

Hebrews

1. THE RIDDLE OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

1. Who was the author?

The following verses tell us all we know about him: 2:3; 13:19, 23.
Barnabas? Paul? Luke? Clement? Apollos? Silas? Philip? Priscilla and Aquila?

2. Where was he writing from?

Italy? (13:24) Rome? Athens?

3. Was he writing to Jews or Gentiles?

Or was it a mixed audience?

4. Where did they live?

Two passages suggest that a particular church or group of churches is being addressed: 10:32-34; 13:18-19.
Jerusalem? Palestine? Rome? Cyprus?

5. When was the work composed?

While Timothy was still alive (13:23).
Clement of Rome quotes Hebrews in his letter to the Corinthians (probably written AD 96).
Before or after AD 70?

6. What sort of composition is Hebrews?

A letter? A sermon? An essay?

7. Why was it written at all?

To challenge Christians on the verge of apostasy to hold fast to Christ (see 2:1-3; 3:6, 12; 6:11-12; 10:28-29, 35; 12:3, 15).

The danger of apostasy comes from unbelief (see 3:12; 4:2, 11).

Hebrews is a word of exhortation (13:22), which also reminds the readers that suffering is an inescapable part of the Christian life (see 10:36; 11:24-26; 13:13)

2. BY HIS SON: LAYING THE FOUNDATION (Hebrews 1:1-3)

Hebrews begins with three contrasts.

CONTRAST 1:

'Long ago' (v. 1): before Christ came.

'These last days' (v.2): the period of time that began with the coming of Christ.

The main thought in the opening sentence is 'God spoke'.

CONTRAST 2:

'By the prophets' (v.1): God's word was fragmentary.
'By his Son' (v. 2): God's message is complete in him.

CONTRAST 3:

'The fathers' (v. 1): the Jewish ancestors.
'Us' (v. 2): the whole world.

THE SON'S NATURE

Note the repeated 'all things in verses 2-3: All things are his destiny, and he carries all things towards their destiny. But it is with our world that he is chiefly concerned.

From the Son divine glory radiates.

THE SON'S WORK

1. On earth, in the past: he made purification by his atoning death preceded by a sinless life.
2. Its commencement in heaven: he fulfils prophecy, and is the unique priest.

3. SUPERIOR TO ANGELS (Hebrews 1:4-2:18)

The angels are introduced because of their part in the giving of the Jewish law (2:2; cf. Acts 7:35; Galatians 3:19).

The law was a source of immense joy to the Jews.

Psalm 8:4-6 is quoted in 2:6-8. The ultimate reference of the Psalm is to the Son of God made man: all things are under his dominion – even though we cannot yet discern his complete control over everything.

But we do see Jesus now crowned as the champion (2:9).

But there is a puzzle: if he is superior to angels, why was he made lower than the angels?
Because his route to victory was via the way of death.

But how can death be the way to victory?
Because of the nature of his death: it was for others, and was the ultimate expression of God's grace.

So a suffering Messiah is not to be rejected. In fact, it was through suffering that he was made perfect – not morally as the founder of salvation (2:10).

A Saviour can only save those who are like him (2:11-13). So to be the Saviour Jesus had to become like us (2:14, 17).

There are three reasons given in 2:14-18 why the Son of God became human:

- (1) To undermine the devil (v. 14).

The devil's attempts to be the 'murderer' (John 8:44) are no longer effective.

- (2) To release us from the trap of sin and death (v.15f).

He helps us in this way by changing us.

(3) To become our merciful and faithful high priest (v. 17).

His work as high priest involves propitiation.

Propitiation entails turning away the anger of God from sinners.

He makes propitiation by his intercession in heaven, just as Moses' prayer after the Golden Calf incident resulted in the LORD relenting of the disaster he had planned to bring on the people (Exodus 32:14).

The result of Jesus' becoming human is that he can support us in our temptations. (v. 18).

4. A GREAT HIGH PRIEST (Hebrews 3:1-5:10)

3:2 takes up the word 'faithful' from 2:17. Jesus is the founder of the family of God.

Moses was the chief figure in Jewish history (John 1:17; 5:45; 7:19; 9:28f; Acts 6:11, 14; 7:35; 2 Corinthians 3:7), but Jesus is worthy of more glory. Moses pointed to him (Luke 24:27; John 5:46; Acts 3:22).

We must therefore hold fast to Christ. And perseverance is the evidence of genuine faith.

The author uses Psalm 95:7-11 (especially verses 7-8 and 11) to press his challenge.

The background to the Psalm is Israel's refusal to enter the land at Kadesh Barnea (Numbers 13-14).

This refusal was all the more astonishing, since this generation had heard the word of the LORD so clearly (Exodus 4:31; 19:9; 24:7; Deuteronomy 4:12, 33; 5:26).

But we have heard God's last word in his Son. We live in the 'today' that follows the resurrection of Christ (see Acts 13:32,33).

There is a discrepancy between difference ancient Greek manuscripts in 4:2:

was the problem that they did not unite hearing with faith?

or was it that they were not united with those who heard truly (believers in every place and time)?

What is the meaning of the word 'rest'?

Originally it meant the settlement of Israel in the promised land (Exodus 33:14; Deuteronomy 12:10; Joshua 21:43-45; 1 Kings 8:56).

4:3-4 make clear that it is a rest which is God's gift to his people.

But the promise of entering the rest still stands.

4:8 shows that there is more to the rest than simply the settlement in the land.

4:9-10 shows that the rest is found in the gospel of salvation by grace alone. It is the fulfilment of the Sabbath (Exodus 31:13-15; 20:12). To enjoy it we must forsake our own works (Exodus 16:26-30; Leviticus 23:28-32).

In what ways are we to strive to enter the rest (4:11)?

1) by daily renewing our allegiance to Christ, avoiding complacency (2 Peter 2:10).

2) by persevering to the end.

We cannot deceive God about our spiritual standing (4:12-13).

3:7-4:13 have been a digression. At 4:14 we return to the main theme of this section.

Verses 14 and 15 neatly balance each other. Verse 14 speaks of Jesus' high exaltation. Verse 15 assures us that he is still sympathetic. So we can say anything we like to God (v. 16).

Jesus' sympathy is far greater than that of the earthly high priests who were sinners themselves (5:1-3). Their ministry only had any value as it pointed to his.

Verses 4-6 remind us that God appointed Jesus as high priest.

Verses 7-10 teach that Jesus was perfected as a Saviour by learning obedience to his specific calling (John 4:34; 17:4).

In answer to his prayers he was raised from the dead.

5. ENCOURAGEMENT TO HOLD FAST (Hebrews 5:11-6:20)

In this section the main challenge of Hebrews comes right to the surface.

The writer is frustrated in 5:11-14: he cannot develop the theme of Christ's high priesthood, because his readers have not fully grasped the basic truths of the gospel.

So they need to move on (6:1).

By 'the elementary doctrine of Christ' the writer probably means the Old Testament (cf. Luke 24:27; John 5:39). They have left that behind, and they must not go back to Old Testament provisions. They live in the age when God's purposes have reached maturity in Christ.

The six items listed in 6:1-2 are a summary of Old Testament arrangements. The clue to that is the word 'washings' in verse 2. Hebrews 9:9-10 define it (cf. Mark 7:4). The other five items are also Old Testament emphases. But we now live in the age of their fulfilment in Christ, so we cannot go back.

1) **Repentance from dead works** – sinful works lead to death (Genesis 2:17; Ezekiel 18:4,20). The way to life is through repentance (Isaiah 46:8; 2 Chronicles 6:36-39). Now repentance is in the name of Christ (Luke 24:47).

2) **Faith towards God** – true faith is the assumption that God is reliable (Habakkuk 2:4). Now true faith is directed towards Christ (Acts 2:21).

3) **The laying on of hands** – this was a regular feature of Old Testament worship, as the people identified with the sacrifices (Leviticus 4:15; 16:21). Now our guilt has been transferred to Christ and totally removed (Hebrews 10:18).

4) **The resurrection of the dead** – Paul called this the hope of the Jews (Acts 24:14-15; cf. John 11:24; Job 19:25-27). Now we can say that Christ is risen (1 Corinthians 15: 20).

5) **Eternal judgment** – God is the judge (Psalm 50:6). Now judgment is delegated to Christ (John 5:22; Acts 17:31).

So now the writer plans to leave the Old Testament behind (6:3).

6:4-6: a controversial passage!

Our starting assumption: a true believer cannot fall away finally to eternal destruction. Yet these verses appear to say that he can.

Some people distinguish eternal salvation from repentance in this life. Three things count against this interpretation:

1. Verses 7-8 appear to illustrate hell fire (cf. Revelation 19:20; 21:8).

2. to separate repentance from salvation seems inconsistent with other Scriptures (Luke 24:47; Acts 3:19; Luke 13:3,5).

3. Verse 9 implies that salvation is the concern.

There are then three ways that people have tried to resolve the problem:

(1) Verses 4-5 are not talking about a true believer. However, it is hard to defend this point of view:

- i. They have been enlightened – cf. John 1:9; Hebrews 10:32; Ephesians 1:18.
- ii. They have tasted the heavenly gift – cf. Ephesians 1:3.
- iii. They have shared in the Holy Spirit – cf. Galatians 5:16,25; Romans 8:9.
- iv. They have tasted the goodness of the word of God – cf. 1 Timothy 4:6; 2 Timothy 1:14.
- v. They have tasted the powers of the age to come – cf. Ephesians 1:20-21.

(2) Verse 6 does not describe a real danger: it is purely hypothetical. However, this empties the warning of any significance.

(3) Such warnings are one of the means that God uses to prevent true believers falling away (cf. Matthew 24:13).

The second part of verse 6 explains why restoration is impossible. To fall away is to identify with those who mocked Jesus (cf. Matthew 20:18-19; 27:31; Mark 15:15).

How total is this impossibility in view of Luke 18:27 and Matthew 19:26?

The two verbs in Hebrews 6:6 are present participles. It could be rendered, ‘while they are crucifying once again the Son of God for themselves and holding him up to contempt’.

Verses 9-10 show that the writer is confident that his readers have not yet taken this disastrous step. He is not teaching salvation by works. His confidence is rooted in the character of God: his justice provides forgiveness (Romans 3:25-26; 1 Joh 1:7-9).

So, in verses 11-12, voices his desire that they persevere to the end. That will require patience.

Such perseverance is sustained by confidence in God’s promises (6:13-20). Abraham modelled such patience as he waited many years for God’s promise to begin to be fulfilled.

The guarantee of fulfilment is God’s oath (Genesis 22:16-18; cf. Genesis 24:7; 26:3; 50:24; Exodus 6:8; 32:13; Deuteronomy 4:31; Joshua 1:6; 21:43-45). Like God’s purpose, it is unchangeable. So to have Christ as our city of refuge is to be safe (cf. Numbers 35:26-28). It is to have a hope which serves as an anchor. ~~hope is to have a future orientation. In Hebrews, ‘hope’ refers to the present fulfilment in Christ of the things which Old Testament people could only look forward to in the future. To expect too much in the present will lead to drifting.~~

At the end of chapter 6 the writer signals his intention to return to the theme of Jesus’ Melchizedek priesthood.

6. A CHANGE IN THE PRIESTHOOD (Hebrews 7:1-10:18)

This is the longest section of the letter. It brings us to the heart of what the book is about. The exhortation to press on is now rooted in the doctrine of the high priesthood of Christ.

The section opens with an account of the occasion when Melchizedek met Abraham (Genesis 14:18-20), and a commentary on the significant details of the event (7:1-10).

The main point is to demonstrate the greatness of Christ by showing 'how great this man [Melchizedek] was' (v. 4). The writer's intention is to show his Jewish readers that their Scriptures point away from themselves to Christ. He does this by pointing out some ways in which Melchizedek resembles Jesus Christ:

1. Christ is the king of righteousness (v. 2. cf. 1:8-9; Isaiah 32:1; Jeremiah 23:5).
2. Christ is the king of peace (v. 2. cf. Isaiah 9:7; 52:7; Luke 2:14).
3. Christ is the eternal Son of God (v. 3. cf. 1:2,8).
4. Christ is the eternal priest (v. 3; cf. Ps. 110:4).

Melchizedek is greater than the Levitical priests. This is obvious from two facts: (1) that Abraham paid a tithe to him; (2) that he blessed Abraham. The important thing is that Abraham was the ancestor of the Levites. The Levites collected tithes (Numbers 18:21-24) and blessed the people (Deuteronomy 10:8).

Melchizedek's greatness is emphasized by five phrases:

- (1) 'Abraham the patriarch' (v. 4. cf. 2 Chronicles 19:8; 23:20; 1 Chronicles 27:16-22).
- (2) 'their brothers' (v. 5). But Melchizedek's descent was different (v. 6).
- (3) 'who had the promises' (v. 6; cf. Genesis 12:2-3).
- (4) 'mortal men' contrasted with 'he lives' (v. 8; cf. Numbers 20:25-28; Deuteronomy 34:5-7; Leviticus 10:1-2; Numbers 8:24-25).
- (5) 'Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes' (vv. 9-10; cf. Acts 2:30; Genesis 35:11; 2 Chronicles 6:9).

This lays the foundation for the teaching on the greatness of Jesus Christ, and the superiority of his priesthood to that of the Levites.

At v. 11 we turn directly to this subject. The fact that Psalm 110:4 speaks of a different priesthood proves the insufficiency of the Levitical priesthood.

Its insufficiency was its inability to bring 'perfection'. This word was used in the Septuagint of the ordination of the Levitical priests (Exodus 29:22-24; Leviticus 8:22-23). The Levitical priests could not actually do what they were ordained to do: to make atonement (Leviticus 16:32). To make atonement is to appease legitimate anger, and so secure acceptance (Genesis 32:20). Atonement is connected with forgiveness (Leviticus 4:20). Full, perfect atonement was not possible through the Levitical sacrifices.

The parenthesis in verse 11 indicates that the Levitical priesthood was the logical basis for the law, in the sense of the entire Old Testament system (cf. Exodus 24:12).

Verses 12-17 make the point that a change in the priesthood requires a change in the law restricting the priesthood to the tribe of Levi, because Jesus came from the tribe of Judah (cf. 2 Chronicles 26:16-21). The command that the priests be from the tribe of Levi was of only earthly concern, and of limited duration.

In verses 18-19 the writer broadens his discussion: the law as a whole, the Old Testament arrangements in their entirety, made nothing perfect. There is now a better hope, which is defined as drawing near to God (Exodus 3:8 cf. Ephesians 2:13).

Verses 20-22 assure us that God's promises in Christ are absolutely guaranteed.

The author now highlights two ways in which Jesus is a better priest than the Old Testament Levitical priests:

1. *The duration of his priesthood* (vv. 23-25). He is not mortal, so our salvation is eternal. We are kept for ever as a result of Christ's intercession.

2. *His moral character as priest* (vv. 26-28). He is *holy* (Acts 2:27; 13:35; Psalm 16:10). He is *innocent* (cf. Romans 16:18). He is *unstained*. The final phrase of v. 26 probably refers to the ascension as the conclusive proof of his moral excellence. In verses 27-28 the writer points out two ways in which Jesus differs from the earthly priests: (1) he is not offering sacrifices repeatedly (cf. Exodus 29:38-42); his perfect moral character meant that one sacrifice was enough; (2) he did not need to make a sacrifice for his own sins; because of his moral perfection he could offer himself, and that made him the only perfect priest.

In 8:1-2 the writer gives a summary of his main point. So there is a sense in which these are the most important verses of the epistle. The main point is that we do have a priest. The original Jewish readers would have felt the need for a priest, and would be relieved to know that, in leaving the Old Testament arrangements, they had not deprived themselves of that cardinal element in true worship.

But the main point also emphasizes the fact that Jesus serves as a high priest in heaven. Heaven is the reality which the Old Testament tabernacle symbolized (cf. Acts 7:44; Exodus 25:9). Old Testament worship was always, essentially, tabernacle worship (cf. 1 Kings 8:4; 2 Chronicles 24:6; Psalm 43:3; 132:3-7; Ezekiel 37:27).

Verses 4-5 make the point that Jesus has to serve in heaven because there are already earthly priests serving according to the law. However, they serve only a copy and shadow of the heavenly things. The tabernacle was patterned on heaven (Exodus 25:9,40; 26:30). And since that is where Jesus is, obviously his priesthood is better.

Verse 6 introduces the theme of the covenant. The word means a will or testament. The new covenant is better than the old. Verses 7-8 tell us that the old covenant was faulty because of the nature of the people.

Not everything about the old covenant was inferior, and not everything about the new covenant is new. There are some identical features. Verse 6 makes two of the identical features clear: (1) both covenants are legally established; (2) both covenants are covenants of promise.

In Hebrews 'old covenant' and 'law' are synonymous terms (see 7:19,22; 9:1,18-22; cf. Exodus 19:5; 24:7; 31:16; 34:28; Deuteronomy 4:31; Psalm 78:10; Hosea 8:1).

Hebrews 8:8-12 is a quotation from Jeremiah 31:31-34. Hebrews 10:16-17 shows which parts of the quotation are important to our author. At this point his concern is to show how a new covenant makes the old one obsolete (v. 13).

He will demonstrate this by talking for a while about the old covenant. In 9:1-5 he describes the layout of the tabernacle. His concern is with its second section, the most holy place behind the second curtain (v. 3). This is accessible only once a year and only to the high priest (v. 6-7). Verses 8-9 explain that this restricted access taught that access into the holy places is not possible as long as the first section is still standing, and that the first section symbolizes the present age. This raises two questions.

(1) *What is meant by 'the holy places'?* That nearness to God which the earthly most holy place symbolized (v. 9).

(2) *What is meant by 'the present age'?* The phrase may mean either 'the time now present' or 'the time then present'. The latter meaning fits the perspective of Hebrews better. It refers to the period when the tabernacle was in use. The physical structure of the tabernacle emphasized the distance between the people and God, the lack of perfection.

The word 'conscience' comes in verse 9. Its use here is the first of several occurrences. Hebrews 10:2 defines it as consciousness of guilt.

In verse 11 we have one of the Bible's glorious 'buts'. The writer demonstrates Christ's superiority as high priest in four ways:

1. He is the 'high priest of the good things that have come' – the things that make up perfection (v. 11).
2. He passed 'through the greater and more perfect tent' [ie. these last days (1:1), the world to come (2:5)] into the holy places [heaven] (v. 11-12). Just as atonement was made on the altar of sacrifice, so Jesus' death made atonement.
3. He entered heaven once for all (v. 12).
4. He entered by means of superior blood (v. 12). Verse 7 reminds us that the old priests took the blood with them into the most holy place. However, that detail is merely incidental. Jesus did not carry his blood into heaven. The important point is that it was the blood of the sacrifice which entitled the priest to enter (cf. Leviticus 16:3).

Verse 12 notes that this superior priesthood has secured an eternal redemption.

Verses 13-14 centre on the words 'how much more'. A comparison and contrast is being drawn between the Old Testament arrangements and the achievement of our Lord.

Two Old Testament passages form the background to verse 13: Leviticus 14, and Numbers 19. Old Testament methods of purification applied only to the flesh: they related to an earthly situation, and they were short term.

There were similarities between these arrangements and Christ's work. His death was a sacrifice: the statement that he was 'without blemish' is borrowed from the description of the type of animal acceptable in the Old Testament sacrificial system (Leviticus 22:19-25; cf. 1 Peter 1:18-19).

But whereas their relevance was only earthly and temporary, Christ's blood purifies our consciousness. It removes completely the burden of guilt.

From verse 15 the writer begins to consider more fully the implications of the new covenant. Verses 16-17 make the general point that a will only becomes operative when the person who made the will dies. And a death has occurred (v. 15) – the death of Christ. Those who are called may therefore receive their inheritance, which is eternal.

At this point the writer has the Jewish people in mind. 'Those who are called' are those who had committed transgressions under the first covenant (cf. Isaiah 48:1).

The first covenant failed to secure eternal redemption. The deliverance from Egypt was the archetypal Old Testament redemption (Exodus 6:6). It was achieved on the night that the firstborn died (Exodus 11:4-5). Israel was the LORD's firstborn (Exodus 4:22). The lamb died instead of them, and the blood around the door was a sign that a death had already taken place (Exodus 12:13). However, this was only an earthly redemption. But now that Christ has died, the Jews' redemption is complete.

The fact that a covenant becomes operative as the result of a death was anticipated in the old covenant (v. 18-22). These verses refer to both Exodus 24:7-8 and Leviticus 16:15-19.

The second part of verse 22 states a timeless principle (cf. Leviticus 17:11). That is why the earthly tabernacle had to be purified by blood (v. 23).

In what sense did the heavenly things need to be purified (v. 23)? The reference is again to 'these last days' (1:1), 'the world to come' (2:5).

Verse 24 presents the evidence that Christ's sacrifice was better: he entered heaven itself. Verses 25-26 tell us the ways in which it was better: he sacrificed himself and he did it once for all.

Notice the inexact parallel between the work of the Old Testament high priest and the work of Jesus in verses 25-26. The high priest 'enters the holy places every year'. We would expect the writer to continue: 'Jesus entered heaven once for all'. But he does not. He says, 'he has appeared once for all'. The focus is not on his entry into heaven, but on his coming into this world. The writer is stressing that his sacrifice was the crucial thing – and that took place on earth. But it secured perfection.

In verses 27-28 the writer bypasses Jesus' entry into heaven altogether. He jumps from his death to his second coming. That is when his saving work will reach its completion. And that is God's real objective in the work of his Son. So we must be eagerly waiting for him.

Hebrews 10:1-4 spells out why the Old Testament sacrifices could never be the ultimate forms of true godliness. They are just a shadow. The reality is Christ. They could not bring perfection. That is why they had to be offered repeatedly. As a result they were a constant reminder of sin. It is simply impossible for animal blood to remove sin completely.

In verses 5-10 the author quotes from Psalm 40:6-8. Jesus is speaking through the Psalmist. The Psalm speaks of the Old Testament sacrifices. The LORD did not want them (cf. Psalm 51:16). It is only when Christ sacrifices himself that the LORD will find pleasure in a sacrifice (Psalm 51:18-19; cf. Matthew 3:17; 17:15; Colossians 1:9; Ephesians 1:5-9). The Old Testament sacrifices could not change the hearts of the people (1 Samuel 15:22; Hosea 6:6). Only Jesus fulfilled the conditions (cf. John 4:34; 5:30; 6:38). God's will is to give eternal life to those who believe on his Son (cf. John 5:39-40). Our perfection in Christ never alters for all eternity (cf. Hebrews 10:14).

Verse 11 says that the old priests stood. Their work was never finished. Verse 12 says that Jesus sat down. The work of making atonement has been finished now (John 17:4; 19:30).

Verses 15-18 quote again from Jeremiah's new covenant prophecy. Verse 17 is making the main point. Because of what Christ has done, God makes a deliberate decision never to call our sins to mind. When God remembers sin, the sinner is punished (Jeremiah 14:10; Hosea 9:9). Not to remember sin is an act of sheer mercy (Psalm 25:7; 79:8; Isaiah 43:25; 64:9). With the coming of Christ, forgiveness is total and eternal.

7. LET US DRAW NEAR (Hebrews 10:19-39)

This is another section where the writer drives home his exhortation. He makes an application of the truths expounded in the previous section.

Verses 19-21 (cf. 8:1-2) summarize those truths in two main points:

1) *'We have confidence to enter the holy places'*.

Hebrews 9:24 equates the holy places with heaven. However, the idea of heaven as a place does not suit this context. Here 'heaven' has a relational meaning: it means closeness to God (cf. 9:8; see also 2 Chronicles 2:6; Psalm 139:7). For Jesus to go to heaven was to go to the Father (John 13:3; 16:10; 20:17).

We may approach God without any hesitancy. We may do so because of Jesus' sacrificial death. He has opened the way that leads to life.

We approach 'through the curtain, that is his flesh'. The writer is thinking here of the tearing of the veil when Jesus died on the cross (Mark 15:37-38). The veil separated the first section of the tabernacle from the most holy place (Exodus 26:33). It symbolized the exclusion of sinful people from the presence of God. When Jesus died it tore from top to bottom: God tore it, because complete atonement had been made.

In what sense is Jesus' flesh the counterpart of the veil? It is the torn veil which represents Jesus' flesh as it was torn in his sacrificial death (cf. Colossians 1:21-22; 1 Peter 3:18; 4:1).

2) *'We have a great high priest'*.

And as the great high priest, Jesus is the head of God's family, because a priest is what the family chiefly needs.

On the basis of these two truths, the writer makes three exhortations. The middle one (v. 23) is the main theme of the whole letter. The writer assures his readers that God's faithfulness will enable them to hold fast.

The other two exhortations are:

1. 'Let us draw near' (v. 22). We are to cultivate relationship with God. This requires four things:

(1) *A true heart* – the opposite of the kind of heart described in 3:8,10,12,15, and 4:7.

(2) *Full assurance of faith* (cf. 6:11).

(3) *Hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience*. When we really believe the truth about the atonement Christ has achieved, our hearts are at peace.

(4) *Bodies washed with pure water*. This is probably a reference to baptism as marking the break with the past.

Hebrews 4:16 begins with the same word as this verse: to draw near to God is to approach the throne of grace as a beggar in need of mercy.

2. 'Let us consider how to stir up one another' (v. 24-25). We are to support one another in the fight against apostasy. We do this by means of encouragement. To neglect fellowship is discouraging. 'Love and good works' (cf. 6:10) are the evidences of genuine Christian life.

Verses 26-31 explain why these challenges are so necessary.

Verse 26 only makes sense if the sin in view is apostasy (see 1 John 1:7; 2:1-2). If we reject Christ, there is no other sacrifice to which we can turn. So those who drop out will face judgment (cf. Matthew 24:13). In verse 28 the writer refers to Deuteronomy 17:2-7. How much worse, he asks, is the sin of apostasy from Christ? It involves spurning a glorious person, treating his blood as if it is nothing special, and despising grace.

In verses 32-34 the author encourages his people again. He reminds them of the sufferings they have endured. Throughout they were enabled to maintain their Christian joy (cf. 2 Corinthians 8:2; 1 Thessalonians 1:6; James 1:2). This joy comes from the certainty of future glory.

And so the challenge is presented yet again (v. 35-36). The word translated 'reward' is an unusual one. It means the delivery of the reward. It emphasizes the certainty that the reward will be given to them.

In verses 37-39 the author urges the readers to press on in faith, and comforts them by acknowledging that they are people of true faith. So he paves the way for the next section, where he will expound the meaning of true faith.

8. FAITH IS... (Hebrews 11:1-12:17)

So what exactly is faith?

11:1 gives a twofold definition. Faith gives things hoped for solid reality in our experience, and it persuades us that invisible things are real.

The invisible things may be in the distant past (v. 3).

The things hoped for are things that were future before Christ came but are now present realities (cf. 6:18; 7:19).

Hebrews 11 shows that believers of Old Testament times were looking towards the future age of fulfilment in Christ. Since we live in that age, we must not revert to the arrangements of former times.

1. The three preliminary examples (11:4-7)

Abel's faith anticipated the sacrifice of Calvary.

Enoch's faith anticipated Christ's resurrection.

Noah's faith anticipated the eternal benefits of the work of Christ.

2. The major patriarchs (11:8-22)

The illustrations of faith in this passage grow out of the promise which God made to Abraham (Genesis 12:2-3).

By faith Abraham journeyed into the unknown (v. 8), lived as a stranger in the promised land (v.9; cf. Genesis 12:5-7), and proved willing to sacrifice Isaac, even though it seemed to put the promise at risk (v. 17-19; cf. Genesis 22:1-18).

By faith Sarah was confident that God would do the necessary miracle for her to conceive (v. 11-12; cf. Genesis 11:30; 22:17).

By faith Isaac spoke God's prophetic word into the lives of his sons (v. 20; cf. Genesis 27:28-29, 39-40; 28:3-4). He passed on to Jacob the blessing of Abraham.

By faith Jacob blessed Joseph's sons (v. 21; cf. Genesis 48:14-20).

By faith Joseph anticipated the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham (v. 22; cf. Genesis 50:24-25).

The writer to the Hebrews sees that the patriarchs were looking to the coming of Christ.

In verse 10 he notes that Abraham was looking forward to the heavenly city. This does not mean only heaven itself (cf. 3:1; 6:4), but the life of the believer in the age of fulfilment in Christ (cf. 12:22), which stretches onwards into the eternal future (cf. 13:14).

Verses 13-16 make the point that any fulfilment of the promise during the days of the patriarchs was not the fullness of God's intention. So they lived in hope for the day when what the promised land (Exodus 20:12; Leviticus 25:18) symbolized would be fulfilled in complete salvation in Jesus Christ.

The writer's main point is to say that we would be very foolish to return to Old Testament arrangements when Old Testament believers were looking forward in hope to the age of fulfilment in Christ which we are now enjoying. The hope of past generations is now reality.

3. Moses and the people of Israel (11:23-31)

Moses' parents were not afraid of Pharaoh because they knew the power of God (v. 23; cf. Exodus 2:2).

It was faith which enabled Moses to turn his back on his privileged upbringing to identify with God's people (v. 24-25; cf. Acts 7:23; Exodus 2:11-12, 15). It was by faith that Moses left Egypt in the exodus, defying the king's anger (v. 27; cf. Exodus 5:1-2, 7-9). The Passover was an act of faith (v. 28; cf. Exodus 4:22).

The faith of the people of Israel was evident in the crossing of the Red Sea (v. 29; cf. Exodus 14:22-25) and in the conquest of the land (v. 30; cf. Joshua 6:11, 14-16).

Rahab's faith led her to receive the spies in peace (v. 31; cf. Joshua 2:9-12).

In verse 26 the writer makes explicit the principle he is stressing: Moses' gaze was fixed on the eternal future in Christ. He was therefore willing to endure hardship for Christ's sake. How foolish we would be to reject what he so keenly hoped for.

4. Old Testament believers in general (11:32-40)

Verses 33-38 lists some of the faith-driven exploits of other Old Testament believers. The list falls into two parts. Each part contains ten items. The first ten are marvellous works of prowess. The second ten have to do with the afflictions suffered by God's people.

They willingly suffered, knowing that the day of resurrection would come (v. 35). They regarded this condemned world (cf. v. 7) as worthless compared with the glory of Christ.

However, the Old Testament believers did not live to see the fulfilment of what was promised. It is only in the era of time in which we live that Christ has come and inaugurated the age of fulfilment (v. 39-40). Now, however, they are perfected (cf. 12:23).

So it would be pointless for us to go back to the Old Testament system. We live in the age of fulfilment in Christ, the era for which the Old Testament believers earnestly hoped.

5. Concluding application (12:1-17)

Since we live in the era of fulfilled hope, we must press on to the end.

The Christian life is like a race. Previous champions are cheering us on. God, too, is bearing witness that our sins are forgiven (cf. 11:2, 4, 5, 39).

We must lay aside every weight (every wrong reaction to persecution and hardship resulting from a bad sense of self-importance), and avoid the sin of apostasy.

We are to look to Jesus.

Verse 2 is probably telling us how he became the founder and perfecter of our faith: he accepted the cross with all its shame (cf. Deuteronomy 21:22-23), instead of the joy that could have been his (cf. Philippians 2:6-8).

Jesus' present position is the Father's corroboration that his Son's death achieved its intended design. So we certainly must not abandon him.

At verse 3 the writer turns to consider Christ's example as one who suffered verbal abuse (cf. Matthew 9:3,11; 4:25; 12:2,10,14,24; 15:1,12; 16:1; 19:3; 21:15,23; 22:15,23,34; 26:3-4,59,65; 27:1,12,22-23,29,39-44,63). To consider what he suffered for us will help us not to desert him. And our sufferings are nothing compared to his (v. 4).

In verses 5-11 (cf. Proverbs 3:11-12) the writer shows that suffering is part of our heavenly Father's training programme for his sons. It is a sign of his genuine love for us. It helps us to respect him. And he never makes any mistakes. Suffering can do us good (cf. Psalm 119:67,71), though we only perceive this later as we look back.

So the challenge is presented again in verses 12-15: we must press on along the Christian pathway. As we do so we must strive to maintain peace even with our persecutors, avoiding the bitterness which would be a failure of holiness. To fall away would be a profane act (v. 16).

The example of Esau reveals the motivation behind apostasy. He exchanged the birthright for a bowl of soup (Genesis 25:29-34). He lacked long term vision. He was concerned only for the needs of the moment. Apostasy represents the loss of an eternal perspective, and a preference for comfort in the present.

Verse 17 warns us that the consequences of our decisions are irreversible. It is referring to Esau's reaction to Jacob's acquisition of the blessing (Genesis 27:34,38). But the birthright and the blessing went together. If we fall away from Christ, there is no alternative way to God.

The reference to sexual immorality in verse 16 is probably metaphorical (cf. 1 Chronicles 5:25; Hosea 9:1).

9. TO SUM UP (Hebrews 12:18-29)

This section is a brief summary. The writer wants his readers to be clear about the major differences between the covenants, so that they will be convinced that the new is better.

In verses 18-21 the writer talks about the Old Testament situation. He uses the events at Sinai to present his case dramatically (cf. Deuteronomy 5:2; 9:9). These events were tangible (v. 18), audible (v. 19) and visible (v. 20). This emphasizes their provisionality (cf. Colossians 2:21-22).

Exodus 19 and 20 and Deuteronomy 5 are in the background. Notice the echoes of those passages in Hebrews 12:

verse 18 – Exodus 19:9,16,18; Deuteronomy 5:4,22.

verse 19 – Exodus 19:13,16,19; Deuteronomy 5:22; Exodus 20:18-19; Deuteronomy 5:5,23-27; cf. Deuteronomy 18:15.

verse 20 – Exodus 19:12-13,21-22.

verse 21 – Exodus 19:11,16.

Significantly, the description of the old covenant ends with the word 'fear'. That covenant could not achieve the total atonement which takes away the fear of judgment.

In verses 22-24 the writer turns his attention to the new covenant. He uses nine phrases, which reach a climax in the pair in verse 24.

He builds on the idea of Mount Zion (cf. 2 Samuel 5:7). Zion symbolizes God's dwelling place (Psalms 9:11; 76:2; Joel 3:17). It is the source of Israel's salvation (Psalm 14:7). But that salvation extends to the ends of the earth (Isaiah 2:3; Revelation 14:1-3). Here Zion represents full salvation in Christ.

The residents of God's eternal kingdom are listed: the angels, Old Testament believers, God, and believers of every nation in the Christian epoch.

In verse 24 we reach the heart of the new covenant. Jesus mediates it, and his blood 'speaks a better word' than Abel's (cf. Genesis 4:10). Abel's blood cries out for justice. Jesus' blood proclaims forgiveness.

The word translated 'refuse' in verse 25 is the same as that translated 'beg not' in verse 19.

In verse 26 the writer refers to Exodus 19:18 and to Haggai 2:6. The shaking which Haggai is predicted is the impact of the gospel on the nations (Haggai 2:7; cf. Acts 17:6).

The purpose of this gospel shaking is to remove the transient things of human concoction, until only the kingdom of Christ remains (v. 27-28; cf. Matthew 24:29-30). By his grace we are to offer acceptable worship.

Verse 29 reminds us that the God to whom we draw near is the same God who appeared at Sinai in the fire. He still has to be taken seriously.

Our writer is quoting Deuteronomy 4:24. For God to be a consuming fire is to be a jealous God (cf. Deuteronomy 4:16-18,20,23; Exodus 20:4-5; Deuteronomy 5:8-9; Exodus 34:12-16; Deuteronomy 6:13-15).

God demands the total allegiance of believers in this present age (cf. Matthew 6:24).

10. THE ETERNAL COVENANT (Hebrews 13:1-25)

Verses 1-6 make several references to Old Testament laws. That is obvious in verses 4-6. Verse 4 is a statement of the seventh commandment (cf. Exodus 20:14). Verses 5-6 contain an application of the tenth commandment (cf. Exodus 20:17).

Verse 2 extols hospitality to strangers (cf. Leviticus 19:33-34).

Verse 3 is a restatement of an Old Testament requirement (cf. Proverbs 21:13).

Verse 1 is a heading, and verses 1-3 are an exhortation to fulfil the summary command of Leviticus 19:18.

It is important that the Jewish Christian readers realise that turning to Christ does not undermine the moral principles of God's law, which they cherish (cf. Romans 2:17-20).

Verses 7-17 are the central verses of this chapter.

Verse 7 urges them to imitate the faith of those who pioneered the gospel amongst them: they persevered to the end.

Verse 8 reminds the believers that the Christ whom their leaders followed will never change. Even in Old Testament times, he reigned, and it is not possible to advance further when we come to him.

So verses 9-10 urge the readers not to revert to their former practices. God's grace comes by Jesus Christ.

Verse 11 introduces an aspect of the Old Testament arrangements which the writer has not previously mentioned: the carcass of a sacrificial victim had to be burned outside the camp (Leviticus 4:11-12; 16:27).

Verse 12 then explains the figurative significance of this: Jesus suffered outside the gate (cf. Mark 15:20).

In verse 13 the writer makes clear that this has exemplary significance for Jesus' followers: we must bear his reproach (cf. 10:33; 11:26).

Verse 14 explains how they will be able to persevere despite these hardships: they must maintain their vision of a lasting city to come.

Verses 15-16 sound strange in the context of this letter. The emphasis has been on the termination of all sacrifices except the sacrifice of Christ. Now we hear that we are to offer sacrifices. Again the writer wants to point out the continuity between the old and new covenants. The concept of non-atoning sacrifices is taken from the Old Testament (Psalms 50:14, 23; 51:16-17; 107:23; 116:17).

Verse 17 urges the readers to obey their present leaders with submission.

This verse gives us a helpful insight into the proper work of Christian leaders (cf. Matthew 20:25-28).

In verses 18-19 the writer requests prayer, especially that he may soon be able to be with his people (cf. v. 23).

Verses 20-21 contain the author's prayer for his readers. The thing that stands out is the reference to 'the eternal covenant'. The whole thrust of the letter has been that the old covenant is now superseded by the new covenant. This is the first hint that there is an eternal covenant.

The new covenant is not novel. It is the historical anchoring of God's eternal plan of salvation. Here is another reason for holding fast to Christ. The eternal covenant leads to eternal salvation (5:9), eternal redemption (9:12), and the eternal inheritance (9:15).

The old covenant has been described as a shadow (8:5; 10:1). It is not primarily a foreshadowing, but a shadowing down from the light of heavenly reality.

The author finishes by appealing for understanding, explaining his intention to visit, passing on greetings, and praying for them all – that God's grace will enable them to persevere to the end.