

Hebrews Devotionals

HEBREWS DEVOTIONALS AND ILLUSTRATIONS

Our Daily Bread Excellent Sermon Illustrations Updated January 17, 2014

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Today in the Word
Moody Bible Institute

Hebrews 1

Hebrews 1:1-4 - Hebrews 1:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Moody Bible Institute president, Dr. Joseph Stowell, has written concerning today's text: ""God has always had spokesmen ready to

speak for Him. When He wanted to announce the birth of His Son, He sent an angel with a message too significant to trust to a human being." The same was true for the news of Christ's resurrection. But God's greatest spokesman was neither a patriarch nor a prophet nor an angel. According to the author of Hebrews, when God wanted to reveal Himself fully, He spoke "by his Son" (Heb. 1:2).

There's a very good reason that God spoke fully, and finally, through Jesus Christ. Jesus is the only Person of whom it can be said, "He is exactly like God." That's because Jesus is God--He is therefore both perfect and superior to anyone who has come before or since.

In a nutshell, that's the thesis of the letter to the Hebrews: Christ is superior in every way. This wonderful, and sometimes hard to understand, book is the focus of our study this month. We believe you'll be richly repaid for the time you spend in God's Word over the next thirty days. Hebrews will remind you of the incredible provisions and privileges you have in Christ.

Our study of Hebrews will follow this basic outline: the superiority of Christ's Person (1:1-4:11), the superiority of Christ's priesthood (4:12-10:18), and the superiority of Christ's power (10:19-13:25).

Since the book is anonymous, we don't know who the author of Hebrews was. It could have been Apollos, Barnabas, Silas, or Paul. It was probably written before the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD, since it refers to the Mosaic sacrificial system as if it were still in practice.

What we don't know about the book of Hebrews is not nearly so significant as what the content of the book itself makes clear. In Jesus Christ, we have a Savior and a High Priest who is superior to the Old Testament prophets (vv. 1-2), superior to the Old Testament priests and their sacrifices (v. 3), and superior to the angels (v. 4). Jesus alone can claim the title "Son of God."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If it's been awhile since you have thought about the provisions and privileges you have in Christ, Hebrews is the right book for you!

Here are three privileges you can praise God for today, as you prepare your heart for this study. First, since Jesus is God's final "spokesman," we have God's complete Word in our hands. Second, since Jesus offered the final sacrifice on the Cross, you don't have to bring an animal to church to sacrifice next Sunday--He paid the price of sin once and for all! And third, because Jesus is superior to the angels, you don't have to go through any other human or heavenly being to gain direct access to God

Hebrews 1:1-3

This world has no shortage of discouragement. People all around us insist there is no God or that belief in Jesus Christ is foolishness. Those who stand against us mock us. Sometimes the people we love most break our hearts. Other times life just doesn't go our way. Because of those disappointments and more, every believer at one time or another has felt the temptation to give up.

The book of Hebrews is the perfect remedy for the person on the verge of losing the will to carry on in the faith. Not only does Hebrews show the superiority and sovereignty of Jesus Christ, it also invites us into the finality of His salvation: His perfect, eternal rest.

Our opening passage in the study introduces several themes that recur throughout the book. First of all, Jesus, the Son of God, is the flawless communication of the identity of God. The concept of a visible earthly person or object representing a heavenly reality plays heavily throughout Hebrews, and Christ is a special example far greater than any other. Secondly, the dual concepts of creation (or birth) and inheritance (which is related to death) frequently arise in the discussion. Jesus is both Creator of all and Inheritor of all.

All of those themes converge into the overarching reality of God's perfect rest. It is perfect because it is not merely a break from activity or suffering but rather a final stage of existence. The Son of God sat down, a position of rest, and one of honor and sovereignty as well! Jesus completed the work to save us and, unlike the examples from the Old Testament we'll see over the next several days, Jesus' journey into a glorious place of rest is final! And it is for us to share.

But the path Jesus traveled to arrive there should clue us in to the nature of our journey as His followers. When He "provided purification," He did it on the cross. To follow Jesus into the salvation of His holy rest is not a sweet and gentle Sunday afternoon stroll. We are compelled to suffer, to strive, and to serve Him until the day we can meet Him in person.

Apply the Word

Do not be discouraged. If life is hard, if it is painful, if it is more than you can bear, these are not signs that you are out of God's favor. Those are reasons to pursue His holy rest. Unlike that feeling of fleeting relief when the work week is over and the weekend begins,

the rest of Jesus Christ that awaits us as believers is permanent and eternal and glorious. Let your faith be so steadfast as well. Praise God for this assurance through His Word, His Son!

Hebrews 1:1-3; 2:1-4

In these last days [God] has spoken to us by his Son. - Hebrews 1:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Fans of George F. Handel's Messiah know that during its premiere performance in 1742, King George II of England became so inspired by the exhilarating music of the Hallelujah Chorus that he stood to his feet. The rest of the audience, assuming that the performance was over and the king was leaving, stood up too. The tradition of standing for this great chorus took hold, but as it turned out the Hallelujah Chorus was not the last word in the Messiah.

When it comes to God's last word to His creation, there is no such confusion. God began speaking to His people in the Garden of Eden, and His message continued to come to our spiritual forefathers in a variety of ways.

These people included heroes of the faith such as Abraham and David, amazing people to whom God revealed Himself in incredible ways. But none of them heard His last word on the subject of salvation. That did not come until Jesus presented Himself to the nation of Israel and to the world as God's Messiah and Savior.

The reason for Jesus' superiority to any human figure is obvious. He is much more than human! We are made in God's image, but Jesus alone is the exact representation of God's being (v. 3). This is the language of deity. And only Jesus is qualified to sit at God's right hand in heaven.

Because Jesus Christ is God's final word to the world, those who brought the message of Christ to the Hebrews were worthy of a careful hearing. That was especially important for the readers of this letter to understand, since they were in danger of drifting away from Christ.

As he warned them against this tragic mistake, the writer used his favorite style of argument to prove the point. He argued from the lesser to the greater. If God held people responsible for their obedience to the old covenant, how much more would He hold us accountable for the word of His Son?

This is the salvation we have today. If you're ever feeling a little disconnected, sit down with your Bible and review the ""family history."" You are part of a story that goes back thousands of years and includes the greatest names in history!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God the Father gave us His definitive word when He spoke from heaven at Jesus' transfiguration: ""This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to Him!"" (Matt. 17:5).

The command to listen to Jesus has never been canceled, and never will be. As we prepare to begin another month in God's Word together, pray that He will give you a listening ear and an open heart to hear what He wants to say to you. And don't forget to thank the Lord once again for our rich heritage of faith.

Hebrews 1:1-2, Mark 1:1-45

God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets ... In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son. - Hebrews 1:1-2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Will Durant, one of last century's most able historians, had planned to serve in ministry. His faith foundered, however, when he discovered authors anathema to his Christian faith, like Darwin and Huxley. Later, when writing The Story of Civilization, he rejected the divinity of Christ, found in Him hypocrisy, and attributed to Him "no new moral ideas." Durant had wandered far from his childhood faith.

Hebrews 1:3; Exodus 31:1-11; 35:30-35

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being. - Hebrews 1:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

The cathedral in Chartres, France, completed in 1223, is one of the most beautiful cathedrals ever built. Inside, a sense of lightness and soaring space was designed to draw one's eyes toward heaven. Stained glass windows portray Bible stories. Outside, ornate stone carvings depict Christ's glorious return. These medieval architects understood the power of the physical materials to portray

the spiritual reality.

This is a very biblical perspective, as we see by looking at God's purposes for the tabernacle. As the people wandered through the wilderness, God commanded Moses to build a tabernacle where God could meet with His people. Today's passages record how the Spirit of God came upon two individuals, Bezalel and Oholiab, to give them the skills, abilities, and knowledge necessary to construct the tabernacle according to God's plan.

The instructions that Moses received from God for the tabernacle (outlined in Ex. 26) specify that its curtains were to be made of fine blue, purple, and scarlet linen with cherubim woven into them, and were to be hung with gold clasps. The supporting beams of the tabernacle were covered in gold. Inside the tabernacle, the altar of incense and the table of showbread were also covered with gold, and the lampstand was made of pure gold. But the most beautiful object was the ark of the covenant, inside the Holy of Holies, which was also covered entirely with gold. These were the objects that the Spirit of God came upon Bezalel and Oholiab to make, as well as all the tabernacle's other objects, made of silver, bronze, stone, and wood.

The tabernacle was exceedingly beautiful. But God's purpose was not just to construct a beautiful building. Instead, the tabernacle, constructed by means of the Spirit, gave a physical picture of God's holiness, glory, and order—a stark contrast to the barren desert all around! Located in the center of the camp, the tabernacle also showed that God was the center of every aspect of life.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The Spirit filled Bezalel and Oholiab to make beautiful objects that portrayed God's eternal glory and holiness. John Calvin wrote, "The tabernacle was a sort of visible image of God." The fullest image of God, however, is revealed in Jesus Christ, as seen in today's verse from Hebrews. John 1:14 could be translated, "The Word became flesh and tabernacled among us." Using a Bible dictionary, learn more about how the tabernacle and the account in Exodus 24-31 anticipate Jesus Christ, the radiance of God's glory.

Hebrews 1:3

A Perfect Image

When a Roman emperor assumed power, he created new coinage with his image upon it. As the new coins spread through the empire, his image spread. And as his image spread, the emperor expected the coins to carry his power into the empire. Hebrews 1:3 likely has this concept of image in mind, and many translations use the word image instead of representation. Hebrews 1 reinforces Jesus' words that "Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father" (John 14:9). But the author intends our associations to go beyond coinage, all the way back to Genesis 1 when mankind was made in the image of God.

The Son has the attributes of God in relation to making of all things (v. 3), but we also see that the Son is not a mere extension of the Father. His glory now has roots in His purifying work related to our sin. The Son is not the Father.

Neither is the Son angelic in nature. "For to which of the angels" (v. 5) sets up a contrast between the Son and angels. The Son has an eternal throne (v. 8), whereas the angels are created and worship Him (v. 6). The author also develops a contrast between the purely spiritual nature of angels (v. 7) and the identity of the Son, who has "companions" (v. 9) above whom He is elevated. These "companions" are not angels, however.

If we read chapter 2 we discover that the Son is none other than a particular human, the Man Jesus (2:9). We are the companions spoken of in 1:9, and we get to share in His inheritance. The links between the world's creation, humanity, and the identity of the Son have come into much sharper focus.

Apply the Word

Some scholars tried to argue that Jesus was just a really good man. In response, some Bible-believing Christians have swung to the opposite pole, focusing only on His deity and ignoring His humanity. Scripture affirms that He was both fully God and fully man, and both natures are essential to His work of salvation. Thank Him today that you have access to God through Jesus!

Hebrews 1:4–9

Author Elizabeth Stone said that the decision to have a child "is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body." Indeed, the connection between a parent and a child is unlike any other, marked by love, likeness, and oneness. Although the divine relationship is undoubtedly unique, any parent (or child for that matter) can understand some facet of the special loving relationship between God the Father and Jesus the Son, especially the joy surrounding Jesus' birth.

In yesterday's passage, the author of Hebrews wrote that God spoke through Jesus. Lest we make the mistake of equating Him with any of God's other messengers, the writer emphasized Christ's superiority over angels. He is not merely God's messenger or God's

servant—He is God's Son, a far more important and glorious name (v. 4)!

The Old Testament passages quoted here carry more significance than simply denoting the Father/Son relationship. The first, from Psalm 2:7, emphasizes that Jesus was literally, physically born as the human offspring of God (the words translated "I have become your father" in the NIV could also be expressed as "I have begotten you"). The second verse hearkens back to 2 Samuel 7, when the prophet Nathan told David that his royal offspring would rule the kingdom of his descendants in eternal peace and glory. This passage connoted royalty.

Angels, on the other hand, are subject to the authority of the Son of God. They worship and serve Him. Comparing them to fire showed the temporary nature of their service. That isn't to say that the existence of angels will be extinguished, merely that their divinely appointed roles are limited in scope and duration. Not so with Jesus.

Again we're reminded that Jesus' reign is eternal, righteous, and anointed above all creation. Tomorrow, we'll examine the contrast between Christ's rule and angels' ministry further, but today let us celebrate the unique relationship of the Father and His only begotten Son. God loves Him as His own and bestows upon Him His entire kingdom—what's more, we share in both blessings!

Apply the Word

Whether it's continually at the front of your mind or you have lost sight of the reality, today is a perfect opportunity to remind yourself that you are a child of God. While you were not born under the same miraculous circumstances as Jesus, you were born again in the power of His Spirit! Is there any struggle or setback that could outweigh the joy of knowing that God loves you with an undying love? Let that motivate you to live for Him in obedience.

Hebrews 1:5-14

Your throne, O God, will last forever and ever, and righteousness will be the scepter of your kingdom. - Hebrews 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

When George Vanderbilt opened his new home for a family dinner on Christmas Eve, 1895, it was more than just a family get-together. The home, though still not completed, was the fulfillment of Vanderbilt's dream: a 250-room mansion majestically nestled in the mountains of Asheville, North Carolina. Young Vanderbilt felt he had a name and a family reputation to uphold. His grandfather, Cornelius Vanderbilt, had been the most powerful and successful business baron in America in his day.

Jesus Christ also has a name to uphold, but that's where the comparison ends. Jesus is the Son of God—eternal and exalted far above any other name, title, or created being in heaven or on earth.

The author of Hebrews wanted to be sure his readers understood the superiority of Christ over everything they had ever known. The writer had a good reason for demonstrating Christ's greatness. The evidence from the book suggests that the Hebrews were a group of Christians who had come to faith out of Judaism.

As we will see later, these believers had undergone persecution for their faith and may have been facing trials again. Such persecution seems to have caused them to waver in their commitment to Christ. They may have even thought about returning to Judaism.

Yet the writer wanted them to see that they had no reason to go back, for, in Christ, they had Someone who was superior—even to the angels.

Why the comparison of Christ to angels? There is evidence that first-century Judaism gave extra prominence to the ministry of angels. So the Hebrews author begins his case for Christ's superiority by demonstrating how much higher He is than angels.

While angels are "ministering spirits" (v. 14), Jesus bears the exalted title of "Son of God." The Father has bestowed this title on Jesus in much the same way God declared the Davidic king as His Son (see Ps. 2:7, which the writer quotes in v. 5).

But Jesus did not just become the Son of God one day. He is the Son, the eternal Second Person of the Trinity. The following verses clearly demonstrate His eternal nature as God. Jesus was active in creation (v. 10), and He will never change (v. 12), being "the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There are lots of famous family names in history, but no one bears a higher name than Jesus.

We also bear His name, because we are His children. Part of our calling as believers is to bring Jesus Christ honor by the way we conduct our lives. Today, let's pray that the people who are watching our lives will get a favorable picture of what Jesus is like.

Hebrews 1:1-14

In these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things. - Hebrews 1:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Leo the Great, in an ancient sermon entitled, “On the Feast of the Nativity,” explained the Incarnation in these words: “Without detriment therefore to the properties of either substance which then came together in one person, majesty took on humility, strength weakness, eternity mortality: and for the paying off of the debt, belonging to our condition, inviolable nature was united with possible nature, and true God and true man were combined to form one Lord, so that, as suited the needs of our case, one and the same Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, could both die with the one and rise again with the other.”

As the writer of Hebrews proclaimed in today's reading, Jesus Christ was and is fully human and fully divine. His Incarnation made possible the fulfillment of God's promises of redemption. In the opening verses, we see the basic contrast of b.c. and a.d.: In the past, God spoke through prophets, but now the “final Word” and best revelation has come in the person of His Son (vv. 1-2). The Son is not some new being but is in fact God Himself, “the exact representation of his being” (v. 3). He did the work of creation and continues to sustain the natural world (vv. 2-3a). He accomplished God's plan of salvation (v. 3b).

Numerous Old Testament references make it impossible to see Him as anything less than God. Only God receives worship as the Son does (v. 6). Only God is eternal. Only God created (vv. 10-12). The Father-Son relationship is qualitatively different from the God-angels relationship; for example, no angel has ever been invited to rule at His right hand (vv. 5, 7-9, 13-14).

The idea that God had a “Son” was a new one for the Jews. Even today, many people struggle to accept the idea that one God could be in three Persons. Though we will never fully comprehend the wonder of the Incarnation and the Trinity while on this earth, we continue to affirm that Jesus Christ is fully man and fully God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today's Bible passage, and the fact that Christ is fully man and fully God, is both inspiring and challenging. If you desire a deeper understanding of this key truth, you might seek an in-depth study of the book of Hebrews. One of the writer's main purposes was to help us grasp the connections and interrelationships between the Old and New Testaments, and how Christ is God's best and most complete revelation of Himself.

Hebrews 1:10–14

No one can say for sure what the last song performed by Wallace Hartley's band really was, but popular legend suggested it was “Nearer, My God, to Thee.” The only witnesses close enough to hear his closing number perished aboard the RMS Titanic as it plunged to its frigid doom. The name of the tune was in question, but—despite the fact that some people have mocked the band for stubbornly refusing to flee—the nobility of the musicians is not. They performed their duties to the very end for the benefit of the evacuating passengers, despite the knowledge that their whole world was sinking.

A crucial point of today's passage reminds us that this earth, like that ill-fated ship, won't last forever. Our Lord, however, most certainly will. How can we be so sure He'll outlast this world? Because He created it.

Just as the world considered the Titanic to be unsinkable for the size implied by its name, the vastness of our world and the great expanse of space can lead us to forget that it is as insignificant as specks of dust compared to our infinite God. Jesus has the power to change it all, and yet He cannot be changed!

Jesus is superior in substance, in nature, and in power. The comparison to angels continues in verse 13, where we see that they do not measure up to the authority and power of the Son of God. Unlike the angels, who are subject to His authority, Jesus has been decreed to rule over even His enemies. There is no one and nothing above Him or equal to Him.

The passage concludes with an interesting note about the roles of angels, though. Not only do they serve Christ, the author of our salvation, but they also serve the inheritors of that salvation (v. 14). They are spirits that minister to us. What's more, the author referred to salvation in the future tense. Earlier, he spoke of Christ's saving work as complete, but here he alluded to that aspect of salvation to which his audience still looked forward.

Apply the Word

The security of the believer is a subject that arises several times in Hebrews, and today's reading offers just a taste of it. For now, let's direct our thoughts to the one on whose righteousness we depend completely: Jesus Christ. He died so that we could have life. We should spend our lives advancing toward the rest He secured for us. And we have ministering angels to assist us in this pursuit! Spend time in prayer today with the assurance that God loves and provides for you.

Hebrews 2

Hebrews 2:1-9

We must pay more careful attention, therefore, to what we have heard, so that we do not drift away. - Hebrews 2:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to the Campus Journal, a major university recently removed a popular line of study notes from its bookstore. These notes summarize the plots, themes, and characters of well-known books so students can pass an exam without having to read the required book. The university wants its students to wrestle with the message of great books rather than to opt for the easy way out.

The writer of Hebrews did not want his ""students"" to take the easy way out and turn away from their commitment to Christ. Because he wanted them to wrestle with the great truths of their faith, he wrote them a letter that has become one of the great books of history.

The Hebrews were not simply students trying to make the Dean's List. Defection from Christ would result in more serious consequences than a failing grade. Today's verses offer the first of five warnings in the book. Here, the recipients of the letter are pictured as being in danger of ""drifting away"" from Christ--much like an inattentive child in a crowded mall who refuses to heed his parents' warning to stay close and who consequently gets lost.

The author reminded his readers that just as violators of the Mosaic Law received punishment, they also could not expect to drift away from the new covenant in Christ without receiving discipline.

The text does not spell out the discipline the Hebrews could expect if they pulled away from Christ. Perhaps the writer did not define it because he was ""confident of better things"" from them (Heb. 6:9).

One of the blessings the Hebrews might have forfeited is suggested in the first chapter of Hebrews. In verses 1, 5, and 13, the picture is of God enthroning His king and giving Him absolute triumph over His enemies. The king would then share His joy with ""His companions"" (Heb. 1:9).

This is a picture of Christ on His millennial throne, a reign in which His followers will share. The writer was looking at the ""world to come"" (Heb. 2:5), showing that even though humankind had lost dominion through sin, the Son regained it through His sacrificial death.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Obviously, the Hebrews weren't the only believers in danger of drifting spiritually.

We've all known times of lethargy and lack of attention to our ""great salvation"" (v. 3). One way you can guard against drifting is to promise the Lord you'll be faithful in prayer and Bible study this month. It may help to write out your commitment, sign and date it, and put it in a prominent place in your kitchen, bedroom, or office.

Hebrews 2:1–10

Any baseball player would be honored to have his career compared to Babe Ruth's. The same is true for basketball players and Michael Jordan. A filmmaker would rejoice to have a critic mention her film in the same breath as Citizen Kane, as would any painter whose masterpiece was likened to the Mona Lisa. To be compared to those great people and works would be considered high praise in itself.

In our readings so far, the writer of Hebrews proved Jesus was superior to angels and to the prophets—but that is by no means an insult to those esteemed messengers of God. On the contrary, Jesus' superiority has special significance because the prophets and angels spoke the very Word of God! Theirs is no small message, and ignoring it would be no small mistake.

This is the first of what are often considered five parenthetical warnings in the book of Hebrews; however, in our study this month these warnings are anything but a side note. We'll view them more like the main points of application as we absorb the truth about Christ. The messages delivered in the past by angels and through prophets had been verified by deliverance or by judgment. So it stands to reason that the message of salvation announced by Jesus would also come to fruition with even more profound and long-lasting results. Hebrews then urges believers to hold true to the faith and enter His rest willfully and boldly instead of lazily or passively.

The author of Hebrews punctuated the message of Christ's superiority with a mark of irony. Mankind surrendered their position of authority over all creation because of sin (cf. Psalm 8). Jesus reclaimed it for Himself by taking up a place of humility, sacrifice, and death. And so He became the perfect pioneer of our salvation. Not only does that assure us of the salvation waiting for us, it foreshadows the nature of our path into His rest. We shouldn't be surprised when the road is difficult; we shouldn't be shocked when pursuing shortsighted, selfish, and temporary goals fails to satisfy us.

Apply the Word

Jesus was crowned with glory and honor by suffering and submitting to the will of the Father. We may not be able to repeat Christ's level of courage, wisdom, and perfection, but we can model our lives after it. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide you to put His will and others' needs before your own desires. When service and submission become your focus, notice how rarely you become disappointed or ungrateful. Save the honor, glory, and rest for eternity instead of seeking it now.

Hebrews 2:10-18, Matthew 4:1-11

Tempted Like Us

Many people admire military men of a certain type. Alexander the Great personally led cavalry charges. George Washington put himself at the head of his column at the Battle of Princeton. General James Longstreet said, "You can't lead from behind." Great leaders share the burdens of those they command.

Jesus' leadership of His people exhibits this same principle. Some suppose that because of His deity everything was easier for Him. The fullness of Jesus' humanity (Heb. 2:14), however, means that He faced everything we face. What's more, Jesus "leads from the front" and pioneers a way to salvation.

The author of Hebrews has the military analogy in mind in 2:10, for he uses the word "pioneer," the same word used to describe Joshua in Numbers 13:2-3. He earns this title through suffering, because He cannot lead others if He has not shared in their burdens. Our encouragement should increase when we realize that just as the twelve "captains" represented the people of Israel, so too Jesus represents all His followers (Heb. 2:11).

Once again note Jesus' temptation in the desert in the context of Israel's history. After their baptism in the Red Sea (1 Cor. 10:2), Israel's disobedience led to forty years of desert wandering. After His baptism, Jesus underwent His own wilderness experience, and He stayed faithful. Now, like Joshua, He can lead us to the Promised Land.

Satan's temptations focused on getting Jesus to question His identity (Matt. 4:3, 6). But he saved perhaps his strongest test for last when he offered Jesus power without suffering. Jesus rejected Satan, and in refusing to abandon suffering He also refuses to abandon His "brothers and sisters" (Heb. 2:11). His union with humanity means more to Him than all the kingdoms that Satan could offer.

Apply the Word

Christians can sometimes confuse temptation with sin. Facing temptation does not mean that one has sinned. Jesus too faced temptation. If you struggle with a particular sin, be encouraged. First, Jesus knows all about temptation. Second, Satan would not tempt you if you posed no threat to him. Rely on the power of the Spirit to remain faithful to God and remember the example of Jesus.

Hebrews 2:10; 12:1-3

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. - Hebrews 12:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

At age twenty-two, James Fraser left a bright future in England to serve God overseas. In 1908 God led him to the Lisu people in the remote foothills of southwest China. Facing spiritual oppression and physical hardship, Fraser persevered in bringing the gospel to these people. Years later, thousands praise God for Fraser's pioneering efforts in evangelism and discipling.

People like James Fraser clearly follow the footsteps of our Lord Jesus Christ whom Scripture calls "the author and perfecter of our faith." Although we often think of authors in terms of books, the word also refers to an originator or creator of something. That's why some translations use "pioneer," "forerunner," or "captain" to translate this same Greek word.

Not only is Jesus the source of our faith, He is also the endpoint. Notice the context for Hebrews 12. The writer used the image of an athlete running in a stadium with cheering spectators all around (v. 1). This imagery is easy to grasp if we just think back to the recent summer Olympics in Sydney!

The passage then talks about “the race marked out for us” (v. 1). What is this racecourse? It’s the way of the cross, which Jesus, “for the joy set before him endured” (v. 2). Because of His willing sacrifice, He was exalted and sits at “the right hand of the throne of God” (v. 2). This is how Jesus is also the Perfector of our faith. Perfection in the Bible often means completion, so this is another way of saying that Jesus is the Finisher or Completer of our faith. The Jerusalem Bible translation captures these two ideas quite well: “fixing our eyes on Jesus, on whom faith depends from start to finish.”

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It’s always inspiring to read biographies of Christian missionaries who have pioneered the way to salvation for so many others.

Hebrews 2:10-18

Today in the Word

Philip and Lucy Bliss died the night their train to Chicago crossed a trestle bridge that collapsed, sending the train plunging 75 feet into a ravine. When Philip’s trunk later arrived in Chicago, in it were found the words to a hymn he had recently written: “I will sing of my Redeemer / And His wondrous love to me; / On the cruel cross He suffered, / From the curse to set me free.

Philip and Lucy Bliss didn’t know how soon they would meet their Redeemer. Yet it is the redemptive work of Jesus Christ which is the answer to our greatest fear. Perhaps there is nothing that we fear more than death itself. As human beings, we find our own mortality one of the hardest realities to bear. Death is a curse of the human existence. Even for Christians who hope for eternal life beyond death, death is still our enemy.

What Jesus did on the cross was to break the power of death. By rising from the dead, He determined that death would no longer be the final word. He was reversing the cruel fate to which all of human creation had been subjected, beginning when Adam and Eve sinned in the Garden and were sentenced to death. From Adam onward, humans have known what it means to be haunted by death, and to know that at any moment, breath can be extinguished, and life evaporate.

Apart from Christ, the fear of death is a form of slavery. Those who have no eternal hope are powerless in the face of death. They cannot control or determine when or how it should come. In a universe without a Sovereign God, death is the ultimate victor. Every day is pregnant with fear, whether conscious or subconscious.

But Jesus Christ has conquered the grave. He has reversed the curse, and He has set the captives free. What is there to fear if death itself, seemingly so ultimate and terrifying, has been rendered powerless?

Apply the Word

Maybe you’ve recently received a terminal diagnosis—or someone you love has. Death is cruel, and aging and disease were not part of God’s original plan for the world He created. And yet, even in death, there can be freedom and hope. Look to the merciful and faithful High Priest, Jesus Christ, who suffered a very cruel death on your behalf. Cry out to Him, knowing that He understands and sympathizes. Because of Him, death is not the end of the story.

Hebrews 2:10-18

[Jesus] had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest. - HEBREWS 2:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

Seeking the Democratic presidential nomination in 1960, John F. Kennedy visited a coal mine in West Virginia, where a miner asked him, “Is it true that you’re the son of one of our wealthiest men?” Kennedy said it was so.

The miner continued, “Is it true you’ve never done a day’s work with your hands all your life?” Kennedy nodded.

“Well, let me tell you this,” the miner replied, “you haven’t missed a thing.”

So much for a presidential candidate trying to identify with his constituents! One of the problems of finite human beings is that we can’t possibly identify with others perfectly and understand exactly what they are going through.

But we have a Savior who can! This great section of Hebrews holds more blessing and encouragement than we can absorb in one setting. It’s worth several days of study. Consider what these verses tell us about our great salvation, and our great Savior.

First, although the Hebrews were looking back to Judaism, the writer was pointing them forward to Christ’s glorious reign. It was God’s purpose to bring His children to glory by giving them a “leader” or “captain” of salvation who could identify with them in

every way (v. 10). In fact, so close is the relationship between Christ and His people that He is not ashamed to call us family (v. 11)!

But why did the sinless, eternal, perfect Son of God have to come to earth to identify with humanity in His suffering? He came so that He might render the devil powerless, freeing those held captive by him in the slavery of sin and the fear of death (vv. 14, 15).

Think of it. Jesus is not some distant deity, far above and aloof from our pain. He took on human flesh so that He might live a sinless life and die a sacrificial death—all to pay the debt for our sins! No wonder the author of Hebrews set Christ before his readers and said, in effect, ""Take a good look at Jesus before you decide to slip away.""

This is also the first mention of Jesus' priesthood, a theme we will meet again. Unlike human priests, Jesus did not have to pay for His sins before offering atonement for the sins of the people. Because He was tempted, He understands what we face. But He never yielded, so He can help us in our need (vv. 17, 18).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God said we would be tempted, but that we do not have to yield.

Although the devil is still in business for now, Jesus has disarmed Satan (Col. 2:15). We can have victory in Christ over temptation, but we also need to make sure we aren't helping the enemy gain a foothold by our actions. Why not do a ""temptation checkup"" this weekend to eliminate anything that may be giving Satan an opening into your life?

Hebrews 2:11–18

For a leader of great renown, siblings and family members of ill repute can cause massive political headaches. Be it a wayward member of a royal family or a renegade sibling of a presidential candidate—or even past associates who stir up controversy—public figures often find their image at the mercy of their family tree. Their advisers often do all they can to keep family embarrassments out of the public eye.

But Jesus isn't ashamed to call believers His family, despite our more than checkered past. The first reason listed here in today's reading is that He delivers us from our sinful history, atoning for our sins (v. 17) and making us holy (v. 11). And He doesn't just rescue us from what we have done—He saves us from the punishment we deserve.

Because of His deliverance, we are freed from the fear of death. Jesus (John 8:34) and Paul (Rom. 6:6) both taught that we were slaves to sin. The writer of Hebrews, however, identifies a different nuance of that slavery: being slaves to fear, specifically the fear of death, is a result of sin. Jesus took on that penalty and destroyed it (v. 14). Interestingly, though, He didn't do it from on high as a distant king eradicating a threat to his lowly subjects. Jesus recorded that victory as one of us.

That is a crucial distinction for those of us who are still living in a world dominated by sin. He didn't just defeat the power of sin from afar. Jesus suffered the temptations afflicting us. And He died to conquer the power behind them. Here we find the image of Jesus as our high priest who can relate to our weaknesses yet also live up to God's requirements of righteousness (v. 17). The power of sin that tempts us to betray the Word of God? Jesus has faced and resisted it. The death we deserve for falling short of God's glory? Jesus took it upon Himself, and He has been raised from it. The fears that would cause us to lose hope? Christ has, by His example, proven them unwarranted.

Apply the Word

We are spiritual descendants of Abraham because of our faith in Jesus, who became his physical descendant. He makes us holy, and He makes us His family. Paul wrote that he was not ashamed of the gospel; amazingly, the Author of the gospel is also not ashamed of us. Take that as motivation to honor the family name of Christ in your behavior today. Be His child, publicly and without apology, and let everyone see your faith, hope, and love on full display.

Hebrews 3

Hebrews 3:1-6

Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. - Hebrews 3:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

As the procession wound its way down the west side of the Mount of Olives and the city of Jerusalem loomed ahead, the band of disciples became increasingly excited. Their leader, Jesus, was riding triumphantly into Jerusalem in recognition of His rightful claim

to be the Messiah. Just as the prophets had written, the Messiah was coming to the nation of Israel on a lowly donkey (Zech. 9:9). The joyful disciples could not help but shout praise to God and throw palm branches in Jesus' path.

On the day we now celebrate as Palm Sunday, the thoughts of Jesus' followers were fixed on Him. The author of Hebrews would have applauded that focus. We need to fix both our thoughts and our eyes (Heb. 12:2) on Jesus.

Earlier in this book, Jesus had been compared to the prophets and to angels and was found to be superior to both. His salvation was also shown to be greater than the system of law handed down to Moses. It is not surprising that the author would again introduce Moses into his argument here in chapter 3.

The mention of Jesus as our high priest brings to mind the sacrificial system instituted under Moses. The Law even specified the ""house"" that Moses was to build, which was the tabernacle in the wilderness, so that sacrifices could be offered. Moses was faithful to build the Israelites' place of worship just as God commanded.

But Moses was still just a servant in God's house. Jesus, on the other hand, was the ""builder of everything"" because He is God (vv. 5-6). The ministry of Moses pointed forward to Jesus and was a testimony to His coming. Jesus was the fulfillment of this testimony. Moses was ""in"" God's house, but Jesus is ""over"" God's house; the Son is greater than a servant is.

This passage of Hebrews ends with a wonderfully encouraging reminder that we, too, are part of God's house--the body of believers of which Jesus is the Head.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's impossible to overstate the importance of keeping our focus fixed on Jesus.

But to do that effectively, we need to ""unplug"" our minds and hearts from things that distract us and keep us from focusing on Christ. Perhaps a problem area for you is the temptation that you brought before the Lord yesterday. Try to identify the activity that occupies most of your time and attention. Then evaluate whether the time being spent on this activity is proportionate to the importance of the activity.

Hebrews 3:1–19

Nineveh is remembered as the wicked city that repented in response to Jonah's prophecy (which he delivered grudgingly, to say the least). In that chapter of their history, the Lord relented from His judgment—but, as Nahum prophesied, the city of Nineveh ultimately fell to Babylon a century later after forsaking their short-lived obedience to God's Word.

The Exodus of God's chosen people out of Egypt, led by Moses, has a similar place in our memories as a positive example of God's deliverance that ended with disastrous results for many of the people involved. Yes, Moses was the leader of a stirring, miraculous example of God's mercy. Because of the rebellious unbelief of the people, however, Moses and the adults he led out of Egypt died on the outskirts of the Promised Land. They failed to enter God's rest because they failed to believe.

The author of Hebrews pointed out to his audience that one of the greatest events in Israel's history, led by one of its greatest heroes of faith, was desperately incomplete. We'll find several similar examples throughout our study, and they appear in stark contrast with the complete and perfect work of Jesus. And if that historical unbelief is something we tend to gloss over in our memories, we need to familiarize ourselves with God's perspective on the matter lest we duplicate the same mistake in our own lives.

Unbelief angers God, particularly in those to whom He has shown time and again that He is faithful, powerful, and gracious. Upon reading this, believers might wonder if past confessions of faith were genuine or if future blessings are indeed secure. But the key point of this passage is the subtle phrasing in verse 13: "as long as it is called 'Today.' " That is the decision pressed upon us by the writer. What are we to do today? Encourage each other in the faith. We know that the penalty for unbelief and rebellion is severe. Even more, we know God can help us stay true to Him today. We must not let our faith become another story of incomplete success. Christ completes us!

Apply the Word

Did you notice the prescribed frequency for encouraging our brothers and sisters in faith? It's not weekly or occasionally. We should encourage each other daily. If you are finding persevering in the faith to be difficult, do not attempt to get through it alone. And don't let your fellow believers fall into the same trap either. Take some time today and every day to encourage someone you know to focus their thoughts on Jesus. It will help them immensely, and they will return the favor.

Hebrews 3:1; Leviticus 16:1-34

Fix your thoughts on Jesus, the apostle and high priest whom we confess. - Hebrews 3:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Let your imagination take you back several thousand years to the time of Israel's wilderness wandering. The golden calf incident showed you that God is holy and takes sin seriously. On occasion, you and your family have brought a goat to the tabernacle to be sacrificed as a sin offering. But throughout the year, there have been ways that you have sinned, not to mention thoughts that have been less than holy. So, you have been eagerly anticipating this day, the Day of Atonement.

Before you stands the great high priest Aaron. He is human like you, but he leads you into worship and sacrifices on your behalf. On his breastplate, you see the stone bearing the name of your tribe, together with eleven other stones (Ex. 28:21). As he offers sacrifices concerning his own sin (v. 6), he also sacrifices for your sins (v. 15). As he sprinkles the blood of the sacrificed goat in the Most Holy Place, he makes atonement for your sin (v. 16). Finally, he confesses your sins and all the people's sins over the live goat. As the goat is led away into the wilderness, you see the guilt of your sin removed (v. 22).

The Day of Atonement made possible this restoration of the people that was essential for continued worship of the Lord God. Atonement, or the covering of sin, showed that shedding of blood was necessary. In other words, death was the price required of sinful humans. In the Old Testament, the blood shed was that of bulls and goats. But in the New Testament, we learn that only the blood shed by Jesus Christ could fully restore fellowship between God and man.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Reread today's passage, taking note of the function of the high priest, the sacrificed goat, and the scapegoat. Then read Isaiah 53:4–8. In what ways is Jesus, the Suffering Servant, like the goat sacrificed as a sin offering? In what ways is Jesus like the scapegoat who removes the guilt of our sins? Later in our study, we'll look at Jesus as the true High Priest, but for now, take some time to praise the Father for sending the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world (John 1:29).

Hebrews 3:1-6

[Jesus] was faithful to the one who appointed him. - Hebrews 3:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Reformer John Calvin said: "Christ was both a sacrifice and a priest. No other satisfaction for sin could be found, and no one else was worthy to offer the only-begotten Son of God. Christ now fills the office of Priest so the Father will look favorably upon us and welcome us into His family."

The picture of Jesus as the high priest who offered His own blood in sacrifice for sin (Heb. 9:12) reminds us of His uniqueness. No one else could do what He did. Consequently, the fact that Jesus was faithful in every detail of His ministry is a great reason for us to celebrate today.

Remember what it cost Jesus to be faithful to His calling as our high priest. The cross was the price He paid, and paid joyfully (Heb. 12:2), to save us and bring us back to God.

After His resurrection and ascension, Jesus took up His place as high priest in the heavenly temple, where He serves on our behalf today. He is there carrying out the work of a priest--mediating between God and us and offering the sacrifice that will, as Calvin said, cause God to "look favorably upon us."

Since there is no other way to God but through Jesus (John 14:6), Jesus' faithfulness in spite of great suffering becomes an even richer source of blessing and encouragement for us. God had no other plan for salvation except the death of His Son, and Jesus' obedience to His appointment was never in doubt. For this, we will be eternally grateful.

The writer of Hebrews told his readers to fix their thoughts on Jesus. One reason for this is because they were slipping from their commitment and needed an anchor. You may not be slipping in your spiritual life right now, but fixing your thoughts and your eyes (Heb. 12:2) on Jesus is wonderful advice.

One benefit we gain because Jesus is our faithful Savior and priest is found in our text today. If we are connected to Christ, we are part of God's house because the Father has appointed Jesus, His faithful Son, as head over His house.

This is a reference to our union with Christ as "living stones" in the church, the spiritual house He is building (1 Pet. 2:5). Jesus is not only our Savior, but a high priest we can approach for help, comfort, and strength today (Heb. 4:14-16).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Hebrews 4:16 says we can approach God with confidence because Jesus is our sympathetic high priest.

Why not take advantage of that access by bringing to the Lord the praises and concerns of your heart? Spend time worshiping Him for His faithfulness, then share the things that burden you. And don't forget to thank the Lord that because He is faithful, you can be assured that He will work in your circumstances for your good and His glory.

Hebrews 3:7-19

Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts. - Hebrews 3:7-8

TODAY IN THE WORD

What one national park worker calls ""a false sense of security"" continues to lead visitors of national parks to ignore warnings and to take dangerous chances. Despite clear warnings, for example, people still try to pose with the bears, to get too close to other wild animals, or to enter waters that are not safe for swimming. This park worker suggests that perhaps the word ""park"" itself helps to lull people into feeling safe when they are actually in a potentially dangerous environment.

It seems to be part of our human nature to ignore warning signs. The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews had a very clear warning posted before them of the tragic consequences of allowing their hearts to be hardened through unbelief. But the writer was afraid these believers were about to crash through the warning sign and commit the same error that a previous generation of God's people had committed.

These verses are part of an ongoing series of warnings directed at a group of people who were wavering in their commitment to Christ. They were reminded that the generation of Israelites that came out of Egypt under Moses never reached God's promised rest in Canaan, although it was waiting to be claimed.

The problem was the people's hardness of heart, which led them to test God, to doubt His provision, and to rebel against His will for them. These Israelites provoked God to anger, and He ""declared on oath"" (v. 11) that their bones would bleach in the desert until the entire generation died out (v. 17).

We also need to take this warning to heart. Unbelief always displeases God. The solution to this problem is to keep our hearts tender toward Him, something believers need to help one another do every day (v. 13).

The urgency of doing this today is obvious from the fact that sin is very deceitful. If we ignore it, sin will harden our spirits as surely as cement hardens once it has been poured. We need the same kind of faithfulness the writer of Hebrews urged his readers to maintain (v. 14).

Just to make sure the point wasn't missed, the writer returned to the example of Moses' unbelieving generation (vv. 15- 19). It's a warning we can't hear too often. God honors faith, whereas unbelief invites His judgment.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This very day is one of the ""todays"" that the author of Hebrews urges us to take advantage of as we encourage one another.

Through today's study, we have attempted to encourage you to walk faithfully with Christ. Do you know someone you can encourage in his or her walk? It might be a family member or a friend who is experiencing doubt or a trial. Ask God to lead you to someone who needs an encouraging word this week.

Hebrews 4

Hebrews 4:1-11

There remains, then, a Sabbath-rest for the people of God. - Hebrews 4:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

If you saw a notice in the newspaper listing you among potential heirs being sought for a great inheritance, would you make contact with the people placing the ad? Probably so. And if you checked things out and discovered you were a legitimate heir, would you be motivated to show up at the time and place designated to claim your inheritance? You'd be foolish not to go!

That's similar to the situation facing the readers of Hebrews--and us as believers today. God has a promised inheritance for His people called His rest. This rest was offered to the generation that Moses led out of Egypt, but they failed to claim it because they lacked the one prerequisite: faith.

The opening verses of Hebrews 4 continue the writer's train of thought. Having previously described the generation that angered God by its unbelief, he now applies the lessons of that generation to the believers of his day. And, as always, believers in every generation need to learn the same lessons.

The good news of this passage is that God's offer of a rest, a Sabbath rest, still stands. Even though Moses' generation missed it, God's promise remains. His rest has been available since the dawn of creation. God rested from His work (Gen. 2:2) and decided it was such a good idea that He commanded a rest for His creatures.

Notice that God's rest includes the cessation of work (v. 10). In God's case, He rested because He was finished with creation--His was a rest of completion and satisfaction.

If we are to enter God's rest today, what work must we cease doing? Part of the answer is that we are to rest from or give up our own efforts to save ourselves, since God's rest includes our salvation. The ""rest"" of salvation is entered only by faith.

The writer urges the Hebrews, ""Make every effort to enter that rest"" (v. 11). So the rest must go beyond salvation, since they were already believers. It seems clear that God's rest extends to the entirety of our lives, as we give up our attempts to live the Christian life in our own strength and rest in His promises.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The principle of Sabbath rest--one day in seven set aside for rest and worship--stands out in this passage.

This is a rest God wants us to enjoy today. For us as Christians this special day is the Lord's day. But sadly, for many of us, this day is as hectic and noisy as the rest of the week. If your day of worship seems like every other day, except for church services, make a commitment to turn off the noise, unplug some of the activities, and spend more time in contemplation of God's goodness

Hebrews 4:1–10

The concept of the Sabbath was no mystery to the recipients of this letter. They would have observed the Sabbath, which literally means "to cease," more than a thousand times. It had been a basic tenet of their faith and culture as a people since the Exodus from Egypt. Consecrating the seventh day of every week and resting from their work required no explanation—being restricted from experiencing the rest of the Lord, however, was something new.

Observing sabbath rest once a week symbolized something bigger, and the symbolic act did not guarantee the fulfillment of the eternal rest to which it pointed. To someone in whom the Sabbath was deeply ingrained as a way of life, the prospect of failing to enter the rest would have been shocking. Indeed, for those Israelites who failed to enter the Promised Land, the Word of God was deemed virtually worthless to them because they lacked faith (v. 2). Keep in mind that these were the same people who had obeyed God's command to paint their doorposts in the blood of a spotless lamb (Ex. 12:21–28). The implication to the believers addressed here was that the gospel would be worthless to them if they lacked faith.

The author established that God's rest, which He entered on the seventh day having completed creation once and for all, still awaited His people. As people of faith, they were not yet done with their labors (v. 10). The author reminded them of the rest of God, a concept with which they were already quite familiar, so that they would also consider the choice facing anyone who hears the Word of God: to enter by faith or to harden their hearts.

That choice was not relegated to the past. It was present with Moses, with Joshua, and with David, and it was still before them in the days after the resurrection of Christ in the day God called "Today." This rest that has been in existence since the completion of God's created work remains a future consideration for all of us who are still living and serving. As long as we have breath, we must never stop serving. Our work is not yet done. We still long for God's eternal rest.

Apply the Word

Whether you are enjoying retirement or planning for it, it's important to remember that we always have a duty to continue serving the Lord, and that begins with obedience. Even if you don't have an official role as a leader in the church or elsewhere in vocational ministry, there is always a job for you to do for the Lord. Encouraging other believers, communicating the message of the gospel, and obeying the Word of God are all things you can and should do to remain faithful to the end.

Hebrews 4:12-13; Ephesians 6:10-18

The sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. - Ephesians 6:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

The samurai warriors of medieval Japan believed their swords had spiritual reality and power. These swords were always with them, from birth to death, whether in the bedroom or on the battlefield. Those who made the swords approached their craft as a spiritual endeavor, fasting, praying, and even wearing priestly white robes. They mixed and hammered layers of hard and soft steel to forge swords that excelled in both sharpness and strength. To the warriors, these swords represented their honor.

We should take the “sword of the Spirit” with equal seriousness, for its truth and power come from God. Today’s reading describes the “armor of God,” by which we put on His strength rather than relying on our own (v. 10). Spiritual warfare is real, for the Devil is scheming how to put stumbling blocks in our path, and if we trust in ourselves to fight these battles we will surely fall (vv. 11-12).

The sole offensive weapon in Paul’s extended metaphor is “the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God” (v. 17). Under house arrest at the time that he wrote Ephesians (v. 20), he may have been using his guards as a visual reference as he described the belt, breastplate, shield, sandals, helmet, and short sword.

While a typical Roman soldier also carried a spear, these guards wouldn’t have needed one for this assignment, which probably explains why there’s no spear in Paul’s picture.

Hebrews 4:12-13 uses the same vivid comparison. In these verses, we understand that God’s words are dynamic, purposeful, and powerful. They penetrate and judge us accurately, leaving no room for hiding or self-deception. They wound us with razor-sharp edges when we harbor sinful attitudes or actions.

Because God is the Author, His Word is effectively linked to His omniscience, wisdom, and right to judge. This truth should inspire in us humility, respect, and gratitude. The live words of a live God are a very great gift!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If you have never before memorized Hebrews 4:12, today is a great time to start! If you feel overwhelmed with idea of Scripture memory, try at least one phrase a day.

The verse reads: “For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.”

Hebrews 4:12-16

In [Christ] and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. - Ephesians 3:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

The British pastor Charles Spurgeon once made this observation about our need for the application of the Scriptures: “When a soldier is wounded in battle, it is of little use for him to know that there are those at the hospital who can bind his wounds and medicines there to ease all the pains which he now suffers. What he needs is to be taken there and the remedies applied. It is thus with our souls. To meet this need there is one, the Spirit of truth, who takes of the things of Jesus and applies them to us.”

Although the writer of Hebrews may not specifically have had the comforting power of God’s Word in mind here, Spurgeon’s point is helpful. Only the Word of God, applied with surgical precision by the Spirit of God, can meet the needs of the human heart.

Why did the author mention the Scriptures at this point (v. 12)? Because sin is so deceitful (Heb. 3:13) and the danger of drifting away so real that our only safe guide is the Word of God.

The Word is so potent that it can expose the deepest motives of our hearts. We need this penetrating work desperately, as did the Hebrews, because “the heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can understand it?” (Jer. 17:9). God’s Word can reveal our tendency toward waywardness and help keep us on the path of faithfulness to Christ.

We have another source of help and strength in our struggle. In addition to the living written Word, we have the living incarnate Word in the Person of Jesus Christ.

In verse 14, Jesus is presented in His ministering role as our great High Priest. Jesus took the blood of His sacrifice into the heavenly sanctuary, just as Israel’s high priest took the blood of animal sacrifices into the inner sanctuary of the temple to make atonement for sin.

We are encouraged to approach Jesus in our weakness because He was tempted in every way that we are tempted (v. 15). The difference, of course, is that Jesus never succumbed to temptation. He never sinned.

Instead of Jesus’ sinlessness being a barrier between Him and us, we are encouraged to come to Him for mercy and grace in our time of need (v. 16).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

With today's passage we begin the second section of our study, the superiority of Christ's priesthood (see the April 1 study for our brief outline of the book of Hebrews).

We're in for several weeks of encouragement and blessing as we consider Christ's priestly work on our behalf. That ministry is available to you today, especially if you are facing a time of need. Bring your burden, problem, or sin to the Lord right now and thank Him for His mercy and grace to deal with it.

Hebrews 4:11–16

The saying, "Live by the sword, die by the sword, is rooted in Christ's admonition of Peter in Matthew 26:52: "Put your sword back in its place, for all who draw the sword will die by the sword" (cf. John 18:10). The church father Origen interpreted this statement as a contrast of the physical and the spiritual. Peter drew a literal sword, but his violence would be judged by the sword of the Word of God, a far more fearsome weapon.

As believers, we often teach and memorize verse 12 in today's passage as reassurance that the Bible is a living text that always remains relevant to our lives and powerful for revealing the true condition of our hearts, which is true. But the sword imagery here is not merely depicting a tool of protection. The Word of God is a weapon against disobedience and a device of judgment on hardened, rebellious hearts.

That foreboding image comes immediately after the encouragement (and warning) to enter the rest of Christ by remaining obedient to Him every day until the very end to avoid a fate similar to the Israelites in the wilderness. It is foolish for anyone to think God will overlook their continued rebellion: His Word exposes our hearts and His eye sees all (v. 13).

But we have no reason to fear for our security if our faith is in Jesus, the Son of God and our great high priest (v. 14)! He has ascended into heaven, so He has finished the work of conquering death. He can relate to our weaknesses because He was tempted as we are. And we can trust in Him alone because He did not succumb to temptation, but has victory over it, and we can share in that.

Should we fear for the security of our salvation? Not at all! The sword of God's Word may be a threat to the disobedient, but nothing prevents us from drawing near to God's throne—and it is a throne of grace (v. 16)! We need mercy, for we are not perfect, but we also have grace to help us stay true. God gives us confidence, not fear. Why should we ever lose faith?

Apply the Word

There is merit to the line of thought that says doing the right thing is quite often doing the difficult thing—but that's due in part to our sin natures. When we value the opinions of others or our own pride above our standing with God, we feel conflicted. But we should adopt the mindset that we are both afraid to disobey the Lord and confident to approach His throne of grace. In light of His Word, isn't that an easy decision to make?

Hebrews 4:15; Matthew 26:36-46

But we have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. - Hebrews 4:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

A woman invited several guests to dinner. At the table, she asked her daughter to pray. "I don't know what to say," the child complained. The mother encouraged her, "Just say what you hear Mommy say." The girl bowed her head and prayed, "Dear Lord, why on earth did I invite all these people to dinner!" Every child looks for models of how to act and speak; unfortunately, not every model is a good one!

Fortunately, Jesus Himself provides the perfect model. Faced both with the excruciating suffering and death on the cross and the weight of providing satisfaction for the world's sin, Jesus declared, "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death" (v. 38; cf. Ps. 42:6). As a man, Jesus knew the fear of death and pain. But look now at His response. On three separate occasions, His words evoked the prayer He taught His disciples. Jesus practiced what He preached.

First, Jesus fell before God and prayed "My Father" (v. 39). He addressed God as Father; in fact, in Mark's version, Jesus uses the intimate word, "Abba" (Mark 14:36). Jesus knew God as Father and approached Him with His request.

Second, look at the request itself. Initially, Jesus asked that He might not have to go to the cross in order for the Father's purposes to be accomplished. But twice, Jesus emphasized obedience: "may your will be done" (vv. 39, 42; cf. Matt. 6:10). Ultimately trusting God as His loving Father, Jesus' human will obediently submitted to the divine will.

Third, upon finding His disciples sleeping rather than praying, He urged them, “watch and pray so that you will not fall into temptation” (v. 41; cf. Matt. 6:13). He knew the power of temptation; yet He also knew the source of resistance: prayer to the Father. Only then, after spending time in prayer with His Father did Jesus rise to face His betrayer and His death (vv. 45-46). What a perfect model of human trust in our heavenly Father.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It is one thing to confess trust in our heavenly Father, another to live it day to day. Take this prayer adapted from Ignatius of Loyola and live it out today: “O heavenly Father, when all is darkness and we feel our weakness and helplessness, give us the sense of Your presence, Your love, Your strength. Help us to have perfect trust in Your protecting love and strengthening power ... for, living close to You, we shall see Your hand, Your purpose, Your will through all things. Amen.”

Hebrews 4:14-16; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13;

We have [a high priest] who has been tempted in every way, just as we are--yet was without sin. - Hebrews 4:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

C. S. Lewis made these insightful observations about temptation: “No man knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good. A silly idea is current that good people do not know what temptation means. That is an obvious lie. Only those who try to resist temptation know how strong it is... Christ, because He was the only Man who never yielded to temptation, is also the only Man who knows to the full what temptation means.”

The perfection of Jesus Christ, our great high priest, in the matter of temptation could be a source of despair and even fear for us, except for the wonderful teaching of Scripture that He sympathizes with us in our struggles. Instead of rejecting us and driving us from His presence because of our failures and imperfections, Jesus offers us His limitless power to defeat temptation.

This is good news for us, because Paul leaves no doubt that temptation is a universal experience. To combat the enemy's attacks, we have an advantage over earlier generations of believers. Twice Paul says the Israelites' failures in the wilderness were recorded for our warning and spiritual education.

Having a clear example put before us in the pages of Scripture is a definite advantage. Along with this is another blessing--the promise of God's faithfulness to us even when we are under assault on every side.

God's faithfulness in temptation takes two distinct forms. First, He limits the intensity of the temptation to keep it well within our “resistance range.” It may not feel like this is true when Satan is attacking you in an area where you are especially vulnerable, but the promise of God's sovereignty stands nonetheless. God will never allow Satan to defeat you.

Second, God is faithful to install a “door” in the temptation so we can have a way out. The reason we don't escape more often is not that we are hopelessly trapped by some evil thought or desire, but that we aren't really looking for a way out. The door of escape is always there.

A faithful and merciful high priest who is ready to help us, a promise that temptation will not overwhelm us, and a door of escape--what more do we need to be victorious over temptation?

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

From Timeless Insights magazine comes this helpful formula to help us defeat temptation in the days to come:

“We need hindsight to learn from our past so we don't forget God's faithfulness and repeat the same mistakes. We need insight that comes by saturating our hearts and minds with Scripture. And we need foresight to prepare for tomorrow's battles. This will help us anticipate and avoid situations and people that can lead us into temptation.”

Hebrews 4:14-16

Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy. - Hebrews 4:16a

TODAY IN THE WORD

Haley Mills was an established child star at the time, but her escort to Disneyland one day had even more clout. As she was ushered past thousands of guests waiting in endless lines, one security guard attempted to stop the duo from proceeding. He yelled, “Hey, who do you think you are, Walt Disney?” Imagine his shock and embarrassment as Mills's escort turned around and said, “As a matter of fact, I am Walt Disney.” Needless to say, the guard let them through.

Special relationships with people in high places garner all sorts of special access. And our relationship with Christ gives us immediate access that even a king would envy. Today's reading in Hebrews reveals that, with Christ as our high priest, we enjoy benefits even Solomon couldn't call his own. Our high priest has ascended higher than any Old Testament priest ever could (v. 14)!

But our access comes not just from Christ's lofty position in heaven, but also from the common experiences Jesus went through on earth (v. 15). We have a high priest who can relate to our weaknesses and has overcome all our temptations. Because of that unique relationship, we can "approach the throne of grace with confidence" to receive help whenever we need it—whether it's grace when we suffer or mercy when we stumble (v. 16).

This doesn't negate, however, Ecclesiastes' warning about the appropriate awe the presence of God should stir within us. It simply adds another dimension to the picture. "Under the sun" thinking puts primary stress on our sin without considering the redemptive power of our heavenly high priest. Our inclination toward faithlessness makes any oaths we might make to God very risky. But Christ's priesthood is confirmed with an oath straight from God that can never be broken (Heb. 7:20–22).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Is there some temptation in your life you're afraid to bring to Jesus, some sin you've never had the courage to confess? Jesus can sympathize with whatever you're facing! You can approach His throne with boldness and claim His grace and mercy in your time of need.

Hebrews 4:14-16; 7:23–28

Therefore, since we have a great high priest ... let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. - Hebrews 4:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1989 a group of Romanian students embarked on a risky trip, smuggling Bibles into neighboring Moldova, part of the former Soviet Union. Being caught with Christian literature in either country could have put them in jail. Yet somehow they made it through border crossings, past local police, into designated apartment buildings, and back home without one encounter with security forces. Only later they learned that a Christian, Vasili, had spent three entire days in intercessory prayer on their behalf.

It is always encouraging for us to learn that others have been praying for us. How much more encouraging is it to realize the Lord Jesus Himself is praying for us! Indeed, Jesus as our Great High Priest "always lives to intercede for [us]" (Heb. 7:25).

A key Old Testament figure was the high priest, chosen from the tribe of Levi. The high priest oversaw the duties of priests (2 Chron. 19:11) and served as mediator between God and the people. On the annual Day of Atonement, the High Priest--alone--was able to enter the Most Holy Place of the tabernacle, where he sacrificed for his own sins and for those of all the people (Ex. 30:10).

In Hebrews, we see how Jesus is superior to all that has gone before Him, including the Old Testament high priest. In Hebrews 4:14, Jesus is called the Great High Priest, the One who has gone before us through the heavens. Although Jesus is vastly superior to any human high priest, He is still able to understand our human weakness, because He is fully human and fully divine--yet He is without sin (v. 15).

Hebrews 7:27 shows that whereas a human high priest had to make atonement for his own sin, Jesus had no sin of His own to atone for. Moreover, Jesus "sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself" (v. 27). Finally, whereas the high priest had to be replaced each time one died, "because Jesus lives forever, He has a permanent priesthood" (v. 24).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Since Jesus always lives to intercede for us, we also have the privilege of praying for others.

Hebrews 5

Hebrews 5:1-10

He became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey Him. - Hebrews 5:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

More than a century ago, a young English preacher of great promise suddenly lost confidence in the Bible. The liberal thought of the late-nineteenth century left him confused and questioning the Scriptures. So 21-year-old G. Campbell Morgan locked all of his books

about the Bible in a cupboard and sat down to study the Bible itself. Morgan came away so convinced of the truth of God's Word that he spent the next sixty years preaching and teaching it on both sides of the Atlantic.

We can be sure that given his experience, Campbell Morgan would have been sympathetic to any sincere doubter he met. We tend to be more patient and understanding with those who have our weaknesses.

In the same way, Israel's high priests were able to ""deal gently"" with struggling sinners (v. 2). Why? Because the high priest was a redeemed sinner himself. The sacrifices he offered for the people's sins were necessary to cover his sins as well.

Clearly, the Spirit-inspired writer of Hebrews was appreciative of the office the high priest held. After all, these priests were called by God, just as Aaron was called to be Israel's first high priest and the model for priestly ministry.

But as honored as the office of high priest was, the men who occupied that post could not help but pale in comparison to Jesus Christ--God's perfect, sinless, eternal High Priest.

We said at the beginning of the month that the author of Hebrews is concerned with demonstrating Christ's superiority. Today's passage is a perfect example of this emphasis. Just as earthly high priests had to meet certain qualifications, so Jesus met, and far exceeded, those qualifications.

For instance, Jesus was also appointed to His priestly post by God. And He offered a sacrifice for the people's sins.

But that's where the comparison ends. Jesus is the Son of God, He holds His priesthood forever, He Himself was the sacrifice for sin, and He is the source of salvation ""for all who obey Him"" (v. 9). And Jesus' priesthood is not after the order of Aaron, but after the order of Melchizedek, a mysterious figure we will meet again.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The ""loud cries and tears"" of Jesus were most evident in His prayer in Gethsemane just before His crucifixion.

Gethsemane takes on added significance for us during this special week, as we see a Savior who can sympathize with our human limitations. It was in the garden that Jesus ""learned obedience"" by submitting Himself to His Father's will--and it was on behalf of us, to take the burden of our sins upon Himself! For Him, it would mean suffering and death on the Cross. Today, let's worship, praise, and adore the Savior, our permanent High Priest who offered Himself up for us!

Hebrews 5:1–10

A new generation of American socialites, sometimes dubbed “celebutantes,” has achieved fame for their narcissistic antics. They flaunt their families’ riches and publicize their wild, spoiled lifestyles. One such starlet, whose net worth is estimated at over \$45 million, epitomized the trend with this quote: “The only rule is don’t be boring and dress cute wherever you go. Life is too short to blend in.”

Inheriting a position of wealth, rank, or influence doesn't mean much without honor, responsibility, and meaningful achievements of one's own. Jesus, the Son of God, didn't simply inherit the role of high priest through a sense of entitlement or a grand coronation. Jesus was heard by the Father due to His “reverent submission” (v. 7). How is it that the Son of God had to learn obedience? Because the highest royalty in the universe took on humility for our sakes.

A student of the law might question Jesus' qualifications to be a priest since He was from the tribe of Judah, not Levi. But Jesus didn't cut corners to gain that title. He was a priest in the order of Melchizedek, a distinction we'll explore in further detail later. For now we'll focus on the fact that He was appointed by God to the position. Therefore, there's no question that Jesus can relate to the people He represents.

Verse 9 states that Jesus was made perfect, which is not to say He was ever imperfect. Through His sufferings, Jesus was made complete as the perfect high priest who, like other priests, could relate to our sufferings and struggles as humans. But unlike other priests, Jesus had no sins of His own to confess. Thus, He is not merely a go-between who confesses our sins on our behalf; instead, He is the true source of our salvation (v. 9).

This passage is encouraging because it emphasizes not only the high qualifications of Christ but also the humble way He ascended to that position. As the Son of God, He had nothing to prove. But as one of us, He knows just what we're going through.

Apply the Word

It has become fashionable in recent years to speculate about what it would have been like to be Jesus, with an increased fascination on the details of Christ's humanity. Ironically, Jesus doesn't have to wonder at all what it's like to be us. He can sympathize completely with our struggles, and He assumed that position by choice. Rejoice today in the knowledge that Jesus

relates to your pain. It should make obeying His Word that much easier to know His demands are never unreasonable

Hebrews 5:7-10 Luke 22:39-44;

He humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! - Philippians 2:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

Charles Spurgeon, the noted nineteenth-century preacher, once asked, “Is it not a curious thing that, whenever God means to make a man great, He always breaks him in pieces first?”

Hebrews 5 says much the same thing regarding the life of Jesus. He learned obedience through His suffering. We know that Jesus has always been perfect, but in His humanity, Jesus was utterly dependent upon the Father and submitted to Him completely. Having trusted Him to the point of death on the Cross, Jesus became the source of salvation for all who would obey Him (v. 9).

Today’s passage from Hebrews also says that Jesus’ prayers were heard because of His “reverent submission” (v. 7). And in today’s passage from Luke, we see just how fully Jesus submitted to the Father. Truly, Jesus lived out what He taught His disciples to pray: “Your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matt. 6:10).

Yesterday we focused on Jesus’ agony in Gethsemane; today we’ll focus on His obedience. Luke’s account adds some details that aren’t in either Matthew or Mark. First, Luke says that an angel ministered to Jesus, further indicating the intensity of Jesus’ wrestling in prayer. Luke goes on to say that instead of retreating from this battle, Jesus prayed even more earnestly (v. 44). As His anguish increased, Jesus didn’t pull back, but rather turned His entire being toward what God was asking of Him.

We don’t know how long Jesus prayed that night, but it had to have been at least several hours. All three Gospel accounts indicate that Jesus rose from prayer fully resolved to carry out what the Father asked. Both Matthew and Mark record that when He finished praying, Jesus said, “Rise! Let us go! Here comes my betrayer!” (Matt. 26:46; Mark 14:42), purposefully walking toward Judas.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The hardest prayer we can pray is “not my will, but Your will.” Learning to submit to God is a lifelong process. It’s easy to think we’re submissive and obedient to God’s will when circumstances are favorable. But when hard times come into our lives and we’re forced to set aside our own dreams and to trust God, it gets much harder. As we contemplate the price that Jesus paid for us on the Cross, He becomes our constant reminder of a will fully submitted to the Father.

Hebrews 5:11-6:3

Solid food is for the mature, who by constant use have trained themselves to distinguish good from evil. - Hebrews 5:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Well-known devotional author Oswald Chambers has said, “If you believe in Jesus, you are not to spend all your time in smooth waters just inside the harbor, full of delight but always moored. You have to get out into the great deeps of God and begin to know for yourself, begin to have spiritual discernment... Beware of harking back to what you were once when God wants you to be something you’ve never been.”

You won’t find a better description of the people to whom the book of Hebrews was written. They were like adolescents stuck in kindergarten, or college students struggling with their ABCs. We could shake our heads at these spiritually stunted saints--except when we look in the mirror and realize how often we fail to act on the truth we know.

The writer of Hebrews was in the middle of some important teaching about the priestly ministry of Jesus when he looked up, as it were, and saw that he was losing his class. The Hebrews had become slow spiritual learners. This was not an indictment of their mental abilities, but of their shaky commitment to Christ and their growth in the knowledge of Him.

Spiritual dullness is a serious problem for any believer. But its effects ripple outward from individual Christians to the body of Christ. By the time this letter was written, the author felt these Hebrew believers should have been ready to teach others. Instead, they were in need of teaching so basic that the writer pictured them as infants still on the bottle.

That’s a painful assessment, but it fit the Hebrews. There’s nothing wrong with “pure spiritual milk” (1 Pet. 2:2), the basics of the Christian faith. Peter tells us to crave this truth--but not for the rest of our Christian lives. The purpose of milk is to help babies grow into maturity so that they can eventually digest solid food.

Just in case his readers didn’t get the point fully, the writer laid out his challenge explicitly in verses 1-3. In the words of Oswald Chambers, it was time for the Hebrews to leave the “smooth waters” of spiritual immaturity and “get out into the great deeps of

God."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

This Good Friday, as we remember the suffering of Jesus Christ on our behalf, would be a great day to take a new step of Christian growth.

Maybe you can name an area of your spiritual life where you want to see growth: prayer, stewardship, love, obedience, faith, or patience. One tangible step you can take this weekend is to get out your Bible concordance and see what the Word has to say about your topic. Most important, decide that you will obey the truth as God reveals it to you.

Hebrews 5:11–6:12

The eternal security of the believer is an important theological tenet of our faith. This doctrine teaches that our salvation comes from God and therefore cannot be removed or lost. Once we place our faith in Christ, it is secure (see John 6:37; 10:27–29; Rom. 8:35–39; Eph. 1:13–14). Some have read our passage for today and wondered whether this text undermines the doctrine of eternal security. Does Hebrews contradict the teaching of “once saved, always saved”?

Obviously, understanding this subject requires more than the span of one day’s devotional study, but it will help to look at Hebrews 6:4–8 within the context of the whole passage and the message of Hebrews as a whole. Prior to today’s passage, the author was explaining the essential points of Jesus’ qualifications as high priest—an important, yet largely new, line of thinking for many readers of this letter. Beginning in 5:11, though, the writer expressed frustration with the fact that many of these believers had abandoned the discipline of growing in their knowledge of Christ.

In fact, they had yet to fully grasp foundational, elementary concepts such as repentance, faith, baptism, and eternal destiny (6:2). But, beginning with the phrase, “It is impossible,” the stern warning that concludes in 6:8 takes the argument one step further. Those who mock Christ and dismiss His gift after tasting the goodness of His Word and experiencing the powerful influence of His Spirit reveal their true spiritual condition through their actions. They have mocked Christ with their dismissal of His gift. They have produced no fruit, so why should we expect anything else (v. 8)?

The writer of Hebrews expected his readers to have progressed in their understanding and obedience, not teetering on the edge of doing right or doing wrong. They should be growing in their knowledge of Jesus, flourishing in good works, and working diligently to live out their faith with every day of their lives. The Christian life isn’t a matter of obeying the rules. We are expected to grow, to study diligently, and to actively inherit our salvation.

Apply the Word

Our works can never save us—but our saving faith will produce works. Yet we all know someone who has fallen away from the faith. The word that stings our hearts is impossible. Is it really impossible for a fallen brother or sister to return to repentance? The words of Christ tell us: “With man this is impossible, but with God all things are possible” (Matt. 9:26). God is full of grace and mercy, but that should encourage us to love and serve Him, not test His forbearance.

Hebrews 6

Hebrews 6:4-20

We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. - Hebrews 6:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

Isabel Smith was a happy young nursing student when she was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1928. Her family sent her to a nursing home for what they thought was a few months of treatment, but Isabel wound up spending the next twenty-one years in bed. She refused to give up, however. She read widely and wrote letters and taught other patients to read and write. She even met a young man, a fellow tuberculosis patient, and dreamed of marriage. Although Isabel came close to death several times, she eventually married the man she loved. She then went on to write a book, *Wish I Might*, about all the good things life had brought her.

In several ways, the remarkable life of Isabel Smith pictures what the epistle writer hoped for in the lives of the Hebrews. They had been afflicted with a debilitating spiritual disease that was severely stunting their growth in Christ. So serious was the problem that dire warnings were called for.

Verses 4-6 are difficult to interpret, and at least four different scenarios are suggested. It seems best to understand these words as a

warning to true believers against being disqualified for God's service by failing to remain faithful to the truth they know (see 1 Cor. 9:24-27, which describes a similar problem).

The fire in this text, then, is not the fire of hell, but the scorching of an unproductive field so that it could be replanted in hopes of a fruitful crop. The danger for the Hebrews was not losing their salvation, but living such unproductive lives that everything they did would be burned up in the end (1 Cor. 3:10-15).

Verse 10 shows that these believers had known better days, having logged faithful service in the past. They needed to continue on this path (v. 11), the end of which is a secure hope.

The Hebrews had a great example of faithfulness in Abraham, a man who believed God and received His unchangeable promise. Even more encouraging is the truth that a believer's hope is secure because it is anchored in heaven, where Jesus Christ now serves as our ever-faithful High Priest.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The day before Easter gives us a great reminder of the faithfulness that our Lord showed, even in the face of death.

With Jesus as our model of perseverance and faithfulness, as well as the One who paid for our sins on the Cross, how can we fail to be faithful to the God who has called us? Paul told the Galatians they were running a good race--until someone ""cut in on"" them and tripped them up (Gal. 5:7). How is your Christian race today?

Hebrews 6:9-15

After waiting patiently, Abraham received what was promised. - Hebrews 6:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

The old saying goes, "Good things come to those who wait." But this waiting is more than a matter of sitting around on our hands, expecting blessings to fall from the sky. One such example is Walt Disney, who was turned down 302 times before he got financing for his dream of creating Disneyland. Rather than sit passively and assume someone would call him offering money, he persisted in seeking the funds he needed.

Today we turn our attention to the fruit of the Spirit called patience. For many of us, patience has a passive connotation, a "wait and see" attitude. But Hebrews clarifies for us just what it means to exercise this fruit of patience.

Our key example is Abraham, who waited patiently for God to fulfill His promises (v. 15). He is set forth as an illustration of someone we should imitate, because through his faith and patience he did see the faithfulness of God (v. 12). This link between faith and patience is critical, because the primary motivation behind our willingness to wait on God is our faith that He will do what He has promised to do.

We see both positive and negative examples of patience in Abraham's life. God had promised him a son, but as the years passed and no son materialized, Abraham decided to take matters into his own hands. He had a son with Hagar, the maid of his wife Sarah. Abraham's lack of patience here is tied to his doubt that God would indeed do what He said: give him a son with his wife Sarah, who was barren.

God did fulfill His promise, and Abraham and Sarah had their son, Isaac. Then God told Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice. Abraham obeyed, and we see an example of active patience. Even though he thought he would lose his son Isaac, he patiently believed that God would make a way to fulfill His word (see Gen. 22).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

To encourage you to persevere, to practice active patience, we recommend that you keep a spiritual journal

Hebrews 6:13-20

The complete details are secret, but the rigorous security protecting the vault at Fort Knox is known worldwide. The walls of the vault are lined with granite. A 22-ton blast door protects the entrance. The combination to enter the vault has to be entered separately by ten different individuals who alone know their part of the code. In addition to the expected cameras, alarms, and guards, the Bullion Depository is rumored to boast lavish security measures such as attack helicopters, mines, automated machine guns, and a flooding system designed to drown any intruder.

Anyone looking for a loophole in God's promise of salvation to His people will have more success trying to infiltrate Fort Knox. God's Word on its own is unchangeable and sure, but to add an extravagant layer of security for our comfort, He sealed His promise with

an oath sworn on the highest name possible: His own. By His Word and by His name—two things absolutely guaranteed to be true—God confirmed that a great nation would come from Abraham (v. 18).

Take note: even though there is no one higher than God, He found it suitable to relate to Abraham and to us using a humanly understood authentication of His promise. He didn't need to. The promise itself was sufficient. He did so to help us understand more clearly just how invariable His salvation would be (v. 17). He did this after Abraham verified his faith beyond dispute through his willingness to sacrifice his own son (Genesis 22). Was Abraham's faith born out in works? Yes. Were his works the reason for his assurance? Not at all. Abraham may have waited patiently (v. 15), but we know he didn't wait perfectly. It was the Word and name of God that assured him.

What an inspiring assurance after the warning in yesterday's passage! To prevent anyone from falling prey to the belief that our salvation is based on works, the author of Hebrews reminded us of the true anchor firmly holding our souls secure. It is our hope in Christ, who is already enjoying the rest of resurrection and communion on high with the Father in His sanctuary.

Apply the Word

The doubly guaranteed promise of God should provide incomparable assurance in our hearts. How can we let doubt creep in when God has given us such an ironclad covenant? He didn't swear by Himself for His own good but for ours. Let the truth of His Word and His name cast all doubt from your mind. Spend at least a few minutes quietly savoring the hope we have in Him. Or sing aloud a hymn such as "Blessed Assurance," and praise your Savior all day long!

Hebrews 7

Hebrews 7:1-10; John 19:17-30; 20:1-9

When he had received the drink, Jesus said, ""It is finished."" - John 19:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the most fundamental principles of the Old Testament priesthood was this: a priest could not come before God empty-handed. He had to bring a sacrifice to cover both his own sins and the sins of the people. That sacrifice anticipated the perfect, once-for-all sacrifice that Jesus Christ, our great High Priest, offered on the Cross. This was not for His own sins, for he had none, but for our sins.

What better day than Easter Sunday to consider Jesus' high priesthood? The result of His sacrificial death is salvation for us today and forever. When Jesus cried out on the Cross, ""It is finished,"" He was announcing that the full payment for sin had been made. The debt God held against us had been canceled! Praise God for the love that took Jesus to the Cross.

Today, however, we celebrate the fact that Jesus did not remain in the tomb. ""He always lives to intercede for [us]"" (Heb. 7:25). As our eternal High Priest, Jesus is the perfect fulfillment of the priesthood practiced by the somewhat mysterious Old Testament figure named Melchizedek.

The author had started to explain the importance of Melchizedek's priesthood earlier (Heb. 5:1-10). But he despaired of his readers' ability to understand, given their spiritual immaturity. After a parenthetical warning, the author returned to his subject in this passage.

We know very little about Melchizedek, to whom the writer of Hebrews assigned some lofty titles. His name is very significant, however, meaning ""righteousness"" and ""peace."" These two attributes alone are enough to identify him with Jesus Christ.

The writer, however, had other reasons to present Melchizedek as a priestly forerunner of Christ. Neither this man's parentage, birth, nor death were ever recorded. Although the writer is not claiming that Melchizedek is eternal, this lack of human record makes him a fitting representative of the eternal Christ.

But there's another point the Hebrews needed to understand. As a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, Jesus is superior to the priests of the old covenant. Therefore, the ministry He instituted is superior to the priesthood and the sacrificial system of the Mosaic Law, which was never meant to be permanent.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's hard for us to imagine the earthshaking change that Jesus' death meant for those who had grown up under the Law.

The change was symbolized when the great curtain in the Jerusalem temple, which barred access to God's direct presence, was

torn in two as Jesus died (Mark 15:38). Two thousand years later we are still enjoying the full benefits of Christ's death and the assurance of eternal life that His resurrection brings us. Sometime today, try to get alone for a ""mini-retreat"" with the Lord to praise Him for His death on your behalf and for His glorious resurrection.

Hebrews 7:1–10

“Father Abraham” is a children’s song rehearsed in Sunday schools for generations. The implicit message, one adopted by many believers even without singing the song or conducting the motions, is that Abraham is the father of faith in the one true God. We tend to assume that when Abraham was called by God, he represented the lone pillar of faith in the world, and all believers are spiritual descendants from Abraham and his decision to follow God.

But the biblical account in both our reading today and in Genesis 14 offers interesting additional information. After Abram valiantly rescued Lot, he was greeted by Melchizedek, who was a leader without genealogy (v. 3 in today’s reading). He was both king and priest, and he was a righteous and obedient servant of God. We aren’t provided with many details about Melchizedek, but clearly he is important for us to understand the nature of Jesus’ priesthood and our faith.

If we were tempted to think that all faith in the history of creation springs from Abraham, we would be sorely mistaken. Abraham is a spiritual father, to be sure. But he is not the author of faith. In fact, he recognized the authority of Melchizedek above his own and paid a tithe to him accordingly (v. 4). Melchizedek provides evidence against anyone who would object to Christ’s qualifications as high priest on the basis of His tribal lineage. While Jesus is not his physical descendant, he is a priest of that order or of that nature, independent of (and, the author argued, even superior to) the Levitical line from which Hebrew priests were selected (v. 9).

One last quality about Melchizedek relates very closely to the nature of Christ: the meaning of his name. His name and title meant king of righteousness and king of peace (v. 2). How fitting that such an affiliation would be bestowed on Jesus Christ, the source of our righteousness and the Prince of Peace (Isa. 9:6). It also helps convey that Christ’s priesthood was not a hostile takeover but the ultimate phase of an established, superior priesthood.

Apply the Word

If your view of Christian faith has become confined to only the people like you, perhaps it’s time to look for how God is working in other places. You could read a biography of a Christian from another denomination, or read some testimonies of believers in other parts of the world. The point of this exercise is not to identify theological variances, but to be encouraged by how God calls, equips, and preserves His people in all times and all places in the world.

Hebrews 7:16 John 8:31-49

One ... has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. - Hebrews 7:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Neale Donald Walsch explains that his book, *Conversations with God*, originated when he began to transcribe his discussions with the “Divine.” In the course of those conversations, he heard—much to his relief—that God wasn’t intending to punish the world for unbelief. “We are all going to heaven,” says Walsh. An important question must be answered: Why believe this guy? What credibility do we lend to someone who claims to have a revolutionary new word from God?

The same question was asked about Jesus in John 8, and it is a relevant and important question still today. Does Jesus have credibility? Can His message be trusted? We learn that people answer that question not simply from the proof they’re offered, but on the basis of their willingness to understand a personal need for salvation.

Jesus offered sufficient proof to His audiences throughout the Gospels, but He was rejected by many. Here, the Jews rejected Jesus’ message because they rejected His concept of salvation. He called them slaves in need of rescue. This offended their sense of heritage, of being children of God simply because they were children of Abraham.

Jesus defended His Abrahamic heritage. The covenant blessings come through Abraham, no doubt. But Jesus insisted that if the Jews were truly sons of Abraham, they would receive Him. There is one God, one Father. If you know the Father, you embrace the Son. These Jewish leaders, in rejecting the Son, were ultimately turning their backs on their heritage of faith.

Jesus’ authority depended ultimately on His deity. He made this claim by asserting His immortality. Death equalizes all of us as humans, but the Son of God, existing before birth and defying the grave, proved that He had come from God. The ultimate proof that Jesus can be trusted is His resurrection from the dead!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Peter Kreeft, a Christian apologist, maintains that belief in the divinity of Christ is “the central Christian doctrine, for it is like a skeleton key that opens all the others.” As you talk with others about the gospel, this doctrine is one you must be able to understand and capably explain. In order to do so, you will want to know passages like this, and others, where Jesus clearly claims divinity. Furthermore, you will want to be able to defend why these Bible passages are historically reliable.

Hebrews 7:25 John 17:13-19

He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. - Hebrews 7:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bible scholars talk about imputed righteousness and imparted righteousness. Imputed righteousness has to do with the saving work of Jesus Christ on the Cross. When we put our faith in Jesus, we’re declared “not guilty” in the Father’s sight because of the price that Jesus paid for our sin. Imparted righteousness has to do with the work of the Holy Spirit. Through God’s Word and His indwelling presence, the Holy Spirit sanctifies us, or makes us more like the image of Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 7:1-28

In him and through faith in him we may approach God with freedom and confidence. - Ephesians 3:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

For most of us, using a password to gain access to something is a daily reality. We use passwords to log on to computers, or to withdraw money from our bank accounts. Life can get a bit complicated when we forget these passwords!

In a certain sense, Jesus is like our password to gain access to God. He is the One who makes it possible for us to draw near to God and who brings our petitions before God. In the book of Hebrews, this role of Jesus is described in terms of the high priest of the Levitical order in the Old Testament (see Dec. 7).

In Hebrews, Jesus the high priest is likened to Melchizedek, whom we first meet in Genesis 14, when Abraham offered him tithes after defeating some foreign kings. Hebrews 7 mentions two very intriguing things about Melchizedek: first, he doesn’t have human genealogy, and second, he remains a priest forever. There’s much debate about this mysterious figure’s identity and nature, but the author of Hebrews mentions him to show us something about Jesus. In order to be a Levitical priest, a man had to descend from Levi. An unknown genealogy would prevent a person from the priesthood. In Jesus’ case, His genealogy traced back to Judah, not Levi (v. 14). So the author of Hebrews wants to show that, like Jesus, another high priest (Melchizedek) was without genealogy and still wasn’t disqualified from the priesthood.

Second, Jesus is like Melchizedek in that He also is a priest forever. One major problem with the Levitical priesthood was that the priests eventually died (v. 23). Jesus, in comparison, “has a permanent priesthood” (v. 24). Unlike these priests, Jesus is able to intercede continuously for those who come to God through Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We need a priest like Jesus (v. 26)! We need One who offered the perfect sacrifice. We need One who intercedes for us. And we need One who leads us in worship.

Hebrews 7:11–28

The advent of ultrasound technology revolutionized the medical field of obstetrics. Prior to its advancement in the 1960s (and its popularity boom in the decades that followed), doctors and midwives used techniques that provided a much more limited knowledge of the health and development of unborn children. These ultrasonic images convey a wealth of potentially life-saving information.

In similar fashion, the priesthood in the order of Aaron served its purpose for a time, but it was limited in its effectiveness. Compared to the priesthood of Christ, the function of the Levitical priesthood was helplessly incomplete.

The author made it clear that Jesus did not fit the traditional pattern that Israel expected from a priest. But that was actually a blessing rather than a detriment, because the work of the traditional priest was forever unfinished. The work of Jesus Christ was complete forever (v. 25)! And Christ’s qualification as priest was secured with a divine oath (vv. 17, 20; cf. Ps. 110:4). Notice how the author of Hebrews continually used Old Testament passages to verify the authenticity of this New Testament priesthood in Christ.

One chief limitation of any human priest is the one that plagues us all: death (v. 23). That wasn’t a problem for Jesus, because He died and rose again before taking His place as priest. Whereas other priests offered a service to people of faith for a time but were

constrained by their own mortality, Jesus is able to save us completely even from death because He has already crossed that chasm. He is all that we are not: holy, sinless, set apart, and exalted. Yet He is not detached.

Through Christ, we draw near to God (v. 19)! As Hebrews has established again and again, Jesus Christ relates to us, and in addition, He intercedes for us and brings us close to our Heavenly Father. He bridges a spiritual and natural gap that we could never cross on our own. He also takes us from temporal to eternal—this relationship with God, established through His priesthood, will never end!

Apply the Word

We can draw near to God. The power of that simple yet profound truth astounds us. We might not fully grasp the eternal process of Christ's priesthood, but the result for our lives is clear. Yet how often do we avail ourselves of the throne of grace to which we can draw near? If the answer to that question isn't "every possible waking moment," we are missing out. We have a permanent connection beyond this fallen world. Rejoice in that and make full use of it today!

Hebrews 7:11-19

What the law was powerless to do... God did by sending His own Son in the likeness of sinful man. - Romans 8:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Imagine the following scenario for a moment. As you back your car down the driveway tomorrow morning on your way to work, a local police officer pulls up behind you and gets out. The officer comes to the driver's window and says, "'Don't worry, nothing's wrong. I'm just here to escort you to work, to help make sure you don't violate any traffic laws on the way. It's a new service we're offering our citizens to help them obey the law.'"

If that happened to you, you'd look around for the friend who was playing a bad practical joke on you. Or you might look for the hidden TV camera--anything that would prove it wasn't real. You would know something was up, because the law simply doesn't work that way. Obedience depends on you. The officer shows up only after there has been a violation.

That's the problem with the law. It can only do two things: command and condemn. It has no power to help you obey. Even so, we respect the law. To an even greater extent, a first-century Jew would have respected the Law. Therefore, the readers of this letter must have been startled when the author called the Mosaic regulations "'weak and useless'" (v. 18). The writer, however, was not attacking God's Law; he was simply pointing out the temporary nature of those legal statutes.

Since the Law could not make anyone perfect in relationship to God (vv. 11, 19), a change was necessary--specifically, a change in the priesthood. Why was this change necessary? For a number of reasons.

First, the Levitical priests were themselves sinful men who had to offer sacrifices for their own sins. They had no power to help the people obey and no authority of their own to forgive sins.

Second, the Levitical priests died out and had to be replaced in each new generation. Although the human priesthood could not be truly permanent in nature, Jesus' priesthood is built on "'the power of an indestructible life'" (v. 16).

A third reason change was needed is that the sacrifices of the Law covered sin only temporarily. God never meant for the blood of animals to make permanent atonement for sin.

What a blessing it is to know that the death and resurrection of Christ have decisively addressed every inadequacy of the Law! The Hebrews needed to understand that, instead of turning back to the Law, their hope lay in going forward with Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The freedom from the Law that we enjoy in Christ (see Rom. 6:14) should become even more precious to us after a study like this.

Given the finality of Christ's sacrifice, it would be a shame for us to fall into the trap of trying to earn God's favor by our performance. Yet even sincere Christians can do this to themselves and to others. Are you judging yourself, or someone else, by a performance standard you have created? If so, make this a day of release.

Hebrews 7:20-28

He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. - Hebrews 7:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Two words are central to the author's argument for the superiority of Christ: perfect and better.

These words hold the key to today's passage. Jesus is a perfect High Priest, totally separate from sin; therefore, He brought in a better covenant. This is the basic truth to grasp in the verses before us.

The author is building the case for his declaration that the Law of Moses, under which his Jewish Christian readers had been brought up, had been done away with in Christ. Chapter 7 is part of an extended section, stretching into chapter 10, in which the superior priesthood and covenant of Jesus Christ are revealed.

The oath of God is one reason that the new covenant Jesus established is better than the old. The Law of Moses did not require an oath from its priests. Even if those priests had been required to swear their faithfulness, their oath would have lasted only as long as they lived. Every new priest would have had to swear a new oath.

The priesthood of Jesus forever settled the issue of an oath; God Himself took an oath that Jesus would be ""a priest forever"" (v. 21). This verse and verse 17, quotations from Psalm 110:4, show that God made this promise long before Jesus came to earth to fulfill His ministry. Since the oath of God cannot be changed, Jesus is guaranteed an eternal priesthood.

It seems that every paragraph we encounter in Hebrews gives us another reason to thank God for the new covenant in Jesus' blood (Luke 22:20). It's obvious that human spiritual leaders are imperfect people who grow old and die, just like everyone else.

It's one thing to lose leaders. It's another thing to have to rely on those leaders and their endless sacrificial rituals for our acceptance before God. The whole Levitical system had a sense of impermanence about it that nothing could fix--except a totally different priesthood and a perfect High Priest!

Jesus meets this need (v. 26). Look at His qualifications, compare Him with every other priest, and you'll praise God that He appointed His perfect Son to be your High Priest.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

No one but Jesus can ""save completely those who come to God through him"" (v. 25).

The book of Hebrews helps us understand about the ""present tense"" of salvation. This is the priestly work that Jesus Christ is carrying out in heaven today to help us in our struggles and to keep us cleansed from sin. Because He always lives to intercede for you, you can bring Him your deepest need or burden today--and we urge you to do so.

Hebrews 8

Hebrews 8:1-13

I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more. - Hebrews 8:12

TODAY IN THE WORD

Polycarp, the bishop of Smyrna in what is now modern Turkey, was a worthy defender of the Christian faith. Born in 65 AD, he counted the apostle John among his teachers. It was John, in fact, who named Polycarp to the office he held for more than fifty years. He died at the stake in 155 AD, after many years of defending Christian truth against paganism and mystical heresies such as gnosticism, the error that threatened to engulf the church in the decades immediately after the apostles.

Polycarp considered his life of little importance in comparison to the truth of God. We can't say whether or not the author of Hebrews became a martyr for Jesus Christ. But the fact that the book is anonymous tells us that the writer considered God's truth far more important than personal identity. Like Bishop Polycarp, whoever wrote Hebrews was a worthy defender of the faith.

Chapter 8 is another vital link in the writer's argument for ""the truth that is in Jesus"" (Eph. 4:21).

Some people tend to think of Hebrews as somewhat hard to understand. Clearly this was not the author's intention. He wanted the Hebrews, and the larger body of Christ, to understand exactly what he was saying.

And what could be clearer than the teaching of verses 1-6? Jesus Christ is a High Priest who serves at God's right hand in the true tabernacle in heaven, of which the tabernacle Moses built was just a copy and a shadow. Therefore, both Jesus' ministry and His covenant are superior to the old.

Even the promises of the new covenant are better. The writer proves this by quoting the great new covenant promise of Jeremiah 31:31-34. We recognize this as the salvation purchased for us by the blood of Christ, a salvation which included not only full forgiveness of sin (v. 12), but also the promised indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit.

What was deficient about the first covenant? As we saw earlier, the problem was not the commands of God but the people's inability to keep them. If God had not provided a way for us to be forgiven for our transgressions of His Law, none of us would be able to stand before Him.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Israel's sacrificial system crumbled when Jerusalem was attacked by Roman invaders in 70 AD.

Even before that event, Jesus Christ had already made the offering of animal sacrifices obsolete. But that does not mean we have no sacrifice to offer God. Instead of offering God a lamb to cover our sins, we are instructed to bring Him ""a sacrifice of praise--the fruit of lips that confess His name"" (Heb. 13:15). This week, let's bring the Lord this sacrifice by sharing about His faithfulness to someone who needs Christ.

Hebrews 8:1–13

In geometry, a circle is defined as the set of all points in a plane that are a set distance from the center. Although we can see drawings of a circle and observe objects that are circular in shape, they aren't true circles. The points that make up a circle are immeasurably small, having no width, height, or depth. A true circle would be imperceptible to the naked eye. What we see are mere representations of an ideal concept.

Like a representative sketch, so too the earthly tabernacle, the sanctuary of the Lord set up by Moses in the wilderness, was an imperfect symbol. The main difference is that, unlike a geometrical ideal, there is a true heavenly original upon which the earthly tabernacle was based. It was neither set up by Moses nor intended for transitory life. The true sanctuary is permanently stationed in heaven.

Today's passage marks the logical conclusion about Christ's status as the perfect high priest with the perfect qualifications, in an established place of service, living in the true tabernacle (vv. 1, 2). For any Jewish believers who may have been wavering between their commitment to their new Savior and the comfortable familiarity of their old traditions, the argument made in chapter 8 would have been quite convincing. The temporary nature of the old covenant was obvious.

The writer was not making a new point. A significant portion of this chapter is in fact yet another quote from the Old Testament (Jer. 31:31–34). The law would no longer be engraved in stone or inscribed on a scroll; God planned to implement a new law and record it in the minds and hearts of His people (v. 10). The prophecy foretold a people who would not only know the Word of God, but one who would know God Himself (v. 11). The means to that end was Jesus Christ. This High Priest, promise, law, covenant, and tabernacle are superior to their earthly manifestations. The temporal was nothing to cling to, but rather a system intended to point to the perfect future ahead. People of faith had no reason to turn back to past traditions. The future in Christ was so much brighter.

Apply the Word

The imagery and tradition of modern worship may be very different from past Jewish practices, but both are merely foretastes of coming glory. We celebrate the New Covenant, but our hymns and songs are but a preview of eternal praise. Our sermons and teaching preview an eternity with the Word Himself. We are not meant to be complacent with where we are in our spiritual growth—remember your citizenship in heaven and focus on the real home we have yet to enter.

Hebrews 9

Hebrews 9:1-14

Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God. - EPHESIANS 5:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. G. Campbell Morgan (see the April 9 study) said this about believers who are reluctant to commit themselves wholeheartedly to Christ: ""When our convictions are yielded to Him completely, He is able to give Himself to us in all His fullness. Until that is so, He cannot trust us. How true it is that we often miss the joy and strength of our Christianity because, by withholding ourselves from Christ, we make it impossible for Him to give Himself to us in all the fullness of His grace and truth.""

What an accurate description of the spiritual loss the recipients of Hebrews were in danger of bringing upon themselves! By pulling back from their commitment to Christ--perhaps under persecution from certain Jewish elements or the threat of it--they were risking the loss of unspeakable blessings.

The first half of Hebrews 9 spells out clearly the two choices facing these believers in terms of their commitment. They could go back to the familiar--the old covenant with its repeated sacrifices offered by imperfect priests. Or they could go on with Christ to enjoy the blessings of the new covenant.

We have hinted at this several times, but it becomes very obvious in today's text: if you ever have reason to doubt the advantages we enjoy in Christ, turn to these verses immediately. The contrast could not be greater.

Notice, for example, the difference between the ""earthly sanctuary"" of the old covenant and heaven's ""greater and more perfect tabernacle,"" in which Christ offered His sacrifice (vv. 1, 11). And this is just the beginning.

The priests under the first covenant had to offer sacrifices ""regularly,"" while the high priest had to go into the ""inner room,"" the Holy Place, every year (vv. 6-7). But Jesus entered the Most Holy Place in the heavenly tabernacle ""once for all"" (v. 12), one of the key phrases in Hebrews. Also, the Old Testament priests brought the blood of animals (vv. 7, 12-13), while Jesus came into the Holy of Holies on the merit of His own sacrifice (vv. 12, 14).

And here's the best part. Although the blood of sacrificial animals could not make a final cleansing for sin, the blood of Christ has washed away sin's stain forever (vv. 10, 14)!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Notice that everything about the old system required human effort.

The tabernacle was built by human beings, someone had to raise the animals for sacrifice, and the blood was offered by human priests. But Christ's sacrifice and present priestly ministry are divine; the writer even says the heavenly tabernacle was ""not man-made.""

The point? The work of redemption has been done for us. We are free to ""serve the living God"" (v. 14). Where has He called you to serve Him today, or this week? Serve Him with all your heart!

Hebrews 9:1–10

The city of St. Petersburg, Russia, has a rich history. For over two centuries, it served as the capital of the Russian Empire, but when the capital relocated to Moscow in 1918, St. Petersburg lost its status as the center of the Russian world. As Czech author and journalist Joseph Wechsberg quipped, "To the Russians [St. Petersburg] is not what Rome is to the Italians or Paris to the French. The decisions are made in the Kremlin. The city of Peter remains a museum, open from 8:00 A.M. to 5:00 P.M."

Upon the crucifixion of Christ, the role of the temple sanctuary in a life of faith and a relationship with God changed dramatically. What was once of central importance was intended to point to a greater reality about God and His people. Although lost, destroyed, or irretrievably hidden after the Babylonian destruction of the temple in 586 B.C., the contents of the original tabernacle sanctuary had been crucial instruments of worship and atonement for generations of priests. They represented the presence, provision, and protection of God—and yet they were not perfect.

The things the author of Hebrews described in these verses were considered the holiest objects and places of the Jewish faith. Had they been preserved to this day (or were they to be discovered) they would be considered the most valuable archaeological treasures in the world. Even now as we read of the Ark of the Covenant, the gold jar of manna, Aaron's budded staff, and the stone tablets of the covenant, the thought of those artifacts is awe-inspiring. But here the author called it all just an illustration (v. 9), carrying out mere external regulations (v. 10).

The holy objects and rituals, amazing as they were, were not sufficient to clear the conscience or cleanse the stain of sin (v. 9). What's more, everyone was not free to enter the place where the Lord dwelt. When Jesus died, He tore the curtain that separated the entire world from the Most Holy Place and He completed the ceremonial sacrifices. He had no sins of His own to atone for—only the sins of the world.

Apply the Word

The initial list of qualifications and regulations needed to enter or even draw near to the inner rooms of the tabernacle appear in Leviticus 16. Read through that description and then go back to a verse we focused on earlier this month: Hebrews 4:16. "Let us then approach God's throne of grace with confidence." Rejoice in what the work of Christ has accomplished! Where man could rarely

set foot, Jesus has a permanent place. Through Him, so do we.

Hebrews 9:11-14, 21-28

[Christ] entered heaven itself, now to appear for us in God's presence. - Hebrews 9:24b

TODAY IN THE WORD

The king, the priest, and the prophet were three of the most important officials in Israel. These offices were filled by different people during Israel's history, since no leader had all the qualifications necessary to serve God's people as a ruler, a representative in God's presence, and a proclaimer of God's Word.

But in God's ultimate plan, that division of labor proved to be a temporary arrangement. God's purpose was to prepare a leader who would fill each of these roles and fill them perfectly. The people who served Israel as kings, priests, and prophets were types, or examples, of this One who was to come: Jesus Christ who fulfilled all three offices.

The church as the body of Christ is not a direct equivalent to Old Testament Israel, but as God's people we also need a king, a priest, and a prophet. These needs are met in our perfect Leader and Representative, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus fulfills the office of a King. As an infant He was given kingly gifts; as an adult He was crucified as the King of the Jews. He will ultimately be acknowledged by all as King of kings and Lord of lords.

Jesus fulfilled the office of a prophet during His days on earth as He delivered God's message to the world (Heb. 1:1-2). People often compared Him to the Old Testament prophets Elijah and Jonah.

Jesus fulfilled the office of priests. Today, as our High Priest in heaven, He represents us before God the Father (v. 24). This is also His present ministry in heaven, as the writer of Hebrews explains. When He offered Himself as a sacrifice for sin on the cross, Jesus entered the "temple" in heaven and applied His blood as the final offering that would ever be needed for sin (v. 12).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus' ministry as High Priest has a direct application to where you are today in your Christian life.

Hebrews 9:11-10:18

Since we have a great high priest ... Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. - Hebrews 4:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

About this time of year, many people start thinking about New Year's resolutions. There's conviction and hope that habits will be changed or pounds will be shed. For many, however, these resolutions are broken in January and forgotten by March. Months pass, December arrives, and the cycle repeats itself!

It's part of our human nature to experience limitations, despite our best intentions. This limitation is part of the argument made in Hebrews. Yesterday, we saw that Jesus the Great High Priest was able to do what the Levitical priests couldn't do. Today, we'll see that because Jesus is fully human and fully divine, He is able to offer a better sacrifice (Heb. 9:11–14) and effect a better covenant (vv. 15–22).

Access to the Holy of Holies in the wilderness tabernacle was only possible when human sin was cleansed by sprinkled animal blood. But Jesus is able to enter to the true Holy of Holies, heaven itself, because of His own shed blood. This better sacrifice does more than cleanse us from sin temporarily or externally—it cleans our very consciences.

The covenant mediated through Moses was glorious (2 Cor. 3:7), and with it came the inheritance of the Promised Land. But even so, this covenant is surpassed by the new covenant that Jesus Christ Himself mediates, and which effects the eternal inheritance of life with Him. Just as a human will only becomes effective when the person who wrote it dies, so too the old covenant required the death of animals; the new covenant required the blood of Jesus. The key to this is that forgiveness for sins requires shed blood (v. 22).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Hebrews helps us see the true significance of all the symbolism in the tabernacle. The arrangement of the tabernacle, the high priest, and the sacrifices all point to Jesus Christ. Like the tabernacle, He is where the glory of God is found. Like the high priest, He leads the people to God. Like the animals sacrifices, His blood removes sin. But unlike any of these earthly things, Jesus Christ accomplishes perfectly and forever what the earthly tabernacle could only do imperfectly and temporarily.

Hebrews 9:11–14

After an explosion sank an off-shore oil rig, The Deepwater Horizon, into the Gulf of Mexico, crews attempted to clean up the nearly 5 million barrels of crude oil using a number of methods. One of the more controversial approaches was the use of an unprecedented amount of a dispersant called Corexit. The blend of chemicals allows the oil to more easily blend with water, preventing it from coating elements of the ecosystem. It doesn't technically remove the oil, but it does clean the surface.

The presentation of the blood of Old Testament sacrifices provided cleansing and purity for the people of God. It provided atonement, and it allowed the high priest to enter the Most Holy Place once every year. But it did not assuage guilt of their sins from their consciences, and it had to be repeated continually.

Jesus did what the high priests before Him could not do: He entered a better tabernacle that was not of this earth (v. 11). A quick translation note: some Bible versions (NIV) translate the phrase in verse 11 as "the good things that are now already here," while others (NASB) render it "the good things that are to come." The reason for the difference stems from a textual variant in the ancient manuscripts, and while most scholars tend to side with the latter translation, the certainty of Christ's complete work is maintained by both wordings. The important point in these verses is that Jesus alone could enter the heavenly Most Holy Place.

He didn't enter only a superior tabernacle as a superior high priest, but also He offered a superior sacrifice. The presentation of His own blood brought eternal redemption that could cleanse us inwardly, spiritually. His sacrifice needed to be made but once. And there's an added level of redemption here. Not only are we protected from the penalty of eternal death caused by sin, but we are also freed from the control of sin and able to serve the living God this very day (v. 14)! Our consciences are clean, and our ability to serve is untarnished!

Apply the Word

How often do we forget that there is another world beyond what we see with our eyes? Let today's study remind you that our eternal destination is in a better place because Christ offered a better sacrifice to pave a better way. And He did more: He cleansed the invisible stain of sin in our souls when we placed our trust in Him. Find strength for what you face today knowing that all that you need has already been given to you by Christ.

Hebrews 9:15-28

But now [Jesus] has appeared once for all... to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. - Hebrews 9:26

TODAY IN THE WORD

D.L. Moody was determined that a lack of finances should not deter any student who wanted to come to his new Bible school in Chicago. So Mr. Moody instituted the policy of not charging student tuition--a tradition that continues to this day at Moody Bible Institute! Mr. Moody told the young man who would later become the school's first graduate: ""You come to my school in Chicago, and God will provide the funds.""

The writer who gave us the book of Hebrews would have concurred with Dwight Moody's faith. In fact, this anonymous author argued something very similar in relation to Christ's finished work: ""You come to Christ, and He will provide the necessary payment for your sins.""

This is the ""will"" or covenant that Jesus has mediated for us. Its wonderful provisions are in force because the One who drew up the will died to put it into effect. Although a covenant and a will are not exactly the same, the ""outcome"" is the same. Christ's death provided ""the promised eternal inheritance"" (v. 15) to all of those who are called by His name and who are His heirs. This inheritance is salvation in all of its fullness--past, present, and future.

Once again, Moses and the ""first covenant"" he received from God are set in contrast to what we have in Christ. We have been told that the Law's endless sacrifices could never deal with sin once and for all. Here we are reminded of the reason for that inability. The blood offered under the old system was the ""blood of calves"" (v. 19) and other animals that could never take away sin once and for all, but cover it only temporarily.

It was necessary that another blood sacrifice be made, since God requires that blood be the means of atoning for sin and providing the forgiveness that sinful people need so desperately (v. 22).

Jesus' death fulfilled these requirements perfectly and permanently. His death put His ""will"" in force, so that those who are trusting in Him can receive everything promised both in this life and in the age to come when Jesus appears a second time.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's hard to imagine a greater blessing than knowing that we can look forward to Christ's return, not with ""a fearful expectation of judgment"" (Heb. 10:27) but as heirs receiving an inheritance!

If you want a really solid reason to thank the Lord, you won't find a better one than this. Think of it: Jesus kept our appointment with judgment (v. 27) when He died on the Cross for our sins. That's good news worth praising God for today--and it's worth sharing with someone else.

Hebrews 9:15–28

In legal parlance, a covenant generally stipulates an action or actions that both parties agree to carry out (or refrain from). It is a promise to behave in a certain way. At this point in his letter to the Hebrews, the author points out a peculiar detail of God's covenants, new and old, with His people. In some ways these covenants of promised action take on the function of a last will and testament. They are covenants because both parties live on (for eternity, no less). But the covenant also calls for an inheritance, as in the case of a will—and to enact it, someone has to die.

To make this legal arrangement even more interesting, Jesus is the Testator (the one whose will it is), the Decedent (the one who has died), the Executor of the will (who carries out the provisions), and the Mediator of the covenant (who intercedes on our behalf before the Father). We've already discussed how He is both the high priest and the sacrifice, and at the beginning of the book we learned that the world was created through and is sustained by Christ (1:2, 3). How significant do you feel by comparison?

Somehow, though, in all His glory and authority, the reason Christ mediates this covenant—the reason He offered His own blood as a sacrifice—is so that we could receive our inheritance, which is eternal salvation and relationship with God (v. 15). If Christ's many roles had you feeling small, His sacrifice should make you feel quite special.

Much of today's reading restates what we've already read and puts it into its logical context in the story of our salvation. Jesus, our high priest, entered heaven in a manner that previous high priests could only symbolize on earth. Once and for all, at the culmination of the ages in a realm not bound by time as we know it, Christ offered Himself as the perfect sacrifice and eradicated the power of sin (v. 26). From the moment Adam and Eve first sinned, it was mankind's destiny to die once and appear before God to face judgment. Jesus countered by dying once and offering His sacrifice before God in order to accomplish salvation.

Apply the Word

If we think about it long enough, the greatness of Jesus Christ will make our heads spin. We can't grasp the enormity of His glory in our finite minds, but we can testify to His vital importance with our actions. The Testator, Decedent, Executor, and Mediator of God's covenant ensures your salvation! How can we let our own selfish inklings and material desires get in the way of serving Him? Let us live like people who are waiting eagerly for His return.

Hebrews 10

Hebrews 10:1-18

These are a shadow of the things that were to come; the reality, however, is found in Christ. - Colossians 2:17

TODAY IN THE WORD

U.S. critic and lecturer John Mason Brown was giving a lecture at the Metropolitan Museum of Art when he noticed in the light of the slide projector that someone in the audience was mimicking his every move. Brown, annoyed, invited the person to leave. No one moved, and he continued his lecture. The mimicking shadow appeared. It took the nervous Brown another ten minutes to realize that he was seeing his own shadow.

That story illustrates the problem with focusing on a shadow. Since it's not the real thing, you can get distracted from the business at hand.

The writer of Hebrews called the Law of Moses a shadow--not the reality. That was not a negative statement toward God's holy Law, but simply a statement of the old covenant's built-in temporary nature. The system of sacrifices instituted under Moses was designed by God to foreshadow the coming of Christ and His once-for-all sacrifice.

But by the time Christ came, many in Israel did not recognize Him. They were so caught up in the rituals of Judaism that what was intended to be a shadow had become a thick cloud, obscuring the very Person the Law was meant to foreshadow.

Somewhere in all of this were the people we know as the Hebrews, apparently feeling intense pressure to step back into the shadows of the old system. But in chapter 10, the writer of this book continued his eloquent plea for them to come back to the light of Jesus Christ.

As we have seen time and time again, there was really nothing for them to go back to. Since Christ had rendered the Law obsolete by His atoning death, God was not pleased by the continual offering of sacrifices (v. 10). The priests may stand and offer their sacrifices day after day, but the fact has already been established that those sacrifices can never take away sins (v. 11).

Since atonement for sin could never be achieved through the bodies of sacrificial animals, God prepared a body for His Son. It was in that body that Jesus offered Himself on the Cross as the final sacrifice. The Hebrews, and all believers before and since, were the beneficiaries of Jesus' death.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Two of the ways we have benefited from Christ's death are mentioned in today's passage.

We were ""made"" holy at salvation (v. 10). This is God's declaration that we are now righteous before Him by virtue of Christ's death. And we are ""being made holy"" (v. 14). This is the ongoing process of Christian growth, of becoming more like Christ. In light of these exciting realities, why not renew your determination not to become distracted by the ""shadows"" around you?

Hebrews 10:1–18

On June 2, 2010, pitcher Armando Galarraga had a perfect game, one of the rarest achievements in baseball. But on the would-be final play at first base, umpire Jim Joyce ruled the runner safe, a call every observer could see was wrong. After the game, Joyce admitted he was wrong and ruefully said: "I just cost that kid a perfect game." The call could not be reversed, but the next day, June 3, the pitcher and umpire met at home plate, and the audience stood in applause in recognition of a different kind of perfection—the kind that comes from forgiveness and restoration.

Human attempts at perfection are almost always doomed from the start. Even a mistake-free performance is subject not only to the mistakes of others but also to the impermanence of the temporal world. What we often consider perfection is just the act of being error-free for a limited time. We can't stave off sin on our own. Animal sacrifices brought ceremonial atonement and purity for a year only. And even after a spotless sacrifice was presented, the guilt of sin remained on the consciences of those who worshiped (v. 2). Even an unblemished sacrifice was still not perfect.

Again, the author of Hebrews used Old Testament messianic prophecies to establish Jesus' standing as a better sacrifice and priest (cf. Ps. 40:6–8; Jer. 31:33–34). He will also bring about a better covenant. Instead of a written law, the earthly copy of God's heavenly realities (v. 1), Christ will usher in a law that is programmed into our very makeup (v. 16). Rather than obeying a list of rules, we will be ruled by the righteousness of Christ within us!

The picture of the future in Christ painted in these last verses is vivid, bright, and promising. All enemies of Christ will be defeated. All believers are made perfect in Him, although our sanctification is a process (v. 14). And perhaps the most miraculous act of all is that the sin we have already committed, which is prevalent and despicable, will be erased from God's consideration (v. 17). We have every reason to be hopeful and motivated to serve in obedience.

Apply the Word

The reality of our weaknesses and shortcomings can depress and discourage us if we focus on them. But we are, at this very moment, forgiven of our sins! Allow that truth to sink into your heart today. Remember that as you consider those who have wronged you, even those who refuse to apologize. What grounds do any of us have to hold grudges? Soften your heart toward those in the wrong and ask the Spirit to help you forgive, for you have been forgiven much.

Hebrews 10:19–25

Ramzi Yousef, convicted of perpetrating the 1993 World Trade Center bombing, was sentenced to 240 years and life in solitary confinement. The only human contact he is allowed comes in the form of legal counsel and minimal exposure to the guards watching over his isolated cell block (which houses only one other prisoner). Some activists call that level of isolation cruel and unusual punishment. Others think it's necessary for national security. Everyone agrees that it is severe punishment indeed.

For whatever reason, believers often get into the habit of putting themselves (or at least the Christian aspect of themselves) in utter solitude. Some of this letter's original audience may have done this out of fear—discovery of their faith could have led to literal imprisonment or torture. Others may have given up hope or simply grown lazy in their development as believers. In our day, the excuse could be shame, depression, frustration, or any number of reasons for withdrawing from fellowship with other believers. But

spiritual solitary confinement can have severe consequences.

To counter this, the writer issues three “let us” directives in today’s passage. The first was to draw near to God (v. 22). We have every assurance that God welcomes us into a loving relationship. The second “let us” statement is related in that we are called to hold on to hope, namely our hope in the salvation promised to us (v. 23). We are not isolated from God, and we are not abandoned to waste away in this fallen world.

Both of these “let us” statements affect our vertical relationship with God. But we are also created for relationship with other people, not only with God. To thrive spiritually, we also need deep connections with others. Hence the third exhortation: we need to stay connected to our fellow believers (v. 24). This involves more than attending church, although that is a helpful part of it. We aren’t just called to congregate socially but to hold each other accountable, to love each other, and to serve together as well. We persevere in pursuing our relationship with God and building our faith, and we also grow spiritually by acting in faith to serve our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Apply the Word

Notice how verses 24 and 25 frame our fellowship as believers. We aren’t called to continue meeting together for the purpose of self-improvement. We should enter into our relationship with fellow believers with an eye toward encouraging others. Consider how you can take the initiative to encourage your church family. Waiting for others to come to you is the first step toward isolation. Instead, find someone who needs your help or a ministry that needs your service.

Hebrews 10:19-25

Let us not give up meeting together... but let us encourage one another - Hebrews 10:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association says that people who are involved in a variety of activities such as work, church, sports, and family recreation catch fewer colds than people whose lives are only consumed by a few things--work being the most common. The article supports the idea that mental well-being affects a person's physical health.

This is encouraging news for the winter season, but we don't need a study to tell us that believers who are faithful to the church are spiritually healthier than those who are not. Today's verse shows that all of us need the strength we draw from one another. That's the way Christ intended His body to work.

How does the command to continue meeting together relate to God's faithfulness? You probably saw the connection in verse 23. God's faithfulness to His promises is the link that connects verses 19-22, in which we are urged to draw close to God, with verses 24-25, which command us not to forsake the church.

The point is that both of these spiritually healthy activities are possible and beneficial because our God keeps His promises.

The writer of Hebrews had already taught his readers that they had a faithful and eternal high priest in Jesus Christ (Heb. 3, see the November 6 study). Given this confidence, and the assurance that Jesus' blood was sufficient to forgive sins and cleanse the conscience, these believers had every reason to draw close to God and in so doing get a firm grip on their faith.

The Hebrews were slipping in their commitment to Christ, wavering back and forth and leaning toward a return to Judaism. The writer gave them a wonderful two-step cure for their problem: attach themselves firmly to the Lord, and then attach themselves firmly to one another.

This is a great life plan even for Christians who aren't wavering in their faith. We're not saying that our salvation depends on how well we hold on to God. His hold on us is secure. But in terms of our faithfulness and service, we need to connect with Him and with each other. And the connections will hold because God is faithful.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The command in Hebrews 10 is not hard to understand. We could paraphrase it, ""Don't quit going to church.""

But there's more to it than simply depositing ourselves in a pew every Sunday. The body of Christ is designed to be interactive, every member drawing strength from every other member (see Eph. 4:16). How are you doing in the ministry of encouraging your fellow believers, spurring them on to ""love and good deeds""? You don't need a job title to be a blessing to others. Ask God to lead you to someone at church whom you can encourage this Sunday.

Hebrews 10:19-31

Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith. - Hebrews 10:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

John Bunyan, author of *The Pilgrim's Progress*, once wrote that when Christians begin to lose communion with God, one of the first things forgotten is that they live in God's very presence and their lives are in God's hands.

This kind of spiritual affliction should sound very familiar by now. We have been following the reasoning that the author of Hebrews used to convince his readers that defection from Christ was nothing but spiritual disaster. The final verse of today's reading underscores the danger in stark terms: "It is a dreadful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (v. 31).

We're in the middle of another warning section in which the Hebrews were cautioned against turning away from grace and going back to the dead rituals of Law. Most Bible teachers call this a "parenthetical" warning, since the writer seems to interrupt his thought to give this warning.

When you compare the warm exhortations of verses 19-25 with the strong warnings of verses 26-31, you can see why generations of Bible commentators have wrestled with the meaning of Hebrews.

These people are the writer's "brothers." They are urged to draw near to God in complete confidence, meeting together as the church for mutual teaching and encouragement (v. 25). All of this is possible because the God who called them to Himself is faithful (v. 23).

Yet with the next strokes of his writing instrument, the author says that anyone who rejects Christ can look forward to nothing but God's fearful judgment. Some try to solve the puzzle of this passage by claiming that the Hebrews were not true believers and that the judgment spoken of is eternity in hell, the final penalty for all unbelief.

But we believe these people were genuine Christians. That doesn't weaken the author's warning, because God takes sin among His people very seriously. We can fall into God's hands in the sense of experiencing His fiery judgment without being lost forever. Some Corinthian believers had died prematurely for their sin (see 1 Cor. 11:30), but Paul does not imply eternal separation from God.

The lesson for us is that instead of trying to walk on the edge, we need to draw close to our Lord in loving fellowship!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One key to understanding this passage and our response to it, is found in the phrase "deliberately keep on sinning" (v. 26).

The idea is to willfully continue sinning. This recalls the defiant sins for which no sacrifice was possible (Num. 15:30-31). In light of this, what must we do today? We need to continually adopt God's attitude toward sin, which is to loathe it and run from it. Today, let's take the warning of Hebrews seriously and pray that God will keep our hearts tender toward Him.

Hebrews 10:19-25

Let us not give up meeting together ... but let us encourage one another and all the more as you see the Day approaching. - Hebrews 10:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

This December 31 promises to be one of the noisiest New Year's Eves many people have spent in their lifetime. Entertainment providers have been busy planning the 'party of the century' on land, on sea, and in the air as the supersonic Concorde takes a group of revelers around the world. Even the traditional New Year's eve celebration in New York's Times Square is going to begin twenty-four hours earlier than usual.

Getting together with people is a good way to multiply our enjoyment and divide our anxieties. Close fellowship with others is important on the spiritual level too. It helps us keep our equilibrium and focus on what is eternally important.

Since that's our goal, look at four powerful ways we can accomplish it. The writer of Hebrews tells us first to draw near to God (Heb. 10:19-22). We can do this because the blood of Jesus Christ has opened the way into God's presence, and Jesus Himself is there to minister on our behalf as our great High Priest.

Second, when our relationship with God is solid we can hold to the hope we have in Him without wavering (v. 23).

The Hebrews themselves were wavering between their faith in Christ and their former lives in Judaism. There are plenty of believers today wavering in doubt every time they hear some doomsayer predict the terrible things that could happen at the end of the millennium. That kind of fear does not produce steady faith. God's faithfulness is not limited by events.

Verse 24 describes a third way we can keep an eternal perspective. When we come together as believers, our objective is not just to have a social or mark a date on the calendar. We should be urging each other on toward love and Christian service.

The best context for this ministry is the fourth 'Let us' in today's reading (v. 25). We need to stay in contact with our fellow believers on a regular basis. We have a 'Day' approaching the return of Christ. We need to stay close to God and one another to be ready when this day comes.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Maybe God's people should plan the 'fellowship of the century.'

Churches used to get together on New Year's eve to 'pray the old year out and pray the new year in.' Can you think of a better year to do that than 1999? You may want to think about arranging and/or hosting a year-end fellowship, bringing your Sunday school class or other group together for prayer and mutual encouragement. You could also plan a special night for the whole church.

Hebrews 10:25; Song of Solomon 2:8-9

Let us not give up meeting together. - Hebrews 10:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

According to an old saying, "Absence makes the heart grow fonder." But another saying warns that separation can have the opposite effect: "Out of sight, out of mind." Which of these is true? It often depends on the situation. Sometimes being with those we love causes us to take them for granted. Once we are apart, we realize how much their presence means to us. On the other hand, sometimes being separated may cause us to become distracted with other things to the point that we scarcely think of our loved one at all.

In today's verses from the Song of Solomon, the bride waits with expectation for the groom's arrival. She hears and sees the groom from afar. The groom comes seeking the bride with such intensity that the obstacles (the hills) seem like nothing. The bride compares him to a gazelle or a young stag. Gazelles were known for their grace and speed. The stag was famous for its ability to leap. The bride's portrait depicts the groom as one who is in eager pursuit.

However, this portrait also reveals the potential for separation in the relationship. Despite his eagerness, the groom can only see the one he loves from a distance. He gazes longingly upon her through the window and the lattice. This portrays separation and desire. The groom has exerted considerable effort to seek the one he loves. He initiates this relationship and does whatever he must to maintain it.

Like many exchanges described in the Song of Solomon, the scene in today's passage has something to say to us on two levels. As an example of human love, it is a good reminder that love cannot be maintained without a measure of effort. In particular, it provides a model of the kind of initiative the husband should take in his love relationship with his spouse.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

In a love relationship we must take initiative on two levels. We must take the initiative to show others that we love them, and we must respond to the love that others show to us.

Hebrews 10:26–39

In 1912, the volcano Novarupta in southern Alaska erupted, the largest of its kind in the twentieth century. The blast had worldwide impact. In the next few days, Kodiak Island, which is 100 miles away, became covered in a foot of ash—the nearby Knife Creek valley was so filled with ash, it appeared perfectly flat. Within two weeks, clouds of ash reached all the way to Africa. Due to the lack of modern seismology, no one had seen the eruption coming.

Sometimes as the benefactors of God's grace, we treat the Lord's wrath as if it's a volcano that has gone permanently dormant. But unlike the case of Mount Novarupta, we are without excuse if we aren't prepared for the coming eruption. Much of Hebrews has featured reminders from the Old Testament that God's merciful plan of salvation has its roots in God's earliest promises to His people, probably because many Jewish believers appeared to have trouble connecting the new covenant of Christ with the old traditions of Israel. Today's reading corrects an equally dangerous error: thinking that God's intolerance of unbelief was limited to the Old Testament.

At the outset of this passage, the author issued his sternest warning yet. Deliberate, sustained, rebellious sin is a serious offense, and the author of Hebrews did not see how genuine faith could produce such callously wicked results. Moreover, he did not see how the believers he knew and loved could ever become guilty of turning away.

The audience of this letter had already suffered for the cause of Christ with the knowledge that something better awaited them (v. 34). It would have been the pinnacle of foolishness to endure the punishment of society now and the wrath of God in the future. Were true believers really in danger of falling away in such a manner? The author himself doesn't appear to think so, as he wrote, "But we do not belong to those who shrink back and are destroyed, but to those who have faith and are saved" (v. 39). Nevertheless, the idea that our actions are without consequence is preposterous. God judges unbelief. And true faith bears no resemblance to the wickedness that incurs God's wrath.

Apply the Word

The natural inward reaction to the warnings in Hebrews, such as the one beginning in verse 26, is to ask yourself, "Have I sinned so greatly as to deserve God's judgment?" But that's the wrong question to ask. To dwell on past sins is to focus on your own spiritual depravity. Your works are what condemned you, not what saves you. Turn your eyes instead on your high priest, Jesus Christ, and His Spirit who indwells and seals you for salvation. Now obey Him with confidence.

Hebrews 10:32-39

My righteous one will live by faith. - Hebrews 10:38

TODAY IN THE WORD

Most people tend to think that great artists and musicians produce their works in relatively quick bursts of creative energy. But the facts suggest otherwise. It is said that Beethoven rewrote each bar of his music at least a dozen times. For his work "Last Judgment," considered one of the twelve master paintings of the ages, Michelangelo produced more than 2 sketches and renderings during the eight years it took him to complete his masterpiece.

It's safe to say that anything of lasting value requires patient commitment even in the face of adversity. That includes the Christian life. First-century believers must have needed that reminder often. Otherwise, we wouldn't have all those great verses in the New Testament urging us to walk faithfully with Christ no matter what the cost.

The Hebrew believers who received this letter were among those early believers who needed this strong word of encouragement. The closing verses of chapter 10 reveal that they were not just a group of weak-willed Christians who were ready to renounce Christ in a heartbeat. They had walked with the Lord long enough to have experienced some pretty intense suffering.

These Christians had suffered public persecution, imprisonment, and loss of personal property in the earlier days of their Christian lives. They even suffered such losses joyfully because they had their eyes on eternal things.

There is a suggestion here that one of the Hebrews' current problems was that they were uncertain regarding Christ's return. They may have been expecting Him to come to relieve them of their suffering; and when that did not happen right away, they began to lose heart.

We know that the earliest generations of believers expected Christ to return in

their lifetime. The Thessalonians became upset when some of their fellow believers began dying and Christ had not returned. Paul had to comfort them and set them straight about the issue (1 Thess. 4:13-18).

Whatever the reason for their wavering, the Hebrews needed to recall those early days of faithfulness and repeat them. Their confidence in Christ would be "richly rewarded" (v. 35).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Today we read about Christians who "joyfully accepted the confiscation of [their] property" (v. 34) for the Lord's sake, and maybe we wonder if the same could be said of us.

We don't know what God may require of us in the days ahead, but we can help prepare ourselves by adopting the attitude that everything we are and have belongs to Christ. So today is a good time to ask yourself, "Am I holding my possessions in an open hand? If God were to take something I value, would I respond in obedience or in anger?"

Hebrews 11

Hebrews 11:1-3

By faith we understand that the universe was formed at God's command. - Hebrews 11:3

TODAY IN THE WORD

Did you know you're in "Faith's Hall of Fame"?

You're probably familiar with Hebrews 11 and the gallery of faithful people listed there. What you may not have noticed is the reference to "we" who believe in creation (v.3) This applies not only to the original readers, but to us as well. Just as believers have throughout history, we in modern times trust in and follow the Creator God!

John Calvin commented on these verses: "[We] understand the power of His word, not only as manifested instantaneously in creating the world, but also as put forth continually in its preservation; nor is it His power only that [we] understand, but also His goodness, and wisdom, and justice... The faithful, to whom He has given eyes, see sparks of His glory, as it were, glittering in every created thing. The world was no doubt made, that it might be the theater of the divine glory."

This month we want to take a closer look at this "theater of the divine glory" as we examine the doctrine of creation. We'll see how closely this vital belief is interwoven with other key aspects of Christian life and doctrine. Along the way, we'll rejoice in the created world and worship our Creator.

Following an introduction, we'll first examine lessons from the Genesis creation narrative. Next, we'll consider how creation reveals God's attributes, after which will be a section on the links between creation and redemption. The fourth and final part, by means of favorite nature psalms, will focus on creation and worship. The month will conclude with a "sneak preview" of the new creation.

If we believe in creation by faith, what is faith? As defined in verse 1, in reference to the past, it is certainw about the unseen (cf. 2 Cor. 4:18). We claim to know what we did not ourselves witness. In fact, no human being saw the creation of the world. Our knowledge is not based on empirical observation or logic, but on a belief in God's trstworthiness and power.

What do we know and believe? Succinctly, "that the universe was formed at God's command" (v.3).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Now that you know our topic is the doctrine of creation, ask the Creator to be your teacher and guide through this month's study.

Pray that God will open your heart to new insights into His world and our relationship to it, that He will make real to you the meaning of this essen-tial doctrine, and that He will show you practical application of the biblical truths presented this month.

This will be our prayer for you as well!

Hebrews 11:1-3

In his New York Times opinion piece entitled, "Taking Science on Faith," author and researcher Paul Davies questioned the premise that scientists believe only in the facts that can be proved by physical evidence. He asserted that scientists blindly trust the impersonal, mathematical laws of physics to behave in an orderly, consistent fashion without any explanation as to why that is the case. He concluded, "Until science comes up with a testable theory of the laws of the universe, its claim to be free of faith is manifestly bogus."

In a similar way, Christians who claim to have incontrovertible proof of all that we believe do not really reflect what Scripture teaches. The reason we call it faith is that, as today's passage explains clearly, for us believing does not require seeing. That is not to say that our beliefs aren't supported by the facts we have at our disposal. But ultimately, we put our trust in the invisible, even when the visible might discourage us.

Let's work backwards through these three verses, because the third points to the explanation for the very earliest event in which we believe: the creation of the visible universe by a being we cannot see. What evidence, apart from the testimony of those to whom God has spoken, could prove that in our current context? We understand it to be true in part because of the undeniable difference we have experienced in our lives.

The testimony of those who have gone before us speaks loudly and authoritatively to us (v. 2). While we do not have proof in the specific scientific sense, we do have assurance. And while our hopes in the future resurrection cannot be tested in a laboratory, we do have confidence that our hope is not misplaced. We have the examples of many believers who share our faith, even those who died waiting to see the fulfillment of what was promised to them. The reason we have that assurance: the person of Jesus Christ our Savior. Those before Christ had faith He would come to enact salvation, and we have faith that He did. Even now, we continue to have faith that He will come again and lead us into our eternal inheritance.

Apply the Word

However sincere their convictions, everyone accepts some of their most basic beliefs on faith. While apologetic arguments for our faith can serve to strengthen and encourage us, the best evidence in support of our faith is faithful obedience to God, which includes being loving and humble in your treatment of those who disagree. If you have people in your life whom you long to see accept the truth of salvation, resist the urge to argue and instead seek to love and serve them.

Hebrews 11:1 Genesis 22:1-19

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see. - Hebrews 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

The Bible is full of mystery. Of course we've got our theologians and pastors to untangle some of the knots, but certain stories seem to defy what we know and understand about who God is and how He works in this world. Today's narrative of Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac has been described as one of the Bible's most challenging passages. In Eugene Peterson's words, "God seems to us to behave outrageously out of character."

For all of our shock, surprise, and even outrage as readers, Abraham himself seemed to have no hesitation when God asked him to sacrifice his son. Although it seemed utterly at odds with everything that God had yet revealed of Himself and His plans, Abraham obeyed, making thorough preparation for an unthinkable act.

The narrative is remarkably tight-lipped. We don't know Abraham's thoughts; we hear only one simple exchange between Isaac and Abraham. But what is clear is the cost of the sacrifice. Four times, in a single sentence, it crescendos: "your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac" (v. 2). Abraham must give up, indeed must kill, the person whom he loves most.

It's not simply that Abraham loved Isaac. It's that Isaac embodied the very promises of God. God had promised to bless Abraham and to build him a family through Isaac. What would now become of the promise? What if God meant for Isaac to die? What if the promise failed? What if God failed?

Fear is faith's hungry predator. Fear threatens to devour our resolve to trust God and to risk obeying Him. For Abraham, the stakes were infinitely high. He had already forsaken his native land and sacrificed time and again before he began the climb up Mount Moriah. Was it for nothing?

Abraham models for us what it means to fear the Lord: we readily obey and willingly sacrifice. We reject the "what ifs" of fear, and we keep on believing that God is good even when life doesn't make sense.

APPLY THE WORD

Fear is an opportunity for each of us to grow a deeper, more persevering faith. The question underneath our fears is simply this: who is God? Is God big enough, good enough, and faithful enough to handle what I fear? Are His intentions towards me ultimately for my good? Will I continue believing the promises of God, or will I believe somehow that He's failed? Our battle with fear requires us to be deeply rooted in the truth of Scripture.

Hebrews 11:1; Genesis 22:1-14; 35:27-29;

TODAY IN THE WORD

Believe it or not, engineers are spending hundreds of hours attempting to improve the design of a humble tool that has been around for ages--the hammer. These revisionists have tweaked the handle and experimented with shock-damping systems.

Why all the fuss? The boom in home renovation has tool manufacturers tinkering with this tried-and-true product, and marketers report that some of the new designs are catching on with consumers.

Leave it to the folks in marketing to fix what isn't broken! The hammer is unspectacular, to be sure. But it gets the job done, even while surrounded by fancier, costlier and more potent tools such as power saws.

If the patriarchs of Israel were likened to tools, Isaac would probably be the hammer. Sandwiched between a dad who was the ""father of the faithful, the friend of God,"" and a son who bore the namesakes of the twelve tribes of Israel, Isaac tends to disappear in our memories. Ask the average believer to name three events from Isaac's life, and the result may be prolonged silence.

Despite this fact, Isaac is important because he was important to God. In today's verses as well as in many other places in Scripture, God identified Himself with Abraham's son of promise.

Isaac got off to an excellent start. As in the case of Samson, John the Baptist and Jesus Himself, Isaac's birth was announced ahead of time by heaven (Gen. 17:19-22; 18:10). In Isaac's case, God even came in bodily form to make the announcement Himself!

Isaac is also justly famous for being the willing sacrifice in God's monumental test of Abraham's faith. If Isaac was as old as some Bible teachers believe, he likely could have overpowered his aged father when Abraham began tying him up.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Most of us would find it easier to identify with Isaac than with Abraham or Jacob.

There's nothing wrong with being an everyday sort of ""Isaac."" God calls very few of His people to bring nations to birth! Besides, as we were reminded earlier this month, the size or scope of our calling is God's business. Obedience to Him is our proper response.

Hebrews 11:1-3; Genesis 1:1-2

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what

we do not see. - Hebrews 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pointing to Hebrews 11--12, Dr. Joseph Stowell gives us this vivid word picture of the Christian life: "The Bible defines the race we are to run as a relay race. This means we are connected to all those who come before and after us in the contest of faith. The Holy Spirit hands us the baton, we hear the crack of the starter's pistol, and we suddenly realize, 'It's my turn!' The goal is to run our leg of the race faithfully and hand the baton to the next generation."

What a great challenge for us to accept here at the beginning of summer. It may be time to haul out the vacation gear, or just enjoy a change of pace. But summer is not the time to let down or slack off in running the race of faith.

As Dr. Stowell suggests, we are connected to the people of God who have already completed their race. Hebrews 11 reviews many of those faithful runners, and we'll spend this month looking at their real-life examples--including their exploits. Then we'll finish with a cross-section of Jesus' teaching on faith.

In the process, we'll discover why these men and women were "commended" for their faith (Heb. 11:2), and how we can imitate their faith in our lives. Today's reading lays the groundwork for this trip through biblical history. Faith is far more than a religious sentiment. It is a way of looking at all of life, a mindset that guides every decision we make.

Seen through the eyes of faith, our daily circumstances are part of a larger plan by which God is working out "the hope to which he has called [us]" (Eph. 1:18). Because our hope is anchored in Christ, we can hold to it by faith and be sure of our future. Even though spiritual reality is unseen, faith counts it as certain.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Here's a challenge to consider today. Through the prophet Jeremiah, God asked, "I am the Lord, the God of all mankind. Is anything too hard for me?" (Jer. 32:27)

Hebrews 11:1-7

Faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see. - Hebrews 11:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

You may be aware that a debate is currently raging in scientific circles over whether the complexity of the universe allows for the possibility that it is the product of ""intelligent design."" Interestingly, the argument has revealed that many scientists hold to their presuppositions about the origin of life with the same fervor as the most passionate Bible believers.

That should not surprise us, because Paul says belief is a matter of the human will, not simply a question of evidence (Rom. 1:18-20). The problem is not that people can't believe; it's that they refuse to believe.

Hebrews 11 is one of those great New Testament passages that has come to have a life of its own. We are so familiar with it that we almost forget that this wonderful chapter has a definite context. Setting Hebrews 11 in its proper frame only enhances its blessing.

Yesterday we read that these Hebrew believers needed to hold on to their faith in the face of opposition. If they were faithful, God would richly reward their confidence in Him.

Chapter 10 ended on a mixed note of warning and hope (vv. 38-39). Those who shrink back fall under God's displeasure and are destroyed. That's a strong word; but remember that the writer was not talking about the loss of eternal life, but rather God's stern discipline of saints who shrink back.

That is the context for Hebrews 11. The best antidote for unbelief is faith, and a wonderful way to encourage the fainthearted is to remind them of those who ran the race well and were richly rewarded by God. Put these two thoughts together, and the result is the chapter often called ""God's Hall of Faith.""

Verses 1-3 are a prologue to the chapter, showing that faith involves a comprehensive world view that sees God as the Author and Creator of everything.

Verse 6 reminds us that faith is not the sort of dreamy, make-believe fluff that secular minds often make it out to be. Faith is real-life stuff, the core of a life that pleases God. Abel took faith very seriously, as did Noah. And Enoch was such a person of faith that God took him straight home without his ever experiencing death!

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God often asks His people to do things that don't make much sense from a human perspective. But He richly rewards faith.

Maybe you're facing a Hebrews 11 kind of challenge today. Here's a simple exercise that may encourage you. Write on a card: ""By faith, I can... "" Then fill in the step of faith you believe God is asking you to make. Write Hebrews 11:1 after your statement, and use the card as your Bible bookmark and a prayer reminder for the next few days as we study this great chapter.

Hebrews 11:1-16; 39-12:3

These were all commended for their faith. - Hebrews 11:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

Faith and spirituality seem to be on the rise in the United States. In fact, a March 19, 2004 survey by the Barna Group found that nearly nine out of ten adults (87%) claim that their religious faith is very important in their daily life. Given the accompanying statistics on divorce rates, pornography addiction, and materialism, we might well ask about the nature of that faith, and whether it does in fact have any power to affect our lives.

Hebrews 11 is known as the "Hall of Faith" in Scripture. Yet interestingly, we don't see a list of items to believe in. Instead, we see a list of people who demonstrated their faith through their obedience to God. This passage reveals that faith is not just a matter of mentally agreeing to certain propositions. Faith is the willingness to stake our entire lives on God's promises. Faith means living a certain way—as if what God has said is true.

Note that these Old Testament saints lived in faith, and yet still didn't receive the fullness of the promise in their lifetimes (v. 39). What was this promise that we have but they didn't? We now have the Holy Spirit. We have His work in us to produce the fruit of faithfulness, so that our lives can reflect what we say that we believe.

After giving us a dramatic presentation of biblical heroes who exhibited faith, the author of Hebrews urges us to continue to press forward in our Christian lives. We are called to "run with perseverance," and are encouraged not "to grow weary and lose heart" (12:1, 3). This implies that our Christian race will not always be easy. Living in faith will require us to make sacrifices and face challenges. To further encourage us, though, the author presents the greatest model of faith: Jesus Himself. He has endured more than we will ever face, and He accomplished His work (v. 2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We are called as Christians to share our faith with others. This includes both being able to describe our belief in Jesus and living in a way that demonstrates that what we believe is true.

Hebrews 11:4; Genesis 4:1-15

By faith Abel offered God a better sacrifice than Cain did ... God spoke well of his offerings. - Hebrews 11:4

TODAY IN THE WORD

A. W. Tozer describes the impact of the Fall on worship in a poetic and poignant way: "Man was made to worship God. God gave to man a harp and said, 'Here above all the creatures that I have made and created I have given you the largest harp. I put more strings on your instrument and I have given you a wider range than I have given to any other creature. You can worship Me in a manner that no other creature can.' And when he sinned, man took that instrument and threw it down in the mud and there it was lain for

centuries, rusted, broken, unstrung.”

When we consider the purpose for which we are created—to join in the eternal worship of the triune God—Genesis 4 is painful to read. This account can be hard to understand. It seems as if Abel and Cain brought similar offerings to the Lord and that the Lord accepted one offering and rejected the other, for apparently no good reason. In fact, people sometimes look toward this passage to claim that God is capricious. But a closer look at the text reveals the opposite.

First, notice that Genesis 4:3 tells us that Cain brought “some of the fruits of the soil” to the Lord. We have no indication what the quality of this produce was; we certainly have no hint that it was the best of the harvest. Now, notice that verse 4 tells us that Abel brought the “fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock.” The fat portions were the best pieces of meat. Additionally, the firstborn always indicated something prized. In other words, Abel gave the best he had, and Cain offered whatever he was willing to spare.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Notice that the Fall didn’t destroy worship; instead, it was now possible for worship to become horribly misdirected. But God’s favor can never be earned by anything we offer to Him. Instead, true worship helps us cleanse our imaginations and focus our minds on God’s majesty and beauty.

Hebrews 11:4–16

Yesterday we mentioned our legacy from past people of faith who testify in support of our common hope. Today we begin to explore the catalog of witnesses in Hebrews 11, what is commonly referred to as the Hall of Faith. This chapter includes some of the most widely known heroes of the Old Testament, but the author of Hebrews began the list with two comparatively unheralded names from the past.

The first was Abel, whose entire life was chronicled in the span of a mere seven verses (Gen. 4:2–8). The reason God found Abel’s sacrifice to be favorable has been the subject of much speculation, but the core reason is identified beyond doubt in this passage: Abel had faith. He believed in something he could not see in a way that Cain did not. And, as verse 4 alludes, the blood of Abel cried out to God even after it was spilled (Gen. 4:10). He was murdered, but a new home awaited him.

Enoch’s time on earth was also recorded briefly, as he was mentioned only

in the genealogy from Adam to Noah (Gen. 5:18–24). We know even less of Enoch, but the Bible does say that he walked faithfully and that God “took him away” in mystery. It’s interesting that Hebrews, which states that people are destined to die once (9:27), mentions Enoch for whom no record of death is found. It is fitting, since the author of Hebrews wanted to remind his audience that eternal life existed beyond this fallen world.

The faith of Noah, Abraham, and Sarah needs little review. The names alone elicit strong emotions in the hearts of believers who have studied the miracle of Noah’s rescue from both flood waters and cultural ridicule and of Abraham and Sarah’s amazing story of childbirth at an impossible age. Their faith will never be forgotten. What we often fail to remember is that they all relied on faith to the very end of their lives on earth. The phrase stands out like a neon sign: “They did not receive the things promised” (v. 13).

Apply the Word

It’s humbling to realize that the most revered people in the history of our faith felt like strangers on this planet. They looked forward to another home. To follow their examples, we cannot tie up our emotional attachments to the things of earth. Our possessions, our work, our leisure activities, and even our health are all ultimately temporary. God has prepared a city in a heavenly country for us—anchor your heart in the world to come.

Hebrews 11:4-6; Genesis 4:1-5; 5:18-24

Without faith it is impossible to please God. - Hebrews 11:6

TODAY IN THE WORD

When veteran FBI agent Robert Hanssen was arrested earlier this year and charged with spying for Russia, many people who thought they knew Hanssen expressed their surprise. One neighbor said about the accused spy and his family, “They go to church every Sunday--if that means anything--loading all six kids into the van.”

This person’s telling comment reminds us that the way we worship and the way we walk, or live our lives, needs to be consistent with what we say we believe. The author of Hebrews pointed to Abel and Enoch as worthy examples of what it means to worship and to walk by faith.

Most people remember Abel as part of a famous brother pair, and as the first murder victim in history at the hands of his brother Cain. But it was Abel's act of worship, bringing a sacrifice to the Lord, that earned him God's favor and a place among the Bible's faith heroes.

It's interesting that the Scripture does not say exactly why Abel's sacrifice pleased God, except that he obviously offered it in the right spirit (Gen. 4:4-5). It could have been more costly than Cain's offering, since Abel's required sacrificing some of his sheep.

Whatever the reason, Abel understood that he needed to approach God in humility and faith to secure His approval. Abel's offering, and the heart attitude it revealed, marked him out as a righteous person. God was so pleased with Abel that He made Eve's second son an example of faith for every generation by including him in this list of godly examples in Hebrews.

Enoch is the classic illustration of what it means to walk by faith. In the Bible, "walk" is a synonym for our daily life. Enoch's life was so consumed by his relationship with God that he simply disappeared one day (Gen. 5:24). The Scripture suggests that God enjoyed fellowship with this amazing man so much that He didn't allow Enoch to experience death, which in the Old Testament always meant separation from God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We can't study the lives of Abel and Enoch without examining the quality of our own worship and walk.

Hebrews 11:7; Genesis 6:1-22

Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord. - Genesis 6:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

There's an old Jewish proverb that says, "A friend is one who warns you." According to this definition, the world that existed before the Flood could not have had a better friend than the patriarch Noah.

This righteous man (Gen. 6:9) spent 120 years warning his sinful generation of God's impending judgment. Peter called Noah "a preacher of righteousness" (2 Peter 2:5), letting us know that Noah combined his many decades of ark-building with the faithful delivery of God's message.

The fact that no one believed Noah and was saved except his own family is not surprising, given the indictment that the whole earth was corrupt in God's sight. The early verses of Genesis 6 describe what some believe to be sexual activity between fallen angels and human women that produced a corrupt race--a gross sin that God judged by imprisoning these angels (2 Peter 2:4) and announcing His intention to destroy the earth (Gen. 6:13).

In this setting of unbelievable sin and violence, Noah's faith shines even brighter. He apparently had no human example of godliness he could imitate, and no one in his generation who shared his love for God except his wife and family.

But look at what Noah's faith accomplished. The writer of Hebrews emphasized that Noah believed God's warning of judgment by water in spite of the visible evidence to the contrary (Heb. 11:7). It had never rained before, and there was no obvious need for a large boat. Every piece of wood Noah cut and fit was a statement of faith.

Noah worked in "holy fear" (v. 7), a reverent awe for God and His holiness that real faith produces. Noah had God's promise that He would establish a covenant with him, and that was all Noah needed.

The Bible says that the ark, which was a means of salvation for Noah and his family, was a symbol of condemnation to the people of Noah's day. His faith exposed their unbelief; he was saved by his belief, and they were condemned by their unbelief.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Noah's story would have ended before it started if he had failed to translate his faith into obedience. But he did everything God told him to do (Gen. 6:22).

Hebrews 11:7 Genesis 6:9-22

By faith, Noah, when warned about things not yet seen, in holy fear built an ark to save his family. - Hebrews 11:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

In New York City in the early summer of 2011, an eight-year-old boy walked seven blocks home alone from his day camp. His neighborhood of strictly observant Jews is known to be insular and safe. He knew the route well, but this particular day, got disoriented. Tragically, the stranger he stopped to ask for directions had a psychotic history. The boy never made it home.

Our world is a terrifying place. Children disappear, and terrorists board planes. While we might think that the horrors of today are worse than any other time in history, we see that the violence and treachery of Noah's generation had reached epic proportions. Brutal crimes were commonplace, and fear was everyone's constant companion.

Noah, however, was a righteous man who walked with God. God confided in Noah His intentions to judge his generation and literally wipe out everyone, with the exception of Noah and his family, from the earth. To imagine the devastation and destruction to come must have left Noah breathless, both because of the magnitude of the death sentence and the acquittal he and his family had been issued. Perhaps he had to stare down fears of his own. There was certainly no guarantee that Noah would even be allowed to work freely on this boat of colossal proportions.

The writer of Hebrews explains that Noah's faith gave him courage in the midst of fear. Faith compelled him to take God at His word. Faith also moved him into action. Rather than focus on enemies and obstacles, Noah acknowledged that God was powerful and also good. He knew that he owed God obedience.

The fear of the Lord prompts us to take seriously every word He speaks. Sometimes we have to do something as radical as building a boat; some days it's just getting out of bed and trusting Him for the strength we need.

APPLY THE WORD

Noah's example teaches us that disarming our fear requires us to listen. God is actively speaking to each of us, especially right in the midst of our fear. Maybe He's speaking words of strength and courage to steady your quaking knees. Perhaps He is speaking words of comfort that His presence is still with you. Maybe He's got specific instructions for you as He did for Noah. His voice quiets fear's whispering. Get still enough to listen.

Hebrews 11:8-16

Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. - Hebrews 11:16b

TODAY IN THE WORD

In 1952, the late King Farouk of Egypt was overthrown and went into exile with his daughters Fadia, Fawziyah, and Ferial. Farouk died in Rome in 1965. Now his daughters are trying to reclaim 1,774 acres of land and a palace in Cairo owned by their mother, Queen Farida, who had divorced Farouk in 1948. The late king's daughters currently live in Switzerland and are suffering a variety of financial, health, and personal problems.

Few of us know what it's like to leave behind everything that is familiar, comfortable, and secure to us and to live "like a stranger in a foreign country" (v. 9). However, this is the kind of existence to which God called Abraham and other fathers and mothers of the faith.

But there's one important difference between those heroes of faith and these exiles like the Egyptian princesses. God's "exiles" didn't look back to the place they left to try to reclaim a slice of their former lives (v. 15). They kept looking ahead all the way along the road.

This might sound fairly easy to us, because we've read the Book and know how the story ends. But as a true exile, Abraham didn't even know where he was going when God first called him to put the "For Sale" sign in his front yard at Ur.

Why did Abraham keep going? His obedience to God motivated him, as did his hope of reaching a city built by God--heaven. Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob reached the promised land of Canaan, but they understood that God's promise pointed even farther ahead to their heavenly home.

In other words, faithful spiritual pioneers like Abraham and Sarah didn't experience the full extent of God's promises on earth because God's promises reach far beyond this life. Abraham was constantly reminded of his temporary status on earth because he never had a permanent home in Canaan. Living in tents makes you realize you're just passing through.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The apostle Paul has a great word of counsel for us today as we think about heaven once again.

He writes in Colossians 3:1-2, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God. Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things." Our ultimate home is in heaven with Christ, so it makes sense that our thoughts should center on things above

Hebrews 11:8-10; Genesis 11:27-12:9

He was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God. - Hebrews 11:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bible commentator Allen P. Ross does a good job of helping us appreciate the faith that Abraham (or Abram at this point) displayed when he responded to God's call. Dr. Ross writes, "This passage [Gen. 12] points up the faith of Abram... Abram was middle-aged, prosperous, settled, and thoroughly pagan. The word of the Lord came to him--though it is not known exactly how--and he responded by faith and obediently left everything to follow God's plan."

Abraham's faith is amazing not only because he left behind a settled, comfortable life in highly-cultured Ur, and later in Haran, to obey God. Abraham traded the house and good life in Ur for the existence of a nomadic tent-dweller in Canaan.

In fact, the "father of the faithful" never really owned any land again, except for the cave he bought for family burials (Gen. 23:1-20). Abraham did not live to possess the land of Canaan, the land God promised to him. But Abraham still believed God, and by faith he saw the day when his descendants would receive the land as an inheritance.

The writer of Hebrews stressed that Abraham did not even know where he was going when he first started out for Canaan. After telling Abraham to leave Haran, God did not reveal Himself to the patriarch again until Abraham had arrived in Canaan (Gen. 12:7)--and again, Abraham's response is worth noting. He built an altar and worshiped the Lord, and then did the same thing again a little later.

Given the fact that Canaan was filled with pagan tribes at that time, Abraham's actions were a remarkable witness to the true God. It's even possible that "the great tree of Moreh" (v. 6) where Abraham built his first altar was the site of a Canaanite worship shrine. Talk about "marketplace" witnessing!

Imagine Abraham pounding the "For Sale" sign in his front yard in Ur. When the neighbors ask where he's going and what he will do, he replies, "I'm not sure."

"Then why are you giving up all of this?" the neighbors exclaim.

"Because the true God commanded me to go, and I must obey."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Hebrews 11:10 tells us that by faith, Abraham saw a lot more than just the land of Canaan as his future inheritance. The great faith hero's ultimate hope was heaven.

Abraham's hope of heaven determined his actions on earth. That's what our hope is supposed to do for us. John said that the hope of being with Jesus should cause us to purify our lives

Hebrews 11:8-22

God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them. - Hebrews 11:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

Let's suppose you are out driving on a hot day with your windows rolled up and the air-conditioner humming. You pull alongside another car at a red light and notice that the driver, whose windows are also rolled up, is tapping his fingers on the steering wheel. His mouth is moving and his head is swaying slightly back and forth--all for no apparent reason. Would you assume he was crazy, or would you just look away and drive on?

Chances are you would do the latter, having concluded that the other driver was simply listening to a song you couldn't hear.

That's the way it is with faith. God's Old Testament faithful ones were not beside themselves with the desert heat. They persevered because they ""saw him who is invisible"" (v. 27). They were, in effect, listening to a song others couldn't hear.

Abraham remains the classic example of a life of faith. Consider the greatness of this amazing man's faith. He journeyed forth at God's command, not knowing where he was going. He looked forward to a city that he was never to see in his lifetime. By their faith, he and Sarah had a child when it was all but impossible for them to conceive.

And in the greatest individual act of faith ever recorded, Abraham set out to sacrifice his long-awaited son, not knowing how God would fulfill His promises.

No wonder Abraham's descendants could also speak of things even far in the future as if they had already happened! Joseph spoke

of the exodus from Egypt and ""gave instructions about his bones"" (v. 22) many years before the actual event.

Notice how the author of Hebrews stopped in the middle of his narration about Abraham to make some important summary comments (vv. 13-16). Given the readers' current situation, these verses would have carried a good deal of impact.

The point seems to be that if believers such as Abraham could keep on in faith throughout their whole lives without seeing all of God's promises fulfilled, the readers could make it too.

Moreover, Abraham didn't keep looking over his shoulder, sighing over what he had left behind and wishing he could go back to the easy life he had known. The obvious parallel to the Hebrews' condition could not have escaped their notice.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you ever have a little ""sanctified nostalgia,"" reminiscing about the good old days when you were a new believer, full of faith and on fire for the Lord?

Well, those days may be gone--but the Lord is the same today (Heb. 13:8! Would you like to be more daring, more enthusiastic for Jesus Christ as you walk with Him along the way? We suggest you talk to Him about this today. Just be ready for the answer--a desire for greater faith pleases the Lord.

Hebrews 11:11-12; Genesis 17:15-18:15

Is anything too hard for the Lord? - Genesis 18:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

Children born in biblical days were often given names that reflected their parents' circumstances before that child's birth. Isaac (meaning "laughter") certainly fit into that category, because both of his parents laughed at the idea that Isaac would ever be born.

The two laughers were Abraham and Sarah. They considered themselves far too old to become parents after so many years of being childless. But Isaac was born when his parents were age 100 and 90, respectively, and it's a story of doubt and faith that we can learn from today.

The problem with Abraham and Sarah is that they laughed in doubt. It had been twenty-five years since God first promised Abraham that he would become a great nation, and yet nothing seemed to be happening. Fourteen years earlier (Gen. 16:16), Sarah had tried to help the promise along by giving her servant Hagar to Abraham, resulting in the birth of Ishmael.

But God had other plans. Abraham wavered for a moment when God announced that Sarah would have a son and become "the mother of nations" (Gen. 17:16). That struck Abraham as so unlikely that he laughed and asked God to make Ishmael his heir. God did not directly rebuke Abraham, but restated His plan to establish His covenant through Isaac.

Abraham's full confidence in God was restored by the time God Himself and two angels appeared to the patriarch in the form of three men. This time, Sarah laughed inwardly in disbelief as she heard the promise of a son being made one more time (Gen. 18:12).

Despite these displays of humanness, God kept His promise to send Isaac. Abraham was commended for believing that God could bring life from two people who were as good as dead when it came to having children (Heb. 11:12).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Have you ever laughed at the idea that God could do something that seems impossible to you?

Hebrews 11:13-16

Our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ. - Philippians 3:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

An ad placed in a London newspaper by Arctic explorer Ernest Shackleton drew thousands of responses, even though the ad made this offer: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages, bitter cold, long months of complete darkness, constant danger, safe return doubtful." Shackleton's goal was to reach the South Pole and prove that it was on land rather than beneath the Arctic Ocean.

People will give up a lot when they believe the goal they're sacrificing for is worth it. The heroes mentioned in the early verses of Hebrews 11 were willing to give up whatever it took to follow God. We could call this the perspective of faith, and it's the only way to live.

The opposite of this faith outlook is to live only for this life--to pile up all the possessions we can and enjoy them while we can. In Jesus' story of the rich man and Lazarus, Abraham said to the rich man at his death, "Remember that in your lifetime you received your good things" (Luke 16:25). But all of the man's wealth did not prepare him for eternity.

It's possible to read today's verses and feel sorry for these people of faith who didn't receive everything God promised them. But the writer is making a positive statement, not a complaint.

The idea is that these people were still going strong in the Lord and full of faith when they died. They were content to be aliens without a country and pilgrims ("strangers"), always on the move, because they believed that when God makes a promise, it's as good as done (v. 13).

Abraham, for example, left behind his citizenship papers and a settled existence in Ur to trust God and travel to Canaan on the strength of nothing but God's command. Abraham and the others didn't have the Bible's teaching on heaven that we have, but they knew the God of heaven. And that's where they anchored their hope (Heb. 6:19).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Living by faith may mean that we settle for a little less here on earth.

Hebrews 11:17–35

You can learn a wealth of information about people by asking their thoughts about dying. Some, like Mark Twain, stress the importance of character: "The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time." Others, like Groucho Marx, prefer to laugh away their concerns: "I intend to live forever, or die trying." People of faith, like Billy Graham, focus on the life beyond: "You're born. You suffer. You die. Fortunately, there's a loophole."

Today's portion of the Hebrews 11 Hall of Faith includes a host of men and women who treated death like a minor obstacle. Most notable among them was Abraham, because his faith in the power of God to conquer death extended even to the life of his beloved son. Those who follow this example of fearlessness and faith in a life after death are the spiritual children of Abraham.

Isaac blessed his sons, knowing that God had a plan for their future even after his death. Jacob, for all of his flaws, retained his faith in God's plan for the nation that would spring forth from his sons. And Joseph's faith even extended to the final resting place of his bones, believing that his descendants would be free to carry him out of Egypt (Gen. 50:4). The fulfillment of his prophetic words wouldn't come for another 430 years, but it came to pass, by faith (Ex. 12:41).

Moses' parents did not fear the edict of death pronounced upon their child. Moses did not fear the attack of Pharaoh when he led his people out of Egypt. And the nation of Israel did not fear the walls of water that ultimately crashed down upon their pursuers in the Red Sea. All of these examples looked forward not only to a new country but also to a resurrection beyond their earthly graves. To imitate the words of the author of Hebrews, we do not have the time or space to study each entry in the Hall of Faith of this chapter. Death, torture, fire, and sword were not powerful enough to conquer the faith of these heroes who share in the same promise in which we hope.

Apply the Word

If you're facing a trial today or you have recently come through one, reread chapter 11 and imagine your name and your struggle included in the list. How does what you fear most compare to the situations faced by God's people in the past? Is there any reason to fear? Not at all! Do not be discouraged. None of the people mentioned in this chapter were perfect, but they all saw their faith to completion because they believed in what God had promised. You can too!

Hebrews 11:17-19; Genesis 22:1-18

On the mountain of the Lord it will be provided. - Genesis 22:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

In his wonderful book, *Growing Strong in the Seasons of Life*, Charles Swindoll makes these observations about the startling sacrifice that God commanded Abraham to make in Genesis 22. "We are often hindered from giving up our treasures out of fear for their safety. But wait. Everything is safe which is committed to our God. In fact, nothing is really safe which is not so committed. No child. No job. No romance. No friend. No future. No dream."

Most of us are still learning the wisdom of trusting God with everything. Nothing is safe if it is withheld from God. Was Abraham somehow holding out on God by failing to commit Isaac to the Lord? There's no evidence for that. Instead, God wanted Abraham to undergo the ultimate test of faith--whether he loved God more than anyone or anything else.

It's hard to appreciate all that was at stake for Abraham. Isaac was a beloved and only son for whom his parents had waited twenty-five years. Fatherly love alone would be enough to make most fathers pull back in horror at the idea of giving up their only son.

But Isaac also represented every hope Abraham had for the future. It was God who promised to bless Abraham and his descendants through Isaac and no one else.

The writer of Hebrews says that Abraham obeyed God, believing that He had the power to raise Isaac from the dead (v. 14). That may appear to take the edge off of the test, but far from it.

First of all, Abraham's confidence in God's power reveals an incredibly strong faith in a day when there was no evidence of resurrection. Second, he still had to raise the knife over Isaac's heart and bring it down. That would take great faith no matter what Abraham believed about the outcome.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Let's finish today's study with Paul's teaching on the importance of the resurrection (1 Cor. 15:12-20).

Hebrews 11:20; Genesis 27:1-40

These were all commended for their faith, yet none of them received what had been promised. - Hebrews 11:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

One basic principle of Bible study is that Scripture is often the best commentary on itself. Isaac's inclusion in Hebrews 11 is a good example of how one part of the Bible helps us understand another part. Hebrews 11:20 shows how God used Isaac to accomplish His purposes even in the middle of all the deception and anger that surrounded Isaac's blessing of Jacob and Esau.

This faith perspective is important because it's hard to see from Genesis 27 how anyone in Isaac's family was acting in faith. Isaac was famous mostly because of his famous family. He lived longer than either Abraham or Jacob, but there's not much space given to him in Genesis. His most clearly recorded act of faith was to pray that he and his wife Rebekah would have children (Gen. 25:21).

When it came time to pass on his blessing, Isaac turned to Esau, probably ignoring God's prophecy that Esau would be subservient to Jacob (Gen. 25:23). Isaac's decision was motivated more by his appetite than anything, because he liked what Esau hunted and cooked.

Esau had already shown his contempt for spiritual things when he sold his birthright to satisfy his own hunger. The Bible says that Esau "despised" his birthright (Gen. 25:34).

Jacob wanted the blessing that God wanted him to have, but he and Rebekah used deception to get it instead of acting faithfully. Jacob seems to have been more worried about getting caught than he was about the rightness of the plan.

All four family members had their own agenda, but God overruled this biblical "soap opera" and Jacob became the next in line to inherit the promises God first made to Abraham.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God still overrules and uses human sin and weakness to work out His plan for our good and His glory.

Hebrews 11:12; Genesis 48:1-22

Each generation of the upright will be blessed. - Psalm 112:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Cyrus McCormick, the inventor of the reaper and manufacturer of farming equipment, was a friend of Dwight L. Moody and a generous supporter of Moody's work. McCormick's son, Cyrus Jr., also a very capable business leader, later stepped into his father's place and led the company, International Harvester, for more than thirty years. He was also committed to Christian work, and became one of the original trustees of Moody Bible Institute.

God is always looking for faithful people to bless generation after generation. One of the greatest benefits of a life of faith, which Hebrews 11 demonstrates so well, is the opportunity it gives us to pass on a godly legacy.

Abraham's family is Exhibit A of this principle at work. His grandson Jacob inherited and preserved the blessing--though far from perfectly, given Jacob's years of deceit and the faithless actions of his older sons in their treatment of Joseph among other things.

Despite everything, Jacob was still the “blessing carrier” for his generation, and he followed a family pattern in the way he blessed Manasseh and Ephraim, the two sons born to Joseph in Egypt (v. 5).

Like Isaac, Jacob had bad eyesight, suggesting that he couldn’t tell Joseph’s boys apart. Jacob seemed to be confused when he crossed his hands to confer the blessing, despite the fact that Joseph lined the sons up so that Jacob’s right hand would rest on Manasseh (v. 14).

But Jacob knew what he was doing when he reached across and blessed Ephraim instead. This was the fourth generation in a row in which the younger son received God’s blessing: Isaac over Ishmael, Jacob over Esau, Joseph over Reuben, and now Ephraim over Manasseh. By basically adopting Joseph’s sons, Jacob gave his faithful son’s family a double inheritance.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Looking back on the time when you first came to know the Lord, you can probably remember several people who played a role in bringing you to faith.

Hebrews 11:22; Genesis 50:15-26

Let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit. - 2 Corinthians 7:1

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last August, the class of 1970 at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas, finally held its commencement exercises. The 30-year delay was the result of a deadly tornado that struck the city on May 11, 1970, days before the university’s graduation exercises. The ceremonies were called off as Lubbock dealt with the tragedy. A group of those 1970 graduates, now fifty-somethings with children old enough to graduate from college, participated in commencement exercises.

Some things are too important to be forgotten with the passage of time. We’ve been meeting “heroes from Hebrews” whose faith in God and His promises did not fade throughout more years than most of us expect to live. In fact, “These people were still living by faith when they died” (Heb. 11:13).

Joseph was one of these faith champions. His confidence in God never wavered from the time he was a seventeen-year-old sold into slavery in Egypt until he died at the age of 110. The writer of Hebrews could have drawn on many dramatic stories from Joseph’s life to prove his faith.

But Hebrews 11:22 also speaks of Joseph’s prophecy concerning Israel’s future (Gen. 50:24-25). Woven into this account is a dramatic statement of faith in God’s ability to keep His word.

Genesis 50:20 has been called the Romans 8:28 of the Old Testament. It takes a faith perspective to realize that even the hateful actions of other people are part of God’s greater plan for our good. Joseph’s faith was put into action (James 2:18-26) when he embraced his brothers and their families instead of taking revenge on them.

But Joseph’s greatest act of faith may have been his last act on earth. He looked ahead and believed that God would someday bring the Israelites out of Egypt and back into the promised land. Joseph’s command to take his coffin with them was a statement of his confidence in God’s fulfillment (Gen. 50:24-25).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Joseph’s life is the embodiment of today’s verse. He believed God’s promises and made faith commitments that kept him true to God even in the face of temptation (Gen. 39:1-12).

Hebrews 11:23-31

[Moses] persevered because he saw him who is invisible. - Hebrews 11:27

TODAY IN THE WORD

On April 27, 1874, Mississippi Senator L.Q.C. Lamar made a politically risky speech to his surprised colleagues. Senator Charles Sumner of Massachusetts, an abolitionist who was said to have been the most hated man in the South, had died. But Lamar eulogized Sumner as a man who loved and defended freedom. The dramatic speech helped the cause of postwar reconciliation, although it could have backfired for Lamar and cost him his seat in the Senate.

Moses knew what it was like to take a risk for something he believed in. Why would the adopted son of Pharaoh trade the palace for the desert, give up the robes of royalty for the rags of a shepherd, and choose mistreatment over endless pampering?

Today's verse holds the answer. Moses was one of God's faithful who saw something others didn't see. Take away the faith factor, and the life-threatening risk Moses took by siding with the Hebrew slaves doesn't add up at all.

But Moses wasn't adding things up by human equations. He was a child whose life had been spared by his parents' faith in God; even so, when he came of age, Moses acted on what he knew best.

Now if you know the full story of Moses and the exodus, you will recall that his first attempt to identify with his Hebrew brethren involved the murder of an Egyptian. Why didn't the writer of Hebrews include that unsavory detail?

For the same reason that none of the failings and foibles of God's faithful are mentioned in Hebrews 11. The emphasis was on their great faith, not on those moments when they failed to act faithfully. Besides, the writer was not trying to hide anything--the readers knew the full story just as we do.

The faith choice that Moses made must have been another powerful encouragement to the Hebrews. They also needed to decide whether suffering ""disgrace for the sake of Christ"" (v. 26) was more valuable than any temporary advantage they might gain by going back to their old way of life.

You will face that choice yourself more than once. When the test comes, it makes all the difference whether you are looking back or ""looking ahead"" (v. 26).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes, it can seem as though we traded a good deal to follow Christ.

Let's consider some of those tradeoffs. When we put our faith in Christ, we traded eternal death for eternal life. We swapped out hopelessness for hope, and exchanged a futile way of living for a life filled with purpose. But that's not all. We also gave up the fading, rusting, moth-eaten rewards of earth for an everlasting inheritance in heaven. Today, we have many reasons to choose to stand up for our belief in Christ. Let's pray that God will strengthen our faith in a tangible way during the next week.

Hebrews 11:23; Exodus 2:1-10

By faith Moses' parents hid him for three months... They were not afraid of the king's edict. - Hebrews 11:23

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bible teacher Chuck Swindoll points out that in 1809, the world's attention was riveted on the conquests of the French emperor Napoleon. That year Austria fell to Napoleon, as the ""little corporal"" swept across Europe, amassing a huge empire. But in terms of lasting influence on the world, Swindoll notes, the most important events of 1809 did not happen on battlefields but in baby cribs. Among the future leaders and influential figures born that year were William Gladstone, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Charles Darwin, Edgar Allan Poe, and Abraham Lincoln.

The situation in Egypt in the fifteenth century B.C. was much the same. The Pharaoh was focused on kingdom business--protecting his empire and issuing royal edicts to keep his potential enemies in check. But the most important event of that era was the birth cry of a Hebrew boy born to a Levite family in Egypt.

Moses was arguably the world's greatest human liberator and the leader God had chosen to form a ragged collection of slaves into the nation of Israel. The fact that Moses was born under Pharaoh's death sentence was no obstacle to God. He put in the heart of Moses' mother Jochebed (Ex. 6:20) the same kind of daring and courage that the Hebrew midwives had shown.

Jochebed didn't have the opportunity to read the story of Noah, which her infant son had yet to record. But she did the same thing to save Moses that Noah had done to preserve his family. She took a ""basket"" (v. 3) and coated it with pitch to make it watertight. The word for basket is translated as ""ark"" in Genesis 6:14.

What a great picture of God's saving and preserving care! When He wants to save the righteous or raise up a leader for His people, neither a world full of water nor a king's command (see 1:22) matters to Him.

God not only saved Moses' life, but arranged for him to be weaned by his mother and raised in Pharaoh's court. The future liberator would spend almost forty years absorbing Egyptian education and culture. When it came time for him to make a choice, Moses would stand with God's people, although his first attempt at leadership was tragically misguided.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jochebed probably had two or three years to be with Moses. We can imagine the influence she had on him as she taught him about the true God. This is how Moses knew he was a Hebrew (2:11).

Thank the Lord for godly parental influence! We need to pray today for Christian parents around the world, especially those who are raising their children in hostile and dangerous environments. And if you are a parent seeking to instill godly principles in your children, be encouraged by Jochebed's example.

Hebrews 11:23-29; Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Hebrews 11:23-29

TODAY IN THE WORD

Since World War II the remote Russian island of Sakhalin has been ""home"" to tens of thousands of Koreans. Now the surviving members of this sad story want to go home.

During the war, when both Korea and Sakhalin were in Japanese hands, the Japanese brought some 60 Koreans to the island to work in its factories and coal mines. The Koreans were left behind after the war, and Russia prohibited them from leaving until 1988. But permission to go home means little to the elderly Koreans. Because they spent their youth in slave labor, they have no money for the trip home.

Moses would certainly identify with these people taken from their homeland and forced to perform slave labor for a despised enemy. Although he spent his early years in Egypt as the adopted son of Pharaoh's daughter, Moses eventually identified with his own people and their sufferings and made his choice accordingly (Heb. 11:25-26).

To say that Moses finished well is like saying the Pacific Ocean holds a lot of water. We could spend the entire month reviewing Moses' life and accomplishments as the great miracle-worker, liberator, lawgiver, patriarch and prophet of Israel.

Besides Moses' measurable achievements, we are reminded that the Lord knew Moses and spoke to him ""face to face"" (Deut. 34:10). No wonder God took personal charge of Moses' funeral arrangements and felt no obligation to reveal where He had buried His faithful servant.

But even in Moses' case, Scripture does not ignore the other side of the story. Deuteronomy 34:4 reminds us that Moses was prohibited from entering the Promised Land because of his disobedience at Meribah (Num. 20:1-13). He died gazing into Canaan, with God's promise in his ears.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Maybe you feel a little like Moses today, standing on the pinnacle of 1996 and looking over into the new year, wondering what lies ahead.

Since none of us can see into the future, we need to cling to Him whom we cannot see, our never-failing God whose love and abiding care is more real than anything we can see, taste or touch

Hebrews 11:23; Exodus 1:6—2:10

The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them. - Psalm 34:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

A recent missionary newsletter carried the story of the Tajumulco Baptist Church in Guatemala, which meets on property located next to two sacrifice stones thought to be left over from a Mayan temple. Local witch doctors still offer animals on the stones, and pray that the Christians among them will be "skinny, sickly and removed."

When two opposite and antagonistic worldviews meet, people have to make a choice and take a stand. This is happening in Guatemala and many other places today, just as it happened in the time of Moses. Pharaoh forced God's people to make a choice when he began oppressing the Israelites, and then ordered the death of all newborn Hebrew boys.

The Hebrew midwives were the first to make the decision to obey God rather than the pharaoh. They refused to kill the newborns because they feared God (1:21), a faith commitment that He rewarded by giving them their own families.

Hebrews 11 focuses on the choice made by Moses' parents, Amram and Jochebed (Ex. 6:20). Jochebed and Moses' sister Miriam were the main characters in today's story, but in Hebrews, Amram is also credited with acting in courageous faith to help save Moses from Pharaoh's murderous order (Heb. 11:23).

The story of baby Moses records the second time that God had preserved His faithful people by putting them in an ark. The word translated "basket" (2:3) is the same word used of Noah's ark. The ark became a symbol of God's ability to save His people while judging unbelievers, which happened in a spectacular way when Moses pronounced the plagues on Egypt and led the people of

Israel out to safety.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Hebrews 6:10 assures us, "God is not unjust; he will not forget your work and the love you have shown him."

Hebrews 11:24-26; Exodus 2:11-25

Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. - Matthew 5:10

TODAY IN THE WORD

Think about the forty years that Moses spent living in the royal palace of Egypt as Pharaoh's adopted son.

How often did Moses see Hebrew slaves being mistreated as he rode in his chariot, and when did it begin to bother him? Did his real family ever tell Moses about his origins or did God reveal it to him? Did Moses suddenly decide one day to forsake the riches of Egypt and identify with the Hebrews or was it a conviction that grew in his heart over a long period of time?

The Bible doesn't answer questions like these. The martyr Stephen did say in Acts 7:25 that Moses believed his killing of a cruel Egyptian would cause the Israelites to accept him as their liberator.

Moses' decision to identify with the people of God was the right one, but his timing and his methods were not God's choice (Ex. 2:11-12). The Israelites rejected Moses' attempt to lead them, and he had to run away for forty more years of preparation as a shepherd in Midian.

The writer of Hebrews telescoped the events of Exodus 2, focusing on the faith behind Moses' decision to reject his royal status and identify with God's people. How was Moses able to trade a life of pleasure among the "beautiful people" of Egypt for a life of pain among despised slaves?

The answer was in his perspective. He was "looking ahead to his reward" (Heb. 11:26), not looking back at the pleasures of Egypt. Moses had the same faith in God's promises that those before him had.

This led him to give up what he could see in favor of what he couldn't see--except through the eyes of faith. He knew that the pleasures of Egypt were not only temporary but laced with sin, and he made the right choice.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Sometimes we believers can begin to develop a "martyr complex" as we think about all we've given up to follow Jesus.

The apostles had a touch of that one day as they watched a rich young man walk away after talking with Jesus with all of his wealth intact (Luke 18:15-25). The apostle Peter spoke for the group: "We have left all we had to follow you!" (v. 28).

Hebrews 11:27-28; Exodus 12:1-36

The blood will be a sign for you on the houses where you are; and when I see the blood, I will pass over you. - Exodus 12:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bible teacher John MacArthur says that true faith always accepts God's plan and God's provision, even when these don't seem to make sense to human ways of thinking. He points to the experience of Moses and the Passover as an example.

Humanly speaking, putting a baby in a basket and then hiding the basket in the marshes doesn't seem to be the best way to keep a future leader alive--much less for him to wind up in the right hands.

It also doesn't make sense to think that the most powerful king on earth would let his slaves go free, or that painting an animal's blood on the doorframes of the slaves' houses would save their firstborn sons from death. But that's what God commanded the Israelites to do.

Before Moses was ready to lead Israel in observing the Passover he had to leave Egypt, which Hebrews 11:27 says he did "by faith, not fearing the king's anger." This seems to present a problem with the account in Exodus 2:14-15, which says that Moses was afraid his murder of the Egyptian had become known, and fled from Egypt because Pharaoh tried to kill him.

But Exodus does not say that Moses was afraid of Pharaoh. And although he had to leave Egypt to avoid being killed, Moses' actions--even when wrong--were motivated by his basic faith decision to identify with God and His people.

It was a different Moses who returned to Egypt forty years later to deliver God's command to the king: "Let My people go." By the time God was ready to carry out the tenth plague on the land and establish the Passover with Israel, Moses was the recognized leader.

In that role Moses faithfully communicated God's instructions to the nation. These included both directions for Passover night itself, and for the future observance of the Passover feast that would become a part of Israel's worship (vv. 24-28).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The book of Hebrews says, "Without the shedding of blood there is no forgiveness" for sin (Heb 9:22).

Hebrews 11:28; Exodus 12:21-36

By faith [Moses] kept the Passover and the sprinkling of blood. - Hebrews 11:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

When we read the story of the first Passover and the plague of death God brought upon Egypt, we understand better why the writer of Hebrews made the statement contained in today's verse.

For example, the Passover was a demonstration of faith on the part of Moses and Israel. The story is so familiar to us that it's easy to forget the Israelites had no precedent for such a ceremony. They had nothing to rely on but the word of Moses as he had received it from the Lord.

That's a lot, for sure. And it's true that Israel had watched God bring nine miraculous plagues against Egypt. But the point is that Moses and the nation carried out the Passover by faith. They believed God would keep His word, both in striking down the first-born of Egypt and in passing over the houses where the blood was on the doorposts.

Another striking feature of Hebrews 11 is that the act of faith in keeping the Passover is credited to Moses. That's not just a literary device to keep things simple. It's a tremendous statement about the man whose leadership we are studying--and, we hope, learning from--this month.

This great story of Israel's redemption from Egypt began with God's selection of Moses as His representative. The instructions for the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and the warning against disregarding them, came first from God to Moses. And it was Moses, along with Aaron, who carefully relayed God's message to the elders of Israel.

In other words, because Moses was faithful to his calling, the Israelites were saved from "the destroyer" (v. 23) that God sent among the Egyptians. We could say that like Abraham, Moses believed God, and salvation followed (see Gen. 15:6).

The reaction to Moses' leadership is worth noting. First, the Israelite elders believed Moses and bowed in worship and obedience to God (vv. 27-28). And when morning revealed the horror to the Egyptians, Pharaoh gave Moses and Aaron permission to leave and even asked for their blessing (vv. 31-32). Then the Israelites obeyed Moses in plundering the Egyptians (v. 35).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

David said in his great prayer of confession, "Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean" (Ps. 51:7).

David knew hyssop was used to apply the blood of the Passover lamb to the Israelites' houses (v. 22). David was asking God to forgive his sin and cleanse him from his guilt. This is a picture of the righteousness we have in Christ, the true Passover lamb. His blood saves us, and continues to cleanse us from sin. All we have to do is confess our sins and accept Christ's forgiveness (1 John 1:9). Is your "sin account" up-to-date with Him today?

Hebrews 11:29; Exodus 14:1-31

Do not be afraid. Stand firm and you will see the deliverance the Lord will bring you today. - Exodus 14:13

TODAY IN THE WORD

The reformer Martin Luther once wrote, "Reason holds that if God had a watchful eye on us and loved us, He would prevent all evil and not let us suffer. But now, since all sorts of calamities come to us, we conclude: 'Either God has forgotten me, or God is hostile to me and does not want me.' Against such thoughts, which we harbor by nature, we must arm ourselves with God's Word. We must not judge according to our opinion but according to the Word."

Luther wasn't writing about the Israelites at the edge of the Red Sea, but he could have been. They were trapped between the water

and the Egyptian army in a developing calamity that caused them to turn angrily on Moses (vv. 11-12). The people could have substituted God's name for Moses', since they were really questioning God's love and goodness.

The Bible says the people went through the Red Sea by faith, but at least in the early stages of this miracle the faith seems to have been on Moses' part (v. 14). He calmed the people and assured them that the Lord's purpose for them was complete victory, including their enemy's destruction. Moses acted faithfully as God's leader, and the way was prepared for Israel's escape.

Let's give the Israelites some credit too. Even with the Red Sea's waters walled up on each side of them and dry ground to walk on, it still took faith for the people to step out on the sea bottom and walk between the high walls of water without looking back.

This was the moment of faith that Hebrews 11:27 speaks of. The sight of the waters piled up must have been overwhelming, even with the safe passage God provided. When the people made it safely across and watched the Egyptian army being swept away, their faith was renewed (Ex. 14:31).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you feel trapped between a hard circumstance and the enemy today? Maybe it's time you stepped out in faith to discover God's way of escape for you.

The apostle Paul wrote in 1 Corinthians 10:13 that when we are tempted or tested (the word can be translated either way), God will not let us drown beneath the waves, but will make "a way out." Read this verse, and then pray it back to the Lord while you take a Sunday walk today. As you walk and pray, imagine yourself walking through the Red Sea on dry, solid ground.

Hebrews 11:30; Joshua 6:1-21

Be strong and courageous ... for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go. - Joshua 1:9

TODAY IN THE WORD

Faith can be embarrassing--at least to the world's eyes. From the safety of Jericho's high walls, the city's defenders must have ridiculed the Israelite priests and soldiers who walked around the fortress day after day doing nothing but blowing on trumpets. Maybe even some of the Israelites themselves secretly wondered what they were doing, and why.

But as unorthodox as it seemed, this was God's plan to hand Jericho over to Israel, which meant finally entering the promised land after forty years of disobedience in the wilderness. Joshua was acting under direct orders from "the commander of the army of the Lord" (Josh. 5:14).

The chapter break between Joshua 5 and 6 is a little misleading, because the conversation begun in 5:13 continues into chapter 6, after a brief parenthetical note about the situation at Jericho (6:1). The complete lack of any military effort on behalf of the Israelites underscored the most important part of this story: Jericho was conquered "by faith" (Heb. 11:30).

This Commander who appeared to Joshua was the Lord Himself, most likely Jesus Christ in one of His appearances before the Incarnation. Joshua asked Him whose side He was on (5:13). But as someone has said, this Commander didn't come to take sides. He came to take over. And His strategy was to take Jericho in a way that would leave no doubt whose victory it was. The people of Jericho were afraid of Israel (Josh. 2:9-11, see tomorrow's study). So it must have been a relief to them when the dreaded Hebrews arrived and started holding "camp meetings" instead of attacking.

But the secret to Israel's strength wasn't in her people's military might. It was the presence of the Lord in their midst that made the difference. That's why it's interesting to learn that the trumpets the priests blew were the trumpets blown during Israel's feasts to announce the Lord's presence. The Israelites would have known the trumpets' significance.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Joshua and the battle of Jericho may seem like a children's Bible story, but there is a sober note of judgment to it. God commanded Jericho to be destroyed.

Hebrews 11:31 Joshua 2:1-21

By faith the prostitute Rahab, because she welcomed the spies, was not killed. - Hebrews 11:31

TODAY IN THE WORD

Last year, Nancy Wake, or "The White Mouse," as the German military called her, died at the age of 98. During World War II, Wake saved the lives of hundreds of Allied soldiers by escorting them through occupied France to Spain. She was also one of 39 women who parachuted into France in preparation for D-Day, collecting drops of weapons and ammunition and hiding them. "I was never

afraid," she said. "I was too busy to be afraid."

Today's reading takes us on a secret spy mission. God had rescued the Israelites forty years earlier from Egyptian slavery, but rather than immediately possessing the territory they had been promised, they didn't believe God and doubted His power to deliver them into the Promised Land. For forty years they wandered the desert as punishment for their sin. Now in today's reading, having served their sentence, they again found themselves at the border of the Promised Land.

The two spies whom Joshua sent out found the house in Jericho of the prostitute Rahab. This might have proven an unwise choice for many reasons. Frequently in the ancient world, prostitutes were involved in intelligence activities. But by the work of God's providence, these two spies found a friend, not an enemy, in Rahab.

Rahab seemed to be the least likely hero of faith. Her profession was scandalous, and she was a heathen, a Canaanite. But she confessed faith in Yahweh, a faith that trembled at the sovereign God of the universe (v. 11). She wasn't simply trying to curry favor with the enemy. From deep within her being, she acknowledged that this God was great enough to control everything. Unlike any of the tribal deities she may have known or worshiped previously, she began to understand that something was categorically different about Yahweh. He was God over every inch of space in the universe. There was nothing He could not do. There was no one who could oppose Him. A holy fear of Yahweh took root in Rahab's heart, and it gave birth to great faith that led to her salvation.

APPLY THE WORD

Knowing God and understanding His character is a critical step for combating fear. This doesn't mean just memorizing rote facts about God. It means immersing ourselves in God's story, just like Rahab did. Yahweh had parted the Red Sea, rescuing His people from Egypt. He had dethroned two powerful kings, Sihon and Og. Whose stories are teaching you most about God? Are you paying attention to what your own story says about God's power and faithfulness?

Hebrews 11:31; Joshua 2:1-24; 6:22-25

Those who honor me I will honor, but those who despise me will be disdained. - 1 Samuel 2:30

TODAY IN THE WORD

Which is harder for God to do, conquer a city with thick, thirty-foot-high walls, or conquer the heart of one person?

The answer, of course, is that neither is too hard for God. And in the ancient city of Jericho, He did both. Jericho stood in the Israelites' path as they advanced into Canaan, and the people of Jericho were under God's judgment for their gross immorality. He brought the walls down by His sovereign power without an arrow being fired.

But because God is also gracious, He opened the heart of a Jericho resident who seemed to be the least likely candidate for salvation. Rahab heard about the approaching Hebrews and their great God, who parted seas and flattened enemies on their behalf (Josh. 2:10). Like the rest of her neighbors, Rahab feared this God.

Hers was a different kind of fear. The rest of Jericho's people simply hunkered down behind the city's walls and locked gates and hoped the Hebrews wouldn't come. They showed no inclination to repent of their sins and throw themselves on the mercy of the true God.

But Rahab's fear turned into awe for the Lord, and she came to believe in the God of Israel (2:11). As a result, He credited her with faith. James 2:25 says Rahab's faith was genuine because she acted on it by receiving and hiding the Israelite spies. In this way she was like Abraham, who believed God and proved it by leaving Ur, and later offering Isaac as a sacrifice (James 2:21-24).

Rahab's faith was rewarded by the salvation of her entire family. She came to live in Israel, and even became part of Jesus' lineage by marrying a man named Salmon and becoming the father of Boaz, David's great-grandfather (Ruth 4:21; Matt. 1:5).

Because of her faith and God's blessing on her, Rahab came to be highly regarded both by Jews and by Christians despite her former life as a prostitute. Some biblical scribes have tried to soften Rahab's reputation by making her simply a hostess or an innkeeper.

But God's grace doesn't need any help. All of us are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Rahab's life illustrates this biblical principle: "Man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7).

Hebrews 11:32-34; 1 Kings 18:1-40

How long will you waver between two opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him. - 1 Kings 18:20

TODAY IN THE WORD

Pioneer missionary Robert Moffatt served for years in South Africa without seeing any converts. But when friends in England wrote to ask Moffatt what they could send him as a gift, he replied that he wanted a Communion set. The friends were surprised, knowing the difficult struggle Moffatt was having, but they sent him the set anyway. By the time it arrived, enough people had come to Christ under Moffatt's ministry that he was able to hold a Communion service.

There's a certain kind of confidence that comes when you're living by faith in the God "who gives life to the dead and calls things that are not as though they were" (Rom. 4:17). By faith, Robert Moffatt could see those first converts as if they were already there.

God's prophets spoke and acted with the same confidence. Of all the people and events mentioned in today's verses, we chose one of the Bible's best-known examples of the confidence that faith produces. Elijah served during the reign of Ahab and Jezebel, arguably the darkest period in Israel's early history.

These two were so fearsome in their opposition to God that anyone with less fire and courage than Elijah might not have been able to stand against them. When Ahab and Jezebel filled the land with idolatry and supported a total of 850 false prophets, Elijah stood in their path to stop the madness and call the people back to God.

Elijah was not afraid of Ahab, even though the king's servant Obadiah reminded Elijah that Ahab could order anyone killed any time he wanted. Elijah's confidence was not self-focused but anchored in the Lord (v. 15), which explains why he called for the contest on Mount Carmel with absolute assurance that God would answer and glorify His name.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

On June 7, we encouraged you to pray for an unsaved person you know--even the one who seems to be the farthest from God.

Hebrews 11:32-40

These were all commended for their faith. - Hebrews 11:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dan Southern, president of the American Tract Society, tells of a friend in a small town whose house was on the route of a local parade. Because few people came out to watch, this woman stood outside her home waving at the marchers and greeting them. As the parade went on, she became more excited and began responding with great enthusiasm. Suddenly, a VIP in the parade came over to Dan's friend and gave her a hug. It was the state's governor who had noticed her enthusiasm and wanted to say thanks.

We can almost imagine the readers of Hebrews, watching the parade of the VIPs of God passing by. But the writer did not simply want his readers to watch the parade of the faithful. He was calling them to fall into step and join it.

Remember, Hebrews 11 was not written just to praise the Old Testament spiritual giants. The Hebrews were being given an armload of reasons for not shrinking back from Christ, but for persevering and gaining ""what He has promised"" (Heb. 10:36).

Verses 32-35a speak of triumph, escape, and displays of power. It's no surprise, then, to find David, Gideon, and Daniel in this list, although Daniel is not mentioned by name (v. 33).

But beginning with second half of verse 35, the picture changes from conquest to weakness and suffering. About a dozen kinds of persecution are cataloged here, and it's possible that the Hebrew believers had experienced some of them.

No one can accuse the author of sugarcoating the suffering that might await those who are committed to Christ. The Bible never denies that believers will suffer. Jesus assured us we could expect trouble (John 16:33). So the issue is not whether we will suffer, but how we will suffer.

Moses was a model of godly suffering for the Hebrews--and for us. Only someone looking to the things of eternity would choose affliction with the people of God over the short-lived pleasures of sin (Heb. 11:25-26).

This powerful chapter closes with an amazing statement. All of these great saints of the past still lacked the ""something better"" which believers on this side of the Cross enjoy: the coming of Christ and His perfect sacrifice for sin. In that sense, only together with us are they made perfect.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We have a great advantage over the Old Testament saints. We can see the fulfillment of God's promises, we know the reality of the Cross, and we hold God's complete revelation in our hands.

It follows, then, that our commitment to live by faith should be as great as theirs, if not greater. Is that true of us today? Each of us needs to answer that question before the Lord. Maybe it's time for a spring weekend walk as you talk with the Lord and allow Him to examine your heart.

Hebrews 11:32-12:3

But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who believe and are saved. - Hebrews 10:39

TODAY IN THE WORD

The legendary runner, John A. Kelly (1907-2004), started a record 61 Boston Marathons, completed 58, finished as runner-up 7 times, and won 2 of these grueling 26.2-mile races. He was a three-time Olympic athlete and named Runner of the Century by Runner's World magazine. Boston honored him with a larger-than-life statue in his likeness, commemorating his longevity in the marathon and life.

The race of faith marked out for us is not a sprint, but rather a marathon that requires our endurance. As we read the record of faith heroes in verses 32 through 37, we sense it could go on indefinitely—and that is precisely the author's intent. This catalogue only begins the attendance list of witnesses who testify that God is faithful and commendable faith is possible (12:1). If faith is possible for Jephthah, for example, despite his imprudence (cf. Judg. 11:29-40), then faith is possible for us, despite our shortcomings. If God's people of the past remained faithful in the face of great suffering, Hebrews encourages us to be faithful when we face suffering.

Verse 40 links the first readers of Hebrews—and us today!—with people of faith from the Old Testament. God's "better" plan is Christ, who through His death and resurrection offers us eternal life and unites people from every tongue, nation, and generation.

Hebrews directs us to rid ourselves of sin and everything that impedes commitment to Christ, such as love of wealth, fixation with image, or sexual impurity (v. 1; cf. 12:14-17; 13:4-5). We are inspired not only by the faithful witnesses of the past, but most effectively by the victory of Christ (vv. 2-3). His perseverance and faithfulness is not only exemplary but also empowering! The author of Hebrews knew how we can become exhausted in the journey of faith. When life's struggles are disheartening and seem never-ending, and when the alternative tempts us with a quick fix, the remedy is a resolute gazing upon Christ.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

John Chrysostom, an early church leader in the fourth century A.D., once observed, "Faith both accomplishes great things and suffers great things." Many people throughout history have proved him right. Foxe's Book of Martyrs recounts the stories of the earliest Christians who died triumphantly for the name of Jesus. By Their Blood tells of twentieth-century Christians who have died for their faith. These books are available in bookstores or online. They will encourage you to gaze on Christ even through difficult times.

Hebrews 11:35-36; Jeremiah 37:11-17; 38

If you suffer as a Christian, do not be ashamed, but praise God that you bear that name. - 1 Peter 4:16

TODAY IN THE WORD

An unusual story of people who learned to thank God for their pain comes out of Mozambique, the African nation ravaged by floods last year (see yesterday's study). As people climbed trees to escape the rising waters, a pastor and sixteen other people found themselves clinging to a tree for life. The exhausted people asked the pastor to preach to help them stay awake. He was tired too, but mosquitoes began biting him, keeping him awake. The group was rescued after almost two days, and the pastor said, "I thank God for the mosquitoes because they stopped me from falling asleep. If we had fallen asleep, we would have been carried away by the water."

Most of the time, we don't see such an immediate and obvious reason for suffering. There is certainly no promise in Scripture that those who live by faith will live trouble-free. Peter knew something about the Christian life and suffering.

After absorbing a cruel beating for preaching Christ, Peter and the other apostles went away rejoicing that Jesus considered them worthy of suffering for His name. And they went right on preaching the gospel (Acts 5:40-42).

The role call of the faithful in Hebrews 11 included those who were "put in prison" (v. 36). The prophet Jeremiah is a good representative of these suffering saints. He had perhaps the hardest assignment of any Old Testament prophet, announcing to

Judah that God was handing His sinful people over to the Babylonians for judgment. Jerusalem would be plundered, and the people would be carried into exile (Jer. 37:15).

Jeremiah's message was very unpopular in Jerusalem. No surprise there. Soon the messenger became so identified with his message that Jeremiah began to undergo severe persecution. He was beaten and put in stocks (Jer. 20:1-2), arrested and beaten again, then arrested again and lowered into an empty well where he sank in the mud (Jer. 38:6).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

If everything was clear and the answers all made sense, we wouldn't need to live by faith.

Hebrews 11:35; 1 Kings 17:1-24

My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. - Philippians 4:19

TODAY IN THE WORD

When George Mueller opened orphanages in Bristol, England, in the 1800s, he decided to live by faith, relying on God's promise to provide. He often didn't know where the money would be found, but he knew that God would always be true to His promise to be a "Father to the fatherless."

One day there was nothing to feed hundreds of children the next day. Mueller went to bed, praying for God to supply their breakfast. The next morning, during his walk, he met a friend who, without knowing the dire situation, asked Mueller to accept his gift of money. Mr. Mueller thanked him, praised God for answering his prayer, and went back for breakfast.

What a powerful reminder of the truth that when we live by faith, God accepts responsibility for our welfare. Today's verse is set in the context of faithful giving to God's work, which is what the widow of Zarephath did when she received Elijah and supported God's worker. By faith this unnamed woman "received [her] dead back, raised to life again" (Heb. 11:35).

Today's story preceded Elijah's contest on Mount Carmel (see June 20). Elijah met this widow during his time of seclusion after his first appearance to King Ahab of Israel and the prophecy of drought.

These were dark days in Israel, times that demanded strong faith from God's people. Ahab and Jezebel threatened to extinguish the worship of God by introducing Baal worship. But God had another plan.

He first used ravens to feed Elijah, and then sent him north to Zarephath in Sidon, the homeland of Jezebel (1 Kings 16:31)! There Elijah met a widow who was suffering from the drought and preparing to die with her son. Her faith in "the Lord, the God of Israel" (v. 14) was amazing for a Gentile woman who was putting her life on the line to obey Elijah's instruction.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God has committed Himself to those who are committed to live for His glory. Take a few minutes today to read Jesus' teaching on this subject in Matthew 6:25-34 and meditate on it. Then prayerfully examine your actions, intentions, and motives to understand if God's kingdom and His righteousness are at the top of your priority list. Close by thanking Him for His gift of faith, His faithfulness and His promise to supply the things you need.

Hebrews 11:36-40

During the primaries leading up to the 2008 presidential election, two prominent candidates made the mistake of using the word wasted to describe the lives of American troops who died fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both candidates intended to convey the idea that the deaths could have been avoided, but their poor choice of words grieved the families who lost their beloved sons and daughters and who needed to be reassured that their losses were not in vain.

A life unselfishly given out of love for another is never a waste. But it isn't always easy to see that under tragic circumstances. It is very likely that the recipients of this letter personally knew believers who had been martyred. The history of God's people is filled with examples of those who paid the ultimate price for their faith. Today's passage mentions this group and defines their identity by their courageous faithfulness to the very end.

A stark reality puts a harrowing signature on this commemoration of their sacrifices. "None of them received what had been promised" (v. 39). It is hard to read those words without thinking, "What a waste!" But their lives were not wasted at all. God had planned something better! What those men and women receive in eternity is incomparably better than anything they ever could have attained in this life. The readers of Hebrews needed to know that just as we need to know it now. Why? Because we play a part in giving their deaths meaning.

Only together with us, the body of Christ who remain faithful to the very end, will the martyrs of the past be made perfectly complete. Those who looked forward in faith to the coming of Christ will be joined with those who look back in faith to His resurrection and welcome the indwelling of His Spirit. They helped bring the message of salvation to us. It is our duty to keep it alive by maintaining our confidence in the truth and our obedience to the Word of God. To ignore that would be to treat their sacrifices, and the death of Jesus Himself, as a wasted loss.

Apply the Word

As believers we are united and interconnected in Christ. Because of that, our actions take on immense significance. Who we are individually reflects on the entire group. This isn't meant to be a guilt trip but rather an opportunity for encouragement. We have a responsibility to each other that includes the profound privilege to help each other in faith. In doing so, we honor those who have gone before us and leave a legacy of love.

Hebrews 11:37-38; 1 Kings 19:1-18

We have this treasure in jars of clay to show that this all-surpassing power is from God and not from us. - 2 Corinthians 4:7

TODAY IN THE WORD

If we ever needed proof that God's ways are not our ways, all we have to do is look at the roll call of His faithful people. There isn't one of them who had what we could call an easy life. We have already seen that living by faith doesn't mean living trouble-free.

Instead of raking in the honors and living comfortably, God's faithful people suffered in an amazing variety of ways. Tradition says that the prophet Isaiah was sawed in half by King Manasseh. Zechariah, the grandson of Jehoida the priest, was stoned to death after delivering God's word of judgment (2 Chron. 24:20-24).

Other faithful servants of God wandered in caves and deserts and mountains (Heb 11:38), for a very good reason. They were often being hounded by someone in power who was hostile to God. This world has never been very friendly to the people and the things of God, and the Bible doesn't indicate that this will change before Jesus returns. That's why Peter said persecution shouldn't surprise us (1 Peter 4:12).

David knew something about being hunted. He spent years hiding in caves and the desert as Saul tried to kill him. It was David who described so well the world's attitude toward God's people. "The wicked bend their bows; they set their arrows against the strings to shoot from the shadows at the upright in heart" (Ps. 11:2).

Many of the prophets in Elijah's day were executed by Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 19:10). Those who survived had to hide in caves (1 Kings 18:4). Elijah himself had to head into the desert after his great victory on Mount Carmel when Jezebel put a price on his head for killing all of her false prophets.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Jesus made us a guarantee we can take to the bank:

"In this world you will have trouble" (John 16:33).

Hebrews 11:39-40; 10:35-40

You need to persevere so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised. - Hebrews 10:36

TODAY IN THE WORD

People don't always live to see the fulfillment of things they have hoped for and lived for. At least two American presidents died on the verge of seeing their hopes fulfilled. Abraham Lincoln lived to see the Civil War brought to an end on April 9, 1865, but he was assassinated just three days later. His hoped-for healing and restoration of the nation occurred without him. Franklin D. Roosevelt, who led America during World War II, died on April 12, 1945, just a few weeks before the Allies declared victory in Europe on May 8.

The Old Testament believers who populate Hebrews 11 also had a sense of incompleteness to their lives. The Bible says that "none of them received what had been promised" (v. 39). That's why they felt like such aliens and pilgrims on earth.

Don't get the wrong idea. There was nothing defective about the faith of these heroic saints. It's just that they lived in an era when God's promise of salvation through the coming of the Messiah was still ahead. They looked into the future and saw the promise, and embraced it by faith. But they died with a sense of longing that we don't have today because we live on this side of the cross.

We may feel as if our faith is small compared to the faithful of Hebrews 11, but in several ways the experience of God's people in the church completes and perfects their faith. We have received the fullness of God's promise in Jesus Christ.

Therefore, we can look back at those who went before us and say, in effect, "You were right to live by faith. The fulfillment of God's promise has come. Salvation is complete. You are made perfect in Christ."

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

The faith stories of the Hebrews heroes have been told. Ours are still being written, which is why we need to hold on to our confidence in Christ and persevere for Him (Heb. 10:36).

Faithful to the End: Faithful in the Hard Things

Hebrews 11:17–12:3

Long-distance runners feel burning muscles, aching joints, and cardiovascular exhaustion. Marathon runner Matt Gabrielson was on mile 18 of the New York City Marathon when he felt an intense pounding in his quadriceps. Rather than give up, his solution was to refocus. He studied the faces of the people cheering on the sidelines. By focusing on the pleasure of the crowd instead of on his pain, he was able to finish the race.

This second half of Hebrews 11 continues to list individuals whose lives were distinguished by faith. But it takes the idea of faithfulness a step further by including the names of those who faced unimaginable decisions or circumstances. What must Abraham have felt when faced with the instruction to sacrifice his son Isaac? Moses' parents hid their child in a basket to prevent his murder and as a mark of hope for his future. Moses grew up to make his own difficult choices: to defy Pharaoh and to lead God's people out of slavery.

Others are mentioned by name as well, and their stories bear repeating: Rahab, Gideon, Samson, and Samuel. These men and women were imprisoned, tortured, jeered, and even stoned. For these individuals who obeyed God no matter how great the cost, it was said, "the world was not worthy of them" (v. 38).

Even though God commended each of these people for their faith, their reward was not on this earth. They knew that God had something far better for them. They kept their eyes on eternity. Being faithful to God in this life requires keeping our focus not on ourselves but on Him and remembering the faithfulness of those who have run the race before us. They are surrounding us, cheering for us to continue to be faithful to God.

Apply the Word

Because we believe that Jesus' death and resurrection have made eternal life with God possible, the communion of believers includes those who have preceded us in death. They are worshiping now in heaven even while we are worshiping God on earth. If you have a loved one who has passed away, thank God for that inspiring life and example that continues to encourage you

Hebrews 12

Hebrews 12:1-11

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. - Hebrews 12:2

TODAY IN THE WORD

Dr. Joseph Stowell has excellent advice for anyone who wants to run a successful race for Jesus Christ. Dr. Stowell says that running well involves at least three forms of preparation. First, we need to "unload the baggage," getting rid of things in our lives that distract us from the business of living for Christ. Second, we must "shed the sin" which blocks our fellowship with Christ and disqualifies us from the race. Third, we must "stay at it," running with a commitment to hang in there when it gets tough and finish the race.

That's a great training regimen for any believer who wants to be counted among God's faithful people when it's all over. Hebrews 11 is a great chapter because it teaches us that faith pleases God, and shows us what He can do with people who are determined to live faithfully before Him.

But the encouragement doesn't stop there. In Hebrews 12 we discover what it takes to live a life of faith that doesn't quit. The plan

isn't quick or easy, and there are no shortcuts on God's cross-country race course. We are called to "endure hardship" and accept discipline that is often painful. But the blessing of "righteousness and peace" (v. 11), and God's crown of victory (2 Tim. 4:8) are more than worth the sacrifice.

Hebrews 12 also takes the lesson of faith one step further by offering the ultimate example of faithfulness: Jesus Christ in His suffering on the cross (v. 2-3). Our Lord did not falter once, of course, even though His suffering was beyond imagination. Because He endured the shame and pain of the cross, we can run our race with endurance and finish the course.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Did you have a favorite story of faith from Hebrews 11? Today would be a good time to turn to that passage again and help yourself to a faith-enriching review of God's Word.

Hebrews 12:1–11

Spiros Louis was a humble water carrier who, in 1896, found himself the bearer of unprecedented esteem with a permanent place in the history of his nation. He represented his nation of Greece, the host of the first modern Olympics, in the inaugural running of the race from Marathon to Athens. When he entered the stadium, first of all competitors, the home crowd showered him with cheers. The Crown Prince Constantine and Prince George joined his side for the completion of the arduous race. A man who began the day a commoner finished it as a companion of royalty.

The opening verses of today's reading comprise one of the most inspiring exhortations in all of Scripture, and they compare the successful completion of a life of faith to the triumphant victory of a race watched by our most faithful supporters, culminating in a royal destination. We fix our eyes on Him who is seated at the right hand of the throne of God and who traveled a much more painful road to arrive there. Our sin, our worries, our troubles, and our frustrations are nothing but needless entanglements holding us back. We are called to throw it all off—what a freeing, invigorating invitation!

After verse 3, however, the author changed tone in order to recognize the very real hardship faced by every believer. By doing so, he helped his audience view their sufferings in the proper perspective: as discipline from the Father. His warning that only illegitimate children would not undergo discipline is purely hypothetical—for everyone undergoes discipline (v. 8). You need not worry about whether you have faced enough hardship in life to be counted a true believer.

The point is to be encouraged by the discipline you have faced and will continue to overcome. Hardship is a reminder that the things of this earth that make us content and comfortable are not the things that will last for eternity. By shifting our appreciation from temporal things to a longing for eternal blessing, discipline sanctifies us into a share of God's holiness. We are set apart from the citizens of this world, and we become participants in the race that ends at the feet of Christ.

Apply the Word

Take a serious approach today to the call to throw off everything that hinders us. Obviously, the entanglements of sin should be eliminated, but let's consider what else might be holding us back. These things might not be inherently sinful, but they are preventing your spiritual race. Maybe there's a relationship that needs to change or a habit that needs to be eliminated from (or added to) your routine. Ask the Holy Spirit to help you identify and release anything that is holding you back spiritually.

Faithful to the End: Confidence in What We Hope For

Read Hebrews 11:1–16

Noah was about 500 years old when God told him to build an ark. We must remember that he lived in an area that did not require transportation by ship. There was no reasonable explanation that this elderly man could give his neighbors as to why he was building an enormous vessel on dry land. But Noah steadfastly ignored ridicule and faithfully obeyed God's precise instructions. He built the vessel to specifications, using exact measurements and gopher wood. The boat, which others mocked, was a symbol of his obedience and faith in God. It also became his salvation when a flood covered the earth.

This chapter of Hebrews offers a beautiful explanation on what it means to be faithful. Today's verse defines faith as the "confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see" (v. 1). When we move forward with trust even while not seeing evidence that our decision is a good one, that is faith. Noah exhibited this type of faith when he built the ark and followed God's command. The examples of Abraham and Sarah also illustrate the point. Abraham moved his family to a foreign country. Sarah bore a child in her later years. They trusted God and moved forward in faith.

This type of faith pleases God (v. 6). We are called to love Him and to obey Him even when we cannot see Him. In this, we are told, is great reward. These actions may seem illogical and ridiculous to others. In fact, God has not promised that we will always understand His plan for us. We are to have confidence in what we cannot and even may not ever see. We are "longing for a better

country” (v. 16), and this belief will be demonstrated in the way we live in this one.

Apply the Word

Our culture thinks that some of our faithful choices are ridiculous. Give up a day of the weekend to meet with other people to praise God? Choose not to indulge in some kinds of entertainment because it won't edify or encourage us to follow Christ? Remain faithful to our commitments to our spouse? Yet we can bring glory to God by remaining faithful to Him, even if our neighbors think we're silly.

Hebrews 12:1

Running the Race

It sounded like something straight out of the Jetsons. For this year's Boston Marathon, one of the runners participated from outer space.

U.S. Navy Commander Suni Williams, age 41, qualified for the Boston race by completing the Houston Marathon in 3 hours, 29 minutes and 57 seconds. However, in December she blasted into space on the space shuttle Discovery and would not return in time to run in Boston.

Instead, Williams ran the equivalent distance on a treadmill located in the international space station—210 miles above earth. Because of the lack of gravity, Williams was tethered by bungee cords. Her sister, Dina, ran the race at the same time in Boston. Although separated by miles and space, the sisters expressed their desire to encourage one another to finish well.

As believers, we also run a race and can be encouraged by our co-runners to keep the faith and to finish well. We may be separated by age, by location, and even by centuries. In both the Old and the New Testaments, we read of men and women who ran the race steadfastly.

Hebrews 12:1-2 records those examples of faithfulness: “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith.”

Runners usually have some personal motivation for enduring a grueling race. We, too, must find motivation to have faith that endures earthly suffering. Hebrews tells us not to look to ourselves, but to Jesus. “Fixing our eyes on Jesus,” says verse 2, “the author and perfecter of our faith.” Jesus is the author, the reason we run. Through Him, we are able to finish.

The apostle Paul relied on God's power to finish well. Paul says, “I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7).

Sometimes the race is difficult. When we feel weak or stumble, we can be encouraged by that “great cloud of witnesses”—those who have triumphed over adversity and doubt. Through the pages of Scripture, we read their stories and are encouraged by God's final reward.

Paul encourages us to finish the race well: “In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing” (2 Tim. 4:8).

Hebrews 12:1-3

Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. - Hebrews 12:1b

TODAY IN THE WORD

Near the end of the third century ad, Saint Anthony's parents died and he inherited a rather large fortune. But rather than enjoy the pleasures such riches would give him, Anthony took the opposite approach. He gave away all he had and withdrew himself completely from the world and all its pleasures. The converted emperor Constantine had popularized Christian faith and put an end to the rampant persecution of the church. Although some of his practices may have been extreme, Anthony stood out in an era of comfortable Christianity. He became one of the first monks to impose a level of suffering on himself. He withdrew from the routines of a typical daily life, not to escape the responsibility and pain, but to resist the delights of “under the sun” living.

What a stark contrast to what we've studied in Ecclesiastes! In terms of personal satisfaction, Anthony's approach was an attempt to mirror Christ's suffering and sacrifice. Today's passage compels us to make such an attempt ourselves.

Hebrews describes the life of a believer as a race, an interesting picture in light of Ecclesiastes' cyclical metaphors. Even a race held on a circular track in an arena has a finish line, a point when the race starts and stops. As verse 2 points out, the prize awaits us after the race is over.

The portrait painted here is of Christ, who ran a course none of us could duplicate. He, the supreme King over all creation, did not enjoy a life of ease, peace, and luxury. He faced shame, opposition, and suffering throughout His ministry, especially on the cross (vv. 2, 3). Ecclesiastes might have directed Him to enjoy life on earth while it lasted, but Hebrews makes it clear that Christ's ultimate joy was yet to come (v. 2).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

You don't need to follow Anthony's example of giving away all your possessions and moving into a cave somewhere, but you can adopt a similar mindset. Take a mental inventory of everything you own. What do you have that exists primarily for personal enjoyment? Consider selling those items and giving the proceeds to your church. Ask the Holy Spirit to search your heart and your home for any "extras" that hinder you spiritually—and ask for the resolve to give them up in order to run the race of the Christian journey

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Hebrews 12:1-3

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith... - Hebrews 12:2a

TODAY IN THE WORD

After operations on both of his Achilles' tendons, Olympic athlete Derek Redmond was running well in the preliminary heats for the 400 meters race. But in the finals, Derek turned and fell to the track as a sharp pain stabbed his right leg. He struggled to his feet in intense pain and began hobbling toward the finish line. His father Jim, who was in the stands for the race, ran to his son's aid. Derek leaned on his father's shoulder as the two finished together, well after the other competitors had finished the race. Thousands of people remained in the stands, and rewarded Derek and his father Jim with a standing ovation.

That dramatic example illustrates the essence of today's reading from the book of Hebrews. The witnesses in heaven don't come out of the grandstands to help us literally, but their example is meant to inspire us as we run our race. We can draw strength from the godly lives of Noah, Abraham, Sarah, Rahab, or Moses, or any other biblical hero, as we read of their faith and perseverance and commit ourselves to the same high standard.

The testimony of these witnesses is important because as Christians we are living for heaven's applause, not for earthly medals or headlines. The lives of the saints teach us that it is possible to run a winning race. From their example we can learn how to throw off the burdens that weigh us down and live for Christ without getting tangled up in concerns that don't ultimately matter.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

It's hard to walk, let alone run, when you're constantly looking down, looking around, or looking backwards. It's best to keep your eyes forward.

Hebrews 12:1-11

Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith. - Hebrews 12:2a

TODAY IN THE WORD

Bible teacher Tony Evans tells of a farmer who was teaching his son to plow with a mule. ""To make straight furrows, son, just pick out an object beyond the field and keep your eyes fixed on it."" The boy nodded his understanding, and the farmer left.

When he came back an hour later, the farmer was shocked to see a field of twisted furrows. ""What happened, son? I thought I told you to keep your eye on an object beyond the field.""

""I did, Dad,"" the boy replied, pointing to the ""standard"" he had chosen--a cow in the adjoining pasture!

That humorous story holds a serious lesson. Whether you're plowing a field or running the race called the Christian life, it's critical that you keep your eyes on the right target. Despite all the great men and women of faith the Hebrews had just read about, only Jesus Himself was worthy of their undivided loyalty and attention.

The writer made a good bridge from the past to his readers' present by showing that the greats of history were now pulling for those believers to finish their race triumphantly. It's an interesting word picture: Christians running in the arena of life with encouraging cries from the grandstand ringing in their ears, but with their eyes fixed firmly on Jesus.

Running as Jesus ran means training hard and shedding anything that drags us down. Jesus endured great hardship and opposition to reach His finish line, the Cross. Up to this point, not much has been said about the suffering Jesus had to endure to finish His race and offer the perfect sacrifice for sin.

The writer did not dwell long on Jesus' sufferings here, but there wasn't any need to do so. The point was made: God can demand faithfulness of us because His own Son ran the most demanding race of all and finished it perfectly.

Beginning with verse 4, the imagery changes from a race to a father/child relationship--although enduring hardship is still the subject (v. 7). God's discipline is like a loving father's in that while it may seem stern, it is applied in love and has the child's ultimate good as its goal.

If we patiently bear His discipline, God promises us something no earthly father can guarantee to his children: a harvest of righteousness and peace.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Some people find it easier to exercise consistently when they have a friend to help keep them accountable.

Do you have a spiritual running partner--someone with whom you can share your heart? Accountability is a buzzword these days, but God thought of it a long time ago. Sometime today, read Ecclesiastes 4:9-12 and thank the Lord for giving you such a friend. And if you are running alone, ask Him for a ""running partner.""

Hebrews 12:1-13

Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles. - Hebrews 12:1b

TODAY IN THE WORD

Anyone who has participated in competitive sports knows that days early in the season can be some of the most difficult. The coach pushes prospective team members to run faster and longer than they have ever run before. He may even have them perform the same drills over and over again. At the end of the first week there is a noticeable difference in the number of participants. Those who had thought they wanted to be part of the team now have second thoughts. In fact, some of those who thought about joining the team could summarize their feelings in two words, "I quit!"

Christians who have been living out the faith for awhile can understand why athletes sometimes feel like quitting. Being a Christian isn't always easy. Facing hostility from family members and friends can be intimidating indeed. That's why the writer to the Hebrews calls readers to one of the most significant virtues that any believer could pursue--the virtue of perseverance.

Perseverance is that attitude of mind and soul whereby we make a decision to be faithful to Jesus Christ and His Word no matter what obstacles we are facing. It doesn't mean that we have to live out the faith in our own strength, because that would be virtually impossible. Instead, we are told to live in the power of the Holy Spirit in all that we say and do as Christians (Gal. 5:16).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the ways that you can grow in perseverance is to take a good look at the context that surrounds Hebrews 12. The writer refers to "a great cloud of witnesses." These are individuals mentioned in the preceding chapter who persevered in their faith and service to God even when it was difficult. But there are probably people in your own life who have served as models of faith and perseverance. Take some time today to write a short note telling one such individual how much his or her example has meant to you.

Hebrews 12:1-29

Without holiness no one will see the Lord. - Hebrews 12:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

After Hurricane Katrina, Sam Thompson, a native of the ravaged coast of Mississippi, felt compelled to help. He embarked on an unusual mission: to run 50 marathons in 50 states for 50 consecutive days in an effort to raise money towards hurricane relief.

Sam Thompson understands the nature of a race, a metaphor used by the writer of Hebrews in our reading today. The gospel message, as we hear, understand, and confess it, sets us in motion. It propels us off the starting blocks for a journey of faithfully following Jesus Christ. Our destination is to see the Lord one day (v. 14).

To run well requires spiritual fitness. The Bible calls this holiness. In the first four verses of Hebrews 12, the writer explains what this entails. It requires spiritual determination to keep going when everything inside you and around you screams, "Stop!" It requires wisdom to anticipate potential roadblocks to spiritual growth and to chart a course, making provisions to avoid the entanglements of sin. It requires steadfast focus on Christ.

Holiness is not, however, a contest of self-effort. God determines that we will share in His holiness (vv. 5-11). He arranges the circumstances of our lives, allowing just enough pain so that we grow spiritually but without surrendering to defeat or discouragement. God superintends this process of making us holy.

Another dimension of holiness is relational (vv. 14-17). The writer calls us to peace and forgiveness. He urges us not to give in to bitterness. Holiness is not just a matter of an internal spiritual fervor. To be holy is to pursue right relationships with others.

And finally, holiness is a result of authentic worship. We have much for which to be thankful. The gospel has mediated a settlement for us with God. We are pardoned. We are guaranteed eternal life. It is the resulting joy and thanksgiving that gives us the perseverance with which we are to run this race.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Consider some questions this passage raises. First, are you running well by anticipating and avoiding sin that so easily entangles you? Second, if you are facing a painful circumstance in your life, can you remember that this discipline is a guarantee of the Father's love for you? Third, are you living a life of forgiveness and reconciliation with others? And finally, what are ways you're expressing your reverent worship and awe of God?

Hebrews 12:12-17

Make every effort... to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. - Hebrews 12:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

William Carey, often considered the father of modern missions, once wrote: ""If, after my removal, anyone should think it is worth his while to write my life, I will give you a criterion by which you may judge of its correctness. If he give me credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly... I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit.""

William Carey had that spiritual trait the Hebrews needed so badly: perseverance. They needed to learn how to keep running even when their arms ached and their knees felt as if they were going to buckle.

There's nothing wrong with being a plodder. In fact, it's safe to say that there are more plodders among us than there are sprinters. God's work has room for both.

As weak and wavering as the Hebrews were, it might not have occurred to them that they could strengthen others. But that is what the author encouraged them to do, so that the weakest among them would not stumble. Remember that mutual encouragement was one reason they were urged not to give up meeting together as the church (see 10:25).

Those believers were also urged to pursue peace and holiness, another way of describing sanctification or Christian growth. If the lives of the Hebrews were marked by turmoil from outside pressure and persecution instead of peace, they could at least try to ensure that they were not adding to the turmoil by their own actions.

While turmoil may not be something over which we have any control, no one can prevent us from becoming more like Jesus Christ.

This seems to be what the writer had in mind when he warned his readers against missing the grace of God. We have already established that he is not talking about a loss of salvation, but rather the tragedy of a life lived with no effectiveness for God.

There was one additional Old Testament individual that the author had in mind--but Esau was a bad example. Snubbing the holy in favor of his stomach, he suffered incredible spiritual loss. When it comes to a life like Esau's, we need to run the other way.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Has it been a while since you have looked around to see who might be following you in the race called the Christian life?

Yes, we know that you're not supposed to look behind you in a race. But this case is different. Whether you are a spouse, parent, employer, supervisor, teacher, Saturday morning coach--or just about anything else--it is almost certain that someone is looking to you as an example. Did you run a level path last week for that person to follow? It's worth thinking about today.

Hebrews 12:14 Matthew 5:23-26

Make every effort to live in peace with all men and to be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord. - Hebrews 12:14

TODAY IN THE WORD

The cousin of French king Louis XV had the habit of ordering his coachman to try to run over any monks he saw walking in the road. This dangerous amusement was permitted to go unchecked, and it eventually led to a deadly consequence. One day the king's cousin passed a man who was repairing a road and shot him--just for the sport of seeing the man fall. When the crime was brought to the king's attention, he pardoned his cousin but with this warning: "Let it be understood: I will similarly pardon anyone who shoots you."

Jesus does more than describe the nature of anger. He diagnoses its root and warns of its ultimate consequences. Anger is what we feel when we believe that we have been wronged by someone. It springs from resentment over an offense and contempt for the individual. It results in an adversarial relationship that has the potential to disrupt fellowship and worship alike.

In His teaching on this subject Jesus offered two important principles for dealing with anger. The first principle is initiative. In this passage the focus is primarily on the one who has offended someone else. We might have expected Jesus to focus primarily on the offended party, since they are the most likely to feel anger towards another. Instead, in these verses it is the offender who initiates the process of reconciliation. Elsewhere Jesus urges the offended party to make the first move (Matt. 18:15). Both share an obligation to work for resolution when there has been a conflict. Ideally, the two would meet en route to one another and settle their differences "on the way."

Jesus' second principle is urgency. How important is it to deal with anger? Reconciliation is so important that it takes priority over everything else. It even takes precedence over worship. God would rather see us resolve our differences than receive our offerings.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Do you know someone who is angry with you? Is there someone who has offended you? How can you take the initiative in each case to reconcile with that person? Before attempting to reconcile, take some time to think through your strategy. For example, reconciliation may be better attempted face to face rather than over the phone. You may even want to write out what you will say in advance. There is no way to guarantee how the other person will respond, but you can be certain of God's help as you "make every effort."

Hebrews 12:12-17

For centuries, the nation of Switzerland has maintained a foreign policy of neutrality. Their goal, criticized by some, has been to stay out of the fray during times of conflict among neighboring nations—but that doesn't mean they are without opinion on international matters. For instance, they have been known to offer asylum to politically persecuted people. Many people expect Switzerland to exercise fairness, and their history of doing so isn't flawless—but their desire to maintain peace is honorable.

As believers, we can learn a lot from that approach, not that we should mimic it exclusively. Sometimes believers in their quest to stand out, sanctified from the world, take a combative approach to anyone who dares challenge our beliefs. But that wasn't how the author of Hebrews wanted his readers to approach holiness. We shouldn't go looking for a fight. On the contrary, he asked his audience to make every effort to be at peace and be holy.

It is no simple task to remain true to our convictions and be at peace with those who disagree with us completely. But note that the two commands are not mutually exclusive. In our discipline, we are called to be strengthened, not incapacitated, and to stay on the path of righteousness. Someone who failed in that regard would be like a bitter root, causing trouble for himself and those associated with him (cf. Deut. 29:18). We want others to notice that we are different—not quarrelsome, and definitely not immoral.

The illustration of Esau at the conclusion of this passage reminds us not to follow our primal, material urges. Esau had godless inclinations, and he abandoned his long-term inheritance for instant satisfaction. In time, he grew to desire something more meaningful, but the mistake he made by bartering away his birthright inflicted permanent consequences. Believers aren't immune to the effects brought on by sin. If we allow God to slip from the focus of our hearts, our sinful inclinations will rise to the surface during moments of weakness. We should never assume that we can escape the repercussions. Keep longing for what is eternal, and the sinful, shallow temptations of this world won't be so appetizing.

Apply the Word

It's much easier to live in peace with everyone when we focus on something other than our own desires. Pride, jealousy, and vengeance easily arise from being more concerned with other people's opinions than remaining on God's path. Do you have any feelings of bitterness or unrest that have emerged from what you thought was your quest for holiness? Pray for the Spirit to help you discern whether the root of the matter isn't a selfish thought masquerading as righteous indignation.

Hebrews 12:18-29; 13:14-16

They will perish, but you remain. - Hebrews 1:11

TODAY IN THE WORD

On October 17, 1989, at 5:04 p.m., an earthquake with a magnitude of 6.9 rocked the San Francisco Bay area. The epicenter was located about 60 miles south of San Francisco. Those who did not experience the tremor directly, witnessed it live on television as they were watching Game 3 of the World Series. For those who did experience this disaster, it took years to rebuild homes and to recover from the trauma caused by this quake.

For many reasons, earthquakes are terrifying events. As those who dwell on the earth, we have a sense that the earth is solid and unmovable. Earthquakes destroy this perception. In Hebrews 1:10-12, the writer of Hebrews quotes Psalm 102:25-27 to show that the very foundations of the earth and the heavens above will eventually wear out and perish. But the Son, Jesus, remains forever. These opening verses are the background for today's passages.

In Hebrews 12, we find a wonderful description of the heavenly Jerusalem into which we will enter one day. The author begins with imagery from the Israelites' approach to Mount Sinai, as recorded in Exodus 19, to draw a stark contrast between two different events in God's history with His people.

At Sinai, the people were terrified to be in God's holy presence, which was accompanied by stern warnings and restrictions. At the heavenly Mount Zion, however, being in God's presence is not only possible, it is filled with celebration and worship, offered by thousands of angels and countless believers. The key difference between these two events is Jesus Christ, whose blood has mediated a new covenant.

As we read this description of the "unshakable kingdom," it's no wonder that we're exhorted to be thankful (v. 28) and that this gratitude is described in terms of acceptable worship. In Hebrews 13, this thanksgiving is described as a "sacrifice of praise." Once again, we see the close link between thanksgiving and praise.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Hebrews 12 and 13 encourage us to be thankful for our final destination, the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem. These passages also indicate that our present response to this future reality is thanksgiving. Tomorrow we'll see that giving thanks is an

essential part of what we'll do in the heavenly Zion. Take some time to linger over the rich and powerful imagery of Hebrews 12. As you do, let your heart fill with gratitude and praise for wonderful depiction of where you're headed as a believer in Jesus Christ.

Hebrews 12:18-29

You have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. - Hebrews 12:22

TODAY IN THE WORD

One of the caricatures of God that skeptics sometimes draw is the so-called distinction between the fiery, distant, vengeful God of the Old Testament and the loving, forgiving, turn-the-other-cheek God of the New Testament.

Any first-year Bible student could refute that nonsense. The God who set Mount Sinai on fire is the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God's holy character did not change between the Testaments. It is the author of Hebrews, in fact, who warned that it is fearful to fall under God's judgment (Heb. 10:31).

But there is definitely a difference between the way God manifested Himself in the Old Testament and His revelation in Jesus Christ. The author of Hebrews acknowledged that right up front (Heb. 1:1-2). Throughout the book, we have seen that the old covenant, represented by the Mosaic Law, was a temporary provision pointing ahead to Jesus.

The difference between the two covenants is plainly spelled out in today's reading. The giving of the Law was an awe-inspiring, terrifying visitation of God. Even Moses trembled with fear. There was no drawing near to God with confidence on the Israelites' holy day. The people begged that the voice speak to them no more.

Now let's think of another day of darkness and gloom. As Jesus was hanging on the Cross, darkness fell over the land for several hours. The people watching the crucifixion fell silent.

When the darkness was at its deepest, Jesus cried out with a loud voice and then slumped in death. The scene was so striking that even a hardened Roman soldier had to confess: "'Surely this man was the Son of God!'" (Mark 15:39). And the temple's huge veil was torn in half.

Because Jesus died in the darkness of Calvary, the barrier between God and us that would keep us from His presence was removed. Compare these two scenes and you'll see why the book of Hebrews refers to the better covenant Jesus initiated. And you'll see why refusing Him in the sense of turning back from full commitment is so dangerous. No matter which Testament you turn to, "'Our God is a consuming fire'" (v. 29).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Even in this day of grace we are still told to worship God "'with reverence and awe'" (v. 28).

God is worthy of our reverence because He is the awesome God who will one day shake the whole creation with His voice when Christ comes to establish His kingdom (v. 27). When God gets through shaking things, only what's eternal will be left! Today, let's praise God that because of Christ's sacrifice, we can be part of His eternal kingdom.

Hebrews 12:18–29

When the time came for God to deliver His commandments to His people, they found His appearance terrifying. The Lord had descended on Mount Sinai in fire, covering it in smoke and shaking the mountain with thunder and lightning. God issued a warning that none of the Israelites should approach the base of the mountain, but they hardly needed to be told. They begged Moses to ask God to talk to only him, for they feared that they couldn't survive hearing the voice of the Lord (Ex. 20:19).

Such was the scene when the Law was given. The meeting point for the delivery of the message of God's grace was entirely different. The scene in Hebrews 12 resonates with the heavenly descriptions found in Revelation. Mount Zion, the city of the living God, heavenly Jerusalem, an assembly of angels in the church of the firstborn of heaven ... these images are both strange and familiar to us on earth. Scripture has given us a peek into the heavenly reality that resounds with our heart's deepest longings. The constraints of time collapse as past, future, and present collapse into heavenly time: "You have come ... we are receiving a kingdom" (vv. 22–23, 28).

And unlike the setting at Mount Sinai, where every onlooker was filled with fear at the mere thought of approaching God's presence, we are called to draw near to Him. In fact, the author warned his readers of the dangers of turning away. As we face the throne of Christ, the world we know is waiting behind us at risk of crumbling into nothing. The only safe place for us to go is to the throne, because nothing else will be left standing (v. 27).

The Israelites at Mount Sinai feared what would happen to them if they got too close to God; now our greatest fear is what would

transpire if we fall away. Through the sacrifice of Christ and His mediation of a new covenant, we are assured of security that nothing on earth can imitate. Our appropriate response is to worship Him “with reverence and awe” (v. 28). Deuteronomy 4:24 reminds us that God is a consuming fire who is jealous of our worship.

Apply the Word

There's another aspect of our response to the security we have in Christ: gratitude. Hebrews exhorts us to be thankful, and from that springs our acceptable worship. Undoubtedly some circumstances in your life are less than pleasant. But they are also temporary. List the things that will never change for which you are thankful. Rejoice in them and marvel that the Creator of the universe would see fit to bestow eternal riches upon you.

Hebrews 13

Hebrews 13:1-6

We say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?'

TODAY IN THE WORD

Old-time baseball umpire Bill Klem once had a run-in with John McGraw, the fiery manager of the New York Giants. Enraged by a call, McGraw roared, 'Klem, I'll have your job for this!'

Klem answered, 'McGraw, if it's possible for you to have my job, I don't want it.'

It's been said that if someone else can take something away from you, it wasn't really yours to begin with. If that's true, we have another good reason to spend our time and energy investing in spiritual values and commitments that no one can take from us. This is living with an eternal perspective.

The writer of Hebrews gives us a terrific list of things we can work on this month and into the new year. No computer glitch can erase Christian love, moral purity, a sense of contentment, and God's own promise of His eternal presence.

We suggested earlier that if temporary needs do in fact develop from the Y2K problem, Christians may be called upon to go the second mile ministering to fellow believers and exercising hospitality. That's right in line with the exhortation of verses 1 and 2.

God also wants us to identify with those who are suffering imprisonment and mistreatment, particularly for their faith in Christ. This is happening to our Christian brothers and sisters in dozens of countries today. We can pray for them and make our influence felt by working for their protection.

Moral purity is something else that we don't have to surrender under any circumstances. God's desire for our faithfulness in marriage, and sexual abstinence outside marriage (v. 4), won't change with the new millennium.

The last item on the list in verse 5 is a big hurdle for many of us. You can lose your money and your possessions, but no one can threaten your contentment if it's anchored in God and His promises.

These are powerful blessings, all of which are safe from the millennium bug! When you put this together with God's promise to help, you can say to the world, 'Go ahead and take your best shot.'

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Self-giving love, moral purity, and deep-seated contentment.

How about giving these as Christmas gifts to the people you care most about, and even to yourself? For example, you can pray for opportunities to give of yourself in loving service to someone who needs you. You can renew your pledge of purity and devotion. Why not give yourself and your loved ones the gift of contentment by choosing to cut back on spending money and instead, spend more time together?

Hebrews 13:5; Matthew 6:22-24

Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you.” - Hebrews 13:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

A man came to Jean Agassiz, the Swiss naturalist, and attempted to persuade him to deliver a lecture to the organization he represented. Agassiz flatly refused because he felt his time would be better spent doing research and writing. The visitor, however, refused to leave and continued to pester Agassiz, noting that his organization would be willing to pay a large sum of money. The offer held no incentive for the naturalist. "That's no inducement to me," Agassiz told him, "I can't afford to waste my time making money."

Agassiz understood that money makes a poor master. Today's passage warns of the danger of greed and the impossibility of serving God and money at the same time. Jesus compared the eye to a lamp in order to illustrate the danger of greed and the importance of generosity, "If your eyes are bad, your whole body will be full of darkness" (v. 23).

In Jewish culture the phrase "evil eye" described a stingy person. Gifts from such a person always have strings attached. That is why Proverbs 23:6 warns, "Do not eat the food of a stingy man, do not crave his delicacies; for he is the kind of man who is always thinking about the cost. 'Eat and drink,' he says to you, but his heart is not with you." Ironically, greedy, stingy people don't realize that true poverty is their destiny (Prov. 28:22).

Jesus' warning is most sobering of all. He cautions that one who loves money cannot love God at the same. These two masters are mutually exclusive.

At its root the problem described in these verses is one of devotion. The choice entails the decision whether to serve God or money (Matt. 6:24). In the original text, the term that we have translated money in English is mammon, an Aramaic word that meant wealth or property. It may be money or the things we can get with money that capture our affections. But either way, it will lead us away from service to God.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

Whenever we choose to invest ourselves--whether it is our time, energy, or money--we are choosing a "master." Jesus admonishes us to choose carefully, since as we see in our passage we can't serve more than one master.

Hebrews 13:15 Romans 12:1-21

Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise. - Hebrews 13:15

TODAY IN THE WORD

A symphony orchestra is an amazing thing. Various musical instruments together produce music more glorious than any one instrument could produce individually. The overall effect can be so harmonious that it's hard to distinguish individual instruments. It's easy to see why a symphony is such a good illustration of the body of Christ. Each of us is unique, yet when we come together in worship, the effect is more glorious than it would be if we were going solo.

Hebrews 13:1-6

Be content with what you have, because God has said, ""Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."" - Hebrews 13:5

TODAY IN THE WORD

The story is told of a stonecutter who delivered stone to a merchant. Seeing the merchant's goods, the stonecutter wished he could be a merchant. His wish was granted, and he was happy. But then when he saw a prince riding one day, he wished to be a prince. That wish too was granted, but the man was not happy for long. He continued to wish for greater things until he became a mountain, which seemed to him the greatest thing on earth. But one day, a man came with a hammer and chisel to cut stone, and the mountain could not stop him. ""That stonecutter is greater than I,"" said the mountain. ""I wish I were a stonecutter again.""

It's hard to be content. The Hebrews probably felt like that stonecutter at times, not sure exactly what they wanted to be. They had tasted the joys of salvation in Jesus Christ; yet for whatever reason they were looking back over their shoulders.

Maybe that's why contentment was one of the traits the writer urged these believers to adopt. Being content with what you have, especially when you have the promise of God's abiding presence, has a steadying effect. And the Hebrews certainly needed a steadying hand on their lives.

Another way to bring stability to a troubled life and to help turn one's focus outward is to reach out to others. So the Hebrews were urged to continue showing family love to one another, hospitality to strangers, compassion to those imprisoned for their faith, and care for the suffering.

Abraham entertained angels without knowing it when he welcomed the strangers to his tent (Gen. 18). Did the writer mean the

Hebrew believers might expect a similar experience? Not necessarily. The word angel means "messenger," so the angels coming to them might have been God's messengers--visiting teachers or missionaries. But even human messengers from God were to be received as His angels.

Today's verses remind us that even in the midst of their turmoil, the Hebrews still needed to live worthy lives. They could do all of this--love others, keep themselves sexually pure, and be content--because they had God as their helper. Therefore, no real or potential threat from any human persecutor could harm them.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

God is your Helper, too--and that means you don't need to be afraid.

Is there a fear gripping your life today? If not, perhaps you know a fellow Christian who is being paralyzed by fear. For you or your friend, write out that fear and then search the Word for verses that speak to the fear. Also, commit to memory Psalm 56:3, where the psalmist, addressing God, proclaims: "When I am afraid, I will trust in you."

Hebrews 13:1-8

Since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful. - Hebrews 12:28

TODAY IN THE WORD

An amazing thing happened at the Leverenz Shoe Company in southeastern Wisconsin. Some would even say it was downright foolish. When another shoe factory across the street from the Leverenz plant burned to the ground, Bob Leverenz invited his corporate neighbor and competitor to come and use his plant until his factory could be rebuilt. For months the two companies used the same machines day after day to keep their operations going. When network news agencies learned of the unusual arrangement, company president Bob Leverenz was asked why he would do such a thing. He answered that true faith in God shows itself by helping those in need.

Whether he realized it or not, Bob Leverenz demonstrated for us what brotherly kindness is all about. And according to the virtues listed in 2 Peter 1, brotherly kindness is one of the qualities that every Christian should be adding to one's personal faith. It's not the love that is sometimes expressed in romantic music or Hollywood love stories. It is a response born out of saving faith to minister to the needs of others.

The exhortations expressed in Hebrews 13 are not simple moral platitudes. Instead, the writer calls for the kind of action that grows out of a confidence in what God is doing. The recipients of the Epistle to the Hebrews were having second thoughts about the Christian faith. Some assumed it would be better to return to the religious practices of Judaism. But the writer reminds them that through their faith in Christ believers are part of a kingdom that cannot be destroyed--God's kingdom.

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One of the ways you can begin to practice brotherly kindness is to put verse 2 into practice as soon as possible. Sunday is just three days away. You might want to consider inviting someone, particularly a family or an individual that you really don't know that well, over for lunch after the morning worship service. Through the sharing of faith stories, you'll no doubt encourage each other. The sharing of life together can be an initial first step in practicing brotherly kindness.

Hebrews 13:1-25

The first twelve chapters of Hebrews are filled with some of the most intellectually challenging, spiritually gripping passages in all the Bible. It features Old Testament allusions, teaching that the author himself described as advanced, stern warnings, and theologically rich prophecies. Simply reading this letter to the Hebrews at times feels like studying a master's- or doctorate-level research book. But the purpose of the book isn't merely academic in nature--far from it. To the person who asks, "What does any of that mean for my life practically?" chapter 13 is the answer.

As much as we have endeavored to explain what it means to pursue the rest of God awaiting us, the final chapter renders the most tangible expressions yet, beginning with the very first command: keep on loving each other as brothers and sisters. More practical applications follow, including hospitality, purity, and praying for fellow believers who are imprisoned--they need our encouragement as well! Also, the freedom from the love of money mentioned in verse 5 is more than just steering clear of Scrooge-like notions of wealth; it also involves ridding ourselves of the fear of poverty.

Another way to put this book into practice is by imitating godly leaders throughout the past. Just as Jesus Christ helped them in their time of need, He will likewise help us now (v. 8). With that in mind, not all who profess to be leaders are trustworthy, and we should stay on guard against false teaching. On the other hand, we should also be willing to carry truthful teaching to those outside of our

Christian circles of fellowship. We should be generous with our message and with our possessions.

We are also called to be supportive and submissive to our church leaders, and the author puts it so beautifully. We should live in such a way that being a leader in the church is an absolute joy. To do so yields benefits for the whole congregation (v. 17). The closing benediction says it all: the person of Christ gives us great encouragement so that we can do His work and give Him glory.

Apply the Word

We have faith that the request of the benediction will be fulfilled: that God will equip you with everything good for doing His will. And while you are doing His will, He will be working in you. May you remember today and for the rest of your life that Jesus has secured your salvation, and that you actively participate in pressing forward in faith to the eternal rest of salvation in the presence of God. Grace be with you.

Hebrews 13:8; Revelation 21:1-7

I am the Alpha and the Omega ... who is, and who was, and who is to come, the Almighty. - Revelation 1:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

A Mobius strip may seem an unlikely way to conclude our series on the names of Christ! You may remember from school that a Mobius strip is simply a long strip of paper that has been given a one-half twist and then taped together at the ends. The remarkable thing about a Mobius strip is that you can lay your finger flat against one side of the strip and, as you keep running your finger along the edge, you will trace over both the outside and inside edges of the strip--without ever lifting your finger from the paper!

Yet a Mobius strip is a helpful way to approach New Year's Eve, when we often look back over the past year's events forward to the upcoming year. At such times, it is wonderful to remember that "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever" (Heb. 13:8)

It seems only appropriate to conclude our study of the names of Christ with the description of Christ's eternal nature found in the book of Revelation that uses the first and last letters of the Greek alphabet--the Alpha and the Omega (Rev. 1:8; 21:6). Elsewhere in this book Jesus' eternity is described as the First and the Last (1:17) and the Beginning and the End (21:6). (All three titles appear together in 22:13.) Much of this rich imagery was first used when Isaiah described our eternal Lord: "I am the first and I am the last; apart from me there is no God!" (Isa. 44:6; cf. 48:12).

Another way to understand this eternal name of Christ is to see that He is Lord over creation (recall our study on the Word; see December 10) and that He is Lord over the new creation (recall our study on the First-born; see December 29).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

One popular form of poetry is the acrostic, in which the letter of each line also spells a word.

How about writing your own acrostic poem? You could spell out J-E-S-U-S C-H-R-I-S-T or you could list all the letters of the alphabet in a vertical column on a piece of paper.

Hebrews 13:7-19

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. - Hebrews 13:8

TODAY IN THE WORD

British-born Bible teacher and pastor G. Campbell Morgan has become a friend this month (see the April 9 and 16 studies). Through his writings and godly influence, Dr. Morgan is one of those saints who still speaks even though he is no longer living (Heb. 11:4). Dr. Morgan's ministry of careful and thorough Bible exposition came at a crucial time in history for the church in Great Britain and America. He ministered to and helped to establish in the faith many of the thousands of new converts who flooded the churches following the work of great revivalists such as Charles Finney, D.L. Moody, Gipsy Smith, and Billy Sunday.

Campbell Morgan is one of those leaders to be remembered and imitated. The Hebrews had been led by such people, and by pointing to them the writer was probably coming at his main point another way: ""Remember the faithfulness of your early leaders, and be like them. Don't waver, give up, or turn away from Christ.""

Notice the contrast between these human leaders, who apparently were no longer on the scene, and the eternal, abiding presence of Jesus Christ. It's only because of Him and His unchanging nature that any of us can find the strength to be faithful.

At this point in the letter the author made one final plea for faithfulness to Christ. He returned to the major truth of the book: the once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus Christ had set aside the Law and made believers holy (see 2:11; 10:10, 14). There was nothing to turn

back to, because, as believers in Christ, they were fed spiritually from a greater altar--probably a reference to Christ's sacrificial death.

The writer acknowledged that identifying with Christ would ""disgrace"" them in the eyes of those who were trying to turn those believers back to the old ways (v. 13). But as people who were on their way to a better and eternally enduring city, they would be foolish to turn back.

Verses 15-17 contain one final word on sacrifices, and it's a good one. As Christians, we have our own sacrifices to offer God: praise and good works from a heart of love for Christ. The same spirit of love and humility needed to be shown to their current leaders, of whom the writer considered himself a part (v. 18).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

We regularly encourage our Today readers to honor their spiritual leaders.

Recall how you felt the last time someone wrote you a note of thanks or spoke a word of sincere appreciation. Why not do the same this week for your pastor or other church leader--or perhaps your spiritual parent? A good book or other gift, along with an offer to pray for any prayer requests, would also be a welcome encouragement.

Hebrews 13:11–21

Worship: A Continual Sacrifice of Praise

When you love someone, it's hard to keep quiet about it. In his *Reflections on the Psalms*, C. S. Lewis wrote, "I think we delight to praise what we enjoy because the praise not merely expresses but completes the enjoyment. It is not out of compliment that lovers keep on telling one another how beautiful they are; the delight is incomplete till it is expressed." This is an apt description of the attitude at the heart of worship and the exhortation from today's key verse.

The book of Hebrews was written to Christians struggling to hold on to faith. The audience seems to have had a deep knowledge of the Old Testament so they were probably Jews and Gentile converts to Judaism who had come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. It seems that persecution had demoralized many in the group and they were considering a return to the seeming safety of their previous convictions.

We don't know who wrote Hebrews, but "the preacher" had a consistent and insistent sermon: Jesus is God's final word. One cannot dismiss or exclude Christ and have a right relationship with God. The preacher switched back and forth between words of warning and words of assurance, presenting the fear of God and the grace of God as important spiritual realities that both need to be acknowledged.

Today's passage comes near the end of the preacher's sermon and praise is described as a kind of sacrifice that—along with kindness—was pleasing to God. Praise is called "the fruit of lips that openly profess his name," and we are told to lift it up to God constantly. Those who love God will have a posture of the heart that offers a sacrifice of praise that honors God. Our worship is a fulfillment of the pleasure we take in the character and provision of God.

Apply the Word

In today's passage the preacher makes a clear connection between what we say and do. In addition to "the fruit of lips that openly profess his name," doing "good" is a sacrifice that pleases God. If you have a regular time of prayer, consider also scheduling times during which you worship God through acts of kindness or service.

Hebrews 13:20-25

Grace be with you all. - Hebrews 13:25

TODAY IN THE WORD

Anne Sullivan became famous as the teacher who broke through to a blind and deaf girl named Helen Keller. But as a child, Sullivan herself suffered from vision problems and at one time was a student in a school for the blind. Surgeries in 1881 and 1887 restored Sullivan's sight, but she chose to stay at the school to work with others. It was there that she met Helen Keller.

We might compare the Jewish believers of the book of Hebrews to the young Anne Sullivan. They were having spiritual vision problems of their own. But God's will for them was to recover their sight so that they could help others in their Christian lives.

We can see this goal in the writer's warm benediction to these people whom he obviously knew and loved. His closing prayer for the Hebrews was that God would ""equip [them] with everything good for doing His will"" (v. 21).

This word ""equip"" is the same word Paul used in Eph. 4:12, where we are told that the goal of Christian teaching is to equip or prepare every Christian for works of service. And the goal of this good work is that every believer might be brought to full spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:13-16).

Given the wavering condition of the people to whom he wrote, this might seem like a pretty lofty goal for the writer to set. But that's not the case; the New Testament makes it clear that spiritual maturity and effective service are the normal Christian life, not the exception.

The writer's affection for his readers shines through in these closing lines of the letter. He had written some hard things and had issued strong warnings. But his confidence was that these brothers and sisters in Christ would receive these exhortations patiently and act on them (see Heb. 6:9).

The personal notes about Timothy's imprisonment and the greeting from ""those in Italy"" tell us that this nameless writer was well-acquainted with the leadership of the early church. These clues don't necessarily help to establish his identity, but in the end it doesn't matter.

The Holy Spirit wanted this book written anonymously--maybe because He wanted all the glory to go to Jesus Christ (v. 21).

TODAY ALONG THE WAY

There are two things we can say with confidence about Hebrews: it is full of great teaching about our awesome provisions in Christ, and it contains many things ""that are hard to understand"" (2 Pet. 3:16).

For these reasons, and more, we encourage you to invest time in the study of this great book. Moody Press has several excellent commentaries on Hebrews that help the everyday student to get a firm handle on the Word. Ask your local bookstore for these tools as you dig deeper into the Scriptures.