores the ignominy of both current and past High Priests and instead emphasizes their proper function, again refusing to elevate Jesus Christ by denigrating others. He offers his readers a brief lesson on the role and function of the priest in order to show not only that Jesus performs the same function, but more importantly that He has a unique *place* to perform that function.

*For every high priest is appointed to offer both gifts and sacrifices. Therefore it is necessary that this One also have something to offer.* (8:3)

It is easy to get off track from this verse, and many commentators have done so, by spending an inordinate amount of time determining exactly ‘what’ Jesus Christ has ‘to offer.’ Orthodox commentators, of course, find the answer in Christ’s sacrificial offering of Himself, of which the writer of Hebrews has already spoken. But the thrust of this portion of Chapter 8 is not upon the offering given by this unique High Priest; rather it is upon the *place* where that offering has been and is made. The writer speaks of the offering by way of reminder to the readers of a fact with which they were all very familiar – in order once again to show both the difference and the superiority of Jesus Christ’s ministry. The reminder that ‘every High Priest must have something to offer’

takes us back to the original establishment of the office of High Priest, as we read from Numbers 18,

*Then the LORD said to Aaron: "You and your sons and your father's house with you shall bear the iniquity related to the sanctuary, and you and your sons with you shall bear the iniquity associated with your priesthood. Also bring with you your brethren of the tribe of Levi, the tribe of your father, that they may be joined with you and serve you while you and your sons are with you before the tabernacle of witness. They shall attend to your needs and all the needs of the tabernacle; but they shall not come near the articles of the sanctuary and the altar, lest they die – they and you also. They shall be joined with you and attend to the needs of the tabernacle of meeting, for all the work of the tabernacle; but an outsider shall not come near you. And you shall attend to the duties of the sanctuary and the duties of the altar, that there may be no more wrath on the children of Israel. Behold, I Myself have taken your brethren the Levites from among the children of Israel; they are a gift to you, given by the LORD, to do the work of the tabernacle of meeting. Therefore you and your sons with you shall attend to your priesthood for everything at the altar and behind the veil; and you shall serve. I give your priesthood to you as a gift for service, but the outsider who comes near shall be put to death."*

(Numbers 18:1-7)

Thus Aaron and his descendants in perpetuity were placed in responsibility of the *offerings* of the people of Israel before their God – *all* the offerings. God was not to be approached by any other than the sons of Aaron, and even then He was not to be approached without offerings. This much is elementary; what follows in Hebrews 8 is the main point of the section and the groundwork for the second half of the epistle.

*For if He were on earth, He would not be a priest, since there are priests who offer the gifts according to the law.* (8:4)

The author is setting up a logical syllogism here. The first premise is from the Scriptural design of the office of the High Priest: *Every High Priest must have something to offer*. This is immediately followed by a second premise, having been established previously in the epistle: *This One, therefore, has something to offer*. Now comes a contrary statement in verse 4, *But this One cannot have presented His offering on earth, as there is already an established priesthood to do that – the Jewish High Priest in the Temple in Jerusalem*. The conclusion, amazingly, is left

off – it is obvious and does not need to be stated: *Therefore, this One must present His offering in heaven!* He must present His offering – a far better offering than the blood of bulls and goats – in the antitypical tabernacle for which the earthly tabernacle/Temple serves only as a shadow and type. Delitzsch summarizes, “...our high priest, in order to be high priest at all, and as such Aaron’s antitype, must have something to offer, and that the place of such offering cannot be an earthly, and therefore must be a heavenly one.”

It is important to follow the train of thought established up to this point by the author, a pattern of theological thinking that is consistently followed by New Testament writers. That is the fact that the faith that grew into the religion called ‘Christianity’ grew organically from that which was called ‘Judaism.’ The point is this: Jesus Christ, being a High Priest of the order of Melchizedek, could not simply establish a separate temple on earth; He could not simply lead His followers off into the wilderness of Qumran and set up a parallel religion. As the light to the shadow, the antitypical to the typical, Christ’s priesthood must overtake and supersede that of the Aaronic/Mosaic institution. The last 150 years of American Christianity has clouded this truth through the setting up of Christianity as a separate ‘dispensation’ from Judaism – *and* teaching that a return to the Mosaic/Aaronic system is part of God’s future plan. Nothing could be further from the view of the writer to the Hebrews, as we shall see stated explicitly at the end of Chapter 8.

It appears from the wording of this passage, and later verses, that the author had an idea that the old Aaronic priesthood was living on borrowed time, and the note was soon to be called. The current verse helps us place the date of authorship as prior to AD 70, as the writer speaks of the on-going priestly work presumably in the Temple at Jerusalem: *“since there are priests who offer gifts according to the law.”* He is not referring to the ancient priesthood in the tabernacle, nor is he speaking of the priesthood that existed when Jesus was on earth, for he specifically states the hypothesis *“If He were on earth”* implying *today*,

*now*. In other words, if Jesus were *still on earth* He would not be a priest for that role is already taken. Again Delitzsch writes, "Another such priesthood ministering in that which is the shadow of heavenly things would be unimaginable. The high-priesthood of Christ, therefore, must belong to the heavenly world itself, and be of a supra-mundane and heavenly nature."

In a sense the author, in this verse, is granting legitimacy to the Jewish priesthood, and this might appear to some readers to work against his basic position that the Hebrew Christians must not return to their former religious practice. What he is doing, however, is maintaining the same position as the rest of the New Testament writers that the Jewish High Priest and the Aaronic/Levitical priestly system is not rendered illegitimate by the coming of Christ, it is *fulfilled* by His work. To use the author's own word later in this same chapter, the Aaronic priesthood is not illegitimate, it is *obsolete*. It is past its time, and its purpose.

*...who serve the copy and shadow of the heavenly things, as Moses was divinely instructed when he was about to make the tabernacle. For He said, "See that you make all things according to the pattern shown you on the mountain."* (8:5)

Without being explicit, this verse serves as the conclusion to the logical syllogism discussed earlier. Since the earthly tabernacle/Temple is a shadow of the heavenly, and since the Aaronic priesthood already occupies the role of High Priest in that earthly tabernacle/Temple, then it follows that the priesthood of Jesus Christ must function in a heavenly tabernacle. The earthly sanctuary was a magnificent display of divine grace, but it was never to be the permanent display. "The Levitical priests performed their ministry in a sanctuary that was sanctioned by God, but which only imperfectly and incompletely reproduced what Moses had seen. Although Moses was shown a 'model' to follow, as a

human-made sanctuary, the tabernacle that he erected was inferior to the sanctuary in which Christ performs his ministry.”

This teaching is a solid refutation of the popular belief among American Christians that, had the Jews received Jesus as their Messiah, He would have set up His kingdom here on earth and in Jerusalem during His first advent. For too long the teaching of the author of Hebrews has been ignored with regard to the fact that the ‘Church Age,’ as it is called, is not a divine reaction to the failure of the Jews to recognize Jesus as the Promised One. There was a planned obsolescence to the Levitical system, and intended end that was to come when that which the former system shadowed had come to light. The author of Hebrews drives this point home time and time again throughout the second half of the epistle – the former institution was the type, the current is the antitype. Lane writes,

During the former situation, marked by the ministry of the Levitical priests, there was no entrance into the real, heavenly presence of God; full entrance into the eternal presence of God was made possible only with the life and redemptive accomplishments of Jesus. The celestial sanctuary became the scene of an effective priesthood only from the moment of Christ’s exaltation.

When the impact of the author’s argument is properly understood, the thought of ‘going back’ to the old system, the old priesthood and Temple is clearly a giant leap from the light back into the shadows. Yet this is exactly what many present-day Christians believe will happen during the millennium. For some reason the heavenly priesthood of Jesus Christ – so powerfully established and defended in Hebrews – is set aside in favor of an earthly Davidic kingdom, *with a return of the Levitical priestly ministry!* To what effect? What redemptive power can there be in re-establishing the ineffective ministry of the former, typical economy in place of the effective, eternal and heavenly ministry of the antitype? It seems that the temptation faced by the Roman Hebrew Christians of the mid first century has come full circle in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup>.

*But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.* (8:6)

The author completes his transition from his earlier discussion regarding the person of Jesus Christ into his developing treatise regarding the work of Jesus Christ. The center of it all is the *covenant*. This verse contains a very important principle for understanding biblical ecclesiology – the principle that the priesthood is founded upon the covenant and not the other way around. Moses received the covenant *before* Aaron received the priesthood; and the same is true of Jesus Christ. The *New Covenant* was first prophesied, then inaugurated and established in the Person and Work of Jesus Christ during His earthly career, and subsequently mediated by a new and better High Priest. This is why the author speaks of Jesus being perfected through suffering as prologue to His ‘sitting down at the right hand of Majesty...’ Christ’s perfect obedience and humble submission to the redemptive will of the Father qualified Him to be the self-offered sacrifice which in turn qualified Him to be the eternal, ever-serving High Priest of the New Covenant. “His entrance into the heavenly sanctuary guarantees God’s acceptance of his sacrifice and the actualization of the provisions of the superior covenant he mediated.”

With this transitional verse the author embarks on a topic little understood and appreciated among modern Christians: the *New Covenant*. Two polar views contend within modern American evangelicalism. The first, already alluded to, is Dispensationalism. This view tends to over-emphasize the ‘new’ in the New Covenant; new as in completely different, brand new and not at all related to the old. The organic relationship between the Old Covenant and the New is thereby clouded, and in some cases lost completely. The other pole is represented by Covenantalism, in which the ‘covenant’ in New Covenant is emphasized, and a perceived continuity upon this word brings the signs and symbols of the old into corresponding signs and symbols of the new. What follows from Chapter 8, verse 6 through Chapter 10 is a detailed discussion of the



New Covenant with balanced emphasis upon its newness and upon its organic relationship with the old. The New Covenant is a central and immensely important theme in Scripture and well worth careful study.

**Week 3: The New Covenant – An Introduction****Text Reading: Hebrews 8:7 - 8**

*“...there has been a universal feeling, a sentiment never forgotten, of the necessity of an interpreter or mediator between God and man.”*

(R. Milligan *Epistle to the Hebrews*)

The passage before us in this lesson is worth a slow and careful investigation. The author's usage of the 'New Covenant' prophecy from Jeremiah is a watershed in redemptive theology – a succinct and powerful insight into the crowning glory of God's redemptive plan through the ages. As a mini-treatise on a specific theological issue, Hebrews 8:7-12 ranks with Romans 4 on Justification by Faith, Romans 9 on Predestination, and I Corinthians 12-14 on Spiritual Gifts. With only a few words of his own, and the inspired use of an Old Testament prophecy, the writer of Hebrews sets forth in unmistakable terms the nature of the New Covenant and of those who are members therein.

Yet the passage has not often been used to its full clarifying potential in the age-old debate between the two schools of thought within evangelicalism concerning the covenants. Both the Dispensationalist and the Covenantalist finds a defense of his peculiar soteriological framework in Hebrews 8 when, in fact, neither can rightly do so. The Dispensationalist points to the 'fact' that the New Covenant was to be made with 'the house of Israel and the house of Judah' as proof that it is a *Jewish* institution and therefore pertains not to the Church Age but to the coming Millennium. The Covenantalist, maintaining that divine covenants are always *familial*, may view the 'least of them' as a reference to the infants of believers, to whom they claim the New Covenant sign of baptism rightly belongs. The Dispensationalist view results in a separation in the work of Jesus Christ as the One Mediator between God and man, the true and heavenly High Priest, into one phase for the Gentile nations and another for the Jews, with Hebrews 8 referring solely to the latter. The Covenantalist view overlooks the

powerful statement in the text concerning the nature and characteristic of a person who has been brought into the New Covenant, on whose heart the law of God has been written. The Dispensationalist applies the New Covenant too narrowly, the Covenantalist too broadly. But the author of Hebrews has been presenting to us the *one* work of the *one* High Priest of the mysterious order of Melchizedek, Jesus Christ. Therefore our interpretation must adhere to what the epistle of Hebrews, and the rest of the New Testament, has to say concerning the *effectiveness* and the *extent* of Christ's priestly ministry. In this way we may avoid the opposite errors of Dispensationalism and Covenantalism.

We may summarize the biblical paradigm for the salvation of man this way: It is to be agreed among evangelicals, whether Dispensational or Covenantal, that there is no other salvation for the sinner – Jew or Gentile – but by grace through faith in Jesus Christ. Thus we must conclude that the finished work whereby Jesus Christ secured the honor of 'High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek' was and is the instrumental means by which any man is to be saved. As the writer of Hebrews clearly sets forth that this Melchizedekan work *inaugurated* the New Covenant, we must conclude that the very same New Covenant is comprehensive of *all* who will be saved – there can be no 'other' covenantal arrangement, no different covenant for the Jew than for the Gentile. Yet the efficacy of Christ's High Priestly work, as compared with the inefficacy of the ancient Aaronic/Levitical priesthood, also forces us to conclude that the man to whom the New Covenant is applied, is effectively and eternally made to be a member of that Covenant. In a word, *he is saved*. These brief summary thoughts are defensible both from the rest of the Book of Hebrews and from the balance of Scripture, and therefore they will serve as hedges to keep us clear of the two interpretive errors discussed above.

However, before we can begin what will hopefully be a fairly thorough analysis of the New Covenant, we are presented by the author with a disconcerting statement regarding the Old Covenant – that it was, perhaps,

*faulty*. We will understand the perfection of the New Covenant better as we better understand the imperfection of the Old. And it is important that we understand *wherein* this imperfection resides – was it in the Covenant itself? Or was it imperfect due to the imperfection and sin of those with whom it was made? The answer, we will see, is a little of the former and a lot of the latter.

*For if that first covenant had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.* (8:7)

On the face of it, this verse is incredible in its audacity. It appears that the author is claiming some lack of perfection, some blameworthiness, in the Old Covenant that was inaugurated through Moses and had governed the religious life of the people of God for fifteen centuries. The word translated ‘faultless’ by all the standard English versions does mean just that: “blameless, deserving no censure, free from fault or defect.” Must we conclude, then, that the writer views the Old Covenant as having fault? As being subject to some blame? As worthy of censure? If so, then it would be the first time in the entire letter that the author has attempted to exalt the new by denigrating the old; that just has not been his style.

Fortunately we do have an ‘out’ that does not do exegetical violence to the passage. The word ‘covenant’ as it appears in our English translations of verse 7 is not actually present in the Greek text – it is an assumed antecedent for the word ‘first.’ Obviously it is not an unreasonable assumption, as it is found as ‘covenant’ in every major English translation from the King James to the New International. All of the translators have sought the antecedent for the ‘first’ in verse 7 from what the author had just written in verse 6,

*But now He has obtained a more excellent ministry, inasmuch as He is also Mediator of a better covenant, which was established on better promises.*

There are two options in verse 6 for the antecedent of verse 7 – either ‘covenant’ or ‘ministry.’ The first of these is reasonable on the basis of the fact

that the New Covenant is the topic of the subsequent section of this chapter, verses 8-12. But 'ministry' is also a reasonable antecedent, as the heavenly ministry of Jesus Christ - contrasted with the earthly ministry of the Aaronic priesthood - has been the topic of discussion thus far, and is arguably the thrust of this whole section of Hebrews. Would the following translation of verse 7 be inadmissible on the basis of the author's line of argument thus far?

*For if that first ministry had been faultless, then no place would have been sought for a second.*

If we were to glance ahead into chapter 9, we would find that the problems the author discovers with the old system (holding off on the use of 'covenant' for a while...) have to do with various aspects of the *ministry* of the tabernacle/Temple - the sacrifices and those who performed the sacrifices. The use of 'ministry' as the antecedent of verse 7 seems to be supported by the unusual use of the third person pronoun in the opening clause of verse 8, "*For finding fault with **them**...*" The Greek pronoun is definitely plural here, with no textual variants to fall back upon. In other words, if the author had intended for 'covenant' to be understood in verse 7, then it would have made more grammatical sense for him to have used the *singular* pronoun 'it' in verse 8. But if instead he intended the 'ministry' to be understood in verse 7, then the plural pronoun in verse 8 is perfectly understandable in that he would have been speaking of the *ministers*, the Aaronic and Levitical priests, of the old system.

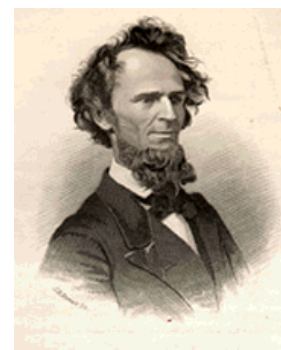
If we assume for the sake of argument that the author was referring to the ministers of the old sacrificial system, then the fact that God found fault with them is no surprise at all. Indeed, it is a recurring theme among the Old Testament prophets. One graphic example of this, one of many, is found in Isaiah chapter 1, where the people of Israel (through their priests) are condemned for religiously following the prescribed Old Covenant worship,

*To what purpose is the multitude of your sacrifices to Me?" Says the LORD.  
 I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams and the fat of fed cattle.  
 I do not delight in the blood of bulls, or of lambs or goats.  
 When you come to appear before Me, who has required this from your hand,  
 To trample My courts? Bring no more futile sacrifices;  
 Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of  
 assemblies – I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting.  
 Your New Moons and your appointed feasts  
 My soul hates; they are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them.  
 When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you;  
 Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear.  
 Your hands are full of blood...* (Isaiah 1:11-15)

While it is possible to find fault with the ministers of the Old Covenant without controversy, to do so with the Old Covenant itself presents a very troublesome situation – that something ordained and instituted by God was less than perfect. Delitzsch writes, "It was God, the Deliverer from the land of Egypt, who offered that first covenant of Sinai to His people. That covenant was therefore not altogether wanting in grace and glory." Commentators struggle, however, with coming to grips with the possibility of 'fault' in the Old Covenant, as verse 7 appears to state. Delitzsch himself offers a statement that is jarring to the sensibility of anyone who considers the works of God to be perfect,

God's faithfulness to that first covenant was indeed gloriously vindicated in the very fact that *when it had failed to accomplish His gracious purpose* in its institution, he forthwith devised a second covenant which could not fail; and so grace was outbidden by yet larger grace.

Robert Milligan, a Bible scholar of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, attempts to reconcile the sovereign wisdom and purpose of God with the necessity of instituting a 'new' covenant. Milligan writes, "Let it not be supposed, however, that God was in any way disappointed in his purposes with respect to the Old Covenant." Milligan then argues



**Robert Milligan (1814-75)**

biblically that the nature of the Old Covenant – as we are taught in numerous places by the apostle Paul – was not *to save* but *to warn and instruct*. Paul informs

us in Romans 7 that is was the Law that made him aware of his sin, and in a sense, killed him. Elsewhere Paul refers to the Law as the 'schoolmaster' to lead man to Christ - to show man the depths of his depravity and the severity of his need for a gracious Savior.

Milligan believes that the 'fault' of which the author speaks in verse 7 was in the fact that the Jews had turned the Old Covenant into something it was never meant to be: a vehicle for personal salvation. "The fact is that the Law, or the Old Covenant, was never given for the purpose of justifying any man." In this Milligan is on firm biblical ground,

*For as many as are of the works of the law are under the curse; for it is written, "Cursed is everyone who does not continue in all things which are written in the book of the law, to do them." But that no one is justified by the law in the sight of God is evident, for "the just shall live by faith." (Galatians 3:10-11)*

Perhaps we can conclude, therefore, that the 'fault' found in the Old Covenant was really with the Old Covenant people who tried to find salvation in the works of the Law. Yet while this may be true - and evidently Paul believed it to have been the case among at least some of the Jewish nation - the thought itself is pretty far afield from the basic thesis developed by the author of Hebrews thus far in this letter. If any fault is to be found in the Old Covenant, and any justification for the inauguration of a New Covenant, it may certainly be found in the ministers and ministry of the Old Covenant. But it may also be found, in a less blameworthy sense, in the fact that the Old Covenant was *typical*. It was *incomplete*. True, it was never intended to be complete - no more than the shadow is ever intended to stand for the light. Again Milligan seems to grasp well the meaning of the author of Hebrews, "Such an arrangement (i.e., the Old Covenant and its associated ministry), however necessary as a preliminary measure, was never intended to accomplish fully God's benevolent designs and purposes with regard to the salvation of the world." If generations of Jews mistakenly believed that the Mosaic institution was the 'end all' of God's

redemptive plan, the fault was not with the institution *in theory* but *in practice*, as the old priesthood assumed a position of religious and moral domination over the nation. Nonetheless, even if the Jewish nation had maintained the proper position with respect to the purpose of the Law (and every man walked by faith), yet it would still have been necessary for the Old to be set aside and the New to be brought in. In proof of this the author turns not to his own understanding on the matter, but to the prophetic words of Jeremiah.

*Because finding fault with them, He says: "Behold, the days are coming, says the LORD, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah—*  
**(8:8)**

Two things are of note in this opening verse of the passage from Jeremiah. The first involves the circumstances under which the prophecy was originally given, and the second the nature of the recipients of the promise - Israel and Judah. The prophecy itself comes from the 31<sup>st</sup> chapter of Jeremiah, and came at a very low point in the history of the nation of Judah (the Northern Kingdom of Israel having long since passed into exile and obscurity). The Babylonians had invaded Palestine for the third and final time, destroying the City of Jerusalem and razing the sacred Temple. Thousands of Jews had been carried off into captivity, and thousand of the lower classes had remained to fend for themselves in a desolated land. Jeremiah, offered the opportunity by the Babylonians to come to Babylon as a favored guest, chose to remain in Judea. To all intents and purposes it appeared that the final hammer had fallen upon the descendants of Abraham, and that the ancient covenant had finally been annulled for ever. The prophetic word that came through Jeremiah at this time was a word of comfort, but comfort that was set in the distant future.

The prophecy begins with a word for those Jews who had been taken captive and removed from their native land. They were to pray for the peace of the city to which they were taken, and to know that the exile would last seventy years. The overall thrust of the prophecy was to assure all Israel - both the



captives and those who remained in the land – that God had not abandoned His people. There would be a returning, but not to the way things used to be. Rather there would be a *new* covenant, one in which the typical would become the real, and the shadow give way to the light.

The concept of ‘new’ in the New Covenant is one that deserves intense and detailed investigation, something we hope to do in this study. But before dealing with the newness of the New Covenant, and all that this entails, we must first deal with an interpretive obstacle that was erected roughly 150 years ago with the advent of Dispensational theology. This obstacle is found in the wording of the prophecy itself – that the New Covenant would be made *with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah*. When one reads the chapters in Jeremiah that pertain to the context of this prophecy, it is hard to imagine that the Gentiles were much on the prophet’s mind at the time. Jeremiah was comforting *Israel* with a promise of a future time when God would rekindle His favor toward His people and would solidify that favor with a new and even more intimate covenantal relationship. It makes sense that the author of a letter called ‘Hebrews’ would pull this ancient prophecy into play in an effort to strengthen the faith and fortitude of Jewish believers. But where does all of this leave the Gentiles? If the New Covenant was promised to the houses of Israel and Judah – a clear reference to the *national* identity of the descendants of Jacob – how can the prophecy be made to pertain to Gentiles without violently spiritualizing it?

Dispensationalists claim that this is exactly what Covenantalists do – they get around the problem of the words by referring to the Church as ‘Spiritual Israel.’ It is claimed by many Reformed theologians that the Church has subsumed the identity of Israel into itself, and therefore the prophecies from the Old Testament addressed to the nation of Israel were fulfilled in the Church. Dispensationalists rightly recoil from this spiritualizing hermeneutic. In the case of the prophecy quoted here in Hebrews 8, the interpretive process of spiritualizing is even more tenuous. The prophecy addresses ‘the house of Israel’

- already removed from the physical scene by the Assyrians roughly 150 years earlier, and 'the house of Judah' - the remainder of the twelve tribes who lived in the Southern Kingdom and under the Davidic royal house. These are *political* references and not *covenantal* ones. The prophecy, in other words, is speaking to the Jewish nation *as a nation* - or, as was the case, *two nations* - Israel and Judah.

We may look at this another way. Often when we read 'Israel' in the Old Testament, it is in reference to the descendants of the man Jacob, whose name was changed by God to Israel. It is a covenantal reference, and speaks of the people as they were heirs to the covenant God made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Here in Hebrews 8, however, the dual reference to Israel and Judah brings to mind the existence of the people as political entities, as civil societies and not as covenantal heirs. This is sound reasoning, but it led the Dispensationalist theologians to an unsound conclusion. Dispensationalism reasons that, since the prophecy (and others like this one) addressed *political* Israel/Judah, then the fulfillment must also address *political* Israel/Judah. Because the prophecy speaks of a restoration of the temporal fortunes of the nations of Israel and Judah, then the fulfillment must also be temporal, earthly. Yet it must be clear by now that if such an interpretation of Jeremiah 31 is accurate, it would have no place in the developing treatise of Hebrews 8. If the author is trying to establish the *heavenly* priesthood of Jesus Christ, why would he refer to a prophecy that speaks of the *earthly* restoration of Israel?

Nonetheless it remains true that the interpretive method of turning Israel and Judah into the Church (and one that was rapidly growing in Gentile flavor) leaves much to be desired. The alternative, leaving the Gentiles out of the picture altogether (or drawing a separate picture especially for the Gentiles) is patently unbiblical and violates one of the fundamental promises of the Abrahamic Covenant itself, "*In your seed shall all the nations be blessed.*" The solution to this conundrum must lie somewhere in between the extremes.

If we consider all that the apostle Paul wrote concerning the nature of 'true Israel,' the privileges of hereditary Israel, and the nature of the Church, the solution becomes clearer. From Romans 9 we learn that 'not all Israel is Israel,' and Paul makes the important distinction between Israel according to the flesh and Israel according to the spirit. But throughout that discourse the apostle is still speaking of ethnic Israel. He is not employing some verbal sleight of hand to magically turn Gentiles into Israelites. His answer for that problem comes just a chapter or two later in the same epistle. But first let us consider what the apostle thought about ethnic Israel.

*I tell the truth in Christ, I am not lying, my conscience also bearing me witness in the Holy Spirit, that I have great sorrow and continual grief in my heart. For I could wish that I myself were accursed from Christ for my brethren, my countrymen according to the flesh, who are Israelites, to whom pertain the adoption, the glory, **the covenants**, the giving of the law, the service of God, and the promises; of whom are the fathers and from whom, according to the flesh, Christ came, who is over all, the eternally blessed God. Amen.* (Romans 9:1-5)

"To whom pertain the covenants..." That says it all, and agrees both with Jeremiah's prophecy and the Hebrews author's use of that prophecy. "With the house of Israel and with the house of Judah..." It was both the intention of God, and His ultimate fulfillment, to enact the New Covenant with Israel - national, physical Israel. Thus Jesus came 'unto His own' and, though His own 'received Him not,' inaugurated the promised New Covenant with the restored political/national entity of Israel. God did not establish the New Covenant with the Gentiles, but with His ancient people Israel.

This seems to be a statement of agreement with the Dispensational view. But that view would set up parallel soteriologies: one for the Jews and another for the Gentiles, and that would do great injustice both to the scope of biblical teaching and to the writing of the author of Hebrews. The proper perspective comes when one remembers that rather than Israel *becoming* the Church through a form of corporate mystical regeneration, the Gentiles who now largely

comprise the Church have been *grafted into* Israel – made an integral part of the people with whom and for whom the covenants were made. The apostle Paul never teaches that the ‘true Israelite’ is really a Gentile – it is hard to imagine the rock-solid student of Gamaliel even considering such a thing! A ‘true Israelite’ is one who is an Israelite *of faith* as well as *of flesh*. Equal in privilege to these, however, is the ‘ingrafted Gentile.’ He now partakes of the same vine, the same nourishment, the same covenant as the true Israelite. This is the teaching of Paul in his epistle to the Ephesians,

*Therefore remember that you, once Gentiles in the flesh – who are called Uncircumcision by what is called the Circumcision made in the flesh by hands – that at that time you were without Christ, being aliens from the commonwealth of Israel and strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far off have been brought near by the blood of Christ.*

(Ephesians 2:11-13)

We come, then, to a preliminary point of summary in our investigation of the New Covenant. As with the major salvific covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic), the New Covenant pertained to the people of Israel – the ‘lost sheep’ to whom Jesus was sent. The ancient promises were addressed to this Israel, and were fulfilled ‘in the fullness of time’ to this same people. Yet, to borrow from C. S. Lewis and the words of Aslan, ‘there was a deeper magic.’ Not exactly from the dawn of time, but at least from a time 450 years before the establishment of the Mosaic economy. This more ancient promise encompassed the Gentiles, and assured their inclusion into the gracious covenant given to Abraham. This inclusion was not done by mutating Israel into a Gentile Church, but by spiritually grafting Gentiles into a thoroughly Jewish covenant. Therefore Gentile believers, while not the natural, are nonetheless the full beneficiaries of all that the New Covenant promises and provides.

**Week 4:                   The New Covenant – The Dispensational View**

**Text Reading:       Hebrews 8:7 - 8**

*"It is not only the new covenant; it is the last covenant."  
(O. Palmer Robertson; *The Christ of the Covenants*)*

It appears that one of the major problems associated with the two major hermeneutical paradigms popular within evangelicalism – Dispensationalism and Covenantalism – is that many believers do not really know the theological systems they espouse. This phenomenon is, of course, prevalent in all religions; but the topic of the New Covenant seems to highlight it in the case of both schools of evangelical thought on the subject. The identity of Israel vis-à-vis the Church on the one hand, and the continuity versus the ‘newness’ of the covenant on the other, are perennial sources of argument among Bible scholars, commentators and theologians. But the rank-and-file members of Dispensational church are more aware of their pastor’s views on the end times than they are of his views on the New Covenant. Similarly, most members of Covenantal churches simply view the baptism of their infant children as an extension of the church’s blessings upon the child and not as a statement of regeneration.

But the eschatological views of the Dispensationalist, and the paedobaptistic practices of the Covenantalist, are both founded upon their respective, and diametrically opposed, views on the New Covenant. If these views on the New Covenant are in error, then the foundations upon which the eschatology and infant baptism are weak and perhaps entirely unstable. By way of an excursus, therefore, and hopefully not by way of a rabbit trail, we will investigate further the two views – Dispensationalism and Covenantalism – as they pertain to the doctrine of the New Covenant.

We begin with the Dispensational view for two reasons. First, it is the most common view among American evangelicals and, second, it comes to light with the opening phrase of the Jeremiad prophecy required in Hebrews chapter 8,

*"...I will make a New Covenant with the House of Israel and with the House of Judah..."*

In their three-volume *Integrative Theology*, Gordon Lewis and Bruce Demarest offer the following helpful guide to the understanding of Dispensational exegesis of Scripture,

The absolute essentials of dispensationalism are three: (1) the distinction between Israel and the church, (2) a consistently literal hermeneutic, and (3) the glory of God as the basic theme of his dealings with humankind.

The first two of these principles are of most concern in our evaluation of the dispensational interpretation of Jeremiah's prophecy and its use by the author of Hebrews in chapter 8. The *a priori* conviction that there is and remains a sharp distinction between Israel and the Church necessitates the view that a



covenant made in the Old Testament *with Israel* cannot be a covenant made *with the Church*. Nor can it find its fulfillment in the life of the Church. Thus John Walvoord, long-time president of Dallas Theological Seminary, concludes regarding the New Covenant,

**John F. Walvoord (1910-2002)**

The new covenant prophesied in the Old Testament and *to have its primary fulfillment in the millennial kingdom* is also an unconditional covenant. As described by Jeremiah, it is a covenant made 'with the house of Israel, and with the house of Judah.'

Walvoord's interpretation of Jeremiah 31 and Hebrews 8 presupposes both the inviolate separation between Israel and the Church, and the doctrine of a future, literal millennial reign of Jesus Christ on earth. He views the description of the New Covenant in these two passages as reflecting a perfect environment that can only be posited in the millennial dispensation. He writes, "This passage anticipates the ideal circumstances of the millennial kingdom where Christ is to be reigning, and all will know the facts about Jesus Christ."

In this view Walvoord is following his predecessor and mentor, Lewis Sperry Chafer, founder of Dallas Seminary. Chafer believed that the establishment of the Church was entirely at Pentecost and that there is no reference or prophecy to be found regarding the Church in the pages of the Old Testament. In his own words concerning Israel and the Church, 'all is contrast.' Chafer taught that God had from eternity past purposed two distinct lines of redemptive history, "one related to the earth with earthly people and earthly objectives involved, which is Judaism; while the other is related to heaven with heavenly people and heavenly objectives involved, which is Christianity."

How does this view impact our study passage in Hebrews 8? The Dispensational view of the author's use of Jeremiah 31 generally emphasizes the fact that the letter was written to *Hebrew* believers and therefore there is no problem with the author quoting a prophecy that was Israel-specific. This view, however, stumbles on the extension of new covenant blessings to Gentiles, a historical reality that Dispensational scholars do not deny. These *Hebrew* Christians were already part of the New Testament Church, and it is evident from the chronicles of Acts that Gentiles were already a significant part of that Church. There has already come to pass a mixing of two distinct ethnicities, and it becomes hermeneutically difficult – if not impossible – to draw a line where Old Testament prophecies apply and where they do not. Walvoord recognizes this problem and discusses several common solutions among evangelical commentators.

Because the New Testament, however, also relates the church to a new covenant, some have taught that the church fulfills the covenant given to Israel. Those who do not believe in a future millennial kingdom and a restoration of Israel, therefore, find complete fulfillment now in the church, spiritualizing the provisions of the covenant and making Israel and the church one and the same.

The view Walvoord outlines here is clearly not one that he supports. Such an interpretation of the New Covenant 'spiritualizes' the terms of that covenant – and usually the term 'spiritualizing' is pejorative in modern biblical literature.

Also, this is the view of those who 'do not believe in a millennial kingdom, etc.' – a belief that Walvoord along with all Dispensationalists hold very, very firmly. Walvoord offers another interpretive option to handle the biblical fact that the New Covenant does have numerous references to the Church.

Others who recognize Israel's future restoration and the millennial kingdom consider the New Testament references to the new covenant either to be an application of the general truths of the future covenant with Israel to the church, or to distinguish two new covenants (one for Israel as given in Jeremiah and the second, a new covenant given through Jesus Christ in the present age of grace providing salvation for the church).

Walvoord does not choose between the two options presented, but it is evident that he does not oppose either. The final sentence of the paragraph simply states, "Actually, the new covenant, whether for Israel or for the church, stems from the death of Christ and His shed blood." This statement, 'whether for Israel or for the church,' may indicate a preference on Walvoord's part to the two-covenant option. This is a common view among Dispensational Bible scholars and commentators, in keeping with the fundamental premise that there must be a complete distinction between Israel and the church in matters of biblical exegesis.

Can a two-covenant view regarding the New Covenant be supported from Scripture apart from this *a priori* view regarding the uniqueness and immiscibility of the Church and Israel? On the face of it such a view would seem very unlikely – just from passages such as Hebrews 8. Regardless of the primary ethnicity of the original recipients of the letter, the author was well aware by the time of its writing that God had included Gentiles into His redemptive work through Jesus Christ and in the Church. The use of Old Testament prophecies – without any caveats concerning their ethnic or chronological application – would be grossly misleading at best, deceitful at worst. The pages of the New Testament would shrink remarkably if one were to excise all quotations and allusions to Old Testament prophecies that were originally given to Israel.



Further, if one reviews what the New Testament has to say regarding the New Covenant, nowhere is there any indication that *two* such New Covenants are intended. Chronologically we hear first of the New Covenant on the night of Jesus' betrayal in the inaugural Lord's Supper: "*This is the New Covenant in My blood...*" Matthew, Mark, and Luke all record these words. It is widely considered that Matthew's audience was primarily Jewish, whereas Luke's was primarily Gentile. Yet the Lord's Supper was considered pertinent to both. The Apostle Paul reiterates the formulaic words in his first epistle to the church at Corinth, a church that no Dispensationalist would maintain was anything but Gentile. Taking a 'consistently literal' hermeneutic, and 'rightly dividing the word, etc.' the Dispensationalist must show where there is a distinction made in these New Testament passages between one New Covenant that applies to the Jewish people only, and another that applies to the Church. It certainly appears that the apostles knew of only one New Covenant, and they applied the memorial/sacramental Supper of that covenant to both Jewish believers and Gentile.

If we follow the transition from the Old Testament to the New, we are again at a loss to find an explicit distinction between two New Covenants. The phrase occurs only a few times in the Old Testament, but it is often found alongside a similar phrase, the 'everlasting covenant.' O. Palmer Robertson, in his excellent work *The Christ of the Covenants*, provides a helpful summary of the main passages in which one of these two terms is found. The 'new covenant' is, of course, the theme of Jeremiah chapter 31, but the 'everlasting covenant' is discussed in Jeremiah chapter 32 and it is apparent that the prophet has not changed his train of thought,

*Behold, I will gather them out of all countries where I have driven them in My anger, in My fury, and in great wrath; I will bring them back to this place, and I will cause them to dwell safely. They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an **everlasting covenant** with them, that I will not turn*

*away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.* (Jeremiah 32:37-40)

Note the common covenantal phrase, “*They shall be My people, and I will be their God.*” In Ezekiel chapter 37, the famous Vision of the Valley of Dry Bones, the prophet speaks of two sticks – one for Judah and one for Ephraim/Israel. This is very similar language to Jeremiah 31, and in the passage from Ezekiel there is mention of the ‘everlasting covenant.’

*David My servant shall be king over them, and they shall all have one shepherd; they shall also walk in My judgments and observe My statutes, and do them. Then they shall dwell in the land that I have given to Jacob My servant, where your fathers dwelt; and they shall dwell there, they, their children, and their children’s children, forever; and My servant David shall be their prince forever. Moreover I will make a covenant of peace with them, and it shall be an **everlasting covenant** with them; I will establish them and multiply them, and I will set My sanctuary in their midst forevermore. My tabernacle also shall be with them; indeed I will be their God, and they shall be My people.* (Ezekiel 37:24-27)

Once again the covenant formula, “*I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*” The Lord also speaks through Ezekiel of the everlasting covenant being as well a ‘covenant of peace.’ Restoration of Judah and Israel, one common shepherd David, and effective obedience to the statutes of Jehovah are all part and parcel of these references to the ‘new covenant,’ the ‘everlasting covenant,’ and the ‘covenant of peace.’ Surely it is most reasonable to view all of these references not as speaking of different covenants, but of one and the same covenant – the New Covenant. Considering the previous references to the inauguration of the Lord’s Supper, “*the New Covenant in My blood,*” it should not surprise us that the author of Hebrews includes in his benediction, not only a reference to the Shepherd promised through Ezekiel, but also the ‘blood of the everlasting covenant.’

*Now may the God of peace who brought up our Lord Jesus from the dead, that great Shepherd of the sheep, through the blood of the **everlasting covenant.*** (Hebrews 13:20)

**Progressive Dispensationalism:**

Over the past few years, probably no more than twenty, there has been a tangible shift in the teachings of some Dispensational scholars. Even some of the professors at Dallas Theological Seminary have moved toward what has come to be known as 'Progressive Dispensationalism.' This is a *via media*, a middle road attempted between premillennial Dispensationalism and reformed amillennialism. The hard-and-fast distinction between Israel and the Church, long the bedrock of the Dispensationalism of Lewis Sperry Chafer, C. I. Scofield, Charles Ryrie, and John Walvoord, has been noticeably softened. In particular, Progressive Dispensationalists reject the concept of two New Covenants and maintain that "the new covenant discussed by Jesus, Paul, and Hebrews is not different from that spoken of by Jeremiah." Yet these progressives are still Dispensational, and substitute degree for kind - while there are not two different 'kinds' of New Covenant, one for Israel and one for the Church, there are still two different 'degrees' of fulfillment of the one New Covenant. Their Dispensational eschatology, and their adherence to viewing Israel as God's 'earthly' project, so to speak, demand that all Old Testament prophecies containing reference to the *land* must be literally fulfilled during the millennial period in the very same *land*. Robert Saucy, a graduate of Dallas Theological Seminary and a professor of Systematic Theology at Biola University, writes,

To be sure, Israel as a nation has not entered into the provisions of Jeremiah 31 and therefore the specific national fulfillment of the covenant to the 'house of Israel' and the 'house of Judah' awaits their future conversion. But the 'messenger of the covenant' has come, and those who receive Him receive the salvation of the new covenant.

Progressive Dispensationalism makes proper note of the inclusion of the Gentiles in the promised blessings of Israel, from the time of the covenant made with Abraham to the Isaianic prophecies of the 'Servant of Yahweh.' In these latter prophecies, the Lord promises that the One who would be the 'glory of Israel' would also be 'the Light of the Gentiles.' Progressives therefore recognize that all Old Testament prophecies, though couched in different terminology (i.e.,

'new covenant,' 'everlasting covenant,' etc.) find their culmination and fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the mediator of the New Covenant. Yet once again their stern adherence to a separate 'dispensation' yet to come for Israel alone forces them to mitigate the impact of this fulfillment with regard to the church. Again, Saucy,

This prophecy looked forward to the establishment of the Messianic kingdom at the coming of Christ when salvation would flow through converted Israel to all nations. But this salvation has now come to the church during the time of the mysteries of the kingdom between Christ's first and second comings *as an earnest or guarantee of the final fulfillment.*

What this quotation means is that, although there is but one New Covenant, there are two phases of its fulfillment - the primary one which involves 'converted Israel' during the 'Messianic kingdom' (aka, the Millennium), and a present and secondary one, given to the church 'as an earnest and guarantee of the final fulfillment.' Thus the passage we are studying in Hebrews chapter 8 does not speak of the true fulfillment of the prophecy from Jeremiah chapter 31, but only of a foretaste, an *hors d'oeuvre*, so to speak, of the final banquet that is reserved for the ethnic people of Israel in the millennial kingdom.

What is remarkable about both the traditional and the Progressive Dispensational views is that, in both cases, the choicest selections of the feast are already present for the church in this current age, and the only course remaining for the millennial kingdom is the literal habitation of Israel in the land of Palestine. "The church enjoys the eschatological salvation of the new covenant. Full and final remission of sins is a reality for those in Christ." Speaking of the benefits of the New Covenant in this current dispensation, Walvoord writes, "There is no salvation contemplated for man in this age that does not guarantee perfect preservation here and a final presentation of the saved one in glory."

Note the limitation of scope with regard to the New Covenant in the following passage from *Progressive Dispensationalism*,

It is indisputable that the New Testament views the new covenant predicted by Jeremiah and Ezekiel as established in the death of Jesus Christ with some of its promised blessings now being granted to Jews and Gentiles who are believers in Jesus. These are not blessings which are *like* those predicted by Jeremiah and Ezekiel. They are *the very same* blessings which those prophets predicted.

'Some' of the blessings of the New Covenant are being experienced now by believers. Even the terminology used, 'Jews and Gentiles who are believers in Jesus,' indicates the standard Dispensational view that the coming millennial age will see a completely different soteriological framework. It is remarkable, in the Dispensational view, that God should allow 'Jews and Gentiles' to share new covenant blessings in this age; but in the age to come all blessings will flow to and through Israel. That is the Dispensational line, and Progressives continue to toe it.

The time has come to analyze this view, and the thought paradigm that leads men to posit 'two new covenants' or 'two fulfillments of one new covenant.' It has already been mentioned that the only tangible feature of the New Covenant promise from Jeremiah chapter 31 that is not currently being realized within the believing community is the literal habitation of a believing Jewish people in the ancient land promised to Abraham. Simply put, the Jews, while residing in the same physical territory of Palestine, are still under the hardening of which Paul speaks in his epistle to the Romans. Israel is restored to the land, but not *covenantally*. Does this fact necessitate an additional and final fulfillment of the New Covenant prophecy? Is the *land* so important that all of the other *incredible* blessings of the New Covenant are incomplete without it? Or do we only have recourse to the 'spiritualizing' hermeneutic that simply replaces 'Israel' with the 'Church' and calls all things finished?

That that physical land once possessed by the nation of Israel is part of the New Covenant prophecy in Jeremiah 31, should not be doubted. The mention of

'the house of Israel' and 'the house of Judah' seems very strongly to indicate a *political* aspect to the prophecy – a restoration of the ethnic people of Israel to their ancestral land. But a very serious question stands in the path of a *future* fulfillment of this physical aspect of the prophecy. That question is, 'Why does the actual, historical return of the Jews to the land, and the consequent rebuilding of the temple and reinstatement of the sacrificial rites, *not count*? Jeremiah, in the very context of the New Covenant prophecy, speaks of the seventy year hiatus that the nation would endure in Babylon before being restored to the land of their fathers. Ezekiel speaks of the temple worship being reinstated, of sacrifices again being offered to Jehovah, and of the re-establishment of the priestly ministry. All of these things took place just as they were predicted! The Jews returned to the land, and while there is no explicit mention of the tribal representation it is apparent that Jesus himself viewed Israel as fully represented in the land when He came,

*These twelve Jesus sent out and commanded them, saying: "Do not go into the way of the Gentiles, and do not enter a city of the Samaritans. But go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. And as you go, preach, saying, 'The kingdom of heaven is at hand.'*

(Matthew 10:5-7)

Is it possible that Jesus considered only representatives from the tribes of Judah and Benjamin, the former Southern Kingdom, as constituting 'the lost sheep of Israel'? Is it not reasonable to conclude that the national, physical aspect of the prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel was literally fulfilled, and it was to the restored Israel that the fullness of the New Covenant was brought through the person and work of the Messiah? This view has the advantage of taking the writer of Hebrews at his word – that the inauguration of the promised heavenly High Priestly ministry was accompanied by the inauguration of the fullness of the New Covenant of which Jesus is the mediator. It also places the author's usage of the prophecy from Jeremiah in its most encouraging and comforting light; not as a partial fulfillment but as a complete fulfillment of all for which the faithful worshiper of Israel hoped and longed. Finally, it puts the various aspects

of the New Covenant prophecy in a more proper relationship, recognizing that the physical and earthly is not as note-worthy as the spiritual and heavenly. Restoration of a right relationship with God through the forgiveness of sins and the indwelling of the Holy Spirit ought always to be counted a greater blessing by far than the restoration of any people to any plot of land. God fulfilled His promise with regard to both aspects; there is no reason to expect Him to do so again with respect to the lesser of the two.

**Week 5: The New Covenant – The Covenantal View****Text Reading: Hebrews 8:7 - 8**

*“How does one become a member of the church? The means of entrance into the church is voluntary, spiritual, and internal.”*  
(Wayne Grudem; *Systematic Theology*)

Our on-going analysis of the promise of the New Covenant, reiterated by the author of Hebrews here in chapter 8, has thus far focused on the questions *who* and *when*. With *whom* was the New Covenant to be made? And *when* is or will be the New Covenant in effect? The classical Dispensational answer to these questions has been the topic of our last lessons – those answers being *with physical Israel* and *in the Millennial Kingdom*. Miles Stanford, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Dispensational author and speaker, summarizes the point in unequivocal terms, “Israel’s New Covenant is between God and kingdom Israel only, and will be inaugurated and fulfilled at the Second Advent...God has never made a covenant with the Church.” Progressive Dispensational teaching has attempted to modify this stance, recognizing a relationship between the predominantly Gentile Church and the New Covenant. However it remains a critical component of Dispensational teaching to maintain a thorough separation between *Israel* and the *Church*. One contemporary Dispensational author writes,

What then is a suggested relationship of the church to the new covenant of Jeremiah 31:31-34? The church is united to the mediator of the new covenant. The new covenant has been cut. The actualization of the new covenant in the lives of believers, however, is yet future, when Christ returns and the house of Israel and the house of Judah are transformed by God’s grace to obey completely the commands of God.

Another writer states simply that the Gentile Church’s “share in the promise and covenants comes in Christ, through the Holy Spirit, not by some incorporation into Israel.” These authors’ insistence on a separation between historical, physical Israel and the ‘New Testament’ Church derives not only from



their dedication to the foundational *literal* hermeneutic of Dispensationalism, but also in large measure as a reaction to another form of biblical interpretation in which Israel and the Church have melted into one entity. This view is Covenantalism, and is the perspective from which we will analyze the New Covenant promise in this current lesson.

Robert Reymond, a Covenantal theologian and professor at Knox Seminary, writes of the hermeneutical chasm that lies between Dispensational and Covenantal theology,

It is difficult to conceive of two evangelical perspectives on Old Testament faith differing more radically. The covenantal perspective stresses the unity and continuity of redemptive history; the dispensational perspective stresses the discontinuity of redemptive history.

As Reymond notes, the essence of Covenantal Theology is *continuity*, in



Geerhardus Vos  
(1862-1949)

particular, *continuity of the covenants*. As a hermeneutical principle, this distinctive paradigm requires *non-literal* interpretations of Old Testament passages and prophecies whenever a literal interpretation results in a 'break' in the covenantal line. Geerhardus Vos, professor of theology at Princeton Theological Seminary in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, writes, "God cannot simply let go of the ordinance which

He once instituted, but much rather displays His glory in that He carries it through despite man's sin and apostasy." This comment sounds similar to what a Dispensational writer might say regarding God's covenant promises to Israel – that God cannot abandon those promises but will *literally* fulfill them *with Israel* in the Millennial Kingdom. The Covenantal theologian, however, disputes the 'break' between God's dealings with Israel under the 'old' covenant and His dealings with the Church under the 'new.' The covenants are, to the Covenantal theologian, the map by which the student of the Bible traces in unbroken lines the path of redemptive history from the Fall to the Consummation. The

Covenantal theologian cannot but reject the comment quoted above, “God has never made a covenant with the Church.”

Central to Covenantal theology is the concept of ‘representation,’ sometimes referred to as ‘federalism’ or ‘federal headship.’ This principle is most clearly illustrated by the passage in Romans 5 wherein the apostle Paul speaks of ‘all dying’ in Adam, and ‘all being made alive’ in Christ. Adam was the federal head or representative of the human race in its inception, and was party to the first covenant made between God and man – the *Adamic Covenant*. This covenant is not set forth explicitly in the opening chapters of Genesis, but is alluded to by the Lord through the prophet Hosea,

*But like Adam they transgressed the covenant;  
There they dealt treacherously with Me.* (Hosea 6:7)

The apostle Peter speaks of the representation of the human race in Noah in the next great covenantal transaction between God and Man, the *Noaic Covenant*,

*...when once the Divine longsuffering waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared, in which a few, that is, eight souls, were saved through water.* (I Peter 3:20)

This Petrine allusion to the Noaic Covenant and water has a further bearing on our discussion in this lesson, as the apostle speaks of the deliverance of Noah from the Flood as being a type of baptism in Jesus Christ.

The principle of representation within Covenant Theology takes us next to Abraham, and the *Abrahamic Covenant*. Whereas Abraham was not placed under a probation as was Adam, nor was he the sole survivor (along with his family, of course) of a worldwide deluge as was Noah, nonetheless God covenanted with Abram/Abraham in a manner in which representation is clearly seen.

*I will bless those who bless you,  
And I will curse him who curses you;  
And **in you** all the families of the earth shall be blessed.*

(Genesis 12:3)

The key term in regard to the representation principle is the phrase 'in you' as highlighted above. This distinguishing mark separates those covenants which follow the main thoroughfare of redemptive history, and those which were, so to speak, side roads. This is an incredibly important feature to Covenantal theology, for it alone places the New Covenant and the Mosaic Covenant in their proper perspective.

The Dispensational view of the covenants brings the Mosaic Covenant into redemptive history subsequent to the Abrahamic. Historically and chronologically speaking, this is correct. However, it must be noted that Moses' role in the covenant promulgated through him was not *representative*. Moses did not stand in the same position as Adam, Noah, and Abraham before him, nor that of Jesus Christ after him. The Law was given *through* Moses, but Israel did not stand *in* Moses. Moses' own behavior, and Moses' own faith, did not stand in the place of his posterity – and nowhere in Scripture is such a representation made. The same distinction can be made, of course, with regard to the Davidic Covenant, although in David's case the royal line of the Messiah 'represented.' Still, David did not stand under an Adamic probation, nor did all Israel stand covenantally in David's faith. And while David's military triumphs did deliver Israel from her enemies, it can hardly be said that Israel flowed from David's loins as the human race did from Noah's. Therefore we can (and probably must) make a distinction between the Old Testament covenants – with three following the main line of redemptive history, and two traversing somewhat of a side road. The following illustration may help put this concept into clearer light:

We must be careful to note that the representative principle does not mean that the 'other' covenants are less divine, less important, or less sure as God's promises. It only means that they are not 'representative,' and thus are of a different nature from those that are. Four of the covenants, then, are 'representative,' while two are 'mediatorial.' If we consider the bold line arrows as indicative of the promise made in Genesis 3:15 – *the Seed of the Woman* – we can see this overarching redemptive promise as superimposed upon the outworking of that promise through the various covenants.

This principle of representation, as illustrated above, shows the magnitude of the difference between Dispensationalism and Covenantalism as theological and interpretive systems. In Dispensationalism it is the Church of the New Testament era that represents the side road, whereas in Covenantal theology it is the Mosaic Law and Davidic Kingdom that are a temporary side stream from the main flow of redemptive history. This concept does help to explain why the apostle Paul, when teaching on the faith principle of the Gospel (as opposed to the legal commandments) focused not on the Mosaic dispensation, but rather on the life and faith of Abraham and the covenant made with the patriarch by God. Consider the following passage from Galatians in light of the foregoing discussion,

*Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, "And to seeds," as of many, but as of one, "And to your Seed," who is Christ. And this I say, that the*

*law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. For if the inheritance is of the law, it is no longer of promise; but God gave it to Abraham by promise.* (Galatians 3:16-18)

And, subsequently, what the apostle has to say about the Law which came later,

*What purpose then does the law serve? It was **added** because of transgressions, till the Seed should come to whom the promise was made; and it was appointed through angels by the hand of a mediator.* (Galatians 3:19)

Note the highlighted word 'added.' Paul goes on in the very same passage to remind his readers that the Law was by no means unimportant. Yet it is hard to miss the general thrust of Paul's argument, that the Law given through Moses was 'an addendum' to the covenant given through Abraham - which itself was a continuation of the covenantal line flowing from Adam through Noah, and eventually on to Christ Jesus. The apostle's point is that the Abrahamic Covenant is the *main line* of redemptive history that leads directly to Jesus Christ, the Seed in whom all the nations of the world was to be blessed. The Law of Moses, and with it the entire 'old covenant' dispensation of Israel and the Levitical priesthood, were *added* because of transgression, added as a pointer and 'schoolmaster' to Jesus Christ.

Herein lies the continuity principle of Covenant Theology, and it stands on a strong biblical foundation. It is beyond the scope of this study to go into the depth and detail available from Scripture concerning the representative principle, but the several passages quoted or alluded to already are sufficient to establish the principle as comprising the 'method' of God's redemptive work in human history. This interpretive paradigm also has the benefit of fitting in properly with the more important 'Seed Promise' of Genesis 3:15, showing how the covenants served as living channels through which the indestructible lineage of the 'Seed of Woman' flowed to fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

More importantly to our current study, the representative principle makes the critical connection between the New Covenant and the Abrahamic Covenant.

Such a connection is necessary if we are to understand the relationship of the Church vis-à-vis the New Covenant and the overall redemptive plan of God. Contrary to Dispensational teaching, the Church was not (and is not) a parenthetical event in redemptive history, but is contained as a germ in the covenants made with Adam, Noah, and Abraham. The Adamic Covenant cannot be limited to any sub-race within humanity, but applies to 'man' - the meaning of the Hebrew *adam* - in all of his subsequent racial and ethnic manifestations. The Noaic Covenant, though channeled more specifically later through Shem, was really a covenant with all of Creation - a concept the apostle Paul brings under the umbrella of Christ's redemptive work in Romans chapter 8. While the *channel* of the redemptive work of God narrows further into the family of Abraham, then Isaac, then Jacob/Israel, the *scope* of God's purpose remains 'all the nations of the earth' who were to be blessed in Abraham's seed. "Said another way, the 'new covenant' itself is simply the administrative extension and unfolding of the Abrahamic covenant."

#### **In What Sense 'New'?**

If, as Covenant Theology teaches, the representative covenants form an unbroken line of redemptive history, then in what sense is the New Covenant 'new'? A 'new' covenant sounds very much like the beginning of a 'new' dispensation, and one might conclude that the adjective itself demands discontinuity between the 'old' covenant and the 'new.' But even the Dispensational view on the New Covenant does not hold that it is a complete change from the Old Covenant. In fact, most Dispensational treatments of the New Covenant - inaugurated and fulfilled in the Millennial Kingdom - describe a civil and religious system *exactly* like that of Old Testament Israel, with a Davidic king on the throne and a Levitical priesthood officiating in the rebuilt Temple. Thus from both theological perspectives, 'new' must mean something other than 'completely different.'

Covenant Theology is so committed to the concept of continuity between the covenants, that it is very difficult to find an explicit treatment on the 'newness' of the New Covenant from a covenantal writer. A survey of such writings leaves one with the impression that 'new' means 'new and improved,' in a similar manner to the way advertising agencies tout a redesigned or repackaged product. The product is the same, but it is 'better.' O. Palmer Robertson, in his classic *The Christ of the Covenants*, refers to the New Covenant as having "a more lasting effectiveness than the form by which the covenant was administered through Abraham, Moses, and David." Robertson titles his chapter on the New Covenant: "Christ: The Covenant of Consummation." But a consummation is not something new, rather it is the completion of something old. Robertson admits as much later in the chapter, "The new covenant can be understood in no other way than as a bringing to fruition of that which was anticipated under the old covenant." That is well and true, as far as it goes; but it does not answer the question, 'In what sense 'new'?'

This is perhaps the most serious weakness of Covenant Theology - it fails to adequately address the newness, the *change*, of the redemptive work of God in Christ. The steadfast commitment to continuity within the covenants translates into an interpretation of the New Covenant that leaves one wondering if it is simply the Old Covenant under a new name. It is common among Reformed authors to extend the term 'Church' back into the Old Testament era, as Douglas Bannerman speaks of the 'Church in the time of Abraham' in his *The Scripture Doctrine of the Church*. This is a somewhat innocuous practice derived both from the principle of continuity, and from the fact that the term 'ekklesia' is used in Acts 7 - Stephen's defense - as *the congregation in the wilderness* (7:38). Ekklesia is, of course, the standard New Testament word translated 'church.' But the word itself means 'an assembly' and undoubtedly meant something other than 'church' to those who heard Stephen speak. Ekklesia is the Greek word used to translate the Hebrew *qahal*, which means 'assembly.' It is an anachronism to

speak of the 'church' in the wilderness, or the 'church' in the time of Abraham. But it is also the logical result from a disproportionate emphasis on continuity within biblical revelation.

Another, and more serious, result of Covenant Theology's emphasis on continuity is the practice of infant baptism. Of this practice we will have more to say as part of the commentary on the next section of Hebrews 8. It is important to note at this stage, however, that the practice of baptizing 'covenant children' is the result of focusing so much on the sameness, or continuity, from covenant to covenant, as to miss the changes. In this case the aspect of continuity is found in regard to the *familial* orientation of the divine covenants. Covenant Theology maintains that the making of covenants with a man *and his family* is of the very essence of divine covenants and therefore must be an integral element of any covenant under consideration. Benjamin Warfield ties these two distinctively Covenantal positions – the past existence of the Church and the familial nature of covenants –



**B. B. Warfield (1851-1921)**

together in his definitive statement in support of infant baptism, "the argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established His Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it." Reymond adds, "The Reformed paedobaptist position is, of course, based upon the unity of the covenant of grace and the oneness of the people of God in all ages."

The argument from the familial nature of the covenants has a *prima facie* strength to it when one considers the three representative covenants of the Old Testament. Clearly Adam's covenant relationship with God, and his probation, included his posterity; that much goes without saying. Noah's deliverance from the Flood included his three sons, and the continuation of the human race was clearly tied up with their survival as Noah did not have any additional children afterward. But it is with the Abrahamic covenant that the idea of 'covenant



children' is most clearly found, as the sign and seal of that covenant was to be the circumcision of every male son. The familial nature of the covenant went beyond the biological offspring of the father, for all male servants were also to be circumcised as they also comprised the man's 'family' in the widest possible sense. This aspect of the familial nature of the covenant is not often (if ever) dealt with by modern paedobaptists, who limit the application of the covenant to the specific offspring. It is of little concern today, but it did reflect a serious inconsistency in the practice of paedobaptists in the antebellum South, in that the slaves of believing masters were not, typically, baptized as infants.

Nonetheless it is apparent that the three representative covenants of the Old Testament era did have an important characteristic by which the children of the representative were included in the covenant. Adding to that the Covenantal assumption that baptism is the sacrament/ordinance that takes the place of circumcision, one arrives at the fundamental justification for the practice of infant baptism within many evangelical denominations. "The basis of infant baptism is the covenant relation which God has established with His people and the covenant relationship which the children of such sustain to God by His own institution." A. A. Hodge summarizes the thought, "The divinely appointed and guaranteed presumption is, if the parents, then the children. This is not an invariable law binding God, but it is a prevailingly probable law, basing the authorized and rational recognition and treatment of such children by the Church as heirs of the promises." This is a remarkable statement, for it seems to speak in two directions at once: the familial relationship within the covenants is both and at the same time 'a divinely appointed and guaranteed presumption' and 'not an invariable law.' The manner in which Hodge speaks is made necessary by the fact that evangelical paedobaptists repudiate *baptismal regeneration*. In other words, it is not maintained by theologians like Hodge, Warfield, and Murray, that infant baptism *regenerates* the child, nor that it guarantees the child's ultimate salvation. Yet infant baptism remains a sign and

seal signifying that the child is a member of the New Covenant, presumably though not necessarily saved. To credobaptists this is an example of paedobaptists having their covenant cake, and eating it too.

A more thorough treatment of the doctrine of infant baptism, specifically focusing on its relationship to the New Covenant, will follow logically from the exegesis of Hebrews 8:9-11. At this point it is important that we attempt to come to grips with the New Covenant – prophesied by Jeremiah, regarded as fulfilled by the author of Hebrews – in light of the two divergent views within evangelicalism – Dispensationalism and Covenantalism.

#### **A New and Yet Continuous Covenant:**

Larry Pettegrew, writing in *The Master's Seminary Journal*, states succinctly, “First of all, the New Covenant really is a new covenant, not a renewed old covenant.” He points out the fact that the Lord says through Jeremiah that the New Covenant will not be like the one He made with Moses. This stands in refutation of the Dispensational view that the actual fulfillment of the New Covenant, in the Millennial Kingdom, will be to all intents and purposes a revitalization of the old, Mosaic covenant.

On the other hand, the ‘new’ covenant also implies a radical break with the old – Hebrews 8:8 speaks of God’s displeasure with the old, and verse 13 of the obsolescence of the old and its imminent removal. “He speaks of a new covenant, not a covenant renewal, and thereby assumes a radical break with the Mosaic tradition.” It is equally untenable to maintain a complete continuity of covenants in light of the terminology used both to name the New Covenant and to describe it. The Covenantal position, with its unflagging adherence to continuity, cannot bring to light the newness of the new.

This is not to say that neither Dispensational nor Covenantal theologians have attempted to deal with the ‘new’ in the New Covenant. It is, however, to say that in both theological perspectives there are ironclad presuppositions that

prevent an even-handed treatment of 'new' and thus prevent a biblically balanced and valid interpretation. The New Covenant is, in many important ways, continuous with the covenants of the past; *and* it introduces something entirely new and discontinuous with them at the same time. The answer to this conundrum is found in the Person of Jesus Christ as *Israel*.

Vern Poythress, in his book *Understanding Dispensationalists*, speaks of Jesus as "an Israelite in the fullest sense." Jesus is the Son of God and, as Matthew puts it in his gospel, God "*called His Son out of Egypt.*" This quote from Hosea in its original context clearly refers to the calling of the nation of Israel out from the bondage of slavery in Egypt. Yet Matthew could justifiably (and under inspiration) utilize the same quote in reference to Jesus being brought by his earthly father back to Palestine from Egypt after the death of Herod. Unless Matthew viewed Jesus *as Israel* his use of the passage from Hosea makes little sense; in fact, it seems very much like a convenient twisting of Scripture, a conclusion with which no one who holds to the inspiration of Scripture could agree.

The newness of the New Covenant is of the same nature as the newness of the New Creation. Each phrase treats the Person and Work of Jesus Christ from a different perspective. The first deals with Christ's redemptive work from the standpoint of the covenants as they culminated in Israel; the second from the standpoint of creation in general. Again, perhaps an illustration will help:

The lower tier of this diagram follows the biblical logic of Jesus Christ as the 'new' or 'second' Adam, and of all creation finding its *recreation* in Him. The first tier speaks of the lineage of the Seed of Woman through whom all that is promised in the lower tier is fulfilled. It is in this sense that Jesus can be seen as the consummation of all that was Israel – the *true* Israel, God's Son. Thus we see that Adam represented not only his posterity, the human race, but also the whole of Creation for which in his innocence he stood as co-regent.

In relation to the New Covenant, then, this line of thinking finds that the covenant promulgated through Abraham and expanded through Moses and David, ultimately failed on account of the continued sin of Israel the nation. Only Israel in one man – Jesus – fulfilled to perfection both the faith of Abraham and the legal obedience of Moses. Thus the Old Covenant (and in a sense, all of the covenants) *died* when Christ died, and rose again when He rose again – in newness of life. Union with Christ, therefore, is the ultimate and only basis for membership in the New Covenant for Jesus Christ is the federal head of that Covenant as Abraham, Noah, and Adam were of the covenants named for them.

The Davidic Covenant, and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, is not of the same nature as the Mosaic. Yet it does furnish an illustration by way of analogy regarding what we are proposing here. Jesus Christ as the Messiah was prophesied to be the 'shoot' or 'branch' rising out of the 'stump of Jesse.' This image speaks of deadness – a stump is the dead remains of a once-mighty tree. In the 'fullness of time' when Jesus was born, the house of Jesse and his great son David was indeed 'dead.' It existed, of course, but the name 'Ichabod' could have been written over the doors of all of its members – *the Glory of the Lord had Departed*. The man from the lineage of David chosen as the earthly father of Jesus was an itinerant carpenter from Galilee (read "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"). Nonetheless, a new and powerful growth sprang forth from that dead stump, and in an analogous way, a new and powerful covenant sprang

forth from the deadness of the old. Thus the New Covenant is continuous with the old in the same sense as the Son of David was/is continuous with David. But the New Covenant is different from the old, as Jesus Christ is a different King than David was.

**Week 6: The New Covenant – Inward Renewal****Text Reading: Hebrews 8:9 - 10**

*“It cannot be that the body should receive the sacrament of baptism,  
unless the soul has before received the truth of faith.”*  
(Jerome, 4<sup>th</sup> Century)

Consider again the biblical sense in which the word ‘new’ is employed to describe consummative works of divine redemption. The New Creation, for instance, does not actually create a new individual in the physical, human sense. Rather the divine work of regeneration *creates* a new nature, and *implants* a new heart within the same soul, the same person who was once a slave to sin and in bondage to death. The apostle speaks poetically of this redemptive work in his second letter to the Corinthian church,

*Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away;  
behold, all things have become new.* (II Corinthians 5:17)

No one supposes Paul to mean that an entirely new soul has been created, the character and personality of the former person being obliterated in the process. Saul of Tarsus may have changed in name to the Apostle Paul, but the man who inhabited both names was still the man “*circumcised the eighth day, of the stock of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of the Hebrews.*” Yet no one supposes that Paul the apostle was the *same* man as the Pharisee Saul who pursued the young Church “*breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord.*” There was continuity, and there was discontinuity – yet Paul was a *New Creation*. It is in this dual sense of continuity/discontinuity that we must understand the newness both of the *New Creation* and the *New Covenant*.

While it is not decisive to the exegesis, it may be of comfort to know that the Greek word translated ‘new’ in II Corinthians 5 and Hebrews 8 is indeed the same – *kainos* (καινος) which means, of course, ‘new.’ This is only

significant in that some commentators have made unreliable distinctions between the two Greek words - *kainos* and *neos* (καινος and νεος) - translated into English by the same word, 'new.' If any distinction can be made, however, perhaps the former has more to do with 'new in the sense of quality or form,' whereas the second with 'new in the sense of time.' It is worth noting, in this regard, that the same author of the Book of Hebrews employs both Greek words in reference to the 'new' covenant: in Chapter 8 it is the New (*kainos*) Covenant, and in Chapter 12 Jesus is referred to as the Mediator of the New (*neos*) Covenant. It is unreasonable to assume that by using two different words that contain essentially the same meaning, the writer is subtly delineating *two* different 'new' covenants.

There is but one New Covenant, and it brings to its recipients a quantum change in nature while leaving the same individual intact before God. The prophetic word through Jeremiah and Ezekiel describe this change to us, and teach us beforehand of the newness of the New Covenant. Yet just as the new High Priest is a continuation of the prophetic Mechizedekan priesthood, so also the New Covenant is a continuation of the covenant once cut with the patriarch Abraham. The author of Hebrews, in quoting from Jeremiah 31, reaches into the past beyond the covenant of Moses, to reconnect with the Abrahamic Covenant now renewed internally in its members. The writer alludes to a former covenant, the Mosaic, and makes it clear that the New Covenant will not be 'like' that one. This confirms our conclusion from the previous lesson that the Mosaic covenant, being a mediatorial and not a representative covenant, was not of the same nature as the Abrahamic or the New, both representative. It is very important to properly determine which of the Old Testament covenants is *passing away* and *becoming obsolete* in order to avoid either extreme of complete continuity or complete discontinuity within the redemptive covenants of God.

*...not according to the covenant that I made with their fathers in the day when I took them by the hand to lead them out of the land of Egypt; because they did not continue in My covenant, and I disregarded them, says the LORD. (8:9)*

These are the sort of words that got the apostle Paul in serious trouble with the unbelieving Jews. They cast an aspersion upon the Mosaic covenant and the entire Levitical worship system. They speak not of a revitalization of the old system, but a complete replacement. If the author of Hebrews had not prepared the way for this statement by reminding his readers of the Melchizedek prophecy of Psalm 110, he might have lost them completely with these words. But we must be careful to follow the writer's own *modus operandi* throughout the epistle, for he has never yet exalted anything pertaining to the Person or Work of Jesus Christ by denigrating a previous work of God. It is not, therefore, his intention to bring the Mosaic Covenant into disrepute with this statement, but only to show the all-important *difference* between that 'old' covenant and the New.

The author speaks of the Mosaic Covenant indirectly, using the literary device of circumlocution. In other words, he 'speaks around it.' Rather than referring explicitly to Moses, he speaks of the famous event of which Moses was the divine instrument and mediator - the Exodus. No Jewish reader would miss the allusion, and by foregoing to mention the name of Moses, the writer perhaps defuses any prejudice that might arise in the hearts of his readers in favor of that great leader of God's people. Thus it may have been very politic of the author to speak this way, for a direct discussion of the abrogation of *Moses* was, as had already been noted, a veritable hot button with first century Jews, as we see in the case of the first Christian martyr, Stephen,

*And they were not able to resist the wisdom and the Spirit by which he spoke. Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and God." And they stirred up the people, the elders, and the scribes; and they came upon him, seized him, and brought him to the council. (Acts 6:10-12)*



Yet there are many ways the writer could have alluded to the Mosaic Covenant without mentioning Moses' name directly. Perhaps he chose this particular combination of words, and the reference to the Exodus, for several reasons. First, the Exodus had stood for many generations as *the* symbol of divine redemption on behalf of the people of Israel. In terms of salvation, the deliverance of the nation from the bondage of Egypt was *the* soteriological paradigm of Scripture. And the entire thrust of the epistle to the Hebrews is, indeed, salvation (*cf.* 2:3, "*how shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*").

Second, the manner in which the author reflects upon the Exodus, "*when I took them by the hand,*" brings to the forefront the divine condescension and mercy, the divine compassion and paternalism, in effecting the deliverance of Israel from Egypt. Far from minimizing or speaking ill of the covenant God made through Moses, the author wants to emphasize that it was a covenant of love, that Jehovah led His people 'by the hand' as a father would lead his own children. By reminding his readers of the divine love, the author is also reminding them of the steadfastness of that love - preparing their hearts to receive and understand that the New Covenant is a further manifestation of that delivering, redeeming love.

Third, and again in an indirect way, the author is able by this phrase to highlight the intransigent stubbornness of the people of Israel. In spite of the fatherly love (and strength) with which God led the Israelites from Egypt, they in turn "*did not continue in My covenant.*" This has been a recurring theme with the writer of Hebrews (*cf.* 4:1-6, "*and those to whom it was first preached did not enter because of disobedience.*"). When we remember the peculiar temptation to apostasy - to return to the traditional Jewish religion - we can readily understand the author's wisdom in repeatedly mentioning the one characteristic that was common to Israel throughout her generations: disobedience. The entire thought is captured by another Old Testament prophet, Hosea:

*I taught Ephraim to walk,  
Taking them by their arms;  
But they did not know that I healed them.  
I drew them with gentle cords, with bands of love,  
And I was to them as those who take the yoke from their neck.*  
(Hosea 11:3-4)

Finally, the reference to the Exodus focuses the reader's attention upon the act of God in the formation of a people, a nation separated from all other nations to receive His grace and His law. Whereas the operative covenant was instituted through and in Abraham, the nation of Israel as God's people was not historically inaugurated until the Exodus from Egypt. B. F. Westcott writes, "The Old Covenant is connected with the first formation of the nation and with that sovereign display of God's power by which he separated externally a people from the world." It is very fitting that the author should allude to this nation-creating act of God through Moses at the time of the Exodus, for that is exactly what God had done in the New Covenant through Jesus Christ. The Apostle Peter confirms this in his first epistle, using the same Old Testament language used of Israel,

*But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light; who once were not a people but are now the people of God, who had not obtained mercy but now have obtained mercy.*  
(I Peter 2:9-10)

These words are often treated by Dispensational commentators as referring specifically to Jews, and not applicable to the Gentile Church. It seems more reasonable, however, in light of the overall teachings of Paul, Peter, and the author of Hebrews, to understand these words as applying to the recipients of the New Covenant - Jew or Gentile - and as describing the newness of the peculiar nation God has formed in that covenant in Jesus Christ. We should not find it disturbing that the New Testament authors use the same language, borrowed from the Old Testament, in speaking of the Church, for it only serves

to remind us that the historical events which occurred under Moses were always intended to foreshadow those events which were to come under Jesus Christ.

One more thing might be said regarding the author's reference (the prophetic reference, that is) to the Exodus as the key event in the redemption of Israel and the seminal event in the future New Covenant. It was at the time of the Exodus that God covenanted with Israel through the giving of the Law, written on tablets of stone, at Mt. Sinai. Commentators spend a great deal of time in their remarks on Hebrews 8, discussing the many differences between the 'old' Covenant and the 'new.' But it seems that only one crucial difference is of concern, that one difference encompassing all other differences. This difference is the material upon which God's law was to be written. Under the Old Covenant, stone; under the New, the tablet of the human heart.

*For this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws in their mind and write them on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people.* (8:10)

There has been in the Christian Church for millennia, a sad misunderstanding in regard to the position of the Law in relationship to God's people. Many have erroneously taught that the Old Covenant under Moses was a 'works' covenant in which man was saved through his obedience to the Law. One passage alone from Paul should have long ago dispelled such notions,

*We who are Jews by nature, and not sinners of the Gentiles, knowing that a man is not justified by the works of the law but by faith in Jesus Christ, even we have believed in Christ Jesus, that we might be justified by faith in Christ and not by the works of the law; for by the works of the law no flesh shall be justified.* (Galatians 2:15-16)

It would go a long way toward easing the apparent logical tension between 'law' and 'grace' if we would fully understand that God has, at all times and in all dispensations, *intended that His law should be obeyed.* The justice of God's judgments through the ages is founded on this principle: that man is responsible to obey God, and God is just in punishing man when he does not

obey. Adam was justly punished by God for disobedience, the world flooded by water due to disobedience, and Israel cast out of the promised land because of disobedience. Man has not been capable of fully and perfectly obeying God's law since he fell into sin in the Garden, but that has never diminished his responsibility to God's holy law one iota. All of the covenants have reference to obedience, and obedience has constant reference to God's law. Consider the reason God himself gives for choosing Abraham,

*For I have known him, in order that he may command his children and his household after him, that they keep the way of the LORD, to do righteousness and justice, that the LORD may bring to Abraham what He has spoken to him.* (Genesis 18:19)

Obedience was bound up in the Abrahamic Covenant no less than in the Mosaic, yet obedience was no more a source or cause of salvation in the Mosaic Covenant than it was in the Abrahamic. The catastrophic heresy of Pelagius – that man's *responsibility* to obedience implies his *ability* to obey – has plagued the Church for fifteen hundred years. Many modern Christians think that because the Mosaic Law was engraved on tablets of stone, man under that covenant was both responsible and able to obey the Law and thereby secure eternal salvation. Conversely, too many now believe that because we are 'under grace' in Jesus Christ, it is no longer incumbent upon believers to obey God's Law – they may still do so, but it is an option rather than a requirement. It cannot be imagined that any Old Testament prophet, or any New Testament apostle, would have abided by such a concept at God setting aside His holy Law as 'optional.'

How has it escaped notice that the emphasis placed upon the legal requirements of righteousness under the Mosaic Law was intended not to lead a man to a works-oriented salvation, but to show him his utter inability to achieve salvation in that manner? Peter called the legal statutes "*a burden neither we nor our fathers could bear.*" In doing so he was not saying that the Law was bad or wrong, but simply that it was too heavy for any man to carry. Paul makes it clear that the purpose of the Law was to make him painfully aware of his sin and

inability. Yet the view persists that the Mosaic Covenant was a works-covenant, and that Old Testament saints were saved through obedience to the law.

This particular error, however, seems only to affect the eschatology of those who maintain it – believing that in the Millennial Kingdom the Mosaic Law will again be the dominant paradigm for reconstituted Israel. A more current and dangerous view is the converse – that those who are ‘under grace’ need not concern themselves with God’s law unless they are interested in receiving ‘rewards’ in heaven. This view is often held in concert with the perspective on the New Covenant that teaches that it pertains only to the Millennial Kingdom. This is a necessary position, for otherwise one would have to wonder why God would bother to write a law upon the hearts of people who may or may not obey that law, at their own whim. Hopefully it can be established that neither view – the optional nature of the law or the postponed realization of the New Covenant – is biblically tenable.

The promise of the New Covenant writing of the Law upon the heart is not merely found in the passage from Jeremiah 31 quoted here in Hebrews 8. In fact, the internalization of law-obedience forms the essential characteristic of the future work of God as delineated by both Jeremiah and Ezekiel in the days of the Babylonian Exile. The Lord speaks further through Jeremiah, in Chapter 32,

*They shall be My people, and I will be their God; then I will give them one heart and one way, that they may fear Me forever, for the good of them and their children after them. And I will make an everlasting covenant with them, that I will not turn away from doing them good; but I will put My fear in their hearts so that they will not depart from Me.*

(Jeremiah 32:38-40)

The same internal change is also found in Ezekiel 36,

*Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.*

(Ezekiel 36:25-27)

The wording is different, but the similarities are too clear to miss: the heart of flesh in Ezekiel is the same heart upon which the Lord promises to write His Law in Jeremiah. The intent of this inscription of the law upon the heart in Jeremiah is that God's people would walk in His statutes - that they should finally obey His commandments. The mind and the heart are renewed in this divine redemptive surgery, and the recipient is changed, made *new*, in his very nature. "God first enlightens the understanding by means of his inspired word, and then he inscribes it on the heart. Through the heart, the truth affects the will, and through the will it controls and sanctifies the life."

In His interview with Nicodemus, Jesus reproached the Pharisee for his ignorance regarding the new birth, "*Are you the teacher of Israel, and do not know these things?*" On what basis did Jesus assume Nicodemus prior knowledge of the new birth? Certainly we cannot find the phrase 'born again' in the Old Testament. It seems reasonable to conclude that the new birth itself is so strongly implied in the promises of the New Covenant, through the prophetic writings of Jeremiah and Ezekiel, that at least the *teachers* of Israel ought to have understood the concept. Nicodemus, by coming to Jesus in the first place, was acknowledging that there must be something more than obedience to the Law, and Jesus reads his heart at the very outset of their conversation, "*Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.*" But Nicodemus, like so many of the Jews, failed to grasp the newness of the New Covenant, that it was 'not like' the Mosaic Covenant. Nicodemus knew that God would not change His law; what Nicodemus failed to understand was that God would change the hearts of His people. "Therefore God proclaims His law by human voice in vain unless He writes it in our hearts by His Spirit, that is, unless He forms and fits us for obedience." This is the key to understanding the Law - not that it was a 'dispensation' of salvation through works, but rather that it painfully highlighted the need of sinful man for something much, much more. Not a new law, or an easier law (as some teach faith to be), but an inward power

to obey the law. The need for this was foretold by Moses in one of his last orations to the people of Israel,

*Yet the LORD has not given you a heart to perceive and eyes to see and ears to hear, to this very day... And the LORD your God will circumcise your heart and the heart of your descendants, to love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, that you may live.*  
(Deuteronomy 29:4 & 30:6)

If the New Covenant is in force, and wherever and for whomever it is in force, this statement regarding the internal reality of the new heart must also be in force. It is of the essence of the New Covenant – not as a future promise, but as a present reality. What is lacking in the heart of every man is the ability to love, to fear, to obey God (all words used in the above prophecies for those virtues which will accompany the inward change). When someone is graciously made a partaker of the New Covenant, he or she is made a New Creation through the New Birth. In reverse, when a sinner is born again, he or she is made new through the regenerative power of the Holy Spirit, the Law of God written upon their new heart, and themselves united to the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. This is biblical salvation, plain and simple. Whether the sinner looked in faith toward the new birth yet to come (Old Testament saints), or look in faith to the consummation of the new birth already begun (New Testament saints), the ‘formula’ remains the same in all times.

If salvation has always been ‘by grace through faith,’ then what difference was there between the Old Covenant and the New? The answer is not to be found on an individual level, for just as no sinner was ever justified by the works of the law, so also no sinner was ever saved apart from faith. The answer is to be found in the covenant *community* – and specifically the conditions of entry and continuance in that community. Under the Old Covenant the community was identified physically as descendants of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob or by conversion to that people by a Gentile. The key was circumcision, a physical surgery to signify a physical relationship. The covenant community was

externally oriented and determined; it was 'carnal.' The covenant community under the New Covenant is spiritual and inward, and membership within that community is made by an act of God through supernatural birth rather than physical birth: "*who were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.*" A man was a member of the Old Covenant community, and a woman by her relationship to the man, without regard to his or her faithfulness in obedience to God. As Milligan points out, "multitudes of those who lived under the Old Covenant never received the impress of God's law upon either their understanding or their hearts." Nonetheless each was, by birth and circumcision, a member of the covenant community.

This is not to say that birth and circumcision alone could *keep* a man within the Old Covenant community. There were indeed provisions of exclusion for the unrepentant and rebellious. But the inward condition of true salvation represented only a subset of the overall community – the remnant, as it were. In the New Covenant the set of those who are saved is coextensive with those who are members of the New Covenant community. To be in the New Covenant is to be in the Mediator of the New Covenant, Jesus Christ; and to be in Jesus Christ is to be saved. It is this issue of inclusion or exclusion that brings our study to the issue first raised in the previous lesson – the issue of infant baptism and the covenant community.

#### **The Reformed Doctrine of Infant Baptism:**

Reformed theologians recognize and have affirmed that the nature of biblical baptism is tied up with the nature of the New Covenant community. In Reformed theology, the New Testament Church is the visible form of the New Covenant community. Therefore it is concluded that membership into the Church and membership into the New Covenant community are of the same nature. Benjamin Warfield, in his essay titled *The Polemics of Infant Baptism*, writes, "the subjects of baptism are the members of the visible Church: and who





A. A. Hodge (1823-86)

those are, will certainly be determined by our theory of the nature of the Church.” Speaking of the Old Covenant ritual of circumcision in comparison to New Testament baptism, Archibald Hodge links the two sacraments in typical Reformed fashion, “Each in its own age was the authoritatively appointed door of entrance into the fold of salvation, and the badge of citizenship in the kingdom of God.” Both of these statements are representative of the Reformed position on both the New Covenant community and the members thereof. Following the Reformed hermeneutic of continuity, Reformed theologians find a continuous pattern or mode of existence between the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant. Warfield comments in his defense of infant baptism, that the practice is “the unavoidable implication of the continuity of the Church of God, as it is taught in the Scriptures, from its beginning to its consummation.” This hermeneutic of continuity is applied to the covenants and their signs.

The sign and seal of the Abrahamic Covenant was circumcision, as we read in Genesis 17,

*This is My covenant which you shall keep, between Me and you and your descendants after you: Every male child among you shall be circumcised; and you shall be circumcised in the flesh of your foreskins, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and you. He who is eight days old among you shall be circumcised, every male child in your generations, he who is born in your house or bought with money from any foreigner who is not your descendant. He who is born in your house and he who is bought with your money must be circumcised, and My covenant shall be in your flesh for an everlasting covenant.*  
(Genesis 17:10-13)

The ‘sign’ of a covenant is the outward mark or visible emblem of the covenant. It is similar in theological terms to the ‘seal,’ though the nuance of difference between the two terms is not pertinent to this study. Reformed theologians also speak of covenantal signs as ‘sacraments’ as they are viewed as

giving, containing, and/or signifying divine grace as they are observed. This term has often been rejected by non-Reformed theologians as being too close to the sacramentalism of the Roman Catholic Church, and thereby too close to a magical, mystical view of the signs. These theologians therefore tend to call signs like circumcision or baptism, 'ordinances' as being rituals whose observation was ordained by God. The issue, of course, is not what the rite is called, but to whom it properly applies.

In the case of circumcision, Abraham and his posterity were to circumcise all males whether born of the father, purchased as slaves, or born into the household as slaves. The women of Israel were included in the covenant community by association either with their father or their husband, and continued therein whether orphaned or widowed. Circumcision was not a surgery unique to the Israelite people; it was practiced by other Ancient Near Eastern societies as well. But with Israel it took on a deeper, religious significance as the stated sign of the Abrahamic Covenant. Entry into that covenant community by an uncircumcised Gentile was not complete until circumcision was performed. Commentators over the centuries have attempted to determine why circumcision was chosen by God as the sign of the covenant for Israel – from medical cleanliness to purity of procreation – but so far no particular reason stands out as indisputable. Nonetheless it was *the* sign of the covenant, and any uncircumcised male Israelite was to be cast off from the covenant community altogether.

The connection between the Abrahamic Covenant and the New Covenant is not difficult to make from Scripture. The New Covenant is mediated and represented by the 'seed of Abraham' in whom all the nations of the earth were to be blessed. Paul indicates in his letter to the Galatians that the covenant of grace in Jesus Christ reaches back beyond the Mosaic covenant to the Abrahamic. This much has already been discussed thoroughly in this study. What remains to be seen is whether baptism truly takes the place of circumcision under the New

Covenant and, if so, infant children are still to be the recipients of the covenant sign. Warfield reflects the Reformed paedobaptistic conclusion,

The argument in a nutshell is simply this: God established His Church in the days of Abraham and put children into it. They must remain there until He puts them out. He has nowhere put them out. They are all still members of His Church and as such entitled to its ordinances. Among these ordinances is baptism, which standing in similar place in the New Dispensation to circumcision in the Old, is like it to be given to children.

If we begin by accepting, for argument's sake, Warfield's contention that circumcision is replaced by baptism as the sign of the covenant, it remains to determine if his conclusion regarding application to infant children follows logically. On the basis of Reformed teaching regarding signs and seals, it soon becomes apparent that the Reformed position on paedobaptism is a *non sequitur*. Hodge gives a definition of sacraments as signs or symbols, "wherein outward physical signs represent inward invisible grace." In relation to baptism he later maintains "the outstanding essential fact, about which there can be no controversy, is that baptism with water is a symbol of baptism by the Holy Ghost." Finally, he concludes that "the outward action ought never consciously and intentionally to be applied where the inward invisible grace is absent."

This is a remarkable statement coming from a paedobaptist, but it reflects the common theological position of those who advocate infant baptism as a continuation of the covenant sign of circumcision. Credobaptists, those who advocate baptism only for those who make a profession of faith, argue that there can be no visible evidence in an infant that the faith reflected by the sacrament is indeed present. In response, paedobaptists offer two lines of defense. First, it is argued, that even credobaptists do not have infallible knowledge of the inward reality of the professed faith of adults or older children. This contention is without argument, for only God knows the true state of any man's heart. Nonetheless, it seems to credobaptists to be a dangerous stretch of logic to baptize infants on the basis that we cannot infallibly know that they are *not*

among the elect and therefore members of the New Covenant community. Under the Abrahamic Covenant there was an outward evidence required before circumcision was administered, that being either physical descent from an Israelite, or conscious attachment by an adult to the Israelite community. Even then the heart of the one circumcised was hidden from human view. It stands to reason that there would be an outward evidence upon which New Covenant ministers are to apply the sign of the covenant (again assuming that baptism takes the place of circumcision). That outward evidence is a profession of faith, as physical descent is no longer the determinative factor for community membership. Credobaptists, at least *Reformed* credobaptists, do not argue that it is impossible for infant children to be saved – that would be to argue from ignorance as to God’s inscrutable will. They do, however, argue that visible evidence must be present before the sacrament acknowledging that evidence can be administered. It is one thing to admit, as Reformed credobaptists do, that their knowledge of the validity of another man’s profession of faith is fallible; it is quite another to accept the presence of inward grace upon no evidence of faith whatsoever.

Paedobaptists disagree with this reasoning, and their second line of defense hinges upon the nature of the Abrahamic Covenant (indeed, of all divine covenants) as *familial* in application (*cf.* Warfield quote above, p. 75). Hodge writes,

The divinely appointed and guaranteed presumption is, if the parents, then the children. This is not an invariable law binding God, but it is a prevailing probably law, basing the authorized and rational recognition and treatment of such children by the Church as heirs of the promise.

This quote was dealt with earlier in regard to the double-speak employed of a ‘guaranteed presumption’ that is yet not an ‘invariable law.’ Here is it the word ‘presumption’ that must be analyzed, for it forms an important part of the paedobaptist doctrine. Accepting the principle that the sacrament ought not to

be applied where the inward faith is not in existence, paedobaptists resort to a concept called 'presumptive faith.' It is presumed, on the basis of the familial nature of divine covenants, that the children of believers are themselves numbered among the elect. In a remarkable statement, Hodge writes, "The faith involved is that of the parent and of the Church, while the unconscious and passive beneficiary is the child himself." Interestingly, both sides see themselves as erring on the side of safety with regard to the well-being of the child. The paedobaptist baptizes the infant child on the 'safe' assumption that as a child of believers the infant stands in the same relation to the covenant community as the Israelite male child under the Old Covenant. The credobaptist requires an outward profession of faith so that the 'safe' position of visible, though not infallible, evidence is in place before the sacrament is administered.

But is it a reasonable interpretation of Scripture to say that circumcision has been replaced by baptism under the New Covenant? Nowhere is this contention made explicit in the pages of the New Testament, and there is only one passage in which the two rites are mentioned together, in Colossians 2,

*In Him you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by putting off the body of the sins of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ, buried with Him in baptism, in which you also were raised with Him through faith in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead. And you, being dead in your trespasses and the uncircumcision of your flesh, He has made alive together with Him, having forgiven you all trespasses...*  
(Colossians 2:11-13)

Although this is only one passage, yet it appears to draw an irrefutable link between circumcision and baptism. The question is whether that link is one of transition or of replacement. Paul's treatment of circumcision elsewhere in his epistles speaks of the fulfillment of Old Covenant physical circumcision being New Covenant spiritual circumcision of the heart. He writes to the Romans,

*For he is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is circumcision that which is outward in the flesh; but he is a Jew who is one inwardly; and circumcision is that of the heart, in the Spirit, not in the letter; whose praise is not from men but from God.*

(Romans 2:28-29)

In keeping with the internalization of the New Covenant, Paul speaks of God performing an internal circumcision of the heart – another way of speaking of the new birth. This is the reality and the newness of New Covenant salvation – God doing a work that no man can do. Baptism is then spoken of as being symbolic of the new life that has been created through the new birth,

*Or do you not know that as many of us as were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into His death? Therefore we were buried with Him through baptism into death, that just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, even so we also should walk in newness of life.*  
(Romans 6:3-4)

In a sense, then, baptism does take the place of circumcision. Yet it is symbolic of a vastly different sort of birth – the new birth by grace through faith in Jesus Christ rather than the physical birth of a descendant of Abraham. Where there is no evidence of that faith, therefore, there can be no application of the symbol.

**Week 7:                   The New Covenant – Divine Provision**

**Text Reading:       Hebrews 8:11 - 12**

*“It cannot be that the body should receive the sacrament of baptism, unless the soul has before received the truth of faith.”*  
(Jerome, 4<sup>th</sup> Century)

In the last lesson we briefly touched upon the topic of the covenant community and its relationship to God under the gracious provisions of the New Covenant. That the author of Hebrews, and the context of the Jeremiah prophecy, are *community* oriented is clear from the wording used: *I will be their God, and they shall be My people... None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother... from the least of them to the greatest of them.* While it is true that the community is made up of individuals, and that salvation is an individual not a corporate phenomenon, it is also true that the individualization of the Gospel over the past century or so has seriously lessened believers’ understanding of the

importance and centrality of the community in God's redemptive work. One of the most serious casualties of this modern perspective is a more accurate understanding of biblical passages that are oriented toward *community* but too often interpreted *individually*.

Consider the phrase found in Hebrews 8:10, and here and there throughout the Bible – *I will be their God and they shall be My people*. This is the covenant refrain uttered by the Lord from the beginning of His deliverance of Israel from the bondage of slavery in Egypt,

*Therefore say to the children of Israel: 'I am the LORD; I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, I will rescue you from their bondage, and I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with great judgments. I will take you as My people, and I will be your God. Then you shall know that I am the LORD your God who brings you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians.'* (Exodus 6:6-7)

Elsewhere we find the promise given as the chief end or result of God's placing His tabernacle in the midst of the tribes and establishing the mediatorial priesthood of the Levites,

*I will set My tabernacle among you, and My soul shall not abhor you. I will walk among you and be your God, and you shall be My people.* (Leviticus 26:11-12)

In the midst of the Babylonian Exile these words became an anchor of faith through the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, assuring the exiles of God's continuing faithfulness,

*I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them. Then you shall dwell in the land that I gave to your fathers; you shall be My people, and I will be your God.* (Ezekiel 36:27-28)

This covenant refrain continues, remarkably, into the New Testament era and covers the Church with the same paternal umbrella spread over Israel. Paul speaks to a predominantly Gentile congregation in Corinth and assures believers there of their membership within the covenant community of God,

*For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:  
"I will dwell in them and walk among them.  
I will be their God, and they shall be My people."* (II Corinthians 6:16)

The frequent repetition of this phrase throughout the various periods of redemptive history should convince believers that the salvation wrought in them by divine grace is not to be viewed from a strictly individualistic perspective. To a large extent the modern emphasis on the faith of every individual believer is a necessary reaction against 'Christendom' of the Middle Ages, when one was born into the Church and considered a member of the Church community from the moment of baptism as an infant. Individual faith took a back seat to corporate solidarity, and one's eternal welfare depended more on one's unfettered communion with the Church than upon personal communion with God. The individual element was not altogether lacking, but was to be found mainly in the marginalized teachings of the pietists such as Jacob Böhme and Thomas à Kempis. For the most part individuals did not concern themselves with a personal faith, but only sought to maintain membership in the Church through the sacraments.

Even the Protestant Reformation did not entirely correct this disproportionate focus on corporate solidarity, except within the teaching and the practices of the despised Anabaptists. But American Christianity owes more to these fringe believers of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century than is often admitted: congregation selection of ministers, non-interference of government in religion, and, not least of all, a return to the biblical teaching of individual faith as prerequisite to salvation. But the pendulum has swung far to the other side, and in 21<sup>st</sup> Century American Christianity church attendance is selective and voluntary. What is important to most professing believers today is their own, personal relationship and communion with God in Jesus Christ.

The loss is greater than we realize, and of similar magnitude as the error of Christendom in which everyone was a 'Christian' by virtue of birth. At the very least such an overworked individualism requires a reading of Scripture completely apart from its obvious context – in both testaments. Words like



'people' and 'nation' are everywhere used to describe the salvific work of God. An excellent example of an individual's conversion into a corporate body is that of Ruth,

*Entreat me not to leave you, or to turn back from following after you;  
For wherever you go, I will go; And wherever you lodge, I will lodge;  
Your people shall be my people, and your God, my God.* (Ruth 2:16)

This passage shows that the covenant refrain was an echo, and the chorus was to be God's people. They were to sing the words back to God, personalizing them corporately, if we can put it that way. *Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.* Personal, yet corporate. Individual salvation, yet communal association.

*None of them shall teach his neighbor, and none his brother, saying, 'Know the LORD,' for all shall know Me, from the least of them to the greatest of them.* (8:11)

What is unique, therefore, about the New Covenant is the fact that the blessings of the covenant - the true, inner working of divine regeneration - belong to all members of the covenant community not by birth, but by conversion. The remaining promises or blessings of the New Covenant are all given in the a community setting, *None shall teach his neighbor...none shall teach his brother...but all shall know Me...* This particular promise removes the mediating layer of priests from between God and the covenant community. This liberation is not arbitrary, but is based on two events that characterize the New Covenant community, and which did not characterize the old. The first is the 'once for all' sacrifice of Jesus Christ, the Lamb of God, thus forever ending the need for continual and continuing sacrifices in order for God's people to commune with Him. The second is of equal importance, and that is the regeneration of New Covenant believers through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. This divine work applies the first, and unites the community - both as individuals and as a community - to God through union with His Son Jesus Christ. Delitzsch speaks of a "new bond of communion between the Lord and His people," and this is the essence of the New Covenant. Milligan writes,

For unless a man is begotten by the Spirit, through the word of truth, the good seed of the kingdom, he can not become a member of it, nor can he be a partaker of its benefits.

Some have erroneously taken the promise of not needing anyone to teach as justification for a private faith, and a 'self taught' Christianity. This has historically led almost invariably to heresy and apostasy. Another verse frequently quoted against 'professional' instruction (i.e., paid ministers, seminary-trained theologians, etc.) is I John 2:27,

*But the anointing which you have received from Him abides in you, and you do not need that anyone teach you; but as the same anointing teaches you concerning all things, and is true, and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, you will<sup>e</sup> abide in Him.*

Taken together with Hebrews 8:11 it might appear that individual Christians are in no need of instruction and are already in possession of all that they need to know. When one considers, however, the frequency with which the apostle Paul exhorts men like Timothy and Titus, and even himself, to instruct the congregations in the 'full counsel of Scripture,' it becomes apparent that such an interpretation of I John 2:27 and Hebrews 8:11 would render Paul's word meaningless. The matter hopefully becomes clearer when one considers the authoritative foundation of all teaching and its nature as both objective and subjective.

Under the Old Covenant the Levitical priest was the *objective authority* with regard to the instruction of God's people in the laws and statutes of Jehovah. It was their God-given responsibility and prerogative to teach the people about God. Many of the Levites, however, abrogated their *subjective* authority either by lack of personal study or lack of personal morality. They were supposed to be teachers (objectively), but often disqualified themselves as teachers (subjectively) because of their own unbelief and wickedness. In contrast, there were others who through personal piety and study earned subjective teaching authority, though they did not possess the objective authority of the Levite. Nicodemus was such a man, as were many of the Pharisees. The

people viewed the rabbi Jesus as such a man, though also possessing an objective authority that was not derived from his being a Levite. In essence, then, the promises of Hebrews 8:11 and I John 2:27 do not remove the need for instruction but only the objective authority of a particular tribe (Levi) or man (i.e., the Pope). Westcott comments,

No privileged class is interposed between the mass of men and God. All are true scribes in virtue of the teaching within them. All have immediate access to the divine Presence.

The way is now open for all believers to attain the level of teacher, and even the author of Hebrews uses this fact to chastise the Hebrew congregation for its negligence of this great privilege and heavy responsibility, *“For though by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you again the first principles of the oracles of God; and you have come to need milk and not solid food.”* (5:12). Instruction is perhaps made even more important by the new, inward capacity of every believer *to learn*. And this instruction is still to be done as it was done (when it was done correctly) in Old Testament Israel – within the context of the community. It is an amazing feature of the history of heresy to discover how many times men and women who led others astray were themselves ‘self taught.’ Even the isolation of the seminary classroom falls under the indictment. Somehow the pendulum needs to begin to shift back again toward the community, and if possible stop before it goes too far the other way! Calvin summarizes the continuing need and opportunity for all believers to receive instruction,

We know that teaching has a double purpose, first that those who are completely ignorant can begin from the first elements; and secondly that those who have made a start can make further progress. Therefore since Christians ought to make progress as long as they live, it is certain that no one is so wise that he does not need to be taught, with the result that willingness to learn is no small part of our wisdom.

What does it mean to be God’s people, and for Him to be the God of the community? Though this concept is a full study in and of itself, it can be

summarized in two contrasting but coordinating words: *separation* and *witness*. Associated with the covenant refrain is the divine command, “*Come out from among them and be separate...*” inculcating a tangible separation between those who are God’s people and those who are not. This has meant, among other things, a prohibition upon marriage between the two communities. Paul speaks as well of not being ‘unequally yoked’ with unbelievers, a concept that goes beyond simply the marriage bond. But this separatedness is not merely external; indeed, the external aspect of it is by far the least important (though by no means unimportant) feature. The essence of biblical separatedness is the pursuit of holiness,

*Therefore, having these promises, beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all filthiness of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God.* (II Corinthians 7:1)

This verse from Paul’s pen suffers from an unfortunate chapter division, as it is really the continuation of the apostle’s exhortation at the end of chapter 6. ‘These promises’ flow from the same covenant refrain that we have been discussing throughout,

*I will dwell in them and walk among them.*

*I will be their God, and they shall be My people.*

*Therefore,*

*Come out from among them and be separate, says the Lord.*

*Do not touch what is unclean, and I will receive you.*

*I will be a Father to you, and you shall be My sons and daughters,*

*Says the LORD Almighty.*

(II Corinthians 6:16-18)

This facet of the separatedness of the believing community is the intended result of the imprinting of God’s law upon the minds and hearts of His people. It has long been the view of philosophers that the mind and heart of a man are instrumental in directing the will and the actions. “God first enlightens the understanding by means of his inspired word, and then he inscribes it on the heart. Through the heart, the truth affects the will, and through the will it controls and sanctifies the life.” This fact of an outward, visible expression of the inward impression should itself prove the foolishness and unbiblical nature of a *physical* separation from the world.

Yet, unless balanced by the other aspect of separatedness – *witness* – the holiness aspect has historically degenerated into monasticism, asceticism, and self-righteousness. Professing Christians in Protestant America may not enter physical monasteries any more, but they can nonetheless maintain a monastic separation and condescension toward the world around them. Modern Christians are often more concerned about the world around them ‘defiling’ them, than they are about their own responsibility to witness to the world. This phenomenon is also a result of the unhealthy emphasis on individualism within modern Christianity.

The author of Hebrews urges the Jewish converts to Christianity in Rome to stand fast against the temptation to return to the Mosaic dispensation and worship. Yet it would not have been acceptable to him for these believers to relegate their new faith to their ‘private lives’ and to disassociate themselves with the world around them. In point of historical fact, most of the believers were slaves and servants and did not have this luxury in any event. Still, the example of Old Testament Israel and of the young Church in Acts is one of a community of people who were *separate* in the midst of the world, not separated from the world. The very same separatedness that is enjoined upon God’s people is that which witnesses of God’s redemptive work to those ‘outside.’ The Hebrew Christians in Rome, and all Christians in all places and ages, are suppose to live life in this world as a visibly, noticeably separated people while still interacting daily with those from whose immorality and impiety they have separated. This concept is beyond the scope of the current study to fully develop, but it touches upon all aspects of the believing community as the individuals within that community self-consciously pursue a separated witness in their homes, their workplaces, the marketplace...everywhere.

*For I will be merciful to their unrighteousness, and their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more.* (8:12)

The manner in which the Lord phrases this wonderful promise of the New Covenant blessing of the forgiveness of sins is quite significant. *“I will be merciful to their iniquities”* is a way of saying *“I will forgive their sins”* that would draw the minds of the Hebrews readers to the Old Covenant ministry of the Day of Atonement. The contrast in this prophecy from Jeremiah 31 is between the Old Covenant (and its ministry and effectiveness) and the New Covenant (and its ministry and effectiveness). Thus the wording takes us behind the veil of the Temple to the place where the High Priest offered up the blood of the annual sacrifice for the unrighteousness of the nation. The very word ‘merciful’ (חַנּוּן - *hane'um*) is from the same root word used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament with reference to the ‘mercy seat’ – the covering of the ark of the covenant. The ark, of course, contained the stone tablets of the Law – the Law that the people of Israel violated daily throughout the year. But the blood of the annual atonement sacrifice, sprinkled on the mercy seat, was sufficient under God’s gracious ordinance to effect mercy for the whole nation for the coming year.

Thus with the promise of the New Covenant, God is saying that apart from the annual atonement service He will nonetheless have mercy upon the iniquity of His people. Richard Phillips paraphrases Hebrews 8:12 as *“I will be mercy-seated toward your iniquities.”* Of course this mercy is founded upon another, more perfect and more durable atoning sacrifice, but the focus here is not upon the means but the result, as the second clause of verse 12 reminds us: *“...and their sins and lawless deeds I will remember no more.”*

The heart of man’s problem, his eternal and insoluble problem, is the separation made between him and God on account of man’s sin. The strands of human sin, the holiness of God, and forgiveness form a theological and philosophical knot that is harder to untie than Gordian’s. The legendary problem with the Gordian Knot is that the string had no ends from which to begin the unraveling process. This is metaphorical of all problems that seem to

have no starting place, and therefore no clear path to a solution. In the case of man and sin the various possible starting points all lead logically to an unhappy conclusion. If one starts with the holiness of God, as many Reformed theologians do, the knot unravels into a noose into which all men have placed their neck through sin. God's just wrath triumphs over His mercy. If, on the other hand, one begins with man's sin, it is too often the case that the knot becomes a bow set upon the 'free gift' of divine forgiveness, and the seriousness of sin is lost.

Another frequent outcome of this second perspective is that of a works-salvation. Because our sins are 'ever before us,' as David said, there is a natural tendency to attempt to self-atone through religious works. But our sins become like Lady Macbeth's blood-stained hands – the spots will not come clean. Our minds record each sin with indelible ink, and our consciences are defiled by the remembrance of our sin-filled past. It is also hard to understand, much less to accept, that God does not have this same record of our sin in front of Him. David, who wrote of his sin being before him in Psalm 51, writes in Psalm 69 of God's perspective: "*O God, You know my foolishness; and my sins are not hidden from You.*" (69:5). Phillips asks the question that lies just beneath the surface of every believer's heart, "How can God, on the one hand, know all things, be perfect in knowledge, and yet, on the other, forget the wicked things we have done?"

The answer, of course, is the Person and Work of Jesus Christ, the One who by His own atoning death cut the knot and brought the ends of mercy and justice together. God's forgetting of the sins of His people is not based on mere altruism, but rests firmly on the fact that the debt of sin can no longer justly be remembered, as it no longer exists. "God's forgetting is based on his forgiving." This is the Gospel, pure and true. It may take a lifetime, and perhaps even eternity, to fully grasp what God has done for sinners through the atoning work of His Son Jesus Christ, but any alteration of the truth is a corruption of the Gospel. Delitzsch writes, "...in Christ Jesus all our sins are once for all forgiven...we have nothing to do but to receive this forgiveness in humble faith,

and...when we fall into sin the covenant foundation still remains, and needs not the repetition of legal sacrifices to give it fresh validity." It is upon the foundation of Christ's full and final atonement for sin that we find God *"faithful and just to forgive us our sin and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness."*

By God's pardoning of sin all that hinders mercy is removed. For sin is that cloud which keepeth away the light of God's mercy; the dam that keepeth the current of God's grace from flowing on to us; and the bar that fast closeth the door against God's entering into our soul. When that cloud is dispelled, and that dam is broken down, and that bar pulled out, a ready way is made for God's mercy to come unto us.



**Week 8:                   The Passing of the Old****Text Reading:         Hebrews 8:13**

*Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down."*

(Matthew 24:1-2)

Verse 13 of Hebrews Chapter 8 is an often overlooked passage in the transition from the prophetic restatement of the New Covenant to the author's extensive treatment of the description of the sanctuary beginning in Chapter 9. The discussion before is all about the priesthood, the discussion afterward all about the sacrificial system, and tucked neatly in the middle is one of the most significant verses – Hebrews 8:13 – to the writer's entire argument. Verse 13 is also intensely 'eschatological,' yet when one peruses the Scripture Index of most books on that theological topic this verse is almost always missing. There is a great deal of information that can be gleaned from this one verse without overworking it, so we will devote this lesson to its exegesis and interpretation.

The thrust of the entire epistle/sermon, as we have discussed before, is an exhortation by the author to Hebrew converts to Christianity who, according to our working hypothesis, were living in Rome. The admonition is to stand firm against that particular form of apostasy that would entice these Jewish believers to abandon their profession of faith in Jesus Christ as the Promised Messiah, and to return to 'orthodox Judaism,' the ancient religion of Moses. The methodology employed by the author has been consistent: without ever denigrating the Old Covenant in its leadership or ritual, to show the superiority of everything associated with the New Covenant in Jesus Christ. Thus the frequent refrain, "better than." Jesus is 'better than' Moses; Jesus is 'better than' Aaron; the once-for-all sacrifice of and by Jesus is 'better than' the offering of bulls and goats; etc. The Hebrews Christian readers would be taking a huge step backward to abandon Christ for Moses, they would be trading the light for the shadows.

But now, briefly, the author introduces another reason why such an apostasy would be the height of folly. Not only has the old system been superseded by the new and Moses replaced by Jesus, but the old system in its entirety is about to disappear altogether. By these words the writer warns against a false interpretation of current events (current in his day, that is): that the two ‘covenants’ would continue in their physical existence and observation along parallel paths. No, one of them – the *old* – having been rendered obsolete by the advent of the *new*, was soon to pass from the scene forever. It is as if the author is saying, “Do not think to take the easy path back to Moses, to avoid persecution for the name of Christ, for the time is soon coming when all that is associated with Moses will itself vanish.”

Set in its historical context, this statement would have been hard to understand or imagine. ‘Moses’ had been taught and believed on by Jews for over a millennium and a half. Mosaic Judaism, to be sure, had suffered serious persecutions in the past, but recent history was remarkable. Unusual favor had been granted to the Jews by the Greeks under Alexander, and then by the Romans. In spite of its unique monotheism, Judaism was a legally valid and protected religion within the Roman world, and Jews were accorded religious privileges that bring to mind, anachronistically of course, First Amendment rights under the U. S. Constitution. From a political and social standpoint, there was no reason to think that historical Mosaic Judaism in its full ritual force would not be around for millennia to come. But the truth of the matter was that the whole Levitical and Aaronic system would soon, and dramatically, pass away.

The terminology used in verse 13 is full of finality and permanence. The two key words are *obsolete* and *vanish*. The first of these, translated ‘obsolete’ by the NASV and NKJV and ‘decaying’ by the KJV, is the Greek word *palaiō* (παλιός) which simply means ‘that which has grown old in years.’ In several places where the word is used the context adds the further thought that

that which is 'old' has been, or is being, superseded by that which is 'new.' This is the case in Romans 6 when Paul speaks of the 'old' man and the 'new' man. This is also the case here in Hebrews 8:13. The word is used most frequently in a natural sense, that of a man growing old and soon to die and pass from the scene. It is not a pejorative word, and probably should not be translated by the negative English words *obsolete* or *decay*. Of these, however, *obsolete* is to be preferred as it carries the sense of the old being rendered invalid by the advent of the new. The Old Covenant had indeed been around for a long, long time; but that was not the reason that it was soon to pass away. Had the New Covenant not been inaugurated in Jesus Christ's own person and blood, the Old Covenant would have been around until it was. But the New had come, and the author wants to make it very clear that the New and the Old would not long continue together.

The second key word in verse 13 is *vanish*, from the Greek *aphanizō* (αφαιζω). The construction of this word involves the 'alpha privative' - the prefix 'a' or α attached to another word, negating the root word. Thus the word means the negation of *phanizō*, which means 'to appear.' Hence the translation 'vanish,' as the word in verse 13 literally means 'to not appear' or 'to disappear.' The thought is simple, but the concept profound - all visible evidence of the Old Covenant will vanish, disappear. The combination of words used in this verse serve as a final sentence upon the vestiges of the Old Covenant - it is old in years, superseded in function, and is soon to vanish forever from the scene. With regard to the Old Covenant, the words of Qohelet concerning the fate of all men apply: *There is no remembrance of former things* and *...the living know that they will die; but the dead know nothing...for the memory of them is forgotten.* (Eccl. 1:11; 9:5)

One piece of information implied by the wording of verse 13 regards the date or period in which the epistle was written and distributed. The writer clearly indicates that the Old Covenant system - old and superseded as it now

was – was *about to* vanish. In other words, it was still operational at the time of the letter's writing. The effectiveness of the Old Covenant and its priesthood had already been removed by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ and His ascent into heaven as the new and greater High Priest. Christ by His work on the cross and His victory over the grave, 'took the Old Covenant out of the way.'

*...having wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*

(Colossians 2:14)

The Levitical priesthood and the Aaronic High Priest continue to function in the Temple in Jerusalem, though their ministrations were no longer of any value. The author of Hebrews and his original audience were living in a transitional time, the years after the resurrection and ascension of Jesus Christ in which the Old Covenant was passing away and the New Covenant coming into its own. The point in time at which we can say with assurance that the Old Covenant, as far as its ritual, sacrificial system was concerned, 'vanished' is AD 70, the year in which the Roman general Titus breached the walls of Jerusalem, set fire to the city, and utterly destroyed the Temple. Thus we can convincingly argue for a date of authorship of Hebrews, some time before this catastrophic event. Milligan is perhaps too exact as to set the date of writing to AD 63, "And as a civil Institution it continued for only about seven years after the writing of this Epistle."

For the vast majority of modern eschatological writers the events of AD 70, and the circumstances of the First Jewish Revolt that precipitated the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple, are not dealt with to the degree their significance warrants. The author of Hebrews foresees these events, speaking prophetically in 8:13, and sees in them the denouement of the entire Mosaic religious system. Although Hebrews 8:13 is a short verse tucked in between major sections of theological discussion, nonetheless it is a powerful warning to the first readers of the letter. The unbelieving Jews of their day lived in peace and prosperity, their

religion accepted by the Roman authorities and thus the temptation for Hebrew Christians to 'go back' to Moses was powerful. But all of that was soon to change, and to change dramatically and forever. Jews throughout the Roman Empire would be affected by the maelstrom of events leading up to AD 70; Judaism as a whole would be drawn into the vortex created by the 'vanishing' of the Old Covenant from the world. When the dust would finally settle, the Old Covenant would no longer remain, but the New would survive and grow - and that is where the Hebrew Christians belonged, and truly where they were 'safe.'

#### **Eschatology and the Destruction of Jerusalem:**

In the year AD 66 the Jews of Palestine launched a ferocious rebellion against the Roman presence in their land. Authority within the Jewish community has progressively shifted in the previous years to the Zealots, that political/religious group that abhorred Roman domination and advocated violent rebellion and independence. For years Zealots had opposed the compromising Herodians, the political party that advocated acceptance and appeasement toward Rome and the party that the Romans had maintained in power in Palestine for decades. In the mid-60s the Zealots seized control of the newly completed Herodian Temple, and from this position of strength organized an almost-successful revolt against the Roman legions.

The First Jewish Revolt (or War, depending on the perspective of the historian) was fought in phases over the years from AD 66 - 70 and involved two very famous Roman generals who went on to become Emperors. Vespasian was commissioned by the Emperor Nero to travel to Palestine to put down the revolt and to punish the Jews. Vespasian enlisted his son, Titus, to travel to Palestine by way of Egypt, bringing two powerful Roman legions with him from Alexandria. This combined force was successful in defeating the Jewish forces from Galilee south into Palestine, including a famous victory by Vespasian over the Jewish forces led by the priest/general Josephus. Josephus' life and liberty



**Vespasian (AD 9-79)**

were spared when he predicted the ascension of Vespasian to the purple, which occurred after Nero's death (and the deaths of three other short-term emperors) in AD 69, the "Year of Four Emperors." Josephus went on to become the famous historian of Jewish antiquity and of the Jewish War in which he

himself was a part. This work has proven to be an invaluable aid to biblical study as it provides an extra-biblical account of the events concurrent with the lives of Jesus and the apostles.

Vespasian placed his son Titus in charge of the Roman forces in Palestine and, in AD 70, the walls of Jerusalem were breached and the city put to the sword. The massive death toll both of the siege and the subsequent destruction of Jerusalem was of a scale that convinced many contemporary Jews and Christians that the Fall of Jerusalem represented divine judgment. Jews believed the judgment to be on account of Jewish unfaithfulness, while Christians believed it to be divine retribution for the Jewish execution of Jesus. From either perspective the events of that year were too significant to be ignored.

Yet within modern Dispensational eschatological works they have largely been ignored, their significance in terms of biblical prophecy passed over. The loss of life, the destruction of the city and of the Temple, and the subsequent deportation of Jews and articles of the Jewish religion were of a



**Scene from the Arch of Titus in Rome**

scale equal to or surpassing the Babylonian conquest and exile. Nonetheless, Dispensational eschatology fails to accord the events of AD 70 a significant role in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy. Indeed, many of the eschatological events still on the 'calendar' as far as Dispensationalism is concerned, can reasonably be said to have occurred in that tumultuous year of Jerusalem's fall. The passing

away of the Old Covenant and its sacrificial system was far more important to the early Church than many modern writers realize.

At the heart of Dispensational eschatology we find the famous prophecy from the Book of Daniel concerning the Seventy Weeks. Of particular importance, of course, is the last or seventieth week, which is viewed by Dispensation writers as the 'Week of Jacob's Troubles,' or better known as the 'Tribulation.' Tied up with this 'week' are such eschatological events as the advent of the Antichrist, the sealing of the 144,000, and the Rapture of the Church. There are many different formulations as to how these events relate to each other chronologically, but the common denominator within Dispensationalism is that they are all *still future*. Daniel's Seventieth Week has not yet occurred. But this view overlooks the events of AD 70 and their possible relationship to the ancient prophecy.

There is almost universal agreement among biblical scholars and eschatology students that the prophecy found in Daniel Chapter 9, the Seventy Weeks, furnishes the divine time-table for the advent of the Messiah.

*Seventy weeks are determined  
For your people and for your holy city,  
To finish the transgression,  
To make an end of sins,  
To make reconciliation for iniquity,  
To bring in everlasting righteousness,  
To seal up vision and prophecy,  
And to anoint the Most Holy.  
Know therefore and understand,  
That from the going forth of the command  
To restore and build Jerusalem  
Until Messiah the Prince,  
There shall be seven weeks and sixty-two  
weeks;  
The street shall be built again, and the  
wall,  
Even in troublesome times.*

*And after the sixty-two weeks  
Messiah shall be cut off, but not for  
Himself;  
And the people of the prince who is to  
come  
Shall destroy the city and the sanctuary.  
The end of it shall be with a flood,  
And till the end of the war desolations are  
determined.  
Then he shall confirm a covenant with  
many for one week;  
But in the middle of the week  
He shall bring an end to sacrifice and  
offering.  
And on the wing of abominations shall be  
one who makes desolate,  
Even until the consummation, which is  
determined, is poured out on the desolate.*

(Daniel 9:24-27)

As with much of biblical prophecy, there are parts of this prophecy that are fairly easy of interpretation and parts that are not. For instance, it is clear that the prophecy deals with the coming of the Messiah and it is clear that the prophecy contains a 'calendar' of sorts regarding when the Messiah would come. Sixty-nine weeks (seven plus sixty-two) were ordained until the Messiah would come, which works out to 483 years (sixty-nine 'weeks' of seven years each) from the starting point. There are disagreements as to when the prophetic clock actually started, but by almost all reckoning the sixty-nine prophetic weeks brought the nation of Israel to the first century AD and the period in which Jesus lived, ministered, and died. Thus the Daniel prophecy has always been viewed as a powerful apologetic in establishing the fact that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Promised Messiah.

But this still leaves one week hanging out there, so to speak, both in the prophecy itself and in its fulfillment (or at least the interpretation of its fulfillment). Daniel's Seventieth Week is the time period in which the 'prince who is to come' destroys the city and the sanctuary. At the time of the Babylonian Exile, when the vision was given to Daniel, there were three powers yet to come: the Medo-Persian, the Greek, and the Roman. Of these the most powerful and most fearsome was the fourth, the Roman, and it is most reasonable to see the phrase 'prince who is to come' as an oblique reference to the Roman Emperor. This is, at least, how the passage has generally been interpreted by both Jewish and Christian scholars over the course of history. Thus the main ingredients of the latter portion of the prophecy, the Seventieth Week, are: a powerful prince, and the utter destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. Are these not the same ingredients found in the catastrophic events of AD 70?

The Seventieth Week of Daniel's prophecy must, to be consistent, have lasted seven years. This is a point frequently made against interpreting the events of Jerusalem's fall at the hands of Titus as the fulfillment of Daniel 9.



Dispensationalism's literal hermeneutic demands a literal seven years as the unfolding of the Seventieth Week, and the fact that the First Jewish Revolt only lasted from AD 66 - 70 is pointed to as refutation of those events being the fulfillment of Daniel 9. But it must be noted that, while we may accept the seventy weeks as representing seventy times seven *literal* years, the demarcation of those years in time has not been easy, nor in some respects even possible. For instance, the sixty-nine weeks are divided in Daniel's vision into seven and sixty-three. That means that from the starting point (whenever that was) there were two distinct periods: the first lasting forty-nine years (seven weeks times seven years per week) and the second lasting 441 years. No biblical scholar has been able to identify these two periods of time, or any event within the years between Daniel and the advent of Christ that would correspond to the division between seven weeks and sixty-three weeks. We may have no doubt that *some* event corresponded to that transition; we simply do not know what that event was.

By the same hermeneutic, however, we must also place the seventieth week of Daniel immediately subsequent to the sixty-ninth week. There is no room in the prophecy for a gap of time prior to the last week, much less a gap of almost 2,000 years and still counting. It would seem reasonable, employing a literal interpretation of the text, to find the events corresponding to the seventieth week somewhere in the history of Palestine at the time of Christ and immediately thereafter.

The historical data that we do have, however, argues very powerfully in the direction of seeing the events of AD 70 as comprising at least a partial fulfillment of the prophecy. One need only peruse a few paragraphs of Josephus' *Jewish Wars* in connection with the First Jewish Revolt to learn that the destruction of Jerusalem and of the Temple was vast and complete. Archaeologists are still discovering the remains of the Herodian Temple, and further proof that 'no stone was left upon another,' just as Jesus' predicted. Furthermore, though it cannot be said with absolute certainty, there is also some

correspondence in history to the 'week' of seven years. It is a well known fact of history that Herod's Temple took a long, long time to build. In Jesus' own day work had been progressing for over forty years (*cp.* John 2:20). What is not so well known is that the Herodian Temple was only dedicated *circa* AD 62-64, long after Herod's death and also long after Jesus' crucifixion. If the Temple was completed in AD 63, the start of the Jewish Revolt in AD 66 and the ultimate destruction of the city and Temple in AD 70 all correspond quite well with the division of the seventieth week as prophesied in Daniel 9. This interpretation also does great justice to Jesus' own prophecy contained in the Olivet Discourse, recorded in Matthew 24 - 25.

The Olivet Discourse was Jesus' response to a question put to Him concerning the signs of the end of time and of His coming. The section of that discourse that is most pertinent to this study is found in Matthew 24,

*Then Jesus went out and departed from the temple, and His disciples came up to show Him the buildings of the temple. And Jesus said to them, "Do you not see all these things? Assuredly, I say to you, not one stone shall be left here upon another, that shall not be thrown down." Now as He sat on the Mount of Olives, the disciples came to Him privately, saying, "Tell us, when will these things be? And what will be the sign of Your coming, and of the end of the age?"* (Matthew 24:1-3)

Jesus proceeds to tell His disciples of events that were to come to pass before the end of the age. Dispensationalists view this discourse as referring entirely to events yet future, events that will occur during the Tribulation just prior to the advent of the Millennium. Variations of this view have been held throughout the history of the church and are not entirely the fruit of Dispensational study, but in every variation the events of AD 70 are either diminished in significance or ignored completely. The timing of the events spoken of by Jesus hinges upon the interpretation given to His own statement, "*Assuredly, I say to you, this generation will by no means pass away till all these things take place.*" (24:34). What is meant by 'generation'?

Dispensationalists point out that the word 'generation' in the Greek can also mean 'race' or 'ethnic group.' Thus Jesus is simply saying that the Jewish people, the Jewish *race*, would remain throughout the long centuries before the end of the age would come. If we accept the future fulfillment of Daniel 9 and Matthew 24, then it is historically true that the Jewish people have survived as a race and show all evidence of continued survival into the future. But is it reasonable to apply this interpretation to the word in Matthew 24:34? Does this interpretation fit the context? Or would the more natural interpretation of 'generation' as the roughly forty-year period between a father's generation and that of the son be more reasonable?

The context of Matthew 24 is intensely personal as Jesus warns His hearers with such statements as "*Therefore if they say to you, 'Look, He is in the desert!' do not go out; or 'Look, He is in the inner rooms!' do not believe it*" and "*And pray that your flight may not be in winter or on the Sabbath.*" The whole tenor of the discourse indicates Jesus' own belief that the events of which He spoke were close on the horizon. Indeed, it was this clear consciousness on the part of Jesus that the signs of the end were so imminent that led Albert Schweitzer to famously state that Jesus was deluded and disappointed, that Jesus got it wrong! There is a significant body of evidence as well to show that the disciples who were living in Jerusalem during the Jewish Revolt remembered and applied Jesus' words to their own circumstances,

*Therefore when you see the 'abomination of desolation,' spoken of by Daniel the prophet, standing in the holy place (whoever reads, let him understand), then let those who are in Judea flee to the mountains. Let him who is on the housetop not go down to take anything out of his house. And let him who is in the field not go back to get his clothes.*

(Matthew 24:15-18)

Early Church historians such as Eusebius write of the 'Flight to Pella,' in which thousands of Jewish Christians fled Jerusalem to the mountainous enclave of Pella and thus survived the Roman onslaught. Several historians of that era claim that of the million or more deaths within Jerusalem during the siege and

overthrow, not one was of a Christian. Now it must be accepted that such claims from antiquity are often exaggerated. Nonetheless, it may also be accepted that the basic contention is true: Christians interpreted the arrival of Titus' armies as the fulfillment of Jesus' words in the Olivet Discourse. In any event, they 'got out of Dodge' and survived.

The eschatological school that holds AD 70 as the terminus of all biblical prophecy is known as 'Preterism.' In its various degrees, preterism has always been a minority view since it seems to leave no room for future eschatological activity. 'Full' preterism holds that the entire prophetic calendar has been cleared; nothing is left. The logical conclusion of this view is the eternal continuation of things as they are now, albeit with slow progress or improvement. For this reason full preterism has been correctly rejected by most Reformed writers. Yet there must be a balance between preterism on the one hand and Dispensationalism on the other, in which the events of AD 70 are accepted for what they undoubtedly were - fulfillment of the seventieth week prophecy of Daniel Chapter 9. The Olivet Discourse is broader in scope than that of Daniel 9, and therefore touches upon eschatological events farther off in the future beyond the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. For instance, Jesus makes the coming of the end of the age contingent upon the preaching of the Gospel "*in all the world as a witness to all the nations.*" He also ties the gathering of the elect with the end of the age. Neither of these events had occurred by or in AD 70.

Still, Jerusalem was destroyed by Titus and the Temple systematically dismantled and razed, never to be rebuilt again. These are historical facts that cannot be denied or discounted, and they impinge heavily upon one's interpretation of biblical prophecy with regard to the Jews, the Temple, and the continuation of the Old Covenant system of worship. Dispensationalists bring all of these back in order to destroy them again in the future. Perhaps it is more reasonable to simply allow the Old Covenant to vanish once, as predicted in

Hebrews 8:13. Daniel's Seventieth Week has come and gone, occurring after a generational reprieve granted by the Lord Jesus, yet occurring much closer in time to the previous sixty-nine weeks. What this interpretation means to the Dispensational teaching concerning the Tribulation and all its accoutrements, is left for the reader to work out in further study.

The author of Hebrews has, for his part, directed our vision heavenward to the true sanctuary (the earthly one now having vanished). In Chapters 9 and 10 he embarks on a thorough comparison between the sacrifices and rituals of the Old system and the New and, as we would expect, find those of the New to be 'better than' the Old. Now that the eyes of all believers have been focused above, where Christ is seated in the heavenly sanctuary as the true High Priest, why would God redirect them below, to earthly Jerusalem, and to an expectation of the return of a system that vanished long ago?



























































































































































**Week 14: No More Consciousness of Sin**

**Text Reading: Hebrews 10:1 - 4**

*"Sacrifices and prayers do not abolish sins,  
but recall them to remembrance."  
(Philo)*

Doctrinal disputes and disagreements are as old as the Church itself, and perhaps no controversy has possessed such inveterate opponents as the debate between Calvinists and Arminians. But recently a new phenomenon has arisen within American evangelicalism: the 'Four Point Calvinist.' More and more believers are coming to understand the Calvinistic doctrines of Total Depravity, Unconditional Election, Irresistible Grace, and the Perseverance of the Saints. But the middle letter, the 'L' in TULIP, still causes indigestion among many - the thought that Jesus' atoning death was not given for *all* men just seems to place too stringent a limitation upon the love of God. John 3:16 is still held up as the answer to all objections: "*For God so loved **the world** that He gave His only begotten Son...*"

The debate over the extent of the atonement has been an unfortunate one on two accounts. First, Reformed theologians have for centuries preferred *not* to describe the atonement as 'limited' - while at the same time sticking with the acronym TULIP as a mnemonic aid for teaching the Five Points of Calvinism. *Definite* Atonement is a far more accurate description of the biblical doctrine, but TUDIP just does not the same ring to it. Nevertheless, the atonement is, according to Reformed teaching, *definite* in that it is both intended and effective for a definite segment of the human population: namely, the elect. The essence of the Calvinistic position is that Christ's death on the cross was a sacrifice rendered not for the sins of the entire human race, but rather for the elect of God chosen from before the foundation of the world. Such a clear statement of the doctrine may not draw Arminian opponents into agreement, but it does show the sense in which the atonement is viewed as 'definite.'

The second problem with the debate, focusing as it does on the 'L' of *Limited Atonement*, is that the point is often overlooked that both sides of the issue possess a 'limited' view of the atoning work of Jesus Christ. Calvinists limit the atonement in terms of *extent*, whereas Arminians limit the atonement in terms of *effectiveness*. The Calvinist claims that the death of Jesus Christ was 100% effective for those for whom it was given; Arminians maintain that the same death was 100% extensive – delivered for every man, woman, and child in the entire human race. However, since even the Arminian (for the most part) will not allow that every human being will be saved, it must be concluded that the atoning death of Christ on the cross is not fully effective for those for whom it was given. The views of the atonement held by the Calvinist and the Arminian are mutually exclusive positions unless one adopts universal salvation. *Either* the death of Jesus Christ is fully effective, *or* it is full extensive; it cannot be both.

The debate between Calvinism and Arminianism is not the theme of the author of Hebrews as he progresses through his comparison of the Old Covenant ministry of the Levitical priesthood and the New Covenant ministry of Jesus Christ. Yet what the writer has to say about the death of Christ might be reasonably expected to shed some light on the more recent controversy. If the author, as we would come to expect by this point, speaks of the atoning death of Jesus Christ as fully effective in its intended work, then we must revisit the question as to whom that death is to be applied. Indeed, the terminology used by the author in the opening verses of Chapter 10 is such that one may only conclude that the atoning work of Jesus Christ on the cross is *fully* and *finally* effective. Therefore, should any who were the intended recipients of that atonement fail to be saved, an answer must be found for the reason why. The Arminian claims that this can only be due to unbelief on the part of the sinner. But this places the sin of unbelief beyond the effectiveness of Christ's atoning death, thereby limiting it, which contradicts the initial premise of the full effectiveness of that death.

If, on the other hand, we accept the Arminian premise that the saving benefit of the atonement is effectuated only through the faith of the sinner, we thereby establish a limit to the power of that work of which the author speaks so highly in Hebrews chapters 9 and 10. No matter how wonderful the atoning death of Jesus Christ when compared to the temporary ordinances of the Levitical sacrificial system, it is still not strong enough to overcome the sinner's unbelief. The choice between the two theological positions is not, therefore, between a limited atonement and an unlimited one. Rather it is between a *saving* atonement and one that merely *makes salvation possible*. Thus the nature of the effectiveness of Christ's atoning death ought to be in the back of our minds as we continue to read what the author of Hebrews has to say on the subject.

The author is bringing his most recent line of argumentation - the comparison between the liturgy of the Old Covenant with that of the New Covenant - to a close in the first eighteen verses of Chapter 10. With this summation of his thoughts he will also wrap up his overall theme of the exaltation of Jesus Christ above all that has gone before - Moses, Aaron, the angels, Melchizedek, etc. - and will turn in verse nineteen to points of application within the Hebrew believing community to whom he writes. He will exhort believers to a boldness not possessed by the Old Testament worshipper, because of a once-for-all sacrifice that has altered the nature of worship completely. In the very first verse of Chapter 10 he addresses the most fundamental need of man - the ability and right to come into the presence of God without fear of utter annihilation on account of sin. Significantly, he opens the application section of his epistle - in verse 19 of Chapter 10 - by assuring all believers that they now have "*boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus...*" Something the Old Testament saint could never claim has now been made freely and fully available to the New Testament believer. It is upon the nature and effectiveness of the atonement of Jesus Christ that this boldness rests.

*For the law, having a shadow of the good things to come, and not the very image of the things, can never with these same sacrifices, which they offer continually year by year, make those who approach perfect. (10:1)*

This verse is best handled in reverse order: to discuss the basic and most fundamental need of all men; that is, the ability to approach God with a perfect heart and conscience. The image of the veil of separation within the two sections of the Old Covenant sanctuary stands as a historical reminder that “*your sin has made a separation between you and your God.*” In reviewing the author’s discussion of the structure and furnishings of the old sanctuary we were reminded of the angelic guard and the fiery sword that separated fallen man from his once pristine and uninterrupted communion with God. It has been man’s unending need, though often neglected and repressed, to return to that state of fellowship with his Creator. All man-made religions have sought some vehicle for such a return to innocence and perfection, though man has frequently substituted his own philosophical constructs (i.e., ‘nervana’) for that of a personal God.

The word that the author uses to describe ‘*those who approach*’ (as the New King James version renders it) is but one word in the Greek original: *comers* (Greek  $\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\iota\mu\omicron\tau\epsilon\varsigma$  - those who come into). The idea of ‘comers’ describes every man’s condition with respect to God. But the modern view of God is of a benevolent, tolerant deity who accepts all ‘comers.’ This view, however, has a woefully inadequate perspective on both the holiness of God and the sinfulness of man, and fails to appreciate the impossibility of fallen man simply coming to God apart from atonement. The author of Hebrews, along with the writers of Scripture in general, does not labor under such a misapprehension. He has already established the Old Covenant provisions whereby the High Priest was permitted to come into the presence of God – once a year, and not without the shed blood of an innocent sacrifice.

Yet the point now needs to be reiterated that this sacrifice was not enough. It was sufficient for the moment, for the dispensation in which it was ordained.

But for the cleansing of the conscience of the ‘comer’ it was insufficient; it was imperfect and incomplete. The point of the author in these opening verses of Chapter 10 is to firmly establish the principle that he has already begun in Chapter 9: namely, that the Old Covenant sacrifices were incapable of rendering the ‘comer’ perfect. The constant repetition of these sacrifices was proof positive of their inadequacy.

What is needed for the ‘comer’ to come boldly into the presence of God? “Perfect expiation must be made, complete pardon bestowed, the conscience must be quieted, and the heart purified,” writes John Brown, “this is necessary to



**John Owen (1616-83)**

the bringing of him to God.”<sup>1</sup> This the Law could not do; indeed, this the Law was never intended to do. The Law, says the author, was only the shadow or outline of the reality that was to come; and that reality was and is the Lord Jesus Christ. John Owen poignantly writes that it was Jesus Christ himself who was the ‘pattern’ shown to Moses on the mount. “He [i.e., Christ] was the idea in the mind of God, when

Moses was charged to make all things according to the pattern showed him in the mount.”<sup>2</sup>

The author of Hebrews employs a distinctively Pauline term to describe the role of the Law: *shadow*. John Calvin and John Brown both liken the author’s use of the word to that of an artist sketching a rude and indistinct outline of the figure he intends to ‘flesh out’ by painting. Owen rejects this allusion as inappropriate to the context of first-century Hebrew believers (and in this he is probably correct). Nonetheless the idea here in verse 1 is indeed that of an incomplete outline of something to be made more clear at a later time. Brown writes,

<sup>1</sup> Brown, John, *An Exposition of the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1964 rprnt), 435.

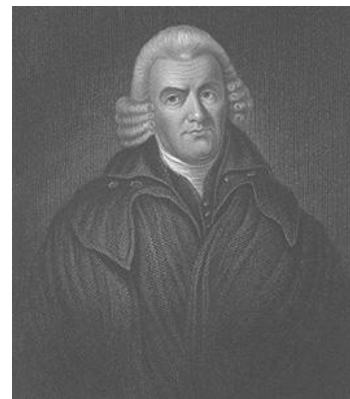
<sup>2</sup> Owen, John, *Hebrews: Volume 6* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth; 1991 rprnt), 422.

The word *shadow* is used by artists to denote the first rude outline which they take of an object which they mean to represent; the word *image*, of the completed picture or statue...The Mosaical institute contained in it a rude sketch, but not by any means a complete picture, of the blessings to be enjoyed under the Messiah.<sup>3</sup>

In the Epistle to the Colossians, the apostle Paul also utilizes the term 'shadow' in reference to another aspect of the Old Covenant era. *"So let no one judge you in food or in drink, or regarding a festival or a new moon or sabbaths, which are a shadow of things to come, but the substance is of Christ."* (Col. 2:16-17) These parallel passages - Hebrews 10:1ff and Colossians 2:17 - along with the previous quotation from Owen's pen, show us the ultimate direction of all that the author of Hebrews has been writing: *the substance is Christ.*

Often the question comes up in reference to the worship of the Old Covenant saints, 'Should they have been able to see the inadequacies of the Levitical system?' There is no denying that the sacrificial system established under the Mosaic Covenant was ordained by God, and therefore there is no denying that it possessed at least a degree of efficacy with regard to the expiation of sins. Leviticus 17:11 reminds us that God *gave* the blood of the sacrifices as an atonement for sin. *"For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it to you upon the altar to make atonement for your souls; for it is the blood that makes atonement for the soul."* What was there within this divinely-ordained system that should have clued the Old Covenant 'comer' as to its inadequacy?

Apart from the various prophecies, beginning with Moses, of One who was to come, there was the constant repetition of the sacrifices to tell the Old Covenant worshipper that something more, something greater was needed. The fact that the sacrifices had to be repeated annually (not to mention daily and



**John Brown (1722-87)**

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<sup>3</sup> Brown, 433.

monthly) was a reminder of sin and of the fact that sin had not been fully and finally dealt with. "There is the shadow, but there is not the image; for there is not one sacrifice, but many, - there is not complete and permanent expiation and purification, but imperfect and temporary expiation and purification."<sup>4</sup> Only the Jew who looked, incorrectly, on the sacrifices as having the power of completely cleansing the soul could fail to realize that more was needed. For even after the sacrifice was completed, and because the sacrifice was repeated, there remained the 'consciousness of sin.'

*For then would they not have ceased to be offered? For the worshipers, once purified, would have had no more consciousness of sins.* (10:2)

The rhetorical question posed by the author has been so well prepared that no one could doubt of the answer. If a sacrifice under the Old Covenant had been adequate and sufficient to purify the worshiper, then there would have been no need of its repetition. This of course assumes that the perfection of any sacrifice with respect to human sin covers more than just past sins - it expiates *all* sin, past, present, and future. This is because the perfect sacrifice does more than temporarily expiate *sins*, it eradicates *sin* completely so that there is *no more consciousness of sins*. This is powerful testimony to the efficacy of Christ's atonement, and one which we will investigate in greater depth shortly. But at this point it is worth analyzing more thoroughly the argument concerning the repetition of sacrifices.

Of first note is the fact that the repetition of any sacrifice is evidence of its weakness, not its strength. The Jewish nation became proud of its divinely-ordained sacrificial system, and even many modern Christians look forward to a time when those sacrifices are re-instituted. Brown writes, "But when they considered this circumstance [i.e., the repetition of the sacrifices, especially the Day of Atonement] as one of the things which gave them reason to trust in that

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<sup>4</sup> Brown, 434.



economy as a method of justification, they plainly fell into the mistake of taking that for a proof of strength which was in reality an evidence of weakness.”<sup>5</sup>

The author of Hebrews recognized this error within the old system and among his countrymen according to the flesh, and sought to guard the Hebrew believers from falling into the same error. If only the Roman Catholic Church could see the logic contained in these few verses, that the repetition of any sacrifice speaks of its inadequacy to perform that for which it is given. “The repetition of the same sacrifices doth of itself demonstrate their insufficiency unto the end sought after.”<sup>6</sup> Let us examine the logic behind this contention, using as an analogy the laws of mathematics.

There are those who maintain that the multiplicity of sacrifices is made necessary by the magnitude of human sin. This is a plausible explanation, but it actually fails to truly grasp that magnitude. Human sin, having been committed against an infinitely perfect and holy God, is itself infinite. Mathematically we learn that the concept of infinity is not defined as the summation of all numbers, for there is no way to reach infinity simply by successively adding numbers. For any number, no matter how large, there is a number one greater. Thus by analogy the adding together of any number of sacrifices cannot overcome the infinite magnitude of human sin. “What cannot be effected for the expiation of sin at once by any duty or sacrifice, cannot be effected by its reiteration or repetition.”<sup>7</sup>

Another mathematical analogy comes, in a sense, from the other direction. It may be argued that the multiplicity of sacrifices progressively diminishes the guilt of sin until it is ultimately removed. The Roman Catholic Church has taught for centuries that a person can exceed his or her required allotment of holiness and thus, by works of supererogation, store up excess merit for use by others. But the reality is otherwise, and not unlike the asymptotic nature of

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<sup>5</sup> Brown, 435.

<sup>6</sup> Owen, 430.

<sup>7</sup> *Idem.*

fractions. If one begins to reduce the quantity of any number by a factor – say, by two – he can never reduce the total quantity ultimately to zero. He approaches zero ‘asymptotically,’ that is, he gets closer and closer but never can nor will reach it. The analogy breaks down, of course, in that fallen man cannot even begin to think of reducing his guilt anywhere close to zero. Still, each of these analogies shows that repetition alone cannot achieve the goal.

The evidence given to the Old Covenant worshipper, that the constant repetition of sacrifices was insufficient to purge him from sin, was the ever-present *consciousness of sins*. This is a tricky phrase, for it may be interpreted as referring to the worshipper’s own awareness of sins, something that is not eradicated even under the New Covenant. Some commentators have tried to address this concern by theorizing that the *intensity* of sin-consciousness is reduced under the perfect sacrifice of the New Covenant. Owen writes that the meaning of the phrase is that the sinner should have “no conscience agitating, tossing, disquieting, perplexing for sins.”<sup>8</sup> While it may be, and indeed should be, true that the believer in Jesus Christ should have a heart quieted in regard to sins, it cannot be said that any such mitigation in the intensity of sin-consciousness is equivalent to *no* consciousness of sin. It is the latter that the writer of Hebrews implies is to be the case under the New Covenant with its most perfect sacrifice.

Perhaps a better interpretation of the phrase ‘no consciousness of sins’ is to view the matter from the perspective of God. First, the requirement of repetitious sacrifices was ordained by God not only to atone for the sins of the nation, but also as a reminder – a bringing to conscious awareness – of sins. There is no explicit mention of this purpose for the annual sacrifice on the Day of Atonement, but there is an interesting reference to such a purpose with regard to a unique sacrifice involving a jealous husband. In Numbers 5 we read,

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<sup>8</sup> Owen, 435.

*...if the spirit of jealousy comes upon him and he becomes jealous of his wife, who has defiled herself; or if the spirit of jealousy comes upon him and he becomes jealous of his wife, although she has not defiled herself – then the man shall bring his wife to the priest. He shall bring the offering required for her, one-tenth of an ephah of barley meal; he shall pour no oil on it and put no frankincense on it, because it is a grain offering of jealousy, an offering for remembering, for bringing iniquity to remembrance.*

(Numbers 5:14-15)

We at least have here an example of a sacrifice whose purpose, at least partially, is to bring sin to remembrance. God is establishing the sacrifice in order to make the sinner aware – conscious – of sin. Furthermore, as long as sacrifices are required to be repeated, God Himself, it may be said, remains conscious of sins as well. This is shown by implication from what the Scriptures say concerning God's remembrance of sin once the final and perfect sacrifice has been made,

*For as the heavens are high above the earth,  
So great is His mercy toward those who fear Him;  
As far as the east is from the west,  
So far has He removed our transgressions from us.*

(Psalm 103:11-12)

If we tie all of these strands of 'consciousness' together, we come to the realization that any sacrificial system, if it is to be completely effective, must touch and cleanse the conscience. On the basis of a perfect sacrifice there is both the awareness on the part of the sinner of a conscience that has been cleansed from the defilement of sin, and no further remembrance of sin brought about by any continuation of the sacrifice. In a word, all is well with the sinner's soul. As the author states in verse 2, those who 'come' to God are seeking to have their souls purified, seeking a sacrifice that will accomplish this once and for all. To tie back into the earlier comments, they were seeking an atonement that was so effective an expiation for sin that it need not be repeated again. Just that powerful an atonement is what now has come in Jesus Christ to inaugurate the

New Covenant, and to effect a complete purification for sins. “[T]he sins of those who are interested in this atonement shall never be remembered against them.”<sup>9</sup>

*But in those sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.* (10:3)

The author has placed the Old Covenant service of the Day of Atonement at the center of his discussion, and returns to that solemn annual event here to close the argument regarding the efficacy of the entire Levitical sacrificial system. One might say that the daily and monthly sacrifices in the tabernacle and Temple drew their strength from the annual ceremony; that God’s renewing covenant with the people of Israel at *Yom Kippur* reinvigorated the entire sacrificial system with whatever propitiatory power it possessed. Thus the annual sacrifice was the greatest of them all; yet it, too, was but a reminder of sins and not a full and final answer to sins. “The offering of these sacrifices was an acknowledgement that the offerers were yet sinners, whose sins had not been expiated.”<sup>10</sup>

This is not to say that there was no value at all in the Old Covenant sacrificial system. In its time that liturgy possessed immense value to those who availed themselves of it in the right frame of heart – *in faith* directed toward the perfect and singular sacrifice yet to come. The issue under consideration by the author of Hebrews is not the absolute merit of the Old Covenant – that was never in doubt – but rather the relative merit of the Old Covenant now that the New Covenant has been inaugurated. The Levitical sacrificial system was sufficient before God to answer to the sins of those who lived, in faith, under that system; but completely lost its efficacy when once the perfect atoning sacrifice has been made. It is the purpose of the author to convince the wavering Hebrew Christians of the folly of returning to that old and obsolete liturgy. Viewed now from the era of the New Covenant, it is apparent that the repetitive nature of the Old Covenant sacrificial system was an indictment against its ultimate strength.

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<sup>9</sup> Brown, 437.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem.*

Those who lived under the Old Covenant will be judged according to their faith measured against the revelation given up to that time. The Hebrew Christians, however, had received a further and fuller revelation of God's redemptive plan in Christ Jesus. Therefore any return to the Mosaic system would not only be folly, but a subjecting of oneself to ultimate judgment. That which was acceptable in worship to the Jew of David's, or Jeremiah's, or even John's time could not be acceptable after the perfect offering of the Lamb of God on Golgotha. "For he requires not faith and obedience in any, beyond the means of light and understanding which he affords unto them."<sup>11</sup> The Hebrew congregation that first received this epistle/sermon had received greater 'light and understanding' through the preaching of the Gospel (*cp.* Heb. 2:1-4), and could therefore never return to the ancient ways without serious consequences.

*For it is not possible that the blood of bulls and goats could take away sins. (10:4)*

The author states matter-of-factly what ought to have been obvious to every Old Testament worshiper. As the 'comer' brought his sheep, his ram, his turtle dove to the altar as a sin offering, must not the thought have run across his mind, 'How can this animal - this irrational being that cannot sin - stand in my place before an offended deity?' It was a man that sinned, how can the death of an animal suffice? One might answer, 'Because God made it so.' But that is no answer, really, for if God can arbitrarily alter the universal basis for judgment - that "*the soul that sins shall surely die*" then the moral foundation of the universe is torn asunder. It is true that God 'gave' the blood of innocent animals upon the altar as an atonement for the sins of His people, but the entire discourse in Hebrews chapters 8 through 10 prove that this was always a temporary and prophetic arrangement. Delitzsch writes,

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<sup>11</sup> Owen, 419.

The blood of animal sacrifices offered on the altar was indeed, under the Old Testament, a divinely appointed means of making atonement for human souls...but a means manifestly inadequate to accomplish its end, and therefore one ordained merely by way of accommodation, and for a temporary purpose. The animal sacrifice was but a shadow, and yet, as ordained by God, a true indicator and prophecy, of another sacrifice in which the divine will would be fully accomplished.<sup>12</sup>

What is the penalty of sin? Death. The death of the one who sinned is required in payment, and the insertion of a substitute was but a reminder to the offender that it was *his* life that was forfeit, his blood that by all rights ought to be shed upon that altar. Man as a rational and moral being stands in a unique relationship to God, as one who must give a full account of his moral failure. Animals do not possess the same nature and, therefore, are not susceptible to divine judgment. "Neither the blood of the bullock nor that of the goat could, on the one hand, weigh in the balance against the guilt of a human soul, nor, on the other, exercise any spiritual or cleansing power on the inward man."<sup>13</sup>

The concept here is that of the proportionality of justice. "In satisfaction unto justice, by way of compensation for injuries or crimes, there must be a proportion between the injury and the reparation of it."<sup>14</sup> The crime under consideration is both the original and the perpetual rebellion of wills committed by every human being naturally descended from Adam, against an infinitely holy God. The blood of animals in no way measures up to either the deep, dark nature of the offense on the one hand, or the majestic honor of the offended on the other. The 'giving' of the blood of animals for atonement was, as Delitzsch puts it, clearly an accommodation. It was grace, pure and simple, that accepted the death of a substitute in place of the sinner. Apart from this grace the entire human race would be forfeit, as the great deluge in Noah's day so powerfully teaches us. But as an act of grace this accommodation on the part of God was never intended to serve the full and final purpose of putting away sin, and

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<sup>12</sup> Delitzsch, 148-9.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

<sup>14</sup> Owen, 445.

should never have been taken as such. “It is possible that things may usefully represent what it is impossible that, in and by themselves, they should effect.”<sup>15</sup>

This concept did not need the advent of Christ and His death on the cross to make clear, for it lies at the very heart of even the most common sense of justice. The righteous and faithful worshiper, living under the precepts and practices of the Old Covenant liturgy, was capable of recognizing the insufficiency of the animal sacrifice for either the full atonement of sin or the ultimate cleansing of the fallen conscience. These were those who looked forward in faith to *the blood as of a lamb unblemished and spotless, the precious blood of Christ*.

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<sup>15</sup> *Idem*.

**Week 15: The Covenant of Redemption****Text Reading: Hebrews 10:5 - 10**

*“The faith of the old testament was,  
that he was thus to come;  
and this is the life of the new, that he is come.”*  
(John Owen)

One of the most intriguing concepts to be found in Scripture is the apparent chronology of God’s redemptive plan relative to man’s fall into sin. Many modern believers erroneously consider that God’s plan to redeem man from sin must have come to pass *after* man actually sinned. If it were otherwise – if God had *planned* the crucifixion prior to Adam’s fall – then it would logically follow that God *planned* for Adam to fall. This comes painfully close to making God the author of sin, and many professing Christians simply take it as an article of faith that man sinned first, and then God determined the plan of redemption through Jesus Christ. But Scripture does not allow us to cut the knot so easily, for in several places we read of God’s plan of salvation through Jesus Christ as being antecedent to creation and, therefore, prior to the Fall. One such passage is found in I Peter 1, where the apostle speaks of Christ,

*He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for you who through Him believe in God, who raised Him from the dead and gave Him glory, so that your faith and hope are in God.*

(I Peter 1:20-21)

One fairly common modern evasion is to allow God the contingency plan of Christ’s sacrifice *in case* Adam failed his probation and fell into sin. In this view, which is part of the teaching of Open Theism, God responds with infinite wisdom to the free-will decisions of man, beginning with that fateful decision in the Garden. Open Theism is a errant philosophy wholly without support in Scripture, where we read that God does not respond to the decisions and actions of man, but on the contrary, *“works all things according to the counsel of His will.”*



(Eph. 1:11). It appears from even a cursory review of the passages on this topic that the 'counsel' of the divine will predetermined and set forth the entire scope of human history – creation, fall, and redemption – all *before the foundation of the world was laid*. In the same first chapter of Ephesians we read that the elect were chosen in Christ “*before the foundation of the world*” (Eph. 1:4). Indeed, even the sacrificial death of Christ as the Lamb of God is spoken of as having taken place before the world was,

*It was granted to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them. And authority was given him over every tribe, tongue, and nation. All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of **the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world**.*

(Revelation 13:7-8)

The evidence from Scripture is irrefutable in support of placing the redemptive plan of God prior to the fall of man into sin, regardless of the difficulties such a view entails. The difficulties reside entirely within man's finite and fallen mind, and not with the clarity of Scripture. Beyond the verses that speak of election and of the atoning death of Christ as occurring before the foundation of the world, there are also several wonderful passages that provide a glimpse of the 'conversation' between the divine Father and the divine Son setting forth the plan of the ages. This conversation is often called the Covenant of Redemption, and it is a golden thread woven through the fabric of Scripture. The very first conversation recorded in Scripture is part of this covenant communication: “*Let Us make man in Our image...*” (Gen. 1:26).

Another such passage is found in Proverbs, written in the figurative language of the Wisdom Literature, yet clearly setting forth the intimate relationship between the Father and the Son from all eternity. Read carefully how 'Wisdom' – personified in an allusion to the Son – participates in all that the Father wills to do, with a special interest in the well-being of Man,

*The LORD possessed me at the beginning of His way,  
 Before His works of old.  
 I have been established from everlasting,  
 From the beginning, before there was ever an earth.  
 When there were no depths I was brought forth,  
 When there were no fountains abounding with water.  
 Before the mountains were settled,  
 Before the hills, I was brought forth;  
 While as yet He had not made the earth or the fields,  
 Or the primal dust of the world.  
 When He prepared the heavens, I was there,  
 When He drew a circle on the face of the deep,  
 When He established the clouds above,  
 When He strengthened the fountains of the deep,  
 When He assigned to the sea its limit,  
 So that the waters would not transgress His command,  
 When He marked out the foundations of the earth,  
 Then I was beside Him as a master craftsman;  
 And I was daily His delight, rejoicing always before Him,  
 Rejoicing in His inhabited world,  
 And **my delight was with the sons of men.*** (Proverbs 8:22-31)

Another place where we are made an audience to this eternal conversation is found within the Servant Song passages of the prophecy of Isaiah. One such is Isaiah 42,

*I, the LORD, have called You in righteousness,  
 And will hold Your hand;  
 I will keep You and give You as a covenant to the people,  
 As a light to the Gentiles,  
 To open blind eyes, to bring out prisoners from the prison,  
 Those who sit in darkness from the prison house.* (Isaiah 42:6-7)

Finally, though not exhaustively, a reciprocal conversation – from the Son to the Father – is recorded for us in Psalm 40, and is repeated in the midst of Hebrews as the author of that letter continues to exhibit the superiority of the New Covenant over the Old. The psalmist is David, and the immediate setting apparently involves David’s continued flight from the wrath of King Saul. Nonetheless, both the words of the psalm and the inspired use of it by the author of Hebrews proves that the true speaker is not David, but his greater Son and Lord, Jesus Christ. “It is not as if Christ, and *not* David, were the speaker: David

speaks; but Christ, whose Spirit already indwells and works in David, and who will hereafter receive from David His human nature, now already speaks in him.”<sup>16</sup>

By employing this psalm, the author of Hebrews places the final nail in the coffin of the Old Covenant and its sacrificial liturgy. He does this by showing that the greater atoning work was prepared by God long before the Levitical system was set up, and this preparation is announced to Israel by her greatest psalmist and king, David.

*Therefore, when He came into the world, He said:*

*Sacrifice and offering You did not desire, but a body You have prepared for Me.*

*In burnt offerings and sacrifices for sin You had no pleasure.*

*Then I said, ‘Behold, I have come – in the volume of the book it is written of Me –*

*To do Your will, O God.’*

**(10:5-7)**

The author of Hebrews provides inspired commentary on several verses from Psalm 40, a psalm of David. Allowing there to be no misunderstanding who it is that speaks in this psalm, and when it is that the words are spoken, the writer of Hebrews introduces the quote with the phrase, “*therefore, when He came into the world...*” This is as clear a reference to the incarnation of Christ as can be imagined. Yet we are not to suppose that the author of Hebrews believed the infant Jesus capable of uttering these words to the Father. Rather, these are the words of the divine Christ, the second Person of the Godhead, spoken in that eternal counsel when the Covenant of Redemption was formulated. This eternal conversation was placed on the heart and pen of David, a type and ancestor of Jesus Christ, to show in the midst of the Old Covenant the absolute necessity of another.

Before investigating the passage as it stands in Hebrews 10 and as it contributes to the author’s ongoing argument, it is necessary to point out the discrepancy between the quotation of Psalm 40 here and what the reader will

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<sup>16</sup> Delitzsch, 154.

find turning to the psalm itself. The primary difference between the two is found in what would be Psalm 40, verse 6,

**Psalm 40:6 (NKJV)**

*Sacrifice and offering You did not desire;  
My ears You have opened.*

**Hebrews 10:5**

*Sacrifice and offering You did not desire,  
But a body You have prepared for Me.*

The version of the passage utilized by the author of Hebrews follows exactly as found in the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Septuagint. The English translations of the Old Testament, however, are taken from the available Hebrew manuscripts. Discrepancies between the Septuagint and the Hebrew manuscripts are not uncommon, and often the differences are inexplicable. That appears to be the case here. Attempts to explain the difference between Hebrews 10:5 and Psalm 40:6 have not proven convincing.

One such attempt tries to move from the 'opened ear' to the necessity of a body to house that ear. The 'opening of the ear' is a phrase denoting both the understanding of a command and the willing obedience to it. That such applies to Jesus Christ is beyond doubt, though it does not necessarily pertain to the author's line of reasoning in Hebrews 10. Still, one might argue from such passages as Isaiah 50 where the Servant of Jehovah declares His readiness to listen and obey,

*The Lord GOD has given Me  
The tongue of the learned, that I should know how to speak  
A word in season to him who is weary. He awakens Me morning by morning,  
He awakens My ear to hear as the learned.  
**The Lord GOD has opened My ear;**  
And I was not rebellious, nor did I turn away.* (Isaiah 50:4-5)

The similarity of Isaiah 50:5 to Psalm 40:6 is undeniable, and it is also undeniably true that both passages speak of the willing obedience of Jehovah's Servant, the Christ. But this information does not readily lead us from the 'open ear' to the 'body prepared.' The fact that it was necessary for the Servant to *have*

a body in order to have an ear that could be opened is, to say the least, obvious. What is not obvious is how it came to pass that the translators of the Septuagint, writing around the third and second centuries before Christ, should interpret – and consequently retranslate – the verse in light of the future incarnation.

This is an example of the type of manuscript variation that is occasionally found in Scripture. There are two different readings of Psalm 40:6, and both speak of truths regarding the promised Messiah that are corroborated by many other passages. Neither reading is doctrinally or theologically in error; neither denies any clearly established principle of Scripture. In short, one could take either rendering of the verse and not go astray. The significant difference, however, between this particular textual variant and many others is that there is an inspired confirmation of one reading – the one recorded in Hebrews 10:5.

The overall context of Psalm 40 fits well with what we know of David's own experiences, especially during the interval of time when he was pursued by Saul. It is not necessary that the entire psalm be applied to the life and ministry of the Messiah, though some commentators have done this. David could speak the same words quoted by the writer of Hebrews, as applying to himself as well as to the coming Messiah. He was the anointed king of Israel, the first to stand in fulfillment of the ancient prophecy concerning the scepter and the tribe of Judah. He was to be God's king, as Saul was the king of the people. His heart was already trained in obedience, and his ear attuned to God as the ear of a disciple. In all of this David was a type of Christ, though clearly from his subsequent life an imperfect one. Delitzsch summarizes the typical and antitypical aspects of David's words,

David presenting himself to God, and declaring his readiness to accomplish God's will concerning him as king of Israel, speaks *by the Spirit* (מִן הַרוּחַ), and therefore in typically-ordered words, which issue, as it were, from the very soul of the antitype, the Anointed of the future,

who will not only be King of Israel, but also Captain of their salvation, as of that of the whole world.<sup>17</sup>

This brings us to the truly important matter contained in the psalmist's words, as replicated by the author of Hebrews. The important contrast is not between the Hebrew manuscripts and the Septuagint, but between the multitude of sacrificial animals offered, slain, and burned under the Old Covenant, and *the* body that God had intended to be His sacrifice from eternity past. Both the psalmist and the One who spoke through him knew that the sacrifices – the *sacrifices and offerings...burnt offerings and offerings for sin* – were not the ultimate expression of the divine will concerning the expiation and satisfaction of human sin. The list of sacrifices in Psalm 40 is meant to encompass *all* of the Old Covenant offerings involving the death of a sacrificial animal. “It is evident that the Holy Ghost in this variety of expressions compriseth all the sacrifices of the law that had respect unto the expiation of sin.”<sup>18</sup>

This conversation between the Son and the Father is a rare glimpse into the eternal plan of God concerning the redemption of fallen man. The words are spoken by One who, in the fullness of time, would be born under the Law and therefore subject to the Law. But this is also the One who, by virtue of His eternal divinity and participation in the Covenant of Redemption, knew that the sacrifices stipulated under the Law were not what God *desired*. They were not what God intended ultimately, since they were by nature insufficient to the task. “No sacrifices of the law, not all of them together, were a means for the expiation of sin, suited unto the glory of God or necessities of the souls of men.”<sup>19</sup>

Many commentators seem to consider the ‘scroll of the book’ as referring to the Old Testament books of Moses. Delitzsch and Milligan find allusion to the

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<sup>17</sup> Delitzsch, 154.

<sup>18</sup> Owen, 453.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*; 455.

Torah in general, and perhaps Deuteronomy 17:14-20, the *les regia* or 'law of the kings.'

*When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, 'I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,' you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to Egypt to multiply horses, for the LORD has said to you, 'You shall not return that way again.' Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart turn away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself. "Also it shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book, from the one before the priests, the Levites. And it shall be with him, and he shall read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes, that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right hand or to the left, and that he may prolong his days in his kingdom, he and his children in the midst of Israel.*

Certainly this is plausible if the passage in Psalm 40 applies only to David, and if the 'will' of God for David be limited to his role and duty as king over Israel. One might even find reference to the ancient prophecy of Jacob, found in Genesis 49:10, concerning the scepter and the tribe of Judah. As David was the first of that family to hold the scepter, it might be argued that it was for this purpose that David 'came into the world.' Other commentators, such as John Brown, consider the reference to be to the Old Testament prophecies in general.

But perhaps the 'scroll of the book' does not refer to an extant portion of Scripture at all. Perhaps this scroll is akin to the 'Book of Life' alluded to in Revelation 13,

*All who dwell on the earth will worship him, whose names have not been written in the Book of Life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world.*

(Revelation 13:8)

If we consider both Psalm 40 and Hebrews 10 as speaking not so much of David, but rather of the eternal council of redemption between the Father and the Son, it would seem that such 'books' were penned, if we may even use the term, as an abiding record of that divine council. Jesus Himself makes an

oblique reference to this so-far unrevealed corpus of scrolls, in Matthew 13. Also quoting from the Psalms, this time from Psalm 78, Jesus says,

*All these things Jesus spoke to the multitude in parables; and without a parable He did not speak to them, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet, saying:*

*I will open My mouth in parables;*

*I will utter **things kept secret from the foundation of the world.***

(Matthew 13:34-35)

Again we have a glimpse into the pleasure and purpose of the Godhead as it was before time began, and as this divine will was set forth in secret '*before the foundation of the world.*' One of the most moving uninspired passage ever written is the scene found in C. S. Lewis' *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, when Lucy and Susan are reunited with Aslan after the latter's bitter death upon the Stone Table. It is easy to think that Lewis had this very concept of an eternal Council - held before the foundation of the world, held to secure fallen man's redemption - when he penned these marvelous lines,

"But what does it all mean?" asked Susan when they were somewhat calmer.

"It means," said Aslan, "that though the Witch knew the Deep Magic, there is a magic deeper still which she did not know. Her knowledge goes back only to the dawn of Time. But if she could have looked a little further back, **into the stillness and the darkness before Time dawned**, she would have read there a different incantation. She would have known that when a willing victim who had committed no treachery was killed in a traitor's stead, the Table would crack and Death itself would start working backwards."

It is to this 'deeper magic' that the author of Hebrews, and the writer of Psalm 40 before him, allude as they meditate upon the timelessness of the divine will and purpose to save those whom God has chosen in and through the body of His Son. The comprehensive total of all the sacrifices of the ages before Christ pale in comparison to this one, glorious, and eternally-predetermined death. What the author has to say beyond this passage is somewhat anticlimactic, for the pinnacle of all Old Testament and New Testament doctrine on the atonement



is summed up in *the body* that the Father had prepared for the Son, "in the stillness and darkness before Time dawned."

*Previously saying, "Sacrifice and offering, burnt offerings, and offerings for sin You did not desire, nor had pleasure in them" (which are offered according to the law), then He said, "Behold, I have come to do Your will, O God." He takes away the first that He may establish the second.* (10:8-9)

The author treads carefully with regard to the Old Covenant liturgy, and the self-evident meaning of Psalm 40. The passage is unmistakable in its statement that the very sacrifices that God had ordained were of no pleasure to Him, and did not constitute His will in regard to man's salvation. This is an amazing concept that many Christians fail to grasp - that it is possible for God to 'take no pleasure' in something He has ordained to be. Many Arminians balk at the thought that the fall of man could have had any part in God's eternal plan, for Scripture tells us that God takes no pleasure in sin, nor in the death and damnation of the sinner. The logic is the same there as here: God has ordained the sacrifices of the Law - "*which are offered according to the law*" - yet He takes no pleasure in them.

Theologians have wrestled with this concept for ages, and reformed theologians have developed elaborate theories concerning God's 'revealed' will, His 'secret' will, and His 'perfect' will. The arguments and theories can be helpful, but they can also be confusing. For instance, there is little practical value in speaking of God's 'secret' will, for if anything willed by God has not been revealed to man, it is secret - and we cannot even know that such a thing exists. To talk of God's 'perfect' will verges on the ridiculous, for God *is* perfect, and anything and everything He wills is perfect. The fact of the matter is this: "*the secret things belong to God*" and "*that which He has revealed is for us.*" In other words, we must work with the revelation given, and assiduously avoid conjecture regarding anything "*beyond what is written.*"

Yet we are comforted and encouraged to know that what God *has* revealed concerning Himself and His will is perfect and without fault. So how is it that He can will and ordain a system of sacrifices with which He is not pleased, and in which He finds no delight? The answer lies not in the distinction between revealed and secret, or perfect and imperfect wills. Rather it lies in the concept of intermediate and ultimate wills. For all of God's will can be summed up in His settled intention to be glorified among all Creation. Whatever intermediate purposes He may will as means to that end are perfect because the end to which they all lead is perfect. Nor is this an 'end justifies the means' argument, for God alone possesses the knowledge by which all things will work together for His ultimate glory through Jesus Christ. Hence sin, the sacrifices, and even the death of His eternal Son are all ordained perfectly by God as intermediate steps to the glorification of His Holy Name in the universe. God does not will things for a time, but rather for a purpose: that He may be glorified. Man will be capable of arguing against the eternal plan by which God is fully glorified only when man can conceive of what is truly a better way. That will never be.

So, in respect of the Old Covenant sacrifices, though they were indeed ordained by God, they were so only as they pointed forward to the perfect sacrifice that alone would atone for human sin. Again the author reiterates the argument from before, that once the ultimate has come the intermediate must make way. Again, it is hard to conceive of any purpose for which God would bring these intermediate and obsolete sacrifices back now that the One whose body had been ordained from eternity past has come, obeyed, and sacrificed Himself. "What God doth not will, is the offering of material sacrifices; what He wills, is the free self-oblation of a rational personality."<sup>20</sup> The personality is, of course, that of His eternal Son made flesh.

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<sup>20</sup> Delitzsch, 156.

*By that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.* (10:10)

The principle of the Old Covenant liturgy is that human sin, by divine ordinance, may be expiated by the death of an innocent substitute. This alone necessitated the substitution of animals, for until the 'fullness of time' there was no innocent human being. It seems that God delayed the sending of His Son in order to fully reveal the blackness of human sin through the uncounted and innumerable animals whose blood was shed on its account. Furthermore, the intricacies of the Levitical system brought to light the intensity of holiness that is required of man if he is to see God. The Law points to a level of sanctification that it cannot deliver itself. Even Peter, slow as he was to catch on at times, recognized the impotence of the Law for true sanctification,

*So God, who knows the heart, acknowledged them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as He did to us, and made no distinction between us and them, purifying their hearts by faith. Now therefore, why do you test God by putting a yoke on the neck of the disciples which neither our fathers nor we were able to bear?* (Acts 15:8-10)

The issue all along has been the purification of the sinner's heart, which is the best and simplest definition of sanctification. Owen writes, "The principal notion of sanctification...is the effecting of real, internal holiness in the persons of them that do believe, by the change of their hearts and lives."<sup>21</sup> God having ordained that this true sanctification could be effected for sinful man through a perfect substitute, the Old Covenant sacrificial system was then ordained to point the way - that the bringing about of salvation would be through the death, the shed blood, of the substitute. The bodies of the animals were all types of the one body, prepared from before time, that would fully and finally sanctify those for whom it was broken. "That inward holiness, which the sacrifices of the law

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<sup>21</sup> Owen, 478.

with all their annual repetitions were unable to produce, has been effected once for all through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ."<sup>22</sup>

To comprehend that the sinner's salvation and sanctification were purposed in the counsel of the Godhead from before the foundation of the world, hopefully serves to reorient the believer's understanding and perspective on the whole concept of sanctification. Many erroneously believe that the sinner is saved by faith, but achieves sanctification through good works. God will accept no such limitation on the power of His will. "In this will we are or have been once for all sanctified; *i.e.*, in the accomplishment of this will is based all our sanctification, effected by the self-offering of Christ."<sup>23</sup> The Covenant of Redemption did not stop short of the complete salvation and sanctification of the elect, but provided all steps along the way – perfectly suited to the ultimate glorification of the goodness, mercy, justice, and holiness of God (and all other perfections) through the revelation of Jesus Christ. Good works of men are banished from consideration, along with centuries of insufficient and impotent animal sacrifices. Only one 'work' was sufficient to achieve this end – the willing and innocent offering of a perfect, sinless, *human* body. "This 'offering of the body of Jesus Christ' is the glorious center of all the counsels of the wisdom of God, of all the purposes of his will for the sanctification of the church...for Christ crucified is the wisdom of God and the power of God unto this end. This is the anchor of our faith, whereon alone it rests."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Delitzsch, 157.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*; 156.

<sup>24</sup> Owen, 480-81.

**Week 16: The Session of Christ****Text Reading: Hebrews 10:11 - 14**

*“He is now and henceforth  
High Priest upon His throne...  
seated in unapproachable and everlasting rest.”  
(Franz Delitzsch)*

Little is said among Christians about the ‘occupation’ of Jesus Christ in the years since His ascension. There is a great deal of focus on His earthly life and ministry, His death and resurrection, and His promised return, but the lack of corresponding consideration of the interval might lead one to assume that Christ is currently inactive. This, of course, is far from the case; yet it remains true that most believers think of Christ’s activity as either past or future. Such neglect of Christ’s present ministry would not be the case if more attention were paid to the teachings of the Book of Hebrews.

Theologians do chime in on the topic of the location and activity of Christ in the years between the Ascension and the Second Coming. This interim period is termed the ‘Session’ of Christ, from the Latin *session* which means ‘to sit.’ That is, according to Scripture, what Christ has been doing all these years: sitting at the right hand of God in heaven. But there is more to biblical ‘sitting’ than inactivity; much more. It has been one of the themes of the author of Hebrews to describe to his readers, and to us, the multifaceted ministry of our great High Priest as He sits at the right hand of majesty. The fact itself, that the exalted Christ is seated in the heavenlies, is mentioned four times by the writer of this epistle,

*...when He had by Himself purged our sins, sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high...* (1:3)

*We have such a High Priest, who is seated at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens...* (8:1)

*But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, **sat down at the right hand of God.*** (10:12)

*...looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and **has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.*** (12:2)

It is fairly obvious that the 'session' of Christ was a matter of some importance to the author of Hebrews and, of course, to the Holy Spirit who inspired his writing. There are several aspects of Christ's 'having sat down' that bear upon our understanding of His overall ministry - past, present, and future. As to His past ministry - His life of perfect obedience and His death of sinless submission - the fact that He is now seated at the right hand of God signifies



**John Gill (1697-1771)**

divine acceptance of the sacrifice that Christ offered of Himself on the cross. To be permitted to sit at the right hand of the sovereign, in the ancient world, was a privilege granted only by the sovereign, and never assumed as an inherent or perpetual right. John Gill, in his *Body of Doctrinal Divinity*, discusses at length the importance of this honor - to be seated at the right hand of the of the sovereign - as it applies to the eternal Son

of God become Man, Jesus Christ,

It is expressive of great honour and dignity; the allusion is to kings and great personages, who, to their favorites, and to whom they would do an honour, when they come into their presence, place them at their right hand...This supposes such a person, next in honour and dignity to the king; as Christ, under this consideration, is to the Majesty on high, on whose right hand he sits; and therefore is not to be understood with respect to his divine nature, abstractly considered, or as a divine Person; for as such he is Jehovah's fellow, who thought it no robbery to be equal with God: nor with respect to his human nature merely, and of any communication of the divine perfections to it; for though the fulness of the Godhead dwells bodily in him, yet this is not communicated to, or transfused into his human nature, as to make that omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent, or equal to God, or give it a right to sit on his right hand; but this is to be understood of him as Mediator, with respect to both natures; who, in that office capacity, is inferior to his Father, and his Father greater than he; since the

power in heaven and in earth he has, is given to him by him, and received from him; and he is made subject to him, that put all things under him, by placing him at his right hand; where he is next unto him, in his office as Mediator.<sup>25</sup>

Christ, as the eternal Second Person of the Trinity, possessed that right in essence, as we learn in Philippians 2,

*Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men.*

(Philippians 2:5-7)

But Christ as the God-Man, the incarnate deity, regained that exalted place at the Father's right hand by virtue of His obedience and self-sacrifice,

*Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

(Philippians 2:9-11)

It is for this reason that the author of Hebrews, in three of the four references to Christ's being seated at God's right hand, establishes a causal – or at least consequential – link between Christ's self-offering and His session. The Father has accepted the Son's sacrifice, and now the Son's work in that regard is finished. That is the second aspect of biblical 'sitting' – rest and cessation from labor. Yet in regard to Christ it must be understood that this rest does not mean inactivity. Just as God 'rested' after the six days of Creation, yet '*continues to work until now,*' so also Christ has rested after His atoning work on Golgotha, yet '*ever lives to make intercession,*' for His people.<sup>26</sup> It has been the consistent theme of the author of Hebrews that Jesus Christ *continues* to execute the office of High Priest in the true and heavenly sanctuary.

There are numerous references in the New Testament to this on-going activity of the seated Christ. From His exalted throne He gives spiritual gifts

<sup>25</sup> Gill, John, *Body of Doctrinal Divinity*; Book V; Chapter 8.

<sup>26</sup> Kistemaker, Simon, *Hebrews* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House; 1992 printing); 281.

within the Church; He gives to the Holy Spirit who in turn gives to His people; He *'nourishes and knits'* the various disparate parts of His body together into one, as He builds His Church to overpower the gates of hell. He is, in a word, anything but inactive.

Yet it remains the case that most modern believers are more interested in the termination of Christ's session – of the time when Christ will again rise and return to earth. Far more ink has been spilled on theories regarding Christ's future activity *after* His session, than on the doctrine of His Session proper. It is a fascination bordering on obsession.<sup>27</sup> In regard to Christ's Second Coming, however, the doctrine of His Session provides a great deal of illumination on the parameters set forth in Scripture for that future event. It is widely viewed, on the basis of Jesus' words in Matthew 24, that the primary criteria to be met in preparation for Christ's return is that the *"gospel of the kingdom will be preached in all the world as a witness to all the nations."* But there is another, perhaps even clearer, indication of the circumstances that will mark the end of Christ's Session, one that is mentioned or alluded to at least seven times in the New Testament. Each reference is drawn from the same Psalm – Psalm 110 – that is again quoted in our focus passage in this lesson,

*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)

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<sup>27</sup> 'Obsession' is an intensified form of 'session' and means 'to sit down before' with the intent of staying along time – its use in the Middle Ages for the act of besieging a city illustrates the meaning well.



In all of the discussion regarding the events which must take place prior to Christ's Second Advent - in whatever form and order the various eschatological schools present that event - the fact that Christ's Session is made contingent upon *His enemies becoming His footstool* is often overlooked. Yet this criteria is mentioned far more frequently than any other event on the eschatological calendar. Indeed, even though the phrase is not used explicitly, the concept is at the very heart of Paul's famous eschatological passage in I Corinthians 15,

*But now Christ is risen from the dead, and has become the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. 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. But each one in his own order: Christ the firstfruits, afterward those who are Christ's at His coming. Then comes the end, when He delivers the kingdom to God the Father, when He puts an end to all rule and all authority and power. **For He must reign till He has put all enemies under His feet.** The last enemy that will be destroyed is death.*

(I Corinthians 15:20-26)

This passage is the most expressive in the Bible concerning the 'activity' of the Lord Christ as He sits at God's right hand during the present time. He is 'reigning' and will continue to do so up to the point when the goal or end of this reign is met, and all of His enemies are placed under His feet. What is especially significant about the 'timing' of Christ's Second Coming - assuming that this event coincides with the end of Christ's Session - is that the last enemy to be placed under Christ's feet is death. In other words, whatever else might be said concerning the 'time' after Christ's Second Advent, *death* will no longer exist. It is beyond the scope of this present study to work out the implications of this fact, but it suffices to say that they are and must be profound.

For the author of Hebrews in his current line of argumentation, the passage from Psalm 110 is proof positive that the High Priestly work of Jesus Christ - both on earth and in heaven - is so far superior to that of the Aaronic High Priests, that it renders them utterly impotent and obsolete. Though the Levitical priests continued to 'stand' before the Lord in the sanctuary of

Jerusalem, the true and only High Priest was 'seated' at the right hand of God in the heavenly sanctuary. Thus the author begins to bring the doctrinal section of his epistle to a close.

*And every priest stands ministering daily and offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. But this Man, after He had offered one sacrifice for sins forever, sat down at the right hand of God...* (10:11-12)

The author previously described the furnishings of the sanctuary both in the wilderness and in Jerusalem: table of showbread, lampstand, incense altar, etc. One piece of furniture is noticeably missing from the list – *a chair*. Priests did not sit down at work, for any reason. They were as servants are, to *stand* before their Master as they serve.

*At that time the LORD separated the tribe of Levi to bear the ark of the covenant of the LORD, to stand before the LORD to minister to Him and to bless in His name, to this day.* (Deuteronomy 10:8)

*So if a Levite comes from any of your gates, from where he dwells among all Israel, and comes with all the desire of his mind to the place which the LORD chooses, then he may serve in the name of the LORD his God as all his brethren the Levites do, who stand there before the LORD.* (Deuteronomy 18:6-7)

*Behold, bless the LORD,  
All you servants of the LORD,  
Who by night stand in the house of the LORD!* (Psalm 134:1)

The dignity of Christ's session is contrasted here against the constant standing to minister of the Levitical priests, as it was contrasted in Chapter 1 with the constant agency of the angelic hosts,

*But to which of the angels has He ever said:  
"Sit at My right hand, till I make Your enemies Your footstool"?  
Are they not all ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation?* (1:13-14)

Christ is now seated in power and authority, sharing full sovereignty as the God-Man with the Sovereign of the Universe. Yet He remains a Priest, and

an active, ministering High Priest as well. Delitzsch calls Him a ‘ruling Priest,’ a phrase that alludes to the prophecy of 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)

Just as the Hebrew king was not to usurp the role of the priest, so also the Jewish High Priest was not to assume to himself the civil rule. The offices were kept permanently separate until the Branch would come – the Branch rising from the stump of Jesse, the Davidic line – who would “*rule as Priest upon His throne.*” It is hard to see how the Jews of Jesus’ day, and since, have missed this prophecy and its fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

The work of the High Priest under the Old Covenant was a fearsome task, and every man who undertook the labor with seriousness must have done so with terror. Several commentators have made reference to a wonderful description of the true status of the Old Covenant High Priest, a quote from a German theologian named Menken,

The priest of the Old Testament stands timid and uneasy in the holy place, anxiously performing his awful service there, and hastening to depart when the service is done, as from a place where he has no free access, and can never feel at home; whereas Christ sits down in everlasting rest and blessedness at the right hand of Majesty in the holy of holies, His work accomplished, and He awaiting its reward.<sup>28</sup>

This is indeed an apt quotation, fitting the context of the author’s argument throughout the past three chapters of Hebrews. It contrasts the dignity and power of Christ’s eternal ministry with the tenuousness and impotence of

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<sup>28</sup> Quoted by Delitzsch, p. 161; also quoted by Milligan and Kistemaker in their commentaries on this verse.

the priestly ministry under the Old Covenant. Who could wish for a return to the weak, *standing* priest once the omnipotent, *seated* Priest has taken His place at the right hand of God? Who could wish for a return to a service that could only be assumed with the greatest of fear, once a year, when one has been established for all eternity wherein the Priest is at all times seated in the very Holy of Holies? These questions are placed powerfully before the doubting Hebrew believers of the first century, and before every believer in every age since. They are, of course, rhetorical.

*...from that time waiting till His enemies are made His footstool.* (10:13)

We have already looked in some detail at the theological point that is expressed by this reference to Psalm 110. The author's use of the phrase here is not to reiterate or emphasize the entirety of Christ's Session, but rather to continue the contrast between the continuing labors of the earthly priests and the eternal blessedness of the One whose singular sacrifice finished His atoning work forever. Delitzsch writes,

The antithesis on which he is here dwelling is simply between the labour and passion of His earthly life, and the unchanging blessedness of its perfection above. Christ no more descends to fight; His strivings are over: He takes part as to His whole being in the omnipotent dominion of the heavenly Father, and awaits the final manifestation of His power.<sup>29</sup>

Milligan adds,

For while every Levitical priest standeth daily ministering, as one who has never finished his work; Christ, on the other hand, having offered one sacrifice for sins, sat down perpetually on the right hand of God, as one who has accomplished His work.<sup>30</sup>

The cumulative effect of these quotations, and the clear conclusion of our exegesis of these passages in Hebrews, is that the work of Christ regarding sin has been fully and finally accomplished. There remains nothing more to do.

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<sup>29</sup> Delitzsch, 162.

<sup>30</sup> Milligan, 272.

One must carefully consider this fact when developing a view regarding the activity of Christ in the coming age - the 'end of the age.' Whatever eschatological system one may develop from the less-than-crystal-clear passages of the New Testament, it simply *cannot* have any place within it for sin and death - these have been decisively dealt with by the great High Priest, who now rests secure in His accomplishment as He awaits the consummation.

*For by one offering He has perfected forever those who are being sanctified.* (10:14)

This is a classic 'Now and Not Yet' verse. It speaks of an on-going sanctification of a people already perfected forever. Thus it reminds us that all that is needed has been accomplished in Christ, and that the believer's only standing ever will be that of being 'in Christ.' The common division within evangelicalism of justification as a 'one-time, completed act' and sanctification as a 'life-long process' is misleading. It is true, so far as it goes; but it does not go far enough.

The danger of this view is to fall into the trap of postulating a 'grace' justification, but a 'grace plus works' sanctification. It promotes a monergistic view of justification and a synergistic one of sanctification. All such dichotomies must fall, for each and every aspect of the believer's path to glory has already been accomplished in full by Jesus Christ. "The sanctification and perfection of the church being the end designed in the death and sacrifice of Christ, all things necessary unto that end must be included therein, that it be not frustrated."<sup>31</sup>

If there is a 'work' of sanctification, it is that same work that Jesus Himself claimed to be the only one acceptable before God, *to believe on Him whom He has sent*. In the context of this verse in Hebrews Chapter 10, that work of faith manifests itself in an ever-growing trust that one's complete sanctification is already secured in Christ. It can be found no place else, nor can it be 'worked' through the power of the believer's will. This was perhaps the greatest error of

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<sup>31</sup> Owen, 494.

Wesley's Methodism – to codify a methodology of sanctification as one pursued perfection. Wesley preached reliance on Christ, yes; but also too much reliance on the obedience of the flesh. We must come to understand that the power of a faith resting in the finished work of Jesus Christ is stronger than the power of a will attempting to cooperate with God toward sanctification. There is that, indeed; but it is also the fruit of faith.

As difficult as this is to comprehend, it is what the author of Hebrews claims to be the truth – that what is needed has already been perfected, though it still remains to be revealed. In a sense, all the works of God are of this nature. Completed from eternity past, as there is no succession of time with God, yet these works are progressively manifested in time. There is a great comfort in life to know that all things have been sovereignly ordered by God before there were any 'things' to order. It is good to know that someone is in charge of this universe, and that He is both sovereign and omnipotent. The same is true in microcosm with regard to our sanctification – it is in the capable hands of Jesus Christ, *the Sanctified One* in whom all who will be sanctified already are.

If therefore our faith looks for Christ sitting on the right hand of God, and rests quietly in that truth, we shall at the end enjoy the fruits of this victory along with Him who is our Head, and, when our foes are vanquished along with Satan and sin and death and the whole world and when we have put off the corruption of our flesh, we shall triumph.<sup>32</sup>

What more can be said?

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<sup>32</sup> Calvin, 138.

**Week 17: No More Sacrifice for Sin**

**Text Reading: Hebrews 10:15 - 18**

*"It is the authority of the Holy Ghost alone,  
speaking unto us in the Scripture,  
whereunto all our faith is to be resolved."  
(John Owen)*

It is widely agreed by commentators that the author of Hebrews brings to a close the more doctrinal portion of his epistle with verse 18 of Chapter 10. The final four verses of the didactic segment of the book, which begins dramatically with the opening verses of Chapter 1, bring it all to a close in a somewhat anticlimactic fashion. The passage before us in this lesson is, we may say, the imprimatur placed upon the whole of what has gone before: *"the Holy Spirit witnesses to us..."* For all intents and purposes, the author has said what needed to be said concerning the superiority of Jesus Christ over all that one might imagine in the way of a sinner's salvation. He has set Jesus Christ in contrast to the holy angels, to Moses, to Aaron, and to Melchizedek – both as to His person and to His work – and has proven beyond doubt or argument that all that is related to Christ's ministry is 'better than' all else. There remains now only the denouement of verse 18 before the final section of the letter dedicated to application and exhortation on the basis of sound doctrine.

If the dogmatic section of the book - running from Chapter 1, verse 1 through Chapter 10, verse 18 - is likened to a symphony, then a good case could be made that the whole argument is a crescendo that rises to a climax in Chapter 10, verse 14. It is probable that the reference to the witness of the Holy Spirit applies to all that the writer has set down, from the beginning of the epistle to this point. But William Gouge, an eminent commentator of this book, considers the authoritative testimony of the Spirit to focus primarily on verse 14. "Concerning the main scope of the testimony, the point proved thereby is, that Christ's one sacrifice, once offered, is perfect in itself, and maketh others

perfect.”<sup>33</sup> While this may be narrowing the scope of the Spirit’s witness too much, it nonetheless recognizes the remarkable nature of what the author has just written in verse 14. All that has gone before concerning Christ’s High Priestly ministry culminates in the thought contained in that verse, and the entirety of the application and exhortation that is to follow flows from the same. Milligan places the highest regard on this particular section of Scripture when he writes, “To understand this one section, therefore, in all its legitimate bearings, is, in fact, to understand the whole economy of Divine grace.”<sup>34</sup> It is well worth considering in greater measure.

The key to verse 14 is the use of two verb tenses with regard to the effects of Christ’s perfect sacrifice in the lives of believers. The actual verb, *perfected*, is in the form of past tense that indicates continued results from a past action. In this sense, the work of perfection has been completed, of course, because the sacrifice has been completed. The emphasis of the tense is on the ‘once for all’ nature of Christ’s sacrifice. That self-offering was made for others, just as the Old Covenant offerings were made for others and not for the priest who was performing the sacrifice (although the priest, as the author has already noted, had to previously make an offering for himself before he could perform the sacrifices on behalf of others). Jesus Christ had no need of offering a sacrifice for His own sins, as He had none, and so the entirety of His offering was substitutionary – it was for others.

The efficacy of that sacrifice is what the writer of Hebrews highlights in verse 14 – both as to its initial result and to the duration of its effects. Christ’s sacrifice *has perfected* – completely achieved the ends for which it was intended – *forever* – with no further need of repetition – the ones for whom the offering was made. That brings us to the second verb tense in the verse – that of the participle that describes those for whom the sacrifice was made. *Those who are being*

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<sup>33</sup> Gouge, 701.

<sup>34</sup> Milligan, 275.



*sanctified* represents this select group who have fully and forever benefited from the perfect atonement in the body of Jesus Christ. What is remarkable in this description is the use of a present tense participle, indicating a work that is ongoing (and hence not yet complete). The thrust of the verse, therefore, is that the work that is ongoing, *sanctification*, is taking place in those who have already been *perfected*. This truth ought to bring about a radical reformulation in the minds of most believers as to what exactly 'sanctification' is, and how it is to be achieved.

Conventional evangelical wisdom teaches us that we are 'justified' once and for all through faith in the shed blood of Jesus Christ. Justification being a forensic and judicial act, it is non-repeatable. Sanctification, on the other hand, is a 'life long process,' at least as most evangelical preachers and teachers have it. Justification is solely the work of God in Christ; sanctification is a work of cooperation whereby the believer submits to the will of God and, through obedience, is progressively sanctified. This formula seems to best fit the actual experience of believers, who are by no means perfect and without sin the moment they first believe. But, close as it may be to experience, it is a far cry from what the author of Hebrews – and other Scripture as well – teaches. New Testament authors such as the apostle Paul speak of sanctification as a finished work in Christ,

*And such were some of you. But you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.*

(I Corinthians 6:11)

It is hard to tell whether the apostle is using the three terms – *washed*, *sanctified*, *justified* – in a somewhat synonymous sense here, or whether they represent three distinct blessings incumbent upon salvation. In either case, however, it is of particular note that Paul mentions sanctification *before* justification, an order certainly different from standard evangelical teaching. In addition, all three terms are in the past tense, representing actions that have been

completed, and not ongoing, progressive states. The significance of this usage, as well as that of Hebrews 10:14, strikes to the very heart of the believer's understanding of what has taken place 'in Christ.'

It is common for modern Christian teachers and writers to speak of the believer's justification as something that God considers only as He looks upon the believer *through* the lens, so to speak, of Jesus. Some have made it sound as though if Jesus were to step aside, and God were to see the Christian without the intervening image of Christ, he would be seen in all of his native defilement and sin. Some emphasize the filtering effects of Christ's blood on God's perspective of an otherwise very sinful human: the believer.

Opponents of Christianity have called this doctrine of justification 'judicial fiction' which, in fact, it is. The complaint is that God is calling something 'just' that is not so, and doing this on the basis of another person's innocence. This is not the type of judicial decision that would be accepted in any human court, and to apply it to the Court that undergirds all human justice seems to many to be unacceptable. In short, it is argued, God can only call a person *just* if he is so.

Orthodox, and especially reformed, Christianity has always responded with the correct answer in regards to the *imputed* righteousness of Christ. By the divine ordinance of representation, God has determined that Christ's perfect righteousness was to be imputed - credited to the account of - those for whom He died and rose again. The classic verse concerning this judicial concept is again from Paul's pen,

*Therefore, from now on, we regard no one according to the flesh. Even though we have known Christ according to the flesh, yet now we know Him thus no longer. Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; old things have passed away; behold, all things have become new. Now all things are of God, who has reconciled us to Himself through Jesus Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation, that is, that God was in Christ reconciling the world to Himself, **not imputing their trespasses to them**, and has committed to us the word of reconciliation. Now then, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were pleading through us: we implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. **For He made Him who knew no sin to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him.*** (II Corinthians 5:16-21)

Thus the doctrine of imputation is employed to answer the objection of 'judicial fiction.' Yet it still leaves us with God justifying men who are unclean and, in a sense, unjustifiable. To employ a biblical metaphor, God covers the leper with a clean robe, but only progressively renews the leper's skin. The leper is 'declared' clean, but in reality he is not clean. Or is he?

The whole point of Paul's discussion in II Corinthians 5, is that the believer is, indeed, clean. He is altogether new, and the new nature with which he has been endowed is clean - perfectly clean in Christ. Contrary to so much that passes for biblical teaching on sanctification, there is nothing for the believer to do in the way of his sanctification, for it is complete and perfect in Christ. It is for this reason that the apostle can claim "*It is no longer I who sin, but the sin which dwells within me.*" The life of 'progressive sanctification' - remembering that sanctification was in the present tense in Hebrews 10:14 - is not one of cooperative effort between the believer and God. It is also not one of 'good works' by which we earn rewards in heaven. Nor is it one by which we accumulate holiness to ourselves through our own obedience. It is, rather, as Paul states elsewhere, "*no longer I who live, but the life that I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God...*"

Where, then, does obedience come in? Jesus Himself stipulated that our obedience would be the proof of our love to Him, so clearly there must be room in our theology and practice for obedience. The answer that ties all of these concepts together in a practical manner, is found once again in the writings of Paul. This time we turn to Romans, and to an interesting phrase that itself deserves a full and separate study: *the obedience of faith.*

*...who was declared the Son of God with power by the resurrection from the dead, according to the Spirit of holiness, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about **the obedience of faith** among all the Gentiles for His name's sake...*  
(Romans 1:4-5)

*Now to Him who is able to establish you according to my gospel and the preaching of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery which has been kept secret for long ages past, but now is manifested, and by the Scriptures of the prophets, according to the commandment of the eternal God, has been made known to all the nations, leading to **obedience of faith**; to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, be the glory forever. Amen.* (Romans 16:25-27)

Paul, as it were, begins and ends his great doctrinal treatise of Romans with this concept of the 'obedience of faith.' There are many ways the phrase can be interpreted and understood, as the Greek construction is susceptible to several different perspectives. One such perspective is that faith is the source and motivation for the obedience of which Paul speaks; the believer's obedience *flows* from his faith. Another possible interpretation would be that the obedience of which the apostle speaks is of the very essence of the faith with which he is saved – that the believer now lives *faith's obedience*, the obedience that belongs to faith. In any case, however, it is clear that the obedience that believers so often link with sanctification is tied inexorably with the faith that believers too often link solely with justification. So closely are these two – faith and obedience – tied together, that one may reasonably say that any act of 'obedience' that does not flow from faith is, in fact, not obedience at all.

In the context of this current discussion, the believer's obedience *unto* sanctification flows from the believer's firm belief that he is *already* sanctified in Jesus Christ. Faith, being the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things not seen, holds the reality of the believer's past and perfect sanctification as if it were already fully manifested in the flesh, while at the same time acknowledging humbly that this manifestation has not yet come to fruition. Perhaps it will remain a mystery until Christ Himself is revealed, and we in Him; but it is a mystery that does not confuse or confound the one who has his or her eyes fixed on Jesus Christ, who has become to us *cleansing, sanctification, and justification*.



utilized the inspired writings of the Old Testament, incorporated into their own, inspired writings as a continuation of the testimony of the Holy Spirit.

*For whatever things were written before were written for our learning, that we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope.* (Romans 15:4)

*This is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, says the LORD: I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them," then He adds, "Their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more."* (10:16-17)

The author closes this particular section of his letter by returning to the quote with which he opened it. This time, however, he condenses the prophetic passage from Jeremiah 31 into the two most important parts as regards the perfect salvation wrought by the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. The two clauses are interrelated, and probably causal. This means that the second phrase, "*their sins and their lawless deeds I will remember no more,*" is based upon the fulfillment of the first phrase, "*I will put My laws into their hearts, and in their minds I will write them.*" The writing of the divine law upon the heart and mind of a sinner is nothing less than the divine act of regeneration – the creation of a new nature through the power of the Holy Spirit. The foundation of this gracious act is the perfect offering by Christ of Himself upon the cross; the beneficiaries are those who were "*chosen in Him before the foundation of the world*"; and the everlasting effect is that the sinner's transgressions and guilt are removed from God's sight and memory.

William Gouge has an interesting comment on this passage, especially in light of the previous discussion concerning perfection and sanctification. Gouge writes,

Concerning our sanctification, which is God's putting his laws into men's hearts...concerning our justification, which is a remembering of sins no more.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Gouge, 701.

Again, and remarkably, the author places the sanctifying work of the new heart and mind before the justifying work of the removal of sin from the presence of God. This order, however, should not be viewed in a chronological, but rather a theological, sense. The cleansing of the heart and the writing of the divine law thereon, form the theological and judicial basis for the removal of sins from the remembrance of God.

*Now where there is remission of these, there is no longer an offering for sin. (10:18)*

Owen puts a fitting epilogue to this verse, the last in the author's doctrinal section which runs from the opening of the book. Owen writes,

And here we come unto a full end of the dogmatical part of this epistle, a portion of Scripture filled with heavenly and glorious mysteries, - the light of the church of the Gentiles, the glory of the people Israel, the foundation and bulwark of faith evangelical.<sup>38</sup>

The logic of the author's treatise on atonement, and the efficacy of any other form of sacrifice other than the perfect body and blood of Jesus Christ, is very tightly argued and biblically sound. It is a logic that may be applied with equal strength and validity to all other religions than Judaism. Even more so, in fact, since only Judaism among all world religions was ordained and established by God. Nevertheless, it remains true that Jesus Christ's self-oblation answers not only to the comprehensive shadow-work of the Old Covenant, it also answers to the very essence of religion itself. Milligan writes,

The great end of all religion is to purify the conscience from all that is impure and unholy; and so to qualify us for the service of God here, and for the enjoyment of his presence hereafter.<sup>39</sup>

The logic is also simple, though not simplistic. Perfect cleansing requires a perfect sacrifice, as John Brown notes, "If there is perfect pardon, there must

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<sup>38</sup> Owen, 497.

<sup>39</sup> Milligan, 275.

have been perfect expiation; and if there be perfect expiation, what more need can there be for sacrifice for sin, the only end of which is expiation?"<sup>40</sup> Those who wish to bring back the Levitical sacrificial system during the millennium must consider well the only biblical reason for sacrifices – atonement, not memorial – and realize that there is now no basis for such sacrifices to be offered, nor will there ever be again.

Jesus Christ has dealt with sin, fully and finally with His perfect offering of Himself upon the cross. The work is indeed ‘finished,’ and the benefits of that work have accrued in their entirety to those for whom the offering was made. Sacrifices of animals have absolutely no warrant, and no efficacy, now that *“Christ our Passover has been sacrificed.”* Sacrifices of ‘good works’ are likewise negated, in that they must never be done without a firm conviction that they profit nothing in themselves, and are only profitable to the extent that they rest fully upon the glorious person and finished work of Jesus Christ. This is the ‘obedience of faith,’ and other than the ‘sacrifice of praise,’ it is the only liturgical work assigned to all believers as priests unto their God.

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<sup>40</sup> Brown, 448.



**Week 18: Boldly Enter**

**Text Reading: Hebrews 10:19 - 21**

*“No saint of the Old Testament,  
could draw nigh to God so confidently,  
so joyously, so familiarly as we can now.”  
(Franz Delitzsch)*

The evident transition from verse 18 to verse 19 of Chapter 10, a transition from exposition to application, offers an excellent opportunity to re-evaluate the basic thesis underlying this study regarding the *purpose* for which the epistle was written, and the *context* in which it was received by its original recipients. The letter itself gives little indication of such information – the author, the original audience, where the letter was first sent, etc. But there are hints, and commentators have for centuries attempted to piece the evidence together to recreate the original circumstances that gave rise to the Book of Hebrews. The hypothesis developed in this study places the first recipients of the letter in the city of Rome, in the years following the revocation of the Edict of Claudius that exiled all Jews from the Imperial Capitol. The historical data available concerning that edict indicates that the disturbance among the Jews may very well have been on account of the preaching of Jewish Christians and the doctrine of Jesus Christ.

Jews – Christian and non-Christian alike, the Romans made no such distinctions at that time – suffered greatly from the forced exile. Believing Jews like Aquila and Priscilla lost their home and business, retaining only what they carried on their backs. The author comes to remind them that they were the ones who *“joyfully accepted the plundering of your goods, knowing that you have a better and an enduring possession for yourselves in heaven”* (10:34), quite possibly as a result of Claudius’ Expulsion Edict. Now they had returned to their home city, and possibly to their plundered homes. The temptation must have been intense to

'lie low' and keep their testimony of Jesus quiet, or perhaps to abandon it altogether, in an effort to avoid a reprise expulsion under Claudius' successor Nero. There are strong indications throughout the book that their succumbing to this temptation was the author's great concern. As early as Chapter 2 we read the earnest rhetorical question, "*How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation?*"

*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, which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed to us by those who heard Him, God also bearing witness both with signs and wonders, with various miracles, and gifts of the Holy Spirit, according to His own will? (2:1-4)*

The author continues the theme of 'holding fast' and 'not letting go' with verse 19 of Chapter 10, but in doing so he is merely reaching back to what he had already written by way of exhortation in Chapter 4,

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

The exhortation to "*hold fast the confession of our hope*" in 10:23 is reminiscent of the "*let us hold fast our confession*" in 4:15. It is apparent that the danger of the Hebrew believers 'letting go' of their faith and hope was real; these exhortations are far from being a platitude, a 'keep on keeping on' from a coach. These were stern words of warning from one who had suffered along with them (10:34) and probably was one of their earliest teachers (5:12). The same God who has provided 'so great a salvation' is also "*a consuming fire*" (12:29) falling into whose hands is a "*fearful thing*" (10:31). All that the author has written has been geared toward stirring the Hebrew believers to endurance, of which they had great need (10:36), for they were in great danger. The exhortations of the closing chapters of Hebrews are of the same nature as those found earlier, but they are

given “in deeper and fuller tones” as the author comes to the end of his entreaty.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the author’s current exhortation is the attitude he commends to the Hebrew believers: *boldness*. Gentile believers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (or any prior century for that matter) cannot comprehend the impact of the author’s words – “*having boldness to enter the Holy Place*” – upon a Jewish audience. For unbelieving Jews such an assertion would be nothing less than blasphemy: only members of the Aaronic priesthood were permitted to enter the sanctuary, and one doubts that they did so ‘boldly.’ Yet the author of Hebrews uses this amazing adverb twice in the closing verses of Chapter 10 to emphasize the believer’s new relationship to God through the New Covenant mediated by Jesus Christ:

**Hebrews 10:19**

*Therefore, brethren, having **boldness** to enter  
the Holiest by the blood of Jesus*

**Hebrews 10:35**

*Therefore do not cast away your **boldness**,  
which has great reward.*

So far the working hypothesis concerning the *Sitz im Leben* of the original audience still holds; there is nothing to be found within the exhortations to follow that would contradict a Roman setting, and a Hebrew congregation fearful of a return of great suffering and loss because of the testimony of Jesus Christ, the Jewish Messiah rejected by the Jewish nation. Indeed, there is much yet to come in Chapter 10 and beyond to bolster the theory as to the audience and setting of the Book of Hebrews.

Whoever may have written this epistle, and to whomever it was written, and whatever their situation in life may have been at the time, it is a matter of universal agreement that the author of Hebrews offers his audience – then and now – something that every religious adherent seeks: *assurance*. Assurance of salvation marks the difference between reverent fear and unholy terror, between a settled conscience and a troubled soul. The doctrinal positions of the various

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<sup>41</sup> Delitzsch, 169.

branches of professing Christianity on the issue of 'assurance' have varied widely all along the spectrum of options. The Roman Catholic Church pronounces anathema upon anyone who claims that full assurance of salvation can be known by any 'normal' believer, whereas many of the Reformers thought that to doubt one's salvation was tantamount to denying the faith altogether. As with many issues of dogma, the truth is probably to be found somewhere between these two extremes. It is clear, however, from what the author of Hebrews says in this section of his epistle, that the answer is not directly in the middle, but definitely on the 'full assurance' side of the scale.

*Therefore, brethren, having boldness to enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus...*  
(10:19-21)

We have often had occasion to note that written Greek is not a language that is built on the same word order conventions as English. The familiar Subject-Verb-Direct Object sentence structure of English does not apply to Greek. For the expositor of Scripture this characteristic of the biblical language is important in that it forces him to alter his paradigm of sentence diagramming, and allow the Greek writer to do in his language what the English writer would do in a completely different manner. Often, however, the nuances of the Greek are not easily translatable into English, and subtle (and not-so-subtle) shades of meaning and emphasis can be lost. In the case of Hebrews 10:19-21, the author places significant emphasis on the participle '*having*' by placing it as the first word in the Greek construction of verse 19. By doing this he draws his readers' attention to their birthright as children of God through faith in Jesus Christ. All of the blessings that are to follow are founded on the full right of possession, by all who are members of the New Covenant, of all that Jesus Christ is and all that He has done as the 'great Priest' of the heavenly sanctuary. The author has been exhorting the Hebrew believers to 'hold fast' and 'not let go'; once again he reiterates, and more forcefully, exactly what they are to hold on to.

“Boldness” is what the believer possesses in full right of ownership due to his or her relationship to God through Jesus Christ. The word translated ‘boldness’ in verse 19 denotes “freedom of speech, unreservedness of utterance.”<sup>42</sup> It signifies an attitude of fearlessness to speak before august personages and, hence, a cheerful courage in circumstances that might otherwise be quite dangerous. “It connotes a new, objective reality obtained for the Christian community by the death of Christ.”<sup>43</sup> The reference, of course, is to the access of the worshiper to the holy place of the sanctuary, a fearsome place in the tradition of the old Jewish worship. The priests of the Old Covenant were permitted, even commanded, to enter into the sanctuary – to the Holy Place, and once every year to the Holy of Holies – but their entrance was circumscribed by procedural rules, and was never to be without the blood of sacrifice. One may read the detailed instructions given to Aaron through Moses and never come away with the sense that the Aaronic priest had ‘boldness’ when he entered into the symbolic presence of God.

The two veils that shrouded the sanctuary in mystery – one before the Holy Place, through which no ordinary Jew could pass, and one before the Holy of Holies, through which no ordinary priest could pass – stood as constant reminders that sin had made a separation between man and God, and ‘boldness’ in human approach to the Holy One was inconceivable. The blood of the animal sacrifice granted permission to enter, but it was the blood of an animal and not the blood of the sinner himself; the sinner’s conscience was still defiled, his sins remained, and only fear and trembling could govern his timid approach to the divine throne. This was the case of the priest whose right and responsibility it was to minister before Jehovah on behalf of the people. As for the people themselves, the thought of approaching into the Sanctuary at all, let alone with boldness, was blasphemous.

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<sup>42</sup> Vine’s Dictionary of New Testament Words

<sup>43</sup> Lane, 283.

Free access, freedom of speech, ‘unreservedness of utterance,’ are the birthright of all who are born again through faith in Jesus Christ. These are the purchased possessions of Christ Himself, who has entered into the intimate presence of the Almighty, and is now seated at the right hand of majesty. But these possessions were not purchased for Himself; rather they were purchased for those whom the Father had given to the Son from before the foundation of the world. That believers should benefit from the self-oblation of Christ was foretold by the prophet Isaiah, through whom the Lord prophesied that the rewards of the Messiah’s self-sacrifice were not limited to His own exaltation,

*He shall see the labor of His soul, and be satisfied.*

*By His knowledge My righteous Servant shall justify many,  
For He shall bear their iniquities.*

(Isaiah 53:11)

The author of Hebrews wants his readers to contemplate the honor and amazing blessedness of being in full possession of the right of free entry and free speech, to a place once closely guarded and mysterious. “Our being entitled to enter the heavenly sanctuary, the place of God’s essential presence, is a source of joyful confidence to our minds: we may approach now with perfect confidence, as being assured of admission.”<sup>44</sup> Owen adds, “We have a right unto it, we have liberty without restraint by any prohibition, we have confidence and assurance without dread or fear.”<sup>45</sup> It is a wonderful privilege granted - and granted in perpetuity, never to be taken away - as a direct result of the efficacy of the atoning blood of Jesus Christ. “It is the blood of Christ shed for our reconciliation which is the basis and the source of our confidence.”<sup>46</sup>

This last point, one that is made explicitly by the author in verse 19, is extremely important to the overall concept of ‘assurance’ in the life and conscience of the believer. Roman Catholicism errs in denying that assurance to individual believers because it errs in its doctrine of justification and

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<sup>44</sup> Delitzsch, 170.

<sup>45</sup> Owen, 502.

<sup>46</sup> Delitzsch, 170.

sanctification. Rome acknowledges that only that which is perfect may dwell in the presence of absolute perfection, and that even the least measure of sin renders man odious in the sight of God. There can be no assurance or confidence for the one who abides under the divine wrath. But Rome has failed for centuries to see that the atoning blood of Jesus Christ washes the believer completely clean, and purchases for him not only full access to the divine throne of grace (Hebrews 4:16), but also *full assurance* of that fact. There is no weighing of personal merit in the case of the one who approaches; all merit belongs to the One who has already entered in, and in Whom the believer now approaches. Infinite merit (being Christ's) imputed to the believer brings infinite assurance of acceptance by God.

*...by a new and living way which He consecrated for us, through the veil, that is, His flesh, and having a High Priest over the house of God* (10:20-21)

That the way into the sanctuary is 'new' stands to reason from the whole of the author's argument to this point, that Jesus Christ is the Mediator of the *New Covenant*. What is especially intriguing here is that he calls this new way, a 'living' way. Commentators are all over the field on the meaning of 'living' in reference to the believer's access to the heavenly sanctuary. Lane believes it is living because it 'leads to life'; Delitzsch offers that the way is living because 'it is the antithesis of that which is lifeless and powerless'; Kistemaker holds that the way Christ has opened for believers is living because 'it is not a road without an exit, a dead-end street.' The very divergence of these views from one another seems to indicate that perhaps none of them have gotten it right. Without being dogmatic in disagreement, however, it is probably that the author has given clues within the verse itself.

The 'living way' that Christ has opened is 'through the veil,' and that veil, according to the author, is 'His flesh.' The author is engaging in allegory here, fully realizing that it was a literal veil that separated the holy sanctuary from the

congregation of Israel, as it was a literal veil that was torn without hands upon the death of Jesus Christ on the cross. Allegorically this veil represented the broken body of the Lord, whose sacrificial death was the impetus for the removal of the literal veil in the Temple and the true 'veil' which obscured the heavenly sanctuary. As the author ties the 'living way' to the 'veil which is His flesh,' it is quite possible that the adjective 'living' has reference to the resurrection of Christ from the grave. It is, of course, the resurrection - and the consequent fact that Christ "*ever lives to make intercession*" - that renders His self-sacrifice non-repeatable and eternally effective. The sacrificial animals of the Old Covenant did not come back to life again; they were dead and gone, and their blood sufficed for but one of many, many oblations. But Christ's death did not end His life, and therefore did not end the efficacy of His blood.

This may not be exactly what was on the author's mind when he wrote this phrase, but it does lead well into the next clause, "*having a High Priest over the house of God.*" This office Christ's now holds by virtue of His triumph over death, and holds not only as eternal God, but also as resurrected and glorified Man.

The words translated 'High Priest' are unique to this verse in all of Hebrews. They are governed by the emphatic 'having' from verse 19 (there is no repetition of that word in the Greek of verse 21), and the words used are a departure from the way the author normally refers to the High Priest. The usual word is *archiera*, which is universally translated by the English 'High Priest.' Here, in verse 21, the author uses two words, *hiera megan*, which literally mean 'great priest.' It is not uncommon in Jewish literature for the High Priest to be referred to as the 'great priest,' but the author of Hebrews never does so elsewhere in his epistle. That is not sufficient reason to completely discount the translation 'High Priest' in verse 21, but it is sufficient to cause some reflection on the author's meaning. Several commentators have offered the suggestion that the author is actually referring to Christ not so much as the fulfillment of the Aaronic High Priest, but even more so as fulfillment of the royal, Melchizedekan



Priest. Delitzsch writes, "By *hiera megan*, therefore, here we are to understand not simply a high priest, but one who is at the same time Priest and King...one who is enthroned as Priest above all created heavens."<sup>47</sup> Milligan believes the author chose this usage of words "to denote Christ's personal dignity and royal highness. Like Melchizedek, he sits as a priest upon his throne."<sup>48</sup>

In these verses the author erects the twin pillars of assurance, the Jachin and Boaz of the New Temple. The first is the worshipers newfound boldness and confidence to enter into the presence of God without Levitical mediation or the shedding of animal blood. The second is the 'Great Priest' who is encountered there, Jesus Christ who now sits in majesty at God's right hand and reigns supreme over all creation - as God *and* as Man. The glories of the Old Covenant are as faded as Moses' face long after he descended from the mountain, the luster of the New shines brighter and brighter in the author's estimation...and hopefully as well in ours.

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<sup>47</sup> Delitzsch, 173.

<sup>48</sup> Milligan, 280.

**Week 19:            Let Us Persevere**

**Text Reading:     Hebrews 10:22 - 25**

*“Unchangeably,  
God stands behind His promise.”  
(William Lane)*

The imperative is the mood of command. In English this verb mood occurs only in the second person, since English does not have a means for commanding or earnestly exhorting except with an implied ‘you’ attached. It says something about our language that commands, or at least the imperative mood, only encompasses the relationship between the commander and the commanded. Perhaps it says something more about our culture. In any event, this limitation within the English verbal moods results in a limitation of our understanding of Greek moods, for the latter does not have the same restrictions.

An excellent case in point is found in the focus passage for this lesson, Hebrews 10, verses 22, 23, and 24. Each of these contains an imperative in the original language, though each imperative – unlike English – is in the *first person*, first person plural, to be exact. A first person singular imperative would be somewhat schizophrenic in any language, but the first person plural imperative is quite common in ancient languages such as Greek and Latin. Grammatically, an imperative sentence is called ‘hortatory,’ and when the sentence is in the first person plural, it is called ‘cohortatory.’ We are familiar with the common root to these two grammatical terms, as it forms the basis for our English ‘exhortation.’ Unfortunately, however, the meaning of exhortation has been somewhat diluted in common usage, as it now connotes something closer to strong encouragement rather than command. The hortatory form of speech, as it is found in the ancient biblical languages, is unmistakably imperative; it is *command* speech, regardless whether first, second, or even third person.

The best the English translators of the Bible can do with the Greek cohortative mood is to insert 'let us' before the active verb. Thus in verse 22 we have "*Let us draw near,*" in verse 23, "*Let us hold fast,*" and in verse 24, "*Let us consider.*" Each of these verbs in the Greek is a first person plural imperative - a *command* - though in the English they come out sounding more like an encouraging pep talk. The author of Hebrews is, no doubt, encouraging his readers to do the things he specifies in these verses, but it is worthy of note that the verbal mood he employs is a strong one. There are at least two reasons for which the author uses such strong language. First, the things he commands in verses 22, 23, and 24 stand together as a proper and logical response to the doctrinal truths he has so carefully elaborated concerning the high priesthood of Jesus Christ. Worship of God is an imperative for all of God's rational creation (and perhaps also for His irrational creation as well). A major part of the judgment that will befall mankind will consist of man's disobedience to this categorical imperative. But for believers, who have been brought to God through the blood of His only Son, the worship imperative is not abrogated; rather it is intensified.

The second reason for the use of the imperative is the author's knowledge that only steadfast perseverance in the faith is a true preventative against apostasy. The Hebrew Christians to whom the author is writing were in danger of abandoning their profession of faith in Jesus Christ and returning to their old religion of Judaism. Steadfast, continual perseverance together with other believers - *let us* - was the best remedy.

Exhortations to persevere, however, seem to run counter to the popular notion of 'once saved, always saved.' The relationship between the sovereign, monergistic power of God in the salvation of a sinner, on the one hand, and the responsibility of the believer to bear fruit in keeping with repentance, on the other, has been a perennial theological bugbear. To one extreme there is the teaching that, though justification is through faith, the maintenance of salvation is by continuing in good works, and ultimately one's salvation can be lost through negligence, sin, and apostasy. To the other extreme, there is the teaching that the 'lordship' of Christ, and the obedience and growth incumbent upon that concept, are optional for the believer. Simple profession of faith, made even once, is sufficient for eternal salvation. As with so many things, the truth is to be found

somewhere between extremes. Suffice it to say at this juncture, that the author of Hebrews does not predicate the believers' salvation upon their own faithfulness in perseverance, but rather upon the faithfulness of God: "*for He who promised is faithful.*"

One last item is worth noting as introduction to the passage before us in this lesson. The authorship of the Book of Hebrews has been a point of debate for centuries, with the majority opinion awarding the letter to the apostle Paul. Here in Chapter 10, amidst the three cohortatives in verses 22, 23, and 24, many find support for this conclusion. This is because the author, displaying at the very least a Pauline style or influence, uses the 'triumvirate of virtue' - faith, hope, and love.

*Let us draw near...with the full assurance of **faith**.* (v. 22)

*Let us hold fast...the confession of our **hope**.* (v. 23)

*Let us consider one another...to **love** and good deeds.* (v. 24)

There is no denying that these three virtues are common within the acknowledged letters of Paul. In addition to the famous passage in I Corinthians 13, the apostle also uses the three words in I Thessalonians 1:3 and 5:8, as well as in Colossians 1:4. Yet the use of these three words by the author of Hebrews does not definitively mark the book as a product of Paul's pen. Perhaps it only proves that the author had spent time with Paul, and under his instruction, and had thus imbibed some of the important categories of thought employed by the apostle. Such a list of men would include Luke, Timothy, Silas and, as our working hypothesis conjectures, Apollos. Be that as it may, it is significant that faith, hope, and love continue to govern the believer's walk and worship throughout his sojourn in this world.

*"...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water." (10:22)*

The first cohortative follows with impeccable logic from the previous announcement that the way into the Holy Place has been made abundantly open for all who are in Christ Jesus. The veil having been removed, and all restrictions

according to tribe or time also abolished, all that remains is for the members of the New Covenant to *"draw near."* The word itself is pregnant with Levitical worship connotations, as it is frequently used in the Septuagint for the ministrations of the priestly class in the tabernacle and Temple. The difference, however, is quantum. The Levitical priests – really only the family of Aaron – drew near at set times, not to the real presence of God but to a symbolic sanctuary, a manmade reflection of the true heavenly one. The New Covenant expands the invitation to 'draw near' to all members, not just one caste, and at all times since there is no longer a veil to hinder access. Most importantly, believers now draw near to the real thing, the throne of the eternal God, as adopted children through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. As with the other two cohortatives, this first is an agreeable command when one considers the immense privilege of 'drawing near.'

Instead of simply listing three first person plural commands, the author adds depth to each with expansive and descriptive clauses. To the first he adds, *"with a true heart in the full assurance of faith"* and *"having our hearts sprinkled...and our bodies washed."* The first clause depicts the attitude with which every believer now approaches God, an attitude that is founded upon a full understanding and acceptance of what Jesus Christ has accomplished on his behalf. "Only when the heart has been purged from the defilement of a smiting conscience can it be renewed in fullness of faith and sincerity toward God."<sup>49</sup> This condition of approach has been secured by the perfect atoning sacrifice offered by Christ and accepted by God. This does not represent a heart attitude that the believer is to somehow create within himself, but rather it reflects the truth of the new heart promised in the New Covenant. For this reason the 'true heart' and the 'assurance of faith' go together, for the sin that still indwells the believer's members often accuses the heart of being 'untrue.' Again we rest upon the faithfulness of God in His promises, and the New Covenant promise of a new

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<sup>49</sup> Lane, 286.

heart. The Father is seeking worshipers who will worship Him *“in spirit and truth,”* and He finds them by creating them in Christ.

To the heart attitude of approach the author adds the sacramental condition that renders approach possible: *having the heart sprinkled and the body washed.* Again, the writer is using Levitical, liturgical language here – sprinkling and washing were common preparatory rituals within the priestly service of the Old Covenant. Again, the writer takes these terms further than they ever could be taken under that covenant, from the type to the reality. The efficacy of the sacrificial blood of Christ, the *once-for-all* atoning sacrifice, is complete for the cleansing or sprinkling of the sinner’s heart, changing it from defiled to pure. This work answers to the prophetic word of Ezekiel 36, a ‘New Covenant’ passage similar to Jeremiah 31,

*Then I will sprinkle clean water on you, and you shall be clean; I will cleanse you from all your filthiness and from all your idols. I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; I will take the heart of stone out of your flesh and give you a heart of flesh. I will put My Spirit within you and cause you to walk in My statutes, and you will keep My judgments and do them.* (Ezekiel 36:25-27)

The second part of the second clause, *“having...our bodies washed...”*, is almost universally attributed to the rite of Christian baptism, a reference that makes sense within the context and within the time. The meaning of the sacrament/ordinance of baptism has been lost in many branches of modern evangelical Christianity. In many churches today, baptism is emphasized as a ‘public profession of faith,’ in spite of the fact that several of the most notable baptisms recorded in the Book of Acts were not public at all. What has been lost is the connection between the sign – baptism – and the thing signified – a new, pure, ‘circumcised’ heart. William Lane reminds us of the original and biblical significance of baptism, which *“refers to the outward sign of the inward purgation accomplished by the blood of Christ.”*<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Lane, 287.

Far from stipulating things that the believer must do in order to ‘draw near,’ this first cohortative is firmly founded upon what Jesus Christ has already done on behalf of His own. The newly created man (II Corinthians 5) in Christ is now has full right and privilege to enter into the presence of God. Until the consummation, however, this entrance must of necessity be ‘by faith.’ The physical eyes do not see the glorious majesty of the heavenly sanctuary, and the metaphysical eyes of the believer’s mind still see all too clearly the sin which still indwells his body.

*“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for He who promised is faithful.”* **(10:23)**

The present necessity of faith is graciously accompanied by biblical hope, for without hope our faith would undoubtedly fail. The phrase ‘confession of our hope’ may indicate a baptismal formula that was employed in the early church, whereby the baptized issued a common statement concerning his or her new life through faith in Jesus Christ. We know historically that such formulas did exist in the early church, as they continue to exist in many denominations today. Whether the author is referring to such a formula is debatable, but his use of the word ‘confession’ – a word that literally means ‘to say the same thing’ – would seem to indicate just such a reference. The content of any such formula that may have been on the author’s mind has, of course, been lost, but from other baptismal statements we know that the baptized was reminded of all that the washing of water signified. John Brown summarizes this ‘confession’ well:

It was a declaration that he considered himself as one with Christ – as having died with Him, been buried with Him, been raised with Him, – and of his expectation of a personal resurrection and ascension entirely on the ground of what He did and suffered.<sup>51</sup>

It would make sense for the author to allude to the believer’s earliest confession of faith in Jesus Christ – especially if it were one that possessed

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<sup>51</sup> Brown, 464.

serious content – as the basic foundation for the believer’s eternal hope. No matter how much one learns along the way, through study and instruction, the foundation facts of the Christian faith never change and never lose their seminal importance. The believer’s hope is not, and never should or can be, sustained by theological erudition. In this sense it is true that our hope is based not on what we know, but Who we know (or better still, Who it is that *knows* us). Theological knowledge grows, and sometimes changes – older beliefs are exchanged for those more in line with the teaching of Scripture. But the ‘confession’ of the true believer can never change, and therefore is to be ‘held fast without wavering.’ Lane comments that this adverb “connotes swerving neither to one side nor to the other.”<sup>52</sup> In other words, it means holding steady on course. The course is common to all believers, for it was set by the Forerunner of their faith, Jesus Christ.

The encouragement to persevering in hope must never be anything less than the faithfulness of God. Too often the believer’s steadfastness in hope runs in proportion to his or her own perception of progress in sanctification. While it is true that there ought to be progress, both the consistency of that progress and the believer’s own assessment of it render such a standard of hope very tenuous indeed. It is another feature of the Pauline literature that all assurance be founded solely upon the faithfulness of the One who promised. Consider just a few of the apostle’s statements of confidence in the eternal security of believers:

*I thank my God always concerning you for the grace of God which was given to you by Christ Jesus, that you were enriched in everything by Him in all utterance and all knowledge, even as the testimony of Christ was confirmed in you, so that you come short in no gift, eagerly waiting for the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, **who will also confirm you to the end**, that you may be blameless in the day of our Lord Jesus Christ. **God is faithful**, by whom you were called into the fellowship of His Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.*  
(I Corinthians 1:4-9)

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<sup>52</sup> Lane, 289.



*Now may the God of peace Himself sanctify you completely; and may your whole spirit, soul, and body be preserved blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful, who also will do it.* (I Thessalonians 5:23-24)

Throughout the epistle to the Hebrews, the author has painted a magnificent picture of the New Covenant in all its grandeur and majesty. The Great High Priest, Jesus Christ, seated at the right hand of the Father, interceding at all times for those for whom He shed His blood – the Priest-King of the order of Melchizedek – all of these things are set before the believer’s mind as accomplished facts through the earthly ministry of the Lord. In the midst of worldly trials and tribulations, such truths are indeed an anchor of the soul and a hope that is *“both sure and steadfast and which passes through the veil”* (6:19). The vision is unseen by the world in which we live, but is clear to the eyes of faith. *“To see Him as He is, in royal state, triumphant over every foe, and to enter on the riches of our own inheritance in Him, is still for us an object of hope, which as an anchor of our souls is fixed already in the sanctuary above.”*<sup>53</sup>

*“And let us consider one another in order to stir up love and good works,”* (10:24)

This third cohortative most clearly brings out the ‘plurality’ of the first person imperative that the author is using in this passage. Each of the first two could conceivably been individualized – to ‘draw near’ and to ‘hold fast’ are imperatives for every individual believer. But the third imperative drives home the truth that both of the former imperatives are actually impossible to the individual believer. *“The well-being of each believer is bound up with the well-being of the whole body.”*<sup>54</sup> The pendulum has swung from the medieval emphasis on one’s membership in the Church as the foundation of one’s security, to the modern era in which the personal aspect of faith has been emphasized in many instances to the exclusion of the corporate. The idea of someone ‘not needing a church’ would have been not only foreign, but blasphemous, a mere

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<sup>53</sup> Delitzsch, 180.

<sup>54</sup> Westcott, 324.

hundred years ago; today it is commonplace. The modern believer has lost his way.

The author exhorts his readers to do exactly what he has been attempting to do throughout the epistle – to *provoke* them to love and good works. He includes himself in each of the three cohortatives –let *us* – because he considers himself, rightly, as a part of their body. “The sacred writer is addressing all his readers as *brethren*, having in common equal rights of approach to the eternal sanctuary, and to a share in all the blessings of the household of Christ.”<sup>55</sup>

The verb used in this third cohortative is an intense form of the verb ‘to think.’ Literally the word means to ‘think upon, to consider deeply or closely.’ With this word the author enjoins upon all believers the careful consideration of every other believer in his or her sphere of contact and worship. “The exhortation is rather in opposition to that selfish indifference to the condition and interests of one’s neighbor which characterizes the man of this world.”<sup>56</sup> This admonition is another proof that the divine answer to Cain’s arrogant query, ‘Am I my brother’s keeper?’ is a resounding ‘Yes!’

The intensity of this consideration one for another is remarkable. The author uses a word that is almost universally used in a pejorative sense. Literally, he instructs believers to ‘provoke’ one another to love and good deeds. The Greek word *paroxysmos* is the root for the English ‘paroxysm,’ which is defined as a ‘sudden violent emotion or action.’ Calvin comments that the word usually denotes the ‘fierceness of strife.’<sup>57</sup> It is not a word that is often used to depict a positive relationship between people, but that is how the author utilizes the term in verse 24. Perhaps he uses the word ‘provoke’ because that is usually what one person does to another after even a short acquaintance. Rather than provoking one another in a bad way, we are exhorted to exert the same energy to

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<sup>55</sup> Delitzsch, 180-81.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>57</sup> Calvin, 143.

stimulate one another *to love and good works*, “the only provocation worthy of a Christian.”<sup>58</sup>

Westcott notes that this mutual provocation is mutually beneficial, “[The believer] is therefore constrained to give careful heed to others in the hope that he may rouse them to nobler action; and again that he may himself draw encouragement and inspiration from noble examples.”<sup>59</sup>

*...not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but exhorting one another, and so much the more as you see the Day approaching. (10:25)*

This verse has often been used in modern times to advocate what amounts to an ‘attendance grade’ for believers – anything less than the believer’s presence at each and every church function is a step down the road of total apostasy. Such a conclusion and application, however, derives a positive action from a negative prohibition and therefore rests on shaky logical ground. The author could very well have admonished the believers to attend every gathering. He chose rather to warn against a ‘habit’ that was already being displayed among them, of professing believers absenting themselves too frequently from the assembly of the saints. Westcott helps to establish the first century setting for this warning, “Nothing is more obvious in the history of the primitive Church than that the members of the several congregations were wont to meet together on every Lord’s Day, and no doubt also frequently during the week for public and social worship.”<sup>60</sup>

The fact that some were drawing back from the congregation, rather than drawing near to God with the congregation, fits well with the working hypothesis that the Hebrew believers’ profession of faith in Jesus Christ was earning for them persecution from their unbelieving fellow Jews. Perhaps those who were getting into this habit thought that they had found a middle way: not

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<sup>58</sup> Delitzsch, 181.

<sup>59</sup> Westcott, 324.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-84.

denying their newfound faith entirely, but also not making a too public display of associating with other Christians. This kind of private faith has been around since the beginning of the Church, and it is no less disturbing today than it was in the first century. Lane comments, “the writer regarded the desertion of the communal meetings as utterly serious. It threatened the corporate life of the congregation and almost certainly was a prelude to apostasy on the part of those who were separating themselves from the assembly.”<sup>61</sup>

The author is not issuing a blanket command for believers to attend every assembly of the congregation. He is, however, commanding them to avoid the habit of pulling back and forsaking the gathering of believers in order to avoid persecution, or to pursue private matters of business or pleasure. We must be careful not to read too much into this third cohortative, while also giving it the full weight of the imperative mood in which it is cast. A recognition on the part of every individual believer that his relationship to the congregation is one of mutual necessity and benefit, would go far toward striking the balance and avoiding the danger. “Every one...is bound in duty to the whole congregation to minister to its edification both by word and example. If [the believer] neglects this, he incurs a great responsibility.”<sup>62</sup>

The second clause of verse 25 - *as you see the Day approaching* - seems to indicate a belief on the part of the author that the end of the age was imminent, a view that is pervasive throughout the New Testament writings. The ‘Day’ referred to here is none other than the ‘Day of the Lord,’ the day of final judgment and the consummation of the ages. Obviously a complete analysis of the ‘Day’ and all that it implies is well beyond the scope of this study, but Delitzsch’s summary is helpful: “It is the day of days, the final, the decisive day

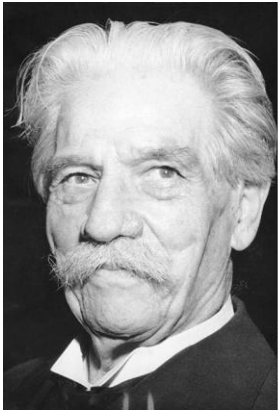
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<sup>61</sup> Lane, 290.

<sup>62</sup> Delitzsch, 183.

of time, the commencing day of eternity, breaking through and breaking up for the church of the redeemed the night of the present.”<sup>63</sup>

It has been a troublesome issue for many commentators, and some believers, to read the earnest expectation of writers like Paul, Peter, and the



**Albert Schweitzer**  
(1875-1965)

author of Hebrews for the soon arrival of the Day of the Lord. There is no doubt that these men seemed to expect the Lord’s coming within their own lifetimes. The problem arises in the fact that the Day did not come, a fact that seems to indicate fallibility on the part of the New Testament authors. How is it that they were mistaken, if inspired? And if mistaken, were they inspired? Liberal scholars like Albert Schweitzer

concluded that the apostles, and Jesus Himself, were clearly mistaken and just as clearly uninspired. But there is another reasonable conclusion that does not require complete abandonment of one’s view regarding the inspiration of Scripture.

First, it should be noted that the New Testament writers held a common view regarding the imminence of the Lord’s return; for the most part they did not envision any obstacles to the event. Paul’s discussion of the great apostasy and the ‘man of lawlessness’ are, indeed, an exception worthy of careful study; but even this expectation did not seem to mitigate the apostle’s own earnest expectation of the Day coming. The disciples were told in no uncertain terms that the exact date of the Second Coming was a matter of private divine knowledge, but that did not mean that they were to view the day as far off into the future. The *parousia* is a sudden, immediate thing; it will occur *like a thief in the night*, without warning. Hence the Second Coming is imminent at all times and in every age, though the intensity of this expectation has lessened as the years have passed.

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<sup>63</sup> *Idem.*

Second, and perhaps more cogent to this particular book and to the audience of Hebrew believers, is the body of prophetic material indicating a near-term cataclysm involving Jerusalem and the Temple. The Olivet Discourse contains numerous indications that the events foretold would not tarry, but would take place within the lifetime of those listening. The scale and magnitude of the destruction, and the fact that it would not correspond with the final, consummative Day, were items of knowledge withheld from the disciples and from the primitive Church. Nonetheless, something was coming, and the signs were increasingly pointing to that something coming very soon.

But at the time when this epistle was written the approaching judgment on Jerusalem, of which so many signs filled the sky, brought home the thought in a peculiarly vivid manner to men's minds. That judgment, indeed, though not the day itself, was truly it fiery and blood-red dawn.<sup>64</sup>

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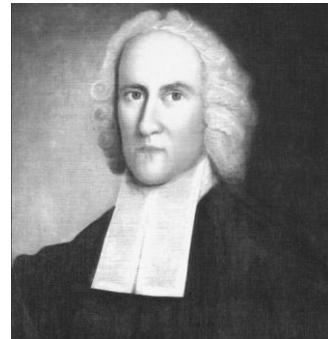
<sup>64</sup> Delitzsch, 183.

**Week 20: In the Hands of an Angry God****Text Reading: Hebrews 10:26 - 31**

*“Under all the cultivations of heaven,  
they brought forth bitter and poisonous fruit”*  
(Jonathan Edwards; *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*)

The revival later known as the Great Awakening had been spreading through England and Scotland and across the Atlantic through Britain’s colonies, since the early 1730s. But by 1741 it had yet to reach Enfield, Connecticut. On July 8<sup>th</sup> of that year, all was to change. Jonathan Edwards was well-known in

New England and among theologians in both the colonies and the mother country. But he was not what would be called in our day a ‘popular’ preacher. His sermons were intricate works of theological philosophy and tightly-woven logical syllogisms. In short, they could not have been easy to listen to. But on that summer day Edwards was a



**Jonathon Edwards (1703-58)**

guest preacher for the congregation in Enfield and by the end of the service the Great Awakening had awakened that Connecticut village. Although Edwards’ sermon text was from Deuteronomy 32, the title of his sermon was borrowed and modified from Hebrews 10:31, *Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God*.

Edwards’ sermon has become the most recognized and analyzed piece of pulpit oration in the history of American Christianity, if not in all of Christian history. Most Edwards scholars would agree that the sermon does not rank among the theologian’s most academic or philosophical works; but all must agree that it stands as his most influential and enduring sermons. Liberal Christian scholars and almost all unbelieving analysts point to *Sinners* as an example of the harsh, ‘fire and brimstone’ sermonizing of the Puritan era. There can be no doubt that the words Edwards preached that Sunday in July 1741

would not be a welcome sound in most churches on any Sunday in 2010. The very principle of a justly wrathful God suddenly removing His gracious life support from the persistent sinner, and that sinner immediately plunging into death and eternal hell, are hardly the stuff of popular preaching in the modern church. If all of Edwards' sermons were of this type, one might reasonably conclude that he had an unbalanced view of the nature of God vis-à-vis man; but they were not all of one color. It is the modern imbalance of 'God is Love' that has rendered the *Sinners* sermon so repugnant to modern professing Christianity. The content of the sermon is biblical, the theme appropriate, and the outcome historical – terror, and repentance and revival in Enfield.

The passage under consideration in this lesson is one of the more disturbing sections of Scripture, ranking with Hebrews 6:4-6 in terms of anxiety generated, even among believers. It is a passage of unadulterated judgment, unmitigated by mercy upon those who have "*received the knowledge of the truth*" but have rejected it and the One in whom it is incarnate. Of course that statement begs the question, assuming as it does that the ones of whom the author speaks in Chapter 10, verses 26-31 are unbelievers. And that is not a question the answer to which can simply be assumed. The Book of Hebrews, and this particular passage in it, are directed to professing believers. The crux of the matter comes in defining the term 'received' as in "*received the knowledge of the truth.*" Was this reception a regenerative work in the heart by the Holy Spirit? Or was it an intellectual or emotion assent in the mind of the sinner? If the former, then salvation is not secure in this life. If the latter, then it might seem as well that one may not know until the end that he or she has actually been saved.

There are no easy solutions to such passages, and Edwards' sermon almost 300 years ago is a reminder that their edge must not be dulled by platitudes about God's love and the false security of church attendance. Edwards chose a passage from Deuteronomy that especially suited what he perceived to be the situation in Enfield – a New England town that remained



essentially untouched by the seasons of outpouring of God's Spirit that had been going on for over a decade. Many who had experienced the revival, and pondered the breadth of its influence, considered that the end of the age must be on the horizon. For those whom the spirit of revival had touched, those persons and villages that remained untouched were an enigma and a deep concern. Church attendance in 18<sup>th</sup> Century New England was a familial and social duty, and in the first half of that century many of the preachers were still evangelical, and not a few were Reformed. The congregations were hearing the Gospel, including the one in Enfield, but until 1741 God's Spirit had seemed to pass that town by.

In Deuteronomy 32:35 the context is similar to the situation in Enfield. The chapter contains the Song of Moses which recounts the historical blessings of God upon the nation of Israel, and foretells that nation's apostasy from Jehovah. Those whose feet "*shall slip in due time*" were not unbelievers from among the Gentiles; rather they were the children of Israel who had received all of the 'means of grace' available at that time. According to the prophecy, Jeshurun (another name for Israel, probably an affectionate or diminutive name given to the patriarch and his people by Jehovah) *grew fat* or prosperous because of the divine blessings, and *kicked* or rebelled. Yet they did not perceive their rebellion, and considered themselves still to be in God's good graces. But when God withholds judgment it is merely because of His mercy, exercised for a time for reasons known only to Him. The sense of the verse in Deuteronomy 32 is that when the rebellious apostates considered their footing to be most secure, their foot would slip, hurling them into destruction and wrath.

For Israel the foot slipped when the Assyrians conquered the northern tribes and dispersed the people far and wide, and slipped again when Nebuchadnezzar's forces destroyed Jerusalem and its Temple. In each case the delay between sin and judgment was a matter of centuries, so it is easy to see how the people grew complacent. Edwards considered the people of Enfield to

be in a similar danger as the children of Israel. All around them God's Spirit was being poured out in manifest revival: hundreds of sinners saved, if not thousands; taverns and brothels closed, not by legislative act but by lack of patronage; father's hearts being turned to their children and vice versa - stories abound of how people's lives were changed in dramatic fashion and in numbers too large to ignore. But it seemed that the people of Enfield were indeed ignoring them.

Edwards' sermon is a window into the church of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and into the divine attribute of Justice as it will be finally exercised against unrepentant men. A few excerpts will serve to get a feel for the sermon's power; one can only imagine the power that must have accompanied it when first delivered. Edwards first reminds his audience that their consistent attendance at church would not be enough to save them in the day when their foot slipped; nor will their friends and social class be sufficient to deflect the wrath that is to come:

There is no fortress that is any defence from the power of God. Though hand join in hand, and vast multitudes of God's enemies combine and associate themselves, they are easily broken in pieces. They are as great heaps of light chaff before the whirlwind; or large quantities of dry stubble before devouring flames.

Later in the sermon he points out the greater blessings that had been bestowed upon the congregation at Enfield through the faithful preaching of God's Word for several generations. Rather than being changed by that preaching, the citizens of Enfield took it for granted that their situation was comfortable and safe. Edwards notes that no man in such a deluded state recognizes his own delusion:

The greater part of those who heretofore have lived under the same means of grace, and are now dead, are undoubtedly gone to hell; and it was not because they were not as wise as those who are now alive: it was not because they did not lay out matters as well for themselves to secure their own escape. If we could speak with them, and inquire of them, one by one, whether they expected, when alive, and when they used to hear about hell ever to be the subjects of that misery: we doubtless, should hear one and another reply, "No, I never intended

to come here: I had laid out matters otherwise in my mind; I thought I should contrive well for myself: I thought my scheme good. I intended to take effectual care; but it came upon me unexpected; I did not look for it at that time, and in that manner; it came as a thief: Death outwitted me: God's wrath was too quick for me. Oh, my cursed foolishness! I was flattering myself, and pleasing myself with vain dreams of what I would do hereafter; and when I was saying, Peace and safety, then suddenly destruction came upon me.

Perhaps the most powerful section of the sermon comes when Edwards chastises his audience for assuming that their day is yet far off, that they still had time to make amends before they died. In a famous section of a famous sermon, Edwards speaks of the burden of sinners upon the earth, which would open up and swallow the entirety of fallen humanity if not for divine grace:

Were it not for the sovereign pleasure of God, the earth would not bear you one moment; for you are a burden to it; the creation groans with you; the creature is made subject to the bondage of your corruption, not willingly; the sun does not willingly shine upon you to give you light to serve sin and Satan; the earth does not willingly yield her increase to satisfy your lusts; nor is it willingly a stage for your wickedness to be acted upon; the air does not willingly serve you for breath to maintain the flame of life in your vitals, while you spend your life in the service of God's enemies.

Your wickedness makes you as it were heavy as lead, and to tend downwards with great weight and pressure towards hell; and if God should let you go, you would immediately sink and swiftly descend and plunge into the bottomless gulf, and your healthy constitution, and your own care and prudence, and best contrivance, and all your righteousness, would have no more influence to uphold you and keep you out of hell, than a spider's web would have to stop a falling rock.

What was Edwards' intent and goal in preaching a sermon like this? It is hard to imagine a venue in the modern church where such a sermon would not meet with universal condemnation. What did Edwards' hope to achieve? Well, apart from the assistance of the Holy Spirit, nothing. But he did hope that by God's grace, and His gracious outpouring of the Spirit, the sermon would be a literal 'wake-up call' for a congregation that time and blessing was passing by:

The use of this awful subject may be for awakening unconverted persons in this congregation. This that you have heard is the case of every one of you that are

out of Christ.-That world of misery, that lake of burning brimstone, is extended abroad under you. There is the dreadful pit of the glowing flames of the wrath of God; there is hell's wide gaping mouth open; and you have nothing to stand upon, nor any thing to take hold of, there is nothing between you and hell but the air; it is only the power and mere pleasure of God that holds you up.

God granted Edwards' hope, and revival came to Enfield. The historical data is murkier with regard to the congregation of Hebrew believers in Rome during the first century – those who first received the 'wake-up call' of Hebrews. The author shows that there are times when the sternest, and even scariest, of language is called for – times when danger is so imminent that soft words would constitute reprehensible negligence on the part of the preacher. Although the comparison is anachronistic, the words of Hebrews 10:26-31 are very 'Edwardsian.'

### Hebrews

*...a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.*

*...who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*

*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

### Edwards

*...he that stands on such slippery declining ground, on the edge of a pit, he cannot stand alone, when he is let go he immediately falls and is lost.*

*...the floods of God's vengeance have been withheld; but your guilt in the mean time is constantly increasing, and you are every day treasuring up more wrath; the waters are constantly rising, and waxing more and more mighty; and there is nothing but the mere pleasure of God, that holds the waters back, that are unwilling to be stopped, and press hard to go forward*

Such language as this was directed at the covenant people of Israel in Moses' day, and to the professing believers of Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> Century, and to professing Christians in Enfield in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. In each case we are presented with the unsettling concept that eternal wrath can and will be meted out upon those whose outward situation in life would make others think that they were among the favored of God. "Many will say on that Day, 'Lord, Lord...'"

All who read such words are challenged to work out in their own minds and hearts the evident comfort that Scripture gives to those who believe, with the deep sincerity and pathos of the stern warnings, also and equally biblical.

*For if we sin willfully after we have received the knowledge of the truth, there no longer remains a sacrifice for sins,* (10:26)

This verse is reminiscent of the earlier statement, in Chapter 6, regarding the impossibility of repentance for one who has been 'once enlightened' and then falls away. John Brown writes, "To 'receive the knowledge of the truth,' seems just the same thing as the 'being enlightened' which is spoken of in the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter."<sup>65</sup> Here in Chapter 10, as there, the major hermeneutical problem is the identification of those of whom the author writes. The key phrase is *received the knowledge of the truth*. The list of options concerning who these people might be is the same as for the similar question in Chapter 6. One option, espoused by some commentators but not very convincing, is that the category is hypothetical. In other words, *if there was a person who received the knowledge of the truth and that person rejected it and sinned, then there could be no further sacrifice for sin*. This option is flawed on its very face, for the language of both Chapter 6 and Chapter 10 is hardly 'hypothetical.' It is ludicrous to think of a hypothetical person '*falling into the hands of the living God.*' It is also flawed in that it is a tautology – a statement of the obvious – if it is hypothetical. The author has just spent the better part of two and half chapters convincing his readers of the one, and only one, sacrifice for sin. It stands to reason that there would be no other for a hypothetical sinner who rejects the one.

Another option, more frequently chosen, is that the category of people referred to are those who have become believers – have been saved – but have fallen away and are thus rendered beyond the reach of salvation. Several problems attend this possible solution. First, it admits of ultimate failure for one

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<sup>65</sup> Brown, 467.

who, by becoming a member of the New Covenant, was ostensibly perfected by the blood of Jesus Christ, the High Priest (*cp.* Hebrews 10:14). Having been “*perfected forever,*” these believers allegedly apostatize completely and lose their salvation. The second problem is that those who hold to this interpretation do not put it consistently into practice. There should be no attempt to return a backslidden Christian to the faith, for there no longer exists a sacrifice for their apostasy. If Hebrews 6 and Hebrews 10 teach that a once-saved person can lose their salvation, they also and with equal firmness teach that they cannot recover it.

A third option for the interpretation of Hebrews 10:26 is that it refers to people who only appear to be believers – who make a profession of faith, attend regular worship services, and in most things conform to the life and practice of the believing community. Brown comments, “To ‘receive the knowledge of the truth,’ is not only to be furnished with the means of obtaining a knowledge of Christian truth, but actually to apprehend its meaning and evidence in some good measure, so as to make a credible profession of believing it.”<sup>66</sup> Ultimately, however, they deny the faith and return to their unbelief, manifesting the fact that they never were believers in the first place. This option is only slightly better than the second one mentioned above, in that it accepts the principle that true salvation cannot be lost. Yet it puts forth the horrible specter of men and women whom everyone around believe to be saved, ultimately proving not to be at all. This view strikes at the very heart of any degree of assurance for the Christian: the possibility of being self-deceived must remain a very unsettling principle throughout the believer’s life.

It would seem that the author defines the phrase ‘receive the knowledge of the truth’ later in the same verse. He says that for such people there “*no longer remains a sacrifice for sins.*” Who was it that had a sacrifice for sins before the coming of Jesus Christ? Only the Jews. The Levitical sacrificial system and the

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<sup>66</sup> Brown, 467

Aaronic priesthood was the only worship liturgy in the whole world that had God's sanction, since it was established by God Himself. The author has taken great pains to show these Hebrew believers that that entire liturgy was typical, and pointed only to the 'once for all' sacrifice of the perfect offering, Jesus Christ. What could be left for the Jewish religion if it rejected this knowledge when it finally came? Once again the author is alluding to the truth that the two covenants would not be allowed to coexist - that the New having come, the Old must pass away. Since it was a return to the Old Covenant that was tempting the Hebrew believers, the writer wants to make perfectly clear what sort of end that covenant - and the people who still adhered to it - could expect. Not only would the old Levitical system be of no avail to them, but even the sacrifice of Christ would no longer offer hope of salvation. Consider the sobering comments of Delitzsch on this passage:

He who knowingly and willfully rejects that sacrifice [i.e., the self-oblation of Christ], suppressing by an act of self-will his own better knowledge and convictions, in order to return to the dead works and lifeless service of Judaism, for him no other sacrifice for sin is kept in reserve. The meaning is not merely that the Jewish sacrifices to which the apostate is returned have in themselves no sin-destroying power, nor even that there is no second sacrifice additional to that of Christ, but further that for a sinner of this kind the very sacrifice of Christ itself has no more forgiveness...He not only shuts out himself from grace, but the door of repentance is shut behind him; and he has before him only the prospect of a damnation from which there is no escape.<sup>67</sup>

There is at least one potential difficulty to this forth option of interpretation: the author's use of the personal pronoun 'we' in verse 26, "*If we go on sinning willfully...*" It is possible, of course, to explain this usage by saying that the author is associating himself with his countrymen in much the same way that the apostle Paul sometimes did. While this is possible, it cannot be asserted with assurance. Perhaps the only explanation is a negative one - if the author meant to imply that he, along with the other readers of his epistle, could

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<sup>67</sup> Delitzsch, 185.

ultimately fall away and be irretrievably lost, then we are back to option 2, and the conclusion that the blood of the perfect sacrifice of Christ is not as efficacious as the author has previously indicated. That is not an acceptable conclusion. We must conclude, therefore, that the use of the first person plural pronoun is stylistic, and represents solidarity with the people for whom the author has such grave concern.

*...but a certain fearful expectation of judgment, and fiery indignation which will devour the adversaries.* (10:27)

In this verse the author assumes a stern demeanor that has for the most part been missing in the epistle. What is foretold here in verse 27 is serious; there is no way to minimize the danger facing those whom he describes in verse 26. A *fearful expectation* and *fiery indignation* are phrases that represent the unmitigated wrath of an offended God. The first, *fearful expectation* is viewed from the perspective of the apostate himself and describes his only reasonable thought concerning his future. Brown accurately points out that not all, or even many, apostates actually experience the emotional turmoil commensurate with this 'expectation;' most have consciences so seared by the apostasy itself as to be beyond the reach of fear. What the author is saying, however, is that "the apostate has nothing to expect but a fearful punishment."<sup>68</sup>

The second, *fiery indignation* views the matter from the perspective of God, whose offended holiness is further provoked by the willful rejection of the shed blood of His Son. Literally this last phrase is the 'fire of indignation' and is a personification of the righteous wrath of God. "As the divine Word, so this divine fire has a divine personality behind it."<sup>69</sup> This verse, and the strength of the terms used in it, must be allowed to stand with full force. Thus any interpretation of this entire section concerning the apostate must be founded on the realization that the sin considered here places the sinner forever and

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<sup>68</sup> Brown, 469.

<sup>69</sup> Delitzsch, 186.



completely beyond the reach of salvation. “Cut off from all hope of being saved, nothing remains for him but a certain fearful anticipation of coming judgment and a fervor of fire which will finally consume all the enemies of God.”<sup>70</sup> There is no room in this passage for ‘backslidden’ Christians who ‘rededicate’ their lives to Christ. The ones to whom this transgression applies are lost forever.

*Anyone who has rejected Moses’ law dies without mercy on the testimony of two or three witnesses. Of how much worse punishment, do you suppose, will he be thought worthy who has trampled the Son of God underfoot, counted the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified a common thing, and insulted the Spirit of grace?*

(10:28-29)

Verses 28 and 29 must be read together. The first is simply a reiteration of a Mosaic principle, recorded vividly in Deuteronomy 17,

*If there is found among you, within any of your gates which the LORD your God gives you, a man or a woman who has been wicked in the sight of the LORD your God, in transgressing His covenant, who has gone and served other gods and worshiped them, either the sun or moon or any of the host of heaven, which I have not commanded, and it is told you, and you hear of it, then you shall inquire diligently. And if it is indeed true and certain that such an abomination has been committed in Israel, then you shall bring out to your gates that man or woman who has committed that wicked thing, and shall stone to death that man or woman with stones. Whoever is deserving of death shall be put to death on the testimony of two or three witnesses; he shall not be put to death on the testimony of one witness. The hands of the witnesses shall be the first against him to put him to death, and afterward the hands of all the people. So you shall put away the evil from among you.* (Deuteronomy 17:2-7)

The sin under consideration in this passage is the same as is under discussion in Hebrews 10. The Israelite who abandoned the faith of his or her nation and pursued other gods was to die *on the testimony of two or three witnesses* and *without mercy*. No suspension of sentence, no time off for good behavior, no parole. Death. *So shall you put away the evil from among you.*

The author of Hebrews employs this well-known Mosaic law in another of his arguments ‘from the lesser to the greater.’ What is so poetic about this particular passage is the correlation between the ‘two or three witnesses’ of the

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<sup>70</sup> Milligan, 285.

Mosaic statute and the witnesses that the author claims have borne testimony to the veracity of the Gospel. There are three: *First*, there is the testimony of the Son of God himself, which the apostate 'tramples underfoot'; *second*, there is the testimony of the shed blood of the perfect Lamb, the ultimate sin-offering once-for-all given on the cross, which the apostate scorns and considers 'a common thing.' *Finally*, there is the witness of the Holy Spirit - the 'Spirit of grace' - by whose testimony and witness the power of the Gospel had already been manifested both among the Jews and among Gentiles since that first Christian Pentecost. This last witness the apostate 'insults,' essentially slapping the divine face with his rebellion.

Throughout this section it has become obvious that what the author is talking about may justly be considered the 'unpardonable sin.' It is a sin that places the sinner beyond the hope of pardon. In addition, it would not be unreasonable to call this sin the 'blasphemy of the Holy Spirit,' for not only is it a sin that will not be forgiven either in this life or the next, it is a sin that does insult to the Holy Spirit. Finally, it may also be that this ultimate sin of apostasy is the very same 'sin unto death' for which the apostle John advises his readers not to intercede.

*If anyone sees his brother sinning a sin which does not lead to death, he will ask, and He will give him life for those who commit sin not leading to death. There is sin leading to death. I do not say that he should pray about that. All unrighteousness is sin, and there is sin not leading to death.*  
(I John 5:16-17)

Within the first generation of the Church, this form of apostasy apparently possessed a common feature, described for us in Matthew 12:24, "*Now when the Pharisees heard it they said, 'This fellow does not cast out demons except by Beelzebub, the ruler of the demons.'*" The context of first-century Judaism required the apostate Hebrew Christian - the professing Christian who returns to Judaism - to denounce the entire system of salvation through the blood of Jesus Christ as having been wrought by the devil. "When a man in the primitive age

apostatized, he necessarily joined with the scribes and Pharisees in ascribing to diabolical agency what had been effected by the influence of the Holy Ghost."<sup>71</sup> Thus the same fate awaits the apostate as that which the Lord promises to those who 'blaspheme the Holy Spirit.'

*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 12:31-32)

***For we know Him who said, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord. And again, "The LORD will judge His people."*** (10:30)

This verse might seem out of place until one reads again the statute previously referred to from Deuteronomy 17. Verses 28 and 29 of Hebrews 10 deal with the summary judgment that befalls the apostate; verse 30 tells him whose hand will be the first against him. In the Mosaic legislation it was to be the hand of the witnesses who first cast the stones of execution against the apostate. It is the same here. The Church of Jesus Christ was never granted executionary powers, nor the right to assign those powers to the civil authority as was done during the Middle Ages. The Church *excommunicates*, the Lord *executes*.

The reason for this is not hard to find. Only God knows the heart, and no man is safe from false accusations and judgments leveled against him from other men. In the case of the Israelite who abandoned the faith of the nation, it was necessary that his apostasy be witnessed 'in the act.' Under the New Covenant, however, that act is one of the heart and therefore not capable of being truly and infallibly witnessed by other men. Outward deeds are sufficient grounds for excommunication, but only the inward condition of the heart can indict a man before God for the crime of apostasy. God witnesses the falling away; God casts the first - and fatal - stone.

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<sup>71</sup> Brown, 475.

*It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.* (10:31)

“The scriptural description of the final punishment of the enemies of God is enough to make the ears of every one that heareth it to tingle.”<sup>72</sup> The Lord’s hands are safe for believers, even those whom the Lord intends to discipline. David knew this, and when offered several alternatives as punishment for his crime of taking the census, he chose the option that placed both him and his people in the hands of God. *“And David said to Gad, ‘I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man.’”* (II Sam. 24:14). But David was not an apostate; rather he was an example of a child of God coming in repentance under the disciplinary hand of his heavenly Father. Of that situation the author of Hebrews has much to say, later, in Chapter 12.

The apostate cannot rest in the mercy of the Lord as David did. Milligan vividly sets forth the difference:

For it is not for the purpose of being corrected during the short space of three days, or even three centuries, that the apostate falls into the hands of Jehovah; but it is that he may be punished with an everlasting destruction from the presence of the Lord, and from the glory of his power.<sup>73</sup>

It is beyond the scope of this study to thoroughly discuss the doctrine of eternal punishment. It is sufficient to say that many otherwise orthodox theologians who have attempted to contemplate the matter in its full, scriptural portrayal have ended up denying the doctrine altogether in favor of an ultimate ‘nihilism of the soul.’ Even the most cursory consideration of what ‘eternal punishment’ must mean, should lead every professing believer to *“make his calling and election sure.”* The alternative is too awful to imagine.

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<sup>72</sup> Brown, 477.

<sup>73</sup> Milligan, 288.

**Week 21                    Theatre of Shame****Text Reading:            Hebrews 10:32 - 34**

*“The man ;who is fully persuaded  
that he has in heaven this substance  
will not grieve very much at the loss of worldly substance.”  
(John Brown)*

It is often the case that the most difficult time a believer experiences is that period just after his or her conversion. In spite of some evangelistic techniques that promise the blessings of God raining down upon the new believer, the reality is frequently not only very different, but very discouraging. The phenomenon is not so unusual when one considers the fact that, prior to conversion, the person's associations were probably mostly unbelievers. Unbelieving friends, unbelieving spouse, unbelieving children and extended family, unbelieving co-workers. These associations are not miraculously changed, or converted, when a sinner becomes a saint. In other words, the new-born believer finds himself in the midst of the unbelief he once shared, and consequently also finds ridicule, persecution, and rejection. Later, when new and believing associations are made, the tension lessens and overt persecution diminishes. At least that is the common pattern in a society such as found in many Western nations; circumstances are vastly different and far more dangerous in Islamic or Communist societies.

It is also common that the newly regenerated man or woman reacts with an exuberance that is rarely tempered with wisdom, and just as rarely appreciated by the person's unbelieving friends and family. The young believer's desire to see his or her loved ones come to the same knowledge of the truth generates a boldness that further intensifies the opposition. This is especially true of those who have come to the Lord in later years - young adult or older - and from an unbelieving environment. For such as these, the 'former days' are often filled with 'a great struggle with sufferings.' As time goes by the

youthful exuberance fades; the believer suffers less, but often also exposes himself to less opportunity for suffering. We usually call this the wisdom that comes with maturity; it may be the timidity that comes with rejection.

The first Christians experienced far worse treatment at the hands of their contemporaries than any modern American believer has ever suffered. The author of Hebrews not only reminds his audience of those bitter 'former days,' but admonishes them to let those days live on vividly in their minds. Reading the author's comments beginning in 10:32 and running on through Chapter 12, one cannot help but wonder whether the believer's best days were those former days of great suffering, even if it was not as severe as what these saints went through. Their litany of rejection, persecution, exile and death is a significant auxiliary theme that runs through the New Testament history. The bloodlust of the Jewish crowd at the time of Stephen's martyrdom was not satiated until the Church in Judea was scattered far and wide.

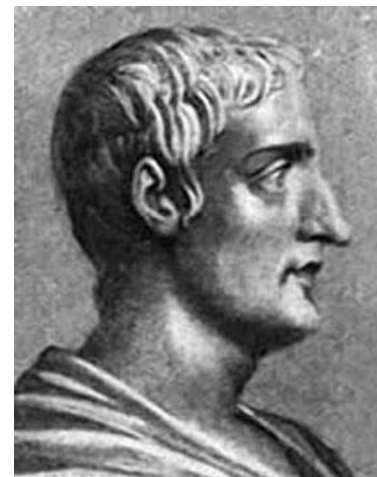
*At that time a great persecution arose against the church which was at Jerusalem; and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles. And devout men carried Stephen to his burial, and made great lamentation over him. As for Saul, he made havoc of the church, entering every house, and dragging off men and women, committing them to prison.* (Acts 8:1-3)

Saul's vicious pursuit of Christians brought him face to face with Christ; and his own conversion brought down upon him the wrath and persecution of those for whom he once persecuted believers. Saul, now Paul, was saved in Damascus, and barely got out of that city alive. Later the apostle Paul would recount the many 'great sufferings' he endured in his service for Jesus Christ, and the Church he once tried to destroy. Many commentators believe that these biblically recorded periods of suffering - including the martyrdom of James and the imprisonments of Peter and John - are the 'former days of great suffering' to which the author of Hebrews alludes in verse 32. However, he refers to a particular form of abuse that was not common among the Jews, but was an age-old practice among the Greeks and Romans, spreading in usage from Rome to

Alexandria. The 'gazingstock' treatment; literally, the 'theatre of shame' upon which stage the early Christians were subjected in great numbers.

The concept is not all that foreign to modern Western readers, for the 'stocks' were a punishment of frequent use in the not-so-distant past. Modern Americans can picture the malefactor in colonial New England spending days and cold nights bound hand and foot in the stocks, exposed both to the weather and to the scorn and ridicule of his neighbors. The new republic of the United States considered such forms of punishment by exposure and public humiliation to be 'cruel and unusual punishment,' and the practice was abolished throughout the country. Yet the principle itself did not die, and men and women now living can remember the 'dunce stool' from their elementary school days, and the 'dunce cap' that usually went along with it. Troublesome children, or at least those who the teacher considered troublesome, were made to sit for long stretches in the stool, wearing the cap, subjected to the jeers and laughter of their classmates. The person who coined the ditty, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words shall never hurt me,' never had to endure the dunce stool or the stocks.

Such public humiliation and scorn was a common mode of punishment in the ancient Greco-Roman world, though it was usually only the preliminary phase in a much more brutal process than that which prevailed in colonial America or 20<sup>th</sup> Century elementary education. After being exposed for days to the weather and the taunts of enemies, the 'criminal' was led off either to the cross or to the coliseum for the grand finale of his punishment. All was very public, however, so that the person's dignity was stripped away before his or her life was taken. That was the



**Tacitus (56-117)**

main point. The Roman historian Tacitus describes how 'mockery' was an integral part of the public persecution and execution of Christians in the days of the Emperor Nero:

Mockery of every sort was added to their deaths. Covered with the skins of beasts, they were torn by dogs and perished, or were nailed to crosses, or were doomed to the flames and burnt, to serve as a nightly illumination, when daylight had expired.<sup>74</sup>

Such a travesty of human dignity was foreign to the penal code of Israel, at least insofar as that nation followed the legal provision of the Mosaic Law. Executions were to be done speedily, outside the city gates. The executions were public, but in many cases the public was required to participate in the execution: those who testified against the criminal were to be the first to cast the executing stones. It was not 'theatre,' but a sobering reminder of the insidious nature of sin within the community and a stern warning against imitation. The body of the executed malefactor was immediately buried (often under the very stones used to execute him) and, if hung on a tree, was to be taken down before sunset. Thus it would seem that the form of persecution recounted in Hebrews 10 does not fit the historical situation of those early Christians who suffered at the hands of the Jews, Stephen again being the classic example. As the passage quoted above notes, in the midst of a general persecution against other Christians, Stephen's body was buried, unhindered.

The robbing of the possessions of the one who suffered such treatment as described here, was also a common feature of social behavior in the Greco-Roman world. Indeed, there are many instances when accusations were leveled against a man with the express intention of plundering his wealth when he had been removed from his home. The first century Jewish philosopher Philo speaks of the fate of his fellow Jews in Alexandria when the Roman citizens of that city launched one of their chronic episodes of anti-Semitic persecution. "Their

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<sup>74</sup> Tacitus, *Annals of Rome*; Book XV.



enemies overran the houses now left vacant and began to loot them, dividing up the contents like spoils of war.”<sup>75</sup> The Jews, believing and unbelieving alike, who were forced to leave their homes in Rome due to the Edict of Claudius (AD 49) were unlikely to find them unmolested or unoccupied when they returned after Nero lifted their banishment. Yet, if our hypothesis regarding the original recipients of the letter to the Hebrews is correct, the believers among the returning Jewish exiles accepted their loss with great equanimity and even joy.

Therefore, whether the ‘former sufferings’ were extreme like those suffered by the Hebrew believers in Rome, or discouraging like the rejection and ridicule many young believers receive from their unbelieving friends and family, the fact that these sufferings were endured is to be remembered long after the experience itself has passed. Yet it is not so much the sufferings that are remembered, but the willingness to endure those sufferings, and more importantly, the *reason* for that willingness to suffer loss for the sake of Christ. To be in Christ was once something the believer counted of greater worth than reputation, property, or even life itself, the author reminds his readers. Christ has not changed; therefore to be associated with His name is still that pearl of great price, worth as much now as it was in the ‘former days.’

*But recall the former days in which, after you were illuminated, you endured a great struggle with sufferings:* (10:32)

It is significant to note that the same word is used here in verse 32 as we found in Chapter 6, verse 4 where the author spoke of those who were “*once enlightened.*” The ‘illuminated’ of the New King James Version is the same Greek word translated ‘enlightened’ in 6:4. As the author uses the term here with regard to those whom he considers to be in the faith, it is evident that he views ‘enlightenment’ as somewhat synonymous with ‘converted.’ Lane interprets it as “the saving illumination of the heart and mind mediated through the preaching

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<sup>75</sup> Quoted by Lane, 300.

of the gospel."<sup>76</sup> At the very least this indicates that those who have been regenerated have been enlightened, though all who are enlightened are not necessarily regenerate.

The Parable of the Sower comes to mind here. The second and the fourth types of soil, the stony and the good, represent two groups of 'enlightened' people. Those of the stony ground are the ones who "*hear the word and immediately receive it with joy.*" (Matthew 13:20). But tribulation and persecution cause them to fall away and deny the faith, for they have no true root in Christ, no 'anchor within the veil.' But those to whom the author of Hebrews writes are, he presumes, of the fourth plot of good soil. They *endured* persecution and tribulation and came through it with their faith intact. This in itself was a strong indication of the veracity of their profession and the reality of their conversion. Therefore the days of those earlier trials are worth remembering, for they give indication of a true faith dwelling within the hearts of those who suffered and persevered.

The suffering of those days was intense, as the word the author uses to describe them - 'great struggle' (Greek  $\alpha\gamma\omicron\upsilon\lambda\omicron\sigma$ ) - "was originally used of the intense efforts of athletes in the sports arena."<sup>77</sup> We derive the English word 'athletics' from the Greek word used in this verse. But the struggle of persecution was no 'game,' for the ancient athletic events of the Greco-Roman world often ended, for the loser, in death.

*... partly while you were made a spectacle both by reproaches and tribulations, and partly while you became companions of those who were so treated;* (10:33)

Guilt, and guilt by association. These were the two forms of persecution that the Hebrew believers suffered in the former days. Either they were singled out on account of their profession of faith, or they refused to be left out of that number and freely associated with their brethren who were being persecuted.

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<sup>76</sup> Lane, 298.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*

They were either in prison, or visited those who were imprisoned; either way they bore a faithful testimony to their faith in Jesus Christ.

The word used in verse 33 to describe the form of suffering endured, is *theatrizomenoi* (θεατριζόμενοι), from which we get the English word *theatre*. It is a rare word in the Greek, and is used only here in the New Testament. The connection between the word and the modern word 'theatre' is the stage and the publicity, although the former was entirely negative while the latter is entertainment. "The verb...originally meant 'to bring upon the stage,' but it soon acquired a figurative meaning, 'to make a spectacle of someone.'"<sup>78</sup> Delitzsch adds, "Its proper signification is to be exposed in the theatre for shameful punishment, or to be made a spectacle of shame to the world, having to endure both scornful taunts and active persecution."<sup>79</sup>

The 'stage' for much of Roman history was the coliseum, where Christians were brought to be publicly displayed, taunted, scorned, abused, tortured, and killed. The crimes of which the early Christians were accused are incredible considering the nature of true faith. They were accused of atheism, of incest, of drunkenness, of promiscuity, and of the sacrifice of children. Christians before the time of Constantine were rarely allowed the benefit of legal counsel or defense, and their only possible means of escaping the 'theatre of shame' was to recant their profession. The Latin Christian Tertullian mocks the fallacious judicial process whereby a murderer is not believed when he denies his crime, whereas a Christian is acquitted if he denies his.

"I am a Christian," the man cries out. He tells you what he is; you wish to hear from him what he is not. Occupying your place of authority to extort the truth, you do your utmost to get lies from us. "I am," he says, "that which you ask me if I am. Why do you torture me to sin? I confess, and you put me to the rack. What would you do if I denied? Certainly you give no ready credence to others when they deny. When we deny, you believe at once."<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Lane, 299.

<sup>79</sup> Delitzsch, 192.

<sup>80</sup> Tertullian, *Apologia*; Chapter 2

The well-known communal term, *koinonia*, appears in verse 33, describing the manner in which the Hebrew believers who were not personally subjected to the ‘theatrical abuse’ allied themselves with those who were. The word itself is full of meaning and is translated in the New Testament by many English words. The essence of its meaning, however, is ‘to partake, to share intimately’ in any thing, event, or feeling. Vine’s Dictionary interprets the word as “the share which one has in anything, a participation, fellowship recognized and enjoyed; thus it is used of the common experiences and interests of Christian men.” The Hebrew believers who thus ‘communed’ with their persecuted brethren may not have suffered the same public humiliation, but they exposed themselves to it without fear. “The writer thus stresses that the conduct of the community exhibited a solidarity with each other that made visible in the world the solidarity Christ shares with his people.”<sup>81</sup>

*For you showed sympathy to the prisoners and accepted joyfully the seizure of your property, knowing that you have for yourselves a better possession and a lasting one.*  
(10:34; NASV)

Verse 34 presents one of the textual variants sometimes found in our English translations of the Scriptures. Some versions, such as the New King James version which has been the basic English text for this study, speak of the Hebrew believers as having compassion *on the author* when he was in prison. While this is, of course, historically possible, the weight of internal and external textual evidence seems to support the translation quoted above.

**New King James**

*for you had compassion on me in my chains*

**New American Standard**

*For you showed sympathy to the prisoners*

Thus far the discussion has been solely about the congregation in its early days, when it suffered greatly for the faith and when all were united in

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<sup>81</sup> Lane, 300.

sympathy and support in the midst of persecution. The author does not mention himself at all, until verse 34 if the textual variant used as the basis of the New King James translation is correct. But even here the insertion of the author's own imprisonment is somewhat incongruous, as he has just commended the Hebrew believers for their 'communion' with their brethren who suffered - with no mention of himself in verse 33. Since there are good arguments on both sides of the translation variant, perhaps the best thing that can be noted about the disagreement is that it, like all such variants, has no bearing on doctrine, practice, or even the meaning of the author's overall message.

It is therefore a satisfaction to know that the difference of these readings does not materially affect the sense of the passage; the obvious purpose of the writer being in either case to praise and encourage the Hebrews on account of their former sympathy for those who were in bonds and afflictions.<sup>82</sup>

Whatever their experience while in the locality of this persecution, the result was banishment and the subsequent seizure of their property and possessions by their neighbors and enemies. This would seem to indicate that there was not, in this period of great struggle, a significant number of believers who were actually put to death. No mention is made, in this passage at least, of martyrdom - scorn and ridicule, public humiliation, imprisonment and material loss; but not death. This is not, of course, to minimize in any way the intensity of the suffering. It is only to note that, if the actual execution of believers was not a major feature in this particular struggle, then it would match up rather well historically with the events and circumstances surrounding the Claudian Edict of AD 49. Furthermore, the absence of any specific mention of martyrdom would seem to preclude such events as the persecutions that followed the death of Stephen or of James.

The same solidarity and focus that enabled the Hebrew believers to stand firm in the face of ridicule and scorn, enabled them to accept the loss of their

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<sup>82</sup> Milligan, 290.

businesses, homes, and possessions as a result of their banishment from Rome. We are reminded of Aquila and Priscilla and their exile from Rome. Having been a tradesman and merchant (tentmaker) in Rome, undoubtedly Aquila suffered a great deal of loss when he and his wife were forced to flee the city. Such imperial edicts did not allow the victims time to secure their belongings, much less to take them along. Those who returned after Nero rescinded the edict were, in effect, starting over. At the time of their loss and banishment, they counted it great joy to be considered worthy to suffer for the name of Christ. But on return they were tempted to bitterness, and to forgetfulness concerning that vision which enabled them to hold their worldly goods so lightly.

In the early days they saw with clarity that they possessed a 'better' and an 'enduring' possession. The words 'in heaven' may not be original, but the thought that would have led a later copiest to add them is manifestly biblical. These Hebrew believers, in their early days, were "*storing up treasure in heaven*" and, though they may have possessed treasures here on earth as well, the latter bore no resemblance to the former and were easily parted with when necessary. "The adjective 'better' (טוב) is regularly used in Hebrews to express the superior quality of the reality Christians possess through Christ."<sup>83</sup>

The term 'better' still describes what every Christian possesses, in any and every age and in the midst of any and every trial. This will be the theme of the author in Chapter 11, reminding all believers that there is a "*great cloud of witnesses*" of departed saints who considered their heavenly treasure of far greater worth than anything this world could offer, or take away. "When they have deprived you of every earthly good, you know that you have for your own a better and inalienable possession."<sup>84</sup> Brown adds,

Worldly wealth scarcely deserves the name of *substance*; it is, like all things worldly, unsubstantial; and it is, like all things worldly, fading and shortlived.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>83</sup> Lane, 300.

<sup>84</sup> Delitzsch, 196.

<sup>85</sup> Brown, 482.

The author has traversed an emotional roller coaster in the past eight verses of Chapter 10. From the solemn and sobering warning of what the apostate can expect (verses 26-31) he rises to the incorruptible glory awaiting the saint who perseveres through trial. The common phenomenon of Scriptural warning coupled with Scriptural comfort is found equally amidst the New Testament writers as it is in the Old Testament prophets. This method is not manipulative, for the Lord who is its author is also the One who has sent His Spirit into the hearts of His children, bearing witness within them that they are His. The danger of apostasy is always very real, but need not terrify the one who has made his 'calling and election sure.' One way to do this is to recall to mind the struggles of the past, remembering why such struggles were endured (and by Whose grace they were endured), and realizing that the cause is still as great, the Name as worthy, of perseverance today as in the former days. "He has led them to the brink of a terrible precipice of negligence or apostasy, down which they seemed in peril of falling, and now he leads them back from it to the contemplation of their own steadfast and favoured past."<sup>86</sup>

The inner conviction that, by God's grace, the believer would stand firm in the face of ridicule, rejection, and persecution – now as then – is a self-testimony to the veracity of his profession of faith in the Lord Jesus Christ. It is not presumption, for he realizes that he stands in grace and by grace. But it is a firm persuasion that he has indeed laid hold of that for which Christ laid hold of him. "The man who is fully persuaded that he has in heaven this substance will not grieve very much at the loss of worldly substance in any circumstances; but when the giving up of the latter is required in order to the obtaining of the former, he will show that he counts it but as the dust in the balance."<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> Delitzsch, 196.

<sup>87</sup> Brown, 482.

**Week 22                    No Retreat, No Surrender****Text Reading:            Hebrews 10:35 - 39**

*“Steadfastness is an essential condition  
of obtaining the fulfillment of the divine promise.”  
(Franz Delitzsch)*

It has often been said that the Christian life is not a sprint, but a marathon. The best writers in all ages have emphasized the steady faithfulness and the long haul that characterizes the life of the believer from spiritual rebirth to physical death. Only those, like the thief on the cross, who enter into Christ shortly before death are spared this almost universal aspect of day-by-day perseverance. One author, writing in regard to the Lord’s Day, speaks of the Sabbath as the seventh day drum beat that marks the cadence of the Christian’s life-march. Nice thought.

But not everyone makes it to the end, and that fact has been a deep concern for Christian leaders and laymen for centuries. So long as the Church recognizes that salvation does not hinge upon a person’s being born into a particular nation, or being a member of a particular denomination, it consequently recognizes that some who have seemingly made a good start fail to finish. Many theological innovations have been developed in attempts to overcome this phenomenon by reasoning it away. Baptismal regeneration, for instance, takes the matter out of the rational control of the individual and ‘saves’ him while yet an infant. Covenant paedobaptism does not go as far, but still gives the infant child a head start, as it were, toward heaven. The doctrines of ‘carnal Christianity’ and the ‘backslider’ were both developed in response to the evident ‘falling away’ of many who had once made credible professions of faith. And the ubiquitous flowery crosses that line our highways and back roads testify to the more recent development in soteriology – salvation by car accident.



The problem of runners failing to cross the finish line is both real and disturbing, and cannot be glossed over with theological and ecclesiological innovations. The author of Hebrews was quite concerned about the problem, and undoubtedly worried that many to whom he was writing had already fallen away. Nonetheless, he makes no attempt to minimize the serious situation these folk were in by appealing to their earlier 'walk down the aisle,' or their signature on a decision card, or to their baptism, or to any other outward evidence of their one-time profession of faith in Jesus Christ. The danger posed by apostasy is terrifying and irremediable, as the writer of Hebrews vividly describes in Chapters 6 and 10. Troubled though he was about the prospect of professing believers falling beyond the grasp of grace, the author calmly and matter-of-factly establishes two fundamental categories of people within the community of faith - 'those who draw back,' and 'those who believe.'

These two categories cannot be based on voluntary membership, for they both constitute the *final* condition of a person in this life. They look at the life of an individual as if standing at the very end and surveying all that has passed before. Furthermore, the verbal voice used by the author of Hebrews is passive: *we are of* and *we are not of* one of the two groups. It is determinate language, the language of divine election. Thus in the face of the disturbing reality of apostasy, there is the coordinate reality of perseverance. There are those who 'draw back,' and there are those who believe to the end. It is debatable whether one can know of his or her membership in the first group, but the author of Hebrews is quite confident that he, at least, belongs to the second. In fact, it is this very confidence that he earnestly exhorts his readers 'not to cast away' at the beginning of this closing section of Hebrews Chapter 10.

Theologically, the doctrine to which these verses point is called the Perseverance of the Saints; the 'P' in the Calvinistic TULIP. The Reformed doctrine of Perseverance has little to do with the 'once saved always saved' of modern Arminianism. In fact, perseverance is not something logically

compatible with consistent Arminianism. Perseverance as a doctrine 'guarantees' the final salvation of one who is born again in Jesus Christ. If human free will is, as Arminianism teaches, of the very essence of being human, than any ironclad statement concerning the final success or failure of anyone's faith is impossible. This is one of the most important, and most condemning, characteristics of Arminian teaching: *any* statement of the future condition of a human being is logically inconsistent with the free-will premise upon which Arminianism is built. If any comment can be infallibly made with regard to a man's future state, his free-will is thereby abrogated - it *will* be as it has infallibly been foretold.

Perseverance, however, fits hand-in-glove with Reformed soteriology. This is true not because of any inner strength of man that enables him to persevere, or even due to the strength of the *new* nature of the one who has been born again. Perseverance is true simply because salvation is first and finally of the Lord, and not of man. Indeed, perseverance is only the outward manifestation of that which really guarantees the ultimate salvation of the regenerate man: *Preservation*. The saint *perseveres* through the course of this life only because the saint is *preserved* by God. The men who gathered at Westminster in the middle of the 17<sup>th</sup> century recognized this fact:

This perseverance of the saints depends, not upon their own free-will, but upon the immutability of the decree of election, flowing from the free and unchangeable love of God the Father; upon the efficacy of the merit and intercession of Jesus Christ; the abiding of the Spirit and of the seed of God within them; and the nature of the covenant of grace; from all which ariseth also the certainty and infallibility thereof.<sup>88</sup>

Opponents of the doctrine of Election, upon which Perseverance is firmly based, often raise the strawman of sinners being dragged 'kicking and screaming' to heaven - *against their will*. As a corollary of this picture, they also

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<sup>88</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith*; Chapter XVII; Paragraph II.

paint the miserable portrait of a man languishing for eternity in hell even though he desired to go to heaven – he just (unfortunately) was not one of the elect. These two common forms of argumentation are despicable travesties of biblical anthropology. To entertain the concept of any sinner ‘desiring’ to go to heaven is clearly contrary to Paul’s description of fallen man in Romans 3.

*As it is written:*

*“There is none righteous, no, not one;*

*There is none who understands;*

*There is none who seeks after God.*

*They have all turned aside;*

*They have together become unprofitable;*

*There is none who does good, no, not one.*

*Their throat is an open tomb;*

*With their tongues they have practiced deceit;*

*The poison of asps is under their lips;*

*Whose mouth is full of cursing and bitterness.*

*Their feet are swift to shed blood;*

*Destruction and misery are in their ways;*

*And the way of peace they have not known.*

*There is no fear of God before their eyes.”*

(Romans 3:10-18)

Beyond that, to think of any man ultimately being in heaven ‘against his will’ betrays a thorough lack of understanding and/or appreciation for the new birth, whereby a sinner is given a willing heart according to Psalm 110:3.

*Thy people shall be willing in the day of thy power, in the beauties of holiness from the womb of the morning: thou hast the dew of thy youth.*

(Psalm 110:3, KJV)

Perhaps the Arminian might remember that Saul of Tarsus was doing all of his kicking (against the goads) before his encounter with Jesus Christ and his consequent salvation. Afterward, the apostle Paul ‘fought the good fight’ and ‘finished the race.’ Paul was not of those ‘who draw back,’ but was of those ‘who believe to the saving of the soul.’ Jesus knew that Judas Iscariot was of the first group; God knows infallibly those that are His.

*Nevertheless the solid foundation of God stands, having this seal: “The Lord knows those who are His,”*

(II Timothy 2:19)

Most believers are able to understand the fact that an omniscient God must know those who are His. The question arises as to how the individual believer can know, *confidently* know, that he or she belongs to God. That this degree of confidence is attainable is at least indicated by the author's bold statement in Hebrews 10:39, *But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.* With regard to his readers, the author begins this affirmation of perseverance from a negative perspective: one way to know that we are not of those who 'draw back' is by never giving up.

*Therefore do not cast away your confidence, which has great reward.* (10:35)

The terminology used in this verse is frequently used in ancient Greek literature with regard to soldiers who shed their armor and weapons as they flee from battle. Milligan comments, "There seems to be an allusion here to the conduct of weak and cowardly soldiers who in the day of battle were wont to throw aside their shields and turn their backs on the enemy."<sup>89</sup> That which apostate believers 'cast away' is the same boldness that the author mentions in verse 19, the boldness that believers have to "*enter the Holiest by the blood of Jesus.*" The Greek word used is the same in verse 35 as in verse 19, though both the King James and New King James versions render it differently in the two verses. Interesting, the American Standard version renders the word 'boldness' in both verses, while the New American Standard opted for 'confidence' in both.

The price paid for casting away one's confidence or boldness is the loss of reward. This concept has been erroneously developed within the modern American church in a manner that separates salvation from eternal rewards - the first being based solely upon a profession of faith, the second upon a life of sanctification. This is the 'Lordship Debate' wherein it is taught that a sinner may accept Jesus as 'Savior' (and hence be eternally and irrevocably saved) and additionally as 'Lord' (and hence receive eternal rewards in return for his

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<sup>89</sup> Milligan, 291.

obedience). Whether this doctrine may be supported from other passages in the New Testament may be debated; but it is certain that it cannot be from Hebrews Chapter 10. The parallelism developed by the author makes it clear that the 'great reward' that awaits perseverance is the same 'salvation of the soul' that comes to those who persevere. The biblical concept of rewards is quite different than the modern view by which the believer earns heavenly accolades through earthly behavior. Jesus clearly teaches that even the servant who has done all that his master requires is still but a 'poor, unworthy servant,' having merely done that which is required of him. Man, as the creation of God, cannot 'earn' rewards. Yet God, as an infinitely gracious Sovereign, freely grants 'exceedingly, abundantly more than we could ask or think.' The Parable of the Talents is an illustration of this principle. The money left to each servant was the property of the master, as was any and all earnings. The responsibility of the servants was to see to their master's business by bringing him a return on his principal; therefore the third servant was justly condemned for his fear and sloth. The other two servants, however, were permitted to keep both the principal and the interest earned - a gracious reward for merely being what they were, faithful servants.

Thus the author of Hebrews places reward in the same sentence with perseverance, without entertaining the thought that there is something 'extra' for 'spiritual' Christians. The ultimate reward is salvation itself, and the believer's confidence of obtaining that reward is manifested in this life through steadfastness.

*For you have need of endurance, so that after you have done the will of God, you may receive the promise:* (10:36)

'Endurance,' the Greek word *hupomenā* (◆🏠□□○□■🌀👉), literally means 'to abide under.' It is sometimes translated 'patience,' sometimes 'steadfastness,' and sometimes 'endurance.' These three English words together comprise the characteristics of the one Greek word, for it is a long-term

(steadfast) and cheerful (patient) bearing up (endurance) under trials. The biblical view of trials is that they are not arbitrary, nor are they without a purpose divinely orchestrated. Westcott writes, "The trials to which you are subjected belong to the perfect discipline of the faith which you hold. You have need of patience therefore that you may obtain what you expect."<sup>90</sup>

What the believer expects is the fulfillment of the 'promise' of God of salvation through Jesus Christ. The promise itself cannot be strengthened or made more sure by the endurance of the believer, for God's veracity is not subject to change but remains eternally true regardless of man's behavior. Yet this same eternal veracity of the divine promise serves as motivation to the believer to 'bear up under' the trials that God has ordained for the development and perfection of faith. The faith which rests upon the divine promise, and the hope which confidently looks forward to its fulfillment, are the sword and shield that the believer must not 'cast away.' Delitzsch writes,

That joyous confidence of faith and hope, and that boldness in confessing Christ, is indeed the Christian's noblest weapon, both offensive and defensive, against all assaults and dangers, from both outward and inward temptations.<sup>91</sup>

It is becoming clear that, in the view of the author of Hebrews as well as other New Testament writers, one of the surest manifestations of one who belongs to that second group earlier discussed is *patient endurance* in the faith. Delitzsch goes on to say that "it is only that unshaken, unyielding, patient endurance under the pressure of trial and persecution, that steadfastness of faith, apprehending present blessings, and of hope, with heaven-directed eye anticipating the glorious future, which obtains what it waits for."<sup>92</sup>

It is significant that the author links this endurance, and the reception of the promise, to the doing of God's will. This can either mean, as Lane interprets

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<sup>90</sup> Westcott, 336.

<sup>91</sup> Delitzsch, 196.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*; 197.

it, that “the measure of endurance is obedience to God”<sup>93</sup> or that it is God’s will that the believer ‘endure’ under trials. The latter view fits well with what Peter and James have to say about endurance and trials.

*In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while, if need be, you have been grieved by various trials, that the genuineness of your faith, being much more precious than gold that perishes, though it is tested by fire, may be found to praise, honor, and glory at the revelation of Jesus Christ.* (I Peter 1:6-7)

*My brethren, count it all joy when you fall into various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces patience. But let patience have its perfect work, that you may be perfect and complete, lacking nothing.* (James 1:2-4)

There are undoubtedly other aspects of the believer’s progression in grace as he lives out his faith in this life, but the fact that he simply never gives up is certainly one of the most important and profound. Delitzsch speaks of this characteristic of the true believer as “an unshaken trust in and cleaving to God’s word and grace, a steadfast onward and upward glance, - a trust, fidelity, and confidence that rests upon and hides in God.”<sup>94</sup>

*For yet a little while, and He who is coming will come and will not tarry. Now the just shall live by faith; but if anyone draws back, My soul has no pleasure in him.* (10:37-38)

This is an interesting compilation of Old Testament prophetic verses. It seems to be an amalgam of Isaiah and Habakkuk. The first phrase, “for yet a little while” is reminiscent of the Lord’s exhortation for the faithful among Israel to go into their secret closets in order to ride out the tempest of divine wrath that was being unleashed upon the nation.

*Come, my people, enter your chambers,  
And shut your doors behind you;  
Hide yourself, as it were, for a little moment,  
Until the indignation is past.* (Isaiah 26:20)

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<sup>93</sup> Lane, 302.

<sup>94</sup> Delitzsch, 200.

If this allusion is correct, then the meaning is that the trials and struggles facing the Hebrew believers will be temporary, at least relatively so. One thinks of the apostle Paul's eloquent comparison between present struggle and eternal glory, in II Corinthians 4,

*Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal.*

(II Corinthians 4:16-17)

The second part of the prophetic quotation comes from Habakkuk; from one of the more familiar passages in that prophecy.

*Write the vision*

*And make it plain on tablets, that he may run who reads it.*

*For the vision is yet for an appointed time;*

*But at the end it will speak, and it will not lie.*

*Though it tarries, wait for it; because it will surely come,*

*It will not tarry. "Behold the proud,*

*His soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith."*

(Habakkuk 2:2-4)

The essence of this prophecy is that the Lord's coming will be sudden and unexpected, a message that has been true throughout time and under both covenants. Within the current era of the New Covenant, it means that the Second Advent of Jesus Christ is at all times imminent, "because since His ascension He has been always coming, His return a matter of constant expectation."<sup>95</sup> The quotation from Habakkuk seems to negate the isolationism inherent in the one from Isaiah. Rather than spending the 'little while' sequestered in their rooms, the Hebrew believers are to live out their faith in a manner that 'he who runs may read it.' What is important with respect to the imminent return of Christ is not the ability to predict the time, place, or manner of the Second Advent, but to be found faithful and living by faith when Jesus does return. Again, steadfastness of faith is of greatest value.

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<sup>95</sup> Delitzsch, 199.



The one who ‘draws back,’ however, settles upon himself the displeasure of God, just as the unfaithful and disobedient children of Israel in the wilderness:

*Today, if you will hear His voice,  
Do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion, in the day of trial in the wilderness,  
Where your fathers tested Me, tried Me, and saw My works forty years.  
Therefore I was angry with that generation, and said, ‘They always go astray in their  
heart, and they have not known My ways.’*

*So I swore in My wrath, ‘They shall not enter My rest.’* (Hebrews 3:7-11)

Verses 37 and 38 represent the last, brief warning from the pen of the author of Hebrews. It is just as stern, though more succinct, than those found in Chapter 6 and earlier in Chapter 10. And, as in those earlier passages, the author follows the solemn warning with a note of encouragement.

*But we are not of those who draw back to perdition, but of those who believe to the saving of the soul.* (10:39)

We are reminded in this verse of the grammatical principle in biblical Greek that the person and number of any verb is indicated by the ending of the form. In other words, such pronouns as ‘you,’ ‘he,’ or ‘we’ are unnecessary as this information is contained in the way the verb itself is formed. That being the case, when the pronoun is included in the text, there is an indication of emphasis. When that pronoun, furthermore, is placed as the first word of the sentence, the emphasis is very great indeed. This is the case with verse 39 – the specific pronoun ‘we’ (ἡμεῖς) is included, and it is the first word of the sentence. Emphatically the author comforts his readers, “*We ourselves, however, are not of those who draw back...*”

How do we know that we are included in the ‘we’ of Hebrews 10:39? By faith – original and abiding trust in the salvation of God through His Son Jesus Christ. “At this point the mind of our author becomes wholly engrossed with

the saving and soul-sustaining power of faith; and leaving once more his direct line of thought, he makes this his main theme in the following section."<sup>96</sup>

Thus the author closes the main section of doctrine and admonition, and enters into a running, living illustration of men and women since the dawn of time who 'endured' and refused to 'cast away' their confident boldness. Chapter 11 is called the Hall of Faith, and that it is. But the focus of the author in writing the following chapter was not so much to point out that these famous personages had faith, but that their faith *endured* to the end. Through trials, tribulations, persecutions, and death - and without having received the promise here in this life - these men and women form together a 'great cloud of witnesses' from beyond the grave, exhorting believers in every age to hang on, 'for a little while,' until the promise is finally fulfilled.

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<sup>96</sup> Milligan, 295.