

Truth On Fire

Studies in Hebrews

Don Roberts, M.Div., B.A.

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So Great Salvation

It is said scripture contains waters so shallow a young believer can comfortably wade and waters so deep as to challenge the most mature believer. Perhaps no Bible book better makes the case for that assertion than the book of Hebrews.

Its target audience is multifaceted. It is clearly intended to evangelize unconverted Jews by showing how Jesus of Nazareth fulfilled every OT Messianic prophecy, especially those related to the priesthood and sacrifices. If we accept an authorship date circa 64 A.D., thirty years after Jesus' earthly ministry, there may have been Jews still alive who were eyewitnesses of that ministry who had "tasted" of its supernatural powers. For Jews who had not actually seen Jesus but experienced apostolic, post-Pentecostal preaching, teaching and healing, this epistle is for them as well. Jews who professed faith in Jesus Christ, either by hearing him directly or by hearing the words of salvation from those who heard him, are admonished to hold fast to their profession. Gentiles, whether saved or lost, stand to benefit from its content, whether by the exploration of Christ's riches or by gospel exposition.

Our text is found in Hebrews 2:1-4:

"Therefore we ought to give the more earnest heed to the things which we have heard, lest at any time we should let them slip. For if the word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward; How shall we escape, if we neglect so great salvation; which at the first began to be spoken by the Lord, and was confirmed unto us by them that heard him; God also bearing them witness, both with signs and wonders, and with divers miracles, and gifts of the Holy Ghost, according to his own will?"

The theme of Hebrews is encapsulated in three words: SO GREAT SALVATION (2:3). The content of the entire epistle revolves around this proclamation and explains why the salvation God offers is so great. In Chapter 1, for example, it's so great because of its PERSON, the Son of God, who is "so much better than the angels" (1:4, 8). In Chapter 2, it's so great because of its PASSION, exhibited in Christ's sufferings (2:9-10, 18) and its PREEMINENCE inasmuch as all things are in subjection to Jesus (2:7-8). In Chapter 4, it's so great because of its POWER unleashed by the Word of God (4:12). In Chapter 5, it's so great because of the PRIESTHOOD of Christ (5:1-6). In Chapter 6, it's so great because of its PROMISES to them who believe (6:13-18). In Chapter 7, it's so great because of its PERFECTION (7:17). In Chapter 8, it's so great because of its PITY toward sinners. (8:12). In Chapter 9, it's so great because of its PROPITIATION in Christ's blood (9:14). In Chapter 10, it's so great because of the PRIVILEGE it affords the believer to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus (10:19-22) and its PUNISHMENT of those who trample it under foot. (10:28-31). In Chapter 11, it's so great because of its POTENTIAL for believers (11:6ff). In Chapter 12, it's so great because of the PATIENCE it inspires in those who look to its Author-Finisher (12:1-3). In Chapter 13, it's so great because of the PERMANENCE, the eternal sameness, of Jesus Christ, upon whom our salvation rests (13:8).

So great is **τηλικούτος** (tēlikoutos), "of such proportions, size or magnitude." It is only used four times in the NT. In addition to its usage here, scripture uses it to describe our deliverance from "so great a death" (2 Corinthians 1:10), a ship that's "so great" but controlled by a very small rudder (James 3:4) and an earthquake during the Tribulation that's "so mighty an earthquake" (Revelation 16:18). Perhaps no fact calls attention to "so great salvation" than its contrast with

“so great a death” from which Jesus saves the believer.

In addition, the reader will notice the chain of custody that was established by (1) the words of salvation spoken by the Lord himself, (2) the same words passed on by those that heard him, and (3) the same words passed on to others who heard them as a third link in the chain. These words—the message of the gospel—were inspired and preserved in the pages of scripture. The chain of custody is now in our hands. Generations of the faithful with scripture as their infallible guide have passed on these words of salvation concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, the one in whom so great salvation is found.

Our text admonishes hearers (1) to give the more earnest heed to these words, (2) to avoid neglect of them, and (3) to expect judgment from God, from which there is no escape, if we chose the path of neglect. This passage does have its interpretive challenges. We'll endeavor to arrive at a proper understanding by comparing scripture with scripture and considering the target audience. What does it mean to neglect so great salvation? Is it possible for a born again believer to be guilty of neglect? We'll seek to answer these questions.

I. The Matter of Giving Heed

The word *ought* is **δεῖ** (dei), a necessity in the nature of the case. In this case, the nature of the case is the salvation of the soul. The verb *give heed* is **προσέχω** (prosecho), a combination of **pros** (toward in terms of direction) and **echo** (to have, hold or possess). It was used of bringing a ship to land for the purpose of mooring it. It includes the idea of addiction. The picture is that of a hearer of the gospel literally mooring his life to the words of salvation, addicting himself to them. The present tense signifies continuous activity as a pattern of life. The writer further intensifies his admonition by adding the adverb *more earnest*. It is **περισσότερως** (perissoterōs), “to a greater degree, in superabundance.” How many ropes does it take to moor a ship securely to a docking platform? The words *more earnest* suggest we simply cannot have too many ropes mooring us to Jesus! The hearer of the words of salvation should super-addict himself to them by every means available!

The writer juxtaposes the ideas of heeding and slipping as if failure in the first makes the second inevitable. The word *slip* is **παρῆναι** (pararreō), a combination of **para** (to the side of) and **rheō** (to flow). It means “to flow to side of, to drift or glide by.” One can picture a life preserver drifting by a drowning swimmer just beyond his reach. This is the only usage of **παρῆναι** in the NT. In the OT, however, the English *slip* is used four times. In every occurrence, it's used in relation to the feet as a spiritual metaphor. There's a causative relationship between the words of salvation to which one moors his mind and the steps one takes in life. Slippage in the former causes slippage in the latter. Contrariwise, heeding the former will prevent the feet from slipping.

II. The Matter of Neglect

Now we'll examine the neglect of so great salvation and whether a genuine child of God is capable of it. The word is **ἀμελέω** (ameleō), a combination of **a** (without) and **meleō** (to care about, to have regard for). It means “to have no regard for, no concern.” For one to neglect so great salvation, one must exhibit no concern or regard for it. Does this sound like a genuine believer could be capable of neglect?

The text of Matthew 22:1-14 lends light to this question. Jesus told a parable regarding the kingdom of heaven. A certain king (the Father) made a marriage for his son (the Lord Jesus). He

sent his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding; but they would not come (22:2-3). Two verbs are instructive. *Bidden* (invited) is a perfect tense. Those whom God called had a standing invitation to attend the wedding. *Would not come* is an imperfect tense. The imperfect signifies continuous action in time past. The invitees continued in a state of unwillingness to attend. Their lack of responsiveness prompted the king to send other servants to reissue the call and provide additional detail—animals are killed, dinner is prepared, everything is ready (22:4).

Notice the shift in their attitude. The scripture says: "*But they made light of it*" (22:5). *Made light of* is the verb **ἀμελέω**, the same verb translated *neglect* in Hebrews 2:3. Their indifference to the first call ("Thanks, but no thanks") turned into outright disregard for the second ("Get a clue, we've got better things to do!"). They went THEIR ways, spurned the invitation of the KING. Those better things included a farm and merchandise (Eng., "emporium"). But in some, disregard erupted in rage (22:6). The remnant (i.e., the ones who had nothing better to do than rain retribution on the servants) entreated them spitefully, killed them. We get our English word "hubris" from the same root. They were bothered enough by the second invite to treat the servants with rudeness, violence and death.

When the king got word the invitees had so treated his servants, his wrath was kindled (22:7). This time he sent forth his armies to destroy the murderers and burn their city. But the story doesn't end there. The wedding was still on, and the king wanted the wedding full of guests in honor of his son. So again he sent servants into the highways to invite whosoever to come (22:9). In the end, the wedding was furnished with guests (22:10). The parable was clearly intended to teach that the wedding invitation rejected by the Jews would be accepted by the Gentiles. But the use of neglect with regard to both so great salvation and the king's wedding invitation makes it difficult to believe a genuine believer could make light of the gospel. In our Lord's parable, believers would be those who say "Yes!" to the king's invitation, would they not? In other words, when they hear the message of so great salvation, they decide they have NOTHING better to do than give earnest heed to it. It seems a genuine believer would be incapable of the neglect Hebrews 2:3 warns against. But an unconverted Jew certainly would, as Matthew 22:1-10 affirms.

But that doesn't deliver the believer altogether from neglect. Hear Paul's words to Timothy: "*Neglect not the gift that is in thee*" (1 Timothy 4:14). *Neglect* is the same word, **ἀμελέω**. Timothy, whom I believe was incapable of neglecting so great salvation, was indeed capable of neglecting the spiritual gift vouchsafed to him by grace. A distinction must be made between the GIFT of the Spirit and the GIFTS the Spirit distributes at will within the body of Christ for the purpose of ministry. Paul admonished Timothy concerning the latter. In 2 Timothy 1:6, he gives the young pastor the antidote for neglect: "Stir up [fan the flames of] the gift of God, which is in thee."

The sad fact is some believers live an entire life without ever discovering the spiritual gift the Spirit of God gave them. Others discover their gift and spend a lifetime of service in the church using it for God's glory and serving others. The rest lie somewhere between those two bookends. Most believers at some time(s) in their lives allow the flame of passion for Christ to wane for whatever reason. Fires turn to flickers, flickers to embers, embers to ashes. Revival is the business of the Spirit of God, the Giver of gifts, to rekindle the flame. If we fail to stir up the gift within us, we essentially neglect it. It is unseemly for one who has embraced so great salvation to neglect the gift that salvation gave him. But, alas, it happens all too often.

III. The Matter of Escape

"How shall we escape...?" begins a rhetorical question. The context provides a point of reference, as follows: "*The word spoken by angels was steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just recompense of reward*" (2:2). The mentions of transgression and disobedience, in my mind, are clear references to the Law of Moses. Scripture says the Law was "*ordained by angels in the hand of a mediator*" (Galatians 3:19). When God at Mount Sinai wrote the Law on tablets of stone, a host of angels were in attendance, probably as witnesses and future enforcers. The writer's point: If there was no escape for violating the Law given through the auspices of angels, how can there be an escape for neglecting so great salvation God provided through his Son, whom he made so much better than the angels?!

The word *escape* is ἐκφεύγω (ekpheugō), a combination of **ek** (out of) and **pheugo** (to flee). The prefix makes it intensive. It signifies fleeing out of harm's way, escaping to a safe place. Paul used this word to describe the inability of hypocrites to escape the judgment of God (Romans 2:3), his own escape at Damascus from a wicked governor as friends lowered him through a window in a basket (2 Corinthians 11:33) and the inability of sinners to escape the day of the Lord's wrath after the Rapture (1 Thessalonians 5:3). These usages paint vivid pictures concerning an escape out of harm's way or an inability to escape.

It's clear what no escape means for the neglect of so great salvation. It's so great a death, eternal separation from God in the Lake of Fire. The believer, however, whom God has delivered from so great a death and predestinated to be conformed to the image of his Son, should know that he or she will not escape the discipline of the Father if they neglect the gift that's in them. If Timothy was capable of such neglect, we are as well. And if it was possible for a believer to neglect (make light of) so great salvation, perhaps no one got closer to crossing that line than the prophet Jonah. He not only refused to use (neglected) his prophetic gift to preach repentance, but later lamented the fact God brought so great salvation to Nineveh.

The Brethren

God gave his Son a name that's above every name—the name of Jesus—a name that means 'salvation'. But what would be the significance of that name if there was no one to SAVE? Jesus is Emanuel, which means 'God with us'. But what would that mean if there was no US with whom to share his presence? Jesus is the Redeemer. But he would cease to be the Redeemer if there was no one to redeem. In Hebrews 1:2, we are told "God in these last days hath spoken unto US by his Son." Hebrews, a book that magnifies the person and work of Jesus, the Son of God, is intended for US. If there was no US to receive it, there would be no reason for God to give it.

In Hebrews 2-3, the writer uses *brethren* five times (2:11, 12, 17; 3:1, 12). The word is **ἀδελφός** (*adelphos*), a combination of **ἄλφα** (*union*) and **δελφύς** (*womb*). It signifies those who come forth from the same womb. For believers, who are brethren, the womb from which they come is the womb of Christ himself, who is the way, the truth and the life. It's the womb all believers have in common. But when we consider Jesus, who said we are his brethren, what womb do Jesus and his brethren share? In terms of physical birth, Jesus and believers came from the womb of a WOMAN. That's not the same womb, but rather the same 'kind' of womb.

Jesus and believers, in spiritual terms, came forth from the same womb of PROMISE. Galatians 3:14-22 makes this truth abundantly clear. Paul uses the word promise eight times in these verses to teach that both Jesus, as the promised Seed, and believers like Abraham are all the fruit of promise. The covenant of which Paul speaks is the blood covenant the Father ("smoking furnace") and the Son ("burning lamp") entered into while Abraham was in a "deep sleep" (Genesis 15:9-18). The physical birth of Christ was the fruit of the womb of covenant between the Father and Son. The spiritual birth of the believer is the fruit of the womb of promise given to Abraham by both Father and Son as they walked between the blooded pieces of heifer, she goat, ram, turtledove and pigeon. This is the womb Jesus and his brethren share in common—the womb of promise!

The first use of brethren in Hebrews is in 2:11: "*For both he that sanctifieth and they who are sanctified are all of one: for which cause he is not ashamed to call them brethren.*" The verb *sanctifieth* is **ἁγιάζω** (*hagiazō*), meaning "to make holy, purify or consecrate." Sanctifying something is literally 'holy-izing' it. Scripture portrays Jesus as the Holy-izer of his brethren. The phrase *he that sanctifieth* is a present active participle. Literal translation: "The one who is continuously holy-izing." The phrase *they who are sanctified* is a present passive participle. Literal translation: "The ones who are continuously being holy-ized." The goal of Jesus for his brethren is to make them more like him. They are predestinated to that end (Romans 8:29).

There will never be a moment in the life of a child of God when Jesus ceases to sanctify him or he ceases to be sanctified. Even when a Christian is backslidden, as wayward as the Prodigal, his elder brother, the Lord Jesus, is about the business of sanctifying him, perhaps with chastening. But according to Hebrews 12:5-11, chastening is part and parcel to God's sanctifying work, which yields the "peaceable fruit of righteousness" in those "exercised thereby." If one is not making progress in holiness (i.e., being holy-ized), it calls into question whether he's ever established a relationship with the Holy-izer.

Jesus is not ashamed to call them brethren because he and his brethren are "all of one." The preposition of is **ἐκ** (*ek*), meaning "out of" (as denoting origin). The *one* is God the Father. The Father is the womb that Jesus and believers have in common. The Father, according to Messianic

promise and the work of the Spirit, gave physical birth to his Son (incarnation). The Father, according to the promise of life in Christ and work of the Spirit, gave spiritual birth to believers (regeneration). The Father is the common origin (womb) for the God-Man and born-again men. It is a profound truth that Jesus sees believers as his brothers who share a common paternal origin.

Our text is Hebrews 2:17:

"Wherefore in all things it behoved him to be made like unto his brethren, that he might be a merciful and faithful high priest in things pertaining to God, to make reconciliation for the sins of the people."

In this one verse, we have a logical progression of thought that addresses four major Bible themes integral to the 'so great salvation' Jesus provided for us.

I. Obligation

The word *behooved* is **ὀφείλω** (opheilō), meaning "to owe, to be in debt to." Vine's says: "It indicates a necessity, owing to the nature of the matter under consideration." The phrase *it behoved him* in 2:17 is the same verb, tense and voice translated *it became him* in 2:10. Twice in Hebrews 2, scripture tells us Jesus was under obligation to provide for a perfect salvation for sinners. The verb in both cases is an imperfect tense, active voice. The active voice signifies that Jesus willingly took on this obligation. It was not imposed upon him, which the passive voice would have indicated.

The imperfect tense signifies continuous action in time past. This 'behoval' activity ended with the incarnation of Christ. It officially ended on the cross when he cried: "*It is finished*" (John 19:30). But when did it begin? If one answers, "Before the foundation of the world!", he would be correct in terms of eternity. But can we identify the beginning of that behoval in terms of history? I believe we can. As I see it, the obligation came over him as he prepared "coats of skins" for Adam and Eve and sent (drove) them from the Garden (Genesis 3:21). In his heart, I can hear him saying: "I owe you better clothing. But those skins are the best I can do...for now. Even as I have made coats of skins for your physical need, one day I will become like unto you, and secure for you the spiritual clothing prefigured by the substitutionary death of those animals. I will clothe you in my own righteousness. I will become like you so you can be like me!" That first bloodletting began his sense of obligation to become sin for us, who knew no sin. The imperfect tense depicts a behoval that endured for four-thousand years until Jesus finally paid in full the debt for our sin.

II. Assimilation

The word assimilation is one we apply to immigrants as they seek to conform to American culture. Conformity includes (1) compliance with Constitutional Law, (2) the ability to communicate in English, and (3) acquisition of employment, making one a self-sufficient wage earner and taxpayer. Assimilation denotes full immersion into the American experience.

The words *made like unto* suggest our Lord went through a process of assimilation when he took upon himself a human nature and traversed Israel for thirty-three years. He "learned obedience" by the things he suffered (5:8). The verb is **ὁμοιόω** (homoioō), meaning "to assimilate, to be similar, to liken." It's passive voice, "to become, to be made similar." While Jesus' obligation to sinners was embraced willingly, his incarnation imposed on him the need to grow into perfect manhood. Jesus fully assimilated EVERY aspect of the human experience (including compliance

with Mosaic Law) EXPECT where sin was concerned. Jesus "KNEW no sin" (2 Corinthians 5:21), "DID no sin" (1 Peter 2:22) and in him "IS no sin" (1 John 3:5).

In every other aspect of humanity, as God in the flesh, he fully immersed himself in the human experience and assimilated humanity. The result was a perfect sacrifice for the sins and the basis upon which God could raise him from the dead for our justification. It is critical to note that Jesus' full assimilation of the human experience, including fulfillment of Mosaic LAW, did NOT include assimilation of the TRADITIONS of the scribes and Pharisees, a continual point of contention between him and them.

III. Intercession

One of the goals of the incarnation was establishment of Jesus Christ as our High Priest. Inasmuch as Jesus was and is the fulness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 2:9), he transformed the role of high priest. In the OT, God and the high priest (intercessor, mediator) were TWO distinct persons. The incarnation enabled God to combine those two roles into ONE person, the Lord Jesus Christ (Galatians 3:20). His full, sin-free assimilation of human experience rendered him fully qualified to represent man before God and God to man. There is no circumstance a believer could ever endure without Jesus being well-acquainted with it.

The scripture tells us Jesus is a "merciful and faithful" high priest in things pertaining to God. It is said mercy is God withholding from us what we deserve whereas grace is God giving to us what we do not deserve. But I wonder if we should restrict mercy to withholding activity. Oftentimes a believer comes to the Father through the Son with needs unrelated to sin. There are decisions to make, wisdom to obtain, the need for longsuffering in dealing with others and divine supply for any number of other needs that prompt feelings of inadequacy. It's the mercy of God administered by our merciful high priest, that meets the need. The fact that he's a faithful (dependable) high priest means the brethren will NEVER be disappointed when they come to Jesus in need of divine supply.

The context here is one of intercession where Jesus is portrayed as High Priest. A comparative text in 1 John 1:7-2:2 portrays Jesus as our Advocate. His role as Advocate for (defender of) the brethren is one of intervention. In Hebrews 2:17, Jesus the High Priest is "merciful and faithful." In 1 John 1:9, Jesus the Advocate is "faithful and just." When it comes to Jesus' dependability in meeting the NEEDS of the brethren, he is MERCIFUL. When it comes to his dependability in forgiving the SINS we confess, he is JUST. In a manner of speaking, Jesus lets us OFF the hook for sins (forgiveness) because he put himself ON the hook for those sins on the cross (justice). We should always remember that every divine act of forgiveness is backed up by a divine act of justice!

One more thought about intercession. In the OT, only the high priest, God's designated intercessor, was allowed to enter the Tabernacle's holiest place. This he did once a year on behalf of the people by bringing the blood of atonement to sprinkle on the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant. Hebrews 9:8 tells us: "The way INTO THE HOLIEST of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing." In the next chapter, we are given this assurance: "Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter INTO THE HOLIEST by the blood of Jesus" (10:19). In the OT, the high priest entered the holiest once a year with Israel hoping he would COME BACK OUT. In the NT, Jesus our High Priest bids his brethren "COME ON IN" with the expectation they can come boldly into the holiest as often as the need for mercy and grace requires (4:16). The

English language is incapable of expressing the enormity of this sacred privilege!

IV. Propitiation

The word *reconciliation* is **ἰλάσκομαι** (hilaskomai), meaning "to be or become propitious, merciful." It is used only twice in the NT. The other usage is Luke 18:13, where Jesus told the story of the publican who beat upon his breast, and cried: "God be merciful [propitiated] to me a sinner." The other NT word for *reconciliation* is the Greek **καταλλαγή** (katallagē), "a restoration to agreement." Its noun and verb forms are used seven times in the NT to describe the work of Christ in bringing sinners back into agreement with God by imputing to believers his own righteousness as a free gift.

In the Septuagint (OT Hebrew translated into Greek), translators used **ἱλαστήριον** (hilastērion) for each instance of "mercy seat." NT writers used it in Romans 3:25, 1 John 2:2 and 4:10 where it is translated "propitiation." The scriptures declare Jesus is THE propitiation for our sins and those of the whole world. The mercy seat, the place where the high priest sprinkled the blood of atonement, was "the place of propitiation." In Jesus, the PLACE of propitiation became the PERSON of propitiation. Whereas the place provided TEMPORAL satisfaction, the Person provided satisfaction that is ETERNAL. In terms of the sins of all mankind, Jesus IS the satisfaction.

Every aspect of atonement prefigured in the Ark of the Covenant was fulfilled in Jesus of Nazareth, especially the Mercy Seat. Jesus provided satisfaction for sin ONE time for ALL time. Based on his TOTAL satisfaction for our sins, Jesus can provide ETERNAL redemption for the believer. Propitiation enables God to be merciful, faithful and just in ALL his dealings with the believer.

Jesus and his brethren are all of One. He is continually sanctifying them, and they are continually being sanctified by him. His mission to bring many sons into glory was born of obligation, which required full assimilation of the human experience, enabling him to provide both intercession and propitiation for them that believe. What a mighty God we serve! And what a great salvation he has provided!

The Kids and the Grown Ups

Members of the body of Christ, both universally and locally, live with various levels of spiritual maturity. At the moment a man or woman is born again into God's kingdom by faith in Christ, they become a spiritual baby. It's God's design for his 'kids' to grow spiritually and attain 'grown up' status. But how does one know if he or she has achieved spiritual maturity? When does a 'kid' become a 'grown up'? The scripture gives us a few indicators that enable us to distinguish childhood from adulthood for those who have eternal life in Christ.

Our text is Hebrews 5:13-14:

"For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

Our first observation is the contrasts between (1) "milk" and "strong meat" and (2) a "babe" and those who are "of full age." Kids are babes with a milk diet. Grown ups are of full age and consume strong meat. What do we know about the difference between milk and strong meat? The basic difference, from a physical standpoint, is the body's ability to break down food effectively and extract nutrients. Milk is a 'predigested' food source.

Nutritionists recommend a baby stay on a milk diet (formula, breast milk or both) for the first four to six months. Milk is perfectly suitable for infants, supplying all the necessary nutrition. At the six-month point, some babies are ready to have certain solid foods introduced into the diet, such as bananas, soft cereal, pureed foods. In short, the better a food is broken down, the easier it is for a baby to process it. Milk is a good thing. Many adults continue to consume milk as part of their diets. But it would be unseemly for an adult, with a full set of teeth for masticating meat and a digestive system capable of breaking it down and extracting its nutrients, to keep consuming milk as his primary (or solitary) food source.

Our text tells us the reason babes remain on predigested milk. They are: *"Unskilful in the word of righteousness."* Unskilful is **ἀπειρος** (apeiros), "inexperienced in, no experience of." What does it mean to have no skills when it comes to handling scripture? It's the difference between KNOWING the truth and DOING the truth. There is a big difference between being knowledgeable and skillful. Take a man who's a recent graduate of an aeronautics institute. He graduates at the top of his class, masters all the laws of aerodynamics, understands all the cockpit instrumentation and knows how flight control systems work. With these academic credentials, he submits his resume to a major airline for a job as pilot. The first question the interviewer asks is: "How many flight hours have you logged?" That's where the interview comes to an abrupt halt. The interviewer looks at the applicant and says: "Sir, it's clear by your resume you know a lot about airplanes. We're looking for people who have actually flown an aircraft, who have 'X' number of hours behind the controls and 'Y' number of takeoffs and landings. Sir, we're looking to hire experienced pilots, not mere academics!"

How does this analogy translate to spiritual life? James said it like this:

"But be ye doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving your own selves. For if any be a hearer of the word, and not a doer, he is like unto a man beholding his natural face in a glass: For he beholdeth himself, and goeth his way, and straightway forgetteth what manner of man he was" (James 1:22-24).

The experienced believer, one who is skillful in the word of righteousness, does what hears. He may not do it ALL of the time. But the general disposition of his heart is to DO what the Word of God SAYS and experience (live out) the truth first hand. The inexperienced believer, one who is unskilful in the word of righteousness, may have accrued a wealth of biblical knowledge, but very little actual experience living it out in day-to-day life. His knowledge of truth far exceeds his experience of it. That's why you see men and women who've been saved for ten or so years being troublemakers, the biggest critics of others and making no meaningful contribution to the spiritual life of the church. They're babes who never grew up. If only they could start DOING what they KNOW and EXPERIENCE Christ. These baby believers (if they are truly born again) too often become deacons because of tenure in the church, not true spiritual qualifications.

The 'grown up' believer, who is of full age and consumes strong meat, is one who has developed the interpretive skills necessary to derive spiritual nutrition from the word of righteousness—masticating it and breaking it down into its component parts, understanding the practical implications of truth on his life and seeking to DO what he has come to KNOW. Translating knowledge into experience is what a 'grown up' seeks to do. Moreover, he loves to grapple with the 'strong meat' of theological-doctrinal truth. He desires to understand it and master articulation of it. Accruing biblical knowledge is a noble quest. But the pursuit of knowledge without a corresponding hunger to experience it stunts spiritual growth. Get knowledge! But in all thy getting, get experience!

Our second observation is what our text says about 'grown up' believers: "*Those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil.*" Senses is **αἰσθητήριον** (aisthētērion), "an organ of perception (whether in body or mind)." This is its only NT usage. In this context, it clearly indicates a function of the mind that facilitates perception and sound judgment. *Exercised* is **γυμνάζω** (gymnazō), "to exercise in a palaestra (wrestling school), to exercise vigorously." Our Eng. 'gymnasium' comes from this root. The verb is a perfect passive participle. Literal translation: "the ones...with senses having been exercised to discern (with the result their senses retain that discernment)."

Use is **ἔξις** (hexis), "a habit or practice, or a power acquired by practice." As with senses, this is its only usage in the NT. A man who starts frequenting the gym three times a week begins by bench pressing 80 pounds, 1 set of 8 reps. Six months later, he's bench pressing 120 pounds, 2 sets of 10 reps. His 'habit' has yielded dividends in both strength and endurance. By reason of habitual lifting, his ability to lift is enhanced. So it is with a believer whose life habit is reading the Word of God, meditating therein and seeking wisdom from his Lord about how to make its precepts part of his daily practice. This is what 'grown ups' do that 'kids' have yet to learn.

Discern is **διάκρισις** (diakrisis), "a judgment, a distinguishing, an estimation (esp. in judicial settings)." The verdict in every jury trial depends on the ability of jurors to weigh the evidence and make a determination as to where the truth lies. The ability of jurors to distinguish fact from fiction is discernment. A jury renders a 'Guilty' verdict if it judges the evidence to be incriminatory. It returns a 'Not Guilty' verdict if it judges the evidence to be exculpatory. The believer is like a juror who hears evidence about good and evil every day from scripture. The word of righteousness, the evidenciary standard, is the means whereby he discerns whether what he's thinking and doing is good or evil. The better he understands what the mind and will of God are, the more likely he is to come down of the good side of things. Again, this is what a spiritual 'grown up' does.

One of the great challenges for a pastor is to provide a spiritual menu in his weekly preaching that

has nutrition for everyone—the kids, the grown ups and everyone in between. He cannot tailor his preaching for one group at the neglect of another. I've actually heard pastors respond to complaints about the shallowness of their preaching, saying: "I'll start preaching deeper when you start living better!" It's hard for me to imagine a pastor making a dumber statement than that. In his sermon preparation, the pastor needs to rustle up some steak (strong meat) for the grown ups along with mashed potatoes (milk) for the kids. He must remember everyone needs to get fed...and pray the kids will one day become grown ups!

If They Shall Fall Away

Any salvation a saved sinner can lose is a salvation grace did not produce! Any salvation a man earns by good works is a salvation he must maintain by good works and can lose by the cessation thereof. If a sinner is saved by good works, it stands to reason he can lose his salvation by bad works. But scripture affirms our justification is "not by the [good] works of the law" (Galatians 2:16). Paul wrote to the Romans: "And if by grace, then is it no more of works: otherwise grace is no more grace. But if it be of works, then is it no more grace: otherwise work is no more work" (11:6). If salvation is by works, then grace is turned on its head. Grace is no longer grace if our salvation is in ANY way contingent upon works or the lack thereof. And if our salvation is by works, then works MUST be redefined to constitute grace since salvation can ONLY be by grace!

Scripture teaches God makes his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, to be "wisdom, righteousness, sanctification, and redemption" for every believer (1 Corinthians 1:30). Salvation is IN Christ. The believer is IN Christ. Christ is IN the believer. Salvation is NOT Jesus plus (+) something or minus (-) something. Jesus IS salvation. There is NONE OTHER NAME under heaven given among men whereby we MUST be saved (Acts 4:12). He that has the Son has life (1 John 5:12).

Despite the unassailability of salvation-by-grace doctrine, there are those in the religious realm who insist that salvation is contingent upon good works and the keeping of it contingent upon maintaining them. The majority of 'good works' proponents do so as an expression of "confidence in the flesh" (Philippians 3:3-4), But there are honest folks who genuinely struggle with biblical passages that appear to teach otherwise. One of those texts is Hebrews 6:4-6, which reads:

"For it is impossible for those who were once enlightened, and have tasted of the heavenly gift, and were made partakers of the Holy Ghost, And have tasted the good word of God, and the powers of the world to come, If they shall fall away, to renew them again unto repentance; seeing they crucify to themselves the Son of God afresh, and put him to an open shame."

In our treatment of this text, we'll seek to identify what it means to "fall away" and whether any genuine born-again believer is capable of doing so. There are several interpretive keys that will enable us to do this. But first we'll examine the text itself and then bring to bear other biblical considerations.

I. Textual Comments

The words *fall away* are the translation of **παρῆντω** (*parapiptō*), "to fall beside, slip aside, fall away." While it implies apostasy, this is its only NT usage. Some scholars see it as equivalent to an OT word for "trespass" that signifies departure from the true worship of Jehovah (Ezekiel 14:13; 15:8). As such, **παρῆντω** would represent departure from the true worship of Christ. The fact the Holy Spirit used it only once in the NT means it probably has unique application to the writer's target audience—Jews who had professed faith in Jesus Christ but still had an affinity for Mosaic Law and a propensity to mix Law and Grace. The mixing of the new covenant in Christ's blood with the old covenant of Law is a recipe for spiritual disaster!

The verb *fall away* is a predicate nominative in past participle form: literally, "ones having fallen away." It is the fifth in a series of five predicate nominatives introduced by the definitive article those. Literal translation: "For [it is] impossible to renew again to repentance the ones having

been enlightened, ones having tasted of the heavenly gift, ones having become partakers of the Holy Spirit, ones having tasted the good word of God and the powers of the impending age and ones having fallen away." The word *if* does not appear in the Greek as a condition for the first four verbs. The Greek is **καί** (and) as a continuation of them. It can mean *and* or *even*. The force of **καί** is: "EVEN IF if they [are] ones having fallen away [after having experienced the first four influences]."

The writer expresses this falling away as a remote and almost unimaginable possibility. What is the possibility of ones having experienced the first four blessings abandoning the Lord Jesus Christ as the total sufficiency for salvation? As remote as that possibility is, it is even more remote—yea, impossible—for God to renew them (or bring them back) to a place of repentance and faith after they've abandoned it. Question: If a professor of faith DOES fall away, what would God use to renew them again to repentance? Answer: The same influences he already used to draw them to himself in the first place. See Romans 2:4, which affirms "the goodness of God" is the means he uses to lead men to repentance.

The writer makes clear the falling away in view is much more than a believer being beset by his or her sins. It is a falling away that's fundamental to the gospel. The ones having fallen away are guilty of re-crucifying the Son of God and putting him to an open shame. The cross of Christ is the crux of the gospel—its gravamen! The cross was the means whereby God the Father laid upon Jesus the iniquities of us all (Isaiah 53:6). It is also the basis upon which God meted out JUSTICE for the world's sins so he could be the JUSTIFIER of those who believe in Jesus (Romans 3:26). If one who falls away is guilty of re-crucifying Jesus and openly shaming him, that falling away MUST therefore involve a tacit repudiation of Christ and his cross as the total sufficiency for our salvation. In other words, he has ultimately rejected the gospel of grace to which at one time he gave mental assent.

The verbs *crucify* and *put to an open shame* are also predicate nominatives, but in present participle form. Literal translation: "Seeing they are ones continuously re-crucifying the Son of God and ones continuously putting him to an open shame." The Greek syntax teaches the ones having experienced (past tense) the first five participles are now engaged in continuously practicing (present tense) the last two participles. The verb *put to open shame* means "to expose to infamy, make a public example of." Its only other NT usage is in Matthew 1:19, where it is said Joseph was not willing to make Mary a public example. In other words, he had no desire to bring reproach upon or embarrass her in a public manner. The professor of Christ re-crucifies and openly shames the Lord Jesus when, having been exposed to heavenly dynamics, abandons the cross as the crux of the gospel. A genuine, born-again believer is incapable of falling away. If a professor of Jesus Christ EVER falls away, it is evidence that individual NEVER believed.

In ascertaining what it means to fall away, it might be helpful to contrast two prominent men in scripture—one who DID fall away and one who did NOT fall away. They are Judas and Peter. Jesus hand-picked Judas to be one of the Twelve. Judas experienced many displays of Holy Ghost power. He preached the gospel of repentance and of the kingdom. He cast out demons and healed the sick in Jesus' name. He experienced enlightening, tasting and partaking. Sadly, he fell away in the end. His betrayal of Jesus revealed he was NEVER a true believer.

Peter NEVER fell away although we know he rebuked Jesus on one occasion for predicting his death (Matthew 16:22), denied Jesus three times (as attested by all four gospel writers), quit the ministry and endeavored to return to his fishing profession after the resurrection (John 21:3). The difference between Judas and Peter lies in these words of Jesus to Peter after predicting his

denial: "But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren" (Luke 22:32). These are the words of an Advocate—the same Advocate that pleads the cause of EVERY true believer (1 John 2:1-2). The faith of those for whom Jesus prays NEVER fails! They may be overly confident, spiritually impotent, beggarly in weakness and cowardly in denial. But none of these shortcomings constitutes a failure of faith or a falling away. Peter would need to be converted (restored) with a view to usefulness; but NEVER renewed with a view to repentance!

John 6 further reinforces the truth concerning Peter. After Jesus had fed the five thousand (6:5-13), many Jews took to following him. In a practical sense, they became his disciples. Things went well until Jesus claimed to be the "Bread of life" (6:35,48,51,58), giving ETERNAL life to those who consume him in contrast with Moses and his TEMPORAL manna. Jesus knew many of those FOLLOWING him were not BELIEVING him (6:64). So he made this statement: "No man can come unto me, except it were given unto him of my Father" (6:65). John tells us: "From that time many of his disciples went back, and walked no more with him" (6:66). Jesus then asked the Twelve, his inner circle, this question: "Will ye also go away?" (6:67). Peter rejoined: "Lord, to whom shall we go? thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God" (6:68-69). The verbs believe and are sure are both perfect tense. Paraphrase: "Lord, we're firmly convinced and know with unshakable certitude that YOU are the Son of the living God, possessing the words of eternal life NO ONE else can offer! We're not going anywhere!" Peter never wavered from this persuasion!

Judas, on the other hand, NEVER came to such a persuasion, which is why he finally fell away, went back. He followed, but never believed. Jesus never became his Advocate, one to whom he was so close, whose glory he experienced first-hand. It wasn't until AFTER Judas left the Eleven on his betrayal errand that Jesus interceded for his own. He asked the Father to KEEP them (John 17:11,12,15) and to SANCTIFY them (17:17,19). According to Jesus, NONE of them was lost, but the son of perdition (17:12). Jesus extended his advocacy to future believers with this request: "Neither pray I for these alone, but for THEM also which shall BELIEVE on me through their word" (17:20). Jesus petitioned the Father to keep and sanctify ALL of us who have believed. If so much as one genuine believer EVER falls away, it would call into question Jesus' role as Advocate. For if he lost one, what assurance would the rest of us have that he could save and keep us to the uttermost?

II. Contextual and Biblical Considerations

There are several interpretive keys from both the immediate context and the broader scope of scripture that can provide some light. First, the immediate context is an exhortation to build upon the foundational doctrines of the Christian faith and achieve spiritual maturity (6:1), wherein are "things that accompany salvation" (6:9). When the writer uses *persuaded* in the perfect tense, he makes it clear that, even though warning about the dangers of falling away, he has no one specific in mind, certainly not his target audience. Contrariwise, he recognizes their "work and labour of love" and ongoing "ministry to the saints" (6:10). But he realizes tares grow alongside the wheat. For that reason, he is bold to caution them concerning "an evil heart of unbelief" (3:12).

Secondly, the word repentance in 6:6 builds upon its use in 6:1. The impossibility of renewal unto repentance is due to the destruction of the foundation previously laid. According to Paul, Jesus Christ is the ONLY foundation that can be laid (1 Corinthians 3:10). One falls away when he abandons the foundation. The reference to "dead works" juxtaposed with "faith toward God" is a

contrast between the works of the Law, which have NO ability to give life, and the Lord Jesus Christ, who IS eternal life.

Thirdly, a prominent event in Hebrews is “the provocation” of 3:8,15, which looks back at Numbers 13-14. The Israelites were in Egyptian bondage for 400 years. God sent Moses to deliver them. They observed as the Lord brought nine plagues upon the Egyptians, from which they were immune. With the tenth plague, immunity from death would be secured ONLY by application of lamb's blood to the door posts. The Lord prescribed the manner in which this was to be done. Every detail prefigured Jesus, the Lamb of God. When Israel was hemmed in at the Red Sea, they watched as God (1) appeared in a pillar of fire protecting them from Egypt's army, (2) parted the Red Sea as an egress for them, and (3) drowned their enemy.

At Mount Sinai, they beheld God's awesome glory for forty days while he sustained his servant Moses for that same period without food or water. The Lord led them to Kadesh and instructed Moses to send twelve spies to survey the land, to ENLIGHTEN them concerning the land God promised, to PARTAKE of its beauty and bounty before taking possession, to get a TASTE of things to come. After forty days of exposure to the land, ten of the spies gave the majority report—an evil report. The minority—Joshua and Caleb—argued: “We are WELL ABLE to possess it NOW!” But the majority said: “We are NOT ABLE to possess it, God or no God, promise or no promise! The inhabitants of the land will destroy both us AND our kids!” The majority opinion won the day. With that opinion, they FELL AWAY from God, his promise and their future.

After all they had seen God do, it was not enough to convince the majority to take God at his word. Instead they expressed a desire to go back to Egypt. This spirit of unbelief infuriated the Lord. He smote the ten unbelieving spies and told Moses to tell the people over twenty years of age they would spend the next forty years wandering and dying in the wilderness, one year for every day the spies spent in the land. The death sentence jolted them into confession of sin and reversal of thinking about taking the land. But it was too little, too late. God refused to RENEW his promise to that generation. He would fulfill his promise with the next generation—their kids. Their rejection made renewal of the promise IMPOSSIBLE!

If one properly understands what happened with the provocation in Numbers 13-14, which the author references in Hebrews 3:8,15, he'll have a handle on (1) what the falling away means in 6:6, (2) why it's impossible for one who falls away to be renewed to repentance, and (3) why a believer, who is IN Christ and IN whom Christ lives, can NEVER fall away. Many believe the wilderness wanderings prefigure the life of a carnal believer. But that comparison just doesn't hold up if you understand the truth of Hebrews 3. What the wilderness wanderings teach us is how God provides for a covenant people, which Christians indeed are. Spiritual lessons abound. But the better OT parallels with the Christian life begin with the book of Joshua, which documents ENTRY into the land (salvation) and CONQUEST of the land (discipleship), including the KEYS to spiritual victory and the PITFALLS that portend spiritual defeat.

Who Is Melchisedec?

The OT mentions two non-Levitical priests—Melchisedec and Jethro. Genesis 14:18 cites Melchisedec as the “priest of the most high God,” who met Abram upon his return from rescuing nephew Lot. Scripture speaks of Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, as “the priest of Midian” (Exodus 2:16; 3:1; 18:1). The scriptures are silent about how these two priests, who were separated by more than half a millennium, came to be called “priests” in the first place. How did they come about their priesthoods? Who appointed and anointed them? To what degree were they intercessors between God and man? In the case of Melchisedec, it's clear God himself set him apart. The fact he is called “priest of the most high God” tells us his priesthood was more than a title. He was a divinely appointed representative, to whom Abraham paid tithes.

The purpose of this study is to ascertain whether Melchisedec was more than mere man. Was he the Second Person of the Godhead in pre-incarnate form? As far as Jethro is concerned, his priesthood, whatever it involved, is shrouded in mystery. But scripture indicates the priesthood of Melchisedec was far more weighty than that of Jethro. Our efforts to identify Melchisedec will examine biblical evidence and seek to connect the dots to arrive at an answer to the question: Who is Melchisedec?

In Genesis 14:18-20, we read: “And Melchisedec king of Salem brought forth bread and wine: and he was the priest of the most high God. And he blessed him, and said, Blessed be Abram of the most high God, possessor of heaven and earth: And blessed be the most high God, which hath delivered thine enemies into thy hand. And he gave him tithes of all.” This is the only OT reference to Melchisedec. It comes at a very early stage of human history and involves the man who would become the father of the Hebrews and through whom Messiah would come.

Several observations are in order. First, Melchisedec is both king and priest. So is Christ. Secondly, Melchisedec is the king of Salem, the future Jerusalem. Christ was crucified outside Jerusalem, and will one day rule the earth from Jerusalem. Thirdly, Abram's quest to rescue Lot would have taken him in close proximity to Jerusalem on its east going both north and south. Christ is close to each of us. Fourthly, according to Hebrews 7:1, Melchisedec “met Abraham” on his return. This suggests he took the initiative with Abram, reaching out with bread and wine. Christ always takes the initiative with men. Fifthly, Abram acknowledged the spiritual authority of Melchisedec as indicated by his payment of tithes. We pay tithes to Christ for the same reason. Did Abram see in Melchisedec more than a man? Lastly, Levi paid tithes to Melchisedec inasmuch as he was in the loins of Abram (Hebrews 7:10). It is accepted the lesser pays tithes to the greater, making Melchisedec's the greater priesthood, to whom the scripture likens the Lord Jesus Christ.

The phrase “after the order of Melchisedec” is used six times in Hebrews (5:6; 5:10; 6:20; 7:11; 7:17; 7:21). The word *order* is **τάξις** (taxis), meaning “a regular arrangement, a fixed succession within a fixed time.” It signifies an orderly condition. Our English word taxonomy, the science of classification, comes from this root. In terms of classifying biblical priests, Melchisedec and Jesus Christ are in a class all by themselves. Within the Levitical priesthood, beginning with Aaron, there were many hundreds through the centuries that served the Tabernacle and Temple. When scripture says Jesus came “in the fulness of the time” (Galatians 4:4), it no doubt includes the timeliness of God sending the second member of the Melchisedekian order, his Son Jesus, into the world.

Hebrews 7:1-3 reads:

"For this Melchisedec, king of Salem, priest of the most high God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings, and blessed him; To whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all; first being by interpretation King of righteousness, and after that also King of Salem, which is, King of peace; Without father, without mother, without descent, having neither beginning of days, nor end of life; but made like unto the Son of God; abideth a priest continually."

It is the author's purpose to show why both Melchisedec and Christ share the same taxonomic classification. The challenge for the interpreter is to determine the writer's intent. When he says without father and without mother, does he mean to say Melchisedec was of heavenly origin (i.e., pre-incarnate Christ), only appearing to be human? Melchisedec is said to be: (1) fatherless, (2) motherless, (3) without a birth record, (4) without a death record, (5) without descent, and (6) made like unto the Son of God. *Without descent* is **ἀγενεαλόγητος** (agenealogētos), Our English *genealogy* comes from this root. There were no genealogical records to document his human roots.

The verb *made like* is **ἀφομοιῶ** (aphomoioō), "to produce a facsimile, assimilate closely, copy." If you placed a picture of Melchisedec in a Fax machine, a picture of the Lord Jesus would arrive at the destination to which you sent it. Hebrews 7:15 says: "It is yet far more evident: for that after the similitude of Melchisedec there ariseth another priest." The word *similitude* means "likeness, resemblance." In connection with likeness and similitude in Hebrews 7, consider what Nebuchadnezzar said when looking into the furnace of fire: "Lo, I see four men loose, walking in the midst of the fire, and they have no hurt; and the form of the fourth is like the Son of God" (Daniel 3:25). The fourth man he saw was almost certainly the Lord Jesus in pre-incarnate form. I've never heard an evangelical preacher argue otherwise. Was Melchisedec simply a man, albeit a godly man, who represented God on earth, whose earthly origins were simply unknown to future generations? Or was he the pre-incarnate Christ, who had assumed kingship over Salem (Jerusalem)?

Whatever conclusion we arrive at, we must consider the following facts. First, there are TEN kings mentioned by name in Genesis 14 in connection with the cities over which they reigned. Melchisedec is the tenth—the king of Salem. In the context, is there any reason to believe Melchisedec was any different than the other nine kings in terms of his humanity? Secondly, Matthew 1 and Luke 3 provide us with great detail connecting Jesus to both David and Adam in terms of genealogical roots. The birth and death of Jesus are well documented. Thirdly, God had his priestly representatives on earth hundreds of years before the Levitical priesthood was established under Moses. That to me is the seminal connection between Melchisedec and Christ. In that regard, they belong to the same taxonomic classification of priests. Whether we interpret Melchisedec as the pre-incarnate Christ or just a man who was unique in his priestly credentials, it in no way affects the uniqueness and efficacy of the Lord Jesus Christ, whose eternal priesthood is after the order of Melchisedec.

The Suitable Son

In Hebrews 7:26-28, the writer makes a series of summary remarks concerning the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, in his redemptive role as the High Priest for believers. Our text reads:

"For such an high priest became us, who is holy, harmless, undefiled, separate from sinners, and made higher than the heavens; Who needeth not daily, as those high priests, to offer up sacrifice, first for his own sins, and then for the people's: for this he did once, when he offered up himself. For the law maketh men high priests which have infirmity; but the word of the oath, which was since the law, maketh the Son, who is consecrated for evermore."

The scripture is meticulous in drawing a sharp theological distinction between the priesthood that sprang from Levi and the priesthood of Jesus Christ. The Levitical priesthood was after order of Aaron (7:11). The priesthood of the Lord Jesus is after the order of Melchisedec. Since Jesus sprang from Judah (7:14), it was necessary to link his priesthood to a different priestly order (taxonomic classification). Melchisedec, the priest of Salem, to whom Abraham paid tithes, fit the bill.

Our text tells us Jesus is such a priest. He became us. Such is τοιοῦτος (toioutos), "such as this, of this sort or kind." The verb became is the imperfect of πρέπω (prepō), "to be suitable, proper, to stand out, be conspicuous." The imperfect tense, representing an ongoing activity in the past, is clearly a reference to the three-year ministry of Jesus of Nazareth. In his walk with the Father and interactions with men, he displayed all the characteristics sinners would need to represent them before God. He was entirely suitable for the task. In that regard, he was and is the suitable Son.

There are two fundamental tasks for the priesthood—intercession (7:25) and mediation (8:6). *Intercession* is the present tense of ἐντυγχάνω (entygchanō), "to light upon, meet with a person for the purpose of conversation, consultation or supplication." In his role as High Priest, Jesus meets with the Father continually on our behalf for the purpose of pleading our cause, interceding on our behalf. For this reason, he is able to save to the uttermost those for whom he pleads. *Uttermost* is παντελής (pantelēs), "all-complete, perfect unto completeness." Jesus is able to "complete all" that pertains to us in the matter of salvation. To use a marathon metaphor, Jesus our High Priest is able to get us his people ALL the way to the FINISH line!

Mediator is μεσίτης (mesitēs), "a go-between, one who intervenes between two for the purpose of brokering a peace, forming a compact or ratifying a covenant; an arbitrator." In the context, Jesus is the mediator of a better covenant (8:6), a new testament (9:15), a new covenant (12:24). He's the MAN Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). As mediator and intercessor, Jesus is a suitable man, the essential man to represent men before the Father. Unlike Moses, who was a third-party mediator between God and Israel, Jesus is both God and Man, eliminating the need for a third party. When a man comes to Christ Jesus seeking mediation, he finds both God and Mediator in ONE Person. Thus Paul could write: "Now a mediator is not a mediator of one, but God is one" (Galatians 3:20).

The writer uses three words, two phrases to explain why the Son is suitable to serve as High Priest, Intercessor and Mediator. Jesus is *holy* (benign, undefiled by sin), *harmless* (without guile or fraud; trustworthy), *undefiled* (free from defilement, unsoiled, pure). Jesus is *separate from sinners*. The phrase is the translation of χωρίζω (chōrizō) in predicate nominative form, perfect

passive tense. It means "to divide, put asunder." It is sometimes translated "depart" in contexts signifying separation from a geographical location. Literal translation: "An high priest...one having been separated from sinners with the result he remains separated."

Who are these sinners? At first blush, you might understand this to be a reference to mankind in general. You'd be technically correct. But the context points to a more specific group. The sinners from whom Jesus has been separated are the Levitical priests, who were required to offer up sacrifice first for THEIR OWN SINS (7:28). But because Jesus was holy, harmless and undefiled, he was a suitable sacrifice to offer up himself for OUR SINS as well as for the SINNERS that constitute the Levitical priesthood.

Jesus is made higher than the heavens. By virtue of his sinless life, vicarious death, triumphant resurrection and ascension up into the third heaven, he was made higher than the heavens. God highly exalted him with a name above every name (Philippians 2:9). In ALL things, he has the preeminence (Colossians 1:18). As the member of the Godhead, he's the object of this acclamation: "Let them praise the name of the LORD: for his name alone is excellent; his glory is above the earth and heaven" (Psalm 148:13).

The phrase "higher than the heavens" brings to my mind the image of a fifty-story high rise with a penthouse on the top floor. Penthouses are usually occupied by (1) the owner of the building, (2) someone with a controlling interest in the property, or (3) someone with sufficient resources to purchase the penthouse or pay the exorbitant rent. If you can imagine that fifty-story high rise representing the earth, the heavens and all that in them is, Jesus lives in the penthouse, upholding all things by the word of his power!

Jesus of Nazareth became us. As the God-Man, he is suitable to serve as our High Priest, our Intercessor and our Mediator. He demonstrated his suitability during thirty-three years of traversing Judaea as the Second Adam, the Last Adam, with his holiness, harmlessness, purity, separation from sinners and preeminence perfectly intact. He is, in every way a sanctified mind can imagine, the suitable Son.

No Wavering Allowed!

You'll find the following definitions if you look up the word "waver" in your dictionary: "Shake with a quivering emotion, become unsteady or unreliable, undecided between two opinions or courses of action, irresolute." If we think of wavering in terms of indecision or irresolution, all of us, at times, have wavered. It might be as simple as indecision about two breakfast options, something more weighty, like a car or house purchase, or whether or not to buy shares in a particular stock. In other words, wavering is an accepted part of our physical lives. It happens.

But in the spiritual realm, where a man's walk with God is concerned, there are two specific areas in which God allows no wavering whatsoever. In our King James translation, the word *wavering* is found twice. The words *without wavering* have to do with our PROFESSION of faith in Christ (Hebrews 10:23). The words *nothing wavering* have to do with our PRAYER life (James 1:6). Let's examine these passages.

In Hebrews 10:23, we read: "*Let us hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering; (for he is faithful that promised;)*" The phrase *without wavering* is the translation of ἀκλινής (aklinēs), a combination of the negative particle ἄ (without) and the verb κλίνω (klinō), "to bow, incline, recline." Have you ever heard someone say he was "inclined" to do this or that? He meant to say he was leaning toward one option more than the others. In the book of Hebrews, the writer repeatedly admonishes his Jewish readers (1) to remain steadfast in their persuasion that Jesus Christ is the total sufficiency for their spiritual needs, and (2) to avoid backsliding into a felt need to re-embrace the Law as a necessary component of righteousness. The ONLY valid inclination for any believer, whether Jew or Gentile, is the Lord Jesus Christ. The believer should bow to (incline himself toward) Jesus ALONE.

The admonition to hold fast the profession of our faith without wavering is rooted in the very nature and character of God, who has made promises to the believer and is faithful to make good on EVERY one of them. An underlying theme in the book of Hebrews is "the provocation" (3:8,15). In Numbers 13, God sent twelve men to spy out the Promised Land for forty days, to give them a taste of what he had promised. Two of the twelve—Joshua and Caleb—reckoned God who promised the land was able to deliver according to his promise. The other ten men saw the apparent obstacles to conquest as TOO BIG for God and his promise to overcome.

Instead of being inclined to believe God and move forward by faith, they were rather inclined toward unbelief and a return to Egypt. God's divine irritation and indignation with the unbelief of that generation resulted in forty years of wilderness wandering—one year for each of the forty days God allowed them a glimpse of the glory to come—and the death of every Israelite over age twenty at the time of provocation. For the professor of faith in Christ, to waver is to repeat the error of Israel in provoking the Lord. It's dangerous business!

In James 1:6, we read: "*But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.*" The word *wavering* is the translation of διακρίνω (diakrinō), "to separate thoroughly, discriminate, make a distinction." It is translated *doubt* on five occasions. The idea is that of a petitioner dividing the possibilities of prayer and into things he believes God CAN do and those he thinks God CANNOT do. It's like parting the Red Sea and placing what you believe possible with God on one side of the divide and what you think impossible with God on the other. The word *nothing* is μηδείς (mēdeis), "not even one." In terms of our prayer life, the possibilities should be a one-sided affair. NO wavering is allowed. There are

NO exceptions, not even ONE!

This dividing asunder of the CAN's and the CANNOT's is dishonoring to the Lord Jesus, who said, "All things are possible to him that believeth" (Mark 9:23). In addition, it leaves the doubter vulnerable to the winds of life, which drive and toss. The verb *is like* is **εἶκω** (eikō), "to be like, resemble, simulate." The verb is a perfect tense, signifying a permanent condition as long as wavering persists. The verb is coupled with three predicate nominatives in the present tense. The verbs *driven* and *tossed* are passive voice. An expanded translation: "For the one who is continuously distinguishing between what God can and cannot do has simulated a wave of the sea, one who is being continuously driven by the wind and one who is being continuously tossed (by that same wind)." We all know that winds determine waves. When a man doubts, he becomes a wave driven by the wind. When he believes without wavering, he determines (controls) the speed and direction of the wind in his spiritual life. Which of these two options appeals to you?

The scripture prohibits wavering in two key areas of our spiritual lives: our professing and our praying. If and when wavering takes place in either realm, spiritual trouble lies ahead. We can avoid wavering by (1) trusting God's faithfulness to deliver on his promises in Christ, and (2) believing all things are possible to him that believeth.

The Day God Handed Out Pink Slips

Employers issue pink slips to employees whose services they no longer need. I have been laid off several times in my life. Only once did I actually receive a pink slip, which contained a thirty-day notice of termination of my employment. Oddly enough, it was in 1970 from my first job after leaving the Navy. I worked for a major airline based in Miami, FL, which hired me as an aviation electrician during a strike. When the union settled its dispute with the airline, all the strikers came back to work. Their return created over-staffing. Since I was at the bottom of the seniority totem pole, the airline issued to me and several others our pink slips.

The longer one works in the employ of another, the harder it is to accept a pink slip. The man who works for a company ten years and extends himself financially due to 'reliable' income is far more traumatized by a pink slip than the man employed for ten weeks. Can you imagine the shock of a family member who's worked in a family-owned and operated business for ten years getting a pink slip? What if that family had been in business for fifteen-hundred years and the head of the family decided to shut down the business and issue pink slips to every family employee?

That's exactly what happened when Jesus of Nazareth died on a cross outside the gates of Jerusalem. In all three Synoptic Gospels, we're told "the veil of the temple was rent" in two pieces from top to bottom (Matthew 27:51; Mark 15:38; Luke 23:45). Every priest in the temple at that hour must have marveled, and thought: "What am I supposed to do now?"

In Hebrews 9:6-8, the scripture provides a glimpse into the job description of the Levitical priesthood:

"Now when these things [tabernacle furniture] were thus ordained [set up for service], the priests went always into the first tabernacle, accomplishing the service of God. But into the second went the high priest alone once every year, not without blood, which he offered for himself, and for the errors of the people: The Holy Ghost thus signifying, that the way into the holiest of all was not yet made manifest, while as the first tabernacle was yet standing."

For fifteen-hundred years the descendants of Levi performed tabernacle service. They performed the service in various degrees of compliance through the centuries. At times, the priests performing the service were corrupt individuals who were immoral and took bribes. At other times, the priesthood was performed with the proper reverence. While Solomon was dedicating the Temple, wherein the priests were fully engaged, the "fire came down from heaven, and consumed the burnt offering and sacrifices; and the glory of the LORD filled the house. And the priests could not enter into the house of the LORD, because the glory of the LORD had filled the LORD'S house" (2 Chronicles 7:1-2). That glorious day in the history of Israel was like NO other day before it or after it...UNTIL Jesus died at Calvary!

The priests in Solomon's day were confronted with a glory that, while it kept the priests out of the Temple for a season, nevertheless left intact the veil separating the first tabernacle from the second. But the blood Jesus shed for sinners ripped that veil wide open from top to bottom, the Holy Ghost thus signifying the way into the holiest had been established. That was the day God handed out pink slips to the family of Levi.

After three days, Jesus arose from the dead, appeared to selected groups of disciples for forty days, ascended to the Father's right hand to become our High Priest after the order of Melchisedec

and sent the Holy Ghost into the hearts of the disciples on the Day of Pentecost. The empowered Church was an evangelistic dynamo, a growing entity! Within a matter of weeks, this is what was happening in Jerusalem according to Luke: "And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith" (Acts 6:7). Those priests who might have wondered, "What am I supposed to do now?" found the answer to that question: BELIEVE on the Lord Jesus Christ! Can you imagine the pure bliss of believing priests, who heretofore could NOT enter the second tabernacle, now enjoying through the blood of Jesus free and unlimited access to the holiest in the heavenly tabernacle, which God pitched, and not man?!

How many priests make up a "great company"? The Greek is **ὄχλος** (ochlos), "a multitude, crowd, throng." The NT often uses the word to describe the massive crowds that followed Jesus around Judaea and Galilee. The word **ὄχλος** speaks of common men, not societal elites. While we will never know the exact number of which that great company of priests consisted, we do know these former priests found new significance in the blood of Christ—a precious blood they now shared in common with the whole world!

Those priests ministering in the temple precinct at the moment Jesus died witnessed first hand God opening the way into the holiest as he rent the veil asunder. Again, Hebrews provides this truth:

"Having therefore, brethren, boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, By a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh" (10:19-20).

Several observations are in order. First, *having* is a present participle. The brethren are in continual possession of boldness to go every moment of every day where only the OT high priest could go once a year. Secondly, the word *boldness* is **παρρησία** (parrēsia), "freedom in speaking, openness, fearless confidence." Jesus used the same word when he said he "spoke openly to the world" (John 18:20). We are exhorted to "come boldly unto the throne of grace" (Hebrews 4:16). In at least five NT instances, **παρρησία** is translated *confidence*. Consider that truth in contrast to the trepidation the OT high priest experienced on that ONE day (Atonement) wherein he was required to enter the holiest. Under certain prescribed violative circumstances, God could strike the high priest dead. The blood of Jesus vanquished that fear once-for-all!

Thirdly, the way into the holiest is *a new way and a living way*. The word *new* is **πρόσφατος** (prospatos), that which is "lately slaughtered, recently slain." It's been two-thousand years since Jesus offered himself for sinners as the Lamb slain. But the efficaciousness of his blood is as fresh and recent with God as though it was shed this morning. Access into the holiest by the blood of Jesus will NEVER wear itself out! The word *living* is a present participle, depicting the KIND of way Jesus made for us. When Jesus said he was the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6), he no doubt had in mind the WAY into the holiest his blood would provide and the privilege of believers to experience HIS LIFE on an ongoing basis by means of the indwelling Spirit.

Human experience has taught us we should avoid pink slips at all costs. Pink slips are the pathway to joblessness...and sometimes hopelessness. In the spiritual realm, God is in the business of handing out pink slips of his own. It was not a good day for Ananias and Sapphira when God issued to them pink slips for lying to the Holy Ghost. But the day God issued pink slips to the Levitical priesthood by ripping the veil asunder and providing a new and living way into the holiest by the blood of Jesus was the best thing that could have happened...for them and for us!

Riding the Coattails of Christ

Most of us have heard the phrase “Riding the Coattails” of another. The concept is actually quite biblical. When the LORD decided to destroy the earth by water, he said to Noah: “Come thou and all thy house into the ark; for thee have I seen righteous before me in this generation” (Genesis 7:1). The pronouns THOU and THEE indicate Noah had righteous coattails that saved his family. In the previous chapter, scripture says: “Noah found grace in the eyes of the LORD” (6:8), and “Noah walked with God” (6:9). These statements do NOT prove Noah's family members weren't righteous and didn't walk with God. But they do demonstrate a spiritual singularity about Noah that (1) his family members did not share, and (2) from which his family owed their physical salvation from the Flood waters. In other words, Noah had coattails!

We know the story of Joseph, how he ended up in Egypt, found favor with Pharaoh and rose to second position in his kingdom. In time, his father Jacob and brothers rode his coattails into Goshen where they flourished for a few centuries before a hostile Pharaoh imposed harsh bondage. A few centuries later, Israel rode the coattails of Moses as he led them out of bondage and across the Red Sea. During Paul's trip to Rome, two-hundred seventy-five crewmen, soldiers and prisoners rode the coattails of Paul to safety as “the angel of God” delivered them all from a catastrophic storm (Acts 27).

There are NO coattails in scripture bigger than those of Jesus Christ. In Hebrews 6:19-20, Jesus is said to be our forerunner, who entered within the veil for us. *Forerunner* is **πρόδρομος** (prodromos), “one who comes (runs) in advance to a place where the rest are to follow.” This is its only NT usage. As our forerunner, Jesus has provided coattails for the NT believer that were unavailable to the OT priesthood. Under OT Law, ONE man was allowed to draw near ONCE a year on behalf of the nation. Under NT Grace, EVERY believer is allowed to follow (ride the coattails of) their forerunner into the holiest. Because the blood of Jesus is the propitiation (total satisfaction) for our sins, God's exhortation for us to draw near is no compromise whatsoever with his holiness. The magnitude of God's grace is incomprehensible!

Our text is Hebrews 10:22:

“Let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled from an evil conscience, and our bodies washed with pure water.”

In its context, the exhortation is based upon two possessions: (1) having boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus—10:19, and (2) having an high priest over the house of God—10:21. A believer possesses these because of his forerunner. *Let us draw near* is **προσέρχομαι** (proserchomai), “to come toward.” It's a common verb in the NT, used over 80 times. In many instances (esp. in the Gospels), it's in a context that describes one person coming into the physical presence of another. The verb is present tense, conveying the sense of: “Let us keep on drawing near!” It's also middle voice, signifying an action taken with a reflexive benefit for the actor. When one acts in middle voice, he does so in his own best interest. A man does himself the greatest service possible when he draws near to God in prayer and spends time lingering in his Lord's presence. Contrariwise, nothing is more self-defeating for a child of God than the neglect of his or her prayer life.

The phrase *true heart in full assurance of faith* signifies an absolute absence of doubt. A true heart is a genuine heart, sincere, without pretense. The operation of a true heart is when the lips

replicate the heart. He is a fool who tries to impress God with fiction. Jesus spoke of Israel as a people who DREW NIGH with mouths and lips, but whose hearts were FAR FROM HIM (Matthew 15:8; Mark 7:6). *Full assurance* is "abundance of confidence." It signifies faith that is certain, confident; a faith with NO room for doubt. This raises the following question: Why would any believer be reluctant to draw near with boldness, knowing his forerunner awaits him there?

In addition to the two possessions (boldness and high priest), the exhortation to draw near has two prerequisites: (1) hearts having been sprinkled, and (2) bodies having been washed. Both verbs are perfect passive participles. The perfect tense signifies a completed action with abiding results, making the sprinkling and washing one-time-for-all-time events with lasting effect. The passive voice means that both that heart and body are recipients of an action. This presents an interpretive challenge, especially where the body is concerned. What is represented by the washing with water? One thing is certain: Paul's readers would have grasped immediately the symbolism of sprinkling and washing in relation to Mosaic Law.

It is the blood of Christ that sprinkles the heart from an evil conscience. The Tabernacle was a bloody place that foreshadowed the blood-sprinkled way into the holiest. The priest was required to sprinkle the blood of sacrifice round about the Altar at the door of the Tabernacle. He sprinkled blood at the veil before entering the holiest. He sprinkled blood on the mercy seat upon the Ark of the Covenant. From Altar to Ark, the way to the holiest was a blood-sprinkled path.

An *evil conscience* is one with a consciousness of sin. The blood of bulls and goats could not make him that did the service perfect, as pertaining to the conscience (9:9). If they had been purged, they would have had "no more conscience of sins" (10:2). But the blood of Christ purges the conscience from dead works so believers can serve the living God with a good conscience (9:14). So with hearts having been sprinkled from an evil conscience, we believers can draw near in full assurance of faith. In short, the blood of Jesus has the power to transform an evil conscience into a good conscience.

Interpreting *bodies washed with pure water* is a more difficult task. Does the writer use "bodies" to represent the whole man—body, soul and spirit? Does "bodies" mean the literal physical body? What are the various biblical washings? Which one is connected to water? Specifically, what biblical washing involves both body and water?

It isn't within the scope of this document to examine all the OT requirements for washing with water. But here are a few examples. Aaron and sons (i.e., the priesthood) were required to wash their hands and feet with water before performing service in the Tabernacle. Failure to do so would result in death (Exodus 30:19-21). The Law of the Leper required the leper wash (bathe) his body as a requisite for being pronounced clean (Leviticus 14:8-9). In addition, there are instances whereby a person 'touching' something unclean would render him unclean, requiring a process to reestablish cleanliness, which involved a physical washing of the body in water.

The first 'washing' consideration is the blood of Christ. Revelation 1:5 tells us Jesus "washed us from our sins in his own blood." But it's a stretch to interpret bodies washed with pure water as in any way connected to the blood of Jesus, especially since the previous "sprinkling" is a clear reference to the blood. A second consideration is the word of God as the washing agent. Jesus is about the business of sanctifying and cleansing his Church "with the washing of water by the word" (Ephesians 5:26). There's no doubt the word of God is pure water. But if "bodies" means physical bodies, then it's hard to see how the word of God could be the writer's intended meaning.

A third consideration is the Holy Spirit. Jesus said the Spirit would be "living water" to believers

(John 7:37-39). In Titus 3:5, Paul made reference to “the washing of regeneration, and [even] renewing of the Holy Ghost.” The scripture teaches the body of the believer is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19). Since the Spirit is connected to the ideas of water, washing and the body, could bodies washed with pure water be a reference to the Spirit that now indwells the believer? Doesn't it make sense the Spirit, who makes the believer's body his temple on earth, would be the same agent who provides access to the Father through the Son into the holiest in heaven (Ephesians 2:18)? Interpreting bodies washed with pure water as a reference to the Spirit is certainly less of a stretch than either the blood of Jesus or the word of God.

There is a fourth consideration that makes perfect sense IF properly understood. Bodies washed with pure water could be a reference to water baptism. Evangelicals typically reject this meaning in knee-jerk fashion due to the doctrine of baptismal regeneration. But that knee-jerk reaction obscures the significance the early church placed on water baptism as one's public declaration of faith in Christ. We must remember the context here is one that accentuates fellowship with God, not salvation.

Let's be clear. Water baptism cannot take away sins. Nor can it impart spiritual life to one dead in trespasses and sins. But what baptism does provide is a public 'answer' to one's faith. See **Water Baptism: The Interpretive Key** for a more complete treatment of baptism's significance. Water baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost is the answer of a good conscience. In the context, the sprinkling of Jesus' blood purges an evil conscience so it becomes a good conscience, which issues forth in the answer of water baptism. Ananias commanded Paul to be baptized in order to “wash away” his sins (Acts 22:16). There's no doubt, based on the preponderance of biblical evidence, that this washing away of sins was symbolic—a public answer to a washing from sin Paul had already experienced.

Moreover, submission to water baptism is the first formal act of submission to the spiritual authority Jesus brings into the believer's life. If a professor of faith in Christ refuses to submit to water baptism, he will NEVER have full assurance to draw near to the throne of grace. It is impossible to compartmentalize rebellion. If one refuses to yield to Christ's authority on earth, he's kidding himself if he thinks he can yield to that authority in the holiest, where yieldedness is paramount!

Praise be to God for the forerunner Jesus is for us believers. By simple child-like faith in him, the believer can literally ride the coattails of Christ into the holiest. Boldness to enter the holiest and a high priest to meet us there are possessions we believers will always have. Nothing can change that. With hearts having been sprinkled from an evil conscience and bodies having been washed in pure water, the believer can draw near in full assurance of faith. I understand how some would disagree with water baptism as the interpretation of bodies washed with pure water. But water baptism (1) does no violence to the text, (2) comports with the importance the early Church placed on the ordinance of baptism as the 'answer' of a good conscience—1 Peter 3:20-21, and (3) is consistent with the writer's own reference to the doctrine of baptisms as integral to the principles of the doctrine of Christ—Hebrews 6:1-2.

Now Faith Is

The scripture has several ways of expressing what a man does when he exercises saving faith in Jesus. Sinners are saved by grace through FAITH (Ephesians 2:8-9). They TRUST in Christ (Ephesians 1:12). They RECEIVE Jesus and BELIEVE on his name (John 1:12-13). They CALL UPON the name of the Lord (Romans 10:13). They OPEN THE DOOR of their hearts and let Jesus in when he knocks (Revelation 3:20). All these biblical expressions represent what a man does at the moment God saves him from his sins.

Some express the salvation formula as "accepting Christ as personal Saviour." I don't care much for that phrase. While I get the sentiment, there exists no biblical reference to men "accepting Christ." When Jesus saved me at age twelve on my knees by my bedside, I had no thought of accepting Christ. I did, however, have a heart-felt desire to be saved from my sins by trusting (believing on) Jesus, calling on his name and opening the door of my heart. A truly biblical discussion of "acceptance" in the matter of salvation has nothing to do with whether a man has accepted Christ, but whether God in Christ has accepted him (Ephesians 1:6).

The one exception is found in 2 Corinthians 11:4, where Paul expressed concern over the Corinthians accepting 'another' gospel they had not heretofore accepted. When someone accepts the gospel, they no doubt accept the Christ of the gospel. But this is an indirect reference. I prefer to use the direct references of scripture—trusting, believing, receiving, calling upon and opening the door of the heart.

In Hebrews 11:1, often referred to as "The Faith Chapter" of the Bible, Paul provides a more detailed definition of faith:

"Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen."

Now is a logical now. It connects truth Paul is about to introduce (11:1) with truth immediately preceding it (10:22-39). In those verses, Paul mentions "full assurance of FAITH" (10:22) and "the just shall live by FAITH" (10:38). In 10:38-39, he contrasts those who draw back unto perdition with those who BELIEVE to the saving of the soul, expressing confidence both he and his Jewish readers belong to the latter group. Having made these references to faith, he 'now' proceeds to explain the essence of saving faith and illustrate how it manifested itself in lives of OT saints.

Faith is πίστις (pistis), "a conviction of truth, belief (with the predominate ideas of trust, confidence)." In the NT, it is used 244 times. It derives from a verb meaning "to persuade." Faith is conviction born of persuasion. Persuasion is the child of repetition. Please do not criticize your preacher for repeating himself. Repetition is the breeding ground for persuasion. When persuasion gives birth to rock-solid conviction, your church is better off for the repetition. Faith is far more than 'accepting' a set of facts. It is a persuasion about Jesus Christ that results in trusting him!

Paul defines faith as both *substance* and *evidence* in terms of what a believer hopes for and yet remains unseen. *Substance* is ὑπόστασις (hypostasis), "a setting or placing under." It refers to that which has a foundation that's firm, a substructure. It's used five times in the NT. In two instances, it's translated "confidence." The other three usages are in Hebrews. In 1:3, Paul declares Jesus to be "the express image of his [God's] person [substance]." Since Jesus is the express image of God the Father's substance, he MUST be God in the flesh. Jesus iterated this truth when he told Philip: "he that hath seen me hath seen the Father" (John 14:9). In 3:14, the

writer urges us to hold steadfast “the beginning of our confidence [substance].” The reason believers can “hold fast” is because faith has substance. The substance we hold to is Jesus—the Author and Finisher of our faith (12:2), an “anchor” of the soul, both sure and steadfast, who’s entered within the veil of the heavenly Tabernacle (6:9).

I grew up in Miami. Back in the 1950’s and ’60’s, it was common to drive down Collins Avenue and observe pile drivers sinking huge concrete pilings into beach sand to establish a firm foundation for the hotel that would rest upon it. Those concrete pilings were a substructure for the hotel even as Jesus is the foundation of our faith.

In 11:1, Paul says: “*Faith is the substance of things hoped for.*” The verb *hoped for* is **ἐλπίζω** (elpizō), “to expect with confidence.” There is no “hope so” in biblical hope. It is a confident expectation God will perform all that he has promised. Biblical hope NEVER disappoints those who possess it (Romans 5:5). Our expectation of FUTURE glory is the Christ who NOW lives in us (Colossians 1:27).

He adds: “*The evidence of things not seen.*” Evidence is **ἔλεγχος** (elegchos), “a proof, that by which a thing is proved or tested.” It’s used twice in the NT. In 2 Timothy 3:16, Paul used it to describe the profitability of scripture to provide “reproof” (evidence) of what is right versus wrong, of what is agreeable to God’s will and what’s contrary to it. If your fingerprints or other DNA is found at a crime scene, it would serve as ‘evidence’ or proof you were there.

The words *substance* and *evidence* are inseparable! If someone asks a believer, “How can you believe in what you haven’t seen?”, the believer may answer: “My faith IS my evidence!” But his faith is not standalone evidence. His evidence has substance, a firm foundation, in the historicity of Jesus of Nazareth—his life, his death, his resurrection and ascension to the Father’s right hand. If Christ is not risen, our faith is in vain. But the Person of Jesus Christ and his resurrection are the substance of our faith.

Not seen is **βλέπω** (blepō), “to see or look upon with the physical eye, discern with the mind’s eye.” A believer never abandons his evidence even though he’s unable to see it. The words “not seen” appear several times in the NT. (1) In post-resurrection remarks to Thomas, Jesus pronounced a blessing upon those who had NOT SEEN him and yet had believed—John 20:29. (2) Paul said eyes have NOT SEEN the things God has prepared for them that love him—1 Corinthians 2:9. (3) Believers live out their lives in a temporal setting looking at eternal things that are NOT SEEN—2 Corinthians 4:18. (4) Noah prepared an ark after being warned of God concerning things he had NOT SEEN—Hebrews 11:7. (5) Peter reminded readers they loved Jesus even though they had NOT SEEN him—1 Peter 1:8. For these things not seen, there’s evidence they’re substantive. Faith is substance and evidence of unseen things, making them as real as if they we had already experienced them.

Things is **πράγμα** (pragma), “an accomplished fact, a real act or object.” The word “pragmatic” comes from this root. Pragmatism has to do with the practical as opposed to the theoretical. There is nothing theoretical about the place called heaven Jesus has prepared for believers (John 14:1-3). Nor is there anything theoretical about the glorified body with which Jesus will one day clothe his people (Philippians 3:21). The things for which believers have an expectation are absolutely pragmatic. They’re tangible!

It is worth noting that while the word “things” appears twice in the KJV text, **πράγμα** appears only once in the Greek text. This is important because the things we are hoping for and the unseen things we are looking to see one day are not TWO sub-groups, but rather ALL the things belonging

to ONE glorious salvation package.

Now faith is the substantive foundation for everything we are hoping for in Christ and the evidentiary proof of everything not yet seen that shall be seen. Faith is the unshakable certitude, the conviction, the persuasion that what God has promised us he is well able to perform and deliver. Biblical hope is not a "think so" or "sure hope so" hope. It's a "know so" expectation! Biblical faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.

A More Excellent Sacrifice

In Hebrews 11, the Faith Chapter of scripture, the writer cites Abel as his first example of genuine faith and how faith translates into actions of which God approves. Abel teaches us offerings of a sacrificial nature were a key component in God's relationship with fallen man from the outset of history. The companion passage in Genesis 4:3-8 provides background for the diverse approaches Cain and Abel took. These texts enable us to connect the dots to determine exactly what it meant for Abel to offer a more excellent sacrifice than Cain.

Our text is Hebrews 11:4:

"By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he being dead yet speaketh."

The phrase *by faith* is a translation of the Greek **pistis** in the dative case. There is no preposition in the original text. The literal sense is: "With reference to faith, Abel offered." We must remember revelation is ALWAYS the foundation for faith. Faith CANNOT operate apart from revelation! Faith is NEVER blind. The definition of faith given in 11:1 tells us Abel was hoping for something from God by way of his offering and confident he would receive it. His faith was evidence he would obtain from God what he expected. The contextual facts of Hebrews 11 lead us to ask: (1) What did Abel hope (expect) to receive from God?, and (2) What evidence did Abel have he would receive what he expected?

Let's answer the second question first. The interpreter of scripture is not entitled to invent truth if it's not set forth in the pages of Holy Writ. But he is allowed to reasonably infer what scripture abundantly suggests. The LORD God told Adam if he ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil—the SOLE restriction to an otherwise TOTAL freedom—he would surely die in the day he ate thereof (Genesis 2:16-17). After Adam and Eve sinned and before God drove them from the Garden, scripture says: "Unto Adam also and to his wife did the LORD God make coats of skins, and clothed them" (3:21).

In so doing, God introduced the principle of substitution as a redemptive component that would run throughout biblical history and culminate in the Cross of Christ. Spiritual death occurred immediately. Physical death came with the animals, from which God made coats of skins. From the animals that died FOR them came clothing to hide their nakedness, a foreshadowing of the gospel of Christ, who died FOR our sins and clothes the believer with his own righteousness. What Abel learned from his parents was evidence based on this revelation: Certain death because of sin could be deferred through the death of a substitute, from which a divine attestation of righteousness by faith was obtainable.

Now we'll address the first question. For what was Abel looking? The answer is in 4:7: acceptance! God had "respect" unto Abel's offering (4:4) but not to Cain's (4:5). The Hebrew word translated *respect* conveys the idea of a favorable look or gaze. When God looked at Abel's offering, he did so with favorability. But he didn't look upon Cain's offering with the same favor. It is not within the scope of this document to examine HOW God "testified" to the gifts of Abel. But there is ample biblical evidence to suggest fire fell from heaven to consume his offering. God withheld that same fire from Cain's offering, which caused Cain to be wroth, his countenance to fall (4:5). In his attempt to reason with Cain, God used the word "accepted" to describe what happened to Abel

and what COULD happen to him IF he would DO WELL (4:7).

It is important to note the Lord's problem with Cain was in WHAT he did, not in WHY he did it. It is argued by some the problem with Cain's offering might have been in his attitude in bringing it, not necessarily in the nature of the offering. In other words, Cain might have done the right thing for the wrong reason. The tandem of action and motivation can take four forms: (1) Right thing for right reason; (2) Right thing for wrong reason; (3) Wrong thing for right reason, and (4) Wrong thing for wrong reason. Abel's offering took form #1. Cain's offering took form #4. While forms #2 and #3 are distinct possibilities in life, they're inapplicable to the offering of Cain. The suggestion God might have accepted Cain's offering IF he had brought it with a better attitude is both unbiblical and untenable. It's a subtle assault on the gospel foreshadowed in the offering of Abel and the coats of skins God provided for his parents. Moreover, it suggests Cain's attitude (WHY) was unrelated to his offering (WHAT) and therefore unrelated to sin. If Cain's attitude was unrelated to the disobedience of bringing a substandard offering before the Lord, what exactly was wrong with his attitude if his offering was right?

More excellent is the translation of **πλείων** (pleiōn), a comparative word meaning "greater in quality or quantity." In our context, the idea of quality is clearly in view. In the gospels, Jesus used the word to describe himself as "*greater than* Jonah" (Matthew 12:41) and "*greater than* Solomon" (12:42). When Jesus saw worshipers giving their temple offerings, he said a poor widow had "cast in *more*" than all the others (Mark 12:43). In our Lord's reckoning, perhaps he had both quality AND quantity in mind. In Abel's case, his was a more excellent sacrifice in terms of quality; of SORT rather than SIZE.

Sacrifice is **θυσία** (thysia), "a sacrifice, a victim." It is used 29 times in the NT and always translated "sacrifice." Its root is the verb **θύω** (thyō), "to slay, kill, slaughter." Each time scripture uses "sacrifice" (**θυσία**) it refers to a killing, a bloodletting. It is important to note that while all sacrifices are offerings, not all offerings are sacrifices. There were OT offerings related to worship and thanksgiving that did not require blood. But ANY offering related to sins or trespasses ALWAYS required blood. Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, which included the killing of the "firstlings of his flock" (4:4). Cain's offering from the "fruit of the ground" involved no killing whatsoever (4:3). In that regard, Abel offered a more excellent sacrifice.

What was the fundamental problem with Cain's offering? There was NO sacrifice in it! Why would anyone offer the conjecture the offerings of Cain and Abel had nothing to do with sin against God, a sense of deservedness to die because of sin and the need to seek acceptance through the bloodletting of a substitute? This is the revelatory evidence Abel acquired from his parents, the basis for the acceptance he was expecting. Cain, on the other hand, rejected that same evidence to his own peril.

Pleasing God

Chapter 11 of Hebrews has earned the distinction of being the "Faith Chapter" of the Bible. Within its verses there are many specific individuals mentioned that exhibited God-pleasing faith, who serve as models for us. One of those role models is Enoch, who is the focus of our text:

"By faith Enoch was translated that he should not see death; and was not found, because God had translated him: for before his translation he had this testimony, that he pleased God. But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him" (Hebrews 11:5-6).

Enoch was one of two biblical characters whom God translated (transferred) into heaven without experiencing death. It's worth noting not even Moses, whom the Lord buried on Mount Nebo, was afforded this privilege. Enoch and Elijah alone were recipients of this death-denying benefit.

Enoch was a godly man who had relationships with other believers. After his translation, Enoch came up missing. Friends looked for him, could not find him. Enoch literally disappeared off the face of the earth. The verbs in the phrases "had this testimony" and "he pleased God" are both perfect tense. The first is passive voice, the second active voice. The perfect tense signifies a past action with settled results. Enoch's testimony was not only a lasting one, but one he did not take unto himself. The passive voice means he was assigned that testimony, either by God, his fellow man or both. It was rock-solid. That Enoch "pleased God" is perfect active. The perfect tense signifies a permanent condition. Enoch walked in a manner so agreeable with the will of God there was no thought, word or action God would find disagreeable. It's no wonder God one day decided to take him to glory!

In Genesis 5:22-24, we're twice told Enoch "walked with God." Hebrews 11:5 says Enoch had a testimony that "he pleased God." How could the writer of Hebrews know that? Isn't it reasonable to assume that if God and a man "walk together" that they enjoy each others company? That's fellowship! Consider our Lord's invitation to the Laodicean church: *"If any man open the door, I will come into him, and will sup with him, and he with me"* (Revelation 3:20). A shared supper speaks of a believer and Jesus enjoying each others company. The ultimate goal of the Christian life is for God and the believer to fellowship so the believer becomes more like his Lord. There's no doubt in my mind Jesus thoroughly enjoyed his time with the disciples. They enjoyed their time with him. The testimony of Enoch—that he pleased God—should be the goal of every believer.

The point of our text: While Enoch's translation was obtained by TWO, the testimony of Enoch is obtainable by ALL. Pleasing God comes from trusting God. But without trust, pleasing God is impossible! We who live 2,000 years AFTER Jesus came have the same ability to please God as Enoch did 3,000 years BEFORE he came. The basis for pleasing God has NEVER changed! Jesus said: "I do always those things that please him" (John 8:29). Since Jesus was always PLEASING the Father, it means Jesus was always TRUSTING the Father! So should we!

Our text points out three essential components of a God-pleasing faith:

I. Existence

The foundation of our faith lies in the fact that God IS. He exists self-sufficiently, eternally. This is more than a belief in God's existence, which even the devils acknowledge (James 2:19). It is a

firm persuasion concerning ALL that he is because he IS.

Perhaps no passage of scripture reveals more about who God IS than Exodus 3:1-15. It's was here the angel of the Lord revealed himself to Moses in the midst of a burning bush, which was aflame but not consumed. The angel of the Lord was the Second Person of the Trinity, the pre-incarnate Christ. We know this because the text further identifies him as the "LORD" (3:4, 7) and as "God" (3:4, 6). After the LORD God called Moses to travel into Egypt to deliver Israel from Pharaoh, he began to offer four reasons (excuses) why he was NOT the man for the job.

He expressed the first reason as follows: "Who am I, that I should go unto Pharaoh, and that I should bring forth the children of Israel out of Egypt?" (3:11). He told God he had NO REPUTATION that would carry any weight in Pharaoh's court. He said: "Who am I?" God said: "Certainly I will be with thee" (3:12). In other words, my PRESENCE is all the standing you need! Furthermore, after you bring my people out of Egypt, you're coming back to this mountain. God spoke to Moses in past-tense terms about future events.

After God answered his first objection, Moses offered up a second: "Behold, when I come unto the children of Israel, and shall say unto them, The God of your fathers hath sent me unto you; and they shall say to me, What is his name? what shall I say unto them?" (3:13). He now told God he had NO MESSAGE for the children of Israel when asked about who sent him. God responded: "I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you" (3:14). In other words, my EXISTENCE—an eternal existence that made me LORD God to your fathers—is the same existence upon which I'll be the LORD God to you!

When the writer to Hebrews says we "must believe that God IS," he means to say we must believe that God is I AM. The NT validates this truth. Jesus told the religious elites of his day: "Before Abraham was, I AM" (John 8:58). In addition, Jesus said: "I AM the Bread" (John 6:35, 48), "I AM the Light" (John 8:12; 9:5), "I AM the Door" (John 10:7, 9), "I AM the Good Shepherd" (John 10:11, 14), "I AM the Resurrection" (John 11:25), "I AM the Way, the Truth and the Life" (John 14:6), "I AM the Vine" (John 15:5).

In John 18. when Judas came with a "band of men and officers" (18:3) to Gethsemane, Jesus asked: "Whom seek ye? They answered him, Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus saith unto them, I AM he (v.4-5). When he said, "I AM he", they went backward, fell to the ground (v.6). It's important to note that "band" is the Greek σπεῖρα (speira), which represents one-tenth of a legion (600-700 men), who had "weapons." In other words, this was no small group of officers dispatched to arrest Jesus. When Jesus said "I AM" all 600 of these weaponized men fell backward. That must have been quite a display of power, unleashed by the mere mention of his identity. Now that Jesus had both told and shown them who he was (i.e., the I AM who appeared to Moses), he asked once again: "Whom seek ye? And they said, Jesus of Nazareth" (v.7). Then Jesus answered: "I have told you that I AM he: if therefore ye seek me, let these go their way" (v.8).

In Matthew 18:20, Jesus made this promise to church-goers: "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." When God's people gather together in his name on the first day of the week, the Lord Jesus, the I AM and all that he IS, is in the midst of them. What does this say about the infinite and eternal resources available to God's people when they assemble? There are many churches that go through the motions of doing church. Then there are those rare congregations that experience the I AM each and every time they meet. Isn't that what you want for your church?

To these great truths about Jesus, scripture adds: "Jesus Christ the same yesterday, today and

forever” (Hebrews 13:8). God is unchangeable! What he IS he will always BE! He is not a software system that requires periodic upgrades. Jesus Christ, the Head of his church, is the same Christ who spoke the worlds into existence, parted the Red Sea, brought down the walls of Jericho, shut the mouths of lions and filled the temple of Solomon with his glory.

II. Subsistence

In Genesis 15:1, the LORD told Abram he was his “exceeding great reward.” The word “reward” is the Hebrew **sakar** (wages or pay). In our text, the scripture says God is a “rewarder” of them who live their lives trusting him. The word “rewarder” is the Greek **misthapodotēs** (one who pays wages). The rewards that God GIVES are an extension of the reward that God IS. Moreover, there are two different verbs translated “is” in 11:6. In the phrase “believe that God is” the verb is **eimi** (to be). In the phrase “is a rewarder” the verb is **ginomai** (to become). The difference in the two is not an accident. It is God's EXISTENCE, and all that his existence means, that brings SUBSISTENCE (rewards) into the believer's life. God's rewards are tangible assets.

We can illustrate the difference in the two verbs with a courtship-marriage analogy. John IS a single man. One day Jane, who IS a single woman, catches his eye. John begins to pursue Jane, diligently seeking to spend time with her. The relationship blossoms into romance. Finally, John pops the question, she says “Yes!” The marriage date is set. Prior to the wedding, John IS a man, Jane IS a woman. But on their wedding day, John BECOMES a husband, Jane BECOMES a wife. God is I AM. To the one who diligently seeks I AM, he becomes a Rewarder. The change in verbs does not signify a change in God's existence, but rather a blossoming of the relationship between God and the believer.

At first blush, the concept of rewards, or things earned, may seem counterintuitive to grace, or unmerited favor. There is no contradiction for this reason. Whereas the grace of God flows from God's LOVE, rewards flow from his RIGHTEOUSNESS. In 6:10 affirms: “God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love.” When the believer labors in kingdom matters as a result of grace operating in his life, God rewards him in a righteous manner.

The remainder of Hebrews 11 calls attention to the tangible assets (rewards) that God brought into the lives of believers. Noah got the tangible reward of a blueprint for an Ark of salvation (11:7). Abraham received land, a promised son and a promised Seed (11:8-10). His wife Sarah, barren in old age, conceived Isaac (11:11).

Two other OT personalities illustrate perfectly the rewards of diligently seeking God. The first is king David. He diligently sought the Lord over the illegitimate son he fathered with Bathsheba. You cannot read Psalm 51 without being struck with David's diligence in seeking forgiveness and restoration. Although the child died, David proceeded to take Bathsheba to wife. She gave birth to Solomon, whom “the Lord loved” (2 Samuel 12:24). Solomon would later succeed his father on the throne, enjoy both wisdom and riches, and build the temple of God, which God filled with his glory. To say Solomon was a reward is an understatement!

The second is king Hezekiah, who sought the Lord diligently over (1) his impending death, for which God gave him fifteen additional years, and (2) Sennacherib, king of Assyria, who surrounded Jerusalem with the intent to destroy it. The Angel of the Lord slew 185,000 Assyrian soldiers in the process of protecting Hezekiah and Israel. I'd say the rewards of his own life and his nation were significant rewards indeed!

III. Persistence

God is a rewarder of them that "diligently seek him" (11:6). The verb "diligently seek" is **ἐκζητέω**, the prefix **ἐκ** (out) and the root **ζητέω** (to seek). The verb contains the idea of an investigative search. It reminds me of a story I heard one time about a black preacher dressing for church who couldn't find a certain tie he wanted to wear. He complained to his wife. She came in, went through the closet and found the tie. He said; "I looked in there!" She replied: "Yeah, you looked in there, but I searched in there!" The rewards of God are for diligent searchers, not just casual lookers. The verb form is present active participle. Literal translation: "those who are continuously seeking him out." The durative nature of the present tense suggests habit of life rather than occasional inquiry. The dynamic duo that engages God in the lives of his children is dependence mixed with diligence.

At the Jerusalem Council, James used the same word to summarize what ALL for whom Christ died should do: "That the residue of men might SEEK AFTER [**ἐκζητέω**] the Lord, and all the Gentiles, upon whom my name is called, saith the Lord, who doeth all these things" (Acts 15:17). While Hebrews 11:6 encourages the believer to KEEP ON seeking the Lord, Acts 15:17 admonishes all men to START seeking him if they haven't already done so. The truth of scripture is simply this: God WANTS to be investigated, searched out in earnest, by ALL men!

Two more biblical references are in order. In Acts 17:27, Paul spoke these words to an audience on Mars' Hill: "That they should seek [**ζητέω**] the Lord, if haply they might feel [handle, touch] after him, and find him, though he be not far from every one of us." The scripture affirms that everyone who sets out to seek God will not have to look very far, because he is NOT far from every one of us. Then we have the words of Jesus: "For the Son of man is come to seek [**ζητέω**] and to save that which was lost" (Luke 19:10). Jesus stated his very purpose on earth was to seek the lost. Those who set out to "diligently seek him" are simply RECIPROCATING a search Jesus INITIATED. When ANY individual, saved or lost, sets out to seek the Lord, he's seeking the Lord who's already seeking him!

Pleasing the Lord involves a belief in God's existence and ALL that his existence means coupled with a belief that God who IS our Reward BECOMES a Rewarder of those who diligently seek him. Show me a believer, and I'll show you a seeker! Without the kind of persuasion that issues forth in action, pleasing God is impossible!

As Good As Dead

Ask any successful restaurateur what his secret is, and he'll likely respond: "Start with the BEST ingredients!" A reputable building contractor desires the BEST materials to erect his structures. A small business entrepreneur, who desires to become a major corporation, will employ the BEST salesmen, the BEST application developers and the BEST inventory management personnel he can afford. On draft day, an NFL team may select the BEST player available in each round with a view to one day winning a Super Bowl Championship.

You might expect what we know about human endeavors to be true of divine initiatives as well. But you would be wrong. When God plans to build something big, he begins with something insignificant by human standards. He chooses the foolish things of this world to confound the wise, weak things to confound the mighty, so that NO FLESH can glory in his presence (1 Corinthians 1:27-29). When the giant Goliath was threatening and intimidating Israel, the Lord raised up a young shepherd boy to win the day. When Jesus began assembling his inner circle as the foundation for his Kingdom, he bypassed the religious elites and hand-picked an assortment of nobody's. When the LORD God decided to build a nation through which to send the Promised Seed (Genesis 3:15), he started with a pair of childless old folks, not exactly the kind of 'breeding stock' you'd expect as embryonic to a great nation.

All God needs to accomplish his will on earth and turn a grain of sand into a mountain are men and women of faith—ones willing to embrace his promise and wait patiently for him to perform it. Abraham and Sarah are set forth in scripture as examples. Our text is Hebrews 11:11-12:

"Through faith also Sara herself received strength to conceive seed, and was delivered of a child when she was past age, because she judged him faithful who had promised. Therefore sprang there even of one, and him as good as dead, so many as the stars of the sky in multitude, and as the sand which is by the sea shore innumerable."

In my mind, the First Family of Israel suffered from double jeopardy. Sarah was incapable of conceiving during normal child-bearing years. That inability extended into her old age. Abraham, who was able to father children as evidenced by Hagar and Ishmael, became unable to impregnate a woman during the decade and a half that elapsed between Ishmael and Isaac. The fact Abraham was "as good as dead" (literally, "one having been deadened") was a matter of his own sterility combined with Sarah's infertility—double jeopardy! Now that the task of nation building seemed utterly impossible, God had exactly the right circumstances through which his power could flourish to HIS glory.

Sprang is **γεννάω** (gennaō), "to procreate, beget, father children." The verb is past tense, as you'd expect, but passive voice. It signifies Abraham was MADE to procreate as a God-given ability. In other words, God restored to Abraham the procreative prowess old age had taken from him. After Sarah's death, Abraham married Keturah, by whom he fathered six more sons (Genesis 17). In other words, Abraham became a baby-making machine. At this point, we must ask: "Is there anything life has taken from you that you would like God to restore?" The writer juxtaposes the word "one" with the words "multitude" (in terms of stars) and "innumerable" (in terms of sand) to magnify by contrast the potential results when an infinite God injects himself into the affairs of finite man.

In this Laodicean Age, there are many so-called evangelical churches that are as good as dead.

What would you say about any church that goes month-after-month, year-after-year without a single adult being "born again" in their midst and joining the fellowship? Can any church legitimately claim to be alive if no lost sinners are finding life in Christ by virtue of its existence? If you doubt this analysis, consider the words of Jesus to the church at Sardis:

"These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art [as good as] dead. Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die: for I have not found thy works perfect before God" (Revelation 3:1-2).

The church at Sardis was not completely dead, as indicated by the phrase "things...that are ready to die." But for all intents and purposes, they were a spiritual morgue. While Jesus did not use the word "dead" in his message to the Laodicean church (3:14-22), concluding they were "as good as dead" is no stretch considering the Giver of Life was knocking on the church door, seeking for "any man" to hear his voice and open the door (3:20). The messages to Sardis and Laodicea are made the more alarming when you consider they were just two generations removed from Pentecost, a time at which the church was vibrant with the life of Christ and Holy Ghost power. Abraham was a man as good as dead in terms of his inability to reproduce physically. Some local churches are equally as good as dead in terms of their inability to reproduce spiritually. The church at Sardis had a name it was alive, but Jesus pronounced them as good as dead.

Finally, scripture affirms a man can be dead and yet be as good as alive. Such a man was Abel, concerning whom it is said: "By faith Abel offered unto God a more excellent sacrifice than Cain, by which he obtained witness that he was righteous, God testifying of his gifts: and by it he BEING DEAD YET SPEAKETH" (Hebrews 11:4). The second man to exit the womb was the first to die. His father Adam lived 930 years, died of natural causes. Abel was murdered at the hands of his brother Cain at a young age. But Abel has been preaching now for 6,000 years and is STILL speaking! His message is the theme of Hebrews: "Sinners can find acceptance with God and eternal redemption through the blood of the Lord Jesus Christ!"

No Country for Faithful Men

The movie No Country for Old Men (2007) was a neo-Western set in 1980 West Texas near the Rio Grande River. The old man in the script was an aging sheriff, who was often seen reflecting on better times against a background of ruthless murders and drug trafficking. He felt time had passed him by with the evolving mayhem of the country. Old men like himself no longer had a country with which they could identify and in which they could feel at home.

The scripture teaches us the Old Testament patriarchs, Abraham in particular, lived their lives with that same sense of dislocation. Unlike the aforementioned movie script, faithful men like Abraham never felt they were 'stuck' in a country where turning back the clock was impossible. They looked forward to a new country, to a new city, wherein God would turn the clock forward and usher in the things he's prepared for the faithful.

Our text is Hebrews 11:9-10, 14-16:

"By faith he sojourned in the land of promise, as in a strange country, dwelling in tabernacles with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise: For he looked for a city which hath foundations, whose builder and maker is God."

"For they that say such things declare plainly that they seek a country. And truly, if they had been mindful of that [country] from whence they came out, they might have had opportunity to have returned. But now they desire a better [country], that is, an heavenly: wherefore God is not ashamed to be called their God: for he hath prepared for them a city."

Sojourned is **παροικέω** (paroikeō), "to dwell beside" (reside as foreigner). The word is used twice in the NT. In its other usage, one named Cleopas said to Jesus: "Art thou only a stranger [sojourner] in Jerusalem, and hast not known the things which are come to pass there in these days?" (Luke 24:18). In other words: "There is NO way you could be a permanent resident of Jerusalem and NOT know about the crucifixion of Jesus of Nazareth that shook the city a few days ago!" What we believers share with Abraham is a sense of sojourning in a strange country that is NOT our permanent residence.

The phrases "as in a strange country" (11:9) and "they seek a country" (11:14) are instructive. The scripture uses two different words for "country." In the first instance, the word is **ἀλλότριος** (allotrios), "belonging to another, not of one's own family." In the second, the word is **πατρίς** (patris). "a father-land, one's homeland." The first is temporary; the second is permanent. Our Father Land is where the Father abides. Jesus said: "In my Father's house are many mansions [abodes]" (John 14:2).

One truth made abundantly clear in these verses is the inseparability of "country" and "city." The writer employs a unique blend of verbs and tenses to teach us the proper mindset for sojourners. That mindset is revealed in four phrases: (1) "for he [Abraham] LOOKED for a city," (2) "they [Abraham and kin] SEEK a country," (3) "if they had been MINDFUL," and (4) "they DESIRE a country."

Looked is **ἐκδέχομαι** (ekdechomai), "to look out for, to receive or accept." In terms we can understand, it means the Patriarchs were 'on the lookout for' a city of God's making, and willing to wait God out for fulfillment of the promise. The verb is imperfect tense. They kept on looking out

for the city as a pattern of life. *Seek* is **ἐπιζητέω** (epizēteō), "to seek upon, desire, demand." The prefix **ἐπι** (upon) intensifies the root **ζητέω** (seek, to be zealous for). It paints a picture of zeal layered upon zeal for the heavenly Father Land. The verb is present tense. The use of the present tense to describe past events is a unique literary device in scripture. It allows the reader to view the action as if it's happening in real time.

Mindful is **μνημονεύω** (mnēmoneuō), "to exercise the memory, be mindful of." The verb is imperfect tense, the same tense used with the verb "looked." Its dual usage is instructive. Their continual looking for a city prohibited a continual remembrance of the country from whence they came. The one imperfect offset the other. The writer does NOT mean to say Abraham never once thought about his former country. But Abraham did not DWELL on it. If he had, he might have found opportunity (a time, season) to have returned. To get the sense, imagine an avid deer hunter who bags his limit of deer each year and loads up his freezer with venison. Do you believe he only thinks about deer hunting when the season opens? An avid deer hunter is mindful of deer hunting ALL year long, setting up deer stands, salt blocks and corn bins, and surveying potential hunting sites for deer signs. His mindfulness of deer hunting goes unfulfilled all year UNTIL opening day of deer season. That's when the first deer-hunting opportunity presents itself. He'll be in his deer stand before daylight!

Desire is **ὀρέγω** (oregō), "to crave, to stretch one's self out in order to touch or grasp something." In two other NT usages, it is used of one who *desires* the office of a bishop (1 Timothy 3:1) and of some who have *coveted after* money with resultant sorrows (6:10). The verb is present tense, middle voice. As *looked* and *mindful* are both imperfect tenses, *seek* and *desire* are both present tenses, as if happening in real time. The middle voice signifies a reflexive benefit for the actor. The believer who sets his affections on things above and craves, as a pattern of life, the Father Land, does himself a great service. A continual craving for the Father Land that lies in his FUTURE has tangible benefits for him in the PRESENT! One benefit is having a God whom you cannot disappoint. That's because you are continually stretching yourself out for that which he's prepared for you. A believer is in a good place when he longs for things that matter to his God!

God is both builder and maker of the city he's prepared for his children. *Builder* is **τεχνίτης** (technitēs), "a technician, artisan, craftsman." In three of its four NT usages, it's translated "craftsman." We seldom think of God as a technician. *Maker* is **δημιουργός** (dēmiourgos), "a workman for the people." This is its only usage in scripture. It depicts God as a public servant. Imagine a land developer who buys 100 acres of land with plans to build 100 houses on one-acre lots. Before the first foundation is poured, a host of public workers and contractors survey the land, place lot markers, install infrastructure (sewer and power lines) and lay down curbs and asphalt for streets. ALL this they do for those who will inhabit the houses.

In the city God has prepared for us, he was the technician, building its infrastructure and doing all the groundwork so we could one day live there forever. ALL the infrastructure and groundwork for that city in the Father Land was accomplished by Jesus when he endured the Cross, shed his redemptive blood for sinners and broke the chains of death in his resurrection. That's enough for every believer to keep on looking for, seeking and desiring what God has prepared for the faithful.

Abraham: Man with a Promise

Hebrews 11 has earned the reputation as the "Faith Chapter" of scripture. There is no disputing that distinction. But often overlooked is the inseparable connection Hebrews 11 makes between the faith of the believer and the promises of God. In addition to the twenty-one mentions of faith are seven mentions of promise. If faith is the rope a ship utilizes to tether itself to a dock, the promise of God is the dock to which a ship moors itself. The stability of the ship depends upon the immovability of the dock. The purpose of this document is to examine the dynamic and inseparable relationship between faith and promises as disclosed in Hebrews 11, especially as it pertains to Abraham and Isaac.

Our text is Hebrews 11:17-19:

"By faith Abraham, when he was tried, offered up Isaac: and he that had received the promises offered up his only begotten son, Of whom it was said, That in Isaac shall thy seed be called: Accounting that God was able to raise him up, even from the dead; from whence also he received him in a figure."

Several observations are in order. The first is what scripture says about Abraham having received the promises. This may seem like a contradiction with other verses stating OT saints had not received the promises (11:13,39). In the context, the overriding promise is the coming of Christ. We know this because (1) "seed" is singular, and (2) Galatians 3:16 explains the singular form: "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ." Abraham was among those OT saints who had not received the promise of Christ. But he did receive the promise of Isaac, a promise God made to him and no one else.

The second is the phrase "he [Abraham] received him [Isaac] in a figure" (11:19). We should understand this in the same sense expressed in 11:35: "Women received their dead raised to life again." In the mind of Abraham, he had already received Isaac back from the dead BEFORE he ever set out for Mount Moriah. In Genesis 22:1-8, scripture states five times God required Abraham to offer Isaac as a "burnt offering" (22:2,3,6,7,8). Abraham was expecting God to raise the BURNT body of Isaac, not just his DEAD body. In The Terminator (1984), one of its final scenes shows the cyborg walking out of a fiery truck explosion. The cyborg, however, walked out without its external flesh. The resurrection of Isaac, with every body part restored, would have been far more dramatic.

The third is the word *figure*. It's **παραβολή** (parabolē), "a placing of one thing alongside another, a juxtaposition, for the purpose of comparison; an example by which a doctrine or precept is illustrated." The English "parable" comes from this root. A parable is often described as an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. In retrospect, the offering up of Isaac by Abraham was a parable, a side-by-side comparison, of what God would do with his own Son at the same location 2,000 years later. The heavenly meaning behind this earthly story prefigured what God the Father was going to do with his only begotten Son, the Lord Jesus, in making him a sin offering for us!

The fourth is the phrase *God was able*. It's instructive for us to consider this phrase in light of two other relevant passages. In John 11, Jesus reasoned with Mary and Martha concerning their dead brother Lazarus. He sought to make this point: "If you fully understood who it is that now stands in your midst (i.e., the RESURRECTION and the LIFE), you'd know—yea, believe—that LIFE is not

out of reach for your DEAD brother!" No such reasoning was required with Abraham. He reckoned Isaac offered up and resurrected before he began his three-day trek to Mount Moriah. In Daniel 3, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego, facing a fiery furnace and willing to die for their faith, believed God was able to deliver (3:17), but had no assurance of deliverance. With Abraham, however, the belief in God's ability coupled with a promise guaranteed the resurrection of Isaac. When Abraham and Isaac got within eyeshot of Moriah, Abraham spoke thusly to his young men: "Abide ye here with the ass; and I and the lad [WE] will go yonder and worship, and [WE will] come again to you." There was never a doubt in Abraham's mind about the outcome of offering up Isaac.

The fifth is perhaps the most important. We're told twice Abraham "offered up" Isaac, his only begotten son. The dual mention is instructive in that scripture uses two different verb tenses. In the first instance, the writer uses the perfect tense. In the second, he employs the imperfect tense. The perfect tense signifies past action with abiding results. The imperfect signifies durative action in time past. The use of two different verb tenses to describe the same act teaches a great truth about the will of God as to the knowing of it and the doing of it.

Let me try to illustrate. A technical writer is often tasked with composing both policy and process documents. In a policy document, he sets forth WHAT the company will do in terms of conducting its business. In a process document, he sets forth HOW the company will carry out its policy in terms of the actors and actions they take during policy implementation. In Genesis 22:2, God commanded Abraham to offer up Isaac as a burnt offering. That command, which constituted the will of God, became policy for Abraham, which is reflected in the perfect tense. In 22:3-10, scripture describes the actions Abraham took over the next three days to implement the policy, which is reflected in the imperfect tense. Those actions included saddling of an ass, recruiting two of his young men, gathering fire wood, traveling by foot forty-five miles to Moriah, preparing a fire, building an altar, binding his son Isaac and laying him on the altar. The perfect and imperfect tenses in Hebrews 11:17-19 convey perfectly the unfolding of events in Genesis 22:1-10. The carrying out of the will of God in offering up Isaac consisted of both policy and process.

Why is it so important to understand this dynamic? It's absolutely fundamental to the concept of discipleship! In a nutshell, discipleship for the child of God is studying the scriptures to discover what the will of God is (policy) and then relying upon the indwelling Spirit to guide him into those activities whereby the policy becomes part of his everyday living (process). In John 13:17, after delivering to his disciples a benchmark lesson in servanthood, Jesus said: "If ye KNOW these things [policy], happy are ye if ye DO them [process]." The overwhelming need for revival in our churches today is evidenced by so many who have mastered the policy without engaging in the process. They have come to KNOW a lot of stuff, but have failed to DO much of it.

In closing, we'll quote two passages related to promises. In 2 Corinthians 1:20, we read: "For all the PROMISES of God in him are yea, and in him Amen, unto the glory of God by us." Unlike the Mosaic Law, which is largely prohibitive, all the promises of God in Christ are affirmative. One of the sad realities in many churches today is the imposition of prohibitions upon new converts and calling it discipleship. You can do no greater harm to one newly saved by GRACE than to teach him to live under LAW. In 2 Peter 1:4a, we read: "Whereby are given unto us exceeding great and precious PROMISES: that by these ye might be partakers of the divine nature." The walk of faith anchored in God's promises enables one to partake of the nature of God himself as he grows in grace and becomes more like the Lord Jesus. The Christian life is an affirmative life. It's a life of power rooted in promises, not prohibitions.

Hebrews 11 is without doubt the Faith Chapter of scripture. But it is every bit the Promise Chapter

as well. Faith is never a standalone commodity. Faith has the God of promise as its object. God has vested his very character in his promises, which is why a promise of God can never fail for one who believes it! It's why exercising faith that rests upon a promise of God can never disappoint. Abraham was such a man, a man with a promise. Hebrews 11 teaches us the believer with a promise is the richest man on the planet, capable of seeing with spiritual eyes what the world can never see. To express it another way, a man like Bill Gates would be RICHER with just one of our promises than we would be with one of his millions!

The Running Man

Several thousand years before Arnold Schwarzenegger hit the big screen as The Running Man (1987), scripture was documenting its own running men and elevating the physical act to a spiritual metaphor. The verbs "run" and "ran" appear over 130 times in the KJV. Perhaps the best known mention of running came from the prophet Isaiah: "*But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall RUN, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint*" (40:31). David adds: "*I will RUN the way of thy commandments, when thou shalt enlarge my heart*" (Psalm 119:32). And again: "*For by thee I have RUN through a troop; and by my God have I leaped over a wall*" (18:29).

We find the first biblical mention of a running man in Genesis 18. The occasion is a visit by the LORD (the pre-Incarnate Christ) to Abraham and Sarah accompanied by two angels (18:1-16). When Abraham saw the three men, he RAN to meet them, and bowed himself to worship (18:2). It's significant that while Abraham saw three men, he only addressed one of them as his "Lord." The LORD among them was clearly distinguishable from the other two. After offering to feed his guests, he RAN to fetch "a calf tender and good" (18:7). The Law of First Mention is an important interpretive tool. In this case, it teaches us the best running a man can do is that which takes him into the presence of his LORD to worship and render service.

The purpose of this article is to examine what scripture teaches concerning one of the most important running men in scripture—the NT believer. Our text is Hebrews 12:1-2:

"Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, Looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God."

The primary verb in these verses is *let us run*, modified by several participles, prepositional phrases. *Let us run* is the translation of **τρέχω** (trechō), "to run, or walk hastily." The word "trek" comes from this root. The present tense carries the force: "Keep on running!" It reminds us the writer assumes the best of his target audience. All references to neglect of so great salvation (2:3), falling away (6:6), casting away confidence (10:35) and drawing back (10:39) are not intended to impart doubt, but rather to stir up sober introspection regarding the genuineness of their profession.

Every race has a finish line, the point at which the racer finishes his course. The race for the NT believer is to be like Jesus. At the moment of regeneration, God predestines the believer to be conformed to the image of his Son (Romans 8:29). All of the grace and chastening that come his way in life are designed to form Christ in him as to both character and conduct. One day all believers will cross that finish line with bodies fashioned like unto the glorious body of Christ (Philippians 3:21). Meanwhile, the believer is racing to apprehend that for which Jesus apprehended him (3:12).

The two participles modifying *let us run* are (1) *laying aside*, and (2) *looking*. The verb *let us lay aside* means "to put away from." It's a past participle. Translation: "Having put away (laid aside) once for all every weight and the sin that so easily besets us, let us keep on running." *Weight* is **ὄγκος** (ogkos), "a burden, encumbrance." The passage differentiates between weights and sins.

Weights are encumbrances to one's ability to run effectively. A weight causes premature fatigue. Marathon runners typically hit the proverbial wall at mile twenty. At what point do you suppose they'd hit that wall with an extra one-pound weight in each shoe? How about a three-pound waist belt? In like manner, the believer should be constantly examining his life for encumbering weights. A weight could be something as simple as an innocuous habit or something as complex as a friendship that does not lend itself to holiness of life. Jettisoning some weights is a relatively easy task. Laying aside others may involve a degree of personal pain. In the end, the believer must ask: "Will laying aside this [weight] make me a better runner in the quest for Christ-likeness?"

In addition to every weight, the believer is tasked to lay aside the sin that doth so easily beset him. The modern understanding of 'besetting sin' is that spiritual or moral weakness most likely to cause the believer to miss the mark. An exegesis of the phrase, however, and consideration of the context suggest the besetting sin to which Paul refers is the sin of doubt. For a more in-depth analysis and defense of this position, see *The Besetting Sin*.

The second participial phrase is *looking unto Jesus*. The verb is present tense. *Looking* is ἀφοράω (aphoraō), "to turn the eyes away from other things and fix them on something." The verb conveys a continuous singularity of focus. Hebrews 12:2 is its only usage in the NT, affirming the uniqueness of the Christian race. For the writer's target audience, its primary application is looking unto Jesus alone as opposed to Jesus plus Moses. Jesus IS the reality behind the figures and patterns of the tabernacle. Tabernacle service and observance of other rudimentary elements of Mosaic Law are activities excluded entirely from the new covenant and the race a NT believer runs.

Our text contains two word plays. The first is with the words *patience* (12:1) and *endured* (12:2). Both come from the same root. *Patience* is the noun ὑπομονή (hypomonē), "an abiding under." *Endured* is the verb ὑπομένω (hypomenō), "to abide under." Both words signify patience, endurance, steadfastness. If Jesus ran his race with a patience that led to enduring death on the cross, doesn't that imply a believer who runs with patience might very well endure the same burden? The writer reminds them: "*Ye have not yet resisted unto blood, striving against sin*" (12:4). In other words: "Your race up to this point has not required of you the same bloodletting the race Jesus ran demanded of him. So keep running!" Scripture says: "tribulation worketh patience" (Romans 5:3). The race a believer runs is fraught with all manner of tribulation. As the grace of God enables him to abide under and work through tribulation, he develops patience—a greater capacity to endure more trouble.

The second is with the phrases "RACE set before us" (12:1) and "JOY set before him" (12:2). In both instances, the verb *set before* is πρόκειμαι (prokeimai), "to place before in the view of someone." In 12:1, it is a present passive participle. A literal translation: "The RACE that is continuously being placed before us." In 12:2, the verb is also a present participle. A literal translation: "The JOY that is continuously being placed before him." One would think the historicity of Jesus' death would argue for a past tense. But if you understand what the JOY set before Jesus is, the present tense makes perfect sense.

The JOY the Father set before his Son was the millions of brethren he would bring into glory (2:10) for his endurance of the cross. That JOY is ongoing as sinners keep hearing the gospel of grace and believing it. It's hard for us to imagine the JOY Jesus experienced after his death when he arrived triumphantly in Abraham's bosom and announced to the OT saints: "It's time to come home!" He led captivity captive (Ephesians 4:8) and took the OT saints into glory! What a time of rejoicing that must have been! For the OT believer, Jesus was the author of faith. It was not until

Jesus died on Calvary that he became both the author AND finisher of faith.

Another incentive for running the race with patience is *so great a cloud of witnesses*. There is speculation about who these witnesses represent. But the context supplies the answer. The "wherefore" points back to Chapter 11. The "we also" is a reference to NT believers in addition to OT believers. All the OT saints listed in Chapter 11 comprise what has been called The Hall of Faith. These individuals were race runners in their own right. They serve as witnesses to the effectiveness of faith and patience BEFORE Christ came. There is also a great cloud of witnesses SINCE Christ came that attest to the same truth. This cloud of witnesses consists of tens of thousands of believers who, by the time of the writing of Hebrews, had established testimonies as race runners who ran with patience.

One of those witnesses is Stephen. The message he preached in Acts Chapter 7 was a historical and theological masterpiece, delivered with Holy Ghost power and conviction. Stephen was a NT running man who DID resist unto blood, striving against sin. With Saul of Tarsus standing close by, consenting unto his death, Stephen crossed the finish line, breaking the tape. Before the last stone deprived him of breath and life, he was still looking unto Jesus...and discovered Jesus was looking at him. How's that for a singularity of focus and the reciprocation thereof?

The NT believer is a running man engaged in the life-long pursuit of Christ-likeness. His race involves (1) the laying aside of weights (encumbrances) and the sin that so easily besets him, and (2) a looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of his faith. Jesus is seated at the right hand of the throne of God. According to scripture, God the Father has seated the NT running man in heavenly places in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 2:6). Any way you look at it, the race for Christ-likeness is a race worth running!

The Besetting Sin

Do you have a besetting sin? Does every believer have a particular weakness that can cause him to stumble as he runs the Christian race? The most common notion alleges every believer has some spiritual or moral weakness, a propensity or inclination, to which they are particularly vulnerable, the sin that's most likely to trip them up. The phrase "besetting sin" has certainly taken on that meaning over time. The scripture tends to support that premise. Abraham twice misrepresented the truth about his relationship with Sarah to save his own skin. Samson, David and Solomon all had a weakness for sexual lust. The prophet Moses, the meekest of all men, had a short fuse for a temper. An untimely display of temper prohibited him from entering the Promised Land. It's generally accepted that every individual has an Achilles heel, so to speak, that represents a particular weakness for them. But is that what the writer of Hebrews had in mind back in the first century?

The single biblical reference to besetting sin is found in Hebrews 12:1: "the sin which doth so easily beset us." The whole conversation about besetting sins comes from this text. The purpose of this document is to examine the text of Hebrews 12:1 and determine, from an exegetical-contextual standpoint, what the writer had in mind when he penned these words.

Let's begin with a bit of exegesis. The Greek of Hebrews 12:1 reads: **τὴν εὐπερίστατον ἁμαρτίαν**. The word for *sin* is **ἁμαρτία** (hamartia), "a missing of the mark." It is singular, not plural. It is preceded by the definite article **τὴν**, which signifies a specific sin in contradistinction to other sins. Inserted between the definite article and its object is the adjective **εὐπερίστατος** (euperistatos), translated *so easily beset*. It's a compound word consisting of **εὖ** (well), **περί** (around) and **ἵστημι** (to stand). Literally: "a standing around well." In the context, it signifies that which stands around (besets) the runner so well as to impede him, thwart his progress. By application, there's an obstacle to the Christian runner in any and every direction he chooses to run. So what's that singular impediment, in contradistinction to all others, that believers encounter as they run?

Based on the Greek construction, we can eliminate the idea it refers to a spiritual or moral weakness that differs with every individual believer. The scripture says it's THE (singular) SIN that besets all of US (plural). Moreover, all of US are exhorted to "lay aside" this sin along with every weight—things that may not be sin in themselves, but can serve as impediments or distractions to race progress. So what is this besetting sin, a sin surrounding us so well, that all believers encounter it no matter what direction they run in life?

I believe it is THE sin consistent with the book of Hebrews—UNBELIEF. It's not, however, unbelief that causes a man to DISOWN Christ, but rather to DOUBT him. A genuine believer can never DISOWN Jesus. But he can certainly DOUBT his Lord in the midst of life's trials. The story of Peter walking on water recorded in Matthew 14:22-33 teaches this truth unequivocally. What surrounded Peter on every side was a "boisterous" sea (14:30). So long as Peter was "looking unto Jesus" his faith enabled his mastery of the storm. But when fear crept in, he began to sink. After Jesus stretched forth his hand to catch and save Peter, he asked him: "*O thou of little faith, wherefore didst thou DOUBT?*"

In the closing chapter of his gospel, Matthew refers to this post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to his disciples: "*Then the eleven disciples went away into Galilee, into a mountain where Jesus had appointed them. And when they saw him, they worshipped him: but some DOUBTED*" (28:16-

17). *Some* means more than one. And we know Thomas was in that number. In another context, Paul issued this caveat with regard to our Christian liberty: *"And he that DOUBTETH is damned if he eat, because he eateth not of FAITH: for whatsoever is not of faith is SIN"* (Romans 14:23).

In the broader context of Hebrews, we are taught to come BOLDLY unto the throne of grace to obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need (4:12). Again, believers have (as a permanent possession) BOLDNESS to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus (10:19). BOLDNESS is fearless confidence. Fearless confidence is integral to FAITH. The entrance of DOUBT is destructive of both FAITH and BOLDNESS. The believer cannot exercise BOLDNESS while smitten with DOUBT. A Christian is totally dependent upon the resources ONLY obtainable from the throne of grace, the holiest, in order to run the race set before him. In addition to laying aside EVERY WEIGHT, we believers are exhorted to lay aside ALL DOUBT as to the total sufficiency of Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, for every pathway in life.

The interpretation of DOUBT as THE besetting sin is further attested by considering the target audience and the testimony of Church history. In Acts 15 at Jerusalem (51 A.D.), roughly twenty years after Pentecost, there were professing Jews (former Pharisees, 15:5) who taught salvation was contingent upon compliance with the Mosaic Law (15:1,6). In other words, there was systemic DOUBT among some Jewish believers (the target audience of Hebrews) as to whether Jesus ALONE was sufficient to save sinners. The Council concluded: "The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ" (15:11) is the sole basis of salvation for both Gentile and Jew. Thirteen years later (64 A.D.), when Hebrews was written, this systemic DOUBT still persisted. When the writer got to 12:1, he was essentially saying: "If there are ANY of you still in DOUBT about the total sufficiency of Jesus in light of new covenant truth I've set forth and expounded, please know God sees that DOUBT as SIN. Lay it aside and every weight (encumbrance) that threatens your progress, so you can run effectively the race set before you!"

We need to remind ourselves that Paul, a Pharisee of the Pharisees, had to lay aside any DOUBTS he might have had concerning the gospel of grace, the total sufficiency of Christ to save apart from the works of the Law. Paul began running his race on the road to Damascus. But according to the ministry time line he provided in Galatians 1, Paul spent years of revelatory solitude with the Lord Jesus, during which time the Lord helped him connect all the OT dots to arrive at the NT gospel of grace. In Philippians 3, Paul referred to all his law-based righteousness as DUNG, that he might win Christ. But Paul did not arrive at that conclusion overnight. So when he urges US to lay aside every weight and the sin that doth so easily beset US, I believe the laying aside of which he speaks is something he himself had to do.

The modern-day notion of besetting sin is consistent with what we know about human nature. Every individual has a moral weakness to which they are most likely to yield in time of temptation. The question: Does Hebrews 12:1 support that interpretation based on the meaning of **εὐνεπίστατος**? Moreover, 1 Peter 2:1 admonishes: *"Wherefore laying aside all malice, and all guile, and hypocrisies, and envies, and all evil speakings."* These are SINS (plural) we should lay aside. Yet Hebrews 12:1 speaks of THE SIN (singular, unique) we should lay aside.

The sin that so easily besets us all is DOUBT. It is THE sin common to all believers. I believe this interpretation is supported both exegetically and contextually. The believer is surrounded daily by obstacles and challenges that can instigate DOUBT in the heart. DOUBT finds an entrance when we take our eyes off Jesus as Peter did on that boisterous sea long ago. If a believer cannot lay aside his doubt, he cannot run an effective race for Jesus.

Endurance in Considering Christ

Some of the most critical times in our lives are periods of consideration before points of decision. The standout high school athlete with five Division 1 college scholarship offers on the table will consider all options carefully before making a commitment. In better times, the college graduate with three standing job offers from Fortune 500 companies would carefully consider salary, benefits and work environment before choosing an employer. In the race called the Christian life, the disciple who runs is encouraged to consider Jesus, the Author and Finisher of faith, as the model for endurance.

Our text is Hebrews 12:3:

"For consider him that endured such contradiction of sinners against himself, lest ye be wearied and faint in your minds."

The context addresses *the race that is set before us*, of which it is said we should *run with patience* (12:1). The text contains an exercise in redundancy for effect. The words *patience* (with respect to running), *endured* (with respect to the Cross), and *endured* (with respect to the contradiction of sinners) all come from the same Greek root. The noun *patience* is **ὑπομονή** (hypomonē), "an abiding (remaining) under." The verb *endured* is **ὑπομένω** (hypomenō), "to abide (remain) under."

The word paints the picture of persistence and perseverance. It signifies God placing upon the shoulders of his people burdens agreeable to his will and purpose. Our job is to stay under the load, continue to bear it, and persist and persevere when circumstances might dictate we jettison the burden and walk an easier, less arduous path. If the believer needs one or more points of reference as motivation, the writer offers (1) the cross that Jesus endured for our transgressions and (2) the contradictions of sinners he endured to get to that Hill of incalculable suffering. What more does a believer need, in terms of example, in order to endure the rigors of the race?

The verb tenses are instructive. When the writer says Jesus *endured the cross*, he uses the aorist. When he says that Jesus *endured the contradictions of sinners against himself*, he uses a perfect active participle. The use of active voice instead of passive portrays Jesus as a champion, one who actively took on his antagonists, instead of a victim, forced to endure the contradiction of sinners. Expanded translation: "One having persevered through three years of locking horns with sinners with the result he endured them to the very end, who finally endured that one last comprehensive and incomprehensible act of suffering on behalf of the very sinners that opposed him." That is endurance with an exclamation point!

These images in the forefront of our thinking are intended to motivate us to stay focused upon the race at hand. Mental focus of this sort can serve either as preventive medicine or as an antidote for weariness and faintness of mind that can weigh us down. If you and I run long and hard enough, it will likely serve as both!

What does it mean to consider Jesus? The verb *consider* is **ἀναλογίζομαι** (analogizomai) It combines the prefix **ana** (above, over) and its root **logizomai** (to think, ponder). Our word "logic" comes from this root. It means to think something over, ponder it, to make it an integral part of our thinking process. The noun contradiction is **ἀντιλογία** (antilogia). It's the prefix **anti** (against) together with **logia** (mental processes). It means to have a mindset contrary to another, thus creating rebellion, strife. It means to gainsay (deny). Rebellion raises its ugly head whenever a

subordinate develops a mindset that contradicts that of his superior. The scribes, Pharisees and religious elites crucified the Lord Jesus because they saw in him a superior authority whose thinking they chose to reject.

There is a subtle play on words between *consider* (the mindset of believers toward Jesus) and *contradiction* (the mindset of sinners toward Jesus). They have a common root, but their prefixes make them exact opposites. Thus Paul said: "*The carnal mind is at enmity [warfare] with God; for it is not subject to the law of God, neither indeed can be*" (Romans 8:7). James adds: "*Ye adulterers and adulteresses, know ye not that the friendship of the world is enmity with God? Whosoever therefore will be a friend of the world is the enemy of God*" (4:4). Friends are friends because they share commonality of thinking. Friendships typically disintegrate when a change in the thinking of either party makes a continued close association impossible.

Christian runners who consider Jesus as a pattern in their thinking will likely endure the same contradictions that Jesus endured. It's not something for which they must strive. It's just that their consistent godliness of life that the consideration of Christ creates will, by its very nature, create the requisite friction and resultant contradiction.

There are three good reasons for considering Jesus. First, it's a reality check. The opposition he faced is exactly the kind we can expect if we walk in a godly manner. He is our motivation to keep on running! Secondly, it breeds a spirit of worship. Reflections on his steadfast love cause us to look upon him in awesome wonder. Thirdly, it is therapeutic. Weariness and faintness of soul are potential pitfalls that our consideration of Jesus is designed to prevent. The consideration of Christ is a win-win. It gives glory to him...and grit to us!

No Place of Repentance

The technical definition of repentance is “a change of mind.” Its contextual usage in scripture goes beyond its basic etymological meaning to include an altered disposition of the will that translates into a change in one’s behavior. Moreover, the scriptures teach us that while repentance is a prerequisite for forgiveness, it does NOT necessarily guarantee restoration of that which might have been forfeited or lost as the result of a sinful act.

In Hebrews 12:16-17, the writer warned readers about the danger of being a “profane person”, and cited Esau as an example: *“Who for one morsel of meat sold his birthright. For ye know how that afterward, when he would have inherited the blessing, he was rejected: for he found no place of repentance, though he sought it carefully with tears.”* No place of repentance! Esau lost something personal and precious that he could never recover.

There is a distinct difference between repentance and the place of repentance. Repentance is that change of mind following an act of sin that realigns the mind of the perpetrator with the mind of God accompanied by a measure of godly sorrow. The ‘place’ of repentance is the actual condition or status that existed prior to being altered by the profane act. It does NOT mean that Esau was incapable of repentance. Nor does it mean he could not have received forgiveness for his profane act. What it DOES mean is that it was impossible for Esau to recover what he had lost. The birthright was gone. Remission of sin is no guarantee that a place of recovery will follow.

The twelfth chapter of Hebrews has been variously interpreted as to its application. Some allege the primary application to be Jewish brethren who had professed Christ without possessing Christ. It seems to me that its content is applicable to both true and faux believers alike. If the shoe fits, wear it! A genuine child of God can struggle with profane tendencies (that formerly ruled his or her life) long after conversion. The context identifies two other potential trouble spots—bitterness and fornication. What a trifecta! They are itemized in connection with profanity for good reason. Some who named the name of Christ were fornicating, allowing themselves to become embittered, and defiling others in the process.

The scripture teaches us that the underlying cause for Esau’s forfeiture of blessing to younger brother Jacob was a profane streak. One is profane when he or she relegates the sacred to common status. Profanity is essentially a distorted value system that alters one’s perception of reality. Esau was profane long before he returned hungry from his hunt. So when faced with the option of abating his appetite by selling his birthright, it was no more difficult than flipping a switch. His choice was made in a moment of time, but changed his future for all time.

Esau “sought” to recover his inheritance “carefully with tears” (12:17). The words “sought carefully” are the translation of the verb **ekzeteo** (“to seek out”). The prefix ek intensifies the verb to indicate a vigilant search. Esau’s search was an exhaustive one. It was no nonchalant inquiry from which the unsuccessful petitioner might walk away saying, “Oh well!” Peter used the very same verb to describe the OT prophets who “enquired” and searched the scriptures diligently to learn all they could about the salvation to come (1 Peter 1:10). The fact that Esau sought a remedy for his dilemma with energy comparable to that of truth-hungry prophets says it all.

The word “afterward” tells a sad story. It represents the time when the blessing should have been inherited. No individual has ever been more qualified for the “Shoulda-Coulda-Woulda” lament. But thoughts of “afterward” never entered Esau’s mind as he opted for that one morsel of meat. He sacrificed his future upon the altar of the immediate. Have you ever patronized your favorite

BBQ joint or Buffet and wondered “Why did I do that?!” AFTER wiping out your third plate of all-you-can-eat ribs or fried chicken? Most of us have done so multiple times. Twenty-four hours afterward your bloated stomach is no longer an issue. But trading a birthright (or other precious possession) for a mess of pottage (or other fleeting pleasure) will have you asking that heart-sickening query for the remainder of your life!

How can one avoid tendencies toward the profane? Or if one has been guilty of a profane act and lost something of inestimable worth in the process, how can he or she avoid a repeat performance? The answer can be found in regular ingestions of the truth coupled with prayer and meditation—a godly exercise that brings and keeps the mind in sync with the mind of God. Synchronization of this sort arms the believer with wisdom and strength that he or she can tap into at the moment of temptation. The wherewithal to nurture a profane-free character via daily vigils at the throne of grace is a sacred privilege no believer should neglect. Failure to do can cause us to “fail of the grace of God” (12:15) and set us up to forfeit something irreplaceable after a profane act has run its course.

Them that Have the Rule Over You

Paul spent nearly twenty years preaching the gospel of grace and establishing Gentile churches all across Asia Minor before he penned the book of Hebrews. In 13:25, he affirms: (1) Hebrews are his target audience, (2) he wrote the book while in Italy, and (3) Timothy was his scribe. His focus in Chapters 1-12 is Jesus—his Person and the New Covenant established by his blood. He only mentions the “church” twice. The first is in 2:12—a reference to Jesus meeting with LOCAL congregations, singing with his people, preaching through his pastors. The second is in 12:23—a reference to the UNIVERSAL church, a general assembly, whose resurrected Lord, the firstborn from the dead, guarantees the resurrection of its members. The Rapture, the gathering together of ALL God's people in the Church Age, will be the first time the UNIVERSAL Church (general assembly) will be gathered by her Lord in LOCAL fashion. Revelation 4-5 portrays what a hallelujah time of unbridled worship that will be for the tens of millions gathered around the throne.

The Hebrews to whom Paul writes are members of BOTH churches. As members of local assemblies comprised of both Jews and Gentiles, their pastors are likely Gentiles. They could be Jews, or perhaps a Jew-Gentile mix, like Timothy. In other epistles, Paul taught that in Christ Jesus there was NO difference between Jew and Greek, male and female, bond and free. For a Jewish believer to have a Gentile pastor was irrelevant in church life. In Chapter 13, Paul refers to the pastors of churches to which Hebrew believers belonged. Paul delivers three clear admonitions:

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation” (13:7).

“Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (13:17).

“Salute all them that have the rule over you, and all the saints. They of Italy salute you” (13:24).

The common thread in these three verses is the phrase: “Them that have the rule over you.” The immediate task for the student of scripture is to ascertain just exactly what it means for a pastor to “have the rule” over the people he pastors. I once invited a co-worker to attend church with me. He retorted: “I’m not going to sit there and let some man tell me how to live!” He thought of a pastor as sort of a boss. Sadly, too many share this view, which does not square with scripture.

Rule is **ἡγέομαι** (hēgeomai), “to lead, go before, exercise authority and influence.” Depending on its context, it can have the meaning of “to count, think, esteem.” In 17 of its 28 NT usages, the KJV translates it in that manner (10x as “count”). The biblical pastor of a local church is one who leads by example. His preaching is an extension of his living! His faith is one his people can follow as they consider the END of his conversation (lifestyle).” God have mercy on the church whose pastor encourages his people: “Do as I SAY, not necessarily as I DO!” He’s attempting to lead his church from behind. The pastor seeking to push his people rather than lead them is on a fool’s errand.

Follow is **μιμέομαι** (mimeomai), “to imitate (someone).” Before the photocopier, people used a mimeograph machine to make duplicate copies from a stencil. Imitators of others are mimics.

Both of these words come from this root. A pastor is a stencil for his people, whose life they should duplicate and whose behavior they should mimic. In writing to the Thessalonians, Paul encouraged them to follow (duplicate, mimic) what they observed in Paul and his associates (2 Thessalonians 3:7,9). If one has reservations about mimicking his pastor, he should ask the Lord to lead him to a church whose pastor he CAN mimic with good conscience.

A pastor worth following (mimicking) is one whose bailiwick is both preaching and living the word of God. At the time of writing, the Hebrews and their pastors were in possession of OT scriptures and perhaps a few NT epistles in early stages of circulation. The primary content of the 'spoken word' would have been texts from the OT, from which Christ and godly living were expounded.

Some larger churches are now living with what I call the CURSE of visual media. Remember the days when God's people brought Bibles into the preaching service and followed along from the pages of scripture as the pastor read and expounded a biblical text? While this is still true in many churches with visual media, whose pastors are good stewards of the technology, others have abused it. There's no need to bring a Bible to their services. Media systems display biblical texts (often from watered-down translations) on screen for the congregation. Instead of these pastors using visual media to enhance the exposition of scripture with text-related insights, they REPLACE the Bible. There exists NO suitable substitute for black-and-white pages of scripture—a collection of sixty-six inspired books—HELD in HAND by the man in the pew!

The CURSE is exacerbated by a fundamental lack of expository preaching. The average congregation is subjected weekly to topical preaching, where random passages are cited in support of a theme. There's little attention given to the nuts-and-bolts of a biblical text, to word studies and elucidation of a text within its context. The Lord GOD spoke to the prophet Amos about a coming famine "of hearing the words of the LORD" (Amos 8:11). We're living in an age wherein God's people are STARVING spiritually for lack of true expository preaching, with pastors often being perpetrators of the FAMINE! God's people are in desperate need of doctrinal truth from the contextual exposition of scripture. Doctrine is to the church what the skeleton is to the body.

There is no Greek preposition translated "over" in our English text. It is a pronoun, second person plural, in the genitive case. A literal translation would read: "of you." But you can see how "them that have the rule of you" would be a less-than-smooth translation. The meaning is: "Your leaders." But that doesn't diminish the spiritual authority vested in the pastor as God's spokesman. The pastor who sees himself as leader OF the church rather than a boss OVER the church has it just about right. The pastor is more of an elder BROTHER than a BOSS.

Remember is **μνημονεύω** (mnēmoneuō), "to be mindful of, call to mind, hold in memory." It is obvious a church member is NOT going to forget who his pastor is. The admonition to remember one's pastor is an appeal to keep in mind the importance of his work, to be mindful he is a special target of satanic wiles, to remember he and his family have basic needs to which a congregation should attend, to hold him up in prayer. Pastors are not perfect men. But like all believers, they're in the process of being perfected. As a general rule, churches never exceed the spiritual life of their pastors. If a church is growing, it means God is growing its pastor. If you want God to grow your church, remember your pastor every time you approach the throne of grace!

Obey is **πειθῶ** (peithō), "to persuade, induce one by words to believe." When used in a reflexive sense (as here), it means "to be persuaded, allow one's self to be persuaded and therefore obey the words of God spoken." *Submit* is **ὑπεικῶ** (hypeikō), "to yield under, yield to authority, resist no longer." Both verbs are present imperatives. The sense: "Keep on allowing yourselves to be

persuaded and keep on obeying the word of God spoken by your pastor!" The degree to which any church member should "obey and submit" to the pastor is directly proportional to the truth preached. No man should allow himself to be persuaded by the opinions of men. The two critical questions after the preaching are: (1) "What hath God said?" and (2) "What will God have me do?" The answer to the second lies in knowing the answer to the first. If the pastor has done his job expounding biblical truth, the people will know of a certainty WHAT to do as well as to WHOM they should do it.

In the final analysis, the man who leaves church with just ONE truth, ONE biblical directive, so clearly expounded and understood as to transform his thinking and living, will have, at the end of one year, fifty-two ingested truths to make him more like Jesus. What pastor could not rejoice over those kinds of results? In 1980, I wrote this quote from Morgan Noyes in a leaf of my Bible: "A minister can have as much authority as the truth of his message deserves, no more. That's all the authority any minister needs, who's concerned about his mission rather than his prestige."

Watch is ἀγρυπνέω (agrypneō), "to be sleepless, to keep awake, to be circumspect." This is the other side of the pastoral coin. Paul makes an assumption of pastors—vigilant, watchful, always alert to the spiritual climate. The phrase *for your souls* is introduced by the preposition ὑπέρ (hyper), "over, in behalf of, in the stead of." It's the preposition scripture uses to teach the substitutionary death of Christ 'for' sinners. What does that say about the concern a pastor should have for his flock? Wouldn't that be Christ-like concern? The sad fact is some pastors are hirelings, going about their weekly routine, crafting a few sermons, visiting the hospital and shut-ins, drawing a paycheck. While these are certainly part of the job, watching 'for' the souls of people takes the pastor to another level of care, where he shares the heart of Christ in his prayer life, in his study of scripture and in his compassion for people, especially as an evangelist.

Salute is ἀσπάζομαι (aspazomai), "to draw to oneself, enfold in the arms, salute, embrace." Paul uses this word repeatedly in his epistles to encourage spiritual affection, spiritual bonding. In 13:24, Paul instructs the Hebrews to extend this 'salute' to ALL the saints in addition to ALL their pastors. It's clear Paul had in mind more than mere courtesy, but rather a heart-felt recognition that ALL God's people have a common origin rooted in the grace, mercy and compassion of the God who loved them, and gave himself for them.

A Brief Summation

In this series of articles from Hebrews, we have sought to call attention to the major themes and truths taught in this transformative book. Our efforts have only scratched the surface of its depths. But we trust the content will have enriched your life in some way. In this closing chapter, we'll make two summary observations.

Our first observation is found in Hebrews 8:1-2:

"Now of the things which we have spoken this is the sum: We have such an high priest, who is set on the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens; A minister of the sanctuary, and of the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, and not man."

Sum is **κεφάλαιον** (kephalaion), "the principle or main thing, sum total." The things which he has spoken up to this point are contained in the first seven chapters. He now proceeds to tell us what it all means, the bottom line, in chapters eight through ten. Paul is like a prosecuting attorney who's laid out the case FOR Christ in the course of a trial. The word "sum" indicates he is about to deliver his closing argument to the jury, which consists of his Jewish readers and the Church at large.

The verb *is set* is active voice. A passive voice would have indicated the Father set the Son on the throne. But the active voice indicates the Lord Jesus sat himself down on that throne. That is, the Father deemed him worthy to take the position on his own merits.

Majesty is **μεγαλωσύνη** (megalōsynē), "greatness." It's a term reserved for the divine greatness, a greatness that has no equal. This is the second time in Hebrews Paul used the word to describe our Lord's position as he "*sat down on the right hand of the Majesty on high*" (1:3). In the OT, the use of "Majesty" is distinctly linked to the LORD (1 Chronicles 29:11; Psalm 29:4; 93:1; 104:1; Isaiah 2:10,19,21; 24:14; 26:10; Micah 5:4). The majesty Jesus SEES IN the Father at his right hand is a majesty he SHARES WITH the Father.

Pitched is **πήγνυμι** (pēgnymi), "to build by fastening together, to set up (a tent)." This is its only NT usage. Any Jew reading this would have their minds transported back to Exodus 33:7, where Moses "pitched" the tabernacle without the camp. In Numbers, which chronicles the wilderness wanderings, there are nearly forty references to Israel "pitching" the tabernacle as well as their own tents each time they relocated. John wrote: "*The Word was made flesh, and dwelt [tabernacled] among us*" (John 1:14). Jesus of Nazareth is the tabernacle God the Father pitched, the fulfillment of the patterns built into the OT tabernacle. This truth is the principle point in Paul's summation!

Our second observation comes from Paul's repetitive use of "better" to describe the superiority of Jesus and his priestly work for sinners over the Law of Moses, the Levitical priesthood and its sacrifices (Hebrews 1:4; 7:19, 22; 8:6; 9:23; 10:34; 11:16; 12:24). *Better* is **κρείττων** (kreittōn), "more useful, serviceable, advantageous." Its root is a NT word (**kratos**) translated "power" as a manifestation of strength. As a noun of comparison, it cries out for an analogy to provide comparative scale and give us a sense of: "How much better?"

Foremost in my thinking are sports analogies. If the winner of the Masters posts a 12-under score and the second place finisher shoots 11-under, the Green Jacket goes to the golfer who shot the BETTER score. If Usain Bolt runs 10.0 in the 100 meters with the second-place finisher running

10.1, he'd get the Gold Medal for running the BETTER time. But in these two analogies, the second-place finishers made it close. A better analogy would have a world champion pole vaulter, who clears the bar at 20 feet, competing against a quadriplegic. That comparison is more in line with what Paul had in mind when he said Jesus was BETTER than Moses and the Law.